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Charles Taylor’s ‘Imaginary’ and ‘Best Account’ in Latin America

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Abstract:
Imaginary is, in Taylor’s thought, a category of understanding social praxis and the reasons people give to make sense of these practices. The ultimate reason is the hypergood, which influences the strong decisions. Those strong evaluations outline the moral framework from which people address their own lives and the lives of others. We only recognize our cultural framework as an ‘imaginary’ -challenging the supposition it is something ‘objective’- when others make their apparition in our lives. After the encounter nobody remains the same; something in our imaginary has changed. The outcome of this process is the ‘best account’ we have to make sense of our life. If we accept the category of ‘imaginary’ and the process of ‘best account’ as accurate enough to address Latin America reality; the problem we have to solve is how we can find out a Latin American social imaginary.
Keywords:
Charles Taylor – Social imaginary – Latin America – Ethnocentrism – Hermeneutics –

1 Introduction

One strand of Charles Taylor’s work is modernity. He addresses modernity looking at the
ways the identity and vision of the good are connected (Taylor, 1989: x). He upholds that
vision and identity are shared by a culture, and they provide a framework from where a
culture faces reality. These ‘visions and identities’ are the imaginary. An imaginary is, in
Taylor’s work, an understanding of the moral order (2004: 143) that makes sense of our
practices (2002b: 36).

There is always some difficulty when we try to address Charles Taylor’s work. His thought is an ‘armamentarium of interlocking ideas’ (Kitchen: 33) with an
‘intractable unity’ that makes it hard to compartmentalize (Baker: 141). The reason for
that, it has been said, is that Taylor keeps alive the tension between the person and the
community, between the social good and the individual rights (Saurette: 724-725).

In the following pages I will examine the way Taylor uses the ‘imaginary’
category and the ‘best account’ principle in order to see if they can be useful for tackling
the Latin American modernity.

2 Cultural theories

Taylor supports the point of view of the ‘cultural theories’. This approach upholds that
the place we give to culture in human life will condition the way we address modernity.
Human beings are always formed by a culture, with a specific self-understanding and
language. But there are two theoretical views of the role of culture: those who hope to find an account of ‘human nature’ and to explain culture as an *accidens*, and those who think of cultural difference as the *explananda* of ‘human life’ (Taylor, 2002c: 282).

Taylor tackles modernity as a new culture (1995a: 24) because he thinks modernity is a new ‘language and a set of practices, which defines specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind and soul, good and bad, virtues and vices’ (1992: 88). People inside the same cultural framework share discriminations, certain opinions of what is admirable, honorable, worthless or what needs to be done (Taylor, 1989: 21; 1995a: 27). Since we are inside this constellation, we are not used to seeing modernity as a cultural shift but as a development of human nature. Since we are who we are because of the culture in which we grow up, it is natural that we find our practices and beliefs superior to another. Our understanding of other people and their values is partial, bounded by our personal experience.

Taylor tries to address modernity with an awareness of difference between cultures. We all have backgrounds of understanding that may be completely absent in other societies (1989: 38; 1992: 88; 1995a: 24; 2002c: 295). Ethnocentrism is a collapse of the distinctions between cultures into the content of a single one. Ethnocentrism denies, or at least loses sight of the deep links between culture and historical communities. It attempts to impose on everyone the categories and words of my own language because it seems to be the ‘real one’. Ethnocentrism implies the assumption that all cultures share the same background but chose different manifestations (Taylor, 1989: 40; 2002c: 285; 2004: 38). A way to avoid it would be a cultural theory of modernity that makes us aware of our own cultural framework. This account considers the differences
between cultures as those between civilizations, that is, it emphasizes the contrast
between different constellations of values (Taylor, 1992, p. 91).

2.1 Cultural theories and their criticisms

The cultural theories present some limitations. For example, when we say we respect
every culture, we do not mean a culture that supports slavery, but only those which are
expressions of a certain way of living. Our moral outlook not only pretends we have the
right to uphold our own point of view, it also asks for wider claims. In the former
element, it asks for criticism on those cultures which fail in accomplishing the standard
of mutual respect (Taylor, 1989: 67, 68). Nevertheless, we can make claims that are
ethnocentric or insensitive. With which claims have we construct the ‘understanding of
moral order that makes sense of our practices’? How can we solve the problem of
comparison between cultures? Moreover, how should we deal with two different cultural
worlds in conflict?

Addressing this problem, Taylor has been criticized because he either provides a
‘non-partisan’ view, or gives us a criterion to evaluate the ‘epistemic gain’ (Stephenson:
10). Both have been said: on one side, Saurette said Taylor tried to eliminate deep
plurality (2004: 731); and Redhead added he provides an argument just for believers
(2001: 95). On the other side, Taylor has also been accused of not providing a ‘universal
argument’ from which to address differences (Levy: 52). I want to make two comments
about these objections. First, I think it is not possible a ‘neutral’ thought. Philosophical
commitments are as powerful as religious ones; a philosophical school cannot be ‘non-
partisan’. Second, if we pretend that our argument should be shared by everyone in every
culture, are not we ethnocentric? Taylor answers both problems by disclosing his own
imaginary and giving a place to the competing moral claims recognizing a de facto ontological pluralism (Baker: 142; Klaushofer: 141, 146; Steele: 440).

Taylor says a better understanding of western modernity as a historical one shaped in a specific culture, should enable to recognize other modernities arising in other parts of the world; this recognition will free them from ‘the distorting grid of a bogus universality and us from our ethnocentric prison’ (Taylor, 1992: 108). However, it has been said that Taylor’s attempt remains ethnocentric in a Greek-Latin intellectual history because he did not give room for non-European thinkers (Arthurs: 580; Dussel, 1988: 125; Dussel, 2000; Redhead, 2001: 92; Steele: 441). This criticism addresses my question: Are Taylor’s categories, which are built in a specific framework, useful to non-western realities? Can we adapt the ‘social imaginary’ category so it becomes useful in understanding other cultures? Is it an accurate way for addressing and understanding Latin American modernity? To answer these questions we need to understand what Taylor means by ‘imaginary’ and ‘best account’.

