

From the margin: Orphanhood, autonomy, and a critique of universalism*

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Abstract

Questo articolo offre una riflessione contestualizzata sull'autonomia come compito politico, esistenziale ed epistemico, prendendo come punto di partenza *El escritor argentino y su tradición* di Borges. Attraverso il concetto di «orfanezza creativa», la distanza dalle tradizioni dominanti viene ridefinita come fonte di agency. Attingendo dall'esistenzialismo sartriano e dalla teoria postcoloniale, la libertà viene definita come un lavoro contestualizzato che deve negoziare sia la forza normativa della tradizione sia i vincoli strutturali della subordinazione geopolitica. La questione della rilevanza – ciò che conta veramente – guida un progetto normativo per la costruzione di una vita propria. Sei principi orientano questo progetto: eradicazione della povertà e della disuguaglianza; difesa critica dei diritti umani; pluralismo democratico; giustizia socio-ambientale; produzione di conoscenza situata; attivazione del patrimonio culturale. Il saggio sostiene che le posizioni periferiche costituiscono punti di vista privilegiati da cui reimmaginare l'universalismo attraverso l'esperienza storica concreta, promuovendo un'etica del progetto che trasforma l'esposizione in orizzonte e il margine in fondamento.

Parole chiave: autonomia situata; tradizione e critica; orfanezza creativa; universalismo dai margini.

This article offers a situated reflection on autonomy as a political, existential, and epistemic task, taking Borges's *El escritor argentino y su tradición* as its point of departure. Through the concept of «creative orphanhood», distance from dominant traditions is reframed as a source of agency. Engaging Sartrean existentialism and postcolonial theory, freedom is defined as a situated labor that must negotiate both the normative force of tradition and the structural constraints of geopolitical subordination. The

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question of relevance – what truly matters – guides a normative project for building a life of one’s own. Six principles orient this project: eradication of poverty and inequality; critical defense of human rights; democratic pluralism; socio-environmental justice; production of situated knowledge; and activation of cultural heritage. The essay argues that peripheral locations constitute privileged standpoints from which to reimagine universalism through concrete historical experience, advancing an ethics of the project that turns exposure into horizon and the margin into foundation.

Keywords: situated autonomy; tradition and critique; creative orphanhood; universalism from the margins.

Introduction

In his essay *El escritor argentino y la tradición* (1932)¹, Jorge Luis Borges offers a reflection that goes beyond the realm of literature to become an epistemological, aesthetic, and political key. Borges suggests that the condition of the South American writer – and, by extension, of the South American subject – is marked by a peculiar dual belonging: we inhabit the world of Western culture, yet do not feel entirely bound by it. This ambiguity reveals itself as an advantage: we can draw on the resources of the canon without the reverential burden it carries in its places of origin. We can – as Borges puts it – act with irreverence, which, far from implying frivolity, translates into creative freedom and critical possibility².

Building on this insight, Borges outlines a condition of possibility for intellectual and political intervention from South America. The goal is not to affirm a localist identity, but to recognize that from our orphanhood – with respect to the great cultural and political traditions – emerges a freedom of movement, an opening for thinking unbound by the chains of cultural determinism. In this paper, I propose to explore three lines of thought derived from Borges’s reflection: (1) the conditions for intervention from cultural orphanhood; (2) the problem of tradition and determinism; and (3) the articulation between the local and the universal as a horizon of autonomy. My impression is that these three elements sketch a standpoint that could be productively embraced in the effort to shape a collective life of our own.

I use orphanhood as an analytical and normative category rather than an identity label. It names a condition of non-tutelage – a stance of distance from hegemonic traditions that enables recombination, irony, and authorship. This stance is neither proprietary nor exotic; it has force only when anchored in its material and

¹ J.L. Borges, *El escritor argentino y la tradición* (1932), in Id., *Obras completas*, Emecé, Buenos Aires 1974, pp. 272-277.

² I draw on Borges conceptually rather than philologically. The point is the possibility of «tradition without tutelage» and the permission structure it affords for irreverent recombination from the margin.

institutional conditions (cultural, social, economic, scientific, technological, and legal). Read this way, orphanhood avoids both romanticization and a politics of authenticity, while clarifying why irreverence can be a method for situated creation.

This article makes three contributions. First, it develops a concept of creative orphanhood as a productive response to historical dependency, refining Borges's insight about peripheral authorship. Second, it reframes Sartrean freedom as a task instituted through material mediations (cultural, economic, scientific, technological, and institutional), thus bridging individual agency and public policy. Third, it advances a situated universalism (neither absolutist nor identitarian) articulated through six normative criteria for common life.

