The Kissinger Commission Report: Its Implications for the Academic and Consulting Latin Americanist Geographer

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INTRODUCTION

On November 18, 1983, Ronald Reagan signed Executive Order No. 12433 providing for a study of alternative American responses to the political and social disorder in Central America. A bipartisan commission composed of twelve members from government, business, labor, and academia produced a 50,000 word report in February 1984. The document constitutes one of the most comprehensive policy recommendations toward Latin America since the Alliance for Progress. The Kissinger Commmission Report (KCR) outlines a number of proposals that are of interest to both the academic and consulting geographer.

This paper summarizes those portions of the reeport that appear to hold particular portent for professional geography. Interested geographers must study the entire document to determine what policy implications it holds for a particular country.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE KISSINGER REPORT

The Kissinger Commission was guided by three major principles in its search for answers to the turmoil in Central America. These three principles were the following: (1) to promote political self determination in Central America; (2) to stimulate the economic and social development of the region; and (3) to protect perceived American and Central American security interests. A major premise of the report is that regional disorder is very clearly the result of Soviet-Cuban-Nicaraguan interference.

The work succinctly traces at the outset the economic and political history of Central America. Much of the report focuses on contemporary analysis, including the burgeoning debt held by the respective Central American nations (Guatemala, EI Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama). As with the Alliance for Progress, outlined in 1961 and gradually implemented throughout the remainder of that decade, the Kissinger Commmission's proposed economic aid packages rely primarily on the establishment of bi- and multilateral pacts with the United States government, the Inter-American Development Bank, The World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Unlike the Alliance for Progress, however, the KCR's review of Central American history is one of candor.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ACADEMIC GEOGRAPHER

Chapters three and four of the report, respectively entitled "A Crisis in Central America: A Historical View" and "Toward Democracy and Economic Prosperity, " provide a thorough synopsis of the region's economic history as well as the views held by the current United States administration regarding the causes of political instability in the region. These two chapters lend themselves well to underrgraduate courses of regional and political geography. A few examples illustrate this. The historical review of U.S. military, economic, and political intervention cites the escapades of William Walker in Nicaragua in the 1850s, the presence of U.S. Marines in Nicaragua, the operations of the United Fruit Company, and the direct participation of the U. S. government in overthrowing several democratically elected governments (e.g., Honduras, 1911; Guatemala, 1954). Although the mere citation of these events may be interpreted as superficial accounts of American intervention in Central Amerrica, it should be recalled that the Alliance for Progress was officially announced only months after the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba. That incident lessened the credibility of the Alliance for Progress in the eyes of many Latin

American leaders (Levvinson and de Onis 1970; Personal communication, Teodoro Moscoso 1980).

The report outlines an eight-point emergency sta- **[end p. 56]** bilization program for Central America that provides useful organizational rubrics for reviewing the economic geography of Central America. These points address the need to strengthen the Central American Common Market (CACM), renegotiate the foreign debt, stimulate the private sector in national and regional economies, stabilize the prices of major export commodities, and facilitate credit for producers of manufactured and agricultural goods. The renegotiation of the debt and the proposal to strengthen the CACM are not novel plans and could be addressed by faculty and students in classroom discussions.

The geopolitical implications of communist insurgency in Central America is the dominant theme of the report. The Kissinger Commission views the need for greater military security against outside[2] (i.e., non-Central American) aggression a cornerstone of U. S. foreign policy. Development projects in the fields of health care, education, agriculture, industry, and housing will be of little value if the alleged foreign aggression continues. Increased millitary aid to El Salvador is seen as a first step in ensuring peace in the region. In this regard, the geopolitical implications of the report complement works by geographers who have explored the reelationship betweeen geographical factors and guerrilla warfare (McColl 1969) and border conflicts in Latin America (Child 1985). McColl, for example, noted the importance of eastern Cuba as a region hostile toward central administration under colonial and national rule. He contended that this historical attitude, dense vegetation, difficult terrain, and remoteness from large urban centers allowed Castro to gain momentum in moving from eastern to western Cuba between 1956 and 1959. A parallel can be drawn with the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua where the Miskito Indians are a potential source of separatism in Nicaragua as well as anti-Sandinista suppport. This kind of analogy between contemporary geopolitical conflicts and the geographical literature is one of several comparisons that can be drawn from the Kissinger Commission Report.

