



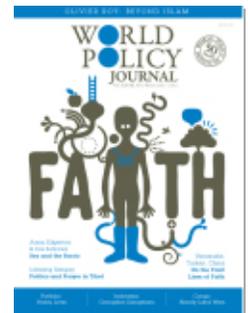
PROJECT MUSE®

Inside the Bubble: Educating Ecuador's Elite

Thea Johnson

World Policy Journal, Volume 28, Number 2, Summer 2011, pp. 41-48
(Article)

Published by World Policy Institute
DOI: 10.1353/wpj.2011.0005



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/wpj/summary/v028/28.2.johnson.html>

Inside the Bubble

EDUCATING ECUADOR'S ELITE

THEA JOHNSON

QUITO—It is springtime in the capital of Ecuador, and that means everyone is celebrating *Carnival*, as are people all over Latin America. In the halls of the Fundación Colegio Americano—the American School—in the neighborhood of Carcelén, students are gearing up for the annual election of the school’s “princess.” This is no suburban prom queen selection. The election takes a beauty contest and transforms it into a grand display of wealth. One candidate is chosen from each of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. Even in a school for the ultra-wealthy, filled with unusually attractive children, these girls stand out as the true beauties. As the three candidates campaign, six-foot photos of each hang in the school’s main foyer, greeting those who enter with a hint of cleavage and the come-hither expressions of fashion models.

Three days of *Carnival* festivities have led now to the climax—a school-wide dance where the princess will be named. At this grand finale, each class is charged with the responsibility of creating an elaborate dance routine before its candidate for princess is “revealed” to the audience. The routines involve elaborately choreographed theatrical numbers—intricate matching outfits, dancers moving in a harmonized bridge—in anticipation of the arrival of the entrant. Along with my fellow teachers, I sit watching the performance. The audience fills with parents, relatives, siblings and friends, as camera flashes create a circle of light around the stage.

As the music builds, the mass of dancing teenagers reaches a crescendo of movement. Then, with a wave, all the students point skyward with one grand gesture. The audience follows the movement with their eyes, craning their necks. And suddenly, above, there appears a giant glass ball. Eyes take a moment to adjust, but soon we can all see the first candidate, encased in the immense transparent ball, dangling dramatically from the ceiling. She is wearing a white dress with a corset bodice and a full skirt—quite likely purchased from Miami, or hand-made by a member of the small group of women in Quito who earn a living outfitting the rich. This year the candidates are limited to spending \$500 on the gown. Before the school imposed the price cap, these young women could spend \$1,000 or more on the chosen dress.

The first would-be princess waves at her audience, who cheer raucously below.

She is beautiful. Her skin is tan, but not dark. Her layered, dusky blonde hair falls over her shoulders. Her figure is flawless.

As the glass ball descends slowly, majestically, few look past it to the ceiling. There, all but invisible to the wealthy throng below, dark-skinned men in blue uniforms are balancing from the rafters. They are the school’s janitors and grounds keepers. Standing precariously on the beams, without any safety net or belts, easily 30 feet off the ground, they are holding the rope attached to the glass ball and its cargo. The men brace themselves against the beams as they lower the ball as slowly and gracefully as possible. They are sweating, straining with all their might. The candidate smiles and waves inside the glass. Finally, mercifully, the ball lands and the men relax their muscles. On the floor, the door to the ball opens and the girl emerges. The crowd erupts.

LIMITED MOBILITY

Many outsiders would find this scene strange, if not downright troubling. But to the participants, and to most of the on-lookers, it seems perfectly normal—and not just because it happens every year. The girls who vie to become princesses already are royalty of a sort, living out their entire lives in a glass bubble of tremendous wealth, a lifestyle of prosperity made possible by a permanent underclass that toils without the benefit of a basic safety net. In a country where it is not uncommon to see child “fire-eaters” earning pennies performing on street corners, this three-day extravaganza cost each of the students’ families and the school several thousand dollars. To them,

Thea Johnson spent two years teaching at the American School of Quito. She is now a writer and a public defender in New York.

it is a small price to pay to demonstrate—mostly to themselves—their own affluence, and to reinforce their self-image as a class very much apart and above the rest.

