

The Present State of the Stench. Some Themes in Günter Rodolfo Kusch's Output

La actualidad del hedor. Algunos temas de la producción de Günter Ro

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Abstract

In this brief text, we present a synthetic understanding of the author's intellectual itinerary based on a thematic overview of his writing output. First, we present the plant metaphor that is found in his early works and has later repercussions. Secondly, we present his fieldwork in the Argentine puna and the emergence of a phenomenology of culture. Below we show clues about his participation in the Philosophy of Liberation movement and his reflections on geoculture, people, and liberation. Finally, we report on the author's latest published texts, in which he rethinks cultural hermeneutics based on the symbol and the popular.

Keywords. vegetable metaphor, culture, popular thought, liberation, symbol

Resumen

En este breve texto, presentamos una comprensión sintética del itinerario intelectual del autor a partir de un repaso temático de su producción escrita. En primer lugar, presentamos la metáfora vegetal que se encuentra en sus primeras obras y que tiene repercusiones posteriores. En segundo lugar, presentamos su trabajo de campo en la puna argentina y el surgimiento de una fenomenología de la cultura. A continuación, mostramos algunas pistas sobre su participación en el movimiento de la Filosofía de la Liberación y sus reflexiones sobre la geocultura, los pueblos y la liberación. Por último, informamos sobre los últimos textos publicados por el autor, en los que repensa la hermenéutica cultural a partir del símbolo y lo popular.

Palabras clave:. metáfora vegetal, cultura, pensamiento popular, liberación, símbolo

Introducción

Günter Rodolfo Kusch was born in Buenos Aires on June 25, 1922, of German parents. Professor of Philosophy (UBA), he taught secondary and higher education at Argentine and Bolivian universities. He made research trips and field work and organized symposiums, seminars and academic conferences on American topics during his stay at the University of Salta; he participated in Americanist congresses, in the 2nd National Congress of Philosophy (Alta Gracia, Córdoba, 1971) and in the Academic Weeks of the Universidad del Salvador, San Miguel area (1970–1973). He was a member of the Board of Directors of SADE between 1971 and 1973. After the military coup of

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1976, he went into self-exile in Maimará, Jujuy, with his family. He died in Buenos Aires on September 30, 1979.

In this brief text, we present a synthetic understanding of the author's intellectual itinerary based on a thematic tour of his writing output. First, we present the vegetal metaphor that is found in his early production and has later repercussions. Secondly, we present his fieldwork in the Argentinean puna and the emergence of a phenomenology of culture. Then we show indications of his participation in the Philosophy of Liberation movement and his reflections on geoculture, people, and liberation. Finally, we give an account of the author's latest published texts, in which he rehearses cultural hermeneutics based on symbolism and popularity. Obsessed by deep America and indigenous and popular thought and by culture, between the seduction of barbarism and the figures of the people, Kusch was the author of numerous works, in which he transmitted his great aesthetic and philosophical sensibility.

The Vegetable as a Place of Enunciation

From the beginning of his literary production until the publication of *Seducción de la barbarie*, the texts contain an American aesthetic and popular thought. *Seducción* is the end of a stage where the vegetal metaphor occupies a prominent place. The 1953 book includes texts from the 1950s to the 1960s. In *La seducción de la barbarie*, he developed an original reflection from the landscape where he perceives that the vegetal, the telluric, and the demonism are proper to the American against the universal sense and the objective reality, the truth, and the fiction of the European. And it is so characteristic of the American that it has passed the pre-Columbian era to pass through the caudillo and the leaders of the independence movement, adopting the form of "barbarism" to reach our days in the form of the "popular": That is why history is in the first place an unconfessed submission of the intelligent present to the original demonism of the soil (Kusch, 1953, p. 57).

