

LATIN AMERICA: CULTURE AND POVERTY

Everybody knows nowadays that the degree of development is measured according to a certain number of criteria, of which the most important one, and initially the only one, was the Gross National Product (or G.N.P.) of each country, related to the number of inhabitants. The arbitrarily-settled line some twenty years ago between the rich and the poor or, as called at that time, the “underdeveloped”, was based at the level of 1000 U. S. dollars *per capita*. The expression was badly accepted by those it described, because development confers a dignity which cannot be refused to anybody. That is why the following euphemism appeared: “developing countries”, as promising as it is little compromising. Later on, this exclusively economical criterion was moderated by several additives, linked to social structure, to the rate of elimination of illiteracy, and even to cultural factors.

It is true that efforts are made, as far as possible, to save the national identity of populations, but most of these, both today and in former times, are concentrated on increasing the income *per*

Translated by Kathinka Tabourin.

capita or per household and do not always measure the social cost involved in efforts. Many—more or less respectable—traditions do not resist, whatever is done to save them; we are not even mentioning here either the marginalization of certain strata of the society, kept apart from the rest, or the financial and technological dependence of the country *vis-à-vis* foreign countries. But no one cares about these effects that everybody hopes will be temporary, the argument being: isn't that the price to pay to have an access to the international market, maintain one's rank, and be admitted to the "progress club"? Why should the road to success taken by others not be the right one for me?

This paneconomic view of things is the outcome of a perfectly logical way of thinking which finds its origin in the Cartesian discourse on method and in the logic of Port-Royal, picking up, in passing, the fruits of the Enlightenment philosophy, becoming stronger in the light of Comte's positivism about the contributions of technology based on mathematics, and finally nowadays taking on an essentially industrial and financial sense. That is how economy becomes an end in itself, a sort of insatiable Moloch that no market expansion is able to satisfy, the golden calf to which the entire world is submitted. Except for the consumer and leisure society, nothing is safe. It seems to include all sorts of material and social welfare. Nothing escapes its attention. The universal submission to its laws seems so obvious that one is surprised—and even shocked—when a brilliant American sociologist, such as David Riesman, dares wonder: To what purpose?—"Abundance for what...?"

Man, caught in the infernal workings of this great universal machine, like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, between purchases and sales, stocks, raw materials, payment conditions, delivery times, crises, royalties, increasing interest rates, sees art reduced to the state of merchandise, science to that of an instrument and thoughts degraded so much that they are only taken into account in terms of profit and loss on the exchange market.

It is not wrong to wonder whether such a conception truly corresponds to Western standards, whether it remains faithful to its Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian origins, or whether it corresponds, on the contrary, to a regrettable deviation towards quantity, material goods, violence, without either any brakes or any

counterweights. It is not up to me to give an answer to such a question, but let me just propose other aspects of the Western world which are no less real and can be expressed as follows: freedom, dignity, beauty, detachment, joy of living. So many other ways of conceiving the world, which do not depend on either the law of demand and supply or profitability and efficiency constraints, or on the insolent omnipotence of Mammon. Among them I would quote the Baroque, a subject to which I would like to return some day.

Apart from these considerations, in which any one is free to find some taste of metaphysics and romanticism, one has the right to wonder whether this paneconomic model, which has been in the fashion for more than 20 years, at least has the merit of being efficient. How many efforts have been devoted in the meanwhile to the betterment of life conditions in the countries which economic development has forgotten, and to reducing the bigger and bigger gap between rich and poor countries? What is more noble and reasonable than such an enterprise?

The measure of the effects will be much more relevant if we look at United Nations figures for the years 1959-1960 and 1979-1980, in order to see whether the gap between these two extremes has been increasing or reducing during these 20 years.

Let us choose four countries: two wealthy and two poor; two with a high density of population, and two with a scattered population. Let us put them together two by two: the United States and Dahomey on one hand and India and Switzerland on the other hand. Then let us see what happens.

