

## GOING AFTER THE DREAM: PEASANTS IN A PROVINCIAL CITY

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### INTRODUCTION

To even the most casual observer, the results of population movement occurring in Latin America are clear. Today, many city populations are growing at the rate of 50% each decade. In the past 20 years, 40% of this growth is attributed to rural-urban migration (Davis, 1972). Skirting the peripheries of most major cities, new developments—combinations of privately-constructed as well as government-built housing—attest to the numbers of people who for various reasons leave the countryside. Not surprisingly, over the past decade these migrants increasingly have become the subjects of countless studies which hope to understand some of the dynamics of the process in order to more effectively deal with both its causes and consequences. Scholars, representing a variety of disciplines, have lived with, interviewed, and questionnaired migrants, all with intentions of better understanding the process. The works of the last decade and a half have provided us with plenty of data. Earlier dichotomous models now are dismissed as too simplistic. Now a much clearer picture emerges regarding what factors, working in unison, cause movement, from what segments of the population the principal participants come, and what types of strategies the protagonists are likely to employ in securing housing and jobs.

The following contribution picks up one of the threads from the migration theme and specifically addresses the issue of migrant satisfaction or contentment with the decision to move and with life in a low-income neighborhood of Popayán, Colombia. As a basis of comparison, we will look at migrants' perceptions of their new way of life versus what things were like in the areas they left. Comparisons of the "good life" will be made between migrants and their nonmigrant (defined as people born in Popayán) neighbors. My study focuses on ex-countryfolk who recently migrated to an urban setting: people from the low-income, working-class *barrio* Tulcán (population about 2,000), on the outskirts of Popayán, Colombia (population about 80,000), capital of the Department of Cauca. Approximately 80% of the heads of household in the *barrio* were born outside Popayán (84% arrived in the city after age 15).<sup>1</sup>

### ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

Barrio Tulcán is wedged between two streams and a hill that occupies much of its center. A number of winding dirt roads form unevenly divided blocks. Two hundred sixty houses of the *barrio* are built with materials ranging from mortar and brick walls with tile roofs to cardboard and bamboo walls with flattened olive oil tins for roof covering. By their own definition, the residents are of the "lower class"; they call themselves "humble people" or part of the "working class."

Because there is little industry in Popayán, there are few jobs for the unskilled (a classification applying to most heads of household). Three-fourths of the heads of household work in unstable jobs, are underemployed, and frequently unemployed. Many are small-scale merchants (operators of housefront stores, itinerant vendors); *coterros* (men, less frequently women, who move produce through the city on small two-wheeled carts, or who unload cargo); construction workers who, except for a few "master" masons, are out of work three to four months of the year; agriculturalists who cultivate land in the *barrio* or in outlying areas; and residents who take in laundry and wash clothing for a living.

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### THE MIGRATION PROCESS

Peasants move to the city for various reasons stemming not necessarily from any one single force. The peasant feels he is being "forced" out of the countryside by crowded rural conditions or poor prices for his cash crop—factors exacerbating his already tenuous economic situation (Camacho de Pinto, 1970). At the same time he is attracted to the city by the notion of finding lucrative, steady work, or getting away from the monotony of rural life. Many migrants move because they dislike agricultural work; others leave because there is not enough available land to support a growing family. Most migrants arrive in Tulcán without work experience except for agriculture and cannot get jobs other than those for unskilled laborers; and for those jobs, there are too many candidates.

Jaime Torres, as a young man, left the village of Bolivar, Cauca, and moved to Popayán. He said, "I was tired of trying to make a living in the fields." Jorge Cruz worked on his uncle's coffee farm before moving to Popayán in 1955. Unlike many other migrants, Jorge had previously acquired some training in nonagricultural work. He was an accomplished mason and could find employment when he arrived.

Lack of adequate medical facilities is a second frequently cited reason for leaving the countryside. There is a severe shortage of trained medical personnel and facilities in most rural areas. But even people who seek "folk" cures and curers must move to the city for intensive treatment (Press, 1971). Adolfo González left the management of his small farm to his two older sons and brought his wife, Maria, and their two small children to live in the city after a doctor recommended moving to Popayán to treat Maria for a "blood disorder." When her condition did not improve after visits to several doctors and a variety of "clinics," Maria visited a local curer and suddenly began getting better. Adolfo pointed out that he certainly would not have had the choices for curing had they remained in the country.

