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Reality and Research: Some Relationships for the 1980s

"Research methodology" was always viewed as a forbidding topic replete with either excruciatingly dull "how I did it" accounts or ponderously written tomes consisting of platitudes wrapped in profundities. After Quantifactus hauled Geografia across the River Styx during the mid-1960s, Qualifactus stopped sniffing and, pulling up his socks, learned to use the SPSS package so that he too could sound erudite while saying very little. I hope that the next few pages will, at the very least, not bore. My purpose is to reiterate the thesis that I presented at the first CLAG conference a decade ago. The thesis then and now is that economic and social geography must remain contemporary in choice of research subject and have, as its minimum goal, the responsibility to hold a mirror up to the rapidly changing culture, society, and economy of Latin America. It is gratifying to note that the proportion of economic and social geography articles with a focus on the rapid urbanization, industrialization, and technification of agriculture within Latin America has indeed increased in the seventies as compared with the sixties. From my viewpoint, however, the proportion of efforts made in these directions is still insufficient.

A new thesis that I wish to advance for your consideration is that a principal task of the North American economic and social geographers for the 1980s is to aid and encourage Latin American geographers to increase the volume, breadth, and depth of their own research. This thesis is based on the perception that the balance between research generated or originated by Latin Americans as opposed to Latin Americanists is now shifting rapidly and steadily south and represents a healthy trend. Inevitably the focus of the work changes in the process.

Another thesis was actually rather obviously true ten years ago and has only become compellingly clear in the interim. More and more it is becoming necessary for Yankees to work with Latinos on jointly selected topics of mutual interest for financial, political, and intellectual reasons. Moreover, this is a good thing because we have always had the tendency to impose our perceptions of the research agenda upon the evolving reality of Latin America. When we have a pollution problem, Latin America is instantly supposed to suffer the same problem to the same degree. When we suffer from the alienation and cultural

sterility of the suburbs, urbanization in Latin America is assumed to produce the same problem to the same degree. The sheer cultural blindsideness and national arrogance among regionalists, of all people, is breathtaking. The wry suggestion made seven years ago at the Stockholm Conference by the Brazilian Foreign Minister that, actually, Brazil could use more of a pollution problem because that would be one sign that industrialization was successful was greeted with outrage and incomprehension. We simply fail to recognize that nations, as households, have priorities that reflect where they are any moment and that these priorities must differ from ours because our geographical and historical situations differ.

Finally, I advance the thesis that several countries in Latin America are on the verge of joining the industrialized West and indeed they should be welcomed with open arms. Mexico and Brazil are already among the top 20 nations in the level of industrialization. Both countries will have completed industrialization before century's end. Indeed Brazil will be the second largest economy in the Western Hemisphere and Mexico will possess an economy the full equal of Britain, France, or Italy. Venezuela is well on her way toward becoming a completely industrialized and urbanized state and is being closely followed by Colombia. Even the tiny Central American Republics are breaking away from Yankee control one by one. The era of dependency and village societies is not only passing, but in many important regions traditional Latin societies have already passed. In terms of reality, consider the implications of some of the following facts of life that have emerged during the seventies:

- 1) A number of important Latin American countries are clearly exiting from Phase Two of the Demographic Transition, i.e. their birth rates are now falling while death rates are clearly leveling off at the 10-5/1,000 range.
- 2) Rural-urban migration patterns have now entered the final phase where there is actual depopulation in many rural areas.
- 3) Great urban-industrial belts are forming, e.g. the Veracruz - Mexico City - Guadalajara axis, the Rio - São Paulo - Curitiba axis; and the Caracas - Valencia - Maracaibo axis. These are the emerging Ruhrs, Midlands and Great Lakes regions of raw power for the twenty-first century.
- 4) The discipline of Geography in Latin America has been expanding at a rate during the 1970s which is four to five times faster than in Anglo America. By 1980, the number of departments can be counted in the scores, the number of

professors in the hundreds and the number of students in the thousands. Sometime during this decade, the number of full-time professional geographers living and working in Latin America will exceed the number of outsiders who are Latin Americanists. Furthermore that shift promises to become decisive, i.e. irreversible.

