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## EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA\*

### INTRODUCTION

Education always reflects the concept of life of an epoch, but it is at the same time a powerful factor in the development of that concept of life. Thus, any study concerning education in Latin American countries or elsewhere, and the doctrines upon which it is founded must consider first a few aspects of their national and cultural formation because education will always be linked with philosophical, political, juridical, economic and literary ideas involved in the historical process of nations.

This brief paper does not pretend to give proper consideration to the details of such backgrounds, nor can it delve deeply into the educational trends in the Latin American countries. I shall present only a few general considerations concerning the Latin American people and stress certain cultural conditions and trends in education in these southern latitudes, particularly in some of these countries, and changes that are going on.

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## *Changing Latin America*

When I say "Latin American people", I am immediately aware of the fact that there is a marked heterogeneity of peoples South of Rio Grande even within one single country. Peruvians from the coast are quite different from Peruvians in the Andes; the "ladinos" of Guatemala are different from the indigenous types which are found even in the large cities. Furthermore, people of German stock in Chile and Paraguay, and Italian and German descendants in Argentina and Uruguay, of the first, second and third generations, many of whom speak mostly German and Italian, make one wonder if the Spanish-American is a vanishing type. In such a diversity of peoples, differences are basically social and cultural. They behave, think, feel and speak in a peculiar way that is not difficult to detect. On the other hand, when one says "Latin American people" one thinks of a structure composed of the European, the Negro and the Indian. In the process of cultural change and development these three elements have formed a unit in which certain common patterns have evolved which are typically Latin American although much is being said about the Latin American not having developed yet his own personality. These cultural patterns and the influence of certain factors must have diffused rapidly in spite of difficult communication and persistent hang-over from former periods.

Two factors, hispanism and gallicism in the cultural, not linguistic sense, have been dominant in the Latin American character; they are the roots of their value-orientation. Their way of life has evolved in the Latin-European tradition while the United States followed the Anglo-Saxon tradition. History accounts for these differences. But in the case of Latin America, culturally, its spiritual patriotism is still in Europe not in America which is the site of its historical devenir, the site of its progeny. Latin Americans are strongly influenced by European masters of thought; Descartes, Bergson, Husserl, Scheler, Dilthey and Hartmann. Very often their historical characters, their poets and their teachers speak like Frenchmen and act as Spaniards "We look at America with European eyes", says Zum Felde, the Uruguayan writer, "instead of looking at Europe with American

eyes and evaluating our own history in terms of its devenir."

There is also a provincial modality of nationalism, restrictive, non-expansive, which diminishes to a large extent all attempts for cultural unity among Latin American countries in spite of an OAS. Argentinism, Mexicanism, Chilenism and so on, asfixiate the culture and man, in the turbid cult of domestic myths. Along with this narrow nationalism, bureaucratic parasitism and personalistic politics are deeply imbedded in the culture maintaining "el caudillismo" and militarism which are remnants of the tyrannical personality of the "conquistadores."

Emotional behavior is deeply rooted in their everyday experience. It pours into the verbalism that characterizes Latin Americans: the love for ampular discourse and constant polemics, most of the time a labyrinth of words without useful content; argumentative authority absorbs the sane criterion of reason, and drowns many attempts for mutual understanding. Furthermore, an emphasis on the "present", delays the march of events, "mañana" being a key word in their time-orientation, a quite different time sense from that of North Americans who look forward to the future.

But Latin America is changing; and so are some of its cultural patterns. Today it is undergoing important shifts in dynamic and realistic ideologies both economics and socio-political that seem to indicate the awakening of a new Latin American conscience oriented towards a more dignified social living for all, in which the material welfare will not conflict with freedom. A number of revolutions in economic policy is going on in which the goal is the welfare of group individuals rather than the traditional personalistic ends.

The Mexican revolution is well known and has been going on for years. More recent than the Mexican revolution is the Bolivian social and economic problems aided, in part, by the United States. It brought political freedom to adults and a very drastic land reform which tended to abolish the large landholdings. It also brought the nationalization of the tin mines and other changes in diverse aspects of its socioeconomic life. Even though the experiment has suffered very serious economic setback, the

social changes it brought about continue obstinately, especially from below, from the "campesinos" (the peasants), who will not relinquish their hold on their newly acquired rights.

A new technological revolution is taking place also in Peru which is shaking the semi-feudal structure to its foundations, pressured by the Apristas who have been gaining in political strength. Acción Democrática, now in power in Venezuela, has struggled for years for drastic socio-economic changes, under the leadership of Romulo Betancourt and is marching relentlessly towards its social goals.

