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## **Latin American Geography in the Seventies: Inventory and Prospects<sup>1</sup>**

For those concerned with research, teaching, and related professional activities pertaining to the geography of Latin America, the track record of the 1970s was a chequered one. The decade opened with the organization of CLAG and a surge of enthusiasm among geographer-Latin Americanists. There was a keen sense of identity and mission which, infected professionals and students alike. Despite some misgivings about the future of regional specialization and regionalists, there was an out-pouring of doctoral dissertations with a Latin American focus. Later in the decade, developments became decidedly less encouraging. By 1980 the pace of change in academia and in Latin American societies had become so rapid as to make the future of geographic studies on Latin America challengingly uncertain.

The primary goal of this paper is to identify and assess the most significant of the trends in the seventies, and to speculate about their implications for geographers in the forthcoming decade of the eighties. While cursory note will be taken of the overall scenario that framed Latin American geographic research and teaching in the 1970s, the principal springboard for the assessment will be the presentations and discussions at the tenth anniversary meeting of CLAG. If this summary is more disturbing than reassuring, and if it raises more questions than it answers, it will have achieved an important secondary goal.

### **General Inventory**

In the closing address at the organizational meeting of CLAG in 1970, I observed, "If this session of Latin Americanist geographers goes down in history as a one-shot affair, then the future of geographic research in Latin America will have missed the boat on a potentially valuable mechanism for effective communication, for advancing our common interest, and for fueling the kind of esprit de corps which has brought us together here." Quite obviously, that first meeting was not a one-shot affair. Ten years later (and despite considerable adversity), the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers is still very much alive. If there is a single positive thread that runs through the fabric of geographic professional activity focusing on Latin America in the seventies, it is CLAG's splendid performance. The organization has not only helped to keep alive a sense

of community among those who wear the badge of geographer-Latin Americanist, it has been instrumental in initiating and expanding the channels of communication with our Latin colleagues; its annual meeting has become the most important clearing house for the exchange of ideas concerning geographic research in Latin America; and its publications have been timely, imaginative, and of good quality. I have no proof for it but I also like to blame CLAG for attracting more women colleagues to our number. In 1970, the percentage of Latin American geographers and of women in CLAG's membership was negligible. At present, out of a total membership of 440, at least 20 percent are *Latinos* and roughly 12 percent are women (Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers, 1980). Equally reassuring in the light of the adversity faced by geographer-Latin Americanists in the past decade, the membership of CLAG has continued to grow. There still seems to be a special mystique that binds together those geographers whose professional interests reach "south of the border."

But the positive trend set by CLAG in the seventies tends to be the exception in an otherwise adverse *ambiente*. In 1970, I noted that:

"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 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. . . conditions affecting future research will (also) be shaped by the rapidly changing viewpoints, techniques and values within the geographic profession itself" (Lentnek, Carmin, and Martinson, 1971, 428).

Unfortunately, the premonitions of 1970 have become the virtual realities of 1980. Isolationism, changing views and values within the geographic profession, major changes in both Latin American and Anglo-American societies -- all these and others have been eroding the foundation of traditional geographic research and teaching with a Latin American focus; and to make matters worse, the high inflation rates which we used to view with academic interest in Latin America have also become a disruptive factor and a professional impediment in Anglo-America.

The impact of these negative developments in our Latin American interests is apparent in many ways. To belabor the obvious, funds to provide field experience

for graduate students and for scholarly research have been shrinking rapidly. Partly as a result of inadequate funds, we are not only failing to attract graduate students in sufficient numbers, we have actually been losing trained geographer-Latin Americanists to other areas and interests closer to home.

The malaise of isolationism that has affected Anglo-American society in the last decade is creeping into academia. The international component in graduate student training (whether in language or field experience or working with non-Western socioeconomic models) is becoming an exception rather than the rule. Undergraduate enrollment in courses with a Latin American language and area content is rapidly decreasing.

But perhaps most damaging to our enterprise, the regional geography courses that used to serve as incubators of a student's first germ of interest in Latin America are being phased out in favor of supposedly more rigorous courses in remote sensing, computer programming, and what not. Many among the growing number of adherents to the "new geography" and technical specialists in systematic branches of our field have found it convenient to define regional geography as "bad geography" devoted primarily to description and devoid of analysis and theory. Despite an abundance of arguments to the contrary, the training, research methods, and contributions of regionalists have been written off as lacking in rigor and merit (Augelli, 1968; Diem, 1980). And the campaign of the anti-regionalists has been so effective that even some members of CLAG eschew the regionalist label.

