

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Notes on Peru - I

c/o American Embassy  
Lima  
Peru  
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New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

In this and several succeeding letters I want to comment on Peru as a whole, as I have seen and experienced it during my travels of the last four months. The purpose in this is to give an idea of the context in which the indian farmer lives and without which his culture is less comprehensible. As I have noted before, the indian's contemporary way of life is as much a function of white-mestizo attitudes and desires as of the indian himself.

The most fundamental datum in Peruvian life is that the indian, the white and the mestizo lead entirely distinct lives, equipped with different attitudes and goals, once one passes beyond the basic needs for food, shelter and reproduction. The control of the country is in the hands of the white-mestizo groups and there is on their part a tendency to resist change in the indian culture, since the indian is traditionally the one who serves without being serviced, a desirable state from the point of view of the hacienda owner or the factory manager. The net result of this has been that the indian's behavior patterns have altered at a much slower rate than those of the white and the mestizo, thereby intensifying the differences between the two groups.

In order to make some sense out of the complex Peruvian situation I have organized the observations which follow around four factors which are largely responsible for perpetuating the division between indian and non-indian behavior in Peru. These relate to geography, transportation, the economy and the growth of the city.

Geographically Peru is a triptych with three totally different faces.

Along the Pacific Ocean the outer face is a smooth brown expanse of desert blemished only by Andean spurs and scattered volcanic rocks,

ugly and distorted into strange shapes. Some forty green patches, the oases supported by mountain rivers as they run to the sea, give it refreshing but transient moments of color. This coastal waste is as dry and bare as the Sahara except for these oases, and it is a strange feeling to look out from the center of a coastal town, such as Chimbote, and see the thick shimmering heat waves of the desert rising just at the edge of the cultivated fields.

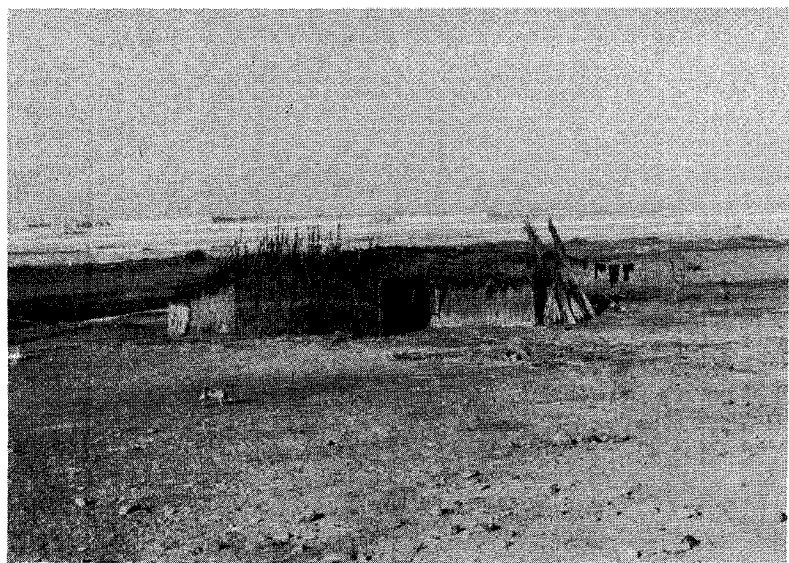
The middle face is the bloated and wrinkled confusion of the Andes proper, dozens of small chains and scattered hills twisting and winding together in careless confusion. Its coloring ranges from the blinding whiteness of the Cordillera Blanca in the northern half to the delicate variations on brown and purple in the southern. Moisture and vegetation depend upon altitude and the presence of rivers so that within the confines of this face one passes from the utter bleakness of the high puna to the luxuriance of a valley like that of Limatambo near Cuzco.

The inner face, turned toward the Amazon basin, is the immense green batik of the montaña, the eastern slopes of the Andes and their descents into the plains of the great basin. The montaña is drenched with the rains which come from the east and is lush in its growths. The tangled forests steam in the sun and the heat is almost always oppressive.

