

CLASS STRUCTURE, POPULISM,
AND THE ARMED FORCES IN
CONTEMPORARY ECUADOR

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FUERZAS ARMADAS Y POLÍTICA EN ECUADOR. By AUGUSTO VARAS and FERNANDO BUSTAMONTE. (Quito: Ediciones Latinoamerica, 1978. Pp. 218.)

EL MITO DEL POPULISMO EN EL ECUADOR. By RAFAEL QUINTERO. (Quito: Editorial Universitaria, 1980. Pp. 386.)

POLITICAL POWER IN ECUADOR. By OSVALDO HURTADO. (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1980. Pp. 398. \$29.95.)

THE PROCESS OF POLITICAL DOMINATION IN ECUADOR. By AGUSTÍN CUEVA. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1982. Pp. 106. \$14.95.)

These four works constitute a watershed in the study of Ecuadorian politics—the appearance for the first time of a series of major works by Ecuadorian authors. The analysis presented by these authors differs markedly in concept and focus from the previously available literature, most of which has been written by North Americans. Despite obvious ideological differences among the authors, a general consensus nevertheless exists on the main points of the “Ecuadorian” view of Ecuadorian politics, particularly on the topics of major concern: the interpretation of Ecuadorian political history in class terms, the analysis of populism, and the analysis of the most recent period of military rule.

Whereas previous works have analyzed Ecuadorian politics in terms of political culture, regionalism, modernization, political underdevelopment, and the interplay between the military and other political actors, the fundamental assumption in the works under review is that politics cannot be understood outside of its relation to the attempts of various classes to assert their political hegemony over competing and subordinate classes. Thus, in contrast to North American works that generally treat contemporary Ecuadorian politics as beginning after World War II, all but one of these works see the collapse of cacao exports in 1922 and the July Revolution of 1925 as the beginning of modern

Ecuadorian political history. With the overthrow of the Liberal regime controlled by the agro-export bourgeoisie, Ecuadorian politics entered a period that was to be characterized by the inability of any class to assert its political hegemony, despite the continued economic and political strength of the coastal and sierra landowning classes. Given the stalemate of the dominant class forces since 1925, various fractions of the upper classes, the military, and the middle class have combined and recombined in a series of fleeting alliances, new parties, and unstable governments. The high level of surface instability—thirty-six presidents in fifty-eight years—is seen as a result of the unresolved hegemonic stalemate, a stalemate aggravated by the increasing complexity of class divisions within both dominant and dominated classes following the banana boom in the 1950s and the recent infusion of wealth from petroleum exports. Osvaldo Hurtado's *Political Power in Ecuador* takes partial exception to this approach in arguing that many of the significant features of prewar history—the Liberal-Conservative split, caudillism, and regionalism—cannot be explained solely in terms of class struggle. Yet even he sees these superstructural conflicts as arising because of the absence of more fundamental conflicts between the large landowner class of the sierra and the landowning-commercial-financial elite of the coast and because of the absence of a true proletariat or a readily mobilizable peasantry due to the predominance of precapitalist forms of production well into the postwar period.

This perspective provides the framework for the discussion of the emergence of populist politics, epitomized by the late José María Velasco Ibarra, who served as Ecuador's president on five separate occasions beginning in 1934. Agustín Cueva sets the tone for this analysis in *The Process of Political Domination in Ecuador*, which interprets Velasquismo as a response to the hegemonic crisis in which neither of the dominant classes could assemble an electoral majority without resorting to fraud. "Economic dominance was in the hands of the agromercantile bourgeoisie; ideological hegemony belonged to the sierra landholders; and the capacity to 'arbitrate' by force of arms was the privilege of an officialdom closely linked to the middle class" (pp. 66–67). But after 1948, the electoral arena was increasingly dominated by the urban subproletariat. Given its nonproletarian character, this new urban mass was not easily mobilized by the traditional left. As Hurtado observes, "A people involved in production relations that are not predominantly capitalist, and moved by spontaneous emotions and immediate interests, is incapable of identifying [its] particular 'class' interests" (p. 209). Cueva similarly asks, "How does one convince a traveling salesman of the advantages of socializing the means of production? . . . How might one organize people whose work . . . disperses rather than concentrates them? How can

one avoid, if people are organized around 'visible' links, that populist measures should seem more concrete than socialism?" (p. 73).

These conditions were ideally suited for Velasco's moralistic sermonizing against the corrupt oligarchy, his promises of jobs, public works, and community improvement, and his curious mixture of liberal, nationalist, and traditional Catholic rhetoric. Cueva's discussion of the religious symbolism in Velasco's populism and its relation to the rural Catholic culture of the *barrios suburbanos* is a masterful analysis of one of the most neglected elements in the extensive literature on populist movements. For Cueva, Velasco was the "prophet, priest, and father of the lumpenproletariat, as well as [its] 'lawyer.' He was the symbolic tutelary figure which allowed them to maintain the illusion of participation in which, after forty years of velasquismo, they were still marginal. It was, in sum, the most subtly ideological mask of domination" (p. 92). Despite the frequently antioligarchical tone of his rhetoric, Velasco never pursued policies that threatened the economic bases of the dominant groups or the middle class. On the other hand, despite the fact that "objectively" he served their interests better than those of his erstwhile constituency, his chaotic administrative practices, fickle alliances, and unorthodox ideology invariably created strong tensions with establishment groups, which led to his overthrow in four of his five presidencies.

