

# CEPAL

## Review

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# CEPAL

## Review

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## The social sciences without planning or revolution?

Martín Hopenhayn\*

From the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, Latin American social scientists saw themselves as important agents in the processes of change and modernization unfolding in the region's societies. Inspired by the exuberance of the sweeping changes occurring in the modern-day world, many social scientists felt they were the best equipped not only to interpret the major political and socioeconomic processes taking place in the region, but also to deduce from those interpretations the policy directions in which Latin America's national societies should plot their future course. The link between the generation of knowledge and active intervention in the real world –the link of organicity– was, for many, the chief element that legitimized the practice of the social sciences in the region. Based on extreme, highly illuminist self-images, such as those associated with the central-government planner or the revolutionary intellectual, many social scientists saw themselves as true *links*, or bridges, between science and power, or between the development of knowledge and the rationalization of the social order.

Today, these extreme images and the rationales underlying them are regarded as highly suspect, as is the notion of organicity which in decades gone by constituted the context for the work being done in the social sciences in the region. What impact does this radical change have on current thinking about social processes? And towards what other modes of perception or cognitive approaches are Latin American social sciences turning now? In the following pages the author attempts to paint both a retrospective and prospective picture of this uncertain scenario.

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## I

### Refuted paradigms

#### 1. *The crisis of intelligibility and the crisis of organicity*

A great deal has been said about the crisis that has been affecting the social sciences in Latin America ever since the mid-1970s. This crisis has been interpreted in two main ways: as a *crisis of intelligibility* and as a *crisis of organicity*.

The term *crisis of intelligibility* refers to the fact that the social sciences are having increasing difficulty in encompassing the mounting complexity of the real world with their traditional tools. Mention is usually made in this connection of the loss of explanatory and orientational power of three of the most important paradigms which guided social scientists' work from the 1950s to the mid-1970s: the ECLAC school of thought (developmentalism in its "original" form), orthodox Marxism and dependency theory. There are many oft-cited factors that can help account for this loss; they include the "anomalies" with which the real world confounded the theorists; the exhaustion of the possibilities suggested by the different versions of forward-looking proposals which were based on a positive assessment of *endogenous* development; the crisis of the populist State and of the associated State-as-planner's various functions; the appearance of authoritarian regimes and State bureaucracies; the reconstitution of social classes and actors; the shift of an increasingly large portion of the labour force into the informal economy, along with the resulting increase in structural heterogeneity; and the challenges faced by newly-founded democracies during a time of economic adjustment and market expansion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Vergara (1991). In the same vein, Heinz Sonntag and Norbert Lechner have said that, starting in the mid-1970s, modernization generated complex processes that simply did not fit into existing categories. One effect of the redefinition and increasing differentiation of social structures was that all-encompassing, generalized interpretations could no longer retain the specificity of these new complexities. See Sonntag (1991) and Lechner (1988), who also underscore the disintegrative effect of growing social complexity on the time-honoured paradigms of Latin American social science.

By *crisis of organicity*, social scientists mean the breakdown of the link between the production of knowledge and structural social change. The political and cultural defeat of the Left, and the political and technical defeat of developmentalism and its national variants, broke the organic (or so-called organic) linkage between the generation of knowledge and the radical transformation of societal structures. It has been said time and time again that social scientists in Latin America have, almost since the very outset, been preoccupied with the idea of *social change* and the ways in which they, as producers of knowledge, could help guide it. In the predominant paradigms to be found in social science literature, social change was characterized as leading to the *modernization of the political, production, social and cultural structures of the countries of the region*.<sup>2</sup> However, under the onslaught of authoritarianism, followed by the more hegemonic onslaught of the neoliberal model, together with the disparagement of the Welfare State and the collapse of socialist models, in the eyes of many the Latin American social sciences were relegated to an historical backwater and seen as irrelevant in the modern world.

It is not necessary to refer to the postmodernist debate in order to talk about this crisis of *intelligibility* and *organicity* in the Latin American social sciences. Nor is there any need to have recourse to such concepts as "multiplicity" or "diversity" to sustain our concern about structural heterogeneity, or to fall back on the idea of "discontinuity" in order to understand truncated versions of modernization, or to hark back to the "crisis of meta-accounts" to feel lost in the absence of viable, comprehensive proposals for freeing the region from underdevelopment and poverty. Nor is it necessary to be an anti-illuminist to understand the forcefulness with which, following the Second World War, Latin American social scientists embodied the Western illuminist model of a producer of knowledge; this modern rider of the wave of progress, armed with an inexhaustible capacity for deciphering the nature of reason, would first identify *the path of reason in history* and, finally, would *deduce from that path, by virtue of his powers of reasoning, the best path into the future*.

<sup>2</sup> They differed, however, in terms of development styles, i.e., with regard to what modernization really meant in terms of the distribution of political power, economic resources and social relations.

