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The Impact of Perception on Urban Migration in Latin America

Small, less centralized cities in Latin America have, in the aggregate, failed to keep pace with larger, centralized cities in recent years. A major reason for this is the economic and social service differentials which favor the larger cities. However, as this paper argues, both the benefits of primate and secondary cities and the disbenefits of intermediate and smaller cities, have been overestimated owing to long-standing migrant perceptual biases in favor of large cities. In the first section, the basic causal forces behind the disproportionate growth of large cities are discussed. In the second section, I investigate both the nature of the perceptual biases and the role of such factors as historical settlement motives, migrant aspiration levels, and mass media images.

Latin American Urban Growth Trends and their Causes

In recent years, Latin American urban growth has taken on a more "mature" pattern in which secondary cities -- those between 250,000 and one million -- have grown more rapidly than primate cities (Jones and Zannaras, 1979). However, viewed from the perspective of North American and European experience, this decentralization of urban growth has not yet significantly altered the condition of pronounced primacy in Latin America countries, and more importantly, intermediate-sized cities of about 100,000 to 250,000 population are still lagging significantly behind secondary cities in their rates of population growth. Consider a single point in time -- the year 1920 when the United States' level of urbanization (measured in terms of the percent of its population in cities of 20,000 or more) was about equal to Latin America's in 1970 – i.e., about 40 percent. At that time, only 8 percent of the total population of the United States resided in the largest city (Borchert, 1967), as opposed to an average of around 20 percent for the larger Latin American countries in 1970 (Fox, 1975). Furthermore, in the first two decades of this century, it was the smaller cities -- below 150,000 -- that grew most rapidly, not the larger cities (Borchert, 1967). In Latin America, in the two decades prior to 1970, it was the secondary cities -- between about 250,000 and one million -- that tended to grow most rapidly. One reason for the rapid growth of smaller cities in the early 1900s in the United States was that a whole set of resources was being opened up in newly-settled

areas -- such as minerals in the West, Texas, and Minnesota; agricultural wealth in California, the Midwest, and Plains, and coal in several parts of the South (Yeates and Garner, 1976, 31-33). In Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, the story was one of limited decentralization of growth, with huge resource-rich portions of the national space -- such as the savanna belt south and east of the Andes; Patagonia; and Amazonia -- not only undeveloped, but still largely unsettled. Thus, despite the pronounced growth of secondary cities, Latin American urban growth disproportionately favors large, centralized cities over small, peripheral cities.

Several reasons have been cited for the failure of Latin America urban growth to diffuse down the urban hierarchy and out into the periphery:

1. Physical environmental conditions hinder effective settlement and constrain the growth of existing urban places in peripheral regions. The trans-Andean savanna, for example, alternates between very wet and very dry years.

2. Government programs to generate economic growth in peripheral cities have been almost non-existent, with a few exceptions such as Brasilia and Ciudad Guayana. Urban planning has not had the advantages of already-established ministerial bureaucracies -- such as exist for agriculture, transportation, industry, mining, housing, and even regional development. Thus, urban planning remains a field splintered from these others, and it tends to be uncoordinated, piecemeal, and crisis-oriented.

3. Job opportunities for immigrants to large cities remain far superior to those in smaller cities and rural areas. This is partly a consequence of the first two factors. These opportunities are of three types: higher average wages (rural residents typically earn one-fourth to one-half the salaries of residents of large cities); greater variety of jobs available; and greater fringe benefits.

4. Urban amenities, available in large cities, are almost completely absent from smaller ones. Again, this is partially a consequence of factors 1 and 2. It seldom fails to amaze North Americans visiting Latin America for the first time that a city of 50,000 may have no daily newspaper, no good restaurants, no higher education facilities, no supermarkets, no decent hospital, and only a handful of physicians. These "amenities" (if they can be called that) are disproportionately clumped in the large cities. The excitement and security of large cities is another element worth mentioning. The term "bright lights" is overused, but one who

has travelled in the Latin American countryside at night, and felt the darkness and social isolation engulf him, will understand the magnetism of large cities, where streets are lit and filled with people nearly all night.

5. Perceptions of urban opportunities and quality of life tend to strongly favor the largest cities. This favoritism is fostered by previous migration patterns, the mass media, the educational process, and by long-standing attitudes toward urban and rural lifeways, existing independently of actual characteristics of such places. It is the fifth factor that is the chief focus of this paper, and the topic of the next section. Among the five factors, it is perceptions that affect the decision to migrate most directly, as shown in the following figure (Figure 1).

