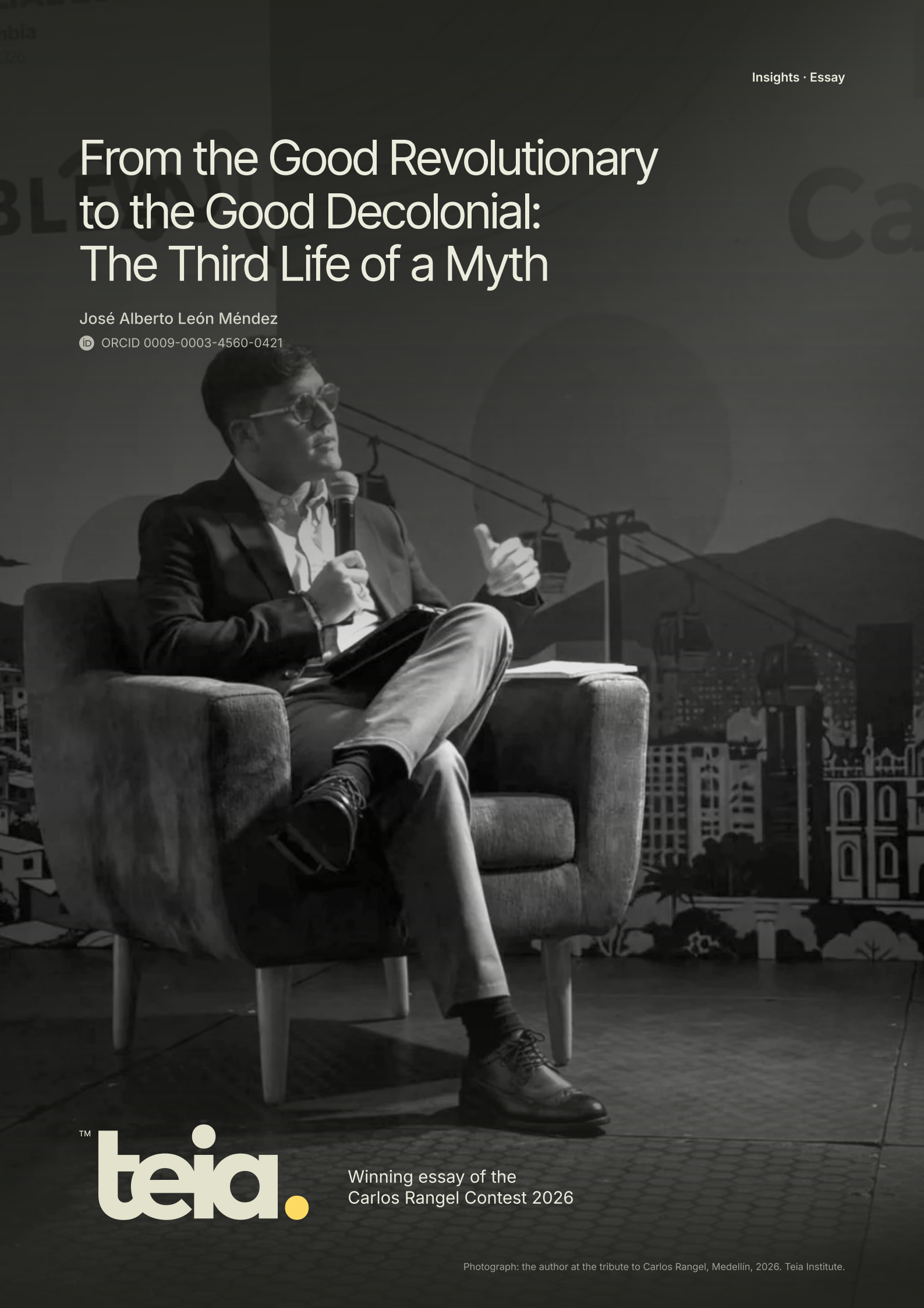
From the Good Revolutionary to the Good Decolonial: The Third Life of a Myth

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Winning essay of the
Carlos Rangel Contest 2026

Photograph: the author at the tribute to Carlos Rangel, Medellín, 2026. Teia Institute.

Editorial note

First-place essay in the contest on the thought of Carlos Rangel convened in 2026 by CEDICE Libertad with the collaboration of the Latin American Liberal Network (RELIAL) and Atlas Network, fifty years after *Del buen salvaje al buen revolucionario*. Translated from the Spanish text the author submitted to the contest under the pseudonym "Diógenes de Caracas". The prize announcement is at teiainstitute.org.

I

Paris, 1976

The book first appeared in French, and the anomaly serves as a portico. The major work of Latin American political theory of the century was published in Paris before Caracas, in 1976, with a preface by Jean-François Revel, and launched into the European debate at the worst possible moment for what it said[1]. Paris was then the capital of a liturgy: that of Third Worldism, of the Cuban revolution still intact as a promise, of a Sartre who still signed manifestos for causes that history was belying. In that city, and in that year, a Venezuelan argued that Latin America's failure was explained not by the guilt of others but by its own. Elizabeth Burgos has recalled the audacity of interrupting, from the periphery, an orthodoxy that the center held as an article of faith (Burgos, 2026); Loris Zanatta has called it a heresy (Zanatta, 2026); and like every heresy, it was spoken in the temple and against the temple.

The thesis Revel drew from the book fits in a single sentence, and it is the one that organizes everything that follows. "Latin American underdevelopment," he wrote, "is political before it is economic," and Latin America "is essentially Western, despite its pre-Columbian past, by virtue of its languages, its worldview, its culture and its population" (Revel, in Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 63). Two claims that sounded like provocation in 1976 and that half a century has not refuted: that backwardness springs from how a region governs itself and not from how others govern it from outside, and that the region belongs to the West even in the stories with which it disowns it. Carlos Rangel devoted an entire book to proving both.

He did so by pursuing a myth through its disguises. *Del buen salvaje al buen revolucionario* is the history of a single figure that changes costume without changing function: the innocent whom civilization corrupts, first dreamed by Europe upon the body of America, later dressed as a guerrilla to condemn capital. Rangel believed he had exhausted the genealogy in two terms. The third was missing; it would arrive after his death, when the revolution lost its prestige and the myth needed a new language, that of the academy. This essay documents that third life and argues that the law Rangel described for the first two also governs the last. The question that guides it is the one he did not live to formulate, because he died before the myth shed its skin once more: what did the good savage do when it lost the Cold War?

