
COMMUNICATIONS

GINO GERMANI

1911–1979

Some men become symbols of an intellectual epoch, partly because they helped to create it and partly because they integrated and expressed so powerfully the themes that others of their time were emphasizing. Gino Germani was the outstanding symbol of the emergence of empirical sociology in Latin America in the two decades following World War II.

Germani arrived in Argentina from his native Rome in 1934, just before receiving a first university degree in economics and business administration. His adolescent years had been difficult: he was an active antifascist and spent over a year in Mussolini's prisons. His family was relatively poor, and he felt socially marginal in the university community. He was bored with his formal studies and became a self-learner, reading history, philosophy and psychology, and discovering sociology through the writing of Emile Durkheim.

The first years in Argentina were ones of drifting, but when he entered the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Buenos Aires in 1938 he found himself. The social environment was much more democratic in style than the one in Rome, reflecting the looseness of an immigrant society. Germani became an activist in student politics, representing a centrist position that opposed the conservative government then in power but did not endorse a Communist solution. He said in conversation that his political philosophy always reflected a central commitment: "To me, the basic value was freedom, and I wanted to find out how to protect it, even enlarge it, in the changing social and political environment." In his studies of philosophy and social science he sought a set of guidelines for dispassionate and rational discussion of social issues in contrast to the strong ideological commitments of both Right and Left, which tended toward authoritarian results.

During his student days he worked with a handful of others who began to apply methods of empirical study to social trends, a style of research that was almost unknown in a country dominated by philo-

sophic rather than empirical interpretations of society. The group used contemporary historical studies, census data, and even tried the method of social survey of public attitudes. Germani discovered and absorbed a small library containing key works of North American sociology, ranging from the theoretical writing of Talcott Parsons through the methodology of Bogardus and Lundberg, and illustrated by complete sets of American sociology journals. He began to introduce a comparative perspective, and asked how the middle classes of Argentina were or were not similar to those of the United States as described in *Middletown*. By 1945 he had written a number of short articles and reviews for the annual *Boletín* of the university's fledgling Institute of Sociology, had received his degree as Doctor of Philosophy, and was looking forward to a position as assistant professor to the university's sole professor of sociology. But General Juan Perón assumed command of the country, and only his devoted followers were allowed to teach; Germani's academic career appeared to end before it had a chance to begin.

However, Germani began a fruitful decade of alternative work. He was employed by a publishing house as translator and editor of books written in Europe and the United States, and was responsible for introducing to Spanish readers in Latin America many of the key works of contemporary social science. He was associated with a group of intellectuals that sponsored the private Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, a place for lectures and discussions of a type not permitted on university campuses. He gave several series of lectures in which he formulated a theoretical and methodological view that gave coherence to his empirical researches.

The culminating event of this period was the publication of his first book in 1955, *Estructura social de la Argentina*, which became a landmark of Latin American social science. It was based primarily on analyses of census archives that allowed Germani to introduce trend lines for the purpose of interpreting the results of the new census of 1947. It included sections on the absorption of immigrants from Europe, on internal migration from rural to urban zones, on the transformation of the labor force toward an industrial structure with large middle and working classes, and on the voting patterns that reflected those trends. It was a model for the empirical interpretation of a national society that was admired in other countries, and Germani's name became widely known.

Just at that time Perón fell and there was a complete overhaul of university faculties. Not being sure of his position, Germani entered competitions for four chairs in as many institutions, and won them all. Naturally, he chose the University of Buenos Aires, and once there he began a decade of institution building. From a single chair and an insti-

tute that was but a room and a name, he built a large department of sociology (including social anthropology, social psychology, and social history) with dozens of faculty members and two thousand students. Research was organized on slum areas, the integration of rural migrants to urban settings, voting patterns, and the forces in politics that created Peronism. Social scientists from other countries in Latin America, the United States, and Europe came for visits, and advanced students from Buenos Aires went abroad to earn doctorates. Funds were obtained from the Argentine National Research Council and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. Links were established with new institutions, sponsored by UNESCO, promoting social science in Santiago de Chile and Rio de Janeiro. The constant flow of people and ideas made the University of Buenos Aires the cosmopolitan center for a continent, and some of the research initiated there stimulated comparative studies elsewhere, especially direct survey work on stratification and social mobility.

During this same period of hectic expansion of the department and the institute, books appeared that expounded Germani's general views on the mission of empirical sociology and on the major social trends in Latin America that could be studied in a scientific manner. Two volumes were published in Mexico and contained collections of his essays on these subjects. Finally, in 1963, his most important statement was published in Argentina: *Política y sociedad en una época de transición*. Germani kept rewriting his main message in many different versions, adding new thoughts and utilizing new research results that became available. Thus the seeds of *Política y sociedad* can be found in his earlier essays, and elaborations on it can be found in *Sociología de la modernización* (1969). Over time, much of the material also appeared in Portuguese, French, Italian, and English.

What were his main themes? He began with an attempt to establish an epistemological foundation for scientific research on society, including the generous use of social statistics. With help from J. Medina Echavarría, he expounded the legitimacy of a positivistic approach not basically different from that of the natural sciences, as long as it was kept fairly close to sound descriptive data and framed by historical study that would define types of societies that were sufficiently similar to warrant comparison. That required a set of evolutionary stages indicating ideal types of social systems. Germani felt that the current stage was one of widespread, perhaps universal, "modernization" that contained common features that tended to overcome previous national differences:

1. Social action changes from prescriptive (customary, traditional, sacred, collective) to elective (rational, calculating, scientific and individualistic).
2. Change becomes institutionalized; the belief in progress and

development overcomes religious worship of the past; youth gains in prestige and power; organized science and technology constantly promote change.