The fifth Velasco administration gave rise to the 1972–76 military government of General Rodríguez Lara, which proclaimed itself a nationalist, revolutionary, humanist regime committed to structural reforms to benefit the popular majorities. For Ecuadorian intellectuals who, like their Peruvian counterparts, were accustomed to seeing the military as the handmaiden of the elites or the expression of a weak and divided middle class, the emergence of an avowedly leftist military regime posed a major intellectual puzzle. Various characterized as petit bourgeois nationalism (Cueva, p. 97), a progressive reformist force (Hurtado, p. 258), and a new hegemonic attempt by the national industrialists (Varas y Bustamonte, p. 66), the military government initially maintained a hardline nationalist position on oil policy, the 200-mile maritime limit, and the Andean Pact, but it failed to withstand elite opposition to its agrarian reform program and the proposed nationalization of the Texaco-Gulf oil consortium. In 1974 Rodríguez forced the resignation of the most radical members of his cabinet. In 1975, faced with a deteriorating economy, he jettisoned most of the rest of the reform program. But instead of pacifying the opposition, these measures only weakened his popular support, leading to his overthrow in 1976 and a gradual process of return to civilian government in 1980. Beyond the government's weakness in the face of vociferous opposition from the traditionally dominant classes, Varas and Bustamonte point to the absence of a political vehicle for uniting civilian and military progressives and the traditional *civilista*

bias of the civilian left as key factors in the failure of the Rodríguez government.

Taken as a whole, these works mark a major advance in the available literature. Cueva's book is a gem, a succinct Marxian analysis that is distinctive and refreshing in its appreciation of the nonmaterial components of political domination. Hurtado's book is a far more comprehensive and detailed rendering of Ecuadorian political history from the colonial era to the present. It will undoubtedly be the authoritative English-language reference work on Ecuador for some time to come.

Of the four works, *Fuerzas armadas y política en Ecuador* is the weakest. Varas and Bustamonte devote three-quarters of the book to discussing various class forces and one-quarter to the armed forces and the Rodríguez Lara government. The attempt to identify the functional logic of each class actor and the role assigned to the armed forces in the ideology of each class or fraction gets lost in a maze of abstractions and reifications that are postulated with almost no reference to empirical data or the experience of other Latin American countries. For example, the authors argue that after 1940, industrial development was held back by the limited supply of labor, leading to industrialist demands for agrarian reform to destroy the latifundio system. The national industrial bourgeoisie is thus alleged to be the motive force behind the military junta of 1963–66 and its attempts to abolish the various forms of precarious tenure. This interpretation may be logically consistent, but it is not consistent with the facts. The junta's policies favoring import-substitution industrialization originated in the National Planning Board, not in the Chamber of Industries. Its fatal decision to raise import tariffs in 1965 was not intended to protect infant industries, but to raise revenues to pay for the government's expanding bureaucracy and expensive infrastructure projects. Similarly, there is no evidence that the military later attributed the failure of the junta to its isolation from workers and peasants.

Varas and Bustamonte pay surprisingly little attention to anti-communism as an element in the external ideological penetration of the military. The major improvement in the level of institutional development and professionalization of the armed forces in the postwar period is also virtually ignored, despite evidence that professionalization has strengthened the identification of military officers with the "armed institution" and decreased the significance of the military's middle-class social origins. Even though the central thesis of the work is that the hegemonic stalemate in civil society results in fragmentation of the military and hence the inability of the military to resolve the hegemonic crisis, no documentation is offered of the links between specific social classes and their representatives within the armed forces nor any real analysis of how these linkages work (which is not to say, however, that they do not

exist). The paucity of empirical data is a weakness shared by the work of Cueva and, to a lesser extent, that of Hurtado. Indeed, all three works might be better described not as social science, but as essays in historical interpretation.

In contrast, Rafael Quintero's analysis of the origins of the modern Ecuadorian state in the period 1895–1934 in *El mito del populismo en el Ecuador* combines a sophisticated Marxist theoretical structure with an impressive marshalling of empirical data in support of his arguments. Based on a careful analysis of stockholders and directors of the major banks, Quintero's study provides by far the most convincing description of the relations among the various class fractions during the Liberal regime and the most satisfying explanation for the limitations of that regime and the strength of both sierra and coastal landowners in the period following the July Revolution. At least for the period covered here (which unfortunately only extends to Velasco's first election), Quintero challenges most of the "myths" surrounding Velasco's "populism." His analysis of electoral data from the 1933 presidential election shows that barely 3 percent of the population voted, that 76 percent of Velasco's votes came from the sierra provinces as opposed to less than 9 percent from Guayaquil, and that his margin of victory was significantly higher in rural parishes than in urban areas. Quintero argues persuasively that Velasco, like Neptali Bonifaz in 1931, won because he was the candidate of the sierra landowning class and the Conservative party that dominated the sierra provinces (which in 1933 constituted over 70 percent of the electorate). Given the extremely limited suffrage, it seems highly unlikely that the urban subproletariat had anything to do with Velasco's first election. Recalling Velasco's famous dictum, "Give me a balcony and I will make myself President," Quintero reminds us that we should ask, "To whose house was this balcony attached?" In 1934, it was clearly attached to the house of the Conservatives. Unfortunately, this analysis of the first Velasquismo says nothing about Velasco's later campaigns, especially 1960 and 1968, when Velasco's strongholds were indeed the coastal provinces, especially Guayas. While Quintero's analysis of the electoral data is at times incomplete, his work sets a standard for patient and careful empirical analysis that augurs well for the future of Ecuadorian social science.