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The Impact of Cityward Migration on Urban Environments: Slum Cities and Squatter Settlements

At the first meeting of the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers ten years ago, John Augelli (Augelli, 1971) noted that one earmark of North American geographers was the tendency to skirt many of Latin America's most relevant contemporary problems, and among these problems was the "urban explosion." This explosion is still evident and is being fueled by the millions of rural migrants piling into the cities, compounding the high natural growth rates in those cities. I will attempt to outline the nature of some of the urban problems concomitant with the explosion and suggest tacks that geographers might take as they pursue solutions to Latin American urban issues in the future.

One problem is the difficulty of obtaining an accurate count of residents in the cities of Latin America who live in sub-standard housing. With a new round of national censuses about to begin, the already poor estimates will gain little in accuracy and even that gain will be short-lived. Many of the cities are growing so fast that a series of annual air photos is perhaps the only way to comprehend the growth dimension. In the 1980s, the cities of over 20,000 population in the region will be adding some 6 million residents annually. Mexico City, with a population of approximately 16 million and a growth rate of 6 percent, is currently increasing by 1 million annually. No urban system can provide housing with growth rates such as those, so it is not surprising that from one-third to two-thirds of the 220 million inhabitants of Latin American cities in 1990 will be squatters. Squatting as a housing solution seems to be more prevalent in the larger cities. Estimates suggest that fifty percent of the total population of Bogota and Lima, thirty-five percent of Mexico City, and thirty percent of Caracas fall into this category (Anthony, 1979).

One fundamental problem facing researchers may well be our own attitudes toward these settlements and settlers. We have an inclination to see these miles of rude shacks lining unpaved streets as "festering sores" or "social aberrations" that are anomalous to a normally healthy, vigorous city. The term squatting itself relates to the illegal occupation of land. Calling the communities "marginal" or "spontaneous" doesn't really change our view. Perhaps we should begin to

perceive and study this phenomenon for what it is: suburban growth. It is people seeking the economic and social benefits of a city while at the same time acquiring inexpensive housing in safe neighborhoods. If viewed in this light, maybe we can realize that a substantial part of urban housing has been and will continue to be created by squatters.

Squatter settlements are not generally viewed by the residents as slums. If slums are places of despair and hopelessness then the term slum must be used with caution in Latin America cities. Scholars in the United States and in Latin America carry middleclass academic prejudices against these settlements, and this has probably prevented us from devoting more careful attention to this phenomenon. Conditions in these communities may be bad from our middle-class view, but most of the residents will tell you that it is much better than the rural village or downtown city slum they left.

There are, in fact, many true slum areas in the cities. Generally these slums are adjacent to the old city core and expand into it as the core ages and deteriorates. In the past, these downtown slums served as the first stop of the rural migrants in the city. Rents were low, less skilled work was close at hand, and living conditions were dreadful. Although slums persist and in some cases grow, they can not hold the hordes that are migrating into the cities today. Some researchers (Jackson, 1973; Eyre, 1972) have noted that slums may be stabilizing; that is, the slum population remains the same generation after generation. They may no longer serve as the point of first contact for any sizable number of migrants. It is possible, however, that slum areas can exist in urban locations other than the downtown core. The garbage dump settlements in Mexico City, for example, are certainly slums even if they are on the periphery of that city.

Squatter settlements and slums do present problems for Latin American cities. Health and sanitation certainly suffer in an environment in which a dozen families use a communal toilet, or where an open trench serves as the sewer. New squatter communities must pirate electricity from nearby legal power supplies, and transportation may be improvised with clandestine taxi systems. The high visibility of the squatter settlements with open sewers and pirated electricity creates a problem that the power brokers find hard to ignore.

City administrators in Latin America have tried to cope with the squatter situation. The popular solution to this problem has been for the government to

build low-rent apartment complexes on the periphery of the troubled city. The locations chosen are convenient to planners but not for the intended residents (Anthony, 1979). The apartments are often far from employment, basic services, and community activities. They are bland, institutional-appearing, and most importantly, not free. Planners soon discovered that new residents of these apartments did not want to live there and that they would leave as soon as possible. More importantly, they also realized the city's financial resources were insufficient to make even a small dent in providing low-cost housing. Even if one makes a case for the construction of these apartments, that very construction may serve as a new impetus for urbanization by providing encouragement to more cityward migrants.

Squatters actually contribute a great deal to the economies of cities. Their houses are built through cooperative or individual efforts, with the construction taking place over decades and accomplished without access to traditional credit resources. The result is that in almost every squatter settlement one sees evidence of investment, thrift, and ingenuity. Squatters contribute a substantial part of the new housing in the region, in some locales as much as half of the total new construction. All of this should come as no surprise since the primary objective of the squatters is to own a piece of land and have a home to call their own with access to the economics and social benefits that the city offers.