In 1960, the Gross National Product per year and *per capita* in Dahomey was around 70 U. S. dollars, while it was 2,884 dollars in the United States. Twenty years later, in Benin (ex-Dahomey) the income *per capita* had grown to 184 U. S. dollars, against 9,864 in the United States. The comparison of these figures is very eloquent. In 1960 the average income *per capita* of an American citizen was 40 times higher than that of a normal Dahomey man, whereas in 1980 it was 50 times higher. It is certainly true that on both sides there has been an increase of the nominal income in constant dollars, but the difference between rich and poor has increased by 25%.

Let us now look at the other pair: India-Switzerland. In India

the G. N. P. per year and *per capita* in 1960 was around 73 dollars; it is now up to 159 dollars. Very good! But in the same time, Switzerland went from 1,594 to 13,335 constant dollars, which means that the difference has doubled: from 1 to 40, the rapport between the average incomes in the two countries has gone up to 1 to 80. Despite some real progress in statistical terms, the gap which divides the rich and the poor has increased in these last 20 years.

Who could then maintain that an economic model should be universally applied? Of course, there are some exceptions. Thank God, results are not always that dramatic! There even are some successes that are of course immediately publicized. But one must recognize that the paneconomic model essentially benefits those who are responsible for applying it; I refer to countries, institutions, even individuals who supply the necessary means to make it work, and who, of course, advertise its merits. As for the others, those who are condemned to progress at any cost, even at the price of abandoning their own identity, those who attend the game, but remain on the touch-lines and suffer all the mud, they have every reason to be attentive to the third decade of progress and the means used to realize it.

Should we then sacrifice everything: honour, culture, traditions, simple life, quiet happiness, just in order to score some extra points on the comparative scale of the wealth of nations? Should we exchange quality of life for quantity of products of this world, like the 20th century Aladdin suggests to us? This was not the opinion of John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople who, as his very name reveals, talked about gold. For him, poverty is not a vice. He even argues further: poverty is not a bad thing either from a moral point of view or from an economic one. And what if he was right? The answer is obvious: in the face of the failure of an economic doctrine based on abundance, why not try to make out of poverty the bearing surface and the lever for prosperity and progress?

Before continuing, let us get rid of any misunderstanding. Poverty is not destitution. The pauper lacks everything, he does not have the necessary material resources to fulfill his most elementary needs, either from an individual point of view, or from a collective one. Destitution is a crime that weighs on the conscience of

humanity as a whole, and compels us to fight it until the last ditch. Let us fight, then, in order that all men on earth may have a standard of living which is in conformity with the dignity of a human being.

The poor man—in the strict sense of the word—owns few things, but enough to survive without help from anybody. He has the essential, but lacks the superfluous, he knows how to accept his condition without feeling any type of frustration. The accepted poverty is an active one, not a resigned one. A state of mind, an attitude, a detachment in the face of the material goods of this world, that we could just as well qualify as modesty, austerity, sobriety; or other similar types of behavior which are the consequence of a wish, that is, a choice within a certain scale of values, and a way of being and acting which conforms with this choice.

Poverty is not a brake, like misery. On the contrary, it offers to the creative force a springboard to the greatest achievements. It is precisely in poverty that humanity has often found the spiritual strength to rise into higher cultures. This strength is not foreign to Western genius, any more than it is necessarily hostile to the spirit of invention which engenders technical progress and material prosperity, for which the paneconomic model is at the same time a reflection and an instrument. Let us say that we are in front of a joining of forces whose united action has had sensible effects throughout the ages. Neither one nor the other can pretend to be exclusive: wealth and poverty, quantity/quality, order and freedom, substance and memory, body and spirit are indivisible by essence.

The West does not have as an essential characteristic, a capitalism based on an early industrialization. The question is certainly not to deny the importance of the material substructure of all that is human. Who would think of talking about some desire to escape from the conditions of bodily existence? But it is important to insist on the hierarchy of values, and when the issue is development, to point out what is essential: man. Justice, love, freedom, dignity, poetry, beauty, we want to remain faithful to our destiny as men made in the image of God. Let us be very clear here. Our aim is not to preach misery, (which would be repugnant), but only to stress the primacy of spiritual values, not only theoretically, but also in all practical forms.

