

Theoretical and Historical Trajectory of Sociology in Mexico

Trayecto teórico e histórico de la sociología en México

■ Zabludovsky, Gina (2024) *Sociology in Mexico. An Intellectual and Institutional History*. Springer ■

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There is no one better suited than Gina Zabludovsky, one of the most respected and solid sociologists in the country, to write this book *Sociology in Mexico: An Intellectual and Institutional History*, published by the prestigious Springer publishing house and part of the “Sociology Transformed” series.

The book embarks on a complex and challenging task: to provide a panoramic yet concise, innovative, and well-documented review of the development of sociology in Mexico from the mid-19th century —long before it was established as a professional and academic discipline— up to the present day. It considers the influences of Western sociology and the various intersections and interactions between the social sciences, with the aim of contributing to the creation of a national, or even Latin American, sociology.

The narrative thread weaves together the history of the social sciences and sociology proper with major national and international historical events that have shaped the country's life from a cultural and intellectual perspective. In other words, it combines history and context. Its goal is to demonstrate the impact that specific political and social conditions had on the study approaches and thematic areas that were prioritized during the phases of the discipline's construction, consolidation, and transformation.

The approach is innovative because it not only gathers the contributions of the most relevant thinkers and researchers of each period, referencing their major works and how these influenced the course of sociology, but it also creates a special space for the intellectual participation of female scholars and academics at different moments, addressing a gap that

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has traditionally been overlooked and is now unacceptable. The author also emphasizes the relationship between sociological work and power, highlighting the different positions the intellectual community developed regarding the political regime in power. Additionally, she rescues the contributions of institutions and universities, as well as the major social movements that took place, to complete the picture of a true intellectual and institutional history of Mexican sociology. The text is brief but rich in scholarly references that illustrate the various moments of the journey, allowing for an engaging and educational reading experience.

The book addresses four major historical periods organized around two main dimensions: 1) the fields of sociological research and 2) the social changes that influenced its development in Mexico. This structure allows for an examination of the relationship between the political projects promoted by various governments and the political-ideological positions of the researchers who analyze social problems and seek to offer well-founded solutions that are sometimes attended to by governments, or not. The book shows us how sociological thought did not always aspire to the theoretical and methodological development of the discipline, but it was committed to better understanding social problems to help address them.

I

The first section, “The Precursors of Sociology (1856 to 1930)”, covers the long period in

which sociological thought was committed to the “national project” during the construction phase of the Mexican state, both pre- and post-revolutionary. It spans from the latter half of the 19th century, when Comte’s positivist ideas —he being regarded as the “father of sociology”— became the dominant intellectual and governmental discourse, to the first twenty years after the Mexican Revolution, when the national agenda focused on the search for a new national identity.

The author delves into the main exponents of positivist ideas and the notion of progress, such as Gabino Barreda and Justo Sierra, showing how their discourse supported the principles of the liberal state —the secularization of Mexican public life, the separation of church and state, and mandatory public scientific education—. Meanwhile, Andrés Molina Enríquez, who published the first sociological book by a Mexican author, *Los grandes problemas nacionales*, utilized data on the social, economic, and racial composition of the Mexican population, emphasizing the strength of mestizaje, in line with the discourse of the new regime following the Mexican Revolution.

As part of this long initial phase, Zabudovsky incorporates the debate on the social role of women, highlighted by Melchor Ocampo who, ahead of his time, advocated for women’s access to higher education, although more as a necessary tool to combat their intellectual inferiority, which he believed hindered humanity’s progress, rather than as a right —in other words, from a utilitarian perspective—. In this context, she reminds us of Lawreana Wright, one of the pioneers of feminism in Mexico.

