

# *Canto General*: Neruda's Quest for Historicity

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## Abstract

The paper intends to explicate *Canto General* (1950), one of the most notable works by Pablo Neruda, in the light of Karl Marx's dialectical materialism. It broadly encapsulates how Neruda, a socially and politically committed poet, identified the meeting points between the general history of Latin America and the struggle of the masses there for liberation. This paper also exposes how the bourgeois governments intentionally excluded the contribution and sacrifice of the liberators of the continent from the text-book history to mislead the coming generations. It indicates the poet's love for and commitment to the struggle of the proletariat who sacrificed immensely to glorify the history of the entire continent. This research inquires into how the bourgeoisie exploited the proletariat during the post-colonial era in the mid-twentieth century in Latin America. Therein it elucidates the manifold contributions of the true liberators of the continent who sacrificed their lives to bring socio-political changes in society. On the whole, the paper explores how ahistoricity stands as a threat to history and historicity in Latin America, and why the proletarian struggle is important to challenge and question the rise of ahistoricity. Alongside this, this research concentrates on the concept of the Marxist vision of freedom which, in the end, accelerates the proletarian movement.

**Keywords:** Historicity, ahistoricity, dialectical materialism, proletarian struggle, bourgeois exploitation

## 1. Introduction

In the domain of Latin American literature, Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) was one of the most influential and socially committed poets who rejected Eurocentric myths of ahistoricity, and instead, played a pivotal role as an organic intellectual to bring to light the authenticity of historical events and facts through his poetry. As a poet and activist, he strongly believed in active role-play of the writers in effecting social-political-cultural changes in support of the downtrodden and the afflicted. During the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, Neruda, while working as a diplomat, witnessed the brutality of the fascists against the peasants in different places of Latin America. This experience developed an aversion in him towards bourgeois politics. At that time, the Spanish communist intellectuals stood beside the oppressed. Neruda greatly appreciated their pro-Republican stance. He understood that literature should be used as a tool for achieving the rights of the marginalized and the oppressed. In addition, he has harshly criticized those literary works that serve the purposes of the hegemonic classes. The stern reality of the Spanish Civil War, and the atrocities committed by different autocratic governments throughout the continent in the 1930s and 1940s inspired Neruda to compose verses that could bring

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into focus the class struggle of the proletariat. And this realization drew him very close to those Marxist ideas about art and literature which throws light on multiple facets of proletarian revolution. Furthermore, Neruda's consciousness of history, historicity, and the spread of ahistoricity in different states of Latin America, and his realization about the necessity of the proletarian struggle to oppose the bourgeois endeavour of falsifying the historical facts---two major issues of *Canto General*---in every possible way, subscribe to Marx's views on history and class struggle. The poem's account of the dictators' agenda of spreading false, fabricated and biased history among people and their brutal attacks on the real makers of history gives us a picture of the oppressive nature of society. Thereupon, the poet, in *Canto General*, has taken up the responsibility for informing us of the actuality of historical events of the continent. Eventually, in this poem, Neruda comes up with an idea of a political apocalypse which, he thinks, will be able to bring changes in society. And he strongly asserts that the ultimate freedom of the suffering humanity is possible if the working-class people carry on the struggle against the tyrants and oppressors.

## **2. Marxist Orientation of Neruda's Poetry**

In *Canto General*, Neruda integrates dialectical materialism with historical materialism. When the concept of dialectical materialism is at the back of his mind, he speaks of those people who are conscious of their basic rights. In this case, Neruda talks about class struggle and its historicity. Likewise, when the idea of historical materialism comes under spotlight, he attempts to demystify issues like the falsification of historical events and cultural imperialism. In a word, he assumes the role of a poet-historian to compose most of the poems of *Canto General*. In those poems, belonging to the 'Bardic Tradition', he irradiates those local cultures of the continent which were on the verge of extinction due to the onslaught of foreign cultural domination. He, through his poems, has shown us how the commoners of Latin America had been celebrating those indigenous cultures since the pre-colonial era. In this way, his poems make the dispossessed aware of their lost glory and heritage. Furthermore, in *Canto General*, Neruda, as a chronicler, unearths the brutalities of fascist regimes in different parts of Latin America. He attempts to reveal how the ruling elite spread false bourgeois discourses through text-books, and how the autocrats misinterpret the historical facts about the class struggles of the proletariat and their contributions in shaping the history of the continent. The majestic voice of the poet urges the commoner to reject bourgeois history. As a Marxist, Neruda challenged the dominant assumptions of the Spanish invasion as a civilizing mission and glorified the struggle of the proletariat.

