The Latin American Way

Fernando Limongi

Murilllo, Schrank, and Luna opened up Pandora's Box. From time to time, scholars need to be warned about what they are doing. They sounded the alarm, and we who study or live in Latin America should thank them for calling us to reason. They are right to call our attention to our past. We are heirs of Hirschman, O'Donnell, Cardoso, and others. Moreover, as the mere reference to these names makes clear, we are members of a community in which political engagement is a must. Latin Americanists are politically committed to the future of the region they were born in or professionally adopted. We study this region because we care about the future of those who live in it.

As the authors emphasize in their opening paragraph, "the region is undergoing a deep economic transformation, which takes place in the context of unprecedented levels of political participation." Therefore, reflection is in order. We need to pause and know why we study what we have been studying. Moreover, we need to be aware of the consequences of the methods we employ. If, in fact, the region is going through a deep transformation, then this is the right moment to analyze Latin America; what it used to be, what it is now, and what it should be in the future. One cannot miss noticing that not all these transformations point in the same direction. For instance, democratic consolidation, demographic transition, and reduction of inequality may indicate a reduction of the North-South divide, whereas the growth based on commodities and the return of populism may be read as pulls in the opposite direction.

Space limitation requires me to be sketchy. In doing so I cannot avoid simplifying their propositions and so I choose, quite arbitrarily, to focus on just some of them. Their account of the area distinguishes three moments: a bright past, a dark present, and a future open to intervention. Obviously, they write to influence the development of the latter, to put the area back on the right track. As I read it, the reorientation they propose is mainly methodological.

The way one reads their paper and processes their recommendations depends on the emphasis one puts on the different sections of the paper. There is, I would argue, an imbalance between the opening and the final sections. The opening section is bold. There is a clear recommendation, a direction Latin Americanists should take, one that is conditional on the region's specificities. The closing section, in turn, is more moderate in tone. Much of what is presented in this section revises the bold statements made earlier, calling for an eclectic approach, highlighting the need "for empirically based research that seeks to produce new theories to be empirically

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tested," a call for interdisciplinary research and the production of "comparative work of a regional scope and that also contributes to our general understanding of the tensions generated by development and democracy." The list of substantive questions they present at the end does encompass most of what we have been doing and should be doing as a way to get a "rigorous, comparative, and empirically grounded political economy of Latin America."

I have little—if any—disagreement with this third and final section. I fully agree with their methodological call and their substantive program. In my view, though, this program contradicts the bold calls made in the first section. If we were to follow the recommendations of the first section, I am afraid, we would jeopardize the nice program outlined at the end. Let me be more precise on this.

The closing paragraph of the opening section presents a diagnosis of the current state of affairs of the Latin American field. It has failed to "generate empirically grounded studies" that help the understanding of the region's transformation because (the "because" is mine, but I think it is implicit) Latin Americanists "have begun to import alien theories and methods that are unlikely to inform policymakers or practitioners in the region." Alien and imported theories and methods are the culprits: rational choice has led researchers to downplay or ignore entirely the importance of organizations that determine individual behavior; those using sociological approaches have not paid due attention to Latin culture; neo-institutionalists base their research on the supposition that "rules and procedures are stable and binding when in much of the region they are neither"; and those who employ experimental and quasi-experimental methods prioritize estimating causal effects over establishing the importance or generality of what they find.

It is not clear to me in what sense these methods (rational choice, sociological approaches, neo-institutionalism, or experimental methods) were imported to the region. One may agree that rational choice fails to explain some things that we would like to understand, that sociological analyses tend to emphasize structure too much, or that experiments are short on external validity. But these problems do not arise only when they are applied to study issues raised by or in Latin America; these are deficiencies of the methods, not of the raw material generated in the region to which they will be applied. Latin America is not unique in the sense that we need to study it in a way that differs from the way we (and others) study other parts of the world.

Thus, it is not clear to me if these criticisms are conditional or unconditional. Is rational choice a bad method and theory, or is rational choice bad only for studying Latin America? Does neo-institutionalism assume too much about institutions, or do the institutions it assumes about simply not exist in Latin America? Rational choice, neo-institutionalism, and experimental methods may be the wrong way of doing sound research, but if this is so, it holds true both in Latin America and elsewhere. These methods and theories may fail or may not provide scholars with all the answers. That is why one should follow or be open to different methods and interdisciplinary work. One should not put all the eggs in one basket. But this should not be true only for Latin America.

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One may argue that Latin America is specific; that "culturally specific practices" have developed on this part of the globe. This may be true. I would argue, however, that it does not follow that to understand the region one needs theories and methods that are specific to the region, adapted to their reality. If rational choice (or any other method) works in Europe, then it works in Latin America. If any of these approaches fails to explain relevant topics of the U.S. political economy, it fails in Latin America as well. It does not make much sense to say that we should strive to develop a Latin American way of employing rational choice models, or that we should develop Latin America-specific experimental methods.

Reality may vary, but not to the point of affecting the laws that organize it. We may disagree about the specifics of these laws; some may even doubt that they exist at all. But given that we accept that the world can be understood in terms of regularities—and the authors do seem to accept this—we cannot say that the regularities are valid in some places but not in others. Adopting a general scientific approach does require denying the existence of specificities. Latin America may be different, but in order to show that this is the case, one needs to abandon the authors' criticisms in the first section and proceed along the lines they develop in the closing section, with their "push ... for empirically based research that seeks to produce new theories to be empirically tested (and contrasted with those produced elsewhere)." This is as nice a program as one can get. In my view, to engage in this program necessarily leads one to abandon the distinction between imported and nonimported theories and methods.

If we were to look into the past, if we were to look at the work of Hirschman, O'Donnell, Cardoso, and many others, I am not sure we would find a rejection of "imported alien methods." Dependency theory was not a method or a theory in itself. Nor was O'Donnell's explanation for the emergence of bureaucratic authoritarian regimes based on peculiar methods. The subject, the questions were region-specific because they addressed issues raised in Latin America; the insights were personal, but not their methods or the theories they generated. Those have been widely used to study developments in other parts of the world. In my view, the towering figures in the study of Latin American political economy that Murillo, Schrank, and Luna rightfully praise adopted precisely the kind of eclectic and interdisciplinary approach the authors recommend in the closing section of the paper. They drew from the common methodological pool available to political economists to understand the reality they faced.

Note

I thank José Antonio Cheibub for clarifying my ideas and comments.

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