Besides the direct investment in housing, residents plan the community to include laying out streets and actual street improvement. Shops open almost immediately and before long small artisan workshops begin to produce for the urban market. In a very brief period of time these communities are integrated into the economic life of the city.

Squatters do not choose their target areas randomly. The land chosen for the invasion is often too steep, too wet, or too dusty for alternate uses. Additionally, squatters know from the experience of others the likely response of government and police authorities to an invasion. Knowing the likelihood of eviction and the nature of the terrain, squatters move in quickly for the occupation. They even understand that the choice of name for their community can have an impact on their chances for success. A wise choice is always the name of a national hero or the ruling president.

Several geographers have commented on the levels or stages that squatter

communities experience (Hanson, 1975; Eyre, 1972). The "initial" stage is when the pioneers move in and the threat of eviction is the greatest. The feeling of insecurity leads to a cohesiveness among the squatters and organization against the common foe. Next is a "transitional" stage when investment in housing begins in earnest and densities increase. Subsequent stages are called variously "intermediate," "permanent," and "absorption." The spirit of cooperation of the initial and "transitional" stages slowly declines as the community becomes permanent. One can usually perceive the stage of the squatter settlement by the appearance of the housing and the amount of building activity, especially on the weekends. From my observations in Mexico City, I would guess that from the first stage to the last may take only ten years. Certainly the squatter settlements of twenty years ago have been almost completely assimilated into the capital's life.

One characteristic of squatters that has been borne out in several studies and generally comes as a surprise to most of us is that they are likely to be very satisfied with their life in the squatter settlement (Jackson, 1974; Cornelius, 1975). They indicate that things are better now than they were before and that they expect them to get even better in the future. Environmental issues are also cited as positive factors of life in the suburbs with "good air," "tranquility," and "good oxygen" heading the lists of positive responses of many squatters.

What kind of process sorts out those who seek shelter in squatter settlements? Just as migrants from the rural area are positively selected, those finding their way to squatter settlements may also be positively selected. The squatters may be the most industrious and ambitious among the in-migrants to the city. One researcher in Mexico found that among his sample less than one percent had arranged for a job before moving there but 46 percent had work within a week and another 30 percent within a month (Cornelius, 1975). From this and other studies, it is clear that most squatter heads-of-household are migrants from the rural areas who move to the city, quickly find employment, and move to the "suburbs" to raise their families.

One of the most important aspects of squatter life concerns the perception of the city in which squatters live. It is not enough to know what squatters think about economic opportunities. If the squatter is to take advantage of opportunities for better jobs or for better housing, he must know where opportunities exist. We need to know more about the mental maps of the city that squatters carry with them and the implications for movement that are

determined by such maps.

Just as growth rates are not uniform from city to city, the growth of squatter populations is also uneven. Some cities, national capitals for example, seem to draw more than their share of squatters. Monterrey and Guadalajara are two cities in Mexico of approximately the same size, but Monterrey has a substantial number of squatters while Guadalajara does not. Although both cities are growing, Guadalajara has managed to control or channel the migrants into some level of conventional housing and the difference in growth rates is likely to be affected by political matters. The political factor in squatter development is an important one but one that has not been adequately addressed.

Slum housing is a phenomenon somewhat more difficult to generalize. It often consists of buildings in the decaying core of the city that have been cut up into tiny rooms and rented to families. Densities in this housing are very high and sanitary conditions are terrible. This housing can serve as the beachhead for newly arrived rural migrants or the permanent home for those unwilling or unable to obtain better housing. Slums have the advantage of being close to the downtown action and accessible to a wide variety of low skill jobs. In Mexico another form of slum housing is that of the *ciudad perdida*. These "lost cities" can be found along railroad tracks, on garbage dumps, or in the middle of normal-appearing city blocks. What sets slum dwellers apart is the lack of a positive attitude toward the future. The residents have little hope of owning their space, and this prevents the kind of improvement one notes in squatter areas.

Geographers have generally neglected the study of squatter settlements and slums in Latin American cities. Dozens of studies have indicated who comes to the cities and how they get there, but we still know very little about what happens to the urbanites after they get off the bus. What route do they take as they seek decent housing? How do they get their information about housing and employment? What are the satisfaction levels among various squatters, and what are the factors that affect satisfaction? We need studies of particular communities in a variety of cities as well as models of urban growth that include squatter settlements and slums. The conclusions we reach for these phenomena in Latin American cities can help us understand the process of growth in cities. It appears from demographic projections that this process will be a critical one for the region's cities in the coming decades.

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