

CEPAL

Review

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CONTENTS

ECLAC: Forty years of continuity with change. <i>Gert Rosenthal.</i>	7
Agriculture as viewed by ECLAC. <i>Emiliano Ortega.</i>	13
Regions as the product of social construction. <i>Sergio Boisier.</i>	41
Some notes on the definition of the informal sector. <i>Martine Guerguil.</i>	57
Changes in development styles in the future of Latin America (Seminar in homage to José Medina Echavarría, Santiago, Chile).	67
Medina Echavarría and the future of Latin America. <i>Adolfo Gurrieri.</i>	73
Political culture and democratic conscience. <i>Enzo Faletto.</i>	79
A hopeful view of democracy. <i>Jorge Graciarena.</i>	85
The change of orthodoxy and the ideas of Medina Echavarría. <i>Aníbal Pinto.</i>	97
New light on the concepts of "private" and "public". <i>Aníbal Quijano.</i>	105
Significance and role of the universities: Medina Echavarría's view. <i>Aldo Solari.</i>	121
Dilemmas of political legitimacy. <i>Francisco C. Weffort.</i>	127
The social actors and development options. <i>Marshall Wolfe.</i>	143
Some recent ECLAC publications.	149

Political culture and democratic conscience

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The writings of José Medina Echavarría made a decisive contribution towards enabling a whole generation of social scientists, in the broadest sense of the term, to gain a more thorough grasp of the intricate realities of Latin America. His studies revealed an acute awareness of the radical changes with which our societies were confronted. In his book entitled *Consideraciones sociológicas sobre el desarrollo económico*,¹ which sums up his final reflections in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Medina postulated that a new cycle was beginning in the region, and that what was important and decisive from the sociological standpoint was an "awakening of awareness" with regard to the definitional characteristics of that new cycle. By this awakening of awareness he did not mean simply and solely the possible knowledge of the phenomenon that a handful of intellectuals might possess, although that too was a fact of extraordinary importance and Medina more than once underlined it. The awareness needed was that of society as a whole, since it would be called upon—as he hoped—to decide as to the options for its future, a task which could not be undertaken without a full understanding of the present.

For Medina the definition of the new cycle was nothing other than the development theme. Could we postulate today that the new cycle augured at the beginning of the 1960s has closed and that a new one has opened? Certainly, "innovations" of all sorts would seem to be the hallmark of our times, and the so-called second revolution, with all its implications, is not a matter unconnected with our present, much less with our future. Nevertheless, both the theme of development in its present forms or styles and the need to be alive to it, are still valid. But perhaps it may be worthwhile to stress the fact that nowadays the phenomenon is much more

complex. Of particular concern are the relations between development and democracy. While José Medina constantly drew attention to their complexity, many others took a perhaps over-optimistic view according to which a democracy would be the almost inevitable happy outcome of a sustained development process.

In the light of the foregoing remarks, we should like, within the framework of the present analysis, to work out a sort of counterpoint between the questions that absorbed José Medina's attention in the above-mentioned years, and those which are of concern to us today. As regards that "awakening of awareness" with which he was preoccupied, it should be emphasized that for him the crux of the matter lay in the political and social innovations which might come about, since the challenge that had to be met was the formation of a new society with new sources of power. For such a purpose nothing could be more important than what in his terminology he called "the movement of ideas".

The experience of recent years has caused much of present-day Latin American sociology to veer primarily towards the subject of democracy, in an effort to verify the existence or the lack of underlying values, since, as has been to a large extent demonstrated, structural conditions alone are not enough to guarantee that democracy will be accepted and made valid. Paraphrasing José Medina, it might be said that in this case it is a matter of inquiring into the "awakening of awareness" with respect to democracy.

To approach the subject in more concrete terms, reference may usefully be made to some studies published in a recent volume, compiled by Norbert Lechner and entitled *Cultura política y democratización*, and in particular to the studies by Julio Cotler, Angel Flisfisch and Oscar Landi contained therein.² It is noted in the introduction to the book that there is a crisis of con-

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¹See José Medina Echavarría, *Consideraciones sociológicas sobre el desarrollo económico de América Latina*, Buenos Aires, Editora Solar-Hachette, 1964.

