

Social representations in the economic elites of the city of Lima, Peru

Representaciones sociales en las elites empresariales de la ciudad de Lima, Perú

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Abstract

This article exposes the representations of the social actors that make up the nation among a group of businessmen and executives belonging to various business associations in Lima. In that way, this work recollected narratives of their personal lives inside the social context. For that reason, the objective of these research was sharing the economic elite representations in the perspective of narratives and testimony instead of structure studies.

These representations were around businessmen, the government and different social groups. In addition of this, the research is born from the need to study the most privileged sectors from anthropology because it helps to understand how in Latin American societies power is exercised. Finally, we exposed the case of study, the methodology used and the researches about economic elites in Peru.

Keywords

Representations, economic elites, nation, narratives.

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Resumen

El presente artículo expone las representaciones de los actores sociales que componen la nación entre un grupo de empresarios y ejecutivos pertenecientes a diversos gremios empresariales de Lima. En ese sentido, el trabajo recoge una serie de narrativas de los entrevistados en donde hacen un recorrido entre su trayectoria personal junto con el contexto que les tocó vivir. De esa forma, el objetivo del presente estudio es compartir las representaciones de las elites económicas más desde la narrativa y el testimonio que desde la estructura.

Estas representaciones giran en torno a la representación sobre empresarios, el Estado y distintos grupos sociales. Así, la investigación nace de la necesidad de estudiar a los sectores más privilegiados desde la antropología porque ayuda a entender como en las sociedades latinoamericanas se ejerce el poder. Por ese motivo, exponemos primero el caso de estudio, la metodología empleada y los estudios realizados sobre elites económicas en el Perú.

Palabras clave

Representaciones, elites económicas, nación, narrativas.

Introduction

This article aims to expose the representations of the actors that make up the nation among businessmen and executives in Lima. These were developed within a chapter of the thesis “Analysis of the discourse on Peruvian society in the main business associations of Lima” presented at the UNM-SM in April 2019. It is framed within the need to study the business sector from anthropology because it implies understanding how power is exercised within Latin American societies.

The information was obtained after a series of conversations with businessmen and executives affiliated with different business associations in Lima, Peru. In them, the interviewees were asked to draw a parallel between their professional lives along with the political context they had to live and develop a narrative. Thus, it was possible to know how the leaders of the main economic unions nationwide at the beginning of this century conceive the Peruvian nation and the representations of other groups.

The document is divided into three parts. The first provides general information about the case study, describing the used methodology and providing contextual data of the group in order to locate the reader. Afterwards, the studies that have dealt with businessmen and the nation of Peru are reviewed, consisting of a bibliographic review of economic elites, as well as what is being said when we refer to reflexivity, narratives and nationalisms with the purpose of providing analytical tools. And thirdly we expose what was said in the conversations regarding representations on three topics: State and politicians, businessmen, and representations on the different social movements with which they interacted.

I want to finally mention that we believe that anthropology has much to say about the most privileged groups of our societies. This is because it has a qualitative methodology capable of understanding the actor. Thus, the purpose of this article is to open a research agenda that allows new contributions to the discipline.

Case study: Lima businessmen

In this work, we spoke with various members of the Lima business sector to learn about their professional careers within the social context that they had to live. Some can be described as life stories and others as in-depth interviews if we take into account the duration. We share the most general characteristics of the interviewees to provide the reader with characteristics that will help them contextualize.

A total of twenty interviews with businessmen and executives were conducted. The duration of each one depended on the dynamics, where some topics were deepened. All respondents live in Lima, the conversations being mostly in the districts of San Isidro, Miraflores and Surco. As for the type of places, these were cafes, offices and private homes.

Of the 20, six belong to industry, four to commerce, four to mining and the rest are in fishing, agriculture and marketing. In industry, the branches of textiles, clothing, metalworking, beverages and food were covered. Then, on the commercial side, most of the people belonging to this sector held managerial positions.

Taking the property as reference, there are two groups: those who are linked to the ownership of the companies and the managers in charge of cor-

porate governance. The location they have within it affects the type of decisions and the capacities to carry them out. On the other hand, the owners are considered those people who make the final decisions. They or their family ultimately maintain ownership and control of a company.

