

ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND THE STUDY OF URBANIZATION:

AN EXAMPLE FROM MEXICO\*

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Abstract

Examination of anthropological studies of urban life suggests that fieldworkers, predisposed to specific types of research, use only a limited number of the many available methods and techniques to study urbanization. Rural-urban migration has been a particular interest of anthropologists at work in developing countries. The author's survey of the literature on urbanism and urbanization in Mexico, and his experiences among Tzintzuntzan migrants in Mexico City, have shown the need for a general methodological and theoretical framework for urban anthropological research.

[fieldwork, methodology, Mexico, rural-urban migration, Tzintzuntzan, urbanism, urbanization.]

In the social sciences, the term "urbanization" is used to describe a variety of demographic, geographic, economic, and socio-cultural processes which operate in complex societies. To demographers, urbanization denotes the ratio of population concentration in large cities, to geographers, shifts in urban hierarchies and settlement patterns, to economists, redistribution of labor and market forces. To most anthropologists, urbanization indicates the appearance of "urban" traits in the populations we study.

Anthropologists have been interested in the diffusion of city influences to rural hinterlands for a long time. This tradition reflects the essentially rural basis of most anthropological research; it persists in contemporary investigations of peasant villages in developing countries. We are also concerned, however, with people's assimilation and adaptation to what Wirth (1938) called "urbanism as a way of life." As Beals (1951) observed over twenty years ago, this way of looking at urbanization is closely associated with the acculturation studies anthropologists have been doing since the 1920s. In fact, despite our growing interest in a wide variety of urban topics, other social scientists still believe that "the acculturation of migrants to the city (or the 'deculturation' of migrants from the country)" represents a "leading subject" for anthropological study (Schnore and Lampard 1968:31).

#### URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY IN MEXICO

Urban fieldwork in Mexico provides a good example of the range of research and theory generated by anthropologists interested in urbanization.<sup>1</sup> However, much of this urban research says little about urbanization as "adaptation to urban life." Instead, most descriptions of urban society remain synchronic and pattern-oriented.

Urban research in Mexico falls into four broad categories: (1) holistic urban studies; (2) studies of residential units within cities; (3) investigations of specific urban groups; and (4) studies of rural-urban migrants.

Several attempts have been made to describe the socio-economic structure of whole cities or towns (Whiteford 1964; Pi-Sunyer 1967;

Bonfil Batalla 1967; Pozas Arciniega 1958; Price 1968). These studies often perpetuate traditional conceptual categories by failing to distinguish urban from universal characteristics of cities. Furthermore, as Leeds (1968:31) has argued,

such studies have, as far as the city aspect is concerned, tended to be non-generalizable, not related to generalizable theory, models, or hypotheses, and hence not generative of broader theory as to cities, urban society, or the social evolution of urbanized societies.

These descriptions of entire Mexican cities notably treat small to middle-sized communities rather than metropolises (Mexico City, Monterrey, Guadalajara).

In a second research category, anthropologists have investigated urban residential units, such as apartment-houses (vecindades) (Lewis 1959, 1969), neighborhoods (barrios and colonias) (Higgins 1971; Spitzer 1958; Valencia 1967), or squatter settlements (colonias proletarias) (Butterworth 1971; Chance 1971; Foster 1971). This "neighborhood" tradition, associated with Lewis and his students, appeals particularly to ethnographers who want to carry out small-scale community research in urban environments. These researchers assume an urban residential zone can be treated as a relatively self-contained and autonomous segment of the total urban system. However, "this cannot be assumed a priori as these studies have tended to do. Rather, the fact that it is a community must be empirically shown, and the mechanisms which create and maintain the boundaries of that community as over and against the rest of the city empirically analyzed in detail as part of the total social process (Leeds 1968; 31-32)."

Third, urban population groups have been investigated on the basis of selected, predetermined traits. Ethnographic surveys have

been made of beggars (Fabrega 1971), tramps (Pozas Arciniega 1968), Spanish expatriates (Kenny 1962), bureaucrats (Jiménez 1955), working class families (Olivé Negrete, César and Piña Chan 1962), and middle class families (Olivé Negrete, César and Piña Chan 1960). Unfortunately such studies often remain synchronic and anecdotal, and contribute little to the construction of general theories about urbanization processes.

