
POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATION

Contemporary Latin American Inequality: Class Struggle, Decolonization, and the Limits of Liberal Citizenship

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Weberian sociological approaches dominate the contemporary study of inequality in Latin America. Theoretically, the major works in the area suffer from a conflation of liberalism and democracy and offer flawed conceptions of capitalism, class, and other social relations of oppression. This article offers an exegesis and critique of several recent influential texts written within the Weberian tradition. It then proposes as an alternative a Marxian-decolonial theoretical framework for understanding inequality and the totalizing power of capital. It demonstrates how such a framework can better account for the complexity of class relations and other internally related forms of social oppression—such as gender, sexuality, and race—in Latin America today. Finally, the article shows the utility of the Marxist-decolonial framework by way, first, of a concrete investigation into the highly contested dynamics of twenty-first-century extractive capitalism in the region, and, second, through an exposition of the life story and activism of Luis Macas, an indigenous activist and intellectual in Ecuador. The core element of Macas's political subjectivity is an underlying utopian-revolutionary dialectic through which he draws on elements of a precapitalist past in looking forward to an anticolonial and socialist future.

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a welcome flourishing of social scientific literature on the enduring problems of inequality in Latin America. However, this article argues that the dominant trends in this new season of academic and policy attention to inequality are limited by a strict adherence to Weberian historical sociology, a thin conception of democracy, and a partial and flawed understanding of capitalism, class, and other social relations of oppression. The liberal ideology underpinning much of the current investigation of inequality in the region is incapable of understanding the capitalist market as a field characterized by coercion and imperatives. Rather, the market, albeit in need of taming and regulation, is ultimately understood to be an arena of opportunities, which can be seized or missed. Because markets are the domain of freedom, movements for freedom from the market become impossible to understand. The empirical separation of the economic from the political under capitalism is celebrated as a normative ideal upon which liberal democracy rests. The invulnerability of the coercive and imperative economic sphere to democratic power is therefore a sacrosanct feature of liberal democracy, one with important consequences for the horizons of human emancipation.

This article proposes an alternative Marxian and decolonial framework as a better way of conceiving inequality and analyzing the totalizing power of capital, the complexity of class relations, and other internally related social oppressions—gender, sexuality, and race—in the current moment of Latin American capitalism. Class is understood in this framework as a living, relational phenomenon rather than an empty abstraction. It is, therefore, conceptualized as being multiply determined in and through gender, race, and sexuality in contemporary Latin American societies. These latter forms of social oppression are not mere epiphenomena of class structure, nor are they reducible to class exploitation. However, the way in which they constitute capitalist society alongside class can only be properly understood when we think of them as being internally related to class. Relations of class, gender, and race are a dialectical unity of multiple determinations, rather

than a series of separate spheres traveling along parallel to one another. They are discrete phenomena but only fully comprehensible in their interaction with one another. Class exploitation under capitalism operates nationally, regionally, and internationally at the point of production, in the sphere of circulation, within the private sphere of gendered reproductive labor, through race and racism, and on the basis of nature (Selwyn 2014). This totalizing complexity exceeds the boundaries of the Weberian sociological imagination and the confines of liberal democratic theory that inform most studies of inequality in contemporary Latin America. Such complexity is central to the theoretical alternative advanced in this article.

Empirically, I use two areas of inquiry to substantiate my claims. The first is the lens of extractive capitalism in twenty-first-century Latin America. The multiple constitutive moments of capitalist exploitation are visible here through Latin America's subordinate repositioning as primary commodity producer in the international division of labor; as novel forms of class struggle emerge through peasant contestation against the dispossession of their land; as racism is used against indigenous communities resisting incursions into their territories for the extraction of natural resources; and, finally, as capitalism's interface with the substratum of nature is revealed through the centrality of mining minerals, oil, gas, and agricultural products to the latest rounds of capitalist accumulation in much of the region. If these are some of the structural nodes through which extractive capitalism operates in the current period in Latin America, my second area of empirical inquiry brings to the surface the political subjectivities informing particular patterns of resistance. Specifically, I focus on the life story and activism of Luis Macas, an indigenous dissident in Ecuador who develops, in theory and praxis, a combined and totalizing critique of colonialism and capitalism. I show how Macas's political subjectivity is informed by a utopian-revolutionary dialectic, through which he draws on elements of a precapitalist past in looking forward to an anticolonial and socialist future.

Departing from this theoretical backdrop, the article is organized into five sections, each relating back in complex ways to the experience of Latin America's recent trends in inequality and the region's uneven and contradictory left turn in the political sphere since the late 1990s. First, it looks in detail at recent improvements in income inequality set against a long historical regional trajectory. Second, and more important, it explores the ways in which renewed scholarly attention to themes of inequality in Latin America in the last decade has been dominated in North American social sciences by the uneasy pairing of a historical sociological explanatory framework drawing on Max Weber (1978), Barrington Moore (1993), and Karl Polanyi (2001), and an ideological prism of truncated twenty-first-century social democracy. Drawing on recent Marxist scholarship, a third section suggests that while the historical sociological framing of much of the recent mainstream literature has offered important contributions to our knowledge of the origins and patterns of trends in inequality, its conceptualization of thin social democracy as the appropriate limit on the region's reformist horizon reflects a failure of sociological imagination, with important implications for our understanding of capitalism, citizenship, and class. A fourth section examines recent developments in Latin America's "new extractivism," which offer a rich, dynamic, and totalizing perspective on the rhythms of capitalist accumulation, old and emerging axes of inequality, and forms of contestation in the twenty-first century. Finally, these widespread Latin American political and economic developments are put into conversation with a biographical portrait of the indigenous Ecuadorian activist, Luis Macas.

Latin American Trends in Inequality

Whatever its wider theoretical and political shortcomings (Toscano 2015; Husson 2015; Roberts 2015; Mann 2015), the English translation of Thomas Piketty's (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* provoked a welcome international stir in popular political debate by showing, with an enormous historical database, that inequality in income and wealth is both inherent to capitalism and becoming alarmingly worse of late. Ironically, within this wider global discussion, Latin America, long recognized as the world's most unequal region (Gootenberg and Reygadas 2010; Engerman and Sokoloff 2005; Blofield 2011), was being touted in scholarly and policy circles alike as an anomalous zone of hope, where income inequality in the twenty-first century was moving in the opposite direction (López-Calva and Lustig 2010). The worst crisis in global capitalism since the Great Depression, beginning in 2007–2008 (McNally 2011), seemed to have had only a minimal and temporary dampening effect on relatively high rates of growth in Latin America, in part due to initial continuities in a Chinese-driven commodities boom that began in 2003 (Webber 2015a; Katz 2012). The uptick in the international commodities market coincided with the rearticulation of the extraparliamentary and electoral Latin American left (Webber and Carr 2013; Katz 2008; Levitsky and Roberts 2011): a tidal wave of presidential victories for left and center-left candidates in elections between 1998 and 2011 put eleven countries, and two-thirds of the region's population, under their rule (Roberts 2014, 50). A combination of

auspicious external circumstances and renewed attention to redistributive policies by these governments resulted in the first sustained declines in income inequality in the region for many decades (Cornia 2014a).

