**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA HONORS COLLEGE**

# What We Talk About When We Talk About Liberty

## Using Conceptual Decolonization to Contrast Political Paradigms

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# Contents

# Letter to the Reader

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope to use this space to explain some crucial aspects of the document before you today.

The journey to finishing this thesis has not been easy. I locked myself in a classroom in May of 2016 and spent three hours honing in on how I could articulate the sum of my entire collegiate career, and a month later I was boarding a flight to Central America. My partner and I decided to live out of a backpack on a shoestring budget and trek through Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, and the journey would not be comfortable. At one point, my partner Molly and I were attempting to cross the Colombian-Ecuadorian border. We had rushed out of Cali to make it to Quito in order to make the expected arrival date at an art collective where we were planning to stay for a week. Our host was planning to leave the country a day earlier than we expected, so we didn't prepare to cross the border as thoroughly as we should have. Molly and I sat on a bus for ten hours but stopped for the evening in Ipiales, the border town, to tackle customs the next morning. Getting off the bus, we knew something was wrong – we had no Colombian pesos left, I had lost my phone, we were fighting off illness, the list goes on. All of our possessions and identifying documents were between our shoulder blades, and as we stumbled off the cramped bus in to the bus terminal, we realized that all of the hotels within eyesight (which was limited due to the lack of any lighting, whatsoever) had "No Vacancy" signs lit up. The bus drove away, the terminal began to clear, and all of the sudden we realized how alone we truly were. Where would we stay? How would we get there?

We managed to find a room and shared it with two French wanderers. The intimate communion of sharing a safe space in an unsafe place was remarkable: without each other, the four of us would not have felt the security required to experience freedom and ease. Huddled together for warmth in the rough border town far above sea level, the four of us shared a quiet moment appreciating how lucky we were to have each other. I realized that these travelers were not so different than us: alone and afraid, but alive with the thrill of a hunt for purpose and awash with the sensations of an alien place. There's something electrifying about speaking to travelers while travelling, where the typical social expectations are absent and conversation is genuine. I realized in that moment that the direction I had placed myself on, however arduous, was rewarding and worthwhile.

Like the night in Ipiales, my time in South America collecting insight on the topic of my thesis was littered with experiences that seemed to escape a clear place in academic taxonomy. Does a conversation with a banker standing in line for coffee at a Starbucks in Cuzco merit an entry on the economic stability of Peru? Were my experiences on Guillermo's ranch outside Neira, Colombia a surreal, otherworldly example of an equitable distribution of labor and capital, or does the dream-like quality with which I remember those days betray a romanticized version of events? And how does the influence of Molly Misek – my partner during our travels who has since parted ways with me and returned to her home in Omaha, Nebraska – play in to my love for the places we visited together; was Mancora, Peru so beautiful because of our night spent wandering the rocky, misty bluffs that litter the beach, or did it actually represent something of substance for the purpose of my studies?

As an avid fan of Star Trek (the original series, of course), I view this document as something akin to Captain James T. Kirk's "captain's log." The purpose of the captain's log is to

record events as they happen for both the logistically necessary purpose of holding the captain accountable for what takes place on his ship but also for the captain to return to his memories as a source of tactical and personal inspiration in future endeavors. In order to display the character of my travels and to lead the reader through the evolution of this project and my thoughts on the subject of liberty, this thesis will be comprised of three main sections organized chronologically.

The first will contain a shortened narrative of my time in South America. I will briefly summarize each of the destinations that Molly and I visited and share a major experience from each place that has stuck with me since our visit. The full collection of journal entries taken during our time abroad will be included in Appendix A at the end of this document.

The second section will attempt to distill those experiences in to the categories by which I organized the paradigms of liberty. Each paradigm is a theory that explains the existence (or lack thereof) of "liberty", as I knew of the idea before my travels, as it was revealed to me during my travels, and as it mutated during late nights of writing and introspection following my travels. This section will also include a literature review of significant sources that will shed light on which ideas inspired my organized categories. The "paradigms of liberty" are ordered chronologically, so the first paradigm is the one I have the most history with and the most to say about, whereas the last is an idea that I've been playing around with since returning from South America.

The third section contains an analysis of the conceptual decolonization process, a critique of my methodology used to derive these categories (a critique extendable to young travelers and academics alike who have a haughty confidence in their ability to understand fundamental "truths" about the world), and a final argument for the existence of liberty.

I hope you enjoy reading this thesis half as much as I've enjoyed writing it.

# I. Hot Days, Late Nights: What Happened In South America

My partner and I's time in South America can be organized in to roughly thirteen periods. The following are condensed descriptions of each, to save you the trouble of reading through sixty-ish pages of typo-ridden journal entries in order to understand what I was up to this past summer.

1. **Panama City** [June 4 – June 10]

Molly and I flew in to Panama City and were blasted in the face by, well, everything. There is a massive disparity in construction, with the coastal metropolitan area glittering with international construction (including a Trump tower) and the *barrios* blocks inland covered in trash and constantly patrolled by motorcycle-riding police. The humidity made everything glisten until it became unbearable, but the heaviest rain I have ever felt covered the city several days in and gave everyone a chance to breathe. We spent a day checking out the Canal, a day on an old American army base converted to an upscale resort island, and two days at the international mall due to technical difficulties. The rest of the time we were learning how to walk around a Latin American city and beating Germans in beer pong at our hostel.

2. **Porto Bello and *The Amande*** [June 10 – June 15]

We took a *Jurassic Park*-esque trip to the Caribbean coast of Panama, complete with no less than four bribes to local police, and drank too much whiskey with our future sea travelers in a tavern straight out of mythology. The night-time, off-road drive to the port of departure mid-storm was the most hazardous thing I've ever experienced. Once departing from shore with

our Argentinian captain onboard the *Amande*, the ten of us island hopped around the San Blas Islands, drank rum from coconuts, played volleyball with island girls, helped offload pallets of soda for the little shops, ate fresh lobster every day, and jumped off the mast in to perfectly clear water. The last two days approaching Cartagena were rocky, open-sea travelling, and no one felt good.

3. **Cartagena** [June 15 – June 18]

Cartagena hit us with color and heat from the second we stepped off the boat. After finding our hostel and lamenting about more technical difficulties, we spent the days exploring the walled old city, hunting down gorgeous street art, and learning about the spirit of the Colombian people during the *Copamerica* futbol games. We spent a day at a mud volcano, which was hilarious, and celebrated Molly's birthday with the other travelers from the *Amande*. Successful slave revolts, jaw-dropping street art, and Colombian partying made Cartagena a good memory.

4. **Medellin** [June 18 – June 21]

A success story personified, Medellin stole our hearts with the passionate citizenry, modern design, and thriving business. Our AirBnB was an old art museum converted in to a secluded mansion complete with monkeys and a gifted piano repairman, who taught us some hard truths about life. We found the best food in Colombia and had a fun time watching the city light up during the ongoing *Copamerica* games. We also learned about the city's violent past as the former murder capital of the world from a tour guide by day who doubled as a labor organizer by night.

5. **Manizales, Neira, and "the Kingdom"** [June 21 – June 29]

We met Guillermo through WWOOF International, a site that lets travelers trade labor for food and rent on locally-owned organic farms across the world. Guillermo met us in Manizales, a small but unremarkable college town, and then took us to his family's ranch in the mountains. The virgin Andean jungle we explored to reach the ranch was awash with life beyond our comprehension and, once on horseback, we journeyed over hills and valleys to reach heaven on earth. At the ranch, we spent the days planting trees, chasing down cattle, harvesting food, painting the houses of the poor, and drinking milk that the Greek gods referred to as "ambrosia." During the nights, the community gathered around the fire and shared libations about war and revolution and love. We stayed longer than expected and cried when we left.

6. **Cali** [June 29 – July 3]

After the most uncomfortable bus ride of my life, Cali starkly contrasted with the raw nature of the ranch and was disappointing. The salsa was everywhere but so was the pollution, the crime, and the uncolored slums of concrete, reinforced projects. Technical difficulties struck again and our cards were declined so we spent a day trying to figure out how to be penniless in a foreign country where we couldn't speak the language well. We were fine, but wired. Later, we spent a night in Ipiales on our way out of Colombia. You have no reason to go to Ipiales.

7. **Quito and Guayaquil** [July 3 – July 6]

Nestled in the shadow of a volcano and a statue of the Virgin Mary stepping on Satan, Quito sprawled endlessly and the fissures of past earthquakes created rocky cliffs throughout the city. Our AirBnB was an artist collective housed by eccentric but talented millennials and we made friends with a couple also dealing with a long-distance relationship. The city took dollars, which was awesome, but the history of brutal American-backed political repression for oil profits wasn't as cool. We also toured Oswaldo Guayasmin's old home, housing a massive collection of the politically-conscious artist's work, and the Temple to Man, an underground vault of his largest work that left me pondering my place in the universe.

8. **Mancora** [July 6 – July 9]

Our introduction to Peru, Mancora is a two-road beach town with the weather and vibe of Long Beach. We spent the days finding the next bar and interviewing other travelers about their time in and out of Peru. Our AirBnB was a whole house overlooking the ocean, which felt weird given the desolate poverty we were witnessing. I cannot tell you how much fun we had in Mancora, though, and it was a needed buttress against the gray tragedy of our future Peruvian stops.

9. **Lima** [July 9 – July 15]

Lima was freezing (we had just come from a beach town and I'm from Florida, so cut me some slack) and we were sick for the vast majority of our stay. Our AirBnB hosts were two good ole' boys from South Carolina, and we had some incredible nights on their balcony talking about the country and the city, but every single piece of history we learned about

Lima and Peru was just rough. We made a point to see the major governmental buildings and taste world-renown Peruvian food, but as we hobbled closer to our last day in the city, we were very glad to leave.

10. **Cusco and Machu Picchu** [July 15 – July 21]

Travelling from Lima to Cusco is akin to descending a level of hell. Whatever former glamour the city had as the capitol of the Incan Empire was beaten in to submission by the thriving tourism industry. We tried guinea pig (*cuy*) and just generally avoided being mugged, as five of the six other hostel dwellers we stayed with had been that week. We made our way to Aguas Calientes, the small town that doubled as a de facto prison for the workers living there and sits like a gate to Machu Picchu. The site itself was glorious but sardonically fallen from its former glory as the fortress of a dying empire, trampled upon by so many wanderlust-moved feet in the past hundred years that the place will soon be closed to visitors. Reading about the history of Spanish empire in Peru while visiting Machu Picchu was probably not the smartest idea.

11. **Puno and Lake Titicaca** [July 21 – July 24]

Descending to the final rung of hell, our time in Puno marked the low point of the trip. We were very, very sick, but the town reflected our feeling in its poverty and grime. Situated on the bank of Lake Titicaca, it exists solely to elevate local Peruvians from their lives as sustenance farmers to clerks in the American-owned tourism industry focusing on the world's highest lake. We spent two nights on a large island in the lake and traded coca leaves with the local Quechua-speaking inhabitants as we hiked up their mountains and

witnessed more stars at night than imaginable. Afterwards, we returned to Puno and decided to salvage this trip from the sadness of the past two weeks.

12. **Arequipa** [July 24 – August 1]

Our fortunes turned with Arequipa. The gorgeous Spanish architecture of the city was proudly preserved, just like the city's history of independence and rebellion against the seat of the empire in Lima. We ate Incan cuisine at the only restaurant in the world that serves it and had the kind of *ceviche* that scares the faint of heart. We also toured an old, perfectly preserved monastery and weaved through the bright blue alleys of the fortified small town. Afterwards, we snuck on to the rooftops surrounding the main square of the town and watched festivities, fireworks, and protests over wine and *pisco*, the country's national grape-derived liquor. We may or may not have also gotten tattoos from two people that we could barely speak to. Worth it.

13. **Huacachina** [August 1 – August 6]

We had originally booked our last nights in Lima (we were flying out from their airport) but changed our minds last minute to spend a week in a desert oasis town. We made the right decision; the entire village rung crystal clear water occupied by ducks and reeds which itself was secluded in between thousands of mountain-sized sand dunes. We rode wake boards down the sides of the dunes head first and gave up trying to count the stars at night. Our hostel's bar was the hot spot in town and I had no less than four unforgettable conversations with complete strangers. When it was time to leave, we sighed and made our way back to Lima to speed through empty streets at four in the morning and taste the sweet air of the United States once more.

These summaries in no way represent an exhaustive description of our time in South America this past summer. I encourage anyone interested in a comprehensive description of the experiences and insights we found to turn to Appendix A and read the journal entries I published on gatomaldito.wordpress.com this past summer in all of their gloriously error-ridden beauty. You can also continue on to Section II if it suits you.

# II. Making Sense of it All: Organizing Political Paradigms

This section is broken up in to two sub-sections. The first is the literature review, which contains a summary of the texts that influenced my conceptual organization of political paradigms before travelling to South America and upon my return to the States. The second section, "Paradigms of Liberty," contains essays that categorize the different political systems in which liberty is understood.

## Literature Review

This literature review shall consist of chapters which I used to frame my journal writings, construct my political paradigms, and critique my organizational method. The writings present a holistic, multi-partisan display of how various authors perceive of the idea of liberty. They are organized alphabetically and their order does not signify a preferential or chronological ordering. Shorter sources, such as independent academic articles and news articles, will not be included in the following section but will be cited in Appendix B – Bibliography.

## Isaiah Berlin's "The Decline of Utopian Ideals in the West" from *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*

The late Isaiah Berlin was a profound historian, author, and academic; having lived through the Russian Revolution before his emigration to England, Berlin became renowned as a scholar on Enlightenment history. He was educated at Oxford University and went on to author almost three dozen books on the nature of liberty and as well as over a hundred essays on that topic, among others. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Berlin) chronicles the historical debate for and against idealism and utopianism, and his essay "The Decline of Utopian Ideals in the West" (Berlin, 20) neatly encapsulates his major points while laying the foundation for further discourse on the nature of romanticism.

Berlin begins by defining utopianism in Western thought. A utopia is a static, never-changing state of existence characterized by a general peace, equality (of some definition), and an inability to continue to improve. Utopianism was first truly posited by the ancient Greeks, including Zeno, Aristophanes, and Euhemerus, who all commented on early signs of decay in the Greek city-state system by turning towards utopian futurism. Criticism of the worldly life are always coded in to descriptions of the utopia; Euhemerus wrote of an island in the Arabian Sea, where inhabitants "live in a state of unceasing bliss on islands divided by the sea from the wicked, chaotic mainland in which men are foolish, unjust and miserable." (p. 22).

Another crucial quality of utopianism is primitivism, or the idea that at one point human kind organized itself in a more desirable fashion than we currently do in contemporary society. Since the end of the primitive utopia, all of Western society (Christian and pagan) has attempted to piece the world back together to that point of perfection. Berlin feels so strongly about the

impact of primitivistic utopianism that he claims, “In this sense utopianism – the notion of the broken unity and its restoration – is a central strand in the whole of western thought.” (Berlin, 24). Berlin establishes three assumptions that utopian arguments make:

1. “To all genuine questions there can only be one correct answer, all the other answers being incorrect.” This principle is a rehashed version of Aristotle’s Law of Non-Contradiction, which states that “A cannot be both A and not A.”
2. “The second assumption is that a method exists for the discovery of these answers.”
3. “The third assumption… is that all correct answers must, at the very least, be compatible with each other.” Berlin elaborates on this idea, stating that all truths must at least not contradict any other truth, lest one of the two truths not be perfect.

Berlin constructs a final thought that sharply characterizes his concept of utopianism by claiming, “It is asserted that unless we can conceive of something perfect, we cannot understand what is meant by imperfection,” (p. 26). Reaction to this last point, bolstered by centuries of academic criticism of the three assumptions laid previously, formed in Berlin’s mind the intellectual spine of the Enlightenment-era revolutions and the severance of Catholic ideological dominance in 16$^{th}$-century Europe. Coupled with a radically expanding ability to measure and organize the natural world *vis a vis* the works of minds like Galileo and Newton, Enlightenment thinkers like Montaigne and Montesquieu challenged the dominance of primitivistic utopianism by refuting the insular worldview of the established powers of their time.

With the acceptance of the idea that individuals could discover their own truth about the natural world, utopianism took a serious blow in the West. The strive to achieve utopia did not disappear – how could it, being a defining cultural trend on the continent for over two thousand

years – but the tools to define that yearning were undercut and no longer usable. With the Protestant reformation, newly-formed nation-states all defined their individual ideas of "the perfect society" and descended into war and political chaos with the same fervency that Catholic powers asserted their divinely-related truths about the perfect life.

The combined forces of empirical scientific discovery, nationalism, and the Protestant reformation delivered a death knell to utopianism. "The notion that there exists a celestial, crystalline sphere, unaffected by the world of change and appearance, in which mathematical truths and moral or aesthetic values form a perfect harmony, guaranteed by indestructible logical links, is now abandoned, or at best ignored," (p. 43). Berlin summarizes the paradoxical situation of the utopian ideals in the last page of his chapter as such, citing Immanuel Kant:

> "Immanuel Kant, a man very remote from irrationalism, once observed that 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.' And for that reason no perfect solution is, not merely in practice, but in principle, possible in human affairs, and any determined attempt to produce it is likely to lead to suffering, disillusionment, and failure." (p.48)

Isaiah Berlin's thorough analysis of the decline of utopian ideals is relevant to the concept of liberty because with the decline of traditional value systems created a demand for a new system of thought by which established principles could be defined. Without the goal of a perfect world, western thinkers found themselves with an opportunity: to posit what values are best to organize a society. Without utopia, the pleasures of the earth became opened to the industrialized, focused efforts of civilization – all that was needed was a justification for their capture.

## John Dewey's "Creative Philosophy: The Task Before Us"

John Dewey was a well-published philosopher and scholar of American political thought in the 20th century. He studied at the University of Vermont and then at Johns Hopkins University, before beginning a long educational career at the University of Michigan, the University of Chicago, and Columbia University, among others. "Creative Philosophy: The Task Before Us" (Dewey) was originally published in a series of essays titled *The Philosopher of the Common Man* (Nagel) in 1940 to commemorate the late scholar's eightieth birthday. This essay came to me in the compendium entitled *Communism, Fascism and Democracy*. (Cohen) "Creative Philosophy" was written to posit core principles of democracy as the ideology struggled against both communism and fascism on the eve of the Second World War to maintain legitimacy.

Dewey begins by recalling the significant impact that the "frontier mentality" has had on American political thought, but he immediately laments the end of a physical frontier and instead redefines it to mean the "waste of grown men and women who are without the chance to work, and in the young men and young women who find doors closed where there was once opportunity," (p. 684). This "moral" frontier, new in the American mental ethos, requires statesmen and philosophers alike to "re-create by deliberate and determined endeavor the kind of democracy which in its origins one hundred and fifty years ago was largely the product of a fortunate combination of men and circumstances," (p. 684). His writings on this endeavor have helped define American neo-liberalism ever since.

The author then explains that the task of recreating American democracy came about due to two competing factors. The first is the faith that democratic ideals will continuously

perpetuate themselves, providing institutions and a civic society which would always support the ideology that birthed them. The second is the opportunistic abuse of leaders in positions of power, who broke an otherwise successful cycle of perpetuation and re-justification by using vast accumulations of wealth to deprive the American public of essential liberties while simultaneously redefining vales such as "individualism" and "democracy" to suit their certifiably corporate and undemocratic ends. These two factors compete constantly: as the will of the public becomes louder, those with power spend resources to redefine, reflect, and resist that will, which in turns raises the volume.

To the end of rectifying their abuses, Dewey endorses the idea that democracy is and must continue to be "a way of life," entailing traditionally civic and political rights and responsibilities as well as newly defined moral, social, and ethical factors. Democracy must be more than voting once a year; it is a moral inclination to rest faith in the "possibilities of human nature" (p. 686) that includes every human being "irrespective of race, color, sex, birth, and family, of material and cultural wealth." (p. 686) In the sphere of the individual, Dewey states, "[Democratic belief] is belief in the capacity of every person to lead his own life free from coercion and imposition by others provided right conditions are supplied." (p.686)

Moving from the abstract to the physical, Dewey proceeds to describe the activities a "democratic" people should engage in: "[the] free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another," (p. 687). Furthermore, democratic resolution to dispute takes as a given that the forceful and suppressive application of violence, even if considered just, cannot produce a solution as desirable as the peaceful debate of disagreements.

Overall, Dewey's goal is to "get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life" (p. 688) in order to "realize that democracy is a moral ideal and so far as it becomes a fact a moral fact," (p. 688). Dewey concludes his essay with a straight-forward definition of democracy – "[the] belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness," (p. 688) – and then includes a defense against criticisms of utopianism, by stating that his faith in democracy as a moral ideal stems from his interactions with his fellow man for almost eighty years.

Liberty is that which exists in a state of democracy. It is the paint to democracy's canvas. By defining the prerequisites of a noble democracy, Dewey establishes goals for his adherents – what would later be labeled adherents of Neoliberalism – to set their sights on. In his uniquely optimistic and passionate articulation, Dewey lays an ideological foundation for the state of American democracy for the remainder of the 20th century.

## "Positive and Negative Freedom" from Thomas Hill Green's *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*

Thomas Hill Green was a 19th-century English social liberal philosopher, and was both educated and taught at Balliol College in Oxford, England. Throughout his life he championed to increase enfranchisement for non-propertied men, an incredibly radical position during the Victorian era of England. Many of his students went on to become reformist parliamentarians, and his thoughts and teachings are frequently cited in the British Parliament to this day. In his book *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*, Green published his most poignant thoughts

on liberty, and an untitled parcel labeled "[Positive and Negative Freedom]" was included in *Communism, Fascism and Democracy* as a seminal example of socialist, progressive thought.

In his writing, Green begins by defining what he means by "freedom" – "we mean a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, something that we do or enjoy to do in common with others. We mean by it a power which each man exercises the help or security given him by his fellow-men, and which he in turn helps to secure for them," (p. 584-585). Green proceeds to delineate the common understanding of freedom as worthless; merely removing a compulsory function of a state is not enabling or promoting freedom, arguing instead "Yet we do not count [the savage] really free, because the freedom of savagery is not strength, but weakness… he is not a slave of man, but a slave of nature," (p. 585). The language that Green uses to describe this "freedom of savagery" implies that such freedom is infinitely less desirable than even the most despotic state.

Green then admonished his contemporary England for not rising to the same level of freedom as the ancient Greek city-states, in part because of its reliance on "the apparent elevation of the few (at the cost of) the degradation of the many," (p. 586). Slavery is the most abhorrent example of such a relationship – and it strikes at the core about notions of property rights, which Green states are established and protected solely on the grounds of common interest. By not establishing and protecting the right to own something, we make collective progress much slower. But this logic stops with slavery, as the harsh deprivation of a human being's freedom cannot be justified by a "collective good." Green raises this example to question what other contracts can be nullified for the same reason.

Labor falls within Green's scope. Regulations on the number of hours women and children could work in a given week increased the cost of employment for the capitalist but increased the health and life expectancy of workers, which in turn increases the overall health of the community. By removing those regulations, capitalists would be able to degrade the overall health of a community for their own benefit. But in order to establish an economic reality where families can afford to have women, children and eventually men working less than 15 hours a day in a coal mine, wages must be raised and public goods must be provided at the expense of the capitalists, who in Green's view have stolen from the overall public well-being by depriving communities of health and wealth. Included in this diagnosis are health and education regulations, regulations on living conditions, and regulations that allow members of unlanded classes to participate in political society. Overall, the battlefield of labor rights represents a fraught conflict between those who work with little control over political action that could benefit their humanity and those who own the means of work and, through that ownership, control over the functions of a political state.

Green finally turns to the prominent criticism that contemporary capitalists levied against proponents of franchising unlanded classes: over-legislation, or the idea that the state latches on to politically popular, bipartisan issues which it then "focuses in on" through vastly overcomplicated legislative agendas, and which is mockingly labeled as "grandmotherly government" by Green's opposition. Here, Green grants the idea that government does and can exceed a popular mandate, but that this argument "is often raised by men whose real objection is not to state interference but to centralization." (p. 588). Unlike over-legislation, which is by definition beyond the mandate of the state and thus politically reprehensible, centralization is but one of many different solutions to the problems that England was encountering and should be

used in conjunction with any other compatible option available. That capitalists decry the increased power of the central state but do not question the authority of local governments is evidence that the real capitalist critique is against a body of government which is not as easily corruptible as a local body.

Green summarizes his argument by stating, "Now, we shall probably all agree that a society in which the public health was duly protected, and necessary education duly provided for, by the spontaneous action of individuals, was in a higher condition than one in which the compulsion of law was needed to secure those ends. But we must take men as we find them," (p. 588-589). Green ends his argument by calling on a public repudiation of the propaganda spouted by the capitalists in his society, and for a common understanding that "a degraded population perpetuates and increases itself," (p. 589). If England has the ability to correct for the invisible hand which leaves so many with so little, it has a moral obligation to do so – human nature notwithstanding. As an argument focusing on the material incentives for competing groups as they seek to claim a stake in the political decision making process, Green's diagnosis of power in English democracy places his beliefs squarely outside the liberal and neoliberal traditions.

## "The Disharmonic Polity" from Samuel P. Huntington's *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*

Samuel Huntington was a uniquely American phenomenon – a political theorist not shy from the public spotlight, a professor with a penchant for action, and a public servant capable of serving bipartisan agendas with furious ideologically-driven pursuits. As the White House Coordinator for Security Planning for the National Security Council under President Carter and the Director of Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, Huntington can be viewed

as a reliable litmus test of American political evolution in both theory and practice (Fukuyama). His seminal intellectual product, the "clash of civilizations" theory, is both viewed as tacitly racialist yet representative of post-Cold War political thought (Fukuyama). Long before such sensationalist pieces, however, Huntington made a career out of articulating with meticulous detail the dimensions of political rhetoric of what he believed to be "the greatest country in human history." His work serves as an example of pro-American, pro-capitalist, and pro-liberty in a sense that could be squarely defined as neoliberal.

*American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (1981) appropriately situates his impact on policy formation in the midst of President Reagan's first term. The work serves to elaborate on what Huntington calls the "great gap" between theory and practice in the American system. In the first chapter of his book, "The Disharmonic Polity," Huntington explains that "an ever-present gap exists between American political ideals and American political institutions and practice," (p. 4) resulting from the scope, substance, and intensity of popular conceptions of American values.

Huntington conceives of this gap from a uniformly consensus-based framework, one of three paradigms with which he categorizes historical discourse on politics. The consensus paradigm assumes that the "overwhelming predominance of the middle class" (p. 5) signifies that historical strife in Europe (namely, feudalism and socialism) has led to a similarly broad acceptance of the basic values of liberty and equality. The progressive paradigm assumes that American history can be viewed through a predominately class-based lens, within which historical events can be understood by examining material motivations of the rich elite and the poor working class. Finally, the pluralist paradigm sees American history as the free market-

sprawl of interest groups advocating their aims through fervent coalition-building and pragmatic alliances.

After explicating the implications, historical support, and possible ramifications of each lens, Huntington firmly categorizes his position as consensus-based. He views these existing lenses as similarly diagnosing the structure of political discourse without legitimately taking in to account the substance of that discourse. In his own words,

> "The key elements of the Progressive approach, as with that of the Federalists, were, first, a stress on the significance of economic interests, as distinguished from idealistic purposes, as the motive moving men in history, and, second, an emphasis on the extent to which American history (and, for the Federalists, history generally) could be interpreted in terms of the clash between two contenders for wealth and power: the popular party and the elite party." (p.6)

In categorizing the progressive paradigm as such, Huntington validates this theory by proceeding to dignify the "substance" of discourse rather than the structure of it – in doing so, lending support to the progressive idea that "each [theory] is essentially static in its approach" (p. 9). Huntington takes issue with this static quality by stating that the primary motivating factors of politics is ideological rather than material, which is exactly how the progressive-theory adherents conceive the mindset of the rich elite to be: materially fluid (and thus rationally unaccountable for the actions taken on behalf of the caste) but ideologically still, paradoxically supporting the caste's claim to dominance.

Despite his partisan bend, "The Disharmonic Polity" neatly summarizes three competing conceptual frameworks by which to appreciate American political history. He proceeds to lay

out what he claims to be the guiding motive of American progress: "…the concept of American history as a gradual but steady unfolding and realization of the ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy" (p. 11) constantly in opposition with "…the extent to which the failure to realize those ideals [occurred and still occurs]." (p. 11). Huntington collapses all three paradigms into a distinctly liberal meta-paradigm, from which the rest of his work is born. The central "problem" in American politics is thus:

> "[T]he commitment to equality and liberty and the opposition to hierarchy and authority are so widespread and deep that the incongruity between the normative and the existential orders is far greater in the United States than elsewhere." (p.12)

Building off this thesis, Huntington continues the rest of the chapter flushing out the similarities of this "general American creed" with communism, religion, and fascism. He identifies "Americanism" as an ideal and a choice as opposed to a reality and a fact – all of us Americans *are* simultaneously nationally American yet striving *to be* American, which stands in sharp juxtaposition with Carl Friedrich, whom Huntington quotes as saying "To be an American is an ideal; while to be a Frenchman is a fact," (Huntington, 6).

To summarize, "The Disharmonic Polity" offers a case study in contemporary American conceptions of liberty. The nature of liberty is not explained or even applied materially in his analysis of American political discourse. He defines three understandings of politics which will factor in to any categorization of liberty as it is understood today:

1. The Consensus Paradigm: the idea that American politics are defined by a popularly-shared definition of values that have served as a source of conflict only in their material application. Political conflict is thus a result of a difference in means rather

than a difference in ends, as every American essentially seeks both "liberty" and "equality" in her experience with American institutions and social structures.

2. The Progressive Paradigm: the idea that American politics are defined by historical material interests, which differ between the majority of Americans (who are poor) and an elite caste of Americans (who are not). Political conflict is thus a result of opportunities taken by either class to actualize their conceptions of "liberty" and "equality" in America.
3. The Pluralist Paradigm: the idea that American politics are defined by interest groups, whose membership and relationship to other interest groups are always in flux depending on the circumstances of any given era. Political conflict is thus a series of coalitions and alliance-failures, which are handled pragmatically by various groups as they seek to assert their ideas about "liberty" and "equality" in America.

The absoluteness with which Huntington asserts this contradiction is why his writing is so essential to this thesis – he explicitly offers a typecast Liberal understanding of "freedom" while using the exact criticizable qualities of Liberalism throughout his writing. It is not free of contradiction; rather, contradiction is used as assertion of fact.

## "The Seeds of Dysfunction" from Thomas Mann & Norman Ornstein's *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the Politics of Extremism*

Thomas Mann is a member of the Brookings Institution and the former director of the American Political Science Association. Norman Ornstein is a member of the American Enterprise Institute and a frequent contributor to publications such as *The Atlantic and Foreign Affairs*. The two scholars have spent decades as the leaders of the Congress Project, which seeks

to analyze and prescribe non-partisan structural remedies to our current legislative system, and jointly authored *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (Mann & Ornstein), a staple in undergraduate political science classes everywhere (Lebette).

Chapter Two of *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, titled "The Seeds of Dysfunction," analyzes the history leading up to the Congressional deadlock that began in 2010, and in doing so offers a compelling (albeit unintentional) commentary and criticism on the nature of American democracy and neoliberal political philosophy in general. The authors aptly summarize their chapter thusly:

> We constantly have to ask ourselves whether all of this is truly different from the past, or even different from what we remember through rosy gauze from previous decades. But our conclusion is firm: the combination of old trends, new technologies, new players, and a coarsened political culture has passed a critical point, leading to something far more troubling than we have ever seen, (p.80).

The conclusion of the authors is that modern Congressional deadlock is a new invention in American politics, that there are policy or judicial decisions that may remedy the current status quo, and that this dysfunction cannot be traced to sacrosanct structural flaws in our conception of political liberty. The authors follow the progression of radically deceptive and manipulative actors within the legislative branch beginning in 1978, and explicitly discuss several major developments that have occurred to bring us where we are today.

The first development, predating a conservative "hijacking" of the legislative branch, came in the 1960's. A symphony of structural changes including Barry Goldwater's victory in

five Southern states during the 1964 election and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 reoriented Democratic strategy, allowing the party to take advantage of anti-government sentiment during the Vietnam War in order to gain considerable electoral advantages throughout the 1970's. With the *Roe v. Wade* ruling of 1973 offering an ideological magnet for conservative voters to rally behind, the Republican Party similarly reoriented national strategy to appeal to rural, evangelical voters, picking up many voters who felt politically homeless following the Democrat's strengthened stance on social justice issues. The strategic realignment of both major parties allowed for opportunists to take advantage of a rapidly changing electoral landscape.

In the midst of this realignment, Congressman Newt Gingrich was elected to office. His practices came to dominate Republican procedures and define conservative dogma. Mann and Ornstein cite close to a dozen manipulative practices made popular by Gingrich and his cohorts, including demanding new Republican Congressmen to fly home for the weekends to portray a public disgust with Capitol Hill politics and booking evening slots in the chambers to have C-SPAN capture passionate speeches by conservative politicians delivered to an empty room, whose phantom audience was not captured by the cameras. The overall purpose of such practices is elucidated by an unnamed Republican committee staff director:

> Should Republicans succeed in obstructing the Senate from doing its job, it would further lower Congress' generic favorability rating among the American people. By sabotaging the reputation of an institution of government, the party that is programmatically against government would come out the relative winner, (p. 55).

The Republicans utilized this general strategy through the Reagan, Bush Sr., Clinton, and Bush administrations to great gain. Congressional Republicans elevated the poignancy of these

tactics with the birth of modern media culture; unverified but highly circulated email chains spread like wildfire throughout the early part of the 2000's and eventually became the subject of several academic studies to gauge partisan leanings. The authors cite the *Washington Post*'s Aul Farhi in his analysis of a collection of emails gathered by the popular fact-checking resource PolitiFact – "Of the 79 chain e-mails deemed false by PolitiFact since 2007, only four were aimed at Republicans. Almost all of the rest concern Obama or other Democrats," (p. 67).