Nor need we resort to the anti-utopian discourse of the disenchanted to appreciate the psychological and even spiritual costs occasioned by the shattering of the image of a possible revolution: a revolution whose time of occurrence might be undetermined, but towards which, for many social scientists and intellectuals in general, all paths led; a revolution which, *as an image*, was clearly losing its ability to mobilize the masses and, *as a form of discourse*, was becoming implausible.

## 2. Planning, revolution and the crisis of rationales

In the following pages we will attempt to situate these crises of intelligibility and organicity in the context of a few other terms: those of *planning and revolution*, on the one hand, and of *crisis of rationales* on the other. This examination may lead to a different understanding of the connection between the crisis of paradigms and the crisis of organicity in the social sciences by avoiding postmodernist rhetoric while embracing postmodernism's injunction to relativize the concepts that have legitimized—and which, in some measure, continue to legitimize—social science praxis in the region.

In the decades during which the paradigmatic model of inward-looking development, of industrialization-oriented modernization and/or sociopolitical liberation had gained ascendancy in the region, *the concepts of planning and revolution were the ones that were best able to encompass the deliberate intervention of reason (technical and technological reason) in history*. They were not, of course, the only normative concepts in the field, but they were the *extreme* images for the *organicity* of the social disciplines and the *strongest* images in terms of the *intelligibility* of social phenomena from the standpoint of structural change in Latin America's societies.

Planning came to be thought of as the main tool of that great engine of change, the State-as-planner.<sup>3</sup> For this actor, planning came to constitute an

<sup>3</sup> In the maximalist sense attributed to it by its apologists, part of which was incorporated into political imagery until the mid-1970s as the State-as-demiurge, meta-actor, leader of industrialization-oriented modernization, impartial arbiter of social conflicts and grand political unifier. It should be borne in mind that, because of the Latin American countries' dependent, peripheral position and their belated development, very early on the State assumed a pivotal role in the modernization and development processes. (See Faletto, 1989; Gurrieri, 1987; Hopenhayn, 1991a.)

idealized nexus which, in principle, would enable it to forge a link between technical reasoning and political reasoning that would make the social sciences the agent of power-based technical intervention and enable them, to paraphrase Hegel, to *make the rational more real and the real more rational*. In this sense, planning was an archetype of the *organic* of social knowledge and social change. The preferred instrument of modernization and of the *dynamic link* among the different agents of modernization, planning was made over, in the best illuminist tradition, into something akin to a science capable of plotting out the future.

In the case of revolution, the pretensions were even greater. Here, it was not merely a question of programming but rather of radically subverting an order that was holding back history (it was holding back production too, but, *above all*, social progress). Far closer to an ethic than to a technology, the revolution symbolized the social scientist's total *immersion* in the struggle to establish a new order. Indeed, this was so much the case that a significant percentage of the literature of development and of the writings of sociologists, philosophers and political scientists during the 1960s and early 1970s were motivated by the idea of revolution. And if the discourse of the planner could be the embodiment of reason carried to its most detailed applications on behalf of the agent in power, revolutionary discourse aspired to being reason carried to its ultimate consequences in opposition to that power.

Thus situated at the two ends of the spectrum, planning and revolution defined the outer boundaries within which, in an infinity of combinations and mediating roles, social scientists came into their own for a few unforgettable decades. Both images—planning and revolution—were laden with “modern” reasoning and shot through with utopianism and illuminism.<sup>4</sup>

The *crisis of these rationales* has long been the object of a debate in which “critical humanists”, on one side, and “empirical functionalists”, on the other, have invested a great deal of energy, with the former devoting their efforts to a critique of formal instrumental reasoning and the latter to a critique of

normative substantive reasoning. Despite their tried and tested capacity for lucidity with regard to such critiques, the modern social sciences took a long time to reach the point of undertaking an *in-depth* critique of two other rationales, which were also very much a part of the modern-day world. We will refer to these two rationales as the *illuminist matrix* and the *utopian matrix*. When it finally did make its appearance, the most determined critique of illuminism and of utopianism arrived clothed in the discourse of postmodernism.

### 3. *The illuminist matrix, planning and revolution*

Critiques of the illuminist matrix have come from a variety of ideological quarters and have called a number of concepts into question: the idea of progress (and of progress elevated to a metaphysical rank), the notion of ideological vanguards, and the euphoria of integrative modernization.

The critique of the concept of progress—a fundamental element of illuminism—contends that history is not a straight, upward climb but rather a discontinuous, multi-directional process and that, consequently, a considerable amount of uncertainty exists as to the future course of events. Since history does not appear to be regulated by any clearly-defined internal rationality, its outcomes are unpredictable or, at least, provisional. From this vantage point, even thinking about the possibility of understanding the internal rationale of history—supposing, first of all, that such a thing exists—and, on that basis, of scientifically regulating society, the economy and the culture appears to be an overblown pretension with possible totalitarian implications.

