

Ecuadorian identity, community and multi-cultural integration

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There are few empirical studies of London's less populous cultural and ethnic communities, many of which have been sidelined to 'other' or 'BME' categorisations. This paper looks at one such contemporary migrant community. Moving from general theory to empirical impressions the paper explores issues of Ecuadorian identity, community and multi-cultural integration in London.

1. Theoretical framework

This first section looks at some of the theory surrounding identity, community and integration. The aim of this section is not to review all available literature but to present the key works and concepts that have informed the data collection process and the stance of the paper.

1.1. Identity

To understand the Ecuadorian community and its location in multi-cultural society, we first need to understand its identity.

Identity is built on difference. It is about the 'other', the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, its *constitutive outside* (Hall, 1996). That is, you are 'Ecuadorian' because you understand what being Ecuadorian is not.

This continual differentiation from the 'other' implies an on-going construction and deconstruction of identity based around the concepts of sameness and difference.¹ Consequently, an individual will identify with, enter and leave many communities either as his or her own position changes or that of the community itself.

Identity is a process of political construction. There is no true inner identity, no essential element. When 'we speak from somewhere' (Laclau, 1996), that somewhere is a dialogical construct. This is not to say that cultural history it is not legitimate, only that it is legitimate as contextualised by contemporary society. In this sense, essentialist claims of 'right' can be deconstructed.

The representation of identity is also a political process. Identities are chosen rather than ascribed (Hall, 2000, 220), and the acts of choosing are informed by power plays that operate on different levels, in different directions and with different intensities. Internal differences are likely to run along ethnic, socio-economic, generational, class and gender lines. So, for example, Ecuadorian men and women will experience their ethnicity differently, as children will interpret themselves differently to their male and female parent.

¹ Derrida (2000) calls this dynamic *différance*. "*Différance* is the nonfull, nonsimple, structured and differentiating origin of differences...the conceptual process (p.89)". Metaphysically, the process of differentiation ensures that a given object will never achieve a complete cultural fit with another object, or with any many objects.

1.2. Community

Identity is not solely about the individual it is also about larger collectives. The Ecuadorian 'community' is one such formation. To understand 'community' we must appreciate its construct and dynamics.

As with many migrant communities, London's Ecuadorian community is not geographically segregated but is constructed of symbols: a common language, the same rituals, or similar clothes (Cohen, 1985: 21). Identification with a 'community' occurs when an individual references these symbols to his or her own cultural history.

The Ecuadorian community is a diaspora: a chaotic economic, cultural and political model with strange attractors that form webs and networks of general commonality (Gilroy, 2000: 128). General commonalities in this case are what is associated with 'being Ecuadorian'.² There is no definitive 'Ecuadorian community'. Members enter, leave and recognise differences between themselves. Community allows for individuality and commonality.

Considered in an etymological sense the Ecuadorian community is also a diaspora. It emanates from a centre – the concept of 'homeland'. Symbols of 'homeland' are maintained and elements of the country of residence are appropriated; some part of the identity displays the experience of dislocation and another part the hope of new beginning (Brah, 1996: 180, 193).

1.3. Integration

The Ecuadorian community is one of the many elements of our multi-cultural society. For each element to maintain its identity whilst forming part of a cohesive whole a balance must be struck in intercommunity and public sectors, between the rights of individuals and the rights of groups.³

These elements require mediation, but contrary to many liberal theorists, the State is not the culturally neutral space capable of the acultural mediation that's required. The State is a proponent of cultural values and as such should be imbued by the plurality that it represents (Hall, 2000: 228–9), which is to say that part of the State should be Ecuadorian.

Good inter-community and inter-personal relationships are essential to social cohesion.⁴ The mutual recognition of the rights of different cultures foments self-esteem and constitutes itself in common consciousness. For multi-cultural society to be representative, the distributive space of cultural values should be heterogeneous not homogeneous.

