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SOCIAL SCIENCE ISSUES IN AGRARIAN CHANGE
AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF LATIN AMERICA

BY

PETER DORNER AND RICHARD W. PATCH

Paper presented at the Discussion Group on Political Leadership in Latin America, sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, February 17, 1966.

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Social Science Issues in Agrarian Change and
National Development of Latin America

by Professors Peter Dorner and Richard W. Patch*

We wish to discuss leadership in a broader context than that which may normally be anticipated by this discussion group. Leadership is not confined to politics. There is equal need for it in business and commerce, in church, school and voluntary organization, as well as in the scientific community. Leaders at any level are likely to influence not only their followers but other leaders as well. In all cases the leadership function can be improved in quality by more adequate knowledge and information.

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Leaders and followers everywhere, in all walks of life, are generating information and experience. This mundane-everyday-experience is indeed all we have (when taken to include the past as well as the present) to guide us in attempting to improve our decisions for action which will generate tomorrow's experience. But this experience of everyday living cannot be understood in the raw--it is too complex, it includes too many things, it mixes the critical with the trivial. If we are to understand it and learn from it in such a way that it can help us improve our judgments and our decisions in the future, then we need a guide, a model, a theory, which gives us some criteria of what is important and what isn't, what facts and observations can be excluded and those that cannot, and how to line up the various pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to make sense out of them.

It is this function of conceptualization, observation and analysis with which social scientists are (or should be) concerned. If this function is well performed, leaders and followers throughout the society can be better informed, and consequently make better judgments and decisions. This is especially important in a time of rapid change (or where such is anticipated). For a number of reasons which we will discuss,

social scientists are having great difficulty in performing well this function. Thus we wish to place the issues of leadership within a context to include the role of social science leadership in the improvement of the quality of decision making by leaders throughout the society. Before turning to these social science issues, however, we wish to discuss the Latin American¹ situation with respect to agrarian change and national development.

I

There is basic agreement among professionals that something is wrong in Latin America. Easily recognized and agreed upon difficulties would include the following: a nation state that wishes to survive and progress in today's world must make adequate provision for the education of its people. When education is restricted to a relatively small group, past experience indicates that political participation and effective citizenship are likewise restricted. But illiteracy rates, especially in rural areas, are high in many of the Latin

1. We recognize the wide diversity among individual Latin American nations. Some of our comments are undoubtedly more relevant to some than to others. But it appears to us a matter of degree rather than of kind.

American countries. This cannot be attributed to unfavorable resource-population ratios.

Although there are national differences, Latin America generally is underpopulated relative to natural resources. While productive potential is very great, per capita income is low and rates of growth have been disappointingly small. Distribution of resource ownership and income is very uneven. Most individuals are "hooked-up" to the future income stream in a precarious, insecure manner, and lack the capacity to exploit the few available employment alternatives. This latter point is highly significant, especially since these characteristics are most pronounced in the rural sector. With a history of paternalism, managerial and leadership skills are not well developed among the rural masses. Yet such skills need be widely distributed, and opportunities must be provided for potential leaders to rise from the lower classes. This seems to be one of the critical blocks in many Latin American societies today.

These "difficulties" are not solely a function of internal, national politics. On this too there is agreement. Three general proposals for Latin American development have resulted from these identifications: 1) improvements in international

trade, markets and prices, 2) Latin American economic integration, and 3) internal structural reforms (especially land tenure reforms).² It is not our purpose to evaluate in detail these proposals. We do wish to register approval with these suggestions, and in so doing emphasize the fact that all these proposals require construction of new institutions or the reconstruction of those existing. As we shall see later, this requirement poses great problems for the social sciences.

It can be argued that these circumstances of widespread illiteracy, low rates of growth in productivity, unequal distribution of resources and income, etc., have existed for centuries, not only in Latin America but elsewhere. If that is the case, and it is, then why the present concern? What are the new conditions which pressure for the construction of new institutions?

2. These points were elaborated recently in an all university lecture by Dr. Carlos Castillo, Head of the Economic Commission for Latin America in Mexico City. This lecture was given at the University of Wisconsin on December 13, 1965. See also Castillo's Ph.D. thesis, Growth and Integration in Central America, 1965, on file at the University of Wisconsin Library, now in process of review for publication.

