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The Development of a Cosmopolitan Sociology in Latin America

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Introduction

Any consideration of the weight of Latin American sociology on the development of social theory and analysis is likely to leave the casual researcher perplexed and disillusioned. After a century and a half of copious scholarship, countless epistemological controversies, many insightful contributions, and much more, the development of sociology in Latin America still remains an enigma for some and at the margins of social science scholarship for others. Perhaps, with the exception of an occasional paper on migration, metropolitan studies, or national development², a journey through the pages of popular textbooks and annual reviews published in the United States and Europe might lead the reviewer to conclude there is simply a scarce of theory production in universities, or, worse, that Latin American sociologists are mere consumers of the abundant scholarship formulated elsewhere. When Richard Morse (1996) published his exhaustive review of the contenting controversies in the literature on Latin America identity, for instance, he dedicated scant attention to sociological arguments. More recently, José H. Bortoluci and Robert S. Jansen (2013) have attributed the relative impact of Latin American scholarship among postcolonial studies to the legacy of the distinct pattern of colonial and post-colonial experiences. G. Duncan Mitchell (1968) went as far as categorizing as American only North American sociologists in his normative tour of social theory. Whether the outcome of mere neglect, ethnocentric tendencies, or complicated historical experiences, the tribulations of Ralph Ellison's invisible man (1952) perhaps best characterize the true self of affairs in Latin American sociology these dates.

Yet, for the serious student of Latin America social sciences, these assessments seem divorced from reality. There is no doubt that sociologists from down South have conceived their own distinct traditions of inquiry, emphasizing the macro over the micro perspective, for instance. But they have also contributed significantly to the general course of sociological studies and in recent years even conceptualized a paradigm shift or two. In an effort to reverse the prevailing myopia, and to demonstrate the depth of the field, this paper shall review specific intellectual milestones and contributions. I guess the argument to be made is that the point of departure of Latin American social sciences is rooted in an attempt to understand the fate of national projects in the context of controversial political, economic, and even cultural relations between Latin America and its neighbors. Its particular historical development suppresses the influence of the pragmatic movement, and the so-called behavioralist revolution, for structural and comparative historical approaches. This essential distinction differentiates the intellectual production among scholars in the region from their mainstream North American and European counterparts, where the focus, for a good part of the twenty-century, has been on functionalist, symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological research agendas.

To be sure, Latin America has impacted the development of social research in at least three ways. For decades, the region served as the source of inspiration and laboratory for numerous quasi-experiments and data gathering, as a recent intellectual biography of Albert O. Hirschman published by Jeremy Adelman (2013) well attests. The Caribbean and South America are also the recipient of more policy analysis and instrumentalist imperatives than anyone can count. But for the purpose of our study, it is important to underline that scholars from Latin America continue to engage European and American ideas about nation-building, often contributing noticeable insights. The process of amending, reengineering, and often revoking ideas from abroad is what makes social research in Latin America cosmopolitan.

A second distinction between scholars in the Americas is their identity and how each perceives its own social role. In Latin America, intellectuals are also often practitioners and decision-makers not afraid of praxis of advocacy, but this is not the case among academics in the United States where instrumentalist tendencies are regarded as

proselytizing. This is an obvious but relevant observation because it underlines the appeal of European traditions in Latin America despite close political and economic ties in the hemisphere.

The rest of the paper shall proceed in two general phases. First, I trace the historical development of sociological ideas in Latin America, emphasizing their incremental evolution and transcendence. This intellectual history consists of three distinct periods, in my view. The first, which I named the formative years, captures the intellectual climate of the nineteenth century. The institutionalization period, beginning roughly around the turn of the century, documents the tremendous growth of sociology as an academic discipline and the beginning of its compartmentalization and professionalization. More recently, along with the early critiques of modernization theory, the literature entered a third phase dominated by rigorous and critical essays scrutinizing every aspect of troubled national experiments. This period also marks the highest exposure of regional sociology beyond its borders since the intellectual endeavors centered on the possibilities of success of various nation-building efforts within the context of the umbrella of contemporary global capitalism, the very same concern Latin American social scientists have pondered since independence. I conclude highlighting a few important insights from recent post-dependency debates.

The Formative Years

Much of the sociology production in nineteenth century Latin America came from public intellectuals concerned with post-independence nation building, in particular with governance, race relations, and national identity schemes. The reason for this particular focus has to do with the organization of social relations and practices in the Spanish empire. During colonial rule, formal education and the means to travel were disproportionately more accessible to the rising Creole elites who, ironically, also developed their own disdains for foreign domination. With the colonial legacy fresh in their minds, these *pensadores*, assumed the responsibility of pondering about the future of their fellowman, particularly with regards to the organization of political life and the types of political economic models newly independent nations should follow. In essence, one of the important legacies of this scholarship was the notion that aspirations and opportunities to attain the good life in Latin America were conditioned by particular historical circumstances and the organizing principles and mechanisms governing the insertion of newly independent nation-states into the world economy.

