



## Tackling the new materialities: Modern food and counter-movements in Ecuador



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### ABSTRACT

Faced with rising non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the Ecuadorian Government has proposed a model health program targeting individual and environmental level determinants. Drawing on cosmopolitan social theory, the experiences of counter-movements and concerns over food policy, the authors explore how mass pesticide poisoning and obesity can be viewed as the product of the 'success' of the modernization policy as well as a specific range of global phenomena configuring civic activity and policy situations. Through the study of NCDs as an emergent social field, the authors examine historical developments and heterogeneity in peoples' practices for insights on more practical and effective public policy responses. The rise of the consumer-citizen in counter-movements represents a paradoxical, but promising dynamic capable of reconstituting economies, culture, and society. In Ecuador, social action appears to be a largely neglected and under-utilized resource for tackling NCDs and perhaps other highly pressing and seemingly intractable food policy concerns.

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### Introduction: The new materialities

Forty years ago, Omran (1971) noted an 'epidemiological transition', in which the pattern of disease moved away from infectious diseases towards chronic, degenerative non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as those associated with food and nutrition, tobacco and the environment. In Ecuador, there is growing evidence of rising rates of overweight and obesity (hereafter referred to as 'obesity') among urban youth, raising concerns over future health consequences, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Yepez et al., 2008a). National studies find 54.5% of the women in the country overweight or obese (BMI > 25) (ENDEMAIN, 2004) and 38% of adolescent children are malnourished, with 16.8% underweight and 21.2% either overweight or obese (Yepez et al., 2008a). Poor, urban women have the highest rates, but rural women and men are also at risk (Waters, 2006). While critical weight studies question automatic assumptions of secular weight gain and health benefits of leanness (Flegal et al., 2005), prominent, yet largely preventable risk factors such as increased blood pressure or cholesterol concentrations are associated with unhealthy diets,

physical inactivity and obesity (Cecchini et al., 2010). Five of the top seven causes of death in Ecuador (ischaemic heart disease, hypertensive diseases, Diabetes mellitus, cerebrovascular diseases, and other heart diseases) are either directly or indirectly associated with or attenuated by poor quality diets associated today's food trends and living practices (ENDEMAIN, 2004).

Despite a growing consensus on the global rise of obesity (Eberwine, 2002; Prentice, 2006; Cecchini et al., 2010; Walpole et al., 2012), there is far less international agreement on the appropriate public policy response. A systematic review on the state-of-the-art in obesity interventions in *The Lancet* concluded (Swinburn et al., 2011: 804), "Unlike other major causes of preventable death and disability, such as tobacco use, injuries, and infectious diseases, there are no exemplar populations in which population-level obesity has been reversed by public health measures." Meanwhile, a recent exploratory study on obesity in Ecuador (EkoRural, 2011) as well as earlier work on the highly prominent, though commonly neglected non-communicable disease of pesticide-induced poisoning (Cole et al., 2007) offer fresh perspective. This experience suggests that NCDs are due less to a lack of information and knowledge and more to the establishment of certain relationships among people, acting as citizens and consumers and involved in the activities of daily practice. In addition, the research found that far from behaving as passive victims, the harmful consequences of modernization in Ecuador has led to multiple, creative civic

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protests and family- and community-level re-organizations, representing a potentially promising and largely unexplored resource for change (Sherwood, 2009; Paredes, 2010).

Based on studies in Ecuador as well as the literature on the deepening socio-environmental consequences of cosmopolitan society (Delanty, 2006; Beck and Grande, 2010), we posit that obesity can be viewed as a reflex generated by 50 years of agricultural modernization and emergent forms of industrial food (summarized as ‘modern food’<sup>1</sup>), thereby creating strange new self-constituting nature-cultures and materialities. We ask: What social processes are involved in modern food and the relationships between public health and local co-productions of NCDs? How is consumption involved in reflexive and relational roles in food issues, leading to the rise of obesity as well as civic counter-movements as a potential resource for public policy?

### Obesity, policy and counter-movements

Here, we view obesity as part of a substantial modern social process transforming life and living practices, in which the obese consumer has been publicly characterized as dupe or dope – an individual who fails to live up to contemporary standards of health knowledge, reason and autonomy from market, marketing and media influences as well as the influences of fashions and trends (Meijer, 1998). Is this obese consumer the product of a failure to live up to a public health policy standard or the result of the exclusionary nature of the modern food policy orientation?

Beginning with land reform and agricultural industrialization in the 1950s, agriculture and food policy in Ecuador has prioritized rapid growth in productivity to solve what is described as chronic food scarcity (Barsky, 1988). This ambitious, unprecedented project of ‘agricultural modernization’ introduced a language of food producer, retailer and consumer. In the process, it created new social relationships, such as the dichotomy between a marginalized rural producer and centralized urban consumer, dependent on a diet that is exogenous to agrarian trajectories (Firat and Schultz, 1997). Agricultural modernization is organized around the notion that progress depends on retailing intermediaries and consumers whose task it is to behave selfishly in the market as a means of driving national production efficiency and market responsibility, with no to little regard for peoples’ other possible roles and societal utilities, such as stewards of social relationships, health and environment.