They are not mistaken. Per capita annual income in Ecuador is just under \$4,000, qualifying it as a middle-income economy, according to the World Bank's classification system. But that income is distributed most unevenly. In Ecuador, the richest 10 percent control more than a third of all personal wealth. At the other end of the spectrum, the bottom 20 percent collect just 3.3 percent. Some 52 percent of Ecuadorians live on less than two dollars a day, and 20 percent get by on a dollar a day or less.

Ecuador's economy in the 20th century was sustained by three major export booms—cacao in the early part of the century, bananas in the 1940s and 1950s, and finally oil, which was first discovered on a grand scale in 1967 by a Texaco Gulf consortium, and which has proved to be Ecuador's greatest blessing and curse. These successive booms created a level of wealth sufficient to support a middle class, a mix of intellectuals, businessmen, and government employees. The oil years also allowed some poor Ecuadorians to improve their lot—partially on account of the rise of labor unions—and join the ranks of the middle class. But most of the boom wealth accrued to the already-wealthy and those who controlled the major industries. Social mobility remained a phenomenon of the lower economic tiers. In Ecuador, it seems, the poor can become working- or middle-class, but the middle class can never become rich.

What accounts for this? A major factor, unsurprisingly, is race. Most of the wealthy in Ecuadorian society can be classified as white or light-skinned *mestizos*—

the term used for those of mixed European and indigenous ancestry. In Ecuador, the logic goes that the lighter one's skin, the heavier his bank account. It's difficult to know how many "white" Ecuadorians there are, because of the elastic nature of racial categories in this part of the world. Most estimates put the number at below 7 percent of the population. (*Mestizos* account for about 60 to 65 percent of the population, indigenous people about around 20 to 25 percent, and Afro-Ecuadorians around 5 percent.) If we assume this roughly 7 percent of the population almost entirely overlaps with the wealthiest 10 percent of the population, we can estimate the tiny minority of white Ecuadorians controls close to a quarter of the country's wealth.

This group and other wealthy Ecuadorians were largely spared the worst effects of the defining moment in modern Ecuadorian economic history—the financial crisis of 1999-2000. The collapse of 16 banks, among the 40 that existed at the time, set off a period of rapid depreciation of the Ecuadorian sucre and a concurrent increase in inflation. The crisis also included a freeze on a huge number of bank accounts, containing money that would either never be seen again or would be returned years later, greatly reduced. Many wealthy Ecuadorians were saved from the full consequences of this collapse because at least some of their money was held abroad in places like Miami. But for most middle-class Ecuadorians—government bureaucrats, teachers, professionals—the crisis wiped out all they had built.

In 2000, the Ecuadorian government made the American dollar the country's official currency, providing a short-term solution to the problem, but ultimately putting Ecuador at a deep disadvantage

to its neighbors and creating an inflation crisis that undid much of the social mobility that marked earlier booms. The middle class simply began to dissolve, with the percentage of Ecuadorians below the poverty line soaring from 35 percent to over 50 percent. Between 1998 and 2002, somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 Ecuadorians—many of them skilled workers and members of the middle class—left the country, most for the United States or Spain. Today, in New York City’s borough of Queens, the most diverse county in the nation, the number of Ecuadorian immigrants outstrips those from Colombia, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and even Mexico.

NORTH OF THE VIRGIN

Throughout these shifts of fortune, the center of power and wealth has remained in Quito. To a greater degree than many other Latin American capitals, Quito continues to be defined by a set of traditional

mores, including those governing race and class relations. Even the geography of the city hews to these traditions. Quito is essentially one very long valley.