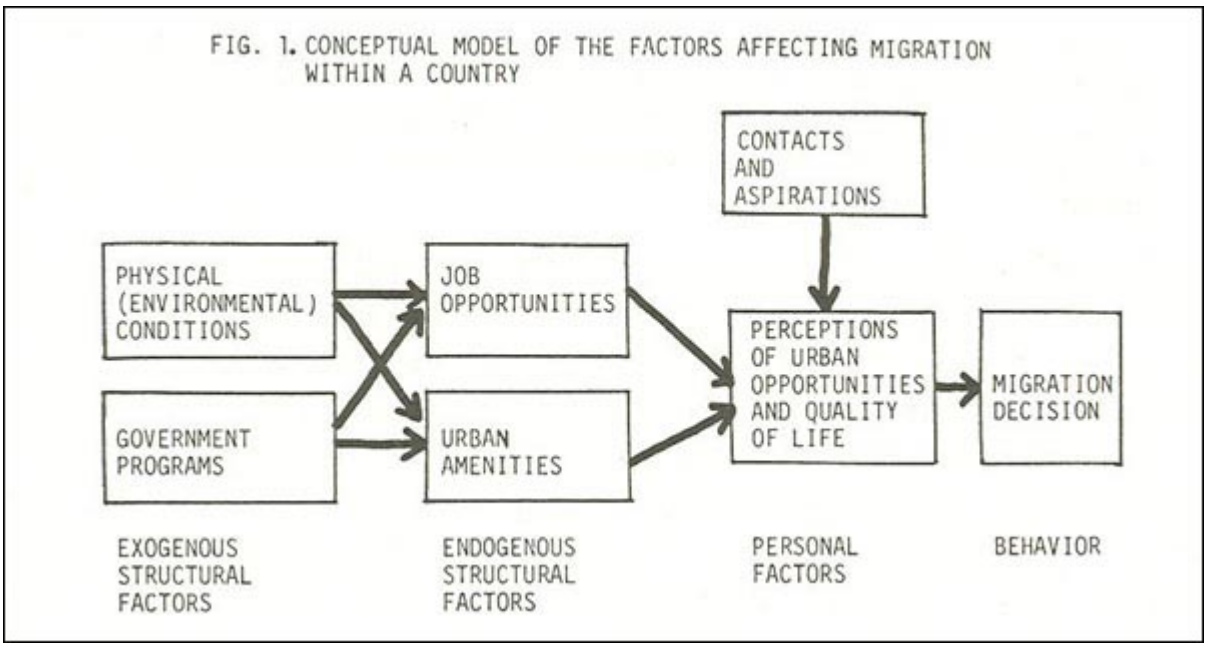

FIG. 1. CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE FACTORS AFFECTING MIGRATION WITHIN A COUNTRY

It is evident that to the degree that individual contacts and aspirations are independent of structural factors, so will the perceptions of urban life be independent of these factors. This migration model is basically similar to that of Mabogunje (1970).

Perceptual Biases and their Underlying Causes

There is good evidence that the differentials between large and small urban places on the aforementioned structural factors are not nearly as great as the previous arguments imply. The writer's Venzuelan experience may offer some insights. First, although unfavorable climate may explain the difficulty of settling and establishing urban centers in Amazonia and Patagonia, the trans-Andean

foothills is a frontier that has great agricultural and mineral potential. Climate cannot explain the underdevelopment of intermediate-sized Llanos cities such as Acarigua and Barinas in Venezuela. Despite the rich agricultural harvests that surround them, these cities process very little of the raw agricultural produce that is shipped to Valencia and Barquisimeto for this purpose. Nor does temperature explain the Llanos' residential unattractiveness; annual averages for Acarigua and Barinas are only 5° F. above Valencia's or Barquisimeto's, and 10 degrees above Caracas'. Second, whether urban development planning exists or not is really of no great consequence, because most Latin cities (both intermediate and secondary) that have grown rapidly have done so spontaneously as a result of spin-off growth from "core" cities or as a result of local resources (Jones and Zannaras, 1979). If smaller cities are not growing, it is because investors have not perceived opportunities there. These first two bits of evidence reiterate Hirschman's comment that:

"it seems to take a special kind of boldness ... perceive the development potentials of the more backward regions of a developing country.... What appears to happen is that the external economies due to the poles, through real, are consistently overestimated by the economic operators" (Hirschman, 1958, 184-185).

Third, wage differentials among different-sized cities are much less than believed, and unemployment-rate differentials are seldom taken into account when different cities are compared. It is one thing to argue that urban wages rise significantly with size of city; this may simply reflect higher-status jobs in the larger cities. It is another thing to argue that pay is significantly more for the same status job in the larger city. In the Venezuelan case, Caracas and Valencia are relatively high-wage cities, but wages paid for a specific job -- such as an electrician or maintenance mechanic -- do not vary significantly from wages paid for these jobs in smaller cities. Venezuelan cities have relatively uniform pay rates for specific wage jobs. Where differences are found is in unemployment rates; the larger cities do have significantly higher rates than than the smaller ones, especially in low and medium skilled jobs. Put simply, competition for a given wage is fiercer in the larger cities. Fourth, just as unemployment is often ignored when discussing wage differentials, so are problems of crime, congestion, and adaptational difficulties often ignored when discussing the amenities of large cities. Migrants may assume that the numerous visible opportunities such as universities, hospitals and clinics, and housing facilities, are synonymous with the

opportunities available to them personally. This is a common failing, one which may lead to considerable disenchantment with life in the large city, especially for ambitious, young, unattached persons with little experience in cities. These latter two bits of evidence suggest that individuals may overestimate the economic and social advantages of the largest cities, just as the "economic operators" have overestimated the economic returns to investments in large cities.

