
EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Latin America has played an important role, perhaps the critical role, in altering U.S. perceptions of the underdeveloped world. The traditional U.S. view of less-developed societies, and the European view as well, reflected deeply held assumptions about history as progress, ideas rooted in the experience of Western Europe and the United States. In the early nineteenth century, Georg Hegel's idealist philosophy argued that history represents a dialectical progress toward realization of the ideal. Subsequent efforts to demystify history in materialist terms, such as Karl Marx's historical materialism and Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, took for granted nevertheless the evolutionary and progressive character of social change.

Max Weber's rather pessimistic and depoliticized reformulation of Marx's vision proved to be a lasting influence on U.S. social science. While Weber emphasized the restrictions on freedom resulting from historical changes such as the rise of bureaucracy, he too viewed social change as an essentially linear process in which traditional norms of behavior are gradually replaced by the greater efficiency of more modern, rationally organized systems. These notions were further codified by functional theorist Talcott Parsons into a theory of systems of social action, according to which more functional or modern social actions would outcompete less functional or traditional systems of behavior.

These grand European and U.S. ruminations about the progressive nature of history were largely uninformed by knowledge of the non-modernized world, which was perceived as a distant panorama of jungles and primitive peoples under colonial tutelage. Richard Lambert, a leading scholar of foreign area studies, observed recently, "Before World War II, only a handful of American scholars dedicated their professional lives to the study of countries outside of western Europe. It was the missionary, the ex-foreign service officer, and to a lesser extent, the itinerant businessperson or immigrant national of the country who provided

the bulk of American expertise. Looking back, it was an odd view of the world that they provided for us.”¹

The notion of history as progress shaped the intellectual response by U.S. social scientists as they began to confront the rearranged international environment following World War II. The Marshall Plan was successfully resuscitating the Western European economies, but independence movements were forcing European colonial administrations throughout Asia and Africa to exit. The Soviet Union’s challenge to Western nations for influence in the “Third World” added an increasingly significant non-European dimension to the cold war. The intellectual encounter between the United States and the non-Western world drew directly from Parsons in the form of “modernization theory,” yielding such works as Daniel Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958) and Seymour Martin Lipset’s *Political Man* (1960). For Lerner, the final stages of development of the “participant” (or modernized) society would result in democracy, the “crowning institution.” Lipset’s investigations into the proposition that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances it will sustain democracy,” formed a happy counterpart to Walt Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960), which suggested that economies with sufficient resources could “take off” into sustained growth. The implications for U.S. foreign policy were obvious: fight communism with democracy and encourage democracy through assistance for economic development.

The evidence from the Third World itself did not particularly support the modernization thesis. Latin Americanists were especially skeptical, given the peculiarities of such cases as Argentina, Cuba, and Mexico. The publication in 1967 of Barrington Moore’s instant classic, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, also contradicted modernization theory with evidence from other sources. After examining the history of class coalitions in the major powers (the United States, England, France, Germany, Japan, Russia, China, and India), Moore concluded that there are several paths to modernization, two of which (the fascist and communist routes) are not democratic at all.

Had Moore known more about Latin America, his case would have been even stronger. This deficit was remedied in 1973 with the publication of Guillermo O’Donnell’s *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*. O’Donnell employed comparative social indicators to demonstrate significant modernization in South America. But O’Donnell argued that the relationship between economic development and democracy in Latin America was increasingly problematic. The economic stagnation of the later phases of import-substitution industrialization increasingly conflicted with the popular pressures resulting from heightened political

1. Richard D. Lambert, “Blurring the Disciplinary Boundaries: Area Studies in the United States,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 33, no. 6 (1990):713.

mobilization. The propertied classes' "great fear" of revolution was exacerbated by the inability of traditional politicians and parties to control popular unrest. An obvious countermeasure for the threatened social classes was reliance on an authoritarian state, based on bureaucratic principles rather than on personalism, with the dual mission of political demobilization and capitalist development.

O'Donnell's analysis became extraordinarily influential during the 1970s, as one Latin American country after another fell under military rule. A new literature emerged for Latin America but also for the rest of the underdeveloped world, predicated on the vulnerability or unsuitability of democracy in the context of rapidly modernizing societies. The democracies of the industrialized Western nations came increasingly to be viewed as exceptionalist outcomes of particularly fortuitous historical sequences, rather than as harbingers of the future. The progressivistic notions that led from Hegel to modernization theory seemed dead at last.

Once again, however, the new conventional wisdom (of pessimism about democracy's chances in the developing nations) was demolished by evidence from Latin America. The surprises multiplied. The bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes turned out to be not very bureaucratic, at least in the sense of being rational. With the exception of a few cases, these regimes failed to achieve either political demobilization or sustained capitalist development. Instead, the bureaucratic-authoritarian experiment led Latin America directly into the debt crisis of 1982. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the very classes that had turned to the military for help began to promote the restoration of democracy. The newly reborn democracies, at first perceived to be short-lived exceptions, have proved durable and innovative. Despite the huge overhang of debt, Latin America began to recover, and by the early 1990s, the region had achieved significant sustained growth.

The experience of Latin America may not differ in all respects from the experience of other Third World regions. But Latin America differs in ways that make it especially significant as an influence on theorizing about the causes and consequences of economic development. Latin America in general is more developed than most of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and even the former Soviet Union. Because of this higher level of development, Latin America is likely to be ahead in terms of economic and political experimentation and adjustment. As a region of European heritage, Latin America is also rich in the institutions that support autochthonous intellectual production, such as universities, think tanks, independent newspapers, and publishing houses. Consequently, the flow of information and ideas from Latin America to the United States and Europe is substantial, in contrast to the paucity of information from vast areas of Africa and Asia.

The articles and essays published in this journal benefit enor-

mously from the exchange of ideas made possible by Latin America's intellectual vitality. Scholars from North America, the Caribbean, and South America are engaging in a continuous dialogue that is reflected in the contents of *LARR*. Knowledge of Latin America in turn has transformed scholarly interpretations of development processes in general. Comparative studies of history, politics, sociology, and economy have all been profoundly influenced by information about the Latin American trajectory. Thus studies of Latin America have achieved a broader relevance that transcends the Latin American context.

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