II

The Law of the Myth

Let us begin with the fact that disarms half the discussion in advance: the good savage is not a native of America. “The fundamental myths of America,” Rangel wrote, “are not American at all. They are myths created by the European imagination” (Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 79), reformulations of an age-old nostalgia (the Golden Age, Paradise before the Fall) that the Discovery did not invent and only came to stir up. Europe looked out upon the New World and saw in it what it already wished to see. Roger Bartra has put it in the cleanest formula: “The wild man is a distinctive myth of Western civilization, and one of its keys”[2]. The European did not find the good savage in America; he brought it with him, ready-made.

Two things must not be confused. There were real peoples in America, with their own languages, empires and theologies, and with a history of dispossession that no metaphor softens; Rangel himself records “the immense tragedy of their defeat, massacre and enslavement” (Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 70). The good savage is none of those peoples: it is the figure Europe painted over them in order to speak of itself. This essay deals with the character, because the real man deserves not to be confused with his mask.

The genesis confirms it scene by scene. Columbus believes himself at the gates of the Earthly Paradise, which theologians placed in a happy land “without sickness, without old age, without death” (p. 82); Thomas More fuses Plato’s dream with the excitement of the Discovery and composes *Utopia*, proof that “the discovery of America contributed nothing to European mythology that was not already present there” (p. 85). From that projection is born “the most potent myth of modern times: the Good Savage,” fabricated by discoverers who went “seeking what pre-existed in their desire” (p. 86). It answers “to the characteristic anxieties of European, Western, Christian civilization” (p. 86), so that the one who suffers from it is the West, even when it speaks from America[3].

The surface has two faces. Alongside the idyllic savage, the same Europe fabricated its dark reverse: the prepubescent America of Buffon and De Pauw, the arrested nature that Hegel dismissed as history not yet born. Antonello Gerbi wrote the history of that quarrel, and from his map it follows (our reading) that praise and contempt came out of the same workshop[4]. Idealizing the other and degrading him are the two sides of a single gesture: speaking of oneself while believing one speaks of America. A myth capable of sustaining the angel and the beast at once describes nothing, and that is why it can serve for everything.

That capacity for metamorphosis is the law that governs this essay: the myth transforms itself without losing its skeleton. Rangel observed how, “in a time when the great deep myths are degraded, that millenarianism has become secular ‘revolutionism’” (p. 92): the Fall ceases to be original sin and becomes “the establishment of private property,” and the Golden Age is no longer awaited from heaven but entrusted to the revolution. The agent of guilt changes and the redeemer changes; what remains intact is the scheme (bliss, fall, restoration) that Montaigne had already lent the savage two centuries before Rousseau, together with the idea that European society “deserved a bloody revolution” that would return it to its natural innocence (p. 90)[5]. Thus the Good Savage “becomes the Good Revolutionary,” in the litany that a Marxist, Michael Löwy, composed without irony: “Red Robin Hood, Don Quixote of communism, Marxist Saint-Just, lay Christ, Saint Ernesto of La Higuera” (pp. 93-94)[6]. The innocent of the jungle and the guerrilla of the sierra are the same character in two costumes.

Such is the law Rangel stated in two terms: the myth survives its refutations by changing bearers, and each bearer believes he is the first to arrive. A caveat serves as a contract with the reader: showing the genealogy of an idea does not refute it, since the revolutionary’s descent from the savage does not by that fact alone make him false. Genealogy proves the form; it does not decide the value. And only a discourse that reproduces the myth’s entire skeleton (innocence, a fall caused by an external agent, redemption through conversion) will count as its heir, not one that merely criticizes the West with data and no promised paradise. A third tenant was missing, the most recent and the most lettered, the one who traded the jungle for the lectern, and what follows is devoted to him.

III

The Inverted Mirror

In 1976, in the fourth chapter of his book, Carlos Rangel wrote a sentence that seems copied from a university conference of today. “When we learned a European language (Spanish, as it happened) we fell into servitude. When we unlearn it, we shall be free again” (Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 240). He wrote it in mockery: it is the *reductio* with which he carried to absurdity Ricardo Rojas’s doctrine of the *genius loci*, according to which cultural dependence was “the basis and explanation of economic dependence.” He offered it as the height of nonsense. For thirty-one years later, Walter Mignolo would formulate that same conclusion (unlearning the other’s terms in order to be liberated) no longer as ridicule but as method, under the name of “delinking”: changing “the terms of the conversation” in order to “fracture the hegemony of knowledge” of the West[7]. The comparison does not set Mignolo beside a caricature; it records that the caricature of 1976 and

the proposal of 2007 have an identical logical form and differ only in sign. That one era's limit of the ridiculous should be another's serious program measures the distance the structure has traveled: none.

Rangel gave the function two words: "compensatory mythology." Collectivities that fail in emulating a foreign project may, instead of persisting, "take refuge in mythology as an explanation for failure and a magical invocation of future revenge" (p. 78). It is a mechanism that admits successive occupants: Rangel showed how Rodó's spiritualist Arielism was displaced by Marxism, which "now fulfills for Latin America the same functions that Rodó's manifesto fulfilled at the beginning of the century, and does so infinitely better" (pp. 253-254). He left the series open at two terms; this essay adds the third.

The third presented itself with academic credentials. Aníbal Quijano gave the mechanism its canonical form in 2000, when he described Eurocentrism as "a mirror that distorts what it reflects," the result of which is that we Latin Americans "go on being what we are not" and therefore "can never identify our true problems, much less solve them"[8]: the good savage inverted, an authentic identity buried beneath a foreign mask. Enrique Dussel gave it its philosophical version by criticizing modern reason "for concealing an irrational myth" that exonerates the modern subject by declaring his victim guilty[9]; Mignolo gave it its slogan, delinking. Three registers converge in a single operation: the explanation of backwardness returned as absolution for the one who suffers it.