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If we believe the dictionary, to develop means to stretch out, to open out, to unroll and so to reveal what is hidden under the folds. The whole problem is not to destroy the substance of the message which is in the fold, while opening the envelope. The growth, if there is any growth, has to preserve its stamp of authenticity. In fact, what is the whole purpose, if not to grow like a plant, or like any living being? To talk about growth means to talk about proliferation of the cells of an organism, but also about equilibrium between all the elements constituting it. As soon as this equilibrium is broken, the organism grows sickly and falls into decay instead of developing normally.

Doing its best, according to its natural and historical possibilities, a population develops in the proper sense of the word; its latent forces, slowly accumulated throughout time, become a reality and give birth to a culture, a way of life, corresponding to a land, an ethnic group, a will to affirm itself in the world in order to then be able to measure its forces with other peoples, and not only with those on whom it is dependent to survive, to look to itself for its starting point, in its own essence, in its soul. Unable to respect this principle, this population is one day or another submitted to a foreign tutelage. No matter which intrinsic value is applied to it, the enterprise is then doomed to certain failure. In wishing to measure all Third World States by the same yardstick, we tend to go astray. What is valid for Africa, for example, is not valid for all other continents. This is what the paneconomic model tries to make us believe, by only taking into account the quantitative aspect of things. The Third World is then a homogeneous bloc: a bloc compelled to growth because of the logic of figures.

The cultural model—if we may call it that, as opposed to the paneconomic one—tries first of all to promote the gifts which are the spiritual heritage of a population, and is therefore completely at the antipodes of colonialism. It accepts the plurality of cultures. Relying on the autochthonal tradition, popular ways and customs, and other social criteria, it promotes an impulse developing in spirals, and ending in a desire for national assertion. But this is neither tourism, nor bogus folklorism. The stake is more serious. The purpose is to recreate confidence within a people, to strengthen its faith in its own dignity, its hope for a better future. Here, the economy is only a means to these ends, a card in a game where

the stake is a much higher cause. When the means of industrialization reach a point where they take the place of the spiritual ends of general progress, the cultural model rebels: it can only oppose their pretensions and denounce their imposture.

The real aims of the cultural model are happiness through stability, quality of life, a friendly world on a human scale and an admission of the right to differ. Wealth is not any more an end in itself. Poverty loses this image of an indelible smudge, attributed to it by paneconomism, and gains an eminent dignity and an instrumental virtue. Detached from any venal ambition, poverty promotes the blossoming of a certain qualitative way of life. The road of poverty leads to the happiness of peoples.

It is argued that the primacy of spiritual matters is something out of date, but it would be a much worse heresy to think that economism can solve all the problems which it has contributed to create or aggravate. The widening of the gap between the rich and the poor is an example of that, as are the exhausting of natural resources, the submission of man to the robots he has invented, or even his helplessness in the face of all the systems which he is no longer able to control. The violence and total war which are threatening are nothing but the after-effects of an ideology based on wealth. One Utopia is just as good as another but preference goes to the one which can plead not guilty, because it has been forgotten for a century. We are witnessing its awakening. It may be very noisy.¹

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Among the regions called upon to develop “in the ways of the spirit”, Latin America should deserve special attention from Europe. One must admit that this half continent is more often relegated to the rank of a market to be conquered or simply part of the Third World. And so we reach this significant concept, just as familiar as it is full of ambiguity.

The concept of Third World finds its origin in the Bandung Conference (1955) which gathered representatives from African and South-East Asian countries, including China and Japan, of

¹ In connection with this, see the book by Albert Tévoédjrè, *Pauvreté, richesse des peuples*.

which the majority were of freshly emancipated States. Here, the word "world" means a global entity of countries tied down by the same bondages, principles and laws which insure them a certain cohesion and differentiates them from other global entities. Initially, the definition of the Third World was unequivocal: its principles were opposed term by term to those of Western society, and all of them had a hostile connotation to white domination, which could be explained by the historical and political conjuncture of the moment. The concept includes two continents which present certain similarities: European civilization entirely superimposed on autochthonal cultures to the extent of suffocating non-white ethnic groups; total economic dependence, non-existent industrialization, open or latent antagonism between the previous metropolis and the newly emancipated colony.

