

IMMIGRATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN PERU:
THE CASE OF JUAN PEREZ

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Juan Perez was born a member of the lower middle class in a small town in the Department of Arequipa.¹ He moved to Lima after finishing high school, and today is one of the most important members of the Department of Justice. The subject of this paper is the strategies Juan Perez took crossing the class barriers, from provincial middle class to the nation's elite. The data presented were collected from acquaintances of Juan Perez.

Juan's early life.

Pedro Perez, Juan's father, was a low income government employee in Camana, a small southern Peruvian city on the coast of the Department of Arequipa. In Camana, the Perez family was considered genteel (familia decente), known and accepted by his neighbors and the most important families in the area (todos los vecinos y principales).² The family was also known to have had former economic problems (venida a menos) and to have had to lower their standard of living and immigrate to Camana. But Pedro Perez did not want his children to continue living in Camana all their life. He wanted them to finish elementary school and high school. He succeeded in his wish. Juan graduated from Camana's public high school in the late 1920's. And while his peers were looking for white collar jobs in Camana and Arequipa, he talked to his father about the possibility of going to Lima, the nation's capital, to study law. Law was the most prestigious career a person could elect in those years. His father doubted that with the low family income room, board, and tuition expenses could

be met. Lima is Peru's most expensive city, especially by provincial standards. Furthermore, who would take charge of the young Juan in Lima, seeing that he kept up in his studies and stayed out of trouble in the big city? After much thought, Carlos Torres, a family friend residing in the capital, was decided upon. Carlos was a native of Camana who left for the capital many years earlier. Juan's father wrote Carlos and asked him to provide Juan with room, board, and advice. Pedro planned to cover all Juan's expenses even though it meant great sacrifice, because having a son as a lawyer would bring pride and honor to the family. Although Carlos was the father of five and lived in a three bedroom house in a low-income area of Lima, he accepted the request. He agreed to give Juan a place in the house and supervise his stay in Lima.

Juan travelled to Lima in the early 30's and lived most of his student years at the Torres house. Upon his arrival he took several temporary, low-paying jobs during the day (cacheulando) and began night courses at the National University of San Marcos. Considering his limited background, he obtained good grades and both his father and the Torres family were proud of his progress.

Juan's upward journey.

At this time, a military government came to power and a general from Arequipa, a friend of the Torres family, was named a member of the Cabinet. Immediately Carlos Torres thought to recommend Juan to the minister in the hopes of getting him a good, stable job. Carlos met with the minister and asked him to help Juan whom he described as a brilliant law student from the Department of Arequipa (also the minister's place of origin) who needed help. The minister called Juan and after talking with

him and checking his abilities made him secretary of his office. This position was an important post with high responsibility. It was a great achievement for a 28 year old man. In his new job, Juan became more interested in politics, learned much about how governmental decisions are made, met influential people, and became a friend of the minister's family. But office work did not allow him to devote the necessary time to law school. He asked the minister who, by then, he felt, would understand, if he could resign and be assigned a part time teacher's post at a national high school. The minister understood and named him teacher with tenure at a prestigious national high school.

During his last years in law school, he joined with other young immigrants to the capital interested in politics and formed a left-oriented political party. Almost all the members of this party had similar backgrounds, and had studied a profession in Lima. Immigrants from the provinces are considered low status people by natives of Lima and tend to associate with each other. Juan was an active member in the party until 1962 when he had to resign to accept a government post.

After obtaining his professional law degree (abogado), Juan became the pride of his family and his home town. He was addressed as "doctor", a title given to all lawyers whether they have received the doctoral degree or not. His teaching job had allowed him to meet the parents of his students as well as pay his University fees, so that when he rented a small office on a central avenue in downtown Lima and hung a bronze name plate on his door, he had the beginnings of a law practice. Many acquaintances and natives of his home province began seeking his advice as well, and he developed a reputation as a trustworthy man (hombre de confianza).

During his years in Lima he met Cecilia Chavez, born in the highland Andean town of Tarma, who was brought to Lima as an infant. Although she was a high school graduate, she did not go to the University because it was not socially acceptable for a woman to go to the University where she would meet all kinds of people, particularly lower status people (rozarse con toda clase de gente).

Having accumulated some savings, Juan and Cecilia decided to marry and stay in Lima. Both were ambitious to achieve higher social status. What would a "doctor" do in Camana or Arequipa? There he would not progress professionally.³ They had to stay in Lima if they wanted to be "somebodies" in Peru.

