

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 12
Notes on Peru - II

c/o American Embassy
Lima
Peru
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

This letter is about a group of people who make up the effective population of one Andean country: the whites and mestizos of Peru, or, simply, the Peruvians. They are "Peruvians" while the Indian who lives in the sierra is not, for the latter lacks a conscious identification with a national entity. The characteristics of the Peruvians and their society which I have cited below are based ultimately on my own reactions to the individuals and situations encountered in my travels throughout Peru. As such they are personal interpretations and should be read on that basis.

The world of the Peruvian is an excessively formalistic one, with definite prescribed statuses and associated behaviors. Before what many Peruvians have taken to calling their "era of industrialization" the criteria of a man's position came from family background supported by money. The Spanish surname was the key to entry into the ruling hierarchy.

With industrialization, urbanization and the spreading of money over a larger group, the criterion of name was joined by that of success in the business world. A member of one of the older Peruvian families said to me, "Anyone can get into our so called society today if he has enough money, and isn't too dark complexioned i.e., Indian."

Whatever the criteria for status, however, every Peruvian is involved in a structure of ritual governing his behavior in relation to his fellows. The case of the handshake is one of the most typical items in this system. Any meeting, chance or otherwise, between two Peruvians begins and ends with a handshake. If one man should enter a group, say at a party, he shakes hands all around in greeting and again when leaving. Even children are included in this - down to those just about able to walk.

When a degree of intimacy beyond acquaintance is reached, the handshake is preceded by the abrazo, a hug alternating with much back slapping. (For women cheek kissing is added.) The kind of abrazo

given indicates the degree of intimacy between two people or their status position with regard to each other. The abrazo, then, may range from a light hand tap on the arm to a warmer grip of the hand on an arm through a single slap on the back with both persons standing at right angles to each other to the full abrazo - two people, arms around each other, vigorously pounding away at each other's back.

These gestures are made automatically by Peruvians, and much confusion arises when a foreigner is involved and fails to play the expected role, especially in the matter of the handshake. Many Americans in Peru, who have adapted themselves to the interminable handshaking, amuse the Peruvians when they shake hands all around a group except with other Americans. A Peruvian wryly commented to me: "You Americans carry hygiene perhaps a bit too far, no?"

The formalism of the Peruvian is expressed too in the ways in which a man may be significantly related to another: the four basic are by blood, marriage, ceremonial (the godparents system) and friendship (which, in this context, is a definite relationship approaching that of a blood tie). To be outside these relationships is in many ways to be outside the society and a newcomer finds that he is eventually taken into the formal structure if he is to be allowed any intimacy with the Peruvians he meets. I, for example, have never been introduced to a Peruvian household without the formula, "This is my (or so-and-so's) very good friend, etc." The stress on good friend is made even if the person making the introductions has known me for only half an hour, so that I, as a stranger, escape being put into a doubtful category. In discussing this aspect of Peruvian society with a local anthropologist, he said, "I was raised with the distinct impression that if a man didn't fit one of the four categories of relationship, he simply didn't exist."

The Peruvian puts a high value on verbal facility and there is an almost universal willingness to talk under any circumstances. The ideal of conversation is that it be conducted with fire, elegance and wit, and a Peruvian spends a good many hours each day sharpening his phrasing and vocabulary. Even in a formal interview with a specific purpose it is considered rude to go directly to the matter at hand - this is to deny the speakers the opportunity to test their eloquence on general matters first. This goes so far that in an over the counter exchange in a grocery store one may find himself discussing Negro prejudice in the United States for some minutes before his box of soap is handed over.

Correlated with this cult of the word is a deemphasis on reading: the printed word seems to lack the immediacy and impact of the spoken one. Even in cases where the consultation of a standard work of reference might settle some dispute the preference is to rely upon memory and word magic - although hours may be spent without agreement.

