THE AMERICAS AND THE MYOPIA OF UNIVERSALISM

(NOTES FOR GIGA/IdA in Hamburg March 10th 2014)

What we need to address in our Colloque in Paris (November 6/7, 2014) are two main questions:

i)What would be lost by dispensing with an “American Studies” regional perspective, and simply dealing with all social science (perhaps all human science) questions on the assumption that our essential object of study is all mankind?

ii) If an American Studies perspective can be shown to add value, or improve understanding of important matters that would tend to disappear from view in a universalist account, how can such studies be conducted in order to maximize their payoff, and to minimize the risk of parochialism and overstatement of regional differences?

This brief note concerns three angles of approach to these much larger questions. They are no more than very partial building blocks that could contribute to the eventual construction of a larger edifice. The note summarizes the three items, and then concludes with a sketch of what they may contribute to the broader work in progress.

A) Tocqueville on the Antimony of Contextual versus Universal Judgment

“It would seem that men employ two very distinct methods in the judgment which they pass on the actions of their fellow men; at one time they judge them by those simple notions of right and wrong which are diffused all over the world; at another they appraise them by a few very special rules which belong exclusively to some particular age and country. It often happens that these two standards differ; they sometimes conflict, but they are never either entirely identified or entirely annulled by each other”.

Alexis de Tocqueville Democracy in America (Reeve Edition, Volume II, Chapter XVIII, First published 1840. In Knox 1945 version, p 242)

Tocqueville was commenting on differing conceptions of “honor’ in mid-nineteenth century protestant America ( where the pursuit of wealth was the central concern) in contrast to aristocratic ideas of honor in medieval Europe. He also implicitly contrasted the United States and Catholic Latin America on this dimension. He did not claim that the features he identified with Protestant American were timeless and invariant, nor did his assume that where the USA led the rest of humanity was bound to follow. But he did end the chapter with the following single proposition; “the dissimilarities and inequalities of men gave rise to the notion of honor; that notion is weakened in proportion as these differences are obliterated, and with them it would disappear”. (p255)

This argument applies not only to honor, but to judgment about the actions of fellow men in general. One day globalization may perhaps complete the homogenization of such judgments, but it had not done so in the twentieth century, nor does this seem in prospect during our generation. In the meantime, we must continue to cope with the persistence of at least two standards of evaluation- one universalist and the other more bound to a given social context. Instead of essentialising either of these two (Fukuyama’s end of history, or Huntington’s American creed and who are we?) we should hold fast to Tocqueville’s key (somewhat relativist) insight- there are two relevant standards in contention, sometimes in conflict, neither of them ever fully absorbed –or annulled- by the other.

So there is a universalist standard of judgment that can be used to assess the history, context, and cultural manifestations of the actions of our fellow men living on the continent of the Americas, but it would be myopic to screen out from such evaluations a second level of judgment that is more specifically regional.

B) Ariel I. Ahram on “Comparative Area Studies”

“Treating regions as theoretically-grounded analytical categories, rather than as inert or innate geographical entities, can help inform both quantitative and qualitative attempts to build general theory …(which involves) using inductive intra-regional, cross-regional, inter-regional comparison”.

*The theory and Method of Comparative Area Studies* in Qualitative Research Vol11,no 1, (2011) p 69.

For Ahram regions are analytic categories grounded in historical processes that cluster spatial, temporal and institutional contexts between and above the country level. This means that to justify the use of a regional approach the researcher needs an explicit theoretical defense, in contrast to the area studies scholar for whom the region is “self-evident”. Different regional domains could be appropriate for different theoretical tasks, and there can be multiple overlapping regional units available for comparison ( central America/Latin America/the western hemisphere, etc). The boundary conditions and identity criteria for each region need to be spelt out explicitly for each task. Invoking a regional category involves drawing attention to contextual factors ( use of roman alphabet; absence of hereditary status; territory of recent settlement ; etc) and permits longue duree reasoning (500 years of christianization). Such tacit contextual knowledge risks being downplayed or screened out in universalist accounts.

The “large N” riposte to this charge is that if all the examples available in the social world are catalogued and included in a universal survey, then any regional effects should be detectable within the global database. Ahram tested this claim by reviewing 741 Large N country studies published in seven leading anglo -saxon political science journals between 2003/5. He found that only 22 out of 741 fulfilled this promise by using regional dummy variables, and only two tested for regional interactions. He concluded that “prevalent techniques of cross-national statistical analysis essentially slip in through the backdoor the proper nouns that were not allowed in the front door of stringently general social science. If they even bother to test for regional variation large-n studies are at a loss to explain it. Large-n analysis overlooks the immense diversity of macro-social outcomes, leaving general theories that are often little more than platitudes meant to describe every case in every condition” (p77).

