

Modernity, Development and the Transnationalization of the Social Sciences in Argentina and Brazil (1930-1970)

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During my two-week stay at the Rockefeller Archive Center in August 2006 I made substantial progress on my research for a project titled "Modernity, Development and the Transnationalization of Social Sciences in Latin America: The Cases of Argentina and Brazil (1930-1970)". The purpose of this project is to analyze the origins and evolution of modern social science in two Latin American countries in a comparative perspective, focusing in particular on how the social sciences contributed to shaping a new concept of modernity. A central aspect of the project consists in analyzing the role of American foundations in the development, modernization and "Americanization" of the social sciences in Argentina and Brazil. More specifically, during my research at the RAC, I focused on how modernity was defined; how the foundations set up a network of reliable "native contacts" to provide information about applicants, projects and institutions; the impact of the foundations in the establishment of research agendas; and

the interaction between “global” and local research styles and traditions. What follows is a very preliminary report of some of my findings at the RAC.

The Rockefeller Foundation (RF) was the first American foundation to finance social science research in Argentina and Brazil, although it was probably more active in the latter country than in the former. Although until the late 1950s the RF would not have a specific program for the social sciences in Latin America, funding was provided for specific programs and individuals. I focused my research on a few specific representative institutions in both countries which, at different times, received funding from the RF: the Fundação Getulio Vargas (Rio de Janeiro) and the Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política (São Paulo), and the Universities of Cordoba and of Buenos Aires (Argentina).

One of the early forms of direct financial involvement of the RF in Argentine social sciences was through the program to aid European scholars escaping from Fascism. In the 1930s, for instance, the RF provided funding to Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, a Spanish historian specializing in the Middle Ages, who later became president of the Spanish Republic in exile. Sánchez Albornoz was helped first to move from Spain to France and later to leave that country and to establish himself in Argentina (first in Tucumán and later in Buenos Aires), where he created the influential Institute of Spanish History at the University of Buenos Aires.¹ At the same time the RF helped to relocate a group of economists from Italy to the University of Cuyo. In the early 1940s the RF also provided funds for an Institute of Library Studies at the University of Buenos Aires.

It is interesting to note that in several cases the RF’s funding of particular institutions originated in personal contacts rather than in established institutional policies or programs. For instance, negotiations for a grant destined to re-organize the University of Cordoba’s library originated in the interest that M.L Zimmer, an American astronomer established in Argentina since 1911 with funds from the Carnegie Institution, developed in the “cordobesa” university². This case is particularly interesting because Zimmer was an individual not related with the RF who tried (and failed) to bridge the cultural differences existing between the “cordobeses” and the officers of the RF. Zimmer

¹ Record Group 1.1 Projects. Series 301 Argentina, Box 7 Folders 72-81 University of Buenos Aires. Albornoz, Claudio Sánchez.

² At the end the grant was a failure due to the cordobeses failure to fulfill most of their commitments.

became a “translator” between two symbolic codes, telling the president of the University of Córdoba what was expected from him (for example, to show some interest in the project by sending a formal letter of request for the funding) and at the same time explaining to the RF’s staff what they could and could not expect from the Argentines at that time.³ These and other files provide excellent insights into the conditions of the public universities in the Argentine provinces as seen through American eyes. A visit report by L.W. Hackett, dated September 27, 1941, for instance, is very pessimistic about the situation of the University of Cuyo, which, he said, looked like a Midwest college but without resources. Moreover, “unfortunately, the Rector, while he has broken with European tradition, is completely ignorant of any other, and has tried to invent something on his own account. HMM and I were filled with sorrow rather than contempt.”⁴

A similar pattern of RF involvement (this time much more successful) with Latin American institutions took place in São Paulo, Brazil, with the Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política.⁵ In 1937 Paul Shaw, an American professor teaching the History of American Civilization at the University of São Paulo, approached the RF with a project to create a Center of American Studies and establish a journal titled *Política Exterior*. In order to support his proposal Shaw pointed out that Brazil played a key role as a link between Spanish and North American cultures. In a moment when Italy, Germany and France were trying to increase their influence in Latin America, it was essential for the US to support projects such as his. But at some point Shaw introduced the RF to Prof. Harnos Lowrie as an example of Brazilian hospitality towards Americans. Lowrie was an American scholar who held a position at the University of São Paulo and at the same time worked for the municipality of the city and for the state of São Paulo. In fact, the State of São Paulo sent Lowrie to the US in order to promote cultural cooperation between that state and the US. Obviously Shaw thought that Lowrie would promote his proposal, but Lowrie had different plans and started discussing his own project of creating international centers of social science research in different Latin American countries, starting with one in São Paulo.

³ RF Record Group 1.1 Series 301 Box 7 F. 76 University of Cordoba. Library 1934-1938

⁴ L.W Hackett to Stevens, Sept. 27, 1941. 1.1 301 Box 7, Folder 78. Albornoz, Claudio Sánchez (Medieval Studies).