One of the byproducts of this hegemony of the word is that the saying of a thing may be - to the speaker - tantamount to the realization of an act described. It is as if the phrase, "there will be 500 new schools in Peru next year," is equivalent to a government decree ordering the construction of the schools. I have seen the disappointed look on a Peruvian's face when, after a half hour exposition on the topic of how the montaña will soon feed the entire nation (a highly debateable point), someone has cited facts and figures against this proposition. It appeared that in the original speaker's mind, it was enough to state the proposition to give it reality. Although this belief in the potency of the word can be criticized adversely, it does give conversation a lively air, and allows anyone to solve world and national problems with some ease.

In his Journal, André Gide says that he was appalled by what he considered a formula of capitalistic society, "Thou shalt earn MY bread in the sweat of THY brow," and was therefore attracted to the developments in the Soviet Union in the thirties. Had he turned away from Europe and looked at such an "indian" country as Peru, he would have been even more greatly upset, for here the application of this inverted version of the Biblical statement is strong. It seems to be taken for granted among Peruvians that each man works in small and big ways for another higher than himself until the top of a hypothetical pyramid is reached and some lucky few work at pleasure and play.

I have been told that fluidity of economic position was non-existent before World War II unless one became a millionaire overnight; Peru was strict in conserving the rigidity of class and class structure which the New World inherited from the Hapsburgs. But, during the last few decades, something more akin to the social mobility sponsored by the Bourbons has entered Peru and a man may now move upward in the pyramid if he is a money maker. Where Gide's formula still holds completely is with regard to the indian.

The new social mobility provides an entry point through which a man born of indian and white can make his way into the non-indian world - provided he eschews his indian heritage. To be an indian and a Peruvian seems an incompatible state of affairs in the white-mestizo world, and in order to be a freer unit in the economic system means rejection of all indian ties. Otherwise one is subject to the definition which has regulated the relationship of the indian with the non-indian for many centuries: a peón to the white-mestizo patrón.

The formal structuring of Peruvian society with its emphasis on proper status and position is modified in practice by the intense personalism one finds among whites and mestizos. For example, if one wants to examine a factory or an hacienda, he does not receive a note

of introduction to an unknown but always to "my friend," "my uncle," or "my compadre." If one wants to be sure that an application will pass quickly through a government office, he goes in person to see another friend, uncle or compadre, and expedition follows. If one deals with some store for a time, he is before long a friend of one or two clerks and his orders will then receive particular attention. Reciprocation for these favors is generally through a small gift, especially at Christmas, to these "service friends" as someone has termed them.

The generalization of this personalism has made each member of the white-mestizo world a sort of club affiliate of everyone else, so that even if a man doesn't know personally some hacendado or the alcalde of a neighboring town, he still feels a kinship with them. This provides a strong cement in the white-mestizo world, and generates an in-group feeling which is quite strong. In these terms the indian nearly ceases to exist for many Peruvians for he can never enter the club.

Personalism, however, is not the only softener in this rigidly conceived society: individualism is the other. A man fulfills the demands made upon him, and performs certain acts and gestures as a sign of his cooperation with the other members of his group, but once this is done, he has the right - some call it the responsibility - to be an individual. To be an individual he must distinguish himself in some way, one proper to his own genius, in the world of business, art or the university. If a man fails in this public way he still has the opportunity to set himself apart by holding a set of opinions on one or many topics which are considered as unique by his contemporaries.

This individualism sometimes resolves itself into nothing more than bad manners, that is ignoring the needs and wishes of others in such public situations as allowing pedestrians to cross the street in front of one's car, in queueing up for a bus or entering a crowded store. One of the least attractive sights in Peru is the stamp window of any post office, at which men, women and children fight, push, shove and shout to be served first. The stranger soon learns to protect himself with elbow, knee, foot and voice but the experience of buying stamps remains an unsettling one. Again, walking down a street crowded with pedestrians is a physical experience of the first order. There seems to be an unspoken challenge in the air: who will move first? Since few people will give way first, passage is affected by a sort broken field trot which never fails to knock a few persons about. One of the first pieces of advice given to me when I arrived in Lima last year was, "Watch out for the elbows on the streets - especially the women's." I have followed this ever since.