## **3. Marxist Dialectical Approach: Theoretical Underpinnings**

Marxist aesthetics arises out of Marxist dialectical materialism. Marxists strongly believe that economic, social, political, cultural, and class relations influence different aspects of our life. Thereupon, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's ideas about art and literature come up with the view that the role of art should be not only to represent socio-cultural conditions as they are but also to view reality in its totality and to search for the ways to improve those conditions. In this regard, the following explanation regarding Marxist dialectics can be quoted:

Dialectics applies to history, human products, and society. Marxism bases itself on the conviction that all that exists goes through a process of developments, through tensions and contradictions that ultimately change form. Dialectics attempts to capture the changing nature of reality that bursts into radical transformations, often seemingly out of nowhere (Anshen 33).

In line with Marxist thoughts, Neruda opines that all social, political, economic, and psychological factors of history, which have helped develop the present layout of the society, must be taken into consideration to know about the historical facts about human civilization. While analyzing Marx's approach to culture and literature, Anshen says, "Marx believes that the worldwide overthrow of capitalism would allow for the possibility of abolishing classes and creating a world without the scarcity or power relations that maintain antagonistic class divisions" (48). By the same token, Pablo Neruda's dialectical approach considers history of civilization as a history of endless class conflict, which promulgates proletarian struggle for the Marxist revolution, and it also calls for future generation to eliminate bourgeois consciousness and its exploitative culture from society. The way contradictory material conditions find resolution in new discourses approves Neruda's concept of social change, which, in many ways, contributes to establishing a society free from all kinds of exploitation.

Neruda's understanding of dialectical materialism also includes Marxist orientation regarding history, literature, and politics. As a socialist, he finds a close relationship between man and nature, between natural and social 'praxis' to testify to the dialectical perspective of society. His poems invariably find a connection and interdependence between the objects of nature and humans. His poems never consider nature as a separate entity. On the other hand, bourgeois realism makes an artist or a poet alienated from his/her society or environs. Indeed, Marxism strongly endorses the fact that the proletariat plays a major role in shaping the history of any nation. *History and Class Consciousness* describes, "When the proletariat proclaims the dissolution of the existing social order (Lukács 2), Marx declares, "it does no more than disclosing the secret of its existence, for it is the effective dissolution of that order" (Lukács 3). He also asserts that understanding the reality of society needs to perceive dialectical analysis, which presents socio-political and economic conditions marked by class struggle. Being influenced by György Lukács' dialectical realism, Neruda considers the history of Latin America a history of class struggle and bourgeois exploitation. Bourgeois realism promotes capitalism and Eurocentric culture and spreads it among people. Conversely, social realism speaks of the ultimate change needed for society. It encapsulates that only dialectical analysis is capable of exposing the falsity of bourgeois ideology. Bourgeois ideology presents an illusionist discourse which restrains mass people from discovering the facts of history. This discourse disperses a false history of the so-called 'bourgeois contribution' among the future generations to perplex them. It always attempts to whitewash the historicity of class struggle and bourgeois deception from society. It creates obstacles to bringing changes in the life of the proletariat.

However, Neruda believes in the integration of man and universe, and this sense of unification ultimately helps the proletariat expel bourgeois injustice and restore order in society. Likewise, *Canto General* centres on the theme of how the protest of the proletariat against bourgeois exploitation contributes to bringing order and thus establishes a plural society.