Depending on the case, the control is delegated to a third party for the administration of the business. As one interviewee comments, they are considered the true businessman. We have to remember then that there is a very close relationship between both groups, being even members of the same family.

Executives are any professionally employed person who occupies the highest positions in decision making within a corporate governance scheme. They have no ownership of it, they are hired by the owners, but they are professionally trained to administer. This is reflected in, for example, that all executives interviewed have masters and graduates in Senior Management.

Regarding their study centers, most attended private universities in Lima or a United States College. There is also another group that studied in public institutions such as the National Engineering University. While all have graduate degrees, an interesting group has master's degrees, obtained in the United States, Europe or Latin America.

And finally, regarding their links with the public sector, 5 of the 20 respondents held high positions from the periods of Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) to Ollanta Humala (2011-2016). Then, 2 interviewees are part of law firms that collaborated with the State in modifications of laws and privatizations. In addition, there is a group that stands out for its experience both in the private sector (companies and unions) and in the public sector. They, rather than belonging to certain professional associations or chambers, have been trained in certain universities in law, economics, administration and industrial engineering. That is, their body spirit is born from the educational trajectory.

In that sense, the testimony selection criterion was based on the search for the greatest diversity of possible perspectives taking into account professional trajectories. General characteristics such as age, sex or sector were also considered, which, we believe, has a significant influence on the formation of representations. On the other hand, when we talk about companies, we refer to the main Peruvian capital companies in their nationwide sector. This together with executives who have made their career in multinational companies. Thus, both these demographic characteristics and the bibliography provided below would help to understand the representations we found.

Economic elites and nation

Studies on economic elites in Peru from the social sciences

The importance of knowing the studies that worked on businessmen and nation is based on observing how other researchers talked about the subject, assuming that all research must take into account what has been worked by other researchers. This issue is not new, but has always been present in the Peruvian intellectual tradition. In the case of the social sciences, it has been recurring to think about how the most privileged sectors think.

According to what was found, research on businessmen and social sciences in Peru had a militant purpose in its beginnings. The objective at that time was to recognize the nature of the ruling class in order to delimit a revolutionary strategy (Malpica, 1964). In that sense, businessmen were associated with oligarchy because they had wealth and power (Cotler, 1978). Being constituted by family groups, the idea of an oligarchy with a dominant but not leading position was formed (Rénique, 2008). With the end of the military government (1980) it was no longer the oligarchy, but the term of ‘economic group’ to study businessmen (Alcorta, 1989). This is due to the influence of the departments of economics, which sought to study the development of their wealth. This occurs between the late eighties and early nineties, coinciding with the introduction of neoliberal reforms in our country (Anaya, 1990). Thus, the objective was to know the impact of these economic policies on Peruvian economic life.

Then, during the new millennium new themes are developed, ranging from gender relations to informal lobby networks (Ramos, 2014). This is because business groups are seen as part of the most privileged sector of society: a “high class” (Kogan, 1999). In general, the central problem addressed in the investigations was the impact of economic, political and social inequalities, as well as the capture of the State by economic power (Campodónico & Durand, 2018).

Then there are the studies prepared by the same business associations. Although in many cases they are laudatory, they constitute a valuable contribution because they show a story about the role played by businessmen in the construction of Peruvian nationality (Reyes, 2008). It should be noted that most of these works were carried out in two places: 1. Elite universities

such as the University of the Pacific or the PUCP and 2. NGOs dedicated to the study of inequalities (Durand, 2016).

Therefore, we appreciate that the issue of nation is found indirectly in most of these works. Although their central object of study was the exercise of power from or for the State, they leave some loose ideas about their vision of society. This implies the representation of a political community, which is the nation. Thus, thinking of a nation is a first step to work on representations.

Reflexivity, narratives and nation in anthropology

The importance of talking about reflexivity, narratives and nation is that they are useful categories to understand how representations are part of a way of conceiving the world. That is, provide reference categories that provide conceptual support for empirical research. Thus, before talking about what was said by the interviewees, we must understand that, in everyday social life, the reflexivity of the actor is born and it arises as a result of it.