When linking the historical processes of modern food with the production of NCDs, the ‘externalities’ of development policy become ‘second-order’ products. According to this reasoning, pesticide poisoning and obesity in Ecuador are not mere policy accidents or oversights but what has become the expected outcome of a deliberative process put into place some 50 years ago – in a sense, the extraordinary ‘success’, if unwanted, of government.

In arguing how NCDs, have become a social and material fact of modern Ecuador, we take a critical social perspective on *policy* as ‘course of action’. Thus, policy is not limited to the explicit, deliberative bureaucratic processes of organizations or government

(e.g., public policy). It also is understood as how actors in civil society internalize, inform, organize and influence the use of resources in favor of certain purposes – even when undesirable, expensive and arguably self-harmful, at the cost of other possibilities. These courses of action in part emerge as a result of the entrepreneurship of people working as individuals as well as in collectives.

Such perspective brings people into processes of enactment, in which the self, lifeworlds, agendas and interests are inseparable, for example, from the incorporation of technology in people’s everyday lives. The research of Paredes (2010) on heterogeneous patterns of appropriation of the technologies of agricultural modernization in Ecuador found that family members do not simply assimilate the procedures in government legislation. They enact creative new forms of policy in terms of their unique beliefs, knowledges, and most substantially, their practices. In the context of pesticide poisoning, Paredes found that people actively translate and reframe institutional policy based on what they already believe, know or do in their homes, fields and places of work and leisure. The result is a remarkable *mélange* that is neither traditional or modern, lay or expert, old or new, but subtly nuanced and original.

The trends of modernity are seen to underpin the notion of policy as part of willful and concerted processes in which individuals are charged the task of constructing the ‘consumer-self’, while building the communities and social networks needed for what Meijer (1998) describes as the ‘consumer-citizen’. Normally ‘consumer’ and ‘citizen’ are viewed at opposite poles of the political spectrum. The *consumer* is understood as inward looking, individualistic and self-serving, while the *citizen* is understood as an agent of the public good – forward thinking and civic-minded. Meijer views consumption as simultaneously a search for individual distinctiveness as well as a social construction. Far from a passive actor, the consumer is understood as owning degrees of freedom and responsibility. Thus, through an ability to consume (i.e., a purposeful orchestration of commodity meanings), he or she can seek forms of self-realization and empowerment (or their antitheses). In addition, consumption is not necessarily an atomized, isolated or private activity. It also is a public performance in which people, acting on force of need, passion or will, relate to one another through interactive processes of reflexivity and choice (Slater, 2001). Returning to Meijer (1998), consumption can be highly purposeful and even a form of emancipation; it can become a transformative civic force. Hence, consumption becomes a form of governance, operating outside the boundaries of official government policy and public institutions.

In his work on post-industrial ‘risk society’, Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that the unwanted ‘bads’ (as opposed to the ‘goods’) of technology and government give rise to ‘sub-political’ movements, what we generically refer to here as counter-movements.<sup>2</sup> Wittman et al. (2010) and Altieri and Toledo (2011) describe how food counter-movements represent a civic response to more institutionalized and bureaucratic forms of democratic governance. While diverse food movements exist in Latin American and beyond, each locality has had its own defining history, cultural nuances, serendipity, leadership, creativity and flair. Born from the contradictions of modern food in Ecuador, we draw on the experiences of the *Colectivo Nacional Agroecológico* (the National Agroecology Collective or *Colec-*

<sup>1</sup> ‘Modern food’ is used to summarize the historic discontinuities with pre-industrial era food production, circulation and consumption. It is a generic term built on the idea that the “quick rise in obesity in middle-income countries reflects the speediness of urbanization, modernization, and entry to global markets” (Brewis, 2011:33). In short, modern food implies an awareness of past and present food patterns to which people can link and, at the same time, distance themselves. The concept of modern food qualitatively differs from ‘food regimes’, as described in regulations and world systems theory literature (see Otero, 2012) in questioning the highly abstract political economy framework of global economy. In contrast, a modern food perspective places its analytical lens on locally distributed and resolved nuances expressed in peoples’ daily practices.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Counter-movement’ is commonly characterized as a cultural response to global hegemonic forces (see for example, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). In contrast, here we use the term to problematize the notion of globality and modernity ‘from the centre’, thus emphasising how locally situated actors receive, translate and re-work communicated messages, material resources, technologies, and cultural repertoires and relations as means of re-positioning themselves in relation to ‘macro’ influences and frameworks. In this view, counter-movements pose and promote alternative agendas for change, which under certain circumstances can come to challenge seemingly dominant and highly intractable forms of authority and order.

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