The final factor considered by the authors in their assessment of contemporary legislative deadlock focuses on financial contributions to campaigns. "By the 1990s, parties found ways of raising so-called soft money – unlimited contributions from corporations, unions, and individuals ostensibly used for purposes other than influencing federal elections." (p. 70). The growing priority of elected representatives was to campaign for financial contributions from major donors and the responsibilities to constituencies, issues advocates, and the rule of law became secondary as a result. The McCain-Feingold Act of 2002 (which author Norman Ornstein helped craft) (Mann & Ornstein 54) , attempted to standardize funding practices to remove pressures on elected representatives and their newfound fiscal priorities, but the Supreme Court struck a major blow to campaign finance regulation with their 5-4 majority decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission.* The ruling, brought on a case originally challenging the legality of a Hillary Clinton "documentary" designed to ruin her presidential aspirations, extended beyond the question of candidacy-endorsing political action committee advertisements (restricted by the McCain-Feingold Act) and instead removed restrictions on fundraising and expenditure focus for political action committees. The effect of this ruling has been felt to this day:

> "Sure enough, in the wake of *Citizens United*, political operatives stepped in with creative ways to push the envelope and use huge sums of money both to influence

campaigns and to shape legislative outcomes, and to brazenly evade the disclosure requirements for donors that were upheld by the Supreme Court." (p. 74)

The synthesis of party realignment, opportunistic elected representatives, a changing media-technological landscape, and the vapid pursuance of campaign financial support through opaque means has led us to where we are today. Mann and Ornstein continue their seminal work by evaluating the influence that each of these factors have on our current system and prescribing limited solutions to each, solutions which have next to no chance of becoming canon in the next few years. *It's Even Worse Than It Looks* is a cynical but honest reflection on our modern dilemma, stocked full of useful data but lacking an effective remedy or, ultimately, a philosophical basis of dissent. Regardless, Mann and Ornstein's analysis has wide adherence at the collegiate level and aptly offers a different understanding of American liberty and its intersection with the dramatic, Machiavellian games that dominate our news cycles beyond a traditional neoliberal understanding.

## Michael J. Sandel's "The Public Philosophy of Contemporary Liberalism" from *Democracy's Discontent*

Michael Sandel is known amongst many students of political science as the bright mind behind the "Justice" lecture series, a free-to-the-public course Sandel has taught at Harvard University for over two decades and which was recorded in 2005 to the pleasure of millions of viewers worldwide. His work spans many subjects but broadly focuses on 20th-century American political philosophy, including a critique of John Rawls' "veil of ignorance" concept earning him international attention from bodies such as *Foreign Affairs*, the Chinese government,

and Utrecht University. His "Justice" video series was made in to a four-part BBC documentary and is still showed irregularly on the BBC and American PBS stations (Sandel).

The first chapter of *Democracy's Discontent* defines the borders of contemporary American political philosophy falling squarely within the "classically liberal" tradition. Sandel uses this first chapter, which serves as a rule book for the complex and opaque course which he attempts to expound upon throughout the rest of his publication, as a starting point by which the interested reader can familiarize herself with the powerful forces demarcating our political conversation. Sandel begins this explication with definitions of liberal and republican political theories; liberal political theory states that "Although [Democrats and Republicans] disagree about how government should act to respect individual choice, both assume that freedom consists in a capacity of persons to choose their values and ends," (p. 4). While not antithetical to liberal political theory, republican political theory posits that "[individuals have] a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake," (p. 5). While not oppositional, the liberal mentality has come to dominate American political discourse while crowding out arguments with a republican basis, which in Sandel's view "sheds light on our present political predicament." (p. 6)

This predicament can be summarized thusly: liberal political theory is fundamentally rooted in a deference in individual decision making with limited interference from a neutral state to facilitate those ends that do not impede upon the existence of other individuals. But as liberal theory has come to dominate public discourse, arguments about normatively just or desirable ends becomes impossible, as the political mechanisms by which the state could protect those ends lose legitimacy among a populace who are promised exclusive rights and who elect representatives that act for those constituencies without regard to the greater environment that

these decisions are being made in. In short, liberal theory offers a secular "blank check" on all decisions made by a populace and in doing so loses any ability to criticize actions which may fray the foundations of a state. Republicanism, by contrast, depends upon a collective ideal for the future circumstances of a state's existence by which supporters can be rallied behind, but with greater diversification among the political electorate and a lessened ability by the populace to engage in state-making politics due to economic and political inequality, it has become nearly impossible for republican-seeded arguments to gain hold.

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to defining and criticizing the evolution of liberal political theory. Sandel identifies two primary strains of liberal theory. The first (and infinitely more recognizable to American readers) lineage hails from John Stuart Mill, labeled by Sandel as "libertarian liberalism." As defined by Sandel:

> The state should not impose on its citizens a preferred way of life, even for their own good, because doing so will reduce the sum of human happiness, at least in the long run. It is better that people choose for themselves, even if, on occasion, they get it wrong," (p. 8).

Libertarian or utilitarian liberal theory loses ground when an attempt is made to apply the theory to the functioning of an actual state. To contrast, Sandel turns to Immanuel Kant's egalitarian conception of liberal theory, which attempts to find the balance between a concern for theoretical political rights and a pragmatic affirmation of a normatively good state. Sandel explains this dilemma and its philosophical conclusion as such:

> The solution proposed by Kantian liberals is to draw a distinction between the "right" and the "good" = between a framework of basic rights and liberties, and the conceptions of

> the good that people may choose to pursue within that framework. It is one thing for the state to support a fair framework, they argue, something else to affirm some particular ends, (p. 10).

Without a common understanding of the forces that constrain an individual's ability to act freely – such as hunger, lackluster representation, and security – then the decisions made by a society collectively cannot be said to take in to account the free will of all participating. Given several premises that will be critiqued at a later point, Sandel establishes that both the libertarian and egalitarian conceptions of liberal theory posit a state which is ultimately neutral to matters of individual morality and economic or material forces and instead acts as a "procedural republic" by which the state facilitates as much individual freedom as possible while cautiously and rarely engaging in actions that limit an individual's ability to seek the life she may choose.

Ultimately, the matter which most concerns Sandel and acts as a standard by which these theoretical suppositions are posited is the topic of justice. Crucially, Sandel is trying to figure out what we mean when we say "the state is acting justly" or "this piece of legislation is unjust." To that end, he defines the output of the century-long debate between libertarian and egalitarian notions of liberal theory: the concept of a minimalist liberalism, which challenges the notion that individuals are truly unencumbered, civically-educated actors who do not seek any form of government coercion in their lives. Minimalist liberalism developed at critical moments of contemporary American political discourse, when neither the moral outcome posited by egalitarian liberals nor the fundamental rights promised by libertarian liberals could stand practical considerations. Sandel turns his attention to the abortion debate as an example of this event:

> Given the intense disagreement over the moral permissibility of abortion, the case for seeking a political solution that brackets the moral and religious issues – that is neutral with respect to them – would seem especially strong. But whether it is reasonable to bracket, for political purposes, the moral and religious doctrines at stake largely depends on which of those doctrines [libertarian or egalitarian liberal theory] are true, (p. 20).

The abortion debate can be viewed as a debate between these two competing definitions of liberal theory; between the libertarians, who view any government endorsement of abortion as the positing of a reality which an individual should ultimately have the deference to decide to inhabit, and the egalitarians, who view the promise of government-sanctioned abortions as necessary to the functioning of a free and just society. *Roe v. Wade* punted the football, so to speak, by permitting some abortions, banning other abortions, and allowing culturally and economically diverse sub-federal states to decide the remaining cases. This decision satisfied nobody – libertarians saw their over encroachment, and egalitarians saw a denial of fundamental equality. The state thusly showed its truly minimalist colors in refusing to offer a universal stance on the topic. The debate thusly continues, and for Sandel, it is a debate worth fleshing out, critiquing, understanding the boundaries of, and ultimately letting go of. The subject of that dialogue makes up the remainder of *Democracy's Discontent*.

While Sandel's analysis is somewhat comfortable among the paradigms established so far by Huntington and Dewey, his meta-analysis of the evolution of political debate is not typically articulated by liberal or neoliberal thinkers. His contribution to the idea of liberty is to mark off the stage within which a debate on liberty is typically had in our political system. For this purpose, Sandel's contribution is invaluable.

## "The Market and the Polis" from Deborah Stone's *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*

Deborah Stone is a professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has taught at Duke, Tulane, and Brandeis College during the tenure of her career. Her name rose to prominence after the publication of *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making* (Stone), an internationally-renowned textbook on incentive-based political processes. The textbook presents a new paradigm by which readers are able to understand political organization, and is separated in to three chief components: the goals of a political community (the "polis," in Stone's words), the problems any polis will encounter when navigating their goals, and the solutions that these political entities implement to overcome their goals.

The first chapter of *Policy Paradox* frames the following acts by defining the "polis," which is done primarily though contrasts with the market model. Stone makes the case that all theories of politics must start with a model of agreed-upon premises from which inductions may be drawn. The United States is very conscious of a "market model" with agreed upon rules, rules which many economists and statesmen have spent many hours defining and debating. These rules include the primacy of self-interest above collective interest, the status of the individual as the chief actor or building block in the market, the significance of material exchange as the mode of collective change, and the concept of competition as the basic form of interaction between actors operating within the model.

The market model is not wrong, Stone states, but it is not a complete understanding of how decisions are made in the political sphere. That environment plays by a completely

different set of rules which includes the rules of the market and yet also takes in to consideration the rules of the community, the family, the "other" (as in other political entities and their rules), and the rules of nature. Consequently, Stone explicates the rules of the market as a standard by which the rules of the encompassing polis (within which the market exists – as all markets exist within social structures which seek to accomplish ends outside of or despite the existence of a market) may be drawn out and defined. Once defined, the polis serves as the model by which Stone is able to define goals, problems, and solutions in a manner which make as much intuitive sense as any economics professor defining the laws of exchange.

To begin this project of contrasts, Stone draws a sharp divide between the market model's granted primacy of the individual as chief actor and the real world's primacy of the community. "Because politics and policy can happen only in communities, community must be the starting point of our polis," (p. 18). To the degree that an actor of any size is significant in a decision making process, Stone seeks to define "collective interest" as the moving force behind community action in the same style that a market model-adherent would define "self-interest" to understand the economic forces at work in a market. Very deliberately, however, Stone states that collective interest is not a scientific or readily bracketed concept – the following excerpt aptly defines Stone's strong argument for the existence of collective will:

> Untold volumes of political philosophy have tried to define and explain the phenomenon of collective intention. But even without being able to define it, we know intuitively that societies behave as if they had one. We can scarcely speak of societies without using the language of collective will. We can argue about whether consensus implies unanimity or only majority, or whether apparent consensus masks suppressed dissension. But we know that consensus is a feeling of collective will, and we know when it exists and when

it does not, just as surely (and sometimes mistakenly) as we know when we are hungry and when we are not, (p. 18).

Given the premise that collective intention is the expression of a group, and that this interest can be studied and operated on similarly to the idea of self-interest in a market model, Stone frames the remainder of her introductory chapter on these premises. Unlike a market, which attempts to mitigate common problems (problems affecting members of the market and members outside the market which individuals have no incentive nor resources to diffuse), the polis operates almost exclusively with common problems. A polis must understand which communities under its purview are susceptible to certain problems, how resources and motivation can be mustered to address these problems, and crucially, how individual interest can be subsumed for collective interest. And unlike the market, the ebb and flow of various group interests in the polis require much different understandings of forces and group dynamics than a market model presupposes if a political actor is going to navigate her environment handily.

For example, a market model's premise of self-interest logically means that a "buyer" or "seller" will change allegiances if a resources can be acquired in a more economically efficient manner. But in the polis, loyalty is both a resource that gains value as it accumulates (in contrast to the finite nature of material exchange) as well as incentivizes actors to behave against their immediate self-interest, and yet loyalty is one of the chief resources of any political environment. "The idea of a 'pure' commercial relationship," Stone writes, "is precisely one not tainted by loyalty or sentiment. In the polis, history counts for a lot; in the market, it counts for nothing." (p. 26). Appreciating the significance of influence, cooperation, and loyalty are nigh requirements for appreciating the polis and the forces at work within it. Due to the complex nature of these forces, Stone arrives at the conclusion that groups, not individuals, are the

primary mode of actor-organization in the polis; groups allow individual interests to be understood efficiently, they act as intercessors for both information distribution and resource management, and they form the building block of collective, consensus-driven decision making.

Thus far, Stone has contrasted the market and the polis by examining their organizational preferences, their means of executing will and sustaining legitimacy, and the primary forces of motivation amongst both. She reserves her final thought in this introductory chapter for the idea of power. For her purposes, Stone defines power as the "source of energy" that motivates actors. Her contrasting of the relationship of the market and polis regarding power is crucial; "In the market model, change is driven by exchange, which is in turn motivated by the individual quest to improve one's own welfare," (p. 33). Later, "In the polis, change occurs through the interaction of mutually defining ideas and alliances. Ideas about politics shape political alliances, and strategic considerations of building and maintaining alliances in turn shape the ideas people espouse and seek to implement." (p. 34)

By approaching the discussion on political paradigms by explicitly acknowledging the complexity of paradigms existing today, this chapter is an important contribution because it starts the discussion from a completely different perspective than the previous authors. A later chapter of hers, "Liberty," is a fundamental source of inspiration for this thesis. It cannot be understood without first examining the rules that Stone plays by.

## "Liberty" from Deborah Stone's *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*

The fifth chapter of *Policy Paradox* is entitled "Liberty" and is situated as the last chapter in Stone's first section, concerning the various goals that political communities might seek to

establish. Stone saves her analysis of liberty within the polis as a conclusory thought because of the significance of the concept in American discourse. She begins her analysis with a discussion on John Stuart Mill and his concept of harm – although she raises challenges to Mill's assumptions about the nature of behavior, the idea that liberty is an individual attribute and not something experienced by groups, and the negative paradigm of liberty that Mill helped to establish generally. For the purpose of her chapter, however, she focuses on the concept of harm and how it is defined, who defines it, and by what purpose the definition is constructed. Harm is not an easy concept to parse through, however. Stone writes,

> Policy issues are then cast as a choice between protecting the liberty of individuals and preventing harms to others. To ask in this framework when government should interfere with individual liberty is to ask what types of harms society should prevent. The question of liberty is then redefined as the nature of harms. As with [other goals of the polis], the intuitively appealing simple criterion is another battlefield upon which people fight for contradictory interpretations, (p. 110).

From this perspective, defining "liberty" in a society is essentially the struggle to decide what harm society will allow. In our polis model of politics, where groups serve as the primary organizing unit when making policy decisions, the debate over permitted harm becomes the debate over alienation, repression, and abuse of particular groups in order to uplift and privilege other groups. Stone hammers this point home by describing the various forms of harm – physical, emotional, psychological, social, economic, environmental, spiritual, and potential, to name a few – and challenges readers to use Mill's principle of harm reduction in situations where several forms of harm are in consideration. Stone uses the example of a factory producing chemicals that are known to harm fetuses. How should a policy maker apply Mill's harm

reduction principle in response? “Should the production and use teratogenic chemicals be banned entirely? Should manufacturers be required to make expensive modifications to [protect workers]? Should employers exclude fertile women of childbearing age [on the theory] that every potential fetus deserves protection from harm?” (p. 111).

Stone then moves from challenging Mill’s harm reduction principle to questioning its overall applicability in the polis. “Because the polis is a community with some collective vision of the public interest, the liberty of individuals is also limited by obligations to the community,” (p. 115). The polis does not exist simply to protect individuals from the harm of other individuals, and even if it did exist for that only purpose, a polis without some form of compulsory obligation to a collective interest would be unable to gather resources or build consensus on how to best respond to acts of harm. So in addition to critically analyzing the definition of harm that Mill proposes and then criticizing the role of harm prevention in any actual political society, Stone proceeds to define types of harm that both must be accounted for in a polis and that fall outside the purview of a market model-based paradigm of political community which lends primacy to the individual as the chief organizing block of politics.

Stone discusses three types of harm which meet these criteria:

1. Structural harm – harm that affects the ability of a community to function as a community. For example, “When private schools are allowed to compete with public (or to put it another way, when parents are given the liberty of sending their children to private schools), the ability of schools to integrate children of different social backgrounds suffer,” (p. 116). Focusing on individual harm alone allows an impotent polis or a malevolent power-holding state to degrade communal life.

2. Accumulative harm – harms that do not cause any significant harm to an individual but which over time degrade the entire community of individuals. Pollution in any form is an example of accumulative harm, and delineating individuals as the sole benefactor of state protection prevents repatriation for accumulative harms.
3. "Representative" [my words] harm – harm to a group resulting from harm to individuals. Essentially, the suffering of some individuals may harm a group or a community more than the suffering of other individuals, such as when a leader is assassinated or a matriarchal grandmother dies.

Beyond harms not defined by Mill's principle, the question of how a polis should respond to harms committed by groups or collections of groups arises. Harm committed by an individual upon another individual is recognizable enough, but what about harm committed by a government agency or a multinational corporation? What balance of liberty and protection could be struck based upon Mill's principles alone? "To see liberty as an attribute of individuals – even individuals in social roles – and to judge it only as applying to individual action is to miss the far more significant political question of the freedoms accorded to corporate actors," (p. 117-118). Continuing later, "Since individuals are affected, and restricted, as much by these types of actors as by other individuals, public policy must address conflicts between the liberties and interests of individuals and those of corporate actors," (p. 118).

Stone winds down her chapter by focusing on "trade-offs" that societies must address when claiming to focus on various goals; for example, in Chapter 3 of *Policy Paradox* (entitled "Efficiency"), Stone considers the trade-offs that arise between a polis' pursuit of the Efficiency goal and the Equality goal, which itself was the subject of Chapter 2. The first trade-off that Stone addresses is between Liberty and Security: "Can a society provide its members with both

liberty and security? Can it protect them from harm without restricting their freedom of action?" (p. 121).

Two considerations arise when trying to weave through the liberty-security trade-off. The first dilemma is that of dependence – as more security is provided for a citizenry, the citizenry become more dependent on the provider of security, which thusly deprives them of independence. Many conservative thinkers today argue that the ideal solution to this dilemma is to place all responsibility for security in the hands of individuals, it would produce self-sufficiency instead of supporting dependence on the provider of one's security. Stone counters this point by arguing, "In a society where liberty is deemed appropriate for all citizens, the solution of 'freedom for those who can provide for themselves' is not an acceptable answer." (p. 122). Practically, those who are unable to provide for themselves are typically the subjects of increased pressures on their individual liberty, such as welfare recipients who are drug tested before receiving their financial support.

The second dilemma of the liberty-security trade-off is that of paternalism. "When, if ever, should government prevent people from acting voluntarily in ways that harm themselves? Is it legitimate to coerce people to do something against their will in order to promote their own good?" (p. 123) Unlike the question of dependence, in which Stone makes very clear that questions of "dependence" and "autonomy" are incredibly politically-charged concepts that cannot be detached from partisan American politics, Stone is less decisive on the question of paternalism. In one aspect, the polis' investment in to a certain outcome that betters everyone necessitates the strong hand of the collective on individual failings. On the other, the body of that strong hand often wields her force pragmatically with brutality, and deference to a state's

inclination to "adjust" our moral behavior does not yield many positive examples in contemporary politics.

The other trade-off Stone focuses her attention on is the trade-off between Liberty and Equality. As Stone writes, "If liberty is understood as the ability to make choices about matters of serious concern, then inequalities of power, wealth, and knowledge also create inequalities of liberty," (p. 129). By extension, in the interest of "maximizing liberty" the polis has an obligation to promote an equal distribution of resources amongst the population, but in so doing can decrease the opportunity for individuals, which flagrantly defies the primacy of individuals as the main political unit in the market model and is still murky within Stone's polis model.

Stone boils down the concept of liberty to manageable and cleanly defined terms. Her polis model strongly bolsters a constructivist paradigm of liberty by dissecting the very real and present debates amongst power holders in political societies, showing how questions of liberty are fleshed out and parsed apart through practice and time.

## "Philosophy and the Political Problem of Human Rights," from Kwasi Wiredu's *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*

Kwasi Wiredu is a Ghanaian-born philosopher and academic whose writings have served as a national source of pride following Ghana's 1957 national liberation. Wiredu wrote most extensively on the subject of linguistics and semiotics but also covered topics including national liberation, colonialism, and tribal religion, earning his place among the pantheon of Pan-African authors serving as the intellectual bulwark of African revolutionary movements of the 1960's and 1970's. He was educated at Oxford College in England and taught at both the University of Ghana and at the University of South Florida until his passing.

In “Philosophy and the Political Problem of Human Rights,” Wiredu defines the concept of consensus and criticizes majoritarian democratic systems for their inability to capitalize on consensus. He begins his argument by describing the traditional Akan (Akan being the largest ethnic group in Ghana, to which Wiredu is a member) form of governance, which he reluctantly calls “chieftaincy”: the chief was given supreme authority religiously (acting as the intercessor between the living community and the deceased ancestors) and ceremonially (acting as a symbol of the unity of his domain), but in politics, the chief was held completely bound by the will of his constituents. Villages elected councils consisting of local family members, so that every family was represented, and each village elected a representative to sit on the chief’s policy-parsing high council. In order for the chief to make a decision, unanimous consensus was always required. How this practice of consensus-raising contrasts with Western winner-takes-all democratic majoritarianism could not be more severe.

In majoritarian systems, the “will of the minority is subordinated by the will of the majority” (p. 175). This process encourages members of a minority faction to obstruct the structure of their political process to suit their ends, which in turns incentivizes structural barriers to minority obstruction by members of the majority. The tit-for-tat, rule-breaking norm of majoritarian systems makes consensus more and more impossible. In the Akan system, deliberation would occur until “unanimity was reached,” (Wiredu, 175). Debate would not stop until every member of the chief’s council agreed on a course of action, and when time became a crucial factor in decision-making, the chief did not have a right to circumnavigate this system, forcing the group to focus on the collective goodwill of the people they represented as opposed to partisan or individual gain.

Wiredu aims this definition at majoritarian systems, which profess to support "human rights" and yet do not ensure the most basic form of political right: the right to be represented in the decision making process of a ruler. All humans have basic needs, such as security and sustenance, which majoritarian systems often overlook; by entrusting distant elected officials to make decisions beyond what is absolutely necessary, citizens of majoritarian democracies allow their representatives to use their human needs as bargaining chips to score political points against rivals. Needs are subsumed to fights over which party controls which part of government, and become perpetually overlooked as representatives seek to break or reinforce systemic rules of engagement to gain power for their faction. Given enough time, "representatives" in majoritarian systems will truly only represent their own faction, which has been so distanced from the needs of constituents that it can hardly be called "representative" at all.

Further complicating representation in a majoritarian system is the existence of human rights. If factions organize based upon ideological lines, then the definition of "human rights" will be defined through the lens of an ideology – who is considered human? What is considered a right? These questions have remarkably different answers depending on which theory one uses to answer them, and the ideological factionalism of majoritarian systems radicalizes adherents into dehumanizing the opposition and ultimately giving a just cause for the unceasing conflict that we call "gridlock." Representatives may end up representing genuine differences in universal outlook among the people they represent, but adherents to any political ideology all need to eat and sleep, and the conflict-prone representative system only serves to obfuscate that fact.

Wiredu proposes an alternative to majoritarian democracy: a "no-party system", akin to what political scientists label a technocracy. Wiredu describes this system as such:

> A non-party system is one in which parties are not the basis of power. People can form political associations to propagate their political ideas and help to elect representatives to parliament. But an association having the most members will not therefore be the governing group. Every representative will be *of* the government in his personal, rather than associative, capacity," (p. 179).

What Wiredu aims to accomplish by defining a novel political system is to critique existing examples. A non-party system would not establish constitutional incentives to factionalism, such as winner-take-all elections, and would decrease the size but increase the number of constituencies so that unanimous consent would be required to appoint a representative. A non-party system would remove the polarization and idealization of majoritarian systems by resting on this unanimous consent-based approach; if everyone making a decision must be in agreement on what to do, then it becomes politically disadvantageous to waste time and resources on striking up abstract distinctions. And in a non-party system, the government's role would be subordinated to the roles of the tribe, family, and individual; essentially, lower-level governments would have a much greater say over the vast majority of decisions that can impact individuals and their tribes (as in, local governments govern the local, the space where most of life takes place), and given that the mandate comes from a much smaller and more ideologically harmonious body, would govern with greater legitimacy than a distant body.

Relating this idea back to human rights, Wiredu writes: "[D]ecisional representation is a fundamental human right. But majoritarian democracy is incompatible with it because of its reliance on parties and its relatively exclusive empowerment of electorally victorious ones. Therefore, in the interests of the human right in question, some non-party system must be

devised." (P. 180-181). By using the language of human rights, a concept touted by Western majoritarian democracies and applied (unevenly) as standards of value across the world, Wiredu hopes to challenge both the idea that the Western political solution is not universalizable, and the idea that the reason for this failure to universalize stems from those who must just be ungrateful savages for not understanding the ideas impressed upon them by the West. Perhaps, Wiredu suggests, the problem stems from the originator of the idea, not the unwilling recipient.

# Paradigms of Liberty

The following essays encapsulate a definition of political paradigms and descriptions of the three different political paradigms by which I organized my understandings of liberty. While inspired and influenced by various academic sources and life experiences, the purpose of describing these paradigms is to relate to the reader the options a young traveler has when trying to make sense of the many examples of liberty (whether these examples promote or demean liberty) when travelling abroad and looking at home for a reference point.

## Introduction: What is a "Political Paradigm?"

To state it simply, a "political paradigm" is a relativistic, abstract, academic term with little to no relationship with anything observable or measurable in the real world. It is a symbol, a marker of sorts, used in academia to point to a concept without a particularly stable reference point. This does not detract from the significance of the concept of a political paradigm, render it useless in attempting to search for solutions in our daily social lives, nor detach it from volumes of writing and centuries of thought from which the idea originated; on the contrary, a

political paradigm can be made concrete and observable, in fact measurable, if only students of politics would take a step out of our offices and "safe spaces" and instead feel along the walls of the labyrinth that is real-world politics.

If politics is a sport, then a political paradigm is a rule book. The game of politics evolves with the players, fields, and audiences in attendance; the game is not a cemented experience, but grows in size and significance over time. At different points, the rule book is updated and amended to include a sort of jurisprudent debate over the sport: with each version of the rule book, new challenges are levied against old complaints, while rules that are considered to be unfair or outdated, or just plainly "against the nature of the game," are thrown out. With each new rule book, a new set of debates, with new aims and new arguments, takes shape. The sport changes with it, and in this never-ending cycle of amendment-reaction-amendment, the rule book and the sport evolve together over time.

Politics is not a time-constrained sport. Points are scored over centuries, sometimes millennia, of play. Crucial moments occur without an audience and losses can be made in to victories if the right referee looks at the right replay clip. But at the end of the day, all of the experiences encapsulated in to these observations of the game are boiled down to their barest forms, and for the sake of regularity and enlightenment, compiled into biospheres of theory about how the game works and should work. A political paradigm is a rulebook.

Of course the "field of play," so to speak, of political engagement is titanic. Politics play out in every single corner of the globe, at every single stratum of society, and in every single facet of human-to-human interaction. There is no universalized definition for what exactly can be defined as "politics", but for the sake of this essay, I define politics as the art of purposeful

human interaction. That is: every single interaction between two humans done for an observable or discernable purpose is political. Given the breadth of "the political," it's not a surprise that no single rule book has come to dominate our understanding of the art.

Since every human who has ever existed has been a player in this sport, every single one of us has had an interaction with one rule book or another. Many university students are privileged enough to study multiple rule books and their interactions with other rule books throughout history, and unfortunately the investigation into this proverbial Book of Life ends there. What is required, in the United States' contemporary political climate especially, is an awakening of inspiration to discover the nature of our political paradigms and an understanding of how each of us has allowed existing ideas about politics to shape our individual world outlooks. We are all responsible for coming to terms with who we are as political actors and both how we can interact and how we are expected to interact within the existing paradigms if we are to have a remote chance of redefining the sport of politics to ensure the survival of our state, world, and species in the coming century. Now more than ever, students must grasp the reality of the rule books of the game that we play.

I have spent many sleepless nights feeling against the walls of the proverbial labyrinth of political paradigms that I have been thrust in to. It has become a passion of mine to find not just a clear and relatable path through the labyrinth, but to also touch each dead end in order to understand the boundaries of my paradigms and to relate those boundaries to those that would join me on this investigation. Leaving my office and my "safe spaces" of the university to discover those dead ends has been a challenging and life-affirming exercise. So as I proceed to discuss my understandings of these rule books, keep in mind that the definitions, explanations, and criticisms that I levy are by no means comprehensive in the academic sense. Rather, I aim to

provide a complete registry of my thoughts on the rule books as I best know them to be, relate the experiences and sources that led me to these thoughts, and parse out the criticisms of these paradigms while also explaining the gaps between theory and observable practice.

In order to transplant "political paradigm" from the abstract to the material, in order to make the vocabulary term palpable and manipulatable and familiar with the lay people of the political world, we must talk about how and why the term is significant instead of taking our presumptions about the idea for granted. The following essays intend to do just that.

## Neoliberal Liberty: The American Approach

Neoliberalism is somewhat of a vulgar term today. Most look at the word with confusion – "liberalism" inspires thoughts of left-leaning politicians and their legacy, whereas "Neo-" hints at a reform or change to the concept of liberalism. Both assumptions are not terribly far off; the term was first used by Latin American critics of Reagan administration policies (Femia) and has since been expanded to define most aspects of American political ideology. Within the definition of "neoliberal" lies a much older and incredibly robust conversation of thoughts and actions spanning hundreds of years.

Liberalism, in its purest form, was the label given to the actions of French and American revolutionaries of the 18th century. The basic precepts of liberalism were a staunch opposition to the centralization of power, which was a process many intellectuals at the time believed coincided with individual and social growth. Materially, the economic changes since the revolutions of that era have changed the idea of liberalism dramatically. Today, liberalism and neoliberalism can trace a lineage to this time period but bear little other resemblance to this

source material. It is important to understand how this change in such a fundamentally defining idea in American politics occurred if we are to understand what Neoliberalism means today.

Published in 1776, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith) was as revolutionary in the field of economics as the revolts of the era would be politically over the coming centuries. Smith advocated for a new form of economics that defied state-owned production models; he stressed that decentralized control would reduce inefficiencies and raise the quality of life for wealth owners, workers, and consumers alike. His beliefs have been interpreted a thousand different ways since their publication, but centrally his publication would become the Book of Genesis for a new economic system known as capitalism. Where writers like John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Jefferson would answer the "why" to the question of political revolution (Sandel), Smith wrote the "how": private control of resource management would empower individuals to live in a state of liberty absent the intervention of a state (Smith). In this first era of revolutionary activity, Smith's writings on capitalism would become a rule book by which statesmen would craft their domains, especially in Anglophile regions of the world.

In the 19th century, the rapid development of Western Europe was seen as the direct evolution of the implementation of what came to be called *laisse-faire* economics. Birth rates remained high while country-dwelling populations migrated to urban areas to chase employment, which became rapidly centralized in traditional seats of power. Industrialized economies could produce basic goods for much lower costs than traditionally centralized and agrarian societies, meaning that access to life-improving resources such as education and sanitation also improved. Politically, capitalism allowed for the mass production of military hardware, which spurned a new wave of European colonialism in East Asia, Africa, and South America, all of which yielded vast sources of raw materials for refinement and manufacturing in European centers. Military

hardware, increasing at such a dramatic rate, also led to a multi-polar arms race between dominant European powers, whose state-backed foreign intervention and domestic policing harmed productive ability and seemed to legitimize Smith's arguments about state intervention in the economy.

Every European state had to manage the material change spurred on by industrialized capitalism, but no two states morally embraced the changes like the British Empire and the United States. Each nation grew closer over the 19th century and essentially cordoned off parts of the world to minimize competition; the United States violently expanded westward and eventually across the Pacific Ocean, establishing an economic and militaristic hegemony over the Western Hemisphere and parts of East Asia, while the British Empire moved unbelievable amounts of people and resources between possessions in Africa and Asia to eventually become the financier for most major governments on the planet. As European state after state became embroiled in conflict in part stemming from domestic resistance to industrialized capitalism, the United States and the British Empire managed international conflicts from across the world.

Business was booming. But by the 20th century, both superpowers became embroiled in World War I, a conflict between ideologically similar and yet economically competitive powers. The world's largest military conflict to date fundamentally challenged one of the primary assertions of Smith: that free, capitalist economies would naturally be democratic, and that democracies have no incentive to go to war with one another. After the incredible material and human cost of the war, a global depression shattered many popular illusions about *laisse-faire* capitalism and the ramifications of the conflict led to the rise of competing theories of political organization, namely that of communism in the recently-revolted Soviet Union and that of fascism in the growing powers of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. Both competing

systems of thought challenged the supposedly causal connection between capitalism, democracy, and a liberal conviction of individual freedom.

In the United States, competing long-dormant nativist and socialist movements exploded in popularity. The cost of World War I, the rise of alternative models of governance, the brutal poverty of the Great Depression, and a lack of clear ideology allowed new paradigms in political theory to emerge. "Liberalism" became associated with politicians as diverse as Eugene Debs, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and William Jennings Bryan. Without a clear, concise ideological current, "liberal" politics became detached from its ideological origins and evolved to become the label given to any action done by the state. Progressive, nativist, socialist, anarchist, abolitionist, suffragist, and racially-charged ideologies competed in the wake of this change to win adherents. For most of the century, liberalism would continue to be the label of choice for politicians that generally supported a larger central government and a tighter regulation of corporate activities, putting it starkly in contrast with Smith's now-adulterated vision of the relationship between state and economy. Many historians today would hesitate to use "liberal" to describe policy agendas such as the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt or the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson, however during their times these behemoths would define the evolution of the term despite belonging to a party which was undergoing a reaction to the nativist and white supremacist bedrock which provided the Democrats with most of their support in large swaths of the country.