² Diaspora breaks from the structural constraints of positivism by 'focusing attention equally on the sameness within differentiation and the differentiation within sameness' (Gilroy 2000, p. 125). This is the concept of *différance*; the idea of communities within communities; the possibility of being 'Black, Asian, Azad Kashmiri, Mirpuri, Jat, Marilail, Kungrivalay, Pakistani, English, British, Yorkshireman, Bradfordian, from Bradford Moor...'. (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000: 47).

³ 'Social life consists of individuals and groups and both need to be provided for in the formal and informal distribution of powers ... [f]or the plural [S]tate, the challenge of the new multiculturalism is ... about creating a cultural synthesis in both private and public spaces' (Modood, 2005: 140).

⁴ As described in Hegel's theories of 'externalisation and return' (1983 [1805–6]), the State is only valid in that it represents the spirit of its citizens (the externalisation of their cultural, ethnic and religious values). In recognising these values the State returns self-esteem to the citizen and community. This fosters good interpersonal and inter-community relationships that negate the concerns of disintegration often attributed to pluralism.

2. Research questions

To explore community and integration, the theories of identity that we looked at in section 1.1 are guided by the following research questions.

2.1. Community

1. In terms of identity, how does the Ecuadorian community differentiate itself from 'others'?
2. How do the internal differences within the Ecuadorian community play out?

2.2. Integration

3. How does the Ecuadorian community interact with other communities?
4. How does the Ecuadorian community interact with the public sector?

3. Methodology

To answer these four research questions, data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews⁵ with Latin American service-providing NGOs, Latin American grassroots organisations, Latin American and Ecuadorian cultural groups, Ecuadorian community members, Ecuadorian business leaders, local government officers and constituency MPs. The same interviewer administered all interviews.

The respondents were determined by a sampling technique called purposeful sampling, which places the emphasis on the selection of information-rich cases for study in depth.⁶ Additional data was collected by means of a qualitative questionnaire and phone interview with Southwark Council Social Policy Unit, analysis of the 2001 Census data, and visits to the Elephant & Castle area of London and the Carnival del Pueblo.

4. Results

To respond to the research questions this section is divided into five parts. The first subsection presents general information on the Ecuadorian community in London. The following four subsections respond in turn to each research question.

4.1. The Ecuadorian community in London

According to the 2001 Census, 2,301 Londoners put down their country of birth as Ecuador. The most populous boroughs were Lambeth (419) and Southwark (207), with smaller numbers living throughout the capital (National Statistics, 2004).

Unofficial estimates on the number of Ecuadorians living in London vary greatly. Due to a large percentage of un-documented Ecuadorians in London, possibly as high as 50% of their total population in the capital, actual figures are hard to ascertain. NGO and community members put the figure at between 30,000 and

⁵ Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as the appropriate data collection technique because it allowed the interviewee to explain his or her understanding of identity, community and integration. We did not locate terms by imposition.

⁶ Limited time and prior knowledge of the cases (there is no literature on the Ecuadorian community in London) determined the choice of the chain sampling strategy to select the respondents. This allows the researcher to identify key 'informants' through previously identified contacts (Patton, 2002: 231–43).

75,000. The Ecuadorian Consulate in London estimates that there are 70,000 Ecuadorians in the UK, 80–90% of whom live in London. According to our interviews, the majority of Ecuadorians in the UK come from Quito, Cuenca, Loja, Ambato, St Domingo, the province of Manabi and a small number from the Orient.

A tumultuous 7–10 years of history accounts for much of the recent Ecuadorian migration to the UK. Wanting to escape from corruption, economic hardship and a lack of professional opportunities in their country of origin, predominantly middle-class Ecuadorians have headed to the UK to find better social and economic opportunities for themselves and their families.

Many Ecuadorians living in the UK are doctors, dentists, teachers, computer technicians, and so on, who have struggled to relocate themselves in their professions. Those who do retrain to comply with UK norms are often underpaid. Our respondents stated that cleaning and catering continue to be the main sources of employment for the Ecuadorian community. Many of these jobs are shift work and there are some suggestions that this has negatively affected family cohesion.