A rapid increase in population is certainly a key factor. The introduction of new medical techniques, reducing disease and consequently the death rate, has led to unprecedented population growth. This has upset the old equilibrium. The institutionalized custom of large families, with its roots in historical experience where half the children died in childhood and where those surviving had the important role of providing security for the parents in old age, is not rationally tied to birth and death rates. A decline in the death rate does not lead families to an immediate rational evaluation of such a custom. While the use of science in reducing the death rate is acceptable by an ethic which seems universal, this does not apply to the birth rate, even though techniques for its reduction are also available.

With rapid increases in population, there is an equivalent rise in the demand for food and other necessities of life provided by the agricultural sector. But food production has not kept pace with growth in the number of people to be fed. This has led to increasing reliance on food imports or a reduction in exports, resulting in a decreased potential for importing capital goods needed in development and the creation of new employment opportunities. This lag in food production

reflects insufficient investments in both traditional and new capital inputs in agriculture, which in turn is associated with the institutional structure of land tenure.

A correlative factor is the need for a different peasant mentality if new techniques in agricultural production are to be introduced. More people must think in terms of the scientific method with a greater reliance on rationalism rather than traditionalism, both to increase food production at home and to remain competitive in international markets. However, the power elite in rural areas see the emphasis on education for agricultural workers required to achieve this as a threat to their present position.

There is a more general phenomenon of developments in science and technology adding to the pressure for change. In the developed countries, especially in the United States, science and technology are advancing more rapidly than ever before. Gunnar Myrdal states that "the economic revolution now taking place in the rich countries under the impact of an acceleratingly rapid advance in scientific and technological knowledge is working not only to leave the great majority of mankind in the underdeveloped countries in a back-water, but

actually to push them backwards."³

Myrdal goes on to say that "the main impediments to the utilization of a new technology capable of solving this problem [low agricultural productivity] are political, institutional and attitudinal. The power in many underdeveloped countries is in the hands of reactionary people who have, or shortsightedly believe that they have, an interest in preventing changes in land ownership and tenancy that would increase the opportunities and the incentives for the peasantry to try to improve their lot." After pointing to FAO calculations and noting that "we must double total food supplies by 1980 and treble them by 2000--for Latin America the figures are slightly higher," Myrdal concludes that "most of this increase in agricultural production must take place in the underdeveloped countries, a fact which would imply a sharp turn of the present curve of development of agricultural production there," and "failure to reach this goal will imply a world

3. Gunnar Myrdal, "The United Nations, Agriculture, and the World Economic Revolution," Journal of Farm Economics, Vol. 47, No. 4, November 1965, pp. 889-99.

calamity, the real import and effects of which are terrifying to consider."⁴

Superimposed on these more or less objective conditions of population growth, science and technology are the expectations generated by conflicting ideologies in the cold war struggle. On the issue of internal structural reforms, the U. S. finds itself in an especially difficult position. As Senator Fulbright reminded us in his Senate speech of September 15, 1965, "... if we are automatically to oppose any reform movement that communists adhere to, we are likely to end up opposing every reform movement, making ourselves the prisoners of reactionaries who wish to preserve the status quo--and the status quo in many countries is not good enough." Thus, although high hopes have been generated through the Alliance for Progress⁵ on the one hand, and through promises from the far

4. Ibid.

5. "To encourage, in accordance with the characteristics of each country, programs of comprehensive agrarian reform leading to the effective transformation, where required, of unjust structures and systems of land tenure and use, with a view to replacing latifundia and dwarf holdings by an equitable system of land tenure so that, with the help of timely and adequate credit, technical assistance and facilities for the marketing and distribution of products, the land will become for the man who works it the basis of his economic stability, the foundation of his increasing welfare, and the guarantee of his freedom and dignity." From the Charter of Punta del Este.

left on the other, the nature of international politics may itself tend to work against their realization.