#### 4. *Canto General* and Its Background

Before discussing class struggle and exploitation as projected in *Canto General*, it needs dwelling on the background of the poem. Why Neruda felt the urgency to uncover Latin American history of bourgeois exploitation requires going through his political experience he had had while staying in Mexico during the 1950s. In Mexico, he underwent some bitter political experiences. The state witnessed absolute brutality unleashed by several autocratic governments and dictators throughout the decade. While staying over there in Mexico City, he experienced a labour uprising. The factory workers went unpaid. The owners of the factories were reluctant to resolve workers' dissatisfaction with non-payment. Consequently, the workers called for a strike for an indefinite period. Finding no other alternative ways, the wives of the protesters decided to meet Manuel Ávila Camacho, the then President of Mexico, to inform him of their miserable conditions. They were waiting in front of the President's palace with the hope of meeting him, but the security forces denied them entry. But those women stuck to their decision and were insisting that they would not return until they met the President. All at once, the armed force fired at them and seven of them died on the spot. The following day, the communist leaders, who attended the funeral procession to convey their condolences to the bereaved families, even failed to utter any word of anger and abomination (Anuwar 56). The incident unravels the fact that people had no freedom of speech at that time. This experience left a deep impact on Neruda's mind and urged him to portray in his epic piece *Canto General* how dictatorship devoured the entire continent in those years. The second thing which led Neruda to excavate the historical facts of Latin America was his visit to Pre-Christian historical places of Maya and Inca civilizations. Recollecting those days Neruda writes in his *Memoirs*:

I moved from house to house, every day. Doors opened to receive me everywhere. It was always people I didn't know, who had somehow expressed their wish to put me up for a few days. They wanted to offer me asylum even if only for a few hours, or a few weeks. I passed through fields, ports, cities, camps, and was in the homes of peasants, engineers, lawyers, seamen, doctors, miners... In that year of hiding and danger, I finished my most important book, *Canto General* (trans. Martin, p. 173).

These lines remind us of his dedication and labour behind the creation of his seminal work, *Canto General*. Moreover, the lines indicate that he developed an intimate relationship with the mass people in those days of his exile, which ultimately gave him a scope to experience oppression and tyranny unleashed by different regimes of South America.

##### I. The Structure of *Canto General*:

The construction of *the Canto General* is very complex. The whole poem is divided into fifteen Cantos. These Cantos contain three hundred and twenty poems. The anthology comprises two cycles. The first one grapples with a description of the Pre-Columbian civilization, and the second one is vast and matured. It ranges from the history of Pre-Columbian America to modern times Latin America. Throughout the poem, Neruda uses forty-two speakers who all create a 'polyphonic symphony' which has added a dimension to the composition (Paul 79). In general, the poem brings into focus numerous historical, political, and cultural transformations Latin America underwent. It unfolds the movement

of the proletariat who raise voice for their political, economic, cultural, and social rights. It also shows how the bourgeoisie endeavour for materialistic dominance creates an obstacle to the advancement of the proletarian movement. Pablo Neruda bisects the entire continent into the pre-Columbian era of equality and justice, and the aggressors' age of truculence and inequity. The opening lines of the following Canto unveil the dichotomy:

Before wig and frockcoat  
 were the rivers, the arterial rivers:  
 the cordilleras, on whose scrapped escarpments  
 the condor or the snow seemed immobile,  
 humidity and density, the thunderclap  
 not-yet-named, the planetary pampas. (trans. Kerrigan, p. 151)

Here the word 'before' signifies the paternity of a continent. It helps us discover primordial Latin America. The above lines introduce us to the continent's unmatched beauty of nature and its freshness. These lines bring out the age-old agricultural and cultural practices of the inhabitants. In a word, the above-mentioned words denote the rawness of nature and the innocence of wildlife of Latin America. Neruda says that the residents of this continent have emerged out of the verdant ingredients of nature. So, he considers them as natural and legitimate owners of the land. But, the bourgeoisie have wiped out their contribution. They have imported Eurocentric artificial culture, which does not acknowledge the contribution and labour of the legitimate sons of the soil. In this way, they have made civilization ahistorical. Neruda, through writing *Canto General*, executes the duty of letting the future generations know about the proper history of the continent.

## II. A Change in Neruda's Vision

It is imperative to note that the poet's Mexico travel depicts not only a visit to different geographical locations but also a journey through the realms of the age-old history of Latin America. It has sharpened his historical consciousness. He, for the first time, witnessed the barbarism of Eurocentric colonisation. Alongside, the traveling allowed him to experience the vastness of pre-Columbian American civilization and its beauty. In 1943, he along with Peruvian novelist Miguel Asturias visited the highest peak of Macchu Picchu, an ancient Inca city. Neruda, standing on a height of about eight thousand feet, got bewildered by the deep silence of the mountains. He writes: "I felt Chilean, Peruvian, American. On those difficult heights, among those glorious, scattered ruins, I had found the principles of faith I needed to continue my poetry" (trans. Martin p. 166). Thousand years old pyramid-like constructions over there attracted him much. He considered himself a descendant of those who contributed and laboured to build this ancient city on the top of the Andes Mountains. In his *Memoirs*, he acknowledges his intimate love for Macchu Picchu, which leads him to compose one of his famous poems, "The Heights of Macchu Picchu." In this poem, he has rebuked those Spanish Conquistadors who committed the mass killing and thus erased the foot-prints of the real makers of the civilization through introducing imperialism and capitalism.

