

Alejandro Portes' Sociological

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"[P]roblems with which inquiry into social subject and matter is concerned must, if they satisfy the conditions of scientific method, (1) grow out of actual social tensions, needs, 'troubles'; (2) have their subject-matter determined by the conditions that are material means of bringing about a unified situation, and (3) be related to some hypothesis, which is a plan and policy for existential resolution of the conflicting social situation." (From *The Philosophy of John Dewey* edited by John J. McDermott, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 409).

These words from John Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* lay out Dewey's program for social science. Freely translated, Dewey is telling social scientists, first: ground your work in genuine social problems; second: study causes and effects that can make a difference; third, proceed from hypotheses bearing on connections between problems and their possible resolutions. Unwittingly or otherwise, Alejandro Portes, former John Dewey Professor at The Johns Hopkins University has fulfilled Dewey's program brilliantly. Portes, now Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and 1998-99 President of the American Sociological Association has consistently sought out problematic features of modern social life, especially those he has experienced at first hand. He has brought exceptional clarity to the explanation of social processes. And he has never abandoned the search for concrete paths to social improvement. Anyone who meets Portes in his orderly office at Princeton immediately recognizes the richness, rigor, wisdom, and personal significance of his passionate commitment to social science. Together with his wife, the effervescent Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (herself a formidable presence in the study of immigration, work, and family in Mexico and the United States), Portes has contributed to a renaissance of Latin American and Latino studies at Princeton.

A native of Havana, Cuba, Portes joined the student opposition to the revolutionary regime of 1959. After his expulsion from school and accompanying political persecution, he received political asylum in the United States. Thus in 1960, at age 16, he abandoned his hopes for a career in the Cuban foreign service. Arriving in Miami, Portes joined the exile opposition to the Castro government, traveling to a number of Latin American countries on behalf of the Cuban Christian Democratic Youth movement. Realizing that he would be away from his homeland for some time, Portes began a new course of study: sociology at the Catholic University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. "The choice of career," Portes reports, "was dictated by the traumatic experience of my recent past and the need to understand how major social upheavals, like the Cuban Revolution, came about."¹

¹ Direct quote from personal communication by Alejandro Portes.

After a year and a half, he returned to the United States and joined his family in Iowa, where his father had found a job teaching French and Spanish at a junior college near Des Moines. Completing his B.A. in Sociology at Creighton University (Omaha, Nebraska) he enrolled in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Like many other students at Wisconsin, Portes soon entered the technical world of research on social mobility and status attainment organized by Archibald Haller and William Sewell (Haller reports of his initial interview with the then twenty-year old Portes: "Within the first minutes it was clear that he understood the field of sociology better than most 40ish full professors"). But Portes soon changed direction: "[T]he weight of my own past came calling, and I decided not to pursue status attainment research for my dissertation after all. Instead, I followed two other lines of research in late graduate school. First with the support of William Sewell and another of my Wisconsin mentors, David Mechanic, I conducted a study of the adaptation process of Cuban families that had resettled in the Milwaukee area...Second, with the support of my advisor, Archibald Haller, I traveled to Santiago, Chile, to conduct research on political orientations in the impoverished shanty towns surrounding the capital city...My study sought to examine the conditions of life among the urban poor and the factors that spurred militant political mobilizations and the diffusion of extremist ideologies in this population."

Portes' two graduate research projects foreshadowed the themes that would animate his research throughout the next 25 years. On one side, he has examined a wide variety of political processes, policies, and dilemmas with the experience of Cuban migrants often present as a touchstone for practical reality. On the other he has examined population change, especially migration, across the Western world.

More precisely, Portes has made major contributions in four areas: labor in the international system, informal economies, immigration and immigrant communities and, finally, cities and their ethnic life. Portes has alternated among three rather different styles of analysis; one of them the use of substantial survey research to carry out sustained comparisons; second, close participant observation in particular communities, and finally broad, accessible syntheses of the available literature. In each of them he has developed a theoretically rich, institutional approach to social life. While attaching great importance to economic organization, he has paid close attention to the context of social relations within which economic activities take place. Portes is the best kind of theorist, one who reasons with systematic observations about the world. As his longtime collaborator Rubén G. Rumbaut puts it: "He approaches truth deductively (like the world-class theorist he is, not to mention the young man who in his teens in Buenos Aires memorized Maritain, the foremost exponent of Thomas Aquinas)." Robert K. Merton sums up Portes' contribution: "Having been privileged to observe Alex Portes and his brilliant band of collaborators during their stint as Visiting Scholars at the Russell Sage Foundation, I can bear local witness to what is widely evident: Alejandro Portes is the grand master of the rapidly evolving sociology of immigration. He has effectively taken the lead in shaping a deeply theoretical, empirically grounded and policy-relevant understanding of one of the great social transformations of our time. What's more, that groundbreaking

program of research in this one specialty provides a prototype for effective research programs in other sociological specialties."

