VOLUME 17 JULY–OCTOBER 1969 NUMBERS 3–4

PHILIPPINE SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF PHILIPPINE SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

PAPERS OF THE 1969 PSS CONVENTION:

MIRALAO and DACUMOS, Elitist-pluralist Continuum in the Study of Community Power / FELIPE, Southeast Asian Student Activism and University Administration / POETHIG, The Squatter Community / GAMBOA and FEENSTRA, Call Girls, Male Homosexuals, and Lesbians / ILAN, An Unobtrusive Approach to Value Orientations / LAING, Pitfalls in Predicting Behavior from Survey Responses / LAMZON and FELIPE, Status, Social Desirability Tendency, and Opinion Change

THE SQUATTER COMMUNITY: A DEAD END OR A WAY UP?

Richard P. Poethig

Early one December morning, cordons of police moved quickly into the old walled city of Manila. They divided into groups and headed for the squatter shacks which clustered among the still standing ruins of World War II. Working methodically with their hammers and crowbars, they began tearing down the jerry-built houses. Voices of protest were raised above the wrenching and ripping of dry wood. The police continued about their business. Women and children scurried into the fast disappearing shacks to pull out their belongings. The men piled up whatever boards or plywood scraps they could salvage from the demolition. As quickly as their possessions could be gathered together, they were piled onto waiting trucks. Throughout the day a motor caravan carried the squatters, their belongings and the remnants of their shacks on a 35-mile trip north, out of Manila to Sapang Palay, the relocation center and their new home.

This scene has been reenacted in different settings throughout the world. The squatter problem comes in assorted shapes and sizes in the cities of the developing nations. The rolling tide of change which began after World War II continues to sweep across the Third World to deposit growing numbers of rural people on the doorstep of the world's major cities. Squatter communities are a familiar sight to the international traveller, whether he has landed at the airport in Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, or Manila.

Who are the squatters? Generally, they are the more mobile among the rural people of the country. Many of those who migrate to the city have had some contact with the municipality in their own areas. They are drawn to the larger city in hopes of finding a job or getting education. Once in the city they are faced by a crowded labor market and limited housing facilities. They often begin their stay by squeezing in with relatives or with friends from the province. This arrangement does not last. Once they have become acquainted with the city, they hunt out vacant space upon which to build their own shack. Usually they squat on government land, along a railroad track or in a park area. Sometimes they find an empty private lot, or a neglected larger estate. More often the newcomer joins an established squatter community which has grown up around a city market or near the dock area, wherever there is the possibility of a job.

Developing countries are helpless in the face of the swelling tide of migrants. Housing programs have not expanded fast enough to provide shelter for any sector of the urban population. In the Philippines, the goal for new housing units needed in the urban areas is 100,000 annually (de Vera 1967:2f). The actual number built each year hovers between 10,000 and 15,000, and few, if any, are for low-income people. The developing country lacks the capital to accomplish all the jobs that need to be done. In the face of the squatter situation, the government finds itself wavering between two reactions; a reflex action which hits out at the

---

*Paper read at the 1969 National Convention of the Philippine Sociological Society, December 6–7, 1969. The Reverend Poethig is the Director, Interseminary Urban-Industrial Institute (P.O. Box 718, Manila).

problem by forciable eviction and relocation, or an attitude of resignation which sees no way of stemming the tide and allows the squatters to stay. Even where government intervention occurs, squatter communities continue to build up. The number of squatters in Manila increased from 23,000 in 1948 to 282,000 in 1963, at a 20 per cent annual rate of growth. As the city expands outwardly, more squatter areas are established on the periphery. Inclusion of adjacent municipalities into a growing metropolitan region increases the area available for squatting, and the total number of squatters. The 1968 estimate of squatters in the metropolitan region of Manila reached 767,000 (Bernido *et al.* 1968: 4). The continuous rural-urban immigration, coupled with high birth rates, insure the perpetuation of squatter areas in the cities of the developing countries for some time to come.

If we accept the presence of the squatter community as an integral part of the city, what is its future? Some writers have seen the squatter community as a dead end, a social milieu which provides little hope of escape to its inhabitants. Insulated as they are in their community, the squatters develop their own style of life. The sociologist, Oscar Lewis, has termed it "the culture of poverty."