A number of migrants were children when they came to Popayán and therefore had no part in the decision to move. Obligations created by family members already in Popayán resulted in still other country people moving to the city. In some cases families moved to care for aging parents who had migrated years before. Still others came for "individual" reasons. For example, Hernán Granada escaped from his home community with literally only the shirt on his back after a drinking incident in which he accidentally killed one of his companions whose relatives swore vengeance. Rosario Gómez, at the age of seven, was "sold" by her mother to a wealthy Popayán family, who trained her as a domestic. She lived with the family for almost a decade before getting married and leaving. A desire to escape the rural violence which plagued Colombia during the 1950s and early 1960s caused some to seek safety in the cities (Whiteford, 1974a).

The desire to educate their children, coupled with the paucity of rural schools, especially secondary schools, brought still other people to Popayán.<sup>2</sup> José López, born in a rural area about a four hours' walk from Barrio Tulcán, came with his family in 1966. He said, "We came here to civilize our children." José said there were no schools where they were living and the school to which his children would have had to go was not very good: "One could never tell from one day to the next whether the teacher would show up." The Lópezes, and others like them, moved to the city to educate their children, so that they could compete for nonagricultural jobs. Many migrants make the move for a combination of reasons and continually assess their motives and objectives.

### ROUTES TO THE CITY

The literature on urbanization suggests that migrants are not typical of the rural population, but are principally the young and best-educated (Butterworth, 1971; McGreevey, 1968; Herrick, 1965). The data from Tulcán support this view. The median age of Tulcán's migrants at the time of arrival in Popayán is 22, the average age 27, and they fall definitely within the 15-35 year age range (Graves and Graves, 1974) characteristic of the general migrant population in Latin America. The average Tulcán migrant head of household has had approximately three years of schooling. He is able to read available printed matter—especially newspapers and magazines—unlike the majority of rural heads of household, who are illiterate (Adams, 1969).<sup>3</sup>

More than two-thirds of the migrants were not influenced by someone else to move to Popayán. For example, Adolfo Samboni was 15 "and without obligations" when he arrived. He had been on the road for almost two years, working whenever and wherever he could find employment. He had relatives in Popayán, but he insists they had not influenced his decision to come. Only one-third of the migrants allowed that they were urged or pressured to make the move, either by people in their village or by relatives or friends in Popayán. Mario Cruz was content working a small piece of land in Timbio, Cauca. He moved to Popayán in 1948 because his mother, who had been living there for several years, was ill and had asked him to come and take care of her.

Three-fourths of the migrants bring all family members when they move. In 1959, after an exhausting 20-hour bus ride, Pedro Medina and eight members of his extended family arrived in Popayán. He had no contacts in town and no idea where they would stay or how they would earn a living. Pedro said he could not leave his family behind, so he brought them all. One-fourth of the heads of household came alone to find employment and housing before moving their families. In 1966 Jaime Torres left his wife and child with his father on the farm. He worked for several months to get his own lodging to which he could bring his family and to find a "comfortable position." Then he returned to La Vega for his family.

For half the migrants, the move to Popayán is the first time they permanently venture off their native soil. Many, however, are old hands at moving; more than 17% of the heads of household came at least three times before permanently settling in Popayán. Some are return migrants who previously had lived in Popayán, had moved to another urban area or back to the country, and then returned to Popayán. As a young woman, Susana de Fajardo and her mother came to Popayán to live with a brother. She met Nemecio, a young migrant, whom she married. After several years they moved to Bogotá where another of Susana's brothers was living. For six years the family lived in the capital. Nemecio worked as a construction laborer; Susana had a job in a factory that manufactures latex gloves. According to Susana, the family liked living there, but "I got sick with asthma from the smell of the gloves we were making." Doctors at the social security hospital told her she needed to live in a warmer climate, and for that reason, the family moved back to Popayán.