Other attempts at democratization of the way of life have been going on in other Latin American countries but these have been hampered by the various factors and cultural patterns whose crust is hard to break. "The greatest obstacle for Latin Americans to attain their new functional democracy" declares politician Antonio de Undurraga "is a lack of originality and imagination. We do not apply creatively ideas from the outside, according to our own Latin American realities.<sup>1</sup> And Gabriela Mistral the Chilean poetess complains: "We are a carbon-copy continent."

K. H. Silvert declares that the trouble with Latin Americans is "a lack of knowledge of themselves, because of apathy and resistance to self-study through objective social research that would point out the urgent socio-economic and political problems of national and continental dimensions which demand rational and creative thinking for their solution."<sup>2</sup>

"No sabemos a donde vamos "We don't know where we are going)" says an Indian villager speaking to me in a market place in Avalo, Ecuador. These words reveal self-examination and mounting preoccupation on the part of the people for Latin America's future.

Briefly sketched, such is the set up on which Latin American

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1 Experimentos democráticos en Lationamerica, Antonio de Undurraga, Cuadernos 55, 18 Ave. de l'Opera, Paris, p. 27.

2 Relaciones Hemisféricas, K. H. Silvert, Cuadernos 53, página 96.

education functions. What kind of education? Let us take a look.

### *The Structure and Content of Programs of Study*

Unlike American education which is pluralistic (with no consistent principle either of authority or philosophy), education in Latin America follows a common pattern of organization and techniques which have resulted partly from European influences and partly from pressures that have come from within. Its guiding philosophy is oriented in the humanities, but in more recent theory there is a general agreement as to the purposes of the school which are found in any modern school system: a better quality of education for all, the development of the whole child to his full capacities so that he may be able to attain a better quality of living and the transmission of the cultural heritage. The question is: Do the programs indeed reflect this double purpose?

The following educational set up may throw some light on this matter.

The Ministry of Instruction sets the aims of education; is responsible for the selection and organization of curriculum content which is rigidly graded and consists of a body of facts and principles. It is also responsible for the selection of books. This means power exerted from the top downwards. This rigidity is relaxing in some countries.

Education is compulsory up to the sixth grade. No age limits are set in most places because of difficult school facilities and pupil attendance in remote regions. There are three levels of schooling: primary, secondary and the University.

#### *The Primary School*

The primary school is attended by pupils in the 6-12 age group and includes Kindergarten, Inferior first grade, Superior first grade and so on up to the sixth grade. I shall describe the Primary School Program of Argentina which is representative of the school pattern all over Latin America with a greater or lesser degree of formality.

#### *The Kindergarten*

*Objectives:* To prepare the child to live in society; to promote

physical and moral development; to inculcate love for God, country and family.

*Content:* Language, drawing, music, gymn, games, diverse practical occupations (such as carpentry, gardening), arithmetic, initiation in reading and writing and moral education.

The material included in the program from first to sixth grades is divided into two parts: *Program of Knowledges, and Program of Development.*

The Program of Knowledges comprises the following subjects taught from first to sixth grades: arithmetic and geometry; geography, history, nature study, civil defense, savings, music, drawing and sewing.

The Program of Development is an analytical, detailed table of the content included in the Program of Knowledges organized in the form of units. The subtitles of the units are: motivation, formative correlation, and objectives (values, attitudes and habits). The term *formative correlation* is supposed to be a horizontal articulation of themes with the purpose of maintaining unity. This is an attempt to modernize the rigid topical outline of content. I think it will be illuminating to give a few examples of the required knowledges in one or two grades.

Geometry in the third grade includes: straight lines, curves, perpendiculars, parallels, the triangle (its elements and classes), problems involving perimeter, construction of graphs.

History, fourth grade: Aboriginal cultures of Argentina; discovery and conquest; colonization; the revolution; evolution of the revolutionary government up to the Congress at Tucuman; San Martin, his political and military action; his historical personality; affirmation of provincial autonomies from 1829-1853; national organization; conquest of the desert; its first settlers; European immigration; regional history.

Art in the third grade includes: stylization, symbolism, popular songs and dances, scenography. Third grade: national unity, economic progress, moral and civic education, popular education and national defense; spiritual and material values, savings; the National Savings Bank; National sovereignty in the Antarctic.

