

Combis and contrasts

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Introduction

In the summer of 2006, I had the privilege of spending two months living and working in Lima, Peru as the Borlaug-Ruan World Food Prize Intern at the International Potato Center (generally referred to by its Spanish acronym, CIP). My two months in Lima and at CIP were stimulating, challenging, and incredibly thought-provoking, and I cannot imagine a more worthwhile way to have spent my final summer before college.

Peru, which the World Bank classifies as a lower middle income country, is just slightly smaller than Alaska and home to 28 million people. With 28 of the world's 32 possible climates, Peru is the most climatically diverse country in the world. Peru is just as diverse in terms of its population's ethnic composition. Peru has a very large indigenous population: 45 percent of Peruvians are indigenous (Amerindians, also called *indios*). Though indigenous Peruvians are the largest population group, they are also the most marginalized and discriminated against. Indigenous Peruvians hold little social or political power, and to say someone acts like an *indio* is to insult him as backwards and ignorant. *Mestizos*, Peruvians of mixed Amerindian and European heritage, are the second largest population group, and they make up about 37 percent of the population. White Peruvians (Peruvians of European, primarily Spanish, descent) make up about 15 percent of the population, and Peruvians of African and Asian descent make up most of the remaining three percent. Peru has two official languages, Spanish (spoken by 80 percent of Peruvians) and Quechua (the foremost indigenous language).

Peru is divided into three geographical regions: *costa* (the western coast), *sierra* (the Andes, in the center of the country), and *selva* (the Amazon). Each region has different traditional food, art, and dress, but some of the most striking differences between the regions are economic rather than cultural. The coast, which includes Lima, is by far the wealthiest, most

urbanized, and most populous region, while the *sierra* and the *selva* are poorer, more rural, and home to fewer people. Forty percent of Peruvians live in the *costa*, 36 percent live in the *sierra*, and only 12 percent live in the *selva*, which contains over 60 percent of Peru's landmass.

The distinctions between *costa*, *sierra*, and *selva* are both basic and useful, but during my two months in Peru, I learned that there's an even simpler – and perhaps more important – divide. There are, I was often reminded, two Perus: Lima, and the rest of the country. Aside from one week in the *sierra* and a few days in Chiclayo (a northern coastal city), I spent my two months exploring just the first Peru – the sprawling, diverse, and invigoratingly chaotic city of Lima.

Over eight million people – a third of Peru's population – live in the Lima metropolitan area. The ethnic composition of the city's population is slightly different from that of the national population: 40 percent of *limeños* (Lima residents) are *mestizo*, 30 percent are Amerindian, 25 percent are white, and six percent are African or Asian. Italian, Japanese, and Chinese immigrants played important roles in the city's development, but recently, Amerindians have accounted for most of Lima's growth. During the Shining Path violence of the 1980s, thousands of indigenous peasants fled their rural villages and came to Lima, where they settled on the outskirts of the city, in slums known as *pueblos jóvenes* (translated directly, “young towns”). About two thirds of Peru's wealth is concentrated in Lima, and Lima is Peru's capital, its biggest city, and its political, cultural, and economic center.

Though Lima is hardly representative of Peru as a whole, it was Lima that overwhelmingly shaped my impressions of the entire country. It was Lima that fascinated and frustrated me; it was through Lima that I wandered. When I think of my time in Peru, it is Lima that I remember, and Lima that I miss.

Life in Lima

When I arrived in Lima, I had outrageously ignorant ideas about what it meant to live in a developing country. I was aware, on an abstract level, that every country, developing or developed, has class divisions and a distinguishable elite, but this awareness did not inform my expectations of what my life in Peru would be like. I had assumed that because Peru is a fairly poor country, all the people I would meet would be fairly poor. I certainly did see an immense amount of poverty in Lima – more poverty, and deeper poverty, than I had ever before encountered. But I had expected to see poverty. What I found more surprising was the amount of wealth to which I was exposed. I visited an elite secondary school that put my very respectable Iowa public high school to shame; I attended the birthday party of the son of one of Lima's wealthiest families; I had a long conversation by the side of a sparkling artificial lake constructed exclusively for the residents of an expensive new housing development. In Lima, I saw much more poverty than wealth, but because I had naively expected to see only poverty, my encounters with wealth were the surprising ones.