Perhaps the most significant impact of the Mexican Revolution on sociological discourse, as the author notes, was the deployment of a true crusade against positivism, to reflect on the character of the Mexican people, led by Antonio Caso and Manuel Gamio. In line with the post-revolutionary official narrative, Gamio defended the need to integrate indigenous people into the country's economic and social development. His principal work, *La población del Valle de Teotihuacán* (The Population of the Teotihuacán Valley), is a study with a variety of statistical data that influenced the thinking of José Vasconcelos, author of what was considered the manifesto of Mexican identity at the time, summarized in the idea of the "cosmic race".

The author's recovery of the work of Anita Brenner is particularly commendable. Brenner was a figure who promoted the new Mexican identity abroad and wrote a book about the phases of the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1940, yet she was ignored by contemporary intellectual circles that denied her recognition as a pioneer of the social sciences. However, she shared the cultural goals of intellectual work with her peers. It is likely that being a woman, Jewish, and writing in English were reasons enough for them to disdain her work, revealing their stereotyped and misogynistic views.

II

The second period, from 1930 to 1959, is characterized by the "Institutionalization of the Social Sciences", with the initial focus on the government of Lázaro Cárdenas, particularly

his policy of supporting the Spanish Republican exile. This policy allowed intellectuals who migrated to collaborate with Mexican academics, both to give theoretical impetus to the social sciences and to create institutions that were key to this purpose, such as La Casa de España, which soon became El Colegio de México, and the Fondo de Cultura Económica (FCE), a publishing house crucial for disseminating major works in the social sciences in Spanish. To illustrate the importance of these exiles, the author mentions Manuel Pedrozo, who taught political theory at the UNAM School of Law, which became a hub for the teaching of social sciences before the sociology degree program was established in the 1950s, even though the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales (IIS) had already been founded in the 1930s to promote the development of research projects that we would today define as public policy. Among the exiles was also José Medina Echavarría, who had a clear academic vocation and translated major classical authors such as Max Weber, leading to the publication of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* in Spanish in 1944, twenty years before it appeared in English.

Zabludovsky's effort to reconstruct this history shows that during these years of institutionalization of the social sciences, the central debate was about the role these disciplines should play. For Daniel Cosío Villegas or Lucio Mendieta y Núñez, the training of graduates should focus on equipping them with practical skills for integration into public service, whereas for Medina Echavarría, these skills should center on the development of theory and

methodology, meaning that his strictly academic purposes were imperative. This confrontation led Medina Echavarría to leave the country.

An idea only briefly mentioned in the text is that the relationship between the Spanish exiles and the national academic community was not entirely smooth and collaborative, as they came from different traditions and stages of development in their respective social sciences. Additionally, there were likely intellectual rivalries that ultimately led to the conviction among national academics to align themselves with the contemporary government administration. This tension between the social and academic functions of the social sciences evolved, with the academic approach gaining ground with specific practical applications aimed at solving social problems.

Later, in the context of the country's modernization projects initiated by Miguel Alemán in the early 1950s, there arose the need for new professionals with technological capabilities, leading to the creation of degree programs in diplomatic sciences, journalism, sociology, and political science, coinciding with the construction of Ciudad Universitaria. In this second phase of the institutionalization of sociology, which coincides with the so-called "Mexican Miracle", teachers and researchers combined their academic work with government jobs. This was when demography flourished and gained social relevance due to the use of data and statistical correlations. The book by Raúl Benítez Zenteno from the IIS marked this new trend, collecting data on fertility, migration,

and mortality, offering population growth projections that became essential inputs for population policy planning at a time when the country and government faced the need to promote birth control policies.

The institutionalization of the social sciences, which enabled the development of their own theories and methodological strategies, gradually distanced them from law and philosophy. However, as the author notes, it simultaneously placed interdisciplinary training at the center for those studying sociology. For Pablo González Casanova, director of the School of Political and Social Sciences, it was necessary to teach history, anthropology, and economics to conduct field studies and undertake quantitative analyses. Unlike previous periods, the institutionalization of the social sciences led to the publication of journals with critical stances towards the government, such as *El Trimestre Económico* and *Problemas Agrícolas e Industriales de México*.

