THE POWER OF ECUADOR’S INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN AN ERA OF CULTURAL PLURALISM

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Abstract: The Ecuadorian indigenous movement emerged just as the binaries that once defined the Indian/white boundary became acknowledged internal polarities of indigenous society. In this article, I argue that these divergences energized indigenous communities, which built material infrastructure, social networks, and political capital across widening gaps in values and incomes. They managed this task through a kind of vernacular statecraft, making the most of list making, council formation, and boundary drawing. As the movement shifts into electoral politics, the same community politics that launched it now challenges the national organization. As they work to define a coherent national program, the principal organizations of the national movement must reproduce the local contacts and relations among communities that made Ecuador’s indigenous pluriculturalism such a potent presence in the 1990s.

Keywords: civil society, comuna, Ecuador, indigenous movements, land reform, lists, uprising, vernacular statecraft

Ecuador’s indigenous movement spent the 1980s creating a national organization, the 1990s achieving popular legitimacy, and the early 2000s undermining much of what they had gained. To be sure, the general strikes, marches, and political campaigns of the 1990s always fell short of aspirations. Even so, they each added to the capacity of the movement: the power to renegotiate legislation during protests against the 1994 land development law, the formation of a new electoral movement called Pachakutik in 1996 to help indigenous candidates, and the achievement of constitutional reforms in 1998. In the 2000s, however, participation in a coup, backroom deals made by indigenous leaders, and the disconnect between Quito-based politicians and the local...
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communities made the movement resemble the old-fashioned politics that indigenous people had hoped to replace.

The provinces remained a bright spot. Rosters of indigenous officeholders grew despite setbacks at the national level. In Imbabura, for example, in the cities of Otavalo and Cotacachi not only did indigenous men win offices, but each faced re-election and won. Meanwhile, the Provincial Council had its first elected indigenous member in its 179-year history. Even here, though, gains no longer seem to be building in the movement. In 2006, Mario Conejo, the mayor of Otavalo, a town with the highest concentration of indigenous-owned industry and capital in Ecuador, resigned from the Pachakutik movement, provoking charges of opportunism and feelings of betrayal.

Such problems were inevitable. The skills and strategies necessary to hold public office and build parliamentary coalitions did not correspond to the community networking and street protests that launched the movement. And if the different constituencies of the movement—Andean peasants, Amazonian nations, pluricultural mestizos—were able to set aside differences in order to win office, conflicts reignited once offices were gained. Even so, the lack of direction and unity has become grave. Commenting on the fallout from Conejo’s actions, an indigenous Otavaleña business woman and party supporter told me: “It looks like we are disintegrating.”

The premise of this essay is that, culturally and economically, the disintegration began decades ago and that, politically, it energized indigenous communities. Since the 1970s, community institutions have been forced to coordinate widening differences in wealth, values, knowledge, and interests. What community residents have achieved is not a single, shared way of being indigenous, but rather a means to cope with cultural pluralism at the local level that underpins the fight for pluriculturalism at the national level. Put another way, rather than proving the stability of a native way of being, agreement in street protests or rural uprisings testifies to the power of indigenous communities to solidify relations in circumstances in which a narrow political goal becomes central.¹

Since the 1970s, Ecuadorian indigenous peoples have created these circumstances through a kind of vernacular statecraft. They have elaborated the apparatus of local government without top-down authority, maximizing functions such as list making, council formation, boundary drawing, and inter-regional organization. The peasant comuna and formal economic associations, two state-sponsored organizational forms, stand at the heart of this effort. Yet embracing state ideals of rural organization has not meant accepting the hegemonic institutionalization of state power, but something more complex. Internally within communities, cultural differences, economic inequalities, and minimal fiscal resources mean enduring rivalry, debate, and frequent failures to unify behind a shared agenda. When consensus is achieved, however, it is often in opposition to state policy, not in step with its implementation. Furthermore, uniform organizational forms and practices borrowed from national models of administration allow opposition to scale up quickly into national protests against the state.
Characterizing this use of state form as ‘vernacular’, I am thinking more architecturally than linguistically. In vernacular architecture, builders imitate and appropriate standard elements of widely used design, adapting them to local conditions and eschewing detailed blueprints. Additionally, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, vernacular architecture is “ordinary and domestic rather than monumental.” Translated into political terms, vernacular statecraft combines replicable form, local action, and an absence of ‘overarching’ governmental structure.

I build the case for vernacular statecraft, or a civil society built of state-designed institutions without the hegemonic control of the state, through a set of related tasks. First, ironically, I must go back and write against the standard scholarly narratives of the indigenous movement that tout rural community organizing. Only in this way can I recover the importance of urban careers, money, and know-how and underscore the new plurality of indigenous society as the impetus of community life. Second, I revisit the 1990 uprising and review how it set up the indigenous community as the focus of ongoing indigenous politics. Third, I go on to detail the workings of community self-administration to illustrate how goals are achieved without either forcing unanimity of values or imposing state authority. To begin with, though, I situate the peculiar position of Ecuadorian indigenous communities in terms of recent debates about civil society.

Identity, the State, and Civil Society in Ecuador’s Andes

Indigenous movements such Ecuador’s are most often analyzed in terms of identity. Indeed, if identity politics refers to “actions that come from a particular location within society, in direct defiance of universal categories” (Hale 1997: 568), indigenous movements could be described as emblematic of this new oppositional approach. In Ecuador and elsewhere, indigenous activists gained attention by breaking publicly with national peasant movements and seeking to protect those values and histories distinctive to their peoples (Hale 1994; Pallares 2002). It is not just that cultural-based claims motivate indigenous politics (Warren 1998). It is the way that identity becomes a means of politics. As Sonia Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar write (1998: 6): “[N]ew social movements were those for which identity was important, those that engaged in ‘new forms of doing politics,’ and those that contributed to new forms of sociability. Indigenous, ethnic, ecological, women’s gay and human rights movements were the candidates of choice.” Participating in the movement becomes a new way of being indigenous, while self-conscious, overt displays of indigenous culture become a new way of being political (Selverston 1994; Selverston-Scher 2001).