Perhaps there is no better illustration of these intellectual trends than the diverting views espoused by the Argentinean statesman and social thinker Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, the Cuban essayist and opposition leader José Martí, and the educator and sociologists Eugenio Maria de Hostos from Puerto Rico. In his popular but highly controversial book *Facundo*, Sarmiento characterizes the choice between two political alternatives, to embrace the course of development associated with European ideals or the local traditions he regarded as barbaric and retrograding. Sarmiento did not hesitate before endorsing the former prescriptions of modernity and the insertion of Latin nations in the liberal world economy as the most fruitful path to emancipation and progress. For Sarmiento, there is no better representation of the success of this strategy than the history of the United States itself, a country he profoundly admired and one of the few nations in the Western Hemisphere to eventually rise from colonial status. His unabashed admiration for the United States was vividly captured in one of the letters he wrote to his friend Juana Manso on April 10, 1865 while traveling through the United States. Reflecting on the impact of schooling on national development, Sarmiento (1899, 19) observes:

¡Los Estados Unidos, con sus escuelas al principio como base, han hecho sin embargo, en un siglo, lo que la humanidad entera ha venido haciendo y deshaciendo en seis mil años de historia! ¡El pueblo rey!

José Martí, on the other hand, always the perennial skeptic of mimicking outright the powerful northern neighbor, hesitated to follow the American model and bedded on the side of regional solutions to promote national prosperity. Active in anti-Spanish politics in his homeland of Cuba since early age, Martí was forced into exile first to Spain and then the United States, eventually residing in New York City for a number of years where he earned a living as a journalist and diplomat while conspiring against Spanish colonial rule. Although he wrote extensively about many subjects, including several of the social issues that swayed United States and Cuban independence, perhaps no other essay best captures his thinking about the future of Latin America than *Nuestra América* (Our America). For our purpose, Martí makes two points in his essay that radically sets him apart from Sarmiento. The first is captured by the term “nuestra,” or ours, that depicts his concerns for the common heritage and state of mind among all Latin Americans regardless of race, ethnicity, or national origins. Whereas Sarmiento’s views were bifocal, Martí’s were transnational and inclusive. Moreover, rather than utterly endorsing the United States as the modernity model to emulate, Martí urges Latin Americans to closely examine their own history and identity, to explore and formulate native solutions to postcolonial issues and concerns, and accordingly to ruminate the success of the United States with some care. For example, in one of his most often cited reflections about the nature of the obstacles associated with national development, Martí concludes:

La incapacidad no está en el país naciente... si no en los que quieren regir pueblos originales, de composición singular y violenta, con leyes heredadas de cuatro siglos de práctica libre en los Estados Unidos, de diecinueve siglos de monarquía en Francia. Con el decreto de Hamilton no se le para la pechada al potro del llanero. (Ripoll, 1966, 225).

A third position, characterized by the work of Eugenio Maria de Hostos, presents the humanistic and ethical, albeit somewhat idealistic, posture. Influenced by the major continental philosophers of his time, the Puerto Rican educator and prolific writer also wrote extensively about the role schooling plays in social emancipation and the integration of principles, conventions and moral values in the organization and function of governing institutions. Maldonado Denis (1992, p. 33) has persuasively argued that in the book *Tratado de Sociología*, first published in 1904, and which consisted of a compilation of revised notes drafted by Hostos for a sociology course dictated in Santo Domingo in 1883, a critical reading of history to understand the current social problems confronting Caribbean nations is suggested.

For Hostos the nature of the debate about the future of Latin America should not be framed in terms of whether or not to follow one or another development model or experiment, but rather on the adherence to our own transcendental values with respect to all matters related to polity. The foundation of social order and progress is dependent on the moral basis of solidarity, he claims (Maldonado Denis, 1981, 142). Once Latin American attains this ideal stage, inclusive progress will set root and science should prosper in the hemisphere. Humanism has the potential to control, and even unravel, the egoistic impulses that might delay social progress. In his words:

..... la civilización fijará sus redes en el Nuevo Continente, y siendo esa civilización más completa, más humana, por ser más completa, la humanidad vivirá mejor que ha vivido, la ciencia tendrá más horizontes que descubrir, la conciencia más leyes que acatar. (Ripoll, 1966, 158).

