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Esteban Castro: Socio-Ecological Futures

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Socio-Ecology: Contradictions and...
Opportunities in the Struggles for Better Futures

Esteban Castro

The social is structured around confrontations between rival, often incompatible societal projects. Thinking about the future does not escape from this general fact. Then, we are bound to ask what kind, and especially whose futures we have in mind. Even if we broadly agree that we have in mind a “better world”, the question remains: a better world for whom? This way of addressing the issue of the futures we want raises uncomfortable, thorny questions. The re-emergence of barbarism, both in Eastern and Western countries, is a painful and clear reminder that for many in this planet a better world means a world that excludes a large part of the human species, for some it would be the non-whites, for others it would be the Christians, for others it may be just the large masses of the very poor inconveniently flocking to claim a share of the social wealth accumulated in the central capitalist countries. It is unfortunate that, in the second decade of the Twentieth-first Century, we can write the above words that could be part of a nineteenth century description of the state of the social. May be the Argentinian sociologist Juan Carlos Marín, who recently passed away, was right when he said “calm down, remember that we are working for the society of the Thirty-third Century”, which takes us back to the topic of the futures we want.

We are learning some lessons from the ongoing social struggles taking place worldwide, many of which I have no doubt are struggles for bettering the world. To avoid overgeneralization, I focus here on some examples from my own research on social struggles against socio-ecological inequality and injustice and the place of Sociology in this context. I argue that socio-ecological inequality and injustice are among the key obstacles facing the process of substantive, material, not merely
rhetorical democratization. This reflexion comes from observations about
the state of the democratization process in Latin America, which in recent
years has become the focus of much discussion and praise owing to the
clear progress made by several countries of the region in tackling
extreme poverty and deprivation. Yet, the very process that has allowed
such advances in the struggle against social injustice in the region is
punctuated by widespread social conflicts, among which socio-ecological
conflicts are very prominent. Unfortunately, the socio-ecological
dimension of inequality and injustice seems to be a blind spot for the
democratic left-of-centre political actors that brought about such positive
outcomes in the reduction of extreme destitution in the region. This is not
a minor problem, because Latin America has become once again the
territory of large-scale expansion of old and new forms of primitive
accumulation, including land and water grabbing and the destruction of
the material basis of societies through the massive and unregulated use
of toxic agro- and industrial chemicals, genetically modified organisms,
and mega infrastructural projects including mining, hydraulic fracturing,
building of dams and river diversions, nuclear reactors, among other.
Many of these activities, or at least elements of them, are highly
regulated or altogether banned in Europe, such as the use of cyanide in
open cast mining or the use of genetically-modified crops, but have no
restriction and are often unregulated in Latin America. Understandably,
the whole region has become engulfed in widespread social conflicts
flaring up from the impact of these activities on human populations. Many
of these conflicts have prompted a renewed wave of social struggles for
substantive democratization, confronting progressive governments with
their own social constituencies.

These examples briefly summarized here contain significant lessons, not
just for Latin America that is the main focus of the research. A first lesson
that we can extract relates to a point raised at the beginning: what kind
of better world? Whose better world? There is much to praise in the
recent history of Latin America, particularly the progressive social policies
implemented by a number of countries since the 2000s, notably
Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela. At the same time
though, progressive social policies have not necessarily been translated
into progressive politics. In fact, in relation to the socio-ecological
dimension we have seen the worsening of protracted forms of inequality
and injustice in the whole region, including the countries governed by progressive left-of-centre political actors. From a detached viewpoint, we could argue that this was inevitable, given that irrespective of the position of the different governments in the political spectrum, the model of development prevailing in Latin America is driven by highly exploitative extractivist capitalism. Paraphrasing Marx conclusions from over a century ago, capitalism does not only exploit the labourers, it also exploits nature and destroys the material basis of society (Marx, 1867: 326). We are witnessing the Twentieth-first century version of this old tale in Latin America. Therefore, even where social struggles to democratize society have succeeded in bringing about a higher degree of social justice, at least by reducing extreme destitution, the question about what kind of better world and for whom leads us to disturbing conclusions. The prevailing model of development tends to consolidate unequal social configurations: capitalism is predicated on the private accumulation of wealth, not in its social distribution, which is the goal of substantive, material democratic politics.

A second lesson concerns the role of Sociology in this debate. Although the socio-ecological dimension has occupied for some time an important number of sociologists, many of whom are grouped in the International Sociological Association’s Research Committee 24 Environment and Society, first established in 1971, it is fair to say that this dimension is still somewhat marginal in the wider context of the discipline. There has been a long-standing and unfinished academic debate about why this may be, and there is no agreement on the matter. A historian of our discipline working in a few decades from now, reading the writings of contemporary members of the discipline or examining the teaching syllabus of undergraduate sociology courses may be puzzled by the very limited attention, in many cases the neglect altogether, paid by sociologists to the socio-ecological dimension. I found recently a stark example of this: a collection co-edited by leading sociologist and former ISA President Fernando Henrique Cardoso that addresses the main challenges for democracy and development in Latin America for the foreseeable future, fails to mention the sociological dimension completely (Cardoso and Foxley 2009). Not even a chapter section is dedicated in the two volumes that compose the collection to the challenges to democracy and development posed by the devastating impacts of socio-
ecological conflicts on the region’s societies. How could this be? And why? I do not have an answer. However, it illustrates that the level of attention paid by Sociology to the interrelations between ecological and social processes is disproportionately low. This is clear taking into account the significance of the socio-ecological dimension when we think about the futures that we want and our struggles for a better world.

To conclude: Thinking about the futures that we want and imagining a better world confronts us with uncomfortable and difficult intellectual, practical, and ethical problems. It requires producing knowledge that is socially relevant and can have a positive impact beyond our academic comfort zone, which for many sociologists may mean going against the current and paying a high personal price. The social is characterized by an ongoing confrontation of rival, often incompatible societal projects. In historical perspective, we can discern a distinctive pattern of progressive social change, which suggests that social struggles for a better world have succeeded many times before, and this is the reason why we are here now and are able to think about the feasibility of better futures. However, the future is a highly contested territory, and we face the challenge of powerful societal projects predicated on social exclusion, inequality and injustice. The shaping of a better world just for a privileged minority is taking place before our eyes. Thinking about better futures and a better world requires taking sides in the confrontation, which is also happening within our discipline.

References


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Banner Image: Activists protest the construction of the Zapotillo Dam at the Rio Verde near Temacapulín, Jalisco, Mexico. Montage based on two photos taken by the author during a visit with the Caravana Ciudadana (Citizen Caravan) in 2014.

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