Although earlier Portes made significant contributions to political analysis and international comparisons, in recent years he has concentrated on the study of immigration and the communities it has produced within large American cities. He was one of the earliest analysts of the informal economy, pointing out the large part it plays in American cities and its crucial role in recruitment and assimilation of some groups of immigrants. A survey of major sociological works published in 1987-88 found that his pioneering article (with Saskia Sassen) "Making It Underground: Comparative Material on the Informal Sector in Western Market Economies" was one of the most widely cited articles in all of sociology. The same survey includes Portes among the 21 authors in their "most prolific" category--author or coauthor of five or more books and four or more articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* or *American Sociological Review* (Clemens, Powell, McIlwaine, Okamoto, "Careers in Print: Books, Journals, and Scholarly Reputations," *AJS* 101, September 1995: 433-94).

Portes has offered theoretical and empirical criticism of general ideas concerning immigrant assimilation, proposing instead a detailed model of "segmented assimilation" backed by close comparative studies of selected immigrant groups. Among other things, that work has analyzed the great importance of enclave entrepreneurship as a path to immigrant mobility. His most compelling analyses concern contrasting experiences of Latin American immigrants, for example Cubans and Dominicans. Within this field, too, the work ranges among surveys of Mexican, Cuban, Haitian immigrants, studies of firms in the Dominican Republic, participant community studies in New York and Miami, and syntheses of the literature such as Portes' overview of the economic sociology of immigration. Such books as *City on the Edge* (co-authored with Alex Stepick) combine these research methods into textured accounts of how different ethnic groups interact within the same local economy. Within each city, Portes has continued to give special attention to the organization and transformation of the informal economy noting how different groups of immigrants have passed through that economy on their way to more extensive engagement in the formal economy. At the same time, he has documented the impact of global economic changes on the character of those local economies, for example in the form of low wage manufacturing.

Portes currently has three substantial studies underway: an analysis of Caribbean urbanization, an examination of the children of immigrants, and an investigation of origins and effects of transnational communities. His style of work causes Portes' admirers in a given field not to realize that he is equally active and influential in another distinct field. At one time or another he has produced leading works on political change, economic development, urbanization, ethnicity, immigration, and the world economy.

Portes has been around. In addition to short-term and visiting appointment with the Ford Foundation in Brazil and at the University of Brasilia, at Wisconsin, at Florida

International, FLACSO-Ecuador, and the University of Miami, prior to his Princeton appointment Portes taught at the University of Illinois, University of Texas (Austin), Duke University, and The Johns Hopkins University (Marta Tienda, who studied with Portes at Texas, describes him as an avid cyclist, a fierce but fair competitor in games, and a faithful friend). At Johns Hopkins, he chaired the department for three years. In 1994 undergraduates awarded him the Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Naturally, other people have noticed the distinction of Portes' work. His books have won such prizes as the Anthony Leeds Award for best book in urban anthropology by the Society for Urban Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association, and the Robert B. Park Award for best book in urban sociology by the Community and Urban Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association (both for *City on the Edge*, with Alex Stepick), while the Russell Sage Foundation, Spencer Foundation, the Latin American Studies Association, and many other organizations have given him special recognition. In 1998 alone the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the New School for Social Research awarded Portes honorary degrees, as the ASA International Migration Section gave him the Distinguished Career Award, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences named him a Fellow.

While pursuing a super-charged academic career, Portes has participated actively in the politics of reconciliation between the United States and Cuba, for example as a founding member of the Cuban Committee for Democracy. "I have started to visit Cuba regularly," Portes tells us, "and to offer lectures and establish ties with academic institutions there. In particular, I currently seek ways to strengthen the teaching and practice of sociology in the country. I have not lost sight of the irony of the situation- helping Cuban institutions acquire knowledge of the discipline that I embraced because of my forced departure from the island. I find this turn of events, after several decades, reassuring."

Fulfilling John Dewey's injunction, Portes has grounded his work in genuine social problems, fought his way towards viable explanations, and never forgotten the policy implications of sociological inquiry. He has served as a one-man bridge between Latin America and the United States. As the ASA's first Latin American-born president, he adds another passageway to that bridge. Jorge Luis Borges put it well:

*Supo bien aquel arte que ninguno
Supo del todo, ni Simbad ni Ulises,
Que es pasar de un país a otros países
Y estar íntegramente en cada uno.*

(from Jorge Luis Borges, *Obra Poética*, 1923-1976, p.143 [Buenos Aires: Emece, 1977]
Madrid: Alianza, 1979.

*He knew well that art that no one
Wholly knows, neither Sindbad nor Ulysses,
Which is to pass from one land on to others
And yet to be entirely in each one.*

(from Jorge Luis Borges. *DreamTigers*, p.75, translated by Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland, New York Dutton, 1970.)