

Campesinos of the Cordillera:  
Economy and Worldview among Mountain Peasants  
of the Dominican Republic

Gerald F. Murray  
Department of Social Relations  
Harvard University

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G.F.M.

Harvard University  
Department of Social Relations  
Cambridge, Mass.

## Abstract

This is a study of a mountain community in the Dominican Republic. There are two economic groups in the village: squatter-farmers and sawmill workers. Both groups are to be affected by a government move to protect the pine forests: the sawmill will be closed and the farming of the hillsides will be eliminated. In effect both groups have been condemned to economic death by government decree.

This thesis is a study of their response to the crisis. The method of investigation was participant observation and tape-recorded interviewing. The question being asked was: how did the people of the village perceive and react to the impending crisis?

Analysis of the protocols showed that what was operating in their response to the crisis was a culturally learned pattern of behavior toward authority--called in this thesis the caudillo system--within which the solution to problems is sought by attaching oneself to a strong leader and counting on him to solve all crises. The caudillo is Joaquín Balaguer. The people of the community cast their hopes on him.

What is interesting is that the crisis was caused by Balaguer's Forestry Department, with permission of the President himself. The study examines in detail the cognitive adaptations by which the people of the village explain away this damaging information and maintain their strong attachment to Balaguer.

There are many intergroup differences in the interviews with regard to attitudes and values, differences that can be linked to the different economic situation of the two groups. But as regards the crisis, both groups perceive and react in the frame of reference of the caudillo system.

## INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted in a small, relatively isolated mountain village in the northwest region of the Dominican Republic. La Loma, the fictitious name given to the community in this thesis, is situated in pine-tree country on the northern side of the Cordillera Central, the mountain range that traverses the island of Hispaniola in a general east-west direction.

The community was chosen for the fortuitous presence there of two radically different economic groups. The majority of the inhabitants are conuqueros, squatter-farmers who make their living by clearing the mountainsides of trees and brush and planting what is necessary for the consumption of their families, selling what little is left over. The second group is a small community of some forty workers who operate a sawmill belonging to a lumber company in Santiago. The sawmill is highly mechanized, run in many respects as a typical modern factory; the workers are strictly wage-earners, none of them have farms or animals. These two economic groups located conveniently together in the same isolated community were to be the object of a comparative study of both attitudes toward work and attitudes toward authority.

But I had scarcely unpacked my suitcase when the peculiar situation of this community came to light. News had just previously reached the village that, in an ef-

fort to preserve the nation's forests, all sawmills were to be shut down and no more pine trees would be allowed to be cut. This spelled economic disaster for almost everyone in the village. The sawmill workers, of course, were to be without jobs; and no provisions were announced to find them new jobs. The squatter-farmers, whose hilly plots of land produced well for two or at the most three years, of necessity had to seek new plots every few years, which involved cutting down the pine trees which covered the hills. Since this was now to be strictly prohibited and the prohibition enforced (the prohibition had existed but was loosely enforced), their source of sustenance was likewise ripped away from them. In effect this entire community had been condemned by government decree to economic death.

Though the crisis had not yet struck and life went on as usual in the village, there was very strong feeling in both groups. Such situations provide the human interest material that makes stirring magazine articles; the plight of the people was real and their suffering was visible. My "comparative attitude study," appearing quite trivial and irrelevant in light of the villagers' plight, was discarded. The task now became somehow to render the situation amenable to description from a scientific point of view.

The people welcomed the presence of a visitor from

outside. They were anxious to talk and let the whole world know of their sad situation. Any "study" was going to have to deal with the situation as they experienced it and felt about it.

How do human beings react in a crisis such as this? The specific question formulated was: how did the people of La Loma perceive and react to the impending crisis? Specific, but not very specific. The methodological advantages of choosing a more limited sub-question--e.g. the effect of the crisis on group solidarity or church-attendance--was offset by the danger in that approach of missing the central thrust of the drama occurring in the village. Thus the question was posed: How did the people of La Loma perceive and react to the death knell sounded to their economic life by news of the impending crisis?

#### Methodology

Response to the crisis, however, doesn't occur as "pure reaction." It occurs in the context of the firmly entrenched patterns of behavior and thought that constitute the daily routine of the members of the community. To approach adequately the question of their response to the crisis, one needs familiarity with their life-style in general.

The methodology which was employed aimed at the greatest possible familiarity with daily life in the community among both groups.

1. This entailed in the first place observation and extensive note taking. Special attention was given to the men's work routine and the means of acquiring food; the cost of this food, if purchased; the relation between income and expenditures, especially in the case of the sawmill workers. Several families from both groups kept daily records of purchases and meals for a week's period. I lived for most of the summer in a house by myself, but spent a week with a hill-farmer's family observing the daily routine of all members of the family. In the initial days of the study, I made a census of the community, to familiarize myself with the people and vice-versa. The questions asked are given in an appendix, though most of the information gathered is omitted, not being directly relevant to the central question.

2. Loosely-structured, open ended interviews. These interviews were to constitute the principal data by which the question asked by the study would be answered. The interview was loosely modelled after Cantril 's self-anchoring scale,<sup>1</sup> great adaptations being made, however, to the situation at hand. The people wanted to talk about their critical situation; they were allowed to talk freely. But questions were asked that dealt with more general attitudes as well, in order to draw some overall picture of the general frame of reference in which the people viewed themselves



and their situation. An effort was made to avoid pre-structuring the situation; enough structure was given to the interviews as to permit comparisons between individuals and groups and the generalizations that these comparisons justify; but at the same time every effort was made to avoid pre-structuring the conversations into the investigator's categories; analysis was to be made only after the data was collected. Cantril's self-anchoring scale, freely adapted both to the situation in La Loma and the open-ended style desired, seemed like a suitable point of departure. The basic interview used with each group is given in an appendix; the questions were not always phrased exactly as written, nor in the same order; but every question was somewhere inserted into most of the interviews.