### III. Struggles and Sacrifices of the Native Heroes:

In *Canto General*, the poet stands as a representative of the martyred workers who have made the earth a better and beautiful place to live in. He finds unity between the labourers who have left us and the underprivileged of the present time. In other words, socialist writers invariably create a nexus between ongoing proletarian struggle and the working-class protest of the past. Likewise, Neruda relates the struggle of the dispossessed of the present age to those working class people who were denied social and political rights in the distant past. In the same way, "The Liberators" applauds the struggle and sacrifice of the native heroes who repulsed Spanish incursion in different countries in Latin America. The poem denounces the dictators who have established their kingdoms overthrowing the vanguards of the Spanish rule. Neruda compares local fighters of the pre-Columbian era with pre-Hispanic men of nature. He considers the freedom-seekers as non-violent, humble, and trustworthy, and the colonizers as greedy, traitor, and materialistic. The following lines highlight how the liberators spread throughout the continent turn a tree of comrades who endlessly struggle for freedom.

So too it rose from the agony  
until a secret hand,  
countless arms, the people,  
preserved the fragments,  
hid invariable trunks,  
and their lips were the leaves,  
of the immense divided tree,  
disseminated everywhere,  
walking with its roots.  
This is the tree, the tree  
of the people, of all the peoples  
struggling for freedom. (trans. Schmitt, pp. 44-45)

### IV. Reign of Terror Versus Proletarian Movement:

"The Soil Betrayed" details the 1950s political vicissitudes uncovering the perfidious role of the South American dictators. It excoriates those traitors who have betrayed their lands by obstructing the smooth, nationalistic movement by the indigenous leaders. Furthermore, following a dialectical process, Neruda composes "The Earth's Name is Juan" shedding light upon those who serve the land as its legitimate sons. This Canto elaborates that the work of Juan, a less known activist, and soldier, has not been included in the text-book history quite intentionally. In effect, "The Soil Betrayed" and "The Earth's Name is Juan" can be read as one composition which has two opposite and contrasting sides. Amid them, the first one portrays the dictators' betrayal with the indigenous leaders, and the second Canto raises hope among mass people projecting the character of Juan who represents the proletarian struggle for freedom. The following lines uncover that though the illegitimate occupiers have killed Juan to silence his voice, they have ultimately failed to suppress his indomitable spirit which has already been circulated among his successors who have, afterwards, fought for freedom:



stance led him to outline and implement a plan to exploit the peasants (5). How his barbarity surpasses the previous dictators' hideous acts is portrayed in the following lines:

González Videla is the rat who shakes  
 his coat caked with dung and blood  
 over this land of mine which he has sold. Every day  
 he pulls stolen coins from his pockets  
 wondering whether tomorrow he will sell land or blood. (trans. Kerrigan,  
 p. 287)

As per Neruda, González Videla's monstrous agenda against the interests of the proletariat place his name beside two other Latin American dictators, namely Melgarejo of Bolivia and Lopez of Venezuela. On the one hand, the poet recognizes the majesty of Melgarejo and Lopez for their gallant role in battling against foreign rules; on the other hand, he condemns the devilishness of González in strong terms. He gets understandably enraged observing dictator González's scale of cruelties unfolded on the Chilean miners. This section of the poem uncovers the fact that González and his henchmen wreaked havoc upon the miners. The ending of section V invites people to rejuvenate themselves and to carry on rebellious movements against the diabolical enterprise of dictatorship. The last stanza of the section also places the Marxist vision regarding the continuation of the proletarian movement to bring ultimate change in society.