An immediate concern of the upwardly mobile couple was where to rent a house. Lima, as in other cities, has low and higher status districts. In the early 40's, San Isidro was considered the highest status district in Lima, but within it there were some low income areas. The Perez-Chavez family decided to rent a house in the less expensive area of San Isidro. Juan and Cecilia were aided in finding a house by their friend the minister, now out of the government, because "that's what friends are for". The ex-minister introduced Juan to one of his compadres, a rich provincial man who owned some houses in San Isidro. The former minister asked his compadre to help the young "doctor" begin his household and rent him a place at San Isidro without charging him the regular price, charging him less as he would a friend. The compadre accepted and rented Juan one of his houses in San Isidro.

The Perez-Chavez's lived in their San Isidro house for more than 25 years. During that period, Juan cultivated a close friendship with

the owner of the house. He became the owner's legal adviser. The owner felt unable to raise the rent of his lawyer and compadre's friend. Thus the Perez-Chavez's, despite the rising cost of living, devaluation, and inflation, continued to pay a symbolic rent for a house in one of the city's most prestigious sections. With the savings they were able to accumulate over 25 years, they bought a large house in an area considered today to be Lima's most prestigious (la mas residencial de Lima). The residence they bought was expensive but they paid a low price for it. Its owner had been involved in a law suit with its tenants for more than five years. For him, the house was an unprofitable business that only brought problems. Juan, a lawyer with influential friends at court, knew that as owner of the house it would be very easy to evict the problematic tenant. He bought the house at a bargain price (precio huevo) and succeeded in removing the tenant. In 1973, he was living in this mansion situated in one of the most expensive areas of metropolitan Lima.

Juan's concern with status.

While Juan was moving upwards in his profession and saving a considerable amount on rent, Cecilia decided to fill her house with imported furniture as the rich people do. Peru has severe importation restrictions and tariffs, and imported goods are extremely expensive. Making use of friends in important offices, she succeeded in decorating her house with very expensive Persian rugs and Chinese porcelain. Her house was one of the first to have a hi-fi when they arrived in Peru in the 50's. When television sets were first imported, the Perez-Chavez home acquired one. Now they have sophisticated and expensive stereo equipment, a luxury few families can afford. But for the Perez-Chavez, accumulation of these

items was a necessary step in their social climb.

Since Juan and Cecilia have been married, they have owned an automobile. Considering the low rate of exchange between Peruvian soles and U. S. dollars and that all new automobiles carry an import tax of more than 100% of their value, owning a new car, especially an American one, is considered a luxury afforded only by the rich. Every two or three years, Juan buys a new American automobile. Since the 60's, he purchased a second automobile: one for him and another for his wife. He decided to hire a chauffeur because it was not socially acceptable for an important man to drive his own car (no era bien visto).

Another indicator of social status in Peru is the number of household employees kept by the family. Many unskilled teenagers from the Andean highlands immigrate to Lima in order to raise their standard of living and social position. The most common jobs for females are as live-in maids or live-in cooks (muchacha con cama adentro or cocinera cama adentro); and for males, as live-in male maids or stewards (muchacho cama adentro or mayordomo). Low income families will usually employ a female servant for both cleaning and cooking. Thus, Juan and Cecilia, when they married, hired a woman to help Cecilia with all the household chores.

Now, because it is customary for an important family to have an experienced cook, not a teenager, a woman who keeps the house in order, and a butler who dresses in black tie and white jacket at lunchtime and helps with cleaning and errands at other times, the Perez-Chavez family has three employees. Cecilia feels the need for these three employees to keep up with (estar a la par) her social reference group. She is considering the possibility of hiring a third woman to take care of her

grandchildren when they come to visit.

With all these people, Cecilia does not need to do housework and can spend most of her time at social affairs, or visiting friends and relatives. Her role in the house is mainly supervisory. Usually, she will spend her afternoons playing cards with ladies of her age-group and socioeconomic status. Gossip is the most important aspect of the game. One of the most frequent topics is household employees: "the house employees are now very scarce", "at school they teach them bad habits, they have created indocile, unmanageable brutes," "who do these stupid Indians think they are," and "illiterate animals" (la servidumbre esta muy escasa, en el colegio me las malcrian, que se han creido estos cholos brutos, analfa-bestias). These and many other similar expressions are used when referring to the house employees and when speaking directly to them. Cecilia, like her friends, knows that these expressions could not be used to describe anyone but household employees because they would bring social ostracism or even a law suit. But because servants are not protected by labor laws, and many of them have never finished elementary school, they do not have the opportunity to seek justice, nor do they find it even living in the house of one of its administrators.

A Peruvian commenting on this situation would ironically remark, "This is one of the paradoxes of life; in the house of a blacksmith, many times you only find a wooden knifex" (se trata de una de las paradojas de la vida: en casa de herrero, cuchillo de palo).

Juan's children.

