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Begging as a Path to Progress

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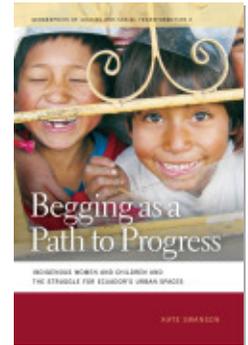
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Introduction

Unraveling Myths

A young indigenous girl approximately six years old approaches a foreign tourist. She wears jogging pants under an *anaku* skirt, a *chumbi* woven belt, a faded Walt Disney T-shirt, and a blue *chalina* wrapped around her shoulders. “*Regálame*” (Give me a gift), she says, while extending her open hand. At a busy intersection, a member of the Ecuadorian upper-middle class encounters a young indigenous woman at his driver-side window while he idles at a stoplight in his SUV. “*Compre chicles*” (Buy gum), the young woman says, with a few packets of gum lodged between her fingers. Catching the driver’s eye, she gives a supplicating gesture and points to the toddler strapped to her back: “*para el wawito*” (for the baby).



Since the mid-1990s rural indigenous women and children from the central Andes have been migrating to beg and sell gum on the streets of Ecuador’s largest cities. The majority of these women and children are from the small, high-altitude community of Calhuasí, in the province of Tungurahua (figure 2).¹ Begging and, more recently, selling gum have emerged as key means to overcome diminishing agricultural returns and to meet rising cash demands for basic necessities. No longer able to sustain themselves from the land alone, by the mid-1990s women and children began to join the ranks of men in temporary out-migration. With few marketable skills and limited employment options, they turned to begging and quickly discovered it as a viable means of earning income. Since then, begging has evolved to become more than merely a survival strategy; it now intersects with conspicuous consumption, status, educational fulfillment, and the drive to be included in consumer culture.

While their overall numbers are small, these young women and children are representative of much larger processes. Begging is a symbolically charged activity. Their presence on the streets is a daily reminder of the poverty that



FIGURE 1. Selling gum in Quito. In the photo on the left, a twenty-eight-year-old woman sells gum with her nine-year-old son. In the photo on the right, a ten-year-old girl sells gum.

subsumes racialized minorities. They are emblematic of rural neglect and the decline of the small-scale agricultural sector, and representative of grave social and geographic unevenness. Yet beyond symbolism, women and children's involvement with begging is also counterintuitive. In a capitalist society where hard work is equated with development and begging is associated with decay, it is ironic that Calhuaseños have discovered begging as a path to progress.

This book explores the geographies of gender, race, ethnicity, and childhood within the context of both modernization and globalization. It is about the differentiated ways in which indigenous peoples are pulled into the modernization project. Isolated in the rural Andes, Calhuaseños have largely survived on subsistence-based agriculture until the last few decades. As a "free" indigenous community, or one that never belonged to a hacienda, external influences remained limited until the 1970s when nonindigenous outsiders began to trickle into the community for the first time. Because they subsisted largely outside of the market economy, the impact of economic globalization has had limited effects on Calhuasí. Their dire poverty is largely the product of a prolonged colonial history of racism and social exclusion rather than of the most recent phase of globalization. In recent years they have not become poorer; rather, they have become more acutely aware of their poverty.



FIGURE 2. Map of Ecuador.

The construction of Calhuasi's first road in 1992 may have been the key catalyst for recent social-spatial change. The new road provided not only an economic link to labor and commodity markets but also a way out for the community's young women and children, who formerly had been isolated at 11,150 feet (3,400 meters). Actively pulling themselves into the modernization process, young indigenous women and children have since been challenging their assigned positions in Ecuador's social and racial hierarchies. They are rejecting employment as domestic workers, striving for better education, and using their earnings to participate in consumer culture. To improve their economic positions they have shifted from agricultural work to informal street work. Rather

than harvest potatoes on steep Andean slopes, they now harvest tourist dollars in the urban Gringopampa (Field of Gringos).