I lived with my host family, the Bartolinis, in San Isidro, an affluent Lima suburb. I had my own, small guesthouse-like residence near the large main house, which was home to about 20 family members and four maids. Thanks to the patient instruction of my wonderful high school Spanish teacher and the good humor of the people I lived with, I was able to communicate quite easily in Spanish. Some members of the family spoke English, but I asked them at the beginning of my stay to speak only Spanish with me, and they graciously agreed to my request.

The lack of a formidable language barrier facilitated my quick immersion into house life. The residents of the house included a scientist, a lawyer, an anthropology professor, and an entrepreneur, all of whom were willing to talk to me at great length about their work and their

unique perspectives on Peruvian society. Ida and Edwin, who acted as my host parents, spoke candidly about their experiences during the Shining Path violence of the 80s; the anthropology professor gave me books about the aspects of her research I was most interested in; Ida's niece made possible my visits to the *pueblos jóvenes* by introducing me to a woman who coordinated day-long service trips into the area. I was in Peru during its presidential campaign, and the adults of the house were also enormously helpful in educating me about the intricacies of the election, as well as about the more general topics of Peruvian history and geography.

The Bartolinis were incredibly warm, attentive, and welcoming, and they often invited me to accompany them on excursions they thought I might enjoy. I attended religious processions, school festivals, art fairs, concerts, family parties, and many, many Masses. Once I made it clear that even the most mundane errands, simply because they took place in Lima, were irresistibly exciting for me, I was rarely without an invitation to accompany someone, somewhere.

My favorite part of these frequent outings was that they inevitably involved riding in a *combi*. Lima's official public transportation system is minimal in its coverage, so the *combi* system has developed to meet the need for cheap, easily accessible transportation. *Combis* are privately owned – and generally decrepit – vans that travel set routes throughout Lima. *Combi* rides are always adventures: the drivers generally demonstrate a flagrant disregard for traffic laws, and during rush hours, *combis* are so crowded that it's difficult to move. Understandably, most *limeños* are not terribly fond of *combis*, so my affinity for this form of transportation quickly became a running joke in the house.

When *combis* are full, people must sit and stand almost on top of one another: knees between knees, head against waist, arm over arm. One reason I so enjoyed traveling by *combi*

was that every ride was an opportunity to observe how people of different ethnic groups and social classes behaved when forced into close physical contact with each other: *mestizo* businessmen with their briefcases stood next to indigenous women holding their young children, white university students reviewing their textbooks sat next to Asian grandfathers reading their newspapers. Ethnic and class differences are as highly consequential in Peru as they are in the US, and riding in a *combi*, I could observe firsthand how these differences played out between strangers.

I was only somewhat aware of class divisions when I was riding in a *combi*: class is obviously a more fluid category than race, and one that is more difficult to judge. In my home in San Isidro, however, the class divisions were obvious. In Lima, almost every upper-middle class home has at least one *empleada*, a woman (often, one who has moved to Lima from the *sierra*) who works as domestic help. The single truly difficult aspect of my transition into life with my host family was adjusting to the presence of the four young women employed as domestic help. During the two months I was in Lima, I did not once do my own laundry, clean my own bathroom, or prepare my own meals. It was not the broad facts of the situation – that someone else was doing, for me, work that I was capable of doing myself – that bothered me; in truth, I thoroughly enjoyed my vacation from these chores. What I found disturbing was my own inability to form normal relationships with the *empleadas* – relationships that transcended the obviously skewed balance of power.