In proper balance, then, the dependency literature and the works of Cardoso and Faletto (1979) should be consulted to contrast the theses of the Kissinger Report. Clearly, dependency theory is a major paradigm in the development literature. According to dos Santos, "dependency is a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development of another economy to which the forrmer is subjected" (1970, 231). Recognition that small Central American economies are linked to the world in precarious ways is central to understanding that region's dependent economy. Despite the fact that the KCR states that between 1975 and 1982 the total debt among the Central American nations increased by 240 percent, it recommended allocating $20 billion to meet interest repayment during the 1985-90 period. The dependentista school might ask what the implications are of refinancing the regional debt in terms of providing the region with economic self-determination? One response is that lending naations would further their hegemony in the region.

A statistic that purports to illustrate the close relationship between the United States and Central America is the total value of trade between the two regions (approximately $16 billion). Nonetheless, these figures mask the economic utility that such products provide consumers. The emphasis that dependency theory places on utility suggests that the importation of coffee, cotton, and bananas to the United States is vastly different from non-essential consumer durables (e. g., designer clothing, videocassette recorders, and other electronic equipment) purchased in Central America. Both the utility of items imported to the Central American nations and the region's balance-of-payments[3] with the United States continue to hamper economic development in the region (Personal communication, Raul Prebisch 1983). In short, the geography instructor can present alternative policy formulations to the current trade policies pursued in Central America as well as those proposed by the commission. Students are introduced at the same time to contrasting perspectives about policy and development in Latin Amerrica.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONSULTTING GEOGRAPHER

Field researchers quickly learn that their source of funding influences, in some measure, the accessibility of information. Latin Americanists well know that their source of research funding in Latin America has been a particularly sensitive topic since' 'Opperation Camelot" in Chile in the 1960s. Operation Camelot was a code name for an investigative project carried out by the U. S. Department of the Army. The purpose of the project was to investigate the conditions of revolution in Latin America. Chile was selected as the first country of operation, but the details of the project were leaked to the Chilean press; the U.S. Embassy in Santiago did not know about the clandestine operation. The principal investigator posed as a social scientist but was, in fact, paid by the United States government for non-academic research. This incident resulted in a series of U. S. Senate hearings on the proper role of social science research in foreign areas, and the affiliation of those "independent" academicians with the U.S. government (Horowitz 1967). P> Nearly twenty years after the Camelot incident, I conducted field research in Chile under a different **[end p. 57]** set of circumstances. The receipt of a Fulbright award in 1983-84 made it immeasurably easier to obtain information than it was for Chileans connducting similar research. A Fulbright award in Chile at that time was a great asset, probably because of the support the Chilean regime was receiving from Washington at a time when Chile was finding itself increasingly isolated in the international community (Valenzuela 1986; Muñóz 1982; von Klavaren 1982). This would not have been the case under the Allende government a decade earlier.

The lesson to be learned from the dynamic reesearch environment in Latin America is that the source of research funding plays an important role in how researchers are received and even the success of their field investigations. All this suggests that geographers need to consider their source of funding in a broader social and political context. It appears imperative that consulting geographers (and academic geographers engaged in fieldwork) in Latin America understand that USAID money for Cenntral American development projects is primarily a response to Soviet-Cuban-Nicaraguan inspired insurgencles.

