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## **II. Two Studies of Political Movements and Their Leaders: Ecuador and India**

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### **Neopopulism in Contemporary Ecuador: The Case of Bucaram's Use of the Mass Media**

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Social and political scientists charge that television endangers democracy. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, provocatively asserted that television is "a threat to political life and to democracy itself."<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Sartori forcefully argued that television is transforming the meanings of politics and democracy because it personalizes politics, presents politics as a spectacle, and is based on emotional rather than rational appeals.<sup>3</sup> Pierre-André Taguieff contends that populism has become telepopulism, a form of "video demagogy: the demagogue acts on his audience by letting himself be seen more than understood." As a result, "citizens are reduced to . . . mere consumers of spectacles."<sup>4</sup> In sum, the argument is, that images are replacing open deliberations and the logic of arguments that have characterized traditional forms of politics based on language.<sup>5</sup>

The electoral successes of Latin American political mavericks such as Collor in Brazil, Fujimori in Peru, Menem in Argentina, and Bucaram in Ecuador seem to confirm these pessimistic assessments. Fernando Collor's election in 1989 was influenced by the power of the media empire *Globo* to manufacture his candidacy. Carlos Menem and Abdalá Bucaram have used television to broadcast their personal successes in nonpolitical spaces such as sports and mass entertainment as a substitute for debates on their policies. These antipolitical-establishment leaders won elections in the context of economic, political, and ideological crises. This new conjuncture is characterized by the crises of import substitution industrialization, the end of nationalist and distributive state policies, increasing levels of poverty and informal subemployment, distrust of traditional mechanisms of political representation, and by the quandaries of class-based politics and ideologies. Scholars have argued that in this context of rapid transformations control of the mass media and manipulation of the masses by media elites are the

crucial variables that explain how neopopulist politicians have won recent elections.<sup>6</sup> Whether interpretations of the media as an all-powerful mechanism that manufactures politicians and manipulates citizens are accepted or not, it is clear that television has become central to politics. The specific role of this medium, however, needs to be assessed.

This essay examines arguments of the decay and transformation of politics by focusing on a case study. It explores the relationship of the media—television and the press—with Ecuadorian populist leader Abdalá Bucaram. Instead of assuming that television in itself explains his election. I analyze how Bucaram used this medium together with traditional mechanisms such as political machineries based on clientelist networks and electoral rallies. Differently from the views of television as a medium with the power to manipulate citizens, I study “how people make sense of the media and what groups and traditions help people mediate media content.”<sup>7</sup> Media images are created and interpreted within particular political cultures, and journalists and other media professionals have an important role in decoding media content.

Defying the predictions of studies of populism as a transitory stage in the modernization of Latin America, or as a phase in the region’s development, this political phenomenon has adapted itself to a new economic situation. Contemporary populist leaders are still drawing on manichaeic discourses of a fundamental ethical struggle between the people and the oligarchy, and on direct forms of mobilization of common people on behalf of a leader that characterized previous populist movements. Neopopulist leaders, however, have pursued economic policies that contradict the nationalist populist recipe of their predecessors. Their neoliberal economic policies based on privatization and the reduction of the size of the state and the opening of economy have negatively affected the social base of classical populist coalitions such as the national bourgeoisie, organized workers, and state officials. Neoliberal policies have included microdistributive programs that have partially incorporated the very poor transforming the base of support of these new populist regimes.<sup>8</sup>

This article is divided in three sections. The first analyzes elite-sponsored media representations of Bucaram as the embodiment of antireason and a threat to democracy and civility. By creating images of the antimodern and barbarian “other,” modernizing elites have constructed their identities as the rational representatives of a civilized modernity. The second section shows how Bucaram was elected in a fragmented political system. He creatively used the media, while also relying on more traditional electoral mechanisms such as political rallies and clientelist networks. The third studies how Bucaram staged power as the politization of two nonpolitical spaces: soccer and mass entertainment. Contrary to Bucaram’s inten-

tions, the privately owned Ecuadorian media and middle-class intellectuals and journalists who participated in the construction of public opinion closed ranks to oppose his attempts to represent politics as a mass spectacle. During his short term in office, Bucaram tried to implement a drastic neoliberal economic project based on convertibility and to apply antipov-erty programs to strengthen his base of support. The combination of a populist style and rhetoric with neoliberal economic policies made Bucaram a neopopulist leader similar to Menem, Fujimori, and Collor de Mello. His economic project was rejected by the elites. The cost of living dramatically increased before antipov-erty programs had time to work, provoking the poor—Bucaram's electoral base—to demonstrate against the government. In the end, Bucaram was transformed into the Repugnant Other, the incar-nation of all evils, who had to leave the presidency and the country. A broad alliance of elites, politicians, the middle-class, and popular sectors took to the streets to demand his resignation. He was forced out of office by Ecuador's congress with the approval of the military and the U.S. embassy in February 1997, less than six months after becoming president, on the dubious constitutional grounds of "mental incapacity to govern."