It matters to say what the comparison does not claim. It does not hold that decolonialism is false because it descends from the good savage; that would be a genetic fallacy, and no lineage refutes an idea. Nor does it hold that Rangel "predicted" it, because Rangel predicted nothing: he described a function (exculpating one's own failure by displacing responsibility, and promising a future revenge in exchange), and that function remains stable while its vocabulary changes. A doctrine can occupy that place of consolation and produce, separately, valid knowledge: the historiography of the conquest, the anthropology of colonized peoples, the recovery of silenced archives and languages are judged by their methods. This essay does not impugn that knowledge; it disputes the inference that runs from the datum to the redemptive exteriority.

The colonial asymmetries were real, and attributing long-term consequences to them is legitimate; nor was that attribution born with the decolonial canon. Edmundo O'Gorman had shown in 1958 that America "was the result of an invention of Western thought and not merely of a physical discovery" (O'Gorman, 1958)[10], without deriving any political program from it; and liberal economics holds the same when Engerman and Sokoloff, or Acemoglu and Robinson, explain the

region's underdevelopment by the extractive institutions that colonization left embedded[11]. The difference lies in the conclusion: one tradition derives from the damage a reform of what exists; the other, a program of alternative institutions (the pluriverse, autonomies, *buen vivir*, the plurinational State) conceived as an outside to the order it criticizes, and the essay asks whether that redemptive outside delivers what it offers.

Nor is the canon a bloc, and the thesis has its limits. The role of consolation is predicated of one use of the theory, not of all of it: it does not reach the thought that derives from colonial damage a reform assessable by its results, nor the critique that admits criteria under which it would recognize itself mistaken[12]. That is why Rita Segato, who fights identitarian essentialism from within the tradition, or the anti-extractivists who denounced the governments that claimed to embody the program, fall outside its radius.

Rangel located the seat of the myth not only in the periphery that casts itself as victim but in the center that blames itself. "Because of the myth of the Good Savage," he wrote, "the West suffers today from an absurd guilt complex, inwardly convinced that it has corrupted the other peoples of the earth with its civilization" (p. 90). A good part of decolonialism is produced in the universities of that same West (a sociological fact, not a reproach), and it formalizes as an analytical category what Rangel had described as an affective disposition: the guilt he observed as a diffuse sentiment occupies its place here, now systematized. Nor is the connection imposed by the essay from outside: Dussel himself took up the figure of the *bon sauvage* as a theme in 1979[13]. Rangel's "absurd" falls on the idyllic version, peoples "as happy as Adam and as pure as diamond," and leaves intact the historical existence of the damage: what is attacked is the idyll that consoles, never the reality of the grievance.

There remains an irony that the chain of alibis lays bare. Rangel observed that Latin American elites first blamed failure on "the Indian, the Black man and the mixing of races," and that this alibi preceded and then coexisted with the one that "attributes the backwardness and frustration of Latin America exclusively to North American imperialism" (pp. 99-100). From race to empire, and from empire to coloniality, the object of reproach changes and the exculpatory function remains. What is inherited is not the content (decolonialism inverts that of the first link, since it denounces the racism those elites practiced) but the structure: the slot is the same, occupied by different tenants for more than a century.

IV

The Suppressed Adverb

Octavio Paz wrote, and Rangel copied with approval, that the political lie had settled among our peoples "almost constitutionally" (Paz, as cited in Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 195)[14]. The whole weight of the judgment rests on that adverb: by saying "almost," Paz left the republic a margin in which custom could still correct what the law had not sanctioned. On December 30, 1999, Venezuela's Gaceta Oficial withdrew the courtesy. The preamble of the new Constitution invokes "the heroism and sacrifice of our aboriginal ancestors" and, two lines further down, sets "the supreme end of refounding the Republic"[15]; and between the homage and the refounding, without the text confessing it, is sealed the pact that links the innocence of origins with the demolition of what exists. The good savage entered the articles; the good revolutionary signed at the bottom.

Chronology is decisive here. The essay in which Aníbal Quijano gave canonical form to the "coloniality of power" was published in 2000, a year *after* the Constitution that already practiced it without having read it, and not even his early 1992 version left a trace in the debates of the constituent assembly[16]. The regime had arrived at the myth without a bibliography, by the classic routes (Bolívar, Marx, oil), and that exempts the essay from a paternity it never had and leaves the theory free for the role it truly plays, that of advocate.

That this role is no idle metaphor is shown by the next document. On October 10, 2002, Decree 2,028 renamed October 12 the "Día de la Resistencia Indígena" (Day of Indigenous Resistance) and ordered "the start of a review of school textbooks on National, American and Universal Geography and History"[17]. Its recitals declare that race "arises as one of the basic categories of the relations of domination proper to the colonial system": Quijano's formula with a State seal. The operation had been rehearsed a year earlier. On December 8, 2001, the cacique Guaicaipuro was incorporated into the National Pantheon, but his remains were never found, so in place of the body a vessel was deposited holding earth from the valley where he is presumed to have died[18]. The new homeland buried with honors what it was fabricating: where history gave no empire, the State gave a decree.

The maneuver was not unprecedented. The very Creoles who in 1781 ordered the erasure of "the paintings or portraits of the Incas" after torturing Túpac Amaru to death "would, from 1810 onward, declare themselves 'honorary Indians,' heirs and avengers of the Good Savage" (Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 98). They summoned the Inca, stirred in his tomb, to bless the power of his own executioners, and the Venezuelan decree would repeat the gesture two centuries later[19]. Rangel named the operation in its exact function, that of "exploiting to the utmost the myth of the 'Good Savage' for its *nationalist*, *anti-imperialist* and *good-*

revolutionary virulence" (p. 398), and he anticipated this case: the exaltation of Inca socialism was attempted "even in countries such as Argentina or Venezuela, whose aboriginal societies had not the remotest resemblance to or contact with the Inca Empire" (p. 410). The concession must be recorded: Rangel regarded the fate of the real Indian as "very understandable and very admirable" (p. 398), and held it just to help peoples rebuild "their own cultural heritage" (p. 399). His criticism falls on the use of the mythical Indian against the flesh-and-blood one, never on the latter's vindication.