It may be, however, that the bright light of Latin America is beginning to fade in some respects, as the mutations of the ongoing global crisis begin to wreak their havoc on the region's economic trends. Slowing growth has very recently coincided with a diminution in the pace of income leveling, for example (Williamson 2015; World Bank 2014). In 2014, the world economy picked up slightly from 2013, with aggregate growth moving from 2.4 to 2.6 percent (CEPAL 2014, 7). The growth of developing countries continued to decelerate, however, even if growth levels in the developing world continue to be superior to growth of the developed world. On average, developing countries grew at 4.4 percent in 2014. China's growth continued to slow in 2014 to 7.3 percent, down from 7.7 in 2013, which was the slowest rate of growth the country has experienced in over two decades. Aggregate external demand for Latin America and the Caribbean has weakened, because of both the continued low growth of the core countries and the slowdown of developing countries, above all, China, which has become the principal trading partner of various nations in the region, particularly those which are primary exporters. The prices of primary materials in this context have continued on a downward trend. Overall prices of primary materials fell 10.5 percent in 2014, on the back of a 5.2 percent decline in 2013 (CEPAL 2014, 7). This helps to explain why Latin America and the Caribbean witnessed a decline of 25–30 percent in foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2014, corresponding with the end of the cycle of investments into mining in particular (CEPAL 2014, 9).

In this worsening global context, the overall GDP of Latin America and the Caribbean reached only 1.1 percent in 2014, the lowest since 2009. But there were important differences in the rhythm of growth in different countries. Most significantly, there was a lack of dynamism and even contraction in some of the region's major economies: Argentina (–0.2 percent), Brazil (0.2 percent), Mexico (2.1 percent), and Venezuela (–3.1 percent) (CEPAL 2014, 8). By contrast, the fastest-growing countries were Panama and the Dominican Republic (both 6.0 percent), followed by Bolivia (5.2 percent), Colombia (4.8 percent), and Guyana and Nicaragua (both at 4.5 percent). In a reversal of earlier trends in the fallout from the global crisis, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean are benefiting from the return of modest growth in the United States, the principal destination for many of these countries' exports, as well as the source of remittances. South America, in contrast, is experiencing a drop in demand for goods because of lower growth in Europe and China (CEPAL 2014, 9). "The recent Latin American experience demonstrates that equity gains can be made in a context of steady economic growth," Kenneth M. Roberts (2014, 57) points out; "whether such gains can be sustained in a period of austerity is yet to be determined."

Although not the poorest region in the world, Latin America has a long history of entrenched inequalities, flowing in the first instance out of the colonial legacies of highly concentrated landholdings, means of production, credit, and political power.¹ The classical liberal period of export-oriented mining and agriculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries deepened and extended extant patterns of accumulation that benefited large landowners and industrial and financial elites. Despite important increases in economic growth and industrialization during the import-substitution industrialization (ISI) era that followed, inequality became even worse (Thorp 1998). By the 1950s and 1960s the distribution of income per capita measured by the Gini coefficient was the worst in the world, ranging from 0.47 to 0.65 (Cornia 2014a, 5). Such measures of income, which exclude wealth, underestimate the multidimensionality of inequality. "In a vivid daily sense," Paul Gootenberg (2010, 1) notes, "Latin Americans live and see these disparities in how they do politics, build urban spaces, work the land, join new and older social movements, experience crime and environmental stress, and access educational, nutritional, healthcare, legal, cultural, and media resources."

Beginning in the 1970s and accelerating through the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal restructuring spanned the breadth of the region in the midst of hyperinflation and debt crises, liberalizing international trade and investment, privatizing public enterprises, and retrenching social spending (Green 2003; Bulmer-Thomas 2014, 391–435; Spronk and Webber 2015, 9–10). This was, particularly in its initial stages, a violent, authoritarian transition away from an exhausted model of ISI. "With a few important exceptions," historian Greg Grandin (2004, 14) points out, throughout Latin America "state- and elite-orchestrated preventive and punitive terror was key to ushering in neoliberalism." The cataclysm of neoliberal counterreform in the 1980s, Grandin (2004, 14) rightly stresses, "had as much to do with the destruction of mass movements as it did with the rise of new financial elites invested in global markets." These economic policies had negative consequences for poverty and inequality, making the most unequal region of the world worse still on every

¹ On the additional role of patrimonial institutions of ethnic stratification, see Mahoney (2015).

measure. Poverty rates between 1980 and 2002 increased from 40.5 percent of the population in 1980 to 44 percent in 2002. In absolute terms, this translated into an increase of 84 million poor people, from 136 million in 1980 to 220 million in 2002 (Damian and Boltvinik 2006, 145). Latin America continued to be the most unequal part of the world, such that in 2003 the top 10 percent of the population earned 48 percent of all income (Reygadas 2006, 122). The average regional Gini index rose skyward throughout these decades, increasing by 2.2 points from the early 1980s to 1990, 1.7 points over the 1990s, and a further 1.2 points during the regional recession of 2001–2002, to a total of 5.1 points over the orthodox neoliberal period (Cornia 2014b, 25). Real industrial wages declined, the informalization of the world of work expanded, and already insufficient social security programs from the ISI period were cut back drastically (Roberts 2014, 56; Portes and Hoffman 2003; Robinson 2008).

The recession between 1998 and 2002 was severe, the sharpest in Latin America since the early years of the debt crisis in the 1980s. Poverty and inequality spiked on the heels of two decades of declining social conditions. The chasm between the ideological promises of neoliberalism and the material reality facing the rural and urban popular classes became unsustainable. If the austerity agenda had been possible to sell to significant parts of the Latin American public at the outset of the debt crisis, in a period of left defeat, debt crisis, and panic over hyperinflation and after two decades of failed experimentation ending in a massive recession, public opinion congealed in the opposite direction (Webber 2015a). A novel recomposition of the social and political left emerged, first in the form of militant extraparliamentary social movements in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, and then electorally across huge swathes of Latin American territory. Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela were among the countries in the region where left or center-left parties won national elections on anti-neoliberal tickets (Webber and Carr 2013).

As Latin American growth rates recovered in the wake of the early twenty-first-century recession and the onset of the commodities boom, the drastic worsening of inequality in the 1980s and 1990s began to trend in the opposite direction. In one of the more comprehensive recent studies (Cornia 2014a), eighteen countries were analyzed, excluding the Caribbean (except the Dominican Republic), and including all South American countries (excepting the Guyanas) and the entirety of Central America. In sixteen of the eighteen countries, inequality declined between 2002 and 2010, the exceptions being Nicaragua and Costa Rica. While a third of the decline in inequality is attributable to the 2003–2004 period, following its intense surge during the 2001–2002 crisis, inequality nonetheless continued to decline during the subsequent period, including during the regional downturn of 2009 (Cornia 2014a, 26). Inequality declined even in regimes governed by the right in this period—Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Honduras after the 2009 military coup (Cornia 2014a, 34)—but “the steepest and most consistent reductions were recorded under left-of-centre governments—in particular, Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador” (Roberts 2014, 63).