There are a number of different routes into the UK from Ecuador which, in the case of un-documented entrants, depend on trafficking flows, access to false documentation and perceived leniency of border crossings. Historically, the favoured route has been via Spain, where there is also a large Ecuadorian population. Other Ecuadorians enter the UK on student visas, with the intention of study or of finding employment.

Business, culture and sport are all visible expressions of Ecuadorian identity in London. The business centre of the Ecuadorian community, as for the other Spanish-speaking Latin Americans, is the Elephant & Castle. Clustered around the shopping centre are a number of small shops that sell Ecuadorian produce, and within the shopping centre a few stalls sell Latin American craftwork. Also to be found are hairdressers, money transfer and communication centres, clothing importers, restaurants and music stores. Outside this main focus, there are Ecuadorian restaurants to be found in Seven Sisters and Holloway Road, North London.

These businesses are by no means the only projections of Ecuadorian culture. Ecuadorians participate in and organise indoor and outdoor football leagues in Clapham, New Cross, Finsbury Park and around the Elephant & Castle. Ecuadorians also play a role in the annual Carnival del Pueblo, held this year in Burgess Park. Approximately twenty Evangelical and Catholic churches around London provide services in Spanish and Latin American Spanish. Some such as Southwark Cathedral and Comunidad Cristiana de Londres boast large Ecuadorian congregations, in the case of the latter a reported 5,000 members. There are also cultural and dance groups that bring Ecuadorian artists to perform in the UK. These groups and their promoters look to strengthen cultural identity, some with a more cosmopolitan outlook than others.

4.2. Community identity

The Latin American populations of London define themselves by their national identity, and the Ecuadorian community is no exception. Most are Mestizo, with an Andean heritage, folklore, food and dialect in common. Ecuadorians also share collective memories and geographical origin, views on life and modes of social organisation. They are a largely Christian community and many attend church.

Although there is a strong association with 'homeland', few of the Ecuadorians interviewed for this study imagined returning to Ecuador on a permanent basis. This is partly because of the ongoing political and economic difficulties there, and partly because their children, born or raised in the UK, are reluctant to return to a country they don't know. Some first-generation Ecuadorians living in the UK feel that their social networks no longer exist, that things are not how they were when they left. They have put down roots in the

UK and have built a life. They simply return to their country of origin to visit remaining family. This is the experience of dislocation with the hope of new beginning. Some described it as a state of 'limbo' others as the 'Ulysses syndrome'.

Within the Latin American community there is a push for the political construction of a Latin American or South American identity. This is in response to under-representation and a lack of political recognition. By forming a regional identity based on shared culture, language and interests, the Latin American community as a whole could become more politically salient. Some believe that this 'caribbeanisation' of identity can already be seen in the youth projects where young Latin Americans interact across national boundaries with greater ease than their parents.

4.3. Internal differences

Identity and community are played out differently across generations. First-generation Ecuadorians we interviewed felt largely detached from their country of origin rather than attached to their country of residence. Not wanting to return, they surround themselves with familiar cultural symbols and markers that offer cultural alternatives for their children (Parekh, 2005).

Many of the second-generation assist school in the UK, have friends from different cultural and ethnic groups and speak English in addition to Spanish. The boundaries of their imagined community and how they differentiate themselves from 'others' are distinct from those of their parents. Some of the second-generation feel and act more or less British, more or less Ecuadorian, though most identify somewhat with symbols of their country of origin – the food, support for the Ecuadorian national football team, the language, the music, etc – just as they identify with other symbols of their country of residence.

In addition to generational divides, other lateral forms of inter-community differentiation (such as gender, religion, class, ethnicity and regional affinities) are evident. Some internal differences are more static than others. For example, while most first-generation Ecuadorians maintain their country of origin's gender roles, religious affinities are more changeable with many Ecuadorians London converting from Catholic to Evangelical denominations. Regional differentiation is displayed in some cultural projects, where participants are from certain Ecuadorian regions or towns. This is in contrast with the geographically heterogeneous origins of the community at large. In London, ethnic and class differences are minimised, in contrast to Ecuador where very real divides exist along lines of ethnicity and class.