These, then are some of the conditions that give rise to pressures requiring institutional adaptation and change--new conditions that did not exist in their same form or intensity at an earlier time: unprecedented population growth; need for similarly unprecedented increases in agricultural production; the need for wider introduction of science and new technology in agriculture with its requirement for a more literate and rational peasantry, which itself may be resisted by the present rural elite; the accelerating growth of science and technology (and consequently competition) in the developed countries and the new obstacles this creates for the less developed; the new expectations aroused and the greater political awareness on the part of many more people than at any other time--all enmeshed within an ideological struggle which may at times strengthen the very opponents of the required institutional change.

On this whole complex matter, U. S. social scientists can be characterized by one of four views (and Latin American social scientists by one of the last three): 1) they scarcely know where Latin America is and couldn't care less of what is going on there; they are "wrapped up" in some domestic issue, 2) they are deeply interested in Latin America, but deny the above formulation; the problem for them is not institutional, but rather getting sufficient capital and technical skills to make the investments required. Institutional change will take care of itself once the economies start moving ahead, and this is largely a function of "sound" monetary and fiscal policy and private sector motivations and incentives; 3) they are deeply interested in Latin America, agree essentially with the above formulation, but deny that anything can be done short of revolution. This is the "wait for the revolution" position--social scientists have no major role to play at present, 4) they believe that there is an alternative to violence and revolution, and that social scientists have a role to play in defining evolutionary alternatives.

There should be no mistaking the historical evidence, however. If change is too long delayed and obstructed, revolutions do occur. Thomas S. Kuhn, although writing on

scientific revolutions, draws the following analogy with political revolutions: "Political revolutions are inaugurated by a growing sense, often restricted to a segment of the political community, that existing institutions have ceased adequately to meet the problems posed by an environment that they have in part created... In both political and scientific development the sense of malfunction that can lead to crisis is prerequisite to revolution."⁶

Kuhn goes on to say that "political revolutions aim to change political institutions in ways that those institutions themselves prohibit. Their success therefore necessitates the partial relinquishment of one set of institutions in favor of another, and in the interim, society is not fully governed by institutions at all. Initially it is crisis alone that attenuates the role of political institutions as we have already seen it attenuate the role of paradigms. In increasing numbers individuals become increasingly estranged from political life and behave more and more eccentrically within it. Then, as the crisis deepens, many of these individuals commit themselves to some concrete proposal for the reconstruction of society in

6. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Phoenix Books: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 91.

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a new institutional framework. At that point the society is divided into competing camps or parties, one seeking to defend the old institutional constellation, the others seeking to institute some new one. And, once that polarization has occurred, political recourse fails."⁷

How do policy makers introduce sufficient change into the institutional structure to keep conflicts within manageable bounds and avoid this revolutionary polarization? How can changes be so selected and designed to have both a chance politically of being implemented and also a capacity to take root and evolve the system to a new level (while maintaining a reasonable order and coming to grips with the conditions before mentioned--population growth, technology, science, high expectations, etc.)? The question to which we now must address ourselves is whether and how social science research can contribute to the quality of leadership by providing some useful guidelines for institutional innovation.

We wish to clarify, however, that social science research is a very broad category involving thousands of professional people. Within each social science discipline there is great

7. Ibid., p. 92.

variety in research approach, methodology and orientation. Our discussion of social science issues is not intended as an overall evaluation and does not address itself to all segments within the several social sciences. We do wish to emphasize the importance for the various disciplines to incorporate within some of their analyses (not necessarily by every individual researcher nor in every study) a conceptualization and investigation of institutional structures with the purpose of understanding "how the system works" so that changes with the potential for continued growth and evolution can be identified.

Every social science has a range of approaches to research questions--from the micro to the macro. Any study, irrespective of the level at which it is conducted, can either ignore institutions or incorporate a recognition of their functioning into the analysis. The problem at present is that in the usual formulation of research questions, institutions are taken as given in the analysis rather than being made the object of study. This is the more serious if studies in Latin America assume that institutions with similar names function as they do in the United States, or worse still, as they are idealized in our folklore. Great efforts have been made to introduce such institutions as agricultural cooperatives, extension

services, family farms and democracy itself. The record on this score is not one of great success. These institutions grew out of our English-American experience and serve us well. But social scientists have not given sufficient attention to the cultural underpinnings that provide the bases of their success in the U. S. When we try to transplant them they fail to take root and grow.