Each of the three faces supports its own peculiar population. In the coastal towns and cities the people are a bewildering collection of the descendants of Andalusians, Valencians, Castillians, indians, Chinese and negroes. The long process of mestizization has left behind a skin color variety ranging from deep chocolate brown to eggshell whiteness.

The mountains are the home of the indian, living in isolated homesteads, clusters of scattered households and towns of adobe, thatch and tile. The complexion of this region is dark and its tone subdued, except during moments of intense fiesta. In the provincial capitals, the gente decente run to lighter skins and livelier habits but they are distinctly in the minority.

Few people live in the montaña: only 20% of Peru's total population although this region makes up 60% of the total land area. Those who do are apt to be European as well as Peruvian, recent immigrants as well as the children of older pioneer groups such as the descendants of the 19th century Bavarian colony of Pozuzo on the Pachitea River. Suggestively flitting through the denseness of the rain forests are remnants of the chunchos, tropical savages who have as little to do with the invader as possible, but who cannot prevent themselves from dying out as colonization and industry move into the montaña. One Peruvian has aptly



Hut on the Coast.



Three Views in  
the Montaña.



compared them to the Plains indian of the United States who died as his buffalo herds were extinguished in the westward expansion. The effective exploiters of the montaña remain the migrated whites.

Between the three faces communication is accomplished by a network of roads and rails, supplemented on occasion by rivers, which wind about the capricious Andes, burrow through them when no other method is possible, and fight a constant struggle against the destructive forces of rain and rockfall. Without these arteries the widely separated clusters of population would not survive above the subsistence level and life would be a strict reflection of the resources of the immediate environment. For example, Iquitos, Peru's port on the Amazon, cannot supply itself with fresh vegetables and these have to be brought from the coast. Lima's wheat comes from the Mantaro Basin, well over 200 miles in the interior behind formidable mountain barriers.

Airplanes link the larger centers of the coast, Andes and the montaña but they cannot hope to approach the role of the truck and the train in the transportation of goods and people over the three faces. The plane has made it easier for businessmen to penetrate from the coast to the interior and vice-versa, and has increased the frequency with which people from the interior come to the coast to buy and play. And the plane provides the line of least resistance to the ever increasing flow of tourists who go usually to Cuzco and Machu Picchu, with perhaps a side trip to Arequipa, the white city of the south, thrown in.

One great drawback in Peru's transportation system is the amount of time it takes to reach a given destination. A look at a topographical map of the country immediately shows the immense mountain ranges and the deep canyons which have to be dealt with in transverse crossings. Huancayo, in the Mantaro Basin complex, is about as far from Lima as Boston from New York. The railroad which connects the capital with Huancayo has to traverse 68 tunnels bored through solid rock (one over 1250 yards long), 55 bridges, most of which span deep gorges, and make 22 zig-zags. The railroad is a spectacular feat of engineering but the trip takes fourteen hours as compared to five for the New York-Boston run.

The fact that no one mode of transportation services the entire nation adds to the problem of mobility in the country. From Chimbote on the north coast the Santa Railway takes the traveler into the Cañon de Pato but stops at Huallanca leaving him to proceed by road into the Callejón de Huaylas. Or, the Central Highway leaving Lima will get one to Pucallpa in the montaña but to go north or south from there the rivers have to be used.

In short, there is nothing casual about traveling in Peru, except perhaps along the north-south coastal highway which has few natural obstacles along its course. The transportation system has not yet reached a point where it can compensate for the isolating effect of the geography which helps greatly to maintain the distinctiveness of life in each of the three faces.

Agriculture is the one common groundswell of activity in each of the three faces, and 65% of Peru's population is engaged in this (although only a bit more than 1% of the land surface is cultivated). Yet much of this is subsistence agriculture carried on by the Andean farmer and the nation cannot feed itself. For example, it produces only 40% of the wheat it consumes nor can it keep up with the demand for meat. There are vast cotton and sugar estates on the coast but these do little to make Peru self supporting in foodstuffs. The general agricultural picture is dim and is not lightened by the breadbasket potential of the montaña which is at present unrealizable due to the lack of transportation facilities.

