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Discovering the Wealth of U.S. Society

Joining the Center for Research on the United States of America (CISEUA)—today the Center for Research on North America (CISAN)— at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) as a researcher when it opened in 1989 was not merely a unique opportunity in my professional career, but the opening of the possibility to explore new research topics that had spurred my intellectual curiosity. They were the result, first of all, of my academic background in sociology, and secondly of my prior experience collaborating on a project in U.S. history, whose aim was to develop an interpretation of that nation's evolution over time from a Mexican perspective.

The combination of these two factors produced a special interest in focusing attention on topics unexplored by Mexicans who were already studying the United States or who concentrated on analyzing issues relevant for the two countries' diplomatic agenda at the time. It bears mention that, in the case of the former, a large number were historians, whereas diplomatic subjects were studied by lawyers, economists, and —needless to say— interna-

tionalists. One of those was, precisely, Daniel Cosío Villegas, at El Colegio de México, who became an important leader, covering studies of the past, the economy, and diplomacy equally.

I should also emphasize that, in the intervening years, the main benefit of joining the CISEUA as an academic has been the freedom the UNAM provides to expand knowledge and teaching. This is sufficient reason to explain from the outset that I have chosen topics for this article because of how enlightening and gratifying their exploration has been.

The U.S. Middle Class and Social Inequality

The study of the U.S. middle class constituted my first challenge as a researcher at the center. I sought to understand how it acquired and determined its particularities in the general context of its class structure. My interest was drawn then to a statement which I personally found intriguing when discussing the decisive importance of sectors of the middle class in constructing the basic sociopolitical consensus that made the U.S. democracy strong.

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After applying the Weberian *Verstehen* method, based on the possibility of recovering the subjective or individual dimensions of social life, I used an eminently deductive methodology to arrive at the fundamental premise of that study: to accept that social scientists had not come to a universal agreement on how to conceptualize and analyze the divisions or hierarchies of social class. Therefore, in this particular case, the most appropriate meaning of the concept of social class would be very simple: a social group that shares a similar occupational range and educational level, combined with a value system that identifies it.

In addition, my accumulated knowledge of colonial history, the Revolutionary War, and the founding of the United States started to take on greater meaning when I was able to identify the origins and relevance of social mobility as the cornerstone of the American Dream. The unquestionable value of the right to private property and its protection and defense was the driving force behind a model of colonization based on granting freedom to white colonists, and consequently was also their reason for rebelling when, in 1765, the British Crown imposed taxes denying them the right to self-determination and likewise barring them from representation in Parliament.

Strictly speaking, the struggle for independence was a reaction in favor of preserving existing freedoms—a key element in the success of the 13 colonies—and not achieving it for all, given that in the Colonial Assemblies, participants were required to meet several prerequisites, one of which was that they be property owners.

This would support an understanding of the capitalist system as the central axis of U.S. social structure, rooted in the existence of a broad material base (vast territory and an abundance of natural resources, capital, and labor), while factors like competence and meritocracy would be imperative for understanding the role and rise of the U.S. middle class, shaped by individualism, ambition, and an obsession with preventing its own decline.

Another important factor to stress is that sociologically pinpointing the middle class went hand in hand with a social stratification in which differences between upper and lower classes were also typified. At the same time, a feature very unique to the U.S. case appeared, based on the fact that, in countless studies, when asked where they saw themselves within those categories, a common response among U.S. citizens was to self-identify as members of the middle class.

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Based on surveys by the PEW Research Center conducted in 2008 and 2012, in the first of those years, 53 percent of interviewees classified themselves as middle class, whereas four years later the figure had fallen to 49 percent. Only 2 percent identified as upper class, a finding that remained stable in the two years surveyed. On the other hand, 25 percent identified as lower-middle and lower class in 2008, increasing to 32 percent in 2012.¹

For the year 2017, the Gallup Report would confirm a further drop in the number of U.S. citizens who identified as middle class, only 43 percent, confirming a progressive decline. Although income has always been a key factor in defining social class, in addition to education and prestige or social status, newer studies of the middle class use more sophisticated cross referencing, in which age, region of residence, ethnicity, or place of residence (rural, urban, or suburban) mark the difference.²

The 1980s, then, saw the beginning of the threat to the U.S. standard of living, as a result of the adjustment and redefinition of the capitalist model. Poverty, homelessness, single-parent households, and loss of industrial jobs all increased, giving rise to a growing national debate on the future of the middle class, which continues to this day.