In the 1980s, the term "neoliberal" became a source of debate. The term first originated as a criticism of the Reagan administration's foreign policy, articulated by Latin American revolutionaries and intellectuals. The term simultaneously caught the attention of dominant voices in the United States such as Milton Friedman and Alan Greenspan, who held a

considerable amount of influence over the United States' economic agenda during their tenure with the Federal Reserve. The loosely defined economic doctrine of Neoliberalism was best articulated by "Reaganonomics" and the work of important international bodies like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; both entities encouraged recipients of generous foreign aid to discourage nationalistic reactions against American involvement in foreign affairs while lowering taxes and regulations against American companies doing business abroad and decreasing public spending for infrastructure projects and education. Materially, Neoliberalism was shaped in to a working theory that the best way to encourage free, globalized trade was for American companies to interact with developing economies aggressively, with the "full faith and credit" of the United States and her military always present.

Ideologically though, Neoliberalism did not and still has not found a bedrock. The world of Milton Friedman is so radically different than the world of Adam Smith that it seems almost pointless to draw similarities between their theories. However, given this brief summary of the development of liberal and Neoliberal thought, a general description of the Neoliberal Paradigm is in order.

Firstly, Neoliberalism treats individuals as the primary political actor. All social and economic decisions are ultimately boiled down to single human being who decides to act in her rational self-interest. Groups are equal to the sum of the individuals organized within the group, which carries only logistical significance in generalizing the actions and histories of individuals and are removed from any idea of collective action or identity.

Secondly, Neoliberalism constructs "freedom" in the negative sense. This means that individuals are born free and are raised in cultures and environments that encourage different

degrees of relinquishment to this natural right. Actions done by the state are at best temporarily necessary but ultimately serve to obstruct the freedom we would all experience had we not decided to group ourselves in to governments in the first place.

And thirdly, Neoliberalism is utopian in the sense that actions done in the present may be apparently contradictory to the above two beliefs but ultimately are taken in order to see these beliefs realized, unhindered, in a future world. Neoliberalism is based on the economic belief that "the end justifies the means" and this line of thought can be extended down to the most basic of debates that occurs within the Neoliberal context.

To state that neoliberalism is often criticized would be to commit a severe misrepresentation; like liberalism before it, Neoliberalism emerged as a reaction to prevailing trends and begins as a functionally critical theory. This means that one can understand more of Neoliberalism by defining what it is not than what it is. Nevertheless, several powerful critiques to this strain of thought have stayed around for almost a century, and continue to shape the way that Neoliberal-inspired policies and theories are experienced.

Many have argued that reducing political agency down to the individual deliberately misconstrues the nature of political power. Deborah Stone implicitly makes this the entire point of her *Policy Paradox* project; by promoting (or at least searching for) a justification for extreme individualism, problems affecting a class of people are not discussed and thus not addressed. Neoliberalism essentially creates class by applying the secular form of the Protestant work ethic to modern economic conditions – the poor deserve to be poor and the rich deserve to be rich. This approach ignores centuries of the accumulation of wealth and power among a select few, fundamentally dividing a population in to two distinct groups. The first group owns the means

of production, and is "in" on the joke of Neoliberalism – that there is nothing free about radical individual liberty, that enforcing poverty amongst those who do not own the means of production prevents a repatriation of resources, and that ideological bromides are required to promote passivity and suppress rebellion against the economic status quo. The second group is the subject of this centuries-old attack.

In the realm of foreign policy, Neoliberal structures have nurtured the growing gulf between wealthy and poor states by delegitimizing resistance to globalized capitalism. States which do not "play by the rules" set by capitalist democracies are attack, exploited, and destroyed. Regions which threaten the existing status quo are destabilized. In a conflict between two radical elements of a society, the capitalist profits off of the "free trade" of arms, regardless of ethical or moral constraints in a cause. While the 21st century is young and it would be hasty to assign major current events a role in the spectacle of Neoliberalism, the paradigm no longer enjoys the hegemonic status is once did and is challenged by both the realities of its implementation as well as a growing popularity amongst nativism and socialism once again.

Neoliberalism, or what I came to realize was called Neoliberalism, was a central tenant of my belief structure growing up. Nationalism and a faith in the status quo, two crucial parts of this paradigm, are taught every day to young men like me; we're encouraged to be civically engaged, support our military, work a job to learn discipline and financial management, and endorse the American Way in general (Bonikowski). As I came to college and began reading a different library, I came to both define Neoliberalism and understand how this paradigm related to my personal and political development. Neoliberalism is the common starting point of many young Americans and is very broad in both propositions and critiques. The development of

alternative political paradigms became a challenge and an opportunity to examine what exactly I was talking about when I talk about liberty.

## Materialism: The Fabrication of Liberty

Materialism is a catch-all term that means many different things to many different people. The label marks a social pariah who chooses to forgo taboos and relish in material possessions. It is the label of the counter-strains of thought permeating throughout academia, ranging from psychology to engineering to physics. And more often than not, "materialist" just means a person who doesn't appreciate – or comprehend – "abstract" notions of a particular subject.

When I think of materialism, I think of my father's outlook on the world. He is not a romantic or idealistic man. In his mind the Constitution, typically revered by those of his political persuasion, is nothing but a tool to warrant acts of power by the men who must lead our nation. As an ardent believer of *realpolitik*, my father looks at events in international relations not by how they are discussed but more often than not by their potential for military conflict or loss of human life. We have argued over many topics in the realms of politics and history, but he has never wavered from his commitment to "realism," and I have never wavered in my critique of it.

So "materialism," in part, is a perspective of political activity drawn from a coldly rational model of international relations best exemplified by my interactions with my family. The tradition of "realpolitik" dates back hundreds of years but was never given this name until the division of East and West Germany (Bew). *Innenpolitik* was at first proudly supported by the West German, Ally-backed parliamentarian government as a progressive, goal-oriented, and principled approach to world affairs. In East Germany, this philosophy was scoffed at due to its

incongruities with reality. *Realpolitik* emerged as the Soviet contrast to West German ideology and strongly criticized ivory-tower solutions to mud-and-blood problems. A diplomat drawing from the *innenpolitik* tradition might approach a state interested in an infrastructure project funded by foreign capital with promises of access to western cultural institutions such as capitalistic growth, democratic access and support, and respect on the world stage. A diplomat drawing from the *realpolitik* school of thought might approach that same interested party with a ream of spreadsheets arguing how their engineers have the best cost-to-benefit ratio of any interested contractor, details of how their project could secure support in politically significant regions of a state, and subdued threats of offers from rival buyers.

In the war-torn and impoverished corners of our planet, this material-focused understanding of politics has many adherents. It is one thing to promise respect; it is another to promise access to clean water. Today, Chinese government-owned construction firms are investing billions of dollars in infrastructure development in Africa using a decidedly *realpolitik* pitch: unlike your previous Western contractors, our projects will not be conditioned on access to regulation-setting bodies, the extradition of former dictators, the construction of Chinese military facilities, or the partial ownership of your state (*Wharton*). The success of this approach is self-evident: the Economist recently reported that at the conclusion of the most recent China-Africa Summit, China's President Xi Jinping committed to investing $60 billion over the course of the next year, or more money than the poorest 33 countries in Africa produce annually (*Wharton*).

Materialism includes *realpolitik* but is not based on it. The tradition of materialist thought is strongly rooted in historical materialism, an understanding of history championed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Historical materialism was an earth-shattering approach to understanding history upon its ascension in the 19th century; it directly challenged the classically

liberal idea of an unbroken chronological historical process driven by the actions of individuals. Historical materialism makes history a science by examining economic motivations throughout eras of development. In his analysis, Marx is incredibly powerful – his description of the evolution of societies, from pre-feudal to feudal to industrial to post-industrial, driven by measurable and manipulatable forces in the classes demarcated by each economic system inhabited – and gave progressive politicians and radical revolutionaries alike a bedrock by which to critique and change the systems of oppression they inhabited.

*Realpolitik* squares nicely with Marxist historical materialism: by basing theories, solutions, and politics on an economic understanding of the world, interactions amongst states have an objective barometer by which events can be judged. Hand-in-hand with international interaction, however, are intranational movements of labor and capital. And here is where the paradigm draws so much criticism by so many states, capitalist or not. Capitalism decidedly depends on inequities of wealth and privilege in any society, but from the classically liberal perspective, these inequities are both essential because they are natural articulations of inequities amongst individuals in a society but also preferable because they are less gruesome inequities that would exist in a chaotic, stateless world. Materialism challenges classical liberalism by demanding that states take responsibility for the inequities present in their societies, that assertions of natural inequities amongst people are simply bromides to populations whose liberation from those social inequities would mean the end of the privileges afforded to the "winners" of capitalism, and in a perfect world neither states nor capitalist industries would exist, meaning that the rich and powerful have an invested interest in denying the promotion of materialist conceptions of the world. Classical liberalism, like its descendant neoliberalism, says

that there are no good guys or bad guys, only winners and losers. Materialism declares such a statement to be heretical.

So in addition to a *realpolitik* mode of interaction and a materialistic conception of world history, the third and most defining quality of a Materialist paradigm is its critical nature. Materialism – within it historical materialism, socialist economics, *realpolitik* international models, egalitarian social equity, and a host of other corollary issues – was developed as a response to existing modes of thought about the world. Materialism could not exist without an "immaterial" opposite, and neoliberalism is that contrast today. By defining itself as a "critical" approach to politics, materialism has developed a substantial arsenal of responses to every single suggestion uttered by the neoliberal approach to politics, which is analyzed by practitioners of Materialist politics as thinly veiled sermons that warrant systematic greed and the forceful subjugation of millions (Femia).

To supplement the contrast of *realpolitik* to Neoliberalism's *innenpolitik*, the Materialist paradigm also contrasts with the Neoliberal paradigm in several important aspects – how political actors are defined, how freedom is defined, and how utopian ideals are construed.

In Materialism, class is the primary political actor. Classes are present in every single stratum of any organization, from the family to the world stage. Classes are most commonly understood to be nebulous, ambiguous collectives of individuals with similar professional and economic backgrounds, but more simply, a class is any group which shares several crucial defining attributes. For example, in the lecture hall, the classes may be defined as students who take the class because it is a requirement for their major, students who take the class as an elective, students who have taken a class with the professor before, and the professor herself.

Each class is defined as such because the common denominator amongst the collective is valued by how integrated into the larger ecosystem of the lecture hall; students who have taken classes with the professor before have greater social capital with that professor and thus have an advantage in the lecture hall environment, whereas students who take the class as an elective have to both learn the material and learn how the professor teaches her course. Furthermore, each class has a set of interests which incentivize conflict or cooperation with other classes in their environment. Students familiar with the professor may have an incentive to outperform students who only take the class as a major requirement in order to collect interest on the social capital they have accumulated with the professor. In the larger world, the work of politics is identifying and defining classes, understanding the remarkably complex ecosystem of class objectives and class conflicts, and prioritizing the values and goals of certain classes to achieve material gains (Fincher). Compared to the Neoliberal paradigm, understanding class as the primary political actor requires much more analysis and observation than abstractly defining the values and goals of "the individual."

Secondly, freedom is understood as a positive goal as opposed to Neoliberalism's conception of freedom as a negative requirement. By "positive," we mean that freedom is an aspirational, normative ideal to be achieved; naked children left in the jungle are not "free" nor will they likely develop the capacity to "be free," as they will not develop in a society which equips them with the social, physical, and mental abilities to navigate the human world around them. The role of the state or the collective is thusly understood much differently as a result: whereas a negative conception of freedom leads Neoliberal adherents to view the role of the state as a necessary evil abridging freedoms for the temporary but common good, Materialist adherents view the state as a necessary force to cultivate the kind of social and material

environment in which freedom can be obtained by classes within that society. In short, a Materialist understands freedom as "the freedom to do something" as opposed to "the freedom from something."

Finally, Materialism and Neoliberalism both subscribe to an idea of utopianism, although their definitions of this "utopia" vary wildly. In a world where class interests are the main focus of political action and debates over politics boil down to which class interests should be prioritized or abandoned, the goal of politics is to decrease class conflict to the point where everyone in a society gains equally from collective action. The "utopia" is thus the state of being in which class interests are no longer prioritized over each other because there are no more classes. This sharply differs from a Neoliberal understanding of utopia in the respect that actions are not moral insofar as they produce a better society, but the competing paradigms are related in that adherents both offer an idea about an ideal outcome to strive for.

The Materialist paradigm is not without critics, to say the least. Understanding class to be the primary political actor is a powerful weapon in organizing society for change, and thus class-based politics have been denounced implicitly by many states grounded in the liberal or Neoliberal tradition. While labeling the actions of power holders who repress class unity falls squarely in line with Materialist conceptions about class conflict, it is worth considering the justification for such repression. Primarily, Materialist politics destabilize societies, and it is their stated goal to do so. As a starkly critical school of thought, Materialist adherents often blow holes through the justifications for accumulations of state power, brutality, and inequality for the purpose of revolutionizing these systems of power. Many people in many societies view this destabilization as fundamentally undesirable, taking an "evil we know to the evil we don't" approach to social change. Leftist politicians and progressive activists are not often chastised for

the sincerity or moral justification of their beliefs, but rather are scrutinized for legitimizing an often-violent upsetting of the status quo to achieve these ends.

This leads to a much larger critique against the Materialist paradigm: the lack of falsification. Essentially, falsification is the principle that a scientific paradigm must have certain criteria by which it could be proven wrong in order to be understood as correct. This line of thinking is frequently leveled against Marxist and Maoist ideology but also against adherents to Freudian psychology, astrology, or even many religious schools of thought generally. And the critique does make common sense – in history, the "falsification" of European superiority was achieved during the two World Wars, when grave acts of senseless brutality obliterated the idea that European ideals of democracy and peaceful coexistence were squarely within the domain of Europeans alone, and that acts of barbarism were reserved for "less enlightened" cultures. Falsification is not a perfect critique, however, as one could wonder what the point is in investing belief into systems of thought which have built-in ontological self-destruct scenarios. At this point in the conversation, human beings outside of the academic ecosystem look upon debates over such abstract differences with gentle disgust, so I digress.

Materialism – Marxism, historical materialism, *realpolitik*, class conflict – is a radical yet increasingly normalized lens through which students of politics understand the world. It offered me the tools to articulate a general unease with the way systems worked around me; why is it wrong that Americans have so much and so many have so little? Where did these inequalities originate and why are they in place today? Discovering Materialist arguments was essential for understanding my place in the world beyond my role as an individual, and they helped flush out a very close-minded construction of conflict and peace around me. Ultimately, however, Materialism offers tools and process but no hard solution to injustices. It is a way of thinking, as

a friend once said to me, "that wants us to whine but doesn't want the wining to stop." It is not perfect. But then again, Materialists never claimed to be.

## Liberty, Inc.: Freedom through Constructivism

To label the third and final political paradigm in this project as a "political paradigm" is ironic. Constructivism is not as defined as Neoliberalism or Materialism, but to define it further than what is to be stated here would be to commit the sin critiqued by Constructivism: creating "objective" definitions of a thought that is based on arbitrary definitions generated through individual experience. All of experience perceived by an individual is essentially arbitrary, Constructivism claims, so delineating fields of thought as distinct is essentially an act of coloring within the lines, where we treat the ink-printed boundaries as somehow more entitled or purposeful than the wax covering the demarcated surface within those lines. Answering where those lines came from and why they are still in place, in short, is the goal of Constructivism.

There are no serious adherents of Constructivism that would label themselves as such. In gender studies, the concept of the constructed gender role is a central tenant to fourth-wave feminism and is the subject of thousands of pages of explanation. Within history, descendants of Marxist historical materialism today spend many sleepless nights searching for the inspiration that leads to historians marking certain "eras" or "period" as distinct from one another. And within art, the idea of value construction personified by line and color dates back at least to the turn of twentieth century and the emergence of the Dada movement, in which artists deliberately broke conventions to show how arbitrary those rules actually were. I do not believe that there are any serious students of politics who would describe themselves as Constructivist or who can point to bedrocks of their ideology in the same way Neoliberals can trace their lineage to Locke

or Materialists to Marx. The following is necessarily a compilation of ideas that I have wandered in to over the past several years and which, through no other reason than sheer convenience, I label as Constructivist – committing that grave original sin in the process.

As a rule, Constructivism starts with the basic principle that all definitions of any aspect of society, politics, and reality in general are subject to the experiences and perceptions of those who articulate these definitions. These definitions in turn are essentially traded in a marketplace of other definitions, in which ideas are not necessarily debated (as this would presuppose common understandings of basic tenants of these definitions) but rather broadcasted and sold depending on the needs of the buyer. Loyal followers of the reality show known as American politics witness this free market of definitions every time they receive a push notification from CNN; the "rights" discussed by President Trump and President Obama may include freedom of the press, freedom of religion, or the freedom to bear arms, but both individuals source their definitions of these rights from wildly different conceptual frameworks. Politicians engage in this debate then not by arguing why an opponent is not entitled to a certain right, but instead argue that the way an opponent defines certain rights is not conducive to the reality he or she is operating in.

Constructivism clearly bears a striking similarity to that most-hated word: relativism. But whereas relativism as an adjective generally (and too often, negatively) describes ideas that are used when convenient and discarded when not, Constructivism is more specifically a paradigm which acknowledges relativistic sources of understanding and seeks to achieve objective ends. What these ends are differs among people and cultures, and the method to achieving these ends varies at least as much, but the overall purpose of Constructivism is to provide adherents with a toolkit of ideas by which we can make sense of why politicians too

often devolve into shouting matches over semantics instead of coming together over the fact that Flint, Michigan still doesn't have clean drinking water.

It is in this vain of thought that Constructivism packs the greatest punch. Fundamentally, Constructivists are able to look at basic human necessities – water, food, shelter – and analyze how society justifies not taking care of these deficiencies. Two scholars reviewed above have the most to say about this understanding.

Deborah Stone specifically writes about the "polis," her label for the smallest political unit possible, in which there are just enough inhabitants to warrant potentially divisive discussion about collective interests (Stone, 25). Her work, Policy Paradox (Stone), attempts to construct the rules of the game – what goals are members of the polis arguing for? What means do they utilize to achieve those goals? And by what metrics, if any, do implement to evaluate the effectiveness of their processes?

The Constructivist paradigm is thus more rightly a meta-paradigm (that is, a paradigm about the nature of paradigms) than a peer of the Neoliberal and Materialist schools of thought. Within the writings of Deborah Stone and her contemporaries, scholars articulate the incentives and means by which political actors of vastly different conceptual foundations collude to accomplish collective ends. Using the lecture hall example stated previously, a Constructivist would argue that the goals of each "class" of student or professor is at least as significant as the position from which they articulate their goals. Students taking the course as a major requirement want to pass the class in the same way as students taking the course as an elective – the classes share the same goal – but students sourcing their academic knowledge from a major unrelated to the lecture would draw upon the studying habits of other majors, which would vary from the habits of students whose experiences are curtailed to courses with similar knowledge

pools and from the habits of students who have taken the course with the professor before, who are even more equipped to succeed because they have experience with this specific style of lecturing and teaching.

The relative advantages and disadvantages of classes in a hierarchical system are of particular interest to a student of the Constructivist paradigm, but these organizational cues are not limited to collective political actors. Individuals engaging in normal, human conversation must also take in to account the experiences and biases of their conversation partner when evaluating the veracity, purpose, or utility. These are factors which simply cannot be discarded in an analysis of, well, anything.

Kwasi Wiredu elevates this examination to the linguistic level. Wiredu is intimately familiar with the impact of alien vocabularies – Ghana's official language is English, the language of its colonizer, but within Ghana several dozen languages are spoken across various households, with Wiredu's own Akan enjoying a plurality but not a majority of adherents. Wiredu, like his countrymen and women, are thus forced to engage in a written code of values, purposes, connotations and denotations that differ from Akan as widely as the day from the night. Basic logical principles, such as Aristotle's Principle of Non-Contradiction (that A is A, and that A cannot both be A and not A), are not logical statements in Akan. Wiredu uses the example of *t'se es t'se*, literally "it is and it is", to accentuate this point; in Akan, objects and ideas can logically be understood to be both themselves and not themselves. Aristotle, if alive today, would rightly say that the Akan language is built upon an impossible logical contradiction. Wiredu would respond by asking Aristotle in what language his principle is more valid – truth, validity, and logic mean very different things in ancient Greek than in modern English.

Wiredu focuses on linguistics from a primarily philosophical framework, as his program is to develop a toolkit by which Ghanaian (and, generally, African) readers can look at failings in their societies and earnestly understand where the failures stem from. Are poor housing regulations a result of biological inequalities between Africans and Europeans? Are they the product of a legal code written in a language that contradicts the linguistic tools the vast majority of civilians use to understand their universe? Or are they inherently contradictory in themselves – are the regulations set forth by imperial offices grafted onto a society in which the regulations are contradictorily implemented, judicated, and executed?

The toolkit that Wiredu uses to answer these questions is named "conceptual decolonization." Simply put, conceptual decolonization is the process by which we define a subject, articulate the logical premises that legitimize the subject, and then critically analyze how language plays a role in understanding that subject to be true or not. Every subject, Wiredu claims, can be broken in to three separate categories.

The first category of subjects are those which are logically valid, despite the language of their origin. Mathematics and music, Wiredu states, fall in to this category. Certain values, such as loyalty and respect, are universally understood but spoken of differently. For example, in the 1964 Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, Justice Potter Stewart was obligated to define obscenity in relationship to the showing of a pornographic film in a small-scale movie theatre and famously stated, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that." The first category of subjects are true regardless of who talks about them.

The second category of subjects are those which are logically valid in one language but not in another. The previous discussion about colonial-era housing regulations in Ghana are understood to make logical sense in English but not in Akan; if the English measure "a foot" to be the actual length of a foot of the King of England, it is difficult to impose an objective value to that unit of measurement upon a culture which does not recognize the divine authority of a monarch.

The third and final category of subjects are those which are never logically valid. Wiredu has a lot of fun throwing Rene Descartes and his writings in this category. More specifically, since logical truths (from which entire ecosystems of though spring forth) are in a sense irreducible, this third category of subjects are both invalid upon reflection with themselves but also invalid in relation to the linguistically-relative statements of truth that the subject is articulated in. Rene Descartes, Wiredu believes, isn't wrong in French. Descartes is just wrong.

Between Stone, Wiredu, and several other "inspirations" of this paradigm such as Michele Foucault, Noam Chomsky, and Sigmund Freud, several common understandings of political actor, freedom, and the utopian ideal are recognizable.

In the Constructivist paradigm, a political actor is either an individual or a collective depending on the size of the political space. In the household, each individual member is both a political actor and a member of a class of individuals (children, parents, cousins, etc.) which also have political agency. Understanding politics in this paradigm is to weigh the relative significance of an individual's incentives, goals and metrics with the incentives, goals and metrics of other actors and – on top of all that – the standards utilized by members of the classes involved in political activity.

Similarly, “freedom” is a tricky concept for Constructivism. Freedom can be a goal (aka a Materialist-esque, “positive” idea of freedom), a metric (like the Neoliberal idea of “more freedom” meaning “less involvement”) and a tool by which to articulate more important realities. Freedom does not have an objective definition because freedom means so many things to people reading this writing in English, let alone discussing the concept in any other language. To define freedom as something objective outside of a specific political situation is, paradoxically, to limit the freedom of the concept of freedom.

And unlike either Neoliberalism and Materialism, the Constructivist paradigm does not project a utopian goal upon political actions. All political action is for a specific goal, but Constructivism is not a program that advocates for a certain outcome, instead focusing on making sense and measuring the nature of debate for certain outcomes. Many great minds who I have unabashedly coopted for my definition of this paradigm are not utopian in the slightest; scholars like Chomsky and Foucault advocate for the general alleviation of suffering, but focus their writings on defining where and why suffering exists because, as Wiredu states, the alleviation of suffering is a goal that pretty much anyone can get on board with (as it belongs in the first category of subjects).

The main criticism of Constructivism is simple: what’s the point? Why spend limited time and resources on understanding the nature of debate, when action for a purpose is a much more pressing concern? This criticism acknowledges the complexity of discourse, the heavy hand of linguistic foundations, and the varied nature of goals and metrics. Is writing about any of these things really going to convince our politicians to stop arguing over semantics and actually make it so that the residents of Flint, Michigan have clean drinking water again?

The short answer is that talking about talk is not going to solve the problems we face as a society, nor will it ever inspire change or motivate our leaders. But if even one more person can understand how the debate over policy takes place, then one more person can be shaken from the illusion that these leaders have any idea how to solve the problems we face as a nation. We invest so much time in mocking leaders on social media or pretentiously chastising policy to show our friends how well-read we are. Constructivism simply posits that the best way to deal with our problems is to cut through the gilded exterior of our institutions, so haughtily elevated to a position of sanctified invincibility, and genuinely question if we've really installed the best systems to address our most pressing needs. And until a leader comes along asking those questions, they will remain unaddressed in the dusty tomes of Constructivist literature.

Ultimately, the purpose of both Stone's polis and Wiredu's conceptual decolonization is to provide adherents of this nebulous Constructivist paradigm with the tools to understand the world around us – and in understanding the world around us, we may build a world that suits the very real and very overlooked suffering that we observe regularly. The question is not, "how does freedom factor in to the world that we live in?" We should rather ask ourselves how far "freedom" has gotten us so far, and how much farther can we go.

# III. What We're Talking About: Analysis and Commentary

In the final section, I include an essay commenting on Kwasi Wiredu's theory of conceptual decolonization and debate its effectiveness in practice. I also include an essay that critiques the process by which I gathered the information and insights that I have used in this document. Finally, I make the case for the existence of liberty.

## Conceptual Decolonization: Theory and Practice

In the spring semester before my departure for South America, I took a class through the Honors College that focused on the contemporary political and philosophical giants of Ghana. The course focused on three major thinkers: Kwame Gyekye, Kwame Appiah, and Kwasi Wiredu. I took the Ghana class because the professor, David Garrison, had introduced Wiredu to me the semester before and I was enraptured by his writings on epistemology and politics. The course made serious efforts to balance out the writings of Wiredu with the writings of Gyekye and Appiah, but as a disciple of Wiredu himself, Professor Garrison privileged the author and shared the man's writings on a variety of topics. It was pretty much heaven.

To introduce Wiredu's ideas properly, it is important to understand the context of their introduction in to my life. In the summer of 2015, I left the United States for the first time. I landed in Istanbul and hitchhiked, bussed, trained, walked, and boated my way up to Amsterdam with just a backpack. I studied with the Honors College for a month in London and then made my way up through Scotland and back south to Amsterdam again before flying home. If the adventure sounds self-aggrandizing, that's how it felt: I returned from my European adventure with a radically altered understanding of who I was, what I was capable of, and how I fit in with

a world that was remarkably more complex than when I left. Life in the States (as any young traveler calls the United States, because that's how pretentious we are) became impeccably dull. My social and political circles from before my travels were basically obsolete, as I came back and found myself seriously questioning the "truths" that I had previously invested my energies in defending. Making sense of this fast-moving period of life was exceptionally difficult: no one had told me that leaving my home for the first time would feed a hunger to see the rest of the world, or emotionally critique every problem in my country out of a sense of obligation, or even wonder if every major life decision I had made up to setting foot on American soil again was taken out of ignorance.

I'm an admittedly dramatic person but at the time I lost sleep from these thoughts. I was attempting to figure out several questions which seemed unshakably important at that point in my life; why did my fellow countrymen boast of their freedom yet not move with the characteristic independence and determination of those I met in alien lands? At what point did I cease questioning the "truths" which now felt so hollow? How do I deliberately organize my life going forward to both respect where I had come from, so to say, while acting on these intensely convincing alternative perspectives that I was exposed to?

And thus descended Kwasi Wiredu's Cultural Universals and Particulars (Wiredu), like mana from heaven. Wiredu's monolithic concept of conceptual decolonization appealed to me on a rational and an emotional level. Logically, the concept resolved several issues I was grappling with. After my first summer abroad, I was very confident in a couple of very basic, simple truths, which I had resolved to remain steadfast in after shoveling away some of their erroneous implications. Some of these basic moral maxims – freedom is good, justice is worth pursuing despite the cost, and the ownership of property is not a natural right, for example –

were articulated consistently in different places and through different tongues. Wiredu's conceptual decolonization categorizes these types of maxims as logically valid despite their language of origin. I felt confident that these maxims were logically sound because of experiences that I and fellow travelers witnessed together, discussed afterwards, and realized (with that beautiful, almost holy shared realization that comes with realizing something about the world with a complete stranger simultaneously) to be true. Left with a wide array of political beliefs that could squarely be described as "American," Wiredu offers a second category of concepts that snugly became their home: ideas about just taxation, individual liberties, and conflict were not necessarily untrue, but rather looked upon as true because of my unique upbringing in the culture in which I was cultivated. Travelling was a shock primarily because of the sheer quantity of beliefs that I came to realize were not universally shared among other peoples, and the process of that discovery is jarring. If nothing else, the United States' specific breed of nationalism truly does inculcate the idea among the young that we are the center of the universe, and the remaining 6.9 billion or so inhabitants of our planet disagree with varying shades of intensity.

The final category of concepts, in hindsight, became a repository of many of my "old beliefs" too quickly. If anyone has ever experienced a spiritual awakening or deadening – if the reader can relate to the sensation of gaining or losing a sense of the divine – they can empathize with this category of knowledge. I very readily dismissed many ardently held beliefs as objects of bad faith, deeming them to be logically invalid in other languages (due to several profound conversations with several profound people over the course of my travels) and also exposed as logically invalid in my own world. I looked at my confidence in my country, my religiosity, my political persuasion, even my tastes in literature, as symptoms of a false religion. The severity

and intensity with which I abandoned these ideas is regrettable because their summary execution forbade real introspection on these ideas, but more poignantly, their dismissal led to a pause on a genuine pursuit of wisdom in several regards that I did not pick back up for almost a year. And with the fervor of a new religious adherent, I simultaneously began to cling to the extrapolations I had formulated from my experiences abroad (experiences which I passively valued like divine revelations due to their power and beauty) while forsaking much of what I had previously clung to.

Throughout the Fall and Spring semesters of my Junior year I read more about Kwasi Wiredu and his conceptual decolonization and with that intellectual stimulation became more confident in my new understanding of the world. I set my sights on South America (inspired as I was by the political relationship between particular states and individuals against occupiers, dictators and armies) and wanted to use conceptual decolonization as a foundation with which to critique the American concept of liberty. I had the idea that these thoughts could even turn in to a well-organized thesis.

Within about 24 hours of landing in Panama City, I realized that I made a mistake. South America was not going to present the hermetically sealed, easily digestible, or air-conditioned experiences that changed my life the summer before. The states I visited would both refute any organized thought process on conceptual decolonization and its relationship to the States, liberty and myself, while at the same time providing a wonderfully efficient proof-of-concept for a deeper, less romanticized understanding of Wiredu's writing.

Let me explain. Conceptual decolonization is an epistemological tool by which an individual can better understand the validity of his own thoughts (Wiredu, 174). It's like a type

of function, with laws and regulations that processes variables to produce outputs. This specific tool was posited by Wiredu as the direct result of his involvement with pre- and post-independent Ghana. The genius of conceptual decolonization is that it mirrors the development of revolutionary action in colonial states; as the oppressed masses come to the realization that the conditions of their suffering are not absolute but imposed by others, the ideas which validated their lowered place in society become obsolete as a means of understanding the world, and the masses are left with the remarkably difficult task of reorganizing their understanding of the world around them while politically, economically, and often violently resisting the efforts of those who would do them harm for yearning for liberation. Likewise, those who wish to utilize a conceptual decolonization are tasked with coming to grips with personal prejudices, demoralizing their prejudices to appreciate them objectively, and then applying a brand-new function to process logical truths while engaging with the world around them. It's not easy to do, and Wiredu cautions his readers against zealotry, in revolution and in life.

In South America, I was presented with numerous experiences that challenged the validity of my beliefs garnered through exposure to conceptual decolonization while supporting the underlying principles that Wiredu uses to justify his process. There are three examples from my journal entries that flesh out the point I'm trying to make.

The first experience was in Medellin, Colombia. We were staying with Jorge in his family's compound, ominously named "Salsipuedes" ("Leave, if you can."). Jorge is an eclectic individual; he is retired after a career of travelling around the Western Hemisphere repairing pianos for some of the largest symphony halls and esteemed artists in the music industry has to offer, and his large home contains literally hundreds of pianos at various stages of disassembly. Like his workshop (housing the bulk of the half-instruments), every corner of his home

contained a vestige of prestige – two photographs with a Colombian trumpet player and a Mexican hung in one of his wash rooms alone. Grandparents, distant cousins, and great nephews created a patchwork scale armor of the aging mansion's aging skin. Within this context, an interview (lost to an undesired iPhone update) with Jorge redefined the necessity of family in my mind. He uncomfortably began portions of speech with loud praises of his Pentecostal faith, and the army of crucifixes (the most likely contender to fill in negative space between picture frames) looked upon him with admiration as he did so. But through his faith, Jorge was able to speak about family with the kind of conviction only a stranger can share with another stranger. He reminded both my partner and I of truths shared with us before life challenged those truths with divorce and family-sourced anxiety.

We left Salsipuedes and Jorge with a wholesomely reimagined respect for the idea of family, and we were very convinced that some "fundamental truth of life" had been shared with us across languages and physical space. And yet unlike Wiredu's category of universal truths, this experience with Jorge was not with a perfect, unbiased source of information. Jorge is a Colombian-American experiencing a quality of life far above what his fellow inhabitants of Medellin will ever experience. It was remarkable to leave his home that evening and descend down the steep dirt-paved neighborhood that has creeped towards his home in recent decades, driven in air-conditioned comfort through crowded streets. If a truth is universal, as Wiredu claims some truth can be, then there must be a source of truth that can testify on its behalf unsullied by bias, and there must be a time and place through which such truth can be shared to listeners undisturbed by any contextual or partisan influence. How such an exchange is possible is beyond me, but despite the reimagined understanding of familial love that we left Jorges'

home with, it would be remarkable to claim that this reimagined understanding was significant despite my prior experiences and contexts, as opposed to being significant because of them.