This leads us to the demythologization of ideological vanguards. If history has no rational direction, no group can legitimately lay claim to *the* one-and-only objective interpretation of history and, on that basis, take unto itself the right to regulate all things. Neither the educational elite, nor science nor the State can therefore aspire to laying down all-inclusive guidelines or principles. Once we have chipped away at the idea of progress and of the existence of an underlying historical rationale, the vanguard's face takes on the features of a despot.

This also partly undermines the legitimacy of the “strong” versions of normative planning and revolutionary change. Planning, in both its theoretical and

<sup>4</sup> Revolution was also, however, overlaid with non-modern, non-secularized movements: messianism, fundamentalism, providentialism and salvationism were all present in Latin American revolutionary discourse and sentiment.

practical forms, has been a point of encounter for science and the State. It assumes the existence of an historical rationale and, at the same time, believes in the possibility of manipulating that rationale with the help of a plan designed and promoted by a group which combines specialized knowledge with power. Unless society sees history as having a definite, positive direction and accepts the idea of a limited group having a scientific capability to "read" the present and effectively plot its future course, the State-as-planner and the normative planning which defines it have little claim to legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> What appears illusory in this new "politico-cultural temple" is a hypostatic concept of the State as some sort of Hegelian synthesis which, independently of the vicissitudes of the moment, is always at the apex of historical rationality and is invariably the most appropriate leader for society. Today it is difficult to think of the current Latin American State as the agent of a harmonious unification of social interests.

The illuminist matrix of the image of a socialist revolution was also hard hit when history revealed the *reversibility* of socialism. It is true that as far back as the early 1960s the overthrow of progressive governments by right-wing military coups in Latin America cast doubt, from the standpoint of the power struggle, upon the supposed "historical inexorability" of the revolution. Moreover, as early as the mid-1970s social scientists had to seriously ask themselves up to what point the extreme image of a socialist revolution –an image defined by the Cuban revolution– could or should function as an intellectual superego. But it was the collapse of the socialist systems of the Eastern bloc in the late 1980s which dealt the cruelest blow to the narcissistic image of a Leftist revolution. That was the turning point after which it became virtually impossible to associate at least *that* revolution with progress, with the liberation of human potentials, or with an improved development of the forces of production. These failures were so resounding that they divested the revolution of its supporting claim to being "right" about history.

<sup>5</sup> The relationship is more dialectic than linear, however, and the political crises experienced by the State-as-planner as well as the grave doubts cast upon the effectiveness of planning itself have played a part in undermining the legitimacy of the principle of illuminist rationality and historical direction.

The crisis of the illuminist matrix raised doubts as to the validity of the theoretical/ideological models that had gathered so much momentum in the region during the 1960s. This was because –even though, during their heydays, capitalist developmentalism and Statist socialism represented antagonistic political interpretations– they both referred back to a normative planning model (whether for mixed economies or State economies) in which the *plan* represented the highest possible degree of rationality in terms of the direction of history. Do not both models retain the illuminist task of social emancipation (defined by developmentalism as modernization and emancipation from traditional or pre-capitalist forms of social reproduction, and defined by socialism as emancipation from international capital –imperialism– or oppressive production relations)? And is it not true that the State-as-planner plays such a crucial role in both images of social emancipation –whether in closing the technical gap or triumphing over domination– that both ideologies hold that their belief regarding the path of history only becomes *real* once it is embodied in the *power* of the State-as-planner to regulate society?

The critique of developmentalism and of socialism that can be deduced from the critique of the illuminist matrix is closely linked to the pro-market ideological offensive which gained in intensity the world over in the course of the 1980s. This mixture of anti-illuminism and anti-Statism can be summed up in a critique of the transformational function of political measures (except when directed towards privatization and economic deregulation) and a critique of State intervention in and regulation of economic relations.

Another reservation about the image of the socialist revolution or the practices of Statist planning –which is also derived from the anti-illuminist critique– has been formulated from a cultural standpoint and by some currently fashionable schools of democratic political theory. From the "culturalist" perspective, both planning and revolution are reproached for their ethnocentric bias: one because it imitates the development style and types of expectations prevalent in the industrialized world and hopes to impose that model on developing countries by working "from the top down"; the other because it takes as its model an emancipatory ideal peculiar to the European version of modernity which is incapable of adapting to the cultural identity of

the Latin American people. Thus, the critique of the illuminist matrix translates into a rejection of a reductionist imposition of an exogenously-induced development pattern or form of historical redemption.

From the standpoint of a renewed appreciation of democracy, the comprehensive scope of the State-as-planner or of some future socialist State (the pretension of moulding society) is called into question while, on the other hand, value is placed on the relative autonomy of civil society and on a sociopolitical order founded upon a broad-ranging social consensus. In this consensus-based order, the "direction of history" would not be determined solely by a central power made up of planners and revolutionary politicians, but by processes of negotiation and consensus among many social actors. From this viewpoint, the utopia of the socialist revolution or of the State-as-planner (as the axis and leader of a model of modernization) appear to be incompatible with a social democracy that encourages the proliferation and expression of a variety of rationales or forms of reasoning that have grown out of the social fabric; in some quarters, these rationales are referred to as the "logic of social movements".<sup>6</sup> In the same vein, the call for social diversity and creativity is not directed towards strengthening the market as opposed to the State, but rather towards calling attention to the complexity of society, the variety of actors and the socio-cultural costs of a form of modernization which has a leveling effect on society.