3 Taylor’s ‘Imaginary’

Taylor upholds there are three levels of understanding. The most abstract one is the level of philosophical or formulated theories: the epistemic place of explicit doctrine about society, divinity and cosmos. On the other side, closer to the praxis, there is the habitus level, or ‘the embodied understanding’ level. We come to understand certain skills in a non-reflected way, as a second nature; we know about our society because we ‘know how’ to deal with certain situations. It is a non-explicit understanding.

In between them, Taylor places the imaginary: expressed in ritual, symbols, and works of art, it is more explicit than mere gesture and asks for imitation. This level
nourishes from the habitus one, but also gives it a kind of expression. Our beliefs about our world are held against a background of unformulated understandings, expressed through symbols that reveal our relationship with which we consider the source of good. Even though those beliefs are not expressed in doctrines, they constitute the ‘social imaginary’. This one is broader than intellectual schemes, and not expressed in ‘theories’ but in images, stories and legends, which are shared by large groups of people, generating a common understanding (Taylor, 1995a: 28-29; 2004: 23). It is the background that makes sense of any given ideas that draw our whole world: space, time, our life among others, our history and our relationship with divinity (Taylor, 2004: 28, 176).

As a group, people are engaged in a common practice, and need to imagine in a similar way what they are doing in order to make a “common” sense of such practice. Social imaginary is the ‘common understanding’ that makes possible ‘common practices’ because it provides them a sense of legitimacy (Taylor, 2002a: 165; 2002d: 91,106; 2002b: 36). It is the way people imagine how they live with others, theirs expectations and the normative notions that underline these expectations (Taylor, 2004: 23). The social imaginary is ‘normative’ in two senses: because it is shaped by the idea of moral order that underlay the forms of social existence, and because it provides a set of expectations of the world that make the norms realizable (Taylor, 2002d: 95).

3.1 Social praxis

The question that arises is if the ‘imaginary’ is an attribution of independent force to ideas in history. Social practices and social conceptions are, at the same time, modes of understanding that we cannot untie. Taylor says that ‘If understanding makes the practice
possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding’ (2004: 31).

Our imaginary is formed by categories that enable common action and others that help us to process and classify the ‘system’. Active and objective categories have complementary roles in our lives. Ideas always come in history wrapped up in certain practices; the motivations which drive the adoption of those ideas are varied. We have to disclose how an idea of moral order shapes our social imaginary and, through it, our practice (Taylor, 2004: 28, 33, 144).

When a social imaginary is transformed, people are introduced to new practices. The new outlook gives a new context to people’s practices; people can understand and address their lives in a way that was not possible before (Taylor, 2004: 29). The new theory is strengthened in the new practice; the practice modifies the theory. On the other side, new practices ask for new imaginaries that make sense of them. For instance, new mode of production would require new ‘ideas’ and legal forms (Taylor, 2004: 32). According to Taylor, in order for the transition to succeed people need not only to understand and internalize the theory but also to have some practices that put theory into effect. In order to transform a society with a new principle of legitimacy, it is necessary to have a repertory of practices that embodied this new principle and the people’s agreement on these practices. These practices have to make sense to the people and be coherent with what theory prescribes (Taylor, 2004: 115).

The conceptions of human fulfillment that have grown up along with a society shape structures, institutions and practices. Institutions are defined by certain norms and specific anthropological conceptions. These conceptions give the institutions their
legitimacy. If people cease to believe in these ideas, the institutions will be useless. At the same time, there is no other way a people can share an imaginary than by experiencing it. It means we rely on these practices to maintain the conception of the good that shapes our ‘anthropological conception’; that is a way to say our identity (Taylor, 1994: 60, 70).

3.2 Moral order and frameworks

When Taylor defines an imaginary as an ‘understanding of moral order’, or as a certain idea that underlies it, he bonds both. Understanding Taylor’s imaginary is understanding Taylor’s view of moral order. In his scheme the hypergood, which includes an idea of life fulfillment, is the keystone that give rise to some strong evaluations. The framework delineated by these evaluations makes sense of our practices (Taylor, 2004: 33,143,155).

For Taylor a given idea of moral order shapes the social imaginary and, through it, has influence on our ordinary life, on the way we believe or not, on our mode of procedure with economic issues and political affairs. This idea gives us a sense of normal expectations of how things usually go and how they ought to go. It means that there is a way of doing we consider right and another one we consider wrong (Taylor, 2004: 2, 24, 25).

According to Taylor’s understanding of morals as a set of ideas we have about what constitutes a full life (Kitchen: 37), in order to understand our moral world we need to know what underlies our notions of fulfillment (Taylor, 1989: 14). This notion is something beyond human beings, a reference that makes sense to our beliefs and moral intuitions (Taylor, 2002a: 187; 2004: 10).

These moral intuitions involve claims about the nature and status of human beings, an implicit assent to a given conception of the human. These intuitions, as a
privileged focus of our attention or will, point us what makes life worth living. They involve our discriminations of right and wrong, better or worse, but assuming that there is a notion of the good which is different and independent of these options. The moral intuitions offer us a standard from which we can make judgments (Taylor, 1989: 3-5).

The framework provides the background for our moral judgments, intuitions and reactions. We discriminate among good and attribute different worth to some of them when we decide follow some and not others. When this discrimination is made in a collective way, we are in an ‘a set of ends or demands’ that allow us to judge others (Taylor, 1989: 63). The ideas of the good and the frameworks of meaning are available in a given culture within history (Stephenson: 7); those frameworks are revealed by the choices people of this culture do in theirs lives (Baker: 141). A framework is the moral horizon that makes up the background out of which the self is formed, and underpins moral judgments and institutions in everyday life (Klaushofer: 141).

