

# CEPAL

## Review

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## CONTENTS

ECLAC: Forty years of continuity with change. <i>Geri Rosenthal.</i>	1
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

# Social actors and development options

*Marshall Wolfe\**

The organizers of this seminar set me the topic of "social actors and development options". I accepted without much thought, attracted by the opportunity of remeeting old friends in an intellectual setting in which I spent a good many years. Now, however, I feel misgivings at tackling such a topic from the remote perspective of Vermont, dependent for information about Latin America on the sporadic coverage of the press and the occasional arrival of ECLAC documents, and speaking moreover before a group of people who are veteran actors by their own right in the drama of Latin America. I am practically condemned to warm up ideas that have already become commonplaces.

In order to start somehow, I should like to reflect on the implications of the image of "social actors" who are supposed to play "roles" in development. The words point to the same topic as "agents of development" but have somewhat different connotations. They suggest a drama in which the actors have roles defined for them, based on development dramas already performed elsewhere or on eschatological theories concerning the destiny of classes and society. No one has exposed better than Don José the ironies that can flow from such implicit or explicit suppositions. One can imagine a stage on which certain actors, convinced that they need a script to give sense to their performances, try to play roles in dramas that are incompatible with the scripts preferred by other actors on the same stage, or who strain to combine incompatible roles in their own performances. Meanwhile, the majority of the participants—from the dominant as well as the dominated classes—improvise and react to continually changing opportunities and shocks, paying little heed to their roles in the drama of development.

Don José, of course, insisted that it is important that the actors acquire more coherent and mutually compatible ideas on their roles and on

the outcome of the drama; the new society sought through development. However, he insisted equally on the dangers of carrying this effort too far through overconfidence in material rationality and the self-assumed right of any actor to impose his own infallible script on society. He assigned priority to pluralist democracy over efficiency in the formation of development policy, not only as a value in itself but also as a means of restraining the excesses of rationality in the definition of roles.

On rereading *Economic Development in Latin America: Sociological Considerations*<sup>1</sup> I noted the emphasis he placed on the "recognition" in Latin America at the beginning of the 1960s that the leadership of the societies and the roles influencing the evolution of these societies could no longer follow the traditional patterns, and that a new governing class had to emerge and propose scripts for development that would be coherent, feasible, and at the same time capable of stimulating popular enthusiasm and participation. In following years, inside and outside ECLAC, this "recognition" became a constant refrain, with the content of the new awareness changing, incorporating new problems and goals, and converting itself into something that I labelled in the middle of the 1970s as "utopias constructed by committees". In a sense, the recognition became a ritual when every other year governments "recognized" the deficiencies and injustices of the real economic and social evolution and declared their intention of overcoming them.<sup>2</sup> However, the political leadership capable of internalizing these recognitions was lacking or was defeated. Real development followed its dynamic and disordered course, accumulating problems for the future that few influential actors detected, and finally the

<sup>1</sup>ECLAC document E/CN.12/616 (mimeo), 2 April 1963.

<sup>2</sup>The author is referring to the biennial appraisals carried out during the 1960s to review the fulfilment by the governments of the region of the goals laid down in the International Development Strategy.

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"recognition" that imposed itself among the actors sharing power in the greater part of Latin America implied a systematic rejection of the democratic values underlying the recognition that Don José would have wanted.

If one can speak of another "recognition" in Latin America today, of what does it consist? From my remote perspective, at least, it seems that Latin America has arrived at a conjuncture in which all the scripts have proved wanting and in which the majority of the social actors have less confidence than before in any preconceived role. Ironically, this conjuncture has revitalized the relevance of the pluralist democracy that Don José proposed as a fundamental value. It would be harder today for any social actor to believe that his role entitles him to impose on society a scheme for development—or for revolution.

