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Sociology in Latin America: Does historical sociology exist?

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In September 2013, the Latin American Sociological Association (ALAS) will hold its 29th Congress in Santiago, Chile. Of the 33 working groups being held, not one will be on historical sociology. Is the historical perspective missing in Latin American sociology? In this article we address this question by reconstructing the development of the discipline in the region and reviewing how sociologists have approached historical change.²

Although there has not been a process of differentiation and institutionalization of historical sociology, we argue that the historical perspective has been central to *mainstream* Latin American sociology since its inception. Traditionally this implied both a focus on global processes of historical transformation and the understanding of contemporary social phenomena as closely linked with the colonial and independency heritage and their aftermath. The series of dictatorial regimes and the neoliberal transformation in the 70s and 80s created a rupture in the intellectual imaginary between contemporary processes and long term historical roots. Consequently the characteristically processual, historical focus of Latin American sociology remained strong, but it was increasingly framed in the middle term duration. In the post-authoritarian period, a number of historically-oriented intellectual communities have emerged that highlight the role of culture and agency in historical change and expand the range of research topics. Finally, there are signs of the development of a differentiated historical sociology in Latin America. The merits of this differentiation are uncertain, for it may imply a more systematic reflection on socio-historical methods and a more extensive use of historiographical material to produce social theory, but also a tendency of the broader discipline to abandon its traditional pretention of comprehending the social and historical totality.³

Foundational period⁴

As early as 1882 there has been courses of sociology in Latin American universities (Blanco, 2005), but it was not until the 1930s in Brazil and Mexico and after

Second World War (mainly in the mid-1950s) in most of the other countries of the region that sociology became fully institutionalized in universities and in regional organizations – CEPAL (1948), FLACSO (1957), and CLACSO (1967). Given the weakness of political science in this period, sociology occupied most of the academic spaces of the social sciences. The development of the discipline was symbiotic with central political and economic trends of this period, namely Import Substitution Industrialization and the process of gradual social and political inclusion in the context of highly ideologized societies. Sociology unfolded as the science that analyzed the process of transition towards industrialized modern societies and its central *problématique* was development, either from a capitalist or a socialist perspective. Within the foundational period two sub-periods have been identified: one is characterized by the predominance of modernization approach⁵ and the other by dependency approach (Trindade et al, 2007).

A first critical stance towards modernization theory came in the late fifties from CEPAL's "historical-structural" perspective and its related "integrated" approach. In opposition to the predominantly ahistorical modernization perspective, historical-structuralism emphasized the need to attend to historical context in the search of explanations, while the integrated approach stressed the need to consider economic, social, political and cultural factors beyond the limits of particular disciplines. An early work within this perspective was "*El desarrollo social de América Latina en la postguerra*" (CEPAL, 1963), which raised the challenges of urbanization and industrialization in the region and the role of the middle classes in championing this process. While some of its main themes were still part of the modernization theory agenda, this work went further by urging social scientists to look into social history in order to analyze social processes:

... The adequate application and reinterpretation of scientific, economic and sociological models require a comprehensive vision of the complexities and tendencies of social processes. This synthesis can only be achieved by using the approaches and analysis of modern social history.⁶

The combined effect of the Cuban revolution in 1959 and the dramatic increase of social mobilizations in the sixties boosted critical – mainly Marxist – positions within Latin American sociology. A milestone in this intellectual and political turn was Rodolfo Stavenhagen's "*Siete tesis equivocadas sobre América Latina*" (1972 [1965]), which refuted some of the central tenets of modernization theory and indicated that development and underdevelopment were two faces of the same coin. Along with Pablo Gonzalez Casanova (1963), Stavenhagen used the term "internal colonialism" to point out the exploitation that rich regions exerted towards poor regions *inside* Latin American countries. The second half of the sixties and the seventies also witnessed the heyday of dependency theory, which unfolded around the idea that poor countries could not develop in a world context in which their key economic decisions were made outside of their frontiers by more powerful countries and corporations. A remarkable book that combined the analytical tools of dependency and CEPAL's historical-structuralism was "*Dependency and development in Latin America*" (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979 [1968]), which described the historical development of the region as a function of the ability of national bourgeoisies to control the productive structure of their economies. Based on this key variable, the authors delineated the different trajectories and stages of historical development of Latin American nations since the colonial period.

