

Critical thinking and alternatives for transformation in Latin America

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Abstract: The reasons of the loss of sovereignty of Latin American countries in favor of a neocolonial order are analyzed critically in the text. One sets out to evaluate alternatives to decolonize the social thought and to contribute to a true democratic and sovereign exercise upon reconsidering the historical, collective and ethical dimensions of social life in our subcontinent.

Key words: sovereignty, democracy, social thought, social life.

Resumen: En el artículo se analizan críticamente las razones de la pérdida de soberanía de los países latinoamericanos a favor de un orden neocolonial. Se propone evaluar alternativas para descolonizar el pensamiento social y contribuir a un verdadero ejercicio democrático y soberano sobre la base de reconsiderar las dimensiones histórica, colectiva y ética de la vida social en nuestro subcontinente.

Palabras clave: soberanía, democracia, pensamiento social, vida social.

As I recall there is emotional, ideological and political tension in the Latin American critical thinking as from the 1970's (Sosa, 1996). My generation grew with the indignation from the student repression in 1968 and 1971 in Mexico, and with the tragic coups that destroyed the conquests of the democratic movements of Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Bolivia during the 1970's (Cueva, 1981).

The current generation is enriched by the democratic triumphs in Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador, Brazil, Paraguay and Chile, and is concerned by the regressions of Mexico and Colombia. In one or the other end, the orientations of thoughts have to do with the drives of collective life (Darling, 2008).

Being a Latin Americanist still means associating and committing to the transformation for the democracy, sovereignty and justice in the region, however each time has its own particularities and, thereby its own demands (Sánchez and Sosa, 2004).

This work is part of a long-scoped reflection which I share with many Latin American colleagues on the role that social sciences and their practitioners have to fulfill before the circumstances of political change that nowadays Latin America experiences, particularly in the face of the world financial crisis and the new threats to the democratic movement in our countries.

The contemporary dimension of the struggle for sovereignty

Almost 200 years ago the Libertador Simón Bolívar denounced in his *Letter from Jamaica* that in our region a “military scale of 2000 leagues in longitude and 900 in latitude in its largest extension [...] 16,000,000 Americans defend their rights”; and stated:

The Americans, in the current Spanish system, and perhaps stronger than ever, do not have other place in society but as servants and maybe as simple consumers; and even this part restricted with disgusting limitations; such are the prohibitions to grow European fruits, the stagnation of productions that the king monopolizes, the impediment of the factories that the very peninsula does not possess, the exclusive privileges of trading even first-need objects; blocks between provinces and American provinces to prevent their communication, understanding and trading; in any case, do You want to learn what our fate will be? The fields to grow indigo, cochineal, coffee, sugarcane, cocoa and cotton; the lonely prairies to rear livestock; the deserts to hunt ferocious beasts; the earth entrails to dig gold, which said avaricious nation cannot satiate (Bolívar, 1815).

He used to call said state of affairs an “outrage and a violation to the rights of mankind”. Unfortunately, the circumstances of our America have scantily changed nowadays. Out of a population of more than 540 million people, over 62% moves around poverty and indigence; an external debt worth 700 million USD consumes a very considerable part of the GDP of the region; transnational corporations dominate most of the strategic productions of our countries, while the so-called war on drugs has militarized the subcontinent at levels not even seen at the times of the dirty wars 40 ago (CEPAL, 2008, 2001; Sotelo, 2005; Valenzuela, 2005; Dos Santos, 2008; SIPRI, 2008).

Latin America is one of the regions of the world which has experienced a large number of crises in the last six decades. Wars, dictatorships, revolutionary processes have occurred one after another leaving behind hundreds or thousands of casualties, forced disappearances and prisoners. None can state now, as Bolívar was not able to in his time, that our States are fully consolidated; it is only that the responsibilities of this disaster cannot be shared by the societies of the region. It is the historical continuity of an oligarchic model that was cemented on the stressing of inequality, on the enclave economy, on the constant dispute over sovereignty.

