

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 32
The Man Between

New York
New York
November 8, 1956

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

A man whom I shall call Enrique Rodriguez is a mestizo, an individual of mixed white and indian parentage. The mestizo has been called the "man between" in countries like Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. Simply explained, this means that he belongs neither to the indian nor the white society. The mestizo's situation recalls that of the Eurasian, the Anglo-Indian and the mulatto in other parts of the world. It is not a happy position to be in.

The sixteenth century Spaniard in the New World divided its inhabitants into two groups: the workers and the served. But the composition of the first group changed over the years from purely indian to indian and mestizo. The latter was a new phenomenon, and he was not content to remain as one of the lower classes, but he was denied entry into the upper class.

He had then to create a third class, with its own behavior patterns and status symbols. In doing this, he imitated the ways of the dominant whites, and energetically rejected identification with the indian. He was rather like a new born baby who, through lack of interested parents, has to train and educate himself. What he has achieved is illustrated in the life of Enrique Rodriguez.

I first met him in the shoe store where he is a salesman. That day I had been searching for shoe laces, and had found after several tries that shoe stores in Lima don't stock them. (No one knows why: they just don't.) After explaining the problem to Enrique, he offered to guide me to a sundries stand, hidden away in the entrance hall of an office building several blocks away. The hunt over (the laces were too short, but there were no others) we stopped for coffee.

Enrique is a surprisingly tall man with broad shoulders and large hands, but with slender wrists characteristic of the indian and mestizo. His face with high cheek bones and brown eyes was clean shaven. Like so many mestizo faces, his was gloomy in repose and extraordinarily cheerful when he smiled.

He was born in Puno, on the edge of Lake Titicaca, twenty-two years ago. His father was mestizo also, a school teacher in a local primary school. His mother was indian.

His father subscribed to several newspapers and journals printed in Lima and abroad, and made a hobby of international affairs. One of Enrique's earliest recollections is the day the last of the pictures of family relatives (standard items in mestizo homes) was sacrificed to the latest of his father's maps. During the evening, his father had taken down and rehung the picture many times, asking the children if they thought grandfather would mind. Finally, he seemed to conclude that grandfather wouldn't and up went the Scandinavian nations.

The father tutored his sons on life outside the Andes, on the importance of world understanding and on each man's responsibility to a community greater than the nation. Enrique's sisters weren't allowed to join in this, for, as his father said many times, "Women are no good at these things." As a result, Enrique probably knows more about world geography and history than most college graduates in the United States.

The family lived on the standard Altiplano diet of potatoes, rice and, from time to time, a bit of sheep. The mother, who spoke only Quechua, moved shadowlike through the small adobe house. She was almost mute in front of his father ("a man of learning, you see") but at ease with her children and filled with stories of local lore. She didn't seem very happy to live in Puno but she was never heard to complain of this.

As a child, dressed in patched khaki trousers, warmed against the cold of the altitude only by a thin poncho woven by his mother, Enrique worked outside school hours as a shoe shine boy. He got a liberal education in the inner life of the provincial capital as his customers seemed to regard him as non-existent while he was cleaning their shoes and felt no need to be discreet. Even then, he said, he was appalled by the meanness of this life which contrasted badly with the histories of kings and emperors he heard about at home.

Given his father's background, it would have been natural for him to have attended the university, but there was little or no money for that purpose. By the time he was 17, his father's and the sons' incomes were going to maintain the increasing family. It was a crisis for Enrique: he had his choice of remaining in Puno where he felt he would never get anywhere or of emigrating to a city.

Finally, he decided to go to Lima, and made the trip in the back of an antique truck with dubious brakes and a happy but quite drunk driver. He was not as overwhelmed by his first view of Lima as were some of his fellow travelers, for he had been prepared for it by his father's home lessons. But he was excited by the tension he felt, and which he considers characteristic of the capital. "You want to get busy, work, run with the rest. It's no place for an idle man."

A relative found him a job in construction, the fate of many country cousins. Before long, he bought a new suit and shoes, and, since he could read and write, was able to get the position in the shoe store. He doesn't claim to be happy there but thinks of it as a "good beginning."

To this point, there is little particularly unique in this resume except perhaps his father's passion for foreign affairs and the influence this has had upon his son. The pattern of rearing, the dissatisfaction with the provincial environment, the emigration to Lima, the initial employment as a manual laborer and finally entrance into a white collar job could describe the life histories of thousands of mestizos now in Peruvian urban centers.

What intrigued me about Enrique was his objectivity about himself and the position he occupies in Peruvian society. After several meetings over coffee, he said to me, "You know by now that I'm a mestizo, which is a very funny sort of animal in Peru - neither man nor beast, that is neither man nor indian."

"This doesn't come out in Puno so much for almost everyone there is mestizo. We did use to see rich men in the Tourist Hotel, and knew that they were different from us in some other way than their possession of money. I found out how different in Lima: they're the ones who rule this country, make the money in it and tell the rest of us what to do. The only way you can beat them at the game is to make a fortune or become president. Then they have to accept you. How they hate Mrs. Odría [the general was still president of Peru] because she's a chola."

