Peruvian Americans

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Some two million Peruvians currently reside abroad, mostly in the United States, South America, and Western Europe. Between 1971 and 2001, the INS admitted 209,618 documented Peruvian immigrants, and the U.S. census counted 60,440 Peruvian immigrants in 1980, 151,837 in 1990, and 276,981 in 2000 (381,850 by adjusted 2000 Hispanic/Latino figures). In 1990, Peruvians were the second largest South American immigrant group in the U.S. (behind Colombians), but by 2000 they were the third largest (behind Colombians and Ecuadorians). In 1999, Peru received $800 million in remittances from migrants abroad.

There are five broad phases of U.S.-bound Peruvian migration. In the first phase (late-nineteenth century), Peruvian and other South American laborers migrated to California during the Gold Rush. In the second phase (early-twentieth century), new pioneer Peruvian migrants were recruited to work in textile mills near Paterson, New Jersey. After World War II, migration increased in response to rising U.S. demand for industrial labor, as well as to oil boom and modernization policies in Peru, which uprooted more Peruvians from their traditional rural lifestyles and provided them with new incentives to migrate abroad (usually to the larger cities in Peru, but later to other countries, too). Due to these earlier migrations, there is now a sizable number of second- and third-generation Peruvians living in the United States.

In the third phase (late-1960s through 1980s), U.S.-bound Peruvian migration increased and diversified. Highly-skilled professionals and technicians began migrating in response to 1965 changes in U.S. immigration law and new employment-based economic policies instituted under the Carter and Reagan administrations. By the early 1980s, Peruvian immigrants exhibited great socio-economic diversity, and most had migrated because economic and social mobility were becoming increasingly harder to attain in Peru.

The fourth phase of Peruvian migration (1980s to 1992) was both economic and political. Economically, Peruvian industrial, export agriculture, and *estancamiento* policies uprooted more manual workers, who had fewer skills and were more likely to come from the *Sierra* (mountainous regions in the Andes) than their professional predecessors. During the "lost decade" of the 1980s, urban poverty was exacerbated by an acute economic crisis, rising unemployment and underemployment, and the overcrowding of Peruvian cities due to continued internal migration from the Sierra and rural areas. Politically, Peru witnessed a massive increase in violence and human rights abuses, starting with the appearance of Shining Path and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movements and then matched by the rise of a state-sponsored governmental opposition

force. This guerrilla and counter-guerrilla warfare terrorized the Andean highlands and urban Lima, resulting in thousands of deaths, massive rural displacements, and declines in ordinary Peruvians' confidence in their government. All of these factors combined motivated large numbers of Peruvians to leave their country in the 1980s. Estimated numbers stand somewhere between 200,000 and 600,000, mostly self-identified *andinos* (indigenous persons of rural, lower-class origins). And out of 112,687 Peruvians who left Peru between 1985 and early 1988, 45,095 (40%) went to the United States.

The Peruvian military's capture of Shining Path's leader in 1992 ushered in a new period of hope and stability for Peruvians abroad, and many returned home. However, the fifth phase of Peruvian emigration began in the late 1990s, due to new economic declines and political insecurity in Peru. The "lost decade" of the 1980s, known even in the indigenous language quechua as *década de chaqwa* (the decade of chaos), was never fully recovered. Peruvian and Ecuadorian emigration rates hit new highs in 1998, 1999, and 2000. In 2000 alone, 183,000 Peruvians left their home country, a figure more than double that of previous years. Teófilo Altamirano shows that today more women than men are leaving Peru, the "brain drain" emigration of Peruvian professionals continues to be of great concern, roughly one in three Peruvians and Ecuadorians in the U.S. is undocumented, and Peruvians' migration destinations in the U.S. have expanded to include all fifty states. In 2000, Peruvian immigrants resided primarily in California (18.3%), Florida (18.2%), New Jersey (15.9%), New York (14.7%), and Virginia (6.2%), and Paterson, New Jersey remains the unofficial center of "Little Peru" on the East Coast.

By education and occupation, Peruvians rank on the low end of South American immigrant groups, but higher than Mexicans and most other Central American immigrant groups. Internally, Peruvian immigrants are diverse. Upper-class Peruvian immigrants are likely to have migrated in the 1970s and 1980s, to be of European descent, and to be well adapted in terms of English language ability, residence, and relationship to American mainstream cultural models. Middle-class Peruvians are likely to have migrated for a more diverse range of reasons, and to identify more with the *mestizo* character of Peruvian national identity. Many hit "glass ceilings" at their jobs, or suffer downward mobility because they cannot successfully transfer their professional statuses from Peru to the U.S. Finally, lower-class Peruvian immigrants, while the smallest in number, tend to come from rural areas in the Peruvian Sierra. Many speak indigenous languages such as Quechua or Aymara instead of or in addition to Spanish, and many are located on the bottom rungs of the U.S. labor market in precarious positions such as factory, construction, and agricultural workers. (For example, several researchers have called attention to the plight of indigenous Peruvian shepherds working on ranches in the American Northwest.)

Peruvian immigrants also differ by region of origin, ethnicity, race, language, and cultural identity. For example, as Ulises Juan Zevallos Aguilar illustrates, Andean immigrants in the U.S. broaden traditional ethno-linguistic ideas of the "Andean archipelago" in South America, linking them with Andean migrant settlements in Lima, Guayaquil, and La Paz. Over the past few decades, he describes how new developments in Peru have resulted in greater emphasis being put on Andean identity there, and argues

that this "Andeanization" is extending to immigrants in the U.S. as well. He has identified four broad groups of Peruvians with Andean ancestry in the U.S.: (1) "bicultural" Quechua/Spanish speaking immigrants; (2) "tricultural" Quechua/Spanish/English-speaking immigrants; (3) "locally-indigenous identified" immigrants; and (4) immigrants who have never considered themselves Andean. Within these groups, he finds both Incan and local indigenous forms of Andean identification.

Finally, Peruvians are well organized compared to other Latin American immigrant groups. They now have over 450 voluntary associations in the U.S., which help new immigrants maintain valuable cultural values, manage adaptation pressures, organize politically, and collect money to remit home. Among them are larger Peruvian-American chambers of commerce as well as smaller Peruvian businesses (especially in the restaurant and tourism industries), immigrant advocacy groups, and an even larger variety of Peruvian churches, restaurants, soccer leagues, and music, dance, and cultural groups (such as the *Peru-Inka Cultural Association* in Coral Gables, Florida and the *Así es Mi Perú* in Lake Worth, Florida). But, as is the case with many immigrant groups, these associations tend to be organized along – and therefore also to exclude others by – lines such as class status, region of origin, race, or ethnicity. Therefore, the diversity of recent Peruvian immigration presents new challenges to the community as a whole as it works to define its identity and achieve success in the United States.

Suggested Readings

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