Every morning, Lucy, who was 16 years old, prepared my breakfast. While I was at work, she tidied up my room; when I returned in the evening, she prepared my dinner and summoned me to the dining room when it was ready. Of all the people living in the house, Lucy was the closest to me in age, and I initially had high hopes for our relationship. One night, when

she knocked my door to tell me that dinner was ready, we started laughing about the antics of some of the young children who lived in the house. That night, after she was done with her work, she came to my room to continue our conversation. We watched a Mexican *telenovela* and she explained its absurd and complicated plotline; I taught her random English words during the commercials. We had similar senses of humor and were both relative newcomers to Lima (she had come to the city, on her own, just a year ago), so the conversation flowed easily.

I wish I could say that after those promising beginnings, Lucy and I formed a real and lasting friendship. For a while, I thought we would. But we didn't, and I think the fault is primarily my own. I was hyperaware of the ways in which my friendship with Lucy was different from my friendships with other people I had recently met, and this awareness increasingly colored my interactions with her, which resulted in an extremely awkward dynamic. The discomfort seemed to be primarily on my side, but I was frustrated by what I perceived as the impossibility of forming a normal friendship – one in which each friend treats the other as an equal – given the facts of situation: she worked for the family of I which I was an honorary member, so by extension, she worked for me. Did I really treat her the same way I treated my friends from work? And was she really as comfortable and candid with me as she would have been under different circumstances?

I remember one morning on which I woke up early and went to the kitchen to eat breakfast. Lucy was there, and in trying to ask her a simple question, I made (as I often did) some atrocious vocabulary error. She started laughing, and when I realized my error, I did too. We both became almost hysterical, and I vividly remember holding onto a chair and trying to gulp air, only to be overwhelmed by a fresh spell of giggles.

In Lima, I was surrounded both at work and at home by people who loved to laugh and appreciated the absurdities of daily life. I laughed often - but I don't remember ever laughing as hard as I did that morning in the kitchen. That experience is one of my favorite memories of my time in Peru. But the memory is tainted, somehow, by the memory of the context in which it took place. After we finished laughing, I left for work, and she washed the crumbs off the plate on which she had served me breakfast.

The International Potato Center (CIP)

Founded in 1971, CIP is a nonprofit scientific institution whose mission is to reduce poverty and achieve food security on a sustained basis in developing countries through scientific research and related activities on potato, sweet potato, and other root and tuber crops. CIP also conducts research and activities related to the improved management of natural resources in the Andes and other mountain areas, where root and tuber crops are important to the diet and economy. Since 2003, CIP has based its work on the Millennium Development Goals, and its decentralized organization reflects the internationalism of its objectives. CIP is headquartered in Lima, but has regional and liaison offices in Kenya, India, Indonesia, Uganda, Uzbekistan, China, Vietnam, and Ecuador. CIP scientists work in labs, fields, and communities around the world, and CIP's projects range from biodiversity conservation in the high Andes to the promotion of sweet potatoes in Uganda.

I was given an enormous amount of freedom to design my own internship program, which was incredibly empowering – but in the context of all the different opportunities available at CIP, also a little daunting. My goal for my internship was to gain understanding of the process through which scientific progress translates into tangible improvements in people's quality of life and nutritional status. With this goal in mind, I began my internship in the Biodiversity Complex, which houses the world's largest potato and sweet potato genebank. Genebanks are an important element of strategies to achieve global food security, as they safeguard the genetic basis of food production. CIP created the genebank in response to global fears about the erosion of biodiversity, and the materials in the genebank are available to both CIP and non-CIP researchers around the world. The genebank holds samples of over 2,000 wild potatoes, 4,000 cultivated

potatoes, and 6,000 sweet potatoes, as well as an additional 1,000 samples of other root and tuber crops. The genebank's materials are global public goods.

In the Biodiversity Complex, I spent one week working in the cryopreservation lab, where I learned the basic steps of the cryopreservation process, which prepares plant samples for storage in the gene bank. I spent my next two weeks in the Biodiversity Complex learning about in-situ/on farm conservation methods, which CIP uses to complement the ex situ methods of the gene bank. As part of my work in this area, I traveled for four days to Huancayo, a city of about half a million people in the *sierra*, and Huancavelica, one of Peru's poorest provinces. In Huancavelica, I visited a community that has worked with CIP to create and maintain a community gene bank to conserve the area's biodiversity. I was very interested in learning about the relationship between CIP and the community, and the scientists I traveled with were enormously helpful in their willingness to candidly discuss the difficulties and successes of such collaborative projects.