If the framework is what gives sense to our actions, the quest for a framework is a search for sense. We find sense through articulating adequate expressions and meaningful explanations (Taylor, 1989: 18). However, life can be structured by a crucial set of qualitative distinctions and remain unarticulated. The work of thinkers is trying to formulate the framework explicitly. Articulating framework means making sense of our own moral responses, disclosing what is presupposed in our judgment (Taylor, 1989: 19, 21, 26).

Frameworks are problematic since this is a vague concept which points towards an open disjunction of attitudes: no framework is universally shared, and people can identify themselves only with selected characteristics. Moreover, since we see
frameworks as an object of a quest, there is always something tentative in our adhesion to
them (Taylor, 1989: 17).

3.3 Identity and strong evaluations

Our identity is defined by the commitments and identifications that are provided by the
framework within which we determine what is good or not. It is the horizon that allows
me to take a stand on my life. When we lose these commitments, we lose the significance
that things have for us, and we face an identity crisis. We do not know who we are since
we do not know where we are. For Taylor, to know who I am is to be oriented in moral
space. This space can be mapped by strong evaluations (1989: 27-29).

These evaluations are always made in context (Kitchen: 46), that is within a
language rooted in cultural histories, which has already been shaped by desire. Strong
evaluations are mediated by cultural values (Steele: 434-435) and influence other realms,
like aesthetics and personal tastes (Taylor, 2002a: 189).

Taylor says we live with some goods and we rank them, giving more importance
to one than another. We judge people and ourselves according to the attention paid to
these goods. This evaluation gives me a fundamental direction in the life, defines my
identity. Our identity orients us because the qualitative distinctions it has incorporated
allow us to distinguish what is or is not important. When I am turned to this good, the life
seems meaningful and whole. On the contrary, the feeling of losing orientation is
destructive in a person’s life (1989: 30, 62-63). Since we seek for a direction, our lives
can be understood as a quest. It also means that identity is something open and that it can
be constructed, to some extent, in the future. It is not only something fixed we inherited
form the past.
Our modern identity is deeper and more many-sided than in earlier times, and this complicates our articulation of it. If we cannot place ourselves in relation with the good, questions about what kind of life is worth living remain unanswered. Taylor’s point is that ‘the goods which define our spiritual orientation are the ones by which we will measure the worth of our lives’ (1989:42). The aspiration to fullness can be answered in many different forms. But the fact is that those orientative goods are interwoven with human life; we cannot avoid answering the question for the good that orient our life. All frameworks place us before this sort of questions (Taylor, 1989: 29, 42-45).

Without understanding qualitative distinctions, a central part of our lives remains unexplained. What I am as a self, my identity, is defined by the things that have meaning for me. Identity is a notion that cannot be answered in universal terms. To ask what a person is, regardless of his or her interpretations, is a misguided question. We are ‘self’ insofar as we ask for the good, for certain orientation in the moral space (Taylor, 1989: 28, 34, 87).

3.4 Hypergoods

The keystone of Taylor’s moral order is the idea of hypergood. We need to locate the hypergoods which shape the moral outlook and practices of a culture because those goods are the moral sources of that culture. Different moral frameworks include different hypergoods (Levy: 50; Baker: 141; Redhead, 2001: 85).

According to Taylor, we have the sense that some actions or modes of life and feeling are higher than other ones. There are ‘goods’, which are worthy or better than others in a way that cannot be compared. They are not only more desirable; they stand independent of our own desires and represent the standards by which we judge our
desires and choices. They mark out what is a ‘worthy life’. The highest good can challenge and reject the former goods. If it changes, all the way of our understanding and relating with other goods will change (1989: 20, 66).

The place of these hypergoods is a problem. They are ‘epistemologically unsettling’ because they present us one option (‘the good’) that challenges others; our acceptance (or not) of this good make us re-evaluate the others. We have to face two problems. On the one side, the perspective of changing and dismissing earlier goods is a source of moral skepticism, but on the other side, we cannot avoid the fact that some hypergoods are interwoven into relations of dominance (Taylor, 1989: 66, 70-71). Taylor says that hypergoods are more than domination enterprises and that the domination problem also shows how people are powered by a vision of the good: the dominant, empowered by their own view, oppress others. The frameworks of the dominant people, pretending to avoid relativism, occlude the ‘good’ that inspire then. Because this hypergood is hidden, it cannot be criticized. Hence, he follows the importance of the articulation enterprise. Our notions of the good, our understandings of the self, the kinds of narrative in which we make sense, and the conception of what is to be one among others, are connected and evolve together in loose packages that should be disclosed in order to avoid domination (Taylor, 1989: 100, 105). In deconstructing this package, or ‘imaginary’, we will have an epistemic gain in two senses: we give room to other imaginaries and we have to be accountable of our ordinary decisions.

As moral orientation is not a fixed reality but a construction, a sort of ‘travel’, a hypergood should be justified through a reading of its history. The ‘hypergoods’ we share in our civilization have arisen over the former ones, which were less adequate. Taylor
understands that the new hypergood embraced by a culture is a step towards higher moral consciousness. It means that a less adequate view is one which does not allow us an account of reality, that blocks us from a satisfactory dealing with it. It is not our ‘best account’.

### 3.5 The problem of ethnocentrism

Here arises a problem. If Taylor says that there are strong evaluations, if he stands that we can compare them and decide which is the best account of life, if he argues that the values we have are the survivors after a kind of Darwinist struggle, how can he explain different views of modernity without being ‘ethnocentric’? Does Taylor actually uphold a ‘cultural’ point of view? His theory can be read as if the failure of a culture is something deserved because of the weakness of that culture. The risk of the dynamics of the ‘best account’ arises when the ‘successful’ account of one culture is imposed on other cultures. When Taylor says we cannot do without a framework, he opens the gate to an eventual ethnocentrism, which is implied in all cultures (Steele: 433).

