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ART, AUTHENTICITY, AND LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE: A DIALOGUE WITH MARIO VARGAS LLOSA AND ARIEL DORFMAN

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MIKE WATERS: Welcome to Focus. I'm Mike Waters. This week we'll be discussing, among other things, the relationship between creativity and politics. We're calling our program "Focus on Latin American Novelists," and our guests are two internationally known Latin American authors. The program is presented by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, one of six non-profit, non-partisan organizations that bring you the FOCUS series.

Sometimes the best perspective on social reality comes from someone who views the situation from a distance. Our host, Alex Wilde, of the Wilson Center, begins the discussion on just that point.

ALEX WILDE: There's something of a paradox in the fact that many of the best Latin American writers live and write abroad, and yet, during this recent period, have created a literature which is recognized as distinctively and authentically Latin American. Now both you, Mario Vargas Llosa, and you, Ariel Dorfman, are now writing novels here in Washington, in the United States. What do you think that it means that so many Latin American writers like yourselves are writing outside Latin America? Is it an advantage? Is it a disadvantage? Is the United States an important way of looking at Latin America for you? What about you, Mario?

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA: I don't think you can establish a general rule for this problem. In some cases, I think exile is productive and useful for a writer, and in some cases destructive. I think it is the same for the reasons that writers have for exiling themselves: in some cases it is for political reasons they are obliged to live abroad; in some cases they choose exile because they feel rightly or wrongly that they can write better abroad than in their own countries. In my case, I think the distance from my country has been useful in the sense that I have discovered what is important in my county and what is secondary, what are the real problems and the objective ones, and also that to be a writer is something that can't be dealt with in a parochial perspective--that you need to have a wider horizon to solve literary problems in a really creative way.

WILDE: Let me ask you the question, Ariel Dorfman. What has it meant to you to live outside of Chile now for some seven years and in that sense, removed from the particularities that one assumes are integral to the novelist's vision?

ARIEL DORFMAN: Well, my case is not that special, but very painful because I cannot go back to my country. So in that sense I am not a self-exiled writer, but I have been exiled because the people in my country will not allow me to go back to write. However, I have found the possibility of turning this into creativity, without any doubt.

I would like to say that the situation of looking at Latin America from abroad is something which begins with the history of Latin America. One of the greatest Latin American writers, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega--an ancestor of Mario's because he is from Peru--was the first one to really look, and he was unable to write about Peru until he was exiled in Europe. He was only able to look at his country from abroad. Now, I had the general idea--and I still have the idea--that it's very important to live and write in your country, but I think that there are things that you can see in the country, there are things which you can wean out from abroad. It is very terrible to do this, but I think it is constantly part of Latin America because our continent is a continent which is constantly importing modes from abroad, which is dependent upon military, social, and economic trends from abroad. So when you go abroad, you are not only going abroad--you are also going back home in the sense that you are understanding the real difference between that which you have had at home, and you think is your own, and is really that which comes from outside.

VARGAS LLOSA: May I add something? I think it is important to say that even though Latin America is divided by so many facets, there is one aspect in which I think it is absolutely united, and this is the cultural level. I think writers, painters, musicians feel themselves first Latin Americans, and then Peruvians or Chileans or Argentinians. I think this probably started with modernism. The modernist writers first discovered that they were Latin American because they went to Europe, for instance. They were seduced by the myth of Paris, and it was in Paris where they. . .

DORFMAN: . . . and they were appalled by what was happening in the States as well. That also gave them a sense of unity.

VARGAS LLOSA: They discovered in Europe that they were not French, that they were not Spanish, that they were not Italians, and they discovered that they were Latin Americans and that there existed a unity above the marginal differences and above the historical and political differences of the times.

WILDE: Isn't there an important change, though, that has come about, Mario, in the sense that in earlier times there was no international market throughout Latin American for literature? There is today. Your novels are sold in the hundreds and thousands and even millions of copies. Isn't that a significant change today?

VARGAS LLOSA: One of the reasons, I think, for the growth of the literary public has been the urbanization of Latin America. It is said that the growth of the city is the growth of literature--that literature grows with the city. I think the other reason is the endemic crisis of Latin America. I think when a society feels that the ground is moving, they need some kind of explanation of the world where they live.