While appealing, this linking of the indigenous movement and identity politics is flawed. First, if it is true that identity has become politically central in the discourse of the indigenous movement, it is also widely recognized that there is no shared way of being indigenous (Warren and Jackson 2002). In fact,
in Ecuador, the indigenous movement itself publicly marks the beginning of the era in which past polarities that once defined the Indian/white boundary—rural vs. urban, Kichwa vs. Spanish, illiterate vs. educated, peasant vs. professional—become acknowledged internal differences of communities. Put another way, for indigenous peoples, a shared cultural identity is a thin political resource, offering few transcendent values that can be used to mobilize people.\\n\\nSecond, in the list of movements offered by Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar above—indigenous, ethnic, ecological, women’s gay and human rights—an indigenous movement has the clearest roots in something **besides** identity. In both colonial and post-colonial times, those rural communities marked as indigenous were liable for different taxes, received latitude to prosecute aspects of customary law, and were recognized as owning certain types of communal property. That is, they enjoyed a different relationship with the state, and their institutions of local governance occupied a unique space in national civil society. To the extent that indigenous politics still focuses on these differences, the terms of debate shift from the question of identity to the specifics of that civil society.

Still, ‘civil society’ does not offer much more analytical purchase than ‘identity’. In introducing a volume on civil society in Africa, John and Jean Comaroff seem to delight in the incoherence of the term, observing that “in the face of more exacting efforts to pin down its habitations, civil society often melts into air” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999b: 7). At a minimum, the notion refers to the collection of voluntary groupings that, taken together, is “a part of society which has a life of its own, which is distinctly different from the state which is largely in autonomy from it. Civil society lies beyond the boundaries of the family and the clan and beyond the locality; it lies short of the state” (Shils 2003: 292). Yet this formulation raises immediate questions for the Comaroffs (1999b: 7): “Does civil society exist as the antithesis of the state, in struggle with it, or as a condition of its possibility?”

Nonetheless, if ambiguities exist, the terms of the debate are relatively clear. The need for clarity in matters of civil society grows in epochs when waxing state power and economic modernization crowd out the influence of non-politicians in public life. Historically, an overreaching state has propelled the debate (Robson 2000). So here enters a problem in the Latin American case. In stride with neo-liberal promotion of the market, state-backed initiatives, civil administration, and even reliable control of law and order have in fact declined. Thus, both state and non-state sectors in Latin America need some definition to be reconciled with common conceptions of civil society.

Post-colonial Latin American states have cycled through weakness and strength. In Venezuela and Colombia, anthropologists have detailed the ‘magical’ appearance of the state in its strong guise, projecting itself as a unifying force “by producing fantasies of collective integration into centralized institutions” (Coronil 1997: 4; see also Taussig 1996). In Venezuela’s case, oil revenues inflate the state’s ‘god-like appearance’. Flushed with petroleum wealth in the 1970s, the Ecuadorian state also intervened widely in rural politics. Designating the terms for registering as peasant communities, cooperatives,
and associations, the state both advanced the agenda of land reform and often co-opted its grass-roots leaders (Striffler 2002). The collapse of oil prices and subsequent government fiscal crises, however, terminated agrarian programs before they achieved much. Such lurching from strong activism to minimal participation resulted not so much in a weak state as an ‘absent-present’ one (cf. Reddy 2001). The state has continued to be present in the organizational forms of rural peoples, the expectations raised, and occasional support for development schemes. Yet its absence is felt in its inability to carry projects to fruition and the leadership that it has ceded to competing NGOs. This combination has proved a fertile ground for the growth of community institutions.

This historic link to the state means that the resultant Andean communities, in fact, fail to fit the common definitions of civil society—voluntary civic and social associations that exist outside of official state administration. Mikael Karlstrom (1999), however, has argued that the strict emphasis on separation from the state ignores the autonomy of many state-initiated communities. He has observed, for example, that local councils in Uganda are not seen by constituents as part of the government. In fact, they may cease to exist when local support wanes and strengthen when seen as vehicles of opposition to the state. Indeed, such amalgamations of state-sponsored forms and local initiative, backed more (if meagerly) by local resources than state funds, may have a more radical, oppositional potential than non-state institutions alone.

I turn now to the arrival of Ecuadorian indigenous communities on the national political stage in 1990.

The Emergence of the Indigenous Movement

Marchers who confronted soldiers during the indigenous uprising of 1990 shouted: “This is not a workers’ strike. This is not a teachers’ strike. This is not a students’ strike. THIS IS AN INDIAN UPRISING.” The protest began when indigenous leaders from CONAIE (the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) and other activists occupied the Santo Domingo church in Quito at the end of May to protest the failure of the legal system to process land claims. CONAIE had come into existence in the 1980s as a vehicle to unite highland and lowland indigenous organizations in order to pursue structural change on a national level. CONAIE’s leaders also saw a general strike for land not merely as a material demand but as a rebuff of values underlying Ecuador’s mestizo-dominated political system. The strike widened beyond their direct coordination to include large marches in provincial capitals and the invasion of a hacienda in the central highlands. Coming up on the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas, Miguel Lluco of CONAIE said: “We were rejecting the celebration of the 500 years. We said, ‘We will at least make it to the 500th anniversary in possession of our land’” (León 1993: 137).