The debate is divided into two currents. The optimists have argued that the strength of the middle class is rooted essentially subjectively. Their fallback would be the ability to distance themselves from attachment to material wealth in critical situations, relying instead on the value of *hope*. Here, it is interesting to observe in passing how the word “hope” was, precisely, part of the campaign slogan of the nation’s first African-American president, Barack Obama, in 2008.

The second current would defend skepticism, questioning the viability of the middle class’s persistence as the country’s predominant social group in a context of rampant neoliberalism. Its proponents would base their position on economic forecasts, which already anticipated technological dynamism, migratory pressures, the service

sector's inability to provide adequately paid jobs, and even a lack of political will as factors that shaped political rhetoric in the leadup to the 1996 general elections.³

We are assisted in this instance by the expository clarity of the emblematic U.S.-Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, the fifty-fifth president of the American Sociological Association, who summarized and fully understood the elements dividing social classes: an unequal distribution of rights and privileges, duties and responsibilities, gratifications and privations, social power, and influence among members of a society.⁴

Values

One of U.S. society's greatest strengths from its beginnings has been its ethnic, racial, and religious diversity, which has gradually expanded to encompass sexual and gender diversity, despite the fact that the latter began to gain visibility in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With particular codes, this has represented an enormous social, political, and cultural challenge, compelling us to briefly examine its framework of values and meaning, as elements to link up trust, solidarity, and social cohesion.

While it is known that, for C. Wright Mills and U.S. sociology, U.S. Americans have two shared values, freedom and rationality, my overview of other perspectives in the 1970s led to a study by Robin Murphy Williams,⁵ who made a list of 15 core values.

Without a strict order of precedence, these values include democracy, individualism, liberty, success, and personal realization, plus moral orientation. The latter is especially relevant in light of U.S. foreign policy at critical junctures in its relationship with Mexico, as President Trump has campaigned for a border wall, making claims of his country's legitimate right to apprehend "bad hombres" who cross into the U.S. from Mexico, stigmatizing undocumented migrants as criminals and rapists. Patriotism is another value that takes on special relevance in the

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same context, by feeding feelings of national pride that bleed over into admiration for the heroism of members of the armed forces, police officers, and the border patrol.

On the other hand, progress, pragmatism, material prosperity, rationality, and the scientific method are all values identified with a capitalist world view, based on the pursuit of profits.

Williams also recognizes the principle of equality, not only because it is enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, but to underscore his argument that it is not a universal value, since women and ethnic, racial, and religious minorities continue to be excluded. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that it is a controversial subject in the U.S., as some choose to limit it to equality under the law or equality of opportunity, which they uphold as bastions of the American dream.

Williams would become a visionary, having framed the discussion of the relevance of identities and their interactions in the social sphere 20 years ago.⁶ In his analysis of subjectivity, he elucidates its links to action and cultural and social institutions. Contrasting his arguments with those set forth by Francis Fukuyama in 2018 in his deliberations on the impact of globalization,⁷ the rise of populist nationalism, including Trumpism, and the struggle for political recognition of a host of new identities, is work that remains to be done in these times marked by uncertainty and conflict.

Women

I must now refer briefly to the singularity of U.S. American women's struggle, in the context of the recognition of gender identity and the emergence of the #MeToo movement, which, beginning with its firm opposition and systematic repudiation of Trumpism, has achieved global reach. Very few references exist in Latin America about women's unquestionable role in what would be the United States between the colonial period and the late nineteenth century. Largely relegated to domestic work, motherhood, and family life, those who were slaves or members of native communities did agricultural labor as well. The constant for them all was absolute submission to the authority of the father or husband. In the case of white society, marriage was a natural and necessary consequence.

