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‘Hidden racism: the continuance of internalized colonization in modern Quito, and its possible economics effects

Revised Abstract
This paper is part of a larger work which examines the construction of mestizo, or hybrid, ethnic identity among upper-middle class university students in Quito, Ecuador. My findings are based on qualitative interviews conducted during 2003. The social hierarchy that the researched population acknowledges as existing is reviewed, separating the economic and educational discourse that is used to naturalize it, from the ideas of ethnicity and race that underlie it.

My research shows that ‘race’ is still a widely utilized concept for identity creation among the population studied. While a generational shift appears to have occurred, as students identify themselves as ‘mestizos’ rather than ‘whites’, as their parents did, mestizos are conceptualized as a heterogenous group. Distinctions between mestizos who “look” more or less indigenous are drawn, along with educational and economic differentiations. An ambivalence towards indigenous people is noted, as current political processes have awakened strong sentiments against them while a romanticized and historically-removed view of indigenous ancestry remains. A hierarchy with strong racial undertones is, therefore, maintained and justified in terms of education, social manners, and wealth. While a certain social mobility appears possible, however, the need separate oneself from what is presently ‘indian’ leads to the ostracizing of those who are seeking upward mobility, who are termed ‘longos’.

The construction of a hybrid ethnic identity by negation has direct economic consequences. Discriminatory practices in hiring and limitations in social interaction, for example, inhibit the creation of socio-economic networks among mestizos. The agency of mestizos, therefore, appears to maintain structures that retard growth and perpetuate racial differentiation.
**Introduction**

Ethnicity, in its many guises, has been, and is, an important ingredient in the socio-economic development of the Republic of Ecuador. Ecuador, much as other post-colonial states, was created on a bed of ethnic diversity, with tremendous power disparities between the different ethnicities. Consequently, the creation of the Ecuadorian nation-state has been, and continues to be, fraught with a struggle to appease the social, economic, and political disparities that have been more or less correlated with ethnic groupings. Often this struggle has been simplistically presented through the conceptualization of more or less bounded ethnic groups with specific characteristics. Conceptualizing mixed ethnic groups, however, is significantly more difficult. In the case of Ecuador this would entail the mixture between Spaniards, Indigenous peoples, Africans, and more recent immigrants. Again, however, it is easy to mistakenly simplify the resulting hybrid ethnicities. Much of the literature on such hybrid ethnic identities as *chagras, mulattos, chullas, cholas, mestizos,* and *longos* can be criticized for such simplification. These mixed ethnic groupings are colloquially held as static, bounded, and homogeneous. Thus, an understanding of them is still far from sophisticated. This is problematic given the large percentage of the Ecuadorian population that falls within even the most conservative definition of hybridity. It is even more concerning given that the Ecuadorian state has continually linked its national identity and development policies to a vision of ethnic mixture.

Since its independence in 1830, the Ecuadorian state sought to build an overarching national identity despite the ethnic divisions within it. As will be further explored in a later part of this thesis, since the early 19th Century, the Ecuadorian state struggled with the role of hybridity in the nation-state project. The largest hybrid group, the *mestizo* sector, made up by those who are linked to both Indigenous and Spanish ancestry, was often been presented as the foundation of the State, as a means to mollify ethnic tensions and construct a sense of unity. This hybridity, however, was simplified and, therefore, the State’s policies did not address fundamental socio-economic realities.

A hybrid ethnic identity can be simplified by ignoring the socio-economic heterogeneity within it, as a single hybrid ethnicity can be part of several socio-economic classes. If different ethnicities are associated with different socio-economic classes, or if being considered of a certain ethnicity is beneficial for socio-economic purposes, then there occurs a complex interplay within hybrid ethnic groups in terms of a person ethnic identity construction and his/
her socio-economic situation. In other words, different sectors of a same hybrid group may embrace or deny components of their ethnic identity for, or due to, socio-economic motives. This presupposes that there can be ethnic differences within a single hybrid ethnic group and that ethnic identity change is possible.

The construction and alteration of ethnic identities are complex processes which utilize a variety of forms of power. The literature that surveys ethnic identity change in the context of the Ecuadorian highlands tends to concentrate on how indigenous people acculturate (often called the ‘whitening process’) to change from being indigenous to become white-mestizos. Change within mestizos or other hybrid groups, however, tends to be ignored or simply seen as a change in socio-economic status, not as an ethnic change. This is at least partly due to the fact that hybrid groups are understood in a simplified way as being homogeneous. If the mestizo group is understood as a homogenous sector, however, tensions and inequalities within it can be hidden and, consequently, not properly addressed by policy makers.

