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Carceral Pandemic Politics and Epidemiological Elites in Ecuador

Beyond harrowing scenes of overburdened hospitals and loved ones unable to bury their dead, Ecuador's coronavirus crisis has also produced carceral involution: "immunological elites" stay home while the poor and working classes must risk contagion and incarceration.

When Covid-19 infections swept across Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest port and industrial hub, in March 2020, the poorest and wealthiest zones in the metropolitan area were the first to be hit. In Samborondón, for instance, home to the *blanco-mestizo* upper class, weddings and large, catered gatherings became superspreading events. Another outbreak tore through the Afro-Ecuadorian community of Nigeria in Isla Trinitaria, a mangrove-ringed zone on Guayaquil's southwestern outskirts where mostly impoverished informal and domestic workers live in cramped intergenerational housing.

A nightmare scenario exploded across the metropolitan area. In a flash, ambulance and hospital infrastructures collapsed. Even more traumatically, the city's privatized funerary and mortuary industries imploded under overwhelming demand. Death-care proprietors, who had long benefitted from nationwide decentralization of the sector, quickly reached maximum processing capacities. Long lines of automobiles with deceased family members in their backseats, or coffins tied down onto their rooftops, waited for hours or even days to bury their loved ones. But this was just the beginning of a rolling—and differently experienced—catastrophe.

By early April, most national and international news commentators viewed the crisis unfolding in the coastal lowland province of Guayas, where Guayaquil is located, as a cautionary tale about the untold human ravages of Covid-19. Local public health experts claimed that a few thousand had died, but testimonials suggested nearly a tenfold number of pandemic-related deaths. Real mortality rates per population were far worse than those of New York. Official narratives treated the catastrophe as if it were about the coronavirus alone. But global public health broadly reflects underlying conditions that are historical and political-economic as well as corporeal and medical—or, indeed, biopolitical and necropolitical.

Guayaquil's civic-managerial attempts to save lives also delineated private, closed-door governmental decisions about who could be left to die, or, indeed, made to die. Municipal and private militarization of hospitals and cemeteries created a citywide archipelago of *cordon sanitaire* zones, but not—as is typically the case—to prevent people from leaving. Rather, security forces prevented loved ones and their medical advocates from gaining access to the dying or even the dead. Pandemic politics' curious new institution—its carceral dynamic—emerged out of these circumstances in Guayaquil and quickly spread



Temporary state security personnel, drawn from the Coast Guard, block an entrance to Pascuales cemetery, on the northern periphery of Guayaquil, April 13, 2020. (EFRAÍN CASTELLANO / COMITÉ PERMANENTE POR LA DEFENSA DE LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS)

across the rest of Ecuador during the following days, weeks, and months in an unevenly distributed “sanitary emergency.” Today, Ecuadorian carceral worlds and their hidden-away logics openly influence health mandates and democratic governance of the living and dead as never before.

Reactionary state and police responses to the unfolding pandemic strongly call to mind the command-control governance under Ecuador’s military junta in the 1970s and the continuation of those policies during the infamous neoliberal 1980s and 1990s. Then, as now, governmental forces used *mano dura* policing in the name of protecting democracy or securing elite interests, with the backing of executive fiat and temporary suspension of civil liberties when needed. In the 1980s, former president León Febres Cordero deployed torture and forced disappearances to crack down a small leftist guerrilla. From then through the 2000s, leaders such

as Febres Cordero and Jaime Nebot, who both served as mayors of Guayaquil with the conservative Social Christian Party (PSC), targeted petty drug traffickers with heavy-handed policing in a globalized “war on drugs.” Now, the government of President Lenín Moreno and Guayaquil’s mayor, Cynthia Viteri (PSC), have also remade the politics of disappearance. The national government declared a public health emergency and imposed a curfew. Viteri introduced measures to enforce shelter-in-place isolation, mask-wearing, and physical distancing. But new forms of public health policing in Guayaquil—which entailed draconian measures for the urban poor—quickly enveloped a city already riven with extreme inequalities, civic abandonment on the urban peripheries, and a serially underreported mass incarceration problem.

As coronavirus cases surged across Guayaquil, urban citizenship unmoored and remapped itself

in relation to both voluntary and obligatory confinement practices, differential geographical and class-based mobility (or lack thereof), and the literal disappearance of certain bodies unaligned with governmental interests—both in life as well as in death. A harbinger of things to come for Ecuador as a whole.