In explaining the appearance of a mass indigenous movement at the end of the twentieth century, a certain conventional wisdom has emerged among scholars and activists alike. First, the case for ethnic politics starts with the
premise that land reform efforts in the 1960s and 1970s failed Indians: “The communities lost the game in terms of access to economic resources” (Korovkin 1997: 32; Selverston-Scher 2001). Without having received sufficient land, Ecuador’s highland indigenous people could no longer farm full-time. Indeed, the few peasant communities that stayed intact primarily through farming were far more likely to be mestizo—ethnically non-indigenous and allied with the urban Spanish-speaking national culture—than indigenous (Zamosc 1994: 43). Kichwa speakers veered toward careers as semi-proletarian migrants.

Most scholars agree, too, that the urban experience was largely fruitless. Amalia Pallares observes that, destined to circulate endlessly from their communities to cities, Indians suffered continual mistreatment or maltrato—the abuse and contempt of civil authorities, fraudulent practices of mestizo merchants, and the scorn of town residents. Work itself was grim. “Towns and cities institutionalized a labor partitioning system that assigned Indians the most menial and underpaid tasks” as maids, porters, and bricklayers (Pallares 2002: 43, 64). When the bottom fell out of the Ecuadorian economy after the 1982 drop in oil prices, this tedious work became even more inadequate. Put simply, conventional wisdom on land reform, racism, and recession holds that Kichwa careers turned into one long losing streak.

And with the material failure of land reform noted and new hardships of urban employment lamented, political analysts switched from economics to community organization. New leadership councils and formal associations that reached across parish boundaries promised hope in the absence of an economic future. “Reform initiated a dramatic growth in indigenous organizing” (Selverston-Scher 2001: 36) and in some places a “provincewide community movement” (Korovkin 1997: 32). Politics, moreover, fed off of a new awareness of culture. The children of the 1950s estate workers were committed to maintain community life and “to promote cultural revitalization and political organization” (Pallares 2002: 43). Only the economics of land ownership remained as a material preoccupation. It surged “as a constant theme and certainly one of the most contemporary and historical problems of the struggle” (Macas 2001: xiv).

I find this story of the peasant-Indian political transition a little too rehearsed. The narrative arc, woven alike into activist accounts and researchers’ analyses, colors recent history with messianic tones. Indeed, it is positively Christian: the crucifixion (the bleeding away of subsistence resources), the death (failed peasant farming and descent to temporary urban wage work), and the resurrection (the rebirth of indigenous society through community organizing). The nadir—urban life, a netherworld of laboring bodies and lost indigenous souls—rebounds to a new zenith of assertive, culturally aware collectivities, which grow and connect. Finally, pushed too far by government indifference, they rise up to make their own history.

I want to question two assumptions underlying this scenario in order to present a more realistic account of the way communities work—and for whom. First, although mistreatment and racism have been equated with a generalized failure of the indigenous urban experience, the reality was that the years following land reform saw mobility that was mostly geographic but also social.
The careers of political activists (León 1993), of middle-class Otavalo businessmen and -women (de la Torre 1999; Meisch 2002), of artists from Tigua (Colvin 2005), and of former hacienda laborers (Lyons 2006) point to the diverse, post–land reform worlds of indigenous people: peasant, capitalist, vendor, community organizer, and lawyer.

Even if Otavalos are set apart, as Pallares does, her own descriptions of indigenous mistreatment can be read against the grain as accounts of social mobility. She observes (2002: 64) “a substantial increase in the numbers of educated and professional Indians” and records the experiences of a few of them, including an indigenous medical assistant in Chimborazo and an engineer from Cotacachi. The sheer numbers of Indians seeking professional careers helped change a basic tenet of national culture. Education no longer had to be equated with assimilation. Undeniably, racism did rob careers of their real potential. Yet through their own efforts, indigenous people had the know-how gained beyond rural places to defend themselves within them, as will be detailed below.

Second, writers repeatedly see rural organizing as an independent realm built of long-standing indigenous values and practices. Zamosc (1994: 54), for example, writes: “Among the peasants who had to organize in order to fight for the land, a sense of collective purpose emerged based on appeals to primordial loyalties. In reactivating the ties of extended kinship and reciprocity, this process reinforced (and in many cases even regenerated) the old Indian community as the natural organizational framework.” The words “primordial,” “kinship,” “reciprocity,” and “natural” imply that an indigenous destiny is at work. Indigenous community organizing, however, especially in the decade leading up to the uprising, had less to do with ancient values than with 1980s ambition, change, and urban careers, which produced a new economic elite within communities.

This is shown by Zamosc’s (1995) own data, which he later compiled to estimate the size of Ecuador’s Indian population. Using a language census from the 1950s, he identified which parts of the sierra were predominantly mestizo and which parts predominantly indigenous. He then charted population growth rates, organizational trends, and other demographic indices. Among these, he recorded changes in the registration of comunas (peasant communities that hold some resources in common), cooperatives (narrower collectives of peasants using shared land for agricultural enterprises), and associations (groups dedicated to shared economic activity or community development). Numerically, associations had actually become the preferred method of indigenous organizing (see fig. 1). Encouraged by new legislation in the 1970s, indigenous groups coalesced around trades, specific development projects, or marketplaces. Forming associations did not require fixed rural holdings and afforded more flexibility. In the run up to the 1990 uprising, associations solidified links outside of the framework of the peasant community.