The historical debate raised by dependency theory revolved around questions on whether Latin America was capitalist from its inception, on the stages of development in the region, on the ability of specific social actors to change the course of history, and on the historical possibilities of becoming socialist societies. History was seen as a sequence of internally coherent stages leading towards socialism and the contradictions within the structures of political economy were pointed as the main driving force behind this transformation. In line with the grand theories of the period, society was conceived as a system of articulated structures that were ultimately determined by the economy. Societies were seen globally as capitalist or socialist, modern or traditional based upon this *underlying* factor (Trindade et al, 2007). The North American historical sociologist, Barrington Moore, and the French *Annales* School were extremely influential in this period.⁷

Dictatorial rupture

The series of dictatorial regimes that afflicted the Southern-Cone in the sixties and seventies and the neoliberal structural reforms that followed in the entire continent changed both the material conditions under which sociologists had to work and their intellectual priorities. Sociology was seen with hostility by the military regimes, therefore most of academic programs in this field were censured or directly eliminated and funding was drastically reduced for those remaining. Many scholars were exiled or auto-exiled and many of those who stayed had to find a living outside of academia. As a surviving strategy, some established Independent Study Centers funded by foreign agencies, which in the Southern-Cone became the main organizational space for sociological research during the dictatorial period.

Through the following decades, the political and economic rupture produced by the dictatorial regimes became the great intellectual issue of Latin American sociology. In Chile, Arturo Valenzuela (1978) applied Juan Linz' theory of democratic breakdowns to describe the historical development of the party system in the twentieth century, indicating that the attrition of the political center and not the radicalization of left and right wings was the cause for the coup d'état of 1973. In Peru, Julio Cotler (1978) used the analytical framework of dependency to explain the incapacity of dominant classes to become hegemonic over other social classes and to create a strong state, a structural weakness that combined with increasing popular mobilization in the fifties and sixties led to military intervention in 1968. In justifying the need to use a historical perspective, Cotler asked rhetorically: "Why is it that to understand the 'rupture' that the military attempted in 1968 we have to refer to the colonial constitution of Peruvian society?" (p. 15).⁸ His answer is illustrative of a generalized belief within Latin American sociologists that past and the present are intimately linked:

Since the 16th century, [Peru] has not had a historical rupture that could have generated a new and different period in its social formation, or conditioned its following development. That is to say, Peruvian society carries, with no interruption, a set of characteristics that are a product of its colonial constitution...⁹

The new sociopolitical context had the effect of strengthening political science – which with the exception of Mexico and Brazil had been a weak academic discipline in Latin America – and eroding the previous "monopoly" of sociology over the social sciences. Sociology itself became more political¹⁰ and, to some extent, cultural and less focused on development and revolution. There was a general consensus among intellectuals and social scientists on the deficit of theorization of the state in general and the Latin American state in particular. Within the Marxist tradition there was a movement in the direction of retrieving the work of Antonio Gramsci, and of understanding military regimes as capitalist revolutions from above, in the line of Barrington Moore. These intellectual transformations reinforced the socio-historical analysis of political regimes.¹¹

As military rule started to weaken as a result of the opposition of social movements, sociological production began addressing the problem of democracy and democratic transitions. An important amount of research was done comparing the cultural, political and social aspects of the evolution of military regimes and democratic transitions in Latin America and other regions of the world. Two good examples of this research are the four volumes of *Transitions from authoritarian rule* (O'Donnell, Schmitter, & Whitehead, 1986) and the two volumes *Política, cultura y sociedad en la construcción democrática* (Barba, Barros, Hurtado, eds, 1991).¹² Based on socio-historical grounds, the works included in these books distinguished the specific features of Latin American democratization process, both in terms of regimes and the actors involved. This set of works, however, was contested by several authors whose main critique was precisely the absence of socio-historical roots in these countries necessary for a western type of democracy (Franco, 1998).¹³

At this point, the characteristically Latin American processual approach to social phenomena remained strong. Nevertheless, the combination of repressive military rule (mainly in the Southern-Cone) and neoliberal structural reforms was strong enough to create a rupture in intellectual production between contemporary processes and long-term historical roots. Although analysis on middle range historical duration continued to be central, rarely did sociologists in this period go as far as the

nineteenth century or colonial periods to compare post-authoritarian trajectories of political or economic development, a very common practice in the past. The justification for using long term historical development seemed less valid. As we will see below, it was only with the development of a more culturally oriented sociology that the colonial constitution of Latin American society became relevant again.