The argument unfolds as follows: I begin by clarifying orphanhood as a condition for intervention and, in due course, contrast it with the figure of exile to distinguish two forms of distance. I then revisit determinism through the lenses of subjective capture and institutional design, preparing the shift from choice to institution. Finally, I argue for a situated universalism that gives systematic ground to the six criteria proposed here.

On this basis, I treat orphanhood not as a deficit but as a condition for intervention (a stance that converts distance into authorship). The analysis that follows elaborates this shift.

Orphanhood as a condition for intervention

Borges's reflection on the position of the South American writer in *El escritor argentino y la tradición* opens a fertile possibility: to conceive our peripheral condition not in terms of deprivation, but of potential. Borges suggests that, not being devoutly bound to European traditions, South Americans occupy a distinctive position from which to exercise a creative freedom that others – those too close to the canon – cannot afford. This critical distance allows us to think our identities and projects from what might be called a condition of creative orphanhood³.

I understand orphanhood not as lack but as a normative and epistemic stance of non-tutelage: a cultivated distance from hegemonic traditions that enables critical recombination and authorship. In this sense, orphanhood is neither a lament nor a claim to purity; it is a practice of selection and re-articulation subject to public accountability. Its distinct promise is to convert distance into an operative criterion of relevance for situated intervention⁴.

³ This applies to those who did not occupy a central position within the great pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas (such as the Andean or Mesoamerican cultures). For these margins, as B. Sarlo aptly notes in her reading of Borges, «nationality has exploded and spread across the map: it is the advantage of the margin» (B. Sarlo, *Clases de literatura argentina, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UBA 1984-1988*, edited by S. Saíta, Siglo XXI, Buenos Aires 2022, p. 71; the translation is mine).

⁴ On non-tutelage as a key to practical identity, see C.M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996. On the ethical dimension of irony as openness to recomposition, see J. Lear, *A Case for Irony*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2011.

Far from being a deficiency, orphanhood here becomes a condition of possibility for invention. To create something of one's own – to intervene, to produce meaning, to act politically – it is necessary to have passed through a rupture with cultural «parental» tutelage. Tradition, as symbolic and normative weight, can inhibit the creative gesture unless one manages to take distance from it. In a certain sense, creation demands becoming orphaned: stepping away from inherited forms not to reject them entirely, but to interrogate them from another position – freer, more exposed, more desirous, ultimately more vital.

For the purposes of this paper, orphanhood can be operationalized through three properties: (i) non-tutelage – freedom from claims of canonical guardianship; (ii) recombining – the active capacity to repurpose concepts, forms, and practices across traditions without claims of proprietary authenticity; and (iii) consequential accountability – orientation to the effects of interventions in shared institutions rather than to the prestige of sources. These properties will guide the evaluative work done later in the paper⁵.

This condition implies an exposure to the void, to the elements – where there are no guarantees, no secure inheritances. Yet this exposure should not be mistaken for abandonment. Orphanhood, as it is proposed here, does not signify mere desolation, but rather an epistemological and existential position that enables irony and irreverence toward the legacy. In this sense, orphanhood is also – and above all – a space of desire: as rigid normative referents disappear, a space opens for freedom, for imagination, and for the invention of new meanings.

From this perspective, the South American position ceases to be a subordinate periphery and becomes a space of invention, where the materials of tradition can be used freely (recombined, dismantled, rearticulated) without deferring to a central orthodoxy. This irreverence is not merely an aesthetic or epistemic gesture; it is also a political stance: one that intervenes without asking permission, one that builds a thought of its own from fragments and displacements, attending more to the challenges of the present than to the promises, places, and problems inherited from the past of others.

Why does orphanhood drive creation? The analogy with the real condition of the orphan offers a key to interpretation. Orphanhood implies a loss: the disappearance of a recognized figure of authority, of a source that once organized the world and provided stable orientation. But that loss, far from foreclosing the future, inaugurates a vital task: the task of inventing a life of one's own. The orphan cannot simply follow a path already laid out; they must invent it. They must determine, from within, how to live from now on. And in that founding gesture lies not only an attention to the present, but also the possibility of imagining and projecting a different future. What is built necessarily draws on remnants, but from a lucid awareness: there is no longer anyone to whom responsibility can be delegated. From that exposure,

⁵ This operationalization aligns with Borges's reading of tradition without tutelage. Recombining here does not imply eclecticism but selection governed by public ends.

creation is neither gratuitous nor merely superficial or ornamental; it is urgent and substantive. What is at stake is the realization of vital possibilities.