Neruda, through the Cantos X and XI, "The Fugitive" and "The Flowers of Punitaqui", expresses his solidarity with the Juans of Chile who suffer unutterable beastliness executed upon them by the goons of González. He considers the dictator's victory temporary. He accuses González of manipulating a victory with money and weapons supplied by his foreign backers. He professes that rising to power without the support of the masses does not last long. Finally, Cantos X and XI declare that the González regime must face a mass revolution that would dethrone the dictator. The following lines attest to the ending note:

What can you do scoundrel, against the air?  
 What can you do scoundrel, against everything  
 That flowers and surges and is silent and watches  
 And awaits me and judges you (trans. Schmitt, p. 284)

### **5. Possibilities of Political Apocalypse**

The stories of betrayal, perfidy, sufferings, and martyrdom Neruda unfolds through his poems are themed not only on pessimism; those tales, in many ways, restore hope among the disenfranchised and the dispossessed. As per the poet, the imminence of political apocalypse through proletarian struggle and communist revolution will restore the previous order of fraternity and equality deposing the present order of brutality and autocracy. Neruda brings forward the necessity of the phrase "Political Apocalypse" which hints at the inevitability of the Marxist revolution to abolish bourgeois exploitative culture. The ultimate triumph of the proletariat, and the punishment of the oppressors and tyrants who oppose people's causes can be regarded as the vital issues of the Marxist vision of freedom.



"The Day Will Come" from Canto IV concentrates on the ultimate triumph of mass people against the status quo underscored by oppression and violence. In the poem, the poet remembers those who have dedicated their lives for the sake of freedom of the long-suffering humanity. He urges the proletariat from every nook and corner of the globe to stand beside the dispossessed and the marginalized. He also calls upon the people to return to their roots and cultural heritage. He motivates the people of Latin America to repel any kind of foreign cultural onslaughts to save their local cultures, traditions, and celebrations from extinction. The poem ends with the poet's clarion call that the people of all persecuted lands of the continent must stand together and continue their protest unless they reach their goal. He also assures the people of the upcoming days when everyone will be free.

Soon a day will come  
when we shall set free  
light and water,  
the earth, man,  
and everything will be  
for everyone,  
just as you are. (trans. Kerrigan, p. 243)

The above lines transparently announce that people will soon see new days, and a new beginning will remove darkness from life. To clarify this viewpoint of the poet, Moran says, "He begs the air to remain free and for the winds of change to blow" (132). The poet again says,

My people will win. All peoples  
Will win, one by one.  
[...]  
The hour of victory is near. (trans. Kerrigan, p. 247)

The dictator's oppressive initiatives against the communist and the progressive forces hurt Neruda much. Nevertheless, as an optimist Marxist, he maintains confidence in the unconquerable spirit of progressive forces. In "You Shall Struggle" from Canto XIII, he reassures that the endless movement of the masses will thrash away the dictator. The poet discloses that though he along with thousands of his communist friends has been blacklisted by the government they will never withdraw themselves from revolutionary engagement. They will never submit to any unlawful violence. They must resist the dictator's blueprint of establishing a capitalistic society instead of a plural and progressive one. The following lines resonate with the poet's confidence in ushering in a change through struggle:

But you'll struggle to change life  
You'll struggle to scratch the spot  
Of manure from the map, you'll doubtlessly  
Struggle (trans. Schmitt, p. 335)

### Conclusion

Pablo Neruda, through expounding the long narrative poem *Canto General*, has exposed and condemned the tendencies to falsifying and erasing the real history of the Latin American. The poem sheds light upon all unsung heroes of Latin America who had undergone indescribable suffering to establish truth over falsehood. Neruda's quest for historical truth exposes how the Latin American dictators have falsified the historical events, and refused to acknowledge the contributions of the indigenous fighters of the continent. Through this poem, he emerges as a unified voice of the continent which chronicles the authenticity of historical events and manifold contributions of the proletariat who have sacrificed their lives to bring social, political, and cultural changes in society. In doing so, he conforms to Marxist dialectics which ultimately leads him to exalt proletarian struggle over bourgeois designs. He finds out how the proletarian movements, which took place at different times in different parts of Latin America, have helped us know about unfolding of history in South America.. Above all, this research shows that in *Canto General*, the poet, on the one hand, uncovers the treachery of Latin American leaders in the era of post-independence, and on the other, emphasizes the substantiality of Marxist social dialectics, which endorses the continuation of the proletarian struggle to protect Latin America from a historicity.

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