Post-authoritarian period

Once military regimes in the Southern-Cone ended by the mid-80s and early 90s, sociologists returned to academia and student enrollment increased. The problem of democratization continued to be a central topic but the thematic range of the discipline diversified as the dual processes of globalization and emergence of new actors based on identity opened new frontiers for research. In this context, grand narratives started to cede their place to middle range theories, interdisciplinary work increased, and a more actor-oriented social science gained ascendancy. The discipline also experienced a process of internal differentiation amongst its intellectual, scientific, and professional dimensions (Trindade et al, 2007).

This period witnessed the emergence of a number of explicitly historically-oriented intellectual communities. One of these is the Postcolonial school, which is an interdisciplinary group of scholars with strong connections to North American academia that achieved its greatest expression under the "Modernity/coloniality" group of Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Edgardo Lander, and others.¹⁴ Its main object is the colonial encounter of Europeans and Americans and its consequences for the formation of modernity, both in terms of the development of capitalism and the creation of a classification of the world population based on the idea of race. A central aim of this school is to indicate and criticize Eurocentric ways of thought within the social sciences. In opposition to previous economy-centered accounts, the postcolonial school considers culture as an autonomous and causally efficacious sphere. As an example, when Aníbal Quijano – an active contributor to dependency theory in past decades – asks why wage labor concentrated almost exclusively in Western Europe during colonial times, he finds no inevitable economic reason; it was rather the colonial system of racial classification

– a cultural factor – which precluded non-whites from wage-labor (2000, p. 290).

Another line of thought concerns Latin American identity and modernity. Latin America is probably the world region where thought on its own identity has been the most prolific. This century-old intellectual tradition did not reach sociology until the 80s and 90s, particularly after 1992, but it soon became a fertile space from which to connect with more theoretical discussions on the nature of modernity in non-western societies. To name a few sociologists only in the Chilean context, Pedro Morandé (1987) and his followers (Cousiño & Valenzuela, 1994) proposed that the founding element of Latin American identity was the encounter of “baroque” Catholicism and indigenous ritual culture. Latin America’s type of modernity, therefore, should be characterized as *baroque*, as opposed to the rationalistic modernity of Europe and North America. Jorge Larraín (2000; 2005) criticized this “essentialist” approach by reconstructing several key periods – independence, the crisis of oligarchic society in the 1930s, the crisis of developmentalism in the 70s, globalization in the 90s – in which Latin Americans redefined their auto-perception with important contributions of rationalism. Owing to Peter Wagner’s theory of modernity, Larraín indicated that the two constitutive elements of modernity – rational mastery of the world and personal liberty – were vague enough to allow different societies to interpret and institutionalize them differently and therefore to constitute different types of modernity.

Other intellectual communities within contemporary Latin American sociology that use elements of historical sociology include those around memory, war, indigenous movements, and gender. The scholars of memory work closely with historians and focus on the cultural trauma caused by the dictatorial regimes and on the ways in which memories of this period are socially constructed.¹⁵ Other Latin American sociologists have used Charles Tilly’s theory of national state formation in Europe to explain how warfare influenced state formation in 19th century Latin America.¹⁶ As indigenous, gender and other social actors became central to Latin American politics in the 90s, some sociologists, along with anthropologists and historians, turned their attention to the historical roots of these movements.¹⁷ The impact of these culturally based social movements in sociological thought is

synthesized by the relevance that the concept of civil society has come to play in recent decades, in opposition to the emphasis on the economy and institutional politics of the previous periods.¹⁸

While very different from each other, these intellectual communities all share a criticism of some of the assumptions of previous socio-historical traditions. Although the refutation of Eurocentrism has always been central to Latin American sociology, the post-colonial school extended it to new arenas, criticizing the colonial system of racial and cultural classification that became constitutive of modern knowledge production. Theorists of Latin American modernity criticize the account that describes European civilization as the only model of modernity. New generation of sociologists have extended the range of relevant actors for inquiry beyond social classes to include ethnic and gender groups in the reconstruction of history. And the thematic range is also widened to include identity, memory and emotions. At a more theoretical level these changes imply the recognition that society is constituted by multiple dimensions, which relate amongst them in a non-deterministic manner. More generally, although there are current attempts to perform analysis of society from a holistic perspective using ideal types,¹⁹ contemporary Latin American sociology as a whole seems to have no longer a central problem articulating its diverse branches. Thus, the role of thematic articulation that development, revolution, and democracy played in the past has been replaced by diverse problems, irreducible to each other, that target to different spheres of society.

