

# **INTERVIEW ADOLFO GARCÍA DE LA SIENRA**

of VERACRUZ UNIVERSITY MEXICO

## **PART ONE**

### **Introduction**

Born in 1951, Adolfo is professor of economics and philosophy at the University of Veracruz, Mexico. He earned his PhD at Stanford University and has taught at the University of Mexico. An author of numerous articles in Spanish and English on both technical and general subjects, he has lectured in various places around the world and is a member of various international and national bodies, including the Association for Reformed Philosophy of the Netherlands. He is married and his second son was born only recently. His two sons are 30 years apart. He is also involved in ongoing discussion with Christian democratic intellectuals in South America.

The purpose of this interview with a Mexican Christian democratic economist is to think about the problems faced in Central America as part of a global economy and our part within it. By doing so we might help ourselves understand global problems in a fresh way. As we read Adolfo's answers we can reflect upon the differences in our part of the world and realise, at the same time, that we are all part of the human family. The international problems we experience in the South Pacific - for instance the unwillingness of Australian and New Zealand Governments to develop "guest worker" schemes for workers from the South Pacific - are only one part of a wider global movement in which many peoples from myriad countries are considering international itinerancy to overcome economic deprivation and potential poverty. It's a big problem and the big countries are not really addressing it. By seeing the trials and tribulations of Mexican "illegals" in USA in terms of this emerging global migration tendency we might begin to see from our own corner new possibilities for justice in international economics.

- Thanks Adolfo for being willing to be interviewed for the Fiji Daily Post. Maybe this interview will prepare the way for a visit one day.

It would be lovely to go to the South Pacific sometime. Especially to Fiji, that land that came from a lovely dream. I am looking forward to meeting the people, to know more of the country and — indeed — to scuba-dive in some places there.

- First tell us some more about yourself and your family.

I am married to Luz María Suárez and now we have our first son, Adolfo. I am also the proud father of Rodrigo 32 who gained a Doctorate in Literary Criticism from the Sorbonne of Paris, and now he is Research Professor at the University of Guanajuato, México. My second son, Adolfo, is 2 months old, but has a Doctorate in Not Letting You Sleep in the Morning. But we are a very happy family and glad to be living in a little city next to Xalapa, which is the capital of Veracruz. The name of the city is Coatepec, famous around the world for its coffee.

- What about you? How did you become an economics professor in Veracruz? What research do you do and what particular courses do you teach?

I was research professor in one of the most important economics institutions of Mexico, in Mexico City, but I don't like living in Mexico City. Since Luz María is from Xalapa, her family lives here, and I had been working here from time to time, we decided to come here to live. I teach Microeconomic Theory on a regular basis, but I also have a seminar on mathematical logic right now. My research is focused mainly in the foundations and philosophy of economics, and I am trying to develop a Christian approach to the discipline.

- Let's discuss your teaching of economics first of all. So why is it important to you that you develop a Christian approach to your discipline?

Because there is no religious neutrality in any discipline, especially not in philosophy.

- That's a pretty hefty comment in a few words! Can you explain this a bit, say in relation to what you have written about the world-view of George Soros.

Well, Soros claims that economic science cannot be developed along the lines of physical science with its concept of equilibrium, as the classical economists thought. Fine but then, being a good humanist, he continues to be occupied with the quest for human autonomy, quite apart from his desire to make lots of money. And it is this religious commitment which blinds him to trans-subjective, supra-arbitrary standards or norms for human behaviour. In his view human happiness must be measured by the degree to which humans become more autonomous and self-sufficient. Norms and standards then become merely the aggregate of what people think their needs are and when we take this path it is autonomous individuals aggregated rather than God and the good creation which put a limit on our choices.

- And so his criticism of economic theory is somewhat lop-sided?