Knowledge of the real problems of the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam and Cuba, on the one hand, and of the United States, on the other, has diminished their plausibility as models or as sources of Utopian scripts. Some actors may have become sobered by the fatal consequences of scripts that they themselves tried to act out in a recent past. Probably the disposition to seek coherent political alternatives through free, rational and public deliberation has become a little stronger; and this is precisely the disposition that Don José sustained in all his works. You know better than I do the precariousness and the contradictions latent within this disposition, and the implications of the fact that it had its origin in a general lowering of expectations rather than in confidence in a future of dynamic development. Many actors clinging to the scripts of authoritarianism, neoliberalism, populism and armed revolutionary struggle remain on the stage. In recent years, the theme of redemocratization or transition from authoritarianism has become fashionable in the academic institutions of Latin America, Europe and the United States. In the already voluminous literature hopes for a real and lasting democratic "recognition" mingle with a wide range of doubts and warnings.

At the same time, of course, the settings of insecurity and disillusion have left as threatening as ever the possibility (also forecast by Don José in *Sociological Considerations*) of generalized anomie, "the complete evaporation of

beliefs", cynical falsification of social roles, or strategies based on the exploitation of the advantages deriving from armed force or wealth on the confident assumption that, at worst, emigration and the export of capital to Miami can safeguard such actors from any national collapse.

One can also mention the idea prominent in some of the works produced by the research project of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington on "Transitions from Authoritarian Rule", to the effect that redemocratization is so precarious that only centre-right régimes, carefully abstaining from tackling the major problems of the styles of development—redistribution and autonomous popular participation—can safeguard this process. This judgment corresponds to one aspect of reality but supposes that the majority of the social actors must resign themselves to passive roles and respect appeals to shared sacrifice that are already discredited by their previous uses. On the last page of *Sociological Considerations* Medina condemns the "Machiavellism of public men" as the most profound form of corruption of the democratic faith: "The mass Machiavellism of the great modern leaders saps, equally and inevitably, the moral fibre of all individual citizens." If one supposes that the resurgence of pluralist democracy can be more than a passing phase of a cycle, the political actors must pose the need for a more realistic awareness than before of the constraints imposed by the conjuncture and must immunize themselves against populist promises of immediate social justice. However, one cannot be content with manipulations that convert the drama into a farce in which the majorities have to convince themselves that they can enjoy democratic freedom only as long as they do not use it.

In his consideration of the Machiavellisms of power, Don José referred, with his habitual discretion, to the public men not only of the countries of Latin America but also of "a foreign dominating country". Today, the indications in the United States of a revitalization of democracy equally mixed with indications of anomie, loss of faith in the future and inept Machiavellisms linked to the decline of the dominant political style are very relevant to the social actors of Latin America. This question falls outside my immediate topic, but I suspect that the

social actors of Latin America are going to have to relate themselves to a quite different combination of external stimuli and obstacles, altogether more compatible with democratic styles of development, but also lending itself to illusions concerning solutions arriving from abroad, as in the years of the Alliance for Progress. The evolution of sympathies and antipathies among different actors in Latin America and the United States, and also the consequences of the enormous growth of minorities of Latin American origin, very diverse in their reasons for being in the United States and in their ties with U.S. actors, deserve a good deal of attention. Even in Vermont, although that state has hardly been touched by these currents of migration, I have been surprised to find significant groups of local people with limited information but impassioned and active opponents of Washington's policy in Central America.

Now we come to the question: how does the new and ambiguous "recognition" manifest itself in the descendants of the social actors studied by Don José and ourselves since the 1960s? How can a rationality aware of its own limitations in the quest for more democratic styles of development be fostered among these actors from within ECLAC? Don José's comments on these actors remain impressively pertinent in spite of the transformation of Latin America in respect of the size of its population, the distribution by rural and urban residence, by social classes and by occupation, the level of education and access to modern communication media, the patterns of consumption, and other factors. One is tempted to repeat the saying that everything has changed so that nothing should change.

In *Sociological Considerations* Don José affirmed that "we are in the dawn of the formation of new governing classes" and of another political class "that will be at the same time energetic and modern". He also affirmed that "only that class which possesses a fund of clear ideas on economic development policy will sustain itself in the future as a governing class". Typically, he observed a few pages later, "let hope triumph over any skepticism".

Obviously, a quarter-century later these new governing classes are not easily identifiable, and an adaptation of another saying comes to mind: "Anyone who has clear ideas on economic devel-

opment today does not understand the situation." The reasons for skepticism seem to have triumphed over hope. However, Don José did not have in mind a class in the strict sense, such as the bourgeoisie. He also affirmed that "Europe has always had a rich multiplicity in its governing classes, which in truth has not made social life easy at every moment. ... Latin America, as in so many other matters, has repeatedly placed itself altogether within this European tradition."