The relationship with the past is thus transformed into an ironic distance, which allows for action without becoming trapped in inert reverential respect⁶. This distance does not imply ignorance or contempt, but rather a playful, critical, and selective attitude that privileges the present and its demands, enabling a more authentic engagement with current desires. Unlike nostalgic repetition, this stance calls for a politics of invention – a politics and an ethics oriented around the commitment to a project. It ultimately entails the exercise of agency capable of embracing its own commitments.

At this point, a fundamental paradox becomes visible: the void left by traditional authority generates the need for authorship – not as an external imposition, but as an internal affirmation. In the absence of an inherited mandate, a founding self-assertion becomes indispensable: an act of authority that is not received but constructed. This authority may take various forms (ethical, epistemic, political) but in all cases it involves a decision: to define what matters, what has value, what must be defended. Orphanhood thus demands the emergence of a proper principle of relevance, a framework that can organize and orient collective action.

This is precisely the terrain where the notion of practical identity becomes relevant. Korsgaard argues that human beings cannot act without some conception of who they are, that is, without a practical identity understood as a description under which one finds one's life worth living and one's actions worth undertaking⁷. This practical identity is not merely a social role or a cultural label; it is an internal normative structure, a compass that orients action and confers meaning. In situations of orphanhood, this construction becomes all the more crucial: it is from this practical identity that autonomy can be exercised, new values articulated, and genuine commitments undertaken.

The question that emerges, then, is not only individual but collective: how do we want to live? How do we imagine we could live? What do we want for ourselves, for our community, for the plurality to which we belong? These questions do not admit prefabricated answers. They require situated reflection, critical invention. Precisely because the past has ceased to be a paralyzing structure, it is now possible to pose them with radical force. And in that possibility, in that opening toward the future, resides the political potential of our orphanhood.

⁶ Lear (*A Case for Irony*, cit.) develops a profound conception of irony as a form of reflective distancing. For Lear, irony is not merely a rhetorical device or a skeptical posture, but an existential disposition that allows us to question our own identities and ways of life from within – without destroying them, yet without treating them as final. In this sense, irony enables a critical pause in the face of what we take for granted, opening space for genuine transformation. From this perspective, ironic distance from the past does not entail uprootedness, but the possibility of reinvention: we do not simply repeat or reject our legacy; we rearticulate it through a renewed commitment to the present and its demands.

⁷ This notion articulates a normative understanding of the self (and of the «we») as a source of reasons, where autonomy is exercised by taking responsibility for one's practical identity (C.M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, cit.).

A potential that is expressed not only in the rupture with the past, but in the irreverent manner in which we engage with it: not as a sacralized inheritance, but as a reservoir of fragments from which something new can be built. It is a construction turned away from canonical narratives and oriented toward the contingencies of the present, where the criterion of relevance emerges from life itself and from the challenges that one's own project poses for the future.

Read as a stance, orphanhood yields a method, i.e. irreverence as disciplined recombination. The point is not iconoclasm for its own sake but the articulation of new lines of authorship under conditions of historical dependency. This also fixes a standard of success: not novelty alone, but improvements in intelligibility and in the practical orientation of common life⁸.

Orphanhood and Exile: Two Figures of Distance

Exile and orphanhood both name forms of distance, but they organize it differently. In exile, distance is primarily spatial-historical: the subject is displaced from a lived world and must reconstitute a home in estrangement. In orphanhood, distance is primarily normative: the subject declines tutelage and assumes authorship under conditions that may include, but do not require, geographical displacement.

As Zambrano⁹ reads it, exile is a threshold experience in which the subject loses the guarantees of a shared world and must craft a form of dwelling from the interruption itself. The wound of separation can become a resource for lucidity, but healing requires some restitution – a renewed pact of belonging, however reconfigured. Exile thus foregrounds the work of repair and the ambivalence of memory¹⁰.

By contrast, Said¹¹, who likewise treats exile as a source of critical insight, emphasizes the intellectual gains of displacement: a vantage from the edges that denaturalizes power. Yet this vantage remains tied to dispossession; critique arises from dislocation, and its ethic tends toward witness and the possibility of return¹².

Orphanhood shifts the vector. Rather than centering the wound of displacement, it centres the refusal of guardianship and the assumption of authorship. Where exile tends toward repair of belonging, orphanhood tends toward recomposition of criteria. Where exile seeks a home – however transformed –,

⁸ «Irreverence as method» is a conceptual, rather than philological reading of Borges. A fuller account of institutional success is developed in the section on situated universalism.

⁹ M. Zambrano, *El exilio como patria*, Taurus, Madrid 1977.

¹⁰ Exile is read as a threshold of dispossession that calls for repair and partial restitution of belonging. This frames distance as wound and memory.

¹¹ E.W. Said, *Reflections on Exile*, in Id., *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2000.