In this book, I aim to unravel myths surrounding the lives of young indigenous beggars, who are commonly misrepresented as “lazy Indians” and “juvenile delinquents.” Defined within the modern construction of childhood, they are further perceived as innocent children exploited by “bad mothers.” In this new construction, which has become hegemonic in the West, childhood is a period of dependence, vulnerability, and innocence. According to UNICEF (2004), “Childhood is the time for children to be in school and at play, to grow strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family and an extended community of caring adults. It is a precious time in which children should live free from fear, safe from violence and protected from abuse and exploitation. As such, childhood means much more than just the space between birth and the attainment of adulthood. It refers to the state and condition of a child’s life, to the quality of those years.” For many of the world’s children, this is a significant conceptual shift. Within this modern construction, children are no longer active producers but rather firmly placed within the world of school and play.

I also examine how indigenous youth’s gendered, racialized, and ethnic identities shift between rural and urban spaces.² Indigenous children struggle with the vast incongruities between their lives and the lives they witness elsewhere. Yet children and youth in peripheral regions are not empty vessels who absorb modern notions of childhood to fit into imagined molds for the “global child.” Rather, indigenous children and youth actively negotiate, traverse, embrace, and resist these constructs to weave their individual identities.

As Calhuasi’s young people become increasingly engaged with the urban sphere, they are forced to negotiate their identities through everyday encounters with racism—a racism that inferiorizes Ecuador’s indigenous peoples by ascribing both physical and cultural differences. By exploring race and ethnicity through the lens of childhood and youth, I bring attention to the fact that young people are situated at a vulnerable life stage where they must negotiate shifting and uncertain identity paths. They must traverse a vast geography of cultural, political, and economic influences, made all the more difficult for indigenous youth through formal schooling, migration, urban labor, television, changing notions of childhood, and a dissolving way of life. These youth are forced to engage with modernity in a way that is radically different from their parents. As a racialized and marginalized minority group, they face particular challenges.

This book is also about social and spatial distancing. Although begging is one of many street-level subsistence activities, it is often perceived as a particu-

larly offensive one. In the current era of revanchism, a concept generally used in the context of North American and European cities, municipalities continue to redefine what is acceptable in public space. The term is derived from *revanche*—French for revenge—and, according to Neil Smith, the revanchist city “portends a vicious reaction against minorities, the working class, homeless people, the unemployed, women, gays and lesbians, [and] immigrants,” brought on by a terror felt by middle- and upper-class whites (1996, 211). Revanchism is a vengeful, right-wing reaction against the supposed theft of the city. Smith explores this concept as it applies to Mayor Giuliani’s zero-tolerance policies in New York City. Increasingly, cities across North America and Europe are also adopting similar punitive urban governance measures (Belina and Helms 2003; Bowling 1999; Hermer and Mosher 2002; Mitchell 1997; Smith 2002). Beggars are a target of this discourse, perceived to be at odds with the project for urban revitalization and landscape aesthetics (Mitchell 1997).

In Ecuador the situation is strikingly similar. In an example of how revanchism plays out in the South, I explore how street begging intersects with urban revitalization and the push for global tourism. I uncover how indigenous women and children are harassed and in some cases forcibly detained while municipalities attempt to control public spaces and sanitize the streets of the “*indio sucio*” (dirty Indian). I describe how beggars are depicted as offensive and disruptive to the image of a “Clean Quito” or the “Twenty-First-Century Guayaquil,” as advocated by municipal campaigns. Even when selling gum, indigenous women and children are constructed as “disguised beggars” who “exchange misery for money”—thus broadening the definition of begging to exclude a wider range of street-level subsistence activities. Begging governance further relies on the dual discourses of “child saving” and “bad motherhood”—both of which are hedged in a racist subtext—as central justifications for removing indigenous beggars from the streets.

Given current political and socioeconomic conditions, the tapping of indigenous toddlers on driver-side windows is a reality that, despite the wishes of some, will not disappear simply by pushing these individuals back to the countryside. By exposing myths, this book aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the reasons behind indigenous children and youth’s involvement on the streets. It is a call to planners, policy makers, and social workers to consider the complex and varied factors that push marginalized families and children into begging. This book also veers from traditional scholarship in that it prioritizes the voices of children through a child-centered methodology. Children are rarely key informants of social inquiry and have for the most part remained marginalized in social analysis. Herein, children are socially significant protagonists.

