VENEZUELA

OIL AND DEMOCRACY IN VENEZUELA

Part II: The Marginal Man

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The country was never a single colony [under Spanish rule] but rather several small colonies, each connected to the metropolis by separate economic and administrative relations with only very weak interregional links. Loyalty was regional rather than national; to a certain degree, the War of Independence in Venezuela was a civil war as well as a fight for independence. Regional feuds persisted during most of the last century, ending only when the central region acquired overwhelming economic power that could not be challenged by other regions, individually or together. The country's political integration on a national basis was consolidated at the beginning of the present century; the processes of economic development, however, did not strengthen nationalism. Development began with petroleum exploitation, an activity unknown to the natives of the country. Its expansion damaged the interest of no one; on the contrary, it favored everyone. In addition, petroleum exploitation required an amount of capital, technical knowledge and control of international distribution well beyond the capacity of the small agricultural and commercial entrepreneurs of the country. Jorge Ahumada, The Politics and Change in Venezuela, MIT Press, 1967.

The sources of Venezuelan society historically have been at its fringes, which always were extremely dispersed and volatile. The historic marginality of the great majority of its people-alien to stable forms of social organization-has impeded Venezuela from rationally absorbing and employing the immense financial resources it has received in the past half-century of oil bonanza. At the same time, the intense demographic growth since 1920 and the urbanization of Venezuela's people have combined to bring the problem of marginality closer to the centers of power, while multiplying many times the overhead maintenance costs of political stability. In recent decades oil and democracy together have cushioned the society from the consequences of continued marginality, but this cushion may be torn away soon by intense population pressures and a decline in the economic strength of the oil industry.

Venezuela has been a de facto society for most of its history. The fragile social structure of the colonial era was undermined, almost from the beginning, by slave revolts and escapes and by intense contraband commerce that tore into the Spanish imperial monopoly. As early as 1570 a Crown official reported that it was impossible to travel by land along the coast from Maracaibo to Rio Hacha "because warlike Indians and cimarrones [runaway slaves] are in the way."

Describing the proliferation during the eighteenth century of fugitive slave communities (cumbes), the Venezuelan anthropologist Miguel Acosta Saignes writes that "the cimarrones frequently served as intermediaries in the contraband. This was one of the ways in which

they could sustain themselves in the villages they founded in inaccessible places." Fugitive blacks and pardos (mulattoes or mestizos, people of mixed ancestry) also poured into the Venezuelan llanos, or southern plains, where they formed the roving bands of herders and horsemen that became the ferocious marauding cavalry of the Wars of Independence, first under the Royalist banner of the cruel Spanish-born General José Tomas Boves and then in the Independence movement led by Simón Bolivar. Something similar occurred on the Argentine pampas to swell the ranks of the Liberation Army of José San Martin, which marched north toward Peru as Bolivar moved south. In this sense the Spanish Empire in America was wrecked by movements that developed at its fringes-socially and economically as well as geographically-rather than its centers of power. The trauma of the Wars of Independence, relived four decades later in the destructive Federal Wars between regional gangs and chieftains for control of the incipient state apparatus, branded upon the upper crust of Venezuelan society a sense of failure, fear, and war-weariness that lasted well into the twentieth century. In 1876, a decade after the terrible Federal Wars, the President of Congress, Antonio Leocadio Guzmán, replied to the Message published by his son, the dictator Antonio Guzmán Blanco: "I do not know, Sir, why you call yourself the Restorer. One restores something that previously had existed, but when has there truly existed the Republic of Venezuela?"

During the twentieth century there has been an apparent consolidation of Venezuelan society. The country has been integrated from its old political, demographic, and economic dispersion, thanks to the resources made available from oil production. The last successful rebellion at its fringes occurred in 1898, when a small army of andinos from the mountain state of Tachira, led by Cipriano Castro and Juan Vicente Gomez crossed the frontier from its staging area in neighboring Colombia, marched across the country and, after a few battles and some negotiation with the commercial elite, installed itself in Caracas.

