



SOCIAL SCIENCE AND LATIN AMERICA: PROMISES TO KEEP*

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I.

During his intellectual and academic life, Immanuel Wallerstein always makes contributions that are the subject of intense debate and controversy. Now he has given us, as an additional legacy to complete his four years of brilliant, hard, and—why not?—controversial work on behalf of our science as the President of the International Sociological Association (ISA), and as a contribution to commencing the 14th World Congress, another powerful provocation regarding the current state of the art of sociology, or better put, social science. He has done this with reference to the contributions sociological thinking has made, the challenges that social science has encountered, and the promises that social science should fulfill. The provocation is broad and taken to its extreme. It alludes to multiple theoretical

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* The original Spanish version of this essay in honor of Immanuel Wallerstein is our comment on his “The Heritage of Sociology, the Promise of Social Science,” the Presidential Address to the 14th World Congress of Sociology, delivered on July 26, 1998 in Montreal, Canada. We have edited this text (and Wallerstein’s eight letters as President of the International Sociological Association between 1994 and 1998) as a book, which has been published by Nueva Sociedad, Caracas, Venezuela, July 1999. Translation by Richard Melman under supervision of the authors.

JOURNAL OF WORLD-SYSTEMS RESEARCH, VI, 3, FALL/WINTER 2000, 798-810
Special Issue: Festschrift for Immanuel Wallerstein – Part II
<http://jwsr.ucr.edu>
ISSN 1076-156X

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traditions and widely varying professional practices, and to that end, resorts to fields as apparently distant as psychoanalysis and chemistry, in spite of his knowing—and reiterating—that he is addressing an audience of sociologists.

We want to accept the provocation and discuss the speech in the light of Latin American sociology: what does this piece tell us, what does it suggest to us, what does it question? Social science is indebted to the uniqueness of Latin America, and it has experienced that uniqueness since its inception, indeed since its precursors in social thought. That was also a challenge, and a hard one, one of enormous magnitude. That is how Don Simón Rodríguez, Simón Bolívar's mentor, understood it 171 years ago when he told us that to understand these lands it was necessary to see things differently, that we could not repeat imported theories or models without going wrong: "Where will we go to look for models?... Hispanic America is *original* = ORIGINAL must be its Institutions and its Government = and ORIGINAL must be the ways to found both. *Either We Invent or We Err (O inventamos o erramos).*" (Rodríguez, 1828-1840/1975, [47]).

How does this ancient drama fit in or confront the six challenges Wallerstein lays down before us in his speech?

II.

Latin America and the Caribbean are said to be part of the West, though they have been called the *Extreme Occident* (J. Rouquié); alternatively, its societies are, in the framework of the *clash of civilizations*, bearers of a culture of their own, which gives them "a distinct identity that distinguishes them from the West" (Huntington, 1996, 46). They have also been called social-geographic-cultural spaces in which utopia is concealed and goes unnoticed until it is implanted throughout the world, especially in the part which is *developing* (Ribeiro, 1971, 186). They are also spaces—it has been said—in which *instrumental reason* will finally be overcome by an alternative: *historical reason* (Quijano in Lander, 1991, 27 ff.).

The difficulties in characterizing the region stem from its particular features. They are the building blocks of national cultures, and they aggregate to form a regional culture, all of which have been characterized as hybrid (García-Canclini, 1992), in view of the coexistence of elements from greatly

different origins: the indigenous culture which existed long before the violent colonization following the "discovery" of the region in 1492; Western culture as such, introduced and imposed by the Europeans (chiefly Iberians) in the course of that process, in a very particular fashion in view of the special place occupied by the Spanish and Portuguese in Western culture; and African culture, brought here by the black slaves over the course of at least three centuries.¹ These three elements, visibly present and individually recognizable, have at the same time intermingled symbiotically to give rise to a *structural heterogeneity* (Quijano in Sonntag et al., 1989, 44 ff; García-Canclini, 1993, passim) based on the *mixing* that is yet another way to represent Latin American and Caribbean culture.²