Among Peruvians with whom I have talked, I have heard three general complaints with regard to the nation's inability to feed itself: inadequate transportation, techniques of production and the uncooperative indian.

The first is a genuine problem as I have suggested above. The second has much basis in fact since many owners of agricultural enterprises do operate them in an inefficient manner. The hacienda system in its common form utilizes only as much land in any one year as the owner feels sustains an income representing a reasonable return on his investment. The unused portions go untouched since this would mean an investment of profits in the farm which the owner prefers to spend elsewhere. With this niggardly attitude toward the exploitation of total resources goes a dependence upon farming with wood (plows, clod breakers, even digging sticks), and a surprisingly small usage of such things as chemical fertilizers and seed sterilization. One hacendado told me that his father drilled into him and his brothers the idea that they should get as much out of their farms with as little capital investment as possible, and that, although he himself is willing to reorganize the business his brothers are dead set against innovation so that the properties of the family are still being run in the old way.

Outside the hacienda system the communal and private properties of the indian are worked generally for subsistence. Because of this it is not difficult for the Peruvian to make the indian the whipping boy in the gloomy agricultural picture: he is inefficient

in his methods of working the land, he is lazy, he doesn't care to increase his production beyond the needs of his and his family's stomach. But these complaints miss the point that the indian has no good reason to make the national granary bulge since he stands so much apart from national life, and no one should really be surprised that he doesn't give two hoots if Lima is underfed according to its standards and has to import to make up the deficit.

Aside from agriculture, the Peruvian economy can enjoy the dubious benefits of the extractive industries - dubious because many of the mining and oil companies are foreign owned, and much of the profits are spent outside Peru. But at least a part of these profits reaches the national pocketbook through taxes, operating licenses and various kinds of legal and illegal subsidies. (In addition, the country does benefit from the roads and railways usually constructed by these companies at their expense.) Some change in this classic situation has come about in recent years. Cerro de Pasco, a U.S. corporation, for example, has turned a face of determined good will toward Peru, and has given more attention to improving working conditions in its mines, investing capital elsewhere in Peru and hiring nationals for technical posts rather than foreigners as in the past.

Industry is a monopoly (up to 80%) of the Greater Lima area, with Arequipa accounting for nearly all the rest. Output is mostly of those goods which are in heavy demand and which can be easily made from national raw materials. These articles are bought mostly by middle and lower income groups who cannot afford the high prices of imported items. Incident to this is that one of the marks of high status in urban centers is the ability of an individual to consume (and display) goods of foreign manufacture. This has gone so far among some families that there has been a total rejection of national, and especially indian, designs, motifs and manufactures in the decorations and equipment of their houses.

The consequences of the present Peruvian economy are such as to separate rather than bring together indian and non-indian activities. Even though he is the first farmer of Peru the Andean indian produces for himself and not for market. He is involved in mining and manufacturing as a worker and his status here is not far different from that of the subsistence farmer. The economic activity of the nation is a monopoly principally of the white-mestizo groups congregated for the most part in urban centers.

The center of Peru and the ultimate focus of its life is the capital city of Lima. The Spaniard in the 16th century founded a city

immediately after claiming some part of the New World for the Crown. He strove to make the city beautiful and powerful, perhaps trying to imitate the Spain he had left behind as a response to a new, strange and generally hostile land. The capitals of the Viceroyalties and Audiencias were given the most attention and when the Republics were made up it was not strange that Lima or Mexico City should continue to be the dominant centers of national life. In modern Peru this is particularly true for Lima is without a doubt the master of all spheres of activity in the nation. Population figures alone are revealing in this respect: Trujillo, the third largest city, has 50,000 inhabitants; Arequipa, the second city, has 100,000; while Lima provides a home for over 1,000,000.