### CIVILIZATION OR BARBARISM

The media-based strategy of the right-wing Social Christian Party dur-ing the 1996 presidential elections can be summarized by the juxtaposition of the picture of their candidate Jaime Nebot against the image of Bucaram. While Nebot's appearance—elegantly dressed with a suit and a tie—symbolized the figure of a rational politician, the image of Bucaram's naked and sweating torso became an icon of barbarism. This manichae-an presenta-tion of the political conjuncture, as the old struggle between civilization and barbarism, was used by the neoliberal right to invade the houses of all Ecuadoreans with television ads of Bucaram's primitive body and vulgar language. This was not just a media-based electoral strategy. It summarizes how this populist leader and his followers have been constructed by journal-ists, intellectuals, and modernizing politicians in the most recent phase of civilian elected regimes (from 1979 to the present).

Ecuador's reestablishment of democracy was envisioned as the political complement of the economic and social modernization achieved during the military regimes of the 1970s. Ecuador was transformed for an agro-export country into an oil-producing nation. This predominantly rural society, where *hacendados* controlled rural cultivators, saw the erosion of the power of the hacienda system, high levels of urbanization, the growth of the state, and the expansion of the urban-informal sector, the working-class and

middle-class sectors. Until approximately the 1960s, traditional haciendas were the dominant institutions. The first agrarian census showed that in the 1950s, when most of the highland population (73.8 percent) was rural, "large haciendas monopolized more than three quarters of the total area."<sup>9</sup> The hacienda was a system of "political and ideological domination that allowed landowners, directly or via the mediation of *mestizo* priests and village authorities, to monopolize power at local levels."<sup>10</sup> The agrarian reform laws of the 1960s and 1970s eroded the social and political power of the traditional haciendas. By 1985, 36.2 percent of the land belonged to large farms, 30.3 percent to medium-sized units, and 33.5 percent to small units.<sup>11</sup> These agrarian transformations did not finish with the *latifundio-minifundio* system. Due to insufficient land, "reproduction of the rural household is achieved through complex combination of agricultural production (for household consumption and for the market), rural employment, and urban-based labor."<sup>12</sup> Agrarian transformations nonetheless provoked a power vacuum in the countryside that allowed for the eruption of autonomous Indian organizations, and for the increasing presence of political parties.

Ecuador is currently an urban country. This is a new development because as recently as 1960 only 36 percent of the population was urban and in 1980 only 44 percent. In 1988, urban voters accounted for 75 percent of registered voters.<sup>13</sup> As in other Latin American nations capitalist development has not resulted in full proletarianization. Industrial workers rely on various strategies to make up for the lack of adequate family wages. Most workers survive in a wide range of informal activities such as street vending, domestic service, and self-employment in microenterprises. Official estimations of the informal sector vary from 41 to 50 percent of the economically active population.<sup>14</sup>

These social transformations that resulted from urbanization and the transformation of the traditional hacienda system were seen as the precondition for a novel political system. The goal was to rationalize the party system to avoid the populist-military coup cycle that characterized the country's history since the emergence of José María Velasco Ibarra's populism in the 1930s. The franchise was expanded from two million to more than four million voters between 1979 and 1988 due to the elimination of literacy requirements to vote, population growth, and voter registration drives.<sup>15</sup>

The project of creating an electoral political system has been somewhat successful. Ecuador is experiencing its longest phase of elected civilian regimes to date. From 1979 to the present, presidents of different ideological persuasions have succeeded one another in office.<sup>16</sup> Even so, a party-based political system has not been successfully installed. Political parties continue

to be weak and numerous. Personalism, clientelism, and populism continue to characterize political struggles. Political parties, politicians, and politics in general appear discredited in public opinion surveys. The semilegal demise of Bucaram in February 1997 revealed that democracy, even in its more restricted definition as the respect for procedures by political elites, has not become the norm. The Ecuadorian state is seen as booty, and political elites are more interested in capturing state resources to be able to build and maintain clientelist networks and to increase the pool of patronage resources, than in respecting democratic procedures once in power. Civilian regimes, ruling in a conjuncture of economic crisis, have applied neoliberal policies which have further increased social inequalities and political instability. Thus far, the military has abstained from giving a coup d'état. Its respect for civilian regimes, however, cannot be explained solely by a new democratic conversion. More likely, as Anita Isaacs has argued, the military has been deterred by economic crisis, by the dangers intervention would present to professional unity, and, especially, by a new international conjuncture not favorable to direct military interventions.<sup>17</sup> The military has not been subordinated to civilian rule but maintains a series of privileges and veto powers which, in Brian Loveman's apt characterization, make Ecuador at best a "protected democracy."<sup>18</sup>

