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A Tricontinental of Knowledge: a Space for South-South Co-operation

IN THE CONFLICT-RIDDEN history of the twentieth century, the staging of the Bandung Conference, in 1955, marked an important historical event: the search for economic, political and social alternatives by emerging nations in the midst of the polarization that marked the Cold War. The Conference was the starting point of the emergence of “third worldism” and of the Non-Aligned Movement, which set itself the goal of finding a path to development that differed from the capitalist path and from the Soviet socialist one.

Under the leadership of India, Indonesia, and somewhat later the Popular Republic of China, the emerging nations promoted the strengthening of relations among them in an attempt to break or transform the relationships of dependence with the old metropolitan centers and to construct new models of political organization and of economic and social development. These were the first forms of mutual approach among the countries of the “third world”, which would later be called “underdeveloped”, “peripheral” or “of the South”.

The two decades that followed the Bandung Conference witnessed intense political, social and cultural agitation. By the mid-1960s, the colonial structure, laboriously built in the preceding centuries by the various European metropolises in Africa and Asia, had collapsed. Nationalism and socialism cornered the traditional forms of domination prevalent in the period. The so-called “socialist camp” split as a result of Sino-Soviet divergences, and in Eastern Europe the first major manifestations of rebelliousness against Soviet domination took place, especially in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Vietnam defeated French colonialism and the up to that time unbeatable United States military power. The large capitalist powers were shaken by the uprisings of young students and other social sectors in 1968. The struggles of women in the West and of blacks in the United States expanded the frontiers of political and social citizenship. In Latin America, the insurgent victory in Cuba and the Revolution’s subscription to socialism extended the borders of the Cold War to the Caribbean. In many countries of the continent, there emerged revolutionary *guerrillas* with a socialist vocation. In this context, and with the promotion of the Cuban leadership with the aim of giving a common horizon to the struggles of the revolutionary movements, Asian, African and Latin American delegates gathered in Havana in 1966.

Thus was born the *Tricontinental*, which aimed to be a space of convergence of the revolutionary movements and of the governments that backed them to face the domination of capital and, in particular, that of the United States. The *Tricontinental* had a brief existence. Even before the end of the boom of the revolutionary struggles that shook the territories and nations of the three continents, it had already vanished. However, the idea of the need to articulate efforts, exchange experiences and develop forms of solidarity among those who were linked *de facto* by the need to wrest their liberation and transform their precarious social and economic living conditions, remained as a challenge.

This experience cannot but be evoked as we gather in Havana, almost forty years later, to reflect on the forms of cooperation among the societies and countries of the South. Today, like yesterday, it is imperative to erect spaces of cooperation that will contribute to the strengthening of our societies and to the development of our countries. If in the 1960s it was the revolutionary upsurge that boosted the *Tricontinental*, at the outset of the XXI century we are summoned by the urgency of strengthening our academic and scientific communities, creating the conditions that will allow the development of critical thinking and the generation of knowledge to be placed at the service of man and of the construction of solidary, equitable and fair societies, inspired in the unrenounceable struggle for freedom.

A Tricontinental for South-South co-operation

The changes that have taken place in the world system in the last decades of the twentieth century, in particular the scientific and technological revolution and the transformations it induced in production processes, have turned the production and appropriation of knowledge into one of the most efficient instruments of domination. Of course, this is not new. Alongside the traditional forms of economic and political domination exercised by the big powers, knowledge has always occupied an outstanding position. What is new is the greater importance it has acquired in the contemporary world compared to the traditional forms. In fact, there are those who characterize this phase of capitalist development as a *knowledge society*.

Those who hold this view attribute to the generation and appropriation of knowledge such an importance that it is even maintained that the difference between wealthy and poor societies resides, basically, in the levels of development of education and in their capacity to generate knowledge. Stated differently, if our societies lack the capacity to ensure decent living conditions for their inhabitants, this is fundamentally due to the weak development of knowledge, to technical backwardness, etc., and not to the global structures of domination which have been imposed on us, and which among other things have limited the possibilities of development for education and for the generation of knowledge.

By making the generation and appropriation of knowledge into one of the main instruments of domination, it is clear that it has also been turned into an arena of struggle for emancipation. One of our tasks is to create conditions so that, through cooperation among the societies and countries of the South, we can shape channels that will allow us to acquire greater strength in these fields, creating robust academic and scientific communities.

Let us get together on the basis of our diversity

The countries of the South constitute a rich diversity of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and historical traditions. We know the indelible marks of domination, poverty, exclusion, but also libertarian struggles and the notable capacity to develop strategies for survival in the midst of poverty and exclusion. Overcoming enormous difficulties, we have accumulated an extraordinarily rich experience in the affirmation of our identities and the construction of our societies and countries. Nevertheless, a certain "coloniality of knowledge" hinders us from recognizing ourselves in them, and we neglect profiting from the rich potential represented by these experiences.

For historical and political reasons we continue to look to the North as the sole horizon and we have magnified it into the goal and the arrival point, within a perspective that undervalues our traditions and experiences. It is indispensable for us to turn our regard back toward our traditions and experiences. It is not a question of ignoring or undervaluing what the North has contributed to us, but of establishing a relation that will allow us to develop a "virtuous circle" in which it is possible to enrich ourselves with the knowledge and analysis of our realities, the dialogue among them, and their critical assimilation.

The societies and the countries of the South must unite based on our diversity to develop new forms of cooperation on the basis of the study of our history, culture, forms of organization and projects for society, and of the exchange and circulation of our scientific and technological knowledge.