The theory arrived later, as lawyers arrive, when there is already a case file. In November 2010 Hugo Chávez personally handed Enrique Dussel the Premio Libertador al Pensamiento Crítico, the highest intellectual award of the Venezuelan State[20]: the theory does not found the regime; the regime decorates the theory. Mignolo had already written in 2005 that embracing "the memory of the Mestizo" was "Chávez's contribution to the de-colonial turn and the support of his project of 'Bolivarian revolution'"[21]; and Ramón Grosfoguel has defended the Venezuelan "decolonial alternative" for two decades in State media, answering his critics with Fidel Castro's formula: "within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing"[22]. That phrase is jurisprudence, and the three illustrate the myth's division of labor: explaining power in such a way that it is absolved. And when the case file turned to ruin, the closest thing to a rectification was a warning from Mignolo in 2012, never the withdrawal of the 2005 loan[23].

And the disaster can be counted. More than 7.9 million people have left Venezuela, in the largest exodus in the Western Hemisphere in peacetime[24]; between 2013 and 2021 the economy contracted by more than three quarters, until the Central Bank itself ended up acknowledging the collapse[25]. Against that backdrop, the regime that for a quarter of a century proclaimed itself the spokesman of the humiliated of 1492 today calls a traitor the humiliated man who crosses the border on foot[26]. Rangel had foreseen the casting: a culture of lying ends up "exalting as heroes those who have contributed most to the deception, and despising... as traitors those who have tried to tell us the truth" (p. 196). The list of traitors has been updated with university vocabulary, but the mechanism that draws it up remains the same as in 1976.

What Caracas displays, the Andes corroborate. Ecuador's 2008 Constitution salutes "nature, the Pacha Mama" and makes it a subject of rights[27]; five years later, the same government liquidated the Yasuní-ITT initiative and opened the park to the drills. The phrase with which Rafael Correa buried his own emblem, "the world has failed us," is the myth's function without residue[28]. Bolivia constitutionalized *suma qamaña* and the equal rank of indigenous justice, and the same government that wrote it tear-gassed the TIPNIS march at Chaparina and later repealed

the untouchable status of the territory that it had itself decreed[29]. The constitutionalized myth is harmless only where it is not applied; where it gets in the way, the good revolutionary governs against the good savage in whose name he governs.

There remains the question that Paz's adverb left open and the Gaceta closed. An "almost" constitutional lie could still be corrected through customs; a constitutional lie demands something more arduous, because the alibi now holds the rank of a norm and has a pantheon of its own. Before looking at the societies that have begun to give the lie back its "almost," it is fair to ask what the man who first saw the mechanism set against all this.

V The Other Rangel

It would be unjust, and false as well, to leave Rangel in the role of demolisher. The author who dismantled the myth devoted entire pages to naming the way out, and they must be read, because without them the essay would run the risk Guillermo Tell Aveledo rightly pointed out: turning Rangel into an oracle, a statue that confirms any of today's polemics (Aveledo, 2026). The antidote lies in the least-cited pages of the book itself, those that vindicate the unglamorous democrats.

Rangel knew that prestige works against the reformer. "As long as we find the lord of gallows and knife worthy of admiration (and even romantic)," he wrote, "Fidel Castro or Perón will be more 'in vogue' than Rómulo Betancourt, Eduardo Frei, Rafael Caldera or Carlos Andrés Pérez" (Rangel, 1976/2025, pp. 537-538). Culture rewards the caudillo who promises heaven and disdains the ruler who delivers nothing more than institutions. Pedro Benítez has recovered this vein of the book, that of the Rangel who defends the reformists "in the Costa Rican manner" against redeemers of greater international luster (Benítez, 2026). It is the reverse of the critique of the myth: if the good revolutionary seduces, the reformist democrat builds, and the second is less photogenic than the first.

The scene that best proves it is in the book itself. In June 1960, Trujillo had a car blown up as Betancourt passed; the president suffered severe burns to his hands as he struggled with the jammed doors of the burning automobile. He refused painkillers, declined to be hospitalized and, within two hours of the attack, was addressing the country on radio and television "with his hands wrapped in bandages, speaking with difficulty through lips swollen by the burns, but in obvious control of himself and of the situation" (pp. 550-551). Rangel adds the detail that makes the scene exemplary: the perpetrators, once captured, "suffered no mistreatment, were duly tried and sentenced to relatively light penalties" (p. 551). The democrat answered terror with the rule of

law, the least spectacular response and the only one that founds a republic. Rangel held the same esteem for Aprismo: “any Latin American political evolution that manages to fuse social and economic progress with freedom and human rights will owe much to Aprismo” (p. 294).

There is one last scene, outside the book, that completes the portrait. In 1981 Hayek visited Venezuela, and Rangel (“since I am above all a journalist, I made myself the devil’s advocate”) held a long conversation with him, from which he took the sentence with which, in October 1985, he inaugurated Cedice’s headquarters: “although we are still in a dangerous situation, it is no longer as dangerous today as it was yesterday”[30]. It is the exact mirror of Paris, 1976: there he was the heretic who interrupted another’s temple; here, in Caracas, the builder who founds his own. The optimism of 1985 would be belied by Venezuelan history before the century was out, but the method survived its own forecast. Demythologizing is the intellectual form of taking responsibility; and taking responsibility for what is one’s own is precisely what the myth, in all its lives, is designed to prevent.

VI

The Defeat of the Myth and the Way Out of the Labyrinth

That way of taking responsibility once took the form of a ballot box, where the myth reached the antechamber of the norm and was stopped at the door. Between 2021 and 2022, an elected Chilean Convention drafted a Constitution that defined the State as “plurinational, intercultural, regional and ecological,” enshrined the “*buen vivir*” that had come from the Andes, made nature a subject of rights and placed indigenous legal systems “on a plane of equality” with the Sistema Nacional de Justicia[31]: the entire program with which this essay is concerned, offered to a country in a referendum. On September 4, 2022, with compulsory voting and the highest turnout in its history, Chile rejected it by almost twenty-two points[32].

What is decisive is where it fell hardest. The Rechazo (Reject) option won in all sixteen regions, and in La Araucanía, the heart of Mapuche territory, it took almost three quarters of the votes; in communes with a strong indigenous presence, such as Tirúa and Contulmo, it exceeded seventy-five percent[33]. No commune-level figure proves what each Mapuche voter thought, and this essay does not pretend otherwise, but the figures prove something sturdier: precisely where Article 309 claimed to speak with most reason, the plurinational text fell by the highest margins in the country. The narrative needed the recognized to recognize themselves in the image offered, and that did not happen.