The process of demographic growth, migration, and road building had begun well before dictator Gomez died peacefully in 1935, but it did not reach, its delirious and perhaps unique intensity until the decades following World War II. According to the 1971 census. Venezuela counted a population of 10,721,522, of which roughly 77 per cent was urban, reflecting one of the highest urbanization rates in the world. Ever since the 1941 census Venezuela's rural population has remained constant at around 2.3 million, while in the same three decades the number of urban inhabitants increased by more than five-fold from 1.5 to 8.3 million, rising at an annual rate of 5.9 per cent.

As the oil boom gained full momentum in the years after World War II, more and more funds were poured from the swelling public treasury into highway construction and enlargement of the government payroll, both of which accelerated the movement into the cities. In 1920, before the oil boom began, there was just one city with more than 100,000 inhabitants (Caracas: 118,312) and one more with more than 20,000 (Maracaibo: 46,099), together accounting for roughly 7 per cent of a total population of 2.48 million. By 1950, following a decade of very intense migrations during the 1940s, there were 16 cities with more than 20,000 people- including three over 100,000-that accounted for nearly 32 per cent of all Venezuelans. Two decades later, in 1971, 60 per cent of the population was living in 62 cities of more than 20,000-four times the 1950 total-while fully 41 per cent of Venezuela's 1971 population was living in 11 cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants.

The Caracas Metropolitan Area alone, with 2.18 million people, contains one-fifth of the country's population, compared with less than 5 per cent a half century ago. These statistics show a high degree of geographic concentration of the Venezuelan people in recent decades, but much of the growth of its urban agglomerations may be seen in terms of squatter accretions. Today roughly one-third of the Caracas population lives in rancho (slum) shacks, a doubling or tripling of the number that existed at the end of the Perez Jimenez dictatorship. In several interior cities more than half the residential land area is covered with ranchos.

Although it has reached spectacular proportions in recent decades, the phenomenon of urban marginality in Venezuela is very old. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, at the height

of the cacao boom that preceded the Wars of Independence, thousands of pardos and freed blacks converged on Caracas to build improvised dwellings at the outskirts of the city. The French chronicler François Depons observed that there were more manumitted Negroes in Caracas than in any other part of the West Indies. Depons wrote that "all carpenters. cabinetmakers, masons, blacksmiths, woodcarvers, locksmiths and goldsmiths are either manumisos or descendants of freed slaves. . . - Their poverty is such that you cannot commission any work without their asking for an advance . ." According to Acosta Saignes' description of the growth of a "lumpen proletariat" in Caracas:

In the lath century we see the city grow for diverse reasons. The periphery is populated chiefly by pardos. But freed blacks, Indians and poor whites also settle there. The number of dwellings constantly grows, and many beggars appear. [The poor and widowed] constantly pressure the City Council to obtain house lots or tax exemptions. Large family groups were formed, with the masters, servants and hangers-on [agregados] in the center-city, and with more relatives and hangers-on in the periphery. Artisan crafts are iio longer practiced only by poor whites, but also by slaves. The marketplace is filled with a motley population with very dissimilar rights in a society of castes. Taxes rise; rebellions of Indians, blacks and whites are organized. It is a century of extraordinary dynamism.

The population of Caracas grew rapidly from 18,000 in 1772 to about 40,000 in 1800 thanks to the influx of colored peoples with no clear status in colonial society. Although the Caribbean colonies were organized on the basis of white supremacy . and forced black labor, both the white and black populations tended to stagnate or diminish, while the pardos increased rapidly. In 1787 in the nearby town of Los Teques there were 94 applications for house lots, nearly all by blacks and pardos, roughly one-fourth of them women; this is the same proportion of households headed by women as, has been repeatedly found in the ranchos of Caracas today, and among urban Negro families in the northeast and southern regions of the United States reported in census data cited by the Moynihan Report in 1965. Indeed the rate of illegitimate births in Caracas (43 percent) in 1969 equalled that given for Central Harlem in the same report.

