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Chapter 3: Background Material

from

El Otro Lado:

Considering the Impact of Education Abroad
on Host Families in Cuenca, Ecuador

a master's thesis by Søren M Peterson

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CHAPTER 3: BACKGROUND MATERIAL

Ethnographic Sketch of Cuenca, Ecuador

In *The Panama Hat Trail*, Tom Miller tells a humorous (but presumably fictitious) story that illustrates how conservative Cuenca society is, especially with regard to Catholicism:

I heard about a Cuencano who sent his daughter to college in the United States. A few months later a business associate was to visit the States, and the father asked his friend to check up on his daughter. Upon his return the businessman lunched with the father. “I’ve got terrible news for you,” the businessman said in a somber tone. “Your daughter has become a pro—.” The rumble of a passing truck drowned his words.

“Oh, that’s awful,” said his unhappy companion. “I raised her so properly, took her to mass every Sunday, sent her to the right schools—why I even had the bishop himself officiate at her communion. Where did I go wrong?”

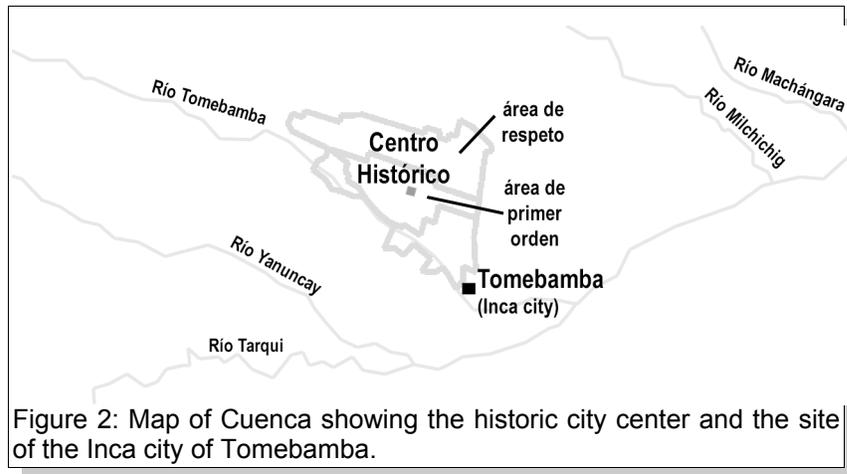
“Yes, such a pity,” consoled the businessman. “I was shocked to learn that she had become a prostitute.”

“Oh!” said the father, much relieved. “I thought you said she’d become a Protestant!” [2001:19-20]

As Miller notes, “even the pope would be considered a backslider here, but he would appreciate Cuenca's municipal motto: *Primero Dios, Después Vos*. First God, Then You” (2001:19). As with most Spanish colonial cities in the New World, Cuenca was settled on a grid pattern with the church on the main plaza, right in the center of town, clearly demonstrating the religious authority's power and importance.

Cuenca has a rich cultural heritage that spans several centuries. Well before the Spanish arrived in the New World, the Cañari settled the town of Guapondélig in a basin between the parallel ranges of the Andes Mountains in what is now southern Ecuador. When the Incas conquered the area in the late 1400s, they established Tomebamba (see Figure 2), a short-lived city that was to have rivaled their imperial capital, Cusco. Ogburn (2004:232) contends that Tomebamba was intended to be the second capital of the Inca Empire. Indeed, the Inca Huayna Cápac built a palace at Tomebamba, and it was there that he died (Robinson 1994:62) in the 1520s.