Regarding the self-perception of the societies in the region, it should be borne in mind that Western culture subjugated the other cultural elements throughout the three centuries of colonial rule, though it never completely defeated or exterminated them. Even at the outset of the Independence Movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (completed toward the end of the latter's first quarter), Western culture continued to predominate. How could it have been otherwise if those who led the movement came from the previously dominant classes (and had not had so exceptional a teacher as Simón Rodríguez)? And since there was no true *revolution* (understood as a comprehensive reorganization of society) that transformed the pre-independence way of life, but only the replacement—by imitation, as Rodríguez would say—of one political system of domination by another that was equally alien, the Western cultural element continued to prevail throughout the entire period of liberal-oligarchic republics which lasted through the first quarter of the 20th Century in most countries. But once again, that predominance did not result in the disappearance of the other elements, nor that of the mixed culture that had evolved—not only because there were some thinkers and intellectuals who constantly defended them

¹ The classic study of this subject is and will continue to be Williams (1944/1975).

² It was chiefly Darcy Ribeiro in a large number of scientific and literary writings who put special emphasis on this characteristic. But it is also present in the works of other intellectuals, both past and present.

but also because the collective actors who represented them resisted continuously, often silent and unspectacular, but successful.

This implies that social thought was equally impregnated by the West, that it followed the clues and orientations of the intellectual currents prevailing in the developed countries at the center of the world-system (to use a particularly apt expression of Wallerstein), in a word, that in the social representations and their theoretical-conceptual systematizations there was no room for Latin American and Caribbean people to think about themselves with their own ideas. *Progress* was the road toward modernity as understood in the West. This axiom was literally turned to stone: the 19th Century architecture of our major cities imitated Western urban form as the aesthetic and urbanistic principle of “our” modernity, which remained unfinished, concentrated, and exclusive, comprised of the small European-oriented elites while the great masses played the role of *the grass over which the train of history moved*, as Fernando Henrique Cardoso once said in a lecture.

The most complete expression of Western predominance in social thought was the influence of positivism, including the version that some have called “tropicalized”, in almost all countries of the region, reflected in their historiography, economic choices, social analyses, and political programs. There was almost no alternative thought, other than that of the handful of intellectuals who were inclined towards socialist ideas that also came from Europe and accordingly contributed to Western culture’s predominance as well. The indigenous and African elements of Latin American and Caribbean culture survived in the practices of the collective actors, especially among the lower classes, and were not articulated or expressed except in oral traditions.

III.

The evolution of capitalism in the region—initially limited to certain particular countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay) and then spread to the rest—not only transformed the economy and social structure but also brought about changes in ways of thinking. Ideas took shape which sought to redeem the indigenous element of our culture, expressed in purest form by the Peruvians José Carlos Mariátegui and Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, and by Mexican thinkers, while essayists and writers from other countries (especially Cuba and Brazil) began to incorporate the originally

African element of Latin American culture into their conceptualizations and other writings.³

It was in this period (from the end of the 19th Century to the 1940s) that the social sciences began to find a place in the academic establishments of several countries. They played an especially active role in Mexico and Brazil. The disciplines that developed first were anthropology and economics, apart from the kind of “sociology” which was more a social philosophy than a social science. A substantial part of this development reflected western influences. Throughout Latin America (especially in Mexico), Spanish intellectuals fleeing from the Civil War and the defeat of the Republic had a very strong impact. But there were also some primary forms of academic exchange, as between France and Brazil, which for example led Claude Lévi-Strauss to teach at the University of Sao Paulo for a time and to do anthropological field work there.⁴ In addition, Latin American scholars pursued postgraduate studies at European universities (particularly in France and Britain) and at U.S. universities (though in smaller numbers at that time).

There was still no true institutionalization of the branches of social science at the region’s universities in this period. The economics and sociology chairs and departments—where they existed—were housed within the Law Faculties, and the anthropology chairs and departments were located in the Humanities Faculties, often closely tied to the history departments and chairs. The tendency to seek and encourage interdisciplinarity may have had its origin in this apparent institutional weakness.