I'd say so. He's somewhat unfair to current equilibrium theory in economics (Game Theory) which does try to take uncertainty, imperfect information and strategic behaviors by reflective agents into account. It is interesting to hear him, one of the fittest survivors in the global financial jungle, rejecting the idea that the rules of economics are abiding and immutable. But then he has to because his notion of human autonomy demands it. I read Kenneth Arrow's work as having shown that within a framework of individualistic assumptions and autonomous human choices, the hope of finding such an aggregated criterion is impossible. Complete individual freedom and arbitrariness in matters of social choice are simply not possible. Liberal humanists like Soros, like the rest of us, are compelled to make social choices, even though they, or we, may be blind to the normative structure of the world. Humanists have a need to derive the economic choice criterion from human autonomy itself.

- At this point you remind me of what another Christian economist, Bob Goudzwaard has argued.

From a Christian point of view, a social consensus must be taken into account but it is unacceptable as a standard for evaluating social welfare. The individuals who belong to a society, as well as their consensus, may be corrupt. I read Goudzwaard as a relentless critic of the idea that the consumer is autonomous, that consumers are the absolute criterion. I think that Goudzwaard's views can borrow a lot of support from the work on social welfare of Amartya Sen, a recent Nobel laureate.

- So does all this indicate you teach from a specific Christian perspective?

Well, I teach regular Microeconomics from a very mathematical viewpoint. One might think that Christian economic theory has to do with norms, but actually almost every economic theory can be focused either by normative considerations — how things *should* be done — or by a positive evaluation of the data — how things *are actually* done. So, there is much in current economic theory that can be exploited from a Christian viewpoint. This includes Neoclassical Theory and — get surprised — even Evolutionary Economics. One interpretation of this theory goes so far as to suggest that firms that are corrupt and don't obey God's norms will be wiped out from the market!

- Thankyou for that. Now we have some idea of how you see your theoretical approach, tell us about Mexico, the country in which you do your teaching. Are the churches alive or asleep? Is liberation theology a force?

Having been a Spanish colony up to 1821, the Roman Catholic Church is very strong here. It is said that up to 80% of the Mexicans are Catholic. This is the only church that has created or inspired institutions here. It is outspoken on issues like abortion or euthanasia. Liberation theology had some force especially among intellectuals in the 1970s but it is not strong in Latin America anymore, not even in Chiapas. There the "zapatista army" has a very strange ideology, a blend of pre-Hispanic paganism with reactionary ideas of indigenous native communities living with a rather backward technology.

- And what about non-Christian religions? We can guess about materialism and the Great Greenbacked Dollar god ...

Non-Christian cultic religions in Mexico are almost non-existent. There are fistfuls of Buddhists and Muslims. Many "Catholics" are really secularized and don't obey what the Church says. They are pursuing what the average "standard" westerner does in Sydney, Dallas or London.

- So does this come into your teaching as a university professor, encouraging students to be responsible citizens? You teach economic philosophy. Does this have a direct relation with the way your students view Mexico's economy?

I teach Microeconomic Theory. I certainly use the theoretical results of micro-economic analysis to teach my students to be responsible, But I also stress the importance of performing well in class. I tell them to make their best effort to learn. Veracruzana University is public, and I tell them that we should not be part of social processes that exploit the poor Mexican. Certain politicians do ignore poor Mexicans and I refer to them as the "viscous rats", endowed with a "sticky viscosity".

- So how did the "rats" contribute to Mexico's special problems living next door to your neighbour to the North?

The truth is that Mexico, from 1982 to 2000, was submerged in an economic crisis brought on by the absurd policies of the "viscous rats". This was especially the case from 1970 to 1982. It destroyed the financial system. We now need 1,200,000 new jobs every year but are creating only 700,000. As a result, large numbers of Mexicans cross the border illegally to work in the US.

- The American media gives ongoing attention to illegal Mexican immigration. But the so-called "illegals" have to go North to get work to survive don't they?. Explain for us how you see what is going on?

The US is certainly benefiting from the Mexican labor power but they don't want an immigration agreement making it easy for those people to move back and forth between Mexico and the US. What is happening is that those who are illegally there never return to Mexico, for fear of being unable to return to the US (or the high costs of doing so). Hence, instead of being guest workers, seasonal workers, they stay for good in the US. So Mexico is losing out here.

