

Preface

If the misery of the poor is caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.

—Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle* (1839)

One afternoon in Quito, after having spent several hours in the archives reading documents on eighteenth-century poverty in colonial Ecuador, I emerged and walked down the archive steps headed for home. From behind a tree appeared an Afro-Ecuadorian woman. She was roughly my age, with a child strapped to her back by an Andean blanket. In an awkward manner, she asked for money. That place, where she solicited my assistance, is of more than symbolic import: it tells the story of poverty in Ecuador up to the present day. The woman was standing next to an *ejido* (communal lands) that had once been owned by all, across from the social welfare and employment offices of the modern Ecuadorian state, and in front of the then National Archives building that housed the history of the nation's social inequality. As cars and buses sped by, I found myself oddly suspended in time, between the colonial documents on the urban poor that I had been reading all morning and the reality of the modern city of Quito. Looking at the woman, and still in the daze of the archive, I wondered, "Had things changed?" How did this woman differ from the many poor people I had read about in the eighteenth-century documents of Quito? They, too, had solicited alms from passersby, had trod the streets of Quito in bare feet, and had carried their children wrapped in indigenous blankets. They, too, could seek assistance from state institutions—though these were far from offering any kind of "welfare state." Poverty and social compacts to assist the poor existed then, as they do now. How, then, did the poor of the eighteenth century differ from the poor of today? After many years of work, I offer a humble answer: things have changed in some ways, but perhaps mostly in meaning. Although, as the saying goes, the "poor are always with us," poverty

denoted distinct meanings in the colonial era, meanings that may seem counterintuitive to us today in our postmodern age.

This book is about poverty and colonialism. The central argument is that colonialism necessitated many meanings of poverty, corresponding to the principle of a socio-racial hierarchy. As this hierarchy came under challenge, so too did the separate meanings of poverty, and in turn colonialism as a form of governance. By defining “poverty” in a multiracial colonial society, this study makes a case for an awareness of distinct understandings of what it meant to be poor in a classic colonial sense. The research focus is on the City of Quito in the Kingdom of Quito in the northern Andes (present-day Ecuador)—an important secondary region in the Atlantic world trade system—during a period of economic and political transition that runs from the high point of late-colonial society to the beginnings of Independence (c. 1680–1810). The study is based on a variety of sources culled from Spanish and Ecuadorian archives: widows’ petitions for pensions, ecclesiastical and criminal records, poorhouse accounts, state policies, reports on legal minors and youth, and petitions for free legal aid. Through these records, I pull out various arguments of poverty in a mature colonial context—of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor—arguments perhaps familiar to us through their religious and moral undertones. I attempt to show that poverty arguments were central to a series of social compacts or contracts whereby the colonial state offered certain groups poor relief and others not, based on a theory of a rigid socio-racial hierarchy.

The study breaks down the generalized poor into distinct experiences of poverty and into distinct arguments of poverty. I envision poverty discourse as an arena of shared cultural argument in which different colonial actors forwarded various meanings of poverty and questioned their mutual responsibilities. The social compacts between pauper and patron, between needy subject and paternal Crown, were the subject of contestation as different actors fought over, manipulated, and negotiated the parameters of their participation in a colonial order. This investigation seeks to tease out the contentious and often dimly visible spaces in which pauper and patron worked out poverty and social compacts in the Highland urban center of Quito. The principal protagonists are the urban poor and the various state actors that the poor invited into their lives when they solicited assistance, or that came uninvited when the colonial government sought to contain the poor. From a distance, this study is a voyage into an era, the lingering of Habsburg governance and the rise of Bourbon rule, and the state’s relationship to a little-studied sector of the population, the urban poor. Closer up, this is a study of change through time and of how transformations in the various mean-

ings of poverty affected the lives of the urban poor and the compacts that underwrote colonial rule.

Three lines of inquiry, or arguments, guide this journey into colonial poverty in the Andes, each reflecting larger social and political trends throughout the empire. The first seeks to uncover the many meanings of poverty and how these different meanings contributed to and were formed by colonial society's normative and structural values of age, gender, and color/class hierarchies. What becomes apparent early on is that there was no one meaning of poverty and no one kind of poor person. Rather, generational, gendered, racial, and ethnic ideologies underpinned the kinds of poverty envisioned, resulting in multiple social compacts of distinct rights, obligations, and expectations that included all members of society. Therefore, to understand "poverty" in colonial times requires that we define it historically and culturally in order to see how it relates to social rank and status (factors such as ethno-racial descent, gender, lineage, and age) in ways that make "poverty" something more multifaceted than a simple economic line of adequate-versus-inadequate resources. That is to say, poverty was a social construction in addition to a lack of economic resources.