The archetypal images of planning and revolution cannot so easily be dissociated from the mythologization of *progress*, from the *rational vanguard* or from *integrative modernization*. If any of these three pillars is removed, these extreme images of the organicity of social knowledge begin to topple. This is because both the planner and the revolutionary made their "pleas" before the court of history as agents *capable of leading society by means of a process of rationalization whose objective was to modernize its political, economic, social and cultural structures, i.e., to incorporate the whole of society into the dynamic of progress (or to place it firmly on the path of history)*.

<sup>6</sup> On social movements in general, see, among others, Jelin (ed.), 1987; Ballón (ed.), 1986; Touraine, 1984; and Calderón (ed.), 1986.

#### 4. The utopian matrix, planning and revolution

The outbreak of the economic crisis of the early 1980s and the collapse of socialism in the face of the "market approach" in the late 1980s placed a firm upper limit on development and social change in terms of the historical conception of those phenomena as well as from the standpoint of theories of social change in Latin America. One unavoidable consequence of the imposition of this objective, exogenous limit by the crisis has been a weakening of the utopian matrix.<sup>7</sup> But what elements of this matrix have been most conspicuous in the discourse of normative planning and of socialist revolution in Latin America?

In the praxis of normative planning, the outstanding trait is the *exhaustive* nature of its management of the tools of development; the desired object is complete correspondence between the plan –its objectives and terms– and its actual material expression. In this form of planning, the utopia is the actual possibility of planning a utopia, especially in association with the pretension of adjusting reality to fit the plan *absolutely*, or of extending its instrumentalist rationale to encompass the entire social fabric: the comprehensive regulation of the real world by the dictates of the production rationale, the agenda of economic modernization, the control of cross-sectoral equilibria and improvements as reflected in aggregate economic indicators.<sup>8</sup>

The critique of the utopian matrix also has two differing theoretical/ideological sides. On the one hand, utopian constructs are opposed on the basis of the coercive influence they may have on the real world; it is argued that the utopian referent, when allowed to govern and direct the present, closes off opportunities and imprisons the present in a strait-jacket. On the other hand, adherents of resurrected

<sup>7</sup> This term is meant to denote a matrix oriented towards the production of utopias, not a matrix which is utopian in the sense of being ideal.

<sup>8</sup> The pretension of normative planning, conceived of as an instrumentalist utopia, can be thought of as a way of subsuming political conflicts into formal structures. Within this framework, planning runs into the problem of its emergence as a "strategic" feature of a State-as-planner in the process of historical formalization (a process which will never be entirely completed). This is why planning's legitimacy crisis cannot be divorced from the crisis of the State, especially in terms of an ideal construct.

forms of realism or political pragmatism contend that utopian thought distorts and oversimplifies the conflicts that actually do exist, skews the relationships among real forces and agents, and ends up confusing desires with facts. Let us examine these two fronts of the attack upon the utopian matrix, which may be launched from either the normative-planning or the revolutionary camp.

The first of these criticisms, which is directed at *utopian determinism*, has been formulated by neo-liberal thinkers who originally drew their inspiration from Karl Popper's critique of Plato, Hegel and socialism in general. This line of argument is that a model set forth on a normative basis, which therefore is intended to plot the overall course of history so as to move towards an objective that has been defined as valid for all, is simply incompatible with the maintenance of an "open" society, i.e., a society that is free to choose and to rectify its own fate (or to permit there to be as many fates as there are people within it). This attack on utopianism has been extended to include planning and the idea of revolution, since in this sense both present themselves as ways of "exercising power over the future". A development process led "from above" or by a certain group, as might occur in the case of a State-as-planner or a revolutionary programme, would represent a threat to an "open society" from its very inception. The rational utopia lying behind such an image of the State, whereby the State embodies an "optimizing" rationale (which, as such, is also inexorable) would, from this standpoint, constitute the first step towards an over-regulated totalitarian regime directed by a power which, in its turn, perpetuates that regulation indefinitely.

This warning may well contain an element of paranoia and lend itself to liberal crusades which themselves could take on totalitarian overtones. But this does not mean that it should be taken lightly. These neoliberal fears present democratic thought with the challenge of re-thinking the image—or model—of the State-as-leader so that it will broaden its utopian horizon to include many different approaches (based on communication, solidarity, aesthetics, participation, etc.). Only by relativizing the utopian matrix (as utopian *reductionism*, whether formalistic or finalistic) can a sphere that has until now been largely pushed to the sidelines—i.e., social subjectivity—be incorporated into developmental

thought. This calls for a thorough-going reworking of the culture of modernization, since it is that culture which has served as the symbolic foundation for the construction of our image of the State-as-planner.