Comprehending such a dynamic process, where ethnic identity is a hybrid, affected and affecting external socio-economic variables, and changeable both through individual agency and structural modifications, requires further research. While some such research has been undertaken, an academic vacuum has emerged around middle-upper and upper class mestizos. Several explanations for this occurrence are possible. First of all, there is the sheer difficulty of researching the socio-economically dominant sectors of a society\(^5\). A process of *exotization* is also present, where academics, mostly of the upper socio-economic classes themselves, research the ‘other’, in this case the lower socio-economic classes. Most importantly, however, the fact that the upper classes have not been more fully researched within the paradigm of hybrid ethnicities says much about how these hybrid ethnicities have been conceptualized. It appears that the discourse of hybrid ethnic identity has been largely imposed on the lower socio-economic classes by a dominant sector whose own ethnic identity has never been questioned. Labels used to identify the ethnicities of lower classes have been largely fabricated by this dominant sector\(^6\).

**Ethnic identities in the highlands of Ecuador – a historical background.**

This section will present a brief overview of the how the ethnic make-up of Ecuador has been historically presented. It does not attempt to decipher the socio-political make up of indigenous peoples, a complex subject which falls outside the focus of this paper. Rather, it will only review the power structures that were constructed between ethnic groups through the conquest and colonization processes.

In order to understand the ethnic make-up of Ecuador, the drastic differences between the regions of this nation must be remembered. Succinctly, Ecuador can be divided into four regions: the Highlands (the focus of this paper), the Pacific Coast lowlands, the Amazon lowlands, and the off-shore islands (which were not part of the Spanish colonization process and, therefore, will not be discussed here). The ethnic make-up of these regions is vastly different and conceptualized in different terms by the inhabitants of each region. This is due to two related processes: the different conquest experiences suffered by each region and the role
each region has played in the national and international geo-economic system. The highlands were the area where the largest interaction between the conquered and the conquerors took place. Thus, the most overt ethnic mixture took place in the Highlands. This region was also the industrial basis of the new nation-state, where indigenous labour was used for the production of textiles, manual crafts, and mining. The coast, on the other hand, became the commercial centre of the nation-state. It developed a different ethnic identity than the highlands as the level of ethnic mixture was smaller and was further nuanced by a larger number of Africans brought as slaves. Finally, the Amazonian region of Ecuador presented the Spanish invaders with a topography and climate that proved too challenging for their conquering abilities. Thus, the influence of Spanish culture in this region was the smallest.

As the Ecuadorian nation-state emerged and solidified its boundaries, the necessity to create a national identity became evident. Not surprisingly, this was complicated by the disparities between the different ethnicities that were now part of the nation state. The Spanish and their descendants, as conquerors, had retained the socio-economic power within the new states. Indigenous peoples and African descendants, contrarily, were highly marginalised. People of mixed ancestry fell somewhere between these two poles. The situation and role of these mixed peoples changed historically, as they became a larger and more vocal part of the population.

It is important to remember, however, that the ethnic make up and socio-political situation of the Ecuadorian highlands before the arrival of the Spaniards was in no way static or homogeneous. Several distinct indigenous groups inhabited the area before the arrival of the Spanish. Most of these peoples, however, had been influenced, whether intensively or not, by the Inca empire which expanded from what is now Peru. The Spanish invaders arrived in the early 16th Century precisely as the Inca Empire was undergoing a civil war as the two princes, Atahualpa and Huascar, sought hegemony. It was feasible for the Spanish to use this internal rife for their conquering interests. Once the Spanish succeeded in their enterprise, however, the initial ethnic diversity present in South America was often forgotten, as the new power structure simply pitted the conquerors against the conquered.

Thus, the Spanish conquest had two main impacts in the ethnic realm of Ecuador. It, first of all, homogenized the pre-conquest inhabitants of the highlands, all of whom became ‘Indians’ (Guerrero 1997:559). Secondly, the conquest established an ethnically based hierarchy. This hierarchy was zealously maintained by the burgeoning legal system. It, consequently, became feasible to speak of the ‘Spanish Republic’ and the ‘Indian Republic’ (Ibarra 1998:10).

