

## Trip to Bogotá, August 18-22, 2010

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I left the Council meeting around 1:45 on Wednesday the 18<sup>th</sup> to fly to Bogota to give some lectures. Bogota is only a little more than a four hour flight from Atlanta, so it made sense to tack this trip onto the ASA. My former student Cesar Rodriguez, who teaches Law at the University of Los Andes, has been urging me to come to Colombia for many years. I have been wary because of the violence, but he assured me over and over that Bogota was safe. Finally, because of the publication of the Spanish translation of *Interrogating Inequality*, I agreed to come. Once there, of course, everything seemed very calm and unthreatening.

### Highlights of the trip:

#### *Arrival*

My flight from Atlanta arrived around 8:45. It took a good hour and a half to get through immigration. The airport was small, old fashioned, dingy, disorganized – very different from other airports I have experienced in South America. We got off the plane and entered the airport at the tarmac level into a long, narrow corridor. Two queues started after about 50 feet, one under a sign saying international connections and the other immigration. Naturally I took the latter, but it turned out that both were actually for immigration – it was just that the first line also indicated the direction one needed to walk to get to the connections passage. The connections line moved much faster, but I dutifully stayed in the immigration-designated line. Sigh. It took an hour and half to make it through the whole process.

Outside a pre-arranged driver was waiting for me with my name on a sign. I always feel a relief when I connect with someone who knows I am coming, even if it is a driver. Off we went. The ride in was pretty unusual in some ways. Mostly, even in very poor countries, the highway that takes you from the airport to the part of the city where there are international hotels, is pretty good, and connects to large boulevards that take you very close to the hotel, so that only at the end, if at all, do you have to drive through small city streets. In Bogota, after about 15 minutes we left what was a pretty bumpy highway and zigzagged our way through ordinary city streets, many badly lit and very seedy. If I had been in an ordinary taxi rather than a prearranged car I would have been nervous – how could this be the way to a nice hotel? It would have seemed more like the script of a kidnapping. There was, of course, no drama; I was deposited at the hotel safe and sound. Later I was told that a new airport is being built along with a new highway to the center of town, and because of all the construction traffic has to take detours through shabby parts of town, including (apparently) the red light district.

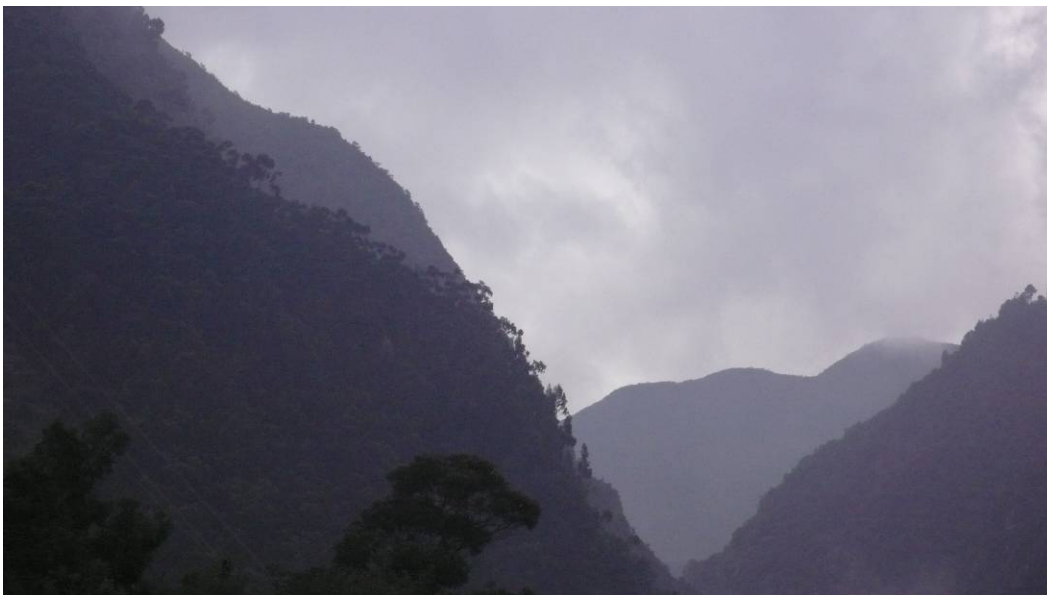
#### *Justicia*

Thursday morning I gave what turned out to be a fantastic seminar on *Envisioning Real Utopias*, at Justicia, the human rights and justice center that Cesar helped found 4 or 5 years ago. Cesar described Justicia to me as the most academic of the NGOs in Colombia and the most activist of the academic research centers. Mostly the staff consists of lawyers engaged in various kinds of human rights and public interest law, but they combine this with research projects connected to the legal issues. Mostly the staff was young – recent university graduates (law is a 5 year undergrad degree) – and mostly women. Everyone seemed very energetic, engaged in what they were doing, and passionate. I was also immediately struck by how much people laughed: they were more than just friendly – the atmosphere was light-hearted, funny. I said, as I often do, that I wanted to have a conversation rather than a lecture with Q&A, so I invited people to interrupt and raises issues whenever they wanted to. Usually this

invitation does not lead to a lot of en route discussion, but this time it did. We talked for a solid two hours.

