

THE CRY OF THE PEOPLE: ECUADOR'S 2019 NATIONAL STRIKE THROUGH GRAFFITI

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ABSTRACT

"They took so much away from us that they ended up taking away our fear" - Silvana Estrada. Ecuadorians are brave and kind; they love profoundly and fight fiercely to protect their rights and their communities. Unfortunately, Ecuador has been historically hit by various economic crises, most of which are provoked by governmental agreements with the International Monetary Fund. These economic agreements provoke economic crises that disadvantage the vulnerable working-class communities of Ecuador. Nevertheless, Ecuadorians have fought for their rights fiercely by taking to the streets and paralyzing the country with their cry for equity. In the National Strike of 2019, the streets were filled with fearless people, Ecuadorian flags, burnt tires to block the streets, and graffiti. In this strike, graffiti was powerfully filling the streets with political messages. Throughout this paper, the National Strike of 2019 would be analyzed through the graffiti made by Ecuadorian protesters. This intersectional analysis aims to understand the political power behind politically charged graffiti and the ways it created counter geography during the strike.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2019, a series of neoliberal economic measures hit Ecuadorian people and provoked political manifestations. Ecuadorians raised fierce organized protests that paralyzed the nation and demonstrated the power of the people. Beyond analyzing the power behind claiming public space to voice political discontent, throughout this paper, graffiti will be closely analyzed to understand its role in the political uprising that occurred in Ecuador's National Strike of 2019. Specifically, graffiti created a counter-geography against the neoliberal economic measures of the government in Quito, Ecuador.

To understand the strike, it is imperative to contemplate the economic agreements that the Ecuadorian government established with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2019. In early March, the IMF Executive Board published press release No. 19/72, which detailed an economic agreement of US\$ 4.2 billion with the Ecuadorian government under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF). The IMF Board claimed that this agreement would significantly decrease the debt-to-GDP ratio by optimizing the fuel subsidies. Additionally, the Board repeatedly claimed that the economic agreement would encourage job creation that would benefit the poor, working class communities in Ecuador (IMF, 2019). This agreement was signed and endorsed by Lenin Moreno, the 47th president of Ecuador and a center-left socialist (Consejo Nacional Electoral, 2017). He moved forward with the agreement and, on October 9, 2019, publicly declared in his monthly national broadcast decree 883 which, among other economic measures, eliminated the subsidy on fossil fuels (Moreno, pg. 4). Moreno claimed that this decree was necessary for job creating and would contribute to the economy (Moreno, pg. 5). Both the IMF and Moreno argued that these measures would serve the country in the long run by increasing employment and economic growth; however, the public was aware that these economic measures would negatively impact the middle and lower classes.

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By eliminating the fossil fuel subsidy, fees for public transportation would significantly increase, and so would production prices. Therefore, the next day, transporters' unions used social media platforms to

encourage all kinds of transporters to join a strike. Transporters from the regional bus systems, tow trucks, school buses, taxis, and more joined the strike, paralyzing the country. Nevertheless, due to their economic instability, transporters could not be on strike for longer and, on October 5, 2019, the transporters' unions lifted the strike leaving the government to make the best decisions to benefit the public.

The next day, La Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE; The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) took the lead and continued the strike by encouraging other unions, students, and social sectors to join the revolutionary movement against the neoliberal economic measures imposed by the government. For the next seven days, the CONAIE mobilized through Ecuador by occupying highways and mobilizing from different regions, all with the ultimate goal of reaching the Capital, Quito (Pérez Torres, 2019). By occupying the streets, Ecuadorians declared their sovereignty, causing the country to become paralyzed and cease its normality. Their objective was to force Moreno to withdraw decree 883. The mass demonstrations exposed that the people hold power and that if the government failed to provide their rights, no fear would stop them from taking to the streets.