The instructions issued by Spain, which was corroded by crisis in the times of Bolívar, are nowadays, likewise and indiscriminately, issued by the World Bank, OECD, and the very U.S. government, whose Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, recently stated before the U.S. Senate that the most serious threat to security is the economic crisis originated in the U.S., this did not mean assuming the lightest responsibility or referring to the world as an unquestioned sphere of the political, economic and military hegemony of the United States (Blair, 2009).

Because of this, it is urgent to center our academic concern on the current meaning of sovereignty and on the future of Latin America. We could and we should redo the exercise of Bolívar to question ourselves, not any longer about the possible effects that this U.S. crisis will bring— something already carried out among others by David Harvey (2009) with extraordinary intelligence— but on how we project our own thinking about what will be of our America, where we want to direct its destiny once the current hegemonic model is defeated, which has virtually dominated it since its Independence from Spain.

Recovering our sovereignty is a fundamental task for critical thinking. Years living subjugated to the so called international order have inherited the use of a language, of concepts and attributions of values and meanings utterly alien to our reality. An instance of this are our educational systems, most of which deem academic activities according to certifications of competences and quality proper to market requirements, as well as the parameters imposed by these international

organisms. In the technocratic terminology they have disseminated, they talk about human capital —a term that indeed reminds the fiction of subordination of mankind to the control of a despotic will, described by Orwell (1948) — to refer to the investment on resources destined to train technicians and practitioners. All that jargon, and what comes with it: the reduction of public resources destined to education, privatization of our educational systems, the impoverishment of our curricula from supposed competences for the market, tries to eradicate the thinking associated to development, the solution of the basic needs of the population, the formation of abilities and values adequate for the ends of a sort of education thought of as a fundamental public service (World Bank, 1995).

On the contrary, thinking of what we really need and what for it implies humongous operations of dismounting the learning chains oriented by the entrepreneurial expectations to later reconstruct them, this time based on the effective demands of our societies.

We name some of them:

- How to guarantee the dignity of life of the human beings who live in our countries (food, health, education, housing);
- Upon which bases to establish a development program that preserves and enriches our basic resources so that it does not mean the destruction or infringement of the recovering capacity of our environmental services;
- How to build a system of social relationships that prevents the aggravation of inequality and which attributions the State must have in order to guarantee the search of new balances based on justice, equality and equity;
- How to reconstruct the public spaces and in which direction revaluing the intervention of the State in social life in views of guaranteeing freedom, tolerance, respect to others, the fulfillment of the aspirations of the majority, and mainly an effective popular sovereignty in public decisions;
- Which system of interchanges of goods, services and products has to be constructed, according to the needs and capacities of the whole of society, as well as the levels of participations of the different sectors, public and private, domestic and international, which proscribes abuse, unlawful monopoly and promotes actual equality in the terms of interchange;
- Which knowledge processes favor the formation of critical, humanistic and scientific culture, to promote the broadening of visibility horizons and the continual flow of ideas, proposals, visions, information from all the countries of the world, and in particular of those which, together with the Latin American, share, as Bolívar said, origin, language and customs;

— Which experiences of our own history feed the formulation of solutions for our current problems and allow us to glimpse hypothesis and formulations to face the future problems of our societies in accordance with our identity and exercising our sovereign will.

The recovery of our sovereignty will be, eventually, a physical fact, but above all the product of an academic, ideological, political and cultural effort to reconstruct our visibility horizon according to our own perspective.

The historic dimension of changes

The transformations of the last 40 years in our region make us reflect on the character of confrontations that take place, not only inside our countries, but at international level; according to Immanuel Wallerstein (2005), the world undergoes a change of epoch and system whose results are uncertain and unpredictable.

The world crisis poses for Latin America the rare opportunity to conquer, on the one side its decolonization from the world system that has oppressed it for more than 500 years; but especially that the results from said decolonization favor, finally, the majority of our peoples, absent from the determinations that defined many of the independence processes along the XIX century; mourning before the magnitude of the revolutionary effort and the smallness of results in multiple processes which occurred early and in the mid XX; more so, defenseless in the face of the processes, which reverted social benefits, carried out by neoliberal technocrats by the end of the XX century.

