Postmodern Plotting in Ecuador? A Response to Guillaume Long

written by Jeffrey R. Webber | October 16, 2015

One of the tasks Guillaume Long sets himself in his recent interview with *Jacobin* is to refute the magazine's recent coverage of Ecuador. In particular, the two recent pieces of note are an interview I conducted with Ecuadorian activist and intellectual Alejandra Santillana Ortíz and an article I wrote separately, reflecting on my most recent visit to the country. I was happy to learn of Long's contribution to *Jacobin* on the current conjuncture in Ecuador. I expected a lucid articulation of the broad perspective advanced by the government of Rafael Correa for international consumption. Unfortunately, rather than a serious contribution to the ongoing debate, Long's intervention is characterized to different degrees by evasion, caricature, and obfuscation. I will limit myself to a few instances in what follows.

Long argues that what "sparked the recent wave of protests was two bills put forward by the Ecuadorian government that tackled two of Marx's favourite issues: inheritance and speculation." In reality, there is no "wave" connecting the various disputes of 2015 but a series of disparate protests with unique motivations and grievances.

Right-Wing Conspiracy?

The "spark" in Long's interview is circumscribed to a set of right-wing mobilizations in June of this year, which indeed centred on the government's two (extremely modest) progressive reforms in the areas of inheritance and speculation. Referring to the events of June as representative of the recent wave, however, is misleading because the "people's strike" and indigenous march of August 2015 are plainly distinct phenomena from the right-wing June protests. The people's strike and indigenous march were organized well before the inheritance and speculation legislation was introduced, and they link not to these issues of right-wing grievance but to a separate lineage of indigenous and popular struggle since 2009, beginning with disputes over the pro-capital legislation vis-à-vis water use and mining concessions. Long's depiction of figures mobilizing against the government from the Right – Guillermo Lasso, Jaime Nebot, Mauricio Rodas, and so on – is thus beside the point, insofar as their particular role in contemporary politics is fully recognized and articulated in the earlier *Jacobin* coverage. The right mobilized opportunistically in the events of August, as everyone understands, but to suggest that they dominated the people's strike and indigenous march is obfuscation.

Long also attempts to portray the August protests as a failure by contrasting the incredible aims of the Left and indigenous movement from what they were able to achieve. He suggests that "minority

left-wing groups did call for a general strike on August 13, but it didn't happen. There was not strike, no workplace closures, nothing that resembles what is understood as a workers strike in the English language."

In fact, the Left groups involved in the events of August did not call for a general strike, but rather, and explicitly, for a "people's strike," a much more modest tactical intervention in the conjuncture, given a realistic assessment of the independent Left's relative weakness. The fragmented Left understood that they lacked the capacity to carry out a general strike in workplaces, and instead opted for a tactic of occupying public space in the capital and disrupting the flow of capital – briefly and often symbolically – in the sphere of circulation. This has been known in left-wing Ecuadorian circles since the 1980s as the tactic of the "people's strike." The interview with Santillana Ortíz explains these local particularities in close detail. Through this realist lens of the possibilities at the moment, they more or less were successful in their aims.

Thus when Long remarks that the indigenous march in August was "a far cry from the great indigenous uprisings of the 1990s," he is introducing a political truism as though it were a revelation. The independent Left is fragmented and the indigenous movement relatively weak. But the absence of a strong Left alternative is no reason to mystify the character of the Correa government, just as is isn't in Greece with the Syriza government, or in Brazil with the Workers' Party. Indeed, a proper characterization is the first step to building the necessary new Left.

Social Movement Violence?

The most outrageous factual claim is that "the demonstrations were exceptionally violent. Over one hundred police officers were left injured, with some policemen kidnapped and humiliated by protesters in the south of the country." The only violence in Quito was carried out by the state, leading to several (violent) arrests of left-wing and indigenous movement activists. How many right-wing agitators were arrested?

In the south, who was "kidnapped" precisely, and what does Long mean by this? This is a hyperbolic claim for which I can find no evidence. What was the context of police injuries? None of this is explained or substantiated. These accusations are presumably a reference to the police incursion into the community of Saraguro at the end of August, during which 26 indigenous activists were arrested. As they have been wont to do in such situations of police presence in their territory, the community detained a police officer and a chief of police for a brief period. The "kidnapping" charge is hysteria.

It is obviously true that unarmed clashes with the armed apparatus of the Ecuadorian state is a regularity for social movements in the Ecuadorian south in an era characterized by the expanding radius of extractive multinational capital where it is unwanted. But in which direction does the violence flow? One good indicator is the rampant use by the state of "terrorism and sabotage" charges against non-violent, often indigenous protesters, for activities such as blocking roads or preventing the transport of equipment of multinational mining companies to their concession sites. There are hundreds of such socio-ecological conflicts ongoing in Latin America at the moment, and unfortunately the Ecuadorian state is not unique in its consistent defence of mining and oil capital when such lines are drawn.

Useful Idiots?

Another rhetorical move is Long's interview is the reduction of the critical Left in Ecuador, along with their sympathizers internationally, to naïfs or postmodern liberals posing as radicals. "In some cases," Long suggests, "this is based on a poor knowledge of Ecuador and a great deal of confusion

regarding recent events. But in other cases it reflects a tendency to espouse a postmodern critique to nation-state building in general," a "vaguely… defined … anti-power, anti-state, anti-leadership, and essentially liberal (even if the new fashionable word is 'libertarian'). It cloaks itself in radical rhetoric but ultimately plays into the hands of a conservative political agenda." In an impressive turn of statecraft, such generalities are directed at no one in particular, but by implication are meant to belittle huge swathes of the critical Left. With regard to one of the specific motivations of his interview, Long fails to uncover evidence of confusion or post-modern liberalism in the earlier *Jacobin* coverage. Paired with general defamation is Long's particular evasion of precisely what loyalty to the state and "nation-building in general" mean in this particular Ecuadorian conjuncture.