DORFMAN: There's a confirmation of what Mario says in my own experiences in Chile during the Allende years when the state publishing house brought out more books in those two and a half years, three years, than all the books that had been published before in the history of Chile. In other words, what people were doing was, for the first time--not only because economically they were better off, but they were able to buy because they wanted explanations, because they were interested in reality--they were taking reality into their own hands, let's say, and when you begin trying to change reality, you also want to read about changes. You want to understand not only sociologically, but in the literary sense, as well.

WILDE: Do you feel, Ariel, that you are, in fact--I'm really trying to get at your concept of yourself as a writer and what it is that you think you are doing when you write fiction. You have written nonfiction--your most famous book is really a work of sociology in the study of popular culture, How to Read Donald Duck, which sold some hundreds of thousands of copies in various languages. But what is the relationship between your fiction and the social reality that you see before you?

DORFMAN: I don't feel that there is a total break between my fiction and my essays. In fact, I think that probably weakens the character of some of my essays from the sociological point of view.

VARGAS LLOSA: Fortunately, for you.

WILDE: But do you see yourself as a social analyst when you write fiction?

DORFMAN: I would say that I am working with that. I'm not sure, however, in the sense that there are times when I would like my fiction, in fact, to be a sort of investigation into all levels of what reality is. Now reality is not only the material economic social reality--it is what people feel, what people live with. In that sense, I think the problems of Latin America, for me, are liberation or domination, and obviously liberation and domination are not something in statistics, but they are everyday things-what we call cotidiano. In other words, what is done daily by people, how men live their relationships with women, women with men, how people live their relationship with the streets, etc. So I think fiction is able to show this. Now, what I am struggling with is that I don't want to impose a previous thesis upon my characters, because they won't accept it. So what I do is try to create a reality

there which has to do with social reality, not because I decided it ahead of time, but because my life has been a political life. In other words, I've lived a revolution in Chile, I've lived fascism, so when I say that my things are political, it's not because I think fiction should be political. I think it's because I am political. So I am expressing in my fiction that which I have lived. You can't do otherwise. Otherwise, you're a fraud.

WILDE: You're using a concept of politics in a sense, I think, more broadly than most Americans would--I mean, you're seeing it as something which really penetrates all aspects of life. It has to do with power relationships, whether they be in the private sphere or the public sphere. Do you see your own work as political, Mario?

VARGAS LLOSA: Well, I have written many books which deal directly with political problems. Two of my novels, at least, are in this sense political. I think real literature, authentic literature, is not dependent on contemporary realities, that authentic literature, real literature, transcends what is happening now, and is something that establishes a link between present men and future men and even past men. This kind of permanence is very difficult, maybe impossible to reach if you subordinate your literary preoccupations to contemporary problems, and political problems are always contemporary. But this does not mean that you can't talk or you can't write about political realities. If your perspective is not contemporary, but something more permanent, you can write about political problems and be a very good and very creative writer. I think this is the subtle difference between politics and literature.

WILDE: So then, Mario, you really are putting your own theory into practice because your current project is a novel about a historical reality, not in your own country of Peru, but in Brazil, about a religious, messianic movement of the last century. Why do you find that particular kind of historical period interesting for a novel?

VARGAS LLOSA: First, I was so impressed by the history of Canudos--it was a small village in the northeast of Brazil, and it was the center of this rebellion which took place at the end of the last century. It was some time after the fall of the monarchy in Brazil and the establishment of the Republic. The Republic was a very generous and idealistic movement. I think the most progressive part of Brazilian society was for the Republic, of course, and it thought the republic was the panacea for all the evils of the society. They were extremely surprised when the poorest people of Brazil, the peasants of the interior of Bahia, rebelled against the Republic and rebelled against the Republic and for the monarchy, because they thought the Republic was heretical--was a creation of masonry and Protestantism and an evil thing. And so they invented a conspiracy to understand what was happening in the Northeast. They invented a conspiracy in which all the evils of society, as they saw them, were present--the most reactionary currents, nostalgic for the

emperor, and England, which had had a privileged relationship with Brazil during the monarchy. It was a civil war in which the two enemies didn't understand each other at all. The Republicans were convinced that they were fighting against an instrument of England and the monarchists, and the peasants of the Northeast were convinced that they were fighting against the Devil, against the Masons, against the Protestants. The result was 40 thousand people dead, and a whole region devastated--destroyed.

I think in all Latin American countries you have some examples of this lack of communication which causes civil wars and similar catastrophes. In this sense, I think Canudos is exemplary to understanding the problems of Latin America.