Occupying the public sphere has long been a powerful dynamic in revolutionary movements from the people to resist the governmental forces and oppressive political agendas. As discussed in her essay "Mapping the Trail of Violence," Orozco expresses that public demonstrations create counter geography that disrupts the spatial violence that seeks to enforce government oppressive measures (Orozco, 2019, p. 152). In the context of her essay, Orozco conducts a place-based analysis to examine how black and pink roses serve as material representations of femicide to shape the Ciudad Juarez landscape into a funeralization site (Orozco, 2019). Despite being set in a different socio-political context and geographical location, her work is critical to understanding the roles of public space in movements of resistance like the national strike in Ecuador. Ecuadorians were claiming their rights by occupying the streets and stopping the normal functioning of the country. These public demonstrations created a counter-geography in all Ecuador to force a spatial recognition of the resistance against the neoliberal agenda pushed by Lenin Moreno.

GRAFFITI IN THE STREETS

Furthermore, as the protests continued, graffiti started appearing in the streets of Quito. By its nature, graffiti has an inherent political connotation as society rejects it, considering it vandalism. In the case of Quito, authorities have enforced the illegality of graffiti through local ordinances. The making of graffiti in public and private spaces without signed consent from the city is considered a Second-Class Violation under Quito's Metropolitan Ordinance 0332. This ordinance states that individuals that illegally engage with graffiti are required to pay half of their monthly income. (El Consejo Metropolitano de Quito, 2010). By enforcing the illegality of graffiti, Quito authorities make sure that those individuals that engage in the making of the graffiti receive approval from the local authorities before drawing or spraying the walls. This systematic control allows authorities to supervise the public sphere and the images portrayed.

Despite the local ordinances, Quito has always been filled with vibrant graffiti. In the essay, "Interventions In The Street, Interventions In The Classroom: Quito's Urban Art," Daniels argues that although sometimes the making of the graffiti is authorized, other times the artists have public recognition of their talent and do the paintings without permission. Thus, street art has become a legitimate art form for many citizens and authorities (Daniels, 2016). Quito's scenery has been uniquely characterized by graffiti, and it has slowly been accepted culturally and socially as a way that citizens express their points of view in the public sphere. Ultimately, having this social context leads to an analysis of the difference between the graffiti existing in Quito and being part of its scenery and the graffiti during the National Strike.

When graffiti appeared in the streets during the strike, it was doing more than challenging the norm by utilizing public spaces and walls. Graffiti became what Waldner and Dobratz called an "expressive resistance tactic" that actively resisted the power of the government (Waldner and Dobratz, 2013, p.379). The authors argue that graffiti is political by nature; however, there are certain graffiti pieces that "[express] views that are counter-hegemonic" (Waldner and Dobratz, 2013, p.381). The scholars

affirm the innate resistance of graffiti to social and political norms that enforce its illegality. Nevertheless, they argue that there is a unique political power behind politically charged graffiti, as it is not only challenging the public sphere, it is creating a counter-geography based on its specific time and location. The graffiti, therefore, is read differently given the socio-political contexts surrounding it. In Quito, as demonstrated before, graffiti has been challenging the authorities and the elite by existing in the public space. However, during the strikes, graffiti became a powerful tool of resistance used by the protesters to denounce the government's neoliberal economic measures.



[Figure 1: Stencil graffiti on Avenida 10 de Agosto, Quito. The graffiti portrays a rat sitting on a wheelchair which is on a military tank that has the FMI (International Monetary Fund) letters printed on the side. Photo by Paula Parrini Saavedra.]