In a paradigmatic expression of passive revolution in the country today, Long weaves a technocratic thread throughout his interview, of loyalty and submission to benevolent elected officials and anxiety in the face of undisciplined, independent, social organization of workers, peasants, and indigenous communities from below. The post-modern liberal left, in this view, "exalts non-state actors, NGOs, and a nebulously defined civil society, elected by no one, who are always seen as forces for good." The Correa government's electoralist calculus – in which politics is increasingly reduced to choosing who rules – extra-parliamentary politics lose all texture and particularity. This is evident in Long's inability to differentiate between Jaime Nebot and trade union activists, between Guillermo Lasso and indigenous activists mobilizing to fight mining incursions into their territories. There is no room in such a calculus for a virtuous dialectic of a Left government operating inside the contradictory apparatuses of a dependent capitalist state, on the one hand, and self-organization and mobilization of popular sectors from below. You could argue, plausibly, that such a dialectic was visible during the Constituent Assembly process of 2006 to 2008, but that time has long since passed.

Economics and Social Gains

No one disputes Long's basic points on economic growth and social improvements under Correa in the realms of health care, education, income inequality, and poverty. But he misrepresents the realities of the international economic environment and exaggerates some of this social improvement, while ignoring its most recent directionality. Improvements in income inequality and poverty outcomes in Ecuador have not been out of step with the general improvement across these areas throughout much of South America (governed by gradations of Left and Right parties) throughout the duration of the Chinese-driven commodities supercycle (2003-2011). Economic growth was rapid throughout this period in South America. Therefore Long gets the timing of the global recession's impact on South America wrong. "Economic growth has averaged 4.3 percent," he writes, "despite Rafael Correa's coming to office on the eve of a global recession." This was a general regional trend, not a particular achievement of Correa's administration.

The global recession, however, is now reaching South America in a delayed reverberation, through China's slowdown. South America has entered what is likely to be an extended period of low growth, and Left (and Right) governments in the region are facing class decisions, made sharper by the absence of high commodity prices to lubricate social programs. Who is paying for the fall in state revenues? The rich or the poor? Mining capitalists or indigenous communities? Early signals in Ecuador are not promising for those interested in genuinely shifting costs onto the elite.

On the directionality of change in income and poverty, a recent intervention by sociologist Pablo Ospina is suggestive:

"The figures for poverty reduction and income inequality in Ecuador since 2001 are no doubt very positive. However, it is clear that the rate of reduction was more pronounced between 2001 and 2006 than between 2007 and 2011, while between 2011 and 2014 things began to stagnate or worse. Indeed, poverty fell from 64% to 37% between 2001 and 2006 and from there dropped to

24% in 2014. More significant is that since June 2013 poverty initially dropped and then started to climb slowly (from 23% to 24%). Something similar happened with income inequality, the Gini index which in 2001 was at 59 points, fell to 54 in 2006 and reached 48 in 2014. The significant thing is that December 2011, when the index was at its lowest point (around 47) it stagnated and then began to climb."

The Transitional Program that Never Begins

Long argues that contrary to the doctrine of an "essentialist Left" there must be a transitional period, away from an extractive primary-commodity driven economy toward a more diverse productive basis. It cannot happen overnight. Instantaneous transformation, "can't be a serious proposal." This is yet another straw-person, set up by Long, only to be knocked down with characteristic vigour. No one of any import is arguing against a transitional program away from primary-export led accumulation, nor are there any notable currents in Ecuador's critical Left dreaming of an overnight reversal of Ecuador's characteristic integration into the world capitalist economy.

If that's the caricature, Long's evasion is a failure to recognize the absence of any serious transitional program under Correa. Indeed it is much worse than this. There has been a well-documented *intensification* of the model of accumulation which Correa inherited from the past – most notably in the unprecedented acceleration of mining concessions to private capital, and the dispossession of those inhabiting these immediate and surrounding areas that such processes necessarily entail.

Ethnic Essentialists and Other Bogeymen

Long complains, finally, that the composition of CONAIE has changed, from an indigenous movement that once "had a more class-based approach" to one where "ethnicists (or essentialists)" now reign supreme. The "founding fathers of the movement," he argues, "rightly denounced the ethnic roots of exclusion and domination, but also insisted on structural factors." Long contends that many of the "old" CONAIE currents support the government. Here is an indicative passage from an interview I conducted in 2010 in Quito with perhaps the most iconic "founding father" of CONAIE, Luis Macas. How well does Long's story hold up?

"We have to differentiate between the platform of the social movements, and the indigenous movement, and the platform of this government. What we have to be clear about is that the government did indeed usurp the language of the movements for its political project. This is evident in the government's discourse, but is not present in the substance of its practice. The government talks about the 'citizens' revolution,' now the 'country is for everyone.' But the country apparently does not include the indigenous communities. As it never has, for centuries. This is the characteristic, the type of government we have in this country, despite the fact that outside the country Correa is seen as absolutely progressive, and it is believed even that this is a government of the Left. But there's nothing to substantiate this."