The second of these criticisms does not question the praxis of utopianism as such, but rather seeks to pinpoint its political and epistemological functions. Here the objection, which is raised by adherents of various ideological and theoretical positions, is to a utopia's claims to feasibility and the fact that such claims distort the way in which the actual order is perceived.

The political aspect of this critique is linked to the recent reappearance of political realism. What is being questioned on this score is the maximalist tendency of any attempt to practice politics on the basis of a utopian vision, since such maximalism often leads to a lack of political realism that ultimately thwarts attempts to actually bring about a structural change in society. In this respect, utopianism is associated with the over-ideologization of which the Left has been guilty in decades gone by, when maximalist positions or the symbolic referent of the revolution would seem to have underestimated the true strength of the social forces opposing proposals for radical change.

The epistemological aspect of the critique is an objection to the confusion generated by the utopian matrix when it leads its adherents to regard present reality as *no more* than a necessary step along the path leading to that utopia. Reality is then something to be "read" as an ideal-in-the-making, which results in the neglect of many aspects and actors making up the real system that are not necessarily marching in the direction of this utopia. Utopianism thus reproduces, in a more earthly version, the old concept of providence which lasted even up to the rationalist megalomania of Hegel. From this illusory vantage point, once again, all that is real appears to be rational and all that is rational appears to be realizable: the subjective, expressive dimension of the people is once again bypassed.

The critique of the utopian matrix contends that the purpose of the utopia should be to serve as a *reference point of intelligibility*; it should permit a greater awareness of the objective limitations and repressed potentials of the present situation. The utopia is, then, a counterpoint that helps us to understand a given real-world situation and a horizon line which helps to plot a course of action that will carry us in a



direction indicated as desirable by that utopia. It is crucial, however, that this methodological function of the relevant utopia should be delimited so as to avoid lapsing into a type of idealization that blurs the differences between an idealized construct and the real world. Such confusion attributes an ontological standing to this utopia which it does not possess.

These political and epistemological criticisms are applicable both to the discourse of revolution and that of planning. It may be thought, for example, that the many functions assigned to the State-as-planner in its role as a meta-actor and a mega-actor and as society's great leader and nexus are based on the supposition that social reality is pliant and can be harmonized by those on high and on the assumption that the State will continue to receive an increasing flow of resources. The idea that economic development could be combined with sweeping changes in social structures while giving rise to so little conflict that the State could settle disputes without any major difficulty does not appear to be in keeping with any realistic analysis of the Latin American societies. This utopian maximalist inspiration of the State-as-planner was also at work, albeit with very different contents and programmes, in the other great undertaking which won so many adherents among intellectuals and political activists in the 1960s: the socialist revolution.

As regards the confused ontological status of such utopias, it should be remembered that the socialist revolution and normative planning never saw themselves as utopian constructs (at least during the heyday of the concept and its application), but rather as a *programme designed in accordance with the path of history*. This programme was, in both cases, a "schedule" for the State's rationalization of society (with a more technical leaning in the case of planning and a more technological one in the case of the revolution), and it therefore saw political power as its repository.

However, in both cases the transition from ideal construct to action was carried out with little reference to reality. The dividing line between the ideal construct and perceived reality was blurred and confused. With the boom in planning set off in 1961 by the Alliance for Progress, *what was real became rationalizable and what was rational became realizable*. Hegel again took the stage in the wave of euphoria that launched national development plans.

These plans not only seemed to be a bridge between the real world and utopia, between the possible and the desirable; their conscientiously instrumentalist rationality was used as a basis for painting a reality that was "ready and willing" to be sculpted into the planner's vision of utopia. Time –along with the interests of some and the power of others– showed that the real world is neither so docile nor so linear, however.

In the production of images of the revolution, the call for political will was perhaps much more explicit than in the case of planning. At the same time, however, the image of the revolution was painted in such epic terms that, in many cases, it failed to grasp the true alignment of political forces. The fact that so many bloody military coups could take intellectuals and the Left by surprise reveals the lack of political realism for which the Latin American Left has been so severely reproached since that time. The epic character ascribed to the revolutionary process and the mythologization of the agent of revolution (militants, settlers, workers or guerrilla fighters) were elements of utopianization exhibited by apologists for radical social change.

How much of a part did the social sciences play in these forms of perception and these biases of intelligibility? To what extent did the production of social knowledge *construct* and to what extent did it *interpret* the illuminist and utopian myths employed by normative planners and revolutionary ideologues? To what point did this maximalism of the normative planner (striving to control *every aspect* of the development process) and the revolutionary intellectual (striving to change *every aspect* of the relationships among agents of development) form part of the imagery of the social scientist during the formative decades of the Latin American social sciences? To what degree did these "ideal types" serve as motives and horizon lines for actual research, analytical thought, and education in the social sciences in Latin America up to the mid-1970s? And if the answers to all these questions must be affirmative, at least to a considerable degree, then to what extent is this still true today? How much movement is there against the tide of disenchantment and autocracy, how much of this effort has been transformed into new utopias and new models for "helping along" the interaction between science and power? At this point, in the heat of the moment of disenchantment and reformulations, it is difficult indeed to be sure.

