

Survey of Bioethics in Latin America
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Science, society and its institutions drive each other based on various negotiations. While science is revered and normatively accepted as a vehicle of “truth telling”, the understanding of Science, is largely culturally specific¹. Cultural norms and expectations about health and science as well as how society interacts with the history and institutions of the state produce and respond to both official and “unofficial” bioethical discourses. Sheila Jasanoff, in comparing three industrialized, bioenfranchised nations, observed that “societies at similar levels of economic and social development often choose different directions, based on divergent framings of what is at stake, and correspondingly different assessments of the risks costs and benefits of various possible trajectories”. The lens of comparative civic epistemologies is further tempered by various other considerations, especially histories of colonialism and development, when turned upon Latin America. The understanding and context of science in Latin America, as well as academic bioethics discourse, and research areas are discussed here, both with respect to issues discussed in Stem Cell and the Humanities GROUP and as they pertain to the distinctive directions and priorities of science in Latin America.

Some of the debates and understandings of biotechnology, focusing almost exclusively on genetically modified crops are addressed in a report produced in 2002 by the United Nations University Biotechnology for Latin America and the Caribbean (BIOLAC) Program entitled, *The Public Perception of Science: the case of*

¹ Jasanoff, Sheila *Designs on Nature: Science and Democracy in Europe and the United States* Princeton University Press 2005

*biotechnology*². While some commonalities across the nations of the region were indicated, for the most part there exists a great spectrum of understanding and involvement in public discourse regarding the possible dangers and benefits of genetically modified food-stuffs. For example, Cuba is described as being “in favor of biotechnology” with few well organized objections or endorsements of GMO food. Of Colombia, the distinctions between support and ethical use are more delineated, as the landscape is described as a debate centered on the “commercialization transgenic foods”. In Chile “intellectual property rights and patenting of the quinoa- sacred plant of the Andes” was a pervasive part of the debate. The differences noted in the BIOLAC report indicate that transnational comparisons among Latin America countries as well as regional comparisons with the developed world on the global scale are necessary, and reinforce the observations that the univocal Latin American ethic is hard to embody in the context of varied and complex relationships between science and states.

The BIOLAC report acknowledges that “(the deficit model) ...is an interpretation that simplifies the relationship that have been established between *science, technology and society*. There is abundant evidence in the literature that demonstrates the comprehension of science depends on the social environment in which the understanding comes to be operational”. In the discussion of “scientific culture”, a term used describe the way understanding operates, the BIOLAC report uses models in Europe and the United States to compare the ways the risks and benefits of products or biotechnology are analyzed. One element of the goal of these comparisons is to develop a model for a

² Carullo, Juan Carlos The Public Perception of Science: The Case of Biotechnology, The Institute of Social Studies in Science and Technology, the Program for Biotechnology for Latin America and the Caribbean, the United Nations University 2002

“meaningful way to communicate” with the public, however, there seems to be little attempt to approach the “lay” public as many different stake holders.

It should be noted that “industry” is specifically cited by the BIOLAC report as being responsible for bringing issues into the “public perception of science”, specifically to quell opposition of grow develop support for a new biotechnology. The report closes with, *Keys to Constructing Public Acceptance of Biotechnology*, outlining fairly specifically how this can be accomplished and tempering the rest of the report with a explicitly “pro-technology” stance.

Soon after the birth and proliferation of bioethics discourse in America and Europe, global publics began to institutionalize and formalize bioethical concerns in various decrees and committees, namely, the 1993 UN Committee on Bioethics, and important to predominantly Catholic nations, the “Pope’s Academy on Life” which was created by John Paul. The Regional Program of Bioethics for Latin America and the Caribbean of the OPS- OMS, publishes “Acta Bioetica”, journal serves to create one of many spaces for bioethics discourse to flourish.³

The establishment of global bioethics institutions raises questions about the transferability and cultural specificity of ethics. Writings about the need for a “Latin American Ethics” deal with the illusiveness of a singular Latin American identity and some of the commonalities among the diverse nations of region with respect to the history of social and political institutions. The history of Spanish colonization and subsequent independence, anarchy, dictatorship and democracy and the prominence of the Catholic Church have had profound effects on the areas of and approaches to this

³ F. Parenti 2001, *Necesidad de una Bioetica desde America Latina* Bioetica desde America Latina Ano 1, No 2

discourse⁴. In example, in a region marked by large and well-established income disparities, some Latin American ethicists and many advocates see health and development as inexorably linked. From this perspective, “illness stemming from inequity, marginalization, or destruction of the environment is ethically unacceptable”⁵.

Francisco R. Parenti, director of the interdisciplinary program on Bioethics in the Region at Universidad Nacional de Rosario Argentina, wrote in 2001 that a bioethics constructed by Latin America should emphasize a Latin American prospective in the larger international dialogue. Bioethics is also conceived as an instrument of public policy with the express purpose of directing development. Parenti writes, “If bioethics is the ethics that has to do with the things of our own, in our nations, the emphasis should be on justice, equity and solidarity.” He goes on to say that while the problems associated with biotechnology in the developed world are questions of ethical use, in Latin America questions are more often centered around *who* has access.