Redhead has proposed to keep Taylor as a ‘practical procedure’ (2001: 82; 99-101; 2004). But Taylor himself challenges proceduralist and formalist theories in their pretension to neutrality (Steele: 432). The first part of the ‘Sources’ (1989) is an explanation of his point: everyone stands in a place, which is considered better than others, and from there addresses life and makes judgments on the lives of others. The respect for others’ opinions, the worth of ordinary life or the commitment to avoid domination all fit in with Taylor’s definition of ‘hypergood’.

Taylor thinks the philosophies that deny the implicit moral outlook and occlude further articulation do so because there is a sort of suspicion over any claim of ‘higher
good’ instead of vindicating the value of ordinary life. Nevertheless, for him, the moral value of ‘ordinary life’ is a hypergood in itself (Taylor, 1989: 81). Moreover, the story of a hypergood of a culture shows us how a less adequate view has been suppressed by history and gives us a criterion to judge over contemporary practices: the principle of ‘equal respect’ can be traced in history as a negation of hierarchical societies, but it is also a standard from which we address modern cultures (Taylor, 1989: 64, 65).

Addressing the problem of cultural conflicts in his reading of Taylor’s work, Enrique Dussel (1988: 127-128) proposes an answer through the principium oppressionis. He says that when the other is considered just part of the system and not a subject it is completely oppressed. The oppression has been shown in different ways. Western Modernity has been de facto colonialistii. However, Dussel goes further. The oppression appears also in the claim of all cultures to being the ‘hub of the world’ as it is the case of many Native American traditions. Nevertheless, Dussel says the principium oppressionis is something more. In every culture there is always something denied or, at least, some reality hidden, not seen, covered. In that sense, every culture is ethnocentric because it implies some options and decisions instead of other ones. For that reason, a particular culture can never be considered as the paradigm against which other cultures should be tested. It will be the best account until we dis-cover the other denied by this culture or system. This best account should always be provisory.

3.6 Imaginary, an articulable articulation

We can resume Taylor’s view saying that the imaginary is an articulation that needs to be articulated.
Since the imaginary is a category that involves the moral order structured by a certain hypergood and manifested in symbols and social practices, it is already a sort of articulation. It provides us with a vision of what is the good for us. The images and stories that inspire us point towards something insightful for us, bring us in contact with our moral source and confer substance on our life. Most of the time the source of our vision remain unknown (Taylor, 1989: xi, 91-95).

As long as an imaginary is unexpressed -and for this reason unnoticed-, it is assumed to be the ‘natural’ or ‘objective order’ of the world. It must be articulated in explicit doctrines and, through those, allow us further challenges and dialogues.

Articulation is the expression and disclosure of a cultural moral framework in words and images. When we can say what help us to build our lives, we bring us closer our source of the good and empower that moral ground. In articulating the values, we also allow them to be normative (Klaushofer: 142). And here is the risk of a ‘partial’ articulation: as they are ‘normative’ and a ‘horizon we are virtually incapable of thinking beyond’, we tend to impose them over other people and cultures. An imaginary can be something purely fictitious, dangerously false. It can be a self-serving fiction (Taylor, 2004: 183,185). At the same time ‘imaginary’ as a category, which claims to be open and never adequately expressed because of its unlimited and indefinite nature, allows us to face the challenges of other cultures. In this sense, the cultural theories are more aware of the principium oppresionis than the positivist frameworks.

Taylor’s articulation target is ‘to explore the background picture which underlies our moral intuitions (...) which lies behind and makes sense of these intuitions and
responses’ and shape our sense of orientation in questions about the good and makes our responses adequate for us (Taylor, 1989: 41).

To articulate any particular background is controversial. Taylor states that to be human is to be equipped with a set of values of a certain culture (Klaushofer: 141). As neutrality is unavailable to human beings, Taylor’s way of proceeding involves mapping connections between senses of the self and moral visions, between identity and the good, disclosing the pretensions of neutrality by highlighting the place of the good in our moral outlook and life (Taylor, 1989: x). Moreover, explanations may be restricted because there is a gap in what people ‘officially’ believe and what they need to make sense of some of their moral reactions (Taylor, 1989: 9).

Our imaginary is already a sort of articulation, but as it is an a-critical one, it pretends objectivity and leads us to ethnocentric assumptions. We need to articulate it in order to challenge it and, eventually, strengthen or change it. That means we need a kind of disclosing method that allow us engage in a dialogue with others. As moral order is so deeply interwoven with our identity, we cannot use a method the aim of which is to avoid particularities.

Henceforth, Taylor will explore hermeneutics in order to provide us with an explicit articulation of our imaginary that might allow us to realize its own characteristics and get into a dialogical process with others. If we are engaged in a dialogue process, and are able to yield some points of view (which is not easy since we have a deep emotional investment in our identity and the images we have of the others), we could reach a ‘provisory best account’. This best account is the one that, in a precisely moment of the history, makes the most accurate sense of our reality and the life of other people. This
account will be able to avoid ethnocentrism if we reach it through an ‘understanding’ method.

4 Taylor’s ‘Best account’

4.1 Avoiding ethnocentrism

Taylor says we cannot avoid using strong evaluations for judging situations or deciding about people because we need some categories to make sense of what are we doing. The imaginary is that which allows us to understand the life of others. The articulation of our moral source is important in order to clarify the implications at the imaginary and the corrections it needs. Articulation also helps us to appreciate and empower our source. An articulation works as long as it brings the source closer, explains the source and its force to inspire us. Some articulation may be obsolete, or change when it has no more power to inspire people (Taylor, 1989: 59, 96).