From this point of view of the multiplicity of governing classes one can identify changes that justify cautious hopes. One can identify various groups holding different sources of power or influence in society and the State that are more inclined than previously to form governing coalitions, interacting with critics, to seek solutions that are acceptable if not optimal within pluralist democracy.

In these efforts the leadership of individuals as rallying points of the coalitions and symbols of capacity to make coherent political decisions remains indispensable, and this carries with it well-known consequences. The leader as actor needs great confidence in his own ability to manage problems and maintain sufficient sources of support in his society, without falling into illusions concerning his own infallibility. And the role of the leader as a symbol that someone identifiable is deciding how to tackle the problems, in situations in which the problems have no clear or immediate solutions, can generate first an exaggerated faith in the leader as performer of miracles and later equally exaggerated disillusionment.

The most important generalization on the components of a governing coalition and its critics—equally important for the democratic generation of policies—may be that each component today has ample reason to distrust the others but also to know that it cannot get rid of them and impose its own rationality.

The application of this generalization to the components of a governing/criticizing coalition—the leaders of political parties, the entrepreneurs, the State and private technobureaucracies, the armed forces, the leaders of unions and interest-group organizations, the intellectuals and academics—could lead us into a

lity of criticisms that can today be found in an extensive bibliography of studies and polemics.<sup>5</sup>

The mention of this bibliography leads us to one of the big differences between the period of *Sociological Considerations* and today. Don José had at hand only fragmentary and hardly reliable quantitative information on the social actors in the development of Latin America. He was profoundly familiar with the theories originating in the European past or in the preoccupations of United States sociologists and political scientists to identify social actors capable of putting Latin America on the road to development processes similar to the trajectory of the United States, or to explain the cultural or psycho-social reasons for the lack of such actors. He also encountered a local ideological production that, in his own words (referring to Bolivia), "only very rarely permitted him to assemble a repertory of clear ideas, a crystalline precipitate of a few simple and effective proposals. One might suspect that something similar would happen if one investigated the intellectual struggles of other countries or of Latin America as a whole". At the beginning of the 1960s social research institutions hardly existed in Latin America.

Today, in spite of all the vicissitudes of political sectarianism, repression and exile of investigators, and precariousness of resources, quantitative information is very extensive and relatively reliable, social research institutions are found everywhere, and interchanges between social scientists of Latin America, Europe and the United States are intense and fertile. If we are still far from the "simple and effective proposals" that Don José longed for, at least there is a more adequate understanding of the complexity of the problems and of the defects of certain simple proposals of the recent past. If the social actors of Latin America are still confused concerning their roles, it is not for lack of accessible information. Moreover, up to a certain point it would seem that the information and the theoretical explanations have been absorbed by broad sectors of public opinion.

<sup>5</sup>The latest effort to bring order to the topic can be found in Alain Touraine, *Adorer sociales y sistemas políticos en América Latina*, Santiago, Chile: Regional Employment Programme for Latin America and the Caribbean (PREALC), 1987.

For our purposes it is also significant that some social theorists and investigators (and not only the economists) have emerged as actors in their own right, as participants in the governing coalitions of the new democratic régimes and, of course, also as influential critics. There is nothing new in the participation of intellectuals as political actors in Latin America, but one might expect that the contribution of the social scientists would have different aspects. Their entry on the stage may be of secondary importance within the drama, but for a seminar in ECLAC, focussed on the possibility of influencing the styles of development of Latin America, it holds particular interest.

