

Review / Reseña

Ernesto Capello. *City at the Center of the World: Space, History, and Modernity in Quito*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.

Of Material and Methods

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In 1942, the Ecuadorian critic Benjamín Carrión urged his compatriots to reject the “moral shrinking” that plagued their country after its recent massive loss of territory to Peru. Admitting that they could not restore that territory, he argued for a new national future, writing, “in our providential tropic, rich in *humus* but also rich in fevers and pests, it is possible to build a patria, a ‘*small great patria*’, with the human material we have.”¹ For Carrión, the key to that new national greatness—a greatness of spirit, not size—lay in Ecuador’s particular national vocations for liberty and for the arts. His argument invoked great figures of Ecuadorian political history alongside a long artistic history extending from the pre-Colombian

¹ Benjamín Carrión, *Cartas Al Ecuador* (Quito: Editorial Gutenberg, 1943), 147.

era. Continuing along a path paved with the work of freedom-loving politicians and artists, Carrión asserted, would take his people out of their current moment of loss and allow them to fulfill their destiny for national greatness.

Though Ernesto Capello's 2011 book, *City at the Center of the World: Space, History, and Modernity in Quito*, closes seven years before Carrión's nationalist manifesto appeared, its evocative analysis sheds new light on the sources and influences of arguments like Carrión's. Capello traces a history of urban imaginings, outlining the ways that Quiteños envisioned their city—its history and its present—in order to establish coherent urban identities in the face of dramatic change and increasing challenges to their city's national dominance. In addition, Capello's study, like Carrión's manifesto, emphasizes that the import of that *small great patria's* history can extend well beyond its local boundaries. Tracing a long tradition of arguments that placed Quito (and, often, by extension, Ecuador) at the "center of the world," Capello implicitly advances a wider claim for the value of studying Ecuadorian history in the first place. Understanding the arguments about Quito that developed across time, across social groups, and across media not only sheds new light on the specifics of Quiteño life at the turn of the twentieth century, but also suggests the lessons that contemporary scholars might learn by studying a small, great capital city in which political and visual cultures collide so compellingly.

City at the Center of the World rests on a robust archive. It draws together diverse elements of history-making—including cartography, urban design, architecture, literature, and photography—to reveal the complex socio-political patterns that sustained Quito's national position over time. The book's historical span reaches from the early colonial period through the mid twentieth century, though it is anchored in the Liberal era between 1895 and 1935. Students of Ecuadorian history and Latin American urban studies will appreciate the book's detailed and in-depth analysis of Quito's self-positioning as the nation's symbolic, historic, and political center. In my reading, however, the true contribution of this book extends beyond its topical specifics. This is a book worth reading as much for the richness of

its methodology and the texture of its archives as for its particular insights about Quito. This book belongs in graduate methods seminars and in the hands of anyone interested in historiography. Its multi-layered analysis of Quiteño space-time offers a model for scholarship that plumbs the full richness of material culture for its historiographic potential, showing how archival complexity can lead to an analytical complexity that might otherwise lie just out of reach.

Capello makes space for that larger contribution by organizing his history of Quiteño arguments around a theoretical framework: the Bakhtinian notion of the *chronotope* or space-time. In this sense, Capello follows a path opened by Eduardo Kingman's 2006 *La Ciudad y los Otros*. Not only do the two books tread the same Quiteño streets and share a temporal span (1895-1935 and 1860-1940, respectively), they also both extend their reach by engaging theoretical systems that range well beyond Ecuador's borders, a fairly novel approach in Ecuadorian historiography. Kingman's monograph takes up a Foucauldian construction of history and urban space in order to re-trace the city's contradictory paths toward modernity. It highlights the mechanisms of administration and negotiation that put modern and feudal systems of control in productive (though often exploitative) tension. For his part, Capello structures *City at the Center of the World* via exploration of seven chronotopes, seven ways that different socio-political groups imagined, appealed to, and organized the space and time of Ecuador's highlands capital. Bakhtin's flexible concept allows Capello to trace how different groups re-imagined Quito's past in order to claim a place for themselves in the emerging modern capital. Capello's Bakhtinian slant doesn't particularly advance theoretical understandings of the chronotope as such. Instead, in Capello's hands, Bakhtin's chronotopic *theory* morphs into a chronotopic *method*. That method lays competing urban projects one on top of another to build a robust sense of the layeredness of urban identity. Shading theory into method grants Capello useful tools for excavating a complex urban terrain made thick with arguments and narratives.