In parallel, Jasanoff observes that in the U.S. the *what* questions, specifically around biotech patents garner the substantially more of the attention than the *who*'s: “who owns, who benefits, who has incentives to innovate”. Again, extreme poverty and exclusion are sited as the primary distinguishing characters of ethical concerns in Latin America, as articulated by Parenti, “When we talk about bioethics from Latin America it means giving priority to a bioethics of the daily problems without excluding the analysis of new problems created by biotechnology”. This analysis speaks to the capacity and

⁴ A. Salles, M Bertomeu editors, *Bioethics Latin America Perspectives* Editions Rodopi 2002

⁵ From “Declaracion de Santa Fe de Bogota” in Colombia 1992 at the International Conference on Health Promotion, sited by Parenti as being one of *A few documents for a Latin American bioethic*.

incentive to deal with the problems of innovation in the face of managing public health concerns so pervasive to the developing world.

Philosophical traditions have informed bioethics and applied ethics in ways that impact the direction of policy and law. Salles and Bartenou indicate in *Bioethics: Latin American Perspectives* that philosophy is a vibrant and productive field in the region, not limited to the works commonly known in the U.S., which tend to focus specifically on liberation philosophy or topics directly related to histories of colonization and imperialism. Philosophy as articulated by Latin American writers shifts both the question and the subject of the discipline. Ada Camarasa, in *Bioetica y Democracia: Reflexiones Filosóficas desde America Latina*, writes, “Philosophy in Latin America has as its end thoughts of the oppressed, whose voice rises with the possibility of survival.” Camarasa, in addressing the Latin American subject as the other face of modernity, writes, “we are not pre or anti or post modern; and for them we cannot plainly realize the end of modernity”. This produces a situation in which the process of liberation, “subsumes the emancipating rational concept of Modernity”. Implied here is that notion of “social preferences” doesn’t fit into the story of exclusion so well ingrained in histories inequity in Latin America. Camarasa says, “in reality we live in a market-ocracy, when in the final instant decisions are handed down for the big economic powers.

Kant, Moore and Foucault are sited as foundational pieces to many of these discourses, especially with respect to the relationships between ability, knowledge and power. This seems to indicate parts of Western philosophy can be successfully and productively be transplanted to Latin America. However, there seems to be a propensity by ethicist and observers to think more immediately of the “social community” in global

or transnational terms. As early as his introductory remarks, “ Each discipline can only achieve maturity when it seeks to enter in dialogue with the international community that work in said discipline and bioethics is not an exception.” This is qualified by his idea that it is not valid to “import critical models from other latitudes that arose from very different historical contexts”.

The agreements between science and society are readily described as a “contract” in the United States and elsewhere. These agreements evolve over time with the conception of “good” science and the understanding of the needs of society. Michael Gibbons has described U.S. society increasingly “speaking back” to science, a process he labels “contextualization”⁶. He writes, “ the epistemological core of science has, over time become crowded with norms and practices that cannot be reduced easily to a single generic methodology, or, more broadly, to privileged cultures of scientific inquiry”.

Jose Miguel Vera Lara, in *Bioethics: an Adolescent Discipline*⁷, sets out to position ethics as the equilibrating force between rights and biotechnology and in exploring the relationship between science and society and he writes about the “moral responsibility of experts”. This frame is strikingly paternalist than the dialogue described by Gibbons as “new” contract, which places science and society them on rocky but vaguely equal footing. Vera Lara observes, “The handling of the technologically sophisticated apparatus, is something that can be achieved by a small group of the social community. Our understanding of the external reality, nature, the greater world, environment or however we want to describe it, has always been indirect, or as it were,

⁶ Gibbons, Michael Science’s new social contact with society, *Nature*, vol. 402, Supplement December 1999.

⁷ Lara, Jose Miguel Vera 2001 *Bioethics an Adolescent Discipline* Milenio Institute of the Advanced Studies in Cell Biology and Biotechnology

has always been mediated” and proposes that ethics can “filter and diminish the effects of the combination of technology and power”.

In contrast to the American bioethical tradition, autonomy is far from a paramount concern for Latin American ethicists. In a discussion of various criticisms of autonomy, Arleen Salles addresses the argument that citizens in Latin America are “neither able or willing to exercise their autonomy”. She contends that while autonomy and self-determination post Enlightenment European values, it may not be entirely an artifact of social construction. Diego Garcia, a leading Spanish ethicist wrote, “Latin People are profoundly uncomfortable with rights and principles. They are used to judging things and acts as good or bad, instead of right or wrong. They prefer benevolence to justice and friendship to mutual respect, excellence to rights” (Salles, Bertomeu). Despite this implication that autonomy is not understood or respected in Latin America, many professional medical organizations at least indicate consent as a matter of consequence, though this seems to be far from the standard of practice (Salles, Bertomeu). Peranti presupposes, “Without access to health plans, we cannot talk about autonomy like Anglo countries” indicating that the issue of autonomy is viewed as valuable if not necessary currently in Latin America. Salles sees autonomy and justice as “inextricably linked” and that “a focus on autonomy reveals a myriad of ways in which the rights of some sectors of the population are just not taken into account”.

In introducing some of these considerations, we can begin to imagine how ethics can be apply to situations produced by the importation and development of biotechnologies in Latin America, including the issues of autonomy rights, scientific inquiry, clinical trials, doctor patient relationships and human health an the environment,

topics that warrant in a much more in depth analysis than could provided here. Here I have been able to make some interesting observations about bioethics in Latin America readings I was able to access in the scope of this project in order to elucidate some of the bioethical frames in which these subjects are being approached.