Almost from its inception, in opening itself gradually to considerations other than the strictly economic, ECLAC has contributed to this entry of the social scientists, through the generation of ideas, through the organization of the information needed to demonstrate or refute certain theses, and through interchanges between its functionaries and other research institutions. Naturally it has been exposed to attacks, some justified and others not, as a consequence of the interaction between its theses and socioeconomic realities. Finally, as we all know, it has been exposed to another kind of criticism: that it has not known how to renovate its ideas, that it has been outstripped by the flowering of the new centres of research and thinking, that it has fallen into a ritualist celebration of its past intellectual achievements. An ex-Cepalino has very recently published a book that develops criticisms of this kind and also makes positive suggestions that are not all feasible in the real situation of ECLAC, dependent as it is on a United Nations in crisis, but that deserve, I believe, serious study and reply.<sup>4</sup>

In June 1977, Don José produced an outline for a work that his illness immediately afterwards prevented him from carrying out. It was entitled "Intelligence in perspective (scientific thought and ideology in the immediate future)". No one other than Don José could have developed this theme in the form that he proposed, but it would be valuable if someone in ECLAC

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Hodara, *Prebisch y la CliPAL- Sustancia, trayectoria y contexto*. Mexico City, El Colegio de México, 1987.

could return to the theme in the situation of today, when there is almost excessive informational and theoretical food for intelligence, but also a perhaps excessive awareness of the obstacles in the way of the "clear ideas" and the "simple and effective proposals" that Don José sought in the intellectual production of his time. One of the subheadings within his outline is particularly suggestive: "The existing forms of intelligence: functional, critical and evasive." Let us hope that we shall become able to combine better the functional and the critical intelligence, and learn how to distinguish them from the evasive intelligence, always tempting in academic and bureaucratic settings.<sup>5</sup>

I am going to pass rapidly over three of the principal social actors that Don José discussed in *Sociological Considerations*: the emerging middle classes, the industrial proletariat, and youth. Obviously, the first two classes, as well as youth, have increased enormously in numbers, have diversified, and have transformed themselves culturally since the 1960s. Don José's doubts concerning their capacity to act as protagonists of a style of development remain valid. Probably few people today would think seriously of their roles in these over-simplified terms. Nevertheless, if one is seeking coalitions or social pacts to promote more democratic styles of development, the three are essential components. Certainly, the main pressures towards redemocratization have come from them. In spite of all the research, major incognita persist concerning the "recognitions" that they have internalized from the shocks of recent years, concerning the corporatist, Utopian, or embittered content of their reactions, and concerning their fears as to the consequences of any downward redistribution of power and incomes.

The last question is important because the "situations of masses" concerning which Don José emphasized the "hazardousness of any attempt at forecasting" remain on the stage. Today these situations apply to the sons and

grandsons of the "populations expelled from the traditional social settings of Latin America" that he identified. If their state of "rootlessness" remains as evident as before it must have other forms and sources. As we can all remember, these masses have been discussed and studied in terms of "marginality", of "extreme poverty", of "informal sectors", etc. All of these labels have been associated with initiatives to change their situation, generally so as to incorporate them into a social and economic system that is assumed to be capable of receiving them. The last label, of "informal sector", recognizes that somehow they have incorporated themselves, sufficiently at least to survive and contribute to the functioning of the economies. They have been exposed to communitarian, populist and revolutionary campaigns designed to mobilize them, and to authoritarian campaigns designed to demobilize them and expel them from their incipient control over political resources. Their intense spatial mobility has diminished the cultural and other distances between the rural and urban masses, and today important contingents have experience of migration outside Latin America. In the most recent years, moreover, the economic shocks have probably reduced parts of the industrial working class and even of the strata previously enjoying "middle" status to equally precarious living conditions and survival strategies. New forms of local social organization have also emerged—the "base communities", etc.—in which intellectual or religious allies hope to find a path towards the liberation of the masses from a style of development that offers them such poor and alienating roles. Don José probably would have observed these initiatives with the mixture of sympathy and skepticism with which he received "community development" in the 1960s.

"The hazardousness of any attempt at forecasting" has not been overcome, but ECLAC continues to have the duty of keeping up its study of these situations of masses so as to be able to make forecasts that can serve as guides to State policy—and also as guides to the mass organizations and their intellectual allies. At this point, however, I feel that I am once again treating the problem with ritualist formulas, many times repeated in our earlier meetings, and developing an evasive intelligence. It is time to halt.

<sup>5</sup>Enzo Palet has called my attention to an essay of Don José, "Acerca de los tipos de inteligencia" (Concerning the types of intelligence), published in 1953 in *Presentaciones y planteos: Papeles de la sociología* (Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad Autónoma de México). This essay distinguishes "functional intelligence, detached or leisure intelligence, and marginal intelligence".