

Introduction to Mauricio Malamud, “Science and politics”

By *Alejo Stark*

This essay was originally published in 1970 in the structuralist Argentine magazine *Los Libros* and has recently been republished in Malamud’s *Escritos* — edited and introduced by Marcelo Starcenbaum.¹ The communist philosopher and militant Mauricio Malamud was asked to comment on what had become at the time a key book within left academic circles: Oscar Varsavsky’s book *Science, politics and scientism* (*Ciencia, política y cientificismo*). In this short polemical book published in 1969, Varsavsky, an Argentine chemist and mathematician, argued in favor of an anti-colonial and national “rebel science” which opposed the apolitical “scientism” of his scientific co-workers. The historical-political conjuncture was the dawn of the “golden age” of Argentine science — periodized by Varsavsky to be between the end of Perón’s second presidency to the Onganía coup. This period was violently ended by the infamous 1966 “Night of the Long Batons.” That night, just months after the coup, the federal police entered the buildings of the University of Buenos Aires and sovereignly suspended a long tradition of university-based political autonomy by brutalizing students, faculty, and staff, in particular, those in the “natural and exact sciences.” Varsavsky’s intervention in this conjuncture was to pose the question of the relationship between science and politics. Malamud argues that although Varsavsky’s intervention was worth considering, the scientist posed the problem poorly. Through a detour via Althusser’s distinction between historical and dialectical materialism as well through Bachelard’s “Rationalist Materialism” Malamud deactivates the false opposition between “a scientism without politics” and “a politicism without science.” At stake is the need to specify the means to correctly define the relationship between science and politics.

-Alejo Stark

¹ For a preliminary study of Malamud’s writings see Marcelo Starcenbaum’s excellent introduction as well as Fernanda Navarro’s beautiful preface in Mauricio Malamud, *Escritos: (1969-1987)*, ed. Marcelo Starcenbaum (Santiago de Chile: Doble Ciencia, 2017). Lastly, see also Alejo Stark’s essay “Science and struggle: On the Althusserianism of Mauricio Malamud” also published in this dossier of *Décalages*.

Science and politics

Mauricio Malamud

translated by Alejo Stark

The title of the short book that concerns us here² carries with it the traces of a problem that — because it is repressed — ends up determining the content of many other discourses of the social and human “sciences.” Its content comes out to encounter that which is often avoided: the question concerning the nature and political role played by those agents who — given the place they occupy in the process of scientific production — turn out to be a part of the social ensemble and are known through the category of “intellectuals.”

But it turns out that the sciences and the intellectuals inscribe themselves at the same time within the system of social relations of class society. This is why a reading of the text that concerns us here is forced to question exactly what is understood by science, politics, and their relation, as it emerges from the text by the author. The field in which the proposal presented by Varsavsky moves in is that of science and sociology of science. Scientism is denounced and what is affirmed is the recognition that the national problem par excellence is that of systemic change. A new social system requires a new science as the decisive condition for such systemic change.

Therefore, at stake is the politicization of science in the service of social change. Scientists — from the scientists in the exact and natural sciences to those in the human and social sciences — are called to rebel, somehow, in their own distinct fields. Herein lies a foundation for interdisciplinarity whose starting point is that of cultural autonomy. The supposed universality and validity attributed to the science of today is therefore redefined from the aforementioned political objectives (i.e. systemic change), given that it turns out that the ways of science benefit those most interested in adapting it to the needs of the system.

The criteria of the valorization of truths changes with the new social system: the importance of a given science, as well as its development and

² Varsavsky, Oscar. *Ciencia, política y cientificismo* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1969).

application, ought to be determined by the needs of social change and not by the preservation of the imposed colonial situation.

