

# Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City

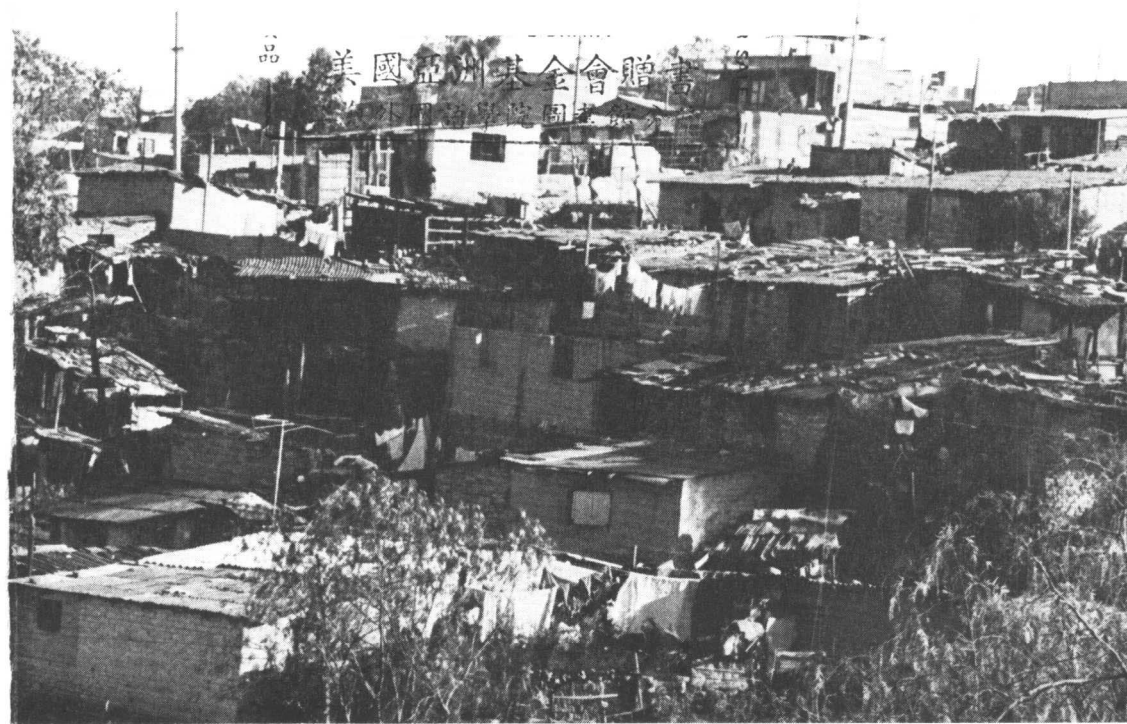
Wayne A. Cornelius



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WAYNE A. CORNELIUS

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W.A.C.

*Lagos de Moreno, Jal., Mexico*  
June 1975

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# Introduction

THE MASSIVE population shift from rural to urban areas in developing nations is one of the great human dramas of our time. Though our attention is drawn most readily to such manifestations of societal instability in the Third World as military coups, guerrilla uprisings, and student riots, an uprising of far greater magnitude is represented by the cumulative decisions of millions of individuals—most of them peasants—to revolt against conditions of poverty, insecurity, and economic exploitation by abandoning the countryside and taking up a new life in the city.

Urban populations throughout the developing world have grown at increasing rates over the past three decades; and Latin America, already much more urbanized than Africa or Asia and somewhat more so than Southern Europe, has surpassed all other regions. From 1940 to 1960, the population in localities of 20,000 or more inhabitants in Latin America increased by about 5 percent annually, doubling in about 15 years—a rate only occasionally realized for short periods in advanced industrial nations at a much later stage of economic development. In the same period, Latin American cities of 100,000 or more grew at an annual rate of 11 percent, more than three times the rate of total population growth in the region. Although some projections indicate a slight decline in the rate of urbanization over the period 1960–80, to about 4.4 percent a year, it is expected that by the end of the 1970's some 60 percent of the Latin American population will be living in urban areas (Miller & Gakenheimer 1971: 9–10; World Bank 1972: Annex I, p. 2).