The sobering reality of Ecuador's political system is that common citizens and political elites typically do not behave according to the expectations of the modernizing intellectuals and politicians who designed the new political institutions. Instead of reflecting on the failure to fully realize this (restricted) conception of democracy, modernizing intellectuals and politicians have defined their own identity by constructing images of the nonmodern or antimodern populist "other." They have used the actions and words of Abdalá Bucaram to differentiate what they perceive as their own "positive modern and rational" politics from "negative irrational" populist politics. Populist leaders and their followers have been constructed as outsiders to the rule of reason and democracy, while "modernizing" elites have proclaimed themselves the moral guides of "modern" Ecuador. Reflecting global changes in political discourse, neoliberalism has become the new dogma and panacea since the 1992 elections, replacing the modernizing social democratic project of the late 1980s.

### **THE "LEADER OF THE POOR"**

Because of the fragmented nature of the Ecuadorian political system, nine candidates competed in the 1996 presidential election; the two runoff candidates displayed different political styles and programs. Jaime Nebot,

the candidate of the right-wing Social Christian Party and the protégée of León Febres Cordero (mayor of Guayaquil and former president of Ecuador [1984–88]), obtained 26.28 percent of the vote in May 1996. He presented an image of a responsible statesman with a clear neoliberal project. Despite his efforts to show independence from Febres Cordero, his candidacy was closely associated with Febres Cordero's regime, remembered by some for its human rights violations and probusiness policies; and by others as a time of law and order. Nebot's candidacy evoked strong feelings of rejection in many who preferred any other candidate. Abdalá Bucaram, who had 27.17 percent of the vote, presented himself as a rejection of the elites, rather than a clear project. To understand how Bucaram won the runoff with 54 percent of the total votes, I differentiate his use of three electoral strategies: an innovative use of radio and television, mass political rallies, and clientelist networks.

Bucaram creatively used radio and television spots. His propaganda delivered a populist message of total antagonism between the people, whose will he claimed to embody, and the evil oligarchy that needed to be crushed. His commercials started with images of extreme poverty and suffering provoked by oligarchical governments. Then they presented Bucaram as the "leader of the poor," the messiah, who will redeem the underprivileged from misery. He appropriated elements of leftist political culture such as class references to workers and peasants, and their symbols such as the fist. Differently from other Ecuadorian politicians who hired foreign experts to devise their political advertisement, Bucaram designed his own propaganda. His commercials had a homemade and nationally produced quality, and were based on aspects of popular culture such as ballad songs and the continuous reiteration of a simple message in the lyrics, the images, and the captions. This style was based on popular religious art that represents the miracles of a particular saint or of the Virgin in the form of a comic with pictures and captions. For instance, when the lyrics of Bucaram's commercials mentioned the evil oligarchy, they simultaneously showed the faces of his political enemies, such as Nebot, with the caption "well pampered rich kid."

As in his previous presidential campaigns of 1988 and 1992, Bucaram's electoral strategy in 1996 was to stage electoral rallies in small and medium-sized cities in poor and forgotten neighborhoods of all regions of the country. He created political spectacles that combined the delivering of emotional populist speeches with the show of *el loco* (the crazy one) who signs and dances and the feeling of attending a concert to sing familiar melodies. Through the repetition of ballads of the Uruguayan pop group *Los Iracundos*, Bucaram created feelings of brotherhood and sisterhood in the plazas. People sang along with him and also watched him dance with Rosalía Arteaga, the

vice presidential candidate. People could also watch his performances in television news, or more likely, in Bucaram's televised propaganda.

What was the meaning of Bucaram's dance with the vice presidential candidate? The media's and the opposition's response was simple: Bucaram gives the people what they like—circus and spectacle. For instance, the well-respected journalist Francisco Febres Cordero wrote: "The singer gathered all the filth from the most pestilent sewers to throw them at the face of his audience with no other intention than to perform a spectacle."<sup>19</sup> Sociologically, the image of a politician singing and dancing has deeper meanings. Bucaram explained his performances by comparing himself to President Menem, who sings tangos, and to President Clinton, who plays the saxophone. He also asked his critics: "What man has not charmed a woman by singing a serenade?" Using the *Iracundos*, the pop group with which he captivated his wife, Bucaram was seducing the Ecuadorian people.

