



An Overview of Historical and Socio-economic Evolution in the Americas

Edited by Alberto Ciferri

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CONTRIBUTORS

Alberto Ciferri (Editor), Alberto Ciferri is currently a Visiting Professor of Chemistry at Duke University, Durham NC, and President of the Swiss-based Jépa-Limmat Foundation. This book originates from the activity of the Foundation in advanced educational and development projects in North and Central America.

Naila Clerici is a retired Professor of History at the University of Genoa, Italy, and director of the magazine *Tepee* dedicated to the Natives of America. Her book *Victorian Brand Indian Brand: The White Shadow on the Native Image* was published in 1993.

Angelaurelio Soldi is a retired Professor of Physics at North Carolina State University, USA. His book *America* was published in 2011.

Maria Teresa Uriarte Castañeda is a Professor at the National University of Mexico, and an expert in Mesoamerican cultures. Her book *De la Antigua California al Desierto de Atacama* was published in 2010.

Carlos Pardo Figueroa Thays is Professor of History at the Catholic University of Lima, Peru, and an expert in the history and culture of Peru. His book *Gitanos en Lima* was published in 2013.

Hugo Fidel Sacor Quiche previously served in the Guatemalan Ministry of Culture and specializes in Mayan related civilizations. His book *Los Pipiles* was published in 2009.

Paulo Alegria is a Professor of History at Universidad de Santiago de Chile. His article *Disciplinamiento y drama social en Chile* appeared in *Revista de Historia Social y de las Mentalidades* in 2015.

INVITED CONTRIBUTORS

Prof. Elizabeth McAlister, Wesleyan University, USA

Dr. Juan Alarcon, Limmat-Stiftung, Zürich, Switzerland

Mayela Barragán, Venezuela

Vivian Barres, Ecuador

EDITORIAL OVERVIEW (permission from Cambridge Scholars Publishing)

This book reviews the most visible historical and socioeconomic features of 28 nations in the American continent, which is characterized by the impressive coexistence of native groups living in restricted areas and advanced institutions where the most challenging advances in human knowledge are addressed. The specific characteristics that the authors planned to highlight include the ethnic conflicts that afflict multi-ethnic nations and the migratory processes, and intra-ethnic or class conflicts that continue to perturb the stability of several countries in the Americas. Several chapters deal with the native populations of America. The main objective of the book is to stimulate an appreciation of history and cultural identities. An enhanced harmony of social relations, together with appropriately balanced economic development, might result in an “authentic” increase in the quality of life.

The book arises from cooperation between professional historians and scientists familiar with the countries they describe. It is written in a plain and easily readable form and is directed to a general audience offering a concise reference on the origins of current conflicts and developments. The book is particularly addressed to young students at the high school and college level that are about to enter the struggle for power and the complexities of real life: the solution of the outstanding world problems is entrusted to them. Furthermore, the book could offer guidelines for local development projects based on the harmonization of cultural values with economic well-being in developed and developing countries. The chapters of the book begin with the presentation of data on the territory, ethnic composition and current political/economic situation of the respective American nations. A typical chapter continues with a factual and concise description of historical events from prehistory to the present time. These history sections follow the conventional scheme of history books, but primarily evidence ethnic and class problems and the evolution of national identities. A final section highlights and briefly analyzes the single most important cultural/economic feature that affects the success or the difficulties of the individual countries. These final sections attempt to relate the current development to the historical events of each country. The vastness of the subject does not allow detailed analysis. However, it evidences correlations and analogies that allow the reader to appreciate the origins of recurrent problems and to formulate their own ideas on possible remedies, and that stimulate interest in cultural courses at a more advanced level.

Teaching history and preserving cultural values for the benefit of new generations has been a goal motivated by several considerations. The decline of culture is reflected in a malfunctioning of the democratic processes. Moreover, there is consensus in considering social relations and economic well-being as the main factors that determine the happiness of people. However, these factors are not adequately distributed in the American nations. Affluent societies with prevailing Anglo-Saxon influence enjoy high income, but those emphasizing GDP and technological innovations promote materialism and jeopardize social and cultural values. They need to recover a more human dimension. On the other hand, nations with a definite Latin influence intensify social and family ties, and need to enhance contact with essential

progress. In spite of a great variety of planned or ongoing development projects, the above differences are not abiding, and the socio-economic gaps among American nations are actually increasing. The authors of this book believe that only a cultural systemic change might promote an improved balance between social harmony and economic well-being. Young generations in both affluent and poor countries need to be directly involved.