It is indispensable that we inquire in depth on the state of the current world; let us not rest in the simplified version that the world is moving leftwards because we observe the advances of a few —significant nonetheless— transformation processes. The world of today has turned, in every sense, into a terribly dangerous and unstable place. The conjunction of immense economic interests with a military power as vast as unruly risk the lives of millions of defenseless people (Quijano, 2007). On which intelligence instruments we rely, we shall wonder, to defeat this voracious and implacable machine that governs our countries and decides on behalf of the world. In which way we will face and defeat the temptation that even democratic governments are dragged by the dynamic of this confrontation and reproduce the ways and manners of the mechanisms used by the great power to secure its domination with the argumentation that it is to exterminate the dangers that stalk the deep transformation of our societies.

And how we manage to keep the fundamental in sight, which is precisely the way to impose the aspirations of our peoples to be freed from all the imposed fetters and that have become increasingly desperate and impoverishing, and the

lack of justice that drowns in frustrations the best change proposals. Where our efforts are and must be directed to, which changes are possible in function of the subjects involved in the transformation processes, which the reaches and limitations of each project are, bearing in mind the evolution of the crisis of the system as a whole; in which way to deal with the worst dangers of an unprecedented international confrontation.

We cannot forget that the best tools we have at hand to understand the nature of the contemporary confrontation are in the history of our countries. Each crisis, which makes a visibility horizon explode, in words by René Zavaleta, recollects previous crises and their teachings: their traumatic experiences from which a people drew invaluable lessons, which it applies on its relationship with governors and on the ways of participation by means of which it resists domination (Zavaleta, 1975, 1974). Learning from logic, strategies of survival, collective memory is invaluable knowledge to explain the scopes, rhythms and logic of mass determinations before critical conjunctures, such as the ones we live.

The collective dimension of social transformations

One of the most ominous defeats of the progressive, democratic, revolutionary movement of the world has been the installation of individualism as a dominant social ideology, and in particular its implantation in higher education centers and universities all around the world.

Very grave is the prevalence of this corrosive ideology, whilst in our countries, as we have just pointed out, the logic of the struggle for survival forces everyday society to weave collective strategies. Ignoring this mass force, which boosts deep and from-the-bottom changes, leads intellectual and scholars who are distant from them to mistake intentions, objectives and scopes of the mobilizations they observe and try to analyze.

It is, because of this, of singular importance to recognize that it is collectivities and not intellectuals, academicians and specialists, which in fact and on their own right *make* history; they are indeed those which recollect and incarnate the social knowledge of an epoch and its possibilities, and which only based on the sharing of their grievances, fears, aspirations and beliefs will it be possible for us to objectively place on the terrain of the really ongoing transformations.

Not only is this a calling to abandon all intellectual pride, all pretension to cast into concepts and artificial categorizations the new confrontation dynamics that rule our societies, but also to appellate for the recollection, not of the common sense, but as Antonio Gramsci (1936) said, the *good sense* that orients the social struggles of our time.

Because of this, it seems to me difficult indeed for us to achieve positive results if we limit to observe from the outside the course of events, even if we try to describe them step by step with full rigor; something will always escape from collective life when we resort to documental sources, newspapers and even, collective testimonials. The definitions of the movement in movement can only be fully understood by the one who shares them, in a manner of speaking, from the inside.

This is, the comprehension of a transformation process cannot be but the product of participation not only in the programs or the general objectives, but into the quotidian tasks, concerns and attempts of those who really endeavor to perform deep changes. Does this mean that it is indispensable to be part of the transformation movement to fully comprehend it? The answer is yes, even from the most modest position, and assuming the risks, the possible mistakes, the limits of the movement.

One of the most difficult things to understand by those who are *outside* the deep logic and the reasons of a movement is indeed what explains collective determinations. I provide two examples: what changed between the first *no* to the successive reelections of Hugo Chávez and the second *yes*, barely three months later? In which way has a dialogue begun between the comandante and the people of Venezuela which turns out incomprehensible and frequently hideous for those opposed to his permanence in power?