While Popayán might be the first stop in a process that takes the migrant from the rural area to an intermediate-size city (Popayán) and terminates in a large, industrial urban center like Cali, Medellín, or Bogotá, most migrants initially regard Popayán as their final destination. Many make the decision to move elsewhere only after living in Popayán for a long time and regarding the city as their permanent residence.

Proximity to their place of birth is important in the selection of Popayán. Though the move to Popayán may take many hours by bus, for three-fourths of the migrants, Popayán is less than 100 miles from their previous home, and 90% move less than 150 miles to reach Popayán. Almost 90% of the migrants were born in the Department of Cauca or in adjacent departments or territories (51.4%). Paralleling the observations of other social scientists (Flinn, 1968; Flinn and Converse, 1970), we can say geographic propinquity plays a strong role in urban selection.

#### GETTING ORGANIZED IN THE CITY

Of the 1974 migrant sample, half were the first of their immediate families to move to Popayán, though two-thirds of the heads of household had contacts of some kind in the city when they arrived. In spite of urban contacts the peasant ideal of independence persists in the city; for Tulcán I have described it more fully elsewhere (Whiteford, 1974b). Only a third of the migrants relied on friends or relatives to help them find jobs on arrival; almost 60% accepted help in getting housing. Three-fourths moved in with urban acquaintances until separate housing could be found; most were living independently within a year.

Many migrants had some familiarity with Popayán even before moving there; over half of them had bought or sold items in the city's markets. Almost half said they knew about life in Popayán from friends who had moved there and had returned to the countryside for visits. This form of communication continues with the present group of migrants; 85% still have relatives living in their places of birth, and over half state they periodically return home. The visits last only a few days, when migrants return home for the ceremony of the

village patron saint, or for the wedding or baptism of a relative. Some visits, like that of Jorge Cruz, last longer. Jorge prefers to live in the country and has returned home at least three times, hoping to be successful in agriculture. At home, he regales his countrymen with tales of urban life. After a few months, when he decides he likes life in the city better, he returns to Popayán.

Another mode of learning about the city is the occasional visits of country kin to relatives in Popayán. More than half the migrants in Tulcán regularly have rural relatives drop in and stay for a few days or weeks while they check the scene and test the winds in anticipation of an eventual move.

The move to Tulcán is rarely without problems. Migrants must adjust to a new and faster pace of life. For many it is difficult to find and adjust to a new kind of work and different life style. Nevertheless, the migrants insist urban life is not hard; half feel they had no difficulty finding a source of livelihood in Popayán; and almost half say they found work *within* a week of arrival. Even people who knew no one in Popayán say it is an easy place to settle (Whiteford, 1974a). Some anthropologists (Leeds and Leeds, 1970; Peattie, 1968) suggest that rural life is good preparation for "making it" in the city. In general, the transition occurs without the breakdown (Lewis, 1952; Butterworth, 1962; Mangin, 1960; Roberts, 1973) once thought to characterize the process of peasants moving to the city (Redfield, 1947).

#### FULFILLING THE DREAM

Though in casual conversation many of my Tulcanés friends spoke of how much they missed country life, only one-fourth indicated any strong desire to move back to their places of birth; most stated they were living in Popayán now and that is where they planned to remain. Three-fourths insisted that under no circumstances would they return to the countryside. Of the one-fourth who would like to return, two-thirds said they would do so only if they had good jobs waiting for them. Migrants agreed (61.5%) that the prospect of jobs and good salaries make urban life attractive; one-third of them indicated they prefer urban life because "everything is here."

It is difficult to ascertain whether the new urbanities have found the "good life" they set out for, but the data point to a qualified "yes." Overwhelmingly, migrants regard living in Popayán as a vast improvement over life in the countryside. This is difficult to understand when one sees their poverty and knows of their tenuous employment circumstances. The move to the city usually alleviates what they perceive as the foremost rural problems—crowded conditions, lack of land, medical problems, and poor education. The move provides them with new opportunities in their lives (Margulis, 1968). The rural community pressures you to conform, Manuel Calderón said, if you want to progress you have to move. "For a man to improve and be called a 'señor' or 'don' he has to move from the place he was born." Manuel said he could only accomplish this because he left his native village.