If the implicit hypergood of a culture is shown in qualitative distinctions, we need to make these discriminations explicit, so we can challenge them as ‘parochial’ principles (Taylor, 1989: 85, 97-98). Disclosing our horizon is a way to avoid ethnocentrism. When we see our moral outlook as an outcome of a certain values and historical conditions, we are opening our sources to a double debate: to our own criticism and to the dialogue among others (Steele: 433). We cannot be free if we do not have the capacity to criticize our beliefs and values, for challenge our norms and rules (Stephenson: 9). Any imaginary must be articulated in order for us to be aware of the tacit values hidden in it. It is *de facto* our best account and could be ethnocentric or could hide a good in our own
life or in the others’ culture. Social imaginaries are ‘real’ because we cannot avoid using them in our daily life (Taylor, 1989: 59).

Cultural conflict exists. Articulating the imaginary helps to reconciliation because it gives us greater lucidity to recognize the goods to which we hold allegiance, it opens to us our moral sources and discloses the underpinning of our strong decisions. Taylor says that, in spite of our comprehension will be improved through this correction, it remains provisory. It is a step towards understanding, which is a long road. This road passes through the undoing of our implicit interpretations that distort the reality of the other. This means that we should allow ourselves to be challenged by what is different in their lives, noticing our peculiarity and perceiving their features undistorted (Taylor, 2002c: 285-286).

As we are not able to say that one imaginary is superior to another, what is worthy is authenticity and faithfulness to our now strengthened source. We cannot know, until experience challenge our paradigmiii, when our appropriate answer to the life will be changed, making us modify our strong evaluations (Taylor, 2002a: 190).

The demand to change our moral outlook is in fact a challenge to our identity. Coming to see the other correctly means that we are going to alter our understanding of ourselves, to make an identity shift within ourselves. This is difficult because ‘We have a deep identity investment in the distorted images we cherish of others’ (Taylor, 2002c: 295). There is no possibility of understanding the other without a change in the way we understand ourselves. A real understanding has an identity cost. Until now, the cost of identity shift has been paid by the oppressed because the ruling groups have based their
understanding in the confidence that their imaginary was accurate enough. Domination forms are hidden in some moral sources (Taylor, 1989: 100; 2002c: 295).

The paradox of identity is that while we want our identity to be respected without ethnocentric impositions, we need others’ acceptance of our own identity. The claim for particularity needs universal recognition (Taylor, 1995b: 24). We need to recognize the others in a common and shared horizon, in order to get their recognition of our particularity.

4.2 A science for culture

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century insulated the scientific language from human meaning in order to create a so-called ‘objective’ language to describe nature. Because of this abstraction, Taylor does not believe we can approach human affairs with the same tools we use for physics. As the physical sciences are no longer anthropocentric, we need a different science for the ‘self’ than the one we use for nature, which is ‘other-than-human’ (Taylor, 1989: 59; 2002c: 280, 281). Moral argument and exploration function only within a world shaped by our moral responses in the same way as natural science arguments function on a neutralized world (Taylor, 1989: 8). The model of science in taking us beyond experience and transcending experience is in principle impossible in human affairs. ‘Human sciences’ should be the explanation of human experiences, that is the explanation of the ‘objects’ challenging our point of view. A theory that bypassed human experience by pretending to grasp its domain in neutral terms cannot give us a ‘human’ science (Taylor, 2002c: 285).

In Taylor’s view, to make explicit our moral intuitions we need a language of ‘thick description’ that makes sense of our life including an interpretation of reality and a
definition of our own identity. The difficulty is that the language we use to understand the people of one society and time fails when we attempt to explain another. Those concepts will change because the people studied have different languages than the students themselves, and because there are backgrounds of understanding that may be completely absent in other societies. Ethnocentrism means the assumption that all cultures share our background (Taylor, 1989: 75-78, 80; 2002c: 283-285).

The ‘self’ is partly constituted by his or her own interpretations of reality and these interpretations can never be fully explicit or articulated. The self cannot be exhausted by any language because to study a person is to study people that are constituted by a certain language. However, as the language exists only in a community, one is ‘self’ only among other selves. The ‘self’ cannot be described without reference to his or her surrounding. Our dependence on language makes the relation with others constitutive of the human agents. Since I am a self in relation to certain interlocutors, community is essential in achieving my identity. Thus, defining identity means both: defining the stand on our spiritual matters and defining the reference to the community (Taylor, 1989: 35-38).

Neither communities nor languages are something fixed once and forever. We need to be aware of the time factor to explain the self. My sense of myself is the sense of my own story, what I am and how I got here. We want our lives to have a meaning; sometimes we want our future to ‘redeem’ our past, to make sense of it. The sense of the good is woven into the story of my life. Making sense of one’s story is not superfluous. We need to tell our story to discover who we are, how we have become this and where
we are going. Narrative structures my identity (Taylor, 1989: 47-48, 51), explains the
present by retrieving the past and sketching the future (Stephenson: 7).

To summarize, Taylor points to features of human culture, space and time, that
complicate the applying of the methods of physical science: the particularity of culture
asks for a particular language to express it and, since identity is shaped through history,
we need a science that discloses this history. Instead of the ‘beyond experience paradigm’
Taylor proposes an ‘understanding’ model. Knowing an object is quite different from
coming to an understanding with an interlocutor. Taylor says the goal of knowing an
object is explaining it in such a way that it will never surprise us again. If I achieve full
intellectual control over an object, it will never talk back and surprise me. Coming to an
understanding with another subject can never have this finality, because it is impossible
in human affairs (Taylor, 1989: 33-34; 2002c: 281, 283). Our partners cannot remain the
same, their life situation and goals may change and the understanding be put in question
(Taylor, 2002c: 280). Moreover, the ‘student’ also changes: the language we use to
understand others changes since it reflects our march towards a goal. The language will
not be the same in which members of a culture understand themselves (Taylor, 2002c:
286-287).