Kusch began his reflection on the vegetal metaphor in "Paisaje y mestizaje en América" (1951), published in the influential *Sur* magazine run by Victoria Ocampo. The first sentence of the text is forceful: "In

the landscape lies a rudimentary form of definition," (Kusch, 1951, p. 37), as "fixation" from vegetal demonism. Rationality, the paradox of being-not-being, and truth are overcome by the mythical attitude that conjugates divinity and landscape. This text is a deepening of "the primitive mentality" (Kusch, 1945). In "Intelligence and barbarism" published in the magazine *Contorno* (Kusch, 1954), he focuses on the issue of the strategies assumed by the intellectual to escape, dissimulate, or frame the monstrosity, the invisible and the incomprehensible of America in the academic normality. Kusch affirmed that beyond intelligence, America is comprehensible by making a "leap into the absurd" from which it is possible to perceive the "fear of living" and assume the "bitter game of a seduction of barbarism". And in "Annotations for an aesthetics of the American" he advanced on an aesthetics of the tenebrous and the frightening, an aesthetics that slips away from the rules of formal art and the tendencies to the stable and the repeated—an aesthetics that appears as a conjuration of the original fright of being American, of the misty of existence, of "being no more" without knowing why (Kusch, 1955).

With *Tango* and *Credo rante*, he inaugurated a different writing register. Both texts are more than a theatrical piece; they are "a rite" (Kusch, 1959, p. 53), emphasizing the idea of a "tango myth" or a "liturgical office" with the presence of a "propitiatory victim". He discovered the implicit forms "of an art of our own" from the "coven of our misery." The search for the foundation of American art led him to affirm the priority of artistic production over aesthetics, as he had already stated in "Annotations" and the imperious need to combine people and art, because up to now, art had not been able to express the people. For the author, the people is not the middle class but the ragged of the suburbs of our capitals, the mestizo and beyond the Indian (Kusch, 1959, p. 3).

With *La muerte del Chacho y la leyenda de Juan Moreira*, he deepened the literary-theatrical register and the search for "an American form of spectacle" (Kusch, 1960, p. 13). The truth of the soil of America emerged by repeatedly opposing cleanliness and stench, city and suburb, knowledge and ignorance, citizen and peasant or Indian, bourgeoisie and people. Thus, the work of popular art gives back to the people a content and a form that are proper to them

(Kusch, 1960, p. 7). He repeats the idea of mysticism and ritual that he had used in *Credo Rante* and insists on the creation of “new forms of spectacle.” The divine and the demonic, the vegetable metaphor, the stench, and the incantation bring to light the tensions between opposites without dialectical resolution, because faced with the inability to opt for any of them, we opt for miscegenation (Kusch, 1951, p. 7; 1953, p. 16).

The ambivalence between being-not being, city-landscape, fasto-nefarious fiction-reality, demonism-divinity, movement-immobility, vegetable metaphysics-citizen intelligence, illuminism-telluric, subject-object; in short, Kusch affirmed that we live two truths, a fictitious one, which we perceive, and a real one that we barely manage to live (Kusch, 1953, p. 15). Incantation is not a technical or strategic operation that maximizes results and manages objects using scientific logic. On the contrary, it is a seminal operation that simply integrates what “is.” The soil, the habitat, and the community are part of an economy of history that incorporates ritual and conjujo: the tremendous and the fascinating together with the demonic and the divine, simultaneously.

From the Phenomenology of Fieldwork to Philosophical Analysis

The understanding of culture as an existential decision was linked to the ethical and political dimension of the social existence of the collective subject. From the understanding of being, Kusch placed the figure of historical leaders in the realm of the symbol and analyzed them as figures of incantation: In the realm of history he highlights San Martín, Rosas, Perón, and Evita and, in another register, the literary one, he highlights Martín Fierro, Juan Moreira, and El Chacho. In *América Profunda*, he affirms that leaders are the political dimension of the stench, which puts it in evidence and turns it into a disturbing antagonist; perhaps, it is the only dimension known (Kusch, 1962, p. 14). As a result, the reflection on culture led to the ethical and the political, since “popular thought constitutes, above all, an ontic situation crystallized in an ethical affirmation” (Kusch, 1976, pp. 9, 14).

