REVIEW ESSAY

LATIN AMERICAN SHANTYTOWNS:
NEW INTERPRETATIONS

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North Americans first noticed Latin American urban poverty in the early 1960s. The mobilization of urban crowds by Juan Perón, the mass violence of Colombia’s Bogotazo and the spread of squatter settlements had been symptomatic of urban problems for two decades before that. It took the combination of the Cuban Revolution and two popular works about slum life (Jestis, 1962; Lewis, 1963) to place the problem on an imperial agenda. Once noticed, shantytowns were denounced as seedbeds of subversion, deplored as evidence that migrants were improperly integrated into city life and, more important for the residents, threatened with demolition. The Alliance for Progress promoted large housing projects to replace the offending slums. Still, unauthorized user-built housing continued to spread, and even to acquire defenders. Turner (1972, 1977) argued not only that shantytowns were rational adaptations to difficult economic conditions, but that the best housing could be built by people somehow outside the system. If not quite the noble savages of Black Orpheus, squatters appeared in this
view as pragmatic rebels defying contractors and bureaucrats to build a better life.

The contrast of positions can be seen in country after country. In Manizales, Colombia, for example, houses built of guadua, a local bamboo, line the cliffs at the edge of the city. To the local elite, they are an eyesore and a possible menace, as is seen in local newspaper descriptions of them as a "true belt of misery." Similarly, to the Marxist critic (Ocampo, 1972) who cites this description they are unsafe slums whose perpetuation is "illustrative of the domination of the ruling class." Yet to an architect who compiled a photographic study of the homes, they are flexible, economical structures, worthy of study and emulation by his profession (Castro, 1964).

Different as these views are, they have something in common. Whether squalid or heroic, the settlements are seen as existing outside and against the social order. This simple picture has only recently been challenged; but the challenge is thorough and convincing. First came studies of neighborhood politics, showing the integration of slum leaders into national political systems and demonstrating government involvement in the planning of squatter invasions (Cornelius, 1975; Collier, 1976). Pedro Beltrán, presented by Turner (1977:18) as a foe of Lima’s squatter settlements, is revealed by Collier (1976:70) as a sponsor of land seizures by squatters and as a far-sighted oligarch who realized such settlements could favor capitalist development by providing economical housing for low-paid labor. Now three new studies have appeared which analyze the conditions of carefully selected samples of urban poor, and which situate their findings in a theoretical understanding of Latin American underdevelopment.

The three studies, by Janice Perlman, Larissa Adler de Lomnitz, and Susan Eckstein, have their origins in doctoral dissertations, but all have been reworked for a wider audience. The Perlman book is particularly clear in its presentation of background and theory, and is exceptionally well written, printed, and illustrated. It should become a standard for classroom use. The other two books are no less important in describing the variety of conditions found in Latin American slums, and in analyzing their social context.

The three books ask a wide variety of questions. Perlman studies three communities in Rio de Janeiro: a squatter favela (which has since been demolished) near the central city and beach area, a peripheral squatter settlement, and a suburban area including both squatters and families who built on purchased land parcels. She examines the neighborhoods'