Poverty, among those chronicled by Lewis in his numerous social studies, is not only an economic state, but a way of life passed down from one generation to another (Lewis 1959, 1961 1966). Children born into this way of life have usually absorbed its values and attitudes by the time they are six or seven years of age. The hopelessness of the situation, having perpetuated itself among the young, leaves them unable to improve their lot in life or to take advantage of the opportunities which a changing society presents to them.

Lewis sketches a picture (1961:xxvi) of this culture by reciting a litany of its social characteristics:

> living in crowded quarters, lack of privacy, gregariousness, a high incidence of alcoholism, frequent resort to violence in the settlement of quarrels, frequent use of physical violence in the training of children, wife beating, early initiation into sex, free unions or consensual marriages, a relatively high incidence of abandonment of mothers and children, a trend toward mother-centered families and a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives, the predominance of the nuclear family (parents and children only), a strong predisposition to authoritarianism, and a great emphasis upon family solidarity—an ideal rarely achieved.

A Philippine journalist, E.P. Patafine (1962), suggests that the traits of "the culture of poverty" are not limited to the urban squatter community. He holds that many of the traits which are associated with the culture of poverty are traditional patterns of behavior in the Philippines. "To a certain extent," writes Patafine (1962:15), "the culture of poverty may be defined, in our case certainly, in terms of the norms which straddle the entire society—from rich to poor. Unless, one were to presume that the entire society is actually a 'poor' one, as the country is considered 'underdeveloped.' "

A person who puts flesh on Lewis' characterization of the urban squatter area is Carolina Maria de Jesus. Carolina Maria is a Brazilian woman who lived with her three illegitimate children in a São Paulo *favela*, the Brazilian version of a squatter community. She records in her diary, *Child of the Dark* (1962), the hour-by-hour struggle to feed her family by scavenging paper and metal from the garbage cans of São Paulo. In a moment of desperation she calls her favela a human garbage dump.

Carolina's favela, built along a river, was virtually a garbage dump. Trucks from the city came to dispose their rotten food and refuse near the favela. Sanitation was open-pit toilets, and the water supply was virtually nonexistent. One public spigot served 150 families. The spigot was opened for two to three hours in the early morning. Sickness was always close at hand, and premature death. The favela inhabitants could expect to suffer from any of a number of diseases—tuberculosis, pneumonia, respiratory sicknesses, gastro-intestinal disorders, or they could choose alcoholism as a way out.

Carolina's story of the favela is one of despair, but her own rise out of it is one of hope. Some

writers have taken hold of this, to point to the other side of squatter life. Instead of being a dead-end, a growing number of writers see the squatter communities as providing the way-up into urban society. One person who holds this opinion is Dr. Aprodicio Laquian, Deputy Director of the Local Government Center of the University of the Philippines. He suggests that the pitfall of many writers is that they look at squatter settlements as prototypes of the American slum. "Life in the squatter settlement is substantially different from life in the ghetto slums in the United States," declares Dr. Laquian. The tall, angular Laquian, whose early youth was spent in a Manila slum, backs up his view by pointing to the recent riots in the American ghettoes. "The loss of social meaning, which is evident among the depressed groups in the United States is not a Filipino problem. Filipinos identify very easily with their areas, both where they came from and where they are living. Perhaps it is because squatter areas are peopled by recent rural migrants, and there is a carry over of the face-to-face relations they knew in the barrio. Social cohesion around family or regional loyalty is woven into the Filipino social fabric."[1]

A recent study of Barrio Magsaysay, a squatter community squeezed on land reclaimed from Manila Bay, has led Dr. Laquian to suggest (1968:67) that squatting provides the means by which migrants work their way into urban society. In Manila, 80 per cent of the squatter families hover around the subsistence line. With most of their income going for food, they cannot afford to pay more than nominal rent. Squatting provides them shelter at minimum expense, while they are trying to get a foothold in the city. In Barrio Magsaysay, only a quarter of the residents paid rent, and 70 per cent of these paid less than ₱15 per month.