Figure 1 is a brilliant piece of graffiti that demonstrates a very specific voice of political discontent. In the graffiti, a rat is observed to be in a wheelchair, which is a direct reference to President Moreno as he utilizes a wheelchair. Moreover, culturally, the rat in Ecuador is viewed as a pest. People believe that where there is one rat, there will be more. Rats' innate nature allows them to reproduce quickly under the right conditions. If there is shelter, food, and other factors that contribute to their development, it takes little time for rats to colonize a new space. This reference becomes political as Ecuador, unfortunately, has had the socio-political conditions that allow many political leaders to implement neoliberal economic measures that negatively impact the working class. To illustrate, in 1994, under the presidency of Sixto Duran Ballen, his administration decided to adjust gasoline prices monthly and automatically by indexing them to world prices. The same happened in 1998 under Jamil Mahuad's presidency (Stanley, 2001). These politicians have always been part of the history in Ecuador and are too many to count. Thus, the rat serves as a narrative to portray politicians as rats that appear to reproduce and lead the country into an economic crisis that causes political and social uprising.

Moreover, the rat is also a public humiliation and defamation of Moreno. Socially, in Ecuador being compared to a rat means being a liar or traitor. The negative connotation serves the purpose the graffiti artists tried to appeal to in their pieces. Moreno was part of a center-left socialist political party in Ecuador, Alianza PAIS. This political party was founded by Rafael Correa and endorsed Moreno in the 2017 elections (Consejo Nacional Electoral, 2017). The political party's agenda is to serve the people's interests by providing strong investments in education, social services, and health care (Alianza PAIS, 2021). Moreno's actions were betraying the people's interests and his compromises for being part of Alianza PAIS. By eliminating the fossil fuel subsidy, Moreno expected to maximize state income to fulfill the agreements with the IMF; the interests of the Ecuadorians that voted for and supported him were disrespected and not considered. Therefore, by creating this piece of graffiti, the author defamed the status of President Moreno to publicly humiliate him and force him to withdraw the economic package.

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Furthermore, the rat and its wheelchair are on top of a military tank that reads "IMF." This brings us to the next political reference, the military tank. During the strikes, Quito was the epicenter for mass demonstrations as it held the Carondelet Palace where the government seat is located. On October 7, Ecuadorians that were coming from diverse regions were reaching the capital and were welcomed with ten military tanks and military personnel. The strike had reached its most violent day and Moreno declared a state of emergency by describing the city as "on war footing" (Ponce, 2020). Ecuadorians were killed and violently silenced, preventing them from demonstrating against his violent regime. By portraying the letters in the tank, the graffiti visualizes the state-sponsored violence that silenced the protesters in the name of the IMF.



[Figure 2: A picture that captures the graffiti that reads "¡Unete Pueblo!" (People Join!). The graffiti is located on the wall of the Attorney General's Office on Avenida Patria in Quito. It is under the mural known as "Grito de la Memoria" (The Memory Cry) by the artist Pavel Egüez. Photo by Collective Cerco Mediático.]



[Figure 3: The picture shows the same graffiti mentioned above; however, it gives a panoramic view of the surrounding area of the graffiti. Photo by Benjamin Aguilar.]

Furthermore, for its location, socio-political context, and message, Figures 2 and 3 show a striking piece of graffiti that creates a counter-geography that calls Ecuadorians to join forces against the government. In the graffiti, the author writes "Unete Pueblo! (People Join!); it is a call to action for the people around the graffiti to join the protests. The graffiti's remarkable location is Avenida Patria, where

the protests gathered, and the most violent confrontations between the police and the protesters occurred. But it is also strategically located under the mural “Grito de la Memoria” (The Memory Cry) by the artist Pavel Egüez. Therefore, analyzing the historical power behind the mural is critical to deeply examine the political power behind the graffiti.