The thematization of the historical popular leaders implied the valorization of the people, of the “es-

tar nomás” as the stinking forms of politics and citizenship to recover the “fucking man.” Kusch discovers this conviction from the understanding of history: the politicization of the popular sectors, particularly of the workers and the social groups. The politicization of the popular sectors had the purpose of transforming the popular masses into a people. In the understanding of the processes of cultural liberation, he considered some slippages of positions: from disorganization to the organized community, from the absence of conscience to personality and social conscience, from ideological postulates and essentialism to the historicity of the social subject, from compliance to resistance and mobilization, among many others. According to Kusch (1975a), it was the truth behind the Inca Atahualpa, and it is the one that continues to throb, even today, after Perón’s death, against this constant that is the people, the left, the right, and the center’s crash. Perhaps there is not even room for politics (p. 5)

Moreover, in deep *América*, he analyzed Quichua and Aymara religious ideas with the hypothesis of finding the categories of American thinking. In the stench and in the abhorrent, in the “hotbed of the world” and the “divine wrath,” the unnamed gods manifest themselves. In that original experience, he perceived that the popular sectors, *descamisados* and *cabecitas negras*, those from below, showed a profound reality: the accursed and abominable, in short, the horror of being a people.

Those from below fought against them, always in that irremediable opposition of the stinking against the clean, without ever finding the middle ground. Thus Tupac Amaru, Pumacahua, Rozas, Peñaloza, and Perón succeeded each other like wild signs. All of them were destruction and anarchy, because they were the revelation in its cursed and stinking version: they were, in short, the stench of America. (Kusch, 1962, p. 14)

In *De la mala vida porteña*, he explored the survival of that original thinking in the city, where he found wisdom at the bottom of the street, in the bar, or in the suburbs. In the behind-the-scenes, what beats in the depths becomes conscious to become a people: The people annul the pretension of “being someone”

to remain in the realm of “just being.” The thematization of historical leaders is at the same time the valorization of the people, of the community, of the marginalized sectors, of “just being” as stinking forms of politics and citizenship. From there, Kusch recovered in his texts the “pure man,” who had been relegated in the liberal society to being someone (Kusch, 1966a, p. 139). In *Indios, porteños y dioses*, he carried out a search for the gods and the sacred in the civic life of the metropolis. He put the life of the altiplano in tension with the Western worldview of beliefs, science, and politics. With subtle stories, which he wrote as a script for a weekly column on Radio Nacional, he discovered disturbing aspects that put in check the pretended authenticity of the “patio of objects.” But even more disturbing was the evidence of a world populated by gods, both in the streets and the inhabitants of the puna and in the spaces and people of the big city (Kusch, 1966b). This journey ended with *El pensamiento indígena y popular*, where he directly addressed indigenous thought based on material collected during his travels in the altiplano. *La negación en el pensamiento popular* concluded the reflections initiated in *América Profunda** and continued in *Pensamiento indígena y popular*.

In *Negación* he clearly intended to show negation as a critique of scientific thought (object-subject) and at the same time he made evident—from popular speech—the form of a living and emotional thought as an energetic source and founding of human thinking in general: with negation one descends to the field of truth in which existence is performed; this is not conceived except in the horizon of being and not of being (Kusch, 1975a, p. 68). From the sayings of Anastasio Quiroga, he analyzed popular thought, discovering logic, ethics, theology, and the indigenous economy, which led him to the invention of the being-being formula. The negation made it possible to identify the heart of the matter: There is no other constant than that of his people. A philosophy of negation evidenced the anti-discursive matrix that “evades the logical proposition” and “blocks any discursive significance” (Kusch, 1975a, p. 20) in order to privilege a situated thought “surpassed by existence,” where the seminal emotionality operates and the energy of the sacred is revealed from the ritual deployment.

The analysis of popular discourse later allowed us to propose a geo-culturally situated anthropology: from the subject to the seminal operators: For this, according to Kusch (1975a) we may have to take up again sectors of our thinking that had been left aside by liberalism or by the left, to recover at last a real politics, framed in an American philosophical anthropology (p. 6).