## II

## The social sciences armed with new rationalities: between signals and conjectures

### 1. *New approaches and perceptions*

If there really is such a thing as cultural "death", whereby, at a given point in time, it becomes impossible for society to generate fresh, renewed images of itself, we must not look to the social sciences to exorcise the prevailing indifference about the future or renunciation of grand collective undertakings. Social scientists have always been creators, *in the sense of being interpreters*, of society's movement (or of the many movements of social reality), but they must be able to draw upon the cultural energy that only society itself can generate as an essential raw material for their work. If today this energy is dimmed or cannot be harnessed, then the social scientist will have to develop a new type of clinical eye and will have to carry on with the help of nothing more than his own tattered or humbled awareness while he waits for society's imagery to be reinvigorated by the next swing of the pendulum. He must remain alert, guard against the discursive obesity typical of those who really have little to say, and *empathize* with what is coming so that he will be able to comprehend new rationalities. And, at the same time, he will have to maintain a somewhat vitalistic perspective together with an incisive, critical outlook in which the best aspects of modern humanism survive.

The options now on the table seem to be leading towards new types of relationships between the social scientist and the object of his attention, between knowledge and reality. It may well be that the pendulum will swing *part* of the way back towards a healthy dose of illuminism and utopianism, which would help to dispel the excessively pragmatic bias that threatens to co-opt the work of social scientists, or to curb the uncritical apologies for the functions of the market that are now being churned out. We may also expect to see the extension of the concept of rationality to include such elements as society's cultural self-production, newly-developed life strategies, the expressive, subjective phenomena set in motion by social actors, and the irrepressibly *mestizo* identity of Latin America. Some veins of postmodernist

discourse will have to be mined, such as the practices of expressing oneself in plural forms, perspectives, simulacrum or alternative scenarios. Social scientists will have to be more humble about the way they transmit knowledge, but they will also have to be more adventuresome in their experimentation with that knowledge. They will have to transfer the pluralism associated with political activity over to epistemological activity and maintain a pluralistic outlook *in their role as social scientists*. They will have to modify both form and content, both their personal *attitude* and their attitude towards their subject; indeed, they will have to become, for a time, that subject, to truly feel the emotions of disenchantment and perplexity on a personal basis and as experienced by their fellow men. Nothing should be ruled out as irrational or irrelevant. We must look closely at cultural nuances and profiles, the traits of sensitivity and personality, in a way that no planner or scientist of the revolution ever thought of doing.

It is not necessarily a question of finding the easy way out, of celebrating disenchantment, or of proclaiming that the social sciences have finally freed themselves from the "bonds" of reason, of Logos, of a commitment to history and to the end of history. Nor is it a question of reducing ethical problems to ambiguous aesthetics, or of reducing practical problems to being entirely a matter of individual choice. It is not, finally, a question of softening or evening out social and structural heterogeneity under the guise of that flattering epithet, "plasticity".

But if the social sciences wish to go beyond the ritual exegesis presided over by university professors; if they wish to break the atomized, taxonomic mould with which research centres approach the acquisition of knowledge; if they wish to transcend the casuistic and find some link in the chain that allows social science praxis to free itself of the descriptive mould enveloping it; if they wish to take just a few steps beyond their technical consultancies for ministries and government departments, just a few steps beyond political marketing and opinion polls, just a few steps beyond the cult of the market and the life of a technocrat, just a few steps beyond all these

substitute or random links between social science and social life, then the social sciences will have to allow themselves to be contaminated just a bit with the new sensibilities being proclaimed in postmodernist discourse. This does not, however, mean that they must adopt a cool, laid-back view of problems which, as is almost always the case with major social issues in Latin America, have reached the boiling point.

## 2. Signals and conjectures<sup>9</sup>

The above-mentioned loss of the utopian referent and of the horizon of communion between theory and practice, between the individual and history, has sent the Latin American social sciences into a kind of exile. So long as the theory of dependence, the image of a coming revolution or a developmentalist agenda were seen as valid or influential, we could convincingly posit a link between the intelligibility of social phenomena in the social sciences and political intervention in the social sphere. Major changes in theoretical thought—such as the decline of militant science, the fragmentation of a body of knowledge which had formerly at least purported to constitute a consistent whole, or the crisis of development models based on planning and sustained modernization—are continuously undermining this emancipatory mystique of the social scientist. Words which are now held as sacred may have been regarded as sacrilegious in the time of social scientists' grand designs: minimalism, low profile, micro-project, interstice, small areas, short-term, sustainability.

One might think that when expectations of a comprehensive approach and synthesis (in theory, too, but especially in the confluence of theory and politics, of the intellectual and the masses) die away, they would leave the field wide open for an instrumentalist rationale to spread unchecked throughout all spheres of social life—thereby reinforcing the inequities associated with the prevailing development pattern—without prompting even so much as an outcry. It might also be thought that the growing professionalization of the sociologist and political scientist, as well as their greater emphasis on pragmatism and technical considerations in their theoretical work, is a reflection of this trend.