4.3 An understanding model

If we say that humanity expresses itself in different values and cultures and that each
society has its strong decisions, it seems that human cultures are incommensurable
(Taylor, 1989: 60-61). Taylor says that we can address the difference by improving the
questions that should be asked, the issues that should be arised and the emphasis that
should be made (Taylor, 2002c: 288). Accounts can be ranked not only for their
‘accuracy’ and ‘non-distortion’ but also because of the way in which they take in and make mutually ‘comprehensible’ a wider band of perspectives. The more comprehensive account is the one which fuses more horizons (Taylor, 2002c: 289). As a result of this struggle for understanding, we come to see a certain vocabulary as the most realistic and insightful for the things of its domain. It is the language that makes the ‘best sense’; that becomes ‘real’ for us and will be unavoidable in any further explanation of our new moral outlook (Taylor, 1989: 69; 2002c, 292).

The fusion of the different ways we understand the human condition takes place when the subject undergoes a shift, and the horizon is enlarged so long as to make room for the object that had no place in it before. Our horizon is extended beyond its former limit; it is not just an introduction of new language but an extension in relation to the other’s language. It is the result of a conversation in which the interlocutors strive to come to an understanding, to overcome the obstacle and to find a un-distortional language for both of them (Taylor, 2002c: 287; 288). A new understanding is the outcome of a shift that enlarges the standards of intelligibility that frame the debate (Klaushofer: 145).

The transition towards a more comprehensive imaginary is made possible because of the inconsistencies of the current accounts, practices and values. The motivation is provided by the struggle we want to solve, expressed in the limits and failures we discover in our language when we address new realities.

When we face a new encounter, we ask each paradigm to account for the existence of the other. This deliberation is done by historical actors within an historical
context in dialogue with and against other moral outlooks - from the past, the present and
many different institutions which compete amongst themselves to provide a meaning.

This dialogue implies that we should be open to yielding some points of view and
to making some changes in our identity. The ‘understanding model’ proposed by Taylor
is a tool that leads us from the epistemic realm towards the moral one. The crucial
moment is the one when we allow ourselves to be challenged by the other, when the
difference is not understood as ‘error’ or ‘un-development’ but as an invitation to see
their imaginary as a viable human alternative. The challenge is to acknowledge the
humanity of their horizons, while still being able to live ours (Taylor, 2001a: 139-140;
2002c: 296).

In summary, coming to an understanding implies that I agreed to yield in some
points of view in order to function together with the partner, meaning listening and
talking; and hence the understanding may require that I re-define my goals. Suppose we
do not reach an agreement, we never come back to the same framework. Frameworks do
not remain the same after the meeting. They have changed, they have been asked new
questions.

The ‘understanding’ approach instead of asking for the ‘human condition’ as a
human nature below the level of culture, tackles cultural difference as the most important
explananda in human life. Our challenge is to put the question in the right place, being
aware of labels. We should keep in mind that we tend to think that we are able to reach
‘neutral categories’ which will fit in all cultures, such as ‘political system’, ‘family’ or
‘religion’. All of them are our way of understanding human life and we cannot assume
that they are either neutral or universal (Taylor, 2002c: 282, 293-294).
4.4 The provisory best account

In Taylor’s view, our moral judgments are comparative rather than absolutist (Klaushofer: 145). We use our imaginary to ‘make sense’. Taylor says ‘make sense’ in two different ways: because the terms of the imaginary are helpful for our understanding of others’ lives; and because we cannot be accountable for our world without them. Our measure of reality is given by these terms which are useful to explain our life and those of others (1989: 57-58; 2002c: 292).

The terms we need to ‘make sense’ are the ones that have been making sense in our history, which is a history with others. This language is useful ‘unless and until’ we find a more clairvoyant one. The result of this search for lucidity, Taylor says, is our best account (1989: 58).

If we allow ourselves to think in different conceptual schemes, we will be able to move from our ‘first language’ –the one at the time of the encounter, that can only distort the other- to a “second” one –richer, since it makes room for a more adequate understanding of the other (Taylor, 2002c: 292-293).

A change in our moral outlook is worthy when we can say that the transition from one point to another is an epistemic gain. Our best account is the one that allows us to better deal with life, reducing the gap between our thoughts and praxis. The account is good to the extent it is grounded in our strong intuitions, it is challenged by other outlooks, and makes sense of ours and others’ lives. This account is the best explanation we can give ourselves about our acts, feelings and thoughts. Rational proof should show that the transition leads to an error, that the conviction with which we have grown up can
be contested by another interpretation of what we have been living (Taylor, 1989: 72-75, 106).

As we are engaged in a continual process of enquiry and reflection about the meaning of our life, our best account –now transformed in to an imaginary from which we address the world with new terms- is always provisory. This provisory’ makes our language vulnerable (Steele: 441), just one of many possible accounts. Taylor disavows the goal of a definitive account of the telos of human life; he just proposes an articulation in the meanwhile (Kitchen: 34).

If, as we have said, the language of the thick description includes our interpretation of reality and a definition of our identity, in making the language fragile Taylor posses a challenge to our idea of identity as something fixed. Identity is not as strong as we used to think. It has been made up during time; it is an outcome of certain inputs. If the inputs change, the result will not be the same.