It would be easy to read too much into that “no,” and this essay resists. Subsequent polls show that the first reason for the Rechazo was the performance of the Convention itself, and the second, close behind, plurinationality and indigenous autonomies[34]: the Chilean voter did not deliver a seminar on the coloniality of power; he rejected a text that seemed alien to him. The myth is not invincible, nor is its march inevitable. It has a breaking point, the moment when a concrete people is asked whether it recognizes itself in the image that has been fabricated of it. Fifteen months later, Chile would reject a second text, this time of conservative orientation, by almost twelve points[35]: the double refusal belies the accusation that rejecting the myth amounts to embracing its opposite.

The grievance is not in dispute: the Chilean State’s debt to the Mapuche people is old and real, and the demand for recognition that beats beneath Article 309 is legitimate. The objection falls on the remedy and not on the wound, on the pretension of settling a concrete debt of justice with a metaphysics of *buen vivir* written by those who do not suffer it: one can be entirely right about the grievance and entirely wrong about the cure.

In Chile, the myth was not defeated by the common people against an enlightened elite; it was drafted by a lettered elite (the Convention) and rejected by the people. The contemporary bearer of the good savage turned out to be the urban cleric who speaks in its name from the lectern, not the peasant or the indigenous person he claims to represent: the Creole of 1810 in another costume, with the same distance intact between the spokesman and the one for whom he speaks.

That a refounding project can be halted by the vote points to an intuition Rangel left in writing apropos of another Chile, that of 1973. Democracy, he held, “is, by its very nature, a system in which power is distributed, fragmented, dispersed,” resting “on the postulate, explicit in all democratic Constitutions, that power must never be concentrated” (Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 586). He wrote it against the Unidad Popular, but it holds against any project that vests sovereignty in a single, redemptive collective subject[36], that insincerity which a redeemer (the proletariat then, the peoples now) comes to correct.

From that intuition follows a program, sketched in the Post scriptum of 1987. The cause of Latin American frustrations, he wrote, “is definitely not only (nor even principally) a Yankee conspiracy to exhaust our resources and prevent our development but, rather, our failure to implant democracy fully” (p. 634)[37]. Three tasks follow, institutional before rhetorical.

The first is to deconcentrate power, which in the region has always functioned “as a prize to be shared out among those who have managed to capture the State and acquire a clientele” (p. 635). A constitution that aspires to endure must be hard to capture: strict limits on reelection, checks on the amending power, a core of rights (property, free enterprise, due process) shielded from any majority. This too is a lock, like that of the Venezuelan Article 126; but the liberal limit binds today’s officeholder and tomorrow’s alike, whereas that one shielded an incumbent against alternation in power. Concentrating sovereignty in a single subject offers spoils; distributing it, a republic.

The second is to teach history without liturgy. Decree 2,028 showed how a State turns the calendar and the classroom into instruments of the myth; the remedy lies in withdrawing the official epic and returning to the citizen the facts in conflict, not in enthroning a liberal counter-liturgy in its place. The test is operable: that the school curriculum keep the document and suppress the adjective. An education that swaps one pantheon for another does not demythologize; it changes myths. If after it the official hero is still untouchable, it has failed.

The third, and the most Rangelian, is to free initiative. The entire Latin American ruling class, he warned in 1987, believes that the way to solve any problem is to “have the government decree still narrower channels for private initiative, impose new regulations, intervene more directly or simply take over” (pp. 636-637). Against that reflex he proposed an image this essay makes its own, that of “removing from peoples the handcuffs that inhibit their initiative, their ambition and their entrepreneurial inventiveness” (pp. 639-640). Decolonialism promises emancipation and delivers tutelage; Rangel’s emancipation was that of a man with a first and last name who is allowed, at last, to strike out on his own, and it is measured in procedures abolished, not in preambles.

The program guarantees nothing, but the Post scriptum closed with an image that falls aptly here, because it deactivates the fatalism the myth needs in order to survive. Spain, he wrote (“where our political backwardness came from in the first place”), “is teaching us that there can be a way out that leads us out of the labyrinth and away from fate” (p. 640)[38]. The labyrinth was Octavio Paz’s, with which the Venezuelan chapter of this essay opened: what was suppressed there by the Gaceta reappears here in its affirmative form. If the lie could become norm, the truth can undo it, and Chile proved that the thread exists.

VII Caracas

From Paris, 1976, to Caracas, 2026, lie fifty years and three versions of the same myth. The good savage was a European dream; the good revolutionary, its armed version; the good decolonial, its university

edition. The three share a trait, and in it lies the key to the harm they do: none of them is anyone. The savage has no face, the redeemed people has no name, the colonized subject is always an abstraction that speaks in the plural and makes demands in the name of millions it never consults. The myth needs that indeterminacy, because an abstraction is not accountable. Freedom, by contrast, begins on the day someone in particular, a Venezuelan with a first and last name, stops waiting for collective redemption and takes on his share.

That is, in the end, the lesson Rangel spent his life defending, and the one his country learned the hardest way. The demythologization he proposed was not an exercise in erudition but a transfer of responsibility: from the empire to the citizen, from the narrative to government, from the abstract victim to the concrete person. Whoever stops explaining himself by the guilt of others recovers, along with the discomfort of his own guilt, the only freedom worth having, that of being able to change what depends on oneself.

It is fitting to end where Rangel ended in private. His son has recalled him reading poetry to his children, far from the cameras and the polemics that filled his public life (Rangel, C. J., 2026). The man who devoted his work to dismantling false words cultivated, in private, the highest form of the true word. This is no contradiction: it is proof that he fought the myth in the name of something, and that something (truth spoken without alibis, responsibility assumed without excuses, the word that does not lie) is still waiting, half a century later, for a generation to take it seriously. The contest that occasions these pages is, perhaps, a sign that this generation has begun to read.