The content of these incipient social sciences was impregnated by Western practice, and did not reflect the emergence of a current of thought acknowledging the hybrid nature of our culture, as occurred in regional literature, plastic arts, music, and dance. But it had a feature that—though not exclusive to it because it already existed, *mutatis mutandis*, in the social sciences of other regions and even in certain Western currents—did give it a

³ Here it would be necessary to list an extraordinarily extensive bibliography, which would include a large part of the Latin American and Caribbean *intelligentsia* of the last several decades. For reasons of space, we refrain from doing so in this essay.

⁴ This author’s most beautifully incisive book of scientific production, *Tristes Tropiques* (Lévi-Strauss, 1955), which is also a beautiful example of *not unequal scientific exchange*, emerged from that stay in Brazil.

strongly distinctive character: among its principal objectives was to contribute to social transformation. That is why its fundamental orientation was toward change, rather than toward equilibrium (Cardoso, 1968; Sonntag, 1988). From its inception, Latin American and Caribbean social science conceived itself as socially and politically committed, not as neutral with regard to the values which inspired it—just what Immanuel Wallerstein proposes and which is now taking shape.

IV.

The true evolution of the different branches of social science got under way after the Second World War, and coincided with the search for a strategy capable of overcoming underdevelopment. However, most of the development proposals were imbued with what Wallerstein calls the *culture of sociology*: proposals based on the formal rationality of capitalism and the assumption that it must be valid for all nonwestern capitalist societies. That orientation provoked two failures to address the challenges posed by Wallerstein. First, the Latin American and Caribbean social science of development—like the Western science—refuses to acknowledge the possibility of *another rationality*; the strength of Freud and psychoanalysis lies in its attack of the concept of rationality and its rejection of normality. Our social science has not managed to understand that there are many rationalities, that the norms which guide individuals' behavior can vary (among other things, from one society to another), and that just like individuals, societies too must follow the premise that *each one must find the path to his own salvation* (as Freud said). Second, there is no single rule, there is no single road appropriate for all societies, because their space-time characteristics differ (as Wallerstein would say, following Abdel-Malek). What does exist are powers which impose themselves and which ignore or deny diversity and multiplicity.

To illustrate, for many years Westernized social science and clichés have dismissed Latin American workers as lazy, simply because they do not work according to capitalist rationality. But the working women and men of Latin America and the Caribbean rise at dawn, have no vacation, and devote themselves to their work with a passion for their friends and relatives (*compadres*), though not for the accumulation of wealth as advocated by the salesmen of progress. The meaning of work and its relation to the accumulation of wealth is different for a large part of the population (*cf.* Briceño-León,

1996 and 1997, paradigmatically in the Venezuelan case as illustrative of the region as a whole), and they accordingly feel at peace with themselves through their sense of tranquillity and their commitment to family and friendship, in the pleasure they derive from giving even when they have nothing for themselves, in their efforts to redistribute what they have among their relatives, and in their renewed hope for reciprocity.

V.

If there is any form of effort that has predominated in Latin American sociology, it has been the search for uniqueness, and in that search the intermingled expressions of extreme admiration for and rejection of Europe have been infinite, as has to be the case of the Far Occident. The eurocentrism arguments put forward by Abdel-Malek as a challenge to the culture of sociology already had—as we have seen—its theoretical and practical predecessors in Latin America. Hence, that argument was well received but unfortunately did not prosper. The region's social science continued to be predominantly eurocentric, whether on the "right" or on the "left", whether reflecting U.S. functionalism or French Marxism, as long as—through its emphasis on the concept of development—it continued to be linked to "the truth of mankind's history (i.e., each nation's progressively greater access to the 'benefits' of history)" and based on "the path through which Western society—to the exclusion of all others—has conceptualized its relation to the past and the future" (Rist, 1997, 44).

And along what "geographic thread" can one define oneself in response to eurocentrism? Is Latin America really a unit which can engender homogeneous responses? What unites a resident of cosmopolitan Buenos Aires with a Guatemalan Indian peasant or a Brazilian landless farmer? Perhaps the first answer lies in the other, not in oneself; perhaps the answer comes from the rejection or acceptance of the successive impositions which simultaneously injure and constitute one's identity, as was the Spanish language for centuries: an imposition which became an identity and even a rallying point for many, but which continues to be nothing but an imposition for many others.

