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## **Future Research in Latin America: Changing Professional Viewpoints and Issues**

The future of geographic research in Latin America is clouded by the uncertainty of change. Part of the uncertainty stems from potential developments and policies beyond the control of the geographic profession. Among these, for example, is the growth of isolationist sentiment in the United States fed by disillusionment with the war in Viet Nam and the surfacing of new national priorities which downgrade the importance of international education and foreign area studies in the allocation of scarce resources. But many of the conditions which may influence future research will undoubtedly be shaped by the rapidly changing viewpoints, techniques and values within the geographic profession itself. Current disagreement and debate about research including questions of relevancy, priorities, methods and underlying philosophy are just as pronounced among geographer Latin Americanists as they are among other professional geographers.

This paper will attempt to assess the professional debate and issues which appear pertinent to future geographic research in Latin America, particularly during the decade of the 1970's. It will draw in small measure upon the author's experience in the general field of Latin American area studies, but more upon his interpretation of the issues, the attitudes and the general mood which characterized the discussions at the first national meeting of the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers (CLAG). In fact, the essence of this paper was initially presented as the "closing address" of that meeting.

### **Background realities**

North American geographers with a research commitment to Latin America have always had to accept an extra dimension of challenge. In addition to making do with skimpy and often unreliable data, they have had to cope with problems stemming from linguistic, cultural and other conditions different from those of their home milieu; compared to colleagues working in more accessible areas, they have had to make a larger investment of time and resources for field work. The burden of some of these handicaps was lessened by encouraging developments

during a roughly ten-year period beginning in the latter 1950's. An explosion of public interest in Latin America prompted the foundations, government agencies and other sources to provide relatively abundant support for field training and research. Concurrently, a strong market demand for Latin Americanists, including geographers, was created as colleges and universities rushed to develop language and area programs. The number of geography students attracted to Latin America rose dramatically, and the volume of geographic research increased accordingly.

An examination of the research achieved by North American geographers both during and before this "boom" period provides some significant insights. In a survey published in 1964, Parsons noted, "Contrasting with the considerable emphasis on historical and cultural studies by geographers in Latin America has been the weak development of work in contemporary economic geography. This is the more remarkable in view of the major revitalization of this field that has occurred in the United States in recent years, in part through the introduction of new and more rigorous methods of regional economic analysis" (Parsons, 1964).

Other neglected fields of research listed by Parsons were urban and political geography and the investigation of land tenure systems. After 1964, there was some increase in the concern for these neglected fields, especially economic geography, and in the application of "more rigorous methods of ... analysis," but such trends continued to be the exception rather than the rule. In short, one earmark of the research record of North American geographers in Latin America has been the tendency to skirt many of the area's most "relevant" contemporary problems, such as economic development and modernization, the urban explosion, and the land tenure-agrarian reform question. Equally noteworthy, past research has largely failed to reflect the important progress in method and in theory development made by the "new geography" in recent decades. It is not surprising, therefore, that some geographers, particularly among the younger breed, tend to attach only limited value to this record.

Unfortunately, the same tendency seems to be manifest among Latin Americanists from other fields. For example, a survey of interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary literature of the type found in publications such as the *Latin American Research Review* leaves little doubt that while practitioners of other disciplines borrow and quote extensively from each other's research findings, the work of geographers is seldom cited (LARR, 1965-1971). Also pertinent is the

treatment received by geographers from the agencies which have been providing grants for research in Latin America. For instance, the SSRC/ACLS Joint Committee on Latin American Studies which administers an important Ford Foundation supported program of postdoctoral grants for Latin America has not always considered it necessary to include a geographer in its membership. More important, the number of grants made by the Joint Committee to geographers during the 1960's has been discouragingly small in comparison to applicants from other social sciences and even the humanities. The record is essentially the same for the Foreign Area Fellowship Program (FAFP) which administers pre-doctoral research grants (SSRC, 1970).