¹² According to Said displacement affords a critical vantage («to see the entire world as a foreign land» – *ivi*, p. 186), yet remains bound to dispossession; its ethic often involves witness and the possibility of return. This contrasts with 'orphanhood,' which centers authorship under non-tutelage rather than restitution.

orphanhood tests new rules for inhabiting the world. Both figures can coincide in lived experience; analytically, however, they yield different normative emphases: restitution versus authorship¹³.

These figures also differ in temporality. Exile privileges remembrance and the ethics of return; orphanhood privileges projection and the ethics of institution-building. Exile's question is how to render justice to a loss; orphanhood's question is how to craft shared standards without tutelage. The former risks nostalgic paralysis; the latter risks voluntarism. A situated autonomy can inherit both insights: exile's vigilance against erasure and orphanhood's demand for instituted authorship.

The distinction matters for this article because it grounds two methodological commitments. First, irreverence functions here as a disciplined practice of recombination rather than as an aesthetics of rupture. Second, the evaluative horizon is institutional: the success of authorship is measured not by fidelity to origins but by the public traction of the criteria it institutes – an orientation that prepares the transition to determinism, capture, and institutional design in the next section¹⁴.

If orphanhood names a stance and exile a condition, the problem that follows is how freedom becomes effective beyond declaration. This requires engaging determinism not as metaphysical fate but as patterns of capture and design – precisely the terrain where institutions, sciences, cultures, technologies, and economies mediate authorship into shared life.

Tradition and Determinism: a critique from the margin

If orphanhood reveals itself as a creative possibility, it is necessary to consider what that possibility resists or counters. In this sense, tradition can operate as a determining force that inhibits invention

In the essay mentioned above, Jorge Luis Borges writes: «the problem of Argentine writers is one aspect of the South American problem, and this, in turn, is nothing more than a contemporary and fleeting form of the eternal problem of determinism»¹⁵. This seemingly incidental statement points to a broader philosophical issue: the way in which tradition functions as a matrix of meaning. Borges suggests that tradition is not merely a repertoire of inherited forms, but above all a structure of expectations – a normative narrative that tends to organize experience in terms of necessity. It tells us how we ought to be, what should matter to us, what we are supposed to worry about, how we are expected to write, speak, think, or even feel.

When this type of narrative becomes absolutized, it produces a form of bondage. Tradition ceases to be a field of resources (a symbolic reservoir from which to draw creative momentum) and becomes a destiny: it predetermines the horizon of

¹³ The opposition is not exclusionary at the level of lived experience; it is a typological device to organize normative emphases.

¹⁴ This shift prepares the turn to institution and to criteria of public relevance that support the six criteria presented at the end.

¹⁵ J.L. Borges, *El escritor argentino y la tradición*, cit., p. 273. The translation into English is my own.

what is possible and forecloses the question of what kind of life one wishes to construct. Under such a regime, culture no longer serves as a source of vital energy but becomes a mechanism of identity assignment, where each subject seems to occupy a preordained place. Ultimately, this amounts to a form of symbolic determinism, one that disguises the inhibition of autonomy as cultural fidelity.

This Borgesian diagnosis finds an illuminating counterpoint in Jean-Paul Sartre. His thesis: «there is no determinism: man is freedom»¹⁶ gains precision once we bring into view the pair facticity/transcendence¹⁷. Facticity names the ineluctable weight of situation (history, language, body, institutions) while transcendence names the projecting movement by which the agent outstrips what is given. Freedom is therefore not an exemption from conditions but a mode of inhabiting them: a task of projection in situation that assumes what is given without letting it fix what can count as a reason. On this reading, determinism (the temptation to treat cultural or historical inheritance as destiny) corresponds to what Sartre calls bad faith, i.e. the flight from authorship behind roles, scripts, and narratives that present themselves as necessities. The corrective is not denial of circumstance but its appropriation: taking up one's situation as the very material of commitment.

In his book *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre¹⁸ states the same stakes explicitly: «man is nothing other than what he makes of himself» and we are «condemned to be free»¹⁹. Being «thrown» into a circumstance – our facticity – does not determine our choices; there are no given essences, no prior human nature, no fate to which we must conform. Existence precedes essence, which blocks moral or cultural naturalism and places responsibility in authored commitments²⁰. Freedom here is not an acquired right but a radical, inescapable task; the human being is nothing other than the sum of his acts – that is, through his choices he constitutes himself.

This also clarifies the status of the project: the self is not a substance discovered beneath contingencies but the unity of a practical orientation enacted over time²¹. To say that «existence precedes essence» is to say that meanings, ends, and identities are authored – fallibly, revisably – through commitments that organize the field of reasons from within a circumstance. In this sense, the relevant contrast is not between freedom and causality but between authorship and heteronomy: whether our

¹⁶ J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Eng. trans. by C. Macomber, Yale University Press, New Haven 2007, p. 34.