Another instance: upon which bases has the integrity of the Bolivian revolutionary movement been preserved, equally harassed by Media Luna and transnational corporations and the U.S. government? How was the approval of the Constitution processed? And how do the fundamental political actors visualize their location in that which has been called, honestly it seems to me, the *re-foundation* of the Republic of Bolivia?

I would like to state here that there is an intellectual effort of large proportions, headed by colleagues as lucid as Boaventura de Souza and Emir Sader, who propose via the World Social Forum the apprehension of the meaning and reach of the transformation movements; in particular it seems to me that the contributions of thousands or dozens of thousands of participants in the encounters of the forum to this effort during the last decade have lent an invaluable service to the cause of critical thinking, which we should appreciate and recollect (De Souza and Santos, 2008; Sader, 2009, 2008).

All in all, I believe we shall retake the statements by Pablo González Casanova and by Hugo Zemelman, when they pointed out the need to gather the transformations in the course of their realization, as well as the reflections that the very actors of the processes carry out to orient their determinations, as a working method to justly value the effort, the advances and the reasons for the limitations of each social struggle (González Casanova, 2004; Zemelman, 2005).

Reflections such as the aforementioned are indispensable, mainly at times when the appellation to democracy includes meanings sometimes so opposed to the collective will (let us not forget that Bush ordered the invasion on Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of democracy) that frequently the backgrounds to each social experience remain obscure, unless they are illuminated, as we have stated previously, according to their historical dimension and their collective dimension (Fisk, 2006).

Preventing mistakes overvaluing the experience of the peoples and undervaluing the value of democracy can only be achieved if we actually recollect these two components of the social explanation and respond, or seek to respond to the basic question on the meaning of a struggle in function of a strategy, not only of collective survival but of long reach transformations. The link between one and the other, even if indissoluble, would allow us to comprehend which movement, which human aspirations we face, and which the forces that oppose to them are.

The ethical dimension of social struggle

For years the U.S. intelligence systems have been accustomed to making use of the social researches produced in the world, and particularly, from Latin America; Centers of Latin American Studies in the United States nowadays exist in every public and private university and are fed with works which scholars from our region carry out in order to understand our realities better.

If sharing knowledge is one of the principles that should rule democracy, we cannot forget that the use of knowledge is also a part of the social struggle and, therefore, it has connotations and implications indispensable to assume.

Aware of this problem, American researchers have already taken up ethical codes to avoid that their studies may somehow affect the destinations of the communities and the processes on which they have performed their researches. Something similar should be proposed for universities and centers of study in Latin America; this means that we cannot be satisfied with storing our studies in a drawer, but neither, that independently from our will and knowledge do they feed strategies opposed to those of the sovereignty of the peoples of our region.

In our opinion some of the principles which have to be contained in the ethical codes of our academicians, and which have to be defended by those identified with the principles of critical thinking, are:

- Respect to the integrity of the communities, peoples and individuals involved in the research;
- The recognition of the right of those very communities, peoples and individuals to recognize, value and make use of the researches which on them and, perhaps with them are performed;
- The commitment that in researches attention is paid to the dynamic of the processes and not to the characteristics, reasons or intimacy of those who exercise some kind of leadership;
- The search for clarifying by means of the tools of knowledge solutions proposed for or practiced onto the collective problems, demands and aspirations, and the commitment of collecting and systematize the historic memory that upon them exists;
- The responsibility of sharing with colleagues and students sources of information, preoccupations, hypotheses and, as much as possible, promote the formulation of collective research projects to enrich our general knowledge and supply proposals, statements, ideas for the solution of collective problems.

Many are the tasks for Latin American critical thinking and fortunately larger by the day is the social base of those of us who are willing to recognize the value that the critical creation of the peoples has to understand and project answers to their questions on life. More than ever we have to share now, and in the future to learn that it is in simplicity, and modesty, in the capability of listening, making questions, in the quotidian interaction with persons and organizations those whom we owe the value of resistance, persistence, patience, the wholeness to transform our America. Indeed it is theirs the critical thinking.

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