Notes

1 The French edition, *Du bon sauvage au bon révolutionnaire* (Paris, Robert Laffont, 1976), appeared with a preface by Jean-François Revel and preceded the Spanish edition from Monte Ávila (Caracas, 1976). The paradox (that the major work of Spanish American political theory should be published first in French) was underlined by Revel himself, who saw in the book the formulation of a law about the actual electoral behavior of Latin Americans when they vote in freedom. The review sometimes attributed to Ludwig von Mises is unverifiable and impossible: Mises had died in 1973. The international endorsement that popular memory assigns to him belongs, in fact, to Revel.

2 Bartra, R. (1992). *El salvaje en el espejo* (Prologue). Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México / Ediciones Era. The sentence opens the prologue. Bartra proves it with a scene that stands for the whole argument: when the conquistadors wished to represent a "savage" at a festival in the main square of Mexico, they did not bring an indigenous man but a hairy European with a club, the wild man of medieval European folklore, the one they already carried within them. America did not invent the savage; it received it, ready-made, from the imaginary inventory of the West.

3 "Latin America" is an imported name. Rangel stresses it at the opening of the book: his is an America "Spanish, then, and not 'Latin'," for the label is an "invention of the French or of the Anglo-Saxons" (p. 73). The category of a "Latin race" set against an "Anglo-Saxon race" is formulated by Michel Chevalier in his *Lettres sur l'Amérique du Nord* (Paris, 1836) and becomes State doctrine with the pan-Latinism of Napoleon III; the phrase itself is put into verse by a Spanish American, José María Torres Caicedo: "The race of Latin America / has before it the Saxon race, / its mortal enemy…" (*Las dos Américas*, 1857). Even the name with which the region thinks of itself was born of a European quarrel.

4 Gerbi, A. (1982). *La disputa del Nuevo Mundo: historia de una polémica, 1750-1900* (A. Alatorre, Trans.). Fondo de Cultura Económica. (Original work published 1955). Gerbi chronicles (and criticizes) the Enlightenment thesis of American inferiority: Buffon postulated a degenerate nature and De Pauw extended it to the native inhabitants, to the point of describing the continent as immature or prepubescent. He should be cited as the cartographer of the polemic, not as its upholder: his book shows that denigration and idyll were twin projections.

5 The filiation is European from start to finish and predates Rousseau. Already "in the mid-sixteenth century" Montaigne takes up the myth "unsurpassably" and lends it "all its future authority" (p. 88); in "Des cannibales" (*Essais*, I, xxxi, 1580) he had written that there is nothing barbarous in those peoples "except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own custom." Rangel drives the point home: "What is there in Rousseau, two hundred years later, that is newer or more terrible than these words of Montaigne?" (p. 90). Rousseau radicalized the "state of nature" as a hypothesis (*Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, 1755); the label "good savage" is later and foreign to his pen.

6 The string of epithets is a literal quotation from Michael Löwy, *La Pensée de Che Guevara* (Paris, Maspero, 1970), taken up by Rangel on pp. 93-94. That it should be revolutionary hagiography itself, and not its critic, that describes itself in Christ-like terms makes the fact unanswerable: the "lay Christ" is not a sarcasm of Rangel's; it is the myth's self-portrait.

7 Mignolo, W. D. (2007). Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies, 21*(2-3), 449-514 (quotation on p. 459). https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647. In the original: “to change the terms of the conversation... it is necessary to fracture the hegemony of knowledge.” The English is quoted here as published. Rangel had written the same operation (unlearning the master’s language in order to be free) thirty-one years earlier (1976/2025, p. 240), but as parody. The distance between the two is not one of content but of sign, since what in one is *reductio ad absurdum* is, in the other, method.

8 Quijano, A. (2000). Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina. In E. Lander (Ed.), *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas* (pp. 201-246). CLACSO. The mirror quotation is on pp. 218-219; the formula of race as the “most effective and enduring instrument of social domination,” on p. 202. The image of the “mirror that distorts” is the good savage turned inside out: a true identity supposedly buried beneath the foreign category, recoverable only by breaking it.

9 Dussel, E. (1992). *1492: El encubrimiento del Otro. Hacia el origen del «mito de la modernidad»* (“Palabras preliminares”). Nueva Utopía. Dussel criticizes modern reason not “as reason” but “for concealing an irrational myth” that justifies violence. The myth, in his reading, exonerates: it turns the victim into the culprit of its own victimization and the modern subject into an innocent. It is the Rangelian function in its pure state, the colonial legacy that ceases to explain and begins to absolve.

10 O’Gorman, E. (1958). *La invención de América* (Prologue). Fondo de Cultura Económica. The concession is deliberate: in O’Gorman “invention” is an ontological category (the attribution of a being and a meaning), not a political denunciation or a bill to be collected. That America was invented by Europe does not oblige one to derive from it any agenda of exteriority; that derivation is an additional step, and it is the step disputed here.

11 Stanley L. Engerman and Kenneth L. Sokoloff, “Institutions, Factor Endowments, and Paths of Development in the New World,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14:3 (2000), pp. 217-232; and Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* (New York, Crown, 2012), on the extractive institutions inherited from the conquest. Both works attribute Latin American underdevelopment to the colonial legacy, and both derive from it an agenda of institutional reform from within, not of exteriority. The contrast delimits what this essay contests: the inference and not the cause.

12 Mignolo distinguishes his “delinking” from Quijano’s and presents it as a complement (Mignolo, 2007, n. 10). On the diversity of the field: Rita Segato, *La crítica de la colonialidad en ocho ensayos* (Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2013), criticizes identitarian essentialism from within the tradition; Maristella Svampa and Alberto Acosta denounced the extractivism of the “progressive” governments that invoked the program. The comparison does not assume a unanimous canon, but a recurring function that cuts across opposing positions.

13 Enrique Dussel, “La cristiandad moderna ante el otro. Del indio ‘rudo’ al ‘bon sauvage’,” *Concilium* 150 (1979), pp. 498-506. The fact defuses in advance the charge of anachronism: the figure of the good savage is not a parallel that this essay projects onto decolonialism from outside, but a theme that one of its founders recognized and worked on as his own.