Northern Quito, the area north of the Panecillo—an elevated area where the Virgin of Qui-

to statue stands—boasts select neighborhoods, such as Quito Tennis, named for the exclusive tennis and country club that the neighborhood grew up around. The south of the city, which faces the Virgin’s back, is a relatively recent creation—the prod-

uct of massive migration from surrounding rural areas. The wealthy stay north of their watchful Virgin.

In 2005, I was invited to the home of a wealthy family for Passover—a holiday few in the country know about, let alone celebrate. Though the small Jewish population in Quito is of Eastern European, not Spanish, descent, their “whiteness” still allows them a presence in a closed world, to which many Jewish families have had access since they arrived in Ecuador, mostly in the 1940s, fleeing the Holocaust.

When she issued the invitation, the hostess reminded me that the event would be “a little dressy.” Having been raised Jewish, I was no stranger to Passover seders. I put on a pleated skirt and a matching blouse and sweater. My favorite *taxista*, Juan, came to pick me up. His eight-year old son, Juan *pequeño*, sat in the front seat, and we drove up to the Quito Tennis neighborhood. We arrived on time, which in Ecuador is early, so the three of us drove around in circles, admiring the neighborhood and its palatial apartment buildings.

I met Juan when he happened to stop for me one day in the Old Town area of Quito. We hit it off, and from that moment he became my go-to taxi driver. Juan would almost never say no to a job, even if it involved driving from the south side of the city to pick me up in my neighborhood, El Batán Alto, in the north. Many times, he had one or all three of his children in the car. Juan occupied a well-populated socio-economic netherworld, a “working poor” class, hovering above poverty but not particularly close to middle class. While he did not have a stable income, he made ends meet by working brutal hours as a taxi driver, knowing that today’s fare likely paid for tomorrow’s school books, or food, or rent.

RICH
ECUADORIANS
ARE NOT A GROUP
THAT WELCOMES
OUTSIDERS,
ESPECIALLY THOSE
WITH DARKER
SKIN OR SMALLER
BANK ACCOUNTS.

mores, including those governing race and class relations. Even the geography of the city hews to these traditions. Quito is essentially one very long valley.

Northern Quito, the area north of the Panecillo—an elevated area where the Virgin of Qui-

Juan had never seen Quito Tennis and took in the surroundings. Meanwhile, his son chatted merrily with me, stopping once with wide-eyed innocence to ask, “You know people who live here?”

Finally, I decided I was sufficiently late to be on time. The apartment was the most spectacular I had seen in Ecuador—a duplex of exquisitely decorated rooms, all offering panoramic views of the volcanoes that loom in Quito’s horizons. As the other guests began arriving, it occurred to me that the Ecuadorian tendency toward understatement had once again escaped me. “A little dressy” had apparently meant black-tie. The women arriving were in long gowns or satin pants and silk tops. Usually, my skin tone gave me away as a foreigner in Ecuador. In this palatial room filled with white Ecuadorians, my cotton blouse and sweater betrayed me.

I sat next to a graduate of the American School, who was driven to and from the meal by armed bodyguards—a precaution made necessary, I assumed, by the exceptional success of his unnamed business. He laughed as he told me about the time his graduating high school class destroyed a boat in the Galapagos Islands, off the coast of Ecuador, during an alcohol-fueled party on their “senior trip.” They were punished with nothing more than a strong suggestion that they never return to the islands again. More than a decade out of high school, he still thought the story was funny. I smiled politely and flipped through the pages of my Haggadah. As we commemorated the escape of the ancient Israelites from subjugation, a legion of dark-skinned staff stood silently along the perimeter of the room, poised to refresh our drinks and clear our plates.

CELEBRATING FREEDOM

Located in the northern neighborhood of Carcelén is the sprawling campus of the American School of Quito. The school, perhaps the most prestigious in the country, educates the children of the wealthiest and most powerful Ecuadorians. These families provide a window into the country’s elite, which publicly embraces a concept of equality, while ensuring practices and policies that keep wealth from being distributed more equitably.