#### ADVANCEMENT

We asked residents born in Popayán and migrants to compare their job situations with those of their fathers on a scale of "better," "same," or "worse." Payanés-born residents divided their responses almost evenly, but *two-thirds* of the migrants regarded their present situations as *better* than their fathers' at similar ages. The migrants preferred nonagricultural work (most of their fathers had been peasant farmers); they felt whatever they were doing was superior to tilling the soil. Manuel Calderón, though not content with his present job, nevertheless stated his job was better than the one his father had at the same age. "All I ever saw my father do was walk here and walk there. What I am doing now has to be better than that."

Migrants differ with nonmigrants in their view of what is needed to get ahead in the city. When asked to select the most important factor in earning a good salary and advancing in social position, almost half the migrants—but slightly less than one-third of the nonmigrants—chose "God's help." "Dedication to work" was of prime importance to 17.6% of nonmigrants but only 2.9% of the migrants assigned it that same level of importance. Perhaps this view stems from the realization that, when tilling exhausted soil and using traditional

technologies, hard work does not necessarily increase agricultural production. More nonmigrants than migrants recognized the importance of "ties" (*palancas*) in getting ahead; this is not too surprising, because the most recent arrivals have not had time to cultivate and extend their urban networks of contacts. Though some differences can perhaps be explained by migrant naivety of how ties and contacts are established in the city, the concept certainly is not foreign; in the countryside, the peasants constantly activate and manipulate social relationships for their benefit (Foster, 1961, 1963; Fals Borda, 1962).

The degree of success and the migrants' general well-being is mainly established by the type of employment, job satisfaction, monthly income, and standard of living scores.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of some general knowledge of life in the city, which most migrants have when they arrive in Popayán, the urban experience is new and necessitates some basic cognitive changes if the peasant is to succeed. Tulcanés migrants fare no worse than their city-born neighbors—this indicates the degree of success the majority of ex-peasants achieve.

Both migrants and nonmigrants prefer certain jobs. Good jobs are stable and permanent jobs one can keep for a long period of time. The jobs should pay the minimum wage, but the majority of Tulcanés breadwinners do not receive it. Some stable jobs in small enterprises in the center of town do not pay the legal minimum rate; and only some provide the worker with such benefits as health insurance, semi-annual cash bonuses, and retirement pensions. Jobs that provide benefits are considered the cream of the crop and are most cherished by those who have them and most coveted by those who do not. The three branches of government (municipal, departmental, and national) are the principal barrio employers in this category. Jobs with the few relatively large industries in Popayán, like the company which manufactures hemp sacks or the bottling plant, are also regarded as occupational plums. Most of the barrio's working heads of household do not have good jobs. However, the percentage of migrants with good jobs is higher, though not much higher than that of nonmigrants.

The majority of heads of household expressed qualified contentment with their jobs, but considerably fewer migrants fell into this category than respondents born in Popayán. Migrants, it appears, have their sights set higher than those born in Popayán. Perhaps the Payanés are simply more realistic about the possibilities for substantive improvement. They have been around enough, and are familiar enough with urban life to know that a poorly educated individual without meaningful social contacts and marketable skill has little opportunity for advancement. In comparison, migrants constantly are scrambling to make the best of their situations and are exploring any avenue for improving their positions. This is expressed in conversations and shows in the results of the thematic apperception tests, the life histories, and in the manner they conduct their daily lives. My lower-class Payanés friends regard the paperwork, red tape, and general bureaucratic obstructions necessary for attaining choice jobs as unfortunate, unnecessary, and discriminatory. They either submit to the requirements (like obtaining a birth certificate, police clearance, [for men] a statement on military status, income tax receipt, etc.), or resign themselves to working at jobs for which they do not need a permit and which are not financially or emotionally rewarding. Many migrants will try anything to get the necessary documents which would lead to work papers. Often this means bribing minor officials and petty bureaucrats, seeking patrons who might be able to pull a few strings, and being tenacious and endlessly patient. Unlike their city-born neighbors, they never seem to give up.

Economically, migrant and nonmigrant heads of household have similar incomes. In 1970, the average head of household earned between 300 and 400 Colombian pesos per month; by 1974, the average had risen to between 500 and 600 pesos.\* Combining the results of both the 1970 and 1974 surveys, we found no significant difference between the proportion of migrants and nonmigrants whose incomes exceed the average income for the barrio—another indication that migrants hold their own in the city.