I enjoyed my work in the Biodiversity Complex immensely, but I was itching to learn more about the nutrition situation in Lima. My Youth Institute research paper had focused on the role urbanization played in Chile's nutrition transition, and I came to Lima with many questions about urban nutrition in general and urban food sources in particular. When I discussed this interest with CIP's Director General, Dr. Pamela Anderson, she suggested that I investigate the opportunities available with Urban Harvest, a CIP partner organization based at the CIP headquarters.

Urban Harvest

Over 48 percent of world's population currently lives in urban areas. Urbanization levels are projected to reach 82 percent in Latin America and 40 to 45 percent in Africa and Asia by 2020.

As the world's population becomes increasingly urban, urban agriculture is emerging as an increasingly important livelihood and nutrition strategy. Already, 800 million people are engaged in the practice of urban agriculture.

“Urban agriculture” describes agriculture practiced in an urban setting. Urban agriculture is a big tent: a small garden that produces vegetables for household consumption, a collective organic farm whose products are sold to local restaurants, and a large-scale livestock operation located on the periphery of a city are all examples of urban agriculture.

The urban poor carry a double burden of ill health: still vulnerable to the communicable diseases typical of underdeveloped rural areas, poor urban dwellers may also suffer from the non-communicable or “lifestyle” diseases associated with urban living. These health risks are compounded by the abysmal environmental conditions in most poor urban areas. Polluted water supplies and the constant presence of uncollected and untreated solid waste are too often the realities of poor urban areas – with disastrous consequences for the health and well being of the families who live in them. Poor urban residents may also have limited access to food that is nutritious but still affordable, and face limited employment opportunities.

It is in this context of urban poverty that urban agriculture operates – and it is this context that urban agriculture has the potential to help change. Recognizing the current importance and future possibilities of urban agriculture, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), of which CIP is a member, created Urban Harvest in 1999 as an initiative to coordinate and direct the urban agriculture research and activities of CGIAR research centers.

Urban Harvest's goals are to improve the food security and nutrition of poor urban families, and to help families increase their earning capacity – all while ensuring the sustainable management of the environment. Urban Harvest's activities reflect its guiding belief: that, when practiced in a sustainable way, urban agriculture can play a major role in promoting urban economic development and food security.

Urban Harvest has anchor cities in Uganda, Kenya, Cameroon, Vietnam, the Philippines, and, of course, Peru. Though I learned a great deal about Urban Harvest's international activities during my internship, my work with the organization focused on urban agriculture in Lima.

Lima has grown from a city of under one million in 1950 to a city of about eight million today. As its population has increased, so has its area: today, Lima is twelve times larger than it was 65 years ago, and Lima's city limits have expanded into what was once productive agricultural land. Much of Urban Harvest's work in Lima takes place on the city's periphery, in Lima's eastern river valley, where Urban Harvest staff members have built close and congenial relationships with urban farmers and their families. The Urban Harvest staff makes weekly or biweekly visits to the farmers they work with, and they graciously allowed me to accompany them to these meetings.

My work with Urban Harvest exposed me to parts of Lima I would never have seen otherwise. On the days I spent traveling across Lima by *combi* with Urban Harvest agronomists, we visited urban farmers in their homes on the city's outskirts, bought supplies in the industrial district, and distributed flyers about upcoming workshops to women working in community kitchens in the *pueblos jóvenes*. Along a dusty stretch of houses built by families who had fled the *sierra* during the Shining Path violence, I sat in on an informal workshop about raising chickens; among the plots of organic vegetables cultivated by farmers involved with Urban

Harvest's farmer field school, I learned about cheap, innovative strategies to address the problem of contaminated water supplies.