The school was founded in 1940 by the then-president of Ecuador, Galo Plazo Laso, and the American ambassador to Ecuador, Boaz Long. It was meant to serve as an alternative to Catholic schools and to the German School, which offered a European educational model. Until then, those were the only viable options for wealthy Ecuadorian and foreign families. Then, as now, the school purported to play a vital role in the development of a democratic tradition in the nation. But the student body has always been comprised almost entirely of the children of wealthy families. The only exceptions to this homogeneity are the children of the school’s middle-class Ecuadorian teachers, who receive a fraction of the already-modest wages paid to the few foreign teachers, but who get the benefit of sending their children to the school for free.

The American School, in fact, is somewhat of a misnomer. The school is not run by Americans, only a small percent of Americans serve on its faculty, and just a handful of its students are American. The school educates the children of the privileged in Ecuador—business owners, diplomats from other Latin American countries, politicians, oilmen. Among my students’ parents were the head of Pizza Hut’s Latin America division, the owner of

all the major shopping malls in Quito, the Brazilian envoy to Ecuador, and the head of one of the most successful restaurant chains in Colombia and Ecuador—a delightful spot, featuring waffles of every variety. The daughter of then-president Lucio Gutierrez was a student at the school. In 2004, her sudden transfer to a school in the United States hinted at her father's not-unfounded fears of being overthrown. (He was thrown out of office in a largely peaceful coup in April 2005.) Such students are the face of wealth and power in Ecuador—a vastly different face than the rest of the nation.

CANNES VS. CAIRO

That is not to say that wealth always leads to a complete disconnect from the larger society, especially among young students, who are constantly exposed to ideas about social justice through travel, television, and contacts with the world outside the bubble. I once asked each of my students in English class to write a brief essay on his or her favorite place, using all five senses. As the students sat writing quietly, one of them, Raul, approached me and said he was struggling with the assignment. He could not seem to decide between Cannes or Cairo—a dilemma very few of his fellow Ecuadorians would ever have to contemplate.

Still, Raul was also a great lover of Che Guevara, and not just because T-shirts bearing his image had recently become fashionable. He was deeply moved by a trip he took to Cuba, and fancied himself a socialist, even though—or precisely because—he came from a world where the difference between the “haves” and the “have-nots” was rarely questioned. He, along with a cadre of students, asked insightful questions about civil rights in the United States and struggled with the

issues of racism and classism in their country and the world. The best paper I ever received—one of the few “A+” grades I handed out—went to a boy named Santiago, for an essay on the Rastafarian movement. When I saw the paper's topic, my heart sank at the thought that I might have a student who had figured out a clever way to extol the virtues of marijuana. What I found instead was a thoughtful piece on the foundations of the religion and its connection to the Black Power movement, a concept that must have been foreign indeed to young Santiago.

The real question, of course, was what sort of impact Raul and Santiago, and those like them, can have on this small group of rich Ecuadorians that comprise their friends and relatives. It is not a group that welcomes outsiders, especially those with darker skin or smaller bank accounts. Indeed, during my time teaching at the school, there was not a single black student among the 2,000 enrolled, and only one indigenous student. Ecuador has a robust indigenous movement, and its Afro-Ecuadorian community has produced many of the soccer heroes worshipped throughout the country. But the status that accrues to major athletes in much of the world is insufficient to allow entry to the tight circles of privilege that isolates Quito's elite.

The few students who do not fit the mold have a tough time. In 2004, the school admitted a young indigenous girl from the Otavalo region, whose family, like others from Otavalo, had made a good deal of money selling traditional handicrafts abroad. She lasted just one year. The rumor among the teachers was that the ostracism of her classmates drove her from the school. She suffered no blatant exclusion. Instead, it seems, it

was the cumulative effect of always being the only person of indigenous descent, the only person not from old money, not from a tony neighborhood in Quito or its surrounding suburbs. I once passed her in the auditorium as she and her classmates presented independent-study projects at the end of the school year. Her project focused on the culture of her indigenous group. That day, she stood patiently by her poster boards in the traditional female dress of the Otavalo region—the colorful multi-layered skirt, a white embroidered blouse with elaborate sleeves, a cloth binding her ponytail, multiple strands of gold and red beads around her neck. Many teachers came to hear her presentation and to view her exhibits, but most of her fellow students strolled past, opting instead to check out the girls who had created their own jewelry lines as their final project—a popular choice that year.