III

The third period corresponds to the expansion of sociology in Mexico (1959-1980). As mentioned in this section, beginning in the late 1950s, three major national and international events had a significant impact on the evolution of sociology in Mexico: 1) social movements (railroad workers, teachers, doctors) that questioned the existing corporatist and union organizational model were repressed; 2) the Cuban Revolution, which introduced Marxism and interest in Latin America into sociological work; and 3) the rise of military regimes in the southern part of

the continent, which led to a new migration of leftist intellectuals to social science departments in Mexico, catapulting the expansion of critical social sciences.

It was during these years that academics began to emphasize the importance of quantitative analysis, which led to studies on income distribution—such as those by Ifigenia Martínez—that used data to reveal how economic policies had primarily benefited the wealthy, or María Luisa Rodríguez Salas's book *El suicidio*, which, using INEGI data, calculated suicide rates by sex, age, marital status, and occupation. Books on social classes and testimonies of violence, such as *The Children of Sánchez* by Oscar Lewis, were also published, showing the other side of the official discourse of prosperity and economic development. This angered the government, leading to the suppression of its publication and the resignation of the FCE's director. The governments of the "Institutionalized Revolution" ceased to view sociological critique as collaborative. Since the government of Miguel Alemán, repression had become the official response to critical positions in the social sciences. However, in this context, new independent publishing houses such as Siglo XXI emerged, and it was then that *La democracia en México* by Pablo González Casanova was published in 1965, becoming an iconic text in the use of statistical and historical data for sociological analysis and representing a leap in the institutionalization of sociology in the country. González Casanova distinguished between the legal, official structure of the country and the real structure of de facto power groups, introducing new concepts such as "internal colonialism" and "dual society", thus highlighting the social scientist's obligation

to end colonial exploitation and to advance scientific disciplines.

In this context, and as a reaction to modernization theory, which gained international recognition, the so-called dependency theory developed in Latin America, becoming the most widely used interpretation of the region's social inequality at a time when statistical techniques were increasingly applied to address social problems.

The critical stance of the social sciences towards government policies coincided with the emergence of the 1968 student movement, which ended in the Tlatelolco repression and led to the addition of demands for freedom of expression and the right to protest to the traditional economic and social demands of the population.

With Pinochet's coup in Chile in 1973, the study of the state, political movements, institutions, and democracy gained importance, and Marxism became the dominant theoretical framework. Sociology at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of UNAM underwent curricular changes that not only questioned the status quo but also argued for the autonomy of social sciences from the state.

It is worth noting that the impact of major Latin American and Mexican events on the development of sociology was not as uniform as might be expected. In fact, there was a discrepancy between the Marxist approach that dominated teaching and what was happening in the field of research, where studies were conducted with quantitative approaches on various specialized fields of social life, such as demographic dynamics, social stratification, and migration. Projects on the regional history of Latin

America, sociolinguistics, political sociology, the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of art, urban sociology, social movements, business and labor organizations, family, education, ethnicity, bureaucracy, women, pressure groups, authoritarianism, unionism, and social inequality also developed, leading to an explosion of research topics.

In line with Gina Zabludovsky's goal of highlighting the research work of women, the text emphasizes the work of professors at El Colegio de México who investigated the situation of women in rural areas, conducted studies on topics such as electoral issues, and studied bureaucracy and social organizations, particularly in the context of Mexico's democratization process.

As part of this fever of sociology expansion, the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) was founded in the mid-1970s, new UNAM campuses were opened in areas adjacent to Mexico City, and specialized research centers were created. The social sciences gained national prominence, and research became decentralized, opening university spaces, for example, in Oaxaca, Guadalajara, and Veracruz. In this context, the state adopted a policy of supporting science and technology —Conacyt was created— but specialized centers for interdisciplinary teaching and research were also established. This new phase involved greater state involvement in the development of social sciences; the Consejo Mexicano de Ciencias Sociales (COMECOS) was created to promote the professionalization of social science schools and works with critical interpretations of Mexico's official history and contemporary social phenomena

were published. One of the most notable books was *Cómo sobreviven los marginados* by Larissa A. Lomnitz, which gave a boost to the theory of social marginalization, highlighting the importance of solidarity among precarious groups and developing the concept of "survival strategies".