In social groups, together with their perception and appreciation schemes, there is a struggle within the social space to impose a certain vision of the world (Bourdieu, 2011). According to our subject of study, the interviewees generate their perceptions largely in the interaction offered by the unions as spaces of socialization and product of their own personal stories, forming a “body spirit”.

In that sense, we must appreciate the need for narratives since they are part of how a social group sees the world and acts on it (Jimeno, 2016). These should be studied according to the meaning of the messages that the subjects seek to transmit within the place where the discourses are enunciated, taking into account how the categories and subcategories are related. Therefore, the narratives are a way of seeing the social reality on the part of the interviewees who, due to their relationship with the State, have become hegemonic because it has become common sense, within the entire business sector and is transmitted in social communication media, giving the idea of common sense (García-Huidobro, 2016).

One of the ways in which these hegemonic narrative manifests itself in the sense of Gramsci has to do with the discourse about nation. This is because he articulates his discourse in a coherent way in the future of the

nation, bringing together other social groups outside the businessmen and sectors of Peruvian society in the narrative around a common discourse on social reality. In this way, the narrative about nation is important because it constitutes a way to gain legitimacy in front of other groups to have greater leadership in public decision making.

It is useful to talk about a nation because it leads the political community to think and the role that respondents play in their formation. On the other hand, the influence of the representations resides in that they become part of the way in which the actors conceive their community, being part of the narrative. Talking about a nation helps us understand the ways of thinking about the management of society and the types of leadership that may exist, better understanding power relations.

The nation and nationalisms are thus an imagined community (Anderson, 1993) that is born within the context of the formation of the world economy (Wallerstein, 2006) and the emergence of mass politics (Hobsbawm, 1997). This should be studied from the agents' reflexivity, as well as in the construction of narratives within a heterogeneous time, in which historical narratives are filled with content and where there is content arising from power relations (Chatterjee, 2002).

In Peru, according to what was found, the most privileged groups did not develop a political program and neither did they have a project around which to group the other classes, so they did not worry about constituting an organic group of intellectuals that would help their class domination (Burga & Flores, 1980). It ended up building, then, a mythified image of Peruvian history in which the Hispanic elements were exalted, but more as a way of seeing the unconscious world. At a general level, the Peruvian State based itself on the clientele relations that the different oligarchic groups had established with both the subordinate population and foreign capital (Cotler, 1978).

In that way, the nation can be seen as an imagined community that is contextualized within the world economy. In parallel, mass politics generates a popular nationalism, which must be analyzed from the perspective of *demos* (political community) and *ethnos* (cultural community), instilling in the reflexivity of the agents (Balibar, 2003). This constitutes one of the forms of manifestation of the representations of the other social groups. Therefore, in parallel to the history of nationalisms there must be a history of the history of nationalisms (Palti, 2003) because it implies a construction

and reconstruction of social groups from the elites, attributing characteristics and functions within the imagined community.

In conclusion, it is possible to affirm the following. 1) People generate their perception and appreciation schemes because of their interaction in everyday social life. 2) These schemes of thoughts born of reflexivity generate different conceptions of social reality. 3) The nation and nationalism is a certain form of those schemes of representation of a collective that revolve around the political community and the cultural community, which is built and crossed by power relations. Therefore, these categories help to understand that actors are conceived as part of a larger community, in this national case, and form a discourse that allows them to integrate into it.

Results of the investigation

State and politicians

First, the public is seen as bureaucratic, with delays and corruption is needed to move the process forward. Something common about politicians, public officials and bureaucrats is that they are despicable because that person's mediocrity is assumed by not being able to form something independently. In most stories, the State is portrayed as unreliable, lacking seriousness and unable to understand the complexity of the corporate world.

For those interviewed, relations with the State are personified in terms of who occupies their post. That is to say, one cannot speak of a "relationship with the State" but of relations with certain governments and individuals. This is particularly explained by the need for business associations to be close to power. In that sense there is no relationship with the State but with the government of x or z.