The second experience occurred before meeting Jorge. Three weeks' prior, my partner and I had arrived in Panama City and within 48 hours her laptop (the only one we brought to save space) overheated and had to be examined at an Apple resale store at the local mall. Panama City is a clearing cut by machete in the middle of a tropical jungle, with the still-uncleared Darien Pass forming the thinnest part of the isthmus that makes up the eastern corner of the state and still today is not passable commercially. The wet, constant heat of the jungle has remained in Panama City, with afternoon gusts of wind from the Pacific Ocean cooling the air in the evening and constant rainfall watering every possible inch of this metropolis. The region of the city where the international mall resides is far enough from the coast to enjoy none of its climate-controlling advantages, but the steel and cement former aircraft hangars that make up the mall act not dissimilarly than the tight vegetation of the surrounding jungle in that they concentrate heat. Within the confines of these echo chambers are almost 500 stores open for paying customers and nearly twice as many shuttered and chained closed. Add in a population that fluctuates between "small city" and "post-industrial ghost town" depending on the weather and the entire scene is simply alien nature. Are there still malls in the United States?

So Molly and I are frustrated that we have to go to a mall on our second day out of the country and the distance, unfamiliarity, and irony of the situation colored our experience. We were starving after an expectedly confusing conversation with the sales attendants and wandered down to the food court. Panamanian (I'll even hazard to say South American) food courts are less like markets and more like fighting pits, with brilliant colors and scents competing for limited attention spans and even less money. Like the Rock of Gibraltar, an unreasonably large

carousel sat steadfast in the center of the food court, manned by a sleeping attendant and arguably used once in the past week. A small boy from Europe begged his mother to ride the carousel and, in a feat of both momentous parental love and unquestioned lack of perspective, the mother shook the attendant awake and had the ride turned on for her boy. The entire cafeteria went silent; somewhere in the distance, a grandmother's sobs could be heard, but even the consumption of rapidly cooling beans and rice slowed to a crawl. The soft patting noises of hand on face sprinkled the motorized music of the attraction like rain on a window as Panamanian mothers scolded their boys and girls for even asking to spend a dollar on such a luxury. The rider didn't even smile as he rushed off the pony at the end of his three minutes and scurried off with his mother, who really wanted to be somewhere else.

This event has stuck in my mind for providing an example of how vast the cultural gap between Panama and not-Panama remains. The mall is a foreign space in an alien land, erected like the flag of a conquering nation on distant soil. Panamanians know this, and any cab driver, waitress, or drinking partner shared their unanimous consent on this fact passionately if asked. The small boy riding the carousel made flesh a tension between the space and the people who inhabit it. What is true to one is not always true to another, as Wiredu affords in his second category of truths, and the very recognition of culture is a recognition of the gulf in understanding between universal, human experiences. And yet the significance of the boy on the carousel was not so much the recognition of different perceptions of truth, but rather the recognition of power. The boy and his mother had the power to travel great distances when their audience may never leave their home. The pair could afford to ride a carousel, and their audience could not. This gulf in access, opportunity, and power was not lost on anyone present, but the beauty of the event was that it revealed through the innocence of a child how constructed

and non-absolute the power relationship was. This experience was not the same thing spoken of differently by different people, but rather a different experience depending on the perspective of the actors and their audience, and as a result conflicts with Wiredu's strict understanding of the second category of truth.

The final experience was dangerously close to the final days of our trip, during which time I made the short-sighted decision to forgo any more interviews and instead just have fun. As luck would have it, the experiences of our last week in Peru would be some of our most profound. We made an impromptu decision to travel to Huacachina, a small town situated around an oasis in the middle of a stark, dry desert. The sand dunes climbed and fell hundreds of yards and the small town (by small, I mean the town consisted primarily of a ring of stores and hostels around a body of water no larger than a retention pond) sustained itself through adventure tourism, a wonderful industry which basically means "doing the coolest thing in this new place that you possibly can." So we went sandboarding, which was awesome, but us and several other people from our hostel also took a day trip out to the nearby coast to visit the remnants of an other-worldly mining port and take a boat ride out to see guano islands. The port town's small seafood shacks were nationally known in a country whose cuisine has recently been elevated to international recognition and we were intent on exploring this unassuming, sun-bleached and red-rocked coast. We woke early, slept on the van ride to the town, and shuffled on to a small boat with an assortment of non-Peruvian tourists to see the distant white-capped rocks that hover like stars in the morning fog that ubiquitously covers the coastline of Peru every winter morning.

We weren't ready for the smell. Guano is bird shit, a fact we knew but did really "know" until experiencing the stalagmites, hills, peaks, valleys, and chaotically strewn piles of the stuff on rock beds that had grown and accumulated for thousands of years. Literally floating in the

middle of the ocean, flanked on all sides by happy seals who hunt the legions of fish that hide under the rocky islands, stand mountains of animal waste. The tour guide informed us that these rocks have also been the source of international war, scandalous affair, and truly the most horrible stories of forced labor I have ever heard; the Spanish, French, British and American slave-trading industries at one point all had control of these guano rocks, where they sent human beings to mine millions of pounds of bird shit to be used as fertilizer to meet Europe's rapid urbanization and the incredible amount of mouths that their empires had to feed. These slaves were unpaid and worked until death, which was typically by the age of 25, as the guano is toxic and releases lethal gas when struck. The one hundred percent mortality rate meant that the influx of slaves had to be constant. The Peruvian government has never made an effort to document the number of people who died in this manner but, given that the islands were privately owned by various European descendants of the trade until the 1980s, and given the sheer volume of more important items of concern facing Peru today, calls for documentation have gone unanswered.

The boat grew silent when the tour guide told us the story about the islands. It was a communal moment; all of us could smell the guano over the wind of the open sea and the salt of the crashing waves, and I couldn't help but imagine the kind of hell guano miners must have experienced. In Wiredu's idea of conceptual colonization, it is difficult to imagine how this experience and its illuminated truth – that such oppression is evil, that the people who perpetuated that industry acted evilly, and that the entire ordeal should be a subject of shame and remorse – would not fall squarely into a universal truth, and it is harder still to think that any logic which justifies such an arrangement would fall squarely in to Wiredu's last category of truth. In the moment, I wanted to do nothing but scream. How could human beings – human beings acting in the name of my country, or on the behalf of my grandparents and their ancestors

– justify such cruelty? And yet, like Wiredu's first two categories of truth, his third does not seem to quite encapsulate the full force of the actions we were collectively mourning over. Somehow, someway, people did justify the execution of their power over the weak in a manner that excused their consciousness. The degree of cruelty and malice capable by fully functional, rational adults cannot be underestimated. Our ancestors will tour monuments to our lack of foresight and compassion, just as we tour the monuments of those before us.

All three of Wiredu's categories of truth cannot cover the width of human experience, and I believe that he was aware of that fact. There are many other types of truth – derived from experiences that are universally felt but universally misunderstood, or derived from revelation or chance or sheer luck and which will continue to evade our species' inability to communicate across cultural and linguistic lines. But the real beauty of Wiredu's conceptual decolonization is not that he accurately describes where the answers to our soul-searching will lead us. Rather, conceptual decolonization is a tool by which we can understand how to march forward in our pursuit to understand more about ourselves and the world around us. Wiredu's ideas add depth to the width of human experiences, and with a greater understanding of this depth comes the responsibility to define personal experiences in a way that can actually make a difference.

## Critiquing the Process

This document has gone through multiple revisions in both purpose and form. When I began writing my thesis in the Spring of 2016, I started by locking myself in a classroom with a whiteboard and writing down all of the things I could be interested in writing on. I connected those ideas with a web of lines and tried to visualize where these subjects intersected. I knew that I was going to travel over the summer and that I would be going somewhere in South

America. I was in love with Kwasi Wiredu. I have an unhealthy obsession with politics and international affairs, so I was hoping that my Honors thesis would be able to make a statement or serve as a starting point for future political publications. And I knew that I did not want to apply the quantitative-heavy, defunct analyzation methods of many of my political science classes, and instead felt motivated to write about how these subjects existed both as experiences to be shared but also moments of revelation, struggle, and growth. I wanted to humanize the trauma and victories of the people I write about and these incredibly significant ideas, because they matter, and at a civic level, my generation needs examples of peers who care about the world around them. A friend proposed the idea of writing an autoethnography, which I had read about in an English class at some point but had never given much attention to. I finally settled on writing about competing ideas about the nature of freedom and using journal entries from travels abroad to justify my thoughts on the subject, with the caveat that these thoughts and entries were both not scientific publications intent on proving a point but rather were intended to be personal reflections on subjects that deserve the respect of intimate observation, not distant speculation.

Part of the tradition of an auto-ethnography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner) is the explicit critiquing of the work produced – if this practice is not part of the tradition, it certainly needs to be, because how else will the liberal arts arise to the social respect of the hard sciences than through some degree of introspection? – and I would like to articulate some of the seemingly-obvious flaws with the structure and content of this document before proceeding to my final essay. Organized below are two arguments against the structure, form, and meat of this thesis.

1. **Cultural expectations could not be prepared for adequately.**

One of the most difficult parts of the experience in South America was learning about a new culture while trying to learn the language the vast majority of people we interacted with spoke,

the variances in language between regions and states, and understanding different connotations to the things that either my partner or I would say. It is easy to ask for directions; it is hard to understand how to speak to a cab driver in Panama City, whose profession is structurally designed to incentivize ripping off tourists, and to a rickshaw driver in Mancora, who is a lifelong personal driver of motorized bikes with covered seats on the back and who comes from a family of personal drivers. It is not enough to know how to say where you want to go – to communicate with a human, one has to know how to articulate ideas, emotions, and expectations simultaneously. It's a complex process that leaves only head-first, gritty, often uncomfortable immersion as the only real chance at learning.

On top of learning how to communicate, my partner and I had to learn how to exist in many different cities that all shared a higher population density and a lower standard of living than what we could have imagined. Panama City was shocking in itself, reminding me of the set pieces of *Escape from New York* or something. But once the city's poverty become stunningly and immediately exposed, you get used to seeing it, and the various ways that this poverty articulates itself cease to amaze. Within a few weeks, we were driving through sweltering slums outside Cartagena, getting lost in the maze of mountain-side tin-shack villages, stepping in the mud of truly rural living, and tasting the poisoned atmosphere of Lima's many distraught industrial sectors. When you're travelling to many places in a short period of time, this dynamic changes itself, but ultimately anyone can visit any city on the planet if they're willing to tread carefully, breathe in the air of the environment, and submit to the mercy of others and fate. It's a worthwhile experience, but exploring such an alien place is an experience in itself, and given that the trip to South America was only our second time out of the country for an extended period of time, we underestimated the difficulty of this aspect.

Then there's the learning how to tread carefully. The simple fact about life is that many people we interact with are as broken as each of us are, and given the opportunity or incentive, we will act selfishly at the cost of others. This doesn't mean that we are incapable of good acts, but this trip really cemented the idea that the responsibility of protecting myself and the people I care about falls squarely on myself. If we were out late at night, it was essential to be aware of everything going on around us at any given time. We had to do this while looking as little like *las turistas* as possible, meaning that we had to remain calm and exercise restraint, even when we were afraid. This is a mental process that anyone who has travelled will be able to relate to, but especially in the moment, it becomes a priority that takes precedent over academic pursuits. There were several experiences that I genuinely believe would have improved my understanding of the cultures and politics of the places we visited that we did not experience because of concerns over safety, and if I could do it all again, I don't think that I would have changed my decisions. Treading carefully is important, and a day didn't go by that we didn't experience something to remind ourselves of that fact.

The bottom line is that my journal entries and missing recorded interviews are testimony to the fact that I wish that I could have explored more about the places I was visiting. There is so much color and age in the places we visited and the four countries we visited each deserve a year to themselves (Colombia deserves two). But ultimately, if I had spent more time developing my Spanish, reading about the histories of the places we were visiting, or seeking out stories from people with similar backgrounds who had also been to our destinations, my experience (both personally and academically) would have been improved.

**2. "Freedom" is so diverse that no two people define it the same way.**

The subject of "understanding freedom" as it pertains to people with different cultural and historical outlooks on the world could not have been a more exciting, excruciating, or enlightening subject to examine as the subject of a thesis. However, there were certainly some challenges that I underestimated when formulating this document.

To begin with, I believe it's pretty fair to claim that there is no universal understanding of freedom. There are many people, however, that would disagree that other ideas of freedom can or should exist. From across the political spectrum, both at home and abroad, we encountered many people who became frustrated when attempting to conceive of how another outlook on the world can have an equally valid and passionately defended conception of freedom. This disconnect – this unwillingness to seek out how other people formulate their ideas about the world – is abused by people who seek to exacerbate tensions and who benefit from the violent responses that occur when such differences are pronounced.

There are just too many examples of this to count. In Medellin, Jorge could not understand how "socialists and progressives" felt justified in legitimizing the political activity of the FARC. Juan – a tour guide with a long history of student and civic activism in the more urban quarters of Medellin – could not understand how rich families like Jorge's could sleep at night knowing the suffering that the government's feud with the guerilla organization caused people poorer than Jorge. Both men had understandings of freedom that did not necessarily clash in principle but differed extremely in articulation, and they would more than likely be on opposite sides of a picket line should they ever be given the opportunity.

This kind of polarity was more prevalent than expected. Of the dozens of interactions, exchanges, and interviews that we had with people about the role of liberty in their lives and

their government, very few did not demonize an alternative or countervailing force acting against their ideals. Articulating these disagreements was shocking not because of their content but because of their frequency; people had no qualms about dehumanizing a person with opposing beliefs in order to make their own beliefs sound stronger than they would be otherwise. The severity of this polarization can be explained by two important factors.

The first is the material nature of politics outside of educated communities. Simply put, the vast majority of people that we spoke with did not have any college education and many did not complete secondary education. Abstract concepts like "freedom" and "democracy" will not provide for their families, no matter how passionately one may believe in them. In that interview with Juan, we were impressed that the bulk of his activism was focused on community education: he would host regular public forums in the city parks of Medellin, invite local politicians or business leaders to discuss a topic of concern, and then have public debates about how the community should respond to a situation. In the past year, his work focused mostly on Medellin's rapidly expanding public rail system and the effect of heavy construction in poorer neighborhoods. Juan was successful in petitioning the city government to redirect their rail away from a particularly vulnerable neighborhood, but he was unable to get them to commit to redevelopment of areas that had already experienced heavy construction and as a result were experiencing less business and less tourism.

This educational process was repeated by Marta, a walking tour guide in Quito. Instead of a positive response to the public forums she would host on the weekends she wasn't working, Marta was originally denied a permit to organize publically in Quito and instead was redirected to Guyaquil, the second city of Ecuador and a heavily industrialized port city known for its horrible corruption and violence. Marta did not listen to the regulators and was arrested for

several months for both defying a government order and interfering with the educational process entitled to every Ecuadorian. The government accused Marta of spreading propaganda, because unlike Colombia – which has a very contemporary history of loud, partisan politics – Ecuador's economic engine depended on the unmitigated extraction of oil, and a population that demands higher wages and better working conditions might prove to be a problem. Hearing Marta's story was remarkable in that it cemented the central importance of education as a tool to accomplish necessary political reform but also as a weapon by which to keep people down.

Devoid of abstract idealization, the politics of the countries we visited were also characterized by a sharp apathy in political engagement. Talking about liberation is fine, but to the citizens of states with a violent and oft-repeated history of revolution and dictatorship, liberation is never viewed in a general sense. Everyone I spoke to on the subject of liberty shared a very similar view on the transactional nature of politics: there is no decision which will please every sector of a nation chiefly because there is no nation in which one sector does not gain at the expense of another. There is no perfect solution to politics, and there is no best way to govern. The vast majority of people we interacted with, especially in portions of cities and countries that were more rural, simply did not care about political activity. This brings me to the second important idea: political apathy is widespread not because of individual hesitation or lack of information but because of a structural incentive to not care. Engagement in even basic political organization is fraught with danger that prevents most working people from taking the risk. Wealth in the countries we visited was so concentrated in higher classes that there is little cost to states or statist politicians in ignoring the opinions of the poor. Entering politics, as a politician or as a "party man," enters one into a web of corruption with countless examples of graft and brutal displays of power – opportunities to rob the country's treasury, threats from

aspiring military men, the usual. As long as the engine of these countries continues to run based on the exportation of raw materials or the prevalence of international trade, it is hard to see how an educated, involved populace – a necessary precursor to a healthy democracy – would be able to develop. And maybe that's the point.

So "freedom" means something different to everyone we spoke to. That this idea was so validated supports the general premise of this paper, that freedom is a varied and complex topic with many valid and competing ideas and articulations. Unfortunately, I underestimated the amount of research required to capture the full breadth of the topic.

## Is Liberty Real?

At the onset of this project, I set out to understand if liberty was real. To be real (and to satisfy my hunger to have the questioned resolved in my mind, my goal was to take the writings of people much smarter than myself and combine their ideas in to recognizable and well-demarcated categories. Then, I was to compile a journal of my experiences searching for evidence that one of these three hypotheses offered a convincing enough of a definition to definitively conclude that liberty, of some sort, is real. Finally, I was to return to the States, pick through my literature-wrought foundation and my journal entries of personal data, and posit conclusively that liberty is real, in a political sense, and that I could draw upon personal experiences to validate this conviction and hopefully offer an example of fun, accessible, and life-changing political engagement for my peers.

If my time in Latin America taught me anything, however, it is that life rarely works as neatly as we would like. All three of the paradigms I fleshed out have grains of truth and glaring flaws. My experiences could be interpreted in one, all, or none of the paradigms. The truth that

I set out to capture has proven much more elusive than I imagined. What follows, then, is less of a conclusion on this project and more of "a call for future research," as the academic field likes to label incomplete ideas. Neoliberalism, materialism, and constructivism are certainly all incomplete ideas.

Neoliberalism enjoys data and precedent as supporters. The idea that everyone is ultimately accountable for their own actions is popular and has been passed down to children across all political affiliations as an immutable truth across the Western Hemisphere. But whereas the idea of personal accountability has meant a gradual limitation of the "self" in the United States to literally mean only one's personal self, the power of family and neighbor are much stronger in the places that we visited. Poncho, our rickshaw driver in Mancora, is a great grandfather at 65 and is the youngest of 12. His political beliefs reminded me of some of the older gentlemen of congregations of my hometown, Jacksonville Beach; like the men I met at church congregations or teaching history classes in high school, Poncho has a steadfast respect for others that is grounded in an expectation of respect for his own decisions. He lives humbly and drinks often, but he smiles more than anyone I've ever met, and the man – with his grandchildren, his career, and a stunningly beautiful beach town to call home – says that his life is truly complete. As a boy growing up, Poncho lived during a very tumultuous time in Peru, when the US-backed dictator underwent a radical program of "de-education" to encourage working at home instead of going to schools as well as a massive curriculum change that more progressive Peruvian statesmen are still trying to completely overturn. Neoliberalism, in the strictest sense, purchases "liberty" – respect for one's actions, and respect for other's actions – with reeducation, force, and coercion. It is a mindset passed down between generations and

nurtured through hard work and personal victories. Like the mountains of central Colombia or the deserts of northern Peru, freedom in the Neoliberal sense is rugged and yet beautiful.

But is Neoliberalism an effective paradigm at increasing the well-being of a nation? Looking at the numbers alone, one might think so. All four countries have grown economically, politically, and socially in the past fifty years. Their states have been under various degrees of US influence, ranging from the complete ownership of Panama to the constant struggle against Peruvian and Colombian guerilla organizations, for most of the 20th century. And while it is undeniable that this influence has resulted in an increase in wealth, the most casual observer would argue that neither order nor equality are particularly present characteristics of any of the countries we visited. The aristocratic division of power that Neoliberal "freedom" justifies secures opportunity for those with wealth, who invariably come from families and industries that have long enjoyed considerable advantages over the vast majority of their countrymen. To say that a Neoliberal approach to securing liberty is particularly successful is to close our ears to the sounds of hobbled children begging for food in Lima, or to shield our eyes from the mangled steel bird that suffered from a drug cartel's grenade attack in central Medellin. Neoliberalism has brought Panama, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru to where they are today. How we evaluate the condition of these countries in relative terms may generally be positive, but if we look at the quality of life for the millions waiting for reliable access to basic needs, an opportunity for their children to live outside of a sustenance-agriculture based lifestyle, or politicians that are not bought or killed every other year, then indictments of Neoliberalism cannot be spread more widely.

The central problem with the Neoliberal appreciation of freedom is that political freedom is neither defined nor valued. Dictator and reformer alike wax poetic about the benefits of a free

press, opportunities for business, and access to education, and yet once in power fail to deliver. If politicians are not accountable to the public for their decisions, and they do not act in response to what the vast majority of constituents want, then any future promises made using the logic of individual liberty falls on deaf ears. Apathy, as discussed earlier, becomes a psychological tactic to evade dashed hopes of a better system. And with so much required for the poor and middle classes in these countries to stay alive day-to-day, it is a waste of valuable attention to think about abstract promises.

Here, Materialism offers a much stronger argument for liberty; whereas Neoliberal-minded leaders and individuals defined what a nation that realized liberty looks like, acted in ways to deliberately avoid or circumnavigate those goals, sold their "success" to an uninformed public, and violently repressed challenges to this process, Materialism measures success without the need for rhetoric. How do you know if you are "free?" Under the materialist paradigm, one is free if one has the power to act without need. "Are you free?" becomes a question of access to medical care, clean water, clean food, shelter, reliable income, public transportation, justice for criminals, and a leader who promotes these goals even if it draws ire from economic partners. Many progressive reformers have used these goals in some fashion to justify their actions and motivate their respective interest groups. Outside Neira, Guillermo and I shared a conversation about how he almost joined the FARC when he was younger; the local *autodefensas* (armed conservative paramilitary groups) had very publically slaughtered a mother in his town and the young men were determined to join the FARC to assist in their national campaign against the paramilitary groups as well as the government which endorsed them. And since every young Colombian male is required to either join the military, police, or prison guard league, Guillermo was intent on escaping a fate of near-certain death by joining an organization which would teach

him how to fight. He changed his mind when a travelling professor encouraged him to go to college and learn about what he hated so much; now, as a recipient of grant funding from the European Union to establish universities across Central America and bring higher education to rural students, Guillermo views the struggle of the region much differently and denounces the violence advocated for by the FARC.

Guillermo turned out to be a revolutionary, but instead of killing people, he raised people to appreciate the world around them in a different way. Like Poncho, Guillermo feels free, but not because his rights were respected; rather, Guillermo had to struggle to ensure that his opportunity was not wasted, and he feels convinced that teaching other young people how to take advantage of an education is the most liberating action one can take. And unlike other conceptions of liberty, Materialism's focus on the alleviation of material concerns makes this approach to politics much more convincing. Neira's first well was funded when a local shopkeeper went door-to-door with a hat to fundraise. Less than a year later, the town had clean water. There was no leader required and no promises had to be made. But is it sustainable? Fundamentally, the staying power of populist, materialistic liberation is questionable. Popular organization suffers an unmistakable disadvantage in a political climate that historically favors strong men and military power. And as local populations act to secure their liberty when provincial or a national government has failed them, they draw the ire of the powers that be. States dependent on a tight control of economic activity supported by violent means do not need local municipalities thriving without the attention of the government, for they may set an example that encourages other municipalities to disregard their superiors.

And yet beyond the stark confines of both Neoliberal and Materialist definitions of liberty, a "third rail" is developing that draws upon the best that both paradigms have to offer.

This path has not been tread by any individual nor can it find much academic support, and yet it has grown remarkably integrated in to all four nations that we visited. Constructivism essentially defines liberty as "whatever you want it to be" and in doing so desanctifies the concept to make it less impactful within political discourse. This is not an unintentional development; across the region, people from all strata of society are arguing for a "reset" of conventional politics. These trends were personified by the conversation with Andres in Panama City, where he elaborated on the history of Panama City and Amador Island and spoke of the general recognition of corruption as we looked at the first-world skyline of the city's coastline; or by the conversation with Sophie on board the *Amande* to Cartagena, where she talked of the shared frustration at all of her ports of call between the dock workers and ship hands over the rabidly globalizing nature of the shipping and tourism industries. Like in the United States, this trend could generally be described as "populism," in the sense that there are several prevailing lines of thought held in common amongst the peoples of different nations. A sharp detachment from populism in the United States, however, is an appreciation for foreign cultures. Here, the Constructivist paradigm has strong support: in Cuzco, the intermingling of Chinese business owners, Peruvian tourism agencies, Quechua-speaking cab drivers and white tourists eager to experience the culture has produced a status quo which, while certainly not equitable, has dramatic advantages over a system which ideologically justifies the censorship of certain ideas, which both Neoliberal and Materialist conceptions of liberty often justify.

This "third rail" of politics is a response to trends that affect pretty much everyone, and the growth of issues that affect more people has led to a growth in an appreciation and respect for competing ideas about freedom. Most, if not all of the people we spoke to said that they believed in climate change because it affected them in their daily lives, and they all wanted their elected

leaders to stand up to industries which harmed their ecosystems. Everyone we spoke to claimed that corruption was a major factor in their distaste in their government, and that local governments were much more trustworthy and accountable than distant stakeholders. These ideas are not inherent to a Constructivist paradigm or worldview, but what was astounding was the degree of support that any effort to combat climate change or stem corruption had amongst people as diverse as Jorge and Juan or Andrea and Poncho. As structural problems that affect everyone become more significant than the individual policy decisions of leaders, an appreciation of the fellow neighbors suffering at your side will grow. There is no precedent to evaluate how a non-partisan, populist-centered conception of politics could develop in the region however, so it will be interesting to experience the development of populist politics in the coming years.

So is liberty real? As a measurable, quantifiable value, I do not believe it can be. Liberty is a valuable concept because of the diversity of thought it encompasses and the sheer volume of experiences it encapsulates. There is no way to bottle liberty and market it to an audience, whether that target audience are my fellow countrymen and women or our neighbors across the planet. As my time in South America taught me, the actions of motivated idealists can have terrible and beautiful consequences regardless of their justification. As South America warily steps forward in to the future, I genuinely hope to return to Panama, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru in my lifetime to witness the progress that these nations are undeniably destined to undergo.

# Appendix A – Collected Journal Entries

All writings were written, compiled, and published electronically on *www.gatomaldito.wordpress.com*. All work is the author's original, edited to correct for formatting mistakes and minor grammatical mistakes. Many pictures have been removed from the original postings to condense the final writings and due to their irrelevancy with the text. No further edits have been made.

**Day 1: Panama City [June 5]**

I've never written for any consistent amount of time, and although I truly do love to write, there is anxiety in my hands thinking about the task I've set for myself over these next two months. As part of the University of South Florida Honors College's thesis requirement, I've decided to spend two months backpacking across Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru with my partner Molly and record our observations. The thesis is about the language of political liberty in these countries; I want to compare how these Latin American cities show government power, defend civil interest, and repress dissent. Do people in these countries have freedom? How do I

measure that freedom? What are the signs that a "free people" would even show to a 21-year-old American?

So I'm trying to figure out how to ask these kinds of questions without knowing how to speak Spanish, days after rushing from Colorado to Nebraska to Florida (sharing a few familial stressors and many relationship milestones with Molly) and showing up at the Orlando airport with about five minutes of sleep under my hat. Security was insane and they confiscated an heirloom from my departed Uncle Stuart, which was up until the checkpoint just a quirky fork-and-spoon camping tool but turned out to have a blade rusted inside. But we make it on to the plane and are informed that if the flight attendant doesn't think we can comprehend enough Spanish she might move us away from our two seats next to the emergency exit, to which I wanted to respond that if we needed to use an emergency exit on a passenger airline then understanding Spanish would probably be the last thing on anyone's mind. Copa Airlines played a Spanish-language version of The Suffragette, which was cosmically fitting in a way, and we ate a marvelous chicken-and-cheese sandwich while dozing in and out over the Gulf of Mexico's ethereally low cloud coverage.

I share these details because it's important to understand my mindset before landing in Panama City. I was a customer, with an understanding of what was expected on my end and what was expected on the company's end of our transaction. For an activity that places a hundred strangers within sneezing distance for three hours, flying in a commercial airliner is a uniquely impersonal experience. There is an understanding of privacy and an expectation that whispering is about as loud a noise as anyone can make.

There is nothing private about Panama City. I'm still digesting all of the experiences we walked through in our first day here, but here are a few notable observations:

Panama City has traffic lanes, but you wouldn't know it. Each space between cars on the freeway was occupied by a motorcyclist – oftentimes a courier, but more frequently one of the police department's tandem bike teams, with two men dressed in "camouflage black" and one carrying an assault rifle pointed towards the sky – or a salesman peddling corn or water. Our taxi driver was kind to us aliens, but three cars butted up against the cement walls of an exit because he cut them off, and he didn't quite seem to care.

Later in the afternoon, I understood why wearing pants was a bad idea. The humidity was unbelievable. I've lived in Florida my entire life but it was orders of magnitude more humid here than Jacksonville or Tampa. With the humidity came the smell of sweat. It might sound disgusting, but honestly, the cocktail of body odor, Pacific sea salt, and street food stands every ten feet made me reconsider what it means "to smell." Nothing here smells like, well, nothing; everything has a marker, a scent, and whole blocks seem to share a familiar smell.

In the evening we ate at the Mercado de Mariscos (the fish market for my mom), which was nestled between a Miami-esque overdeveloped strip of high rise apartments and the Panamanian old town of San Felipe. Sitting down for dinner was a challenge, not because of availability but because every table was right next to every other table. The hostess stepped on to a chair at one point to show us to our seat, and merchants weaved between the sea of plastic chairs hard-selling roses to women seated with their boyfriends or light-up toy guns to children in front of their scorned parents.

I leaned over to Molly at one point during dinner and asked her if she thought the Mercado was a public or a private space. It's owned by someone, clearly, but to call it private would seem absurd. Right away we are able to see a public usage of space that contradicts our American binaries, and that challenges our understandings of how space is supposed to be utilized.

I will be writing one of these blog posts a day, attempting to make sense of my experiences and trying to develop a plan of attack for this thesis. Did I mention that my advisors have jointly recommended close to 25 books for me to read by the time I graduate next May? If they're reading this, I may have left them in Tampa. Don't want to spend my time in Panama burying my nose in a book when I could be doing field research with Molly.

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**Day 2: Panama City [June 6]**


Before I say anything else, it is incredibly hot here in Panama City. How people have lived here for centuries is beyond me. Maybe the heat helps to explain why I haven't met many Panamanians in the United States – in the same way that an average December evening in

Omaha is uncomfortable to Molly and her family but horrifyingly cold to myself, the heat in Florida must be run-of-the-mill to many Panamanians but even colder evenings in Tampa would be freakishly alien to people here. But I digress.

We went to see the Panama Canal yesterday, labeled as a "modern wonder of the world" by signs leading up to Miraflores, the district of Panama City that the canal resides in. After an hour and a half trying to make sense of the bus terminal, Molly and I were helped by a smiling Dominican family on to the right bus. The government has made a concerted effort to modernize the bus system, but the vast majority of citizens still use these old school buses with wild painting (and an abundance of sex symbols), giving inter-state travel a colorful accent.

But anyways, we found (!) the Canal and spent the afternoon watching, well, this:


An excited announcer switched between Spanish and broken English as a crowd of almost 300 (mostly white) tourists sweated and looked at each other, and I'm pretty sure that their thoughts mirrored my own: is this it?

The Canal is essentially three sets of "locks," and each lock is a two-lane swimming pool that raises and lowers to allow vessels to pass through. But the entire process seemed utterly

outdated. In the distance, the lake connecting to the last lock before the Pacific Ocean (the lock which all of us sweaty tourists were told that we had to see) held dozens of cargo vessels each waiting to pass through. And don't get me wrong, the engineering is spectacular.

But Panama exists because of this structure. In the early 1900s, the United States supported an insurrectionist movement in Colombia to "liberate" Panama. Panamanians used to be ethnically separate from the rest of Colombia (the Spanish-transmitted small pox extinguished hundreds of distinct tribes, many which archeologists are only just now uncovering), but following centuries of imperialistic control by Spain, tribes and cultures mixed and differences were diluted. In fact, many Latin American states sought to remove the internationally-recognized borders separating existing states and combine into a newer "Gran Colombia", following in the footsteps of liberator Simon Bolivar and expressing a supranational sentiment advocated for by leaders like Hugo Chavez in contemporary times.

So the United States wasn't acting to "liberate" an oppressed population – they sought to benefit from a canal which the French had started constructing in the 1870s, which would provide merchant vessels with a shortcut through the isthmus of Panama and avoid a perilous journey around South America and through the Strait of Magellan. This sentiment was actually a campaign point in President Teddy Roosevelt's election platform, and he would go on to parade the "Great White Fleet" (a moniker for our nation's first deep-water, far-reaching navy) through the Panama Canal and over to Japan, China, India, and eventually over to Western Europe. Just in case people forgot who the eminent world power was going to be.

Moral of the story: the United States wanted an independent Panama in order to have complete political control of the Canal, and we maintained that control until January 1, 2000 – only

relinquishing control because of an agreement that President Carter made in response to massive student protests in the mid-1960s.

So I'm thinking about all of these things as Molly and I are walking around the US-funded Canal Museum (complete with a $15 3-D movie that, well, sucked) and, while I learned some pretty interesting things about how we moved a lot of dirt from the bottom of these lakes, learned absolutely nothing about how the workers were treated, how many Panamanians died during construction, any of the context of the 1963 Martyr's Movement (leading to Carter's agreement), any of the context of George H. W. Bush's invasion to oust Noriega in the late 1980s, or really anything of relevance to a conversation about liberty in Latin America.

We did have a wonderful cab driver, however. Giovanni was born in Panama but grew up in Brooklyn, going on to serve the US Army in Colorado Springs (side note: Molly and I spent a week in Colorado Springs this past May, so that was pretty cool). He never saw combat but became very calloused about Panama upon returning; "Everything was better when the Americans were here," he told us as we pestered him about politics. "When the Americans were here, Panamanians made $18-$19 an hour working on the Canal. After they left, they made $3.50." He spoke at length about how pretty much nobody votes in Panama because every President is as corrupt as the last, and that the government only cares about heavily policing the parts that tourists go to (more on policing in Panama during a later post).

Giovanni's conversation with us ended as we entered San Felipe, an old part of Panama City. But he helped me put together some ideas about poverty, authoritarian politics, and nationalism that make a lot of sense in my head but need a few more days to gestate before I put them on paper.