It is not entirely surprising, of course, that teenagers may be more interested in jewelry than indigenous culture, and competing theories abound regarding the reasons for the young woman's departure from the school. Still, the fact remains that this experiment in diversity failed. And it was the only one I ever witnessed. The indigenous, who account for around one fourth of the population and who, in some sectors, are thriving economically, were completely absent from the most prestigious school in the country. No matter how well-intentioned, the discussions about civil rights in the school's eighth grade social studies classrooms ring a bit hollow.

NO ROOM AT THE TOP

Many of the school's students will end up in the United States and Europe for college, just like the generation before them. I watched students head off to Tufts

and Columbia, Trinity and Davidson, where they were certainly exposed to ideas of equality, democracy, and meritocracy. But they are also inculcated in the global elite—spending their time with kids who went to prestigious schools in other Latin American countries and now have converged in certain American universities. Most

CORREA HAS YET TO SHAKE THE ROOTS OF THE POWER STRUCTURE.

of these foreign-educated students will return to Quito to take up their assured places of leadership in the country. But despite being steeped from the age of five in an apparently democratic system and American-style schools, most of these students, like their parents, will still hold onto the Ecuadorian idea of social mobility—that it halts at the middle class. They will now also have connections with all sorts of other elites, who espouse the same value system.

There is no great mystery why the wealthy would want to maintain their bubble. For those at the top, it is a very good life. To be sure, it is a life with certain challenges—a volatile political climate, a high crime rate. But economic privilege has proved remarkably sustainable in Ecuador, even as the country's politics are constantly roiled by change. (Nine men have served as president in the past 20 years.)

The question, of course, is whether this will continue to be the case. In 2006, Rafael Correa became president, promising to challenge the oligarchy and the moneyed interests. Correa, much like my young student Raul, is an admirer of the forces behind the Cuban Revolution. (In Oliver Stone's documentary, *South of the Border*, Correa is interviewed while

sitting on a couch next to Raúl Castro). Like many of my former students, Correa is a product of the American educational system, with a PhD in economics from the University of Illinois.

A friend of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, Correa is not the first leader to have made pledges of revolution in Ecuador. As early as 1895, President Eloy Alfaro led a liberal movement to divide up the estates of large landholders. Correa has yet to shake the roots of the power structure. For all his promises of change, he has not fundamentally restructured the way wealth is distributed. Of course, he has turned a few heads. During his tenure, Ecuador has defaulted on \$3.2 billion in international debt. And Correa recently introduced a ballot referendum to alter the constitution in ways that will weaken the press and the judiciary. (It passed with more than 60 percent of the vote.)

Yet the status quo remains. Correa's rhetoric invokes dreams of a socialist revolution, and his considerable political skills have allowed him to hold onto

power far longer than any of his recent predecessors. But for now, he has not seriously dented the elite's hold on wealth and influence. In fact, what limited success he has enjoyed may only have helped solidify the position of the ultra-wealthy. By increasing social spending and decreasing poverty, Correa has allowed some Ecuadorians a modest rise from their previous station. In a country where few dream of extreme upward mobility, any movement from poverty to working class serves, on some level, to reduce the tensions brought on by intense poverty. Mild upward mobility is, in some ways, a great blessing for those at the very top. In effect, Correa has helped a great number of Ecuadorians reach for the next rung, without ever dreaming of reaching for the top. Still, if he finds the will to truly challenge the status quo and create a new society, he will have a very powerful, well connected, and well educated group to battle. And battle they will, to protect their beautiful glass bubbles. ●