## *The Secondary School*

The secondary school runs from seventh to twelfth grades divided into two cycles: one cycle of four years and two years for the second cycle. The first cycle is intended for all students regardless of vocation, future plans or potential dropouts. The second cycle is intended for students who will go to the University. Students reach this stage of their education at an average age of twelve. I shall illustrate with the program of secondary school in Venezuela. More or less the same patterns followed throughout Latin America. *First Cycle*: Four years; including 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th grades.

Subjects: Language and literature, mathematics (all four years) chemistry and physics (third and fourth years); geography (second and third years); history of Venezuela (fourth year); Universal history (first three years); English (first three years); French (first two years); art (first two years).

In the fourth year of the first cycles, that is, in the 10th grade Latin, Greek and Philosophy cycle, that is, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades are: The Problem of Metaphysics, General Axiology, Ethics, Moral Foundations, Moral Valves, Moral Law, Moral Sanction, Moral Conscience, History of Philosophy, Socrates and Plato, Aristoteles, Medieval Philosophy, Renaissance Philosophy, Cartesian Philosophy, English Empiricism, Rationalism, Kants Transcendental Philosophy, Positivism, Romanticism, French Spiritualism, Phenomenology, Existencialism, Spanish Thought in the Twentieth Century, Philosophy in America, Epistemology and Logic.

*Second Cycle*: Two years, that is, 11th and 12th grades.

This cycle includes three areas: Philosophy (as it has been described) and Letters, Physics and Mathematics and Biological Sciences, which are intensified studies intended for vocational purposes. Minearology, geology and social sciences are introduced in this second cycle.

A careful study of this curriculum will reveal that the programs on these two levels, primary and secondary, are formalistic and built on materials in the external environment of the student and very little or nothing in their life process. Besides,

too many subjects are offered that merely brush the surface of the different disciplines. What criteria have guided the selection of subject matter? Maturity level, interest, comprehension, reality?

Little provision is made for vocational education and technical practices in school systems which operate in vast poverty-stricken areas and a forthcoming industrial and technological revolution of continental dimensions. Another question: How much social work is made part of the curriculum? Very scarce, yet Peru is making some headway in this respect. In this field, as in all other fields research action is urgently needed. Also, a large scale program is needed to teach Spanish to the millions of Indian children and adults who do not speak the language. This constitutes a serious language barrier for education.

The above considerations points out the need of a policy for education for a revision of the educational philosophy and of programs from the ground up, based not only on the values of the culture, on a rational humanism, but also on the socio-economic realities confronting Latin America today. A literacy program, agriculture efficiency and trained personnel require urgent attention. Teachers participation would be foremost in this revision. This would decentralize control and action at the top level of the educational system.

There is a desperate need for teacher-training in Latin America. In Brazil about three million students have teachers who have had only primary school training. Another three million students have teachers who have attended secondary schools only. These conditions prevail in other Latin American countries.

### *The Normal School*

The need for adequate teachers-training is obvious. Basic study comprises three years of secondary school and three additional years for teacher training. This scant preparation is inadequate for the task that a teacher has to perform. However, Latin American countries show symptoms of a definite movement to improve teacher education through experimentation with new techniques of instruction to do away the traditional



bookish recitation and memorization. Even a dab at progressive education has been attempted in some schools. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, there is a pilot experimental school on progressive education. Many Latin American teachers leave annually for foreign countries, particularly the United States and Puerto Rico to study new educational trends under the sponsorship of the programs of Point Four, UNESCO, and other institutions that strive for improvement of social conditions and betterment of international relations. Seminars, congresses and other activities are helping this improvement.

### *The University*

The Latin American university has undergone successively three influences: the University of Salamanca, the French University and the North American University. The curriculum comprises faculties of the major professions typical of any European or North American institution of higher learning.

The public universities depend economically on the State and the cost per capita fluctuates between \$180 and \$200. There are also Catholic universities and others which suffer the same economic difficulties. The average schooling period is six years depending on the kind of profession chosen.

There is one factor which sets aside Latin American students from students of most universities. I refer to a nationalistic attitude at times aggressive which probably has its origin in their abhorrence of the prolonged dictatorship and oligarchy to which the people have been subjected. Therefore, their main interest is political and social integration as a safeguard from politicians, foreign interference and other ills which they look upon as detrimental to their integrity. Latin American students also participate actively in the government councils of the universities, except the University of the Andes, in order to force new ideas, to enforce their rights and other claims peculiar to the life of the institution. Unhappily sometimes they get out of control defeating their own purposes. These feelings have been expressed at various student conferences and congresses. In August, 1918, the Cordoba University movement proposed reform against anachronistic university regimes. At the time, the First National

Student Council was established. The movement spread to Mexico where in 1929 the vindication of student personality was demanded. As the movement grew, other organizations were established, among them the National Union of Students which alleges violations of students' rights and university autonomy in various countries. A Latin American Seminar was held in May in 1959 in Bolivia. Finally the International Students Council held its most recent meeting in February, 1959, in Lima, with representatives from 66 countries. This is a program designed to promote maximum cooperation among students all over the world. The observer who looks at these movements with an open mind and without prejudice often wonders if these youths are on the road to democracy without the aid of politicians who have been always promising a change for the best that does not materialize.