Finally, a number of investigations have been made of rural-urban migrants and their adaptation to the urban environment. (Although the other approaches sometimes discuss migration as a subordinate topic, their principal aim is the description of urban structure rather than assimilation of peasants or small-town dwellers to metropolitan life.) A focus on migration can serve to bridge the gap between the two predominant anthropological perspectives on urbanization: the influence of cities on hinterland areas and the appearance of urban traits in specific populations.

Despite the potential importance of migration research, anthropologists generally study only a small range of the total rural-urban migration phenomena in Mexico. Their research designs can be placed in a national framework which varies on one axis from a single rural community to all the nation's villages, and on the other from a single city to all urban areas.

Each of these approaches to cityward migration implies specific assumptions, and produces specific results. First, to study migration at the national level, requires data on all migrants to all cities. Such projects rely on census analysis and yield macro-level results.

Behind this approach is the assumption that the total pattern of cityward population movement must be understood before small-scale research can be begun. The work of demographers, economists, and geographers (Ball 1967; Cabrera 1967, 1970; Stevens 1966; Tabah and Cosío 1970; Whetten and Burnight 1958) displays this orientation, which treats migration as mass behavior rather than as the experiences of individual migrants.

Total migration to a single city can be investigated by combining census analysis with sample survey techniques. Despite the large sample sizes involved (usually,  $N = 2,000$  to  $10,000$ ), the focus remains on the migration phenomenon, not the migrants themselves. In Mexico, studies of this kind have been undertaken in all the major cities (Balán 1968; Browning and Geindt 1968, 1969; Carnelius n.d.; Muñoz García, Oliveira and Stern 1971).

Research has also been carried out among emigrants from a single rural point of origin, regardless of their urban destination. This approach, relying on survey and ethnographic techniques, assumes that out-migration from a single community sheds light on national urbanization patterns, and measures urban influences on specific hinterland areas. Such investigations (Barkin 1971; Butterworth 1969; Rollwagen 1971; Stoltman and Ball 1971; Wiest 1971) understandably yield significant information on individual migrants as well as on the general relationship between rural-urban migration and urbanization. Anthropologists often adopt this research design as an extension of fieldwork in peasant villages, few of which have not experienced significant emigration to the cities.

Finally, migration research can be limited to a single rural community of origin and a single urban destination. Ethnographic case study methods predominate, in this research design, with the result that individual migrant adaptation may receive greater attention than the overall migration process. Projects of this kind are generally carried out in two stages: first, the anthropologist conducts an ethnography in the rural community; subsequently he follows a small group of emigrants to a specific city (Ashton 1967; Butterworth 1962; Lewis 1952).

Predictably, these alternative research designs lead to different conclusions about the relationship of cityward migration to the urbanization process. Of course, fieldworkers can--and often do-- shift their tactics, either intentionally or as the situation warrants. Oscar Lewis' migration research provides a good example: after studying Tepoztlán migrants to Mexico City, he shifted his attention to migrants from other regions, and finally investigated the capital's slum residents without regard to their origins (i.e., whether they were migrants or urban natives).

#### TZINTZUNTZAN MIGRANTS IN MEXICO CITY

The urbanization of peasant migrants from Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán (1970 population, 2,250) to Mexico City<sup>2</sup> offers an illustration of one category of migration research. For at least two reasons, Tzintzuntzan emigrants to the capital are especially suitable as a focus of study. Well known ethnographically through the work of George M. Foster and Gabriel Ospina (1948) who made a thorough study of the community during the period 1944-1946, the Tzintzuntzeños have been the object of Foster's continuing study since 1958, including complete censuses in 1960 and

1970. The censuses provide important supplemental data on out-migration and lend historical depth to fieldwork I did in Mexico City between April of 1969 and August of 1970.

In addition, Mexico City is the principal destination of Tzintzuntzan emigrants, as it is for a vast number of Mexican peasants drawn from the more slowly developing countryside to the city's relatively open labor market. Balán (1969:18) estimates that migrants represent about half the population of the capital; most demographers agree that its formidable social growth (i.e., the natural increase plus the effects of migration) is primarily due to exceptionally high rates of immigration.

Because I had access to Foster's vast store of Tzintzuntzan data, I could concentrate on the second part of what would otherwise have been a two-stage study. Consequently, nearly all my time was spent in Mexico City among the migrants. My research design was similar in many ways to that of Lewis (1952) and Butterworth (1962), who also investigated migrant groups in the capital.