Following Huayna Cápac's death, the vast empire was divided between his two sons, half-brothers Atahualpa and Huáscar, who ruled from Quito and Cusco, respectively. Civil war ensued. During the conflict, the Cañari sided with Huáscar and eventually captured Atahualpa, imprisoning him at Tomebamba (Robinson 1994:62); however, Atahualpa escaped and went on to win the war. Following his victory in 1532, he



exacted revenge for his capture by executing the Cañari population of Tomebamba and destroying the city (Robinson 1994:62). Two decades later, on 12 April 1557, Gil Ramírez Dávalos, a Spaniard, founded the modern city of Santa Ana de los Cuatro Ríos de Cuenca (Saint Anne of the Four Rivers of Cuenca) near the ruins of Tomebamba.³⁴

Today, Cuenca is Ecuador's third largest city. With 277,374 inhabitants, Cuenca is considerably smaller than the country's two largest cities, Guayaquil and Quito, which have populations of nearly two million and one and a half million, respectively (INEC 2001).³⁵ Cuenca is the capital of the province of Azuay and the primary economic and cultural center of the *Austro* region. Although some consider it “provincial” in

³⁴ The site of the Inca city is adjacent to the southeast corner of Cuenca's historic city center and is completely surrounded by urban development.

³⁵ The population figure for Cuenca is from the latest census (2001) and corresponds to the urban portion of the *cantón* of Cuenca, which includes the city itself and several surrounding *parroquias* (parishes). (Including rural areas, the total population of the *cantón* in 2001 was 417,623.) This method also was used for estimating the populations of Guayaquil and Quito.

comparison to the country's two larger, cosmopolitan cities, Cuenca is a center for arts and scholarship, a reputation that has earned it the nickname “Athens of the Andes” (some refer to it more modestly as “Athens of Ecuador”).

As well, Cuenca is considered to be Ecuador's most beautiful city because of its striking colonial architecture and cobblestone streets. The layout of Cuenca's city center is representative of Spanish colonial town planning, which consisted of a grid extended outward from a central plaza. The old cathedral, which dates from the 1580s, graces the eastern side of the plaza, and the new cathedral, built in the 1880s, towers over the western side. Colonial structures on the south side were removed in the 1960s and replaced with modern buildings (e.g., city hall).

Fortunately, in the 1970s, civic leaders had the foresight to recognize the importance of preserving the historic character of the city center and conducted the first inventory of Cuenca's historic buildings (Cuenca 1999). The year 1982 saw two important statutory measures—the *Urban Development Plan for the Metropolitan Area of Cuenca* and the *Act on the Designation of the Historic Center of the Town of Cuenca*—that have helped to safeguard the city center and to restore several historic buildings (ICOMOS 1999:33-34). These preservation efforts were rewarded in 1999 when UNESCO inscribed Cuenca's historic city center on

the World Heritage List.³⁶ An advisory evaluation noted that “Cuenca has been able to retain its image as a colonial town and ... its historic center ... [has] a traditional and active social life” (ICOMOS 1999:34).

In addition to these distinctions, Cuenca also has played a key role in the country's massive transnational migration that started in the 1970s and intensified in the 1980s. Historically, this phenomenon involved primarily people from rural areas of Azuay and Cañar provinces emigrating to New York City (in particular, the borough of Queens). More recently, people from urban areas such as Cuenca have begun to emigrate as well. Additionally, Ecuadorians from other parts of the country recently have begun to emigrate, especially to Spain (see Jokisch and Pribilsky [2002] for a comparison of the “old” and “new” emigration). August 2000 estimates from the Embassy of Ecuador in Washington suggest that there may be as many as one million Ecuadorians in the United States alone (Walmsley 2001:160); however, other sources place that figure much lower. For example, the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at SUNY Albany estimated that for the same year, just 396,400 Ecuadorians were residing in the United States (Logan 2001:6). These figures suggest that a significant portion of Ecuador's total

³⁶ Cuenca's inscription on the World Heritage List in 1999 was based on three criteria: (1) implanting Renaissance urban planning, (2) fusing different societies and cultures, and (3) being an outstanding example of a planned inland Spanish colonial city (UNESCO 1999).

population—perhaps three to eight percent—may be living in the United States.³⁷

Of this total, Jokisch (2001:61) notes that as many 150,000 may be from Cuenca and its vicinity, which he suggests might make the provinces of Azuay and Cañar the largest emigrant-generating region in all of South America. At times, it seems that everyone in Cuenca knows someone (or someone who knows someone) who has emigrated. During the economic crisis of the late 1990s, I saw graffiti that hinted at the extent of transnational emigration and the degree of desperation: “*el último que se vaya, que apague la luz*” (“the last one to leave, shut off the light”).³⁸