Interviews were not given during the first month. The schedule gradually took shape around those elements which a month of informal conversation and questions showed to be most salient in the thoughts and feelings of the people. The final question about Cuba was thrown in mostly out of curiosity on my part; it was always used as the last element in the interview.

Approximately twenty interviews were administered with the schedule, ten from each group. An additional five or six were administered concerning more general topics such as religion and folklore. No attempt was made to be statistically random in the selection of

respondents; an attempt was made to be representative. The small population of La Loma makes one feel safe in asserting that what is seen in the protocols is representative of the thought of the entire community. (How representative it is of the Dominican Republic as a whole is, of course, another question.) The interviews lasted on the average about an hour each, a few lasting quite a bit longer, a few lasting about a half hour. They were all tape-recorded (with the respondents' knowledge). Surprisingly little difficulty was encountered; on the contrary, the presence of the microphone evoked in some respondents an eloquence that at times reached poetic heights, without losing the intensity and genuineness born of the seriousness of their situation.

3. Content Analysis. Most of the tapes were transcribed word for word in the original Spanish--a long, tedious task that took months of time but was essential to the type of analysis that would hopefully answer the question as to how the people of La Loma perceived and reacted to their crisis. The protocols were a rich source of data that represented the situation of La Loma in the perceptual categories of the people themselves. The analysis was carried out by the following technique.

a.) Careful reading of each protocol, analyzing each sentence or group of sentences for its theme: what

was being talked about. A running record of the changing themes was kept.

- b.) The formation of a series of categories on the basis of this preliminary analysis: Government, Company, farming, past vs. present, pueblo vs. campo, assertions about self, and several others.
- c.) The labelling of each segment of the protocols in terms of one of the above categories. Each segment was then joined with all others of the same category in all the other protocols. (The protocols were physically dissected with scissors for this purpose, carbon copies being kept intact to allow each segment to be seen again in context if necessary.) The segments vary in size from single sentences to long paragraphs.
- d.) When the protocols had been divided, each category was examined separately. Workers' segments were separated from farmer segments. When necessary sub-categories were established, e.g.: "complaints against Company for past deeds," "suspicions of Company's future plots," "expression of ambivalence toward Company."
- e.) When the breakdown was finished, each group of segments was carefully read. Trends common to groups were noted and tentative generalizations were made on the basis of what seemed to be common to each group of segments in the same category. Systematic

differences between the segments of corresponding categories in the two different groups were observed and likewise used to make generalizations about inter-group differences. As will be seen there are many cross-group similarities and many systematic differences

The rigid breakdown of the protocols into small, easily identifiable categories seemed necessary in light of the limitations--temporal, financial, and linguistic--which precluded the use of coders.

Out of the wealth of information gleaned from the protocols, it was possible to distil what seemed to be the common, central elements in the reaction of the people of La Loma to the impending crisis, and thus propose an answer to the question posed at the beginning of the study.

However since no statistical treatment was accorded the data, the generalizations made about each group should be considered as empirically determined general hypotheses to guide observation in the future, rather than as definitive statements about either of the groups. There are certainly many within-group differences about which generalizations were not made, but which further investigation could make clearer.

Extensive use is made of the protocols as sources of quotations illustrating the points made. Certain of the protocols are called on much more than others to provide examples, as certain of the respondents had a

greater facility for verbalizing attitudes in a colorful fashion. Because copies of this study have been requested in the Dominican Republic, the quotations have been given in the original Spanish (transcribed semi-phonetically, as spoken, rather than in standard Spanish orthography), as well as with their English translations. An appendix describing the peculiarities of the Spanish of La Loma is given in the back.

A word should be said about my own competence in the language. I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer for two years in the Dominican Republic (though not in La Loma) and while there took special interest in identifying and describing the peculiarities of Spanish as spoken there. On a termination-of-service language examination I was rated as bilingual by an official examiner from the Foreign Language Institute of the U.S. State Department. That is, for the purposes of this investigation I was able to function linguistically almost as a native speaker. As for problems created by more subtle cultural differences and differences in frame of reference, the looseness of the interviews and the strictness of the analysis was all an attempt to deal with these differences and prevent them from influencing the results.

To conclude this section, the following is a list of the few Spanish terms which will be used in the text without translation:

Conuco: a plot of land which has been cleared of trees and bushes and sown with the various plants and crops eaten in the mountains.

Conuquero: a man whose livelihood comes from a conuco.

Sierra: "mountain range." Used generically to mean mountains. E.g. "I live in the sierra."

Serrano: "one who lives in the mountains." In the Dominican Republic the word tends to have the pejorative connotations of the word "hick." In this thesis the word will refer to the people who live by agriculture as opposed to "workers" in the sawmill.

Campesino: a person who grows up in a rural area, as opposed to a city or town. Not directly related to occupation; all of the serranos and many of the sawmill workers refer to themselves as campesinos.

Campo: rural area, countryside.

Pueblo: town, urban area. Pueblo and campo are used as opposites in conversation.