Another illustrative note in this litany of discouragement is the representation at the 1980 meeting of CLAG as compared to that in 1970. Of those who presented papers ten years ago, the vast majority had received their terminal degree in the previous decade of the 1960s. In contrast, out of the roughly 50 persons presenting (or scheduled to present) papers at the 1980 meeting, less than a dozen received their advanced academic degrees in the 1970s, and even most of these finished their graduate studies in the first half of the decade. According to Davidson, in the eight-year period, 1970-78, approximately 172 doctoral degrees in geography with a Latin American specialization were awarded by United States and Canadian universities. Of these, 120 were awarded between 1970 and 1974 and only 52 from 1975 to 1978. The high water mark for geography Ph.D.s with a Latin American interest was the early 1970s. Thereafter, the number dropped precipitously (Davidson, 1980). All this is by way of saying that geographer-Latin Americanists in the United States are not replacing themselves professionally, and

that one crucial challenge of the 1980s may be the very survival of the group.

## **Research**

In comparing the research record of geographer-Latin Americanists in the seventies with that of the previous few decades, one inescapable conclusion is that the more geographic research on Latin America changes, the more it remains the same. During the seventies, the field investigations of United States and Canadian geographers continued to give a disproportionately heavy emphasis to Mexico and the Caribbean as opposed to South America; the diaspora of Carl Sauer's Berkeley School still accounted for a large share of the research effort; and with some exceptions, geographers still tended to be more concerned with their own scholarly interests than with the disturbing problems that haunt contemporary Latin American societies.<sup>2</sup> In short, much of what was said about the strengths and weaknesses of geographic research on Latin America in 1970 is equally valid in 1980. And herein may lie the tap root of the problem facing geographer-Latin Americanists.

While geographic research has undergone only minor modifications in the seventies, the changes in Latin American society have been dramatic. Among the major world regions in 1980, Latin America is the most rapidly urbanizing and the most rapidly industrializing; its population has the highest rate of natural increase in the world, and its environment is one of the most rapidly deteriorating on earth. There is an incredible sense of urgency about Latin America. The stresses and strains of internal disequilibriums are becoming volcanic, and violence as an instrument of protest is engulfing much of the region.

How much of this dramatic change, how much of this sense of urgency and challenge is reflected in the research presented at the 1980 meeting of CLAG? Unfortunately, there is precious little. In fact, an outsider hearing some of these papers might easily conclude that Latin American countries are placid, bucolic pieces of real estate instead of "boiling cauldrons of human miseries and resentments likely to blow their lids at any careless stoking of the hearth" (West and Augelli, 1976, 19). And this raises that old, undying question of research relevancy.

It used to be futile to make reference to what is relevant. As I pointed out in 1970, most geographers would prefer to have their paternities questioned than to have their research priorities changed to fit someone else's view of what is

important. But indications are that in the 1980s research relevancy may be much more closely tied to professional survival than it was in the past. Much of the geographic fraternity concerned with Latin America continues to argue that any research, no matter how seemingly esoteric or how deeply buried in the past, is ultimately relevant to the contemporary drama. But regardless of how sacred this view may be to traditional scholarship, the evidence suggests that funding agencies (whether governmental or foundation or other) are likely to define relevancy in far more concrete and contemporary terms.

The regrets that Parsons expressed over the failure of geographers to become sufficiently concerned in the pressing problems of Latin America's deteriorating environment can be equally expressed with reference to their lack of involvement in a wide range of other immediate problems that plague the region. Many (perhaps most) geographers have felt no obligation as regional specialists to contribute toward the solution of Latin America's problems. Their research during the seventies and before was more relevant to their own academic and psychological needs than to the problems of the area. For geographer-Latin Americanists, the watchwords of the 1980s may have to change from research, publish, or perish to research, relevancy, or extinction.

But regrets over failure to become sufficiently involved in relevant research should not mask some reassuring changes both in geographic research and in other professional activities vis-a-vis Latin America during the seventies. One of the more satisfying developments has been the expanding and mutually beneficial dialogue and collaboration between Anglo-American and Latin American geographers. Not only is the presence of Latin American professionals apparent in the membership of CLAG, but there is evidence of an increasing number of joint research projects; more Latin American students seem to be coming north to our geographic centers, and more of our own students and professionals are forging links with Latin American institutions. The resulting cross fertilization is already apparent and should become more so in the future. Note, for example, how much of the top quality research in physical geography is being done by the *Latinos* themselves.