These transnational migrants keep in contact with family back in Ecuador and occasionally return to visit; in the process, they transmit traits from other cultures. Moreover, monetary remittances from emigrants, which accounted for 10 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product in 1999 (IADB 2001:12), provide their families back in Ecuador with increased social and economic status. This foreign income allows families to build new, larger houses, often using US architectural designs (Jokisch and Pribilsky 2002; Walmsley 2001). As well, remittances may facilitate the disruption of a village's social structure, as Walmsley (2001)

³⁷ Ecuador's 2001 census reported a total population of 12,156,608 (INEC 2001). Current estimates place the population at more than 13 million.

³⁸ Walmsley (2001) has also reported observing this graffiti on the walls of Cuenca's city center.

has documented. One of the changes she observed was that residents abandoned the community-based *minga*,³⁹ and its associated reciprocity and social interaction, since remittances made it possible for them to hire laborers to do the work (Walmsley 2001:165).

In my many visits to Ecuador, I often have heard Ecuadorians refer to the United States, and to New York City in



Figure 3: The famous "I Love New York" tourism logo (image adapted from The Official New York State Tourism Website, <http://www.iloveny.com/>).

particular, as "*la iony*." This term is an example of how pervasive transnational migration is, and how strong an influence US culture can be, in southern Ecuador. It is common to hear Cuencans talk about having just been to *la iony*. I vaguely recall that someone once suggested to me that this nickname was a reference to the presence of US troops in Latin America at various times throughout history. However, during my library research in Cuenca, I found a master's thesis (Ordóñez Rivera 2003:29) that explained that the nickname was actually derived from the famous "I Love New York" tourism logo (see Figure 3). Other scholars (Pribilsky 2004:317; Kyle 2000:2) cite this derivation as well.⁴⁰

³⁹ The *minga* is an indigenous Andean tradition in which community members work collectively on a project (e.g., construction of a potable water system). The idea is similar to a barn-raising or quilting bee during the frontier days of the United States.

⁴⁰ Kyle (2000:2) uses the spelling *yany* (from the Spanish "*yo amo Nueva York*"), which he heard in reference specifically to New York City. Pribilsky suggests an alternate meaning of *iony*: "travelling north means fulfilling the dream of becoming an *iony*, a name ... used to describe returned migrants who have adopted American styles of speech, clothing, and attitude" (2004:317-318). I have always heard *la iony* in

In the early 1990s, when Ecuadorians were still migrating primarily to New York City and its environs, New York and the United States were essentially synonymous. Whenever an Ecuadorian asked me where I was from, and I replied “*los Estados Unidos*,” they generally assumed that I meant New York. If I provided a more specific answer (“*soy de Iowa*”), I usually received a puzzled look, which I later began to conclude meant that the person figured that Iowa was simply an unfamiliar neighborhood or suburb of New York. Once, while I was waiting outside the US Consulate in Guayaquil, a *guayaquileño* struck up a conversation with me. When I told him that I was from Iowa, and explained that it was a state west of Chicago, he still seemed to think that I was from New York. He proceeded to tell me that he had lived in Brooklyn and wanted to know if I had been to the public school he attended or if I knew a certain Polish family he had met there. More recently, as Ecuadorians have started to migrate in larger numbers to other parts of the United States (e.g., Charlotte, North Carolina, and Des Moines, Iowa), I have noticed a distinction between *la iony* (i.e., New York) and *los Estados Unidos*.

Television (especially cable) and the Internet provide Ecuadorians with additional transnational influences such as images of consumerism. As Rahier notes, “since their creation, [Ecuadorian] television stations

reference to the place (i.e., usually to just New York City but sometimes also to the United States generally), and *residente* for migrants that have adopted US styles.

have provided an opening to the rest of the world” (1998:426). He adds that broadcast stations often retransmit programming from the US (and also from Europe), and that the introduction of cable television in the early 1990s forced those stations into increasing competition with foreign channels (Rahier 1998:426). The Internet, which is now ubiquitous in Cuenca, also provides an opening—an interactive one at that—to the world. Internet cafés line the streets of the city center, and they can be found in outlying residential neighborhoods as well.