By all accounts, the legacy of these early intellectual debates will be felt for generations to come throughout Latin America. Moreover, one can already witness in this early phase a tendency for what the Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandez would later refer to as critical and militant sociology, with protagonists that doubled as public intellectuals and social advocates. The concerns of the first generation of thinkers were certainly about improving structural conditions of growth rather than particular situations or personal interactions. Whether coming from one persuasion or another, this group vividly examines critical reflections about Latin America and its ties to the external world as much as many of their contemporaries.

In this sense, the early evolution of social ideas in Latin America did not evolve in very different terms from the process of 19th century liberal social thought in the United States ³. Before the professionalization of the social sciences, the sociological community in North America also witnessed blurring boundary lines demarcating social advocacy and scholastic reflections as was evident in the work and career of Albion W. Small, one of the eminent promoters of American sociology. In the United States, there was also a concerted attempt to understand how structural conditions could determine the fate of social progress. In both regions, finally, scholars mastered many insights from continental philosophy to grasp the realities they experienced.

The Institutionalization Period

The advent of the twentieth-century brought many changes to Latin American societies that revolutionized higher education and furthered the development of academic fields. The university reform movement that evolved after the Cordoba Manifesto of 1918 altered the governance and curriculum of universities, secularized higher education, and created the impetus for the creation of many research institutes and professional associations dedicated to the pursuit of scientific inquiry. After the turn of the century, increasing demand for raw materials and commodities resulted in relative economic growth and a noticeable increase in the size of the middle class only to see the crash of 1929 foment relative deprivation and widespread discontent. The number of new comers, particularly from Europe, who migrated to Latin America to escape the effects of the First World War also rose. At least, one of these immigrants, Gino Germani, was to play a prominent role in the promotion of sociology. Also, of particular importance for the growth of the social sciences was the arrival of numerous Spanish Republican immigrants and political refugees. Internal migration from the interior to major urban centers caused labor volatility, social marginality, and sped the growth of metropolitan regions.

In some instances, academic scholars responded to these social changes by taking an interest in sociology to find evidence based solutions and ways of understanding the major social problems of the day. This intellectual push brought about the first wave of professionalization of sociology. Whereas 19th century intellectuals were deeply concerned with jump-starting the process of national development, twenty-century scholars dedicated themselves

to collecting data to document the extent of many of the social issues in their own societies and in comparative perspectives, since the early process of national development was well on its way. The reaction among academics was to establish university research centers and faculties dedicated to analyzing contemporary issues. In a few years' time, professional associations and institutes housing sociologists were not hard to find.

The establishment of two of the leading social research centers, the prestigious *Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales* at the Universidad Autónoma de México and the *Instituto de Sociología Argentina*, founded in 1930 and 1927 respectively, illustrates this trend. In addition, the former sponsored one of the leading sociological journals in the region, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, which first came to light in 1939. Academic conferences and faculties also gathered during the period. In Brazil, for instance, many normal institutes appointed chairs of sociology by the 1920s, and in 1926 Gilberto Freyre organized one of the first major congresses dedicated to the study of socioeconomic development in the Brazilian northeast and, in 1934, the first Congress of Afro-Brazilian Studies. Other regional associations followed with the Asociación Latinoamericana de Sociología (ALAS) instituted in 1950, the Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO) in 1967, and the Latin American Rural Sociology Association (ALASRU) two years later.

These professional activities went beyond institutionalizing the sociological profession. They also brought about much needed socialization among sociologists and the necessary academic legitimacy to command rigorous empirical investigations. Although in its infant stages, sociologists at the time published important studies explaining the distinct racial relations of Latin America and how these relations manifested themselves differently from other nations, namely the United States. These studies made many North American scholars aware that the analytical models they so carefully crafted needed much retooling before they could be successfully applied elsewhere. With regards to political sociology in Argentina, academics made significant contributions to the study of social fragmentation and political instability. And in Mexico, sociology contributed major studies that attempted to answer one of the major questions that remains pertinent to this day, how the consolidation of revolutions often leads to political centralization and authoritarianism rather than democracy. It did not last long for this research to catch the attention of North American scholars. A recognition of the impact of this literature came when the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, which has been published continuously since the 1930s by the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress, included many essays from and about Latin American sociology.

