
COMMUNICATIONS

A COMMENT ON “LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES”

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Bravo for Professor Soares's candid and frank appraisal of the state of Latin American Studies in the United States. Not often do we get such a critical point of view expressed in a helpful manner. However, there exist some problems with his proposals that should be aired.

First, I do not believe American scholars are quite ready yet to take the great leap into collectivized research. Second, if we were to gather all our top—and presumably less-than-top (somebody to do the scratchwork)—scholars and put them into four of five great centers for Latin American Studies, who would man the forts on the frontiers? Are we to relinquish so easily the inroads that have been made into parochialism? Now that we have a “Latin Americanist” ensconced in many departments of small colleges and minor universities across the nation, are we going to give up the beachheads? Not likely. Third, are we willing to let three or four foundations dictate the direction our research should follow in future years, as Professor Soares suggests? Does this not smack of the worst sort of pseudo-imperialism that Latin Americans have been so keen to detect over the course of the last half century? After all, has not the monolithic United States “dictated” policy and commandeered resources in an imperialistic fashion while presenting its actions as the best representations of democracy, plurality, and free enterprise?

On the first issue—that of communal (collectivized, harmonized, cooperative, the wording can be suited to match one's politics it seems) research with common goals; I find the concept inherently distasteful and perhaps more important, out of keeping with the historical reality of United States scholarly

habits and precedents. Here my professional prejudice will have to be admitted. I am an historian and apparently have been somewhat excused by Professor Soares, along with my anthropologically inclined colleagues, from his strongest rebukes. Nonetheless, I believe that the genius of the human mind has more often found expression as the act of the individual, rather than through the medium or sponsorship of a group, agency, or institution (manifested by the existence of a "center," or a "committee," or some such other aggregation that "directs" research goals and energies).

I am not writing of the problem-solving efforts that groups such as CLASCO and others may have in the past engaged in. When faced with the hurly burly of the moment, and when concrete proposals are being sought from government in the face of difficult problems, then the team effort cannot be scorned. The employment of batteries of computers, the application of the most modern research techniques, the gathering of minds (one is reminded somewhat of Mr. Roosevelt's "Brain Trust" of the 1930s), and the positive setting of goals are acts indeed usually warranted by the situation. But the spark of intuition that leads to theory and perhaps to better understanding is not the stuff of committees or academic alliances. Breakthroughs made by a Keynes, by a Weber, by a Toynbee, or by a Furtado were most often the results of individual labors with self-sought problems in disciplines not narrowly construed. To throw the ten (or twenty or thirty, or however many we may agree exist in the United States) leading Latin Americanists together in a think tank and expect the sum total (an apt tautology) of their efforts to lead us to light is to expect a logical ending to a basically illogical situation.

Anthropologists, historians, and philosophers are not defense department analysts, computer technicians, sociologists, and political scientists who can be grouped in a Rand-type situation to grind out the contemporary analyses apparently so esteemed by government bureaus and jargon-laden professional journals. The best thinking in this country has invariably been a result of the individual coming to grips with a problem and then searching for its unique answer or solution. That he/she may employ or interest his students and colleagues is not unusual. That a "school" or research may grow around his thinking and body of research is not unprecedented. But then the apprentices become journeymen and the journeymen aspire to masterships, and from the original genius there spins off a host of seekers, some to advance the knowledge of the master vertically, others to divert horizontally in search of their own answers.

That a great deal of wasted motion is apparent is incontrovertible. But should we measure the progress of the mind with a stopwatch, invoking the basically dehumanizing principles as exemplified in the catch phrases "time-motion studies," "bottom line accounting," "man-hours," and "efficiency coefficients"? Obviously, it is easy to go astray in deliberating on the pros and cons of individual versus collected and directed research efforts. My argument is that diversity has been a historic strength in the research activity of United States scholars. What may indeed appear as little better than organized chaos or outright anarchy (leading to substandard and inferior products as Professor

Soares implies) in the academic world is more truly the intellectual's expression of a general way of life that indeed seems sometimes chaotic and often undirected. But through this welter of perspiring and struggling aspirants there frequently emerge true scholars with true insights, novel suggestions, and provocative reinterpretations.

Going on to the third point (and thus exercising my right to write a chaotic, unorganized letter that leaves point two to follow point three), are foundations indeed to save us from our own mistakes? Will the combined wisdom of those who direct Ford, Rockefeller, and the Social Science Research Council, as well as numerous other patrons lead the artist, humanist, and social scientist in the right direction? This is to argue that a minute portion of "foundation elite" will determine the basic goals and courses of research activities for all research scholars in the country. The overtones of "Big Brother" are simply too starkly revealed in such a suggestion to veil them in any manner. Would not this direction from above fly in the face of all the controls inherently written into the operation of the foundations themselves? Did not Ford, Carnegie, the Rockefellers, and others exercise undue care to remove the foundation directors from the sources of political leverage, intellectual blackmail, and ideological blandishments? Are they not enjoined to cater to all legitimate academic enterprise without prejudice to race, creed, religion, or professional jargon?