Inequality and Sociological Imagination

How should we understand these recent transformations theoretically, and where might they point us politically and ideologically in terms of imagining still more far-reaching transformations of the colonial and capitalist legacies of unequal development in Latin America? There are severe limitations, I argue, built into the most influential social scientific modes of inquiry at the moment. The dominant trend in recent North American studies of the region has been a combination of Weberian historical sociology and social democratic policy advocacy.² Such a union can be found, for example, in one of the most important recent works on social democracy in the global periphery (with Costa Rica and Chile as Latin American case studies) (Sandbrook et al. 2006, 2007). The argument here is for a pragmatic version of social democracy in which integration into competitive global markets is wedded with genuine democracy and social equity, thereby avoiding the unrealizable utopias of socialism or de-linked antiglobalization, on the one hand, and unfettered neoliberal markets on the other. Key to this general perspective is an emphasis on class compromise within the parameters of the capitalist system, whereby the contending classes of capital and labor, or wider social forces, seek a “redistributive societal compromise” rooted in “an agreement in which the contending sides . . . make real concessions with the objective of avoiding mutual damage and achieving social peace” (Teichman 2008, 447). The sanctity of private property must be guaranteed lest the middle classes be frightened into an

² Here I limit myself mainly to political scientists and sociologists. The closest equivalent turn among political economists is probably toward neostructuralism, following closely the intellectual production of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. For distinct but complementary Marxian critiques of the neostructuralist turn, see Leiva (2008), Webber (2010), and Grigera (2015).

alliance with the capitalist class bent on the overturning of liberal democratic rule (Teichman 2015, 17–18). Likewise, while it is understood that only mobilization from the popular classes can force a compromise on the part of the propertied classes, it is also stressed that their collective action, rhetoric, and strategic aims must be sufficiently moderate so as not to spark fear and authoritarian reaction from above (Teichman 2012).

The vision of social democracy on offer in such a framework often draws on a “soft” reading of Karl Polanyi’s famous articulation of a societal countermovement against totalizing market domination (Silva 2009). Markets, in this reading, remain the motive force allocating most resources in society, but through government intervention and regulation they are subject to social and ecological limits. Taxation mechanisms concentrate substantial resources in the central authority of the state, allowing it to meet the social and economic rights of citizens in accordance with the law. Meanwhile, an ethos of reciprocity underlines the citizenry in such societies, allowing for social democratic reproduction on the basis of empathy (Sandbrook 2011, 429–430). Some of the more influential interventions in debates on the rise of the new left in Latin America offer a variation on these themes (Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Weyland 2011). Kurt Weyland (2010, 6–9), for example, suggests that because of Latin America’s unfavorable insertion into the global economy, its underdeveloped productive apparatus, its polarized societies and segmented labor markets, denuded trade unions, and weak party systems, both the more radical left of the sort in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, and the moderate left, exemplified by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil or Michelle Bachelet in Chile, are under severe constraints in terms of the depth of sustainable redistributive programs they can offer to their societies. However, because the moderate left avoids entering into acrimonious relations with domestic and foreign capital, accepting the basic parameters of the region’s new market model, it has “achieved better, more solid economic results and has charted a more promising course for the long run” (Weyland 2010, 12). In any case, even the radicals have abandoned any fundamental confrontation with capitalism: “Who still believes that socialism as a truly new mode of production is an attainable and desirable goal?” (Weyland 2010, 8).

The intellectual production of Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber, and John D. Stephens over the last two decades (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Huber and Stephens 2001, 2012), with its paradoxical coalescence of rich historical-sociological insight and impoverished political imagination, has had an important impact on research agendas pertaining to different facets of inequality in Latin America, and captures nicely some of the intellectual tensions of contemporary Weberian sociology and social democratic advocacy I am trying to draw to the surface in this article. In the magisterial historical sweep of their classic *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992), they laid out the core theoretical foundations of the class-analytic model they have followed ever since, turning on the domestic balance of class forces in societies, the structure, autonomy, and capacity of states, and transnational configurations of power. They showed convincingly how it has been precisely the historical contradictions of capitalist development which have lent that mode of production its common association with democracy in the modern world: in transforming the class structure of society, capitalism strengthened the class most consistently supportive of democracy (the working class) and weakened the class most consistently pitted against it (the landed upper class). Historically, the bourgeoisie has been generally supportive of constitutional and representational government but opposed to incorporation of subordinate classes. This class has sometimes forged alliances with large working classes against especially intransigent landed interests, but once democracy has been installed, bourgeois support for constitutional rule has been contingent on the reproduction of its fundamental interests—property, above all. When these interests come under threat at the hands of insurgent popular classes, the bourgeoisie can be counted on to turn to authoritarian solutions. The peasantry plays a complex and variegated role inside of these shifting class coalitions. Those peasants lacking autonomous organizational capacity and beholden to their lords often fell under the political sway of dominant rural configurations of power, but rural wage workers on plantations frequently sought to join pro-democratic urban working-class coalitions if they did not face unrelenting repression (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 8–10). This is a fundamentally convincing argument and, in many respects, a path-breaking contribution to historical sociology.³

Nonetheless, in the same book, the strict policing of the constitutive parameters of democracy marks a preemptive foreclosing on more far-reaching emancipatory conceptualizations, an early narrowing of horizons which would find heightened expression in Huber and Stephens’s subsequent works. Relaxing the

³ For recent work lending further support to working-class centrality in the extension of formal democracy in Europe, see Chibber (2013).

otherwise rigorous formality of their investigation in *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens fail to identify specific authors in their often caricatural portrayal of the Marxist tradition when they begin their discussion of the conceptualization of democracy by noting that the “Marxist critique of ‘bourgeois democracy’ [a position from which they correctly distance Marx himself] raises perhaps the most central issue: is the claim of democracy to constitute the rule of the many real, or is this claim a sham that makes the de facto rule of the few more effective and secure behind a screen of formally democratic institutions?” (Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 10). They respond decisively that “no actually existing democracy can claim to constitute in a realistic sense the rule of the many; but ‘bourgeois’ or formal democracy does make a difference for the process of political decision-making and for the outcomes of that process” (Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 10). Thus far, this is a rather banal argument with which many Marxist theorists and actually existing radical anticapitalist movements would agree.

Their next definitional move is more dramatic, in which they make a plea for the abandonment of “the most far-reaching ideals of democratic thought” in favor of “the more modest forms of popular participation in government through representative parliaments that appear as realistic possibilities in the complex societies of today” (Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 10). The realism of this position is not defended theoretically but rather assumed to be a commonsense formulation. In the formal democracy of this type—the only realistic mode of democratic rule in modern societies—states are responsible to parliament, possibly with the complement of an elected executive, and there are regular free and fair elections, freedoms of expression and association, and universal suffrage. We should care about formal democracy, they argue, because “it tends to be more than merely formal. It tends to be real to some extent. Giving the many a real voice in the formal collective decision-making of a country is the most promising basis for further progress in the distribution of power and other forms of substantive equality” (Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 10). Again, there is much in this specific passage with which many Marxists would agree. More controversially, however, they “see in democracy—even in its modest and largely formal contemporary realizations—the beginning of the self-transformation of capitalism” (Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 11). In light of world historical patterns since the early 1990s, this view is so optimistic, not to say complacent, that even many social democratic observers of contemporary North American, European, and Latin American societies would presumably disagree quite vociferously (Oxhorn 2010; Streeck 2014; Mair 2013). It simply does not follow that because there are often more possibilities for popular influence on political life in formal democracies than under historical varieties of authoritarian rule, and that because formal democracies have been established historically out of the contradictions of capitalist development and associated transformations of class structures, that therefore we ought to accept the profound limitations on human freedom that this mode of production and this form of political rule entail as the parameters of the possible. The operative conflation here is one of *democracy as liberalism*, in which, ironically, capitalism is taken for granted, naturalized, and thereby rendered outside the remit of further interrogation.