Urban Harvest staff members enthusiastically introduced me to the urban farmers they worked with, and I was able to have many long and interesting informal conversations with those farmers about the successes and challenges of their urban agriculture activities, as well as about their involvement with Urban Harvest. The farmers were involved in a wide range of urban agriculture activities, from raising guinea pigs (a popular Peruvian food) to sell in the market to growing vegetables in a farm-like setting. Despite the differences in the type of urban agriculture they practiced, however, all of the people I talked with expressed their appreciation of Urban Harvest's horizontal, participatory approach to increasing farmers' knowledge. In order to increase the benefits accruing to farmers from their participation in urban agriculture activities, Urban Harvest offers urban farmers hands-on education. Farmers receive tips and informal tutorials when Urban Harvest staff visit, attend workshops on themes the farmers themselves have identified as important, and can work with Urban Harvest's farmer field school.

Because I was so aware of my own difficulties with crossing class divides, watching Urban Harvest staff interact with the farmers they worked was a humbling experience. The relationships between farmers and Urban Harvest staff were not, as I had expected, like the relationships between teachers and students. Though Urban Harvest staff did teach farmers new and better practices, but they did so in the way one neighbor might teach another. Their approach was profoundly egalitarian, and they cultivated real relationships – friendships, actually – with the farmers they visited each week: they knew about farmers' families, talked about topics other than urban agriculture, and shared stories about themselves and their own families. What impressed me most about the people I worked with was that their commitment to building and

maintaining relationships with farmers and their insistence on responding to the farmers' needs rather than imposing their own agenda seemed wholly unstudied. Though their approach functioned as a strategy to increase the effectiveness of their work, it worked so well precisely because it wasn't a conscious strategy.

Reflections

When I reflect on my two months in Lima, what I remember most vividly is the time I spent in transit, crossing Lima in a *combi*. There was something enchanting about those rides: they seemed to hold the promise of revelation, if you only paid enough attention. I pressed my nose against the window, and was overwhelmed by the feeling that I was watching life distilled. I was sure there was something fundamental, something essential and universal, about the scenes I saw through the glass. The striking contrasts between one neighborhood and the next – the abrupt transitions from dilapidated to comfortable, from lively chaos tinged with palpable desperation to dignified bustle and orderly striving – seemed almost too powerful, too indicative of some deep truth, to be real. Looking out the window of a *combi*, I longed to soak the city in, to absorb its elemental wisdom and understand its counterintuitive appeal.

The literal process of traveling between different areas of Lima is, I think, an obvious but still powerful metaphor for the processes of transition that defined my experience in Peru. What stands out about my time in Lima is the immense variety of experience contained within each individual day. The comfort and quiet of my neighborhood in San Isidro, the chaotic grittiness of the industrial district, the anomalous lushness of farms on Lima's periphery: I vividly remember individual days during which I saw all this, and more. I could – and did – spend an afternoon drinking *chicha morada* next to a guinea pig corral and that night drinking *café con leche* in an elegant apartment overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The ease with which I could transition between such starkly different realities was profoundly disturbing, but the transition itself was invigorating. When I returned to my room at night, I tried to process the day's events, to reconcile my daytime memories with my nighttime ones, but they seemed fundamentally

incompatible – and, considered as complementary, irresistibly appealing. Both frustrated and enthralled by the incoherence of my experiences, I lay awake, unable to fall asleep.

It is in that experience – of being unable to fall asleep – that I see most clearly the value of my participation in the Borlaug-Ruan internship program. My internship experiences made me curious; they energized and baffled and inspired me. They forced me to confront the realities of deep and structural inequality; more disturbingly, they forced me to admit that far from being unequivocally repulsed by such inequality, I genuinely value the aesthetic and intellectual utility of the stark contrasts inequality creates. My internship experiences woke me up, and kept me awake. It is that feeling of invigoration – of energy gained through exposure to vivid contrast – that I remember most clearly, and it is that feeling that I will always associate with my summer in Lima.

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