As the general dimensions of this phenomenon became evident during the late 1950's and early 1960's, social scientists and government policymakers began to wonder about its consequences for political stability in Latin America and other Third World regions. At that point virtually nothing of a concrete nature was known about the political

attitudes and behavior of the newly arrived city dwellers. However, sociological theory and fragmentary empirical studies purporting to document the urbanizing experience of the United States and Western Europe offered what seemed to be relevant guideposts; and the result was a deluge of highly speculative, highly impressionistic, and highly alarmist commentary on the “probable” social and political consequences of rapid urbanization in the Third World.<sup>1</sup> It is now apparent that most of this preliminary effort to come to grips with what was assumed to be a “universal” process (urbanization) with a highly predictable outcome (“radical” migrant masses challenging and perhaps overturning the established sociopolitical order) was fundamentally wrongheaded. The reasons lie partly in the social scientist’s tendency to generalize too widely from the experience of advanced industrial countries, but even more in the kinds of assumptions that were made about the nature of the Third World city, the life situation of cityward migrants and their perceptions of it, and the way in which residence in a city affects one’s orientations toward politics and the political system. All of these assumptions will be subjected to critical scrutiny in the chapters that follow.

Are the migrant masses revolutionary? Definitely not, at least in Latin America and many other parts of the developing world. But this is by no means the only question relating to cityward migration that should concern the student of political behavior. Unfortunately, it seems to have been assumed, in the aftermath of revisionist scholarship in this area, that urban migrants who are not “radicals” must necessarily be apathetic, politically ignorant, withdrawn from the political arena, neither acting politically nor being acted on. But political learning among the migrant poor—albeit of a different sort and with different outcomes than was predicted in the writings of the 1950’s and 1960’s—*does* go on, and there remains a great need to specify the determinants and the consequences of that learning process.

The present work is a comparative study of migrants and their city-born neighbors living in six relatively small, predominantly low-income communities on the periphery of Mexico City, and is based on fourteen months of fieldwork in these communities during 1970, 1971, and 1972. It deals with a relatively small group of people in a limited number of localities at a particular point in time, and therefore suffers from all the restrictions on generalizability of research findings that such an approach imposes. Nevertheless, the research is also addressed to sev-

<sup>1</sup> This literature and the empirical evidence that fails to support its major contentions are summarized in Cornelius 1969 and 1971, Nelson 1969, and Schoultz 1972b.

eral broad theoretical and empirical problems. What is the process by which the individual forms images of politics and the political system, and assumes a role of participation or nonparticipation in political activity? What are the most important incentives and disincentives for political involvement? How can the individual citizen—and especially the disadvantaged citizen—manipulate the political system to satisfy his needs? What effect does a large group of people entering the political arena have on the functioning of the political system, and what effect does the system have on them? What goes on at the “grass roots” of a nation’s political system, and how does political activity at that level affect system outputs? I believe that social science research bearing on these broad issues and concerns should be cumulative. Thus comparative reference has been made throughout this study to as comprehensive a body of empirical and theoretical work as possible, including research done in the United States and other advanced industrial countries.

Some have argued that in this era of huge, cross-national surveys and burgeoning data banks, case studies of the kind I have undertaken are anachronistic and contribute little to general theory-building.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, among social scientists who use quantitative data and research methods there appears to be a pervasive assumption that the most important contributions to our understanding of political behavior and attitude formation *must* come from studies pitched at a high level of generality—at minimum, the single nation-state; at best, a large set of countries. My research, however, was undertaken in the conviction that “micro” studies pursued within a disciplined comparative framework (see Verba 1967) and with sensitivity to the immediate sociopolitical context in which individual political behavior occurs can also make valuable contributions to our basic knowledge of political man. In fact, it could be argued that “micro” studies have been essential to progress in understanding the political attitudes and behavior of cityward migrants, since most of the relevant generalizations flowing from macroscopic comparative studies—especially those based on aggregate data—have had so little explanatory and predictive power.

It is also wrong to assume that one must cross national boundaries in order to locate appropriate contexts for testing hypotheses about political attitudes and behavior among the migrant poor. Several investigators working in Latin America have found significant differences in political culture and governmental performance between major cities

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the argument made by Kaufman (1972: 378–79) with regard to the utility of case studies in Latin American urban research.

in a single country (A. Leeds 1968; Montaña 1974; Portes & Walton 1975: Chap. 4). Moreover, comparative studies of communities *within* Latin American cities have revealed equally distinctive local patterns. In some communities, residents have a strong positive identification with the community, engage in extensive formal and informal interaction with one another, and lack strong ties with the larger society and polity; in others, residents are not positively oriented to the local area, have limited contact with one another, and tie themselves into supra-local social and political structures. Some communities show no capacity for collective political action of any sort; in others, groups of residents are actively engaged in petitioning the government for land titles or urban services. Some communities seem to represent subcultures of political alienation; others appear supportive of the existing political order. Even geographically contiguous communities within a given city have been found to differ considerably in the extent and manner in which their inhabitants are integrated socially, economically, and politically into urban life.<sup>3</sup> The sources of these differences are numerous and complex, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters of this study.