Abdalá Bucaram was not only serenading the people to get their votes, he was also inviting them to see him dance with the future vice president. He always introduced her as a "doctor, a scientist, a journalist, a sociologist, a great teacher, and foremost, a very beautiful woman." Bucaram, a common man, was seducing an attractive woman of a higher social class personified by Rosalía Arteaga. She dressed elegantly, took care of her makeup and hair, and danced like a lady, exhibiting good posture and serenity. Bucaram dressed casually with jeans and *guayabera* shirts. By dancing with a lady from a higher social class, Bucaram represented a male sexual fantasy: to dance with and seduce a "lady."

In patriarchal societies, men construct their masculinity in competition with other men. Because men are never secure about their virility, they must prove it constantly to themselves, and above all to other men, by looking for their approval. This is usually accomplished by "conquering" women desired by other men. "Women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale."<sup>20</sup> The preferred women come from a higher social class and fit colonial-racist standards of beauty. Bucaram not only represented the male sexual fantasy of the popular sectors; instead of referring to his testicles or the quality of his semen (as he did in his 1988 presidential campaign), he showed true manhood by dancing with a lady.

Doris Sommer argues that several Latin American novels (written by novelists-politicians) symbolically united the nation by reconciling people of different races, classes, and regions.<sup>21</sup> Bucaram's and Arteaga's dance can be read similarly. Latin American gender stereotypes assign women the strength of moral superiority, and their role is to domesticate men's uncontrolled masculinity. Rosalía Arteaga's "sanity" was harmonized with Bucaram's primitive passion. Rosalía, the educator, was civilizing Bucaram.

Their performance was not only a symbol of gender and class reconciliation. It also united in one big Ecuadorian family the main regions of the country—Arteaga's highlands with Bucaram's coast. This was a successful strategy given the history of profound regional differences and animosities.<sup>22</sup> Since the turn of the century different export crops were produced in the coast, and Guayaquil has remained as the center of financial and commercial activity. The highlands specialized in agricultural production for the internal market, and Quito as the center of bureaucratic power. Guayaquil and other provinces have charged that the capital parasitically appropriates resources. Elites from Guayaquil think of themselves as liberal entrepreneurs free from the tutelage and conservatism of the Catholic Church. Middle- and upper-class *Quiteños*, for their part, think of themselves as more educated and cultured than the rest of their countrymen.

Similar to other populist politicians, Bucaram personalized politics. Ideologies or concrete electoral proposals are not important; what mattered was the role of personalities as the embodiment of different social classes and lifestyles. He presented himself as a person from a humble background who not only understood the people but also belonged to *el pueblo*. Because he was the son of Lebanese immigrants, he was discriminated against by the elites who considered him a *nouveau riche* with poor taste and bad habits.<sup>23</sup> Bucaram's claim to be part of *el pueblo* was also broadcasted and dramaturgically illustrated: by his way of speaking; his casual dress in *guayabera* shirts and jeans; his passion for playing soccer; his way of eating like the poor with a spoon, rather than a fork and knife like the rich; by his love for popular Ecuadorian cuisine. Like other populist politicians, at the same time, Bucaram sought to make clear that even though he was of the *pueblo*, he was much more than *pueblo*. In public speeches, interviews, and his book *Las Verdades de Abdalá*, he narrates in detail how his humble social origins as a child of Lebanese immigrants has not prevented him from becoming a successful lawyer, politician, and businessman.

Abdalá Bucaram is *el pueblo* because he, too, had suffered. He has been sued and incarcerated in Panama for alleged drug trafficking, and the people know the class bias of the justice system. The laws and the jails are not for the rich. Thanks to his superior character and great manhood, Bucaram has sacrificed himself for the poor, and like many of them, he has become a martyr: "I paid my political dues, I was exiled, imprisoned, and sued." His purity and dedication to the needs of the people have transformed him into the "leader of the poor." These two qualities—his sacrifices for the poor and simultaneous membership in *el pueblo*—as well as his superiority to most common people, transform the man of humble social origins into the person who deserves to become the president of Ecuador. That is why he said, "I have the right to the presidency of the Republic."