If the papers that appear elsewhere in this volume are any indication, certain other conclusions may be drawn about research on Latin America during the seventies. Investigations on the geography of population and settlement still seem to be studiously avoiding the city. Despite the explosive trend to urbanization, less than 15 percent of doctoral dissertations and published geographic research on Latin

America during the seventies can be classified as urban. But the decade witnessed an upward trend both in quantity and sophistication of geographic studies on population shifts and migrations. Geographic contribution in the field of development is still dwarfed by the enormity of the challenge, but it is more noteworthy than it was ten years ago. Our quantitative techniques and theoretical models are being tested with increasing frequency in Latin America, and a few breakthroughs already apparent, especially in Brazil.

In some of the more time-honored research specializations, such as aboriginal and peasant cultures and even a few aspects of ecology, the contributions of geography during the seventies remained strong. Sauer's philosophical heirs and descendants continue to be conspicuous both in terms of the quantity and the quality of their research. As the paper by Richard Jones and Ronald Garst indicates, a few of the younger geographers are beginning to venture into the risky but potentially rewarding field of comparative area studies. We continue to be less bold and adventuresome in the realm of political and social geography, but our achievements are not insignificant. The presentations on "Instructional Strategies" are proof of a growing awareness of the need for new and stimulating approaches to the teaching about Latin America. Without such stimulation, our battle to maintain student enrollment in the decreasing number of courses with a Latin American focus will be difficult to win. In summary, the list of our positive research changes and accomplishments during the past decade is as long as that of the problems that face us. If I seem to emphasize the latter in this presentation, it is only because the challenge of the next decade may be survival itself.

### **The Challenge of the Future**

*Quo vadis? Adonde vamos?* Where are we all going vis-a-vis Latin American geography? No answer to this question can be complete without accepting that the traditional academic base for such research is being rapidly eroded. For example, how many among the Latin Americanist Old Guard that will be retiring in the next ten years expect to be replaced? A random sampling conducted among CLAG members suggests that virtually none predicts replacement by the traditional regionalist Latin Americanist. The replacement process has already begun to give primary emphasis to the candidates' systematic specialty. A perusal of the "Jobs in Geography" section of the *AAG Newsletter* during 1979 revealed pitifully few positions that required a Latin American expertise. Thus, if as Griffin and Hoy observed in their contribution to this volume, "our real problem has been too few people spread out over a massive area," the prospects are that the

problem of inadequate numbers is likely to get worse before it gets better.

There is no messianic formula that will guarantee our survival and growth in the years ahead. Too many factors and forces linked with this issue are completely beyond our control. But some trends are already apparent. The training of geographer-Latin Americanists will no longer be possible in a large number of centers. Increasingly such training will be concentrated in a relatively few specialized centers, hopefully supported by federal and foundation grants and other funds. In fact the process of concentration has already started. Note that the vast majority of advanced degrees in geography with an emphasis on Latin America are being produced by a mere handful of departments across the country.

The challenges of the decade ahead are many. Not the least among them is kindling and keeping alive student interest in Latin America in the teeth of the growing parochialism in our higher education. Another is to continue and expand upon our dialogue with our Latin counterparts through joint research, exchange of students, and other means. Sooner or later the major burden for geographic research on Latin America will have to be undertaken by Latin American rather than Anglo-American professionals. If for no other reason than financial support, our research will be challenged to focus on more relevant problems. But there are other reasons for relevancy. As Professor Soja stressed in 1970, "It is part of our obligation as regional specialists to contribute toward the solution of these problems. . ." (Lentnek, Carmin, and Martinson, 1971, 305). In the process of dealing with relevancy we may be able to alter the image of regional geography and regionalists and win renewed acceptance at home and in Latin America.

Finally, we may have to regroup and reorient in the decade ahead, we may run the risk of fading a bit, but let us resolve that we shall never die. I fully expect to be present ten years hence to celebrate CLAG's twentieth anniversary. Join me.

## Notes

1. This is a but slightly modified version of the closing banquet address given at the tenth anniversary meeting of CLAG. While cleansed of some of its saltier remarks, the paper still retains much of the format, phraseology, and sermonizing flavor of an after dinner speech.

2. Out of a total (172) doctoral dissertations produced by Anglo-American students between 1970 and 1978, for example, more than 60 percent were concerned with Middle America. Mexico with 34 dissertations was by far the most important focus. Guatemala with 14 and Costa Rica with 9 followed. In South America, Brazil attracted 17 doctoral candidates followed by Argentina (9) and by Peru, Chile and Colombia with seven each. (Davidson, 1980).

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