The growth of Caracas slowed markedly in the Century between the Wars of Independence and the beginning of large-scale oil production in the l920s. Since then, however, the city's population more than doubled between 1920 and 1936 and again between the 1936 and 1950 censuses, and Ellen tripled between 1950 and 1971. The greatest surges of urban growth have come following major Political changes: the death of Gomez in 1935, the "October Revolution" military coup of 1945 that brought the populist Acción Democratica Party AD) to power for three years of social reform, and the 1958 overthrow of the Perez Jimenez dictatorship. As in the rest of Latin America, the urbanization process reached its greatest intensity during the 1940s; for the entire 1941-1961 period the annual growth rate of Caracas averaged more than 7 per cent-greater than that of any other major city in Latin America.

The association between squatter settlements and populist and democratic movements in this country is shown by developments in Caracas after Perez Jimenez's fall. Between 1954 and 1957 the Perez Jimenez regime managed to eradicate thousands of ranchos in the western sector of the city, resettling many of their inhabitants in 15-story public housing projects, called superbloques: 51 pastel-colored pharaonic towers standing on the knolls of Catia to dominate the skyline of western Caracas, overlooking the sprawling acres of rancho shacks like scarred and stained temple monuments that preside over the rubble of a bombed city. The superbloque relocation plan, costing roughly $200 million, followed the example of the "slum clearance" programs then in fashion in the United States. At the time the Perez Jimenez dictatorship fell, the hills surrounding the superbloques had been cleared of ranchos and several new apartment buildings, still unoccupied, had just been finished. As a result of the popular uprising and street fighting that preceded the dictator's fall, rancho-dwellers from other neighborhoods swarmed into superbloques and seized some 3,800 apartments that were awaiting occupancy. When the new apartment buildings were filled with squatters, others camped in the community facilities such as shopping centers, the movie house and

schools serving the housing project, which was renamed 23 de Enero for the date of the dictator's predawn flight into exile. According to a government report on the new de facto situation:

During the previous regime, many families were forced to move to the superbloques, having had to abandon their ranchos on the hills of Caracas on a few hours' notice. Later, when the dictatorship fell, thousands of families invaded the vacant apartments awaiting assignment, as well as community service facilities. A high percentage remain as illegal squatters. The hills, which had been cleansed of ranchos by bulldozers, are again covered with shacks and many families are illegally occupying government land, especially at the edges of some of the superbloques. Since the 1958 election campaign, only a small proportion of those living in the superbloques are regularly paying rent. In effect, a peaceful anarchy prevails.

Most families have a traditional diet and low educational levels. . . . The extended family is in the majority: there is promiscuity, a high percentage of informal unions, many unmarried mothers, many children, absenteeism from school, prostitution, gangs of adolescents who escape the control of their parents, an exaggerated dependence on the institution that built the apartments. .....

Four-fifths of the family-heads of the squatters occupying the superbloques were migrants to Caracas and their average period of residence was 13 years, which dated their arrival to the great surge of migration that followed Acción Democratica's "October Revolution."t3 Although before the insurrection against Perez Jimenez there were 9,649 apartments and no shacks in the area of the 23 de Enero housing project, the vacant land was so quickly and heavily invaded that those in ranchos a few years later outnumbered the superbloque population of 105,000. In an incisive study of Venezuelan squatters. Talton F. Ray wrote of the post-1958 period that "the movement of campesinos toward the cities, which thus far had been substantial by any standards, suddenly grew to tremendous proportions. So concentrated was the trend that today more barrios trace their origin back to those first 24 months following the [1958] revolution than to any other period." The clogging of Venezuela's cities and the depopulation of her countryside was further stimulated by demogogic appeals by the Provisional Government headed by Admiral Wolfgang Larrazabal, a presidential candidate in the 1958 elections, who decreed a Plan de Emergencia by which peasants could move to the cities, build shacks, and collect attractive wages for work on real or fictitious public works projects. All restrictions on urban land settlement were lifted, and the outskirts of most Venezuelan cities were soon crowded with new ranchos. Indeed, the Caracas upper class supported Plan as a means of reducing social tensions generated by the mass migrations into Caracas during a period of political confusion. The rancho population of Caracas more than doubled during 1959 and 1966.