Afterwards we went to lunch in the cafeteria of the University of los Andes. The university is right at the bottom of the steep hills that mark the eastern border of the city, and the cafeteria had big glass windows and a balcony looking out at the mountains. It was really spectacular, especially because of dark clouds, mist and occasional bursts of sunlight. The weather here, everyone says, changes hardly at all over the course of the year but frequently in the course of a day. The city is just north of the equator, which puts it squarely in the tropics, but it is 9,000 feet above sea level, so it is pleasantly cool all the time – 60-70 F in the daytime, 50s at night. 12 hours of daylight every day, all year long. No twilight – the sun goes straight down at the horizon and it is dark within fifteen or twenty minutes.

### ***Views from the Cafeteria***



### Lecture at the Universidad de los Andes

After lunch we went to the law school at the University for a lecture on participatory democracy. The lecture was also part of an Internet-based program Cesar has developed in which lectures are broadcast live on the web and then archived for later viewing. There was also simultaneous translation so that the audience and internet viewers could listen in Spanish. The set-up for the webcast had me sitting on a relatively high swivel stool holding a microphone in one hand and my notes in another without a podium. It was a bit awkward, but worked out OK. The talk was focused on my earlier work with Archon Fung on “empowered participatory governance”. I don’t actually like giving talks on that specific topic so much any more. I suppose what I need to do is rework it so that it is more integrated into my broader framework. At the moment this talk revolves around the details of the institutional design principles for EPG that Archon and I elaborated in 2003. While relevant for the specific problem of understanding things like participatory budgeting, somehow the exposition of those points does not really tap the most exciting issues around participatory democracy. Still, the talk went well, the audience seemed enthusiastic and the discussion was good.

Universidad de los Andes  
 Facultad de Derecho

El Programa de Justicia Global y Derechos Humanos  
 de la Universidad de los Andes invita a:

**COLOQUIO JUSTICIA GLOBAL**

# Utopías reales

## La democracia participativa y el cambio social en un mundo global

**JUEVES 19 DE AGOSTO - 5 PM**

**Erik Olin Wright**  
 Universidad de Wisconsin-Madison  
 Presidente, American Sociological Association

Discusión:

**Andrés Hernández Quiñónez**  
 Director Especialización en Políticas Públicas  
 y Gobierno - CIDER, Universidad de los Andes

**César Rodríguez Garavito**  
 Director Programa Justicia Global y Derechos Humanos  
 Facultad de Derecho, Universidad de los Andes

**JUEVES 19 DE AGOSTO DE 2010, 5PM - UNIVERSIDAD DE LOS ANDES**  
 CRA. 1 NO.18 A-10. BOGOTÁ. AULA MAGNA, FACULTAD DE DERECHO  
 (BLOQUE RGC, SALÓN 218) - ENTRADA LIBRE

**¿Cómo pensar el cambio social en un contexto global? ¿Qué formas de democracia tienen potencial para promover normas y políticas públicas incluyentes y eficientes? ¿Qué diseños institucionales existentes alrededor del mundo encarnan la democracia participativa empoderada?**

En esta sesión del Coloquio Justicia Global, Erik Olin Wright —director del Proyecto Utopías Reales del Havens Center de la Universidad de Wisconsin— discutirá estos y otros interrogantes con estudiantes, profesores, activistas y demás personas interesadas en el tema. La sesión estará basada, entre otras

After the talk, Cesar and I went back to Justicia while he finished up some work and then we rendez-voused with his wife, Ulpi, for dinner at a very elegant, delicious Peruvian restaurant. Peruvian cuisine seems to be on the rise here. The men’s room was extremely unusual. How often can one comment on men’s rooms? It had floor to ceiling mirrors on all four walls, very high quality mirrors that had especially bright, clear images. Because of reciprocal reflections, standing at the urinal I was in the midst of thousands of men on either side. Very creepy, even though they all looked like me.