Transportation is another luxury item in a squatter's budget. This is the reason that squatter communities, like Barrio Magsaysay, cluster near the docks or the market areas, where unskilled jobs are available. Squatter relocation policy has made the mistake of resettling urban squatters far from their source of income. Resettlement areas often are without adequate transportation facilities, or the cost of daily travel into the city is too expensive for the squatter's meager income. A survey made in 1966 of the squatters removed from the Walled City in Manila to Sapang Palay in 1963, showed that more than half of those relocated had returned to the city.

Squatter experience in Latin America, particularly in those countries experiencing economic growth, bear out Dr. Laquian's analysis of urban squatting. In Caracas, Venezuela, *rancho* settlements cling to the hillsides which surround the city. As the migrants have had access to employment and income, they have improved their homes. The older migrants at the bottom of the hill have plastered and painted their homes; further up the hill those who came later live in houses of rough block walls; the newcomers near the top live in shacks of tin sheets and boards. Although unemployment in the rancho is higher than in most U.S. slums (in 1961 it was 28 per cent), morale is high among the squatters. The rancho inhabitants look upon their existence, as precarious as it is, as a foothold to greater opportunity. Someone has called the ranchos "slums of hope," where even though the odds appear to be against them, people have hope they will move up. In some countries this hope has been forged by the squatters themselves. In Peru, local squatter organizations have been able to get land for their members. Squatters in Lima have carried out organized invasions of government land on the periphery of the city. Squatter organizations, through their committees, plan the invasion, lay out lot ownership and put pressure on the government to get transportation service, water, electricity and sanitation facilities. The squatter organization's resoluteness in pursuing its goal of land ownership, has forced the government to adopt politices favorable to the opening of public lands to low income people.

Aggressiveness of squatter organizations has borne fruit elsewhere in Latin America. In Chile, the leader of a *junta de vecinos*, or squatter organization, tells his group's story:

We started off with only the bare site and then the *junta de vecinos* was organized. We fought for water, because in winter one had to walk in the darkness to reach the taps, and in summer the supply was often cut off. We fought for light; actually in the beginning, we stole it. Our junta is very representative and we have reached this point perhaps because we had nothing, not even a house, because we took the land with sacrifice, illegally, out of need. We are not like Caro (another settlement) in which they gave them everything ready-made. In the junta there are many ideologies, but we get things done through the directors, never through the politicians. (United Nations 1968: 59, note 11)

Experience has shown that where the squatters have acquired the land through their own efforts, greater participation develops in the improvement of their homes and their community. Developing countries which have been burdened with the problem of housing thousands of urban squatters, are beginning to recognize that more important to the migrant than housing is the security of land ownership. With land guaranteed, the former squatter has a stake not only in his own home, but in his country as well.

Note

1. This statement is constructed from numerous conversations with Dr. Laquian.

References

Bernido, Esteban, *et al.*
1968 Squatting and slum-dwelling in metropolitan Manila. Report of a Special Committee created by the Executive Secretary. Impact 3(8):4–13. Also in Philippine Sociological Review 16 (1–2):92–105.

de Jesus, Carolina Maria
1962 Child of the dark. Translated by David St. Clair. New York, The American Library (Signet Book).

de Vera, Jacobo S.
1967 The Philippine housing situation. Paper prepared for the Pacific Conference on Urban Growth, Honolulu, Hawaii, April 25, 1967. Mimeographed.

Laquian, Aprodicio A.
1968. Slums are for people. Manila, Local Government Center, University of the Philippines.

Lewis, Oscar
1959 Five families. New York, Basic Books Inc.
1961 The children of Sanchez. New York, Random House.
1966 La vida. New York, Random House.

Patanñe, E.P.
1962 The culture of poverty. Sunday Times Magazine (Manila), November 11.

United Nations
1968 Recent changes in urban and rural settlement patterns in Latin America. *In* Urbanization: development policies and planning. International Social Development Review, No. 1. New York, United Nations. Pp. 55–62.

POETHIG, RICHARD P. 1969. The squatter community: A dead end or a way up? Philippine Sociological Review 17(3–4):132–135.