One major problem which Latin American universities are facing is the amazing growth of school population due not only to the fact that population is growing at long strides, but also to the recent trend of mass education which has opened opportunities for a larger number of students to reach higher learning, yet, most universities have not expanded enough to keep pace with this demand given their meager economic resources.

The growth of population has created a larger demand not only for teachers but also for doctors, dentists and other professionals whose services are vital to the safety and progress of a community. Law is a favorite field of specialization; it is believed to facilitate entry in politics.

During my stay in Sucua, a tiny village in the Ecuador trans-andean jungle of about 300 inhabitants not including the neighboring Indian hut clusters a few miles away, a doctor of medicine would fly from Quito, a long littery journey in a Cessna that would land on a grass plot, once a week. A dentist had established residence in the village, with very inadequate equipment, and people from distant villages who could afford it would fly over the distant places many of them incommunicated except for the tiny planes that fly periodically. In many places where no medical services could be had the missionary and the curan-

dero (medicine man) would give medical assistance. It was harder yet to get a dentist. I refer specifically to these two professions; they are the ones that are, besides teaching, in greatest demand in any community, particularly of the type where living is unsanitary and exposed to all sorts of dangers to health.

Another urgent demand which Latin American universities have to face is for the training of technicians due to the rising trend towards industrialization and scientific endeavor.

Some outstanding Latin American educational leaders such as Luis Alberto Sanchez, Rector of the University of Lima, envision a university for the future which, while it strives to maintain the essence of the cultural heritage it may at the same time seek for a balance between specialization and liberal education, also, intensify scientific research, increase intercultural relations, improve the training of teachers, maintain the autonomy and independence of the university, fulfill its role in the community, in fact, canalize the future of these nations both materially and spiritually.

To substantiate these needs, Dr. Frondizi made the following statement in "Comentario", when he became Rector of the University of Buenos Aires: ". . . .The Argentine university has wasted much of its energies without becoming aware that the problems of the university are of a pedagogical nature. . . That instruction should be scarce or non-existent has seemed of little importance. Nor does it matter that the university does no research, that one turns one's back on the necessities of the country, that there are no professors to teach many courses, that the students keep up repeating by memory the used-up notes of previous years, that the professors themselves repeat those same notes and demand them back in examinations, that there is no university life, that the degree is the principal goal. . . and the examination the principal objective."

### *The Future*

To the age-old problems of a high grade of illiteracy comprising 80 million people and poor health conditions among large masses of the population, particularly Indians (among which

many millions do not speak Spanish) new problems are added, such as an increasing rate of mobility, amalgamation with mestizo population, increasing secularization of customs and attitudes, and prospects of large-scale social and industrial revolution, which Latin American education together with other institutions must face realistically. At present the increase in school population has resulted in a disordered expansion of the educational system with inadequate school facilities, shortage of teachers, and confusion regarding the effectiveness of the traditional educational philosophy. A clear conscience has aroused among distinguished educators for the urgent need of a new philosophy and revision of programs, which in collaboration with other social agencies may meet the challenge of the problems of the times.

A new Latin American will arise. Will his center of gravity be displaced from his own self towards the collective functions he will perform in collective work, in unions, sports, and among new forces which will try to subject him a uniform pattern? His problem will be how to maintain his individuality within this framework of collective thinking and collective doing; to attain the priceless values of worth and dignity, he has been denied, to attain his freedom. For the ladino, for the cholo, for the Indian, for the huaso, for the capitalist, for the industrialist, a new era is opening. Let us hope that a new faith in the idea of man may arise, not in the Renaissance concept which identified man with the individual, nor the interpretation of man as the human species (the sum of concrete individuals) of the Age of Enlightenment. Let us hope that there will arise the idea of man, which means the human element that is in him, that will drive Latin America to a fundamental non-violent change in the way of life more democratic, more human and to its integration with the nations that desire a fruitful and peaceful living.