The monolithic structure of research that would result from a conscious foundation decision to direct funds in specific channels with specific goals (and presumably done by individuals with specific precepts and approved principles—political, social, and economic) is rather monstrous to contemplate. I am not arguing for a relaxation of standards or a breakdown of discrimination by the foundations. They too must set certain goals and try to meet them. Let these continue to seek excellence, in whatever disguise it comes. But to arbitrate on the essence of excellence before the fact is to put the tired cart before the even more tired and proverbial horse. Perhaps one of the cardinal sins of the historian is to set his course and then select the facts to substantiate his contention—ignoring compelling evidence that may exist to contradict him. For foundations to endow our brains with prescribed dreams and goals is to create the facts to match our theory. Neither a healthy nor ethical wish upon us or the foundations, I suggest.

On the proliferation of second-rate Latin Americanists in the ever-widening circles of the American college community: I tend to agree with Professor Soares in his contention that the quality of research and the researcher tends to diminish in direct proportion to the distance—geographic and academic—from the large, well-endowed and well-staffed centers of Latin American studies. But the advantages of disseminating a knowledge of Latin America in the junior colleges and other smaller and lesser-known colleges and universities seem to outweigh the dilution of quality that certainly is fostered by the increase in quantity. There exist several lines of faulty reasoning in Professor Soares's contentions in this regard. One, great centers of Latin American studies (presumably those would be created by consolidating present ones) could not exist in a vacuum of interest on all other levels of the academic community. Interest is

generated by training, education, and the natural inclinations of a nation to want to know about other nations. One simply cannot legislate by some magical foundation or government fiat that Brazil, Argentina, Honduras, the Amazon area, or the Andean region will now be studied in great depth with clear goals and luxurious funding by the designated center for that area. Such an effort cannot be sustained if the nation and the community of scholars do not share an interest that is profound and continuing. Two, how is the presence of Latin America (how many times have we explained in opening lectures to undergraduates *where* South America is and what is *spoken*, etc.) to be constantly kept alive and nurtured in the educational system of the United States if not by the hundreds and thousands of laborers who wage a sometimes lonely but almost always lively campaign in their departments and their colleges for the recognition and teaching of Latin American content courses in a curriculum that is so naturally heavily weighted toward the United States? Were it not for this work on the outside it seems there would be no inside or center (or Centers of Latin American studies).

I nonetheless share with Professor Soares many of his misgivings and agree with some of his analysis. The question of applying "universal" principles derived from a less than catholic sampling of experiences cannot be sustained, as Professor Soares quite correctly points out, especially in the Latin American case. However, I believe the data gatherers and the purer social scientists are more guilty of this sin than those of us more traditionally stacked in the corner with the humanists. I, too, have often wondered what gave some of my colleagues the credentials to fly into a country, accumulate some statistics, plug them into some formulas (all this done with a smoke-screen of paradigms), and then pontificate on the nature of this or that phenomena, trend, or any given "ism." Man is a profoundly complicated, adaptable, and eclectic creature whose interaction with nature (geography, weather, resources) and responses to problems (earthquakes, population expansion, hunger, and wealth) are in many cases unique or at least quite varied from the experiences of other peoples, in different places, and in different times. Yet, of course, there does exist an underlying common humanity that gives some credence to the "universalists." But to invoke the general at the expense of or disregard for the particular is myopic and lends itself to distorted and unfeeling visions of the truth.

That we do have "Latin Americanists" in this country who cannot speak Spanish or Portuguese (I won't enter into the question of when volubility becomes fluency—like the man who couldn't describe a giraffe but could certainly recognize one when he saw the creature, I can recognize fluency when I hear it but am in no professional posture to describe it), who possess only the merest nodding acquaintance with a Latin American country (usually its capital, which automatically distorts one's vision—and pocketbook as well), and who produce the shallowest of material that reflects only a method and not the substance is to be decried.

A few years ago the great Mexican historian Daniel Cosío Villegas wrote a preface for the Michael C. Meyer and Richard E. Greenleaf guide to Mexican libraries and archives entitled *Research in Mexican History* (1973). In this preface,

Cosío Villegas pleaded with his North American colleagues to stop sending him earnest but untrained young individuals who yearned for a place in the sun. They were unprepared to research in Mexico, squandered his and their time, and then returned to the United States as "Mexicanists" and "Latin Americanists"—a travesty of the real thing. Perhaps Cosío Villegas was writing in a *moment of great pique, for after all, how does one get started if not by the process of trial and error. So we are faced with a dilemma of sorts; one distinguished Latin American (although only recently deceased, Don Daniel still very much influences Mexicanists) counsels us not to send him our students, while another (Professor Soares), advises us to immerse them in Latin America.*

In sum, it is no easy task being a "Latin Americanist" in this country. We are bedeviled by an assortment of problems and find no easy solutions. Professor Soares clearly identified some of the major problems, and although I tend to disagree with some of his suggested solutions, I certainly thought his essay stimulating. *Me provocó*, and I hope others were also given to weighing his analysis that gave me, for one, much to think about and mull over.