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# COMMUNICATIONS

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## WISHFUL THINKING AS AN OBSTACLE TO DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA: A Critique of Street's Internal Frontier

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Under the present circumstances  
the race toward development is  
mere haste to reach ruin.

Octavio Paz<sup>1</sup>

If we had some bacon,  
we could have bacon and eggs,  
if we had some eggs.

An Anonymous  
Marine Sergeant

My task in critiquing James Street's recent article, "The Internal Frontier and Technological Progress in Latin America (LARR 12 no. 3, [1977]), is made doubly difficult because I am in agreement with so much of what he has to say and because he has qualified and strengthened his argument by incorporating in the final version of the essay most of the criticisms I offered on an earlier draft. Our already similar views were brought more into alignment, for instance, by the addition of such statements as the following: "There is thus an enormous field developing for systematic research in what have been called 'appropriate' or 'intermediate' technologies" (p. 50); "In view of the gravity of the short-term crisis and the distorting pressures of long-term forces that have been described, it is entirely possible, if not probable, that no global strategy will emerge that

will alleviate these trends" (p. 50); "By its nature an educational process takes time, and the trends described earlier may be moving with such speed that the development problems of Latin America will become increasingly intractable" (p. 53).

Nevertheless, Street elected not to modify his overall conclusion—that in spite of the startling (p. 36), grave (p. 50), even staggering (p. 36) combination of trends "pushing Latin America toward a Malthusian outcome" (p. 43), the region has an "internal frontier" (p. 43) that "offers scope for an exceptional range of technological solutions" (p. 53) and that "above all, there is need for a much stronger educational base" (p. 52). Certainly each of these conclusions contains its kernel of truth, but Street's suggestion that they constitute a viable response to the challenges confronting Latin America during the remainder of this century is dangerously misleading and profoundly counterproductive to the kinds of thoroughgoing changes that are the *sine qua non* of improvement of the human condition in Latin America.

Succinctly summarized, my objections to Street's position are that he overstates the realizable potential of Latin America's "internal frontier," he exaggerates the promise of technological solutions, he overestimates the role that could be played by education in meeting the challenges he has quite expertly documented, and he neglects the unavoidably political nature of any adequate response to the region's developmental dilemmas.

Actually Street himself has provided substantial grounds for doubting the great potential he ascribes to Latin America's "internal frontier." He admits but chooses to ignore the all-important fact that "in the present state of the arts, many areas [of Latin America] are not suitable to developmental purposes" (p. 44). He documents the paucity of coal and oil reserves—"Latin America has little more than one-half percent of the [world's] total [coal resources]" (p. 45), and "in petroleum . . . the region is also severely deficient" (p. 45)—yet he goes on to hail recent discoveries as if they materially altered this situation (pp. 45–46). He makes much of the region's hydroelectric potential, even labeling it "a virtually inexhaustible resource" (p. 49), with no reference to the severe limitations on its development given that (1) huge capital and foreign exchange outlays are required for the construction of generation and transmission systems, (2) most of the sites for dams are at great distances from the populated industrial areas, and (3) sedimentation and silting problems are particularly troublesome in the arid areas common to much of the Andes, where rivers are also plagued by large seasonal variations in flows. Nor does he take into account the possibly devastating impact on delicate ecosystems of settling large populations in such superficially appealing areas as the Amazon basin. In short, he allows himself to contribute to the perpetuation of the hard-dying myth that because Latin America's population density is comparatively low there are enormous expanses simply awaiting colonization and settlement. The unhappy fact is that most of the presently habitable areas of Latin America are already inhabited. Moreover, even were adequate sites available, no conceivably feasible resettlement projects could hope to keep pace with the region's rate of population expansion.

Regarding Street's faith in the efficacy of technological solutions, I would

simply mention that an often noted characteristic of such solutions is that in solving one problem they inevitably create others. The Green Revolution, to which Street so glowingly alludes (p. 44), is, ironically, perhaps the classic example of "the monkey's paw"<sup>2</sup> nature of technological solutions. Since only wealthier farmers could afford the more expensive inputs of water, fertilizer, fungicides, and insecticides that the new high-yield seed varieties require, there has been a tendency for the resulting increases in yields to work to the detriment of poorer farmers by driving prices down. When these poorer farmers are unable to repay their debts, they lose their holdings to the wealthier landowners, thus increasing both the concentration of land in few hands and the number of landless peasants. Technological solutions unaccompanied by changes in socio-political and economic structures can regularly be expected to produce such unanticipated and unwanted outcomes.

