

**Book review: “Sociology in Ecuador”
by Philipp Altmann, Palgrave 2022.**

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10291403

Abstract

Book review of “Sociology in Ecuador” written by Philipp Altmann and published by Palgrave 2022.

Keywords

Latin America, Sociology, Education, Research, History, Tradition

First submission: September 2023; Revised: October 2023, Accepted: November 2023

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Exploring the history and establishment of sociology within a Latin American nation, situated in a turbulent and complex region, presents a challenge that Professor Philipp Altmann undertakes with meticulous rigor and proficiency. Through an impressive biographical and documentary analysis, he guides the reader through the emergence, development, and institutionalization of sociology in Ecuador, on a journey that illustrates that the path was far from straightforward or linear.

The book focuses into the 20th century, a period marked in Ecuador by events such as the cocoa boom, the economic crisis, and the subsequent coup in 1925. It also encompasses the 1941 war with Peru, during which Ecuador suffered defeat and territorial loss. The banana boom of 1950, the income surge from oil exports in the 1970s, and the subsequent modernization of state structures and population growth are also included as factors that contributed to shaping the course of sociology in this country. Lastly, the author refers to the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the profound economic and political crises of 1999 and 2000.

These events played a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of sociology in Ecuador. As the author reminds us, Ecuador's sociological trajectory diverged from that of other Latin American nations, beginning with its later development. It wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s, with the establishment of Marxist sociology, that Ecuador's sociological production aligned with broader regional trends, yet always maintaining its particularities.

The three major periods of sociology in Ecuador analyzed by Professor Altmann are, first, positivist sociology, defined by the influence of classic -european- authors of the time, such as Herbert Spencer, Gabriel Tarde, and Georg Simmel, and their reinterpretation at the local level. Secondly, the period when sociology in Ecuador attempted to professionalize and connect with the global debates of the 1950s and 1960s. During this period Ecuador witnessed the establishment of its first research institutes, and in the early 1950s, two Ecuadorian sociologists actively contributed to the formation of the International Sociological Association and its regional counterpart, the Latin American Association of Sociology.

The third moment represents a profound transformation in the local landscape of sociology caused by the military dictatorship from 1963 to 1966, which intervened universities, dismantled internal democracy and student involvement while dismissing hundreds of professors. By the late 1960s, another rupture occurred with the local emergence of critical Marxist sociology. This new paradigm led to a reinterpretation of Ecuador's history and circumstances, rejecting previous notions of positivism and functionalism and instead engaging in debates concerning dependency theory, semi-feudal structures in Ecuadorian society, and the role of sociology in the broader societal context.

Lastly, the author highlights that the 1980s witnessed a significant diversification of sociological research, driven by the increasing importance of research institutes outside the realm of universities. Despite this diversification, Marxism persisted as the prevailing theoretical framework across all sociology degree programs. From the 1990s onward, Ecuadorian sociology has been undergoing a process of change, shaped by a variety of factors that extend into the present day, including political and economic crisis and political reforms. Attempting to undertake a "sociology of sociology" is a complex task that can be approached from various perspectives. In this book, the author applies Roger Geiger's theory of the

institutionalization of sociology proposed in 1975. He described French sociology as a competition among different metaparadigms that ultimately leads to the institutionalization of one of them. Geiger divided institutionalization into three components: the intellectual component, the organizational component, and the sociocultural component. Altmann primarily focuses on the first two components, which include the formation and development of sociological approaches, dominant references, methodological reflections, and schools of sociological thought, among others. This primary focus is combined with the organizational component, related to universities, research institutes, and cultural or political organizations that had an impact on the development of the sociological debate.

The path that led to the institutionalization of sociology in Ecuador appears as a collective task, marked by debates about the function and objectives of the discipline but also intertwined with the consequences of the conquest of America, colonialism, social stratification, poverty, inequality, racism, and the marginalization of large population groups. The development of sociology in Ecuador, much like in the entirety of Latin America, has been intricately linked with the political and economic dynamics that defined the predominant topics and lines of research during different periods. Certain elements are shared across Latin America, including the legacies of colonialism, the exploitation, forced assimilation and abuse of indigenous populations, the recurrent coups, the emergence of radical left-wing movements, and the surge of neoliberalism during the 1980s and 1990s.

Power struggles among post-colonial elites also played a significant role in shaping the fabric of Latin American society and the lenses through which it was understood. These conflicts hindered the region's efforts to resolve internal disputes and achieve integration. Furthermore, the interference of the United States, whether through legitimate or clandestine channels, in the domestic politics of many nations, also contributed to shape the course of events in the region.

Another aspect, central for understanding the social and economic structure of the region is its subordinate integration into the global capitalist system and its international division of labor, primarily through the export of raw materials and, on some occasions, an incipient industrialization that did not fully materialize. In recent times, prominent factors shaping the region's dynamics are corruption, persistent inequality, increasing violence, informality, and new forms of neocolonial dependence together with internal conflicts leading to migrations, especially towards the United States.

In response to these -old and new- challenges, various conceptions of the role of sociology have surfaced, and within these debates and productions the discipline has grown and acquired a distinctive character. However, sociology in Ecuador, as well as in all Latin America, was significantly influenced by European theories that permeated the region's sociological production. This influence together with the background of colonialism and imperialism, lead in occasions to a Eurocentric, if not openly classist and racist discourse. Positivism, with its ideas of evolution, natural selection, and social pathology, was a useful tool to attribute responsibility for all societal problems, especially political, social, and cultural "backwardness," to mestizos and indigenous peoples.

Cultural colonialism was present in Universities and research institutes in Latin America until the 1950s and 1960s, when this narrative was challenged with the introduction of concepts

such as internal colonialism, dependency, center-periphery dynamics, development styles, among others. These notions emerged from studies focused on the specific social and power structures of Latin America. Nevertheless, Altmann highlights that at all times, "Ecuadorian sociology was a genuine sociology, offering proper explanations for social phenomena and engaging with the debates elsewhere." This shows that sociology in the Global South was not simply repeating ideas from the Global North, even though the attempts to build a dialogue did not prosper. The author analyzes this indifference towards the local production of Latin America, which reveals a history of marginalization and exploitation but also as a history of systematic invisibilization (Santos 2011, quoted by Altmann).

The author also engages with debates on post-colonialism and decoloniality, which key figures are Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, and others who contributed to build a non-hegemonic sociology. Relevant regional movements and authors include the liberating education of Paulo Freire, the philosophy of liberation of Enrique Dussel, Arturo Roig, and many others, as well as the Latin Americanism of Leopoldo Zea, José Martí, Juan Bautista Alberdi, all of whom reclaimed Latin American identity, indigenous culture, and emphasized justice, equality, and freedom.

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Finally, as a Latin American and a professional educated in this region, I can attest to the accuracy of Professor Altmann's statements when he asserts that "doing research in the Global South is a particular challenge. Access to material is always a problem [and] Universities do not recognize the role of research and writing in the academic world." However, Professor Altmann manages to provide an extremely comprehensive overview of Ecuadorian sociology with the available materials, drawing from a wide range of sources including sociology journals, newspapers, university library archives, political party debates, interviews with several key actors, amongst others.

The result is a relevant document that reflects the course of sociology in a country with a turbulent past and present, which contributed to the development of a critical social science focused on regional structures and dynamics. The expert knowledge and details presented in this book offer valuable insights into the sociological tools employed throughout the 20th century to interpret the world and, with varying degrees of success, attempt to transform it.