C) Marta Lagos on Latin America and other large regions in the World Values Survey

The Latinobarometro has been conducting annual surveys of public opinion in 18 republics over the past twenty years. Among the questions they use are a range of items borrowed from Ronald Inglehart’s “World Values” surveys of 65 countries, which are intended to track and assess a putative global shift from “materialist” to “post-materialist” values over the past four decades. In her most recent report on this exercise, as it applies to the Latin American region, Marta Lagos concludes that on average there has been a distinctive trajectory that can be contrasted both to the post-materialist theory and to the patterns observable in other large world regions. According to her assessment there are substantially lower levels of inter-personal trust in Latin America, and this underlies the observable weakness of the region’s main political institutions. She stresses the “Catholic” cultural orientation of the region (religion has survived as perhaps the only durable “ideology”), even though secularization has been in progress. The church has lost influence, but remains among the few most trusted institutions. What her time series indicates is that despite political democratization there has been a reinforcement of traditional values. The relation between that and the more post-material trend towards increased “self-expression” is complex, and non-linear. This region-wide generalization is said to be fairly homogeneous overall, although she also highlights the variance between countries where rationality and self-expression are stronger (Mexico and Uruguay) and the rest. Overall she detects a distinctive Latin American “path” as regards the long run evolution of its norms and values, and she concludes that explanations for this trajectory need to be sought from within the region, rather than imported on the basis of supposedly universal “modernization” processes identified elsewhere.

She reproduces a graph from Christian Welzel “How Values Shape People’s Understanding of Democracy” presented at a WVS General Assembly in Istanbul in 2008”. (See Grafico 3 in the attached document “El Sol Latinoamaericano” by Marta Lagos) This which traces the evolution of values in five large culture regions between 1981 and 2006 along two axes :

i)values of self expression- which on average increase significantly across all five regions over that quarter century, including both Latin America and the anglo-saxon world (although from a much lower starting point in the former case, and still behind the anglo-saxon starting point at the end of the period.

ii)rational-secular values, which increase modestly in all other culture zones, except Latin America, where they actually decline from among the lowest to clearly the lowest, quite in contrast to the expectations of modernization, democratization, and post-materialism.

D) Conclusion

This note asked two questions: what would be lost be the elimination of “American Studies” as a framework for research; and how can such studies be organized to maximize their payoff and to minimize distortions. All three items sketched above identify important topics that can be productively investigated through a “large region” line of enquiry, and that might well escape notice under a more rigidly universalist protocol. So the first question is relatively straightforward.

The second question is the more complex to resolve. Each of these three items illustrates the potential for adding explanatory leverage through the pursuit of area studies. But the pitfalls of parochialism and exaggerated exceptionalism can easily offset the advantages of a region-based approach. Tocqueville posed a universalist question derived from his immersion in a non-American regional history (that of medieval Europe) and thus avoided both parochialism and the reification of difference (although many neo-Tocquevillians have tended to flirt with an overstated American exceptionalism that could be read into his argument). Ahram is the most explicit in linking the effective pursuit of area studies with general theory construction, and the importance of extra-regional comparisons. “Who knows his region who only his region knows?” Lagos uses a universalist tool (comparative survey research) to explain both the distinctiveness and the temporal and spatial variability of norms and values within her large region of study. These are three useful building blocks towards the construction of a more integrated and methodologically aware body of “American Studies”.

Laurence Whitehead Feb 17th 2014

PS:

The editors of LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY have made available the early publication of a featured debate:

Latin American Political Economy: Making Sense of a New Reality, by Juan Pablo Luna, María Victoria Murillo and Andrew Schrank just published in Early View and available ungated at this link: < <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2014.00219.x/abstract>>

===============================================================

The field of Latin American politics has undeniably achieved major advances. Nevertheless, one detects a growing intellectual unease and a sense that the excitement engendered by the pathbreaking work and heated debates of  previous decades has waned and perhaps given way to a certain “normalization” of our intellectual enterprise. To explore the current status of political science research on Latin America at this critical moment, LAPS is very pleased to publish a provocative essay on the state of Latin American political economy by Juan Pablo Luna (Universidad Católica de Chile), María Victoria Murillo (Columbia University) and Andrew Schrank (University of New Mexico).  Luna, Murillo, and Schrank have each made signal contributions to recent comparative politics scholarship. Now, they join together in a strong critique of much currently fashionable work in Latin American politics, which they contend promotes a “social science that rewards the testing of context-free theories and disdains the derivation of context-sensitive” research. They go beyond diagnosis to call for the revitalization of a more “grounded” Latin American political science that is more capable of theorizing and guiding empirical research in the early twenty-first century.

To reflect on the provocation issued by Luna, Murillo, and Schrank’s manifesto, LAPS invited brief critiques from Tulia Falleti (University of Pennsylvania), Evelyne Huber and John D. Stephens (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Fernando Limongi (Universidade de São Paulo), Alfred P. Montero (Carleton College), Kenneth Roberts (Cornell), and Ben Ross Schneider (MIT). While sympathetic to Luna, Murillo, and Schrank’s manifesto, these leading political scientists nevertheless raise doubts and advance friendly amendments. Offered the opportunity to respond to their critics, Luna, Murillo, and Schrank, in effect, opt to redoblar la apuesta advocating a revitalization of the study of Latin American political economy, and indeed of comparative politics and of political science as a discipline, premised on a vigorous and open-ended debate among scholars of all persuasions.

William C. Smith

Editor

Annex

**Gráfico: Cambio valórico neto entre zonas culturales (1981 – 2006)**



*Fuente: Christian Welzel, 2008*