WILDE: And, of course, in the struggle at Canudos, the government essentially won and destroyed the rebels.

VARGAS LLOSA: Well, the Republic did win. The Republic destroyed the rebels completely.

WILDE: I can't help seeing what you have just said in light of Ariel Dorfman's earlier formulation of the cultural domination of Latin America from the outside. To take, for example, this historical incident which Mario Vargas Llosa is dealing with in his novel, do you see that rebellion in the backlands as an expression of what is authentically Latin American against England, against imported liberal ideas?

DORFMAN: It's obvious that our continent is very fragmented, very divided--and there is a multiplication of levels in the continent. Not everything that comes from abroad is necessarily against progress. I do believe that it is impossible to change Latin America without the active participation of people in the backlands. I would say that what I find interesting in what Mario is saying is that I find his novel very political and very importantly political. I'm not asking him to make a statement about what happens now in Peru at all. What the novelist has to do--what we all have to do--is to address the central issues of our continent. This problem of a lack of communication is obviously one of the basic problems of our society. All Mario's novels and stories are full of people who are unable to communicate while they are fighting each other, or even loving each other. They are destined, tragically, not to communicate. Now I think that that has to be found and has to be looked for in history, and obviously novelists can do it very well.

WILDE: Some listeners who were not familiar with your work might think that you wrote very realistically in a sort of way that was familiar to American readers, and yet I think it is fair to say that your work, like that of many other Latin American writers, has many elements of fantasy which are integrated into them in some sense.

DORFMAN: Well, I think that imagination is one of the primary instruments which joins us with the people all the time, constantly. What I'm working on now, in fact, is a story about how a group of unborn babies joined forces not to be born until there is a possibility of the world accepting their non-negotiable conditions, and how they are forced into birth and therefore into maturity by everything that is happening in the society. So I would say this is another strain--this constant use of fantasy, this constant use of what we are hoping, what we are thinking, what we are living inside, which is very much stronger in our reality than some of these very inimical forces which come from outside or inside our views. We are not trying to give a sort of x-ray of what is happening in society, because nobody knows very much what is happening. I think we are worried about how people dream and how their dreams change things, or how they don't change things.

VARGAS LLOSA: There is an aspect in Latin American reality which has not yet been studied sufficiently, I think, and it is this: the creativity of the ignorant part of our society to transform what comes from abroad, and to use these negative imported products as very positive grounds to create and to build something different. I think in the case of Canudos you have an example of that, and in the case of the . . .

WILDE: How so? In what sense?

VARGAS LLOSA: Well, what was extremely important for the peasants during the Canudos rebellion were the myths which came to Brazil with the Portuguese since the sixteenth century. All these myths were completely transformed in Brazil. They became very different from what they were in Portugal. For instance, that of Don Sebastian, a Portuguese king who disappeared in the Battle of Alcazar Khibir, and there is a myth in Portugal that this king will come back when Portugal will need him.

Well, the peasants in Canudos fought so courageously because they were absolutely convinced that King Don Sebastian would come at the end to help them and to support them. Through these myths they created a very peculiar kind of society, different from Brazilian society at that time, and of course, the Portuguese society from which these myths were imported.

I think this is very, very positive--this rebellion which you can call a reactionary rebellion in one sense, a political sense. But culturally, I don't think it was so reactionary. I think these people were probably more creative than the civilized Brazilians who tried to establish the Republic, photographically imitating the ideas of Auguste Comte. Well, it didn't work at all. It was a total failure. But for the peasants of the Northeast, I don't think what they did was a failure, in the sense, at least, that during some years they could live in a more genuine and more authentic way because they

transformed from their personal experience of reality what they imported from abroad.

WILDE: Why does that happen? That may be a sociologist's question, but under what conditions is it possible to make those external things authentic in this way?