The sense of ‘provisional answer’ to a ‘provisional question’ makes the ‘best account’ a useful way to avoid ethnocentrism. It implies awareness of the principium oppressionis. The best account is not the end of history; it is just a provisory outcome. It keeps the tension between the category and the reality that challenges it; the tension within time: as the new ‘best account’ was not here before, it cannot be here in the future. Finally, the ‘best account’ keeps the tension of ethnocentrism and identity. In Taylor’s view, the best account is an attempt to hold in balance the option of nurturing one’s own identity while remaining open to the stranger (Klaushofer: 147).
5 Taylor’s categories in a Latino American scenario

Imaginary is, in Taylor’s thought, a category of understanding social praxis and the reasons people give to make sense of these practices. The ultimate reason is the hypergood of a culture, which influences the strong decisions and, in doing so, the identity of a people. Those strong evaluations outline the moral framework from which people address their own lives and the lives of others.

The imaginary that makes sense of our social practices is the framework from which we take our moral decisions about our life and the conduct of others. The imaginary is manifested in symbols and in our everyday dealings with persons and institutions. We only recognize our cultural framework as an ‘imaginary’ -challenging the supposition it is something ‘objective’ or ‘natural’- when others make their apparition in our lives. The encounter with others is not optional; we need them to recognize our own identity. In those moments, reality talks back to say it may be not well addressed with the categories we have. In this search for new categories, which takes the method of a hermeneutic dialogue, we can (a) strength our imaginary, (b) make a shift on it or (c) engage ourselves in a process of enlarging the imaginary in such way that it becomes something different. Henceforth, the imaginary makes sense of the others’ language and horizon. After this ‘experience’, nobody remains the same; something in our imaginary has changed, which is to say that something in our identity has changed.

The best result of this process is possible when we are open to recognizing both: (i) the limits of our framework and (ii) the fact that different cultures have imaginaries that also ‘make sense’ of what is a worthy human life. The outcome of this process is the
‘best account’ we have to make sense of our life. This account is provisory because it keeps the tension of recognition alive.

If we accept the category of ‘imaginary’ and the process of ‘best account’ as accurate enough to address Latin America reality; the problem that arises is how and where we can find out a Latin American social imaginary.

First, can we speak about Latin America as a whole? There are so many cultures in the continent (not only between different countries but also inside them, as in Mexico, Brazil and Bolivia, for instance) that we can hardly generalize about them without being unfair. However, if the others’ recognition is a way of testing our identity, ‘Latin America’ as a whole is a cultural particularity among other western cultures. The name ‘Latino America’ itself was given by the French, in order to distinguish it from the ‘Anglo America’ (Steinsleger).

Since we have said that identity is articulated through narration, we can search for the social imaginary in Latin American narrative. Literary works are not just aesthetic; they make claims that we need to understand, because they can be arguments of a community. A main problem here is which criteria we use to evaluate any written work as representative of a culture. For instance, if we follow Echeverría’s work (2000), in the idea of libero arbitrio (free will) that the Jesuits spread all over Latin America through theirs universities in the Seventeenth century, there is something that can be identified as a ‘hypergood’. This affirmation has a strong ‘material proof’ in the fact that most of the theological documents recovered from the colonial period are about free will (Saranyana, 2005: 30-31). However, is the quantity of printings the proper criteria for the impact of a work in the formation of a social imaginary? It does not seem so. For instance
Himmelfarb, who studied the French Enlightenment imaginary through the *Encyclopédie*, says that such an influential work has been printed just once and was never completely translated (2004: 11).

We need further research in order to disclose the Latin American imaginary of modernity and the hypergood that structures it. We should (a) examine our social practices and ask them about the conception of human life that they embody, (b) ask about the expectations we have about the conduct of the people with whom we share our daily life, (c) inquire what gives legitimacy to those practices and (d) ask what reasons people give to make sense of their ordinary life.

Here I want to highlight some of the moments in which I think we can conduct this ‘narrative quest’ of our identity. Keeping in mind the features of a social imaginary (it gives legitimacy to social practices, it needs others’ recognition and it usually expresses itself in symbols) we can try to articulate the Latin America imaginary in order to disclose the un-explicit hypergood of Latin American culture.

1. After the America’s Discovery, the claim of Montesinos, De las Casas and Vitoria about the Spanish’s right of conquest was paramount. They asked the Spanish Empire for recognition of the Native American rights. No other European Empire has this kind of struggle from the insidevi. In that moment arose two different ‘hypergoods’ that will remain shaping two different Latin American imaginaries.

In the XVII century, the corporate work of the Jesuits influenced an important part of the life and culture of Latin America. That century was the Baroque. It was expressed in the art, but also in other realms of the life, as a struggle between classic forms and new realities. The Baroque was the cultural response that people from America
created in order to make sense of a world in transition, keeping alive the chance of life in America. While accepting the imposed rules, they challenged them in obliquo. This way of ‘resistance’ shaped our imaginary; we can find it in the economy and in politics. For example, in the eighteenth century when the Metropolis imposed the monopoly of commerce on the colonies, smuggling was one of the main economic activities. The reality broke down the imperial laws in a ‘practical’ way, without challenging them openly. Nowadays, our legal system pretends to be ‘developed’ but the informal economy is as large as the formal one.

2. The arising of the ‘national state’ and its thinkers during the Independence age, in the nineteenth century. Newborn Latin American states not only asked for the recognition of their independence, but they also got involved in a dialogue with French and North American Enlightenment in order to form their new institutions (government system, commerce, education). Those years were dominated by the canon of French Culture, which was challenged by the ‘criollo’ imaginary, meaning the recognition of the Spanish and Catholic influence as ‘positive’.

Nevertheless, these new states did not recognize the reality of some political institutions of the ‘Latino Catholic modernity’ as the fact of the ‘chief’ or caudillo. Whenever this reality had been denied, it kept appearing in the always-ambiguous political way of ‘populism’. This feature has been addressed as something characteristic of our social life with roots in the machismo. Nevertheless, for other thinkers, in the populist governments of the first half of the twentieth century there was a sort of ‘modernization process’ through the enlargement of social rights. During the years of
populism, many national identities were manifested (or constructed) through different symbols, like the ‘Muralist movement’ in the Mexican arts.