14 Paz, O. (1950), *El laberinto de la soledad*; Rangel cites it from the Cuadernos Americanos edition and separates the picturesque observation from the accurate one. The sentence with the "almost" still strikes him as a sketch of manners; a few lines later he celebrates the full hit: "But in another part of the same book, Paz strikes the very center of the target" (Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 195). This essay inherits the gesture and carries it to its limit: it discards the folklore of the sentence and keeps its function, that of measuring how much truth still fit in that adverb before a Gaceta suppressed it.

15 Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Gaceta Oficial No. 36,860, December 30, 1999. It would be unjust to read Chapter VIII (arts. 119–126) as a mere alibi: it was a real achievement of the three indigenous delegates to the constituent assembly (Noelí Pocaterra among them) and of their organizations, and it was celebrated as one of the most advanced on the continent. The trap lies in what the text withdraws with the other hand: the lock of art. 126, which denies in advance the fullness of the subject ("the term 'people' may not be interpreted in this Constitution in the sense given to it in international law"), and the unkept timetable, since the twelfth transitional provision ordered the demarcation of indigenous territories within two years and, a quarter of a century later, demarcation remains marginal. The charter was approved by referendum on December 15, 1999, with about 72% of valid votes and abstention above 54% (CNE), so that the Republic was "refounded" with little more than three in ten registered voters saying yes.

16 Quijano, A. (2000), "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina," in E. Lander (Ed.), *La colonialidad del saber* (CLACSO, pp. 201–246); the early version, "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad," had appeared in *Perú Indígena*, 13(29), 1992. The genealogy leaves an irony that suits the thesis: the volume in which the canonical essay appeared was conceived in Caracas, and its editor, Edgardo Lander, would end up as one of the harshest critics of Bolivarian extractivism. The house that sheltered the doctrine also produced the man who denounced it.

17 Decree No. 2,028, Gaceta Oficial No. 5,605 Extraordinario, October 10, 2002. The comparison is literal: the recital declares that race "arises as one of the basic categories of the relations of domination proper to the colonial system," where Quijano (2000) had written that the idea of race was the "most effective instrument of social domination" of the colonial pattern. The decree did not stop at anniversaries. It urged the Academia Venezolana de la Lengua to ask the Real Academia Española to review "words that could be offensive to the dignity of our peoples," and asked UNESCO to "free the texts" of "racisms" and "Eurocentrisms." A presidential decree that corrects dictionaries and amends calendars reveals how far the refounding aspired to reach.

18 Presidential decree of December 8, 2001; Decree 2,028 itself alludes to the "process of the symbolic incorporation of Guaicaipuro into the National Pantheon (2001-2004)." Popular veneration of the cacique is much older and has nothing fabricated about it; what had to be decreed was the State epic mounted on top of it. Rangel does not mention Guaicaipuro anywhere in the book, and he left the reason in writing in a note as brief as it is cruel: the local aboriginal peoples could not "compete as mythical ancestors with the Incas and the Aztecs" (Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 398, n. 3). The Venezuelan State came to settle that old mythological disadvantage with a vessel of earth.

19 The Peruvian anthem proclaims Lima “free once again” after “three centuries of foreign oppression”; the Argentine anthem stirs the Incas in their tombs before “their sons,” who renew “the ancient splendor of the Homeland” (Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 98). Rangel underlines the detail that makes the whole genealogy comic: Túpac Amaru had rebelled in the name of Charles III and against the abuses of the Creoles, so that “it was they who confronted him, defeated him and tortured him to death” (p. 95). The hero the myth invokes was the victim of the grandfathers of those who invoke him; the tomb that now stirs was dug by them.

20 Fifth Premio Libertador al Pensamiento Crítico, awarded by the Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Cultura to *Política de la Liberación. Volumen II: Arquitectónica*, and presented by Chávez at the Feria Internacional del Libro de Venezuela, Caracas, November 15, 2010. Dussel had written his *20 tesis de política* (Siglo XXI/CREFAL, 2006) without any commission from Caracas; but Caracas adopted them, and the State publishing house, El Perro y la Rana, reissued them in its doctrinal Alfredo Maneiro collection. Between the book no one asked for and the prize that power bestows, the circuit this section describes is closed.

21 Mignolo, W. D., “Evo Morales: ¿Giro a la izquierda o giro des-colonial?”, *América Latina en Movimiento* (ALAI), December 25, 2005. Enlisting Mignolo among the propagandists would be unjust, and justice here reinforces the thesis: in 2012 he warned against States that use “indigenous memories” to manufacture left-wing corporatism (*Critical Legal Thinking*, May 2, 2012). He lent the genealogy in 2005, objected to its administration in 2012, and never withdrew the loan. The warning honors the professor; the debt left intact confirms the argument.

22 Three pieces make up the file: the interview “Venezuela, the Decolonial Alternative,” in *Venezuelanalysis*; the appearance on *Aquí con Ernesto Villegas* (VTV), reported by Alba Ciudad 96.3 FM in August 2022; and “La comuna es la alternativa para movernos a un mundo otro,” on the portal of the Ministerio del Poder Popular para las Comunas, January 9, 2025. The invocation of Fidel’s formula, in a public reply to criticism from the Latin American left, dates from August 2025. Twenty years of constancy that betray less stubbornness than method, that of someone who already has the verdict written and is only waiting for the cases.

23 As far as the public record consulted reaches; whoever finds a proportional retraction refutes this line in passing. The honest objection must be recorded, because the field is not a bloc: there were thinkers who did break with the experiment (Lander, already cited; Maristella Svampa, with her critique of the “commodities consensus”; Alberto Acosta, who presided over the Montecristi constituent assembly and ended up in opposition to Correa). The thesis does not accuse an entire field, but the function of the canon that field consecrated; the dissidents prove that dissent was possible and that some chose it. This essay celebrates them.

24 R4V Platform (UNHCR–IOM), 2025 update: more than 7.9 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela, of whom some 6.9 million remain in Latin America and the Caribbean. The figure is assembled from the records of host governments and is almost certainly a floor and not a ceiling.

25 Estimates by the IMF and ECLAC put the cumulative contraction between 2013 and 2021 above 75% of real GDP, and the Banco Central de Venezuela’s own series admit that between 2014 and 2020 the economy shrank to a quarter of its size. The figure has a particular eloquence: the mythical absolution lost its case not against its adversaries but against the accounting of the very regime that invoked it.