Emerging from a study of colonial perceptions of poverty, the second line of inquiry searches out the links between political culture, at the local and Iberian levels, and poverty discourses. At the heart of poor relief lay medieval practices of paternalism and protection of the poor. This paternalism dovetailed nicely with the underlying principles of a colonial patriarchal society and political culture that built upon, at times implicitly and at other times overtly, rules of rights and obligations. Both pauper and benefactor held rights and obligations, understood in this study as "poverty compacts." The poor held and exercised their right to solicit alms from wealthy patrons and to petition for aid from a benevolent monarch. The wealthy and the monarch bore the duty to address the concerns of society's less fortunate and to mitigate against extreme need. In return, the wealthy and the monarch expected the poorer members of society to say prayers on their benefactors' behalf, and, importantly, to abide by their lowly social station. The poor were obliged to provide the labor and tribute that greased the mills of the colonial economy and the social order.

In the theater of Spanish American colonialism, such acts of paternalistic "gift-giving" for political and social stability followed formulaic rights and obligations derived from the gender, age, and color/class rules of a hierarchal society: powerful white men—whether the king, as father, or his local representatives—sat at the top of the pyramid, doling out their paternal protection and benevolence to vulnerable male

and female others below. Different social groups laid claim to distinct rights and obligations before the monarch—that is, to specific poverty compacts. Rule and order flowed smoothly when within this society of compacts both patron and pauper played their assigned roles according to their place in the colonial pyramid. The fissures within this society of compacts were made manifest when patron and pauper acted outside the boundaries of the compacts by not fulfilling them or by making demands beyond their social station. Change through time—in particular, the erosion of the color/class pyramid—brought confusion to the various privileges and duties that propped up colonial rule. Thus, the study of the transformation of the urban poor, poor relief, and poverty is also an investigation into the erosion of the rights and obligations of rule.

Poverty compacts legitimated colonialism. If, however, they failed to work along agreed-upon rules, failing poverty compacts could also undermine the colonial project. Poverty arguments—of deserving and undeserving poor—provide us an avenue into the inner workings of colonial rule, to show how colonialism was forged through tacit consent, voluntary appeals, and ideological hegemony rather than actual coercion by the state. As Latin American historiography has demonstrated, diverse social compacts were in play for the Creole elite and for indigenous groups, and these compacts came undone in the late-colonial era under the Bourbon monarchs.¹ What is less well known are the gradations in between, pacts for falling poor whites and climbing nonwhites. Just as with the boundaries of a fictitious ethnic-racial divide, these interstitial groups trespassed poverty compacts. The poor themselves manipulated institutions and altered their arguments of poverty to meet the changing poverty requirements of the Crown and the state over the course of the eighteenth century. In doing so, the poor eroded the colonial foundation of separate social compacts based on socio-racial placement. The poor's ability to influence the meanings of poverty and poverty compacts is the third argument of the study.

By combining these arguments—poverty as culturally and historically specific, poverty compacts as legitimizing (or undermining) colonial rule, and the agency of diverse groups in defining poverty and claiming assistance—we arrive at the central theme of this study: though poverty was widespread it did not affect all poor people equally, nor was poor relief the same for all. Poverty garnered distinct compacts precisely because not all the poor were similar and because there were many meanings of poverty. Poverty was a diverse and changing concept, one that differed over time and across economic, social, gender, racial, and generational categories.