¹⁷ «No determinism» is taken here as a normative claim about authorship in situation, not a denial of causal orders. Facticity binds as circumstance. It does not legislate ends.

¹⁸ J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, cit., p. 24.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 34.

²⁰ If «existence precedes essence», identities and ends and scripts are authored through commitments that organize reasons over time; in choosing for oneself one also addresses others, which motivates the later appeal to public criteria.

²¹ If «existence precedes essence» (J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, cit., pp. 18-19), identities and ends are authored through commitments that organize reasons over time; in choosing for oneself one also addresses others, which motivates the later appeal to public criteria.

descriptions and ends are genuinely ours or merely inherited mandates that we repeat without acknowledgment.

The convergence with Borges becomes clear at this point: if tradition presents itself as an external mandate that defines what we ought to be, the task – ethical, political, aesthetic, etc. – is to transform it into circumstance. That is, into a given with which we must contend, but which does not determine us. Tradition should be neither blindly obeyed nor reflexively rejected; it must be critically reappropriated, reinscribed in the present in light of the questions and urgencies that traverse it. Freedom is not realized in the absence of constraints, but in the capacity to reconfigure them from a stance that decides what is relevant, what deserves to be preserved, and what must be transformed.

A further implication bears on the paper's political horizon. If freedom is a task in situation, it requires supports – the shared procedures and material conditions that sustain projection, contestation, and revision over time; in this spirit, an instituted freedom, less a celebration of choice than the collective work of making commitments livable and publicly accountable. Under this view, appeals to choice without supports risk lapsing into rhetoric; with supports, authorship becomes a common capacity.

A natural worry arises. If Sartre insists that «there is no determinism», does this trivialize constraint? Properly understood, the claim is normative rather than metaphysical. Constraints shape the field of possible moves; they do not supply a destiny. Facticity binds as circumstance – what must be reckoned with – not as mandate – what must be obeyed. From the margin, the task is to assume and re-script those constraints, turning inherited descriptions into the very material of authorship. This is what prepares the transition, developed below, from an ethics of choice to the institutional conditions under which freedom can be effectively exercised.

Nonetheless, this conception of freedom as a task cannot be sustained without attending to the concrete context in which it is exercised. At this point, it becomes essential to broaden our perspective toward the structural conditions that mediate, limit, and shape that freedom. In the case of a middle-income country (such as many that make up Latin America) the discussion around material, cultural and existential autonomy must be articulated alongside the geopolitical, social, cultural, and economic constraints specific to a peripheral or semi-peripheral region within the international system. Subordinated integration into global circuits of production and consumption, scientific-technological and financial dependency, institutional fragility in the face of multilateral credit agencies, and the constant pressure exerted by hegemonic cultural matrices (whether from the global North or regional centres) form a web of constraints that cannot be overlooked.

These constraints operate not only on the economy but across the material, social, political, cultural, and institutional conditions that sustain the reproduction of life. In particular, they also shape symbolic possibilities, the ways in which the future is imagined, and the resources available for articulating critical thought. In this context, autonomy cannot be conceived as a purely voluntaristic act, but rather as a situated practice – one that must confront both internal traditions and external logics

that seek to shape our horizons of possibility. The question of freedom, then, is inseparable from the question of sovereignty: from where, with what tools, under what pressures, and with which possible interlocutors can a South American voice be constructed today – one that neither merely repeats nor resists, but proposes a form of life in common?

Borges offers a provocative image in this regard. In the text mentioned above, he tells us that in the work that best represents Arab culture – the Qur’an – the camel, the quintessential symbol of the desert, is nowhere to be found. This observation suggests that what is most authentic is not necessarily found in the local or the folkloric. Authenticity does not reside in the repetition of local colour, but in the capacity to speak from one’s own voice – a voice that, even if it dispenses with certain traditional signs, remains deeply rooted in its context.

From this perspective, authenticity does not consist in displaying a fixed identity, but in internalizing a situated sensibility – one woven from the concerns and urgencies of a particular historical moment. This voice is not merely testimonial; it is critical and propositional, capable of projecting meaning. It speaks from a concrete place, but it is not confined by it. It gathers the threads of its time, but it does not submit to their inertia.

Of course, the political response to this situation cannot simply consist in proclaiming the abstract freedom of individuals. It must involve creating the material, institutional, and cultural conditions under which that freedom can be effectively exercised. In this sense, thinking from South America (from its creative orphanhood, as outlined earlier) is neither a decorative gesture nor a sentimental vindication. It is a political imperative. It entails identifying which forms of life present themselves to us as «natural», which narratives organize us without our consent, and what possibilities we can construct – not from an abstract idea of the possible, but through concrete engagement with the circumstances we inhabit and the achievements of our collective struggles.