26 Official contempt for the migrant is on the record. In August 2018 Nicolás Maduro referred to those who had emigrated as people who had "gone off to wash toilets" and urged them to "stop washing toilets" and return to the homeland (reported by El Universal and El Estímulo on August 29, 2018). To that mockery is added the official denial of the exodus figures documented by the R4V platform. The regime that invokes the humiliated of 1492 puts a name and a date to the humiliation of today's migrant.

27 Constitución de la República del Ecuador, Registro Oficial 449, October 20, 2008: the preamble, "celebrating nature, the Pacha Mama, of which we are a part"; art. 1 (a "plurinational" State); and arts. 71–74, which made Ecuador the first country in the world to constitutionalize the rights of nature. Alberto Acosta, president of the Montecristi Constituent Assembly and theorist of *buen vivir*, condenses in a single biography the passage from the academy to the constitution; years later he would become a critic of the government that applied it. The signature and the repentance fit within the same name.

28 National broadcast of August 15, 2013. Only US$13.3 million of the US$3.6 billion expected had been committed (0.37%), so that the first plebiscite was that of money, and the world did not pay. The second plebiscite was that of truth: the popular consultation of August 20, 2023 ordered, with about 59% of the votes, that the crude oil of Block 43 be left underground, and extraction continued. The emblem lost twice (first to the cash box, then to its own believers) and, despite everything, went on presiding over the preamble.

29 Constitución Política del Estado, February 7, 2009, arts. 8.I and 179.II. The Eighth Indigenous March was repressed at Chaparina on September 25, 2011, with no convictions to this day; Law 969, of August 13, 2017, eliminated the untouchable status of TIPNIS that Law 180 of 2011 had itself decreed. The same power that wrote the untouchability repealed it, and between the two laws there passed a march met with gas.

30 Rangel, C. (1985). *Tiempo de conocer la libertad* (speech at the inauguration of the new headquarters of the Centro de Divulgación del Conocimiento Económico, Caracas, October 30, 1985). Cedice. The conversation with Friedrich Hayek that Rangel recounts took place during the economist's visit to Venezuela in 1981; the sentence "it is not as true today as it was yesterday" is Hayek's, and Rangel makes it his own at the close of the speech. The fact dates the optimism: 1985, after the "Viernes Negro" (Black Friday) of 1983 and before the Caracazo of 1989.

31 Propuesta de Constitución Política de la República de Chile (2022): art. 1.1 ("Chile is a social and democratic State under the rule of law. It is plurinational, intercultural, regional and ecological"); art. 8 (the State "recognizes and promotes *buen vivir*"); arts. 103.1 and 127.1 ("Nature has rights. The State and society have the duty to protect and respect them"), with the entitlement enshrined in art. 18.3; art. 309 (indigenous legal systems "coexist, coordinated on a plane of equality with the Sistema Nacional de Justicia"). *Buen vivir*, the Andean *sumak kawsay*, thus landed in a country without a dominant Andean tradition, traveling as an idea before taking root as a demand.

32 Servicio Electoral de Chile (Servel), Plebiscito de Salida, September 4, 2022: Rechazo 61.86% (7,882,958 votes), Apruebo 38.14%; turnout 85.7% of the electoral roll, with compulsory voting for the first time in a constitutional plebiscite. It was the most heavily attended vote in Chile's history.

33 In La Araucanía the Rechazo obtained 73.69% and prevailed in all thirty-two communes of the region; in Tirúa (77.25%) and Contulmo (81.19%) it did so by even wider margins (Servel). The figure is commune-level, not individual: it does not distinguish the Mapuche voter from the settler or the conservative farmer, and rural Araucanía brings all three together (Contulmo, in fact, was founded as a European colony). Added to this, most of the Mapuche population now lives in urban areas, about whose vote the regional aggregate says nothing, and compulsory suffrage brought in an electorate with little prior engagement. That is why the claim in the body is deliberately bounded: it does not hold that "the Mapuche rejected what was theirs," but that plurinationalism fell especially hard precisely in the territories it invoked as its reason for being.

34 Cadem, Plaza Pública survey No. 452 (September 2022): the first declared reason for the Rechazo was "the process was badly done by the convention members" (40%); the second, "plurinationality and indigenous autonomies" (35%). The finding converges with the Ipsos–Espacio Público report. The reading is not an inference by the essayist but what voters answered. Political science reached a similar conclusion: Piscopo and Siavelis (2023) attribute the shipwreck of the first process to the Convention's maximalist overreach rather than to a rejection of change as such.

35 Servel, Plebiscito Constitucional, December 17, 2023: "En contra" 55.76% (6,894,287 votes), "A favor" 44.24%. The second process had reduced reserved indigenous representation from the seventeen seats of the 2021 Convention to a single one, supernumerary and subject to a threshold. Chile rejected two opposing texts in fifteen months; the pendulum was not seeking an extreme but the center that neither of them offered it.

36 Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 586, in the section "Democracia y Marxismo-Leninismo" of Chapter X, written with reference to the Chile of the Unidad Popular. The quotation governs this section by an oblique route, since Rangel there measures the incompatibility between democracy (dispersed power) and any project that conceives power once won as a tactical advantage "to conquer all power" (p. 589). The plurinationalism of 2022 is not the Marxism-Leninism of 1973, but within Rangel's conceptual machinery it occupies the same functional position.

37 Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 634 (Post scriptum of 1987). The gesture is of capital importance and usually goes unnoticed, because twelve years after the first edition Rangel himself dismantles the second of the alibis he had described (the imperialist one) and replaces it with an internal diagnosis. The series of alibis this essay traverses (the racial, the imperialist, the decolonial) finds on this page its anticipated refutation, made by the author of the base text himself.

38 Rangel, 1976/2025, p. 640, the last sentence of the Post scriptum before the bibliography. The image of the way out echoes, consciously or not, Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*, the source of the "almost constitutionally" with which the previous section opened. Rangel's book enters and leaves by the same door: it begins with the lie installed and ends with the possible way out. Spain functions as a deliberate counterexample (it was the origin of the backwardness and is now proof of its reversibility), and that is why it closes off fatalism without falling into easy optimism.

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