At present, ethnic, class and regional differences are minimised within the relatively small population, who still have more in common than in contrast. As the number of Ecuadorians in the UK grows these divides may reassert themselves.

4.4. Inter-community integration

The Ecuadorian community's most intense social, cultural and economic relationships are with other Latin American communities with similar class characteristics, principally Colombians, Peruvians and Bolivians. Shared cultural symbols and heritage, a shared history of migration, socio-economic status and geographical area of activity in London facilitate integration between these communities. The communities interact commercially, in social and political events, and in the provision of services.

Although Ecuadorians see themselves as Latin American, they mark clear distinctions between themselves and their Latin American neighbours. These differences are partly a continuation of the historical formation of differentiation in their countries of origin (the formation of national identity) and partly the result of differentiation in the UK.

Most prominently the Ecuadorians differentiate themselves from the Colombians. With a 30-year history in London, the Colombians are the largest Spanish-speaking Latin American group. The size and longevity of the community account for what is a monopoly of business, funding, service provision and consequently Latin American representation. This is perceived by the Ecuadorians as a threat to their identity and view of the 'good life'.

One of the most prevalent examples of differentiation and struggle for recognition centres itself around the Latin American free-paper media in London. All three free-papers – *Noticias*, *ExpressNews* and *Extra* are owned by Colombians. Many Ecuadorians feel that this does not allow their community a mouthpiece. *Noticias* also stages the Carnival del Pueblo, which is billed as a Latin American festival but is largely a Colombian concern. Ecuadorians feel that Carnival del Pueblo's 'Latin American' status diverts funds from other more heterogeneous Latin American initiatives.

The information we gathered indicates that schools, community groups and churches are all important spaces for inter-community integration. Some Ecuadorian cultural projects also aim to foster inter-cultural exchanges outside the Latin America sphere. However, these spaces are limited in their cohesive effect particularly as regards the first-generation. This is ascribed partly to language, partly to what are perceived as insurmountable cultural divides, and partly to the fact that many first-generation Ecuadorians view themselves as 'foreigners'.

Assimilation into the dominant culture, 'Britishness', is viewed with greater ease. Religion, skin colour and Spanish culture are all factors that people believed facilitated their assimilation. This is not to say that clear cultural differences are not recognised. Sharing food, a relaxed social attitude, concepts of personal space, showing greater respect for others, and a lower incidence of drug-taking, alcoholism and violence are all markers that the Ecuadorians we interviewed believe distinguish them from the British.

Our Ecuadorian interviewees are open to the idea of mixed marriage. Having partners from different ethnic groups is seen as an advantage, and something that will benefit the Ecuadorian community in London. Parents of teenagers seem proud to talk of their children's ethnically mixed relationships. While most agree that they would like their grandchildren to be able to speak Spanish, they largely believe that these decisions will be made by their children and not by them. However, being open to mixed marriage and the actual levels of mixed marriages contracted are two different things. Commentators observe that actual rates of marriage outside the Latin community are relatively low.

4.5. Integration and the public sector

There is a general feeling that the interests of the Ecuadorian community are not adequately articulated by the State. This is partly because Ecuadorians are not shaping the agenda and partly because councils are not responding fast enough to the changing demographics of their boroughs.

The ability of Ecuadorians to shape the agenda is limited by a number of interrelated factors. Latin American communities are dispersed and in no borough form a majority. In boroughs with Ecuadorian populations, other more established communities constitute the majorities and so are able to compete more effectively for limited Council funding. The Ecuadorian community in the UK is also relatively young, and their social networks and political incidence are limited as a consequence. When, too, as much as 50% of the community is undocumented, it means that they are restricted in their involvement in community and political initiatives. In electoral terms Ecuadorians make little impact. While some of the community's Spanish passport holders vote in local and European elections, many do not. Few Ecuadorians are British citizens with the right to vote in General Elections.