Bucaram inverted the meanings of the accusations of journalists and politicians that he was "crazy" and unfit for the presidency, transforming himself into the beloved *loquito* Abdalá Bucaram. He argued that geniuses and leaders with exceptional qualities are stigmatized as crazy. "They call anyone who lets their mind and imagination be free crazy" The denigrating connotation "the crazy," unqualified to govern, was transformed into its opposite: the genius who can save the country.

Following the Ecuadorian populist tradition, Bucaram used religious symbols. He imitated the televangelist who praises the Lord with music, songs, and the participation of the people. His style also simulated the charismatic Pentecostal leaders who go into trances while adoring God. This is why he jumped off the platform after each speech and walked through the masses. The audience tried to touch their leader, who, like Christ and the saints, touched the people to heal and redeem them.

Bucaram always spoke about love: he loved *el pueblo*, he loved the poor, he loved Ecuador. The only ones he did not love were the oligarchy, who were excluded from the "real" Ecuador personified by Abdalá Bucaram. His manichaeian discourse underscored his authoritarianism. Because he did not clearly define what the oligarchy was, this immoral being, now embodied by the Social Christian Party, could become any of his future rivals. Given that the oligarchy is "a state of the soul," it can become anyone who disagrees with however he wants to interpret the popular will. The ethical construction of the profoundly ambiguous term *el pueblo* allowed him to include in this category wealthy business people who supported him.

Like other populist movements, Bucaram was supported by a multiclass coalition. These groups included an emergent elite of Lebanese descent, popular groups, and displaced middle-class professionals. His political movement was financed by an emergent marginal political and economic elite. Unlike the members of the Syrian and Lebanese community who became integrated into the traditional elite, Bucaram, and his closest friends and collaborators (Alfredo Adum who invested two to three million dollars in the campaign, Eduardo Azar, and the Salem brothers) are descendants of Lebanese immigrants who have made a lot of money, but are excluded from the traditional elite because they are viewed as millionaires that made money from contraband.<sup>24</sup>

Contradicting the elitist view held by many journalists and academics of populist followers as disorganized and anomic masses, Bucaram's mass political meetings showed much organizing and little political irrationality. Many local power brokers took their clients to the plazas. Civic associations like unions, peasant groups, women's organizations, and professional groups were also present. Moreover, many supporters were skeptical of

him. Bucaram was not regarded as the messiah he claimed to be. He was seen as the lesser of two evils compared to the Social Christian candidate.

By stressing the rationality of Bucaram's followers, I am not privileging a utilitarian concept of rationality. The Ecuadorian electorate is quite utilitarian and all political parties, regardless of their ideologies, work through clientelist networks. Clientelism, thus, continues to operate as one of the main mechanisms of political control and access to resources that operate in daily life as a concrete problem-solving mechanism.<sup>25</sup> For instance, to have access to education or health benefits, the poor must establish personalized relations with a broker, who belongs to a wider network that guarantees access to people with influence, who can deliver these services. In a context of extreme poverty and lack of fundamental rights "the vote," as Carlos Vilas argues, "works as the poor's credit card" that provides limited access to fundamental social services, protection from the police, and even job opportunities.<sup>26</sup>

Bucaram's appeal, however, cannot be based solely on the strength of his clientelist networks. His election was also a result of his use of populist rhetoric and antioligarchical symbols of status in his media campaign and in his mass public speeches. He presented himself as the embodiment of *el pueblo*. His mannerism, tastes, and words simultaneously embodied the people and challenged the status symbols of the elites. His antioligarchical stance was nationalistic. He symbolically united the Ecuadorian nation by reconciling different social classes, ethnic groups, regions, and the left and center-left into one common opposition against the Social Christians, who appeared as the embodiment of the antinational oligarchy. He constructed Ecuador as a country with richness that is poor because of the evil and immoral oligarchy. Part of his successful strategy was to avoid using foul language to insult his opposition. He said: "I have to be well-behaved." This was a good strategy against the aggressive negative media campaign of his rivals, who concentrated on the negative aspects of Bucaram to portray Nebot as the opposite: the incarnation of the rationality and seriousness of the modern politician.

## **MEDIA EVENTS AND THE POLITIZATION OF MASS CULTURE**

If Bucaram's triumph cannot solely be explained by his use of the media, his short presidency certainly showed new uses of television. Following Menem's style, Bucaram performed his governmental actions as a televised show that represented power as the dramatization of nonpolitical spaces of popular culture such as football and mass entertainment.<sup>27</sup> Bu-

caram, a former athlete who had participated in the Munich Olympics, became president of Barcelona, Guayaquil's most important soccer team. He recorded a CD *el loco que ama* ("the crazy one who loves") with the pop group *Los Iracundos* and presented it on national television. He auctioned off his mustache for a million dollars for charities in a televised show where he danced with bleached-blond models and told jokes. Lorena Bobbit, the Ecuadorian woman who acquired fame after cutting off her abusive husband's penis, was his honorary guest.

