

LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE AND ITS TRANSFORMATION  
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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Latin American culture

1.1 The first concept that should be clarified is to what extent can we speak about Latin America as a whole. In other words, in what sense we can speak about Latin America and in how many senses we must distinguish the 20 Republics of Latin America. This is perhaps one of the most important points we have to clarify if we want to deal with Latin American affairs. There are many differences among the Latin American countries-area, population, degree of social and economic development, income, gross national products, and so on. At the same time, there are some common characteristics to all Latin Americans that make all of them share very similar notions about life, wealth, power, family, love. I would say that the only way of speaking about Latin America in general, is on the assumption that everybody knows the differences among these countries. Therefore, I am going to assume here that all of you know the difference between Brasil and El Salvador, Argentina and Nicaragua, Mexico and Haiti, Chile and Paraguay and Bolivia and Costa Rica.

1.2 Another introductory remark I would like to make here is about the problem of understanding between North and Latin America. One cannot understand things that one doesn't love. And one cannot love things that one doesn't know. Therefore, knowledge and only knowledge is the source of love and understanding. In the same way, love is the source of respect. It means that unless you know Latin

America, and you respect Latin America, there will not be real understanding. What does it mean in practical words? First of all, the recognition that Latin America has its own way of life, its own set of values, that cannot and should not be compared in a negative way with the North American way of life and the North American set of values. And second, that Latin America is under a severe process of change and modernization affects every country in Latin America. At the same time, Latin America is awakening to a new process, the process of economic, cultural and political integration. If we analyse these trends in more detail we may conclude that Latin America is striving to express itself, defining its own objectives, its ideals, its aims. So we can see two trends in the process of modernization of Latin America. One affecting every single country, and the other one a global process of change in all Latin America.

1.3 The last introductory remark deals with the difference of the Latin American continent vis-a-vis the rest underdevelopped world. Some economic statistics may be similar in Latin America, in Africa and in Asia, but Latin America is characterized by basic social political and economic values, coming from European tradition. More than 300 years of colonization by Spain and Portugal and more than 150 years of political independent life inspired by European and American ideals, plus important contributions of European immigration, have produced a continent of many races unified by a common set of values inspired in christian western culture.

These introductory remarks bring us to the following conclusions:

First, the only way of speaking about Latin America as a whole is knowing that there are many differences among the countries in Latin America.

Second, that there is in Latin America a deep process of change in two

levels, national and regional. And that these processes of change make more difficult and understanding between North and Latin America. And third, the characterization of Latin America as a particular area of underdeveloped world because of its ethnical and historical links with European culture. There are the elements of the intellectual frame that we are going to use in the analysis of Latin American culture and its transformation.

## II. LATIN AMERICA: A TRANSITIONAL SOCIETY

### 1. The centers of modern Latin America

One of the main characteristics of Latin America's actual situation is the coexistence at different levels and in different regions of traditional patterns of culture, with characteristics of a modern technical and urban civilization. You might be surprised to know that there are in Latin America 8 large cities with a population bigger than one million and 70 cities with more than 100.000 habitants. These very important urban centers like Buenos Aires, Mexico, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Santiago, Caracas, Bogata, La Habana, are the expressions of a very dynamic and progressive middle sectors. The role of the universities more than 200 in Latin America-as instruments of social and economic promotions have to be related to this important urban centers. The concentration of industries in the largest cities attracts people from the rural areas which are not assimilated rapidly, creating circle slums around the cities, like the "Villas Miseria" in Argentina, the "favelas" in Brasil and the "callampas" in Chile. These are marginal groups of population that give to the Latin American cities an indigenous element which coexists simultaneously with the modern highly urbanized population. This gives an explanation of the contrasts that we may find within the largest cities of Latin America. A very distinguished American political scientist said that because this region is a part of the

western cultural continuum, its social underdevelopment is less pronounced than its economic underdevelopment; thus an exaggerated part of its value structure and its knowledge is gained as a kind of unearned income in greater degree than other extra-Western areas because of its historically higher receptive ability. As a corollary, when Latin American countries choose methods for modernizing their economies, there is less resistance to European norms than in most other parts of the underdeveloped world.