There are a number of specific issues that the Ecuadorian community feel should be addressed by the public sector. Language is prominent, as many from the first-generation, particularly the women, do not speak English. From the community point of view, this places limits on greater participation. However, the Ecuadorians we interviewed would like to address this partly by the provision of bilingual schooling, seen as an essential element of cultural preservation alongside the potential for increased community involvement.

Alongside the lack of bilingual education, there is a general feeling that the public sector does not support Ecuadorian and Latin cultures. They would like to see a Latin American community centre and feel that the lack of such provision will over time be detrimental to their cultural identity. Other specific concerns are the provision of housing and health services to those that do not qualify for social support, and the elimination of institutional racism.

Consigning Ecuadorians and Latin Americans to the 'other' category, and responding to 'BME' communities as a homogeneous whole, has denied Ecuadorians political visibility and a platform from which to seek representation in the public sector. This is not a static scenario. Regularisation, concessions and population growth mean that a greater number of Ecuadorians have access to social support mechanisms and the right to vote. No one political party unites their causes, though their voice is increasingly being recognised in local government and by some constituency MPs.

To respond to the diversity of their borough Southwark Council is introducing a new ethnic monitoring form, with a Latin American section that includes the category 'Ecuadorian'. However, at present the Council has no real idea of the community's size, culture or specific requirements and as a consequence there is no ongoing consultation and no targeted services.

On the other hand, Simon Hughes, Liberal MP for North Southwark and Bermondsey, supports local initiatives such as Carnival del Pueblo, acknowledges the political logic of a collective Latin American identity and recognises specific issues that affect the community.

Language barriers and difficulty of access to social support have led to the founding of numerous Latin American service-providing organisations throughout the capital. These organisations work principally on legal issues, women's rights and the support of the elderly. There are a small number of privately run bilingual nurseries and Saturday and after-school Spanish schools. Both Catholic and Evangelical churches also offer informal social support structures and provide Ecuadorians with social networks that can help those seeking employment.

5. Conclusions

This paper points to a significant and growing Ecuadorian community in London that has established a business and cultural centre and is in the process of developing denser social, economic and cultural networks.

As with other young migrant populations, the Ecuadorian community has yet to make a political impact and many first-generation Ecuadorians feel excluded from local decision-making. This sensation of being an 'outsider' (Faulkner, 2005) has resulted in the first-generation adopting a strategy of either dislocation from or assimilation into the wider society, neither of which is conducive to a representative and acculturative working of multi-culturalism.

Aside from relationships with other Latin American communities, there is a low level of inter-community cohesion. First-generation Ecuadorians see themselves as foreigners and point in many cases to

insurmountable cultural differences between themselves and neighbouring non-Latin communities. This feeling of exclusion should be challenged at a local level to foment cohesion and recognition.

Even within the Latin American community Ecuadorians feel un-represented in the face of a monopolisation of resources by the Colombian community. A local government information deficit on the Ecuadorian population means that these concerns cannot be responded to. However, Southwark Council is responding positively to the changing demography of its borough: the introduction of an 'Ecuadorian' category into its ethnic monitoring should make the community more visible and allow the Council to meet its obligations under the Race Relations Amendment Act.

As the Ecuadorian community develops, the emergence of an overarching Latin American identity may be the instrument that permits a collective Latin voice to be heard and responded to. But this will succeed only if that collective voice is representative of the communities located under its umbrella.

Grassroots organisations will continue to play a vital role in providing services to the Ecuadorian community, and a working partnership with Local Government would be an invaluable step forward. Available funding will allow grassroots organisations to build on successful experiences of inter-cultural exchange and provide a channel for political demands.

This paper represents the stepping-off point for a much broader and deeper analysis of the identities of London's less populous communities. On the back of this study, interest will be raised to support the ongoing compilation of a representative account of the many and varied communities that together comprise our multi-ethnic Britain.

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