²See Julio Cotler, "La cultura política de la juventud popular del Perú"; Angel Flisfisch, "Consenso democrático en el Chile autoritario"; and Oscar Landi, "La trama cultural de la política" in Norbert Lechner (compiler), *Cultura política y democratización*, Santiago, Chile, CLACSO/FLACSO/ICI, 1987.

sensus, which in practice affects possible development strategies and the very idea of social change. This crisis of consensus makes it plain that—as has already been said—any specific order is not the mere result of what are commonly called "objective factors". Essential for the subsistence of a social order is the existence of beliefs and values.

With even more justification may it be maintained that beliefs and values are the very groundwork of a democratic institutional system, since such a system cannot precipitately resort to coercion pure and simple.

There is no intention here of deducing from all this that in recognizing the importance of values and ideas, consideration of the "real" should be neglected, since many interpretations of the present crisis of democracy—existent not in Latin America alone—postulate that it is precisely the increased complexity of real life that calls in question the adequacy of the underpinnings of any democratic institutional system, i.e., of the political parties, parliament and the State as a whole. In short, to use what has become an accepted term, a virtual crisis of governability seems to be at stake. The thesis in itself is of exceptional importance, although one may not be in accord with the way in which it has been formulated by many writers, and still more, may disagree with the conclusions derived from the facts noted. Its importance is asserted because the effective existence of new constitutional régimes in Latin America has concentrated attention on the political moulds in which institutions are cast.

It is now time to make more concrete reference to an initial problem. According to one of the authors cited, namely, Oscar Landi—who is referring specifically to the case of Argentina—, there are two main threads in the new political behaviour pattern which are of outstanding importance as guides to the functioning of the parties: democracy as a social value, and moderation as a principle of political legitimacy. The author stresses the fact that the desire for modernization and the emphasis placed upon it is turned to account by parties and by individuals who show a political leaning as a means towards marking the desired break with the past.

The question now to be asked is whether these two themes that are important for

present-day political life in Argentina—modernization and democracy—are equally so in other contexts. In the studies by Corler and Flisfisch, the former relating to Peru and the latter to Chile, some doubts are raised in this connection.

However, before actually referring to the studies in question, it may be necessary to indicate for reference purposes the political significance of modernization as a value: a type of reflection which would undoubtedly have been dear to José Medina. How sound is this postulate on modernization? Is it explicit enough to serve as the basis for a new option? Certainly, as Landi notes, it may be useful for establishing a cleavage with the past, or at least for marking a strong desire for something different from an experience which is regarded as negative and which there is no wish to repeat, but is it clear enough to serve as the foundation for a future?

In one of his studies, José Medina pointed out something to which in our own reflections we have not always given, apparently, all the importance for which it calls. He said that in Latin America perhaps the last doctrine that had constituted a sufficiently broad general orthodoxy had been positivism. After that, he said, "came a sort of witches' sabbath of the most diverse, contradictory and extravagant ideologies and influences".

The close relationship that existed between positivism and the idea of modernization is common knowledge. Consequently, the next question arising is: On what body of ideas does this—the present-day— notion of modernization rest? Of what nature is its internal coherence?

Suffice it for the moment to pose this question, perhaps to provide a motivation for urgently necessary research which not only will require the aid of the social sciences but also, strictly speaking, ought to be the object of philosophical reflection in the precise sense of the words.

Closely linked to the foregoing theme, is another of no less significance: that of the intellectual. Commenting on John Friedman, Medina noted three main functions of the intellectual in developing countries: a) to disseminate new social values; b) to work out a new economic development ideology; and c) to take part in the creation of a national image.