In addition, two US-style shopping malls, Milenium Plaza and Mall del Río, have been built in Cuenca since 2000 (previously, there were none). These malls are filled with some of the same stores (e.g., Hallmark and health store GNC) that one would find in any mall in the United States, and they also have food courts with KFC and Burger King.

Related to emigration and remittances, it is crucial to mention economic crisis and dollarization. In the late 1990s, it was revealed that directors of several banks had loaned themselves money, without collateral, and then defaulted on those loans. Losing trust in banks, account holders began to demand that banks return their deposits, and widespread panic ensued as banks often were unable to honor withdrawal requests due to cash flow problems. The government liquidated several failing banks. Ecuador's currency, the *sucre*, “depreciated by about 200% in 1999, real output collapsed by more than 8%, and consumer price

inflation surpassed 90%” (Nazmi 2001:734). Whitten notes that “for those with money in a bank ... the radical devaluation of the sucre reduced savings by 75%” (2004:453).

Acknowledging the government's inability to manage monetary policy, then-president Jamil Mahuad announced the implementation of dollarization (i.e., adoption of the US dollar as the country's official currency) and several economic austerity measures, which were conditions of obtaining loans from international sources such as the International Monetary Fund. As a result, he lost popular support and in January 2000 was escorted peacefully from the presidential palace by army officers.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Mahuad's successor, Gustavo Noboa (who had been vice-president) implemented many of the austerity measures, including dollarization.

Six years after dollarization, unemployment stands at 10 percent, and more than 50 percent of Ecuadorians are underemployed (Prensa Latina 2006). Not surprisingly, most families' monthly income is significantly less than the amount the government estimates a typical family needs to cover its basic living expenses (Prensa Latina 2006).⁴²

⁴¹ One of the army officers was Lucio Gutiérrez, who later won the 2002 presidential election. In an ironic turn of events, Lucio himself was ousted in April 2005, becoming the third president to be removed from office in less than a decade. The first ouster occurred in 1997 when Ecuador's Congress invoked an obscure Constitutional provision to remove Abdalá Bucaram, who referred to himself as “*El Loco*” (“the Crazy Man”), on the grounds that he was mentally incompetent. Apparently, Ecuadorians love irony.

⁴² This refers to the *canasta analítica familiar básica*, which is adjusted monthly. For

Exacerbating the problem is the fact that many basic necessities have increased in cost as a result of dollarization. As many Ecuadorians discover that jobs are no longer available, or are not as lucrative as they once were, they seek new opportunities. Those who are able to emigrate often do so (for those emigrating illegally, this involves paying a *coyote* \$10,000 or more to arrange a dangerous, clandestine journey). Others who are unable, or unwilling, to emigrate must seek innovative solutions for economic survival. One way appears to be serving as a host family for the increasing number of international students who visit Cuenca each year.

Education Abroad in Cuenca

During the last decade, Cuenca has seen a rapid expansion of education abroad programs. In 1991, when I first visited Cuenca, there were only a few organized education abroad programs in the city. Today, there are at least a dozen credit-bearing programs and a score of language schools. Many of the students who attend these programs or schools—especially those whose focus is language learning—live with local host families.

December 2005, the *canasta* was \$437.41, up from \$394.45 the previous year (INEC 2006).

The first group of US university students to study in Cuenca was from Lewis and Clark College (Portland, Oregon), which started its program in the 1980s. Initially, the Centro Cultural Ecuatoriano-Norteamericano Abraham Lincoln hosted the program and arranged homestays for Lewis and Clark students. The director of the Abraham Lincoln Center is Richard Boroto, a former Peace Corps volunteer who has lived in Cuenca for more than three decades and serves as an honorary consul from the United States. The program has since moved to the Fundación Amauta, whose academic director is anthropologist Lynn Hirschkind, who conducted her dissertation research in Ecuador in the late 1970s and has lived in Cuenca for the last two decades. Lewis and Clark offers separate summer and spring programs; both sessions focus on Spanish language and anthropology.