The marginal and precarious condition of those who live in ranchos is shown when the rains come each year. The rains attack the hills and the quebradas, or small ravines along which the ranchos are packed, especially in the western part of the city, the main repository of the spectacular peasant migrations of recent years. There are some 50 quebradas that abruptly descend the forested mountain walls that form the valley in which Caracas is cradled. As they reach toward the valley floor the quebradas become filled almost daily, in the dark afternoons from May to November, with sudden rushes of muddy waters that sweep violently down the ravines, coming perilously close to the shacks that are massed along their banks. Small children stick their heads out of wooden and canvas windows and doorways, and sometimes venture onto the primitive catwalks that cross the ravines, to watch the swirling waters carry away old newspapers and tin cans and human excrement deposited in the quebradas to be swept away by the floods. The rains crash noisily against the flat roofs of corrugated tin, weighted down with bricks and old tires and pieces of wrecked furniture so the wind won't blow them away, yet they do their work more subtly and destructively within the soil. As population densities in the Federal District (Caracas) have risen fivefold over the past three decades, from 197 persons per square kilometer in the 1941 census to 964 in 1971, the soil's decomposition has been accelerated by the filtrations of sewage-sewers in the rancho areas are either primitive or nonexistent-down the steep hillsides covered with

shacks. The underground seepage has weakened the foundations of some of the monumental construction projects of these decades of oil prosperity: speedways, tunnels, dams, stadiums, office towers, as well as the superbloques, with the rural city of the ranchos besieging and forcing its way into the asphalt city of public works and government budgets, on hilltops and under bridges, at every unlocked door and political opportunity. The stripping away of hillside vegetation to build ranchos has made erosion much more rapid and violent, causing landslides onto superhighways and evacuation of hundreds of families from the superbloques. When it rains on these hills the soil becomes like a soaked and distended sponge filled with ground water. These subterranean filtrations have been aggravated by the alacrity with which successive governments have been laying water pipes in rancho communities, while failing to install sewers at the same time. (In 1969 one-fourth of the population of Greater Caracas lacked piped water, while three-fourths lacked sewers.) The real danger comes when the subsoil begins to dry after three or four rainless days, when the ground water evacuates the sponge and great cracks appear on hillsides and on the walls of buildings, like the first fissures of an earthquake. The cracks show that the hills and ranchos have become perilously unstable, and may be plunging into the ravine below.

At 3:20 A.M. on Sunday, September 28, 1969. eight persons were buried alive by a landslide in the barrio named after President Isaias Medina Angarita-who was overthrown in the "October Revolution" of 1945. It is part of a shack city of between 70,000 and 100,000 people that had been settled since 1958 and isexpanding inexorably, with each new cluster of ranchos built on a more improbable and perilous incline, along the coastal mountain range that runs north to the Caribbean. ten miles away. Barrio Medina Angarita was a dumping ground, first for garbage and then for excavated earth from the construction of the superhloques, where carcasses of abandoned automobiles have been unearthed from time to time. The rancho where most of the Soteldo-Sequera family was buried under several tons of earth was located at the very edge of Barrio Medina Angarita, where recent migrants from the countryside have planted conucos (small subsistence plots) of corn and beans on the hillsides outside their ranchos. It took three hill days and nights of digging by firemen and soldiers, using bulldozers, to find the corpses of eight of the 12 persons who occupied the rather sturdy two-room rancho made of hollow, salmon-colored bricks that sell for a dime each at hardware stores.

The bodies of two women and six children were ultimately discovered among the wreckage of the family's television set, furniture and refrigerator, along with other buried artifacts such as dance records, a doll's head, beer bottles, a child's composition book, and assorted cosmetics- The two "omen were Isabel Soteldo, 28, mother of three of the dead children, who earned $22 for a seven-day week as a short-order cook in a restaurant, and Sofia Soteldo, 21. who worked as a cleaning woman In the Teachers' Association building in downtown Caracas.