If the different experiences that history records are taken into account, it cannot but be agreed that such, in many instances, has been the role of intellectuals, irrespective of the greater or lesser success achieved. In this connection another field of inquiry can be opened up, with the same intention as lay behind the preceding questions, i.e., that of indicating areas of research rather than hastening to give replies which would be somewhat precipitous. Specifically, it might be wondered whether perhaps the Latin American intellectuals of today are in a position to create a coherent image of modernization which in turn would constitute a new economic development ideology.

There are many possible avenues of approach to this problem, but it would be useful to examine in depth a paradox formulated by José Medina as follows: "during the years that are witnessing this weakening and dispersal of beliefs—in the last decade or so in particular [he is referring to ideologies in a broad sense]—conversely, and with no less vigour, a remarkable strengthening of knowledge, that is, of real and potential information, is taking place". Carried to extremes, it might be said that the theme—of Weberian *bouquet*—consists in determining what is the relation between knowledge and political action at the present time and consequently, what is the relation between the intellectual and politics.

In short, the point is to ascertain whether a body of positive knowledge really exists which can, for example, impart to the idea of modernization—so important for the political option—a real degree of concretion.

Continuing the counterpoint between the topics currently of concern and those to which José Medina drew attention in his day, let us recall the stress that Landi laid on the importance of the idea of modernization as a useful means of marking a distance from the past, a concept of break-away which was also important in Medina's thinking. In his case, the break was with a traditional Latin American system, and resulted from the collapse of its main pillar: the hacienda system. To this phenomenon, and in close concomitance with it, was added the rise of new social groups and an active presence of the masses. All this called for the creation of new political parties—since those of the elite were

no longer sufficient—and likewise for the presence of new leader groups.

This is not the place to reproduce José Medina's brilliant analysis of the sociological significance of the hacienda. Suffice it to recall what in his opinion were its essential features: a) it had been a cell of political-military power together with the economic power which it unquestionably possessed; b) it had formed the nucleus of an extended-family structure which through its ramifications impregnated the whole body of institutions and powers of the society; c) it had constituted the circumstantial model of authority; and d) it had been the creator of a human type of unique "character".

In the language of today we might say that the hacienda was the basis of a culture, and for our purposes we might emphasize that in a very special fashion it was the basis of a political culture. What Medina noted was the break-away from the old and the rise of the new, in which the new was represented by the city (not that it had been of no importance before), the entrepreneurs, the middle classes and the workers.

Here attention should be drawn to two considerations: in the first place, modernization is based not only on the system of ideas but also on the existence or emergence of new structures and on a system of social relations concomitant with these; and, secondly, research should be carried out in depth on the character and evolution of Latin American cities. Of course there are some studies, especially by historians, already in existence, and on the basis thus provided an attempt should be made to formulate an interpretative hypothesis of as far-reaching scope as those suggested with respect to the significance of the city in European history. It should be remembered that in this context, "citizen" means "man of the city" and that citizenship, with all its cultural, economic and political implications, is a fact linked to the existence of the city. It is appropriate, therefore, to clarify what the city has meant in Latin America as the basis of a new political culture and in particular, as the basis of a democratic political culture.

Julio Cotler, in the above-mentioned study on Peru, analyses the experience of the young people from the Sierra who have moved into Lima since the 1970s. Of course, this is a specific case, but perhaps it might be possible to sketch

some generalizations applicable to other Latin American contexts if we were to consider a "type" of city which for want of a better title we might call a "hostile city".

It was observable that these young people, in the popular sectors, undergo a process of learning to organize themselves around specific interests. According to the author, their forms of association are strongly defensive, whether of their neighbourhood, of their housing accommodation, of their wages, of their jobs, of education, of health, of transport, or of any other interest. But what is important is that these mobilizations which give rise to new organizational patterns are not necessarily correlated with institutional modalities of political incorporation.

The fact is interesting because the result, unexpected at times, may take the form of a strengthening of traditional political behaviour patterns. Thus, it can be noted that practices of the clientele type reappear and gather energy, their essence consisting in promises of political support in exchange for protection or services rendered.