There is one measure of economic well-being in which migrants do not fare as well as their city-born neighbors. Based on George Foster's classification scheme for determining the quality of housing in

\*In 1970, the exchange rate was approximately 19.50 Colombian pesos to the U.S. dollar. By 1974, the exchange rate was roughly 25.50 to the dollar. Between October 1970, and July 1974, the cost of living in Colombia rose by 126% (Banco de la Republica, 1974). During the same period, the median head-of-household income rose by only 70%, while the median household income increased by a mere 56%.

Tzintzuntzan, Mexico (Foster, 1967), I devised a standard of living scale for Tulcán. On a 20-point scale based on convenience and comfort, two points are awarded for electricity, sewer or latrine, tile floors, and electric or propane stoves. Other items, such as a radio, electric iron, sewing machine, refrigerator, record player, and bicycle each carry a one-point value. In 1970, the average standard of living score for the barrio was 7.3. By 1974, this rose to 8.4. Nonmigrants have a clear edge over migrants in possessing assorted material comforts.

### OBSERVATIONS

Except on the standard of living score, the migrants in Barrio Tulcán fare no worse than their low-income Payanés neighbors. The migrants, however, have a slight advantage in coping with their poverty because they are more optimistic about the future. They believe things will work out well. They feel they have made some important improvements in their way of life since moving to the city. Poor as they are, they can see how they have accumulated some urban comforts. In fact, some migrants' expectations were unrealistically *low* when they came to the city. The expectations were easily met and their level of relative deprivation changed. Like their city-born neighbors, they see the cars or refrigerators they thought they would never own, but that they now would like to possess. For the migrants—having generally satisfied the mundane needs they brought with them from the country—achieving the new goals seems a realistic possibility. Their dreams are not as jaundiced as the nonmigrants' view about making the dreams reality.

Eventually, the migrants will become disenchanted and their expectations will diminish. In Barrio Tulcán this began to occur between 1970 and 1974. In 1970, the barrio was relatively new, having been founded in 1964, and its residents had many plans for changes. There was community pride; residents boasted about it as a good place to live and about its great potential. After some years of frustration about getting the local authorities to follow through with promises of installing an adequate sewer, making low-interest loans available to residents, and the like, interest in the barrio waned. In 1974, I seldom heard it praised. It was described as harboring thieves and as a place from which one should move at the first possible opportunity.

In time a similar dissatisfaction may occur among migrants. It is already evident in their children, many of whom have grown up in Popayán and Tulcán. The young people are less optimistic than their parents were that the good life can be attained. They also do not share the apparent complacency of the adult generation of nonmigrants. The children of both migrants and nonmigrants walk into town to attend rallies of political groups that demand revolutionary change. The members of the older generation dismiss the radical high school and university students as the "spoiled children of the oligarchy," and ignore their calls for "worker-student coalitions," but their children sympathize with revolutionaries. They read the Marxist literature that comes into the barrio and decorate walls with posters of Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba and scenes of Chinese workers doing communal labor. They discuss the necessity of urban and rural reform and voice their opinions on multinational concerns and foreign imperialist intervention in Colombia.

Like their parents, they dream of the good life, but they differ on the means for obtaining it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The standard anthropological tools for gathering data—participant observation, open-ended interviews—were used. The statistical material was collected in the barrio in a house-to-house census in October 1970 (N=275 [218 migrant heads of household]) and by an interview schedule administered to about 35% of the heads of household (N=101 [83 migrants]) in July 1974.

<sup>2</sup>Adams states that, though schools are available, many children attend only half-day. Four-fifths of the approximately 1,000 high schools in Colombia are in departmental capitals, and one-third of the high schools are in Bogotá alone (Adams, 1969).

<sup>3</sup>Figures on literacy and literacy rates are inconsistent and often misleading. The 1964 Colombian census indicates over half the rural population, 15 years or older, have not gone to school (Weil et al., 1970).

<sup>4</sup>For comparative account of migrant/nonmigrant socioeconomic differences see Balán, 1969.

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