The book highlights the problems, but does not practically contribute to their solution. Therefore, courses based on the book were planned to stimulate the participation of students in tentative models of development aiming towards a balance between social values and economic development. To elaborate these models, the students have at their disposal correlations and analogies derived from the book and exemplified below. The viability of these tentative models will not be an essential requirement; the important result will be the promotion of a socio-economic culture based on a solid historical perspective.

Ethnic issues in the Americas. Remarkable attempts for the harmonization of different cultures occurred even before the Spanish conquest. The Incas used a strategy of ethnic fusion of the groups they conquered south of Lake Poopó (chapter 23). This strategy was counteracted by a strategy of resistance to integration. In more recent times, Spanish missionaries promoted the cultural compatibility of the indigenous and western cultures (chapters 5 and 10). In 1814, Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the first president of Paraguay, issued a marriage decree according to which European men would not be allowed to marry white women. He thus contributed to the extinction of the Spanish European identity in Paraguay, which is now regarded as a “mestizo and egalitarian nation” (chapter 24). Considering the worldwide increase of mixed marriages, and the irreversible increase of spontaneous and forced mass migrations, it is conceivable that global miscegenation (mestizaje) and a more peaceful and egalitarian society might evolve in the distant future of humanity. The following levels of ethnic compatibility are evidenced by the historic events presented in the chapters of this book.

1. Natural compatibility is evidenced, for instance, in the cases of the multiracial, multi-ethnic harmony prevailing in Brazil, where discrimination is limited to the color of the skin rather than genetic traits or ethnicity (chapter 26). This spontaneous compatibility can be attributed to both the fact that there was not a prevailing ethnic group when the Portuguese and black people arrived in the region, and the lack of strong competition between them.
2. Strong incompatibility is evidenced when great differences occur between the religious and fundamental beliefs of ethnic groups. For instance, between the Native groups in North/South America and the European colonists. In North America, the cultural incompatibility is mainly due to the desire of the Native Americans to preserve their traditions and protect the environment for the next generations (chapter 1). Politically and administratively, the Native Americans are integrated into the US nation, but most of them are isolated in reserves. There is now a tendency towards a cultural model that unifies several native groups. Native Americans do appreciate useful technology and would agree to work directly with the federal government under a clearer statement of their cultural identity.
3. Induced compatibility and first-generation migrants. Common interests between groups that maintain their cultural identity may assist ethnic compatibility. The task of the social scientist (or the proposer of development projects) thus becomes the identification of a common interest that can bridge different cultures. It corresponds to the current concepts of “sustainable migration” and a “global compact” for the distribution of migrants according to the needs and aspirations of newcomers and established residents (United Nations, 2018). Interests suitable for the promotion of compatibility may be based on a variety of economical, educational and political factors. For instance, economic advantages and compensating for labor shortages are the main motivations for the spontaneous migration of Mexicans to the US. The adoption of indigenous agricultural practices on the estates of Spanish settlers was a common goal that promoted reciprocal interest between partners (chapter 5). A first generation immigrant who wrote the highlighted feature section in chapter 21 states that it is better to live with a “divided heart” (see illustration on the cover page).

The underlying concept is that, in addition to a common interest, reciprocal tolerance and appreciation of the cultural identities of migrants and the host country might also be needed (chapter 21).

4. Undesirable results may also be produced by spontaneous migration and the slow dynamics of the compatibilization process. For instance, the mobility of Mexican migrants in the US brings about economic development in both countries, but is often accompanied by family breakdown in Mexico (chapter 5). Projects to mitigate the latter effect by supporting the reinsertion of migrants returning home have been promoted by the Mexican government. The US government has established projects to facilitate the professional insertion of the migrants. Both types of project aim to reinforce the economic impact and facilitate a blend of the Mexican and US cultures.
5. Evolution of compatibility and integration. Children of first-generation migrants are often citizens of the hosting country and therefore their political and administrative integration is granted. However, several features of their original culture will be lost through successive generations whereas the ethnic features of the new country will eventually prevail. Nevertheless, some of the cultural features of the migrants will be retained and shared within the evolving multi-ethnic culture of the new country. Interviews with several-generation descendants of Europeans who migrated to the US reveal that most of them profess an “American identity” based on a prevailing British-European ethnicity. The dominant characters of other multi-ethnic identities include German in Chile (chapter 28), Italian in Argentina (chapter 27), Portuguese in Brazil (chapter 27), African-British in the Bahamas (chapter 16) and Amerindian in Peru (chapter 22). In spite of their long struggle and continuing episodes of discrimination and limited opportunities, Black Americans in the US are reasonably well integrated, as evidenced by the two-term election of Barack Obama who was a strong supporter of the politics of the American Democratic Party (chapter 3). The concept of America as a melting pot of many ethnic groups able to integrate might represent a model for the unified society of the future.