Also among the current realities pertinent to future geographic research in Latin America are the drastic reduction of funds for foreign area training and research, the bleak employment outlook for Latin Americanists and other discouraging developments of recent years. By 1970, the once-huge flow of foundation funds in support of foreign area studies was dwindling to a trickle; the government-financed Fulbright grants to North American professors and students for work in Latin America had been reduced to roughly one-third of the 1967 figure; and there was danger that federal budget cuts might soon close many of the NDEA Latin America language and area centers established by the Office of Education in various universities. In addition, the late 1960s witnessed a marked tendency on the part of some foundation programs, such as those of the aforementioned SSRC/ACLS Joint Committee and FAFP, to stress collaboration in research and training between North American scholars and their Latin American counterparts and to attract practitioners from the natural and applied sciences to Latin American studies, a field which had been previously dominated by the social sciences and the humanities (SSRC, 1970). Partly because of these changes and partly for other reasons, the seemingly insatiable job market for Latin Americanists, including geographers, which had existed during the 1960's rapidly declined, and the once-abundant fellowships for graduate students became increasingly scarce.

Also noteworthy among the current realities which cast a shadow on future research is the deteriorating research climate in Latin America for North American scholars. There is increasing and justifiable hostility towards what some Latinos have come to regard as Yankee academic imperialism. Some of this has been triggered by political and ideological reactions to Project Camelot, United States intervention in the Dominican Republic, Viet Nam and other

aspects of official United States policy. Much of it, however, may stem from the insensitivity, irresponsibility and ethnocentric attitudes and practices which have often characterized the conduct of North American researchers in Latin America (Silvert, 1965; Adams, 1969). Geographers as a group may have been less responsible than others for this unfortunate state of affairs, but they may have to pay no less a penalty.

It was against the background of realities such as these that the future of geographic research was discussed at the first national meeting of CLAG in the spring of 1970. While not every geographer concerned with research in Latin America was present at the meeting, those that were constituted a representative cross-section of the profession. The participating group ranged in age from senior professionals like Preston James to graduate students in their twenties; it included colleagues from Latin America, at least one Africanist and even a small feminine delegation. Most important, however, the philosophical stance of the participants ran the gamut from the incurably traditional to the *ultra-avante garde*.

### **Key issues**

Perhaps the most intense debate which developed at the first meeting of CLAG centered on the issues of research relevancy and priorities. In the words of one participant:

"Although the value of scholarship for its own sake cannot be disputed, I feel that the practicalities of the real world require that Latin Americanist geographers turn to contemporary and relevant problems if they are to be successful in maintaining and improving their position with other social scientists working in Latin America and with Latin American governments."

But this was merely one of many views. In fact, listening to the frequently heated discussion on the subject, it was difficult not to conclude that one was hearing the discordant voice of the entire geographic profession (even the entire United States scholarly community) in microcosm. As on any university campus, one could detect the often impassioned plea of the activists, the concerned, the advocates of research in the service of noble causes, and the stubborn answer of those who view scholarship as an end in itself. Each voice had the ring of deep conviction, sincerity and determination; and each voice stated in no uncertain terms that, for the scholar, the selection of research priorities is a jealously guarded, intimately personal prerogative.

Disagreement and debate over issues such as methodology, the training of graduate students and the importance of field experience and cultural exposure were less overt but none the less real. On the training, of future geographic researchers in Latin America, it is impossible to summarize every nuance of opinion. At one extreme, however, is a group which attaches little importance to language command and understanding of the area's cultural milieu as requisites for undertaking research. Its rationale is that while knowledge of the local language, institutional equipment, social conditions and cultural values may be useful, it is less so than sound training in systematic geography, theory and skills such as quantitative techniques. If a graduate student's overloaded program permits courses outside of geography, preference should be given to work in computer languages, mathematics, economics and the like. Such a rationale might also exclude course work in the "regional" geography of Latin America on the grounds that it is traditional, descriptive and devoid of theory.

While not openly articulated at the CLAG meeting, there undoubtedly exists within the geographic profession an equally extreme viewpoint, akin to that held by many economists, which maintains that a well-trained geographer can undertake effective, problem-oriented research in any part of the world with no previous exposure and experience in the cultural particularities of the area. In fact, if adequate data are available in the library, archives and statistical bank on his own campus, a geographer can manipulate data and arrive at valid conclusions without leaving home. Such a viewpoint might consider field work as an impractical, vestigial remnant of the traditional, unscientific days of geography. At the other extreme is the school of thought which attaches maximum importance to the knowledge of language and cultural particularities of the area both for purposes of training graduate students and for effective research; and which is likely to view with suspicion any research on Latin America not based on field work.

