

WISHFUL THINKING AS
AN OBSTACLE TO DEVELOPMENT
IN LATIN AMERICA:

A Reply

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My article, "The Internal Frontier and Technological Progress in Latin America," seems to have disturbed Richard Clinton deeply, and he raises significant questions regarding social scientists and their obligations. His complaints focus on two distinguishable aspects of my work: my affective state of mind, and the sort of advice I should offer to Latin Americans concerning the solution of their problems.

With respect to the first: since I write in a restrained style for a professional journal, am I sufficiently passionate or despondent regarding the state of affairs in Latin America? As a caring individual, do I ever get depressed or angry about what I see taking place? The answer is yes, much of the time!

Clinton points out that "approximately half of the deaths that occur in Latin America each year are among children," a circumstance that he believes would be alleviated by "varying levels of [unspecified] coercion." I think the first time I became deeply saddened in Latin America was in the summer of 1940, when as a student volunteer working on an *ejido* in northern Mexico, I witnessed the almost daily procession of young virgins dressed in white carrying small caskets on their heads, taking another *angelito* to the cemetery, the sorrowing parents following behind. Undulant fever, as well as chronic starvation, was prevalent in that community, and the infant mortality rate was about 300 per 1000, shockingly high. I was despondent then, and saw no escape from the general poverty. Thirty-five years later, I returned to that part of the country and was cheered to find that the infant mortality had been drastically reduced and that there is now a stable community in what was once a drought-ridden area of uncertain habitation. Were these improvements brought about by some form of governmental coercion, or a "sweeping change" in "unjust structures of the past"?

No, I don't think so, but chiefly by the patient dedication of a host of unnamed scientists who developed appropriate vaccines, doctors and extension agents who brought them into use, and rural teachers who taught illiterate peasants to substitute these remedies for the ritual of the *curandera*. The prevalent starvation was alleviated in large part by irrigation engineers and by the

geneticists and plant breeders who laid the foundations for the Green Revolution that Clinton deprecates. Contrary to his view, the transformation of the region generated higher living standards and provided money incomes for the rootless peasants, after land reform as a purely political measure had failed, and Mexico set the example in Latin America for agricultural productivity. The Green Revolution continues to spread to other areas. Average rice yields in Colombia were doubled from 1966 to 1975 after the introduction of similar techniques. The fact is that progress at the human level is made by just such unspectacular technological advances, laboriously carried out by dispassionate investigators and their agents, and rarely by generalized exhortations for sweeping change.

I recall the sense of outrage I felt when some of my students in Paraguay showed me the raw, bleeding wounds on their backs after they had been savagely beaten by the police for having expressed themselves too freely during student elections. When I as a visiting professor protested to my dean, I was told it was not an educational question, but an internal political matter, and one that it would be useless to pursue unless I was prepared to see all future academic contact with the outside world cut off. President Alfredo Stroessner, who had come to power as a result of a sweeping change of the bloodiest sort, is still there, twenty-two years later. When he is in a mellow mood, he permits a degree of freedom in university life; whenever he feels threatened, he cracks down hard. I am depressed by his durability, as I am about the repressions of General Pinochet, General Videla, General Geisel and his hand-picked successor, et al., et al., which may explain my "antigovernment bias." Yet the writings of political scientists do not make clear to me by what process democratic government in Latin America is to be achieved. I don't know how Clinton would cope with General Stroessner, other than to exhort Paraguayan students, workers, and peasants to offer their lives in another sweeping change that would, in all likelihood, produce another Stroessner.

I am also depressed when I consider how many competent social and physical scientists, some of them my close friends, cannot work in their own countries at this time despite their excellent training and the evident need for their contributions. Must we conclude with Clinton that "educational systems are a function of power relationships within a society and therefore cannot be independently restructured except within narrow limits?" In other words, that nothing can be done, and the universities must be written off?

I am depressed when I see the economic calamity that the constitutional government of Venezuela, with its insistence on a "dignified" price for petroleum, has visited, together with its Third World confederates in OPEC, on its neighbors less fortunately endowed with oil reserves. What can they do while they wait for a change of heart, other than develop substitutes from underutilized resources of their own? We are not looking at a pretty society, but one profoundly shaped by its cultural past, as well as by the impact of outside forces such as the OPEC crisis. Emotional depression and anger are hard to avoid when we examine the actualities; yet they do not go far in solving problems.

What my article sought to do was diagnose at a macroscopic level the nature and severity of the immediate crisis in Latin America and its relation to

longer term forces, and thereby suggest some constructive alternatives. If I have failed it is not for lack of sympathy, but because of my professional limitations. The job is still there to be done, and many minds can help.

My conception of social science, as of all science, is that it is an organized, systematic way of diagnosing and solving problems. The social justification of a profession of social scientists is not that our position enables us to make highly documented doomsday predictions while we wring our hands helplessly, but that out of our rich experience of the past we can search for feasible alternatives. The greater the emergency, the greater the obligation to carry on the search. The feasibility of the alternatives cannot be known until they are tested in use. This is not a matter of wishful thinking or blind faith in progress; it is simply a recognition of the historical impact that science and technology, for which there are no known substitutes, have had in improving the conditions of life. Social institutions have always resisted such changes and improvements, but particularly in a frontier environment they have not blocked all progress.

Some of the differences between Clinton and myself are no doubt matters of judgment and particular experience. When he describes the difficulties in utilizing the region's hydroelectric potential and declares, "the unhappy fact is that most of the presently habitable areas of Latin America are already inhabited," I think of what the Caroní dam in the Guyana region of Venezuela, the Acaray dam in eastern Paraguay, and other dams in Central America are doing to transform the habitability and the conditions of life in their respective zones. These are actualities, not wishful thinking, and they are far from exhausting the potential. Of course, each development generates new problems, but it is the net gain that matters.

What I find disappointing in Clinton's approach and in that of others with a similar view, notably in recent writings of the Dependency School, is their fatalism and lack of prescriptive content. It is well enough to say, "radical changes in current sociopolitical and economic institutions [are] the prior condition for improving the region's prospects for coping with the future," but how is this radical change to be accomplished, and at what social cost? We have seen a number of violent social upheavals in Latin America, and we know where they lead. What is to follow the next social upheaval? How will infant mortality, widespread hunger, rampant inflation, mass unemployment, overcrowded cities, and torture by officially appointed sadists then be dealt with? These questions are almost wholly missing from the analysis.

In medieval times hospitals were equivalent to charnel houses, to which ill and infirm were taken so that they could die in God's peace. Later, with the development of modern medicine, the conception emerged that patients could be entrusted to hospitals for treatment with the increasing expectation that they might recover. Latin America suffers from many maladies and may be in an acute stage of its life process, but it need not yet be consigned to the charnel house.