Last but not least: San Felipe has a lot of great wine. We're in Panama to have fun, too.

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**Day 3: Panama City [June 7]**

Nothing academic happened yesterday. The city had been getting more and more humid for several days until noon, when the sky opened up and rain drenched everything in sight. Molly and I had to spend the morning dealing with some unfinished business from Florida, and by the time we were ready to explore it was pretty much impossible to go outside. So instead we bunkered down, found some cheap liquid entertainment, and watched the Panama-Bolivia Copa America game with some very enthusiastic fans.

So instead of logging my observations on this post, I want to put down how I imagine this thesis materializing over the next few months.

I came up with the idea for this thesis while taking Professor David Garrison's Geoperspectives class last spring. The class focused on the philosophical work of several Ghanaian intellectuals, among them Kwasi Wiredu, a brilliant mind in the field of linguistics and political rhetoric. Wiredu's contribution to intellegensia was the concept of conceptual decolonization (CD). CD is a mental exercise that asks practicioners to analyze their thoughts using three crucial criteria:

What is the belief that you hold?

How is that belief constructed by the social, environmental, and linguistic factors in your life?

Can your belief exist without those factors in place?

Wiredu was writing for a Ghanaian audience that was struggling with a common political challenge in post-colonial Africa: how can a country that organically speaks dozens of non-Western languages operate in a state that uses an imperial language? CD is a test for Ghanaians to discern what English (the former colonial power in Ghana) political theorems were meritious in their own right and should be preserved, which ideas were ineffective because of conceptual differences owing themselves to the vast dissimilarity between English and Akan (the native language used by Wiredu and 30% of modern Ghanaians) and which ideas, when examined using an Akan conceptual schema, were in place because of the old imperial order and don't need to exist in a state consisting of non-imperial politics.

CD was especially exciting for me because Wiredu framed his idea in terms of how an African philosophical tradition could be used as a platform to address non-African intellectual dilemmas and thus impact the non-African world. Wiredu was concerned with proving to Ghanaians that the unique nature of their language, history, and social structure could produce a wholly independent set of solutions for the rest of the world – and in doing so, inspire a new generation of Ghanaian authors to craft solutions to the host of problems affecting their home and their continent.

Looking at my political beliefs through the lens of CD very much challenged many previously-untouched maxims. The morality of globalized democracy is an excellent example of this. Growing up in a conservative household, I always believed that the rest of the world would be safer, richer, and happier under the auspices of democratic governance. Wiredu pretty much decimated that belief; I was unable to disassociate my democratic advocacy from my family, my culture, and my language (i.e. the way that the English language attaches pedagogically positive cues to words like "freedom," "independence," and "self-governance"). Most states are not

contemporarily or historically democratic, and many existing democratic states are and have been very authoritarian.

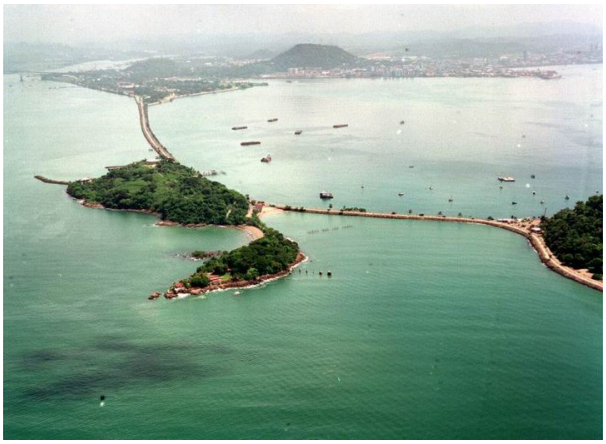
CD applies to much more than politics, however, Wiredu wanted readers to critically look at their beliefs on femininity and masculinity, wealth and poverty, and strength and weakness. The text our class used in Professor Garrison's Geoperspectives class, Cultural Universals and Particulars, devoted chapters to pulling apart these ideas. There really is no idea that is beyond the kind of analysis that Wiredu proposes, and as I found each one of my ideas growing less stable than they were before, I began to ask myself: what do we talk about when we talk about freedom?

Like, really, what is freedom? Is freedom the ability to go where you want, and do what you want to do when you get there? Is freedom the nature of humanity, and what does that entail? Do my rights as an American guarantee some sort of freedom, and if so, does their lack of universality (by nature of my status as an American citizen) deny such freedom a permanent quality? And if I consider myself "free," how do I evaluate the lives of those with seemingly more freedom and, conversely, those who live in places with less?

These questions kept me awake for many nights. The only plausible solution, I figured, was to live out of a backpack in a few foreign countries and try to find some answers.

It's time to go explore. On another rainy day, I'll detail why we chose to come to Latin America, the process I'm using to answer some of these questions, and a few nascent theories that are running through my head.

**Day 4: Panama City [June 8]**



The heat has claimed its first victim. Molly's computer overheated last night, meaning that we get to investigate a new facet of Panamanian life today: access to consumer electronic repair. Which may not sound like much, but the more Molly and I talk about it, the more significant this aspect of life becomes. Think about how much we depend on electronics in the United States. Cell phone permeation alone is massive, and I've yet to encounter a family that doesn't have access to a computer. Businesses depend on computers in a way that would have been incomprehensible 30 years ago.

So what happens to a society that doesn't have a functioning consumer electronics repair infrastructure in the 21st century? We're set to find out today. PS- Apple, you should really consider setting up more stores in Latin America than the two you have in Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro.

Anyways, the two of us had a wonderful Tuesday. We walked close to 10 miles, from our metro station to the island of Amador. Amador floats a mile off the coast of Panama City, connected by a causeway that seems to stretch on forever. Before getting to Amador, we really knew

nothing else about the place. A lot of people retire there, and apparently Panama City is one of the top five places to retire in the world, so maybe there would be amenities closer to what one might expect in Miami than in a Central American republic.

The walk was long. We hugged the sides of an expressway that was overgrown from years of mismanagement by jungle-like vegetation and passed several former shopping centers and artisan cooperatives that hadn't experienced the surge of growth which has so greatly impacted the city proper. At about 9 miles in, we found a breezy bike rental shop (reminding me of the closing scene of The Bourne Identity, where Matt Damon appears like a ghost in the doorway of his lover's moped rental shop somewhere in the Adriatic Sea) and enjoyed a cooling Pacific Breeze as we closed in on our destination.

Except that our destination wasn't a Miami look-alike or an island paradise. With the exception of a main road, Amador is completely privatized, warding stark white resort towers off into the upper limits of the island's mountains with imposing gates and shotgun-armed security guard checkpoints.

We found a sunny open-air restaurant, El Bucanero, and enjoyed margaritas, paella, and ceviche. The waiter was remarkably pleasant and offered to take us to the roof of the establishment after we finished our meal. Molly and I were breathless with the view. For the first time since we arrived in Panama City, the entire modernistic skyline was before us. It stretched on for miles, with metallic twisting spines and gravity-defying backward bends seeming to dance in the cloudless sunlight.

Andres (now sharing one of our cigarettes – truly, a universal sign of appreciation), our waiter, remarked that all of the construction had been completed in the past 16 years. Molly couldn't

believe it. "None of this was here in 2000?" Andres shook his head. "Once the Americans left, we used the Canal to tax shipping. We paid for all of these buildings with trade income. Everything is cleaner, bigger, and safer. And everything is Panamanian." He pointed at two squat, ugly towers away from the bulk of skyline. "Trump's Towers." "Trump es maldito," I quipped. We all laughed.

We digested what he said before Andres turned around and pointed at what looked like cement ruins in the side of the hill, literally pressed against the back wall of El Bucanero. "When [the] Americans were here, Amador was a base. Panamanians were not allowed onto the island at all, not even to work." We couldn't believe it. Personally, I was surprised that my uncle, who was formerly stationed in Panama, had failed to mention that little detail, although to be fair I never pressed him. "Since the Americans have left, this island has become a tourist destination. But it is all privately owned, and Panamanians are still not allowed to live on the island. Even though it is our land, that we built with our hands."

We returned our bikes to the shop, but we walked in silence trying to make sense of what he told us. What existential threat did the Panamanians pose to the occupying American forces? How different was our segregation of Amador from the segregation of Birmingham? Particularly, our cab driver from the Canal several days ago, Gustavo, made a point to say that everything had "gone to shit" since the Americans had left the Canal in Panamanian hands. His narrative seems to contradict with Andres' narrative. Is there room for both understandings of contemporary politics? How does class – Gustavo is a taxi driver, while Andres works in a tourist-centric resort restaurant – play into these understandings of the American role in Panama?

So many questions to answer.  As we experience our last full day in the city, I'm sure we'll find more questions than answers.  For the time being, however, we get to find a licensed Apple repair mechanic in a city that struggles to have adequate lighting at night.  If that's not an adventure, I don't know what is.

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**Days 5-10: The San Blas Islands [June 8 – June 13]**

Where to start, where to start…

The past week has been one of the most beautiful of my life. Molly and I have spent five days as passengers on a sailboat, traveling between Porto Lindo, Panama and Cartagena, Colombia. We weaved in and out of the San Blas Islands, ate fresh lobster with the indigenous Kuna people, snorkeled in clear coral reefs, and experienced an arduous two-day open sea voyage to round out the experience. The colors and smells were so unlike anything I have ever felt before and, to be honest, it felt incredible disconnecting from devices and responsibilities to enjoy the company of our crew, fellow passengers, and all-encompassing sea. We landed in Cartagena and thus far

have been blown away by the rush of energy and life that Colombia has provided. Warning: this will be a long post.

To begin, I had been having a difficult time making sense of what Molly and I had experienced in Panama City. The people were lively yet unhappy. The city was modern and yet starkly out of place with its environment. Different accounts lamented the loss of authority with the departure of the American occupying forces yet others boasted of the progress made since independence. It is a confusing place to introduce a gringo to Latin American life, and although the history and prominence of Panama City merits a large place in Latin American history, I would not recommend it as an appetizer to the wonder of the region.

Our last day in Panama City was difficult. We had to go to a mall to attempt to ship Molly's computer back to the states, if not repair it on the spot. It is very frustrating to have a desire to experience the "true" culture of a country and yet spend two of your six days in the country's largest shopping mall, and yet as we wandered around the commercial center a horrible realization dawned on us…

In the center of the food court sat a very large, carnival-esque merry-go-round. We had noticed it on one of our earlier days in the mall but gave it barely any attention. But on that second day, as we were sitting in the food court trying to plan out our next beleaguered move, we saw a child beg her mother to ride it. It was the first person we had seen ride the attraction and even the attendant looked surprised.

Imagine the scene: hundreds of Panamanians, half wearing fashionable bright polos with khaki pants and sandals and half resting in tshirts that seemed to stick to their bodies through a mixture of sheer determination and sweat, eating in a food court fenced in by all of the chains we expect

in Florida – two KFCs, a Wendy's, and the King, a McDonald's bordered by a chain of heavy customers. The air is stale and the furniture sticks to your legs like melted candy, your drink is too hot for the ice to float, and your food soaks through a thin paper plate resting on top of a plastic tray that has been spilled on, dropped, eaten off of, and thrown for days without sanitary attention.

And in the background, rising above the chorus of low Spanish whispering and the heavy rain of hundreds of steps, rises the sound of a carnival. A metallic, rusty chain pulls the merry-go-round in to motion, and the sickening mechanical hum of a freak show floats through the air as the sole child passenger realizes with despair that her unicorn is the only seat that doesn't pitch up and down with the circular motion. The music grows louder and louder and then finally the attendant orders the blank-faced child back into the hands of an unamused mother before they collapse back in to the sea of hungry customers.

Is this it? Is this the summation of all of their effort? Was the century-long occupation ended so that Panama could resume her place in the shadow of Big Brother's carnival rides and Big Macs with cheese?

We spent the afternoon rehydrating (when I say Panama is hot, I mean that I will never complain about a humid day in Tampa again) before beginning on our journey to Colombia. The shuttle taking us to Portobelo, our departure point, arrived three hours late, but we spent the hot afternoon with our future passenger-to-be John waiting in our hostel's balcony. The shuttle ride was a trip; John is a charismatic Aussie who gave up a career with Deutsch Bank in London to explore the world, and spent the ride talking about his exciting evenings in Panama. A German couple, Kaithi and Haute, joined us on the shuttle and shared a brief moment of terror with us as the shuttle driver asked for money to pay a toll but which sounded at the time like a very forceful request for a bribe. They would also be joining us on the Amande (our sailboat) the next morning, but for the time being we had the wonderfully uniting experience of weaving in and out of Panama's completely undeveloped rural road system.

We met the rest of the passengers at the remarkably genuine Captain Jack's bar, a small hole hostel and restaurant run by the only resident American in the port of Portobelo. The atmosphere was astounding; cheap authentic curry and burgers paired wth cheaper booze was a wonderful preface for meeting our captain Victor. The wiry and serious Argentinian took our passports for immigration purposes (never a comfortable exchange) and left the seven of us to imbibe. In addition to John, Kaithi and Haute, the Amande would be the home of the Belgian Wout and Jasmijn (an antique motorcycle racer and a soap opera actress) and the Dutch Maarten and Yvette (a pharmaceutical salesman and nurse).

In between sporadic, rolling blackouts brought on by the ominous thunderstorm and before our last-minute rush to the town's only liquor store, some beautiful conversation was made. Everyone had spent sometime in Panama City before meeting at Captain Jack's and we all had very similar feelings about the country. Our conversation soon turned to politics; after some

apparently critical comments that I made about the Canal, each nationality took turns remarking about the frustration of American foreign policy. What followed was a humbling experience. Haute discussed the impact of the Bush-Gore election and how voting for a President shouldn't be a huge affair in foreign states, but that people knew our future leader had the ability to end the world so the news cycle was important to watch. Jasmijn brought up the complete impoverishment of the Panamanian people; at one point, she remarked that the state of Panamanian society after a century of American oversight was reminiscent of the Congolese following Belgian imperial control. I eventually said that there was such a disconnect between how American foreign policy was perceived domestically and abroad – that Americans are told that :anywhere an American flag touches the ground, a vibrant liberal democracy follows, even on the fucking moon." We were several drinks in at that point.

We split up in to two pick up trucks and rocked out to Stairway to Heaven as the owner of Captain Jack's drove us to the final departure point. The ride was horrifying; unsaved roads mixed with heavy rain had caused two separate semi trucks to flip in the evening, and singing loudly despite al of the Jurrasic vegetation made for a life-long memory. We threw our bags into

dinghy seat Porto Lindo after we met Victor again and spent the night in our tight cabins onboard the Amande.

Before I give an account of the island cruise, it is important for the heritage of the Kuna people to share the story of the San Blas islands. As with everything in Panama, the story begins with the Canal. When the Colombian government demanded that the American contractors pay a larger portion of future trade proceeds to their state, President Theodore Roosevelt was not impressed. He responded by supporting a group of self-interested separatists with individual bribes in exchange for a lower share of trade proceeds, and used the threat of naval intervention to scare the Colombian government into accepting Panamanian independence. Under the Colombian government many indigenous groups enjoyed complete autonomy (one of the promises of Simon Bolivar's original independence of Gran Colombia from Spain) and the Kuna people counted themselves among those benefactors. Under the American occupation, however, Panamanian police began setting up coast guard stationso n their islands, and in 1920, a grou of several hundred Kuna surprised the Panamanian police and murdered all twenty of them in the middle of the night.

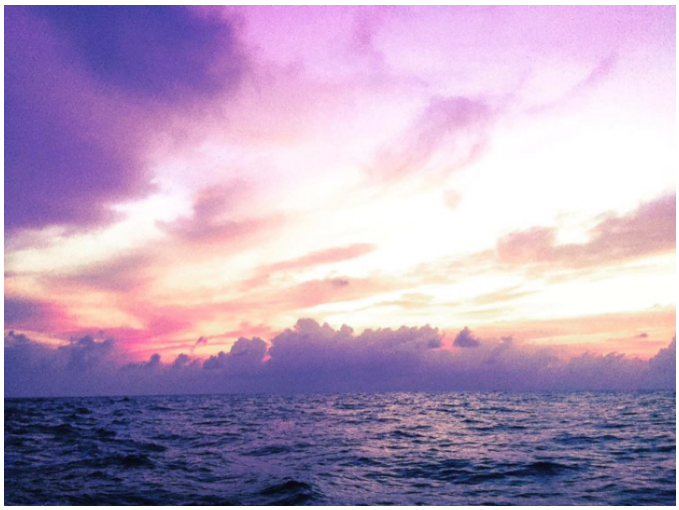
The Kuna then declared themselves part of Colombia, but the American government was worried that the islands would be used as staging points for a larger invasion, so the Panamanians compromised and gave the Kuna people a choice: allow outside contact on a handful of your larger islands, and we will grant you complete autonomy over the rest; otherwise, the government would allow the American navy to intervene. The Kuna people accepted and to this day maintain complete control over their land. Everything on the San Blas Islands and in the water around them belong to the Kuna; if your ship breaks down and the Kuna people come to your rescue, they will keep your ship. Even taking coconuts off the islands, which cost a dollar if

bought from the villagers, will bring about a $300 fine. As a result of their distrust of outsiders, those Kuna who leave the Islands are banished indefinitely, and ritualistic purging of those believed to have mixed blood has been known to occur.

Today, the Kuna people speak little Spanish and practically no English. Their interactions with the outside world and very tourist-heavy; from a young age, the Kuna built single-trunk canoes worthy of traversing their island home to fish and catch lobster. They approached the Amande and many other foreign ships with handfuls of fresh lobster (of which we indulged, happily) and sell their catch for next to nothing. Their current status is relatively stable, as their tribal counsel intervenes little in the lives of individuals and a peace-loving creole religion dominates the culture. Unfortunately, climate change is threatening to wipe the Kuna off the face of the earth. Ocean pollution and acidification has wrecked the fish population and is wiping out the coral reefs that are vital to their ecosystem. And by 2050, the Panamanian government predicts that their entire population will have to be relocated to mainland Panama due to rising sea levels.

All of this was shared with me by Victor, the owner of Captain Jack's, and a local elder who gracefully shared the inner workings of his people as his wife and daughters shared their craft bracelets with the rest of the crew. It was, quite possibly, a once in a lifetime conversation.

While intellectual conversations about the Kuna were admittedly depressing, our interactions with and among the people were wonderful. One evening, we filled up empty beer cans with sea water and rolled coconuts in an impromptu game of bowling, which we shared with the young boys watching and laughing with glee. Another night, several young women joined in a game of volleyball and promptly destroyed us – we joked that volleyball was the national game of the island. Muscular dogs trained to catch lobster in the surf played catch with our frisbee, and a dozen different canoes approached our boats to say hi and climb around the non-wooden boat. And there was snorkeling, and diving and so much drinking, and all in all my time in the San Blas Islands make up the kind of travel blog that people back at home get sick of reading about. Suffice to say, I will miss that place.



The last two days of the ride were not as enjoyable. Victor was determined to beat a building storm and sailed for thirty hours straight. I've never been sea sick, but the fifteen foot pitching,

combined with the dark, damp and stuffy cabins, absolutely broke me. Before I move on to Cartagena, I want to mention Sofie, our French chef on the boat and VIctor's first mate and young lover. I hope that you find lasting romance in California, but for heaven's sake, Victor is not happy enough to be with someone as full of life as you. But I guess that's why you're going to California. Your patrons on the Amande wish you good times and great meals.

I want to write about Cartagena but I believe that it deserves its own post. Besides, the city is calling, and the locals say that Cartagena is best experienced at night.

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**Day 11: Cartagena [June 14]**

I can not think of a better introduction to Colombia than the city of Cartagena.  Brightly colored tight streets weave through diverse and growing communities, sweltering with the Caribbean heat during the day and igniting with a goldenrod sunlight in the evening.  Avenues are full of

tourists buying delicious empanadas and ignoring (or not) the cat calls and cocaine solicitations that add to a chorus of sound throughout the day. People here are proud – proud of their families, proud of their neighborhoods, and proud of the strong steps made by their homeland in the years following the worst kinds of guerilla and street warfare. Colombia has promised us an unforgettable journey, and Cartagena is a hell of a way to start that story.

Molly and I are staying in Getsemani, a hostel-packed district characterized by a wall built by slaves to protect the "entrance to South America." This wall has survived for centuries, encouraging a heavy degree of development (and discouraging an efficient traffic system) as bars and churches populated the region. All of the roads are one-way, but the lanes are more appropriately understood as suggestions and bicyclists mix with legions of taxis that make any street crossing a heart stopping affair.

Getsemani has grown dramatically since a lasting peace was reached with the FARC militia in 2008. Before the peace, Getsemani was known for its prostitutes, gang violence, and drug dealers, and the surge of development hasn't completely stopped the historical economic keystones. Across from our hostel, the same four women grope passebys and joke with the

construction workers who frequent their corner. Walking down Media Luna, the main bar street of the barrio, literally dozens of young men shout “cocaina” at the gringos who respond with a mix of trepidation and knowing grins as motorcycling police weave through the throngs of drunk adventurers. Police here are very particular with their enforcement; drug dealers tip off the police to their underpaying or gullible customers, the police intimidate tourists (an honestly hilarious scene to watch for everyone but the mortified drug user), and then the police collect bribes. It’s a very efficient ecosystem that infringes on Western ethical norms while thinning out the number of drug-using travelers and harshly punishing the dealers who step outside the system by selling drugs to children.

This may not seem like a paradise, but it is. The world of Cartagena is lively and yet dark. It is the center of Afro-Caribbean culture in the country, proudly embracing a history of slave revolt instigated by Pero Romero on November 11th, 1811. The city was the first major Spanish possession to revolt against the crown and set an example for neighboring provinces while severely harming the economic viability of overseas imperialism. Imagine if there had been a successful slave revolt in New Orleans at the same time; the entire Southern economic system would have collapsed long before the Civil War as the slave-produced textile industry would have been unable to find a viable port for exportation. Cartagena’s port was the source of 50 times the amount of trade that New Orleans accounted for – understanding the passion and pride that Colombians have for this city is incredibly easy.


In stark contrast to Panama City, Cartagena was not raped by the overpasses and expressways that installed the de facto ghettos that we saw two weeks prior and which are familiar to anyone living in a large American city. The culture has been preserved, and local gathering places (such as Trinidad Square, a tight and lively courtyard outside of an abandoned church) feel safe and familial. Life has grown here, through the cracks and in the shadows, like resilient weeds; but instead of culling this organic progression, Colombians and Cartagenians have let this growth touch every wall, corner, and alley of their home. The effect is beyond comparison to anything I have seen in the States, and yet I have a feeling that it only for tells the next few months of our stay. I cannot wait to put that idea to the test.

Tomorrow will be an adventurous day; we will be taking a street art tour around Getsemani with a local artist before attempting to discover an affordable laundromat and enjoying a free salsa dancing lesson in the evening. If we're lucky, we may have secured our first true interview as well. I'll stay in touch.

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**Day 12: Cartagena [June 15]**

The struggle for a decent internet connection continues. Drafts get lost and formatting is difficult, so I apologize for the tardiness of my posting.


Colombia is one of eight or nine "mega diverse" countries in the world, meaning that the state contains severally vastly different ecosystems. Cartagena is the largest city along the Carribean coast of Colombia and most appropriately embodies the climate of the region: cool in the early morning, scorching until early afternoon, heat broken up by a mid-day shower, and then an evening that descends into comfortable humidity. The climate of Cartagena has helped contribute to a stereotype that we learned about today: people here go at their own pace. Benjamin Franklin famously is attributed with saying "Don't put off until tomorrow what can be done today." The local stereotype of Cartagena is "Don't do today what can be handled tomorrow."

The hot climate makes Cartagena a huge tourist destination, and the locals seem to love it; meeting the demands of tourists is an economic function that Cartagena has seemingly perfected, as the slew of hotels and hostels attests to. I hesitate to support this stereotype much further

because of the history of the city that we have learned about during a very informative walking tour of the town's street art. As a historically massive shipping and manufacturing center, Cartagena has an insidious reputation of being the "black Capitol" of Colombia. Slaves at one point outnumbered freedmen and the perception of Cartagena's racial makeup is insidiously commented on by many non-black Colombians in a fashion that reminds me of the way many in the South might have remarked about Atlanta in the 60's. The stereotype of Cartagena is further pushed into a darker corner when examined in full; as the hot, tourist center of Colombia, many non-Black people in Cartagena regard the placement of Afro-Caribbean's in the city's booming tourism and hospitality industries as "appropriate."

We learned about the Afro-Caribbean ancestry of Cartagena in a walking tour of the Getsemani barrio's street art. Christoph, a Belgian expat who travels searching for legendary works of urban art, led a group of twenty-some gringos on the most thorough exploration of Cartagenians history that this heart could handle. I remarked about the legendary slave revolt in 1811, which liberated the largest port in South America from the strongest empire in the world, in my last blog post. Christoph expounded upon the story; the city was besieged by the rest of Colombia relentlessly following this liberation, leading to an even greater harming of the post-racist society that Pero Romerez and his followers envisioned. The city survived due to it's accessibility to the ocean (allowing the town to circumnavigate attempts to starve out the resistors) and the slave built walls, whose construction was infamous enough that Christoph had to assure us that slave blood wasn't actually a construction material (!) as the legend goes. But, all in all, the history of struggle that the Cartagenians have undergone seems necessary for the resilient, proud, and hard-working city that we have been experiencing.

We continued on our tour, heat rising meters off the dusty back alleys and colorful avenues, and at each step Christoph's literation of this city's history really sunk in. Gabriel Garcia Marquez is eulogized on almost every street, as artists could express through abstract painting what Marquez expressed through the literary methodology of magical realism. One particular story was incredibly touching: in 2010, a young man challenged the country's ban on graffiti and street art by attempting to paint a mural in Bogota. The police shot and killed him on the spot, leading to a populist outcry. In Cartagena, that outcry was expressed by a massive day of street painting, during which the police let the artists continue with their craft. Since then, the city has officially banned all street art, but continues to allow artists who have the permission of community elders to paint in public spaces while the city actively encourages the creation of art on the buildings with the owner's consent.

Contemporarily, street art has been used to protest massive degrees of gentrification in the city. Above is a picture of a particularly witty creation; littered throughout the city are "se vende" signs, marking property that has been placed on the market within recent years. Incredible quantities of wealth from outside the city have been spent on buying real estate within Cartagena, pushing up the price of basic necessities and hurting long time residents as their communities are

bought up and dismantled for foreign commercial enterprises. Following a crackdown on money laundering by the cartels in the late 90's, thousands of drug-funded apartments began construction and the city's lack of a response signaled that crime organized gentrification was allowed.

Criminal housing inequities pale in comparison to corporate ventures, who see the stabilizing economy of Colombia as a new place to do business. The resulting business kills local economies in a way that can be understood by anyone whose small town, historical shopping centers were eaten away by the introduction of a WalMart; Exxon gas stations have been heavily vandalized after the company refused to hire local managers and instead imported American workers, effectively creating a glass ceiling for Colombians as they watch their local streets torn apart by car-centered construction fueled by a surge of cheap gas. In 2013, when Cartagena invited street artists from across the world to beautify Getsemani, a local petition forced non-Colombian businesses to only donate money without requiring publicity in return. Looking at the color today, the effect of that local focus is staggering.

Molly and I had the pleasure of recording an interview with Christoph later in the evening, and our conversation merits a stand-alone post which I'll be transcribing upon my return to the States

this August. But listening to his incredible story is worth the time; he became interested in street art as a way to connect to the people he helped find rehabilitation as a social worker in Belgium before traveling to Colombia. His story is unique, but it adds to the flavoring and substance of Cartagena as a whole. If you're traveling to Colombia in the near future, his tour is a must.

The lack of stories that I share about the night life in Cartagena should be an indication of high quality. Molly and I believe in earnest field research however, so that's all for now.

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**Day 13: Cartagena [June 16]**

Lost another draft. Struggling in paradise, as they say.

Today is Molly's birthday. It's the first birthday of hers that we've had the opportunity to celebrate together and the first one that we've spent in, well, another country, so we started the festivities last night and ended sometime around 4 in the morning. This was a Thursday night, mind you, and Media Luna's bars didn't close until they kicked us out early last night. Needless to say we're feeling it today.

Instead of boring readers (and potential future law school admission boards) with the details of last night, I wanted to share some thoughts on two very important aspects of Colombian culture.

The first is the concept of personal space. My brother participated in a foreign exchange program to India last year and has shared many different opinions on the concept of personal space in India, but one of his observations especially makes sense to me here today: in America, we have too much of it. Cartagena is not packed shoulder to shoulder with tourists or locals (the bars are a different story altogether) and yet the ease with which strangers approach each other is astounding. Last night, our friends and I asked for directions from this older woman and she promptly hurried over to within a foot of our faces. Her earnestness was visible on her face, and our Colombian hostel desk manager explained that Colombians rapidly "close the gap" with people they want to pay attention to – in fact, the faster one approaches a speaker is a sign of higher interest, while to many people standing in the same place as when a conversation started is a sign of disrespect.

We learned a lot about the Colombian idea of personal space during a day trip to the Volcan de Lodo el Totumo, or El Totuma, a large "mud volcano" outside of Cartagena. It was probably the weirdest thing that's happened to either of us in recent memory. Dozens of sweaty tourists from all over the world packed into shuttles and drove the fourth five minutes out to El Totuma without AC. We then lined up inside of what we were convinced was a middle school locker room from the 1800s while a stressed out tour guide shouted in broken English to leave all of our possessions on a table in the unlocked shower room. Making our way outside, we systematically climbed up fifty slippery, steep steps on what appeared to be the exterior of a large mole hill before reaching the stunning peak: a small, 10″ by 10″ suspiciously square pool of Matrix-grey

mud, at once both reflecting light like a mirror while betraying a consistency of soupy, warm PlayDoh.

Submersion was at this point inevitable, so Molly and I (each clad in our underwear, in public, at the top of a mud volcano – we were not prepared) stepped down a steep wiry ladder as local men covered head to toe in the stuff guide you in to the mud. These men are "massagers" – as in they excitedly glide tourists over the mud in to the arms of other men who proceed to slide mud over the bodies of completely shocked swimmers. Molly and I were in the know, as these "massagers" will charge tourists for their craft unless ordered to stop (Molly made sure that the men in that pool wouldn't get a dime), so instead we spent the better part of twenty minutes examining the incredible pressure on our abdomens, attempting to maintain some semblance of balance and control, and wondering what body part of which person just slid against the back of our legs.

It was a magical experience.

After walking down even steeper stairs and feeling hundred year old mud cake into literally every crevice of our bodies, village women herded us like cattle to the shores of local ponds and used bowls to frantically shower us. Having an Afro-Caribbean grandmother showering off

tourists with lake water in a bowl while attempting to give instructions in Spanish is an experience that I will never forget.

Molly and I spent the rest of the afternoon contemplating what had just happened, and while I'm sure there are lessons to be learned about the socio-cultural impact of El Totuma, it was just too weird of an experience to dwell on for any length of time. If that was uncomfortable reading, well, there's a reason I didn't use the pictures that were taken of us in the mud.

Sitting in the shuttle bus leads me to the next topic I want to discuss: food. I realized that I haven't spent any time describing food in this blog and I won't allow my writing to descend into a food review, but as we approached Playa Blanca (a beach included with the El Totuma tour), we could smell the fried fish in the air. I am convinced that Colombians have perfected the fried fish. It is buttery and warm and not too salty, requiring dexterity to navigate around the tiny bones but rewarding eaters with a juicy, lime-cured treat.

As I had to wake up at 6 am to catchup on my technically – hampered blogging opportunities, breakfast sounds pretty good right now. I should probably get on that.

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**Day 14: Medellin [June 18]**

*[There is some confusion in the dates that these posts were written, the dates they reference, and the dates they were published online. Please excuse the error.]*

Cartagena has given us many good memories and several late nights. We boarded a flight from Cartagena's international airport (situated in a poor suburb outside the city, and characteristically

surrounded by graffiti lamenting the destruction of local life due to the crushed property values in the neighborhood) around 3 in the afternoon and flew in to Medellin.

To be honest, I'm excited to write this, because what happens next is beautiful.

Molly and I were struck by the handsome airport in Medellin, and the cool air that greeted us was a much needed change after three weeks of hot weather. Several gentlemen helped us find the bus we needed to get to the bus terminal, displaying a forthcoming hospitality that stood in stark contrast to the polite but distant kindness of Cartagenians. We could feel that Medellin was about to offer something special.

Taking the bus into the city is a breathtaking ride. Medellin's airport is placed just outside of the valley city's territory, and the road in to town introduces travelers to the city with an unmatched grandeur. Medellin is built into the base of a valley and covers pretty much everything that the eye can see. In our afternoon bus ride, the sea of red brick and twenty floor buildings ending half a mile below the mountain road we descended upon was awash in a silver early evening light. White flowers flavor the view like snowflakes, contrasting with a verdant green and the flocks of black birds moving along the low-hanging rain clouds draping the expansive city.

Medellin is beautiful. I will never forget that first impression.

Getting to the bus station was easier than it should have been. Medellin's rate of car and motorcycle ownership has skyrocketed in the twenty years since it was labeled the most dangerous city on earth, and the freedom of mobility resulting from vehicle ownership helped earn Medellin the label of "The World's Most Innovative City" in 2013, beating out New York and Tel Aviv. Cars, taxis, and motorcycles moved through the main avenues like blood through a main artery, but the public buses have acces to special lanes which dramatically reduce the congestion of traffic.

Molly and I chose Medellin as our first AirBNB stop, but the host hadn't given us exact directions to her home. Which is difficult in a city of over thirty distinct neighborhoods and numbering upwards of three million people, only being topped by the capitol city Bogota. Our taxi driver didn't mind, however; Cesar has been driving taxis for over fourty years, and spent four years in the states as a factory worker. He kindly helped us with our terrible Spanish as he told us his complete life story; he fled Medellin due to horrible violence in the early 80s, worked to send his children to America to pursue a higher education, and proudly watched as each of his children became a doctor, engineer, and lawyer. He retired to his home town, struck by the progress it has made in two decades, and drives taxis "for the fun of it."