The Peak Years

However, the big break for a more rigorous study of sociology came after the late 1940s when the question of national development emerged again as a pivotal concern among social scientists. Once again, events outside Latin America provided the impetus for this change. After the outbreak of the Cold War and the 1948 Chinese revolution, industrial nations, in particular the United States, conceptualized social deprivation and poverty as one of the sources for the radicalization and the rise of extremist nationalism that preceded the spread of Communism around the world. Since many developing economies had not fully bounced back from the depression, and others were still colonized, the United States began to adopt a comprehensive approach to its policy of peripheral containment against Communist expansionism which included not only regional and bilateral security regimes, but also nation-building and development initiatives. This preoccupation, in turn, prompted major funding agencies and foundations to underwrite studies that would promote economic and social prosperity, entrepreneurial initiatives, and industrialization.

It is in this context that the rise of modernization theory came about, and the world's reaction led by Latin American social scientists soon followed. It is worth while to remember that the basic tenets of modernization theory were, by their very nature, antithetical to the core beliefs that Latin American social thinkers have been so painfully advocating since independence. For one, the neo-Weberian notion that existing value systems in developing nations were responsible for tempering economic growth was regarded as misguided and myopic—even individuals who endorsed sympathetically Western industrial policies were disappointed by the idea. Later on, when the second wave of modernization theory proposed the recalibration of internal national policies and institutions as a prerequisite for a more prosperous development path, Latin Americans furiously and loudly countered against the constraints imposed by the international division of labor on nations on their way to attain industrialization. Leaving political rhetoric aside, the reality is that few nations outside Europe and North America have managed to climb to the top of the human development index in the last decades⁴.

The anti-modernization movement, which emerged in the 1950s and was to dominate the next decades, represents the epitome of sociology in Latin America. The scholarship of the period married sociologists, economists, and political scientists to produce iconoclastic arguments and theories that impacted the course of the social sciences well beyond the regional borders. Perhaps one of the most popular responses came in the form of the conceptual rubric commonly referred to as dependency theory, a body of work that encompasses many sub-fields across social science disciplines. Ideas from this paradigm, too copious to examine or even summarize here, are among

the most influential in the history of Latin American sociology **5**. Proponents of the world system perspective, for instance, have acknowledged their lineage to this Latin American perspective.

Moreover, with regards to the political sphere, the work of Guillermo O'Donnell debunked the premise that industrialization was a precondition for democracy. In his work on the rise of new forms of authoritarianism, O'Donnell shows how the push to produce durable goods through the deepening of import substitution industrialization policies required the state to control political risks giving rise to bureaucratic-authoritarian (BA) states among the most industrialized nations of Latin America. Hence, rather than strengthening democracy, as Seymour Martin Lipset and others once forecasted, these nations witnessed one military coup after another between 1964 and 1973. O'Donnell's seminal work also contributed to the reemergence of the literature on the state that dominated much of sociology for at least the next two decades.

Another influential sociologist from Latin America is the Brazilian Fernando H. Cardoso. Radicalized by the political mobilization of the 1960s and the intrusion of the Brazilian military in national politics, Cardoso shifted the focus of his early research on race theory and social stratification to the constellations of class interests that sustained national development initiatives. Cardoso transitioned from one to another research agenda with an important study of the Brazilian industrial class. His book *Empresário Industrial e Desenvolvimento Econômico no Brasil* (1964) illustrates how class cleavages among the Brazilian business elite contributes to the formation of multiple policy networks and simultaneously undermines the political effectiveness of this class.

However, it was his influential *Dependency and Development in Latin America* published with Enzo Faletto in 1969, and reprinted in English a decade later, that came to epitomize the new sociology of development. In this essay Cardoso and Faletto battled against the common tendencies of underdevelopment and domination proposed by radical Marxist and the prevailing optimism assumed by structural-functional models to argue that the insertion of developing nations into contemporary forms of capitalism produces relative, albeit unequal, wealth in these societies but also, ironically, increases their dependency. The disruption is possible, they argued, because as developing nations become more industrialized, political decision-making and internal markets also become more accessible to the comparative advantages of international capital which, through the backing of transnational class interests, manage to leverage political gains in their favor.

Additionally, expositions from the marginality and democratization studies will suffice to illustrate the influential effects of Latin American sociology across the social sciences today. While North American scholarship continues to dwell on the effects of social disorder and organization in poor urban enclaves and conceptualize marginal subsistence as constrains to the human condition, the study of marginality in Latin America stresses how structural constrains continue to produce social inequalities and how the poor struggle to find ways to survive and, in some cases, even thrive under despairing deprivation. Many studies showing working conditions in the informal sector illustrate this point (Portes and Shauffler, 1993).