In agricultural economics research in the U. S., the system of economic organization in agriculture is seldomly included as a variable in the analysis. Family farms are assumed to be the appropriate type of organization. Treating the system of organization as a variable in the analysis means that the performance of alternative forms such as cooperatives or corporations would be studied and projections made for these and compared to the performance of family farms. But this is hardly ever done (partly, we assume, because the family farm is so dominant in the U. S.). Analysis of resource use, allocation and efficiency between farms and regions are made, and conclusions can be very useful for individual farmer decision making as well as for public policy decisions on matters concerning credit, farm prices, marketing services, etc.

In Latin America, however, we may find ourselves in a country with a newly enacted land reform law. The law specifies that both new family and cooperative farming units will be established. But who are the people that will be selected for these units, how big shall units be, what will be the incentive structure on the cooperative units, how is good management to be assured on the different units, under what soil and type of farming conditions should family units be established and under what circumstances should the form of organization be a cooperative, or should it indeed be a cooperative, would the corporate form perhaps be better, etc., etc.? These are but a few illustrations of the kind of questions, rather than efficiency per se, that are ordinarily central to public policy decisions. Under present Latin American conditions the institutions represented in the complex organization of agriculture cannot be ignored or assumed as given. They must be treated as strategic variables in the analysis.

In anthropology, as in economics, sociology, etc., there are many studies that have a very narrow, microcosmic focus. This in itself is not undesirable so long as it is realized that individual farms, or families, or customs, or habits are not being studied for their own sake. The task of research

is to arrive at some generalizations about the way in which the system functions. Investigators must learn enough about the customs and traditions to understand the kind of social innovations and new institutional procedures that are likely to take root and grow. They should be able to learn at what points such changes can be introduced which hold promise for evolving into new forms of organization.⁸ We repeat that not all social scientists need concern themselves with these policy oriented issues. But given the urgent and pressing task of institutional modification in Latin America, some from every social science discipline should be so concerned.

An additional problem is the different unit of investigation used by various social scientists. For example, although an increasing number of anthropologists are qualified to do so, few wish to venture into the field of national problems viewed in a national context. Such an anthropology of the nation is concerned not only with the small community

8. Peter Dorner and Juan Carlos Collarte, "Land Reform in Chile: A Proposal for an Institutional Innovation," Inter-American Economic Affairs, Vol. 19, No. 1, Summer 1965, pp. 3-22. Also as Land Tenure Center Reprint No. 2.

but also with the fabric of culture and behavior which relates communities to one another and which makes more intelligible the structure and functioning of national institutions, as well as behavior and attitudes which derive from the unit of the nation.⁹ The fact today is that public policy is generally oriented to the nation state. In some cases, for purposes of economic integration, even the nation state may be the inappropriate unit. This is not to say that all research must be co-extensive with the nation. But the consequences of institutional change and policy must be understood in the national context, and research is not complete until it recognizes the interconnection and interdependencies among the parts that comprise the nation.

We could go on to list more examples, from our own and others' experience, of different formulations of researchable questions by researchers of various methodological persuasions. But this is not our main purpose and the above should serve as illustrations. The point is that leadership is a

9. Richard W. Patch, "A Strategy of Anthropological Research in the Nation," American Universities Field Staff, West Coast South America Series, Vol. XII, No. 1, March 1965.

public function, and leaders are constantly faced with making public policy decisions. Social science research should be able to provide insight to improve the quality of such decisions and consequently the quality of leadership itself.

Some social scientists will disagree with this formulation, believing that since institutional reform is obviously a "value-loaded" political question, there is really nothing that social scientists can do until the political will is expressed and the basic decisions made. But this is a fundamental denial of the function of intellectual activity and objective analysis on these issues. Policy makers might be more willing to experiment if they had available an analysis to point the way. Even if action does not follow immediately, the role of social science investigations is to determine possible alternatives and their likely consequences.