IV

From Particular Sociologies to Interdisciplinary Studies (1980 to the Present) covers the period in which the discipline faced new theoretical and methodological challenges, not only due to increasing specialization but also because its thematic agenda was enriched with new topics and approaches, such as identities, subjectivities, institutions, studies on the state, democracy, power, and the political system.

Gina Zabludovsky identifies the fall of the Berlin Wall as the first event that marked the path of sociology during this period, accompanied by globalization, which translated into the adoption of theoretical pluralism and changes in fields of knowledge. Although student enrollment declined due to the increase in social sciences degrees across several states in the country, the composition of both the student body and faculty changed, as the number of women increased, and new journals with rigorous editorial standards were founded, covering empirical studies, theoretical topics, reinterpretations of the classics, conceptual debates on the risk society, and explorations of new interpretative schools.

In Mexico, the 1985 earthquake sparked interest in urban sociology, not only to analyze

specific issues related to housing, the informal economy, and the effects of globalization on cities but also to propose practical strategies for improving housing conditions, transportation, services, and more. Later, the Zapatista uprising led sociology to focus on indigenous rights, multiculturalism, regional autonomy, and participatory democracy, demonstrating the discipline's ability to respond positively to emerging social phenomena.

As the 21st century unfolded, following the wave of specialization, complex national and global phenomena brought to the forefront issues like ecological problems, increasing violence, and new types of migration. These challenges forced sociology to pivot towards a holistic understanding of problems with an interdisciplinary approach, leading to the formation of research groups composed of both national and international scholars. Studies on the escalation of violence revealed that fragmented knowledge was a barrier to a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. The dramatic rise in violence against women demanded the development of studies on sex trafficking and femicides, establishing gender studies as an essential field in both Mexican and global sociology.

As the author notes, sociology in Mexico today shares research topics and emphases with sociologies developed in other parts of the world. It might be argued that not all the phases through which sociology in Mexico has passed have had homogeneous orientations, because of the impact of political and social events. Predominant patterns may have emerged, but they have not hindered the production of diverse perspectives and content.

In the current context, where problems transcend national borders to become global phenomena —such as climate change, migration, violence against women, and social indifference towards democracy, among others— perhaps it is time to rethink the concept of Mexican or Latin American sociology. Greater emphasis should be placed on fostering open exchanges with researchers from other countries so that local perspectives, rather than becoming isolated, encourage broader debates on social issues that are increasingly global and thus require global solutions. Of course, local dynamics must find their place within these broader visions.

It is challenging to recount all the dimensions, themes, and theoretical debates, along with their respective exponents, including women, as well as the specific contexts in which they emerged, covered by Gina Zabludovsky's book across the four periods she discusses. What is clear is that all the changes affecting societies around the world have an impact on the orientation and commitments of sociologists, which should contribute to the consolidation of the scientific discipline. In any case, the emergence of new problems, or the deepening of existing ones, presents a challenge not only for sociology but for all social sciences, to foster the necessary collaboration between different areas of knowledge both within and outside our country.

About the author

JACQUELINE PESCHARD has a PhD in Social Sciences from El Colegio de Michoacán and a professor at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at UNAM. Her research focuses on transparency, access to information, the political system, party systems and electoral systems, political culture, voting, and political behavior. Among her most recent publications are: “Transparencia asediada, contrapesos resilientes” (2024) in Ricardo Becerra, *El daño está hecho. Balance y políticas para la reconstrucción*. Grano de Sal; *La ruta crítica para el rescate de la transparencia* (2023) SUT/UNAM.