A clear marker of ethnic identity was established in the 17th Century through the ‘Indian Tribute’. This was a tax collected solely from people who were ethnically classified as indigenous. Thus, “[t]he tribute was central in defining an ethnic categorization of the population: one is indian because he pay[ed] tribute” (Ibarra 1998:13). In return, the contributor was entitled to certain protections from the state and a plot of land. On the other hand, and ‘Indian’ was prevented from undertaking jobs which were deemed appropriate only for mestizos or whites. An ethnically-based division of labour was, thus, soon established.

Those who were not recognized as Indians but who also were not Spaniards were termed
mestizos. Initially, within the Spanish Colonies, all those of mixed heritage were considered castas, while pure ‘races’ were identified by their race (thus, the hierarchy was constructed by Spaniards, Castas, Indians, and Blacks). Soon, however, castas was utilized to mean race or ethnic group. Therefore, a Spanish casta, and an Indian casta were conceptualized (Ibarra 1998:12). A hierarchy was then structured, with the Spanish casta at the top, mestizos in the middle, and indians and blacks at its bottom. To understand the large social gap that existed between Spaniards and mestizos, it is interesting to note that for lower class Spaniards in the 18th Century, termed plebe, being called a mestizo was considered an insult (Ibarra 1998:11). Thus, mestizos were not accepted by Spanish society, even at its lowest spectrum, while they were no longer entitled to the state-benefits reserved for Indians. Mestizos’ unclear ethnic belonging, and their lack of contribution to the Colonial state as they did not pay the ‘Indian Tribute’, made their condition easy to criticise.

When the ‘Indian tribute’ was ended in 1857 the clearest legal marker of Indian identity was lost (Ibarra 1998:12). A process of mestizaje was, therefore, facilitated. Simultaneously, however, the discourse of scientific racism, started with the European studies of Joseph Gobineau, gained validity and was used to explain (and perpetuate) the divisions between the different ethnic groups. Again, therefore, the lower condition of indigenous peoples and blacks was justified and naturalized. ‘Scientific racism’ also provided a justification for the placing of mixed ethnic groups lower than their European ancestors in the ethnic hierarchy.

The modernization of the Ecuadorian nation-state led to the emergence of a class structure. Yet, ethnic differences were never subdued to this new hierarchy, rather, both structures collided into a complex new form. Therefore, “[w]ithout the disappearance of the state structures and the caste hierarchies [the 20th] century sees the appearance of an embryonic class structure although it is trapped in the language of castes” (Ibarra 1998:18).

The growing mobilization of Indigenous and Afro- Ecuadorians has brought ethnic identities increasingly to the forefront of Ecuadorian public policy. Whereas early in the century the debate on ethnicity was informed by external theories which partly naturalized ethnic separations, in has more recently revolved around issues of human rights and the rights and sovereignty of indigenous peoples within the nation-state structure. Moreover, in the last decade the emphasis has shifted, re-assigning importance to the identity and role of mestizos within the nation states (Ayala Mora, 2003). This has taken place partly, again, as a reaction to the indigenous mobilizations of the 1990s and to the increasing role this ethnic sector has played in national politics (Ibid.). A similarity, however, exists between how ethnicity has been approached during this last decade and before: policies have concentrated on reaching ‘the other’. The dominant sectors of society who create policy have sought to change the lower classes to make them more compatible with the interests of the upper classes, generally not problematizing the role and ethnic identity of their own groups: middle-upper or upper class mestizos.

The discourse of mestizaje

Historically the creation and maintenance of the ‘mestizo paradigm’ has constantly been the
responsibility of the elites of Latin America. Social scientists, politicians, and scholars have historically fabricated what constitutes a ‘mestizo’. By defining what fell in and out of this category elites maintained the power of creating ‘regimes of truth’ which could support exclusionary mechanisms (Foucault, in Gledhill 1994:126). For example, by defining mestizos as people who did not habitually partake of superior education, elites could hamper the access to education for a large part of the population.

But it is not only by appropriating the history of those less powerful and constructing them according to their ‘truth’ that the elites accrue power; they can also gain power by constructing a history that conveniently does not problematize their own status. In the case of Ecuador this can be seen as the mestizo elite present mestizos as the ‘other’ while their own mestizaje, their own ethnic identity is never overtly disclosed or theorized. When the structures of power are not questioned because they are covert, as in the case of the dominating upper class white-mestizos, the ability of others to subvert these structures might be hampered.

Thus, my research attempts to problematize the ethnic identity of these historically ruling elite. I attempted to do this partly by interviewing upper class university students. I chose this population because of their upcoming leadership roles in the country, their common educational level, and the ease of access and rapport with them, given our common ethnic heritage and age.