In 1989, Augustana College (Rock Island, Illinois) moved its Summer Spanish Program from Arequipa, Peru, to Cuenca following the escalation of terrorist activities in that country by *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path).⁴³ The Universidad del Azuay hosted Augustana students for the program's first three years in Cuenca. Then, in 1992, Steven Wille, the program's director, and several colleagues from Ecuador and the

⁴³ Sendero Luminoso's founder, Abimael Guzmán, was captured in 1993, and the organization's power quickly diminished. In 1996, Augustana began taking Summer Spanish Program participants to Peru once again, but only for an educational study tour following the completion of their studies in Cuenca.

United States founded the Centro de Estudios Interamericanos (CEDEI)⁴⁴, which has hosted the program ever since. The Augustana Summer Spanish Program focuses on intensive language instruction, and advanced students can take classes in Latin American culture and literature. In addition, Augustana has a triennial Fall Quarter that makes a stop in Cuenca during its journey through Latin America.⁴⁵

There are also numerous other credit-bearing programs for university students that are based in Cuenca. Lenoir-Rhyne College (North Carolina) and Kutztown University (Pennsylvania) have programs at the Universidad del Azuay, and Broward Community College (Florida) and Florida Atlantic University have agreements with the Universidad Panamericana de Cuenca. CEDEI is the most active institution in Cuenca in terms of education abroad. In addition to the Augustana programs mentioned above, CEDEI also co-sponsors programs with the Berkshire School (Massachusetts), Ohio University, St. Ambrose University (Iowa), Salisbury University (Maryland), Syracuse University (New York), the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada), and the University of

⁴⁴ I was a student in the 1992 Summer Spanish Program and then took a year off from Augustana to study at CEDEI during its inaugural year. During the latter portion of my year in Cuenca, I completed an internship at the Centro de Reconversión Económica del Azuay, Cañar y Morona Santiago (CREA), the regional development agency for three provinces in southern Ecuador.

⁴⁵ I was also a student in Augustana's 1991 Fall Quarter in Latin America, which included stops in Cuenca and other parts of Ecuador, as well as Mexico, Costa Rica, Argentina, and Chile.

Wisconsin-Whitewater. All of these programs include Spanish language instruction, and some also offer instruction in other areas such as anthropology, business, and environmental studies.

In addition, in the mid-1990s, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) selected Cuenca as the site for language and cultural training for its Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) program. The program has since moved to Nexus, Lenguas y Cultura, a language school that offers Spanish, English, and German.

Around the time that I started my fieldwork, a Quito newspaper reported that there are now perhaps 20 language schools in Cuenca that offer short-term Spanish instruction (El Comercio 2005), including locally-based CEDEI and Nexus, as well as Madrid-based Estudio Sampere and Quito-based Simón Bolívar. Of these language schools, the largest ones receive roughly 300 students each year (El Comercio 2005), many of whom stay with host families.

To summarize, in the first part of this chapter, we saw that Cuenca is a conservative city with a rich cultural heritage that predates the Incas. Although isolated in some ways, it is nevertheless at the center of a massive wave of transnational migration that has linked the region to New York for at least three decades. In the late 1990s, Ecuador experienced a

dramatic devaluation of its currency that, along with the failure of half the country's banks, led to the worst economic crisis in its history. This crisis prompted many to seek new and innovative strategies for economic survival.

In the latter portion of the chapter, I reviewed the history of education abroad in Cuenca. Beginning with the Lewis and Clark College program in the 1980s, the number of credit-bearing programs for foreign university students has grown to more than a dozen. In addition, Cuenca has approximately 20 Spanish language schools, the largest of which have upwards of 300 students per year. These education abroad programs and language schools offer homestays with local families. In the next chapter, we will learn more about these host families and their interactions with international students.