Situated universalism: normative criteria from the margin

The third axis of reflection confronts us with a decisive question: how do we determine what matters to us? The question of autonomy cannot be addressed without examining the criteria of relevance that structure a life of one’s own. In the South American context, this question becomes particularly acute, as the region’s history has been shaped by recurring forms of heteronomy: colonial legacies, imposed models of development, borrowed ways of life, and identities dictated from the outside²². Within this framework, the search for a life of one’s own is not a

²² A. Quijano, *Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina*, in E. Lander (a cura di), *La colonialidad del saber: Eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales*, CLACSO, Buenos Aires 2000, pp. 201-246: 201, conceptualizes this persistence of epistemic and political subordination as the «coloniality of power» [the translation is mine], a matrix of domination that outlives formal colonialism and structures knowledge, the economy, and subjectivity according to Eurocentric logics.

spontaneous act, but a situated process of discernment – one that requires deciding what to adopt, what to reject, and what to transform²³.

I call the view defended here situated universalism. It rejects two false alternatives: an absolutist universalism that speaks from nowhere and a retreat into identitarian locality. Situated names a method: universals are addressed from within histories, languages, and institutions, yet tested in public for their claim to generality. The point is not to shrink the scope of reasons but to earn it under conditions of plurality²⁴.

By «situated» I mean three constraints taken together: fallibilism (claims to generality remain revisable in light of reasons and consequences), addressability (those affected can recognize themselves as addressees of the reasons that bind them), and reciprocity (criteria one could endorse under a reversal of positions). Taken jointly, these constraints discipline Borgesian irreverence and connect Sartrean freedom-as-task to a public standard of justification: proposals must be open to revision, addressed to those they govern, and defensible from any position.

From this perspective, the opposition between borrowed life and one's own life takes on political and existential depth. To live a borrowed life is to reproduce, without mediation, the values, institutions, expectations, and ways of life that others have defined as desirable. It means accepting as one's own certain standards of success, well-being, or progress that were designed for different realities, based on different experiences. In contrast, to live one's own life is to establish an autonomous criterion of relevance – that is, to decide what deserves attention, care, and defence based on the needs, memories, and horizons that shape our collective experience.

But this autonomy is not exercised in a vacuum. As we have seen in previous sections, freedom is not primordial; it is won, and it always unfolds in a specific situation. Hence the importance of conceiving a situated autonomy: a form of self-determination that neither limits itself to replicating foreign models nor retreats into a closed or essentialist identity. The key lies in constructing a normative framework of our own – one capable of articulating universal principles with local experiences, without falling into either paralyzing relativism or imperial universalism²⁵.

²³ On this issue, the work of Harry Frankfurt is particularly relevant. In *The Importance of What We Care About* (H.G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988), Frankfurt argues that our fundamental concerns are constitutive of our moral identity, as they shape what we are willing to act for, justify ourselves through, or even sacrifice for. Thus, autonomy is not merely the capacity to choose among options, but involves the reflective formation of what truly matters to us. In *The Reasons of Love* (H.G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004), he expands this thesis by showing how love (as a form of deep concern) structures our most significant motivations. From this perspective, determining what matters is not simply an intellectual exercise, but an existential task of self-constitution that anchors our decisions within a personal and shared normative framework.

²⁴ The universals claimed here are situated rather than disembodied.

²⁵ Chakrabarty proposes «provincializing Europe» (D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2000, p. 1) as a philosophical task: decentralizing modern narratives without discarding universal ideals, by reformulating them from non-European histories and urgencies.

In this sense, the defence of human rights constitutes a strategically privileged terrain. Our marginal position within global structures of power does not disqualify us from engaging these principles; on the contrary, it enables a critical reappropriation grounded in lived experience. We must emphasize not only the political and legal dimensions of human rights (such as freedom of expression, voting rights, or due process), but also, and with equal or greater urgency, their social and economic dimensions: access to healthcare, housing, education, and dignified work. These are not «secondary» rights, nor mere supplements to civil liberties; they are the material preconditions for the meaningful exercise of political agency. Without guarantees of subsistence, social recognition, and economic autonomy, political rights remain abstract, hollowed of efficacy. From this standpoint, the defence of equality, dignity, and pluralism does not arise from a desire to emulate the global North, but from a situated and urgent imperative: our histories of dispossession and struggle invest these ideals with concrete stakes and existential weight²⁶. From the margins, universalism is not an abstract luxury but an urgent necessity. The aim is not to claim the position of the «legitimate bearer» of the universal, but to assert the right to rewrite it from within our own conditions. At this point, the argument converges with certain postcolonial approaches, yet it avoids falling into a binary logic of centre versus periphery, opting instead for a critical reappropriation rather than an identitarian rejection.

