CHAPTER 2

The Life and Work of Bolívar Echeverría

We will also dedicate a relatively significant space to the biography of the second author under discussion. This is due, among other things, to the experience that the writer of this book had on 10 November 1994 during a speech given by Bolívar Echeverría at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt. The presentation, on the topic of ‘Die Moderne außerhalb Europas. Der Fall Lateinamerika [Modernity outside Europe: the Case of Latin America]’, took place in the context of the ‘Theodor W. Adorno’ Seminar coordinated by Alfred Schmidt; during the discussion, the massive chasm existing between social philosophy in Mexico and Germany became clear to the author of this book (and co-organiser of the conference); and also that it is not even possible to set out from a similar terminology, much less to speak of a degree of understanding of the facts, above all with regard to contemporary Mexican society and the political and theoretical debates which predominate therein. Therefore, the following chapter will allow us not only to take a look at Bolívar Echeverría as an individual and at the history of the development of his work, but also to situate his formulations within the framework of contemporary social and theoretical-philosophical questions in Mexico and Latin America. To this we must add the fact that Bolívar Echeverría himself considered geographical-cultural factors to be very important in the birth of forms of thinking. This refers as much to theories as to everyday ideas. With regard to the latter, he presented his explanation through his central concept of the ‘modern ethe’. This concept of ‘ethe’ already also includes theoretical postulates which Echeverría did not separate aseptically from everyday forms of imagination – that is, those lacking systematic formulations. As he explained in an interview with the author, he equally emphasised the importance – not to be underestimated – for the manner in which his theory developed, of the location of his activity. This interview sought to determine to what degree there exists some sort of parallel between his theory and that of Herbert Marcuse, since both (each in their respective epoch) sought to tie Heidegger’s postulates to those of Marx.

This sketch of his life hopes to avoid converting him into one of those Latin-American intellectuals who, fascinated by one or several European thinkers in specific and seemingly progressive moments of European thought, arrived on the ‘Old Continent’ as a young adventurer and was molded there both personally and intellectually. Many of these globetrotting academics, however, not only had their head filled with a sense of adventure when they left their own
countries, but frequently were forced to do so, either through a direct threat to their body and life or the political impossibility of continuing to elaborate critical theories in their own country. These are distinct from the generation of Spanish exiles in Mexico due to the fact that the majority crossed the Atlantic twice and, in so doing, it was not rare for them to end up landing in a Latin-American country very different from their country of origin. As a result of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, and because of the tradition – atypical for Latin America – of an armed forces which emerged from the soldiers of the Revolution and which, in contrast to the rest of the continent, is not the preferred place for the sons of the ruling class to make their careers (and whose generals, therefore, are not accustomed to having great political ambitions), Mexico has been practically the only major country in the continent which has not experienced a military rebellion since the 1940s. It thus happened that, after the Spanish exile, there arrived in the country a second wave, this time from various South-American countries, with which once again many leftist intellectuals, who would be important in the future, enriched Mexico with their presence. Echeverría was one of them. The majority continues to carry a turbulent mixture of memories of the rejection suffered in Europe and their reduction to ‘just another person from the Third World’, with the hope that this might at some point come to an end.

Bolívar Echeverría Andrade was born on 31 January 1941 in Riobamba. He was the son of Rosa Andrade Velasco, a housewife, and Bolívar Echeverría Paredes, a farm administrator. His place of birth, situated some fifty kilometres south of the Equator, is the capital of the Ecuadorian province of Chimborazo, which owes its name to Ecuador’s highest peak, at whose foot Riobamba sits. The Andean volcano Chimborazo – 6,310 metres in height and covered with glaciers from 4,700 metres above sea level – leaves an indelible impression on visitors to Riobamba. The entire atmosphere of this mountainous city is marked by this dominant presence; the summit is nearly always in the clouds, and when it is visible – so they say – the legend of the mountain

133 Bolívar Echeverría: Third interview with the author on 10 July 1996 at the Faculty of Philosopy and Arts of the UNAM in Mexico City. Tape recording (cited hereafter as ‘Third interview with Bolívar Echeverría’).

Echeverría authorised the cited passages from the interviews in writing in Binghamton, NY, on 26 March 1999. Moreover, we indicate from here on the cassette number, side of the cassette, and the position of the tape from the cited interview. All cassettes are in the author’s possession. In the absence of a unified counting method, the tape position is indicated according to the apparatus utilised (Panasonic 608). Here: cassette ii, side A, pos. 295.