In the later part of the twentieth-century, the prospect of democracy went from being a national aspiration to a policy concern. When almost all Latin American countries, except Cuba, embarked on some path or another towards more competitive politics, social scientists made significant contributions to the study of political transitions in poor, fragmented societies. One conclusion from this literature worth noting is that, contrary to prevailing expectations, the increase of middle class demands is not the only effort behind democracy. In many cases, the retreat of the military, and other one party states, and the rise of more competitive civilian regimes arrived after the failure of industrial models. One of the reasons behind this paradox is that national elites could not assume the inflated cost of governing under their own failure and their governments lacked sufficient legitimacy to work their way out of economic crises. This observation suggests that democracy comes about as an attempt by ruling elites to save their own political status and capital.

Finally, another line of research to consider is the more recent studies about mobilization, engagement, and civic society. This literature, although abundant in sociology in its own right, also presented an opportunity for Latin Americans to document the intricacies of how popular political maneuvers crystallized under non-democratic situations. One thing is to protest against particular policy initiatives and outcomes in democratic societies, and another is to resist authoritarianism or work to try to bring down praetorian regimes.

The Promise of Post-Dependency Perspectives

Recent security concerns have also impacted social studies of political order. In recent years, the flow of drug trafficking and its resulting corruption have contributed to uncharacteristically large rates of victimization around the region. In recent public opinion surveys, five out of ten individuals residing in Latin America perceived personal insecurity as their principal concern. In Mexico, this rate is even higher: eight out of ten. Almost the same amount of people reported that they have been victims of crime or know someone who has. The homicide rate in some countries, particularly in Honduras, Venezuela, El Salvador, and Colombia fluctuate among the highest in the

world. In short, personal insecurity has become the most urgent challenge to democratic governments of any persuasion in the region and have even adversary impacted their growth⁶.

Confronted with this situation, it did not take long for social scientist to shift their attention to try to tackle the problem. Latin American sociologists have focused on structural conditions and the legacy of civil wars, unlike criminologists who attempt to explain crime as the failure to internalize personal deprivation, isolation, and other social misgivings. At a regional level, it is obvious that the evidence points to a more complicated relation between levels of development and crime rates. Roberto Briceño León (2007) recently categorized Latin American countries by levels of violence. According to his research, for most of the last decade, the two most dangerous societies were El Salvador and Colombia, today Honduras and Venezuela also join the group, and yet these four nations show very different levels of development. However, all four have marked social cleavages, political turmoil of their own, and are exporters or transit hubs in the pesky drug trade.

Furthermore, reliable data from the Congressional Research Service shows that narcotic consumption in Latin America remains relatively low in comparison with other markets outside the region. Researchers from Latin America have argued that transnational forces are also at least partly to blame for the elevated levels of drug related violence. This approach represents an important departure from other studies of crime. In addition to the increasing profitable foreign markets, the drug trafficking, and the violence associated with it, also feeds itself from social disruptions associated with recent globalized social processes such as the ever more frequent family separations due to involuntary migration, the number of deportees who find their way into criminal organizations once back home, or even the reproduction of inequalities brought about by the influx of remittances.

Conclusion

In an effort to highlight some of Latin America's sociological accomplishments in historical perspectives, this paper examined the *longue durée* of the field since independence. A few of its main points are worth recounting. First, Latin American sociology has developed a distinct identity and research tradition. This tradition takes seriously the effects of comparative historical methods and strategies. Second, sociologists in the region succeeded in producing a cosmopolitan sociology. Third, social research from Latin America is responsible for major paradigm shifts in the sphere of national development. Finally, as Bronislaw Malinowski once acknowledged to Fernando Ortiz, the serious student of social sciences appreciates the lasting influence of Latin American scholarship without hesitation. All of this provides the background to reaffirm that intellectual production is alive and well among the region's social scientists.

Notes

1 Most of the research and writing for this essay was completed during my sabbatical leave when I was appointed Visiting Scholar in residence at the University of Miami Center for Latin American Studies and Florida International University Latin American and Caribbean Center. While I grateful to my colleagues for their hospitality and the many conversations we endured about Latin American sociology, the arguments I elaborate in this study are my responsibility alone.

2 See for example the work of Alejandro Portes (1984) and the late Joseph A. Kahl (1988) and a more recent anthology published by Charles H. Wood and Bryan R. Roberts (2005) among recent examples of this exception.

3 For a wonderful account of the development of the social sciences, particularly economics and sociology, in the United State during the late nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth see Ross (1991).

4 The human development index measures quality of life indicators among all countries and is published annually in the UN Development Report by the United Nations Development Agency.

5 One indication of the volume that characterized this literature is that a JSTOR search for Latin American dependency theory generated 8,447 entries.

6 International agencies calculate that the crime wave in Latin America amounts to around a one percent loss of the regional GDP.

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