- And so a new under-class is created?

Yes, since the Americans don't want to provide public services, like health and education, to them and their children, they are creating within their country a class of illiterate resentful people and this will certainly create problems at some future point. Their policy is really stupid and they're going to pay the consequences.

- So how effective is the Mexican government in its efforts to protect these very vulnerable people?

The Mexican Government tries to implement human rights programs to protect those illegal workers in the USA, and it is constantly taking their side, trying hard to get a migration agreement.

- So why won't the US Government develop a "guest worker" scheme since such a labour force is now part of their own national economy?

I can't really explain this. It is stupid and hypocritical.

- So as an economist you would see "guest worker" programs in terms of certain important factors that have to be kept in mind as we develop our analysis.

Yes. In this instance what Adam Smith had to say about labor power as the wealth of nations is directly relevant. In this particular instance Americans are obtaining a lot of benefits from the illegal workers, enjoying cheap, magnum labor power for the industry and services. Yet their leaving Mexico is our great loss and the American failure to develop a "guest worker" scheme has an impact upon the international relationship between Mexico and the US. And keep in mind that If it were not for the Mexican workers in the fields of Texas or California, a lettuce would be as expensive as a Hereford steak.

- Tell us more about the economic problems that face Mexico as a middle American nation? How does Mexico relate to its region.

The economic crises at the end of the century plus the opening of the economy dismantled quite a lot of the productive structure of Mexico. We are exporting a lot but the Mexican component in the goods is low. We are barely beginning to re-structure the productive chains but that is going to take some time, especially taking into account the *electionitis* "illness" of our politicians.

- Electionitis?

Yes. The sad tendency of politicians to only do what is strictly necessary to win the next election.

- You say somewhere in your writings that economics is a normative science. What does that mean?. And what would it mean for the politicians so that they become part of the answer rather than deepening your country's woes?

You can take almost any theory (perhaps evolutionary economics would be an exception) as a "description" of what there is or as a policy recommendation. For instance, you can intend to model a certain economic situation as a game, and then you are successful if reality behaves as your model predicts. But you can also try to mould reality according to your model, adopting certain behaviors and policies, and then you are taking the very same model as a normative recommendation.

- Are you saying we are all economists? We're certainly not all professors but how do we act economically?

We all have a certain economic rationality, insofar as we make choices subject to restrictions. But that doesn't mean we are all professional economists. We all have a worldview, but that doesn't mean we are all philosophers.

## PART TWO

In part one Professor Adolfo Garcia de la Sienra of Veracruzana University outlined his views of economics and of Mexican society in the shadow of its Northern neighbour. In this second part he continues to answer questions about his view of the wider problems that now beset the globe. How can we challenge the "growth at all costs" ideology that causes the worldwide wobbles we hear about almost every day. He is also concerned about *electionitis*, a disease that afflicts many politicians. How does Professor de la Sienra, as a Mexican economist, maintain his Christian hope as he faces up to all these issues.

- Adolfo, we all know about terrorism and global warming and rising sea levels. In Fiji people are very aware of these things.

Yes we are learning more about global warming. Mexico just suffered two hurricanes (Stan and Wilma) that caused tremendous havoc in the Yucatan Peninsula and the South of Chiapas.

- Are there signs of a better tomorrow?

What I see, next to the enormous poverty of some countries - especially in Africa but also in parts of Asia - is an economic monster emerging — that's China — and it looks as though it will swallow a lot of energy and flood the world with cheap merchandise — produced in sweat shops by people earning incredibly low salaries while they wipe out the competition in the rest of the world. I don't want to imagine the day every Chinese family has a 4WD. This means 800 million more 4WDs on the surface of the planet. As a result I don't feel at all optimistic.

- So there are big changes, really big changes in the winds. What for you is the single most important economic issue facing the world?

