

Abby Lodge
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Chapter 4: 1978 to 1987: *Ambientalistas and Ecologistas Emerge*

During this period, the state was transitioning from a military dictatorship to a democracy – it was considered a “fragile democracy.” Previously, in the 1970s, a military government ruled during an oil boom. However, most Ecuadorians did not benefit from the oil revenues and in this early period, “development” was not achieved. Then in 1978 when this period begins, civilian elections were held and the people elected left-leaning President Jaime Roldós. In 1985, right-leaning Febres Cordero was elected President. In 1988, politics would swing back to the left with the election of Rodrigo Borja.

In 1970, Ecuador’s total foreign debt was \$242 million – by 1982, it had increased to \$12.5 billion. This high debt forced Ecuador to renegotiate its loans with the IMF in 1982 and 1983. This meant devaluing the national currency (then the *sucre*) and cutting public expenditures. During this period, a shift from a developmentalist state to a neoliberal state was emphasized. The debt toll had negative consequences for the society and the environment

In 1982, the state made changes to the hydrocarbons law that made it easier for the actors from abroad to receive favorable contracts. In 1984, President Cordero forged an agreement with the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) that provided protections to US investors. In 1985, over 57% of Ecuador’s exports went to the United States and over 35% of its imports were from the United States. In terms of debt, Ecuador’s had sustained a staggeringly high amount – in 1987, it was over \$10 billion and of that, almost 60% was owed to private banks in the United States. Ronald Reagan held President Cordero up as a “model debtor.” In 1987, a major earthquake rocked Ecuador, causing the loss of human life, and destroying the primary oil pipeline – this hurt an already weakened economy and shut down oil production.

Two more national parks were established by 1970 and the seventies witnessed a peak in new establishments – two in 1975 and a surge in 1979 (5 new areas). In the 1980s, four more parks were established. A cynical view of all of the protection of lands was that it was simply a means for the state to control lands to exploit. Unfortunately, most were only “paper parks” – in other words, the parks existed in paper but were not protected on the ground.

This weak state was vulnerable to international pressures such as pressure to alter policies, pressure to develop economically (from lenders and transnational petroleum corporations), and pressure to protect its biodiversity (from transnational conservationists and debt-for-nature swap brokers). Some of these international pressures were contradictory. The majority of the state’s revenue went to debt service, which meant that the state was unable to translate its gain into benefit to its people. In this situation, the state is vulnerable to “radical organizing.” The weakening of the Ecuadorian state in ways made it vulnerable from both “above” and “below.” From above, the weak state is beholden to the IMF creditors, and to private transnational capital wishing to invest/extract in the nation. From below, the weak state is vulnerable to citizen-workers’ demanding investment in public goods such as education, health care, social security and environmental protection. Most, though not all, of these pressures on the Ecuadorian state led it toward actions that accelerated the treadmill of production. In an age of

globalization, economic crisis generates vulnerability for the state not just at the national level, but also at the international level

After the founding of a few important organizations, the movement grew and split into two dominant camps. The first became professionalized and worked hand-in-hand with international supports; representing the ideal type of “ecodependent.” The other took a radical stance against extractive development, mobilized communities and battled transnational polluters, typifying the category “ecoresisters.” Though the movement emerged from within the civil society of the nation, transnational actors played a critical role in the development of the Ecuadorian environmentalism. The state’s debt was a liability through which transnational actors could both limit the state and build capacity for private environmental organizations that would serve transnational actors’ interests

The diversity of Ecuador’s environment movement reflected the diversity of its plants and animals. The Charles Darwin Research Foundation, which focused its work in the Galápagos Islands, had existed since 1964 on the Galápagos island of Santa Cruz. However, it is not considered an Ecuadorian NGO because it was registered as an international nonprofit association in Belgium. The Galápagos National Park was the first national park in the Ecuador, established in 1959. The park then became an UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978. Other international NGOs would eventually make their way to the Ecuadorian mainland, especially after there were more national NGOs with whom to “partner.”

The Origins Era (1978-1987) can be summarized by a weak indebted, and resource dependent state. Transnational funding was the seeds for new organizations and projects to emerge. Environmental policies were not implemented nor existing ones enforced and export-led development based on petroleum. The environmental sector bifurcated into ecodependents and ecoresisters. Finally, Schaiberg’s economic synthesis would best classify this era.