In re-evaluating urban careers and tracing their connection with community organizing, I want to shift away from the crucifixion story of suffering, death, and resurrection to a plot that moves from frustrated growth to internal difference to dialogue to action. Admittedly, ‘frustration’ is a puny word to portray...
the racism that truncated the potential of many of these careers. However, it suggests that discrimination did not so much cripple aspirations as block and redirect them. Community groups, whether peasant comunas, cooperatives, or associations, ultimately benefited from this detour as they became vehicles of ambition. As has been well documented in Zamosc, Pallares, and other accounts of the movement, this new dynamism led to the stacking up of local, provincial, and regional groups into a new national form ultimately led by CONAIE. In the process of the 1990 uprising, Indians had risen to become legitimate interlocutors with the central government, not just with local landowners or sympathetic clergymen.

Consequently, after June 1990 it was no longer just anthropologists asking whether Ecuador was one nation or many. And if many, then whose values, culture, and laws should prevail? The answers in Ecuador after the uprising often came down to a core issue: what it means and what it takes to be an Indian community. Communities came to matter so much for several reasons. First, organizationally, CONAIE’s power sprang from the relations it opened with and among local communities. The uprising succeeded because of the scale of unity among notoriously independent peasant comunas. Second, the community was not only a means but the ends. Greater autonomy for separate communities lay at the heart of the alternative political model offered.
by CONAIE. As CONAIE (1994: 55) later put it in their political program, autonomy is “the capacity of indigenous communities and nations to decide and control, in our own territories, the social, cultural, and economic order with the existence and recognition of our own authorities in coordination with central authorities.”

Third, despite the challenges and limitations of indigenous identity as a political resource, Ecuador’s indigenous movement draws on identity claims to unify peoples, and such claims frequently circle back to community. To be sure, leaders of the 1990 uprising saw identity in terms of history, captured in a shorthand way by the idea of 500 years of resistance. The distinctive manner of their living, though, lay in being part of a community. When asked to comment on the role of women in the 1990 uprising, for example, Blanca Chancozo chose to emphasize less women’s leadership than their membership in the community: “[T]here was a woman killed. It was not that one could say she was the primary one or a leader, just one more member of the community and was, in that, the equal of all” (quoted in León 1993: 135).

The importance of community for the movement, however, begs a question. In light of migration, semi-proletarianization, new access to education, growing commercialization, and other changes, how do communities work as reliable building blocks of political action? Understanding the unity and effectiveness of communities under these circumstances requires moving to practices of community management and administration. Here I turn to three ethnographic examples of the business of community: how the exercise of community justice not only challenges state authority but forces a council to legitimize its jurisdiction against rival councils and over a collection of residents; how collective workdays are managed to mobilize internal resources of a community; and how trade association participation can counter state authority without subscribing to the formal rules of membership set down by the state. Contentious and time-consuming, this politics produces local economic infrastructure and holds together the indigenous civil society at the heart of the wider movement.

**Ariasucu, Imbabura: Councils and Community Justice**

In 1993, three thieves were captured, questioned, found guilty, and whipped in Ariasucu, a densely settled peasant sector near the market town of Otavalo in Ecuador’s northern Andes. Only the week before, a neighboring community, La Compañía, had done the same. Both were emboldened by the national movement’s defense of indigenous justice as a core element of indigenous autonomy. Each act, in turn, was seen by townspeople—both indigenous and mestizo—as evidence of a radicalizing indigenous politics (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002; Whitten, Whitten, and Chango 1997). The power on display in Ariasucu, however, was tenuous. The council members could not be confident of their authority even among their own constituents. Class differences in Ariasucu revealed the contours of a potential community split, and rival peasant communities
asserted their own authority over the neighborhood. In other words, the future of the council and its political boundaries had been put into play.

In fact, the very presence of Ariasucu’s council had more to do with the ambitions of some local returning migrants than with a long-standing tradition of self-government or the incorporation of state-sanctioned communities. Indeed, the council operated for two decades (1982–2002) without formal recognition from the state. In 1982, several unofficially elected representatives successfully solicited an electricity development project. The men who campaigned for the spots and managed the project were all recent returnees, some coming back after years of working in construction in Quito, others from selling in Colombia or elsewhere in Ecuador. Several were building new homes, introducing cement block architecture among the adobe houses, and wanted electricity to further modernize their homes. After the wires were strung, the political entrepreneurship of these and other men only increased. They approached both governmental and non-governmental organization (NGO) agencies about projects ranging from potable water to a child-care center. Competing with the larger neighboring communities of Agato and La Compañía, they appealed to at least 10 different external organizations, all of which promised patronage for development projects (Lema et al. 2000).

The captured thieves were, in fact, an unwanted test for the council. In the past, they would have turned the criminals over to the teniente político, the provincial official in charge of such matters. However, La Compañía’s punishment of thieves just the week before was reported on throughout the province. Failing to follow its neighbor’s example would have signaled the weakness of their community and induced La Compañía to reclaim its authority over much of Ariasucu’s territory. Thus, Ariasucu’s council determined to make a show of its power and unity. In the course of the punishment, the council’s three men and one woman mimicked each other’s moves. Leading the first robber to the middle of the court, the council had him take off his sweater and kneel down before the president, who held a short whip. Before he delivered the first of his two blows, the president made a speech on the theme of “knowing work.” He then cracked the whip once against the man’s back, continuing the speech and repeating that “not working was not valid.” After hitting the man one more time, the president turned the whip over to the vice president, who continued the routine: speech, a single blow, speech, and another blow. The third council member mimicked something inaudible and gave two tentative blows. The fourth council member was much bolder. She took the whip and hit the thief hard across the buttocks, scolded him, then struck again. The other two robbers received the same treatment.