Organic Breakdown

Natural disasters typically accelerate or deepen longstanding political economic and sociocultural divides. Ecuador's coronavirus emergency has been no different. For nearly 20 years, I have studied how *mano dura* policing in Guayaquil's marginal neighborhoods and the normalization of mass incarceration led to a new urban political ecology—or to a mode of Christian majoritarian citizenship that also criminalized “anti-social” youths of color, remapping a newly segregated city into “saved” and “fallen” neighborhoods. Explaining similar urban processes elsewhere in South America, anthropologists Teresa Caldeira and Daniella Gandolfo have described, respectively, the “implosion of modern public life” in Brazil and the neoliberal micro-dynamics of “urban transgression” in Lima, Peru. Yet early in Guayaquil's pandemic breakdown, most residents demanded immediate, across-the-board solidarity and cooperation in hopes that the emergency health measures could be uniformly observed.

City residents watched helplessly as 911 services became unavailable and their loved ones struggled without emergency medical support, taking final breaths and dying right in front of them. The corpses of one, then sometimes multiple family members accumulated in houses and apartments. As temperatures hovered between the upper-20s and lower-30 degrees Celsius (77-94 Fahrenheit) with high humidity in March and April, olfactory traumas built like a pressure cooker among surviving relatives, trapped by police in their homes with putrefying loved ones. National and international media latched on to the spontaneous, collective practice of families leaving their dead outside their living

spaces in makeshift coffins or enveloped in plastic wrap. The smallest details of these images crushed me: a beachgoer's parasol placed above the “head” of a plastic-wrapped body lying prostrate on a city bench; a swatch of beautifully embroidered cloth covering what was obviously a body bag; a corpse wrapped in an industrial-sized black garbage bag deposited right in front of my favorite coffee shop in Guayaquil. What media outlets initially failed to report was that such a pushing away of the dead for the most part took place in poor or underserved districts, and these reports only made news headlines in late July. Families and sometimes whole neighborhoods floated untold numbers of bodies off into the city's saltwater estuaries (*esteros*), or laid them to rest closer to home, allegedly—as rumors had it—in backyard burials. The poorest of working-class communities were already deeply suspicious of the state before institutions began to buckle under the crisis.

Most denizens of poor neighborhoods, located primarily in the city's northern and southern districts, had little savings and needed to leave their homes as *vendedores ambulantes* or informal workers. The urban working-class poor faced a Faustian choice: leave their abodes to ply their trades and expose themselves to contagion or stay in their usually overcrowded residences, with no household income, only to watch their families go hungry. Meanwhile, more affluent classes living in privately guarded high-rise apartments or gated communities often demanded the blanket enforcement of social distancing measures, even as private gatherings and other *fiestas* they hosted went largely unpoliced. Social media posts of *guayaquileños* golfing or jogging in Samborondón's private enclaves, unbothered by law enforcement, generated a whiplash of public outrage. Yet Samborondón also figured among the hardest hit sectors of the metropolitan area, briefly topping nationwide infection rates at the canton level, though its death toll eventually grew on a substantially lower curve. In other words, socioeconomic class quickly became an emerging measure of “immunological privilege.”

Lower classes experienced epidemiological law enforcement quite differently as police and military personnel went on the hunt for public infractions under this new sanitary policing paradigm. The first major targets were urban open-air markets, typically frequented by poor families who cannot afford to shop in upscale supermarkets. Viral social media videos showed baton-wielding police chasing crowds of people from these and other sites. Other video footage widely circulated on Facebook and Twitter showed national police confronting people in front of their own properties and apprehending individuals for allegedly disobeying quarantine, despite relatives' insistent protests. Still other clips revealed police harassing people, beating them with batons for being outside, or humiliatingly obligating them to publicly perform masculinized "feats of endurance," like sets of push-ups, on the spot. *Mano dura* once again ruled the day. But perhaps never before had it enjoyed such broad-based public support.