When I arrived in Mexico City with a list of less than twenty migrant names and only two current addresses, I did not expect to find more than 100-200 Tzintzuntzeño emigrants, based on the experiences of Lewis and Butterworth. My initial plan was to survey the entire migrant population, then to conduct a series of in-depth family studies. In fact, I was aware that I might be able to test Lewis' suggestions about migrant participation in the "culture of poverty." However, I found the Tzintzuntzan migrant population much larger than I expected (although this realization came rather slowly, because the geographic and social distance between migrant households in Mexico City prevented a rapid census survey).

My initial expectations about the size of the migrant population were also influenced by Foster's 1960 census data, which showed barely 200 village emigrants. Even in the mid-1960s, "Tzintzuntzan [had] not yet begun to feel a major pull from urban centers. Nevertheless, although percentages are still small, increasing numbers of emigrants move to cities, and particularly to Mexico City. . . ." (Foster 1967:273). Neither of us anticipated the dramatic increase in cityward emigration in the later 1960s, coincident with the termination of the bracero labor program. Apparently, when this economic opportunity was closed in 1964, rural-urban migration became the only available alternative to village life. The limited lands and fragile tourist-oriented crafts industry of the Tzintzuntzeños were increasingly unable to support the village's rapidly expanding population.

The large size of the migrant group (which totaled nearly 500 persons, including spouses and children born outside the village) forced me to abandon my original plan of study almost entirely. Instead, I had to devote the first seven months of fieldwork to the task of locating Tzintzuntzeños in the city. I found more than sixty migrant households plus nearly twenty young Tzintzuntzeños studying at the capital's secondary schools or universities.

The Tzintzuntzan migrant households were not concentrated in a single zone of the city, but were spread among some forty neighborhoods. In interviewing the Tzintzuntzeños I traveled nearly 9,000 miles by car, bus, taxi, and subway--and still failed to survey the entire migrant population. My research progressed as I built up a series of overlapping social relationships within the migrant group. The first family I met took me to meet two more families, these in turn acquainted me with



several more, and in this way my social network expanded concentrically. This experience may have had more than methodological significance; eventually I realized that informants took me to meet only fellow migrants of approximately equal social status. Because I first met a middle-class family, their social preferences temporarily prejudiced my view of the migrant group. Not until my fieldwork was considerably advanced did I accidentally encounter a migrant of low socio-economic status. Through him, I was introduced to another world: the world of the great majority of working-class Tzintzuntzeños, with whom the smaller number of middle class families had virtually no contact.

The difficulties I encountered during my fieldwork substantially altered my original view of the relation of rural-urban migration to nationwide urbanization processes in Mexico. Confronted by a migrant population scattered over a wide area of Mexico City, whose social relations were determined by a combination of geographical, socio-economic, and consanguineal variables, I had to abandon my synchronic, homogenous view of a migrant "community" and admit the mobility, diffuseness, and "looseness" of actual relations among Tzintzuntzeños in Mexico City. Further, my experiences with Tzintzuntzan migrants to Mexico City show the intimate relationship between research design, fieldwork techniques, and theory-construction. Adequate urban ethnographies depend not only on the collection and analysis of data, but also on the anthropologist's awareness of the constraints generated by particular fieldwork situations.

Urban ethnographers must adjust their styles and techniques to the particular urban situation, just as earlier fieldworkers developed

methods appropriate to the conditions they found in tribal and peasant villages. Furthermore, urban anthropologists must discover a general theoretical posture in which the holistic and comparative components of anthropology can play a more significant role. Otherwise, as Beals (1951) cautioned long ago, "if anthropologists keep on as they have begun in the study of modern culture, they will in time reinvent sociology, but unfortunately it will be at least fifty years behind the rest of the field."

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Mexico has been the site of a very large number of anthropological studies of urbanism and urbanization, at least in comparison with other Latin American countries. A survey of the literature (cf. Kemper 1971) shows that, of 265 citations for the period 1940-1970, Mexico had 64, followed by Peru with 52, Brazil with 33, and Guatemala with 15. In addition, two of the major perspectives on urbanization--i.e., Redfield's "folk-urban continuum" and Lewis' "culture of poverty"--have emerged from Mexican studies.

<sup>2</sup>For details on the urbanization experiences of the Tzintzuntzan migrants in Mexico City, see Kemper 1971a.

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