But when one delves more deeply into the issue, one finds other characteristics which never come to the surface because they are considered shameful, and which constitute cultural threads that provide the basis for a

self-definition in response to Eurocentrism. The approaches to time among many Latin American and Caribbean people are different, to the point where many Europeans mock it: “yes, ..., tomorrow!” But tomorrow is different here. The future does not exist as a principle which totally organizes the present. There is a different way of thinking about the present. That is why the interpretations of underdevelopment which attribute an important causal role to many people’s inability to defer gratification capture a valuable aspect of reality but understand it incorrectly, because they do so in the light of the Eurocentric paradigm and, hence, are insensitive to a different behavior grounded in an alternative view of time.

VI.

And of what time is this place? Of what time is this *land of grace*? Latin America and the Caribbean are of many different times, which overlap in countries, regions, and individuals. That is another expression of the structural heterogeneity mentioned above. Here, software companies which compete in a global market coexist with subsistence agriculture using the ancient slash-and-burn method conserved by many Indian and peasant communities. The Yanomami Indians, who live much as their ancestors did centuries ago, today receive complex medical treatment and use sophisticated consumer products generated by end-of-century technological progress.

In Latin America, Fernand Braudel’s structural time has the heterogeneity proper to its structures. We have experienced a history of events which are told to us and which we retell with pride and amazement, a history of discoveries and wars of independence, a history of construction of borders and nationality myths with “known” origins and destinies. Five hundred years passed since Columbus’ arrival and no one knew exactly what to celebrate: the *discovery*, the *encounter of two cultures*, the *incorporation of the Western Hemisphere into world history*—all terms reflect the eurocentric bias. But the contribution of social science (not all of it because a part remained “stuck” in the western approach) is that at least it manages to cast doubt on the eurocentric concepts. “Who discovered whom?” the region’s activist groups and indigenous communities ask. And then the encounter concept slowly gains ground. This Hemisphere is a land of encounters.

A Venezuelan historian asserts that this country entered the 20th Century in the mid-1930s, with the collapse of the long dictatorship of Juan

Vicente Gómez (1908 to 1935), which marked the end of the liberal-oligarchical republic and paved the way for the emergence of the new political parties and the overriding influence of oil (M. Picón Salas, here quoted by Caballero, 1996, *passim*). But, when did Latin America enter the 20th Century? Alternatively, has any country really entered this century in cultural, social, and political terms as conceived in the model generated by western technological achievements and confirmed by the West’s military might? The processes subsumed under the concept of *globalization* are real ones; in the most remote villages the people listen to radios which repeat the music now in vogue in Los Angeles. But does that make them participants in this century’s culture? Or is it only an example of the overlapping of times and cultures among people who have yet to find their own road?

VII.

Perhaps the breakdown of “Marxism” as a dominant truth in social science is the clearest sign of the “end of certainties” in Latin America and the Caribbean. Beginning in the mid-1960s,⁵ an innovative and critical social science rejected eurocentric influence and the domination of functionalist theory from the United States. For a short time it found a form of expression of its own in the dependency approach (Sonntag, 1988, 57 *ff*). But a large part of regional social science succumbed to the dogmatic certainty of a simplistic Marxism and thereby betrayed itself. The theoretical hegemony of Marxism—and especially that of French structuralist Marxism—in the 1970s provided one more way to construct a self-justifying truth. The return to realism advocated by Prigogine and of which Wallerstein reminds us has provided Latin America and the Caribbean with a critique of the dominant critical thought, though not so much one of the scientific perspective since it has been less influential in social science.