In the Groove of Liberation Thought

In the process of transition from the phenomenology of fieldwork to the philosophy of culture, Kusch exponents of the nascent philosophy of liberation. Although he was not a philosopher of liberation, he came into contact with some founding members of the Argentine group, especially Scannone and Cullen, and was part of the team led by Scannone on the philosophical investigation of the wisdom of the Argentine people as a hermeneutic site for a theory of philosophy of religion about the relationship between religion and language (1977–1979). As a result, Kusch came into contact with the incipient philosophy of liberation and with theologians of the Argentine current of the Theology of the People, an autonomous current within liberation theology that incorporated authors such as Ricoeur, Levinas, and others into his cultural baggage. However, Kusch’s thought was positioned from another vector, investigating the very root of the native cultures, their thought, religiosity, and modes of community organization. Certainly, a philosophical instrumentation was elaborated in the philosophy of modernity: Jung, Lévi Strauss, and his contemporaries, such as Eliade, Heidegger, and his teacher, the philosopher Carlos Astrada. Nevertheless, his concern was to investigate ancient texts of native cultures, symbols and rituals, conversations with informants, taking notes of daily life from interviews, and coexistence with villagers (Fresia, 2020).

In *Geocultura* as in *Esbozo*, he admitted the heterogeneity of the composition of the people, assuming the polarization of sectors and the diversity of social demands integrated into heterogeneous articulations. The descriptions and conceptualizations of the people in *Esbozo* made it clear that “pure living” in America discovers the sacredness of humans in all their fullness. He did not understand the people as a subject.

Being is proto-original. Thus, as in Heidegger, the analytic of being-there was mistakenly understood as anthropology; the same slip could occur if we consider being as mere subjectivity and not as foundation. For Kusch (1979), to speak of a subject in philosophy is already to speak of being, that is, of a constituted entity. But in the field we have chosen, after a leap backwards, it is necessary to inquire into its constitution starting from being, that is, outside the rules of the game of philosophy, insofar as it always demands a subject constituted according to the Western code (p. 107).

The descriptions and conceptualizations in *Esbozo* sobre pueblo made it clear that in the “pure living,” the sacredness of the human is discovered in all its fullness. The people are geo-culturally situated, and we are a deconstituted subject: a heterogeneous composition product of popular demands. In *Esbozo* he gave a very important key: it is also and above all a symbol. But if it is a symbol, one participates in it, and does so from the depths of oneself, from what one does not want to be (Kusch, 1978, pp. 1, 7). This conception of a mythically constituted subject is provocative in understanding the current popular movements and the contribution to the political construction from the popular demands. Kusch stated that he was driven by the conviction that we have founded a nation without a people, and that if we go on like this, the people will found their own nation someday (Kusch, 1966a, p. 9). And in another expression of singular force, he said: “But behold, the people exist. It is not my fault. And neither is the fact that their thought is tirelessly filling the country until we are really a nation” (Kusch, 1977, p. 10).

For Kusch, consulting the sorcerer did not imply an absence of critical sense, primitivism, or assuming the causes because the subject was considered part of nature. Suffice it as an example, the much-cited case of Eucalyptus.

The persistence of an area of prayer causes the truck to be reduced as an object. Better said, it makes the area of the object nothing more than something embedded in the middle of a totality that is the whole rite [...] The choice of the unnamed gods, that is, the area of prayer, predominates over the subject-object relationship, while

in the city, the former is reduced to a minimum, in order to increase the relationship between the self, as subject, and the truck, as object. (Kusch, 1975a, p. 42)

In short, according to the philosopher, “the peasant prefers to consult the sorcerer and not the technician. It must be because the former is the usual thing for him, and to say this is a lot” (Kusch, 1974, p. 69). When those who propose social or educational processes as processes of mutation of the original ethos of the people (and of the peoples) carry the prejudice that it is necessary to incorporate them into the economic life of the citizenry. However, it is by reversing the action that education would contribute to the “development” and not to the “mutation” of the ethos.

The fear, the stench, and the fear of being—the politics and the people, the culture and the popular in America’s background—slip away before the eagerness to “be somebody.”

Essay on Cultural Hermeneutics

Being runs through his entire intellectual production. It is not merely an instrumental category for anthropological analysis, for an aesthetic-literary interpretation, or for philosophical thought, but it manifests a sphere of understanding different from the Western philosophical tradition; at the same time, it tries to show a profound modality of Latin American culture. Evidently, Kusch was a precursor of critical thinking in Western philosophy, of national culture, and of the social forms of the middle class that ignore the background of America. Therefore, being more than a rational understanding requires another intelligence to trace, capture, and apprehend it: that other intelligence is a wisdom, a seminal logos, a (dialectical) phagocytization, or a logic of negation, according to the formulations along his itinerary.