It was difficult to pay attention the entire time because of, well, Medellin. At night the city lights up like none that I have seen. The basin and oldest part of the city was constructed in the lowest apart of the valley, and subsequent centuries saw the growth of small towns along the cliffs and foothills surrounding the city's heart. In the past two decades, mayors have revitalized the city by connecting these suburbs to the main city, resulting in a blanket of single family homes occasionally broken by larger structures all lit by warm electric light. I really can't describe the

effect, and none of the pictures that we've taken or have found online do it justice. You need to see it.

As we were marveling at the city, Cesar was getting lost. The first hour took us to La Pola, one of many steep barrios, and Cesar stopped to ask an elderly woman to decipher to few corrections we had. She had almost ten people come outside to help us make sense of where we were going before a rough consensus was reached that we were on the wrong side of town. So we drove to Belin, an urban and artsy district, before getting lost again. The entire time, Cesar was shouting over to other taxis asking to clarify a turn or guide us a short distance, and not a single one responded with disrespect. Eventually, we thought that we had arrived at the right street, but a local family of four had no idea what we were looking for and spent thirty minutes of their evening calling friends asking for help.

There's a saying in Medellin that seemed wholly appropriate: "If la Paises knows where you are going, he will give you directions. If he does not, then he will show you the way." La Paises, and the history of Antiquoa, merits an individual post and I'll get around to it eventually. But in the meantime, try to imagine living in a city the size of Boston and having literally every person you ask for help genuinely attempt to assist.

After two hours of exploration and conversation, we found Salsipuedues, the art museum-turned-estate nestled into a jungle-like, gated garden. Cesar was pretty spooked, as the AirBNB turned out to be in La Pola again, and Salsipuedes directly translates to "never leave," and to be fair the rusty gate didn't help with departing from a Most Dangerous Game aesthetic. But we met Jorge, our host's husband, and learned about the family and history of our home and host. Both are

remarkably representative of Colombia and Medellin, I feel, and will also be the subject of a later post.

Breakfast is calling and I must go.

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**Day 15: Medellin [June 19]**

As with many days, we started our morning with a conversation about politics. Jorge took Molly and I to Exito to talk about the coming day and discuss the intracacies of a favorite topic for non-Americans: how the hell did Donald Trump happen. Jorge is a personal fan of Dr. Ben Carson and couldn't understand how the most immoral person running for the "party of family values" was able to oust the nomination from what Jorge viewed were good people. As with every conversation about Trump, we were able to offer the usual platitudes: our country is just that messed up, he really does represent the integrity and values of many Americans, and no one (himself and his staff included) thought he would get this far. Molly and I are both Bernie Sanders supporters so the idea of Clinton winning the general election doesn't fill us up with hope, but at least the world economy wouldn't experience a shock due to a trade war with China.

The conversation turned to Colombian history. Demagogues may be new to American politics, but they are the norm in a country torn apart by violence and extremist political factions. In 1948, a tremendously popular presidential candidate was assassinated and the resulting partisan violence resulted in a civil war known ominously as La Violencia. The remnants of the conservative and liberal parties resolved to create a National Front, where every four years the Presidency was exchanged between the two parties without the population having a say in who ran their country.

The FARC emerged as a result. The left-wing organization originally numbered in the hundreds and consisted of organized farmers demanding agricultural reform and political representation. As the National Front consistently left the FARC out of conversations, the organization gained popular support and began growing in size and strength. By the 70's, local paramilitary groups (similar to the Nicaraguan Contras, and sharing the same support from the US and CIA) began fighting the FARC. And with the introduction of massive US-demand driven drug cartels, Colombia entered three decades of chaotic, multi-front civil strife which is only in the past decade subsiding. A peace treaty was signed with the FARC several years ago and a referendum on allowing them to become a legitimate political party is taking place this year.

Jorge doesn't support integration of the FARC, and for understandable reasons. But the entire conversation was somewhat of a reflection on my home as well. The dominance of the Republicans and the Democrats has continued for over 150 years, and while we vote between the two candidates for each party and in theory have the ability to elect someone from outside the parties, in effect we are left choosing between the lesser of two evils every four years. Our National Front's inability to address the issues that form of the core of both party's

constituency's concerns has led to the rise of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders as responses to the state-enforced status quo.

Bring on the revolution.

Per Jorge's recommendation, we used Medellin's metro system to get to Arvi Park. This is not a simple process. As mentioned in the last post, Medellin has spent the last quarter century tirelessly connecting the pores and and most dangerous suburbs to the central city while investing heavily in community-building projects. The metro is the oldest and most important of these projects. It is remarkably cheap and constantly expanding; three months ago they added a street-level tram system that a resident can use on the same ticket she uses any of the 27 metro stops, two cable car lines scaling the sides of the valley, or any of the public buses for less than $1. Watching Colombian children get excited to use the metro system is everything that is beautiful in this world.

But Arvi Park isn't another one of Medellin's two dozen city parks. It is a national forest, secluded from the city by a forty minute cable car ride over the densest vegetation I have ever seen. Molly and I enjoyed our six-person box as it swung over seemingly mile high trees the hid beyond the cliffs surrounding the city. At Arvi, we spent an hour in the massive farmers market, home to exotic fruits and artisan jewelry and some much needed locally brewed craft beers. Colombia has the largest number of birds on the planet owing to their remarkably diverse elevations and ecologists, and it seemed like every single species was joining us as we hiked through the Andean forest and marveled at the lush display of life.

We made our way back to Salsipudes (being able to give directions in a foreign language is a very satisfying experience) and slept through the afternoon rains that habitually visit Medellin.

At night, we had the smart idea to try to go to dinner during the national Medellin-Cartagena/Barranquilla end of the semester furbelows game, meaning that we watched an entire city wearing red and blue jerseys explode with energy as their home team won the match. My plea from Cartagena was only reinforced: go to Colombia and stay for a futbol game. You will not be disappointed.

Taxis draped in flags, honking until three in the morning, couldn't stop us from passing out when we returned to Salsipuedes in the evening. Medellin had once again given us something lovely to dream about.

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**Day 16: Medellin [June 20]**

Molly and I decided that today would be spent learning about the history of Medellin. We managed to get up reasonably early, with the goal of making it to the prestigeous Modern Art Museum and taking a walking tour around the historic downtown afterwards.

Of course, today is Monday, so the museum turned out to be closed. But the journey out to museum was a test in itself; nestled in Poblado, a neighborhood that would be familiar with any hipster in the US, the art museum is an example of the city's goal of constructing spaces that encourage residents to experience their world in safer and more fulfilling way. Behind the museum, a large skate park was built that has advertisements for youth-centered apart programs visible from the half pipes.

We grabbed an artisan breakfast near the museum and talked about family and religion, two very important topics in Colombia. Molly mad the observation that walking around Medellin was

very similar to walking around Chicago; both cities are their country's "second cities", and each has undoubtedly defined its history in part by contrasting their position in economics and cultural affairs as prominently distinct from their respective "first cities." Talking about heavy topics with a loved one is one of the more fulfilling aspects of life.

We hurried to the site of our afternoon walking tour and barely made it in time after a taxi driver dropped us off at the wrong metro station due to our bad directions. Walking tours always start the same way: the tour guide tells the group about how he or she is a native of the area and thus suited for the trip, how rich and diverse of a tour the forthcoming experience will be, and, inevitably, how tour guides are paid based on tips and thus need the support of the group to make ends meet. If you've never taken a walking tour of a foreign city, don't feel pressured to pay them more than you may think they deserve if the tour was just alright – tour guide companies pool tips to discourage overworking of the guides and I've always found the plea for tips a little overzealous.

But anyways, Milo was our guide for the day and told us about his background growing up in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Medellin. He became a biomedical engineer and supports his family with his medicinal work, with tour guides adding income on the side. Entering a biomedical engineering program is very difficult work; over 5000 students take the entrance exam for the university program and only 30 pass. His pride in entering university was attributed to being "la Paises," the name of Colombians who live in Medellin and the surrounding Antiquoa district. Paises believe that their relative isolation from the rest of Colombia contributed to their inherent character; Paises were originally Basque and Jewish religious refugees who survived without larger economic support until gold led to the

construction of a railroad in the late 1800's. The railroad brought in other Colombians as well as generated immense wealth as Medellin exported their gold and historically cultivated coffee.

From the start of the tour, Milo made a point of explaining how little the drug money of Pablo Escobar and the competing cartels influenced the development of his home town. Paises have been living in Medellin for almost 500 years, while drug profits affected the cit for thirty. The vast discrepancy between Colombia's perception as a drug cartel haven is both evidence of the destructive nature of that criminality but also the ease with which "white" countries can stereotype a foreign place. Listening to Milo discuss the heritage of I his cit gave everyone chills.

Milo took us to the government center and showed us a massive structure commemorating the history of Antiquoa. In the early 1990's, the FARC stormed the towering Palace of Justice and the army had to practically destroy the building to save the Supreme Court hostages trapped inside. An infamous video shows one of the hostages escaping alive into military custody, but the next day she was found dead in the Palace hallways and the Army attributed her death to the FARC. This type of controversial practice was widely known to exist up into the early 2000's, when a president affectionately known as "Iron Fist" was caught having homeless people murdered and then dressed up in FARC uniforms to create the perception that the government was making greater strides against the guerilla said than it actually was.

The same president is lauded for advocating the principle of "democratic architecture," which was tested first in Medellin and then spread to the rest of the countries. Democratic architecture consisted of building physical spaces in unsafe or poor areas which encouraged the social activit of residents. Libraries sprung up in slums, providing children with a safe space to go after

school and increasing literacy rates. Medellin's prized metro system was expanded and made cheaper, giving citizens access to safe areas and removing the barrier to transportation that a highly automobile-centered economy necessitates. Milo showed us how a square that was formerly a center for prostitution and drug trafficking was torn down and instead made into a gorgeous, well-lit park that hosts concerts and art shows (and which is bordered by another massive library).

The tour wove us through squares, gardens, open air markets and churches infamous for being the stomping grounds of gay prostitutes. We were shown remarkable hospitality by the people we met and enjoyed an array of delicious foods and drinks whose names were lost in the blur of the crowded streets of a city numbering 3.5 million people. Everywhere we went, la Paises stared at us in wonder; Milo explained that people here were genuinely surprised to see gringos wondering their streets in safety and comfort, and that they loved the chance to speak English to us and hear pour thoughts on their city, country, and women.

The tour ended in San Antonio Park, a famous square which experienced a devestating terrorist attack in 2004. A backpack filled with explosives detonated during a concert, killing several people and a young girl who was photographed moments before the explosion. The bomb mangled a large bird statue, and the mayor ordered the statue taken down; however, the artist offered to build a second, larger statue next to the destroyed one on the condition that the first stay in place as a memorial to the victims of violence. The mayor agreed and today tourists will find few examples of Medellin's violent past.

Imply and I arranged to interview another tour guide, Juan, over dinner following the interview. The contents of that interview will, like the others, be transcribed upon our return to the states in

the fall.  But let it be known that the character of Juan and his ambitions for the future of his country cemented my impression of Medellin and La Paises as some of the strongest and resilient people I have met.  I wish him the best in all he does.

Tomorrow, Molly and I leave for Manizales, a small town near Bogota, where we will work on a cattle farm I exchange for food and a place to stay.  I can't wait to tell you about it.

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**Day 17: Manizales [June 21]**

After pushing our time in Medellin back a day already, Molly and I decided to leave for Manizales to meet up with Guerillmo, an Internet pen pal for the past three months and the Don of a small cattle ranch in rural Colombia. We had no idea what to expect and the shock of our experience, in so many ways, has distracted me from writing this past week.  As we locked our knees riding up warm hills on horseback during the week, a challenge Guerillmo made has stood out:

"Try to count the different types of birds, insects, and plants you see.  Use your eyes."

This week has been a sensory overload, in every sense of the word. Exploring nature untouched by civilization, however slight it may be, is profound. And it's having an effect, whatever it may be.

In exchange for this sensory overload, I've tried to live with our host family in their environment. This is the first tablet they've ever seen and electricity only powers a television and the homemade electric fences that keep cattle in the correct pasture. I'll be doing here what I did with the Amande and the San Blas Islands, writing about my thoughts after the experience when Molly and I are in Cali this Wednesday (or earlier, if the four hour bus ride is straight enough).

In this post I wanted to get that thought down somewhere and describe our last day in Medellin. It was relatively uneventful; Molly and I made breakfast for three and discussed Jorge's business over fresh papaya. We interviewed him afterwards and recorded a wonderful conversation about family and its importance in Colombia before being shown a positively surreal loft room and parting ways.

We made our way to the bus station and found a bus to Manizales leaving within ten minutes, so after a suspiciously cheap purchase we rushed onto the "bus": a van built for six fitting twelve, picking up passengers on the side of the highway and being driven by a man whom I can only assume had a profound trust in a moral God. The amount of times our driver passed three semitrucks in the left lane and didn't see what was coming up around the next mountain bend is astounding.

Four hours of sweaty sleep and car sickness was broken up by a brief stop in a small town for fresh mango and cold water. My seat was built for a population whose national average height is

about a foot shorter than me, and yet I couldn't stop laughing and losing my breath watching the sun pierce crayon-green canyons with sheet roof shack villages teetering on their bluffs.

We made it to Manizales late and took another astoundingly cheap cable car metro ride up the side of the hill to meet Guerillmo in person. He manages the ranch and the several families which reside with his family for work during the week while teaching university classes on agricultural economics on the weekends. He recently set up his ranch as a WWOOFing site, meaning travelers across the world will get to travel to Manizales and work on his ranch in exchange for free rent and food for the duration of that stay. He's young and reserved, preferring the local coffee bar to the dozens of loud holes that aired the Argentina-United States Copa America match the night we met him.

We booked a hostel for the evening and prepared for the next day.

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**Days 18-25: Manizales/Neira [June 22 – June 29]**

Writing about Manizales is going to be hard. Guerillmo, our host, challenged us to embrace the environment of remote Colombia fully and using an iPad to publish my thoughts seems

sacrilegious after meeting people who don't know how to read. So I apologize in advance for the difficulty that I may have articulating these ideas.

To start, let me describe where we stayed. Manizales is a small city of half a million people wedged in the mountains between Medellin and Bogota. We met Guerillmo in Manizales and took his jeep to Neira, a small town of 5000 people reached after an hour on dirt roads and past dozens of hillside shack villages. The farm is not there; instead, we drove the jeep to an abandoned, nature-worn factory (where it stayed for safe keeping), packed our backpacks and groceries onto the backs of four horses, and rode through winding muddy trails and steep stone out cropping a for two hours before reaching the farm. I have never rode a horse, and horseback became our form of transportation for the next week.

The farm, or more correctly, the ranch, has been in Guerillmo's family for 70 years. His father cleared all 23 cattle plots, totaling over 300 acres of uneven, muddy, steep and hot grassy steppes, by machete. The family amassed over 350 cows and the main task of the ranch is to rotate hundreds of cows between two dozen plots while keeping them healthy, developing sustainable forms of pest and weed control, planting hundreds of trees to wean off a dependency

on electric fences, grow enough food to eliminate the need to traverse in to town, and manage the three families that live on the ranch while working from sunrise to sunset.

This place is not so much a farm or a ranch as it is a Kingdom. From the main house – boasting four rooms, a bathroom, relatively clean water and a guest house for travelers – one can see more of creation than thought possible. Hundreds of hills stack upon each other, guarding virgin forests full of monkeys and rivers without stain. Clouds take different shapes in the valleys, snaking with unique designs between the stratified hillsides and covering peaks like cotton sheets. All four seasons are experienced very day: Spring in the morning, as dew covers all in golden sprinkles; Summer by midday, as clouds disappear and shade gives way to hot air trapped in the canyons; Autumn in the early evening, as colors abound and the senses are barraged by the scents of fresh life and slow decomposition; and wet, unfriendly Winter at night. The Kingdom is the strongest evidence for a moral God that I have yet to encounter.

Guerillmo runs this Kingdom, the Don of his household and the patron to the several dozen people that depend upon his employment for existence. Two families live in the main house, accompanied by a family of seven in a distance ranch home and assisted by several seasonal ranch hands. None of the workers have completed high school. Many cannot read, and several do not know how much they are paid. Their work is hard: tending to cattle in the morning, afternoons spent clearing pastures of weeds or removing branches for energy, and making ends meet before beloved sleep in the evening. One family consists of a former prostitute pregnant by her husband, a recovering heroin addict. Another saw brutal violence when he was conscripted in the Colombian army and fought both the left-wing FARC and paramilitaries that commit the kind of atrocities Hollywood directors haven't imagined yet. A family of five children – none of

whom can read or write – is supported by a husband, who works unconscionable 12 hour days and yet can't be promoted to manage cattle because he never learned to count.

Each of these families struggles with poverty, illiteracy, family woes and violence, both foreign and domestic. Each of them is parting of a dying era – the era of physical, rewarding labor, made obsolete by the overseas companies who mechanize their agriculture, pollute the rivers, and distance themselves from the humans inhabiting their ancestral homeland. These families have a history that is woven into the land their parents and their great grandparents have worked on and maintained for centuries. Those histories are not written down because they cannot be read.

Don Guillermo understands all of this with a wisdom exceeding his 34 years. Each family is given a place to live, for free. They are walked through the Social Security process to receive government aid. One family is gifted several cows for milk, the lifeblood of this land and the key ingredient of almost every meal. Another is taught to grown food, because their salary – paid to all workers, above the minimum wage of Colombia – cannot feed their children. More importantly, they are given a purpose in life. In a world that would sooner mechanize their labor,

erase their history, and take whatever possessions they have left, Don Guerillmo gives them a community.

Community is a strange word to write, because it has little meaning in my homeland. Communities are recognized, but they do not contain the same purpose or poignancy as they do here. I am convinced that those who travel to the United States from Latin America can better articulate the essence of the word in their native tongues because it simply doesn't sound right in English. In English, community is an enemy; it is an important word on cardboard advertisements inside banks. It is the word used to isolate people who look "different" from those who look "similar." Community is the secret ingredient to "communist" China or ISIS-inspired psychopaths, and as such, different communities pose varying degrees of threat to "our" identity as Americans. We are a nation of individuals, and for all the horror that such an edification imposes upon communities that don't look like me or speak the way I do, our nation also robs itself of a community by choosing to separate the individual from his herd and then sanctifying that separation.

In the Kingdom, there is a community of people. And because of that, there is freedom. Families stay with other families when their roof cannot hold back the rain. They gather to celebrate individual successes with feasts, each invitee full from the joy of the honoree. Privacy still exists – there is too much space to be together all the time. But of the dozen people that I was lucky enough to meet this past week, every one of them seemed happier to be together than to be alone. In Colombia – in places where wealth and excess cannot buy a castle or unlimited processed food or new clothes every weekend – being alone is where one goes to be lost, to be afraid, or to starve. Freedom results from a strong community, not in spite of one.

That was the most important lesson I learned in the Kingdom. But I learned several others, and each of them are worth sharing.

Turning to politics, I believe that I now have a better understanding of the conflict between the government, the FARC, paramilitary groups, and the peace agreement which was signed in Havanna during our stay with Guerillmo. Crucially, different viewpoints on the peace agreement (known as La Paz in Colombia) show competing understandings of freedom and safety in Latin America.

In the next several months, the Colombian government will hold a plebiscite asking citizens to support including the FARC as a legitimate political party. The FARC agreed to La Paz on the condition that they would be accepted, but as of now polling shows that only half the country supports inclusion while the other half does not.

Frederico is a former Colombian soldier and the administrator of several workers on the Kingdom. He does not support inclusion because he believes that it will change nothing. First off, including the FARC will only legitimize the left-wing critiques of the guerilla organization's hard liners as well as fermenting resentment among the other existing guerilla groups like the ELN. The other groups have not just promised to ramp up their attacks on government interests – they have promised to target FARC members for what they see as selling out. Additionally, La Paz does nothing to counter the violence of paramilitary groups, who enjoy more support among rural populations because they are locally organized and protect (however violently they may do so) against left-wing guerillas, drug cartels, and occasionally what they see as military oppression. La Paz will not end paramilitary organization and may increase their support

amongst people who feel that the punishment for the former guerillas – six months of parole – does not punish the organization enough for their terror.

Ladi is Frederico's wife and a victim of the paramilitary groups from a young age. When she was a girl, her uncle was kidnapped by four female paramilitary members and dismembered until he bled to death. To her, ending violence is more important than justice for past actions. She supports inclusion because legitimizing the FARC may lead to progressive policy making, which could satiate the demands of other left wing guerillas, and may even lead to Colombia's first left-wing president ever. Think about that: imagine if the United States had only elected conservatives since 1948. Liberalizing the government could lead to real changes in dealing with drug cartels, who ultimately fund both spectrums of political violence, and may even lead to the Colombian challenging the United States on our War on Drugs, which is widely seen as the cause of massive drug production in Columbia. La Paz in an opportunity for short term peace and long term reform.

Both sides agree that drug money fuels political violence and that drug money is supported by corruption in the government, which is supported by the drug policies of the United States. Both sides see the poorest in their country – the rural poor, who live where paramilitary groups and

guerilla organizations exert the most influence – as the greatest victims of violence and the greatest beneficiaries of La Paz. While inclusion is not guaranteed by a long shot, both sides see the government's corruption as he single greatest threat to the future of their country. Listening to them speak was kind of like listening to a Bernie Sanders and a Donald Trump supporter agree on the root issue of their political activism.

Coming to an agreement on systemic, structural problems of a political system is more important than an agreement on the policies of that system. Fredrico and Ladi both agreed on that. It's amazing that a family of cattle ranchers in remote Columbian disagree on something as divisive as La Paz and yet agree on the root causes of their country's problems. Where is that agreement in the States?

Another important theme of the Kingdom was the relationship between organic and sustainable development. Guillermo is a professor at a local university and teaches about agricultural business and economics. As a young man, he thought that his father's insistence on traditional farming practices hampered the development of the farm and returned after receiving a university education with new ideas on how to best use the land. He sees a very sharp contrast between sustainable development and organic development, and used every opportunity to stress the difference to Molly and I.

On the farm, we spent several afternoons climbing steep hills, using commercial fertilizer to help pine trees grow. The cow pastures are separated with two rows of electric fences each, but up keeping those fences is extremely difficult; constructing the fences requires cutting down trees and dragging the largest trunks across the property before burying them in the dirt. Cows frequently break the fences and workers have to stop other essential jobs to repair them. But one day, those pine trees will be tall enough to use as the posts in a fence. An entire form of work will be made obselete, and workers can focus on their many other tasks.

Sustainable development is a necessity. To practice a sustainable lifestyle means to organize your material resources in a way that guarantees their existence in the future. The grown trees will reduce work for everyone, granting the freedom to focus on other and newer projects. If Guerillmo didn't plant the trees, he'd be resigning himself to needless, hard work.

Organic development is a luxury. Pine trees are not native to the region and their presence alters the biosphere of the ranch. Commercial fertilizer is too strong and often kill more than was intended by polluting rainwater. Progressing to the point where organic development is also sustainable is Guerillmo's goal; in the meantime, allowing spiders to live plentifully acts as a natural pesticide, using fertilizer only before rainfalls limits their pollutive effects, and eliminating herbicides by picking weeds from the earth greatly helps the local environment.

In the United States, we often confuse the two forms of development. Commercially farming oranges in Florida (using machines, chemicals, and genetically modified crops) is neither sustainable nor organic. Commercially farming "organic" oranges – using the same mechanistic methods but with non-genetically modified oranges, if such a thing exists in the States anymore – is organic but not sustainable, because it is a form of agriculture dependent on herbicides and

pesticides which damage the local environment and will eventually render the practice unfeasible. Similarly, companies which practice environmentally sustainable farming practices with organic food are not truly sustainable. To be sustainable doesn't mean that the planet feels good or something – it means that the practices of agriculture, and by extension, the economic viability of those practices on an industrial scale, can exist indefinitely. Sustainable, organic produce in the US is not sustainable because the products are sold at a price which would not be profitable if not for the consumer demand for higher-quality products, a demand which can only be articulated by customers with a higher-quality budget.

The bottom line? Real sustainable agricultural development is foreign to the United States. On the Kingdom, those farming and up keeping practices are sustainable because they don't destroy the local environment, don't kill or injure the workers (another factor completely untouched here), and can function in the Colombian economy, whose agricultural industry is structured around millions of farmers practicing the same kind of methods that Guillermo uses.

There is nothing sustainable or organic about the cup of coffee we buy from Starbucks. Feeling good about our transaction doesn't fix the planet, it doesn't mitigate the incredible dependency we have on other hands to sate our thirsts, and it certainly doesn't reform a global industry that profits off of a lack of sustainable development. Agricultural reform, in the purest, most revolutionary sense of the expression, is needed to make this planet habitable in our future.

Just a thought.

I want to share a final lesson I learned from working on the Kingdom. When we arrived, Don Guillermo challenged us to count ten different types of birds, bugs and plants. We had to pay attention to the world around us in a way we never had before.

We couldn't do it. Every time we stepped, ten different types of plants were under our boots. Ten different types of birds flew together, in rainbow-colored flocks, returning with breakfast for their chicks each morning. Ten different types of spiders creeped in my bucket of fertilizer as we spread the grey grain across the hills. There is more diversity in life than quantifiable, and I think that was the point of Guillermo's challenge: this world contains more variety than we can possibly put into words. It is a sin to posses the hubris capable of ignoring this fact, but it is a greater sin to treat such hubris as moral. We're just one species swimming in the same fishbowl as an unquantifiable number of other species, bigger and smaller and more colorful than we can imagine.

A story from Guillermo: "When I was younger, I felt the need to change the world. Everyone told me that I could do it, but I wasn't having much luck. So I told a professor about my problem, and he laughed. 'Guillermo', he said, 'Go lie down in a field one night. The closest star you see is over 10,000 light years away. Imagine yourself looking at Earth from that star. The entire written history of our species wouldn't even be observable.' I felt much better after that."

We spent a day painting the home of a worker, the one who wasn't able to count. Guillermo told us afterwards that he would go into the town, give the clerk at the supermarket counter all of his money for the groceries he needed for his family, and receive substantially less change than he was owed. I started crying when I heard that. What kind of person would take advantage of someone who can't count? How unfair is it that I can type these thoughts on an iPad in an air conditioned AirBNB bedroom and he has to work 12 hours a day chopping down trees with machetes only to have his money stolen from him?

I hope that this writing will one day allow someone clarity, resolution, or purpose. But right now, seeing poverty and inequity leaves me feeling empty inside, which I suppose is the proper reaction. I just hope that the worker knows about the stars above him, and even if he can't count, is able to find solace in the vastness of our world. I thank Marjorie, Andres, Ladi, Frederico, and above all Guillermo for sharing such a solace with me this past week in their beautiful Kingdom.

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**Day 26: Cali [June 30]**

Cali is our last stop in Colombia and the last major city in the country before reaching Ecuador. Cali, Quito, and much of Peru all the way down to southern Chile are walled off from the continent by the mighty Andes Mountains, all resting on humid plains and experiencing a tropical heat unlike the rest of Colombia. After our week with Guillermo on the Kingdom, we hurriedly said our goodbyes to avert the tears one earns after sharing such an intimate and fulfilling aspect of their lives.

I wish I could say that our arrival into Cali was pleasant. It wasn't. Our bus ride from Neira to Cali was exceptionally long and the novelty of "second-world" public transportation was wearing off. We struggled on the many stops and hard turns to keep our stomachs docile, but had little success. We ended up getting off the bus (read: large, poorly maintained van stuffed with travelers hopping on and off at legitimately nonsensical stops) a stop early and camping in a small bar for an hour to catch our breath. We were in the outskirts of Palmira, itself an exurb of Cali.

Palmira is not welcoming. The tallest building was two floors and the second floor was missing a roof. The town had a smell reminiscent of aged industry, and antiquitous buildings sported grime like plaque on poor teeth. Taxi drivers literally sprinted to us, begging he first two white people stupid enough to get off at this stop for their money. It was an all-around unpleasant experience, and I wish that our last few days in Colombia hadn't started off like this.


Cali is close to Palmira, and the ride to the city was filled with pleasant enough conversation with the taxi driver, who used the journey to explain why he loved Cali. Salsa was his answer. We realized going in to Cali that we knew literally nothing else about the city except for its reputation as a salsa capitol of the world, which is a reputation we would see in the many discotechas and dance lesson studios we passed entering the city.

After our AirBNB host argued with the taxi driver, who managed to charge us an obscene amount of money for the trip, we drooped inside Casa del Poeta and fell on our bed, exhausted.

The day had consisted of an emotional farewell, a frenetic stomach-wrenching bus ride, and another opportunistic taxi driver. Sleep was welcoming.

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**Day 27: Cali [July 1]**

Cartagena has a gorgeous seaside, buttressed by a historical wall and sharing the sound of crashing waves with denizens of her cobbled streets and fast evenings. Medellin rests at the bottom of a valley, awash in silver light and low clouds while creeping up the sides of green valleys. Manizales offers an unprecedented view of mountains, so many mountains, in so many directions, that one cannot help but feel like they are on top of the world.

Cali is flat.

Cali is hot.

Cali has a lot of traffic.

Our bodies were still recovering from our arrival, and the unspoken fear of another potentially hellish trip to Ipiales the next night loomed over us as we ventured out in the morning. The goal was to find a camera repair store and fix Molly's camera, which was damaged during a particularly merry hike around the Kingdom with Marjorie and Andres, and maybe go to a modern art museum in the afternoon.

Instead, we found a camera repair store, enjoyed the momentary, pervasive thought that everything was finally going our way, and then realized that we were out of money. Not just out of money – our cards were frozen and we couldn't withdraw from our savings, meaning that we were "those Americans" who inadequately planned for financial woes. After the bus rides we had endured, you would empathize.

But in the moment we had to figure out how to get back to our AirBnB, contact our bank, resolve the issue, and then get back to the camera repair store before our 12-hour bus ride to the Colombian-Ecuadorian border territory commenced early the next morning.

We resolved our issue and managed to retrieve the camera. But in a way, the experience helped illustrate a lesson I was learning in Cali and all of Colombia; unlike Europe, which enjoys the fruits of generous international tourism and a reputation for domestic stability, Colombia is not built for non-Colombians. We had read about the seeming obstinacy of Cali, the city which "didn't care whether you liked it or not." The rumors are true. Cali is a city made by Colombians for Colombians. We aren't supposed to feel welcome and Cali could really not lose any sleep over the fact.

In many ways, the resistance we met in the city is a form of freedom. Fewer Colombians were willing to help us out or had time for our broken Spanish than in other towns. Supermarkets have little or no English and absolutely no space for those unprepared for a Cali market experience – here, people want to get their food and go the hell home, not wait for the gringo idling in the rice isle to make up his mind on a brand of food.

The rest of Colombia seems to soak in the international attention brought on by tourism and a globalizing economy. Cali is disdainful of this changing cultural environment. People dance because they work twelve hours a day and the evening is cool enough to socialize. They don't dance because us Americans appreciate the exotic nature of their movements.

We asked our taxi drivers if it was safe to walk back to our hostel from the camera repair store. "Are you from Cali?" "Well, no, we live in Florida." "Then it isn't safe."

That exchange should provide enough explanation, and adeptly summarized our few long, hot days in Cali. After yet another day of fruitless toil in the salsa capitol of the world, we had come to respect the grime and character as authentic. That didn't make sleep any less welcome.

**Day 28: Ipiales [July 2]**

No pictures today, just thoughts.

We have left Cali and are on a 12 hour bus ride to the Colombian border town of Ipiales. We will spend the night in the small town and then cross the border into Ecuador tomorrow morning. Nothing has been broken, stolen, or otherwise damaged in at least 24 hours, and I have a lot of time to write. I figure that I can use this space to start exploring the difference between an American and a Colombian conception of freedom.

This thesis is supposed to elaborate on fundamental political differences between two fundamentally different cultures. By the end of the thesis, I will have written journal entries for the time I spend abroad this summer, an essay describing my understanding of the definition of freedom in Latin America, an essay describing my understanding of that same definition in the United States, and a third essay elaborating on a new, alternative understanding of freedom that draws upon conclusions made in the first two. The thesis will also include written transcripts of the interviews that I conduct while abroad, of which I have completed three so far.

We've now spent a month backpacking in Panama and Colombia, and my understanding of their political identities has increased greatly. Panama has essentially become a country in the past 20 years; before, they truly were a colony, with decisions as impactful as trade policy and as minute as taxi regulations being made in the States. Panama has never been culturally assimilated with the United States, and one can see that the climate, geography, and demographics of the countries are separated by vast oceans. Culturally, Panama is related to the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The dishes are practically identical (only fresher in Colombia) and the Spanish is remarkably similar, even to novice ears.

All of this helps a traveler understand the impact that independence has had. Before gaining control of the Canal, Panama wasn't so much a country as a possession. Panamanians were no more culturally repressed than any other Latin American country living in the same hemisphere as Hollywood, but since independence, their ability to express themselves has grown dramatically. The country now controls the entirety of trade revenues generated by the Panama Canal and the economic and social impact has been unbelievable: formerly segregated portions of their capital are awash with Latin American tourists seeking to explore this once-defunct state, local environmental activism has reverted former ammunition dumps into parks, and the city's skyline has become comparable to Miami.

So what is freedom to a Panamanian? Freedom is the right to say how the product of ones' labor may be utilized. Freedom is the ability to identify culturally distinct traits of your state that came from your neighbors. Freedom is literally the safety to explore your own country – protected by police who speak your own language, with your country's flag upon their sleeve. Freedom in Panama is a very material trait, and the lack of rhetorical conceptions of freedom – not once did a Panamanian equate a democratic government with an ideal of freedom, or discuss rights or entitlements of any kind – was astounding to someone who hears a lot of his countrymen relish in the "freedoms" of legal technicalities and tax brackets that seem to dominate our understanding.

This understanding of freedom, as some sort of material or physical understanding, was greatly supported in Colombia, a country experiencing incredible growth economically and socially. While we were in Manizales, Guillermo rushed inside our guest house to turn on the TV and show us a historical moment – the signing of a peace agreement with the FARC, hopefully ending almost sixty years of guerrilla warfare. Guillermo went on to explain that his family's

first house was actually burned down by the FARC in 2002 because they refused to pay a protection fee. The signing of La Paz was an end to a personal torment, and the freedom that gave him was physically palpable.