To what can we attribute these misperceptions of social and economic differentials among large vs. small Latin American cities? To begin with, the largest cities have a history that goes back 400 years or more; they project a certain magnetism, compelling people to rediscover their urban cultural roots. Sixteen of the twenty largest cities in the Latin America of today were already established by 1580 (Beyer, 1967, 58). The grand scheme of Spanish urbanization under Charles V and Phillip II involved an ostentatious display of Spanish culture, really a transplantation of Renaissance Spain to the New World, particularly to the cities. The spacious central plazas were surrounded by grandiose cathedrals, administrative buildings, and elite quarters; a regular grid of streets out from the central plaza gave these cities a regularity and an ease of communication with the surrounding countryside. From the first, cities were preferred places to live; they were islands of culture amid a sea of peasant and mining villages. The Spanish pushed to settle near extant clusters of indigenous population. From these cores, they conquered the sparsely-populated peripheries of the viceroyalties and *audencias* but did not settle them; there was, in effect, no "frontier" in the North American sense. Because the major cities got such a head start in prime locations, and because they became the recipients of so much attention from the Spanish Crown, they become unusually attractive places for those seeking beauty, social status, power, and wealth. In the Spanish concept of things, it seemed impossible that such beauty and power could be found in the countryside or in smaller cities. In fact, life outside the large city was often seen as dull and boorish, if not immoral. Therein lies part of the bias against small, rural places in Latin America (see Jones, 1979).

Another reason that benefits of large cities are overestimated by potential migrants is that their levels of career aspirations are so high. The sons and daughters of successful agricultural colonists usually aspire to non-agricultural careers (Adams, 1969), college students shun "technical" (vocational) programs for degrees in the professions; ethnic minorities and the very poor hope, by moving to the city, to follow their heroes into careers in soccer, boxing, baseball,

or bullfighting (Pearse, 1961); and many rural people feel that in the city they will find their patron who will finance their education or give them money to start a business or "sponsor" them in some other way. It is the inflated hopes of these people which may close their eyes to the high unemployment rates and the intense competition for social and economic "plums" in large urban areas. My interviews with Venezuelan vocational school students in 1977 (Jones and Zannaras, 1979) have made me keenly aware of the gap between aspirations and attainment. An unusually high number of these students aspire to careers as engineers, physicians, chemists, biologists, and similar professions, careers requiring advanced university training in science and mathematics. Positions in these fields pay from two to five times what one could earn as a *tecnico superior*, a vocational degree given after two years at one of the *institutos universitarios* that are springing up around the country in response to the immediate needs for technicians skilled in (for example) electronics, advanced vehicle mechanics, and industrial design. As a result of high career aspirations, vocational students as well as college-track high school students are pounding at the doors of the national universities (where applications are double the acceptances in an average year), and leaving the *institutos* with considerable excess capacity; also vocational schools themselves are having trouble meeting minimum enrollments. High school and vocational school graduates are having to wait several years for a university opening, holding down petty jobs in Caracas, Valencia, and Maracaibo and becoming more disenchanted all along. Naturally, the regions where the vocational schools were established are not benefiting from the talents of these young people.

Other reasons for the perceived superiority of large cities are found in the nature of Latin American communications and kinship networks. The communications system, particularly mass media, is a spinal or dendritic network of nodes and links which are predominately unidirectional. Information flows from larger centers to smaller ones, seldom in the reverse direction and seldom among centers of the same size, except among the largest cities themselves. Thus, people living in towns are very much aware of life in the cities, but not the converse; and people in towns are unaware of life in other towns of the same size, especially those outside of their immediate regions. Images purveyed by newspapers have been especially instrumental in modernizing ideas about economic development (McNelly, 1966; Rogers and Svenning, 1969). However, these images are strongly pro-metropolitan. Big-city newspapers advertise the finest clothing, the latest electronic gadgets, and metropolitan art and sports attractions (Jones, 1978), and

as noted earlier, they may glorify sports heroes from humble origins who made it spectacularly in the city (Pearse, 1961). Extended research by the writer on the residential preferences of Venezuelan secondary-school seniors has established that among all the components of urban "awareness space," newspaper readership is best related to preferences for Caracas, the capital city (Jones and Zannaras, 1978; Jones, 1975). Students who preferred a Caracas newspaper ranked Caracas significantly higher than those who prefered some other paper; this relationship holds for those students who had no extended direct contact with the city at all (through kin or previous residence), thus obviating the possibility that newspaper reading was a function of pre-established contacts.