Flor Maria Soteldo, 52, is a demure, gray-haired peasant woman of mestizo complexion-One of the three survivors of the landslide-who was mother of three of the victims and grandmother of the other five. "We had been living in that rancho for three years," she said.

My husband, Julián Sanchez, was not at home that night. He had found work as a guachimán [watchmaill and was on the job hat night, so there were only 11 of us in the rancho. We noticed at nightfall that the pig we kept in the yard was very restless. When I went to the window to see what was wrong I saw the grass moving. I told my daughters. and Sofia answered: "We must take care. It may be thieves chasing the pig." The pig kept screaming all night, and I stayed awake until very late. Israel, my 15-year-old son, had gone to a wrestling match and hadn't returned yet. Israel finally arrived at 12:30 A.M. Then I went outside to the public faucet beside the cement stairway that ran between the ranchos, and I filled our gasoline cans with water for the next day. I went back to the house and undressed for bed. Soon after, when my daughters had turned off the light. I heard the pig screaming again, this time desperately. as if he wanted to escape from the corral, while we heard a noise on the hillside. "Something strange is happening, Sofia," I told my daughter. Sofia turned on the light and went to the window. "Mama, for God's sake, the cerro [hill] is

coming down on our heads!" she shouted. We ran out the door, trying to escape. Then Isabel screamed: "We must save the children!" Sofia handed me Ana Irene, her daughter, and went back into the rancho to get the other children- Jose, my 13-year-old son, followed me to the door. Then I felt the cerro was coming down all at once, and I began to run, half-naked and without shoes and with the little girl in my arms. I fell, twisting a leg, so now I can hardly walk, I continued on, carrying the little girl, knowing that my son lose was escaping at my side- I didn't fully realize what had happened until several minutes later, when I sat on the stairway between the other ranchos, burying my head in my nightgown, while people around me screamed.

Until the night of the landslide, the story of the Soteldo-Sequera family was not untypical of the country people who have been migrating to Caracas in recent decades. The family was among the 160,000 peasant families who were "beneficiaries" of the Venezuelan agrarian reform, three-fifths of whom have abandoned their parcels owing to inadequate financial and technical support and because of the lure of the cities. "After Sequera, my first husband, died I went to live with JuIián Sanchez, who ten years ago brought us from Yaracuy to Portuguesa State in the llanos because he heard the agrarian reform was giving out land there," Flor Soteldo told me.

We planted rice and corn in Portuguesa, but our crops were drowned in the floods. We ended up owing nearly $1,000 to the Banco Agricola for crop loans and so we abandoned our plot of land. By then both my daughters had gone to Caracas to work as housemaids. Sofia went to live with a taxi driver named Gilberto Acosta and had two children by him. But two years ago Gilberto was shot dead by a traffic cop who was trying to rob a passenger of his. After Gilberto's death, Sofia went to work as a cleaning woman and sent for me to come to Caracas to take care of the children. Isabel, my other daughter, had gone to live with a man with whom she had three kids. When this man abandoned her, she and her children came to live with us, too. Both my daughters had learned to read since they came to Caracas by going to night school. When they died, Sofia was in the fourth grade and Isabel was in the third.

To avoid more disasters such as this, city authorities in recent years during the rainy season have annually evacuated and torn down some 8,000 ranchos sheltering 50,000 persons. Some of the evacuees have been lodged temporarily in an abandoned jail across the road from the Barrio Medina Angarita, others in an old city garage. This year some 420 families have been kept in the Heliocoide, a huge, uncompleted shopping center of spiral ramps-a $15 million white elephant of the Perez Jimenez era and still a spectacular landmark of the Caracas skyline-which has stood abandoned since 1959, except for the occasional incursions of squatters, drunks, and teenage gangs. According to Jorge Murat, the head of the Caracas Municipal Council's Emergency Relief Department, there are great problems arising from tearing down ranchos when they are threatened by a landslide. "Most of the people refuse to move at first, despite the danger," Murat told me.