One of the real benefits of Capello's chronotopic method is that it allows him to present multiple, exceedingly detailed approaches to Quiteño

imaginings alongside one another. If the detailed density of any individual chapter occasionally risks dryness, the elegance of Capello's writing and the soon-to-come shift of a new chapter alleviate it. Moreover, the book's Bakhtin-inspired, recursive historiography offers readers a uniquely laminated sense of Quiteño imaginings. That sense emerges not only from the topical progression of the book's seven chapters, but also from the reader's own repeated movement across distinct yet overlapped analyses of the same space and time. Readers with interests related to a single chapter will find a useful resource should they choose to read just that chapter. Even the most utilitarian readers, however, might do well to push beyond their isolated interest and read the entire book. The light shed on each chapter by its larger context and the added complexity given to each claim by its refraction through other chronotopes are well worth the time. Chapter by chapter, *City at the Center of the World* adds increasing complexity to our vision of Quito as a site of chronotopic invention in which different groups drew on differing interpretations of place and history in order to claim the modern city for themselves.

Chapter one lays the book's historical groundwork and introduces the chronotope of "nostalgic regionalism" that organizes the study as a whole. It suggests that Quito's move to establish itself as the historic and symbolic heart of the nation arose partially in response to the challenges posed by coastal Guayaquil's growing economic power. Tracing the literal mapping of Quito as a "city at the center of the world," Chapter two follows the history of cartography in Quito and demonstrates how colonial-era expeditions, early republican institutes, and Liberal-era commercial interests used maps to forward their visions for the city. Chapters three and four—about chronotopes of Hispanic heritage and municipal sovereignty—examine arguments advanced by Quito's traditional aristocracy that attempted to place the city at the center of the world and at the center of the nation. Chapter three analyzes efforts to reimagine Quito as a profoundly Spanish and Catholic city, a tactic that intentionally occluded the city's indigenous history. Chapter four treats municipal struggles to gain control over public works projects and urban planning designed to improve the modern city. Chapter five directs further attention to the ways

that Quito's urban elite imagined a modern city steeped in history, tracking how a architectural "chronotope of a hyphenated vernacular" arose in the city thanks, in part, to projects headed by the Durinis, a Swiss-Italian immigrant family that arrived in Quito in the late nineteenth century. Departing from the previous chapters' focus on Quito's urban aristocracy, chapter six takes a hallucinogenic and middle class turn. It examines the literary work of vanguardist authors, often provincial migrants to the capital, who tried to disrupt elite visions of Quiteño space-time via a phantasmagoric "chronotope of an anti-modern city" that featured urban life in all its messy disjunction and dismal turpitude. Chapter seven, following Quito's outward expansion into disputed rural territory, introduces a "chronotope of genealogical power" as wielded by the leaders of the indigenous community of Santa Clara de San Millán. Attempting to forestall the city's appropriation of territory and maintain communal authority, those leaders emphasized their long-standing claim to prime land at the edge of the city and used those claims to intervene in urban development.

Throughout the monograph, each successive chapter deepens and reverse-illuminates the insights of earlier pages. Key players in early chapters appear from new perspectives in later ones, and Capello asks readers to re-tread the same streets in multiple guises. That agglutinative historiographic method places eras, modes, and social positions in tension, showing how different conceptions of space and time in Quito emerged from, competed with, and blended into one another. The resulting complexity in focus and subject is balanced by the study's spatial location within a single, relatively insular city. And yet, as Capello persuasively argues, the meaning and range of that city is anything but isolated: Quito is usefully considered as a city positioned (or positioning itself) at the center of the world.

That titular conception of Quito as the *mitad del mundo* anchors Capello's chronotopic method and the seven chronotopes his chapters trace. Some of the book's chapters address that contested centrality directly: Chapter one shows Quito's elite asserting their city's preeminence in the face of regional tensions with Cuenca and Guayaquil; chapter two

examines how different maps envisioned the city as uniquely positioned in global terms; in chapter three, Hispanicist elites reinvigorate a sense of Catholic heritage in order to reclaim the city's colonial status as a new Rome; and, in chapter four, municipal leaders use Quito's centrality to warrant claims for increased autonomy in the face of budgetary meddling from national-level administrators. The book's later chapters gradually move away from direct appeals to Quito as the *mitad del mundo* yet continue to stress their subjects' efforts to make a particular set of chronotopes central to the city's identity. Chapter five uses changing architectural fashions in Quito to explore how European cosmopolitanism existed alongside and in tension with elite desires for an authentic Andean vernacular. Chapter six shows how modern authors disputed the claims to coherence and modernity that dominated earlier chapters, making the center of the world a fractured, disorienting, and oppressive place. Chapter seven, least concerned with Quito as the center of the world, instead traces indigenous efforts to de-center elite visions of the modern city in favor of their pre-existing claims.