Conclusion

If we understand historical sociology in a broad sense, as the study of the temporal, processual dimension of human societies,²⁰ then most of Latin American sociology has always been essentially historical. Whether it is the movement from traditional to industrial societies, the prospects of transitioning towards socialism, the historical rupture of military regimes and neoliberal reforms, and the transitions to democracy, its core problems have always been transitions and ruptures – two quintessentially time-based phenomena. Additionally, Latin American sociologists’ belief in a strong continuity between the colonial past and the present, especially in the foundational

period of the discipline, reinforced its historically-oriented core.

Contrary to its traditional development, a general concept or theory that illuminates both the general trends of society and its desired future is missing. In this sense, the intellectual environment that made Latin American sociology essentially historical is no longer as strong as it used to be. Paradoxically, the absence of an overarching or central *problématique* may ease the emergence of a differentiated and institutionalized historical sociology. This could be a positive trend if it implies a deeper reflection on socio-historical methods and a more systematic use of historiographical material to produce social theory, but not if it implies the abandonment on the part of the broader discipline of its pretention of grasping the historicity of society as a whole.

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[1] We thank David Lehman for his comments on a previous draft of this article.

[2] Some restrictions of our analysis: first, we do not present an exhaustive list of historically-oriented Latin American sociology texts, but only a few selected works to support our argument. Second, we include mostly analysis for the whole region rather than specific countries or sub-regions, for which there is a vast bibliography on national state formation, persistence of traditional agrarian structures, origins and evolution of social classes and class struggle, constitution of different social actors, etc. As an example, for the case of Central America see Torres-Rivas (1993 [1969]; 1998; 2011). Finally, although there is a rich socio-historical literature on Latin America produced in the United States and in Europe, for this paper we consider sociologists working mainly in Latin America.

[3] For periods and their general characterization we follow Trindade, Garretón, Murmis, Reyna, De Sierra (2007).

[4] The main representative of the modernization approach in Latin America was Gino Germani. His main work, “Política y sociedad en una época de transición” (1965), applies Parsons’ pattern variables to periodize Latin American history after independence.

[5] CEPAL, 1963, p. 156. Our own translation from the original Spanish.

[6] The sociological debates of this whole period are illustrated by two important seminars held in Mexico (Mérida, 1971 and Oaxaca, 1973) that brought together many of the most prominent

sociologists of the region. The works presented at these seminars were compiled in two books. See Benitez Zenteno (1973, 1977) and Labastida (1985). For other excellent example of historical sociology in this line see Zermeño (1977).

[7]Our own translation from the original Spanish version.

[8]Cotler, 1978, p. 15. Our own translation from the original Spanish version.

[9]One of the first and most influential works characterizing the new military dictatorship that made a clear link between sociology and political science, a crucial feature of the period, is O'Donnell (1977).

[10]All these tendencies are well expressed by a seminar in Mexico (Morelia, 1980), of the same characteristics of the ones mentioned in footnote 9, that includes the analysis of class hegemony and new military regimes. See Labastida (1985).

[11]The first book is based on a large international Project initiated at the Wilson Center, Washington DC. The other is based on an international conference at Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1991, organized by FLACSO and the University of Guadalajara.

[12]A balance, among others, of the democratization process in Latin America in Garretón (2003).

[13]See Lander, 2000.

[14]See Jelín, 2002.

[15]See Centeno, 2002; López-Alves, 2000.

[16]For indigenous movements, see Rivera, 1987; Bengoa, 1999, and for gender based movements see Giordano, 2007; Lamadrid, 2009; Brito, 2005.

[17]See for example two important contributions on the civil society dimension Panfichi (2002) and Dagnino, Panfichi, Olvera, eds (2006). On the individuals as social subjects Martuccelli (2010).

[18]See for example Garretón et al (2003).

[19]According to Skopcol (1984, quoted in Adams, Clemens, and Orloff, 2005, p. 10) historical sociologists "ask questions about social structures or processes understood to be concretely situated in time and space... address processes over time, and take temporal sequences seriously in accounting for outcomes... attend to the interplay of meaningful actions and structural contexts, in order to make sense of the unfolding of unintended as well as intended outcomes in individual lives and social transformations."

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