### *Touring with Majo*

On Thursday morning Maria José, a.k.a. Majo, fetched me at the hotel at 9:00 for half a day of touring around the city before heading for the book fair for my book presentation at 2pm. Majo got her PhD in sociology at Pittsburgh, working with my former student Lisa Brush and an old friend Kathy Blee, among other people. She was the person responsible for organizing my trip to Montevideo last May – she is originally from Uruguay – and is currently a professor at Rosario University in Bogotá. I had not met her before, but had heard much about her when I was in Uruguay, so was looking forward to getting to know her on this trip. We had a wonderful time during our meanderings around Bogotá – an instant sense of connection, nonstop conversation, interesting issues. Our first stop was a funicular ride to a religious shrine on the top of one of the hills overlooking the city. In the church was a famous reclining Jesus with human hair. It was truly creepy. All along the corridor leading down from this statue there were plaques from people thanking Jesus for various things they had prayed for: visas, good grades, you name it. I suppose I like creepy statues of Jesus more than the conventional ones – at least this is interesting. But it reminds me how little I really understand the inner feelings of people who believe these stories.



After the Jesus we walked through the old city, past government buildings including the supreme court which was the site of the 1985 hostage crisis and massacre. We discussed Colombian politics and the recent election, in which a good friend of Jon Elster had been the main opposition leader and had been at one time thought to have had a chance to beat the conservative who replaced Uribe. In the end he lost by 20 percentage points. He had previously been a dynamic progressive mayor of Bogotá who organized what Majo said was a very successful project of increasing the level of “civility” in the city. Clowns were hired to work at traffic lights and make fun of cars that tried to go into the intersection, for example. He also did much to improve local schools and access to health care, so he seems to have been effective. But still he lost.

Our walk ended up at Rosario University where Majo works. It seems the Colombia is investing quite a bit of money in higher education at the moment. A new campus for Rosario is being built north of city that will have, she said, terrific facilities, organized as a real campus. The problem is that the graduate programs will remain in the city center, which will create considerable hassles for faculty because of traffic and distance.

Right in front of the University was a large, lively square, with many fruit and food vendors, a row of shoe shine stands, a large statue around which students gathered and an area where fairly ominous looking men gathered, according to Mao, to sell illegal emeralds. Majo said the police generally just ignored them – there was probably some kind of tacit understanding about the game they played.



### **The book fair**

The Bogotá International Book fair is a pretty big deal – the second largest fair of this kind in Latin America. It was huge: lots of pavilions for different publishers and kinds of books, packed with people and lots of kids on school trips to the fair. Walking through one pavilion with Cesar and Majo we passed a large lavish display for Dianetics and Scientology. I made some comment about how wacky this was – to have a religious cult founded by a successful science fiction writer. A woman in the booth overheard me and said, “I speak English. I heard what you said.” Then a guy in the booth whipped out a camera and took my photo. Very weird.



I had a fantastic time giving my talk. The talk was meant as an introduction to the Spanish edition of *Interrogating Inequality*. I built the talk around showing *the Chess Game* and then doing my stand-up



performance of the Shmoo. When I got to the Shmoo part I took off my jacket and shirt in order to reveal the shmoo t-shirt I was wearing underneath. As I unbuttoned my shirt I told everyone that they didn't need to worry – I wasn't going to do anything completely outrageous. Lots of laughs. I had also planned a third part dealing with the Marxism and how to think about it, but we never got that far. I was really hyped up, improvising, adding side comments, sticking in new observations. The audience really liked it as well, totally responsive even though it was in translation.

After the talk, a dozen or so of Majo's students hung around outside the auditorium to ask questions and continue the conversation. One very young looking student asked me what "recommendations" I had for him. I asked him what he meant. "Recommendations – what I should do. What do you recommend?" I turned to Majo who looked quizzically back at me. I said to the boy, "You have a very wise professor" – putting my hand on Majo's shoulder – "she'll be able to answer that."



After the book fair we went back to Justicia one more time. Cesar had some things to take care of. I was sitting in the office and one of the staff people asked me about the talk, so I explained the shmoo performance. They had never encountered the shmoo, so I showed the slides. One thing led to another and I did a reprise of the performance with all of the staff of Justicia gathered around. I have to say that this was one of the most gratifying times I have done the Shmoo saga with different voices for the characters and punchy explanations of the underlying theoretical ideas. Sometimes in teaching you know that you have provided some deep clarification for people who have already been thinking about something, but didn't quite have the framework to put express their own ideas. The shmoo story turns out to be a wonderful way of triggering insight of this sort. I especially saw in a couple of people the excitement of real understanding when I explained how the antagonism illustrated by the shmoo defines a relation in which one group has "positive interests in the ill-fare of another – not just indifference to their welfare, but an active interest in their ill-fare". That is a potent idea – a social relation that binds people together in such a way that one group has an active interest in deprivations of the other. It is possible to sort of understand this without really "getting it." The shmoo did its job.