This study unfolds in four parts, framed by an overarching introduction and conclusion. Part One sets the stage of Quito in the eighteenth century. Chapter 1 introduces the city of Quito, its environs, and the urban population. Chapter 2 presents the various survival strategies used by the urban poor to make ends meet. Part Two explores the meaning of poverty among a group of privileged poor, called here the “social poor.” In Chapter 3, I show how impoverished Creoles acquired the status of the officially poor in order to receive free legal aid in recognition of their socio-racial position within colonial society. It is perhaps in this chapter that the counterintuitive use of the term “poverty” becomes most apparent, for these poverty petitioners at first glance do not seem poor. Chapter 4 considers pension arrangements between elite widows and a distant monarch as an ideal social compact. Both Chapters 3 and 4 present examples of compacts or arenas of social assistance (one non-monetary and the other monetary) whereby petitioners wielded socially prevalent discourses of rights and obligations as tied to social race and to the honor/shame complex in order to garner state assistance as the “deserving” poor. Assistance to both pensioned widows and the officially declared poor reinforced existing social, racial, and gender differences that privileged those of Spanish descent.

Part Three turns to changing state attitudes about poverty, moving from charity (*caritas*) as the principal goal of the Habsburgs to a more Enlightenment view of treating poverty with stipulated social welfare programs (*beneficencia*). This change led the state to deal directly with economic poverty in a rational way, but it also limited access to social welfare and often involved more state controls and coercion. Chapters 5 and 6 enter into the grouping of compacts pertaining to the “economic poor” of colonial society (people of indigenous, African, mestizo, and mixed descent). Up until the enlightened policies of the late eighteenth century, the economic poor lay outside of any obvious state-led measures of relief because the “wretched,” or *miserables*, of colonial society fell into the bottom of both the ideological and economic pyramids. When the state did turn to this group of the economic poor in the late eighteenth century, authorities sought to shore up the dissipating social boundaries brought on by social mobility, miscegenation, and widespread economic misery. Chapter 5 looks at the conflict between Old World visions of the traditional *miserables*—here, legal minors—who received charity as the deserving poor, and the Spanish American reality of racially based economic demands. In Quito, for example, authorities held contradictory opinions as to whether waifs were defenseless children or delinquent vagabonds fit for suspicion, despite established poverty principles that named vulnerable children to be among the poor deserving of

aid. Chapter 6 turns more directly to the unfortunate economic poor of street urchins and paupers, who were rounded up by colonial authorities and placed in a poorhouse as the culmination of Enlightenment efforts to contain and reform the poor while also meeting long-standing spiritual obligations to succor the impoverished.

Part Four brings together the two societies of compacts, of the social and economic poor, in the last decades of the eighteenth century. This section broaches the strain on the older poverty system of starkly divided poor-relief measures for the social and economic poor, and how the meaning of poverty shifted to accommodate social transformations. Four striking social transformations affected poverty compacts: the rise of the Bourbon state, the implementation of state-led welfare at the expense of charity, the erosion of ethno-racial boundaries, and the fall of the social poor into chronic and severe economic want. Chapter 7 returns to a discussion of the traditional poor widows first encountered in Chapter 4. Widowed vassals adapted their arguments of widowhood to the new circumstances of enlightened reforms and the late-eighteenth-century bleeding of social borders. Chapter 8 returns to the earlier-discussed social poor, the petitioners who solicited official recognition of their poverty. Here, we see most vividly the toll time has taken on the division of the poor along a color/class continuum. Through time, the meaning of “poor” became less clear and more complicated. The social poor now competed with the economic poor for the state-led assistance that had previously favored those who were of comparatively middling and privileged social strata. What becomes strikingly apparent in Chapter 7 on widows’ pensions and Chapter 8 on official declarations of poverty is the transformation of petitioners’ use of gender and racial ideologies to garner assistance, and in turn the transformation of provision mechanisms in which those arguments no longer served to exclude racial and economic others.

Before embarking on this voyage into eighteenth-century Quito, I wish to make a comment on the movement of time. History is often assumed to travel in a linear direction, whereby each succeeding year marks progress toward a better life. In many ways, such an assumption is questionable, most strikingly because it privileges certain versions of progress. If anything, the study of the past ought to make us realize that history plays many “tricks of time,” whereby periods that seem better or worse really depend upon point of view, and where ruptures indeed may appear where continuity may lie.² My exchange with the present-day pauper on the archive steps helped me to recognize these temporal twists. She directly challenged a linear view of time as the movement of “progress.” At that moment, I could not help but wonder if Quito was

really better off today: if poverty is the result of institutions and social structures, as Charles Darwin—a visitor to islands that are now a part of Ecuador—asked, then our sins are shockingly great and deeply entrenched. The history of poverty is a very long tale.