Un Cherry por Lima (by Michael Shifter)

Precarious. That's the first sensation I had when I arrived in Lima in January, 1987 - six months after the famous "penales" and six months before the equally famous bank nationalization. What brought me to the city was work with the Ford Foundation. The assignment: to support people and programs on behalf of human rights and democracy throughout the Andean Region and Southern Cone -- including, of course, Peru.

After six years -- three spent living in Lima and three frequently coming in and out of the city -- that assignment is coming to an end next month. I confess that my sensation of precariousness remains. It was formed by my initial drive on the Zanjón, when I saw so many old cars broken down along the way, and so many others whose days were obviously numbered. As I turned from superficial impressions to somewhat deeper learning about Peru -- its political institutions and civil society -- the sense that things here were rather precarious tended to be reinforced.

But the sensation is now different. It is substantially tempered by a greater appreciation of the city's endless marvels: its enormous vitality, cultural richness, and the resourcefulness, extraordinary wisdom, and sheer dignity of its people. "Dignity." The word doesn't flow easily for many of the North American consultants the Ford Foundation contracted to look at our programs. After all, scientists -- even "social" scientists -- tend to prefer more technical language. But after some resistance many of them used precisely this term in conveying their impressions of the people they met in Lima. I couldn't agree more.

The ups and downs of political violence notwithstanding, for the past several years there is no city in the world in which I have felt more at ease. Why is this the case, I wonder? The key, I suspect, has to do with some of the commonalities between Lima's culture and that of my native New York City (though, to be precise, I actually grew up roughly 15 miles outside of Manhattan). Both cities are intense and unpredictable, steeped in drama and mystery, with people living somewhat on the edge.
A number of other parallels come to mind. Several of these derive from the marked New York Jewish milieu of my own background and family, which permeates the city. Perhaps the foremost is humor. Lest anyone think that all forms of Marxism are dead, it's good to remember what Groucho once said: that it is much harder to do comedy than tragedy, for people laugh at different things but all cry at the same things. The tragic dimensions of Lima have gotten all of the attention; the marvelous wit of its people much less so.

I'm not, of course, talking about "jokes", however wonderful these may be in New York and Lima. The American sociologist Daniel Bell has said that "A joke is a contrived situation, a manipulated effect, a commodity of the moment. Jewish humor is wit, the play of words, the compression of language to reflect the compression chamber of life". If the deep and rich irony so prevalent in Lima does not reflect the "compression chamber of life", what does it reflect? In both New York Jewish and Limeño cultures there is a great emphasis on applying oneself, working hard, using one's imagination and mental resources to the fullest -- yet not, God forbid, taking oneself too seriously. Many Limeños and New York Jews mix seriousness of purpose with a refreshing capacity to laugh at themselves, a quality, in my experience, not found in many other parts of this hemisphere.

The mayors of both cities during the period I lived in Lima best exemplify this. Whether the source, or butt, of jokes, Ed Koch of New York and Jorge del Castillo of Lima were closely identified with a special sort of humor. Koch, who is of the Jewish faith, was the quintessential "character", a forceful, colorful, complex personality who said what was on his mind and could not be tamed. New York -- not San Francisco or Boston or Washington -- tends to breed such "characters". Of course, Lima is similarly endowed with an array of marvelous "personajes". Leaving aside whether this is good or bad, it is fair to assert that other Peruvian -- and Latin American -- cities can hardly boast this quality.

Other similarities stand out as well. Limeños and New York Jews are notoriously skilled in the arts of "joder" and, in Yiddish, "kibbitz". These involve a special blend of affectionate teasing with tiresome irritation: employed properly, they often call for treading a very fine line and pushing situations to their limits. After several years I've concluded that "joder" and "kibbitz" have a great deal in common.
One cannot forget the central matter of food. Leaving aside the (spectacular!) quality of Limeño or New York Jewish food, I am struck by how important it is in both cultures. When I was growing up in New York, our family discussed at each meal what we would be eating at the following one. The main topic of conversation at lunch, for example, was what we would be having for dinner. I was amazed to discover that many Limeños also think and talk in these terms. For many here, food is not only an interest but an obsession. Not surprisingly, among my various non-New York friends now living in that city, only the Limeñan describes the magnificent New York "cheesecake" with the same relish and passion and detail as he talks about the "ceviche" of, say, Chorillos.