In improvising their procedure, the council fused familial and state forms of power. The emphasis on moral lecturing, for example, reflected a key practice of rural Andean authority and the expectation that elders, parents, and other responsible figures must offer strong guidance to their charges, to advise or ‘to give words’ (dar palabras) that reinforce rightful behavior. At the same time, by rotating the whip among the president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary, the council tapped into the bureaucratic ideals of community leadership. Here
all the officers of the community had to step up, even if one had a surer hand with the whip, another had no stomach for it, a third could lecture well, and a fourth just hectored. The involvement of those who occupied state-defined roles depersonalized the actions. In the past, the overt formality of such titles contributed to a council’s tenuousness. Seen either as agents of state power or as those seeking a means for personal enrichment, presidents, vice presidents, and other officials received little support outside their efforts to coordinate clearly needed development projects (Becker 1999; Casagrande and Piper 1969; Villavicencio Rivadeneira 1973). However, charged in recent years with everything from redressing the imbalances of past community development projects to carrying out community justice, councils have gained a new backing (cf. Findji 1992).

Despite their careful orchestration, the council members did not win over everyone in Ariasucu. Certainly, they had their support. In the aftermath, my host in the community led me back to his house and showed me a poster above his looms with the Inca greeting, “Ama quilla, ama llulla, ama shua” (Don’t be lazy, don’t lie, don’t steal). He said: “This is the way it was with the Incas. They punished thieves hard, sometimes pushing them into deep gulies.” From this man’s point of view, the council had done well. It had dealt with the threat posed by robbers and legitimized his own community as an upholder of ancient Andean customs.

Yet others in Ariasucu were dismayed. Forced to lie on their stomachs on the cement volleyball court in their thin T-shirts and frayed soccer shorts, the thieves laid bare the poverty of too many indigenous people. Their shame could not be shrugged off by those who told me that these men were “of our flesh.” Furthermore, rather than a triumph of timeless Andean justice, the flogging struck some as flaunting traditional wisdom, which counseled careful deliberations. The division between those who celebrated the punishment and those who identified with the thieves had a rough geography, with council supporters living down on the lower slopes, and dissidents up high, in a neighborhood, not coincidentally, largely unserved by the community’s power lines. Ultimately, when pushed, almost all residents accepted the council’s point of view: the thieves got what was coming to them for robbing when others work hard for their livelihood. Nonetheless, the events revealed that Ariasucu had ironically reproduced within its territory the divides in basic services that had induced them to secede from La Compañía and Agato. The breaking up into two smaller communities with separate councils was conceivable, if unlikely.

Since the 1980s, this division into council-led, bounded territories has altered the Otavaleños’ long-standing economic inequality and social diversity. In the 1940s, the area’s peasant settlements varied according to craft specialty, income, and cultural skills, with the town nearest to Otavalo already getting ahead in mestizo-dominated institutions (Buitrón 1947; Buitrón and Buitrón 1945). Diffuse domains in local political authority overlay these gradations of wealth and knowledge, raising up different leaders on different occasions. By the 1990s, though, this complexity began simplifying into a type of segmentary pluralism. In place of interwoven settlements with blurred social and physical boundaries,
multiple enclaves appeared, each with its own set of institutions. Often, the move to such divisions came with social stratification. Sectors formed with an internal political and economic elite—usually men who had greater contact with cities—ready to direct local priorities. This enclave formation represents a new turn in the region’s organizational capacity, making possible broad alliances of similarly sized and composed groups—or an infinite number of rivalries.

Quiloa, Cotopaxi: Community Work Parties and Lists

Of all the tasks charged to community councils, the *minga* (community work party) is the most common. *Mingas*, in fact are so emblematic of community cooperation, development, and self-management that indigenous politicians brandish the word in election campaigns and street protests to rally constituents. The distinctive power of *mingas*, however, comes less from a spirit of volunteerism than from the harnessing of human labor through cash fines and community rosters. In the course of my fieldwork in the early 1990s, I witnessed approximately 20 community *mingas*, mostly to create a water system in Imbabura, but also to build infrastructure, including a communal house, a mill, and a bridge, in the province of Cotopaxi. The bridge *minga* in Quiloa-Tigua, Cotopaxi, was notable because community members provided not only labor but also some of the key materials.

In July 1992, I had moved with my wife to the sector of Quiloa-Tigua for a research project on the indigenous art traditions and tourist painting trade of the residents. We had arrived in time to see several *mingas* happen, almost in parallel. An Ecuadorian NGO named FUNHABIT was running a project to build 40 new houses with small studios for the benefit of the painters. The need to participate in house-building work parties had brought people back to the community. During our third day there, residents took advantage of the returned migrants and organized a work crew to rebuild the narrow footbridge that spanned the gully splitting the sector.

On the morning of the *minga*, the council secretary, a man named Segundo, stood outside in the community plaza, wincing against blasts of wind and dust and writing participants’ names in his notebook. A group of men lost patience with the record keeping and headed off to destroy the old footbridge. Meanwhile, wildcat parties of community members armed with axes fanned out across Quiloa, looking for suitable trees that could be claimed for the bridge. One group swarmed across the patio of our hosts, Maria Juana Cuyo and Manuel Cuyo, heading for an unusually thick pine tree. Maria Juana shouted to the axmen that her family needed the wood to carve masks to sell to tourists. The community workers left the tree alone and set off to bring down other trees, felling five large eucalyptuses by the end of the morning. The secretary explained they needed so much wood because their plan was not simply to replace the footbridge but to build a new bridge that could handle cars. The residents wanted to make it possible for tourists to drive in and buy paintings, despite the lack of a serviceable road.
People were forced to cooperate in order to heave the large trees into the gully. At this point, the premature destruction of the bridge became evident. Had it been in place, the new logs could have been ferried across and easily positioned. Not having a bridge meant transporting the trunks down and out of the gully on paths etched by sheep hooves. The course proved too steep, and a large eucalyptus trunk got stuck in the gully. In the afternoon, residents hauled four other trunks to the bridge site. With ropes and timbers, they managed to get two of the lighter logs across. People then called it a day, leaving two other logs on the side of the gully and the large one sticking up out of it. Finally, the secretary got out his notebook and recorded the participation of 42 families.