They keep asking us, "Who's going to pay for our ran cho? That's all we have." They're very stubborn about this, although we keep telling them that the cerro is going to come down on their heads. We try to find apartments for them in public housing projects, but half of them can't afford the down payment or the $20-a-month rent. So we truck their belongings to another place, and they build ranchos on the outskirts of the city. However, our greatest problem is that they always come back to build ranchos in the most dangerous places, like the Rock of Tarpeya near the Heliocoide, where we have had to come back six times to tear down ranchos. The problem is that Caracas has run out of vacant land.

At the spot where the Soteldo-Sequera family was buried alive in the Barrio Medina Angarita, a cross stood for two years. Then early in 1972 the cross was removed and a rancho was built in its place. The rancho was built on a 45-degree slope, and its walls were made of scrap wood and rusted corrugated tin with holes plugged by wads of paper. Inside theft was a boxwood table and a broken plastic armchair on the earthen floor. Electricity and piped water were installed six months ago. "We are from the Oriente, from Cantaura in

Anzoátegui State, where we planted corn on our own conuco," said the young woman who was living where the cross had stood. "There's nothing out there in Anzoátegui anymore: no work; no nothing. We came to Caracas nine months ago and lived two weeks with a cousin. We built our rancho here because we got tired of looking for a place. We know it's dangerous here and people have died, so perhaps the government will give us a good house."

These landslides are one sign of intense demographic pressure on the natural and economic resources of Caracas. Yet, generally speaking, these pressures are barely perceived as such, if they are perceived at all. Recently, Lorenzo Fernandez, former Interior Minister and currently the presidential candidate of the ruling Social Christian Party (COPEI), himself the father of 11 children, expressed the commonly held opinion that Venezuela has no population problem, that the country s resource base could easily support three times its present population. That the resource base is ample is evidently true, although Venezuela's population has doubled over the past two decades. Yet demographers and family planning specialists speak not only of this high rate of population increase but also the deficient quality of this growth that constitutes a permanent economic burden to the society. Both private and public family planning practice is still in a restricted and primitive stage- In a society that has been structurally weak for its entire history and is still trying to lay the foundations for institutional stability, population size is less important than the rate of increase. This is because high dependency ratios in the lower age levels-58 per cent of all Venezuelans are below the age of 20-compound both the cost and the skilled effort needed to integrate new members into the society. These high dependency ratios also intensify the populist social and political pressures on finite resources that undermine stability, and siphon away money and skilled manpower that are badly needed to improve the quality of long-term economic investments.

The Venezuelan population has increased more than fourfold over the past half-century, doubling between the censuses of 1920 and 1950 and then doubling again over the past two decades. Over this entire SO-year span the absolute number of deaths has remained roughly the same while total population grew at nearly 3 per cent annually, from 2.4 million in 1920 to 10.7 million in 1971; the annual average of deaths recorded for the 1916-1920 and 1965-1969 periods were 61,721 and 63,549 respectively. This reflected a dramatic drop in the death rate from 24.1/1,000 in 1915 to 16.2 in 1940 to 6.8 in 1969, which gives Venezuela the lowest death rate in Latin America. As in the urbanization process, the critical decade for the decline in mortality was the l940s, when life expectancy at birth rose by 11.5 years and the death rate dropped from 16.2 in 1940 to 10.5 in 1950. According to the demographer Julio Paez Celis. these gains in the Physical well-being of the Venezuelan population in the 1941-1950 period were due to several factors: "a) appearance and generalized use of antibiotics; b) government campaigns against such diseases as malaria, tuberculosis and others; c) substantial increase in physicians and hospital beds; d) increase in the urbanization of the population from 39.4 to 53.8 per cent. . .A) constant decline in illiteracy, from 575 per cent in 1941 to 48.8 per cent in 1950 among persons at least 10 years of age."