Individualism is sometimes corrupted in another way, by becoming

a respect for cleverness, whether ill-intentioned or otherwise. Last year, an executive in a local firm gave a large cocktail party for the members of his company and many of Lima's leading citizens. He failed to make an appearance although the party was a good one. The next day it was learned that he had fled the country with some millions of soles worth of the company's funds. This, combined with the gesture of the cocktail party, made him a general favorite, and the manager of the firm, ultimately responsible for the funds, became a sort of unfortunate joke.

As I noted before, the man with verbal facility and wit usually wins in debate over a duller opponent who has nothing but facts at his disposal. In general conversation, the clever or cutting remark made at the expense of another's individualism has a high value, and is regarded as part of a game to be played without rancor.

Formalism, personalism and individualism are all soundly rooted in a Catholic matrix in Peru. The history of the Church here seems to have been neither distinguished nor dull with the result that it was never discredited here in the way in which it was in Mexico. Today, the Church and State are still one, and all priests, from the Archbishop on down, receive their salaries from the government.

The practice of religion, however, tends to be on an individualistic basis, governed by a belief that adherence to the forms is equivalent to being a sound Catholic. The strongest manifestations of religious feeling occur outside the Church's usual ritual: in demonstrations for some popular saint. During the month of November, for example, which is dedicated to Our Lord of Miracles, women wear ugly purple dresses bound with a cord belt as a form of vow. At the end of the month, huge crowds gather in the central streets of cities and towns to participate in the exhibition of the holy image. In Lima, the image is borne on a large platform which is heavy enough to require at least twenty bearers and it is paraded in solemn procession with singing, candles burning, incense rising and near mass hysteria. Often persons are crushed or badly mauled in the demonstration and one or two have even been killed under the feet of the tightly packed mob of celebrants.

The littler tokens of religion abound: many men wear medals around their necks; in busses and trucks small shrines are installed and St. Christopher medals tacked up; nearly every person crosses himself when he passes a church or shrine; and one can find dozens of small shops selling nothing but religious articles and books. Still, one discovers after he has been dazzled by these surface manifestations of religion that within the white-mestizo world the more "sophisticated" a man becomes the less motive he has for even attending Sunday mass.

On this level, as many observers have pointed out, the practice of religion is left to the women.

Despite this gap between practice and theory, it is important in an understanding of Peruvian society that many of the sanctioned items of behavior derive from a Catholic interpretation of human behavior: the sanctity of the family unit, abhorrence of divorce, the father as the final arbiter of conduct, a disposition toward the hierarchical rendering of human relationships, a somewhat inferior status for women and so on. The definition and tone imparted to Peruvian society by its Catholic heritage are critical elements in dealing with the whites and mestizos of the country.

A curious characteristic of the Peruvian is his tendency to slant the reply to a question in whatever direction the listener might favor. If a tourist, for example, asks "How much time to the next town?" the answer is apt to halve the actual time involved. If a customer in a store asks "How long for these alterations?" the answer will again halve the actual requirement, but if he says "How long will this shirt last with normal washing?" the life of the garment will be doubled in reply.

This exaggeration is relatively harmless once one learns to make the proper deductions or additions, but as one advances into questions about the quality of a certain road, the merits of the indian, the future of the montaña or Peru's political situation, then this desire to say what will please the listener becomes deceptive. I once had some very convincing statistics cited to me on the fertility of soil in the montaña - which was so good that if a man stuck in his thumb in some areas a hand would sprout in five minutes -, but later I read some printed statistics on this topic in a geography text and suddenly realized that my informant had exactly doubled certain percentages from this book's tables and had considerably amplified the author's conclusions. It was disconcerting.