In *Democracy and the Left*, Huber and Stephens (2012) employ the class-analytic theoretical model involving domestic, state, and transnational clusters of power, now called “power constellations theory,” which they first established in *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992) and *Development and Crisis of the Welfare State* (2001). In their latest book, the framework is adapted to the study of redistributive outcomes in various historical periods of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Latin American development. Again, crucial elements of the explanatory framework are compelling, if not as theoretically significant as the findings of their earlier investigation into the relationship between capitalism and democracy in the advanced capitalist countries, Latin America, Central America, and the Caribbean. In *Democracy and the Left* Huber and Stephens argue that politics matter quite fundamentally for inequality outcomes in Latin America, and that therefore the long-term structural trends of inequality in the region may be less immutable than often assumed. “Democracy and the rise of left parties,” they argue more specifically, “reduce the degree to which political power distributions are skewed and thus open the possibility for a greater range of policy options to be perceived, for demands for new policies to be articulated, and for those demands to be met” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 11). Democracy “makes the rise of actors committed to redistribution and the pursuit of actions aimed at redistribution possible” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 11).

Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay are identified as Latin America’s welfare state leaders over the course of the twentieth century, while all of them, except Costa Rica, are also highlighted for praise with regard to the contemporary era of the region’s latest left turn. Specific policy praise is directed at Lula’s increases in the conditional cash transfer programs first instituted under Fernando Henrique Cardoso in Brazil; health care and pension reforms under the Concertación governments of Ricardo Lagos and Michelle

Bachelet in Chile; access to basic medicine, conditional cash transfers, and labor market reforms in Argentina under the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner; and tax, labor market, and health care reforms as well as family allowances under Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay (Huber and Stephens 2012, 9). While the commodities boom “made major amounts of resources available to governments” of various political stripes, “the benefits from this growth could have accrued mainly to upper-income earners, as they did under Pinochet from 1985 to 1989 or during the Brazilian economic miracle of 1968–73” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 247–248). Unlike these earlier periods, however, “pressures from left-of-center parties, first in opposition and then in government, managed to shape social policy increasingly according to the principles of basic universalism” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 248).

From this often persuasive analytical basis, Huber and Stephens shift to more spurious prescriptive terrain. They advocate, first, incremental change and a narrow range of social pursuits, what they call “basic universalism” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 257). Incremental change is said to avoid destabilizing political polarization and allow for efficient management of new social initiatives, both of which benefit macroeconomic performance and democratic sustainability (Huber and Stephens 2012, 257). Working with the assumption of scarce resources—or, austerity—classical universalism is rejected in favor of a basic universalism which broadly targets transfers to those most in need (Huber and Stephens 2012, 257). Alongside incrementalism and basic universalism, investment in human capital plays a major role in their prescriptive conclusions for the Latin American welfare state. In part, this is because human capital is seen to be “the most essential measure in a strategy to put Latin American countries on a development path that results in moving up the product cycle through industrial upgrading” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 259). Higher average years of education and better skills training will facilitate further transition to a value-added, export-oriented economic model with good jobs and better wages, what they take to be an innovation on the “developmental state” for the Latin American region (Huber and Stephens 2012, 260–261). They accept the institutionalist and neoliberal consensus that the exhaustion of ISI in the 1970s means that a turn to open trade markets was the only reasonable alternative. More than reasonable, in fact, open trade markets are to be celebrated because they are “compatible with low levels of inequality and poverty, as the examples of the Nordic countries and Taiwan and Korea show” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 261–262).⁴ Together with incrementalism, basic universalism, investment in human capital, and open trade markets, the best-practice model of social policy-making according to Huber and Stephens also includes higher taxes in the Latin American context, a pragmatic approach to privatization of public enterprises, and a balanced budget across economic cycles. This vision is broadly in alignment with the post-Washington Consensus view of the international financial institutions, and particularly that of the World Bank, which is understood to have transcended the neoliberal paradigm (Huber and Stephens 2012, 261–663).

Unsurprisingly, given these prescriptive premises, Huber and Stephens (2012, 263–266) single out for criticism the ostensibly more radical political and social orientation of the governments of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador.⁵ One problem is their distance from incrementalism, including in their agendas as they do “a broader program of transformation, extending to the economic model and political institutions” through such mechanisms as state ownership, increased regulation of private markets, and constituent assemblies to establish new constitutions and reconfigured state-society relations (Huber and Stephens 2012, 264). While Huber and Stephens worry about centralizing power in the hands of the executive across all three cases, the now common trope of Chávez’s authoritarianism is highlighted specifically: “In the case of Venezuela, the reforms arguably went so far as to undermine democracy” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 264).⁶ Perhaps the most crucial error of these Andean administrations, however, has been their “militant rhetoric, promising to move toward socialism and attacking capitalism as a system and capitalists as enemies of the people, which is counterproductive in a mixed economy that depends on private investment to generate growth and employment” (Huber and Stephens 2012, 264). The potent combination of wide-ranging sociopolitical aims and militant rhetoric has unhelpfully alienated foreign and domestic capital and radicalized opposition forces (Huber and Stephens 2012, 264).

⁴ For an early persuasive critique of both the institutionalist and neoliberal assumptions regarding the “flying geese” model of development derived from East Asian experiences, and echoed by Huber and Stephens (2012), see Hart-Landsberg and Burkett (2008).

⁵ For a perspective on the Morales and Correa governments which sees them as much less radical in their political-economic orientation and social policy regimes, see Webber (2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2015b).

⁶ For a critique of this line of argument concerning the Chávez government, see Spronk and Webber (2014).

To sum up, the dominant social scientific framing of inequality in contemporary Latin America is a pairing of Weberian historical sociology and tepid social-democratic policy advocacy. The historical sociological angle of analysis has led at times to powerful historical findings, such as in the broad conclusions on the class contradictions of capitalist development and the associated rise of liberal democratic rule advanced in *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Such a theoretical framework, however, is unable to build on these findings to investigate fully the consequences for democracy once capitalism is established. Indeed, it offers only the most limited tools for understanding the severe limits on human freedom under liberal democracy precisely because it does not theorize explicitly the novel scope of market domination and coercion that the rise of capitalism implied historically, nor its implications for class rule under societies in which liberal citizenship is predominant. The root of the failure of sociological imagination in much of this tradition of inquiry is not contingent but rather necessary to the commitment to liberalism ultimately underpinning it. In the early twenty-first-century scholarship on Latin America outlined above, modest possibilities for redistribution are outlined in the social-democratic policy recommendations, but empirical investigation into class exploitation, rather than merely income distribution outcomes, is absent from the axiomatic starting points of the dominant theoretical framework. The classically liberal work of T. H. Marshall on citizenship is another example of the weaknesses I am identifying here, insofar as Marshall celebrates as a normative ideal the empirical separation of economics from politics under capitalism (Marshall and Bottomore 1992). In an effort to elaborate a way forward, I turn next to an explicit examination of the limits of contemporary Weberian sociological analysis into Latin American inequality through a close exploration of the relationship between capitalism, class, and citizenship.