This mural was created by Pavel Egüez, a renowned muralist and heir to the Oswaldo Guayasamín artistic school (Aguilar-Laguierce, 2019, p. 3). The Attorney General Office commissioned Egüez to create a mural in memory of the victims of state-sponsored violence in Ecuador under the presidency of Leon Febres Cordero in the 1980s (Aguilar-Laguierce, 2019, p. 7). On the right side of the mural, the artist portrayed the fathers and mothers of many of those who disappeared during the regime. The mural beautifully depicts a violent history by memorializing the lives and families of those that suffered and were killed due to state-sponsored violence. Nevertheless, as powerful and well-intended as this piece may be, it fails to succeed as it is a superficial memorialization that achieves no institutional change. The mural was commissioned by the same office that condemned the acts of resistance during the strikes of 2019. To contextualize, the Attorney General Office is a government institution that criminalizes the right to social protest and persecutes indigenous leaders and other sectors of society, accusing them of terrorism (Ortega Sinche, A.C., et al., 2019). In that regard, from 2017 to 2019, the year the strikes were happening, the office reported that of 64 cases received by the office for alleged crimes of attack or resistance, 42 were generated from social protests (Ortega Sinche, A.C., et al., 2019). This institution promotes the criminalization of the people’s right to protest. It criminalized the Ecuadorians protesting the neoliberal economic measures forced by Moreno onto the country. Therefore, the mural became a facade of peace and change while the office incarcerated the Ecuadorians.

The juxtaposition of this socio-political context is staggering. The mural above the “Unete Pueblo” graffiti is ironically located on the facade of one of the most oppressive institutions in the country, memorializing the deaths of many citizens 40 years ago while in its location many Ecuadorians were being violently beaten and silenced in October 2019. Therefore, by existing in this loaded geographical location, the graffiti constructs a strong counter-geography that aggressively calls Ecuadorians to join the movement. This counter-geography creates public awareness that the only way to provoke institutional change is by joining forces. More importantly, the graffiti exposes the state-sponsored violence that exists and will continue unless the people join forces to declare their fearlessness. Additionally, it states that no tanks, military, or pistols will silence the cry of the people. The Ecuadorian people are here to fight and reveal their power through numbers. Ultimately, the graffiti juxtaposition with the mural brilliantly causes the public to rethink what this historic space commemorates and how it can be reimaged for a better future.

CONCLUSION

Graffiti was a resistance tactic used by the public, and it succeeded. Neither the weapons, the military, nor the police had the power to silence Ecuadorians. The people had courage and indignation that inspired them fiercely to protest against the government. They used graffiti to expose a narrative that served the people and accurately portrayed the experiences of the protesters during the strike. This demonstrates that graffiti is more than a visualization of political discontent; it has the power to create a counter-geography that negotiates public space to challenge the state and international agents that provoked the discontent in the public. The Ecuadorian people were fearless and demonstrated that their rights must be respected. Thus, on October 13, 2019, after five deaths, 554 injured, and 929 arrested, Moreno declared the official withdrawal of Decree 883 (Pérez Torres, 2019). The people had succeeded.

The two pieces of graffiti exposed in this paper are brilliant examples of the ways that graffiti served as a powerful tool to (1) expose political discontent, (2) call the people to join the movement, and (3) publicly humiliate Moreno to force him to withdraw the neoliberal economic measures. Each piece uniquely became a cry for social change charged with political messages; it allowed the Ecuadorian people to claim the public sphere fiercely and achieve social justice.

While working on this paper, I kept reflecting on the legacy of the graffiti shown throughout my analysis. What would it mean for the future generations? How would it be used, or even reused, in future

protests? Unfortunately, my inquiries are beginning to find answers. On Jun 13, 2022, the CONAIE called indigenous and campesino organizations to come together and fight against the government's neoliberal measures. Three years after the 2019 National Strike, Moreno left the presidency, and the subsidy for fossil fuel was gone and the prices for fuel and other basic necessities skyrocketed. This time, the face of all these oppressive practices was Guillermo Lasso, a center-right banker and politician. The indigenous communities are back on the streets and have been protesting for over three weeks. As the graffiti starts appearing in the public sphere, I am curious to analyze the similarities and differences between the graffiti from the 2019 National Strike and the one happening now. I am curious to see the legacy these historical events have on how we analyze graffiti. Graffiti transcends time and space, it leaves a powerful legacy in the walls it occupies; let's see what legacy it leaves now.

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