Multi-ethnic nations. The constitutions of several American states formally support ethnic minorities. Bolivia has the largest indigenous component in South America (62%) distributed over 36 different ethnic groups (chapter 23). In 2009, the indigenous president, Evo Morales, proposed a new constitution in which these groups were defined as “nations” with cultural and territorial identity within the Multinational State of Bolivia. A main objective of the new constitution was to preserve ethnic cultures and languages and confer some political and territorial identity. Territorial autonomy is indeed included in a study by the World Bank that analyzes approaches for the preservation of ethnicities in danger of extinction (chapter 7). However, in the context of a large nation, the enhancement of ethnic compatibility does require constructive interactions, not just territorial separation.

The organization of indigenous groups that prevails in Peru, where 45% of the inhabitants are descendants of the Andean civilizations, is consistent with the latter considerations. In the 1920s, the reformist president Augusto Leguía began a process of permeation of the components of the Peruvian society. The result is that the indigenous and mestizo people now define the national identity, and are main engines for the growth of the country. They appear to be able to implement efficient development projects consistent with their traditional culture (chapters 20 and 22). The administrative and political autonomy of minority ethnic groups within the context of a developed nation is a viable and interesting process that was considered in French Guiana and in Puerto Rico. French Guiana is now an overseas region of France and of the European Union (chapter 18). Puerto Rico is now a free state associated to the US. Repeated referendums revealed that in both countries the majority of people advocated full union with the country with which they had been associated as colonies. In the case of French Guiana, good harmony is reported between the cultures of the majority black and mixed-race people (ca. 66%), white people (ca. 12%), the Chinese, Brazilians and Amerindians. The small number of inhabitants (ca. 260,000) and the French presence since 1634 has facilitated an acceptable relationship and the identification with France. In the case of Puerto Rico, a major obstacle to statehood is possibly the reluctance of the Republican US congress to accept the economic and political cost associated with full statehood (chapter 17).

Intra-ethnic compatibility. Incompatibility occurs between social classes even within a single ethnic group. Social classes are defined by sociologists as hierarchical structures of rather homogeneous groups of people based on an economic, cultural or power status. A typical conflict is that occurring between the poor and the rich classes. The poor have limited opportunities and magnify the goods that they possess, notably family relationships (chapter 8). The conflict between the rich and the poor classes is at the basis of the communist ideology (chapter 13). More extensively considered in this book are the conflicts between classes differing in political or military power that seek government control. The occurrence of extremism within the conservative and liberal classes in Latin America, compounded by the superimposition of foreign economic and political interests, has produced conflicts, civil wars and military dictatorships that have often hindered economic development. Nicaragua is a remarkable case of a country that during nearly 180 years of independence has experienced a civil war, repeated invasion by the US, half a century of dictatorship and a revolution (chapter 10).

A path of ethnic and class reconciliation and a renunciation of extremist policies seems to require that the vision of the governing and opposition parties should not be uncompromisingly extremist (chapter 9). Due to extremist visions, the alternation of progressive and conservative governments in several American countries has not always produced constructive development, but rather a “doing everything again” (chapter 8). It is evident that those nations which have experienced a reduced incidence of internal conflicts are usually those that have produced the largest economies (US, Canada, Costa Rica, Chile), even when not particularly successful in preserving traditional cultural values. Remarkable is the case of Chile where a dictator was deposed by referendum, not by a revolution, and his economic policies were maintained (chapter 28). A study by the Justice Study Center of the Americas evidenced that the proper administration of justice resolved a large number of social conflicts. The readers of our book will appreciate that the ultimate solution to class conflicts is a cultural evolution toward justice, tolerance and rationality.