Ethically, then, one question arises: Are the problems of underdevelopment in the region the result of a long history of social injustice or are they the result of foreign (i.e., communist) aggression? Geographers who consider this question might respond in two very different manners. On the one hand, inequity in the region derives from institutional behavior (i.e., land tenure, political party systems, the Catholic Church) that has been operating in the region for centuries. On the other hand, the arrival of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua illustrates how the elimination of one institution (e.g., the Somoza family) can alter political, military, and economic power, not only in the home country but throughout Central America. The proposed course of action outlined by the Kissinger Commission Report is one attempt to ameliorate social injustice in Central America. The commisssion, however, views the allocation of military aid as a component equal in status to health care and educational and agricultural projects. Latin Americanist geographers should consider the implications of this policy for their own research, for, as Mitchell and Draper argue:

> The most useful and practical approach [to install relevance and ethics in geography] seems to involve indiividual self-regulation .... Only a consistent, individual effort to develop ethical guidelines, and to follow them, will ensure that research in geography attains and retains sensitivity and balance among competing objectives enncountered during enquires (1982, 198).

The Central American dependence on USAID projects is similar to the Alliance for Progress. While Central America is much smaller than the target of the Alliance for Progress (and it is reccommended that $6 billion be spent in Central America versus the $10 billion invested under the Alliance), both schemes rely heavily on the direct allocation of funds for bringing about economic stability and democracy. But, can a "dollar-diplomacy approach" in the form of a mini-Marshall Plan reach the goals set out by the Kissinger Commission? Most aid packages have "tied" loans that oblige recipient countries to purchase most materials from the United States even though such items can often be procured at lower costs from other countries. This sort of "development strategy" is worthy of scrutiny, not solely for any ethical or theoretical issue that might be raised, but also for its cost-effectiveness.

No bipartisan commission of 12 individuals can be expected to produce a total consensus and unanimity was not found in the Kissinger Commission Report. For those geographers who are not interrested in the theoretical and ethical issues raised by development theory, I turn to some of the concluding comments made by the commission members. One major voice of dissent (that of an academician) surfaces in these comments. The issue focuses on the need to eliminate tariffs on Central American imports to the United States versus the commisssion's recommendation to lower those import tarriffs. The former proposal is both pragmatic and very much an outcome of the belief that the marketplace can partially solve the balance of payment problems that Central America suffers. Such a strategy, although subject to congressional approval, would reduce the need for consulting work by providing greater export earnings from sales to the United States, which, in turn, could be used for development projects defined by the nations of Central America. A tariff-free U.S. market for Central American producers might satisfy dependendistas, staunch supporters of laissez-faire economics, and U.S. taxpayers at the expense of a reduced number of consulting geographers in the field.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has considered a number of questions raised by the Kissinger Commission Report that might be of interest to the activities of the professional geographer. The implications for geographic education, field research, and professional ethics noted here could perhaps be generalized to development projects in Asia and Africa. Some evidence **[end p. 58]** exists that Latin American countries are attempting to more carefully control the research agenda in light of some of the abuses noted in this paper. Colombia, for example, has adopted a policy that all foreign academic researchers affiliate with a Colombian counterpart in order to share research findings and, perhaps, to monitor a bit more closely the droves of researchers that carry out fieldwork in that country. Grant lenders, moreover, such as the Fulbright programs, the Inter-American Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council, increasingly rely on either Latin American scholars or Latin Amerrican committees to review research proposals. These organizational linkages are a first step in settting out a research project that is potentially beneficial to the host country. Nonetheless, the projects administered by the U. S. government operate, for obvious reasons, in a more loosely defined research environment. This paper has attempted to raise some of those points of contention, particularly as they apply to the academic and consulting geograapher.

A guiding axiom in this study is that the relatedness of national economies and the strong liaisons between private business and the U.S. government should force geographers to think critically about their geographical work. A discipline that has been characterized as viewing its subject material in catholic terms should welcome the Kissinger Commisssion Report as an important link between policy recommendations and Latin American geographical teaching and research.

NOTES

1. A shorter version of this work was presented at the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers (CLAG), George Washington University, Washhington, D. c., September 27-28, 1985.

2. A content analysis of the work reveals that the word Cuba appears more frequently (approximately 100 references) than the name of any other Central American country.

3. Costa Rica would be forced to spend about one-half of its total GNP on debt repayment between 1985-90, and most other Central American nations would have to allocate about one-third of their GNPs for that same purpose.

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Valenzuela, A., and S. Valenzuela, eds. *Military rule in Chile*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. **[end p. 59]**