Alongside this critical reappropriation of the universal, further criteria are needed to structure a life of one's own. I therefore propose six central normative criteria. Read within this framework, each functions both as a support for instituted freedom and as a check on heteronomy. They are not programmatic add-ons; they follow from the argument developed so far, i.e. an account of agency authored in situation, a discipline of public justification, and the demand that standards gain traction beyond their point of origin.

1. The commitment to eliminating poverty and combating inequality cannot be reduced to an abstract moral imperative; it constitutes a concrete precondition for the very possibility of democratic forms of life. Where large segments of the population lack access to adequate housing, nutrition, healthcare, and education, political participation becomes a deeply unequal privilege, reserved for those who can exercise it without compromising their basic subsistence. In contexts such as South America, where historical patterns of inequality intersect with new forms of precarity, democratic life requires – at a minimum – the guarantee of material conditions that enable deliberation, regulated conflict, and mutual recognition. Without these foundations, the principles of liberty, equality, and dignity risk becoming hollow promises, incapable of sustaining truly autonomous and plural forms of life. As a

²⁶ Mignolo suggests that Latin America should not be conceived as a subaltern space within modern thought, but rather as an epistemic locus from which to rethink modernity and its foundational principles. See W.D. Mignolo, *The idea of Latin America*, Blackwell, Malden 2005.

support for instituted freedom, this criterion guards against the emptying-out of agency by securing material conditions without which autonomy is rhetorical²⁷.

2. The commitment to democratic forms of life – understood not merely as systems of government, but as modes of coexistence rooted in participation, deliberation, and mutual recognition – requires particular attention to the inclusion of marginalized groups and minorities. A democracy that does not actively incorporate the voices, experiences, and demands of those historically excluded – whether on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, or socioeconomic status – risks reproducing patterns of domination under the guise of formal equality. True democratic coexistence must therefore be measured not only by institutional frameworks, but by the extent to which it enables minority communities to shape the norms, narratives, and priorities of collective life. As a check on heteronomy, this criterion ensures addressability and reciprocity in the very procedures that shape common norms.

3. Active respect for the rights of ethnic, cultural, sexual, or linguistic minorities must be understood not as a concession, but as a constitutive element of a democratic life in common. Genuine commitment to plurality requires more than formal recognition: it demands the creation of institutional, discursive, and material conditions that allow minority groups to participate meaningfully in the shaping of collective norms. This entails resisting both assimilationist pressures and fragmenting essentialisms, cultivating instead an ethic of plurality that prevents the common good from being equated with cultural homogeneity. In plural societies – especially those marked by histories of colonization, racialization, and marginalization – democracy cannot be measured solely by procedural fairness. It must also be judged by the degree to which it enables historically excluded voices to contest dominant narratives, co-construct shared horizons, and inhabit public space with dignity and agency. As a test of addressability, this criterion commits us to forms of recognition that allow those affected to see themselves in the reasons that bind them.

4. A non-extractive relationship with the environment requires combining the legitimate right to development with a principle of ecological responsibility. This entails rejecting two symmetrical errors: on one hand, the logic of unlimited environmental sacrifice in the name of economic growth; on the other, the guilt-driven renunciation of efforts to improve material living conditions, as if any aspiration to well-being were environmentally illegitimate. What is proposed instead is a model that integrates social justice and sustainability, recognizing that ecological transition will only be viable if it does not reproduce historical inequalities or place the burden of adjustment on the most vulnerable. As a reciprocity requirement across generations and communities, this criterion refuses to externalize costs onto the most vulnerable or the not-yet-present.

5. The valorisation of science and technology as instruments for addressing local and regional challenges, rather than as disciplines subordinated to external

²⁷ This formulation echoes the paper's earlier claim that freedom is instituted rather than free-floating; the criterion guards against the emptying-out of agency.

agendas. This implies promoting the production of situated knowledge and context-specific technological innovation aimed at fostering inclusive socioeconomic development. It entails reorienting research and innovation to engage with our concrete urgencies – those arising from our histories, environments, and collective struggles – and to respond to questions that are genuinely our own. As a condition of situated authorship, this criterion affirms knowledge-making that answers to our questions and purposes rather than to imported pedigrees.

6. The active defense of one's own cultural heritage – not as a static or sacralized legacy, but as a dynamic and plural resource of meanings, practices, and expressions. This heritage can contribute to shaping present and future forms of life, provided it remains open to reinterpretation, reinvention, and dialogue with contemporary challenges. As a resource for authorship (not essence) this criterion treats heritage as dynamic, enabling reinterpretation and dialogue rather than sacralisation.