Compatibility and economic development. The enhancement of intra- and inter-ethnic compatibility by common goals and tolerance, discussed above, could ideally enhance constructive interaction between traditional cultures and economic development. However, economic development often conflicts with traditional values. The achievements of the capitalistic and free-market system, inspired by the Anglo-American culture and highlighted in chapter 3, are indeed outstanding. Many enjoy highly paid employment, participate in the system through shares and pension schemes, and benefit from unprecedented advances in medical care and education. To reduce the unequal distribution of wealth, governments have established taxation and regulations that the advocates of a free-market would like to reduce (chapter 3). However, the many problems associated with the excesses of the capitalist system mitigate its achievements. Because of the lure of economic progress and the search for new markets, promoted by free international trading and sophisticated advertising, the capitalist philosophy is expanding into other parts of the world. This expansion generates tensions and even conflicts between cultures, such as those with religious inspiration, that are not ready to accept free-market capitalism and related aspects of the Anglo-American culture. Problems that have been mentioned include the stability of families, the isolation of the elderly, consumerism, materialism and an excessive emphasis on increasing GDP. In addition, the current emphasis on digital technologies and artificial intelligence is causing the disappearance of a growing number of activities, with a significant increase in unemployment. The opposite argument is that the flexibility of the human being will create adjustments in the form of new jobs or cultural innovations. Nevertheless, no-abiding preoccupations are generated by the rapid succession of innovations, the globalization of processes, the exacerbation of inequality, the excessive role possibly played by thinking machines and the confusion between the know-how produced by a useful technology and the know-why that derives from true cultural progress.

The future. From the above considerations, the conclusion emerges that social harmony requires not only the sharing of common interests, but also an appreciation and reciprocal tolerance of the differences that characterize cultural identities. Traditional values, particularly family ties, friendship and religion, are based on a fundamental need of man – “not to feel alone” – that innovations may often exacerbate. Today we live in a world in which outstanding technological, biomedical and space achievements are counteracted by

concern over fundamental issues such as the future of the economic system, of democracy, of the ecosystem and of humanity. The leadership of new generations will need to consider new development models that will mitigate excesses, so that capitalism and innovations can better fulfill human expectations (chapter 8).

There is modest but growing evidence that a new development economy is gaining strength. Traditional agricultural and handicraft activities are being rejuvenated (chapters 21 and 22), social enterprises are on the increase (chapter 20), ecosystem protection is growing and Rights of Nature Movements, pioneered in Ecuador, have spread to over 100 countries (chapters 11 and 21). Renewable energies are expanding (chapters 11 and 24), and courses on development economics are being offered by major universities (chapter 20). The reduction of profit might cause a reduction of GDP, but the wealth distribution and the harmony of individuals with themselves and with others could improve.

Use of the book. This book is available in a hard and an electronic version in English. Extensive references and cross-references are included. A preliminary reading of the Highlighted Features sections is suggested for an efficient appreciation of the scope of the book. The book should interest distinct classes of readers. Educated, non-specialized audiences of individual readers, students and families may use the book as an updated, coordinated reference on historic and current events of the 28 American nations and on the origins of national identities. A minimum, objective of the book is an appreciation of the reasons for development problems, assessed by qualitative comparison of the socio-economic situations of different countries.

A more ambitious project is pursued by the courses that have been designed to stimulate new models of development. These courses are currently offered in selected schools in Central America, and their expansion to leading learning institutions is planned. The courses are based on the book, but include preparatory material and a phenomenological framework that facilitates an efficient handling of sociological and economic parameters. Details regarding the methodology adopted by the courses may be found in "Socio-economic inequalities in the Americas: A mitigating educational approach" (A. Ciferri, *Journal of Education and Development* Vol. 2, No 3, December 2018, doi:10.20849/jedv2i3).

A modified Spanish version is also available in a digital Kindle version and a hard, non-commercial edition. The Spanish edition is currently used in general culture courses offered in Guatemala, and has stimulated great interest and active student participation. The text will be frequently updated, thus characterizing the Spanish edition as a living book. Hard copies or electronic versions of selected chapters, propaedeutic material and instructions to teachers will be provided free of charge by the Japa-Limmat Foundation to schools interested in implementing similar courses.