The Venezuelan population, which had been increasing at less than one per cent annually in the half century preceding 1920, multiplied at a rate of nearly 3 per cent over the next 50 years. The crude birthrate-that is, the officially recorded birthrate which was impaired statistically by the heavy under-registration of births until the 1950s-rose from around 3 per cent in 1936 to 4.5 per cent in 1961, which has been explained by demographers largely in terms of improved registration of births and deaths. Because of deficiencies in vital statistics earlier in this century, Paez Celis has constructed a theoretical pattern to reflect the true evolution of birth and mortality rates, a pattern which shows the birthrate remaining constant at 45 per cent between 1920 and 1955, then dropping to 4.35 per cent by 1965; the theoretical death rate, meanwhile, declined from 2.9 per cent in 1920 to 0.8 per cent in 1965. The extraordinary vitality of Venezuelan demographic growth in the past three decades has been nourished by foreign immigrants and their Venezuelan-born offspring. Italians and Spaniards arriving in the 1940s and 1950s increased the number of foreigners living in Venezuela tenfold, from 47,000 in 1941 to 469,000 in 1961; during the 1960s illegal

Colombian migrants replaced the immigration from southern Europe. Since 1961 the number of women in the prime child-bearing age group between 20 and 29-which produces 53 per cent of all live births-has been rising far faster than general population increase, at a rate that more than compensates for the moderate declines in fertility over the past decade. The number of women in the 20-29 age group increased by half in the 1961-1971 period and is expected to increase by 60 per cent in 1971-1981, leading some demographers to anticipate an intensification of population growth in the 1970s and 1980.

Compounding the problems generated by rapid population increase is the weakness of family structure. While Venezuela's urbanization and death rates today are comparable to those of the more temperate and developed South American countries like Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, its rate of illegitimate births is exceeded only by the most backward republics of tropical America: Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Panama, and the Dominican Republic. In Venezuela, according to a recent statistical estimate based on census data, "dissolution of consensual unions, not caused by mortality, is at least eight times higher than dissolution of marriages." Although the Venezuelan illegitimacy rate has declined significantly in this century, from 70 per cent in 1911 to 52 per cent of all births in 1969, the problem of family cohesion remains extremely serious. Thus, it can be argued that without a cohesive family a stable and cohesive society cannot be built. Familial legitimacy and political legitimacy may be closely related.

Familial and political illegitimacy are among the most important of a number of de facto situations that have pervaded and weakened the fabric of much of tropical American society. They go hand in hand with de facto land tenure systems, in which neither landlords nor peons nor urban squatters generally have legal titles to the land they occupy. The republics with the highest illegitimate birthrates-those of Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Venezuela-are also the nations which as a rule historically have had the greatest political instability and the most extensive illegitimacy in land tenure. Land changed hands often when an incumbent government was overthrown, with the lands of the friends and supporters of the old President being distributed among the friends and backers of the new President. Civil wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were largely conflicts between rival gangs composed mainly of regional chieftains, their relatives and compadres, and each of their respective levies of peons. In these circumstances illegitimate sons, including those fathered by the landlord, were a source of cheap labor in peacetime and of soldiers at times of civil war. In the eyes of a peasant girl's parents, the daughter's having a child by the hacendado or some other socially superior person was simply a way for her to improve her position and a source of future protection. For this reason young girls were eagerly sent by their parents to the master's house to work as domestic servants. In the words of one of Venezuela's leading social historians, "There was little stigma among the poor for a girl's having an illegitimate child. The big problem was not in a girl's being pregnant, but by whom."

The Maternidad Concepción Palacios (MCP) in Caracas is the world's largest maternity hospital, both in terms of beds and daily births. Opened in 1939 and expanded in 1958, it is surrounded by some of the city's densest squatter slum areas and has become so intensely used in recent years that, of its 640 beds, roughly one-third are shared by two women at a time on any given day. The hospital also has become an excellent statistical universe for study of the reproductive patterns of the urban poor of Caracas. For example, the rate of fetal deaths per 1,000 live births for unmarried mothers in 1965 was five times that for married mothers, and the rate of fetal deaths registered at MCP was ten times that at private clinics in Caracas. Since roughly 70 per cent of all live births in Caracas are delivered at MCP, gynecologists and family planning specialists at the hospital have been alarmed by signs of increasingly widespread abortions. Dr. Oscar Aguero, the head of research at the hospital, told me the proportion of MCP admissions for abortion complications rose from 9 per cent of all admissions in 1939 to 23 per cent in 1970, while maternal deaths from abortion complications rose from 15.6 per cent of all MCP deaths in 1939-1943 to 411 per cent in 1964-1968. Indeed, the rate of maternal deaths because of infected abortions quadrupled between the 1955-1959 and 1960-1964 periods, becoming the leading cause of