Juan and Cecilia have five children: two boys and three girls. Both parents have been especially concerned about providing the best

possible education for them. In many ways, the educational attainments of a person condition their future status. Juan and Cecilia had to choose between the public or private school system. Both parents had studied in public schools in the provinces, often the best schools outside Lima. But in Lima, it is not acceptable for a genteel family (decente) to send their children to public schools. Public schools are reserved for cholos.⁴

Always interested in raising their social status, the Perez-Chavez family decided to send their children to private schools in the 1950's. But, there is a social hierarchy among private schools. Some are implicitly reserved for the elite. Both of the Chavez-Perez sons were registered in the Santa Maria school, a school for upper class boys owned by a North American religious order. The boys would have an opportunity to learn English and North American habits. Tuition fees at Santa Maria are very high by Peruvian standards and there were many other schools where the two boys would have received a better education at less cost. But being in Santa Maria meant that they would be in close contact with upper class boys. The sons of landlords, owners of industrial plants, personnel of foreign companies, and rarely, of provincial professionals attended Santa Maria. Their contact with upper class boys taught the two boys how money conditioned the behavior of the wealthy, building up social classes where the rich marginated the poor, and how the wealthy learn the special behavioral manners of superiority. They also learned the sophisticated way of life of the upper class Peruvian, the refined manners, the characteristic attitudes, values and habits of this class. But the boys were competing at a disadvantage. As members of a middle class family, they

were considered people who overestimated their place in society and did not know how to stay in their proper place. Many of their classmates came to school in expensive cars driven by uniformed chauffeurs. At graduation, some of their classmates were given sports cars, "baptized" by removing the muffler. But the Perez-Chavez boys had to use the school bus designated for the few low income students.

Both boys were good and responsible students. They were always aware of their classmate's behavior. Juan, the oldest, was motivated to study law as his father had. That way he would obtain the reputation all lawyers have and inherit his father's prestige. He did not study at his father's university because only low status people (cholos) studied there. Instead he studied at the privately owned Catholic University, where upper class people with important last names (facetiously, gente ga ga con apellidos que suenan) study.

The second boy, Raul, decided to study business administration, to his parent's joy. The profession of business administration is now in vogue and completely satisfied his parent's economic aspirations. Raul was also admitted to a privately owned university and finished with good grades.

While the two boys learned English at school, a language that will help them in their professional world, the girls were oriented during their school to learn the language of culture, the language of polished people, French. Their parents registered them in a private school run by French nuns. This school is one of the most expensive in Lima, but for the Perez-Chavez it was a good investment in the sense that their three daughters would be able to meet girls of high status families.

Only two of the girls graduated from high school. After their oldest daughter Irma graduate from school, the Perez-Chavez family decided that she should go to the United States to study. Irma was sent away for 3 years. When she came back, she was hired as an executive secretary in an industrial plant where her father was attorney. In a different situation, Juan Perez would not have allowed his daughter to work as the secretary of a low status boss (jefe comun).

Nelly, the second daughter, could not finish school because of health problems. Nevertheless, when she was fifteen her parents also sent her to the United States for 6 months so she would learn some English.

Isabel, the youngest of the family, had behavior problems at school. She did not like to study and was a troublemaker within the school. Her parents had to change her school twice. After graduating from a low status high school her parents tried to "save" her by sending her to study in a secretarial academy in the United States. Afterwards, she was sent to France. In France, Isabel learned to dress in the latest European fashion. On her return to Lima she fell in love with the son of one of Peru's richest entrepreneurs and married.

We have seen how the Perez-Chavez children were able to meet the children of Peru's aristocrats and oligarchs. Nevertheless, in order to enter their sphere, they had to pay a price. The Perez-Chavez name was not a resounding surname (apellido rimbombante). Many times in elementary school, the children were marginated and humiliated because they did not wear stylish imported clothes, nor did they have expensive toys like their classmates. In high school they were more widely accepted by their

classmates, but continued to suffer from their humble origins.

The Perez-Chavez family needed more than residence in a good neighborhood and acceptance in prestigious schools to secure their social position. The Peruvian academic year used to have two vacation periods: a 3 month summer and a 1 month winter vacation. Many wealthy families own vacation houses on the seashore for summer use, and in the nearby Rimac valley for winter. Juan Perez, under pressure from his family, bought a small house on a small beach south of Lima in the mid 50's. In it his children met with some of their classmates. The beach house was hard to reach because no public transportation was available and the private road was closed to all but invited visitors. During the same time one of his office clients offered him a house in nearby Chosica. The house was situated one hour east of Lima in a valley which was sunny during Lima's cold and cloudy winter. The Perez-Chavez family had the same vacation residences as many rich families.