Within a week, community members had mixed and poured the concrete, set the logs, and nailed planks across the top.

Mingas such as this testify to a shared material life that emerges amid Tiguans’ individual careers and private landholdings. Indeed, among various mutual labors of Andean community life—planting, harvesting, house building, fiesta sponsoring—community mingas have a specific role. They create, maintain, or upgrade physical networks of potable water pipes, electric lines, and paths. Put another way, a minga is shared labor that increases circulation, whether it be water, electricity, news, entertainment, or people. This shared ‘base’ is a kind of human-made commons that underwrites the vitality of private holdings largely by interconnecting them (cf. Gudeman 2001).

A shared base, however, does not translate into shared interests. The seeming inefficiency of Quiloa’s bridge minga spoke of the varied interests of men and women, of urban laborers and peasant farmers, of project beneficiaries and those who were excluded. For example, if 40 families receiving new houses with painting studios benefited by having access to a tourist-ready road, most full-time residents, who had little to do with the painting trade, would not. No one would visit them, and their meager market purchases would never warrant a truck to deliver them back home. While a new bridge would certainly be useful, a big one that consumed the largest trees in the community’s windbreaks did not match many people’s priorities.

In any event, no single value related to land or community could be appealed to in order to unite the people. The ability to coordinate residents rested on the few lean resources that the council has: the authority bestowed through democratic election, the capacity to levy fines, the incentive of some external resources, the personal charisma of its leaders, and the recording of lists of participants. In fact, the last of these may be the most useful technology. To be sure, a list is a pretty thin mechanism to engineer feelings of belonging. As James Scott writes, statecraft, not community solidarity, features elaborate list making—tax and tithe rolls, property rolls, conscription lists, and censuses. To accomplish these tasks, the state had to find a way to systematize identities and “create legible people,” primarily through the use of patronyms (Scott 1998: 65). Yet in managing modern peasant community politics, lists have a hidden power to create a special currency, minga points, and a distinct sphere of exchange, the self-managed peasant comuna where such currency can convert individual resources into shared development. Lists achieve this power,
not so much for the way that they specify people, as Scott would have it, but for three ways that they generalize individuals into community members.

First, in an Andean community, the use of first and last names that supposedly makes people knowable to outsiders often renders them anonymous to insiders, as the names are too redundant for everyday use. A Quiloan ledger, for instance, offers an unceasing array of Cuyo Cuyos, Vega Cuyos, and Cuyo Vegas. Only officials and anthropologists use these names. Real people use nicknames. Second, if lists seem to rob people of their personal history as encapsulated in their nickname, these records also disarticulate social relationships. Historically, belonging to place meant identifying in terms of ayllus, or “named, landholding collectivities” (Salomon and Urioste 1991). Such affiliation locates people in the flow of time and in cycles of growth. Appearing on a list, in contrast, cuts it all down to a single moment of community development. Third, lists also reduce people in a way that makes them strangely convertible. One woman might be a 54-year-old grandmother, an experienced farmer, and a leader in past confrontations with a hacienda (large private estate). Another might be 16, unmarried, and living with her parents. Both, however, are alike on the rolls. Households frequently make use of this reductionism to adapt whatever human resources or underemployed members they have available to get on the list.  

In brief, lists are a device to render people anonymous, disarticulated, and convertible. They strip away individual uniqueness to create a generalized resident made exchangeable through labor value. List making is far more about creating a new commodity—the minga point—than about legibility. Indeed, people frequently talk about “paying the minga” in their home community. This commoditization, however, is precisely where communities can gain power from their rosters and ledgers to defend their territory. Minga lists tackle the problem of conflicting interests by creating a special domain of value. Belonging to Quiloa does not mean having to subscribe to a single unifying idea of the ‘Quiloan’. Rather, it entails pledging time and effort to accumulate the narrow currency needed to improve one’s life within the sector. Different resources can be used to acquire these points; different interests can be served by them. Yet Quiloans themselves are the arbiters of the value. Neither rival sectors nor the state itself can divert the currency of participation.  

Otavalo, Imbabura: Associations and Membership

Having concentrated on two aspects of rural community life, I now turn to artisan trades, an activity that many indigenous communities would count among their economic base, along with their fields and homesteads. Producing and selling paintings for tourists, sweaters for export, or belts and sandals for urban indigenous markets link indigenous people in commodity chains that span rural and urban spaces. The sharp rise in recognized trade associations throughout the 1980s testifies that such commerce has a shared, bounded, and political side. Yet where peasant communities have a clear territorial identity
and an ongoing investment in community infrastructure that concentrate members’ attention, associations have few fixed assets. Their work, in fact, is often event-driven or, better said, crisis-driven. One of Ecuador’s largest indigenous associations, UNAIMCO (Union of Indigenous Artisans of the Centenario Market of Otavalo), found itself attracting members as it coped with unpredictable jumps in wool prices in 2000, only to stall for years afterwards in its organizational efforts. It rebounded remarkably in early 2006. The vagaries of its membership illustrate a common issue: the defense of indigenous grass-roots institutions stands apart from coherent participation within them.

