The Evolution of the Latin American Bourgeoisie: An Historical-Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

In the struggle between the landowning lumpenbourgeoisie and the industrialists in 19th century Latin America victory tended to favour the former in most cases. In the principal countries of the region (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Mexico), the broader social, economic and political base of the landowners generally proved to be decisive. Through its alliances with the imperialist bourgeoisie, the local, export-oriented comprador bourgeoisie was able to triumph over its pro-industrial counterpart, and managed to condition the development of underdevelopment in the region as a whole.

Introduction

THE FOLLOWING IS A VERY GENERAL statement in which I seek to trace the broad evolutionary contours of the Latin American bourgeoisie. It is meant as a guide to more specific studies dealing with the questions of change and development in discreet Latin American societies. In this sense I run the risk referred to by Orlando Patterson when he noted in Slavery and Social Death, that the "generalist" lives in constant fear of the "specialist". By this he implied that those whose scientific pursuits are aimed at the acquisition of nomothetic knowledge and the discovery of general trends and sequences will often be open to attacks from others who are concerned with generating idiographic knowledge from the study of specific, unique events. But this does not imply that idiographic knowledge is to be preferred over nomothetic, or that the latter is less useful than the former. For as someone who specialises in generalities, the sociologist undertakes comparative research and is of necessity interested in identifying the broad features or patterns held in common by distinct societies or social groupings, and in specifying the conditions under which they are likely to be present.

In this study, then, the term "bourgeoisie" will be used in the broad, descriptive sense to identify any group of leading or hegemonic interests within a particular branch of economic activity: the commercial bourgeoisie; the agrarian bourgeoisie; the industrial bourgeoisie; the manufacturing bourgeoisie; the bourgeoisie which produces primary goods for export (hacen-
dados); the comprador bourgeoisie and so on. Further, I will seek to understand
the various fractions of the bourgeoisie on the basis of their specific class
interests, and the types of economic and political strategies that those interests
dictated. In the process I will attempt to distinguish that fraction which could
be said to have had clear national goals from their anti-national counterparts,
and the implications of this distinction for the whole question of economic
development.

The Point of Departure

As an integral part of the Spanish empire, the social, economic and
political structures of the Latin American continent tended, of necessity, to be
conditioned by the colonial relationship, and came to reflect some basic
features of Spanish society. (cf. Parry and Sherlock, 1971:205) Of these
features, by far the most important for us are those related to the low level of
economic development in Spain at the time of the conquest (and continuing
through much of the colonial period), and the consequent nature of the
economic policies pursued by Spain in the New World. These policies have
been described as being primarily "metalista" and "mercantilista" in orienta-
tion, owing essentially to the fact that, during the early period of Spanish col-
onialism, metropolitan interests revolved basically around the relentless search
for gold and silver, combined with monopolistic trading activities of the penin-
sula merchants.

In other words, unlike the situation in Britain where proto-industrial
operations were beginning to take root, the Spanish economy was geared prin-
cipally to commercial interests or pursuits. For this reason, Spain was unable
even to use the specie wealth derived from its colonies to promote economic
development, since, as Ronald Chilcote and Joel Edelstein tell us, "to do so
would have required that the wealth from the colonies find its way into the pro-
ductive process as an investment in the Spanish economy." (1974:34) But
since the relevant social and economic base, in the form of a manufacturing
bourgeoisie, did not exist in Spain, it was not really possible for the specie
wealth (gold and silver) derived from its New World exploits to find its way
into the productive industrial process at home. As a consequence, without local
economic growth and a class capable of promoting it, Spain was in no position
to trigger manufacturing or industrial types of changes in its Latin American
colonies.

In Spain, therefore, the wealth which was accumulated from colonial
pillage and exploitation, never found its way into the productive process, and
hence the country's productive forces could not benefit (as was the case in
England), and the general capitalist development of the society lagged behind
most other countries on the continent. In fact, one may even argue that the
specie flowing from the New World into the royal treasury probably retarded
the internal transformations necessary for the emergence of capitalist relations