Capitalism, Class, and Citizenship

“The critique of capitalism is out of fashion,” Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995, 1) wrote in 1995, right around the time of the publication of Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens’s (1992) magnum opus. “Capitalist triumphalism on the right is mirrored on the left by a sharp contraction of socialist aspirations. Left intellectuals, if not embracing capitalism as the best of all possible worlds, hope for little more than a space in its interstices and look forward to only the most local and particular resistances.” She explains in this text that it was the emergence of capitalism itself that made possible the historical redefinition of democracy in such a way that it was reduced to liberalism. In particular, the differentiation of the political and economic spheres that capitalism allowed for the first time in history, whereby “extra-economic” status—whether it be political, juridical, or military—no longer had “direct implications for economic power, the power of appropriation, exploitation and distribution,” meant that, by association, “there now existed an economic sphere with its own power relations not dependent on juridical or political privilege” (Wood 1995, 234). These historical conditions of capitalist development, which made liberal democracy possible, simultaneously circumscribed the parameters of its constitutive domains:

Liberal democracy leaves untouched the whole new sphere of domination and coercion created by capitalism, its relocation of substantial powers from the state to civil society, to private property and the compulsions of the market. It leaves untouched vast areas of our daily lives—in the workplace, in the distribution of labour and resources—which are not subject to democratic accountability but are governed by the powers of property and the “laws” of the market, the imperatives of profit maximization. This would remain true even in the unlikely event that our “formal democracy” were perfected so that wealth and economic power no longer meant the gross inequality of access to state power which now characterizes the reality, if not the ideal, of modern capitalist democracy. (Wood 1995, 234)

Part of the problem is that liberalism cannot even recognize the market as an arena of coercion and compulsion. Instead, the market is seen as a sphere of opportunity, freedom, and choice, even if it requires regulation at the margins. The conceptual framework of liberal democracy makes it impossible to “really talk, or even *think*, about freedom *from* the market. We cannot think of freedom from the market as a kind of empowerment, a liberation from compulsion, an emancipation from coercion and domination” (Wood 1995, 235; italics in original). Liberal democracy is premised upon the “separation and enclosure of the economic sphere and its invulnerability to democratic power. Protecting that invulnerability has even become an essential criterion of democracy. This definition allows us to invoke democracy *against* the empowerment of the people in the economic sphere” (Wood 1995, 235).

The separation of the political from the economic under capitalism, and the often historically associated political form of liberal democracy that arose out of capitalist contradictions, situates the problem of class exploitation and the appropriation of surpluses by dominant classes outside formal democratic concern (Mooers 2014, 4). “This is not to suggest that formal democracy, civil rights and liberties and representative government are not an improvement on less democratic political forms,” insists Colin Mooers (2014, 5). “For those who have been denied basic civil rights historically, such as women, racialized groups, indigenous peoples or gays and lesbians, winning full citizenship rights is of great significance. But it is equally true that capitalism has had to limit the substance of these rights in ways which make them compatible with the rule of capital.”

Liberal ideology presents the global capitalist system as an arena of free exchange and the source of potential opportunities for the development of less developed countries. The problems of poverty and inequality are generally framed as originating in exclusion from the market. Human development, the amelioration of problems of poverty and inequality, is possible only through proper integration into the world market. This framework explicitly redirects our attention away from the ways in which capitalism as a socioeconomic system, operating across national, regional, and international scales, inherently generates a simultaneity of concentrations of poverty alongside concentrations of wealth, zones of economic dynamism, wealth creation, and technological innovation, alongside and in interaction with zones of immiseration. If inclusion into capitalism is axiomatically taken to be the only solution on offer for the world’s poor, capitalism as a social system becomes “a pristine non-object of analysis” (Selwyn 2014, 2). It pays, then, in a discussion of inequality, to remind ourselves what capitalism is.

“Capitalism,” Wood (2002, 2) points out, “is a system in which goods and services, down to the most basic necessities of life, are produced for profitable exchange, where even human labour-power is a commodity for sale in the market, and where all economic actors are dependent on the market.” Rather than neutral arenas of benign exchange, capitalist markets are comprised of social relations that “reproduce the subordination of the greater part of society (labourers) to the minority (owners of capital)” (Selwyn 2014, 2). Capitalism involves the production of goods and services for exchange on the market under the profit motive. It is founded upon a definitive and exploitative relationship of social classes, principally between the owners of capital and the owners of labor power (Bernstein 2000, 242). Any interrogation of relationships of power in that economic sphere which stands outside formal democratic accountability in liberal conceptions must ask at a minimum: “Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it” (Bernstein 2010, 22). Class exploitation is a precondition of capitalist formation and reproduction, and it unfolds nationally, regionally, and internationally.

In offering a Marxist critique of Weberian historical sociology and liberal democratic theory, it is also fundamentally important to avoid any temptation toward abstract and empty counterpositioning of class against differentiated identities of gender, race, or sexuality. Understood concretely as a moving, living, social relationship, class in real-world settings cannot be separated from the ways in which it is multiply determined in and through other social relations of oppression (McNally 2015, 133). Contemporary capitalist societies are organized around, and constituted by, social relations of gender, race, and sexuality, just as they are simultaneously constituted by class. Relations of race, gender, and sexuality are not epiphenomena of underlying class structures, and their dynamics are not reducible to class exploitation; nor, however, can they be fully understood except in their internal relations with class (Camfield 2016). “Too often,” David McNally (2015, 139) points out, “Marxist critics of the particularism at the heart of personal-identity politics have modelled their notions of working-class unity on the form of unification that characterises capital”:

As a consequence, they offer up an abstracted concept of class that is indifferent to the diverse forms of experience in capitalist society—and hence one whose experiential purchase is minimal. In so doing, they treat class as an essence-structure, in Hegel’s terms, that unifies labouring people *from the outside*—an approach that has had multiple political expressions in the practices of self-appointed external vanguards of the working class. . . . In place of the “living essence” of social class, we get the “monochromatic” schematism of essence-categories and their “lifeless determinations”. Dynamic relations of becoming are reified in an effort to generate a static taxonomy that captures nothing of the rich and diverse life-processes of social class. (McNally 2015, 139; italics in original)

In contrast, vibrant working-class movements “draw together the grievances and oppositional practices of particular oppressed groups into a dynamic totality that expresses (rather than suppresses) its discrete parts,” McNally (2015, 142) argues. “A truly comprehensive working-class movement,” he writes, “requires

a self-activating ‘unity of the diverse’ in which distinct parts of the dominated class, with their specific experiences of oppression, find avenues of self-expression and self-organisation within the wider class movement. . . . only in such ways can socially differentiated groups of workers come to see how their distinct experiences of oppression are in fact internally related, discrete but interconnected parts of a totalising system” (McNally 2015, 142).

Seen from such a vantage point, “the multiple relations of power and domination therefore appear as concrete expressions of the articulated and contradictory unity that is capitalist society” (Arruzza 2014). In the case of Latin America, one concrete expression of the unity of the diverse in contemporary capitalist society is the relationship between indigenous oppression and class exploitation. Indeed, as is developed further below in my biographical narrative of the life and struggles of Ecuadorian indigenous activist Luis Macas, Latin American indigenous movements have more often than not been linked extensively and intensively with class conflict. The legacies of formal Spanish colonialism live on in republican times in many ways. They find expression through contemporary internally colonial race relations, which are imbricated necessarily in the capitalist character of Latin American societies in the twenty-first century.