5) The outlook of most academic geographers in Latin America is at one and the same time more politically radical and pragmatically oriented than the variety practiced here. The central methodological question is "In what way should events in Latin America be permitted to influence the choice of research topic, the type of data collected and the type of analysis performed by Latin American/st economic and social geographers?" This paper's principal thesis is that the basic methodology of economic and social geographers working in Latin America should reflect an active concern for and relationship with the evolving patterns of development in Latin America.

In order to gain a perspective upon the economic geography literature related to Latin America during the 1970s, I have resorted to extensive use of *GEO Abstracts*. In particular, I have used Series C, "Economic and Social Geography," as a guide and Latin America as the particular descriptor. The years covered were 1972, 1974, 1976, and 1979. Since *GEO Abstracts* service is at least one year behind the date of journal publication, the data for 1979 are largely missing and we do lose considerable information for 1978. Nonetheless, about 280 articles published during the 1970 to 1977 period were surveyed.

GEO Abstracts does tend to be somewhat catholic in its definition of what constitutes a "geography" article inasmuch as many authors and journals are clearly not "geographic" either by profession or label. Also, some will object (with justice) that some of the topics treated are not geographic. The result is that an estimate of 700 articles published in the decade (our sample of 280 was drawn from 4 years for an annual rate of 70 per year) is probably somewhat exaggerated. On the other hand, I personally know of several dozen articles that were published in Latin American journals and were not listed in *GEO Abstracts* for the years surveyed and it is certain that there were many more. A good approximation to the "truth" is probably that about one article was published a week during the 1970s somewhere in the world on the subject of the economic geography of Latin America.

As can be seen from Table 1, about 210 out of 280, or 75 percent of the articles included in the survey, dealt with agricultural or natural resource themes. Yet, by decade's end, nearly three out of four Latin Americans either lived in an urban setting and/or worked in a non-primary activity. It is very likely that the proportion of scholarly work dealing with urban, transportation, industrial, and commercial themes had increased over the 1960s. Nonetheless, the rate of change in thematic choice lagged behind the rate of change in reality. The pastoral tradition still remains the dominant theme within North American geography. There are economic geographers who continue to assert that a man-land orientation is not only a perfectly sound way to view all of human geography but that this tradition is most comfortably preserved in settings close to nature. My contention is simply that a sure way to remain largely irrelevant or, in today's jargon, unapplied, is to continue to choose for study every backwater and by-way in a rapidly modernizing continent.

Table I**A Four-Year Sample of Economic Geography Articles
Dealing With Latin America During the 1970's***

Category	Title	Number of Articles
I	Traditional Commodity Studies	40
II	Regional Studies of Development	35
III	Resource Frontier Studies	15
IV	National Reviews of Agriculture Performance of Problems	41
V	Multi-Regional or Pan Latin American Agricultural Themes	17
VI	Agrarian Land Use and Reform Studies	11
VII	Energy Studies	24
VIII	Non-Energy Natural Resource Studies And Environmental Studies	26
IX	Agricultural Commercialization and Central Place Studies	12
X	Urbanization Studies	7
XI	Transportation Studies	10
XII	Industrial Location Studies	17
XIII	Common Markets and Economic Integration	108
XIV	Dependency Studies	5
XV	Miscellaneous and Unclassified	10
		280

Agricultural or Resource Based 209

All Others 71

Within the rural setting, fairly traditional studies of either single commodities or regions continued to attract researchers and so constitute one out of every four articles published. Resource frontiers in deserts and rain forests continued to attract some hardy souls. The content of these articles often had a strong developmental orientation and are highly contemporary in tone. One favorite exercise by both geographers and non-geographers in dealing with Latin American agriculture are country surveys of recent changes. More rarely, one finds serious academic studies of national economic structure. In general, I gather from examination of the abstracts that the relative frequency of studies based upon primary data collection or field work in the traditional sense is

declining in favor of the examination of the ever-increasing flow of quality statistics from government sources.

There are a number of quality articles on agricultural themes that relate to more than one country in Latin America. Many are by European geographers. The land tenure reform issue attracted geographers' attention during the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s but seems to have petered out since then. This is probably a reflection of reality since the democratic left have largely turned to other issues while the radical left detests land tenure reform because it undermines the basis for revolution.

