Cholos and Bureaus in Lima

CASE HISTORY AND ANALYSIS

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Relationships among institutions and between institutions and individuals are changing in Lima (as in the rest of Peru). Immigrants to the city, finding many existing institutions controlled by a set of the population that I have called “creole” (1974) and either unavailable to immigrants or available on undesirable terms, have developed their own institutions for housing (irregular settlements), credit (savings cooperatives), clothing (clandestine manufacturing), prestige (regional associations), and many other requirements. People who generally see these alternative institutions as more appropriate for their own use than the creole-dominated institutions I shall call “cholos.”¹ This definition is not a folk definition, although the population sets it refers to may overlap population sets designated by similar folk definitions. It has two major advantages over ordinary, ethnic or class definitions. On the one hand, it frees us of problematic indicators such as income or skin color. On the other hand, classifying people by what they think they can do, allows us to use the definitions in strategic analysis.

Cholo Institutions

The existence of cholo institutions not only has allowed cholos to avoid dealings with creole institutions, but also has forced many creole institutions to deal with cholos at the institutional level—as when a bank deals with a savings cooperative or a government seeks to “regularize” (and thus, to redefine and control) irregular settlements (see Collier 1971).

Because governments in Peru are creole institutions, the above analysis implies that relationships between cholos and elements of government are changing, and as a result, governmental strategies for controlling the cholo population must be adjusted. The purpose of this paper is to consider primarily through the analysis of one case involving dealings of one group of cholos with a government bureau, some of the ways that cholo-creole relationships may change, and finally to speculate about future implications of such changes.

¹ My reasons for these definitions are more fully presented in Chapter II of my dissertation (1972). “Creole” as I use it must not be confused with criollo, which denotes native born coastal urban poor and their typical behavior.
Before proceeding to the main discussion, I should like to reintroduce some elementary analytical concepts that I have found useful in the past and which I wish to continue using.

The central concept is the "play," which I have defined elsewhere (1974:4) as "what you think you can do in a certain situation, regardless of whether you can 'really' do it or not." Further, I have said that "Each play is a set of plays that may or may not be alternatives," that "the 'situation'... is simply the more inclusive play," and that both individuals and populations may be thought of as possessing lexicons of plays. Finally, I have found it convenient to relate plays to institutions by saying, "If a play is selected often enough by a population, it becomes the core of an institution (ibid.: 5)."

The notion that actors in a given situation select among plays implies uncertainty as to which play to select—either because of the mere presence of alternatives, or because of variable adequacy of information about the elements of plays. Various means of reducing uncertainty are available, one of which is institutionalization. A way of reducing uncertainty that is especially relevant to the present discussion is to pass control of the action to another party, in which case the play becomes a "black box," the actor who chose it being aware only of the outcome. This occurs whenever one employs a specialist to provide a service; hiring a contractor to build one's house, or a real estate agent to sell it; employing a lawyer to solve a domestic problem. To some extent, all of these reduce uncertainty; and although questions of the value and availability of time and so forth must be considered, the money we pay to the specialist may be thought of as a measure of the value we place on reducing uncertainty.

As we shall see, plays of chulos that involve applying to government bureaus tend to be black box plays.1

Cholos relate to bureaus in ways that are quantitatively and qualitatively different from the ways in which most creoles relate to them. On the one hand, most chulos have few resources for bribing or for using personal contacts, plays that allow people with high incomes to avoid, or at least to shorten, many relationships with bureaus. On the other hand, cholos seek bureaucratic aid for

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1 The rather impassioned response of one of the discussants at the symposium where the original version of this paper was presented—to the effect that we must stop believing that poor people think differently than rich people—misses the point entirely. One universal means of controlling a population is to control its access to information. And if you don't know how to do something, or if you have been led to believe that it is impossible for you, chances are you will not do it. Also, some actions that are possible for some sets of a population in a complex society are quite simply not possible for other sets. For example, lacking both money and credit, I cannot play the stock market. But the critical feature of black box plays is not the actor's lack of information but his lack of control. When I apply to a bureau for a permit to do something, I may know quite a lot about behaviour of bureaucrats, number of signatures required for approval and so on, or I may know nothing at all: it makes no difference. The point is that I surrender control of the action when I make the application.