Founded in March 1988, UNAIMCO represents the interests of the artisans who work in the Plaza Centenario or Plaza de Ponchos in Otavalo. Beginning with less than 100 members, the group originally focused on improving conditions in the weekly market. However, by organizing the annual festival of Inti Raimi (the celebration of the summer solstice) since the mid-1990s, by backing Mario Conejo in his successful run for mayor in 2000, and by building a substantial new center for artisan training in 2001, UNAIMCO has become one of the most important voices for the Otavaleño artisan. It claims to represent rich and poor—everyone from old-fashioned weavers, who arrive in the plazas on Saturdays to sell their weavings, to the major intermediaries, who batch 30,000 to 40,000 sweaters at a time for sales to London and Tokyo.

In June 2000, a portion of UNAIMCO’s constituents, the wool distributors, initiated a boycott of woolen yarn produced in factories near Ambato in order to restore pricing sanity in a badly shaken market. Throughout the first six months of 2000, prices rose sharply and unpredictably. Small-time sweater makers suffered acutely. In March and April, they were arriving in Otavalo on Saturday mornings, selling their wares, buying wool for their next sweaters, and then departing without being able to buy food. After two weeks, the boycotting Otavaleño buyers were able to get the factory owners to agree to come to Otavalo to negotiate. The wool distributors asked the UNAIMCO, as a larger umbrella organization that could draw in other trade groups, to step in and lead the discussions. To all parties involved, the negotiations were clearly more than an economic matter. For the Otavaleños, the meeting mobilized a wide cross-section of the community in a cooperative effort to defend an artisan way of life. For factory owners long used to one-on-one transactions with individual merchants, the boycott signaled an uncomfortable political turn in relations with Otavaleños. It conjured the specter of other large-scale indigenous uprisings of recent times. In fact, the owners insisted that negotiations occur at a neutral site 20 kilometers outside of Otavalo in a restaurant on the Pan-American Highway. Even so, the indigenous organizers of the boycott arranged for buses to bring in 300 knitters, wool distributors, wholesalers, and vendors.

The meeting achieved mixed results. At its culmination, the assembled artisans voted to reject the factory owners’ offer of a limited price freeze. As clandestine purchasing began to undermine the boycott two weeks later, though, a temporary freeze and moderated price increases during the rest of 2000 were all that the meeting accomplished. Even so, the boycott represented
further maturation of the artisan leadership and a previously unseen capacity for joint action.

UNAIMCO, however, could not build on its gains. Aside from continual diagnostic studies of the plight of artisans and a few training programs aimed at improving dyeing techniques and fashion knowledge, the leadership accomplished little, and fervor seemed to give way to apathy among plaza vendors. Mario Conejo, Otavalo’s mayor, publicly spurned the organization in spite of the decisive support it gave him. Saying, “I am not the mayor from UNAIMCO, but the mayor of all Otavaleños,” he has given no direct support to any of their recent initiatives. In 2004, when the officers of the organization wanted to step down, no new names came forward, leaving them in lame-duck status. Even the members’ participation in the fiesta of Inti Raimi dwindled. The capacity for direct action seems to have evaporated.

Then in January 2006, Mayor Conejo replaced the indigenous commissioner of markets, whom he had originally appointed, with a mestizo politician named Wilson Sanchez. Citing a high degree of absenteeism among the paid-up, registered users of the sales posts in Plaza de Ponchos, Sanchez sent out his policemen to do a census of who was actually selling in the posts. Rumors circulated that the survey was a prelude to the eviction of current owners and the redistribution of the posts to friends of Conejo’s administration. On Friday, 29 January, delegates from the plaza came to speak with the president, vice president, and other officers of UNAIMCO. They resolved to suspend market operations the following Monday and call a meeting in the afternoon. By 3:00 PM, nearly 350 artisans and vendors arrived in the grade school assembly hall to listen to Sanchez’s explanation of the survey. Put on the defensive, he sought to assure people that he was merely trying to find out the reality of the market and that there was no secret plan in place.

The audience remained deeply skeptical. When Sanchez stopped speaking, a man stood up and explained the unspoken position of many:

You [in the market commission] are only beginning to work, but we have worked here since years ago, in the rain and in the sun. You really must work with UNAIMCO ... The posts in the market belong to older people, and now their sons and daughters are working them, but this does not mean they are abandoned. Others have traveled, but they have trusted their posts with family members. But on their return, where will they work? Once again in their posts [loud, sustained applause]. Me, for my part, I am not a member of UNAIMCO. I am an artisan, but I am ready to collaborate [with UNAIMCO]. In the case that you commissioners want to clear up problems with the posts, you have to coordinate always with an organization that has many years of experience. We are going to respect UNAIMCO [applause].

Among the five suggestions offered to and largely accepted by the municipality at the end of the meeting were “One must coordinate with the ‘mother organization’” (meaning UNAIMCO), and “The users of the Plaza de Ponchos belong to an important ethnic group.” From apathy and drift, the organization resurrected
itself in a weekend to put the brakes on an initiative that would have defined Mario Conejo’s second term in office. UNAIMCO’s trajectory from confrontation to idleness to confrontation illustrates the organizational tendencies of other trade groups. First, even formally recognized associations, such as UNAIMCO, with offices, directors, and staff members, are situational. Power lies more at the periodic, urgent intersections of Otavaleños’ diverse interests than in a fixed membership, permanent leadership, and a bedrock of shared world views. UNAIMCO has gotten where it is by finding formulas that focus diverse segments on a single problem and secure their attention long enough to find a solution. Second, institutional clarity occurs at the boundary of confrontation rather than in internal regulation. It was not surprising that the most eloquent advocate of UNAIMCO’s authority over the plazas was someone who identified himself as a non-member. Frequently, people will fight hard to ensure that someone from their own organization defends their interests, but they leave open their personal commitments to that group. Resistance to outsiders is emphasized over coherence among insiders.