Negativity as a form of reversal of Western logic acts on popular consciousness and reason plagued by symbols, rituals and divinities: The negation of things transforms the world into symbols, and the requirement of truth is only satisfied in the area of prayer, which of course has to be filled with the perfectly structured world of the gods (Kusch, 1975a, p. 42). The consciousness of the people and popular

action reside in the landscape, in the soil, in the “barbarism,” and in the caudillo. The form of barbarism, the impure, and the stinking transform the fiction of “being someone,” of the city, and of the heroes by the negation of “no longer being”: The negation leads to what is, and everything that is is submerged in being (Kusch, 1975a, p. 76).

Influenced by Ricoeur (1986, p. 490)—“the symbol gives what and what to think”—he radicalized his approach to *being*, and radicalized a more hermeneutic reading—in continuity with the philosophy of culture and religion—towards the end of his life. In connection with a phenomenology of religion, from the invitation he received from Scannone to join the Argentine research group, he developed a hermeneutics of the symbol, ritual, and prayer:

Ultimately, as it really happens with the people, of an occurrence of the sacred that regulates in sum the meaning of the world where, for example, the use of a plow depends on a ritual. In such a world objects are nothing more than circumstances subjected to the pressure of the sacred. (Kusch, 1975b, p. 216)

In order to understand the American, other forms are required that are more smelly than neat. It is about a pre-philosophical field that takes place from a leap backwards; this already takes the problem from outside of science, from the circumstance that harasses, and that is what the term *estar* refers to (Kusch, 1979, p. 106).

In “The problem of the symbol,” a posthumous text, he took up and deepened that pioneering expression that “the negation of things transforms the world into symbols” of 1975, where he stated that *being* founds the before of the symbol; while the after of the symbol consolidates *being*. Following Ricoeur’s reading, Kusch interpreted that the symbol contains a “meaning that is seen” from the “indigence of the subject” (Kusch, 1980, p. 5) or from “an originally deconstituted subject” (Kusch, 1979, pp. 5, 108). The original deconstitution of the subject from the symbol-popular thought (myth)-denial relationship, allows us to understand that the “being” is prior to the symbol because what is posterior to the symbol founds the “is” (Kusch, 1989, p. 8).

In Closing: One Hundred Years and an Open Future

In 2023, the celebrations for the centenary of the birth of Günter Rodolfo Kusch, which began in 2022, came to an end. Publications on his thought and reprinting of his works, congresses and conferences, tributes from the Argentine State and the academy, multiplied during the commemoration of an extraordinary author, difficult to classify in some of the classifications of the academy.

Kusch’s familiar themes were already present in his early texts, when he described the vegetal in the landscape and the heretical intuition in *La Seducción de la barbarie*, or when he described the being of the Quechua as clinging to that which could provide some stability in the midst of the unmanageable wrath of the gods, or when he interpreted being from the semantic point of view, distinguishing stare (to stand) from sedere (to remain fixed) as he said in *El pensamiento indígena y popular*. Also negation as a way of recovering the subject and the logic proper to thought, the exchange of goods, economic production, community, and theology, as stated in *La negación en el pensamiento popular*.

The formulation of culture as decision in *Esbozo de una antropología* and the category fagocitación as that dialectics proper to America as developed in *América Profunda* among many other contributions, were again and again recovered and thematized in new contexts and texts producing a thought of great actuality.

After his death, Kusch’s thoughts did not merit great intellectual reception or inclusion in university chair programs. However, after many years, at the insistence of pioneering teachers and researchers, the holding of the Kusch Conference, the congresses in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia, and the talks and proposals for postgraduate training, his thought experienced a revival.

Moreover, when Pope Francis in 2018 said that people was a “mythical, not logical” co-category and made reference to Kusch, worldwide attention was directed to the Argentine thinker (Francis, 2018, p. 38). Currently, his name has international transcendence, as shown by his indirect mention in the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* No. 158, where he says that “people is

not a logical category, nor a mystical category (...) It is a mythical category.” His thought is as current as it is still unknown. And there remains a long future to continue his legacy through re-readings of his texts and updating of his thought.

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