The solidarity of votes from the under-developed countries at the U.N.C.T.A.D. (Geneva, 1964), the creation of the so-called "Group of the 77", and several other international manifestations, had the effect of including in the concept of Third World the Latin-American countries. For the moment uncontested, this raises a certain number of questions. Latin America certainly has more than one thing in common with the other poor countries of this world: its economic weakness, as a producer of depreciated raw materials, with a dawning industry for which any growth depends on the decision-making centres of the world which rank it statistically among the most underprivileged. But if we put aside this resemblance, the reality appears very different.

Latin America, which is very cross-bred, could not, of course, have an anti-white policy. As soon as it gained its independence, around 1820, it asserted its affiliation to the great Western cultural family, claiming to be nothing but a new phase of its evolution, the fourth generation of a line of which the three preceding ones were Greece, Rome, and the Hispano-Portuguese pair of the Iberian peninsula. That shows to what extent it felt integrated with the Graeco-Latin tradition, without denying either its Indian inheritance, or its African one. In spite of both a geographical and a political remoteness from old Europe, it is clear that this new continent, so vast and diversified—it contains some twenty independent States—cannot constitute a homogeneous bloc. It would be more relevant to talk about a mosaic, where Spanish-American,

Lusito-American, Franco-American, Indo-American and Afro-American elements are combined in order to create a whole, joined not only geographically, but also by a way of thinking, a vocation, a unique aim.

These observations taken into account, it might have been better to reduce the scope of the concept of Third World to an essentially economic and political context, which of course has social implications, before extending it to the Latin-American countries. That was not the case, with the regrettable consequences known to all. For twenty years, we pretended to confuse Latin America with African or Asian Third World countries, without taking the least into account the essential differences between these regions.

The psychological effect of such a confusion was considerable: until then, i. e., until about 1950, the Latin-American countries considered themselves as entirely Western countries—though different. The American continent—North and South—represented what was called the “Western hemisphere”. Pan-Americanism, for which the hub since the end of last century was Washington (the Pan-American conference in 1889), represented a political and ideological movement which already claimed to form the Western *avant-garde*. Its slogans were: republican institutions, human solidarity, confidence in the future, recourse to arbitration every time that conflicts of interests threatened to lead to a test of strength, etc...

According to this vision of the world, the planet was, at the dawn of the Second World War, divided into two parts: the ancient and the new world. The post-war period split it in three, and the confusion of Latin America with the Third World provoked a veritable shock, with various repercussions, as much at the level of the States as at that of the different currents of world opinion. Let us quote three of them which had reverberations beyond our own half-continent.

a) Seeing itself, not without satisfaction, rejected by Western countries, a certain stream of opinion hastened to find a common cause with its new brothers of the Third World. It then looked for, and is still looking for, all that in Latin America is not directly associated with the European heritage. Political and cultural links strengthen with other disinherited peoples from other latitudes, and

solidarity towards them develops in the committed milieus;

b) another current, much closer to the financial, industrial and commercial circles, disconcerted by this evolution, tries to maintain its privileged links with the West and does its maximum in order that Latin America return—at least partially—into the orbit of the Western world;

c) and finally the third current which could be qualified as “realistic”, takes cognizance of the new situation and tries to justify it by historical considerations. The vocation of the New World would be to detach itself from the West without, however, identifying itself with the Third World. To be conscious of its diversity *vis-à-vis* these two extremes; to take into the maximum account the heterogeneous influences to which it has been subjected; and to create an independent Latin-American civilization: such would be the three main points of the plan.

These three currents of opinion—each of which, it is obvious, presents many nuances—have always to be borne in mind if one wants to understand present day Latin America. But where is the profound reality? That is the question! For about half a millenary, this part of the New World has had a permanent core of behaviour, to which indigenous elements of great intrinsic value, as well as precious African contributions have come to form a part. From the 19th century onwards one may notice the growth of this core by borrowings from the philosophy of progress, inherited from several European countries and from the United States.

A superficial look at Latin America may give the impression that paneconomism has won the game. One can see everywhere big urban concentrations, skyscrapers and high technology industries. But, going further with the analysis, one notices that the stock remains deeply rooted in its origins, of which the values are certainly out of date but are still glorified by nostalgia for the past.