The important point to be made here is that variations in the social *context* of political learning from one part of a city to another may be responsible for much of the observed diversity in political attitudes and behavior. Recent migrants to the city can be expected to differ not only in social backgrounds and personality characteristics, but also in terms of the socializing influences to which they are exposed by virtue of their residence in particular neighborhoods. This fact suggests a research strategy quite different from that employed in most research on migrant assimilation or adaptation to urban life. Usually, emphasis has been placed on the characteristics of migrants as individuals—i.e. on the set of personal attributes they exhibit before and after migration—and on how these attributes increase or decrease the migrant's life chances or opportunities for successful integration into the urban environment. The basic problem with this approach is one that has also concerned critics of excessively "individualistic" survey research in general, irrespective of subject:

As usually practiced, using random sampling of individuals, the survey is a sociological meatgrinder, tearing the individual from his social context and

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<sup>3</sup> See, among others: Behrman 1971, 1972; Butterworth 1973; Collier 1971, 1973; Dietz 1974; Eckstein 1972a; Frank 1969: 281–85; Gauhan 1974: 36–39; Germani 1967: 188; Goldrich, Pratt & Schuller 1970; Lewis 1961: xii–xviii; Lutz 1970; Mercado Villar et al. 1970; Ornelas 1973; Patch 1968: 178, 219; Perlman 1971; Portes 1971a, 1971b; Roberts 1973; Rogler 1967; Stokes 1962; J. Turner 1971.

guaranteeing that nobody in the study interacts with anyone else in it. It is a little like a biologist putting his experimental animals through a hamburger machine and looking at every hundredth cell through a microscope; anatomy and physiology get lost, structure and function disappear, and one is left with cell biology. (Barton 1968: 1)

This analogy applies to much of the empirical research that has been done on cityward migrants, as well as to the more general, cross-national studies that have tried to use urban residence or migrant status as an independent variable.

To adequately explain the attitudes and behavior of migrants, we must view them as persons playing roles in ongoing social and political systems (cf. Shannon 1965; Shannon & Shannon 1968; Graves & Graves 1974). This approach focuses on the ways in which the structure and organization of a migrant's new community influence the way he adjusts to urban life. Broadly speaking, the present study is an attempt to place the low-income migrant in his social and political context. In doing so, I relied chiefly on a contextually grounded sample survey design and analytical procedure, and on a combination of data-gathering techniques drawn from both the sociological (sample survey) and anthropological (participant-observation and depth-interviewing) traditions. This eclectic approach generated an extraordinarily rich body of both quantitative and qualitative data on a relatively large number of individuals clustered in a relatively small number of communities. The communities themselves, together with their relationships to social and political institutions in the larger urban environment, were subjected to intensive ethnographic study. Throughout the research, it has been my belief that an approach enabling the investigator to focus on the interplay between individual attributes and attributes of the social and political structures in which the individual is enmeshed is likely to be the technique most productive of insights into the process of political learning.

#### THE LOCAL URBAN COMMUNITY AS A SOCIALIZATION CONTEXT

The "human ecology" school of urban sociology in the United States has emphasized the residential differentiation of the city into a "mosaic of social worlds" representing territorially based subsystems of society.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This conception of urban residential differentiation is explicated most fully in Park, Burgess & McKenzie 1925, and in Park 1952: 17ff. The studies of Park and his colleagues at the University of Chicago, as well as other work stimulated by their view of the city, are summarized in Timms 1971: Chap. 1, and in Hunter 1974.