3. Institutions and roles become highly specialized, and must adapt to the new social milieu. Thus the functions of the family change, and that in turn affects demographic rates. Education reorganizes to prepare people for technical careers. Government gets bureaucratized.

Within this general panorama, more specific structural features emerge. The class system alters so that both urban middle and working classes grow in size and proportion, while the agricultural classes decline. And here a crucial fact of timing enters the story: those countries entering industrialization and modernization late in history do so at a pace much faster than those who pioneered the change, mainly because the technology now exists and is imported. The middle and working classes grow very rapidly, mobilize politically, and demand an ever-increasing share of both income and power. Indeed, their expectations and demands are likely to grow faster than the ability of the economy to meet them, and certainly faster than the willingness of the old ruling class to share power. The resulting tensions and conflicts often cannot be handled within the framework of traditional politics, and the legitimacy of government weakens.

In Argentina, the outlet for these tensions was the Peronist movement, which Germani interpreted as primarily a working-class protest against the old establishment, both inside the factories and in politics. In that sense, he saw it as different from Mussolini's fascist movement, which fed on petty-bourgeois resistance to modernization. He also thought (and this idea has since been disputed) that the particular quality of Peronism was linked to cultural habits of recent rural migrants to the city who needed a personalistic and charismatic leader to formulate their demands.

In general, Germani saw the constant tensions and political instability of Latin America as reflections of late modernization in which some leading sectors of society were changing rapidly and other sectors were lagging behind. Without formalizing it, he seemed to be using a model of functionalist integration that would allow social research to study differences in rates of change and indicate an appropriate or "normal" equilibrium. Such studies should make it possible to guide the political process in ways that would ameliorate conflict and strengthen legitimacy, and only legitimate institutions of democracy could guarantee personal freedom. He felt that such a reformist stance was more appropriate to Latin America than Marxist revolution, although he tended to get more pessimistic as he got older and saw the difficulties deepen. (His interpretation of social change and the role of social science in it has often been seen as an adaptation of the views of Talcott Parsons,

but I think he was closer to the perspective of Emile Durkheim on France at the turn of the century.)

Although Germani was aware of structural approaches to social science, including those based on Marxist thought, he was more interested in studying details of social process. He took the large structures as historically given, and focused on particular trends within contemporary society: changing proportions of different social strata, different rates of social mobility and their consequences for class consciousness and political action, adaptation of migrants to city life, and finally, the social psychological impact of modern culture on the personalities of individuals. In all of this, he never lost sight of his personal goal: knowledge that might protect and enlarge personal freedom in a world that constantly invented new paths toward authoritarianism. Indeed, in his last decade of life and work he concentrated on comparative studies in Italy and Latin America of authoritarian movements among young people, trying, it seems, to understand better the events of his own youth when almost all of his peers joined the fascist organizations with enthusiasm.

His emphasis on social process and social psychology left him open to the criticism that he neglected a (perhaps the) major force shaping Latin America: the impact of imperialism. In conversation, he acknowledged that "in *Política y sociedad* I did not go much into the question of imperialism. Why? Because I was looking at another side of the question. I was more interested in internal problems, and this was due to a reaction against nationalism. Of course, I recognized that in Argentina nationalism was partly a popular movement, but the implications were shocking. So often it becomes an aggressive movement, a fascist movement, like in so many places in Europe. There is a connection between anti-imperialism and xenophobia. Besides, even if it is true that there is no other way than some form of nationalism for a given country, it is really a kind of suicide for the human race, because if the nation-state is not abolished somehow, we won't have any more humanity. I am of the generation that believes in 'one world.' The multinational corporation is an expression of the kind of economic and technological structure which we now have that cannot be reduced to the limit of a nation, either capitalist or socialist, and that structure is the enemy, not the United States."

By the early 1960s, the department and institute of sociology that he headed in Buenos Aires came under increasing attack. Spokesmen from the Catholic Right inveighed against sociology as a dangerous solvent that weakened traditional beliefs about God, family, and country. Spokesmen from the Communist Left attacked Germani as a tool of imperialism because he cooperated with North American scholars and accepted money from North American foundations. Younger faculty

resented Germani's strong methods of leadership and felt that he and a few older colleagues were blocking their career ascent. Students demanded the new type of sociology that was committed to Marxist analysis and Marxist politics. Germani tired of the struggle; unable to find an appropriate post in Italy, he accepted a professorship at Harvard University in 1966, which he held until his death at the end of 1979. Shortly after he left Argentina, the military took control of the country and stifled free social research.

Gino Germani was not an easy man to work with. Twice in his life he moved into exile in a new country, and he lived through so many personal crises that his nerves were highly sensitive and his defensiveness often led him to a premature attack. But by the time he was able to practice fully his profession in a proper academic setting, he was already in middle age and felt that he had only a few years to accomplish important results; so he pushed and shoved and offended people.

But above all, Gino Germani was a serious scholar. He was extraordinarily well read in many fields and many languages. He learned new techniques and new approaches many times in his life through personal study and practical application, and proleptized for the utilization of a wide range of methods of social investigation. He pleaded for the maximum possible control of personal bias so as to permit the maximum possible use of objective styles of research. His enthusiasm and devotion bore fruit: under his leadership, the sociologists at the University of Buenos Aires accomplished a lot of important work and influenced the growth of the discipline throughout the continent. Eventually the very authoritarianism that he studied and feared all of his life destroyed the academic integrity of the department of sociology that he built; but in other settings, within Argentina and outside of it, the work he began and the colleagues he trained continue to flourish.

JOSEPH A. KAHL
Cornell University

This essay is based on material in chapter 2 of my *Modernization, Exploitation and Dependency in Latin America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1976).