<sup>9</sup> This section is partially based on some passages contained in the article *¿Qué queda de positivo en el pensamiento negativo? Una perspectiva desde América Latina* (Hopenhayn, 1991b, pp. 87-100).

How then are critical functions based on social theory to be performed, today, in Latin America? What content should we give that theory, and what objects can we ascribe to it without falling into self-pitying pessimism or a paralyzing fatalism? Is it possible to return to a mode of theoretical activity in which criticism gives rise to the empowerment of liberating forces or traits within social reality, makes room for hopes of a more humane order, for the promotion of a more affirmative and less heteronomous culture, for the socialization of an ethic capable of "substantiating" development? If it is, then what signals has social science praxis sent out thus far that might foreshadow new and creative forms of criticism in the sense we have just described? In the following paragraphs I will attempt to take the first steps towards an answer to this last question.

### a) *The emergence of new spheres and approaches in the fissures of the modernization process*

It has been said that, because of the nature of newly emerging political, economic and technological conditions, hopes that the agendas of different groups and individuals can be merged into one grand agenda for changing society seem like a less and less attainable dream. Nevertheless, alternative proposals or perspectives continue to arise which represent an incipient, interstitial attempt to get away from the illuminist paradigms of modernization while at the same time avoiding any identification with the status quo established by the mercantilization of social relations. Some of the emerging values embodied in these proposals merit discussion:

i) An appreciation of democracy as an order in which disputes are settled through dialogue, negotiation and consensus; as a necessary framework for linking the State with civil society in the least coercive way possible by stressing the importance of communication; as a political foundation for reconciling the technical and political dimensions of development, for striking a balance between planning and the market, and for accommodating local and national affairs; and as a springboard for social participation, the decentralization of decision-making and the affirmation of a "culture" of citizenship.

ii) A renewed appreciation of the social actors and the fabric of society and, in the same sense, for the polymorphism of civil society in the face of the leveling action of the State, which is in its turn the

product of a determination to devise new forms of political activity in which political parties and clientage have less of a place and the cultural decisions of the relevant actors have a larger one.

iii) A fuller appreciation of so-called "new" social movements (or community groups or grassroots organizations) by virtue of the fact that these movements operate within the informal sphere of society at the community level; employ *counter-hegemonic* rationales which place emphasis on solidarity, resistance against authoritarianism, cooperativism, and autonomy or collective participation; and create situations in which social energies are not siphoned off by instrumentalist rationales or a logic of domination.

Of course, the above three viewpoints are as yet incipient or diffuse, and the social scientists who embrace them are, for the most part, former Leftists or developmentalists who have become disenchanted somewhere along the way. In a sense, they embody a critical yet not fatalistic view of reality. The appreciation of today's new social movements reflects a concern with the establishment of collective identities whose rationales cannot be subsumed into the rationales of the market and of power; the renewed appreciation of social actors demonstrates a preference for more autonomous rationales of the social dynamic and for more consensual, open forms of political activity; and the appreciation of democracy, in a broad and very profound sense, also implies a desire to shape a *democratic culture* rather than simply establish a government elected by majority vote—in other words, an ideal form of citizenship in the best illuminist tradition.

The approaches that have grown out of these emerging values seem to share a common *meta-value* which might be described as the choice of a *progressively democratic* order whose progressivity is manifested in the fact that virtually all types of relationships are seen as lending themselves to democratization: not just the relationship between the State and civil society, but also those existing within any sort of institution (families, municipalities, schools, the workplace, public institutions, services) in any sphere whatsoever (politics, social matters, cultural affairs, economics and technology). In this context, the expansion of cognitive consciousness appears as a key element that is to be promoted in all areas of social interaction, from the household to politics, from the realm of personal communication

to that of government or business management, from cultural matters to the economy. It comes as no surprise, then, that in the epistemological approach chosen by those who share this meta-value of progressive democratization, an interdisciplinary focus and participatory research also seem to be preferred practices.

b) *An "alternative" form of development and criticism of the instrumentalist model in Latin America*

Adherents of the heterodox school of "alternative" development or "the other development" have stepped forth to challenge the instrumentalist model associated with the prevailing form of modernization in Latin America. This criticism comes from heterodox social scientists, many of whom are working in non-governmental agencies devoted to the study and promotion of community forms of social organization, appropriate technologies, participatory social policies, organic relationships with the environment, the spread of folk culture, respect for the identities of indigenous groups or the channeling of more attention to local phenomena and community or grassroots groups. They assert that the dominant development model (first the developmentalist or Statist model, later the neoliberal one) neglects the qualitative dimension of social life, "ethnocentrically" ignores ethnic and regional forms of expression and identities, and tends to imitate industrialized societies' development patterns, which do such serious harm to the environment. In contrast, the paladins of alternative development are highly receptive to community, indigenous and, insofar as possible, unhierarchized efforts to promote development; they emphasize social development over economic development, cultural over technological development, and local over national development. In fact, their rejection of the instrumentalist rationale is so strong that they do not concern themselves with the major conflicts affecting the central government but instead restrict their attention to microcosms of social interaction where there appears to be a better chance of cleansing social relationships of their manipulatory vices.