Similarly, Juan explained in detail the disgust that the people of Medellin have for the legacy of Pablo Escobar. To Juan, being rid of the violence that defined his city's reputation is an opportunity to begin anew. The freedom he gained, as he was also personally affected by cartel violence in his youth, mirrors the freedom that the people of Medellin have gained since the passing of the infamous criminal – a freedom to choose an identity, instead of having one chosen for them.

Perhaps that is the similarity between these two states and their definition of freedom: the ability to define one's self is more pertinent than the ability to be recognized as…. As what?

I'll come back to this idea later. I also wanted to write out some concerns that I have with the way I've set up this thesis.

To start, I'm worried that I'm looking for a contrast in definitions when there may not be one. Freedom may be fundamentally understood in similar ways among all Americans, as the hemisphere has a full history of actions done in the name of freedom. Maybe freedom is not an inherently relatable concept, and has simply been a bromide for idealistic young men as long as the word has been around. Perhaps the greatest struggle with this thesis is my tendency to over generalize. I mean, I'm trying to understand "freedom" (by no means an easily definable term) by spending only two months in four countries and using that experience to contrast my relatively short lifetime of understanding in a completely different country. Thoughts to consider.

Update: We arrived in Ipiales and, well… If this was the only place in Colombia we had gone to, then we would have left the country believing all of the reputations for violence and criminality that Colombia is trying to escape. No street lights. Everything is filthy. I think there's a prostitute in a room on this floor, because… Yeah.

We found the last vacant hotel room within a lot walking distance and proceeded to pay in dollars because the only ATM was broken – looked like an attempted to robbery. A couple, two French travelers by the name of Gwyn and Kevin, met us outside for cigarettes and we offered to let the, sleep on our hotel room floor for free. Note to self: if I get afraid, try helping someone who needs it/sneaking a couple into my hotel room past the stingy desk clerk. Kindness has a calming effect.

Tomorrow, we're crossing another border. I love crossing borders.

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**Day 29: Quito [July 3]**

Traveling last summer had three distinctive parts.

From Istanbul to Budapest, life is a blur.  There are inhospitable moments (and certainly my least safe) but the blur is one of ecstasy and color.  Imagine watching the best movie of your life and, when you're done, attempting to describe the feeling you felt as the plot exposition was teased out, memorable characters are introduced, and scenes that flavor future climatic moments are displayed for their first times.  Because this isn't your favorite movie yet, but it will soon be, and as the movie starts you already know the future place it will hold.

The magic in Budapest of meeting Molly Ann Misek was executed on a subway platform below Octagon Square, where we decided (however temporarily it may have been) to separate and never speak again. The grays of Vienna and Munich are colored so that my memory cannot distinguish bursts of dark-blue cinder from dust-in-sun timberland Gray, and undeniably a combination of intense weariness and intense emotional dissonance colored that leg of the trip.

Then I saw Brussels and happy dogs on leashes and the canals of Bruges and then the Canals of Amsterdam and color seemed to reappear. I could feel my initial shock at the attention required for backpacking (read: carrying your entire life and any form of legally verifiable documentation on your back and in the pockets of pants you are too tired to remember zipping the fly of) build, be accepted, and then calm to a manageable degree. By the time I left London, I was ready to continue exploring, and I rode a wave of energy and enthusiasm through Scotland and out of Holland's Schipporfield (sp?) International Airport.

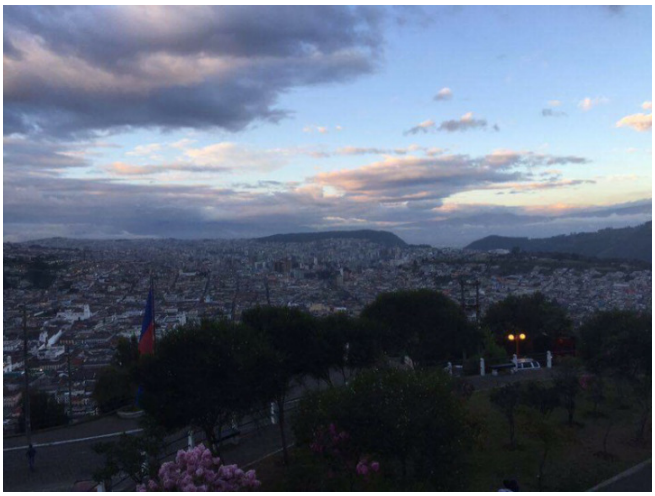
But the pattern is repeating itself this summer. We were excited. And we still are, for sure – but we're also exhausted, and we scheduled the most travel-intensive and least comfortable part of the trip around this period of time so that we could enjoy Peru with the calloused brains one gets after attempting to budget, sleep, smile, drink, and fumble through Spanish for two months.

It is within the context of exhaustion that Molly and I arose from our plastic prostitute-frequented Ipiales hotel mattress to board an early morning bus from Ipiales to Peru. Specifically: we stumbled onto an entire square of yoga pants-wearing senoritas dancing that weird European/maybe Brazilian collective exercising and dancing thing in the square of a city which doesn't have marginally safe lighting or police presence after 8:00 pm, didn't even argue when our cab driver charged us that much to go three minutes to the border crossing, and waited

in the lines of two different customs bureaus each staffed with approximately thirty underpaid nationals which would rather be doing anything else on their Sunday morning than lending Molly a pen for one god forsaken minute.

Like I said, we were exhausted.

The next portion of the day lasted 8 hours and saw the two of us moving exactly nowhere, as sleep hit us like one of the rockslides infamous for plaguing the road to a major Ecuadorian town. We sat and slept and turned and slept and adjusted the blinds once and mostly slept. (Side note: real love is letting your partner have the better portion of the arm rest on an eight hour ride to cement roads).



Our AirBnB was in the kind of neighborhood that your tasteful girlfriend manages to just know is a good place for young people to take pictures. And in Floresta, a neighborhood where a community standard must've forbade residence to anyone over 40, Molly and I were looked at like only two sweaty, exhausted, unironed pseudo-hipsters can be looked at in a fashionable if not slightly pretentious neighborhood consisting of many ironed shirts. La Casa Mutante, the home of several chilly artists who all actually called themselves artists when you ask what they

do, was relatively easy to find, and we pretty much just gave up on trying to make any sense of the wonderful place we had stumbled upon and instead decided to fall asleep with the lights on.

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**Day 30: Quito [July 4]**

I'm in Lima now, finally getting over a cold that has not made the past few days very enjoyable. Time to play catch up.

Quito is a funny city. At 2 million people, it is a small metropolis situated in the shadow of a volcano with a historical penchant for destruction. Earthquakes plague the geography, recently scarring the coast in 2014 with a tremor that damaged part of Quito's endless flat barrios. Like Medellin, Quito bends up and down slopes as far as the eye can see, but the density of the slums is mind blowing. Taking the bus in to town, Molly and I had the chance to watch something evolve that we had never seen before: the Ecuadorian countryside, pickled for hours with metal

shacks and outdoor water pumps, simply conglomerates and gains density the closer we came to the "city."

We're noticing a pattern in the larger cities we've stayed in thus far. In the United States, most major metropolitan areas have a number of suburbs from which workers from the city live. These suburbs vary in class, function, and age, but they support the central city with industry or by alleviating the pressure of rising housing costs that are the norm in major American cities.

This suburb-downtown relationship doesn't exist in Quito, Cali, Medellin, Panama City, or (as we would later learn) Lima. The downtown portion of these cities contains factory and financial regions, high and low housing prices, and political and social hot spots. "Suburbs" are not as ubiquitous as "slums;" remarkably poor neighborhoods which house people at e cexceptionally low prices in areas that are dependent on the central city for support. Slums are not pretty, nor do they have familiarities like parks, libraries, police stations, and often access to basic utilities. They often rise above the cities that we have visited, starkly noticeable from any vantage point of the lower-altitude downtown areas, which has the effect of reminding visitors and residents alike of the pervasive issues that plague their homes.

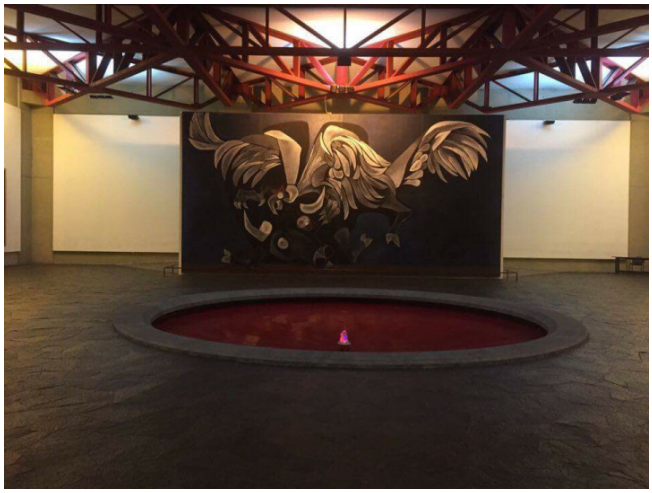
What makes Quito a funny city is the colors. Unlike those other cities, with slums that present themselves to viewers like a blight, Quito's slums are awash with quirky pinks, oranges, blues and purples. Driving in to town we couldn't help but compare the city to Cali – with sprawling slums that reminded Molly of a darker LA – and constantly remarking on the life that inhabited unfinished and forgotten concrete homes, numbering in the thousands in every barrio. Each of those homes had a paint job.

We started our first full day in Quito exploring the Botanical Gardens in the city's modern New Town. The gardens are a prize for the city and the country, which boasts a burgeoning amount of biodiversity and puts them on display in the massive zoo-for-plants that butts up against a well-populated Central Park. The gardens are massive: twenty different distinct ecological habitats with names like "Carnivorous Plants" and "Mystic Remedies" kept us inside the Garden for three hours. I have never seen the variety of plants on display at a uplink in my life; each turn in the wooded walking section showed us a new flower (often an orchid – Ecuador has the largest variety of orchids on the planet) with bright hues that had us stopping for pictures and wondrous, longing looks for minutes. Cactuses the size of pine trees, with needles the length of a baby's forearm, held our fascination and made us long for the sandy dunes of Crestone, Colorado where he had been an impossible month and a half ago. Most striking where signs that promised a three-year minimum in jail and a fine equivalent to three years of a salary if any endangered species were damaged. Molly and I kept our hands to ourselves.

The second part of the day was spent in the Oswaldo Guayasamin Museum, the former residence of Ecuador's most famous politically-charged painter and sculptor (pronounced Guy-ah-suh-

men). The tour was amittedly terrible (the tour guide had a hard time corralling us through the rooms of a home that was simply much too fascinating to rush through) but the subject matter was unbelievable: Guayasamin was a prolific, visionary, and controversial artist who truly poured his life in to his work. His studio was recreated to display several unfinished works of his life, and the walls were covered in pictures depicting the artist with Mao, Malcom X, and Fidel Castro, whom Guayasamin praised until his death in 1999.

Guayasamin's art is profound because the artist let the political and social development of his country affect his subject matter and even his style. His earlier work acts as a biographical summary of different identities within Ecuador, and his portraits depict sadness but also an impersonal and apolitical gaze into Ecuadorian life. His middle period, the Period of Terror, captures the oppression of the United State's involvement in Latin American states by focusing subject matter on victims of corrupt governments and aggressive armies while stylistically taking on a much more deconstructed and symbolic tone. His last period, the Period of Joy, depicts his hope for the future of his people in the form of selected virtues personified in symbolism-heavy scenes.



The crowning portion of the Guayasamin Museum was the Chapel of Man, a blunt structure outside the artist's modernistic and well-elevated home that housed Guayasamin's largest and most impactful works. The first floor is a spacious and breathtaking space which flanks viewers by way of stark, forceful, and massive murals. The bottom floor, however, is less of a chapel than a Sanctuary, containing football-field sized paintings that require little interpretation. The entire structure attempts to show the suffering inflicted by our fellow human beings while still glorifying the strength and love that allows us to overcome that suffering. His art certainly gets the point across.

Our day ended with a trip up to the Panecillo, a hill boasting this giant Virgin Mary statue overlooking Quito. We split a cab with Peter and Ingrid, a lovely couple we had met in the museum (and whom will be the subject of later writings), and made our way up the winding hillside to a stall-strewn summit with an unbelievable view. The Virgin is shown pulling the chain of a Satanic dragon under her feet, and her wings give the work an ethereal vibe that can be felt across the city. It is a wonderful capstone to a beautiful city.

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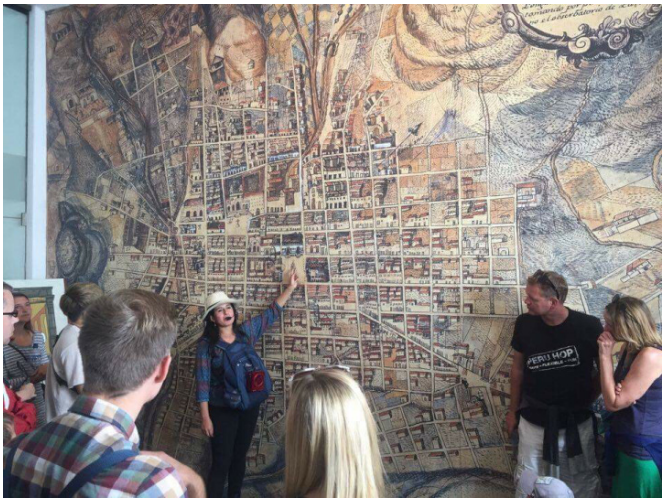
**Day 31: Quito [July 5]**

Our final full day in Quito was packed. Ingrid and Peter joined us from the outset, and we agreed to go on a lengthy three hour walking tour of Quito's Old Town to start the day. The couple, whom we had dinner with the night before after a trip to the Guayasamin museum and the statue of the Virgin Mary, were simply a joy to be around. Peter is a former EMT from Minneapolis whose family regularly leads attic dog sledding expeditions, but because his life wasn't exciting enough at that point he decided to pack up and teach English in Quito. Ingrid is

from Norway, is somewhat of a prodigy in biomedical research, and met Peter when he participated in a student exchange program in her home town before they decided to explore Austraulia and South East Asia together. Spending time with another couple, especially one that gelled as well as Peter and Ingrid, was a great break from roughing it alone.



The walking tour was remarkably informative. Three major takeaways from the experience:

Ecuador is not economically independent from the US. Ecuador adopted the dollar at the turn of the millennia to stabilize wild inflation, and the vast majority of the country lost the vast majority of their savings overnight. Dollars are flown in from the US weekly, and Ecuador ultimately has to run any change in monetary policy, trade agreements, and government-funded economic stimulation by the Federal Reserve.

Ecuadorians do not generally feel politically represented. Ecuador has a long history of elevating the status of indigenous peoples to regular civil society, but the contemporary approach (involving extensive tribal governance and limited control over agricultural rights for ancient tribes) has only recently begun to make up for a US-backed policy, held throughout the 20th century, of economic and educational segregation. Long standing mistrust of the government,

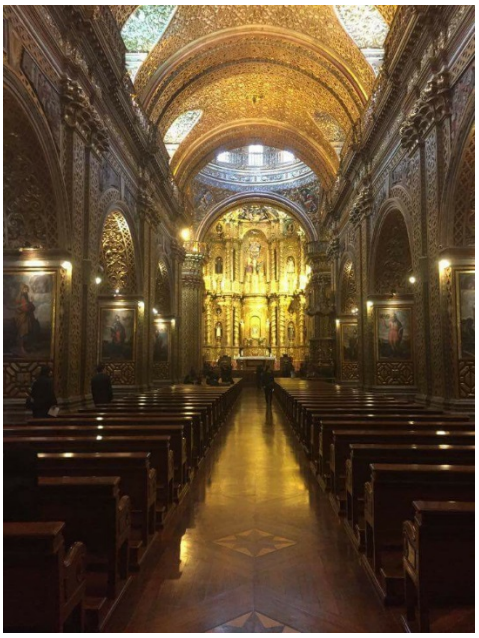
fueled by popular sympathy for indigenous peoples, has led Ecuadorians to vote at lower rates than other Latin American states.

Ecuador is not prepared to deal with the future. As the 7th largest country in South America by size but listing towards the bottom in terms of population, Ecuador is both blessed and cursed with massive proven oil reserves. The economy is centrally dependent on oil exports to support their social net, but a massive generation gap exists, with older Ecuadorians supporting increased drilling and younger Ecuadorians wanting to protect the envithe on mentally fragile jungles (beneath which lay oil) and shift the economy to one focused on tourism. Which is nominally commendable, except for the habitual earthquakes that tear up infrastructure and prevent the country's young tourism industry from getting off the ground.

We learned all of these things during a beautiful, slow walk through Quito's Old Town, which is a UNESCO world heritage site due to a very well preserved colonial cityscape. Fun fact: two presidents were assassinated in the main square of Quito in the late 1800s. One was hacked to death by a machete in broad daylight. There's something about being an American and hearing about other country's sick political violence that brings me a bit of sardonic joy.

After the tour, we ventured into La Igelsia de Compania del Jesus Cristo, openly advertised as the most popular destination for tourists in the city and not without good reason. The church is layered in gold, more gold than I have ever seen in a single building. Of course, the church was built by indigenous workers (politely, the enslavement and maltreatment of construction workers is labeled in the church's bulletin as the "tireless work of hundreds of Ecuadorian hands) and, due to laws preventing indigenous languages from being inside Catholic Churches, the sculptors of the church "signed" their names by leaving hundreds of images reminding converted

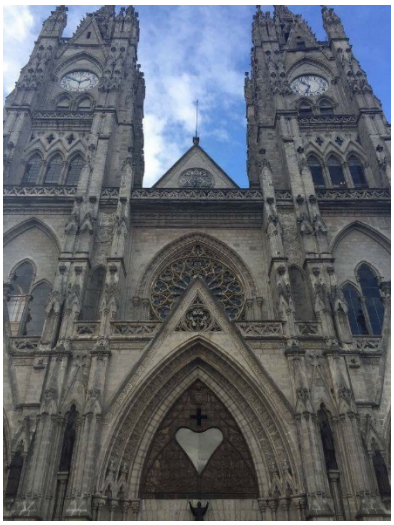
Christians of their homeland – maize, Incan faces, and local fruits are snuck into the gold leaves with remarkable consistency.



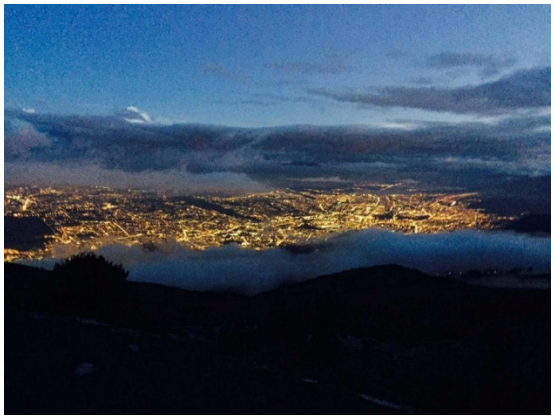
In the back of the church was a large mural that I have to say helps reinforce my current opinions about the Divine; the painting depicts upwards of two dozen gory punishments reserved for the practitioners of various sins, an image which would be very convincing to non-Spanish speakers as to the cost of religious independence. Of particular note was the prevalence of African-inspired demons, reminding the indigenous Catholics that while a Spanish cosmology reserved an eternity of torture and struggle for no believers and sinners, African descendants (read: slaves) occupied an even unholier rung of the existential ladder of morality. But I digress.

While La Compania ("The Company", as it is called; a name that makes me giggle for an entirely different set of ideological reasons) is the most glamorous church in Quito, La Basillica is a church for the people. The Notre Dame of Paris-inspired megalithic building towers over nearby barrios, her twin spires and rear-mounted tower possessing the otherworldly charm that

excellent Gothic architecture seems to exclusively own. For next to nothing, tourists can walk up the many flights of stairs to the top of the twin spires and tower, passing along the way thousands of cute love notes and ardent political message scribbled on the walls in sharpie. The view from the highest point is indescribable, and the resolutely gray Basillica enjoyed an afternoon shower as we climbed it, drenching the surrounding homes with run off from her supporting exterior buttresses.



The last major tourist trap we decided to endure was the TelefriQo line, a cable car (like Medellin's) which slides down one of the hillsides of the sprawling city and pulls passengers through clouds and snow fall. The humidity from the clouds fogged up the glass, but the four of us were ecstatic with the news that Peter had landed his job as an English teacher and we laughed the entire way up. At the top, we could see Quito's 2.5 million people stretched across an impossibly huge swatch of city with the falling sun in the distance. If you ever go to a city with a cable car, you haven't seen the city until you take it.



A small bar at the top of the mountain served us beers and hot chocolate, helping to stem the freezing weather and snowfall on the windows. We managed to make one of the last cable cars back down and enjoyed a dinner at the AirBnB Molly and I stayed at, which was followed by an interview with Peter and Ingrid on the nature of being an expat in the new millennia. After an emotional walk to the cab, we wished our new friends good luck and checked out for the night.

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**Day 32: Guayaquil [July 6]**

I love working in the Study Abroad office because we get to talk to students about traveling. Traveling is one of those things that possesses people; when talking to first time travelers, very much like myself last summer, I would always try to tell them about the parts of being abroad that are not fun. Their eyes would glaze over thinking about the sights and smells of their dream destination during the "not fun" part of the conversation. Transit between cities is one of those things.

Despite how small one may think Ecuador is, we were on a bus from Quito to Guayaquil for twelve hours. The bus was fine and all, don't get me wrong. The entire ordeal of transit is

remarkably stressful. Getting to a terminal is never a straight line, taxi drivers always ask for a ton of money, bus companies are shouting from every direction trying to get your attention, lines are huge, getting to the right bus port at the right time is remarkably more difficult without signs, fighting in Spanish about seat placement… You get the idea.

The rides do give us time to think and sleep, two activities which often go unattended while in a city. That morning, Molly and I interviewed Andrea, the tour guide from yesterday's Old Town walking tour. She had shared some pretty remarkable stuff with us. For starters, we expressed how great it was to finally get the chance to interview a woman, especially given that discussing gender issues was a goal for this blog. Her responses didn't give us a lot to go off of; she believes that Ecuador is a remarkably gender-balanced country, lacking in the machismo culture that permeates so many other Latin American states and often espousing conservative-sourced resentment in the country.

I suppose that she knows what she's talking about; after all, she has worked in the tourism industry since she earned her degree in National Tourism, and has led tours every day for five years. But Molly and I had several issues with the way she characterized gender issues in Ecuador.

Primarily, it's just a simple fact that men can get away with a lot more in Ecuador than in the States. This may sound shocking given the recent prevalence of campus rape cases in the news, but young women report incidents of sexual assault at a lower rate than in the States and men are convicted at an even lower rate than back home.

Furthermore, it doesn't take a progressive outlook to see rampant incidents of sexual and gender-based discrimination in Quito. Industries are remarkably segregated by gender, with next to no

female police officers (an anomaly after Colombia's impressive National Police force) walking down streets and not a single male waiter in any of the restaurants we visited. Andrea confirmed this as well: women have a place in Ecuador, and hearing a college educated mother say that after hearing a defense of gender equity was a remarkable conversation.

Update: We arrived in Guayaquil, late in the evening. I'll just come out and say it: this place looks miserable. Factory after factory as far as the eye can see seem to be broken up by numerous shipping ports and damage from the quake. Found a hostel that managed to not make us broke. Sleep is hard to find.

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**Day 33: Mancora [July 7]**

We couldn't leave Guayaquil quickly enough. We were on the bus by 7:00 am and had bunkered down for a long trip to Mancora with a potentially difficult border crossing in Tumbes, on the border of Ecuador and Peru.

It's hard to describe how excited we were for this part of our trip. Between the other three countries we'd spent time in, Peru has the reputation of being a haven for backpackers, beach

goers, and generally a wide assortment of adventure seekers. The food, which a sniveling French traveler informed us would be joining French cuisine as a UNESCO heritage site (however that's possible), promised to break up the litany of rice, beans, and chicken that was a staple of our trip thus far.

More importantly, Molly and I were ready to have fun. Guayaquil has about as much fun to offer for the passing traveler as an auto parts store, and Quito was exhilarating but impeccably calm/slow. Ipiales was a nightmare and Cali didn't exactly offer us a wonderful experience. Since Manizales and Guillermo, we had been missing the leg-quivering thrill of true immersion in a strange, complex, and beautiful place.

The geography of Peru struck us first. Out of the lush, green canyons that seemed to characterize every inch between Ipiales and Guyaquil appeared a desert unlike anything I could imagine. Tumbes was something out of an old western movie: dust, so much dust, encroached upon the tiny village, littered with abandoned schools, homes, and retail centers. Swimming pools had several feet of dust visible from the road, and the lighting was dramatically warm and yet

staggeringly diffused, sparing no inch of the town from the oranges and reds of sunset. The border crossing was simple enough (it looked to be about the most boring job ever, which was stark compared to the military precision of customs in Ipiales), and the modernistic processing center stood in stark contrast to the seemingly endless sand dunes that characterized the region.

In the distance one can see the pale blue shadow on the horizon betraying ocean, and as the bus continued on our view was flooded with dreamlike fog rising off the Pacific, obscuring massive, primordially-sparse tan cliffs that looked to have the texture of wet sand repeatedly nuanced by gentle waves. In the distance it was impossible to tell the difference between the sea and the sky, an effect which – added with the shadowless desert and lack of breeze – gave the entire environment a dream-like feel.

Tumbes proper was a blur: rickshaw drivers blitzed the opening bus door, led us to a small "tuk tuk" and promptly carted us to the "bus terminal," a garage caked in dust that housed a large black van. Dozens of voices simultaneously directed, scolded, and laughed at us as we struggled to get in the van, our bags being peeled off our backs like zombies ripping boards off a window. Comfortably seated on what I was convinced was an overturned paint bucket, we kicked up dust as the 14-person full vehicle took the one road out of town and carted us to Mancora two hours south. The sun set along the way.

Mancora gave the impression of a habituated northeastern board walk, and we found the personal tuk tuk driver that our AirBnB host used for transport around the area. We were carted off to our beachside palace, met our host, and stayed up all night looking at the stars.

**Day 34: Mancora [July 8]**

Imagine thin green drapes coloring morning light as the first image of your day. Before the drapes is a white room, indescript; beyond the green is a seascape lit more clearly than thought possible, with waves defined miles away from your window and a barricade of palm trees hiding the shore from view. The indescribably heavenly sound of surf in the distance, beckoning us like an old friend, mixed with the heavy warm wind and the chatter of gulls.

Mancora itself – down the steps alongside Giovanna's guest house being rented out for nothing, following a ride into town on the rickshaw of Poncho, the family driver and quite simply the funniest old man I have ever met – is like what I imagine Jersey Shore may have been like. The town has the kind of aura I thought was isolated to memories of 1950's Americana, where nuclear families of four had a car and everyone on the block was friendly and the good guys always won. Everyone here was smiling, and while it is impossible to separate from my conscience the effect of being a white tourist in a brown town, I cannot discount the shocking glory of this place.

Salt kissed the lips in every alley. Sand from the beach littered the front door of every store. Sea breeze gently teased doors open and playfully knocked them against their frames. People here smiled because they lived in a beautiful place, worked with happy people, and ate incredible food. They smiled because they were happy.

My impression of Mancora framed my impression of the rest of Peru. The dreamy air of Mancora and the deserts filling the northern third of the country created a cultural vacuum in the remaining two thirds of Peru, in which the Incans could peacefully thrive and the Spanish could later isolate their viceroyalty from neighboring strife. Peru is a geographically diverse country that, like Colombia, seems unquestionably hobbled together; if not for the force by which the Spanish pieced together their New World Empire, it is difficult to imagine Mancora and Lima occupying the same state. I am tempted to look at pre-Spanish Latin America as an example of complex societies that escaped the materialism-driven conquests and industry of European examples.

Examples of pollution are everywhere, with no real garbage collection in Mancora and smoke from trash-burning fires rising every night. Historically, Peru was a space for raw materials to be extracted, not a “country” in the sense that this geographic factory exemplified a strong civil

society. Peruvians were thusly detached from their land (as they had no rights to it under Spanish ownership) and not tasked with preserving her future. You can see the effects that generational disenfranchisement has on northern Peru when you see the trash fires; unequipped with the rights and the tools to control their home, the monstrously large poor castes in Peru never developed a social infrastructure that valued preservation. Whatever value for preservation they had was dislocated with the fall of the Incan Empire.

Maybe this characterization is too general, but my later experiences in Lima greatly reinforced this idea. In the present time, all I could think about was the beauty of these beaches and the way Molly smiled when she chased the crabs living in the surf-side coral outcroppings. Thinking about anything else proved to be impossible.

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**Day 35: Mancora [July 9]**

I'm still pretty behind on my writing. The goal is to catch up by the time we leave Cusco, which is…. Well, chronologically, challenging.

Our last day in Mancora was work-focused. Molly and I are also applying for places to live in Tampa, so our third roommate (and personal guardian angel) Cameron sent us links to a potential new place and we spent the day in an Internet cafe figuring out how to print and scan things between sporadic bursts of WiFi.

PokemonGo came out in one of the days around our last day in Mancora and the view from outside the States is startling. The orders of Internet infrastructure separating Tampa and Mancora became very stark very quickly; accessible data coverage allows people to catch

monsters in any public space, meet with friends and live in a world where reality is augmented back in Florida. In Mancora, the vast majority of Peruvians don't have smart phones and there is no real data coverage. Internet cafes are abundant to allow users access to a dial-up connection that is often too slow for many data-heavy websites (Facebook being the key one in mind).


To understand the impact of this disparity, I try to imagine Tampa without widespread Internet access. We have a port, but the shipping industry relies on cutting edge Internet technologies and a dependable Internet infrastructure. We have restaurants, but without Google Maps or Yelp reviews, I have a hard time believing that many millennial would take the effort to find them. USF depends on a large and accessible database of academic information to produce research and remain funded, not to mention maintain a thriving student body which uses Facebook to organize campus events almost exclusively.

I would imagine that my age is a limitation in understanding he significance of the Internet on our modern world. I cannot remember a time where we did not have it and it was not improving. Walking around Mancora is like walking through history, because the invisible yet humming network of emails, friend requests, and Tinder swipes is not present.

In the lives of everyday Mancorans, I would imagine that this limitation is noticed but not weighed heavily. Life has always existed without Internet and will not crumble tomorrow because of its absence. Human connection is fruitfully intact despite an over abundance of connectivity, and life certainly feels more free in Mancora than in Tampa.

But imagine one more thought: imagine if you had absolutely no way to observe the social lives of 2.5 billion people. You cannot use a computer to find the answer to any question in a search bar. No more instant access to news about your government or the rest of the world. No more cat videos. And yet, you hear whispers of people in distant lands who walk around with mobile phones and catch little monsters with friends. Would you want that to come to your home?

Short post today because we didn't do much. Enjoy reading this on the Internet!

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**Day 36: Lima [July 10]**

Lima, Lima, Lima… Where to begin.

I'm from a place with nice weather. I take this weather for granted. Jacksonville, Florida has wonderful summers, cool enough autumns (without that "color change" that Molly always talks about), winters that require a coat maybe for a week, and dazilingly blossoming springs. When I go to cold places I find myself appreciating the change, and yes seasons are wonderful things, but warm weather really isn't that terrible of a thing. Clear blue skies, killer sunrises, all that jazz.

Lima is built in the middle of a (surprise) valley near the Pacific Ocean. It was a tiny Incan settlement before the Spanish built up the region with the goal of developing an administrative

center not as difficult to reach as Cusco. Lima is unique for having no visible sky, at all, seemingly ever (taxi drivers say it clears up a little during the summer). So we saw all of these wonderful pictures of Lima, displaying a colorful array of colonial architecture, exuberant street art, all the things that would make two young gringo travelers excited to visit….

And then we got there, and we realized that we had made a terrible mistake.

Lima is not a colorful city. It is not a historically proud city. It is a gray, traffic-clogged, smoke-choked sprawl of 10 million souls.

Lima is cold this time of year and perpetually exists in this state of about-to-rain. Misty wind rattles your face from sunrise to sunset, stopping at midday to encourage heavy sweating with an insane amount of humidity. The sky is a single color – gray, maybe light gray – a result of the historic mists of nearby mountains mixing with non-historic smog to form a permanent blanket of depressing weather.

Molly aptly summed up the city when she explained that her long time friend, backpacking in Colombia at the time, regrets choosing Lima over pretty much anywhere else in South America. I do not believe that judgement is undeserved.

Our introduction to Lima was a gargantuan shopping mall stapled on to a very large but empty bus terminal. The mall was close by and probably had a Starbucks with WiFi, but we could not have imagined the number of people in that mall, and upon further recollection that may have been the most people I have ever seen in any given place. The bustle was enormous, with families of ten pushing through crowds with military unit precision and an unbelievable hunger for whatever store was right around the corner. Molly and I slipped through cracks in these mass

migration movements inch by inch, with all of our belongs on our backs, in a city whose reputation for danger was the worst of any that we had visited.

We left the mall as quickly as possible to get to our AirBnB host. The taxi ride took an hour and a half, but not to the fault of the driver; Lima's main highways are literal nightmares, with the equivalent of twelve lanes of traffic but no traffic lines. Drivers honk microseconds before cutting off drivers to signal a lane change (often foregoing turn signals, for some reason) and the resulting chaos is enough to make one sick.

We made it to Barranco, a nice and young neighborhood in the south of the city, and met our host, also named Chris. Chris lives with his high school best friend Travis, and together the two escaped (their words) South Carolina to "work a lot less and make a lot more." We had an exceptional conversation about our shared home, and talking to other people from the South was refreshing because the accents are still alive and well. They reminded me of home, which is what I needed on my first day in Lima.

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**Day 37: Lima [July 11]**

The vast majority of our first day in Lima was spent, using the vernacular that Molly and I developed, "shmubbing around." Successful shmubbing is remarkably easy – typically, only a couch and TV are required, preferably with an accessible stash of junk food.