⁵ Record Group 1.1 305 Box 53, Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política.

Soon after Lowrie stepped in, Shaw and his plans were promptly discarded by the RF. In the end, Lowrie became a referent for the RF in São Paulo and although his original ambitious plan did not materialize, he promoted the travel and stay of Donald Pierson, an anthropologist from the University of Chicago, at the Escola Livre, where he would remain for two decades. The Escola Livre was an institution of higher education created by a group of Paulista industrialists after the failed revolution of 1932 that asserted Paulista independence against the recently established Vargas government. The school's original purpose was to educate a state-based intellectual and political elite and at the same time to promote high-quality teaching of and research in the social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology. The new institution immediately established links with the University of São Paulo, although it continued to operate as a semi-independent institution. It differed from the University of São Paulo, which until the late 1950s continued to be an enclave of European (mostly French) academic tradition and professors in Brazil. From its beginning, the ELSP had a strong American presence through the attendance of Donald Pierson and funding from the RF and later the Ford Foundation. The University of São Paulo and the ELSP thus promoted two different versions of modernity: a European one, in retreat after World War II, and an American one, respectively. Pierson would play the role of a link between the RF and local academic, intellectual and political traditions. Like Zimmer, the American scientist in Cordoba, Pierson would try to prevent cultural misunderstandings. Sometimes he was successful, but other times he was not. In the end he himself fell victim to one of those misunderstandings. While he was away in the US, his Brazilian colleagues, tired of Pierson's efforts to impose an American academic culture in Brazil, managed to get rid of him.

This and other files show a high level of misunderstanding between local academic authorities and the RF as well as the sometimes misdirected efforts on the part of the RF to overcome them. Precisely to avoid these misunderstandings, RF officers tried to establish a network of reliable local contacts who could provide information about potential candidates for funding, institutions and programs. In Argentina, a key contact was Dr. Bernardo Houssay, Nobel laureate in 1947 and recipient of RF funding for his research on human physiology. In Brazil, this unofficial position was occupied for

a while by a young female economist, Maria Jose Paiva Suggett, who had been educated in Canada and in the US. In the late 1940s she held simultaneous teaching positions at the Universidade do Brasil and at the Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV). The FGV had been created in 1944 as a semi-private institution by the Vargas government with the purpose of educating an efficient state bureaucracy at the federal level. Its first president was Luis Simões Lopes, a long-term friend of Vargas, who served for more than forty years until his retirement in the early 1990s. He had previously headed the DASP, a state organization created by the Vargas government right after the establishment of the Estado Novo in 1937, with the purpose of rationalizing the state technical bureaucracy. The FGV was to some extent a continuation of the DASP. In time, the FGV would become a major recipient of funding from the RF and from the Ford Foundation.

Paiva Suggett soon became a “reliable” contact for the RF officers. She was often consulted about projects and individuals. RF perceptions of her reliability, however, seem to have been based on the fact that she had been educated in North America, although she had not been a particularly successful student according to her professors, and on the fact that her impressions fit very well into certain preconceptions that some RF officers had regarding Brazil. Ms. Paiva was very critical of all things Brazilian, usually advising against programs and people on the grounds that Brazilian institutions and people were not trustworthy because they did not share “modern” American academic values.

My research at RAC suggested several topics that deserve further elaboration. First: Until 1950 the RF involvement in the financing of Argentine and Brazilian social science was oriented towards specific institutions and individuals. In many cases someone acted as a “broker” between the RF and the potential recipient of a grant. These “brokers,” usually American scholars resident in Brazil or Argentina, were not related to either the RF or the potential beneficiary and made efforts to bridge the cultural gaps between the two.

Second, as soon as the RF became interested in a particular institution, its officers would try to generate a network of local contacts. These local contacts had usually been educated in the US, and their role was to provide “reliable information” about local people and institutions. Like the brokers, they also would try to bridge cultural distance,

but in some cases they simply reinforced the Americans' ideas and preconceptions about Latin America and its people.

Third, the RF's involvement in Latin America cannot be understood without taking into consideration the larger postwar involvement of the US in the region. References to US embassies, the Department of State or other US government agencies were a permanent feature in all negotiations for grants. Similarly, the supposed political allegiances of potential grantees was discussed and taken into consideration. However, the RF seemed to successfully avoid undue pressure from the US government regarding this issue. Although political sympathies could not be ignored, scholarly competence in general took precedence.

Fourth, the RF and other American foundations, particularly Ford, played a crucial role in the modernization of Latin American social sciences. Not only did they promote certain research agendas, more clearly the Ford Foundation, but they also promoted the bureaucratic reorganization, following American models, of the recipient institutions. In the postwar period what was at stake was an attempt to impose one particular concept of modernity, defined in American terms, against another defined in European terms.