Part III – The shantytowns

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Background

Most large Latin American cities combine extremes of wealth and poverty. The latter is heavily concentrated in the shantytowns on their outskirts, where much of the low-income population lives in improvised housing, without sanitation, schools or basic medical services. The houses are built initially of waste material. They rarely have more than one or two rooms and often accommodate more than one family.

In Chile these areas are referred to either as poblaciónes (‘neighbourhoods’), callampas (‘mushrooms’, in cases where they sprang up suddenly) or campamentos (‘encampments’). The latter are settlements with a relatively high degree of organization in defence of their rights, usually inspired by politicians. (Because of these special connotations, the term ‘campamento’ is left in Spanish throughout this chapter.)

Piecemeal solutions to these conditions have been offered by reformist governments in most Latin American countries but with little success. Only in Cuba have they been abolished. The Christian Democrats in Chile established limited housing programmes and neighbourhood associations (juntas de vecinos), but in spite of this the shantytowns grew in the 1960s.

This was inevitable, in that the fundamental problem was not just housing, but poverty in general. Though many conventionally employed workers live in shantytowns, due to low wages, a large proportion of their inhabitants are either under-employed or unemployed, as industrial growth in Latin America does little to increase employment; the companies involved are for the most part multi-nationals with a small and specialized work force. In these circumstances, shantytowns are the only outlet for most of the low-income population. Despite the conditions, their urban setting is generally preferred to the rural one from which many of their occupants come.

Their problems have nevertheless become an increasingly political issue, as left-wing parties recognized the growing discontent in these areas. In Chile under the Christian Democrats many of them launched their own campaigns for local improvements. Encouraged by the left-wing parties, they developed their own forms of struggle, notably the land occupations and patterns of internal organization by virtue of which they came to be known as campamentos. Their names – Nueva la Habana (New Havana), Lenin, Ho Chi Minh – reflected their growing political awareness. These largely autonomous developments continued into the PU period, despite the much greater official provision for economic and social improvements.

Foremost among the left-wing parties concerned with this sector was the MIR, partly because its recent and substantially student origins limited its penetration of the organized labour movement. New Havana, where Laura was active as a member of the MIR, was closely associated with it. As she admits, its high degree of organization and political awareness was untypical. Nevertheless, it expressed a potential which raises fundamental questions about this increasingly large sector in Latin America today. Who are its inhabitants, in class terms, and what can they offer to the struggle in which all sectors of the left are agreed that the working class proper is the vanguard? In the lorry-owners’ strikes, for example, neighbourhood organizations were crucial in maintaining distribution. The MIR, especially, stressed the importance of building relations between campamentos and industrial cordons, in the form of the communal commands which developed as the crisis mounted. The Communist Party saw them as less important, given their lack of the cohesion involved in relationships in the work-place, as opposed to those of residence.

Today New Havana has ironically been renamed ‘New Dawn’ by the military junta. Its leaders have been tortured and executed and its eight thousand inhabitants terrorized. Many of them have had to leave, and those who remain are dose to starvation. These new conditions can only have sharpened the awareness which the previous period gave them, reiterating the question of their political importance.