Modernization Meets Globalization

The stories that unfold from this text provide a slightly different narrative on globalization. Undeniably, globalization has had a profound impact throughout much of the world. National economies are being integrated into an increasingly globalized political and economic system, facilitated through a recent intensification of time-space compression (Harvey 1990). Through new technologies, global communication grids, and international financial networks, globalization has left few corners of the world untouched. The effects of this intensification have been particularly significant in the Global South. Neoliberal structural adjustment programs (SAPs) have had devastating consequences for the world's poor while contributing to what some term the "globalization of poverty" (Chossudovsky 1997).

Research has demonstrated the often distressing effects of increasing globalization on marginalized children in nations of the periphery. Although these processes are certainly not uniform, in many regions of the Global South foreign debt and SAPs have had direct or indirect influence on children's mortality, access to health care, and nutrition (Bradshaw et al. 1993; Whiteford 1998). In some cases funding cuts have deteriorated education systems: while the costs of education have risen, classrooms remain overcrowded, resources limited, and facilities poor (Bonnet 1993). Faced with dire poverty, many children are often removed or kept out of school entirely to engage in caretaking, subsistence work, and/or paid employment (Dyson 2008; Katz 2001; Nieuwenhuys 1994; Onta-Bhatta 1997; Robson 1996). While many work at home in domestic or agricultural capacities, others migrate to urban centers in search of enhanced financial opportunities. The majority of these children end up working in the unregulated informal sector and/or on the streets (Beazley 1999; Hecht 1998; Kilbride, Suda, and Njeru 2000; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998). When I began this research, I too expected to find that increasing globalization and neoliberalization were the prime forces pushing indigenous children onto the streets. Yet I discovered that something different is happening in the community of Calhuasí.

This book provides a new twist on an old story: a tale of what happens when modernization meets globalization. Because it has subsisted largely outside of the dominant market economy, Calhuasí provides an example of a community where structural adjustment programs have had few measurable influences. In fact, with the construction of the community's first road in 1992, access to healthcare improved and more children are surviving now than ever before. Furthermore, education has not deteriorated in the community because it was *already* in very poor condition. If anything, educational conditions have been

enhanced in the last ten years. For the community of Calhuasí, poverty has been a long-standing reality. As in the case of many of the nation's indigenous communities, this poverty is rooted in a colonial history and the well-entrenched processes of economic marginalization and social exclusion (see Larrea and North 1997). In fact, in a material sense community members have *not* become poorer during this most recent phase of globalization. Rather, because the road has enabled increased access to urban centers and facilitated greater access to goods, community members have actually become wealthier, at least as measured by the accumulation of material items. What has changed is that in the last ten years, they have developed a heightened sense of their poverty.

Global Export of Childhood

Calhuasí has not been immune from globalization in all of its varied forms. The global diffusion of social policy for instance has affected the community—particularly through the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. On March 7, 1990, Ecuador ratified the UN convention—the first country in the Americas and the third country in the world to do so (MBS 2003). In 1991 the Foro por la Niñez y Adolescencia (Forum for Childhood and Adolescence) was created in an attempt to pressure the Ecuadorian government to uphold children's rights as entrenched in the UN convention. By 1998 several of these rights were written into Ecuador's constitution. A year later children's rights advocates and government agencies began working toward a new Ecuadorian civil code that would harmonize national law with the UN convention. In July 2003, thirteen years after Ecuador ratified the UN convention, the new Código de la Niñez y Adolescencia (Code of Childhood and Adolescence) came into effect. In the end the code was created with the input of over eighteen thousand individuals, including children, teens, professionals, and authorities (INNFA 2001). Being one of the last Latin American countries to create a national code of childhood, Ecuador now has one of the most advanced codes in the region.

The biggest struggle for this movement was to redefine children's rights according to a new philosophy referred to as the *Doctrina de la Protección Integral* (Integral Protection Doctrine). This is as opposed to the former approach, the *Doctrina de la Situación Irregular* (Irregular Situation Doctrine), which focused primarily on deviant and criminal minors, who were granted limited and loosely defined rights. Opponents criticized the old system for institutionalizing children, criminalizing children's poverty, and penalizing children like adults. The new approach, as incorporated into the 2003 Código de la Niñez y Adolescencia, recognizes the rights of all children and advocates for a more integrated, context-specific, child-centered approach to protecting children's

rights (FNA 2001, 2002). Nevertheless, even though this doctrine is now entrenched in law, it has yet to be embraced by the majority.