A media pundit in Quito seized on these short clips of police brutality, in tandem with corporate news footage of commercial corridors in which few people wore masks or observed physical distancing, decrying guayaquileños' "lack of discipline." The report, which ignored any kind of structural analysis of urban poverty or the life-and-death predicaments faced by informal workers, prompted outrage in Guayas. Nonetheless, Guayaquil's mayor Viteri later echoed the same claim in a Facebook Live event from her private residence in Samborondón. And in a public-relations move typical of the PSC, she xenophobically claimed in the first weeks of the pandemic that foreigners and others arriving on international flights posed the greatest threat to Guayaquil—despite clear evidence that the virus was already raging across the city. Without central government authorization, Viteri shut down Guayaquil's international airport and even blocked the tarmac with municipal service vehicles as inbound flights, including one from Spain, attempted to land. The Iberia Airlines airplane—empty except for its crew—was on a state-approved and internationally

commissioned flight: a humanitarian mission to airlift foreign nationals out of Guayaquil's crisis zone.

In the meantime, public hospitals grew so overwhelmed that waiting rooms and storage closets turned into makeshift morgues. Bodies were set down on benches and wheelchairs and laid out on floors. Military and national police forces barred family members from entering hospital grounds. Hospital directors reacted with haste, bringing in refrigerated and sometimes unrefrigerated trucks and shipping containers where bodies were haphazardly tagged—if they were lucky—and stuffed into any available spaces. In tandem, Guayaquil's municipal authorities began to commission the digging of mass graves within or adjacent to major public cemeteries. As trucks left hospitals for these burial sites, some surviving relatives who had been told their loved ones had died but were not permitted access to their bodies used Facebook Live and other social media platforms to catalogue their car chases in mostly vain attempts to gain access to their cargo. Others found their way into these storage containers, only to dig through the stacked-up body bags with little success.

Human rights and civic organizations in Guayaquil have staged weekly protests to draw attention to the disappearance of these bodies. From the beginning of the crisis, Ecuador's public health officials released nationwide infection and death figures that seemed artificially low in the eyes of funerary service workers, ambulance drivers, and hospital personnel. In early May, the official numbers of the dead mysteriously dropped by several thousand overnight as the pandemic-response authorities shifted criteria that would distinguish PCR-tested coronavirus mortality—including respiratory and cardiac fatalities "directly" related to Covid-19—while not counting loss of life due to coronavirus comorbidity factors that could not be positively confirmed. By the end of July, the country had registered more than 5,600 Covid-19 deaths. However, new figures from the Civil Registry revealed a spike in "unusual deaths" in Guayaquil amounting to nearly 17,000 in March and April alone, and such deaths only represented



A protester holds a sign reading “We want justice” in Plaza Rocafuerte in the heart of downtown Guayaquil. Groups have protested weekly to highlight cases of disappeared Covid-19 infected bodies. (ANDRÉS LOOR / COMITÉ PERMANENTE POR LA DEFENSA DE LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS)

the officially registered. Wide swaths of Ecuadorians, in addition to national and foreign media pundits, held the overall impression that government statistics were being used to cover up the real death toll.

As if presaging their political dilemma, governmental and foreign embassy personnel engaged in a concerted campaign to redirect Ecuadorian media attention from this miasma of death and dying and towards state or public-private efforts to flatten the curve of infections. Both Guayaquil’s municipality and Ecuador’s central government hired international public relations firms to help blunt the effects

of “negative” news reports. Nobody can possibly know yet just how artificially low reported numbers are. But protesters in Guayaquil continue to organize street-side demonstrations, demanding accountability for their disappeared family members and loved ones.

Civil Divestment and Immunological Elites

Pandemic politics may seem ad hoc and experimental—a case study in crisis management and public relations. Nevertheless, in Ecuador at least, a new and unprecedented logic of civil organization has quickly emerged. The embrace of voluntary isolation and self-confinement in traditionally wealthy and upper-class neighborhoods has allowed elites to develop spaces *of and for* their immunological privilege. But while privileged classes embrace salvific quarantine measures and often work online from home, the inhabitants of marginal urban districts are obligated to circulate outside the home, to expose themselves to risk factors, and eventually to return to shared housing built for intergenerational and multi-family needs.