This unbalanced situation inspires complaints in the regional capitals with emphasis being placed upon the centralization of political authority in Lima's hands. There is a certain amount of wishful thinking in the resulting battle between centralization and provincial autonomy, heard, for example, in the statement made to me by a business man in the north: "If we in the provinces were to have control of our own political futures there'd be a general decline in the importance of Lima, and instead of the young men flocking there for careers they'd find it just as profitable to stay home." This line of argument is not uncommon outside the capital, but its conclusions run hard into the reality which is Lima: a city already too large and permanent to disappear gracefully, in which the habit of power is endemic, and which has, like Rome, become the focus of a transportation system as well as the center from which power, authority and prestige flow.

For the Peruvian the lure of Lima is strong. To it come men from Trujillo, Cuzco and Arequipa to spend part of their lives and much of their money. The city offers better educational facilities and commercial opportunities to the young and a playground for the old. It is important to remember here that if a person wants to find a wider range of general experience that the provincial capital offers he has only Lima to choose in Peru unlike the U.S. where one can go to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and a host of similar cities.

The people of Lima carry in their features and skin colorings the intricate gene crossings which have come of the city's interbreeding of Spaniards, Europeans, Indians, negroes and orientals. There is no adequate vocabulary to describe the results of this mixing. However, it can be said that as the color of the skin becomes darker income and social prestige decline.

The key to the life of the limeño is commerce - today as in the colonial period from which have come memoirs and diplomatic reports commenting upon the intensity and diversity of the city's business

activities. The man of business gives Lima its tone and he is as a person surprisingly practical, hard headed and realistic despite the tales one hears about Latin languor and impracticality.

Even the traditional "mañana" attitude suffers in Lima: more often than not appointments are kept and orders are sent out on time. When I asked one limeño about this he replied somewhat irritably, "Well, I don't know why you gringos find it so funny that my company keeps its promises and fulfills its contracts. Didn't you start the whole thing with phrases like 'A business should be run in a business-like way' and so on?" However, idea of mañana still has a place in the social life of the city but even here one is allowed to circumvent it by making an appointment for an "hora inglesa" (meaning on time) rather than the "hora peruana" (meaning at your pleasure).

This commercial activity in a primarily agricultural nation may account for the feeling of being unique which the limeños have. One partisan summed this attitude up by saying, "Lima is Peru, but Peru is not Lima." At times one gets the impression that Lima considers itself a corporation which has as one of its functions the running of a nation made up mostly of mountain farmers, assisted in this enterprise (as very junior partners) by the other cities of the country. In line with this is that the company's members do not consider life outside the home office very profitable nor desirable, and one soon discovers that few limeños have bothered to visit the rest of Peru, even on a tourist basis.

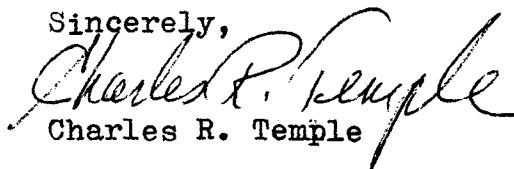
The urban life of Lima is reproduced with minor variations in the rural cities and towns by the whites and mestizos. Whatever the actual pattern, however, whether it be in Arequipa, Trujillo or Huanacayo, it is consciously distinct from the indian's behavior. The latter can participate in it as servant or worker, and should he show signs of wanting to be more than these two things it is noted with surprise and only occasionally encouraged.

Peru's triply divided geography, its incomplete transportation system, the urban interest in commerce and industry, the rural identification with agriculture, and the specialized urban and rural cultures combine to maintain the distinctions between the indian and the non-indian way of life. The two are not entirely but almost mutually exclusive. Perhaps the most important observation in all of this is that Peru has more than an "indian problem" which is so often cited as the cause of Peru's failure to realize its full potential. Instead there



seems to be what might be called a "Peruvian problem" in which no single group is at fault but all share an equal responsibility.

Sincerely,

  
Charles R. Temple

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