III

Earlier we indicated that the proposed remedies for Latin American development all require construction of new institutions, and that this poses a particularly difficult problem for social sciences. As pointed out in the previous section, social scientists tend to assume institutions as

given or constant in their analyses, and seem much more "at home" in analyzing the "goings-on" within the existing institutional structure.¹⁰ We wish to point out that U. S. social scientists operate much the same way in the U. S. as they do when researching abroad. For example, on some of the key social questions of our time, such as racial integration, reconstruction in poverty areas, unemployment and the impacts of automation, a similar type of orientation is required--a viewpoint that looks to institutional modification and innovation. Here too we are just beginning to focus research on some of these questions.¹¹

Why should this be the case? Why are social sciences not well equipped for dealing creatively with the task of institutional innovation? We can only hypothesize about this, but one possibility is that many of the social sciences, at least in the U. S., experienced their major growth and

10. There are, of course, exceptions to this. Nevertheless, this seems to characterize the mainstream.

11. Several publications from the "Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions" have discussed the growing inadequacy of our concept and definition of work, in an increasingly automated economy, as the criterion for a claim on the future wealth produced by the society.

development after the political, economic and social institutions were well established.¹² As a consequence, the research interests took the form of working out defects within the institutional system which was always taken for granted. But the problems posed by economic development require the creation of new institutions.

Social sciences emerged as systematic bodies of thought and theory after the physical sciences were well established. Although neutrality even in the physical sciences is largely a myth, this myth was carried over from the physical sciences and has had a major influence on the formulation of research questions within the social sciences. Research issues frequently are defined very narrowly and thus fail to make contact with the questions troubling policy makers. Problems are defined as a search for the best (most efficient) means for the achievement of some end or goal developed by someone, but a goal which is itself not subject to objective analysis. The means are assumed to be neutral whereas the ends or goals are thought to involve value judgments. But any policy

12. Our colleague, Professor Kenneth H. Parsons, has provided us with insights on this matter.

action has many consequences other than the one specifically sought and intended, thus the implementation of any means always complicates, interferes with, or negates the achievement of some ends or goals even while it achieves the one desired. Thus means are no more neutral than are ends; the separation of means and ends is in fact quite artificial.

Finally, in the course of development of social science thought (as in the physical sciences but where it seems less detrimental) there has resulted an increasing specialization and compartmentalization. The old "moral philosophy" has been split into many sub-divisions, political economy has become differentiated into economics, political science, commerce and business, statistics, etc. Economics, anthropology, sociology--all are very broad fields, loose federations of many sub-disciplines.

Consequently, there are very few professionals who see problems and situations in their various dimensions. These limitations are widely recognized, especially by people trying to understand the process of economic development--involving as it does political and social as well as economic change. In recognition of the difficult nature of the research task, dealing as it must with the functioning of

complex human institutions and entire economic, social and political systems, a new faith is emerging in interdisciplinary research. A team of researchers representing several disciplines should be able to shed more light on these issues than any one professional working on his own.

This is a very attractive idea and, in general, we would support it. But to be for it is not to have achieved it; and to voice doubts is not to oppose it. The mere assurance that professionals from several disciplines are brought into proximity does not assure a higher quality research result.

Several requirements seem critical for a successful program of interdisciplinary research in the social sciences. First, the cooperating researchers must agree on the research problem and formulate it in such a way that their several investigations relate to the same fundamental questions. Second, in order to achieve the first, a careful and purposive selection of individuals is required.

Interdisciplinary research is an attempt to re-integrate several sub-disciplines and disciplines in order to form a more comprehensive framework of ideas for conceptualizing and analyzing real life experiences. But such re-integration must be selective. Within each of the broad disciplines

(economics, anthropology, sociology, political science, etc.) there are various groupings, threads or strands, some of which at least can be traced back to an earlier time before the disciplines became differentiated. For example, there is an individualistic strand in economics as in sociology. Professionals from these two disciplines with this orientation will not find communication too difficult and can fruitfully work together. In fact, communication between individuals from different disciplines as presently defined but with the same orientation (belonging to the same strand as we call it here) is much easier than between two individuals from the same discipline representing different strands. There are aggregative strands and institutional strands. There are individuals from all these strands with a research interest in the problems of agrarian change and economic development of Latin America. But such an area interest is not sufficient to achieve fruitful interdisciplinary research. This must be achieved by careful selection and matching according to the criteria outlined.¹³

13. The Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin is an attempt at integration and a program of interdisciplinary research. The ideal has not been realized and perhaps never will be. But serious attention is being given to this problem, and progress has been and is being made. Disciplines included in the Land Tenure Center research program are agricultural economics, anthropology, rural sociology, law, agricultural journalism, commerce and political science.