Taking this into account, they remember more the relations regarding the companies and the government according to three periods. In that sense, the main stages were the military government (1968-1980), the crisis of the APRA government (1987-1990) and the Fujimori regime (1990-2000). Each of them has a particular representation because it implied a totally different relationship with respect to each other.

The period of military government was seen as poorly organized and arrogant. On the other hand, the APRA government is remembered as times

of economic crisis and terrorism. Finally, the Fujimori government is seen with ambiguity: terrorism is eliminated, but it ends up with corruption and electoral fraud.

In particular, there is a special representation with politicians who define themselves as from the “left.” While it could be associated with social resentment, stronger is the perception that the “leftist” are unpleasant and feed of the university environment because their ideology is more attractive when one is young. The central idea about their proposals is the following: there is an idealistic vision and little feasibility in reality, therefore, they end up generating more problems.

The strongest criticism is on their double discourse: they talk a lot about the need for economic equality among people, but they are the first to show off luxuries. In that sense, they say one thing, but they do another. Finally, everyone considers that communism fails because when there is no difference between the worker and the lazy, the worker ends up lazy.

While they talk about other political parties, the greatest importance is given to the Left. This is because they considered that resentment and conflict are promoted. In that sense, a radical turn is thought of as something that threatens people’s property. On the other hand, it is assumed that this occurs because the Peruvian Left has never reached the Government.

Businessmen, sectors and unions

Within the characteristics of all businessmen, they are thought of as a fighter who generate real wealth for their community. There may be differentiations, but it is at a general level, a pragmatic person who wants to earn money legally and to the extent that he fulfills his ambitions, does good to society in general.

During the conversations, the most frequent idea refers to companies as generators of wealth and governments as generators of poverty. Basically, “giving work” would allow them to gain legitimacy vis-à-vis other actors and position themselves as the agent that should take the leadership in decision making, their criteria being the most adequate.

Entrepreneur is, then, defined as a person who performs a lawful business, generates wealth and labor. In the process it produces material, cultural, social and economic transformation. His way of doing things is pragma-

tic because he is always looking for ways to solve problems. It is generally thought that his duty is to make business, good products to sell, earn money honestly and on the way, he generates employment for others. With that, he already does good for the community. In that way, he believes that doing his job is contributing to the community. However, this can be circumstantial and very context dependent.

Then, there is the widespread idea that the Peruvian businessman makes cartels through business associations and law firms, oligopolies to defend each other and compete under certain margins. He lives regularly in the short term because he is entrenched, thinking about avoiding the government attack. In addition, there is a slow transformation of the business sector in Peru due to a generational change. This is because the business world has become more complex and as a company becomes bigger, it is becoming increasingly difficult to know the decision makers.

The main difference between businessmen is in the sector where one is working, business associations and generation. Thus, the representations, as we have seen, start from everyday experiences of social life. In that line, there are the “liberal” businessmen, who, unlike the protectionists, are more ambitious because they wanted to go out to the open sea, catch the big fish. Who identifies with this idea, would be the people who really think about the best for the country, unlike protectionists who simply see for their interests.

A sector that defines itself as private is the industrial sector. This is represented as innovative, although many businessmen are unwilling to change because of their merchant mentality. To run an industrial company efficiently, one must privilege the long term and not so much immediate profits, as people dedicated to buying and selling do.

Industrialists are attributed virtues such as creativity, giving good jobs and be persevering. An industrial entrepreneur is in his factory, not in an office. In addition, they would be very creative and enterprising, with the ability to adapt to different economic contexts.

On the other hand, according to other businessmen, the industrialist has been caricatured as a protectionist, who did the least possible effort, overprotecting his small market niche because he only cared about his interest and earned at the expense of another. They all used the same discourse around protecting the national industry, even if it was really protecting themselves.

Afterwards, the merchant is credited with a short-term vision and a frequent search to increase profit. This is because he is used to constantly bu-

ying and selling, with the goal of finding similar profit margins. This observation has been more frequent by older industrialists because “many who are now called industrialists have never left their merchant mentality.”