Reflection

In 1978 a small group of university students created and registered their organization, Fundación Natura in Quito as a nonprofit organization. Their goal was to focus on the conservation of species and ecosystems. They had a naïve optimism and had a simple desire, as educated Ecuadorians, to raise consciousness in their country about their environment. Natura’s first project was a television nature show called “Education for Nature.” Fundación Natura was open to working with everyone – they even sought to work with businesses for the good of Ecuador. A strength of Fundación Natura was that the organization included people of all political persuasions. A few months after their funding, Fundación Natura entered a contract with USAID to create an “Environmental Profile of Ecuador.”

Until the mid-1990s, Natura was the only active national environmental organization in the country – it was “the” environmental NGO. In 1985 the Society for the Defense of Nature supported a subgroup called Acción Ecológica (AE), which was and is considered the more “radical green” group in Ecuador. AE was more social than ecological. The members of AE are mostly women and they are sometimes referred to as “eco chicas”

The definition of Ecuadorian “environmentalist/ecologist” was contrasted in the early period between Fundación Natura and Acción Ecológica. Fundación Natura consisted of environmentalists who looked for solutions within the system, such as implementation of

environmental policies, who sought cooperation and compromise, and whose position was considered conservative. Acción Ecológica's concern focused on human-environmental interactions. Natura educated to change consciousness in order to garner support got creating environmental policy, while AE educated to mobilize actors and to help groups organize themselves to protect their environment.

Esperanza Martínez, a founder of AE, has argued that there are three streams of environmentalism expressed nationally and internationally: conservationists concerned with the conservation of nature, environmentalists who focus on intervening conflicts and proposing solutions in line with the system of production and ecologists that question that model of development. While, Teodoro Bustamante, a one-time leader of Natura, describes two camps: the reformers, who believe that the only way the system will work is to incorporate environmental considerations and the rebellious ones, who believe the ecological struggle is the most radical struggle against the system. Fundación Natura embodies an ecodependent organization and Acción Ecología represents an ecoresistent organization. An important difference from Natura is that AE's work has never been funded by the United States Agency for International Development.

If I were living in Ecuador at the time, it probably would have been a hard decision as to what which group I would have supported. I like that Natura is really science based and has a desire to educate people because I too like when policies or things of that matter have scientific backing and also, I like sharing what I've learned with the people I know. However, I also have an interest in anthropology/sociology and I understand that people will also have a unique impact on the environment because we are a part of the environment. So, in the end I think I would have chosen the more radical group of the two, Acción Ecología because they also cared about the social aspect within the environmental movement.

Also in 1987, the first of three movement-changing debt-for-nature swaps took place in Ecuador. Debt was purchased by The Nature Conservancy, the World Wildlife Fund-US, the Missouri Botanical Garden, and the Frank Weeden Foundation (organizations from the Global North) at a discounted price in exchange for a commitment from the indebted nation (Ecuador) to establish a trust fund to carry out environmental programs. The indebted country (Ecuador) will continue to make debt payments, though smaller than the original debt, into the trust fund. The beneficiary of the fund is usually a NGO within the country. For Ecuador, the NGO recipient was the Fundación Natura. To be more specific, "the Central Bank of Ecuador is paying out swap proceeds to Fundación Natura over nine years with a percentage each year being placed into an endowment fund which will exist in perpetuity" (Resor, n.d.). Then in turn, Fundación Natura works with the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, which is responsible for national parks (Resor, n.d.).

There were three underlying conditions that explain why Ecuador became a target of these swaps. First, Ecuador's government was heavily indebted to the international community. Second, due to its high degree of biodiversity, Ecuador was on international conservationists' radar. Third, Ecuador's citizens had shown, through the development of organizations, like Fundación Natura and CEDENMA, that there was national concern about the environment and national organizational capacity was developing to address their problems.

This era ends because three important events occurred in 1987. The first was a national environmental congress was held. Approximately 350 participants from all sectors of society convened at the congress and CEDENMA – Ecuadorian Committee for the Defense of Nature and the Environment was formed. CEDENMA's creation provided an opportunity to bring together competing environmental ideas in a way that could move the environmental agenda forward. The second was an environmental umbrella group was formed to be an arbiter among the conflicting but complementary types of environmental groups. And third, a large influx of international funds was generated for conservation through the country's first debt-for-nature swap.

Bibliography:

Resor, J. P. (n.d.). Debt-for-nature swaps: a decade of experience and new directions for the future. Retrieved September 12, 2017, from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/w3247e/w3247e06.htm>