In essence, the pandemic—and its attendant state of emergency—has normalized logics of police containment measures, further complicating the standard class- and ethno-racial order of the neoliberal penal state. Elites typically enjoy greater mobility and relative freedom from risk-bearing public activities—even when deciding to confine themselves at home during the pandemic. However, regulated working-class movement—now inverted into obligatory forms of “essential” circulation—normalizes enhanced exposure to police repression as well as to premature death from exposure to the virus.

This strange, pandemic-led involution of “carceral immobility” has not surprisingly been deeply informed by recent Ecuadorian history. Last October, massive nationwide Indigenous-led strikes erupted against the Moreno government’s debt restructuring agreement with the International Monetary Fund. The mass protests met wanton use of police force unseen since the 1940s, and state authorities and

protest leaders each accused the other of betrayal and unjustified violence. When Moreno's government responded to the Covid-19 catastrophe some six months later, his administration implemented an immediate lockdown and enforced quarantine of focal outbreak areas. But he also, over time, used these measures to deal with his longer-running political crises. In late March, the central government implemented a graduated "stoplight system"—from red to yellow to green—to limit movement within and between provinces with different rates of contagion. Military, police, and transit authorities controlled public circulation. Each morning, Ecuador's Minister of the Interior announced on Twitter the previous day's number of arrests of offending drivers. Roadblocks mostly impacted working-class drivers' livelihoods, though any number of vehicles were impounded for driving on "off days" prohibited by the stoplight system.

In a well-known case, a guayaquileño uploaded a selfie video on social media criticizing authorities' pandemic response, calling for the repeal of the restrictions on automobility, and urging a mass uprising against the government. The video went viral. Authorities subsequently arrested him in his own home in early April on charges of fomenting hate and civil unrest, video of which quickly made the rounds. Around the same time, students and other groups took to the streets in large protests in Ecuador's major cities to denounce university budget cuts, announced under cover of the pandemic. In Guayaquil, the marchers confronted a brutal police crackdown, documented minute-by-minute by amateur cellphone videographers. Police swiftly detained, then released, human rights workers and other organizers merely following the protest. Subsequently, Moreno's government—elected on a progressive platform but governing with a right-wing agenda—attempted to outsource urban surveillance and street-level control by recruiting neighborhood leaders to report on individuals, groups, and businesses "uncompliant" with state-mandated "biosecurity measures." Another harbinger of things to come.

Carceral Involution

During the public health emergency, Ecuador's central government has implemented a number of long-wished-for austerity measures and other maneuvers that had been stuck in political gridlock. These moves included, among other decrees: progressively reducing state subsidies on gasoline prices, the primary issue fueling the October protests; pushing through dramatic cuts to already-decimated public university budgets; and authorizing lethal police and military force to quell civil unrest in order to preempt "another October," a move quickly retracted due to its broad unpopularity. Additionally, an Ecuadorian judge sentenced former president Rafael Correa, tried in absentia, to eight years in prison on substantial bribery charges and barred him from running for office for 25 years. Whether such charges had actual merit or not is now somewhat beside the point.

One might be inclined, following Naomi Klein, to label this parade of executive power-grabs yet another example of pandemic shock doctrine—political elites exploiting emergencies to reinvent economic productivity and make labor more precarious. It is also a classic example of how "lawfare" becomes a handmaiden of contemporary governance. However, both perspectives fail to recognize how threats of incarceration enable the subterfuge of day-to-night political economic transformations. What is now at stake in Ecuador is nothing more or less than what I call a "carceral involution." As immunological elites embrace stay-at-home measures and economically demand the unflagging circulation of working-class providers of essential services, new states of confinement and the circulatory-regulation of urban publics have inverted the nearly 200-year-old popular and legal understanding of "confinement" as the opposite of freedom.

The idea of carceral involution points to how hundreds of individuals have been locked up because of their involvement in protests against the government or for failing to comply with "sanitary" strictures aligned against informal workers. However, the



Essential workers ride a bus in Quito, Ecuador on April 6, 2020. (BANCO MUNDIAL AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE / FLICKR)

idea derives more specifically from anthropologist Clifford Geertz's work on agrarian capitalist transformation and its multiple unintended consequences in traditional societies. Researching early-to-mid 20th century colonialism, Geertz demonstrated how shifting, externally imposed corporate systems of monocrop production inverted and complicated agrarian ecologies—a process he deemed “agricultural involution.” New capital-intensive agrarian forms were said to have “transformed” local agriculture by a single, obligatory, technological substitution or inversion. Yet such a historic change nonetheless quite often proved remarkably less economically “productive,” or even “sustainable,” when the cultural practices of traditional agriculturalists were inspected ethnographically.