3. During the sixties and seventies, the “Liberation theories” (Theory of Dependence, Liberation Theology and Philosophy, Paulo Freire’s pedagogy and also the foquismo, as a particular Latino form of the Marxist revolution theory) and the so-called ‘magic realism’ in literature not only showed some identity features, but also led to the discovery of the native cultures. In this recognition, we can see a claim to remind us the principium oppressionis which is inside our own culture. This attention to Native American cultures has been neglected in our political systems. While I am writing this article, Bolivia has chosen a Native American as president for the first time in its two hundred years of independent history. Ninety percent of the population of this country is Native American. On this Election Day, on December 2005, Bolivia has the highest rate of participation in a ballot vote in her history and the biggest gap between the first and the second candidate. This gives rise to questions about the accuracy of our institutions in addressing our realities.

Here is, I think, a main insight of Taylor’s work on Latin America modernity. What does it means the structural inefficacy of the state to give its people decent conditions of life? Have our states been organized to address our people’s realities? Does the imaginary that shapes our institutions ‘make sense’ of our practices? Do we share the ‘hypergood’ supported by our institutions and legal frameworks?

We cannot rely on the law to make sense of our practices; we cannot explain our social practices with the rules because we are used to break them. Thus, we have many
ways to ‘make sense’ of this problem. One way is saying that we are an outlaw people, we are corrupted and the solution is to strengthen the states’ police powers.

However, we can explain our practice through the inconvenience of the institutions. If institutions are not helpful for the people, the people will not help them. For instance, the moral principles claimed by our Constitutions are useless if the institutions do not embody them in our everyday life. The equality of the people in health or education proclaimed by our states is a lie until the equality is transformed in a repertory of social practices. Moreover, we have here another way to search for Latin American cultural ‘hypergood’. Our quest can try to disclose the good of these institutional practices, asking the social structures for the hypergood that has shaped them. What is the hypergood which claims to shape our institutions? What is the hypergood that our institutions actually embody?

On the other side, we should research for the ideas of ‘full life’ that underpin people’s moral frameworks. Through a search on our strong evaluations, through the judgments we impose on others, we can understand what is important for us, what things identify ourselves. Since we have many choices and we live in many different situations (family, work, friends, church), our identity is shaped by a sort of ‘competing’ strong goods. This makes it difficult to recognize one ‘hypergood’. As long as we cannot identify one, we are in a struggle among different, and even contradictory, hypergoods. The worry about Latin American identity can be a manifestation of this struggle. The search can be explained because of (a) the disappointment with the hypergoods proposed by the different sources of identity and (b) the uneasy feeling caused by the absence of a hypergood.
Since the hypergood is an orientation, we can attempt to explain the trip through narration. But we must place the questions carefully. We have been oppressed, but we also have our own history of oppression. The *principium oppressionis* is inside our imaginary. The reading of our history might answer who we are and how we got here.

One hypothesis of further work may be the existence of two Latin American imaginaries, which are engaged in a recognition struggle. In this hypothesis, we can search for one imaginary among the elites that shaped our institutions, whose hypergood was the Nor-western modernity in its different versions. On the other side, we have the ‘popular’ imaginary whose hypergood was keeping ‘ordinary life’ alive. The social practices and the political expressions of the first imaginary are the ‘liberal’ civil society and the ‘republic’ system. The expressions of the second are ‘people’s practices’ and the ‘populist’ polity. As no one can be imposed on the other, we have this modernity, an ‘undeveloped’ one according to the Western cultural canons. As each imaginary is normative, but with different allegiances, the fight is between two ethical systems that blame each other because of their failure to better life. Both sides stand on their own imaginary, without realizing of the differences between them. They pretend their own imaginary is the ‘best account’ of our reality, and they attempt to impose it on the other group. However, both imaginaries need the other’s recognition of its own identity. They need to ‘come to an understanding’ and get involved in redefining their goals. No imaginary alone can explain current practices and values since none of them can reach a best account and shape social practices that make sense of Latin American life.
Taylor uses imaginary as a noun in order to express the way ordinary people imagine their social surrounding (2002d:106, 110; 2004: 23).

In spite of the distinctions that Himmelfarb (2004) points to in the American, British and French Enlightenments, all of them were imperialistic.

Since history shows us many shifts in the life of the humanity, we have a case for believing that there is an answer that we cannot imagine, but we have no way to knowing it for sure. The fact that there is an answer is different from our power to achieve it (Taylor, 2002a: 187, 191).

As Klaushofer says, the emergence of multiple moral sources is already an epistemic gain because we realize that people can live human lives in many different frameworks, and this fact allows us to have a truer grasp of the human condition (1999: 145).

The provisory of the Best Account has many interpretations: because a generation can never address the whole history, nor the whole space; because reality resists our attempts to give an exhaustive account of it and there is always a risk of miss-interpretation (Levy: 49, 58); because the past is always open to reinterpretation and our readings of it are always contingent, open to critique and transformation (Redhead, 2001: 100); because Taylor does not say ‘social goods’ win out every time (Saurette, 2004: 724).

For instance, Burke denounced British rule in India because he was against the monopoly sanctioned by the British government, not against imperialism itself. He asked for a ‘benevolent imperialism’ which would respect Indian people and tradition (Himmelfarb, 2004: 78-79).

On the one side, the dissolution of the native cultures, but the unavoidable presence of the Native Americans; on the other the imposition of European forms, but the lack of means of the Spanish Crown in completing the task. Those realities made both sides in America (the Spanish and the Natives) join together in order to make life possible, against the menace of the void and the total failure of the process. It was a multiple transition: between native towards an alien America, between nature towards ‘modernity’, between the pieces of native cultures and Spanish institutions in America towards the possibility of life.

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