Within this framework, a search is being made for an alternative way of re-connecting the outputs of the social sciences with the transformation of society. The *locus* of this re-connection has shifted, in this

case, from the State to civil society, from central planning to the promotion of community efforts, and from an economic focus to a sociocultural one. The social processes and actors focused on by social research in this context are, for the most part, not the ones that attracted the attention of the more prominent proponents of normative planning or socialist revolution. In terms of actors, concern is focused on urban informal and marginal sectors, groups that are victims of repression, ethnic minorities, women, community groups, countercultural movements and non-governmental organizations. As for the processes involved, special attention is devoted to those that include such elements as local participation in scattered suburban or rural areas; an affirmation of collective identities based on gender, ethnic origin or area; initiatives for putting up civil resistance to various types of authoritarian relationships between government institutions and communities; the use of forms of expression or communication to define new collective symbols; new cognitive practices, such as action-oriented or participatory research; new types of social aid programmes that assign recipients an active role; the use of traditional indigenous medical practices and alternative technologies; and even newly emerging schools of grassroots religious or spiritual thought.

c) *Counter-hegemonic rationales: Something new or just a new substitute for social change?*

"Critical" social scientists' concern with studying and vindicating the new social movements, counterculture initiatives, forms of resistance to authoritarianism, ethnic minorities, community efforts to promote development and small-scale projects demonstrates that they are not content to confine their criticism to a mere gesture of rejection. It is in these counter-hegemonic activities that researchers who have embraced unconventional forms of study (regardless of whether they choose to call it action-oriented research or participatory research) seek out interstices providing an opportunity to counter the system. In these cases, the conversion of social knowledge into proposals for transforming society *does not take the form of a plan for establishing a utopia for the whole of society in the future, but rather consists in the discovery of "zones" or interstices within today's society in which the democratization of social relations can be carried forward;*

these "zones" include everything from community-run soup kitchens and self-managed production workshops to less hierarchical forms of organization within modern business enterprises, as well as proposals regarding education, mass communications, ecology, constitutional reform, city management, and many other areas of activity.

The question arises, however, as to whether it is possible to design and build a different sort of societal order by multiplying these interstices throughout society. This reservation notwithstanding, it is well worth our while to take note of these signs, even if their existence is nothing more than a matter of conjecture for the moment, because they suggest that producers of social knowledge are attempting to recapture the will – albeit in a different form – to foster social change. First, the decision to look for new ways of thinking about research constitutes an effort to take up the challenge to reformulate the position and *the commitment* of the social researcher *vis-à-vis* his subject. Second, the identification and vindication of new actors and processes attest to a desire to regain the ideal of a role for the social scientist in the dynamics of social change and to channel theoretical work in that direction. Finally, the criticism of the status quo which is part of this rising tide of knowledge-producing activity and new perceptions has two facets: an attack on a critically-defined general order, and the highlighting of interstitial or peripheral processes whose rationales run counter to those that hold sway within that general order.

Perhaps these shifting focuses of the social scientist are stages in a transition towards as yet unformed paradigms. Perhaps the establishment of new referents in the future will oblige us to re-create elements which many enthusiastic postmodernists are currently hastening to bury in the sands of time. Crucial, long-standing concepts (e.g., alienation, exploitation), as well as such propositional concepts as integrative modernization or the redistribution of the fruits of technical progress, will sooner or later have to be recycled to provide inputs for new *bodies* of theory within the Latin American social sciences. Their recycling may also enrich schools of thought that are only now beginning to take shape by contributing new rationales and utopias-in-the-making, whether they turn out to be the utopia that some have sought to attribute to the new social movements (with their respect for diversity, local autonomy, and solidarity) or the utopia which could be unfolding within

the new democracies, with their commitment to greater political participation, a greater role for citizens in the management of the country, and a more meaningful definition of citizenship itself, or new artistic and cultural forms and new survival strategies that have yet to be developed. And then it will no longer be normative planning or the socialist revolution that define the boundaries within which the legitimized self-image of the social scientist will be drawn.

It now appears to be essential for the social sciences to open up to new perceptions, erratic yet thought-provoking rationales which appear and

disappear at all points of the social fabric, rationalities which gradually work their way into new relationships of power and interchange, newly emerging actors and fragmentary processes. Allowing oneself to be contaminated by discourses which in times gone by might have earned themselves unyielding censure may be a useful exercise in opening up our sensibilities and fine-tuning the spirit. There is validity, at least for the time being, in this odd combination of prudence and adventurousness, this opening up of perspectives, this experiment in knowing, this heterodoxy while awaiting new signs.

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