The Peruvian's facility in over- and understatement leads to a kind of optimism about life and the future which is widespread. It is nicely expressed in the current credit complex here, which seems even more frantic than that prevailing in the United States. Everyone buys on credit, and few stores question a man's simple statement that he will be able to pay for the article purchased in the future. The magic of credit is so strong that even the poorest man would not question his own ability to meet the required payments although he may overextend himself at any time. How this works out was bitterly explained to me by the manager of a book store in Cuzco who expects to have defaults on credit contracts up to 40% each year, and "I have to give credit: everyone expects it. If I didn't people would stop buying

in my store." The situation is exaggerated by the long and interminable legal process necessary to collect bills.

Without giving undue stress to the effect of progressive urbanization in Peru and a slowly growing industrial development, it is nevertheless true that the city, the store, the factory, the restaurant, the movies and all the other trappings of a modern city have come to occupy an important place in the Peruvian's outlook. These elements seem to have displaced land as a source of pride and enjoyment in the white-mestizo mind. If there is a mystical feeling towards the land in Peru, it quite properly belongs to the indian as Ciro Alegria stressed in his novel Broad and Alien is the World. Once the full substance of the white-mestizo world is absorbed a man shows little emotional attachment to land as such: it becomes an industrial unit in his reckoning.

One often wonders how Spain and the countries of Latin America compare today, and in this context it is interesting to note that in a recent study of a Spanish sierra community (The People of the Sierra, J.A. Pitt-Rivers) the author found a similar detachment from land and an attachment to the life of the town on the part of his villagers.

The strongest expression of land love I have encountered is among the rural mestizos, who, still uncertain of their actual status in Peruvian society, tend to fall back on the ownership of land as a cushion against possible rejection. They do have some feeling for their property which approaches emotion, even though at first they will talk of it in investment terms. Here especially, the Peruvian and the indian differ considerably and one of the sources of constant friction between the two is how the land shall be treated. Their different goals and satisfactions in this respect make for one more failure to mutually comprehend each other.

One of the most strongly held convictions of the Peruvian is that, when compared with someone from the United States, the latter comes out as a champion of material values whereas the Peruvian gives precedence to spiritual ones. "It is the things of the spirit which refresh us." This comparison was established in its classic form by the Uruguayan J.A. Rodó when he published his essay Ariel in 1910, in which the Yankee became Caliban, the Latin Ariel.

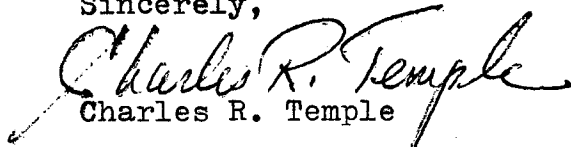
One wonders how true this interpretation is today, as he wanders among the Peruvians, watching their interest in amassing money, their ability to consume material things, their contempt for the un-

successful man, their wholesale importation of United States business techniques, their low consumption of books, paintings and classical records, their orientation around food, liquor, sports, movies, clothing, cars and the like as the satisfactions of life, their delight in visible manifestations of wealth and power (public buildings, Cadillacs, elaborate private homes, Paris frocks).

Yet against this activity can be set a fierce desire for freedom, liberty and the assertion that no man should be frustrated in the expression of his spiritual needs, and there are still men in this country who will die for these sentiments as the recent disturbances in Arequipa (CRT - 11 and WHM - .28) demonstrated.

One person said to me: "The Peruvian talks about spiritual things but pursues the material." Another said: "The Peruvian in the age of mass production and the spread throughout the world of material goods is like a child suddenly confronted with a treasure house of new toys. He is greedy and overdoes himself in enjoying them but once the glamour passes he finds himself still more interested in those things which transcend the material." As one so often finds, no people can ever be interpreted in black and white terms (nor, one suspects, should they so present themselves as Rodó and his partisans did), and the truth in the present instance is that the Peruvian is a mixture of Caliban and Ariel rather than one or the other.

Sincerely,



Charles R. Temple

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