Another group are mining businessmen, who consider their work fundamental in the development of the country. These are considered as agents of progress themselves because they give growth possibilities to the most remote areas of the country. That way, “we go to the highlands, where the real poverty is.” However, from his point of view, this is not communicated despite having many things in favor: he provides good jobs, pays high taxes and brings development to the highlands. In the case of the unions, these are made up of companies and companies must work. One already devotes enough time to solve problems proposed by the State to be talking to everyone. In that sense, the representation of these refers to a group that is exclusively dedicated to defend their interests.

In the case of business associations, these are portrayed as clubs of friends where businessmen are. More than the unions, it is the law firms who impose agendas because they are in charge of grouping companies and taking laws forward. In addition, another characteristic of these lies in the unity of its members: all know each other and form a “body spirit.”

The management of a union can be a very complicated task and for this, there are the managers. There one acts as a hinge, being able to reach a certain type of balance when one works independently. The point would be to try to reach objective decisions: this is the right thing and this is not the right thing. Regularly, when there are rivalries, they mention that some act on principles while the other defends only his interests.

On a general level, then, agreements within a union are “sweetly forced consensus.” This is because one must first locate where one is: that is, be aware of everyone’s needs. Then, the work performed must take into account Peruvian and international companies, make proposals that represent the common good.

In conclusion, the main characteristic of the entrepreneur is his ability to adapt to the context and generate wealth. Then, the representations together with the forms of interaction would be explained if one works in a certain sector. That is why we appreciate a story full of varieties and fissures, which do not conform single block. Then, the unions would be spaces where they form a body spirit for the rest of society, generator of solidarity.

Social movements and civil society

Other groups that were mentioned in the interviews have been varied, ranging from foreign colonies to social movements such as syndicates and peasant associations. This is explained by the particular history of each one, where a certain interaction was established and, with it, certain representations. Thus, the industrialist describes syndicates much better than a merchant while a miner knows peasant communities better than a banker.

First, there are foreign colonies. According to their descendants, these could be integrated through their work and their values. For the Italo-Peruvians, immigration was very positive for Peru because many integrated into national life and succeeded. In the case of German descendants, values such as honesty and righteousness are present generation after generation.

On the other hand, the most mentioned civil society groups refer to social movements with whom businessmen such as unions and peasant associations have interacted most in their daily lives. Afterwards, everyone mentions organizations such as NGOs, but from very ambiguous positions: they range from admiration to contempt. In addition, there is an ambivalent representation regarding academics.

The relationship with the workers has changed, before they were stronger than all social organizations. The most typical thing is to remember syndicates as protected by the State, very politicized, with tensions and strikes. However, over time one should educate syndicalists because, in the end, it is of common interest that the company subsists because when one treats people well and pays people well there are no problems.

There is the idea that labor problems arise if there is no adequate treatment and fair payment. Labor disputes are very feared because nobody likes to work with problems. In that sense, the commitment they claim to have with employees is almost written in stone, in the sense that treating the employee badly can be considered taboo.

The older ones remember bad relationships at the beginning, but in everyday life, one had to have a good relationship with the workers. In the case of the youngest, there is representation of the syndicates as a hindrance since they do not allow for better decisions. This occurs because, with neoliberalism, collective bargaining has disappeared in such a way that younger managers simply don't know how to talk to other employees.

It is the miners who see the peasant communities as those who have suffered the abandonment of the State and are often manipulated by leaderships,

producing false expectations. They can be very hard to negotiate with and their internal problems are strong. Therefore, many rely on their ignorance.

That toughness when negotiating is explained because they are manipulated by people who take advantage of them, using them as “cannon fodder”. In that sense, the most critical position on NGOs sees them as mechanisms for seeking employment, being unprofessional and living off people’s resentment. However, a kinder position informs their role in accompanying state leadership in the search for development, being agents of progress.

The conflicts that develop between companies and civil society have often revolved around labor issues and more recently, socio-environmental conflicts. In that sense, everyone emphasizes not generalizing; that is, it is some businessmen and executives who have conflicts, while the vast majority do not. Many times, it is thought that there are people who stir up conflicts and take advantage of people who are not properly informed, but also recognize one’s responsibility in the sense of “form, but not substantive” errors.