City at the Center of the World can also be usefully divided into sub-sections based on the social status of its chapters' subjects. That particular internal division directs attention to both the broad scope and the inevitable limits of the study. Chapters one through four elaborate chronotopes centered on and advanced from positions of institutional power—scientific expeditions, military cartographic institutes, historical academies, and municipal committees. The subsequent three chapters move to the edges of traditional power, seeing the city through the experiences of an immigrant family that inserted itself into the Quiteño elite; a selection of provincial authors who, locating themselves within Quito, critiqued its urban foibles; and an indigenous community that contested and collaborated with successive Quiteno administrations in order to maintain a semblance of autonomy. Despite the differences in institutional position at work in those two halves, however, *City at the Center of the World* offers a history largely narrated from the perspective of powerful men. Chapters six and seven move, gratifyingly, to disrupt the prominence of elite histories, displacing the arguments of the traditional

Quiteño aristocracy by means of claims put forward by an indigenous community and politically radical writers. Those two later chapters point toward the diversity of chronotopes generated within and about the city, and they emphasize that contestation is as central to the history and modernity of Quito as are the seemingly coherent narratives woven by elites. At the same time, the vanguardist authors of chapter six and the indigenous leaders of chapter seven remain elite within their own contexts. They have sufficient access and clout to leave behind records of their claims about urban space-time. The profound difficulty of uncovering non-dominant chronotopes in the stuff of historical material haunts *City at the Center of the World* as it haunts most scholarly effort. And yet, by virtue of his layering method, Capello makes clear that the chronotopes he presents are only some among many. Each contests the narratives produced by its neighbors; each tells only part of the story. That methodological stress on complexity is productive. Such productive complexity functions as well in the breadth of archival materials that Capello musters to his analysis. His recursive method works so well, in part, because it repeatedly guides readers through the same space-time while drawing attention to the array of objects and claims populating it.

Capello's move to include elements of visual culture as essential counterparts to more traditional, textual materials is particularly generative in that sense. Rather than offering a study of visual culture per se, this book takes Quito as its subject and then makes the reasonable assumption that an analysis of Quiteño space-time cannot adequately treat its subject without considering what is seen within the city alongside what is written and read about it. In this sense, *City at the Center of the World* advances the project begun by Deborah Poole her 1997 book, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*. Capello goes further than Poole did, though, in the evocative depth of his archive, in his treatment of *internal* (rather than primarily European) visions, and in the authority he lends to visual material. For Capello, photographs and buildings serve not merely as illustrations or records of historical events but rather as evocative events in and of themselves. So, encountering buildings designed by the Durini family reveals the interplay of Europe-

identified cosmopolitanism and Andean vernacular in the development of the modern city. Understanding how Hispanism served an urban aristocracy inventing a new history for their city requires not only reading the declarations and histories those elites composed but also seeing the ways they restored and circulated images of the city's colonial-era architecture and encountering the festivals they staged. Similarly, the visual orientations provided by changing city maps and cartographic monuments quite literally laid the groundwork for arguments about Quito's status at the center of the world. Throughout *City at the Center of the World*, photographs, postcards, maps, and buildings stand alongside histories, government records, letters, and court cases. Capello does not call particular attention to his study's inclusion of visual elements. In fact, he explicitly downplays their centrality, noting, "This book is not about a series of postcards but instead about the evolution of [a] specific form of nostalgic regionalism."² To achieve that end and demonstrate how Quiteños deployed chronotopes to "[answer] the challenge of modernity through a reconfiguration of the past," however, Capello quite clearly turns to the whole array of materials available to him. The history such archival flexibility enables is a varied and complex one. It summons Quito into almost palpable presence for the reader and, in the process, offers a model for scholarship that plumbs the full richness of material culture for its historiographic potential.

In some ways, Ecuadorianist scholars today face a diluted version of the problem confronting both Benjamín Carrión and the subjects of Capello's study. The small Andean nation whose history and culture they engage is often overshadowed by its larger neighbors, often seen as isolated from or secondary to more prominent histories. In *City at the Center of the World*, Capello responds handily to that challenge not only by offering an elegant history of Quiteño imaginings but also by furthering recent expansions of the available methods and material of historiography through wide-ranging attention to visual culture. The result is a monograph whose insights resonate beyond the specifics of Ecuadorian history, a

² Ernesto Capello, *City at the Center of the World: Space, History, and Modernity in Quito* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 22.

monograph that uses Quito's rich visual, documentary, and material history to suggest how historiography in general might be pursued. Carrión would be pleased.

Works Cited

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