A Tricontinental of knowledge

For historical reasons, we countries of the South have formed and strengthened our academic communities in a close relationship with Europe and the United States. There are conditions that explain that we should have concerned ourselves more with a greater strengthening of relations with European and North American research centers than with the countries of the South: the importance of these centers in the generation of knowledge, historical links with some of those countries, the availability of resources on their part, and the education policies they have promoted, among others. All of this has entailed undoubted advantages for us: we have shaped the foundations of our academic and scientific communities in some of the most important contemporary debates, and strengthened significant fields of learning, positioning us at the frontiers of knowledge.

Without ignoring these advantages, and without weakening our relations with the research centers of the countries of the North, it is necessary for us to strengthen relations among the societies and countries of the South, boosting relations and exchanges among the research centers and academic and scientific communities. As pointed out earlier, the societies and countries of the three continents –Asia, Africa and Latin America– enjoy an extraordinary wealth in their diversity. We come from different cultural traditions. We constitute a variegated ethnic, religious and linguistic mosaic. Our present is built above a complex and diverse past that we have not always sufficiently explored, and in some cases, we resist identifying ourselves with it. We experience diverse forms of economic, social and political organization in the incessant process of construction of projects of society.

In the midst of this rich diversity, we face a series of common economic, social and political problems, and we share challenges. I list, without any attempt at being exhaustive, some of the problems and of the challenges that they pose. The majorities of our societies are characterized by being markedly inequitable, exhibiting high levels of concentration of wealth and of massive poverty, and are led by social sectors deeply refractory to change. Under these conditions, the majority of their inhabitants lack access to the material goods required for subsistence and for enjoying a decent standard of living. In many countries, forms of political organization have been imposed that preclude the participation of majorities in the definition of the structuring of the society and of the possible paths towards their future. Likewise, many countries witness social and political conflicts, the mechanisms that would enable their peaceful handling and transformation not having been developed –which has made it possible for various forms of social and political violence to be deployed within them. From these problems ensue challenges for the societies and for social researchers. We must achieve a channeling of our societies along paths that will guarantee their economic growth and social development under equitable conditions, which will clear the path to the democratic construction of society on the basis of our specific historical conditions. Democracy in a restrictive sense, understood in the merely procedural sense, has been adopted in many cases as democracy's only form, without considering and creating the conditions, not only the opportunities, for its full fruition. We are in arrears as regards contributing to the theory of democracy the reflection about the experiences and possibilities of construction based on our specific historical conditions, which differ noticeably from those known by the societies that developed the classical forms currently applied. We require comprehensive democracies that are inclusive in economic, social and political aspects. We also face the challenges posed by interculturality and multiethnicity. Which are the political, social and cultural forms that will make coexistence possible, not despite the differences but acknowledging them, and without structuring relations of domination, subordination or exclusion on their basis? We do not know it yet with certainty, but the exploration of our histories and the analysis of current situations will surely throw light on this issue. For the moment, we know, as the result of experience in the construction of national states, that in most cases the latter have not managed to provide appropriate answers to those challenges.

The enunciation of some problems shared by a large number of our countries, and of the challenges that are derived from them, make manifest the magnitude of the task posed to social researchers and academic communities, and gives content to the proposal for South-South cooperation. We must start by accepting that, despite identifying these broad strokes, what we know about the realities of societies on other continents is very little. In particular, we Latin Americans know little about Asia and Africa. And very likely, our African and Asian colleagues know little about Latin America. Strengthening relations among the academic communities of the three continents cannot generate other than advantages for all; hence, the proposal for organizing what we may call a *Tricontinental of knowledge* as a space for South-South cooperation among social researchers in our continents. Knowledge of the experiences of others is a major resource in order to face current problems.

Some outlines for South-South cooperation

As the result of a lengthy march, significant academic communities have gradually been shaped in many of the countries of the three continents. Undoubtedly there are unequal developments. Some communities are more fully consolidated than others, which must be taken into account in the definition of the outlines for cooperation. For the definition and execution of a cooperation program, I propose the following elements:

- The establishment of relations, as is being done, among the main networks of research centers of the three continents. On the basis of relations among the networks it is possible to move forward on the following tasks: to identify the main research centers in the different countries; to identify the main lines of research they are carrying out; to promote intra-continental meetings that will make it possible to establish which lines of cooperation would have the highest priority.

- To define a common agenda regarding some shared lines of research that will allow the development of comparative studies at both intra and intercontinental level. A type of activity of this kind makes it possible to profit from the strengths developed by the centers that are part of the networks, promotes exchanges, and favors reciprocal knowledge about the realities of our societies. I propose some possible lines of research: interculturality; the overcoming of poverty; the construction of democracy; gender equitableness.

- To promote the establishment of research units on Latin American, Asian or African studies, as the case may be, at universities and research centers.

- To hold seminars, workshops, etc., that make it easier for researchers from the three continents to gather in order to move forward on comparative studies, as well as in the analysis and knowledge of specific realities.

- To define an exchange program among researchers of the centers in the networks at an intra and intercontinental level.

The strengthening of South-South cooperation for knowledge about our histories, and the development of relations on the basis of the differences, is a fundamental contribution to the consolidation of our identities and the search for shared horizons that will allow us to face and overcome the challenges derived from the manner in which our countries and societies have been configured, and a path for advancing in the collective construction of societies based on solidarity that will make equity, social justice and freedom real.

Notes

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