In this way, the scientific revolution precedes and makes possible the political revolution. Science ought to be revolutionary. Such operational politicization would establish the new Argentine science which would direct the research process in all of its aspects — both theoretical and practical — in order to remove the obstacles blocking systemic change. It would also establish the characteristics of the struggle for power and the establishment of the new society — the concrete definition of which is to be given by the new science through the joint contribution of all of the resources and technical means that the scientific intellectual knows and is capable of. It is a call for an Argentine Science, a National Sociology that develops [*gestar*] a strategy aimed at a political force capable of realizing systemic change. Such a conjuncture may be nowhere in sight, but the proposal of a rebel science aims to contribute towards the creation of the conditions for the emergence of such a possibility.

The points raised by the aforementioned text cannot be underestimated. Its effects stir up the backwaters of scientism as well as the coffee shop talks (without risks) that sublimate politics by driving it to the field of the imaginary. The author's message proposes to open up a deeper discussion concerning an alternative with respect to the relation between science and politics.

The positive element concerning the debate hereby opened also resides in that it marks the axis around which an old dichotomy turns in a vicious circle — the old dichotomy that divides our intellectuals: a scientism without politics is opposed to a politicism without science. These face each other as two antithetical poles, in order to finally become brethren and be defined by the same kinship relations insofar as they both reside in the same field which engenders them both as opposite poles.

The denunciation of scientism is totally valid: the 20th century Pontius Pilates wash their hands (or dirty them) with the sophist argument that "science provides neutral instruments, and it is up to other forces to use them in a just manner." For these contemporary Pontius Pilates, in the field of their own rationality there is no space for the scientific

consideration of social injustice. Their own suppression, therefore, is not the object of any science whatsoever.

It is certainly correct that “scientism” is nothing but the mask worn by politics in order to appear precisely as its opposite: as “a-political.” The supposed purity of science in its scientific ivory tower is nothing but the covering up of its own political servitude to those interests which, once exposed, are no longer so innocent. But scientism (does it know? or does it not know that it doesn’t know?) represents and is determined by the politics and ideology of the dominant classes, which are not interested in questioning the system, and are rather interested in ensuring its preservation, while resorting to all the combinatorial games that could provide solutions to the social conflicts that interrupt its functioning. Anything could change in these combinations, given that the limit is already imposed by the system it is supposed to save. The system needs scientific workers, which is to say, workers in the service of its politics, rather than intellectuals who rebel and struggle against such a system.

The disagreements with respect to the conclusions of the aforementioned text take us to the foundations of the non-scientific — rather than scientific — foundations from which the author operates. Our understanding is that if science is badly defined, then one errs in defining its relationship with politics. The problem emerges once one thinks about what is meant to replace the scientism that is being criticized. The way in which the productive structure of scientific knowledge is conceived already implicates the sense of the political-social relation of scientific workers itself: both in relation to their own research or experiments, their pedagogy, as well as in the field of scientific applications (at the level of both industrial techniques or ideological techniques, both of which are in themselves very influential). This means not taking either the fossil, totalitarian, nor reformist positions — as the author serially enumerates — but rather, a fourth position: that of rebel science. Let us now elaborate a fifth position: the attempt to redefine the sciences and determine whether or not there exists a science established that is concerned with social change.

Given that it is impossible — in the limited space we have in this brief note — to develop in an adequate manner the theoretical-political matrix in which the problem is condensed for us, let us merely point out

some instances that configure it, while also keeping in mind that the problem posed by Varsavsky is a call to open up, rather than to close down, this debate.

1) Question: Is theorizing in relation to the sciences done through a revolutionized rationality, or through a return and continuation of philosophy of SCIENCE? The structure, constitution, and functioning of SCIENCE, that old character created by the old philosophy, is defined by the author through what he calls “the complete chain of scientific activity: description, explanation, prediction, decision.”

Problem: Rebelliousness is thereby the inversion of the order of the links in the chain. A maximum degree of rebelliousness is still nonetheless ultimately imprisoned, chained up to the academicist and empiricist chain that it itself denounces but does not break from — and rather paradoxically reaffirms— confirming thereby the very act of inversion.