maternal deaths. The head of the Health Ministry's Department of Maternal-Child Hygiene, Dr. Damaso Villaroel, said in an interview that fetal deaths in the Caracas Metropolitan Area have been steadily rising until in 1970 they totaled 41 per cent more than all other deaths, with two-thirds of these fetal deaths caused by induced abortion. As in the case of Chile in the early 1960s, the radical rise both in abortions and abortion-induced maternal deaths seems to reflect a desperate determination of mothers to control family size.

Although family planning programs in Venezuela still are in an incipient stage. they seem to be part of a general tendency to regularize reproductive patterns. Not only have the illegitimacy rate and the proportion of consensual unions to marriages been declining, but the process of urbanization itself has begun to reduce fertility. The birthrate in Caracas has long been decidedly lower than that of The rest of the country, reflecting a long-standing inverse relationship among Venezuela's 23 states between birthrates on one hand and urbanization and per capita income on the other. Arriaga observes that the differences in fertility between urban and rural areas are much greater than those between married and unmarried mothers, both of whom bear, on the average, around the "very high" total of 6.1 live children during their whole fertile span. One would expect, then, a decline in fertility as Venezuela's accelerated urbanization proceeds apace, and this occurred during the 1960s after three decades of sharp rises in the crude birthrate.

It seems that the urbanization process, the increasingly widespread practice of illegal abortion, and Venezuela's incipient family planning programs each have played their role in reducing fertility somewhat over the past decade. The Venezuelan government has been fence-sitting on questions of family planning, refusing publicly to back birth control programs while allowing the international birth control establishment to fund clinical activities at some 130 government hospitals throughout the country, the largest of these at MCP. These sponsors hope to double the present number of clinics in 1973, but the Venezuelan Congress failed to increase its present token support ($350,000) of family planning programs; a doubling or tripling of this appropriation would have brought a much larger influx of funds from the international birth control consortium. While expressions of concern are sometimes heard from members of the elite, the implications of continued rapid population growth still remain to be pondered or discussed by most Venezuelans. The increases in abortions and the interest of poor women in birth control clinics are crude measures of how population pressures are being felt by individual families, who show, at best, a vague and limited appreciation of the demographic stresses on the society as a whole. The presence of large numbers of ranchos in most Venezuelan cities is seen by many as a sign of unjust distribution of wealth or the failure of the political system, but not as a demographic problem. Life in the ranchos is, after all, an improvement over the abysmal economic levels in rural Venezuela. The Venezuelan Marxist leader Teodoro Petkoff wrote recently that "the violent process of urbanization" was "peculiar to capitalism in general," underscoring the controls in communist societies that have prevented peasants from moving to the cities suddenly and in large numbers.

Population pressures as such probably will not be perceived by the whole community as long as government oil revenues continue to grow at least as fast as population, generating enough new investment and employment to compensate for the historic low productivity of the nonpetroleum economy and the heavy and increasing burden of dependents per worker. Consequently, the great problem for Venezuela over the next decade will be to discover and produce large quantities of petroleum to replace its shrinking oil reserves and the declining yields expected from the traditional areas-mainly around Lake Maracaibo-that have been producing for the past half century. Although large untapped reserves are believed to exist in offshore areas, any major exploration program would have to be preceded by politically-explosive negotiations between the foreign oil companies and an increasingly shaky and narrowly based democratic regime. In view of the intensity of population pressures and the historic marginality and instability in Venezuelan society, this may prove to be an extremely difficult task.

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