**Conclusion: The Power of Community**

Involved for two decades in activism at the national level, Ecuadorian indigenous communities have endured as icons of their country’s indigenous culture and as core elements of its politics. When a politician says “in the communities,” it is the same as saying “among indigenous people.” These communities, however, are not merely peasant communities newly awakened with an indigenous consciousness (*pace* Guerrero Cazar and Ospina Peralta 2003). Encompassing the stressed resources and multi-threaded careers of the post-land reform generation, they span long distances and grow in knowledge and social networks, yet they are declining in shared work routines. Indeed, their political ascendance has come at a moment of great cultural dissonance.

In my analysis of indigenous politics, the goal of putting communities first has meant losing sight of the coordination offered by national organizations such as CONAIE. This leadership has been essential for the movement, but the politics of the national movement and the political power of the indigenous base are distinct. If they were mutually reinforcing in the 1980s, the missteps of the early 2000s have shown how the national groups’ fortunes can strengthen or fall independently of the communities. A clearer understanding of indigenous civil society is not merely an effort to understand how communities serve as a base of CONAIE, but also how communities can become organized to operate in parallel or even at odds with the national movement.

An emphasis on community also displaces the importance of identity. Certainly for those who participate in community politics, just as for those who rally around CONAIE, identity is a central concern. Motivated by their sense of identity, many community members become activists to rediscover the value of indigenous history and celebrate ancient commitments to land and family.
Just as assuredly, others who are equally inspired by their indigenousness become activists to break with the past and finally modernize their communities. That is, rather than offering bedrock values to unify people, identity claims can bring people into conflict.

Warren and Jackson (2002: 12) describe the political problem posed by such internal difference in terms of representation, pointing out that the politics of indigenous self-representation is double-sided. It entails both “who represents whom” and “which social lives, languages and knowledge should be represented to selves and to others.” But why stop at representation? Members of indigenous communities must work out problems beyond discourse, identity, and communication. They pursue conflicting interests, make and unmake relationships, and reproduce shared bases of economic life. The project of self-representation offers one means to work through these issues. However, the importance of indigenous community practice is that it offers other mechanisms to coordinate effort and sustain shared projects.

Peasant comunas, commercial associations, cooperatives, and other collectivities have maintained the power of communities locally and escalated their authority nationally through what I conceive as vernacular statecraft. Scott (1998) has argued that state power operates along a set of axes marked as legible/interchangeable/durable. Community power, in contrast, is often contextual/particular/ephemeral—strong on the practical knowledge that Scott refers to as metis. As Coronil (2001: 126) observes: “Since Scott restricts his attention to state designs, his pair of binary oppositions between state/society and abstract knowledge/metis unfolds as a compound opposition between state-abstract knowledge/society-metis.” Critics have consequently taken Scott to task for underplaying the mix of abstract and practical knowledge intrinsic to state activity (Coronil 2001; Herzfeld 2005). To build on, yet reverse, the concern, I argue that a civil society, too, blends abstract schemes and metis. Further, these mixes, although limited in application, can yield power on a wide scale.

On the one hand, appropriated from below, the state-authorized administrative organization of indigenous communities has lost its ‘legibility’. It lacks an easy, systematic order that would enable manipulation from above. Councils operate without being registered with the state. The lists that council members create often track contributions that cannot be exploited beyond the community boundary, with formal names that are used minimally within it. In trade associations, participation may have little to do with official membership. Such disorder reflects a lack of funds, an institutional history of responding to crises and opportunities, and the accommodation of internal rivalries. Ensuring the importance of local knowledge, this lack of compliance preserves a gap between society and state.

On the other hand, working within the organizational map laid down by the state, indigenous community politics becomes scalable. As these institutions and practices replicate across the Andean countryside, indigenous people have gained the means to connect and pursue projects across communities. Thus, the two great accomplishments of indigenous communities in the post–land reform era have been, first, to maintain relations amid the diversity of contemporary
indigenous careers while managing circumstances to allow shared projects to move forward, and, second, to mobilize people and resources along with other communities to sustain a national politics. Yet despite the replication of form, consent to collective protests and politics is not spontaneous. After 20 years of national activism, the community itself remains the institution where consensus is hammered out and then acted upon.

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Notes

1. This description of community borrows Stanley Fish’s (1980) discussion of interpretive communities.
2. Hale (2005) goes further to argue that the promotion of unified cultural identities, especially those linked to bounded territorial units, conforms to neo-liberal multiculturalism instead of setting up true oppositional politics. Rather than identity-based movements, he places his hope for change in Central America in politico-territorial units, known as bloques, that are multi-communal and multi-racial.
3. For instance, a madrina de boda (godmother) who sponsors a young couple’s wedding will take time during the second day of the wedding to wash the groom’s face, hands, and feet with flowers while lecturing him about staying sober, helping his wife, and working hard. Indeed, one of the precedents cited for the flogging was an occasion when 12 men in La Compañía each delivered three lashes to a man who had beaten his wife—a problem that godparents are traditionally expected to deal with.
4. The senior kinship position usually prevailed in local settlements, while the prestige linked to sponsorship of saint’s days of the Catholic Church singled out leaders who spanned neighborhoods.
5. The Andes, though, offer an intriguing example of a list form that bears poetic, ritual, and social potentialities—the khipu. Khipus are bunches of dyed knotted strings, most famously associated with Inca record keeping.
6. In some cases, families can bypass the human contribution altogether and pay the *minga* fines, buying credit on the lists.
7. From UNAIMCO’s minutes for the Asemblea General Extraordinaria, 30 January 2006.

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