2) The “attempt to undertake a global critique of our Science” motivates Varsavsky to find that “something must be going awry with it.” Effectively, what has gone awry reappears itself in the analytic exposition itself, given that, as it is very clearly affirmed, “the law of gravitation is not English even though it was discovered there,” and that scientifically “what is true in New York, is also true in Buenos Aires.” Here the following question emerges: what is the validity of Karl Marx in the history of the sciences, given that it has been shown that he has established the Science of History? If there is a Science of History, it has as much universal validity in relation to its field of study as Physics has in relation to its own field.

Problem: For the author there is no Science of social change on the horizon. Whatever Marx said took place more than a hundred years ago and it was directed at another continent altogether.... Certainly, something has gone awry with our “science”: whatever Newton said, he said it before Marx, and he said it also from the only place it could be said then: within some country, in some continent, on planet earth. But it turns out that Newton did not say it only in relation to English bodies and British space. It turns out that Newton did speak in relation to all continents and that his scientific truth has since then been valid for New

York or Buenos Aires and it has proven to be more than sufficient to reach the moon.

3) Herein lies the knot of the problem: is there, or not, a Science of History founded by Marx? Is the theory of the modes of production scientific? Is the theory of the constitution, function and transition of class-based social relations to a new mode — without classes — scientific?

Problem: If this were to be the case, then the correct definition of the relation between the sciences and politics must be formulated from within the science that is pertinent to the social phenomena at stake (Historical Materialism) — otherwise the formulation of the problem becomes confused.

4) There is no a-scientific politicism, there is no political utopia — as laudable as its goals might be — that is capable of operating scientifically. And neither can an interdisciplinary eclecticism become the foundation of a science. The problem is that there is no possible solution for a problem that, although it might be just, is poorly posed. Scientific rationality remits us to a very recent epistemology, which is neither fossil and traditional, nor dogmatic, nor totalitarian, nor reformist. Unfortunately, it is the survival of such a project that ends up truncating Varsavsky's attempt. The effects of this appear once SCIENCE is defined from the dogmas of philosophy, and in particular from a PHILOSOPHY whose specialty was to produce ideological categories from the clear concepts of the sciences. Ideological philosophy has always exercised a certain repression of transformative politics from such conceptions of SCIENCE. How are we to define, then, in a novel and valid manner, a relation between the sciences and politics?

5) From a Rationalist Materialism we can combat and destroy formalism and empiricism: both of these are brethren, duplicates, accomplices rather than enemies; it is futile to try to confront one with the other. The debate opened up in the work of Gaston Bachelard is key if the goal is to elaborate an epistemology revolutionized by the sciences which in turn redefines them in a non-metaphysical way.

6) There is another history of the sciences, and another theory of that history, which allows us to show that the sciences and its intellectual workers are inscribed within the only sphere in which they exist: in the midst of singular societies which determine them and mark them as an instance with respect its own economic, political and ideological instances. Each science thereby appears socially inscribed in three key fields which make up its proper constitution and functioning: (a) the theoretical field of research and the experimental scientific field, (b) the field of teaching or pedagogy, (3) and the field of application of its products at a technical-social level.

7) Consequences that ensue from this: if it is to be verified that Marx established the social science par excellence, what is the “scientific” consistency of all the sociological and humanistic disciplines now in vogue? It could be said, rather briskly, that they stand in the same relationship as alchemy stood in relation to chemistry. But an alchemist sociology — no matter how Argentine it were to be — would leave the system intact. Its only novelty could be that of a new model which would perhaps work and would turn up to be useful to explain or interpret, with new criteria, the national reality. But it would be of no help in the attempt to transform that reality in a revolutionary way — which is what ultimately matters and what was meant to be demonstrated.

8) Here is an alternative: why not establish an Argentine center of scientific studies that would put intellectuals in relation with each other with the goal of clarifying our political status and our duties and responsibilities as agents of production in the field of the sciences?

Varsavsky’s proposal deserves to be debated.