It is in these broad, encompassing senses, then, that I reintroduce Marxist class analysis as an entry point through which to critique Weberian historical sociology and limited conceptualizations of Latin American democracy. In summary form, class exploitation—operating on national, regional, and international terrains—should be understood expansively, “across five distinct but interconnected and mutually constituting moments”:

1. Within the sphere of production (the workplace) where surplus value is generated by workers and extracted by capital;
2. Within the sphere of exchange (the labour market) where workers’ labour power is institutionally organized so that it can be sold to capital for its subsequent exploitation in the workplace, and where workers’ wages constitute “effective demand” for capital’s products;
3. Within the private sphere (the family) where (mostly) women’s unpaid labour contributes to the generational reproduction of the labour force;
4. Through “race” and racism, which facilitates the generation of categories of worker for particular occupations, reproduces cultural “distinctions” and divisions among labouring classes and “justifies” unequal economic rewards;
5. In capitalist societies’ interface with its substratum (nature) where the latter is commodified and used by capital as an input into production and as a dumping ground for waste production. (Selwyn 2014, 14–15)

These five mutually constituting moments of exploitation are not as immediately visible as noncapitalist forms of surplus extraction, say through the master-slave relation, or the lord-peasant relation. When capitalists purchase labor power and workers sell it in the sphere of exchange, they appear to meet as equals—individuals responding to opportunities as they arise in the marketplace. The coercive element of market dependency and the class inequality of the economic sphere is naturalized and hidden from view due to formal juridical equality of all actors before the law. The basic reality that workers, deprived of access to means of subsistence of their own, have no other choice but to (try to) sell their labor power to capitalists is largely concealed. “Just as the commodity form conceals the human labours which went into its production,” Mooers (2014, 32) points out, “so too does the form of capitalist citizenship obscure the class antagonisms which lie below its surface. Thus, the systematic distortion of social reality associated by Marx with the fetishism of commodities now encompasses the gamut of social relations under capitalism, from wage relations to its most developed juridical and political forms.” Much of theory and history of liberalism deserves protection and improvement, “not only in parts of the world where it scarcely exists but even in capitalist democracies where it is still imperfect and often under threat. Yet the scope for further historical development may belong to the *other* tradition of democracy, the tradition overshadowed by liberal democracy, the idea of democracy in its literal meaning as popular power” (Wood 1995, 235). Such popular power in the economic sphere would necessarily entail much more than a passive paternalism of the welfare state (itself under dramatic retrenchment in most of the world in the age of austerity). It would also entail more than merely a moral condemnation of poverty and inequality. Rather, a renewal of the other tradition of democracy, as literally popular power, would require a recognition of, and resistance to, the inbuilt exploitative basis of class relations under capitalism and their internal relations with other forms of social oppression.

The next two sections offer empirical examples of the integrated constituent moments of capitalist class relations outlined above, and demonstrate further the ways in which Weberian historical sociology and limited liberal conceptualization of democracy are unable to comprehend the totalizing power of capital and its multifaceted forms of coercion and exploitation. First, the particular rhythms of extractive capitalism in twenty-first-century Latin America are outlined, followed by biographical reflections on the life of Luis Macas, who has been active in indigenous struggles of the sort that are regularly erupting within and against the new extractivism in the region.

Extraction, Dispossession, and Value Struggles

If against this backdrop we examine the totalizing dynamics of capitalism in Latin America in the first decade of the twenty-first century, one of the outstanding features has been the so-called new extractivism (Gordon and Webber 2016; Bebbington and Bury 2013; Veltmeyer and Petras 2014; Seoane, Taddei, and Algranati 2013). Through the lens of extractivism we can see a number of the constitutive moments of capitalist exploitation assume concrete forms: shifts in the international division of labor as Latin America returns to its historic role as primary commodity provider to the world market; novel forms of class struggle in peasant communities as they resist dispossession of their lands and livelihoods; racism as indigenous communities in particular are targeted for displacement; and capitalism's interface with its substratum (nature) in the form of mining minerals, oil, gas, and fertile agricultural land.

A set of unique regional dynamics in South America between 2003 and 2011, related to patterns of accumulation elsewhere in the world market (notably high rates of growth in China), kicked off a concerted shift toward the acceleration of mining, oil and gas extraction, and agro-industrial monocrop cultivation throughout the continent. Similar to the orthodox neoliberal period (1980–2000), massive multinational corporations in the epoch of the commodities boom were deeply imbricated in the extension of extraction at the heart of this primary-commodity-led growth everywhere in the region (Webber 2015a). This is true of all extractivist countries, governed by regimes differentially situated across the ideological spectrum. While the extreme violence of paramilitary dispossession associated with intensified extractivism in right-ruled countries like Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and Colombia has been avoided by the center-left regimes of South America, the latter have nonetheless entered into joint contracts between state-owned enterprises and multinationals, negotiating relatively higher royalties and taxes on these extractive activities.

Skimming from the rent generated, many South American governments have established what Uruguayan political economist Eduardo Gudynas (2012) terms “compensatory states,” whose legitimacy rests on the modest redistribution achieved through the priming of often already existing cash-transfer programs to the extremely poor, without touching the underlying class structure of society. Indeed, the very reproduction of these political economies depends on states prioritizing the maintenance and security of private property rights and juridical environments in which multinationals can profit. But a set of contradictions impede the easy reproduction of South American compensatory states, even in a period of booming commodity prices. Because the legitimacy function of relatively petty handouts runs on the blood of extraction, the compensatory state increasingly becomes a repressive state (even with a left government in office) on behalf of capital, as the expansion of extraction necessarily accelerates what David Harvey (2003, 144) calls accumulation by dispossession, and the variegated forms of resistance it regularly spawns. In the representative and ongoing case of the Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure (Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory, TIPNIS) in Bolivia, the steamrolling of the rights to self-governance of indigenous communities resisting highway construction through their territory illustrates the coercive wing of the compensatory state in action. Indigenous self-government in Bolivia is to be defended by President Morales, it would seem, only when the claims are to territories marginal to the state's development project (Webber 2015c). The compensatory state in Latin America co-opts and coerces in response to such signs of opposition, and builds an accompanying ideological apparatus to defend multinationals—an ideology in which communities of resistance are vilified as internal enemies acting in concert with the interests, or even in the pay of, various instruments of imperialism. The discursive gestures of state officials, of course, safely set to one side the obvious imperial character of the dispossessing activities of multinational corporations—now called “partners” rather than “bosses” in development—within the matrix of the new extractivism. Whatever the ecological and social contradictions of this development strategy over time, however, it has shown fairly impressive capacities for reproduction on its own terms in the short term.