2. Latin America is not a typical underdeveloped area

As we analyse the actual situation of Latin American society from the point of view of the characteristics of the underdeveloped societies, we may get a much more clear picture of the process of transformation of Latin America. We are going to consider the foregoing criterias:

- a) Class structure,
- b) Politics,
- c) Cultural values,
- d) Wealth,
- e) Skill and education,
- f) Race relations
- g) Class Structure:

Except for 2 or 3 small countries in Latin America, we do not find an example of a by-class society in which a small ruling group makes the important decisions for the rest of the population. THE Spanish tradition of the government and administration has changed into a much more modern and industrial society and has increased the importance of the middle sectors, as in Mexico and in Argentina. The absence of a class structure eliminates the typical underdeveloped societies from the Latin American scene. We may find here and there groups of indians-no more than sixteen millions in 200 millions of Latin Americans-which live in a rather primitive way. But these

groups are not the more powerful, the more important in Latin America life.

b) Politics:

Here in the United States people are usually very impressed by the news about a "coup d'Etat", military uprisings, revolutions and so on. We Latin Americans have a long tradition fighting for freedom that never succeeded completely but never failed completely. The fact that Latin America is living a profound process of change in social, economic and political matters explains in part the political instability of governments in Latin America. Nevertheless, we have a good example of stable governments in Mexico, Costa Rica, Chile and Uruguay. On the other hand the increasing importance of middle sector creates the sociologist base for a real political democracy. The way to democracy is not easy, as you well know. Specially if we think of democracy not only as periodical elections but as social and racial justice, economic progress and effective government.

c) Culture:

The European culture values are dominant everywhere in Latin America. But this is not in the type of a colonial super imposition, but as an expression of a historical and ethnical link with Europe. Nobody should be surprised to find European ways of life in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay or Sao Paulo, precisely because the people living there come from European ancestors. The millions of Italians and Spanish descendants living in Buenos Aires, although recognize themselves as Argentinians they kept in touch with their relatives in Europe and they followed through education and family relation the cultural pattern of their ancestors. Therefore, the prevailing culture pattern in Latin America is coming from Europe. We may find also some important contribution from indian culture, as in Mexico,

Bolivia and Guatemala. But language, religion, way of life, reflect in general terms, the basic values of European culture.

d) Wealth:

It is true that there are large masses of population who live in poverty. But it is also true that social and economic development is related to the distribution of the national income. The best indicator of a process of income distribution is the growing importance of the middle sectors in most urban Latin America.

e) Skills and Education:

Professional training through universities and high schools is one of the important characteristic of modern Latin America. Education has also improved the participation of Latin American women in the public administration of professional works. The existence of important industrial centers in Mexico, Argentina, Brasil, as well as in other countries, emphasizes the process of modernization of Latin America with organized professional workers, social legislation, and so on.

f) Race relations:

Although we may find in Latin America some small groups that could be considered socio and economically marginals, we do not find racial conflicts in Latin America in the same way that we can find it here in the United States, or in South Africa, or other areas of the world.

None of the characteristics that we have mentioned are "typical" notes of an underdevelopped society. There are no by-class societies in Latin America; there are not European or American groups, or white groups that dominate the natives of the countries; occupational skills are obviously growing; there are not racial distinctions or caste ranking; and there are basic European cultural values widely spread all over Latin America

and supported by the great majority of the Latin Americans. Of course this is not Europe. But it is not Africa or Asia. The notion of underdevelopment is misleading and confusing. Frequently you people speak about the underdeveloped countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America all together, without the slight effort of recognizing the tremendous difference between people and continents. And the concept of underdevelopment is elaborated in reference to your own concept of development.

### III. THE LATIN AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE

This part of our contribution is related to the basic values and social institutions characteristics of the Latin American way of life. It is almost impossible to try to define in detail all values-institutions that define a given culture in a short period of time. But we may select few examples that may give us some elements to understand Latin America. Let's take, as a first example, the attitude of Latin Americans in regard to work. Latin Americans work only to improve their living; they work enough to get what they think they need to enjoy life, because, for the Latin Americans to live is much more important than to work. (The contrary, in the so-called industrialized societies, the aim of life seems to be working, not living and therefore, people seem to live just for working and not working for a living. Perhaps the Latin Americans cannot teach you how to work but maybe they can have some good suggestions about how to relax!