In today's pandemic politics, neoliberal dependence on enforced labor mobilities and upper-class immobility has similarly “involved” the country's political economy, substituting voluntary confinement for the

wealthy and obligatory working-class circulation in order to maintain the status quo. True, labor flexibilization has always been tacitly inclined towards generating captive markets. What is nevertheless new is how carceral dynamics have become more and more *blindingly* obvious as a guarantor of the survival of a neoliberal economic order.

Over the last 20 years, my ethnographic work has centered on a longitudinal study of transformations in the Ecuadorian criminal justice system. The country's dramatic political economic shift in the late 2000s from “the long neoliberal night” to so-called 21st century socialism was nowhere more unaligned with its stated goals than across the nation's prisons. Under former president Rafael Correa, justice system officials developed a prison model based on the spirit of Ecuador's Constituent Assembly and its new, highly progressive 2008 Constitution. In 2014, the National Assembly approved a new Organic and Integral Penal Code (COIP), which included the

incorporation of tiered security and long-promised rehabilitative programming. But the practical upshot of the new prison model was the unprecedented expansion of penalty and the unending growth of prison infrastructure.

COIP renamed prisoners *personas privadas de la libertad* (persons deprived of liberty). However, the act of *renaming* individuals who are explicitly, under law, stripped of their civil rights, does very little to address the problem of the entrenchment of a state-centric need to regulate the politics of life and death through practices of confinement. Over the following years, Ecuador's central government built gigantic regional prison complexes in several provinces, dramatically expanding the state's capacity to rule via penal logics. In 2008, the country's entire prison population amounted to slightly less than 8,000. Over more than a decade, the Correa and Moreno administrations ballooned the prison population—including national penitentiaries as well as detention centers—to nearly 44,000 as of just before the coronavirus emergency, demonstrating that neosocialist and neoliberal governments share penal regulatory expansion quite in common. Recent coronavirus-related executive clemencies have reduced the prison population to approximately 40,000 as of August. Nevertheless, the Ecuadorian regime of civil divestment has only grown, and in fact expanded far beyond the space of the prison itself.

Prisoners in Ecuador are subjected to premature death, inadequate healthcare, and rule by national or local executive decree. State and regional prison authorities are well-known for “spinning” unexpected prisoner deaths on the cellblocks and trying to manage disease outbreaks without drawing attention to institutional mismanagement and potential liability. Inside Ecuadorian prison facilities—as in most of Latin America—committees or groups of inmate leaders generally govern the cellblocks and are held responsible by prison administrators for maintaining peace and hygienic standards. Latin American state leaders therefore generally turn a

blind eye to prisoners' everyday living conditions. Having few actionable civil rights, prisoners describe the prison as a space where only money talks and where no appeal to human rights can be sought, organized, or defended. Those who manage to eke out a subsistence or make productive use of black markets are those who can most readily survive the prison system's life-threatening dangers. Regional scholars generally agree that Latin American penal complexes are, rather than spaces of organized state punishment and rehabilitation, more akin to state lockups for the interment and abandonment of unwanted populations. They are spaces of maximum civil divestment in human beings, entirely dependent on their spatial concentration, segregation, and exposure to premature death.

Under Ecuador's new pandemic politics, the characteristics that most closely define regimes of confinement have quickly become the logics of broader civic governance: rule by executive, sanitary decree, which actually obeys a necropolitical order. Citizens become state captives, locked into processes of political-economic transformation marked by civil divestment and exposure to premature death as an entire state becomes a strange type of open-air prison. Immunological elites pursue voluntary enclosure, a state of safety, and limited privileges, while the working-class, ethno-racialized poor are encouraged—even required—to circulate under new sanitary emergency strictures or suffer the pains of police harassment or imprisonment. What this carceral involution of urban spatial politics may signal for the immediate future is anyone's guess, but the process is already well underway. ■

Chris Garces teaches at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito. His ethnographic interests range from the study of politics and religion—or contemporary political theologies—to the unchecked global development of penal state politics and the history of Catholic humanitarian interventions in Latin America.