All of these criteria should be understood as starting points for a collective construction. They do not constitute a closed program, but rather an invitation to publicly deliberate on what kind of life we want to lead, what kind of world we wish to inhabit, and what responsibilities we are willing to assume in order to make it possible.

Ultimately, the question of what matters to us is inseparable from the question of what we want to become. From the margins, that question is not a privilege but an urgency. And its answer will come neither from any external tradition nor from an insular retreat into identity, but from our collective capacity to weave desires, principles, and contexts into a form of life that can be sustained, projected, and shared.

Taken together, these six criteria specify how a margin authors universals without absolutizing them: not by claiming purity, but by instituting the conditions under which reasons can travel – across differences – without erasing situatedness. Their validity is neither local charm nor imperial decree; it is the earned traction of criteria that survive contestation and guide action in common²⁸.

Two concerns merit brief clarification. One is relativism: «situated» need not dissolve normativity, since fallibilism, addressability, and reciprocity keep justification demanding while rejecting a view-from-nowhere. The other is the risk of romanticizing the margin: the aim is not to valorise subalternity but to convert distance into instituted authorship; without supports, irreverence becomes posture²⁹.

Conclusion: toward a situated form of autonomy

²⁸ «Earned traction» signals the non-absolutist route to universality: criteria extend their reach by withstanding contestation and finding uptake across differences.

²⁹ «Situated» designates constraints on justification (revisability, addressability, reciprocity), not a weakening of normativity. «Supports» names the alignment of material conditions, shared procedures of contestation and revision, and practices that sustain commitments over time – the grounds on which distance can become instituted authorship.

Throughout this article, we have sought to outline a reflection on the conditions of possibility for thinking and exercising a situated autonomy from South America, taking as our point of departure Borges's suggestive thesis that the problem of Argentine writers – and, by extension, the problem of our relationship with tradition – is a contemporary form of the eternal problem of determinism. This claim, far from being a mere footnote in a literary discussion, emerges as a key to understanding our own cultural, political, and existential tensions.

In the first section, we proposed to think of orphanhood as a condition for intervention – not as a lack, but as a creative opening that arises when tradition ceases to function as destiny and becomes raw material for invention. Orphanhood, in this sense, is the critical distance that enables one to assume a voice of their own without becoming trapped in the reverential repetition of the past. From there, a politics of projection becomes possible: a form of authorship that, in the face of the void left by inherited certainties, dares to pose the foundational question of all ethics and all politics: how do we want to live?

In the second section, we explored the problem of determinism not only as a cultural inheritance, but as a form of subjection that can be symbolic, institutional, or material. Through a parallel reading of Borges and Sartre, we saw that tradition, when absolutized, functions as a narrative that imposes modes of being and horizons of meaning. In response, the South American subject must treat their circumstance not as a chain, but as a point of departure. Freedom is not an escape, but an active engagement with that circumstance as a task. Yet we also noted that this freedom is conditioned by structures of inequality operating at both internal and global levels. Autonomy, therefore, is not merely an individual matter but a geopolitical one: it depends on the collective capacity to contest the frameworks that determine which lives are valued, which models are desirable, and which forms of knowledge are considered relevant.

The third section brought this reflection into the normative and political sphere, asking what it means to build a life of one's own rather than live a borrowed one. This question requires identifying the criteria by which we determine what matters. We proposed a set of principles that, while neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, offer guidance for this task: the defense of the universalism of human rights from within the experience of exclusion; the commitment to democratic forms of life that respect minorities; sustainable development as both a right and a responsibility; situated science as an emancipatory tool; and the active care of cultural heritage as a living source of meaning. Together, these elements form a normative horizon capable of linking personal autonomy to a collective project.

Ultimately, what we have sought to argue is that thinking from the margins is not a disadvantage, but a privileged epistemological and political position. From this vantage point – free from the paralyzing weight of centrality and without the obligation to reproduce foreign forms – we are able to explore alternative ways of inhabiting the world. We can construct forms of life that, without denying universal

principles, reinterpret them through our historical experience. Forms of life that neither repeat uncritically nor retreat without direction, but instead assert themselves as proper, autonomous, shared, and open. This is not about inventing from nothing, nor about restoring a lost essence, but about creating from what is at hand, from what wounds, from what is missing, from what we desire.

In times of crisis for abstract universals, this task also requires reimagining the common from historically and materially concrete coordinates – where exposure is not the limit of what is possible, but its very condition. That is, perhaps, the most profound ethical and political task of our orphanhood: to turn exposure into project, and the margin into principle.