From this point of view, the coming years are very exciting. Automation takes care of the job of many many people. And you well know, leisure, not work will be the main sociological problem. There I find the contribution of the Latin American way of life: joy, espiritual approach to material things, flexible attitude vis-a-vis time are some of the

important elements in a "leisure society".

The attitude with regard to money may give a more comprehensive view about what I am trying to explain. I would say that the Latin Americans are less dependent, less concerned, less involved about money. Latin Americans like to invite a friend and pay for the bill. I asked once to a Mexican taxi driver what were the differences he recognized between a Latin American and a North American. He told me an interesting story. He said that one day he was driving on his car a young American couple. Apparently, he said, they were something more than just "friends". When she arrived to her home, she asked the boy how much was the fare of the taxi, the boy divided the fare and asked the girl to pay her part of the trip. The taxi driver said: "Imaginense senor!" We Latin American will never accept money from any girl".

And here is my conclusion: Perhaps, Latin American cannot teach you how to make money but they may give you some ideas about how to spend it. The attitude with respect to the family is also an indicator of the Latin American way of life. The authority of the father is still alive in Latin America, despite the fact that Latin American women are becoming much more independent because most of them work and contribute to the maintainance of the family. Relationship between father and children is strongly based on the paternal authority. The Latin American family is still composed not only by husband, wife and children but also by the grand parents, uncles, aunts and cousins. The conception of the family is more traditional if you want, but I would say it is much more human. What I am intending to say is that Latin American way of life is in general terms idealistically inspired and that the Latin American way of thinging is ready to accept racial equality and, in general, equalitarian philosophies.

But, at the same time, this idealistic approach is the explanation of the

extreme individualism that we find in Latin America and the difficulties to organize a common effort.

This is why we frequently say that one Latin American plus one Latin American equals zero. Everybody opposes everybody. We lack the capacity to accumulate our efforts and, therefore, all of us like to start everything as if we were the founders of the idea.

We may say that the Latin American way of life is based in subjectivity rather than in objectivity, which is another expression of the individualistic approach. A typical example of this individualistic attitude is the way we attend to church. If one goes to a church in Germany or in the United States a highly organized participation of the people during mass can be seen. Everybody stand up, everybody seats, everybody sings, everybody kneels and leaves together after the priest.

In Latin America most of the people arrive late, some stand when the rest is seated, few people sing and many leave the church before the priest. Finally, a last example of Latin American way of life: the popular "fiestas". In Bahia, Brasil, a North American economist was invited to a "fiesta" and started to watch carefully how the people enjoyed the party. The North American made an economical evaluation of the "fiesta" and said that for him this "fiesta" was a signal of underdevelopment. That if people don't work the community will never progress. A Brazilian economist answered that this "fiesta" was an example of a perfect application of economic principles. He said that the cost of this party for the people participating there was almost nothing. Everybody had a small contribution but the benefit was great. With a very small investment the party was marvelous. And the Brazilian economist concluded that in the United States one invests a big amount of money in parties without getting the enjoyment expected. While there, the brasilians, made a small investment with tremendous enjoyment.

IV. CONCLUSIONS:

We have said before that there is no understanding without respect, there is no respect without love and there is no love without knowledge. Therefore, we should never be tired of insisting and pushing for the improvement of teaching about Latin America in the United States. There should not be a High School or University in the United States without teaching a program about Latin America. So you will know the real situation of modern Latin America; you will understand the efforts that we are doing to improve our situation and, at the same time, you will respect Latin America and Latin Americans as different from you and you will recognize that Latin America has great possibilities of making a contribution to the better understanding of mankind. You will refrain your temptation of changing the Latin Americans according to your own model of development; you may change your concept of aid, as many of you may remember last year CICOP's meeting in Boston I said that aid for you means to give us what you think we need according to your definition of our needs. Now, if you really understand Latin Americans you will agree with me that aid is for us to receive from you what we think we need according to our own definition of what we need.

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