It is quite interesting to find that research on the ethnic identity of the mestizo elites of Ecuador has hardly been undertaken for the past 2 decades. Several reasons for this are possible. First, there is the sheer difficulty of researching the upper classes, given their ‘busy’ schedules and the fact that they have no interest in the research and therefore are less likely to volunteer their time and effort for research. Secondly, there is a process of exotization at play, as researchers tend to be of the middle and middle-upper class who research the ‘exotic other’, which usually comes from lower socio-economic classes. The power attributed to researchers is more easily exercised on other groups and classes than among one’s own. Finally, and most importantly, I think that the identity of upper class mestizos has not been researched because of how mestizaje has been conceptualized: the homogenizing discourse of mestizaje presents all those of mixed ancestry as equal, however, within the mestizo group important differentiations are made and upper class mestizos do not truly assimilate mestizaje or, if they must use the term, are creating new terminologies to refer to those who are more indigenous. Mestizos are understood as those closer to an ‘indigenous heritage’, as the ‘popular classes’, as indigenous peoples ‘acculturated’ into a white western world. Upper class mestizos quietly fall out of these groups. In other words the racial hierarchy is maintain through the discourse of mestizaje.

In the 32 semi-structured interviews of upper-middle class university students I undertook as part of my research, all students self-identified as mestizos. This clearly demonstrates the power and spread of the mestizo ideology. They define this mestizaje as varying degrees of biological/cultural mixture. All of the students, however, also acknowledged the heterogeneity existent within the mestizo group. (I will be using some student quotes. As I promised anonymity to my interviewee’s, however, I will be using false names for the quotes). Andres, for example, stated that there are “economic and also physical differences [among mestizos]...as some of them looks more like indians”.
Can the differentiation that takes place among mestizos be blamed on educational factors? The students I interviewed were adamant on the direct link between education and economic status. Thus, they different educational level attained by a person is seen as a result of his/her initial economic situation. Are economic variables, then, the root cause for differentiations among mestizos? If this is the case credence would be gained for the theory of ‘whitening’ set forth by Alan Knight among others, that in racially hierarchical societies such as that of Ecuador, where all strive and wish to be white, acquiring economic betterment is paralleled by an upward movement on the ethnic ladder. The response of the students interviewed, however, is ambivalent in this area. While some of them considered economic status a key division between mestizos, (with such phrases as “socio-economic status highly differentiates between mestizos” and “In societies like ours money gives a certain social class”), many saw economic status as irrelevant in the differentiation among mestizos. Thus, Esteban gave the example of a soccer match “If I go to play soccer”, he said, “with the same guagudo (man with long hair or of indigenous ancestry), and since we are both wearing uniform there is no difference in clothing, thus even if we are all dressed the same, look from the same economic class, you can still see the difference. In the end physical characteristics determine, independent from socio-economic status... if one sees a mestizo, a cholito with money, with good education, people still see him as a cholito [with money]”. In the same way Xavier stated “yes, phenotypes are determinant... they mark you. For example Dr. OO, (a well known Ecuadorian lawyer of indigenous features) has all the money in the world but he is the son of a worker. He is a maintenance man dressed as a lawyer”. Finally Cristina stated that in her university “…it is about the looks, you can be rotting in money but you cannot get into the A group... kids with no money but with the right looks will get together, and this also happens in bars, such as Cerebro: gringos with their awful outfits are allowed in, but a person that is well dressed and with money but darker will not be allowed in”.

It is apparent that the differentiation that is being made among mestizos is largely based on phenotypes and other historically ‘racial’ characteristics. This clearly does not line up well with the homogenizing discourse of mestizaje which has been promoted since the Liberal Revolution of 1895 as a means to create a national identity and terminate the ethnic and racial discrimination that was entrenched through the conquest and colonization. This differentiation, therefore, is understood through a discourse of image, which is not apparently racial. Time and again students stated that the differentiation wasn’t racial but simply a matter of ‘image’: companies and people have the right to choose whom to associate with so that the right ‘image’ is reflected. This idea came out numerous times to explain discrimination in the labour market and roadblocks in the creation of socio-economic networks. Examples abound, but let me site only a few for you:

7 – “If an educated longo was in high position within a firm, at a managers’ meeting he would be ignored because of his looks... in firms for the high positions they are always looking for people with a ‘good presence’ [image], they will never take a longuito” (35).
D – “In the client-service sector you try to choose people that will give the image of your company. Perhaps in a closed room where they have no contact with people, there perhaps knowledge is more important” (69).
E – “You sacrifice knowledge for presence” (69).
2 – “They were going to fire one [man] from JCPenney – because he looked indian” .. 3
“Because he did not have the image that the company wanted to present” (88).