Through international NGOs, media, and government agencies, these Western norms of childhood are now spreading throughout the nation. Posters and parades espouse the rights of the child. Brightly colored pictures of indigenous children are often at the forefront of these images. On June 1 the International Day of the Child is celebrated in Ecuador's urban parks, plazas, and shopping malls: races, clowns, face painting, and special store prices are the main events. How children interpret this day varies: Javier, a nine-year-old boy quoted in one of Quito's newspapers, said, "The Day of the Child is a celebration just for us. Because this is my day, I want my parents to buy me a really cool cell phone" (*La Hora* 2003). For children from Ecuador's marginalized rural areas, however, this day has little meaning.

As Sue Ruddick (2003) notes, the unfortunate reality is that as this modern construction of childhood is being exported to debt-ridden nations of the Global South, the resources needed to reproduce this idealized form of childhood are for the most part sadly lacking.³ For low-income children, media representations of ideal childhoods portrayed through consumerist culture and television dramas may sharpen the experience of material poverty as one of inner deprivation (Stephens 1995). This is particularly true in Ecuador, where poverty rates are high and where the global discourse on childhood continues to gain ground. For Ecuador's elite, reproducing modern notions of childhood is not an issue: elite children live in gated communities, attend private schools, and play within the protected spaces of their private gardens. They have embraced the modern construction of childhood and have ample resources to reproduce it.⁴ But for the majority of Ecuador's children, this is not the case.

Modern notions of childhood are infiltrating Calhuasí through NGOs, education, the media, and young people's experiences in the city. However, reproducing this idealized form of childhood is particularly problematic in indigenous communities because this modern construction is at odds with well-established understandings of childhood, parenthood, and caring.

Global Diffusion of Neoliberal Urbanism

The impact of globalization also shapes the lives of Calhuaseños on urban streets. In this case, it is through the increasing global diffusion of neoliberal urban policies. Currently, harsh neoliberal urban policies have diffused to Ecuador's largest cities, where conditions vary dramatically from those in the North. The cities of Quito and Guayaquil have recently initiated urban regeneration projects that seek to cleanse the streets of informal workers, beggars, and

street children to project a sanitized, whitened image of the city. In fact, in 2002 the municipality of Guayaquil contracted former New York City police commissioner William Bratton to help shape the city's urban regeneration strategy (*El Universo* 2004a, 2004b). Bratton is well-known for coauthoring New York City's *Police Strategy No. 5* along with former mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Smith tellingly describes this document as the "founding statement of a fin-de-siècle American revanchism in the urban landscape" (1998, 2). Flown in from the United States, Bratton was paid close to thirty thousand dollars for three days of work—an astronomical wage by local standards. His diagnosis was an overhaul of Guayaquil's anticrime structure, which was later implemented under the name Plan Más Seguridad (Increased Security Plan) (*El Universo* 2004a, 2004b). This plan—referred to colloquially as Plan Bratton (2002)—was undertaken to "protect" the city's elite from the "dangerous" classes, including informal workers, beggars, and street children, who were seen to be overtaking the city.

Revanchism in Ecuador, however, is being implemented in a locally distinctive manner. It has become integrally linked to exclusionary discourses surrounding race, ethnicity, gender, and childhood. In this book I argue that Ecuador's particular twist on revanchism is through its more transparent engagement with the project of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening. Consequently, the nation's refinement of revanchist urban policies results in the displacement of racialized and marginalized individuals, thus forcing them into more difficult circumstances.

Fieldwork and Personal Politics

The stories within this text are based on in-depth fieldwork conducted between 2002 and 2006, including nineteen months of residency in Ecuador. This was a multisited research project, divided between Quito, Guayaquil, and Calhuasí. In total I conducted over 125 interviews. Despite my Quichua-language training, all interviews were conducted in Spanish. While Quichua is the first language of Calhuaseños, I discovered that their Spanish fluency was generally much better than my Quichua fluency. Thirty-seven of my interviews were with young women and children who beg in the city. Of these, the oldest was twenty-four years old and the youngest was seven. The average age was thirteen years old.