Marxism countered the determinisms put forward by the capitalist development theories—including the ECLA model—with equally deterministic postulates on social change which bore no relationship to the real

⁵ It is fair to recognize that Wallerstein has acknowledged the influence of the critical and innovative strain in Latin American and Caribbean social science in his own work on several occasions, and not only during his visits to countries of the region.

processes it praised—in Russia, in China, and even in the Cuban revolution. The so-called “laws” of dialectics taught at the universities as universal truths of history were “laws” because social science called for the construction of a determinism similar to the one assumed to characterize physics. But it turned out that the model ceased being deterministic. Moreover, if there is no determinism in physics, there is certainly no point in looking for it in social science. There is only conjecture, which allows us to approach an understanding of a complex and changing world.

VIII.

When many people thought that there were few new revisions or additions that could be made to critical thought, the feminist movement appeared with a bold new perspective, and forced us to reformulate our way of thinking and speaking about social problems. The feminists posed new doubts and forced us to formulate new proposals. Women play a very prominent role in Latin America and the Caribbean, though they also suffer the most extreme poverty (especially single women with children). And they make the most strenuous and effective efforts to overcome poverty, and along with it, the disgraceful living conditions imposed on both women and men (Benería & Roldán, 1992; León, 1997). Women are now in the majority among social scientists, in both the intellectual and institutional spheres. At many Latin American universities it is now women who study men, reversing a pattern that has existed since the dawn of academia. The impact of these changes has yet to make itself felt. Women have made important theoretical contributions, though most have not done so as theoreticians, but rather as brilliant and productive professionals. The women’s perspective has not only influenced the men who hold academic power, but also the women themselves, who have discovered a strength, an added and differential value in scientific approaches and in the effort to break the male monopoly of institutional power. In the past they had held back or failed to realize their potential, because they were imbued with the male-oriented professional culture.

IX.

We in Latin America and the Caribbean are not modern; we have never been modern. Modernity has been the dream of a social or political elite,

and as that elite’s project it has always remained incomplete. Naturally, we have certain aspects of modernity: ideas, goals, and aspirations of modernity. But it has never been complete, nor is it what constitutes our form of life in society. We have had a façade of modernity (Sonntag, 1998). That is why Latour’s book comes as no surprise for us, but rather for others, for those who thought they were modern. But now it turns out that we are all “amodern”. How, then, can we classify the position of Latin America? Where do the theories of backwardness stand? Backwardness in relation to what?

Many of the behavioral patterns put forward today as postmodern have existed in Latin America since long before the concept came into existence, and were considered traditional. We are certainly “hybrid” or “heterogeneous” societies. That implies limitations, but can also be a source of immense potential. If modernity has not arrived it needs not arrive. Perhaps we will find more opportunities and more advantages if we try to be more “postmodern” than modern. Many of the cultures of our region can only become modern by changing and destroying themselves. If we have never been modern, it is largely due to the varied forms of resistance and adaptations for survival these cultures have made, sometimes openly and combatively, and other times through silent opposition. To conserve some aspects of that identity and be able to address the challenges of the future, it is necessary to generate changes and accept influences, but also to hold on to what is ours, conceiving it as valuable and useful. The final result of this balance between permanence and change will be determined by history and time, “since each one must find the path to his own salvation.”

X.

Social science for Latin America has vacillated between two major tendencies: either to answer to its people, its society in the latter’s uniqueness, and its urgent needs, or to answer to its era, its time, and the demands of scientific rigor and universal knowledge. The great promise of Latin American thought, its crowning ambition, was summed up a century ago by José Martí when he wrote that the aim was to try to answer to both needs and to be a person of one’s time and one’s people (Briceño-León & Sonntag 1998).

The speech Wallerstein has given us places us once again and in his own words at the same crossroads: we must abandon the concept of formal rationality, break with eurocentrism, think in terms of a different historical

time, and countenance the end of certainty. With the tools of our time's critical thought, he forces us to realize the uniqueness and the dreams of our peoples. The task is not (and has never been) easy, but is there any point in continuing to repeat the same old ideas and refusing to take the risk of approaching the ultimate causes, straightening the paths of science by uniting the two cultures and reunifying social science?

The promise lies in going further down the road, and perhaps in the new conjectures of interpretation we will be able to achieve the re-enchantment of this land of grace, and put flesh on the bones of those old words, dreams, and utopias. ¡O inventamos o erramos!

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