Kinship contacts and prior residence are important, nonetheless. Such contacts play two roles: 1) they provide information about opportunities in the city (Hogan and Berlinck, 1976; MacDonald and MacDonald, 1968), and 2) they offer the potential for direct assistance upon arrival in the city (Kemper, 1974; Lomnitz, 1974). The author's Venezuelan research indicates that preferences for secondary cities (specifically, Maracaibo and Barquisimeto) are much more closely related to previous residence in the city than are preferences for the capital city (Jones and Zannaras, 1978). This is apparently due to the strong regional identities of secondary cities, which induce a fond affiliation among people who have lived there. However, the existence of older siblings in the city is much more important in Caracas' case than in the case of the other two cities, because of the greater need for the shepherding assistance of an older brother or sister in the intricate maze of the capital city.

Given, then, that opportunities in large cities in Latin America may be evaluated too highly, is there proof that these evaluations actually influence migration behavior? Obviously, since we can never accurately measure the real but intangible benefits of migration, we can never say unequivocally that a given migration stream is largely based on misperception, as opposed to perception of intangible benefits not represented in our model. But we can try, by careful attention to prior surveys of migrants and by questions posed to potential migrants, to include the variables that migrants deem most important. In several studies exemplifying these approaches, I have found that patterns of residential preferences explain patterns of urban migration independently of objective opportunities in the urban places. Between one-fourth and one-half of the explainable variation in such patterns is attributable to misperception of opportunity (Jones, 1978). Furthermore, the role played by intervening

perceptual variables is partly a function of the distance of the move. The closer the origin and destination to each other, the more important are the perceptual variables in the movement decision (Jones, 1980). Finally, in the Venezuelan research cited, it has been possible to test traditional multivariate regression migration models incorporating all objective variables against multivariate regression migration models incorporating both objective and perceptual variables. Interestingly, the objective variables play quite different roles in the two types of models, with the positive (attractive) destination characteristics (income, educational level, amenities) playing a more important role in the objective model and the negative (repulsive) characteristics such as unemployment rate, isolation, crime rate, and temperature playing a more important role in the perceptual model (Jones and Zannaras, 1976). The empirical explanation for this is that the perception of attractive factors is reasonably accurate (and thus their ability to explain migration drops when perceptions are accounted for), whereas the perception of repulsive factors is poor (and thus they exert a strong influence after perceptions have been accounted for -- i.e., they catch the migrant unawares). This latter finding repeats the earlier statement that whereas migrants clearly recognize the positive aspects of large urban centers, they do not recognize, or they ignore, the negative aspects. The negative factors may nevertheless influence migration streams by inducing return migration or by influencing a migrant not to move at the last moment when a visit or research shows him that he has been naive.

These negative factors also have an obvious influence on the adaptation of migrants in the metropolitan milieu.

Conclusion

While there are encouraging signs that Latin America's urban growth pattern is reaching a stage of maturity, with secondary cities out-stripping primate cities, there are few signs that small and intermediate size cities will soon begin a growth surge. Rapid "peripheral" urban growth of the type that the United States experienced when it was at Latin America's present urbanization level has not occurred. Although certain very real problems, such as poor physical resources, poor planning, and chronic economic and social imbalances, have been responsible for this lag in small urban growth, their influence has been overstated, and the role played by misperception of relative opportunities in smaller versus larger cities has been ignored. In this paper, I have accorded

misperceptions a much more important role than they usually receive. Despite Portes' comment that

It is not excessive ambition or perverse instinct that makes masses stream into cities...Rather, it is the absence of alternate channels for survival in the existing economic structure (Portes, 1976, 37).

I contend that there is considerable excessive ambition and faith motivating many such streams of migrants in Latin America. The result is an unnecessary period of maladjustment and hardship in large cities, and the chronic loss of talent from smaller places. Beyer's comments are relevant here:

1) A strong case can be made on its own merits for the dispersion of cities on a regional basis (Beyer, 1967,321).

2) One of the worst features of the large-city urbanization now taking place is that no actual improvement usually occurs in the circumstances of the migrant after he reaches the city (Beyer, 1967, 323).

3) With respect to improving urban living conditions, the question arises as to whether the migrant should not be advised before coming to the city, about its conditions and the costs of urban living (Beyer, 1967, 326).

Hopefully, proposals for influencing population flows into cities of different sizes and locations, such as that offered recently by Shaw (1978), will become an integral part of Latin American urban planning.

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