By staging his triumphs in two valued realms of mass culture he was representing common people's dreams of success and social mobility: to play soccer with well-known stars, or to become a TV show person. Bucaram's novel use of the mass media was also transforming the meanings of politics.

Aesthetic antipolitics subverts the power of words through the power of images. It downgrades political deliberations and decision making to mere acts of backstage performance and as a countermove pushes theatrical forms of action to the center stage of politics. With aesthetic antipolitics the political sphere suffers from intrusion and foreign occupation by the logic of theater and drama, rock and roll, sports and entertainment, design and advertisement.<sup>28</sup>

Using constant media exposure, he attempted to construct his persona as the central political event. His image as a winner in nonpolitical spheres such as sports arenas and his transformation into a singer and television star were constantly broadcasted into people's homes. He was acting on television for the public while simultaneously transforming the meanings of public political debates. The discussion of his personal life, his dreams, and televised performances became as important as the debates on his policies. That is why his opinions on what soccer players should be hired by Barcelona were manifested simultaneously with his defense of his economic program. This constant media exposure also transformed the figure of the president.

Instead of following the conventions of a rational bureaucratic ruler, he showed that even though he is the leader of the nation, he was like the common people. He did not follow the rules and protocols expected of a president. He refused to live in Quito's presidential palace, because he claimed that it was haunted. He preferred to stay in expensive hotels in his short visits to Quito and to rule from his private home in Guayaquil. He was thus reinforcing regionalist tensions between the highlands and the coast.<sup>29</sup> By not following the rules of official ceremonies based on strict regulations of formality and respect, he attempted to perform power in new ways. He staged on television the world of everyday life centered on his private dreams and accomplishments as a substitute to the serious official world of politics. Even the language that he used contrasted with the words

of rational bureaucratic domination. He used common-sense expressions and the words of the street. He wanted to create an intimacy with his followers by using common language, or what Mikhail Bakhtin called marketplace speech and gesture. By using these colloquialisms, he intended to create an atmosphere of frankness between the president and his follower and vindicate the unofficial world of common people. That is why Bucaram, his ministers and advisors used curses, profanities, and improprieties. These unofficial elements of speech "were and are still conceived as a break from the established norm of verbal address; they refuse to conform to convention, to etiquette, civility, respectability."<sup>30</sup>

Bucaram's uses of the media not only partially explained why he was elected to office, it also partly reveals why he was overthrown. His language, gestures, and performances in media events limited his capacity to establish alliances with key institutional players, and further antagonized the business elites, the military, politicians, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and upper- and middle-class journalists who participated in the creation of public opinion. For the first time in the history of the country, the most prestigious newspapers and television news shows opposed a president. They questioned his unorthodox and flamboyant style, his authoritarian appropriation of the people's will, and the impossibility of having dialogues in which different opinions could be voiced. Journalists were at the forefront of a democratic opposition to Bucaram when they denounced corruption and rejected his mass entertainment-based antipolitics. Their democratic challenges coexisted with upper-class prejudices that saw Bucaram as the incarnation of mass popular culture and as a shame to the country's civility. This opposition had xenophobic tones when journalists argued that his Lebanese origins explain his corruption,<sup>31</sup> and regionalist tones in Quito when Bucaram was portrayed as the embodiment of Guayaquil's rabble.

As a representative of a marginal economic and political elite, Bucaram could not control or neutralize the privately owned media, who reproduced upper- and middle-class prejudices. His strategy was to dismiss the opinions of influential newspapers and television shows that are not read or watched by most of the population, particularly by the poor. He relied on televised propaganda in three television channels owned by his wealthy supporters of Lebanese origin, but whose news shows, nonetheless, opposed the president. The media constructed him and continued to present him as the embodiment of all of the country's ills, producing a number of anti-Bucaram media products, such as television shows, books, a compact disk, and even a CD-ROM.

On 5 February 1997, less than six months after Bucaram's election, the most massive demonstrations in the history of Ecuador occurred. With

the participation of about two million people, approximately the same number who voted for the "leader of the poor," the crowds demanded that Bucaram step down. With a simple majority of votes, congress dismissed Bucaram from office on the grounds of "mental incapacity" the following day.