IV

In this final section, we wish simply to call attention to the need for developing a viable social science in Latin America, staffed by Latin American professionals. Leadership in the social sciences, as in politics, must be indigenous to the countries under discussion. It is Latin American professionals who must acquire a depth of understanding of their own situation so that they can advise their leaders and guide their policies. Many of the present Latin American leaders in science, politics and industry have been and many of the future will be educated in U. S. universities. The question must be raised, how good a job are U. S. universities doing?

There is, of course, no clear-cut answer. Some universities are probably doing better than others. There is undoubtedly a wide variation between (and within) various subject matter specialties. However, there is, we believe, a certain degree of cultural and environmental bias in our social science theories.¹⁴ Protestations of the scientific

14. We suspect this is the case with most social science disciplines, although some are perhaps more affected than others. In the Foreword of T. W. Schultz, Transforming Traditional Agriculture (Yale University Press, 1964), the following statement appears: "Modern economics has been bred chiefly in Western Europe and the United States, and despite its aspiration toward generality it bears the stamp of institutions and issues characteristic of these areas."

purists notwithstanding, the great minds and theorists of the social sciences have always been close to the practical policy affairs of their country. This seems very evident in economics whether one speaks of Smith, Ricardo or Marx, or at a later period Commons, Schumpeter, or Keynes, or contemporaries such as Galbraith, Berle and Means. In essence, theory and practice have the same origin, the living experience of a people. It is this experience and the institutions which form part of it that interact with intellectual activity out of which come our theoretical formulations.

We can conceive of the U. S. with an institutional structure quite different from that which actually exists. Let us suppose that early policies had fostered a feudal hierarchy or communal ownership of land instead of fee simple ownership and family farms; let us imagine a social organization built around the extended family or the tribe instead of the nuclear family living in relative isolation on its farmstead; and let us assume a political system of centralized control and management over the economy where all transactions involving land, labor, capital and commodities are regulated by central political authority instead of the local autonomy, the markets, and the free enterprise of individuals in their

economic activities. Had the U. S. system been established thus, much of our social science theory would be irrelevant. In fact, more importantly, we would not have the same theories. They could be developed only within that institutional context. They do not make sense or provide analytical insight into a system whose institutions are very different.

Educated in U. S. social science and returning to their country, some Latin American students are of course able to retain their perspective on the real situation which they need to confront. But others, recognizing the inadequacies of the theories learned, turn to ideology for all explanations or engage in esoteric studies and speculations that have little relation to the pressing problems of their country. We would hypothesize also that this leads to a dualism, a separation, between theory and practice. The classroom is where one deals with theory and outside is where one deals with real problems. This is evidence of the lack of correspondence between the theories taught in the classroom (largely imported from the U. S. and Europe) and the real problems faced by the policy maker.

How is this shortcoming to be overcome? We would suggest that a necessary condition is for more U. S. social

scientists to engage in policy oriented research in Latin America and thus come into direct contact with the institutions and problems of these societies. In this they should not work by themselves, but with Latin American social scientists. This, not only to make investigations more relevant to public policy issues, but also to contribute to the construction of new theories. This approach holds promise for both the development of social science and public policy leadership in Latin America. It will also help to make the teaching in U. S. universities more relevant to foreign students.

This is not an easy prescription to follow. Many academic minded social scientists will have no part of it. Yet the task remains. It requires "a willingness to immerse oneself in a strange culture, maintaining sympathy without losing objectivity, forming opinions about the feasibility of alternative courses without becoming passionate, understanding political and practical considerations without becoming involved in them, and emerging with ideas of what is possible and what is impossible within the whole web of men's culture and behavior."¹⁵

15. Richard W. Patch, op. cit., p. 5.