In Benjamin Selwyn's compelling reconceptualization of development as “labour-centred,” this kind of state compensation for dispossession falls well short of the possibilities of human emancipation. In Selwyn's concept of labor-centered development:

labouring-class struggles are re-interpreted as potentially “developmental” in that they contribute directly to improvements, both materially and in terms of generating more freedoms, of their lives and of their dependants and communities. Unlike state-centred and capital-centred conceptions of development, that variously ignore or subordinate labouring classes to the requirements and actions of states and capital, a labour-centred development studies does not ignore the actions of states and market actors in attempting to foster their own, respective, visions of development. Rather it views these actions from the perspective of labour, and attempts to interpret them as processes and outcomes of complex relations between social classes. . . . The struggle against exploitation takes myriad forms and has many outcomes. The challenge of a labour-centred development is to conceptually connect these struggles and their potential outcomes to a vision of human development free from exploitation. (Selwyn 2014, 21, 208)

Properly enhanced, to better emphasize the always racialized and gendered forms that class struggle concretely assumes (Arruzza 2014; McNally 2015; Camfield 2016), Selwyn’s labor-centered vision directs us to focus less, in this particular area, on the compensatory policies to ameliorate inequality coming from above on the part of states, and more on the self-activity and self-organization of myriad forms of resistance from below. In a reflection of one concrete form that such analysis can assume, the next section focuses on the combined critique of colonialism and capitalism offered by Luis Macas, who lives and struggles in Ecuador, one of the paradigmatic cases of the twenty-first-century compensatory states. Through the method of individual biographical portraiture (Mills 2000; Auyero 2003), the aim here is to map, in cursory and partial form, historical processes of Ecuadorian popular class formation, ideological consciousness, and the interplay between racism and capitalism, indigeneity and class-based resistance. What comes to the surface in Macas’s thinking is a utopian dialectic of past and future wherein specific values and threads of the precapitalist past’s social fabric are drawn out and combined with the envisioning of an anticapitalist, anticolonial, and socialist future.⁷

Turning Colonial Capitalism Upside Down

I met up with Luis Macas in his office at the Instituto Científico de Culturas Indígenas (Scientific Institute of Indigenous Cultures, ICCI) in Quito, on July 14, 2010. Macas, arguably the most renowned indigenous leader in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Ecuador, was born in 1951 in Saraguro, in the province of Loja. A lawyer by training, he is currently executive director of ICCI. Macas is an ex-president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the most important nationwide organization of the indigenous movement, and former congressional deputy (in the late 1990s) and presidential candidate (2006) for the Movimiento Pachakutik (Pachakutik Movement, MP) party.

“I learned most of what’s guided me for the better part of my life in the community where I was born and raised,” Macas told me when I asked him if he could describe the long process of his political formation:

My father was a leader in the community at various points. He participated a great deal in the collective leadership of the community. There was no single leadership in the community, no type of *caudillismo* (big man leadership), but rather collective leadership. There are various people, men and women, who lead a process of organization, of unity in the community. This is what I learned about simply by watching. I was raised with all of these lessons. . . . So my first steps in learning how to conduct myself were these experiences—in my own community, with the elders.

Macas describes the communitarian traditions and obligations that he was raised with as having “diminished since that time in many communities, even disappearing in some,” but he repeatedly returned to them in the interview, marking them off as formative features of his present day political identity.

For most of his time in elementary school Macas went outside of his rural community to a small town, where he was first introduced to the Spanish language, having been raised speaking exclusively in Kichwa. “In this new urban school,” Macas explained, “I encountered things that were very strange, very distinct

⁷ For theoretical reflection on the utopian-revolutionary dialectic of past and future, see Löwy (1987); Webber (2015). While the focus in the following discussion of Macas’s life and activism highlights the interpenetration of a politics of indigeneity and class, others have highlighted how such a theoretical and political understanding of contemporary extractive capitalism in Latin America can also be extended to include the particularly gendered dynamics of both violence and resistance. See, for example, Jenkins (2015).

from our practices, beginning with the language itself. I had a very generous, very good teacher. She spoke Spanish very slowly. But nonetheless, I couldn't understand. It was quite a dehumanizing experience, as the educational experience has been for indigenous people." After a dispute between his mother and father over whether Macas ought to return to their community after elementary school and take up agricultural work, his mother won, and Macas was sent to Cuenca, Ecuador's third largest city, to get a high school diploma.

With hindsight, this move reveals itself as a decisive moment in the future indigenous leader's political formation. At high school in Cuenca—the same high school attended by Ecuador's most important Marxist intellectual of the twentieth century, Agustín Cueva—Macas first encountered Marxism, both as theory and praxis. Together with his ongoing ties to the customs, values, and traditions of the indigenous community, Marxism would shape how he came to understand and act in the world from there forward. "In this secondary school," Macas said, "I came into contact with a few interesting teachers. They talked about the community, the system, poverty, how poverty comes about, and so on. And I became friends with some of my teachers."

The teachers in question were heavily involved in land reclamation struggles in neighboring rural indigenous areas. They introduced Macas to the ideas of socialism and communism. "I was a little afraid," Macas said to me, laughing, "because back in my community my parents had been very conservative insofar as their political, ideological orientation. My father always voted for the Conservative Party. But he didn't do it with bad faith. He did it with good faith, saying 'it seems to us that this man is correct.' The motivation had more to do with the person than conservative ideology. And so I was a little afraid. 'What's going to happen, I'm learning about these types of things,' I asked myself. I'd been told that these things were bad, that socialists and communists go to hell," Macas said, still laughing. "God was going to punish me."

Nonetheless, Macas persevered and became accustomed to navigating the libraries of Cuenca. "Because the teachers had talked to me about socialism, communism, and Marxism," he explained, "I went to the libraries and started making my way through the range of literature associated with these ideas. I read away like that, but I didn't understand anything. I read for hours and hours, but I didn't understand what they were trying to say." Later in life, when studying in Quito, the capital, at the Central University, he "read historical materialism, dialectical materialism, and so on, and by that point, yeah, I understood. But I had tons of enthusiasm [during the high school period in Cuenca] to know, to study. And at the same time, I was always tightly linked to the community. Every weekend I would return to my community, participate in the collective work, in the meetings, in community decision making, and so on."

After finishing high school, Macas returned to his community once again. The community reportedly saw him as a "rare bird," someone who had learned things of very little practical application during his high school education. All the same, they needed an elementary school teacher. Overcoming initial trepidation, Macas took up the work and stuck with it for one year. "What I accomplished I don't know. But I learned a lot from the kids. The simplicity and innocence of children is a beautiful world. During this period there was a big gathering in Quito, called the First Educational Gathering of Mother Languages and Bilingual Education. Interesting, I thought. An invitation came to our community, and they said to me, 'Do you want to go?' I said yes, and went."

At the gathering in Quito, Macas met with "indigenous comrades from all over" the country; "it was a discovery" for him to share ideas and learn of the mutual if differentiated experiences of indigenous communities in the rest of Ecuador. The rector of the Catholic University where the seminar was being held happened to be a leftist priest influenced by liberation theology, and after talking with Macas the priest offered to try to arrange a full scholarship for him. Macas eventually did attend the university, studying applied anthropology of indigenous languages, the field in which the scholarship was available. Macas "learned a lot about the different indigenous peoples of the country and finished the degree," and stayed on at the university teaching Kichwa for a period, before beginning a law degree at the same university.

The experience was alienating. "I started my law degree at the Catholic University, but the Faculty of Law at the Catholic University is very elite. The children of ambassadors and government officials go there. I felt more comfortable at the Central University. There were comrades there who spoke my language, who came from the same province, other people from the countryside, and so on. So the Central University was something else from the Catholic University." The Central University was also a center of Marxist studies at the time, and Macas "began to learn a lot about historical materialism and dialectical materialism from the professors," carrying with him until today "the idea that Marxism is helpful as a way of systematizing, interpreting reality. Not to simply apply Marxism as such. But to apply Marxist methodology to understand reality and to apply some of the theory's content."