As I implied with the 4WD problem — the problem can be summarized in one word: *energy*. If a cheap, clean, abundant form of energy can be found, then you can have the whole population of the world (provided it is not too large) with a certain standard of living, and then the issue will be to maintain it for all. The only such form in sight is nuclear energy. But how are we to deal with the waste? One proposal I heard is to use liquid oxygen produced out of sugar cane to send rockets to the sun with such waste, but wouldn't that be dangerous — rockets can fail and if so they can fall on populated areas. In France 85% of its electric power

comes from nuclear plants which means that all its trains, homes and factories are running essentially on nuclear energy.

- So how should we try and develop a more constructive, patient, humble perspective on life? Is that part of economics?

Let's get a little theoretical here. If you define a "system of needs", specifying which needs are "acceptable" and which are not, economic theory can certainly provide tools to design a sustainable and reproducible economy that would serve such a system. The system of needs has to be reproducible from generation to generation — it must help you select a means of production that would then help you to select the consumption levels required to maintain the labor power, to maintain and reproduce the system. It must not be destructive of the environment. The clue to this is — as I have said already — energy; the harnessing of energy.

- And as a Christian, as one following the way of Jesus Christ, how do you see Mexico among the peoples of the world? How "west" is Mexico?

About 50% of the population is Western; their living standards are comparable to those of Spain or even the US. Their worldview corresponds to some of the "basic religious motives" of the west pointed out by various thinkers — the various forms of humanism and humanistic ideology, Christianity in its Catholic and Protestant varieties. But the other half lives in a magic world, in which the dead come to have lunch with the living every 2<sup>nd</sup> of November. For these people there is simply no causality as we usually understand it. These are, of course, among the poor of the country who want to enjoy some of the benefits of the Western way of life and going to the US becomes an important goal.

- You are suggesting that it is important in the present to remember that things can change. What disappoints today may not be so tomorrow?

That's right. Samuel Huntington claims that the Mexican migrants, the so-called "illegals", are threatening the American way of life. He is wrong: it is the Americans people themselves who are their own threat by failing to have a rational policy that deals with these people. Even Le Penn, the French "fascist" says that Mexicans are not a threat to the US because they are "Christian". He is right and the good news is that many of those who go to the US become Evangelical Christians (mainly Pentecostal). Moreover, in a not so distant future, Mexico, Canada and the US will become integrated into a single economy, as the countries of Europe tend to be nowadays.

- So apart from trying to develop our thinking on a wider canvas, what do you think small island nations, like Fiji, can do in the global economy? You have some small nations in your neighbourhood like Panama, Cuba and the small island nations of the Caribbean. How does a small nation contribute to global justice?

I'm not able to tell Fiji readers how Fiji should fulfill its role. But look at Cuba. For historical reasons Cuba has had enormous influence in Latin America. It is small but it tried to export its revolution back in the 1960s. And I'd say that in a world in which the rule of law prevails, the voice of a "small" country with a democratic representation system which provides reasonably for the needs of its people, that maintains an inner integrity, can make a sound contribution. Its voice can be heard. I think of Costa Rica. Fiji is another small nation in this category. Cuba is not because it constantly violates the human rights of its people. But then its impact is profound even though it is small.

- One of the things Fiji is concerned about is what you're concerned about in Mexico. What can ordinary citizens do to ensure that Governments are responsible and are not just implementing policies to get elected at the next election?

As I have said the Mexican system, just like that of Australia and other countries, has fallen prey to an illness to which democracy it is prone: *electionitis*. This is the tendency of politicians to do what they do in office in order to win the next election, even if this means procrastination with all the serious decisions delayed for as long as possible. Those decisions with long-term consequences require political courage. But on the Mexican national agenda

they are the very issues that the politicians tend to put in the "too hard basket". Christian democrats have to find a remedy for *electionitis*.

- You have a Christian Democratic Party in Mexico? Tell us about it?

Yes. The Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) is emerging from rather conservative Catholic positions to become fully Christian Democrat. The day it does, all the Christians of Mexico (including Protestants and Evangelicals) will become strong voters of PAN candidates. Right now it is perceived by most Evangelicals as a pro-Catholic party and so they don't trust it.