### CONCLUSION

This article has questioned interpretations that the media in the age of neoliberalism has the power to manufacture politicians and to determine elections. I have illustrated how Bucaram was elected in a fragmented political system where nine candidates competed in the 1996 presidential election. The two finalists, Nebot and Bucaram, who obtained less than a third of the total vote, faced each other in a runoff. Many electors were not voting for Bucaram but against the candidate of the right. Like other politicians, Bucaram got votes by using the media and more traditional mechanisms, such as electoral rallies and clientelist networks. Bucaram confronted the elites by delivering—in mass rallies and media spots—a populist message that gave voice to the humiliations that the poor have to endure in everyday life. His electoral movement was a multiclass alliance of the marginalized, not understood as the informal poor, but as those who are excluded from the centers of power. Economic elites without social prestige looked to replace the established elites and to legitimize their fortunes. The poor rebelled against their employer's candidates, and displaced professionals and intellectuals looked for positions of authority and jobs in Bucaram's government.

Illustrating what Clifford Geertz calls the paradoxes of charisma and the difficulties in consolidating charismatic movements,<sup>32</sup> Bucaram's flamboyant populist movement appeared among marginal social groups located far away from the centers of power. His style and rhetoric limited his capacity to establish alliances with key institutional players. Bucaram, thus, could not become part of the center of social order. If his election was explained by his ability to articulate the challenges of alternative publics who are excluded from the official public sphere, he did not have the power to transform the hegemonic sphere while in office.<sup>33</sup> Due to high levels of corruption, and because Bucaram relied on the support of a marginal elite, the well-established business elites felt excluded from the potential benefits of his economic plan based on privatization. Bucaram's authoritarian definition of the vague categories "the people and the oligarchy" did not give politicians the opportunities to enter into pacts and agreements with the government. In a perfect example of what Guillermo O'Donnell character-

ized as a “delegative democracy,”<sup>34</sup> Bucaram trapped them in a short-term logic of unconditional support or total opposition. When they had the opportunity, they did not hesitate to use any means to oust him from power.

Bucaram’s short term in office dramatically illustrated how politics are increasingly constructed as media events where organizers, broadcasters, and the public struggle over the signification of these phenomena.<sup>35</sup> The broadcasting by all television stations of his CD during the celebrations of Guayaquil’s independence day, for instance, allowed Bucaram to attract large audiences and to break the routines of media broadcasting. Yet, contrary to Bucaram’s intention, these media events were not interpreted by public opinion as a representation of the fundamental values, symbols, and narratives of Ecuadorian society. On the contrary, these media events were seen by journalists as a threat to democracy and as the irruption of the uncultured rabble into the presidential palace.

Journalists, editorialists, and the elites who participated in the creation of public opinion used the banner of democracy to oppose Bucaram. Their defense of democracy, however, was selective and self-contradictory. On the one hand, they resisted Bucaram’s mass entertainment—based antipolitics, vindicating, instead, democracy understood as the open discussion of and rational deliberation on policies. On the other hand, they were not committed to respect democratic procedures. Journalists and editorialists did not question the legality of the process used by the congress to dismiss Bucaram. Respect for democratic norms became secondary to the need to overthrow a president who, in their eyes, was the embodiment of the dangerous masses.

Arguments of a decay of rational deliberation and their transformation into media-manufactured politics do not help to understand politics in Latin America. Even movements based on projects of the Enlightenment, such as liberalism and socialism, relied on the mobilizing potential of emotional myths and on manichaeic discourses. The connections between emotions and strategic reason are most clearly revealed in populist politics. Populism was the main democratizing force in Latin America. From the 1930s to the 1970s, populist regimes expanded the franchise, and their social and economic policies incorporated popular sectors into the national community. Populist leaders have used a manichaeic discourse that presents the struggle between the people and the oligarchy as a moral and ethical fight between good and evil, redemption and downfall. This moralistic discourse has gone together with an understanding of democracy as a form of direct popular participation, the occupation of public spaces, and the acclamation of leaders. Populist authoritarian appropriation of the people’s will have posed fundamental

challenges to the institutionalization of democracy, and these movements, which have included previously excluded groups, have not always respected the norms of liberal democracies. Populist electoral coalitions and political movements have combined material exchanges between leaders and led with emotional appeals to the people as the incarnation of the authentic nation. The nature of these exchanges and discourses have changed over time. The macrodistributive social policies of classical populism have been replaced by neoliberal policies. These macroeconomic policies that are exclusionary and antipopular go together with microdistributive policies that partially include the very poor at the expenses of the organized sectors, such as unionized workers and state officials, who were the beneficiaries of classical populism.<sup>36</sup>

The idealization of politics as rational and deliberative provide strong normative claims to criticize the unrealized potentials of democracy. However these arguments can also be used as a tool to silence those constructed outside the realms of reason and democracy, particularly in contexts of profound social inequalities and everyday exclusions. As Judith Butler argues, "it is important to remember that subjects are constituted through exclusions, that is, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view."<sup>37</sup> Contrary to the self-interpretation of the Latin American elites, as the embodiment of reason and democracy, their authoritarian practices have historically repressed common people in the name of reason, modernity, and civilization.