During this university period in Quito, Macas became more deeply enmeshed in the organized indigenous movement, by far the strongest extraparliamentary social force in Ecuador at the time (see Becker 2008, 2011). In particular, he was an activist within the Kichwa Confederation of Ecuador (ECUARUNARI), the most important indigenous organization of the Andean highlands in the country, and part of CONAIE at the national level. "The struggle then was the struggle for land," Macas explained, "the defense of indigenous territories in the Andean Sierra—the struggle for identity and education of indigenous peoples, an education that would correspond to the identity and culture of the indigenous peoples."

Returning to themes of the universal and the particular, as well as the utopian-revolutionary dialectic of past and future, what is striking in Macas's recollection of the period and his ongoing commitment to the indigenous movement is the way in which he conceives of it as simultaneously drawing from the communal practices and customs of the past while reaching forward in a revolutionary commitment to transform the entirety of structures of domination and oppression in Ecuador as a whole. As an indigenous person coming from an impoverished rural community, Macas notes how his life in Quito was both unique and particularly fruitful for his political development. He was "learning theoretically" while "always [being] involved in the communities."

It became evident to Macas that the indigenous resistance he was a part of was "not merely a reformist struggle" but a combination of sociocultural reclamation of indigenous liberation and a simultaneous assault on the wider patterns of capitalist exploitation and oppression in the country. "The revindication of our identities is important for the reproduction of our historical cultures as peoples—for example the struggle for land is a vital element, because without land there can be neither our culture nor identity, absolutely nothing—but the constant of the indigenous movement has been what I call the global struggle, a proposal of an alternative to the entire system."

For Macas, the indigenous movement was thoroughly and simultaneously interlinked with the class struggle and left rearticulation in Ecuadoran politics. "None of us doubt that there were these two joined lines of struggle," he told me, "the struggle for revindication, and the strategic struggle for change. The indigenous movement has always balanced these two lines."

Summing up these biographical vignettes and what they have meant for his political consciousness over time, Macas notes again the significance of his introduction to the praxis and theory of Marxism in high school, the university, and the city as crucial to his ideological orientation and grounding. But he returns, ultimately, to his childhood as the axiomatic point of departure. "The whole process I've described of learning has been important for me . . . but my formation was in the community." In 2010, at the time of the interview, the priority for Macas was how to reconcile these two traditions in practice: "The main point for me is how to combine two central struggles: the indigenous struggle—the struggle for identity, the historical struggle of the indigenous peoples—and the class struggle. This is what needs to be understood, this is what we need to do so that neither struggle is isolated."

For Macas, there are two conditions of struggle: "One is to make visible and to transcend coloniality. Coloniality is still very much alive in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, and in all parts of Latin America: the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge, the coloniality of being. This is one major component of what has to be overcome through political struggle. But," Macas continues, "there's another arm of struggle, which has to do with the condition of this economic model, the capitalist model. If we don't destroy both, one is going to remain." A combined liberation struggle capable of "the elimination of both these conditions of oppression and exploitation is what has to be done when we're thinking of the transformation of society, of social and political transformation."

Coloniality and capitalism, then, are, in this worldview, intricately intertwined systems of exploitation and oppression in contemporary Ecuador. In describing the theoretical framework emerging out of the Ecuadoran indigenous movement, Macas returns repeatedly both to a total critique of bourgeois civilization and a perennial dialectic between the utopian characteristics of specific precapitalist practices and values of indigenous life, and to a future which will abolish capitalism, while expropriating and subordinating its technological and productive advancements to human and environmental needs.

"There are two civilizational models that are confronting one another in the current moment," Macas stresses:

two distinct paradigms—a Western paradigm, and a paradigm from here. But the paradigm from here has everything to lose because no one values it whatsoever. "It's those Indians again, trying to recover their notion of *buen vivir*, or living well." . . . These paradigms of "living well," of harmony between humankind and nature—it's from these indigenous paradigms that, in part, an alternative

must emerge. I'm not saying that everything in the Western paradigm is crap. Humanity has evolved and grown. And there are many things worth saving from the Western paradigm.

The mutually constitutive nature of class and indigeneity combines here with a foundational critique of extractive capitalism and its racist underpinnings. The depth and reach of Macas's politics of simultaneous anticapitalism and indigenous liberation flow consistently out of his understanding of the market as a terrain of unfreedom, and his reflections on the development of capitalism in Ecuador as having been intermeshed in concrete terms with the historical trajectory of racism and indigenous dispossession in that country. Connecting back to our theoretical survey of the dominant Weberian historical sociology of Latin American inequality today, what is so powerfully evident is that through the circumscribed Weberian prism, none of the light of Macas's critique is refracted, and the politics that emerge out of that light likewise becomes invisible.

Conclusion

This article has sought to retain the sometimes powerful empirical findings of dominant trends in recent investigations into inequality in contemporary Latin America, while challenging their theoretical allegiances to Weberian historical sociology and liberal ideology. An alternative Marxist and decolonial framework has been defended as a better way to fully understand the totalizing complexity of class and other social relations of oppression in contemporary Latin American capitalism. Rather than the capitalist market as an arena of opportunity, it is understood as one of imperatives and often invisible coercion. The invulnerability of the economic realm to democratic power from below in liberal capitalist democracy is exposed as a perversion limiting the possibilities of human emancipation rather than a normative ideal which we should celebrate.

Class exploitation in capitalist society has been shown in this article to operate in the workplace, in the labor market, in the household (through gendered reproduction), through race and racism, and on an interface with the substratum of nature. Class, it was argued, is not an empty abstraction but rather a living and dynamic relationship that is determined concretely in and through gender, race, and sexuality. These latter forms of social oppression are not epiphenomena of the class structure but are nonetheless fully understandable only as internally related to class, within a dialectical unity of co-constitution.

I have shown that recent studies of inequality in Latin America, informed by Weberian historical sociology and a normative commitment to liberal democratic theory, are incapable of grasping the totalizing power of capital in all its complexity and ferocity. Empirically, I argued, such complexity is expressed in the rhythms of extractive capitalism in twenty-first-century Latin America. The region is regressing, in many ways, to a primary commodity producer within the evolving international division of labor. New forms of class struggle are identifiable even at a glance in the countryside of many countries, as peasants resist processes of dispossession associated with the advancing frontiers of multinational capital in natural resource extraction. Racist ideology is mobilized to demonize and infantilize indigenous resistance to extractive activities. The natural substratum with which capitalism shares an interface is nowhere more visible than in agro-industrial monocropping, exploration for oil, and extraction of natural gas and mining minerals.

Finally, this article has focused on the life and activism of Luis Macas. His combined critique of colonialism and capitalism, in theory and praxis, reveals the ways in which the objective structural conditions of uneven capitalist development in contemporary Latin America, and their interaction with racist ideologies, can help to shape the political subjectivities of anticapitalist and anticolonial sources of opposition. The preferred theoretical optic of this article allows us not only to understand the sources of such opposition but also persuades us to see in them vital potential resources for meaningful human emancipation and ecological sustainability. The traditions of Weberian historical sociology and liberal democratic theory, by contrast, encourage us to see in these struggles sources of instability and democratic regression.

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