Although in the sixteenth century the New England Puritans allowed girls to attend elementary school so they could learn to read and write, the social motivation was religious, since reading the Bible was mandatory. In a male-dominated environment, the ethnic and racial components of social class further deepened the vulnerability of non-WASP girls and women, to the point that, even in the twenty-first century, according to Sabrina Barr, belief in their intellectual inferiority prevails in the United States.⁸

All this notwithstanding, it must be acknowledged that institutions of higher learning that admitted women multiplied across the nation throughout the nineteenth century, with female enrollment reaching a cumulative level of 20 percent by 1870 and surpassing 33 percent in 1900. A few years later, perhaps as a consequence of their victory in the struggle for universal suffrage in 1920, women held 19 percent of bachelor's degrees in the United States. In graduate studies, by the 1980s, women held 49 percent of the nation's master's degrees and almost 33 percent of its PhDs.⁹ Therefore, education has been a fundamental instrument for women's empowerment and a vehicle for their training and effective exercise of leadership.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that women's gains in the political arena in the United States were particularly significant in the November 2018 midterm elections, with a record 117 winning candidacies nationwide. In all, women now make up 51 percent of the U.S. population, which means that they are still far from achieving parity with men in Congress, where they control only approximately one out of every five seats.¹⁰

If we compare figures from 1992, the year women set a precedent with 54 elected to Congress, in 2020 they hold 127 seats distributed among 101 congresswomen and 26 senators (105 Democrats and 22 Republicans).¹¹ Women's struggle in the political arena must continue and show that every obstacle is a learning opportunity, while recognizing that many more battles are being fought in the realm of everyday life, where societal change is strategic.

Final Comment

Based on three decades of systematic observation of U.S. society, we can identify countless adverse elements that corroborate Joseph Stiglitz's statement that inequality in

the United States is the tip of the iceberg, a product of prevailing economic rules and structures.¹²

Good jobs that permit upward mobility for the middle class are increasingly scarce, compared with rising costs in areas like higher education, access to housing, and healthcare, while the gender gap, in terms of wages and income, like the scourge of racial segregation, has closed very slowly.¹³

U.S. society is polarized, although at the same time the present political conditions attest to the U.S. American people's associative vocation, driving the growth of resilient movements to combat Trumpism and support Bernie Sanders, a testimony to an irreversible sociocultural transformation. ■■■

Notes

1 Rich Morin and Seth Motel, "A Third of Americans now say they are in the Lower Classes," *PEW Research Center*, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/09/10/a-third-of-americans-now-say-they-are-in-the-lower-classes/>, Sept. 10, 2012.

2 Robert Bird and Frank Newport, "What Determines How Americans Perceive Their Social Class?" Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/204497/determines-americans-perceive-social-class.aspx>, February 27, 2017.

3 James W. Russell and Silvia Núñez García, *Clase y sociedad en Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM, 1997).

4 The author rose to prominence as a political activist and through his contributions to the theory of social cycles. See Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Mobility* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1959). As a professor at Harvard University, he founded the Center for the Study of Creative Altruism.

5 John D. Carl, "Fifteen US Values, According to Sociologist Robin Williams," *Think Sociology* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2010).

6 See R. M. Williams, *Making Identity Matter: Identity, Society and Social Interaction* (Bloomington, Indiana: Sociology Press, 2000).

7 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity. Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Profile Books, 2018).

8 Sabrina Barr, "Girls and women more likely to be regarded as intellectually inferior to their male peers," *INDEPENDENT*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/girls-women-intellectual-brain-boys-men-inferior-bias-prejudice-study-a8677391.html>, Dec. 11, 2018.

9 "Women's History in America," *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia 1995 CD-ROM*, Compton's New Media, 1995.

10 Maya Salam, "A record 117 women won office, reshaping America's leadership," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/07/us/elections/women-elected-midterm-elections.html>, November 7, 2018.

11 Data published by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), Rutgers University, www.cawp.rutgers.edu/current-numbers, February 10, 2020.

12 Joseph Stiglitz, *Rewriting the Rules of the American Economy* (New York: Roosevelt Institute, 2015), p. 8.

13 *Ibid.*