I have challenged interpretations of neopopulism as manipulation of atomized and anomic masses by elites who control the media. The media is not the key variable that determines how candidates win elections and how they govern, because it has not totally replaced electoral rallies and clientelist networks. Moreover, the media is interpreted within existing political cultures, and journalists, editorialists, and intellectuals that help to shape public opinion have an important role in filtering media messages. Until limited projects of democratization do not seriously include the social question, elites will continue to appeal to reason to mark boundaries between respectable citizens and the "other." Populist authoritarian leaders will continue to claim that they embody the neglected and the poor, while presenting themselves as challenges to limited and exclusionary projects of democratization, further destabilizing liberal democratic institutions. The populist temptation will also be present as long as the poor continue to live in a *regime d'exception* without fundamental constitutional human and civil rights.<sup>38</sup> It will persist as long as class differences resemble estate differences between common citizens without rights and privileged groups who are above the law.

## ENDNOTES

1. This research was founded by the Centro Andino de Acción Popular, Quito-Ecuador, and by a Faculty Research Grant of Drew University. A preliminary version of this paper was presented in the conference "Media and the Politics of Democracy," at the New School for Social Research, 6 March 1998. I want to thank the participants in the conference, and specially Andrew Arato, Jeffrey Goldfarb, Timo Lyyra, Carmen Martínez, and Arthur Vidich for their comments.
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13. Catherine Conaghan, "Politicians Against Parties. Discord and Disconnection in Ecuador's Party System," in Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully, eds., *Building Democratic Institutions. Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 452.
14. Waters, "The Road of Many Returns," 54.
15. Conaghan, "Politicians Against Parties," 450.
16. Jaime Roldós, 1979-81; Osvaldo Hurtado, 1981-84; León Febres Cordero, 1984-88; Rodrigo Borja, 1988-92; Sixto Durán Ballén, 1992-96; Abdalá Bucaram August, 1996-February 1997; Fabián Alarcón February, 1997-August 1998; Jamil Mahuad August, 1998-present.
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  20. Michael Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia. Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, eds., *Theorizing Masculinities* (Thousands Oaks California: Sage Publications, 1994), 129.
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  22. See the essays in the book edited by Rafael Quintero, *La Cuestión Regional y el Poder* (Quito: Corporación Editora Nacional, 1991).
  23. In a recent study of Lebanese and other Middle Eastern immigrants in Ecuador, Mónica Almeida writes: "The elite of Guayaquil denied this class of nouveau riche membership in the city's most prestigious social club, the Club de la Unión, until the 1970s and 80s." Mónica Almeida, "Phoenicians of the Pacific: Lebanese and Other Middle Easterners in Ecuador," *The Americas*, 53: 1 (1996): 104.
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  27. For analyses of Menem's use of mass culture and the media, see Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo, *Política y Poder en el Gobierno de Menem* (Buenos Aires: FLACSO-Norma, 1996); José Nun, "populismo, representación y menemismo," *Sociedad*, 5 (1994): 93-121; and Beatriz Sarlo, "Argentina Under Menem."
  28. Schedler, "Introduction," 13.
  29. Bucaram's level of popularity in Quito deteriorated rapidly. On 17 August 53 percent had approved of his government. By 19 October he was rejected by 64 percent of respondents, and on 11 January 1997 by 90 percent of Quito's residents. (Informe Confidencial, Encuestas Sobre Imagen y Labor de Abdalá Bucaram).
  30. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 187.
  31. These accusations reproduced entrenched anti-Lebanese prejudices. In 1926 the authorities ordered the expulsion of a prosperous merchant on the charges that Arabs are "responsible for the widespread corruption in the country." Mónica Almeida, "Phoenicians of the Pacific," 102.
  32. Clifford Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power," in Sean Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power. Symbolism, Ritual and Politics Since the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 13-38.
  33. Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 69-98.
  34. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, 5, 1 (January 1994): 55-69.
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  38. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, "The Legacy of Authoritarianism in Democratic Brazil," in Stuart Nagel, ed., *Latin American Development and Public Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 247.