What can explain these shared qualities between Limeñan and New York Jewish cultures? I've pondered the question, and am not so sure I know the answer. I suspect it has a lot to do with the peculiar chemistry, complexities and contradictions of both cities. It is the distinctive blend of what José María Arguedas called "todas las sangres" that somehow tends to produce rich humor, an appreciation of good food, colorful personalities, and a sense that things are on the edge and a bit precarious.

It boggles the mind to consider how much rich history was packed into a mere six years -- in the scheme of things, a relatively short period of time -- in Peru. I feel like I was able to soak up at least several lifetimes worth of history. A few highlights come to mind: the growth and expansion of Latin America's most threatening insurgency; the political ascendancy, and defeat, of Peru's world-class writer; the disappointment and failure of Latin America's youngest, most hopeful political leader; the astonishing decline of what had been regarded as one of the Latin America's most promising leftist coalitions; and the phenomenal emergence, defying all analyses and predictions, of a political novice of Japanese descent as the country's elected leader. These, of course, are just a few examples: countless others can also be mentioned.

It has been terrific to have been witness to such a fascinating piece of history. A history, as so many foreign journalists covering Peru have remarked to me, characterized by unmatched "density". The texture of the Lima's cultural and political life is remarkably thick, filled with so many layers and complexities. As a result of this, in my work with the Ford Foundation, it was inevitable that there would be extended periods of what could be
called "foreplay" -- prolonged sessions, often of several hours, of political discussion and analysis before "getting down to business" about the particular program we were supporting. In this sense my meetings with groups in Lima have differed from those in, say, Santiago or Bogotá or Buenos Aires.

Of course, it is a bit hazardous to refer to Limeño culture in the broad sense. I'm actually talking about a tiny slice of that culture, a political/intellectual elite. The slice may be tiny, but it is also exquisitely delicious. It is a subculture whose love for politics, and penchant for irony, is surpassed only by its insatiable appetite for gossip. One of my favorite spectacles in Lima has been to witness the intense game of oneupsmanship in the gossip competition, as each person tries to outdo the other with a yet juicier, more shocking piece of information.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this subculture can be found in Caretas. It manages to blend political analysis, distinctive humor, and lots of gossip, reflecting this tiny slice of Limeño society. In my experience the magazine is unique. Peruvians living in New York tend to rush to the Times Square kiosko to buy it--less, perhaps, as a matter of desire than a sense of compulsion. My impression is that there a few Brazilians living in New York with a similar compulsion to buy Veja, or Colombians to buy Semana.-- or, of course, North Americans living in Latin America to buy Time or Newsweek.

Many have remarked on the down side of this tiny, delicious subculture. Its universe is somewhat restricted, even exclusive; it's optic, circumscribed. As a result, just a few weeks before Fujimori's spectacular showing in the April 1990 elections, few Peruvian analysts had even the most remote clue about the likelihood of these stunning results. The Fujimori phenomenon completely escaped many of the immensely talented and perceptive Limenian intellectuals for whom I have so much respect and deep affection. This, of course, is symptomatic of Peru's underlying problems of social fragmentation and disintegration that make the country so mysterious, with the sense that virtually nothing lies outside of the realm of possibility.
Yet, despite so many enduring problems and contradictions, I am tremendously hopeful about Peru. My optimism is not only of the heart, but of the head. Lima is, at once, such a precarious yet vital and enlivening city. The challenge is to build solid, democratic institutions of various sorts; the puzzle remains why this has continued to elude the country.

But I’m convinced the resources are there and will eventually come together in a positive -- perhaps even unimaginably magnificent and powerful -- way. Several years ago I was interviewed by a North American journalist and gave what I thought was a rather sober and discouraging assessment of the situation in Peru. Her comment: "It’s nice to finally talk to someone who is optimistic." At a panel almost two years ago I said: "Peru suffers from political crisis, social disintegration and institutional breakdown. I hope I’m not being too optimistic."

For an experience enriching and gratifying beyond words, I thank you, Lima, more than you could possibly imagine. It is, however, time to move on. As Groucho would put it, "Hello, I must be going." But, I assure you, I'll be back.