Over all, there were about 160 articles out of 280 in the survey devoted to agricultural themes. It is significant that all of the other identifiable themes attracted less than 5 to 10 percent of the attention. Actually, from an urban perspective, the situation is worse since 50 out of the remaining 120 articles dealt with natural resources, leading to our earlier statement that three-fourths of the economic geography of Latin America concerns one-third of its population. Perhaps the bias can be understood somewhat more clearly when it is noted that economic geographers paid twice as much attention to a rural Latin American than an urban one.

The energy studies were almost exclusively focused on the discovery and distribution of petroleum and understandably became a more popular topic as the decade wore on. Non-energy natural resource studies defy summarization because they are completely diverse in choice of material, method of analysis, and conclusions.

The agricultural commercialization and central place studies theme numbered 12 articles in the survey. Since I have published four articles of which only one was caught by *GEO Abstracts* even though all four were in geography journals, I understand perfectly well that there were lapses in my informal survey. Still, it is rather discouraging to discover that probably there were no more than 30 articles written on the subject by geographers in the 1970s. As articles dealing purely with farmers indicate, the rural countryside has been commercialized to an amazing degree over the past decade with far-reaching consequences for both land use and regional economic structure. Crop diversification has proceeded so far that it can be confidently stated that the old duality of plantation and subsistence crops is now a fading memory for a numerical majority of *campesinos*.

Urban fruit, vegetable, and dairy production has been increasing by leaps and bounds. Yet, we know next to nothing of the process at the scale at which regional geographers are supposed to find their *forte*.

Urbanization, transportation, and industrialization studies number 34 out of 280 articles, or about one-eighth of the articles surveyed. The only urban article in the survey written by an American was by Gauthier and was published in 1972! The only transport article written by a North American was by Biechler in 1973 and basically was concerned with the movement of a crop, coffee in Guatemala. None of the industrialization studies were by North Americans. The authors are Western Europeans and Latin Americans. The work, by the way, is really very good.

An important exception to the virtual absence of North American geographers dealing with contemporary urban-industrial societies is the small but high quality literature dealing with common markets. Not surprisingly, the outburst of radical interest in dependency theory has gone virtually ignored by North American geographers whose personal politics and life styles have always been somewhat conservative. The "unclassified" classification contains a group of often terribly interesting pieces whose subject defies my poor efforts at taxonomy.

The very nature of regional geography would seem to demand some balance in concerns between town and country, modern and traditional, machines and men. Yet, as a group, we are boxing ourselves with every passing decade into the nooks and crannies of a rapidly evolving Latin America. We were in danger of becoming fossils when I conceived the idea of CLAG and convinced some friends (and some strangers) to join with me in founding the organization. We have now passed from that danger by achieving an advanced stage of rigor mortis.

The evidence lies not only in what we, as North American students of Latin American geography, have not done, rather the evidence lies in the growing tide of contemporary work done by Latin American and European geographers and also in the strong tendency of regional planners in Latin America to simply ignore the geographic profession.

I am not arguing for less concern for cultural and historical works. On the contrary, over the years I've come to appreciate and value the products of such work. Rather, I am arguing for an active concern among economic and social

geographers for holding up a mirror to living and breathing contemporary man and for having a humane concern expressed in professional work for the downtrodden masses of people caught up in an industrial revolution that has already run more than half its course.

Clearly, we need some vision of what Latin American society actually looks like in 1980 and what it is likely to become by 1990. To be out of the "mainstream" of Latin American geography, as my work of the past decade has undoubtedly been, may well prove to be in the mainstream of events as they occurred in the 1970s south of the border.

Finally, I foresee a cultural realm dominated by Mexico, an Andean Alliance, and Brazil in which the United States role is that of a supporting actor and fading contender. The outlines of industrial world class power are already visible in Mexico and Brazil and, I believe, are rapidly taking form in Venezuela and Colombia. For the sake of our fellow citizens here, we need to alert them to the changing balance of power in the Western Hemisphere.