He does not, however, expect to achieve either of these things. His ambition is to reach an assistant manager's position in some shop - not necessarily the one in which he now works. To be manager would expose him to the prejudices of the white who deals by preference with the man on top - especially in the delicate area of credit - and expects him to be gente (acceptable). As sub-manager, however, Enrique would have a decent income and less of the responsibilities, and the question of his indian background would never come up.

This is all far in the future and, for the moment, life is far from ample. He makes U.S. \$35. a month, out of which he pays board to his cousin's wife, has to maintain a two suit wardrobe and all the other accessories which a white collar job demands. He never ceases to marvel at how much goes into such small items as cleaning, laundry, coffee and shoe shines. By the end of the month most of his salary has been spent on unavoidable expenditures and little is left for entertainment.

"Marriage is impossible now. Most of the girls I go out with are maids - they don't cost very much. I'd rather be with a secretary or a girl who works in a shop but that's too expensive. As a matter of fact, I don't even have enough extra to visit La Victoria [the red light district of Lima]."

One day we discussed Communism, which is often taken up by mestizos as a protest against the social system. "No good. Most of the Communists I know are not in the least bit interested in making everyone's life better. They want to get to power so as to have bank accounts in Switzerland and homes in Paris. Besides, they're pretty stupid: most of them don't even know where Moscow is.

"The last elections showed that we can get just as far without a revolution. The people were tired of the dictator, and his candidate, Lavalle, got only a few votes. The real choice was between Prado and Belaúnde. I thought that Prado was the better man because he had had previous experience. And, I was bothered by all the promises which Belaúnde made: he couldn't possibly fulfill half of them. Especially that nonsense about reforming the indian.

"Of course, it is funny that Prado, who is a choice specimen of the upper classes, should have won. He wasn't elected by the votes of the rich but those of the poor. It's something like your Eisenhower: he gives the impression of sympathy and stability, and was a successful man in another way before he became president. My father used to complain that the Peruvians liked leaders who'd mother them, that we had an inborn desire for the patrón, and that this could do nothing but perpetuate the system. Maybe so."

On another occasion, I was telling him about some experiences among the indians of Lake Titicaca, and wondered in passing what it was that kept them fixed to the lake edge, following a way of life which was neither rich nor particularly attractive. "Because the indian is lazy. He hasn't got the courage to leave his farm because he's afraid of new ways. All he'd have to do is stop speaking Quechua and dress like everyone else. He could be here in Lima, too, if he wanted."

We also discussed the growth of labor unions in which Enrique is especially interested. He felt that they serve the much needed function of protecting the worker in his job and guaranteeing various social security rights where otherwise they might not exist. While the hacienda indian has some assurance of the future in the paternalistic pattern in which he lives, the urban worker has to shift pretty much for himself. Although there are government regulations controlling workers' rights and benefits, they are lackadaisically enforced and quite often the individual stands defenseless. Unions act as watchdogs over these things.

Although Enrique did not state it explicitly, there is another reason for the popularity of unions which was suggested by several of his comments. The union not only defines the rights of workers but it also challenges the tradition upper class conception of the mestizo's role in society. It says, in effect, that he is entitled to work out his own design for living, no longer allowing this to be imposed from above.

In spite of his way of sometimes looking at himself and his society from outside, Enrique is still bound to its demands and customs. His projected progress toward sub-manager is formulated on knowing how far a mestizo can go at present. At the same time, he seems to render an unconscious approval of the system which makes this inevitable. He wants very much to own those things which mark him as a high status individual - an ample wardrobe, watch, radio, car and his own home.

Yet, he is not satisfied. The barrier between the men who control and those who labor remains for him. His sub-managership will go a long way toward satisfying his ego drives, but even he suspects that once obtained it will only encourage new and impossible wants. "I keep hoping that when I reach that position I'll be content with it, but I don't know."

Enrique has a dream, however, which has nothing to do with the possibilities and probabilities of the Peruvian situation. He wants to live in the United States. Toward this end, he is taking lessons in English and reading everything he can find on this country. He doesn't know if he'll ever have the money for the trip or whether he could find a job once he arrived. In fact, he hasn't really thought out the project clearly. "That would take some of the fun out of imagining what I'd be doing if I were living in New York."

This brief summary of the life and opinions of Enrique Rodriguez demonstrates the essential difficulty of the mestizo position, that his range of experience is limited by the social system in which he exists. The upper and lower classes have their own unique and ample behavior patterns only partially shared by the mestizos. For example, as one consequence of the imitation of the upper classes, the mestizo validates his status position through the consumption of certain material things - clothing, cars, watches, jewelry - which are too expensive in terms of his income. He is filled with a sense of constant want as his needs outrun income. What is lacking is a complete set of behavior patterns proper to the realities of the group's situation in Peru.

After the series of interviews with Enrique, I was in the field for some time. When I returned to Lima, I dropped by the shoe store and found him wearing a mustache so new that he couldn't help running his fingers over it many times while we were talking. In a land where the indian has scanty facial hair, the mustache - the more luxuriant the better - is a sure method of showing the world that a man does not belong to the lower classes.

Sincerely,


Charles R. Temple