DORFMAN: Throughout the whole of Latin American history, also from the very beginning, there is a notion of cultural resistance, I would say, of cultural creation--a kind of constant call to counter-cultural revolution. People are constantly living things at their own level--the poorest sections of society. There is in Latin America a separation--a very drastic chasm between these people, what they feel, what they live, and the articulate elites, the minorities generally on the coasts or in the cities, who very often speak in their name. How you can join these two is perhaps one of the central problems of Latin America, because they are not homogeneous societies. They are societies which, as I said before, have been fragmented not only economically and politically, but culturally, in the sense that they are nations which are being formed--they are still in volcanic eruption. They are still searching for their center, for their consensus, let's say, for their language. The reason why I am so worried about dominance from abroad is that now things are especially complicated because of what is being imported from abroad--TV culture, radio culture, pop culture. I don't know how our people are going to react because this is a possibility which is of a different level of penetration, very different. I mean, you can take King Sebastian and turn him into a popular folk hero. I don't know how you can take Superman and turn him into a popular folk hero. I'm just saying there is a problem. I'm speaking of a problem <u>now</u> in the twentieth century, which is what I am very, very worried about.

VARGAS LLOSA: May I interrupt you, Ariel? I am not worried so much about this problem, and let me try to explain why. I think if in any aspect Latin America is either liberated or on the way to being liberated it is in literature. I think in literature we are creative enough to have established some patterns which are very distinct from the patterns in North American literature, French literature, Spanish literature, etc. Why? Why do we have writers such as Octavio Paz, as Borges, as Cortázar, as García Márquez, as yourself, who are so original, so personal, who cannot be considered in any way instruments of foreign models? I think the reason is because these writers have received all kinds of influences from everywhere and have assimilated and transformed all these influences into something personal. I think this openness of Latin America to the aggression, if you will, of all kinds of cultural and literary influences is at the source of our present richness. It is because we have been inseminated by such different levels of thought, languages, and philosophies that we have created these different things that are Latin American literature. I think we are less parochial than

English writers, French writers, and German writers for that reason--because our tradition is a wider tradition than the tradition in which English or French or German contemporary writers write now. I think this openness of Latin America to all kinds of literary influences has, in our case, really been the instrument of our literary liberation. So I am not so afraid of these cultural products that we are importing from abroad. What is dangerous is that what we import is not of quality, but if the cultural products that we import are, for instance--to speak of the United States, are Faulkner, or Whitman, or Edgar Allen Poe--I don't think we should feel threatened by this kind of menace. On the contrary, I think these kinds of products are going to enrich our cultural and spiritual life.

WILDE: Well, let me try to summarize what you have just said, Mario Vargas Llosa, which is, as I understand it, that Latin America has nothing to fear, really, from the larger possibilities of cultural assimilation; that indeed, it has been able to use foreign influences in an extraordinarily creative way, particularly in this most recent period--the last generation, let's say--to create a distinctive, new kind of language--a kind of language, a kind of literature which has very important social implications. Now, if I understand what you have said earlier, Ariel Dorfman, it is that you believe that as a result, perhaps, of some of the things that Mario mentioned earlier--the process of urbanization, the penetration of a kind of enormously, as you see it, effective mass culture from abroad, which is breaking down the parochialism which existed earlier in Latin America--you see it extremely difficult, or more complicated at least, for Latin Americans to assert their own authentic identity.

DORFMAN: Right. What happens is the following: there is a theory with which I tend to disagree--not entirely, but partly, and that's what makes it complicated--that literature is now a liberated territory of Latin America, a sort of section of reality which is liberated at the moment, which is sort of ahead of its time. I think that literature, this great literature that we are creating, (and which I think Mario has told me--I agree with him in this--that here there is a section of reality which absorbs things, recreates them) exists because it answers the potential need. I speak of the writer's liberation not being complete until the reader's liberation has occurred--in other words, until all those illiterate millions of people who are outside, marginal, are integrated--not as mere characters but as readers--into literature. And I think that much of our literature is a literature which is paving the way for those people. In other words, it is in a great sense written for the future.

I think about those people who are outside society, who are being exploited, who are unable to read: their creativity is what allows us to go forward. I think that if there was not this, even Mario's and all the work that he mentioned, could not exist, because it has to do with a constant creativity in the base of society, in language,

in how people speak to each other in the bars, in the churches, in the marketplace, in bed, etc., and that is what gives it an extraordinary strength. One of the things I think that Latin American literature is today is that it is much better because it has to do with life and death. We are very near to it. I feel that the Europeans are very far from it--I mean, they are sort of in a closet. They are not speaking very much about what really happens to real people who are suffering and searching and hoping in spite of everything. And so I would say that this leads us to the other question--how is this related to another sort of society? And I think Latin American literature asks for a different society. It is asking for more readers than it really has.

WILDE: Ariel Dorfman, Mario Vargas Llosa, thank you very much.