Dinner was at Cesar's with Ulpi, Majo, and Majo's husband Juan-Carlos, but first we had to get there. Cesar tried calling for a cab, but none was available, so we went to the street to hail one. Many cabs, but none free. So we walked for a mile or so to a busier intersection. Still lots of cabs, but none free. Finally we took a bus. Bogotá has a pretty elaborate bus system, but mostly these are small private buses rather than an integrated public transportation system with large buses. Eventually as part of the general upgrading of the city highway system, there will be a more efficient public transport system in place, but that is still a little way off it seems. The city has driving rules that means a given license plate number can only be used every other day, so people take cabs a lot. It was a Friday evening, which adds to the use of cabs and thus the difficulty of getting one.

At dinner the conversation wandered pleasantly over many topics. At one point I mentioned how much I enjoyed the earnestness of the young people at the ASA. I asked if there was a Spanish word that meant exactly the same thing as "earnest", and no one at the table knew precisely what earnest meant in English. So I explained that it was a special combination of taking things seriously, with sincerity and real commitment. Sometimes it conveys a slight sense of taking things too seriously, in the sense of not

being able to laugh at oneself, but not always. I also said that “sophisticated” people on the East and West coast sometimes make fun of the earnestness of Midwesterners, which is something that always bugs my daughter Becky. I think earnestness is a great virtue, and I especially like it in young people. In an older person when the term is used it seems to sometimes convey a sense of naïveté. [I later described this conversation to Becky while in the airport in Atlanta en route home. She said that she felt earnestness need not imply being naïve – one could be sophisticated and earnest, one could laugh at oneself and not take oneself too seriously and be earnest. She felt that the snobby versions of cynical sophistication that disparage earnestness and make fun of it have also somewhat contaminated the word and given it this age profile, since it is acceptable for youth to be naïve but not a mature person.]

### ***Trip to the Country***

On Saturday morning Cesar and Ulpi picked me up for a day in the mountains north of the city to visit the parents of a former staff person at the Justicia, Diana Rodriguez (currently a PhD student at Northwestern) at their country home. We picked up Diana along the way and then had a lovely hour or so drive of twisty roads winding through lushly green mountains. Diana’s father, Sergio, was the founder of the University of Los Andes Law School and subsequently an extremely successful art dealer. Cesar said that he did not really come from a super-wealthy family, so he must have made a substantial fortune from his art gallery because the country house was really spectacular: perched on a ridge overlooking a large lake, elegant rooms, interesting architecture, two servants at lunch, etc. They are clearly very progressive people and Cesar said that they are also important philanthropists in Colombia. I think Colombia is like many countries in its tier of the global economic system – the inequalities in the country are so large that affluent professionals are able to afford maids, housekeepers, cooks, and other kinds of personal services in a way that does not happen in Europe or the US. Academic friends in South Africa generally have maids. So, I know this is the norm, and that it even has some positive features by providing stable employment for people, but it is still always a bit jarring.

After a pleasant lunch on the deck of the country house, we took off for a hike to the fabled lake of El Dorado – the lake higher up in the mountains where the Spanish thought gold had been ceremonially thrown by indigenous people. The lake is an almost perfectly circular lake that looks like a typical volcanic crater lake, even though it was not formed by volcanic action. The legend that the lake was filled with gold was so strong that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century one side of the lake with steep cliffs that held in the water was dynamited to create a breach in the lake wall, which lowered the lake by 60 meters, but still no gold was found.

The hike was lovely and fairly strenuous – a rise of 700 feet elevation starting at around 9200 feet. Because we were in the tropics, even at that height there was lots of interesting vegetation. And of course, endlessly interesting conversation.

View from deck of house





A very strange fruit you eat with a spoon and then suck the juice off the seeds and swallow the seeds.







**Epilogue, on the plane from Detroit to Traverse City**

#1. At the gate in Detroit waiting for the plane a woman next to me said, "Excuse me, by any chance are you a violinist?" Surprised, I replied: "Yes, as a matter of fact I am. How did you guess." She pointed out that I was whistling a classical piece and moving my fingers on my left hand in which I was holding my cell phone, with my palm up, just as if I was playing a violin. She was absolutely right. I have probably done that absent-mindedly for years and never noticed.

#2. The plane from Detroit arrived fifteen minutes late after leaving half and hour late, so I thought I'd have no problem making my connection – there was still 45 minutes -- but then there was some trouble with the jetbridge and we sat at the gate for 20 minutes. We arrived at gate A70. I had to get to gate C2, which meant taking the tunnel at gate A38. I saw the shuttle tram pull in at the tram stop and ran up the escalator to get it, but the doors closed just as I arrived. The timer said it would be 3 minutes and 45 seconds until the next tram. That was faster than I could make it to gate 38, so I waited. I got to the gate after everyone had boarded, but before they closed the doors. Now I am on the plane, ready to go. Too much drama.