

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IDD-5

Seventh Latin-American Conference  
of Sociologists.

July 20, 1964.  
Bogotá.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366, Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The seventh Latin-American Conference of Sociologists was held in the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá last week. I attached myself to the commission on agrarian affairs as an observer, with the right to comment, if I so wished, when no better-credentialed delegate had anything left to say. Such opportunities were rare.

It was a sociological conference, but it left many delegates, and more observers, unhappy with the state of Latin-American rural sociology — in what state of mind members of other commissions came out of it I cannot say.

The first mistake was that the commission, in choosing to discuss the land, chose too much. The land question in Colombia is complicated enough, but add Mexico, add Brazil, add Argentina ... We heard what sounded like a very good paper on Argentina from the Argentine delegate, but nobody could criticize it and no illuminating comparisons were made.

Secondly, the commission suffered from methodological obsessions. A proper discussion of methodology seemed the best way of getting over the first difficulty, that of the vastness of the subject and the variety of provenance of the delegates. The mistake here was that there was no previous discussion of what the methods, or the studies, were for, and that this essential problem was, with a sort of courteous cowardice, avoided all the way through. Or it was assumed that everyone knew. For this was not only a conference of sociologists, but also one of social engineers.

The result was that the discussion of methodology went on and on with the assumption that it was, rightly and properly, all connected with some hypothetical, perfect, massive, future effort in directed social change, and this assumption was not only unchallenged, it was unqualified. There were many papers on various adventures in community development; there were others on the 'grading' of communities, the criteria woefully unsophisticated. Haciendas were black, family farms white. With few exceptions, the papers their authors considered to be descriptive had strong moral and political undertones, the less apparent in that they were the same in most papers. It did not occur that sociology might reach a 'reactionary' conclusion.

To understand a rural society is one thing, and to change it is another. What is found out in an unprejudiced attempt to understand it will lead to an alteration in previous ideas on what is to be changed and how. It might also lead to the conclusion that it is better left alone. Those who approach their studies with a burning conscience may not see anything for smoke. In Colombia it is not clear 'what should be done': it is clear that the assumptions of the progressive sociologists do not hold everywhere. Their descriptive work is not yet done, and cannot be properly done with such assumptions held as strongly as they are.

Professor Morse of Yale puts it thus:

"The central question, therefore, is this: When the intellectual or social scientist turns from 'long-terming' to 'briefing', who will then sound the voice of conscience, insist upon the recalcitrancies of human nature, chart a logic of social processes that does not always obey the promptings of the liberal heart, explain the drama of the nations in terms more acute than the Manichean?"

The best study of rural Colombia is "The People of Aritama", by Gerardo and Alicia Reichel-Dolmatoff. Its authors are primarily social-anthropologists. It is a very depressing book, full of fear, malice, envy and sickness. It should be the nightmare of the social engineer, and it should have shattered many of the assumptions that still prevailed at last week's conference. The village described is far more typical of Colombia than the authors' modest preface admits; its inhabitants are neurotic and intractable, their aspirations, viewed in terms of short-term social welfare, are perverse. Yet, in the words of one of the authors, "Aritama works." In the opinion of this reader, it will not work better for any intimate tinkering. It could do with a road. Beyond that, leave it alone.

I mention this study because, despite its account of the horrors prevailing in a village chosen by the authors because it looked so pretty, it exposes ruthlessly the psychological obstacles to 'obvious' reforms and shows the tenacity with which these people hold to their own particular line of progress: they eat less in order to dress better, to participate in the national economy, to be Colombians and not Indians. Rational? "The ironies and sacrifice of social change." Progress with tears, unsupervised and unsupervisable.

There seemed to prevail in the conference a vague opinion that nothing good could happen without academic assistance, at times approaching the delusion that without that nothing could happen at all. I and many others found this activist conception of social studies disturbing.

It was the more disturbing in that many of these activist sociologists found other disciplines uninteresting. If a sociologist is to be a social engineer at the same time, then he cannot ignore the economics of his project. Yet the interventions of Dr. Lauchlin Currie, which contained what were, if established, very serious objections to much previous projecting, were met with general indifference. As a sociologist, said the chairman, he did not feel competent to comment upon them. Yet many at the conference who tacitly agreed with the chairman — your correspondent's motion to spend more time on Dr. Currie's points was defeated by 28 to 3 — felt quite competent to interfere with various rural economies.

Moreover, with the insistence, always popular, that more studies were needed of practically everything, went a reluctance to draw any conclusions from what is already known. Land questions figure prominently in the histories of Russia, France, Mexico and many other countries. The Mexican experience is particularly close and relevant. Somebody must study these for their usefulness. It is hard to see how the products of each separate discipline can be fed into a computer, nor how a rural sociologist, avowedly interested in the fate of his bit of countryside, can fail to be interested in them.

The agrarian commission thus broke up in a state of confusion. I do not think that this was particularly healthy confusion. Discussion of methodology in a vacuum is profitless; discussion of methodology on the basis of unstated but questionable assumptions of the ways and directions in which rural society should change is even more frustrating. These assumptions influence even the most objective and descriptive-looking studies, and they have their place in any full discussion of method and approach.

"I come here to meet people; Good Lord, I don't come to listen.", said one experienced delegate. For that, and for some specific and un-methodological papers, the Conference was well worth attending.

Yours sincerely,

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