We stayed in doors all day because after a while, when we take a moment to examine ourselves, we realize just how unbelievably tired we actually are. The exhaustion doesn't come from intensive physical labor or even severely stressful situations; we just get worn down from

speaking Spanish all the time, never really having a clear conversation with someone else, eating food that never quite sits right, and fighting with cab drivers. Woe is me, right?

But the idea of exhaustion is an excellent template to jump in to Kwasi Wiredu and his concept of conceptual decolonization. I wrote about this several weeks ago, when we were back in Panama, but support for his framework makes a lot more sense to me now.

To start, Wiredu proposes that the political and social challenges facing nations generally and West African societies specifically is a sort of generalized miasma resulting from everyone in that society having to deal with difficult psychological problems. At an individual level, a Ghanaian is forced to reconcile the language of her people, Akan – and the vast body of historical, conceptual, and religious templates that Akan relies on to be relevant to speakers – with English, the cosmopolitan and legal language of her state. This discongruity, between what is spoken at home and what is spoken in a court, plays out in many different ways that impact Ghana and the lives of anyone living in a society whose ancestral language was replaced with an imposed language that shares very few (if any) similarities.

I don't have Cultural Universals and Particulars with me on this trip but there is an example that Wiredu uses which elucidates this point.

Christian theology supports the idea that upon death, an immaterial soul leaves a material body and leaves the realm we live in for one in which God inhabits. This process of soul removal, transcendence, and divine judgement is a quality or essential part of Christian theology. Among many other reasons, Christians claim that this process is a quality of God that shows practitioners that their religion is worthy of recognition.

Akan theology supports the idea that upon death, you continue into another stage of life that began at birth, transitioned in puberty, transitioned again with adulthood and then old age, and will continue again based upon your invocation as an ancestor by the people who love you. This process of ancestor-attainment is a quality or essential part of Akan theology. Among many other reasons, the Akan claim that this process is a quality of [I can't believe that I don't remember the Akan name for God] that shows practitioners that their religion is worthy of recognition.

A culture that exists for thousands of years with a religion develops/is shaped by the force of that religion on their culture. In Ghana, it is customary today to pour a portion of one's drink on to the floor of a house as a libation to the ancestors of that family. In the United States, burial by coffin, proceeded by a sermon from a pastor, is a traditional death ritual. Both death rituals developed distinctly from each other and impact their respective cultures by influencing ideas on death, the role of the family, and the role of the dead in living spaces.

Imagine living in a place where your people buried the dead in coffins for thousands of years. Another culture, with completely different ideas about the role of death in your society, uses armies and the threat of enslavement to punish people who refuse to stop using coffins and start pouring libations. Your culture's practices become outlawed, your religion becomes sacrilegious, and when you are arrested for practicing in the supposed safety of your home, they read off your crimes in a language that you can't understand.

Such is the case of the Ghanaians, who have endured the fall of their most powerful empire in Africa, the genocide and enslavement and forced separation of their people, and political control

over all areas of their state by an invader for hundreds of years – and still managed to preserve the act of pouring libations.

The essence of Wiredu's work is this: the process by which we individually evaluate the impacts of imperialism on our language and psyche for the end of creating states which embody objectively sound cultural factors is called conceptual decolonization, and everyone in Ghana, and country under the influence of imperialism, and any country who benefits from imperialism must undertake that process to end industrialized, globalized oppression.

I'm a big fan of his writing so I may be aggrandizing a bit.

But the point is the same; if we can acknowledge that some places speak a different language than they used to, and that our languages dramatically impact our ways of organizing the world, and that the linguistic switch was not really done by choice, then we can also acknowledge that there are long-standing maladies affecting the organization and progress of these cultures.

I'll get to how all of this relates to Lima and South America next.

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**Day 38: Lima [July 12]**

Today we took a giant walking tour of downtown Lima, which provides some excellent material to relate to my points about Kwasi Wiredu in Day 37 with some examples in our modern world.

To start, Lima isn't really named Lima.  Lima was originally spelled "Limak", and was the name of the settlement around a holy site in the Limak River under the Incan Empire, but the name was changed because it is difficult to pronounce a "k" sound in Spanish.  The Lima River is now

a dried, pitiful, disgusting flow of little more than human waste and plastic bottles. But at the time of "settlement" by Pizzaro in the late 1500s, The Limak River was an essential source of water for the Incan Empire's irrigation system, which was at the time larger than any system of man-made irrigation on the planet (meaning the Incans had a larger irrigation system than the Europeans or the Chinese, which is insane to think about).

Lima is not a good place to build a city. The Spanish had conquered Cusco but needed a location that was much more accessible for transporting goods, meaning they needed a place near a coast. Because of this the Spanish established their wooden huts in the wake of the plague-eviscerated Limak River community, immediately damned the water supply (cutting off water to that irrigation system), and began bringing more and more people to the site.

The site was not so much a holy site as it was an unholy site, however; the Incans did not settle in the area because of a history of what we now call earthquakes, and it took less than twenty years for the "Lima" community to be destroyed by an earthquake, following which the former-royal-priests-turned-slaves committed a mass suicide in what could be viewed as an escape from their bondage.

Relentlessly, the Spanish brought over more slaves, went to work placing churches at the top of terraced pyramids, and supplanting the significance of the Incan sun-centric religion with the religion of Christ. This supplantation was only sporadically broken up by slave revolts, plagues, and more earthquakes, but the Spanish did not listen to the Incan religious leaders and decided to focus their settlement in Lima despite what the Incans must have viewed as the divine warnings of a very upset deity.

So imagine how the first "Peruvians" post-colonization would have tried to understand their world. Those living in Lima would have been living in a city that in almost every way was opposite to the lifestyles of the Incans 100 years prior. Traditional understandings about the sacred would have been passed down by elders but hidden from public discourse due to threat, meaning that early Peruvians would have to be living in a space that Christians analogously may be able to associate with Gomorrah. Technology invented by ancestors – terraced farming, bead-based economics, remarkably extensive irrigation – would have been taken over by conquerors, forcing Peruvians to watch their cultural heritage be overturned and mismanaged.

Reality for early post-colonial Peruvians would have lacked the material, social, or spiritual stability their culture had maintained for centuries. Such an origin is the basis for a mindset that

Wiredu could only describe as colonial, and which must be undestood in the context of imperialism.

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**Day 39: Lima [July 13]**

If you want to learn to speak a language, it is imperative to talk to people who speak so fast that you don't understand what they're saying. Only by clobbering through a few months of essentially speechlessness can we start to understand the regional peculiarities, idioms, and connotations of a language.

Learning a new language isn't just a past time or a hobby. We construct our world with the tools we are given, and for a species which articulates and organizes existence with our speech and our writing, learning a language amounts to gaining a new brain. With a second brain, we gain the ability to see how others place value on their worlds. We start to bridge the gap between the world views we have developed and the world views which so often occupy an alien space.

Growing a second brain is a humbling experience. It requires a constant willingness to sound like an idiot. We speak those second languages with unearned confidence and expect the listener to make sense of our ramblings with a polite respect for the attempt. Of course, many back home scrutinize those attempting to speak English without the same courtesy that Spanish speakers here greet tourists, but I suppose that the latter has not had the luxury of a non-tourism driven economy.

I've been sick in Lima for several days now and I'm ready to leave. The city's diffused light is partially the result of ancient weather patterns trapping in mountain just and partially the result of

uninhibited industrial production, mixing the fog with smog. The haze produced is unpleasant smelling and mildly innocuous. Getting out of here would be good for my health.

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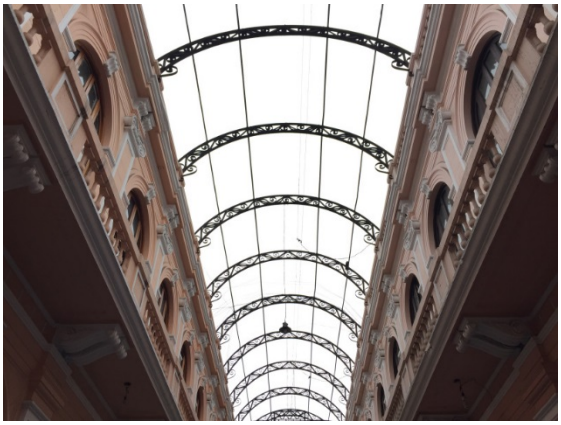
**Day 40: Lima**

I'm still sick. Pro-tip: take probiotics before leaving the States. Our religious belief in hyper-sterilazation may make us feel better about eating those disgusting burgers, but it impedes the American immune system when exposed to the Real World.

I'm bitter. Being sick sucks.



Molly and I spent the day together. A fellow traveler told us about a "cat park" where dozens of stray felines congregate daily. Molly is obsessed with the animals so we found the park and spent a good three hours taking pictures and eating local fig-drizzled sweets intermittently. But first, we found a book store, and added three excellent works to our collection (which will undoubtedly be used as sources of the thesis).

The first two are 1491 and 1493, both by Charles C. Mann. The books describe in great detail modern academic debates around the lifestyles of Native Americans before and after Colombus'

arrival. I'm reading 1491 now and it reads like a novel; the book is organized to refute notions of emptiness in the Western Hemisphere before colonization, an assumption which modern archaeology has all but buried but which popular opinion preserves to assuage guilt over the ensuing genocide of these profoundly ancient and complex civilizations. Mann presents both aspects of many debates with great detail, and reading about the ancient Incans while traveling by bus into Cusco will undoubtedly have a chilli affect.

The third is Open Veins of Latin America by Eduardo Galeano. This book is an epic compilation of Latin America's cultural, social, and environmental rape since the onset of European settlers. While attention is given to the blatantly exploitive nature of Spanish, Portugese, and British imperialism, the author frames modern intervention by the United States in a context that is impossible to disassociate from historical oppression. I have already read the book (thanks to a very close, politically minded Mexican-American friend of mine) but have been left lying awake at night considering it's implications. Molly had to have it.

Armed with new literature, our next few weeks will gain that much more insight. Always bring a book.

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**Day 41: Lima [July 15]**

Our time in Lima is coming to an end and my impression of the city is worse off than when we arrived. It's difficult to describe this city in such a context that would make sense for Americans; it is large and sprawling, like many of our cities back home, but lacks a sense of direction or planning. At any given moment a view of the city takes on a stratified affect: the

lower, immediate level is charming enough but more often gray and dirty; the more intermediate level contains a painfully never ending swath of shack homes (there's always one within sight), mixed in with the paint of graffiti and the sound of traffic unlike any I have ever heard; the distant level bends around the view, with far-off shack housing staining any familiar color with the greys and browns of a city that cannot afford new paint.

Large skyscrapers litter the view seemingly at random, performing impossible twists that seem alien in this environment yet speak to the continuous modernization of the city. Freeways ten lanes wide (broken in half by a metro-like bus system) crisscross every direction, forsaking the natural estuaries that historically populated the metropolitan areas with lanes of motion as gray and dirty as the few remaining instances of water that hide behind ripped chain fences.

Color in Lima comes in three forms:

– on the dress of her citizens, who gather en masse at shopping malls, toting hundreds of dollars of merchandise in dozens of bags improbably all placed on a single arms. Peruvians in Lima dress to the nines, as they say, and the lack of environmental stimuli is partially made up for the always-chilly fashion senses of the city's younger inhabitants.

– on her roads, where car makers assert their might over the city's environmental and traffic-based concerns with a never ending flow of brightly colored automobiles. There is a taxi for every privately owned car and the constant go-stop nature of taxi riders produces an accompanying, constant horn sound which simply cannot be compared to an American city. The color of cars may be difficult to identify with great detail due to the inability of bystanders to appreciate such scenes with relative peace.

– on her advertisements, which reminds Peruvians of the dismal state of domestic industries. Coca-Cola in particular has colonized every open advertisement space along the city's major thoroughfares, resulting in dozens of blonde-haired, blue-eyed models looking down unto the brown/brown inhabitants of sidewalks and taxi cabs with an effect that can only be described as Orwellian. High-quality Chinese phone advertisements promise connectivity, Chevrolet cars promise affordable mobility, McDonalds has never looked more appetizing – and even the country's national drink, Inca Cola, sports the Coke symbol like a brand.

I sympathize with Peruvians who live in Lima. The city wasn't built for them, the government doesn't seem to care about them, and there are so many opportunities to give away their money.

The entire city almost has a theme-park feel, as a place of structure but little substance. I hope to return one day to find my impressions challenged and overthrown.

For now, I'm just happy to move on to Cusco.

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**Day 42: Cusco [July 16]**

Today is a special day. My brother, Zach, is turning 20. I'm not home to wish him well, but as one of the most fiercely independent people I know, I'm not worried about that bothering him. I wish instead that he was able to see this new place with me. Best of luck, Zach. 21 is better.

Molly and I are spending today on a bus from Lima to Cusco. We've been on a lot of busses now so the activity is becoming routine; however, long bus rides make for little interesting writing material, and I find myself grasping at the vast disparity present in the fact that I even have the ability to write at length, from my iPad, on an air-conditioned bus, touring a foreign place.

By disparity, I mean to say “disparity in the opportunity I have with the opportunity many Peruvians have.” And since our global capitalist system places a heavy tariff for opportunities on affordability, disparity in opportunity is al oust synonymous with disparity of income.

If you could see what I see from this bus seat, you would understand the affects of disparity of income. A few observations over these past hours:

– at 5 am, a line of women older than most professors, carrying their lives on their backs, was passed. We passed them on a desert road, sprinkled by marks of civilization such as burnt homes and the occasional rusted fence. We had not been in a town for an hour, and we would not see another town until noon. But there they were.

– entering that town, our bus was the only motorized vehicle in sight. Mothers sat with their children on the side of desert roads, displaying a mat of Chinese-made “local artesian products” (the twins of which we had seen on so many mats by this point). As the bus came closer, these women rushed the bus, begging the driver for the potential life-changing opportunity of selling wares to foreign tourists. The bus did not slow down.

– cleft palettes. There were so many children with jaws mangling teeth in directions seemingly inspired out the of demon-focused church portraits of Quito. I don’t know how people with teeth extruding from their nostrils eat, nor how children learn to smile as a result.

It is stunning to consider the gulf of opportunities between those children and myself. Many do not speak Spanish, instead being raised in a home which sparks only Quechua, the ancestral Incan creole language. The towns they inhabit are without windows or roads, let alone streetlights or basic services like medical care or police. Truly humanitarian teachers travel hours every day to teach basic arithmetic to highschool-aged children, risking potential kidnapping (a lucrative industry in southern Peru) for pennies.

What kind of charlatan is able to equate the opportunity I have with the opportunity of a young Peruvian?

It was not always this way. Ancient Peruvians lived in peace for thousands of years. Mann documents a civilization in *1491* which developed without agriculture (only growing cotton for tools and clothing) and relied on food from the sea. Based just south of Lima, those people existed without developing *weapons* – archaeologists have yet to find evidence of an unnatural killing, a mutilated corpse, or any artistic codex depicting warfare. They lived without starvation, and they lived without murder.

It is racist to posit that ancient Native Americans were simple, overtly peaceful, or too unorganized to follow the agriculture-and-warfare heavy lifestyle of the Europeans. But I understand the attraction of lamenting about the loss of those cultures like Christians lament about the loss of Eden. It is hard to see how the past several centuries have benefited Peru or Peruvians in any topographical way.

Update: we arrived in Cusco and had a hell of a time finding out AirBnB. The high altitude, combined with the 50-pound bags on our backs, made exploring the upper hillside barrio where our AirBnB was supposed to be very difficult. A local shopkeeper took pity on us and told us that the host had moved away a month ago. So we hiked to a relatively safer part of town and eventually found a hostel after very little luck. I have a feeling that the modern-day incantation of the Incan ancestral homeland will leave me with even more cynicism.

For now, I'm just glad that this city has real color.

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**Day 43: Cusco [July 17]**

From the rooftop terrace of our inner-city hostel, we could see all of Cusco. Like so many other Latin American cities, the town is built into a valley and at night one has e feeling of swimming in a fishbowl of bioluminescent creatures. Fireworks sounding an awful lot like gunshots went off every thirty minutes, drawing the attention of what little police presence existed for the non-tourist part of town (where we ended up staying). The complete effect was one of confusion and aimlessness; but we had been confused and aimless all evening, simply looking for a place to sleep, and the result wasn't horrifying.

In the day, Cusco betrays her post-imperial history. An airport is placed in the literal middle of town (contrasting sharply with that oh-so-romantic Colombian gem, Medellin) and the only cars bothering to traverse the winding near-vertical cityscape are taxis. Plaza del Armas sits in the "historic" center of Cusco, hiding none of the turista-only souvenir shops and overpriced pizza

joints with a freshly applied coat of white paint and long lines for another cathedral laced with indigenous gold.

Unlike Lima, Cusco has a character. Large romanticized statues of Incan leaders dot the urban center and children play football in the streets. Food can be smelled here, as here is no haze looming just above rooftops, and the air is clear. The high altitude has blessed the old and young with a vitality our sick and nicotine-enriched bodies simply do not have – going up and down streets is avoided at all cost lest we stop every block as young boys job by without breaking a sweat.

Like Lima, Cusco is not really Cusco. Qosqo, the ancestral homeland of the Incans, was burned many centuries ago by the Spanish. Cusco was rebuilt later and served as little more than a train stop heading south. At the turn of the 20th century, legendary Machu Picchu was identified nearby and the town exploded with speculators hoping to capitalize on the tourist magnet. Shops advertising "authentic Incan food" use microwaves and their pizza has ketchup. Every street has an "authentic" llama-wool clothing store. You get the jist of it.

Molly and I bit the bullet and tried cuy (guinea pig, but I feel bad writing it out) alongside alpaca at lunch, two meats which I can now satisfactorily dismiss from my future appetite. Cuy is particularly gruesome; the rodent is served naked and charred but whole, on a hot platter similar to beef at a high end steak house, before the waiter desecrates the mammal with a butcher knife. The quarters of cuy are then dissected with fork and knife and finger under the advisory that "real Incans eat everything, even the bones" of the beast. The meat was wrapped around joints and limbs and was tasty enough if not oily. But the skin had the texture of rubbery chicken and was difficult to chew, especially once the constant reminder of our meal was brought to us by the poor soul's beady eyes. We managed to take a swing at the body before going for the head ("eating the brain is good luck" – right) and exploring what we realized was the cranial cavity. On this day and this day alone, I ate the gray matter of a bona fide guinea pig. The alpaca was dessert by comparison.

Eating cuy became an analogy for how we approached the cultural experiences of Peru. Peru is a beautiful country and the people are hardworking, genuine human beings. But the economy is structured to rope in tourists and serve them a half-hearted version of Peru, and from start to finish we couldn't escape this fact. What tour guides called "local customs" were part of a sales pitch, constantly. "Incan", as an adjective, is a mix between pejorative backwardness and

cultural heritage, but through excessive demonstration the former always seems to be referenced more than the latter.

Like cuy, Peru has a strange taste. It is not what the casual diner may expect, and to be sure it is possible to enjoy the experience. But like cuy (which traditionally is a celebratory dish eaten only thrice a year), the Peru turistas experience is nothing less than a bastardization of what Peru was and is. We are given the superficial, spiced with topographical pleasantries guaranteed to entice, and protected from the truly widespread economics of disparity of exploitation that have arisen as a result of that serving. We are given flavor but no substance.

Eaters beware.

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**Day 44: Cusco [July 18]**

Our stay in Cusco has charmed us. The grittiness of poverty is never far from view, as are examples of architecture displaying historical injustice – flat land for the rich, steep land for the poor. Walking up and down these streets gives us an appreciation for those peoples who have to carry their children on their backs to spare them the haggard breathing bestowed to all untrained lungs, but as for Molly and I, we are able to simple taste this lifestyle without fear of assimilation. Our families don't live at the tops of these hills, after all.

We find ourselves charmed through osmosis. Peruvians smile much less frequently an Colombians, and their leathery-brown faces and hands reveal little time for play. But even the youngest Peruvian is going somewhere, following in her mother's footsteps by tracking down the next court to kick a ball around in or the next snack from a kind older shopkeeper. Peruvians

seemingly look at the white faces that stare on such a daily basis and shrug, because what else can they really do?

Learning to not care and ignore the unignorable sights around us seems to be the challenge of the Peruvian traveler. Like those around us, we are inclined to buy in to the turista Magic: we are young, bold people in an ancient land that rewards the young and bold. This land, from the curve of the hill beckoning a climb to the glint of old-gold sunset light on brazenly white shop walls advertising Adventurous Spirits, seems sculpted into an ideal travel destination. The Magic permeates all transactions, from the mirror seller who admonishes us about local earrings in nearby Aguas Calientes to the waitress telling us to live a little and splurge on the local treat.

As privileged backpackers we are undeniably integral parts of this magical ecosystem. We are young and relatively attractive, and we have socially provocative tattoos, and we talk about injustices in abstracts with ease. We have our pictures taken with other tattooed relatively attractive young people who are also answering this primordial call to Go and See the rest of the world. Our pictures become the front pages of foreign-owned hostels, Facebook banners, and

punchlines about bar crawls. And like those before us, those images are utilized to create the idea that this place – Cusco, ancient Incan heartland, Peruvian metropolis, Quechua origin story – is somehow made for people like Molly and I to get up and go "explore."

The entire start-to-end process is an insidious marketing campaign at best and a puzzle missing pieces at best. More so than in past countries, I can feel the corrosive effect of my presence on the local ecosystem. Young boys grow up without Internet and see a tall, blonde white guy roughing around and making the most of his youth: I become an example of why these children should strive to leave their homes and forsake their culture. Restaurants tortuously explain to turistas why ice isn't readily available nor pizza isn't made with mozzarella cheese but proceed to serve the same tested sopa to returning customers for a tenth as much as a traveler would expect to pay: we are customers, and the customer is always right.

I'm rambling now. Gonna sign off.

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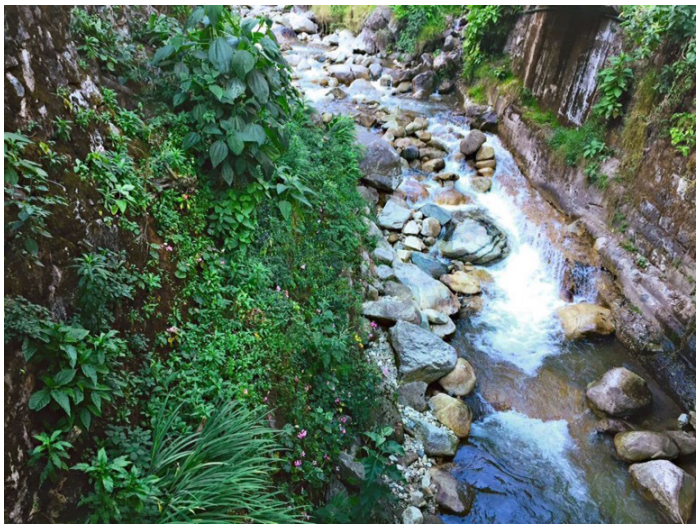
**Day 45: Aguas Calientes [July 19]**

At 5 in the morning, Molly and I were packed and ready to go. Our hostel had called a cab to take us to the nearby train station in time for our early morning trip to Aguas Calientes, the closest village to Machu Picchu and a Disney World-esque town made for foreign tourists.

The lines leading up to the train reminded us of a Peruvian traffic jam, with no real order and a variety of options on where to go. We were hustled on to the train by attendants who realized that single file lines were not in this crowd's character, and had the pleasure of sitting across

from Abril and Alejandra. The young Mexican travelers were taking a break from being human rights lawyers in Mexico City, which I could only imagine is a hellish profession.



We spoke at great length about the election in November, the Mexican people's feelings towards the policies and rhetoric of Donald Trump, and the nature of their careers. Both work extensively with young women and have received death threats from judges who were targeted for explicitly sexist behavior towards female employees (like making his employees crawl in to his office). The young women were remarkably well versed in the nature of law practice and talking to young lawyers is just about the coolest thing ever so the ride to Aguas Calientes was an amazing one.

Getting to the town, we were shocked; the town has seemingly no residential areas, instead comprised entirely of cheap hostels and cheaper restaurants. A train track cut through the town above the Aguas Calientes River and punctuated every ten minutes with a deafening horn. No cars or rickshaws traversed the streets. The first two hundred meters of the town consists of a shack/tarp-roof covered maze of tiny souvenir shops (reminiscent of the Grand Bazaar in

Istanbul) in which we watched several families led into shop fronts on the promise of directions out of the labyrinth.

Finding a hostel was easy enough. The walls were, not figuratively, made of cardboard; Molly and I acidentally kicked one of the paper-thin walls loose when closing the door. Lunch, as every meal we had over the next two days, miserably argued against Peruvian cuisine's recent ascension to the French-occupied World Heritage status. We had a mojito, but the bottom third of the class was unstirred sugar. We were not amused.

In the midst of all of our not-sterling first impression of Agias Calientes, I was reading a portion of Mann's 1491 which detailed the rise and fall of the Incan Empire. The Incans were prolific statecrafters, constructing an irrigation system that brought Ecuadorian water to southern Chile at a time when most of Spain didn't have irrigated agriculture. They managed to complete massive

public works projects in remarkably inhospitable environments, lining their kingdom with a road network rivaling Rome's.

Walking through Aguas Calientes was strange because it was like staring into the future: are all great empires marked by the tourist traps that rise in their place? And then I thought of Orlando, and then I wanted to go to sleep.

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**Day 46: Machu Picchu [July 20]**

It is difficult to describe Machu Picchu. It is equal parts agricultural wonder, ancient ruin, and medieval castle complex. The lighting of the valley in which Machu Picchu sits is a platinum-gold unlike any I have ever seen, and the postcard-worthy Waynapicchu Mountain seems to stand over the battered stone complex like a sentry. The bus ride to the site winds up the side of a mountain for thirty minutes, each switchback exposing viewers inches more of a view that is

bathed in early morning light and teasing us with ancient terraces. By the time the full view of Machu Picchu is in sight, it is impossible not to be awestruck.

Machu Picchu is huge. The entire site consists of almost a hundred evenly spaced terraces (used for producing food for former inhabitants) supporting a surprisingly intact stone fortress. From any angle of the fortress is a breathtaking mountain view; Machu Picchu is nestled in the middle of a multicolored mountain ring, giving the impression that ancient gods built impenetrable walls around the structure to protect the structure from peering eyes. It is ironic that the upkeep of Machu Picchu today is built upon tourism revenue, exposing Machu Picchu to the attention her founders so desperately wanted to avoid.

Machu Picchu was not the largest Incan settlement before the Spanish arrived, but it's hard to imagine something larger. The structure consists of dozens of stone shops and homes lining meticulously exact streets. Even today, it feels like this place could hold a sizable population, teeming with life and social structure. The literal flood of tourists marching over the cobbled streets, through ancient backyards and across temples puncturing the heavenly skyline, gives one an impression of what Machu Picchu must have been like in her best days.

Tour guides and ticket scalpers protect the entrance with phalanx-like dedication, offering unique perspectives on the site every ten feet. Molly and I chose instead to use the knowledge of the place garnered from 1491 to give flavor to our experience. We really didn't even need that, because the site is incredibly designed to almost be self explanatory.

Every morning the sun rises over one of several dozen mountain peaks and shares a clear light across the cityscape. On the solar equinox, the sun rises exactly over the Sun Gate, a small temple one mile from the main structure by rocky mountain path. We struggled up the climb – the high altitude and hot sun combined in a terrible way – but the view was worth it. With the sun rise, Incan priests hiked the same path every morning to produce offerings to their gods and bask in the glory of their creation. The Sun Gate is now littered with backpackers dangling their hiking boots over more impossibly made stone terraces.

Those terraces are the true architectural wonder of Machu Picchu; by constructing the unnatural mountain steps, Incans prevented rock slides, made the steep sheer cliffs traversable, and created a bounty of planting space. Every single inch of the cliff sides are terraced, and one can only marvel at the social organization required for such massive construction without wages. Slavery existed in the Incan Empire, but using slave labor for civil construction was sacrilegious (human sacrificing was not). That so many people contributed to such an effort is a marvel in its own.

Wrapping around Machu Picchu is the Incan Bridge, a long rocky path (with no real railing for the majority of it) that Incans would have used to enter the site. Today, we were able to walk out to the first of two bridges; a small plank bridge over a 200-meter drop acted as a final line of defense, while a longer retractable rope bridge would have been used as well. Fun fact: bridges without bottom-based supports were unknown in Europe when Pizzaro met the Incans, and his

horses were too afraid to cross.  Even if the Spanish had found Machu Picchu, they would not have been able to make it inside.

After two long hikes and an overpriced lunch, Molly and I spent the afternoon sitting in a patio-like clearing of an ancient home, trying to take in the scene while reading our new literature. Bugs of rainbow colors and alien shapes crawled over our jeans as our fingers absentmindedly picked at the packed dirt and stone walls.  The stone was smooth, impossibly smooth, and made even more striking knowing that the Incans didn't have metal tools to cut rock with – they hand picked, carted or carried, meticulously placed, and blessed every rock we could see.

This place cannot be real.

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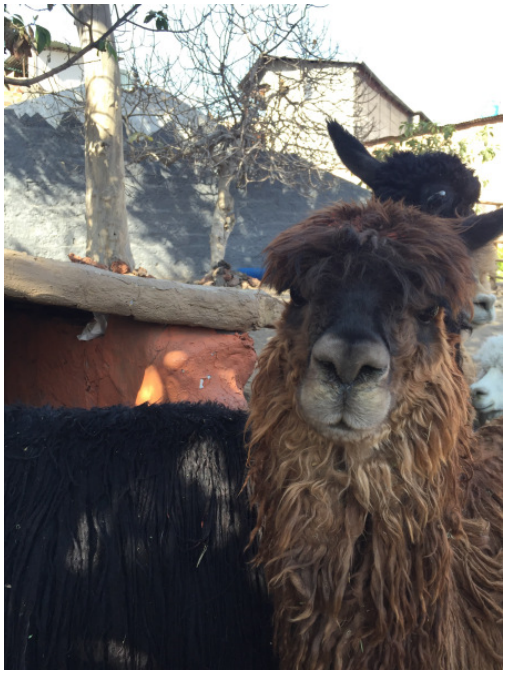
**Day 47: Cusco [July 21]**

We took a late train back to Cusco and shared our experiences with Abril and Alejandra.  A fleet of taxis awaited our train, and Juan Carlos, our driver, shared a few Quechua vocabulary words with us.  It was a mind trip talking to a Quechua-speaking Peruvian taxi driver the day we

returned from Machu Picchu, itself filled with white tourists who probably cannot spell Quechua correctly (myself included).

After returning to Cusco we took a bus to Puno on a whim and sat back for the long ride. But I'd like to share some impressions of Machu Picchu while they're still fresh in my mind.



Machu Picchu is the reason white people go to Peru. It is an ancient world wonder and everyone I know who thinks that pre-Columbus Native Americans didn't have their shit together needs to see it. But Peru receives a massive amount of tourism from Machu Picchu, tourism which is only distantly followed by Coca Canyon near Arequipa and Lake Titicaca near Puno.

Because white people love Machu Picchu, Peru structures her economy to serve white people. There are effectively two different sectors in Peru's economy, those from Peru and those from abroad. For example: Peruvians take collectivos (small dirt-cheap large vans with doors always open for passengers to hop on and off) around their cities. Tourists take taxis, with large English

signs littering the windows. Peruvians eat at home or in small, unmarked restaurants owned by family friends. Tourists eat pizza with ketchup or a plate of scrambled eggs for $10.

Structuring an economy around tourists forsakes Peruvians. Everywhere we go, poverty is apparent. And I don't mean "no TV" poverty, or what we call poverty in the States. I mean real, hungry, broken-windows poverty. Posters for the PPK, Peru's right-wing and only legitimate political party, plaster desert sand-drenched concrete walls and non-functioning light posts, all of them promising to fix solutions. But the lights aren't on.

Structuring an economy around tourists makes some Peruvians really rich. Someone has to collect the licensing fees for all of those shops in Aguas Calientes. Someone is Peru's Coca-Cola representative, and he makes so much money off of the corporate sponsorships littering the country. Someone owns the bus companies taking tourists (who pay close to $80 each) on the ten minute bus rides to and from Machu Picchu. The Peruvian minimum wage is $253 a month, and most employed Peruvians sell wares on streets, where a minimum wage isn't guaranteed. Where does all that money go?

Going to Machu Picchu is important individually but disastrous systemically. Aside from the massive expense in upkeeping Machu Picchu, the economics of tourism in Peru, the widespread suffering in economic sectors detached from tourism, and the seeming lack of political solutions to these inequities, going to Machu Picchu tells Peruvians that "this is the way things are meant to be."

And they aren't. Lima should be spelled "Limak" and still be a tiny sacrilegious site. Machu Picchu should be bursting with organic activity. Pollution shouldn't be a constant factor every there Peruvians go. At every step, Molly and I have to remind ourselves how grossly out-of-

whack (my vocabulary is escaping me) this entire system is. Peru should be easy for Peruvians, not us.

Ranting complete. The sights that spawned it don't seem to be.

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*[The remaining journal entries were typed on an iPad without being published online, and a system update of the iPad made the entries irretrievable. This is the las post from the published journal entries.]*

**Day 48: Puno [July 22]**

I am sick again. Unbelievable. I will never travel out of the country without taking probiotics. I will never travel out of the country without taking probiotics. I will never travel out of the country without taking probiotics.

In between fever-assisted naps on our bus ride, the landscape of southern Peru haunts us. When I was younger I was obsessed with post-apocalyptic literature. If the end of the world looks like the arid landscape south of Cusco, that romanticization has shattered.

There is so much sand and so little vegetation. Brush is a surprise. Mountains have brown craggy outcroppings which look older than the Appalachian foothills, the oldest entity aside from the sea I have ever seen. Lighting is harsh and unwelcome, but my irises are painfully opened at every bump in the road, which in itself is a misnomer because the expanses of paved road are more surprising than the regular potholes.

I'm not sure if this transit is a dream or not.  There are so many children without shoes and with inches of dust on their faces.  A family from Seattle is traveling on our bus and the youngest girl was crying at some point.

Molly is the only beautiful thing I see here.

Sleep is needed.

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*Bolded references are cited in the literature review, beginning on page 12.*


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