Street's ultimate reliance on education as the preferred strategy for developing the "internal frontier" reveals most clearly the contradictions that result from his refusal to accept how desperate Latin America's situation actually is. Not allowing himself to admit the depressing conclusions flowing from his own marshalling of the evidence enables him to prescribe an approach that is in no way commensurate with the urgency, severity, and magnitude of the problem. In the first place, he overlooks the fact that educational systems are a function of power relationships within a society and therefore cannot be independently restructured except within narrow limits. In the second place, he seems to discount how time-consuming a process it would be to revamp an entire educational system as well as the fact that no societal impact resulting from such changes could be expected for many years, perhaps decades. A realistic assessment of the trends described in the initial sections of Street's essay makes clear the inappropriateness of such gradual meliorative approaches.

It is tempting to speculate that the inadequacy of Street's interpretations and prescriptions derives primarily from the liberal bias shared by most North American students of Latin America, that is, from a deep-seated distrust of governmental power and of sweeping change, and from the peculiarly North American variant of this ambiguous body of thought which is characterized by optimism and a profound faith in progress. This optimism accounts for his reluctance to entertain the full implications of the prospect that things will get much worse in Latin America before there is any possibility of their getting better. The typically North American faith in progress explains his preference for technological solutions by placing it in the context of our pragmatic, instrumentalist, profoundly technocratic culture. Similarly, the antigovernmental bias renders intelligible the almost total neglect of political considerations in his analysis, a lack too central to dismiss with the convenient disclaimer that "It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the complex social and political adjustments that must be made to open the internal frontier" (p. 50). Just as resources cannot meaningfully be labeled such until the capacity exists to exploit them, it makes little sense to herald the existence of an "internal frontier" where present sociopolitical and economic institutions are incapable of mobilizing an assault upon it. What Latin American country today could *or would* implement

"a genuine popular education movement . . . that embraces not only an extension of educational opportunity as broadly as possible . . . but involves the conscious adoption of functionally more effective methods of relating what is taught to development needs" (p. 52)? How many Latin American nations could *or would* redirect significant portions of their military budgets toward measures prerequisite to development such as reducing unemployment or providing minimal health services or nutrition to all sectors of the population? How many Latin American governments could *or would* attempt to cut spending for cosmetic purposes in their capital cities in order to meet the more pressing needs of rural areas? What are the chances that any present-day Latin American regimes could *or would* "align themselves in one grouping or another for joint efforts to overcome the general impoverishment" (p. 43)?

Essentially what I have taken Street to task for is having pulled his punches. With the evidence in hand, he has held back from depicting Latin America's situation in all its starkness. Perhaps he has done so for fear of discouraging those who are struggling to resolve the region's dilemmas. Perhaps he is overly sensitive to the inevitable epithets of alarmist, doomsayer, prophet of gloom—forgetting that in some situations realism is pessimism. Whatever his motive, however, the effect of the resulting distortion is to strengthen the position of those favoring gradual meliorative measures in confronting Latin America's worsening problems and to weaken the case of those who see radical changes in current sociopolitical and economic institutions as the prior condition for improving the region's prospects for coping with the future.

If there is anything Latin Americans do not need at this truly pivotal juncture it is encouragement to continue picturing themselves as a beggar seated on a golden bench. The myth that the region can solve its problems without wrenching, disruptive, and painful changes in values and sociopolitical-economic structures, both domestic and international, and that there is time left for gradual piecemeal approaches is itself one of the most formidable bulwarks of the status quo. Equally mythical and supportive of present unjust structures is the belief that such sweeping changes must or can be effected "by noncoercive means" (p. 51). Approximately half of the deaths that occur in Latin America each year are among children. That fact alone should suffice to indicate that varying levels of coercion are amply warranted in mounting an all-out assault on the region's true internal frontier: the resignation or callousness or pious optimism that makes it possible to tolerate the intolerable.

This internal frontier will not be conquered by friendly up-beat reminders that new opportunities remain to be exploited but only by ripping off the mask of false concern and exposing the impotence of present approaches for solving Latin America's development conundrum. Only when the impossibility of meeting present challenges through the unjust structures of the past<sup>3</sup> is driven home to a critical mass of Latin Americans can there be any hope that they will forge viable new structures for achieving "a livable future."<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Octavio Paz, *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid*; trans by Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1972), p. 47.
2. See the often anthologized short story of this title by W. W. Jacobs.
3. Herman E. Daly, "Developing Economies and the Steady State," *The Developing Economies* (Japan) 13, no. 3 (Sept. 1975):231–42; Richard Lee Clinton, "The Never-to-be-developed Countries of Latin America," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 33, no. 8 (Oct. 1977):19–26.
4. Robert L. Ayres, "Development Policy and the Possibility of a 'Livable' Future for Latin America," *American Political Science Review* 69, no. 2 (June 1975):507–25.