- Tell us about the Association of Christian Democratic Intellectuals of which you are a member? What impact does this association have?

This is the so called "Red Buenos Aires", sponsored by the ODCA (Organización Demócrata Cristiana de América) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung of Germany. I haven't been invited yet to become a member but I assume I will become one eventually. I am not a member of PAN (yet) and that might be part of the reason. But I support the forces within PAN that want to make it more ecumenical and open to other Christians. The day it opens, I will join. Right now, I am a teacher of large numbers of Presbyterians and I have to be completely congruent with what I teach. It might be still too early to get into PAN. This association is having an increasing impact upon the Latin American Christian Democratic parties. They are becoming more ecumenical. I think Christian Democratic politics has to be ecumenical.

- Give us some of your thoughts about how we should try to evaluate the kinds of goods and technologies that come into our lives because of what is called the "global market"? How do we make good decisions about whether we need something or not?

The problem of the system of needs is serious. Among the modern philosophers, Hegel is one who saw it most clearly. The modern world produces a proliferation of goods that has to do with innovation and an increasing social division of labor. The problem is that any technological innovation provokes a cascade of new needs, whether you like it or not. And once you open the door to innovation (as the European Mediaeval World did *not*) it is very hard to tell what is "necessary" and what is not. People tend to look for more comfort, or more efficient ways of producing goods, and anything that is seen as conducive to such an end is deemed necessary. Cheap goodies coming from China, or any other economy, are welcomed if they promote these two "values".

- So again how would this apply to a small South Pacific country like Fiji? How should small countries respond to some of the really big global problems we have today and make a difference?

Though we have little news of Fiji in Mexico — it appears like a distant tropical dream full of handsome, pacific people — we do know of the political trouble you endured and have tried to deal with five years ago. If Fiji has found some sort of equilibrium in consumption, production, social equity and environmental feasibility, it can indeed be a role model for the rest of the world. In our international dealings nations like Fiji, or Mexico, should try to treat smaller nations in our neighbourhood in the way we would like bigger nations to treat us. That can be done and has been done by Mexico for many years. Mexico has even given away oil to Central American countries and Cuba — worth several million dollars.

- How should we think about the rich and massively powerful nations of the world? How do we avoid national envy?

Rich and massively powerful nations have a role to fulfill but they have to be more responsible. The US — the example that is closest to us in Mexico — is not being sufficiently responsible but is acting unilaterally to push its power and interests in the world. For instance, many Americans are consumers of cocaine and that creates a huge market that moves up from Colombia to the US via Mexico. If the US cannot address drug dependency among its own citizens it is helping to create a very difficult law-enforcement issue for the Mexican Government and people. Thus we have a very serious security and social problem here as a result.

- It sounds like you are a loyal Mexican ...

Yes indeed but my loyalty means that Mexico must not become an idol. I am the fiercest critic of my own country. But I don't see the Americans solving the problems of our international relations with them in any creative way. We are the main commercial partners of the US and indeed their best friends in the world. We have 3,000 kms. of border with that country and never, in 170 years, has a single terrorist been able to get into the US via Mexico. Yet, they are not addressing seriously many issues, including drug traffic, migration and indeed global warming.

- So you do have hope also for this life?

Yes I do, even though (as I said above) I am not optimistic right now. I believe that solutions can be found and we have the promise that in Christ all things shall be restored in this world. And He has given us a new life, a restored intellect to think on the problems.

- So what is it in our lives that stops good stewardship and justice?

Lack of power or ignorance. But sometimes we are not good stewards even in the small sphere where we can exercise power, let alone when we have a bigger stage on which to act. There are powerful forces in the world stopping justice and good stewardship. Our own sin is one of these.

- How should we view the future of our own lives then?

As a future of hope and struggle in all spheres of our lives.

- Thankyou Adolfo. This has been helpful to see things from a corner of our world we should know more about.

**Readers who would like to discuss these matters further with Professor de la Sienna are invited to write to him at [asienraq@gmail.com](mailto:asienraq@gmail.com)**