These statements evince the underlying discrimination that the mestizo discourse tries to hide. Many who are considered ‘mestizos’ are being discriminated on racial grounds. The Mestizaje discourse has created a superficially homogeneous but the students interviewed speak about a sub-group, determined largely by racial characteristics who they feel justified in excluding. The middle-upper class mestizos who were interviewed consistently spoke about ‘longos’ as the strata that, while being mestizo, was truly different and, therefore, justifiably distanced from themselves. When asked to describe a longo the students stated:

C – “Longo: pelito negro, runita” (67).

L – poor, slow (83)

K – Acomplejado (83)


Q – “It is not so much about their colour as about their physical features” P–
“Features that are thicker, more brusque” O – “More indian-like”

R – “I think it is when you refer to a mestizo more to the indigenous” (95).

S – “Physically unattractive, with ‘puas’ of longo...” (95).

It is important to note that the students mark a clear differentiation between longos and indigenous peoples. The image of indigenous peoples, while not always respected as demonstrated in colloquial humour, although romanticized and essentialized, is held in a higher plane than that of longos.

L – “The indigenous who maintains his culture is more respected more than those who are westernized” (79).

K – “Igualados” (79).

Q – “Indigenous are well defined people” O – “Even geographically. There is much more discrimination against longos than against indigenous. We all agree that the indians are our roots and because of that we have a respect for them even if no one wants to be indians” (89). “The indians have his culture his music”.

3 – “The longo is different from the indian. The longo is mestizo, mestizo with characteristics more indians and he also has a behaviour... It is an insult, a way of being, in other words vulgar” (89).

2 – “They are not of here or there” (89).
Indigenous people, in fact, are seen as almost a touristic commodity:

5 – “Nina Pecari as a keychain” (15).

(When asked if they would hire a white or nina pecari):

4 – “I ignore that she is indian because there are some advantages... I ignore that she is indian and hire her” (17b).

2 – “And some gringos like that” (17b).

H – Gringos wore Otavaleno clothes, that is why mz use them, they copy the Europeans, not the indigenous... 80.

The discrimination that is acknowledged, however, is quickly conceptualized as a result of the attitudes of those who are being discriminated against. Thus, the sub-group of longos is attributed with specific character traits. Most consistently, it was stated that this group was traumatized, and therefore, brought on to itself exclusionary consequences. Thus, for example, Jose stated 4 – “A concierge who rises will have a complex... a little bone with those on his level” (15). Daniel also brought up two other cases:

7 – “A sort of dark friend was in a group with 2 white girls and all the work she had to do, and it was all because of her looks, maybe it is because she felt inferior”

7 – “When I treat people who are darker I am very educated (polite), but they treat me like I am their master, for example, in my residential complex there is a gardener that I treat well, as if he was a normal person, but he treats me like his boss because he thinks that is how he should treat me” (35).

P – “We are socially privileged, these people (mestizos who have not had the same opportunities, reject you because now they have more power and they see you as a risk” (88).

Exclusionary practices and ethnic discrimination are, thus, excused as the result of the attitudes and reactions of those that are being excluded: all responsibility is removed from the upper classes, those who academia has never questioned to start with. Moreover, the students expect these exclusionary practices to have ramifications in the labour market. Carolina, for instance stated that “

B – “Yes, for example, for the cashier of a bank they would never choose someone that did not look... the most mestiza, less indigenous” (69).

**Conclusion**
Please allow me to quickly sum up what this paper has attempted to review and set forth a few questions on which I would appreciate your input. Through this paper I have attempted to argue that while ethnic discrimination in Ecuador has historically been framed as a struggle of the indigenous peoples, the current Ecuadorian reality reflects a discrimination that takes place among mestizos. The discourse of mestizaje has attempted to present a homogenized ethnic group, which permits the dominant sectors within it to maintain a racial hierarchy without having their own ethnic identity problematized. This hierarchy has strong negative effects within the labour market and inhibits the creation and maintenance of information networks. The students interviewed, who belong to this dominant sector, justify their exclusionary practices by speaking of a sub-group within mestizos: longos, who while racially characterized, are also described as having specific behaviours. The question that remains, however, is how can, or should we, within this ever complex social structure separate race and ethnic from class differences.

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