

## Poverty and Politics in Peru

by  
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**Henry Dietz** *Urban Poverty, Political Participation, and the State: Lima 1970–1990*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998. 307 pp.

Lima has long been Peru's largest city and the center of Peruvian economics, containing Peru's wealthiest and its poorest citizens. Over half of its inhabitants are characterized as living in squatter-origin settlements or tenement rental slums. Henry Dietz's *Urban Poverty, Political Participation, and the State: Lima 1970–1990* offers a thorough analysis of the political participation of Lima's poor in its economic, political, and historical context. Dietz interviewed residents of several of Lima's poorer neighborhoods four times over the course of the 20 years—in 1970, under the military dictatorship; in 1982, after the transition to democracy and Belaúnde's election; in 1985, right after García's election; and in 1990, after Fujimori had surprised the world by capturing the presidency.

Dietz begins his text by outlining his framework for analysis, grounding it in the philosophies of several of his contemporaries. He divides participation into formal (voting) and informal (participating in activities such as neighborhood organizations or petitioning the state) and goes on to propose that democracy is a good whose benefit is to be weighed against material well-being—in some cases the costs of democracy may be perceived as too high. Using Hirschfield's calculus, he specifies the following possible actions for the poor in terms of political participation and action: loyalty (to a candidate or organization), voice (voicing complaints within a party or neighborhood organization), and exit (leaving altogether). He examines the impact on popular participation of macroeconomic conditions, the presence and intensity of poverty, the Peruvian state, state-civil society relations, the role of metropolitan Lima, and the role of its individual neighborhoods.

In the first two chapters, Dietz traces economic and political events from 1970 through 1990. The 1970s saw the populist experiment of the military dictatorship under General Velasco and a worsening economy. In 1980 the elections marked a transition to democratic rule and the election of Fernando Belaúnde Terry, a conservative. The economy continued to go downhill, and in 1985 Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance—APRA) leader Alán García was elected to the presidency. His populist policies helped the economy rebound for several years only to collapse in mid-1987. After the successive failures of the major political parties to ameliorate the economic troubles plaguing the nation, Peru turned away from traditional political parties and placed its hope in independent candidates

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for office—specifically, Ricardo Belmont as mayor of Lima, elected in 1989, and Alberto Fujimori, elected president in 1990.

In Chapter 3, Dietz discusses Lima's political and economic history in more depth; in Chapters 4 and 5 he describes Lima, its districts, the six neighborhoods he focuses on, and their inhabitants. In Chapter 6, he characterizes the ways in which Lima's urban poor participated in politics between 1970 and 1990, comparing forms of formal and informal political participation in his six neighborhoods. The Shining Path is discussed in this book, but Dietz is explicit from the outset that it is not to be a "central concern" (56). As he points out, by the 1990 election the country was at the peak of its economic crisis, the Shining Path was making moves toward Lima and had deeply threatened the country's domestic stability, and García had failed on a number of counts. Among all these hardships, the economy was clearly what troubled Lima's poor the most.

The most important of the conclusions Dietz draws from his research may be that the poor gain more from direct action than from voting. While voting, being both easy and mandatory, became the most common form of political participation after it was legalized in 1978, it did not replace informal participation in any capacity. The approach to voting of Lima's urban poor was more practical than ideological. As the economy worsened they switched their support in large numbers from party to party, searching for someone to improve the economy and their way of life. However, as Dietz writes, "in times of great economic stress they did not see the state as very relevant to solving their problems" and thus devoted much of their effort to other, more direct means of participating—working for improvements on a local level. While neighborhood differences at first made a significant difference in types of participation, by the end these had been smoothed out as the communities accomplished much of what they could do on their own. Community involvement was high throughout. In the mid-to-late 1980s, as the state's capacity to respond to requests diminished, petitioning the state as a form of participation dropped off and the urban poor increasingly turned inward for solutions to their problems. Very rational in their participation, they did not spend time and energy on actions that they perceived as futile. Finally, while the residents of these six neighborhoods contributed greatly to the Peruvian democracy—they voted and respected election outcomes and also maintained a rich civil society—they received very little in return.

This is a superb analysis. A brief comparison of the participation of Lima's upper and middle classes would have been a nice addition, but the book is thorough and solid without it. The longitudinal nature of Dietz's study lends much to his findings. He studies the patterns of the political behavior of Lima's poor over a series of changes—from military dictatorship to democracy, from a suffering economy to one of the worst in the world, from a time when the traditional parties were strong to one in which they had lost most credibility. In doing so, he not only discusses action within the political system but also highlights the injustices of the system and an ultimately unresponsive state.