

## Salvation Stories

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**R***edeemers* is a simple idea, brilliantly executed. Mexican historian Enrique Krauze has given us what appears to be an eclectic collection of portrayals of a dozen Latin Americans: politicians, intellectuals, revolutionaries. Taken together, however, the lives of these 12 help us understand the recent political history of the region. All of these subjects believed they were somehow chosen to bring change, to set right the wrongs of the past. They set out to deliver Latin America's people not only from their suffering but also, in many cases, from out of the shadow of the colossus to the north.

At the center of *Redeemers*, both literally and thematically, is the story of Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet and Nobel laureate. Paz in many ways defines this volume; indeed, the narrative of his life encompasses nearly a fifth of the book. With a family history embedded in the revolutionary politics that marked early modern Mexico, Paz's story captures and makes personal the political dynamics and intellectual currents of twentieth-century Latin America that continue to find expression today.

Paz's father died supporting Emiliano Zapata, who led a failed revolution in the early 1900s to bring about agrarian reform and dismantle the neo-feudal regime that ruled Mexico. As a young man Paz became an intellectual adherent of communism, going so far as to address fellow communists as "comrades" and joining with others who wore Russian-style tunics. His politics, however, was at the core driven not so much by ideology as by a poet's antipathy to injustice—and, as Krauze makes clear, by youthful passion and unleashed energy.

Paz penned one of his first poems, *No pasarán!*, in solidarity with republicans in the Spanish Civil War during the fascist siege of Madrid ("Like

the dry wait for a revolver / or the silence that precedes childbirths / we hear the cry. / It lives in the guts, / it lingers in the pulse, / ascends from the veins to the lips: / they will not pass"). The poem became instantly known, as did Paz, who then traveled to Spain, where he enthusiastically showed his support for the Republican cause. On his return to Mexico, he grew dismayed by the brutal and authoritarian path that Soviet communism had taken, though he did not publicly break with the party. Paz soon left his native country, drifting away first to the United States and then to Europe. This

self-imposed exile would last nearly 30 years, even though he remained tied to his native country as he served in various diplomatic capacities, including ambassador to India, in the 1960s.

His thinking kept evolving, most radically with an event similar to one that took place near China's Tiananmen Square 21 years later: the massacre of protesting students in the Tlatelolco section of Mexico City in 1968 by Mexican army troops. Paz resigned as ambassador in protest. A few years later, as he neared 60, he renounced his attachment to Marxism, but not to socialism. The shift provoked severe criticism from a new left that had found in Marxism-Leninism and the Cuban revolution a future path for Mexico, and Latin America, that Paz did not. At the same time, Paz criticized the turn toward military government that had swept through Latin America.

Even as he was denounced by the left, Paz remained a critic of the Mexican state. It had not become a personality-driven authoritarian state like others in the region. But it had, he believed, become unmoored from an emphasis on social development and the ideals of the Zapatistas.

While he remained outside government, editing journals that were not, as many are in Mexico, solely dependent on government grants, Paz's political views now veered toward an appreciation of Liberal Democracy (Krauze's capitalization) as

**Redeemers: Ideas and Power in Latin America**  
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the best way forward, as the only way forward that guaranteed political space for the people when their interests diverged from the elite's.

Krauze, who once served as an editor at one of Paz's journals, renders the man's political and literary life both passionately and, at times, dispassionately. It is a grand life that encapsulates in many ways Latin America's political trajectory over the past century. But it also evokes the ambivalence with which Krauze regards the legacy of all the region's would-be redeemers.

## ICONS, PAST AND PRESENT

The other biographies in the book contain many of the themes found in Paz's story. Three stand out in this respect. The stories of Eva Perón and Che Guevara illustrate two poles of Paz's concern, respectively the *caudillo* (or, in Perón's case, *caudilla*) and the committed revolutionary. And then there is Hugo Chávez, caudillo, military man, and revolutionary.

Eva Perón, the second wife of Argentine President Juan Perón, and the only woman among the men in *Redeemers*, has become, as Krauze notes, a "popular icon." Krauze richly illustrates why, from the personal excesses ("when she died, she would own 1,200 gold and silver brooches, three ingots of platinum, 765 pieces of silver and gold work . . . 1,653 diamonds, 120 wristwatches . . .") to her devotion to the poor ("During Christmas of 1947, she gave away five million toys. Year after year she distributed tens of thousands of shoes, pants, dresses, jars, dolls, tricycles, soccer balls, baby bottles, food products, dentures, sewing machines."). Yet Krauze also describes the reality of the Peróns' blend of personalist and populist politics: the absolute control of the state while staging "democratic" elections, the repression exercised to maintain that control, and the mismanagement of the economy that brought Argentina's development to a halt.

Che, the popular icon whose image can still be seen today on T-shirts in college towns (and also, as Krauze notes, on Mike Tyson's abdomen), is perhaps the most "redemptive" figure in this volume. His death in Bolivia in 1967 has been treated as martyrdom for the "cause," the cause being suffused in years since with a romanticism

that Krauze carefully dilutes. The author draws on a number of biographies to do this, most notably Jorge Castañeda's *Compañero*, which, coming from a man of the left himself, stands out for pointing out the raw realities of Che: the revolutionary turned government minister out of his depth; the physician who oversaw the operation of a labor camp in Fidel Castro's new Cuba in which homosexuals and other "undesirables" were confined. In summarizing Che's legacy, Krauze wonders, with a certain wistful bitterness, just how many others have sacrificed themselves needlessly for the "cause" in the years since Che's death.

Chávez draws not on Che but on his revolutionary companion, Castro, and on the "liberator" of South America, Simón Bolívar, in creating his own sense of bringing salvation to the people of Venezuela—and the rest of Latin America. Chávez, unlike Che but much like Eva and Juan Perón, is a latter-day caudillo, unabashedly. "Even before he assumed power," Krauze writes, "Chávez defended the need for a charismatic leader: 'The caudillo is the representative of a mass with which he identifies, and he is recognized by that mass without any formal, legal process of legitimization.'" Chávez has spent his time in office acting accordingly. Krauze again: "From the moment he was first elected president, Chávez has used democracy to undermine democracy. Venezuela still holds elections but he has taken numerous measures to undermine all independent sources of power and to crush the opposition."

As Krauze notes in his preface to the book, "Redemption or democracy? This is still the central dilemma of Latin America." Krauze's rich and beautifully written sketches of Che, Perón, Chávez, and the others he selected for *Redeemers*—including the Cuban revolutionary and poet José Martí, the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez, and the Mexican rebel Subcommandante Marcos—illustrate this dilemma, caught starkly in a poem by Paz:

We were carried along  
By the wind of thought  
the verbal wind . . .

The good, we wanted the good:  
to straighten out the world. ■