The remaining eighty-eight of my interviews were conducted with community members, indigenous leaders, teachers, politicians, academics, agronomists, social workers, religious leaders, urban planners, police officers, and government members, all of whom were connected to issues surrounding indigenous beggars. Of these individuals, thirty-five were indigenous (namely

community members, indigenous leaders, teachers, and a few politicians and government members), while the remaining fifty-three were white-mestizo.⁵ These interviews were complemented with participant observation and hundreds of field notes from informal conversations with indigenous women and children. While living in Calhuasí I also conducted a survey with forty-two children (in the fifth and sixth grades), concerning their work at home and in the city. My gatekeeper into the community was the Fundación Don Bosco, which is the only organization in Quito that works with indigenous migrants from Calhuasí.

Photography unexpectedly became a key part of my research methods. After each and every interview with young people, I took individual portraits as a token of reciprocity. Because I lived very close to a corner where many women and children from Calhuasí worked, I began to invite them to my apartment to rest, have some food, and look at these photographs. They would often come during the hottest part of the day to avoid the harsh effects of the equatorial sun. Eventually, young women and children came to visit me on a regular basis, often with the motive to collect photos or to look at photos that I had taken of their friends and family. By sitting together and conversing about these pictures, I learned so much more about the community. These visits became great moments to discuss their lives; in fact, some of my best interviews were conducted in my kitchen.

I have chosen to include a number of these photographs in this book. As some have commented, it may seem striking that so many of these children are smiling, given their life circumstances. This representation is in stark contrast to images we generally see of children from the Global South. The popular media often presents poor children as wide-eyed and suffering—images that are disturbing enough to force us to avert our gazes or, more generously, empty our pockets to provide donor aid (see Ruddick 2003). In this book I have made a strategic choice to present young people as smiling because I believe that this is how they would rather be portrayed. However, in doing so, I am in no way suggesting that the lives of these women and children are wonderful and that they love working as beggars. Quite the contrary: their lives are very difficult. However, although they may be materially poor, many of their life experiences are emotionally rich.

This book confronts numerous distressing and uncomfortable issues. Child poverty, begging, racism, and exclusion are not topics to be taken lightly. I take a particular stance, one which some may find controversial. After working and living with people from Calhuasí over the last seven years, I have come to believe that begging is a rational, legitimate, and even clever choice. Ecuador's indigenous peoples live in a highly racially stratified society. Indigenous peoples

are positioned on the bottom rungs of the nation's racial hierarchy, which means that in practice they are accorded few rights in the city. But indigenous peoples have not endured this situation passively. Ecuador now has the strongest indigenous political movement in Latin America (see Becker 2008). However, there has been little substantive change in Ecuador's poorest indigenous communities, despite this active movement of resistance.

The reality remains that for indigenous peoples, particularly women, employment options are limited to highly gendered and racialized positions, such as domestic workers and dishwashers. While stigmatized, begging is an option that allows them to earn substantially more income than they could otherwise. It further allows them to work independently and on their own hours, while remaining the primary caretakers for their young children. Moreover, women are able to use their earnings to pay for their children's education, in the hopes that this will enable better and more prosperous futures.

This argument is in contradiction to many charities who advocate "no gift giving" in the belief that begging creates a pattern of dependency. This may be true in some instances, but in the case of Calhuasi's women and children, I disagree. In a society with no welfare system, begging may be perceived as an individual means of redistributing wealth among the poor. When charities step in to discourage begging or, rather, to encourage diverted-giving campaigns, they impose their value judgments on how the money should be spent and by whom. In my opinion, this is a rather paternalistic approach. Calhuasi's young indigenous women and children are very capable and do not need paternalistic organizations overseeing their spending. The majority have entered into begging as a rational strategy to earn income to help their children pursue their educational aspirations, to allow their families to build better homes, and to improve their material circumstances.

Some may dispute whether begging should be perceived as a legitimate form of employment, but I hope that this book will provide another side of the story: a story of how oppressed people use creative means to improve their life circumstances. I hope to demonstrate that begging is not destroying young people's lives (as some insist) but rather is enabling opportunities that the community's young people have never had before.