One need only compare the viewpoint and contributions of Sauer's "Berkeley School" of geographer-Latin Americanists with those of the emerging group at Ohio State to grasp the range of philosophical stances.

## **Reflections**

If the experience of the first CLAG meeting suggests anything at all, it is that the only realistic attitude towards the issues of research relevancy, priorities and

methodology is a tolerant, "Right you are if you think you are!" The debate merely served to emphasize the futility of assuming that any geographer will change either his research priorities or his methodology to suit someone else's notion of what is relevant, innovative or scientific. At best, all that can be expected is that geographers sharing a common research interest in Latin America will try to maintain a continuing dialogue.

But the necessity for such tolerant *laissez-faire* should not obscure the advantages of focusing future geographic research in Latin America on relevant, contemporary problems. Not the least of these advantages may be more effective communications with Latin American colleagues. (And there is a glaring need for such communications. With rare exception, for example, the methodological revolution which has been sweeping North American geography has not touched Latin American geographers.) If relevancy is to serve as an instrument for improving communications, however, it can not be defined, as it has in the past, primarily by North American standards. Its definition must take into account the differences between the professional value systems and approaches of the two groups. The following observations on United States social science research in Guatemala by Calvin Blair provides some insight into the problem.

" ... The United States academic tends to see Guatemala as a place to test hypotheses and gather data for publications which contribute ... to his own professional progress. Guatemalans tend to see research primarily as a way to attack problems of national urgency... The two systems cause frequent differences of opinion about topics and methods of research... Guatemalans are critical of those visitors who display attitudes of superiority ... who are zealous about imposing United States solutions or models, and those who try to do serious research without the requisite language ability..." (Adams, 1969).

Another advantage of relevancy in future research is a possible competitive edge in the quest for increasingly scarce research funds. Judging from the present mood of the foundations, the federal government and other sources of support, research directed to "the practicalities of the real world" are being given definite priority over that which is geared to "scholarship for its own sake." for example, research proposals dealing directly with or shedding light on contemporary problems are given preference by the Ford Foundation-supported programs of FAFP and the Joint Committee on Latin American Studies (SSRC, 1970).

Nor should tolerance obscure the advantages of research characterized by sophisticated quantitative techniques and a potential for contributing to theory. The author's experience on the screening committees of various granting agencies tends to confirm the criticism that many of the research proposals submitted by geographer-Latin Americanists during the 1960's failed to be funded because they were devoid of a theoretical framework and of rigorous quantitative methods. More important, if geographers are to reach the stage of valid generalization, there is need to test the methodology and theoretical models developed in an industrialized, modern midlatitude setting, such as the United States, in the often radically different milieu of Latin America and other "emerging" areas.

Finally, research characterized by relevance, concern for theory and the application of rigorous methodology may also pave the way for improving the position of geography among the other disciplines. Such research by geographers is already winning the respect of other scientists for work done in North America, and it may be equally successful in future work done in Latin America. One vehicle for achieving such a breakthrough is collaborative research projects with other social scientists, particularly the economists. Of all the social scientists, none disdain identification with a particular area more than the economists. (An economic problem is an economic problem no matter where it is -- just give me the data, etc. runs the argument.) Also of all the social scientists, none have a readier acceptance in Latin America than economists. (After all, these are the architects of economic development.) As a result, economists are being called upon to do national studies which frequently suffer from failure to take into account spatial considerations such as regional inequalities and from other shortcomings which collaboration with geographers can eliminate.

## **Summary**

The nature and trends of future geographic research in Latin America are difficult to predict. All that can be safely said is that those committed to such research will have to adjust to a wide range of disturbing and confusing realities. Some of these realities spring from shrinking research funds in the wake of declining public and academic interest in foreign areas. Others have their roots partly in the failure of North American geographers to establish adequate communications with their Latin American counterparts and with professionals in other disciplines, and partly in the growing hostility towards Yankee

intellectual imperialism which is developing south of the border. But some of the most disturbing realities reflect issues and disagreement within the geographic profession itself. Judging from the dialogue at the first national meeting of CLAG, there is a sharp debate over important issues such as: the record of past geographic research in Latin America and the priorities of future research; the comparative importance of methodological skills versus language and area training in preparing graduate students for research in the area, and others which reflect variety of current viewpoints in geography, and which make the future of geographic research (and even the future of the geographic profession) uncertain.

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