But the family income was too low to maintain three houses, one American automobile, fashionable clothes for a large family, two servants at home, and a high standard of living. After two or three years both vacation houses had to be sold. First, the more expensive summer house was sold. Almost immediately the winter vacation house was rented, and because of problems with the tenant, soon sold. In the meantime the Perez-Chavez family continued living as tenants in their San Isidro house.

After their five children finished school, and while Nelly was in the United States, Cecilia took an expensive tour to Europe, visiting its most important cities and buying expensive furniture and pictures. In those times, and probably today as well, foreign travel was an indicator

of prestige and membership in high society (alta sociedad). Thus, the Perez-Chavez family never vacillated--even when great sacrifices were involved--to send members of the family abroad.⁵

In 1962 the army took over the government. A former assistant of Juan's friend who had been a minister was named minister and invited Juan to help him in his new political post. Juan was named head of an important office until 1963 when a civilian president took office.

Through the government post, he was able to enter different circles which until then had been closed to him; he was also able to meet young army officers who participated in the government takeover of 1968, when the army deported a civilian president. The 60's were a decisive period in his professional life.

During the time Juan held this government position, his oldest son fell in love with a girl while attending the Catholic University. She was born and raised in his mother's home town and immigrated to Lima in order to study at the University. When his parents learned about the affair, their opposition was immediate: how could a member of the Perez-Chavez family be in love with an unsophisticated lower status girl (cholo guachafa)?⁶ Such was the parental opposition and the fear of making his family the object of ridicule, that young Juan ended his affair.

This fear of what people will say and young Juan's reaction to it by terminating the affair reflect the traditional relation between parents and their children and suggest the continuing influence of parents on their children's behavior. Grown children still require parental approval.

A couple of years later, Juan met the daughter of a bank's board member at a party. Dressed in the latest fashion, she was a member of

a genteel family whose last name appeared frequently on the social pages of Lima's newspapers. As the daughter of a rich man, she was immediately accepted by the family. Juan and Cecilia were impressed mainly by the socioeconomic background of their future daughter-in-law. For them the fact that this girl did not finish high school did not mean much.

Let us talk briefly of Irma's marriage. When she attended school in the United States, she became engaged to an American boy and planned to marry 12 months after her return to Lima. But when Irma returned to Peru, while her mother was still in Europe, she became pregnant by a Peruvian. In Peru, as in most Roman Catholic countries, one of the worst calamities that can happen to a family is for an unmarried daughter to become pregnant. Under these circumstances Irma's mother immediately flew back to Lima and the parents of both parties decided to arrange a marriage, the sooner the better. Irma's partner had threatened the most sacred possession of the Perez-Chavez family: its honor. The boy had to marry Irma so people would think she became pregnant as a consequence of a marital relation and that their baby was premature. Thus Irma married her Peruvian lover and, fortunately, the marriage was a success.

The second daughter, Nelly, fell in love with a young lawyer who was welcomed into the family. His father is a well-known lawyer with a background similar to Juan's.

The youngest daughter, Isabel, fell in love with a young immigrant in the United States. But soon after she returned to Lima she met a neighbor from their brand new neighborhood whose father is one of Peru's richest men. Her parents encouraged the romance and the two will probably marry soon.

Since 1968 a new military government has come to power in Peru as a consequence of a coup d'etat against former President Belaunde. Among the members of the new government are the son of the minister with whom Juan worked when he came from Camana, and whose friendship he has enjoyed since those years. Because of internal difficulties within an important government office, this general called Juan to help him reorganize it and asked him to take care of one of its most important branches. Today, Juan has been working in that post for almost $4\frac{1}{2}$ years.

NOTES

¹Juan Perez and all other names presented in this paper are fictitious, as are the number of children given for the Perez-Chavez family and some of the place names. Nevertheless, the family discussed in this paper accurately represents a successful migrant family.

²Throughout the text, idiomatic expressions in Spanish have been included in parenthesis following their translation into English.

³Se ahuesaria is said of someone in a position where no progress is possible. The expression refers to a huesero, a place where the bones of an old corpse are saved after being taken from a tomb.

⁴Cholo has several meanings in Peru. The one used here is a descriptive expression used by the upper classes in reference to people of lower status than themselves. Cholo is also used to describe the working classes in the modern sector of the Peruvian economy and as a symbol of national identification.

⁵It is worth noting that Cecilia spent 6 months in Europe while Juan kept working at his Lima office. When she returned she did not have problems at customs, even though she was bringing in taxable goods. She did not have to pay anything because she had influence (vara) with the customs agents. On her return to Lima all their friends commented on the fact that she had spent 6 months in Europe, and she described for them the things she had seen.

⁶Chola is the female counterpart of cholo. Guachafa describes a person who cannot imitate the manners and customs of the upper classes

very well, and may be translated as ostentatious or loud.