It would seem that the clientèle system reinforced certain kinds of relationship based on subordination and on strictly personalized loyalty. Nevertheless, simultaneously with clientèle practices the existence of a behaviour pattern based on confrontation and violence can be noted, and what must be underlined is that this latter is considered by those who exercise it as a valid means of winning the rights of citizenship. Cotler does in fact remark that "popular youth has incorporated into its political culture two apparently contradictory practices ... but has learnt to handle them simultaneously or alternatively". In the first of these practices, of a manipulatory character, the traditional ties of patronage and clientage acquire outstanding importance, and in the second, which is perhaps no less traditional, emphasis is placed on confrontation, so that every demand is urged —to use the expressive slogan— "hasta sus últimas consecuencias" ("come of it what may"). With respect to this latter dimension, it should be pointed out that such practices are accompanied by what might be considered almost a moral repudiation of every type of compromise or negotiation. This does not mean that compromise or negotiation never exists; what is serious is that it does not figure as legitimized.

In a context such as that just described, it is obvious that the democratic formula is robbed of significance, since it might be said that behaviour of this kind almost negates the possibility of setting up institutional machinery for political mediation, and casts doubt even of the capacity to reach valid compromises.

From all this the obvious deduction is that experience of a "hostile city" —and by that must be understood a whole set of social relations— can hardly form the foundation of a democratic culture. But alongside such situations as this, of which we have cited only one example, there are other elements which strongly influence the phenomenon and which should be taken into consideration.

The study by Angel Flisfisch reproduces the data obtained through a survey whose findings are far from encouraging. As regards orientation towards a democratic régime, this is 59.5% positive and 40.5% undecided or indifferent. In the same survey, 51.5% of the respondents pointed out certain negative features of the political parties, and no one can be blind to the significance of these for the operation of a democratic system or to the importance of their positive valuation. With respect to the degree of interest in politics shown by the respondents, 25.5% expressed much interest, 33.3% little and 41.2% none at all.

Any interpretations of the findings of a survey or observations that may be made on the terms in which it is formulated are always debatable; in this case, however, it cannot be said that the data in themselves are encouraging, for which reason they are a source of disquiet as to the degree of social support for a democratic option.

However, it is interesting to note, as does the author, what happens when a distinction is drawn between those who possess a high or a low degree of "political sophistication", which in the survey is taken to mean the capacity for forming political concepts and the possession of a certain level of information on politics. In those whose degree of "political sophistication" is high, orientation towards a democratic régime is positive in 77.4% and negative in 22.6%. In contrast, where "political sophistication" is low, democratic orientation is positive in 49.2% and negative in 50.8%. In accordance with these results, it would not be hazardous to assert

—given that one of the important components of political sophistication is information— that in a population politically under-informed democratic sympathies are unlikely to be generated and what is worth emphasizing is that the existence or lack of such information is not unconnected with certain forms that power relations often assume in a society.

Obviously, notwithstanding what has been said, other situations exist in Latin America in which there appears to be a stronger consensus in favour of democracy. Allusion was made at the outset to Oscar Landi's study on Argentina. It is common knowledge that in this case two major political parties exist, each of which has its own historical traditions; it might even be said that both possess electorates whose central nucleus is different, but that they present profiles which —according to some analysts— are no longer so mutually exclusive as they were in the past. The author's hypothesis is that this greater similarity is due not to the fact that the society concerned is

more homogeneous, as might be the case in Europe, but rather to the emergence of a will to rearticulate a fragmented society.

It might be postulated that, as the result of a previous traumatic experience, a political culture is being constituted which has a greater tendency to find consensual elements. A question would then arise as to how far this consensus is likely to be firm and lasting. Even so, consensuality itself is not without its problems, which are noted in the article under discussion. In the conditions described, the option between one party or another may be the result of a purely tactical vote or of an electoral behaviour which signifies the reward or punishment of a given political conduct. This might lead —to exaggerate a little— to a conception of politics as administration pure and simple, and therefore to its virtual bureaucratization: a trend which would make it essential to re-state some of the themes in the Weberian tradition which were of such great significance for José Medina.