And in recent years concern over the decline of communal solidarity among city dwellers, conflicts over community control of schools and municipal services, and the problems of maximizing citizen participation in governmental programs at the local level have combined to refocus attention specifically on the low-income urban neighborhood in the United States and other advanced industrial nations as a social and political community.<sup>5</sup> In developing countries the emergence of hundreds of "uncontrolled" settlements formed by squatters on the peripheries of the largest cities has also led to an increased recognition of the local urban community as an arena for social and political interaction.<sup>6</sup>

Studies of low-income urban communities in both developing and industrialized countries provide abundant evidence that such communities represent far more than statistical aggregates of city dwellers. For one thing, they are often regarded by many of their inhabitants as identifiable segments of urban space. Among the migrants included in this study, 88 percent of those interviewed could draw a map of their community of residence that corresponded closely to the actual physical or politico-administrative boundaries of that community (see Figure 1.1).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the high density of population in such areas, the greater

<sup>5</sup> The literature on these and other aspects of the role of the local urban community in advanced industrial societies is voluminous. The role of the neighborhood in fostering a "sense of community" among residents of large metropolitan areas is discussed most extensively in Effrat 1974; Greer & Greer 1974; Bell & Held 1969; Dennis 1968; Fellin & Litwak 1968; Keller 1968; Lenz-Romeiss 1973; Sennett 1970; and Swanson 1970. Problems of local community participation and "community control" are treated in Frederickson 1973; Greenstone & Peterson 1973; Hallman 1974; Kramer 1969; Lynch et al. 1972; Marshall 1971; Yates 1973; Zimmerman 1971, 1972. More generally, there has been a reawakening of interest in territoriality as a basis of political organization, competition, and conflict in urban settings. See especially: Cox 1973; Cox, Reynolds & Rokkan 1974; Moinat et al. 1972; Suttles 1972. Much of the renewed attention to the local urban community as a site of social and political action seems to have been inspired by detailed ethnographic studies of specific low-income neighborhoods in U.S. cities. Among the best are M. Fried 1973, Gans 1962, Suttles 1968, and Kornblum 1974.

<sup>6</sup> The more comprehensive studies of this pattern of urban settlement include A. Leeds 1969, Mangin 1967, Juppenlatz 1971, and Turner 1968a, 1971. Detailed case studies of specific squatter settlements have also been completed; see, for example, M. Ross 1973b, 1973c.

<sup>7</sup> The interviewees were asked the following question: "Now I would like to talk for a while about the *colonia* [community] in which you live. Here is a piece of paper. Could you draw me a rough map of this *colonia*, showing where it begins and where it ends?" Other researchers have also commented on the ability of the urban poor to visualize and describe the territorial community of which they are a part. See especially Stea 1966, 1968, Peattie 1968: 54-55, and M. Fried 1973. Fried, whose research dealt with a tenement slum in Boston, argues (1973: 63): "No matter where the slum is located and which particular types of housing the area contains ... characteristically the slum represents a unique blending of social and physical





amount of leisure time spent by poor people within their immediate residential environment, the use of communal facilities such as public water taps, and the existence of community-related problems such as insecurity of land tenure or lack of basic services combine to promote a high incidence of face-to-face interaction.

Residents of poor neighborhoods often exhibit a strong sense of personal identification with their community. In communities where residence is relatively stable, there may be, in addition, a substantial accumulation of shared historical experiences. Some communities have been found to possess distinctive norm structures that appear to provide important attitudinal and behavioral cues for residents in their relations with neighbors, as well as a kind of cognitive map useful for ordering perceptions of the larger urban environment. Some local norms may result primarily from internal social and political processes; others may be the product of the community's interaction with the larger social and political environment of the surrounding city.

This last point is extremely important, for it suggests that the impact of the local urban community on political learning cannot be fully appreciated or explained if the community is treated as an autonomous, isolated entity. The work of Suttles (1972: 257ff) on territoriality as a basis for social and political organization among the urban poor in the United States is particularly illuminating in this regard. He notes that the local urban community, *as a social and political grouping*, comes into being and acquires its most important socializing properties largely in response to external pressures exerted by government, big business, and other supralocal actors (cf. A. Leeds 1968). For this reason (and others discussed below), a great deal of attention has been paid in the present study to the nature and frequency of interactions between the research communities and external actors, especially political and governmental officials.

Although urban sociologists have long recognized the importance of neighborhood socialization for the learning of a wide range of social behaviors, there has been relatively little appreciation among either sociologists or political scientists of its relevance to processes of *political* learning. In fact, the apparent failure of suburban neighborhoods in U.S. cities to influence the political attitudes and behavior of incoming residents has led some sociologists to dismiss the local community altogether as an important agency of political socialization. For example,

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space. More than other neighborhoods, the urban slum is a circumscribed and distinguishable segment of the world in the midst of the metropolis." Cf. T. Lee 1968 and L. Ross 1970.