

ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH
IN LATIN AMERICA

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I will divide my remarks into two parts: First, I will propose two basic ethical principles which, in my opinion, must guide our reflection. Then, I will present four concrete ethical problems concerning research in Latin America, especially for North American scholars.

1. TWO BASIC ETHICAL PRINCIPLES.

1.1. Ethics is intrinsic to action.

The ethical character of any activity is neither alien to nor extrinsic to that activity. Ethics is nor primarily an afterthought that relates an already constituted activity to some external criteria; the ethical character of any activity is intrinsic to it, it is something that constitutes

the activity itself. In other words, any kind of human activity or enterprise in fact has an ethical structure insofar as it is rooted in a history and in a society.

Consequently, ethics is not a question of subjective intention or individual motivation. At least, it is not primarily that. The relevant ethical question is not: What goals or ends am I trying to accomplish with this particular activity? Instead the question is: What effects is this activity objectively producing?

1.2. Ethics is historical.

The second ethical principle somehow follows from the first: ethical actions are historically bounded. In other words, ethical actions are concrete and situated. If there are general ethical principles --and I do not intend to discuss this problem here-- these principles only appear in their concrete historical demands, which are peculiar to each situation. Every situation determines the structure of its ethical requirements, precisely in order that the situation be truly human, historical, open. In simple words, the problem is not "to do the good." That can be assumed to be the individual's intention most of the times. The problem is: What does "good" mean in this particular, concrete situation?

This consideration is especially important in conflict situations like those of our Latin American countries at the

present time. I do not think it is possible at present for anyone to avoid a personal involvement in Latin American problems whatever the activity he undertakes there. It is therefore necessary to engage in a continuous ethical analysis of our activity in every particular situation.

2. FOUR ETHICAL PROBLEMS RELATED TO FOUR ASPECTS OF RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICA.

2.1. No research.

Paradoxically, the first ethical requirement for research in Latin American countries is that it be done. Where there is no serious scientific research, then ideologized opinions, propagandistic ideas, mystified data, power-distorted schemes mediate our understanding of Latin American societies and history, and we never penetrate to the root causes of the most pressing issues of our societies. Certainly, this distorted knowledge can only benefit those already in power.

For many different reasons, basically that research is not rewarded financially or because of insufficient training, most Latin American scholars are prevented from any kind of serious research on the reality of their own societies. North American scholars can also find many reasons to avoid research in Latin America. But, in this case, it is less a technical or financial than an ethical issue which is involved.

I refer to a group, not an individual, ethical problem, a problem that concerns each of us, not as individuals, but as members of a scientific group. Are American historians, or economists, or sociologists fulfilling their ethical task with respect to Latin America? Are you promoting enough in your teaching and writing, in your Universities, journals and Associations this necessary and urgent Latin American research?

2.2. Funded-Research.

The second problem I see for research in Latin America is to do only that kind of research for which money is available. Of course, without money it is almost impossible to do good research. However, we all know well that very often our research projects are simply devised in order to get money and, consequently, our projects are directed to those fields and problems where money is available --instead of trying to make money available for the projects intended to study those problems that we consider really relevant.

It is obvious that if we only do that kind of research for which money is offered, many and perhaps the most important aspects of the American reality will remain perpetually forgotten and unexplored. As scholars, will be following the dictates of those who have the money --and usually they are not very concerned with ethics.

On the other side, one can always ask himself: Why is it

that there is money for this concrete, specific field or problem, and not for others? Nobody gives anything for nothing and funded research usually has "strings attached." What are then the interests hidden behind those generous grants for research? A typical case is the money available during these last fifteen years for research on population problems in Latin America. I do not think it is necessary to specify in this context what interests lay hidden behind this research money; but I am sure most if not all of you are perfectly aware of what those interests were and are.

2.3. Manipulative research.

A third ethical problem is what I would call the manipulation by researchers of the data of Latin American reality. By manipulation I mean here the tendency to conceptualize and use Latin American problems as simple cases to fit into an already devised discussion framework. While it is desirable that Latin American countries are taken into account, at least as examples of different theories, hypotheses and models, the problem is that most times these examples are brought forward to be fitted into theories devised to explain realities which historically are very different. There is an incredible disregard for those characteristics and peculiarities which make up Latin America reality.

Some of you, for example, will have read that the 1969 "soccer war" between El Salvador and Honduras was a perfect

instance of the noemalthusian hypothesis. In fact --as W. Durham has proved-- this interpretation represents the typical manipulation of a problem, oblivious of concrete characteristics and ignorant of what really went on --and still goes on-- in those poor and small countries. Of course, this manipulative research is not alien to the theories and explanations proposed by the most powerful academic centers.

2.4. Research input-output.

A final ethical problem for research in Latin America which I will mention here is its input and output. This concerns more directly the way in which our research is done. From what perspective do we undertake research? The political situation in most Latin American countries is extremely complex. Thus, if we want to do any kind of accurate research, we will be required to "get inside" the situation or, at the very least, to have access to relevant data. But how to "get inside" or "obtain access" without the approval of those in power? This is a very complex issue, but, once more, we should not avoid addressing it and blithely assume that the effect of our research will simply depend on our personal intention or our progressive ideology. We must remain aware that there are objective factors at work in our research, and that the relationship between the research process and the people concerned very often greatly depends

on the way we approach those people or in which we address a problem.

Another aspect of the same issue is the research output. To what uses do we put our findings? Do we really care that our research findings reach those who can benefit from such knowledge? Or are we simply satisfied to publish our research in specialized journals or technical books which help to improve our academic status but in no way the situation of Latin American peoples?

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As scholars, we believe that knowledge and science are basic tools of human dignity and freedom. But we must ask ourselves whether or not this has been the case with respect to the oppressed peoples in Latin American countries.