In the mining case, false expectations are generated in the population. According to many, NGOs do not know the dynamics of the market and it is difficult to understand that companies are key actors for the country’s development. They think, they see them as the “bad guys in the movie” or as a group of insensitive millionaires who only think about making money.

Regarding the academy, there is a certain respect for the research work that is carried out. That is to say, being a person with degrees has a halo of legitimacy that emphasizes knowledge, making the comparison with an artist: a person who has no material ambitions but whose work is important because it provides things that make society think. In that sense, an intellectual is a person who must be respected: although he would not have the same money, he has knowledge and education that makes him “an equal”.

However, there is also another image. This has to do with the issue of utility, under the premise that those who have dedicated themselves to these types of activities are jealous of the executive world because despite the knowledge they have, they don’t earn the same. In this way, the political militancy of many intellectuals starts from social resentment towards the corporate world.

We appreciate then that the representations found are very ambivalent. In the case of the public sector, the predominant image is that of the bureaucrat: indolent, corrupt and inefficient when doing things. While the executive world has all the opposite characteristics: practical, efficient and that provides benefits for society. Finally, the general consensus on other social groups

is that they fail to understand and value the importance of companies in the welfare of society, being judged as people who only think about money.

Conclusions

First, representations arise from the interaction of business groups within their associations. When businessmen meet with businessmen, they produce images about other actors, attributing certain behaviors. This is because these institutions constitute a matrix on where they perceive themselves as a group and form solidarity. We must remember that these representations are not homogeneous, but that there are specific fissures of the particularities of each interviewee. That is, a story is not just a block but an amalgam of ideas articulated around a larger one.

Then, all these representations are structured according to characterizations. These form frames of reference that indicate the behaviors that certain individuals may have, with the purpose of providing security over future action. While they mention that the goal is not to generalize, it is assumed in everyday life as such.

On the other hand, the representations fulfill the function of differentiating. It is through characterizations that respondents can identify their own attributes and those of others to have tools that guide their interaction. In that sense, unlike the classic nationalist ideologies where the end is inclusive, under neoliberalism the function is to separate social groups in the sense that: "we are all Peruvian, but you are not equal to me because everyone lives from my work".

In accordance with everything described, there is a very negative representation of the State. This distrust has its origin in the last military government (1968-1980) where there was a lot of "hostility" towards the private sector as a result of the nationalizations. This was further reinforced by the emergence of neoclassical thinking in economic management, consolidating throughout the nineties. That is, the State is impractical, corrupt and indolent with the needs of others. Regarding the corporate world, businessmen and companies are represented as those who generate work, are fighters and are accustomed to permanently solving problems, who truly risk betting on their country because it makes their capital available to the rest. However, they believe that the rest of society sees them as insensitive, ambitious and despotic.

On the other hand, the representation of other groups is very ambiguous. It can range from respect (academy, unions) to contempt (social movements,

leftist groups) although they consider that society does not understand or value the role that businessmen play in the generation of wealth. In that way, they consider their role to be important because, in a way, they “maintain” the entire Peruvian society. It is through this representation that they seek to justify privileged treatment.

Finally, we can conclude that representations are part of the ways in which economic elites have constituted the nation since the 1990s. Thus, the most important influence comes from neoliberalism, which has been introduced into the mentality of executives and businessmen as a common sense. On the other hand, it is mixed with a feeling of belonging where everyone believes and identifies with the country because they were born here and because the idea of a nation has been instilled by their family throughout their lives. This would be a beautiful country, with many conditions to get by and where a person who truly loves his country stays to fight from within creating things.

In summary, it can be seen that most of the interviewees conceive Peruvian nationality on the basis of Creole liberalism, that is, the adaptation of classical neoliberal thinking to the Peruvian context. It argues that a community is made up of individuals who, in order to progress, must enrich themselves, being the only possibility of “progressing in life” doing productive work within a free market. In that sense, businessmen are those who generate wealth and employment, giving people real well-being and deserving privileged treatment. It is within this form of conception that the representations of other actors arise in order to develop a political project that is capable of bringing together all those who identify themselves as Peruvians.

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