Jean Fourastié, in a recent book which is certainly one of the best testimonies of our time, writes: “Humanity has been caught in the trap. Progress should have been in proportion with time, that was obvious. It is only today, that is, two hundred years later, that we start wondering whether there might not be divergent values; whether, while progressing, we are not threatening time. It is

enough to note the deep disorder of the nations, the proliferation of destructive weapons. While progressing, we have destroyed without even knowing who we were destroying.”

Nevertheless, behind the facade of a material progress questionable in itself, quite a lot of contemporary Latin-Americans have conserved the time cult which combines a tendency to personalism inherited from the Baroque with a certain aperture to the cosmic timelessness which represents the phylogenetic contribution of “our ancestors, the Indians”.

That part of ourselves which remains linked to its Latin origins expects from the West, and more specifically from the big Mediterranean countries, a “V. I. P. treatment” as members of the same family. It recognizes the worth of all the aid and technical assistance provided by the friendly nations; but it attaches a particular importance to those which know how to show their awareness of the situation in which Latin America finds itself—a very complex situation, between the ancient and the New World, between the industrialized West and the developing countries, at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and pre-Colombian America—but a situation of which Latin America accepts all composite elements, and from which it draws its pride.

This last point is essential: if the sources from which its culture derives are many, and if the integration of the different currents is far from being perfect, Latin America denies nothing of its origins and, on the contrary, respects all of them, considering this diversity a vital element of its true identity. Nevertheless, according to most Latin-Americans, two components of this mosaic deserve particular attention and esteem: I mean the indigenous fibre (cultural heritage, relics of the past, monuments, customs, telluric values, cosmic spirit) and the Iberian fibre (Hispano-Lusitanian, common origin in the Latin language, order, transcendence) which, in spite of the cruelty of historical conflicts, become unified and all but part of the reality of actual society. Let us add to this a certain tension between the feeling of belonging to the Western world, and a fundamental Americanism—heritage of an ancestral Indianism—which gives great originality to this mixture, and at the same time links the southern and central countries to the Third World.

Let us open parentheses here to recall that in Latin America the term “colonial” only took on a negative sense with the political

speeches. In the classical sense of the term, it evokes—and with what pride!—the great epoch of Baroque architecture and colonial art, in which everybody sees with pleasure one of the summits of our culture and the entire expression of our national identity. To talk, as everybody is happy to do nowadays, about “decolonization”, means to cut short any possibility of dialogue. We can never repeat enough that the Latin-American people are Latin—Latin in their own way—in cordial rivalry with Saxons, Africans or Asiatics.

The first preliminary condition to the success of a development aid to Latin America is therefore of a psychological and sociological order: recognition of the political nature of this region of the world, its specific differences, its Latin connections. This way of looking at things works at different levels: cultural, scientific, or simply friendly. The issue is not so much to create new things, but to develop existing realities or latent possibilities, which have in fact already existed since the 15th century and have matured on the spot, slowly. Even though they might appear nonchalant, our Latin-Americans sometimes hide a temperament at times violent and quick to explode. A tradition which is respectful of form regulates complex relations between people, according to the laws of a conventional etiquette inherited from the European 18th century.

Only after having regulated one's conduct to this preliminary recognition of the psychological and sociological aspects can one hope to deal successfully with the other political, economical or technological problems. Trying to reverse the order of priorities would bring any attempt at technological assistance to failure. On the other hand, once contact is made, economic relations are much easier to knot together, thus creating a complicity of language, cordiality and solidarity which can open up wider horizons. This integration of material and spiritual interests is of capital importance for the promotion of a real development of Latin America, in accordance with its own vocation. Thus, it is the success of this development which will condition the real beginning of a North/South dialogue and the possibility of truly reciprocal exchanges, called for urgently by all experts on the subject.

The European role in Latin America is not to look for the conquest of new markets, just as it is not in the common interest to achieve a purely economic development. The aim on each side

is to maintain-Latin American countries in the cultural and historical community of the West, with each of them, of course, remaining faithful to its own traditions and destiny.

Europe can do quite a lot to stimulate growth, to bring to life the seeds which are dormant in the heart of our being and which ask only to blossom on the native land where chance or spirit of adventure has sown them. By helping us to become ourselves again, to bring back to light all the values dimmed by industrialization, but which sparkle in the Latin-American firmament, it will render us—and indeed itself—a great service.

Alberto Wagner de Reyna.
(Lima)