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MILLENNIUM CITIES: STAGING THE ORIGINS OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SOCIALISM

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The Millennium City of Playas de Cuyabeno (Photograph: Manuel Bayón, 2015)
Abstract: The Millennium Cities are a series of new towns currently being constructed across the Ecuadorian Amazon, as symbols of the ambitious post-neoliberal project of the ‘Citizens’ Revolution’. These new towns are being built for indigenous communities with the revenues of the oil and minerals extracted from their territories. As such, they would appear to embody what the Ecuadorian government calls ‘the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism’, based upon the appropriation of natural resources without the dispossession and exploitation of the peasantry. Drawing on extensive field research conducted in 2015, we demonstrate that the Millennium Cities are mere facades of modernity that conceal a hidden history of violent confrontation with indigenous communities defending their own project of petroleum-based modernization. The case of the Millennium Cities suggests that the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism should be understood, not as a radical alternative to the primitive accumulation of capital, but rather as a fantasy of origins that obscures the foundational violence of primitive accumulation itself. The peculiarly baroque modernity of the Millennium Cities is explained by the rent-based nature of Ecuadorian capitalism, and by their function as the set on with this fantasy is staged.

Amazon baroque

The Aguarico River runs across northeast Ecuador, from the Andes through the Amazon to the border with Peru. We travelled downstream by canoe for over three hours from the end of the last road, past endless tangled foliage, occasional thatched huts, and the discrete port of the Páñacocha oil field. As we rounded a long curve in the river, a different reality emerged. Beneath towering storm clouds, set against the dark green jungle, a white city glowed in the evening sun. This was Playas de Cuyabeno, the first of two hundred new towns planned for construction throughout the Ecuadorian Amazon to ensure that indigenous communities benefit from the exploitation of oil and minerals within their territories. In contrast to the scattered wooden dwellings and lack of basic services that have historically characterized the region, the Millennium Cities are orderly grids of modern houses set around a school, a clinic, a sports field, and a police station. In the words of President Rafael Correa at the inauguration of the second Millennium City in 2014: “This is a dream... in the heart of the jungle... where beforehand there was nothing” (Correa 2014).

The Millennium Cities are iconic symbols of Ecuador’s ambitious post-neoliberal project, the ‘Citizens’ Revolution’. Over the past fifteen years, left-wing administrations have come to power in Ecuador and across South America in response to the continental crisis of neoliberalism. An immense critical literature has questioned the extent to which post-neoliberal regimes in countries including Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay have transcended the neoliberal paradigm, acknowledging their achievements in reducing poverty and expanding social programs, but noting their continued commitment to economic liberalization, export-led development, and ‘prudent’ macroeconomic policies (Grugel and Riggiorozzi 2012; Leiva 2008; Macdonald and Ruckert 2009; Yates and Bakker 2013). In many of these analyses, Ecuador is classified alongside Bolivia and Venezuela as an example of a more radical project of ‘twenty-first century socialism’. Liberal critics have dismissed these regimes as populist anachronisms (Castañeda 2006; de la Torre 2013), while many leftist commentators have celebrated them as heralding a new era of democratic socialism in contrast to both the failed socialist experiments of the past, and the limited reformism of other post-neoliberal governments in the region (Burbach, Fox and Fuentes 2013; Ellner 2012).

The transformative potential of twenty-first century socialism, however, is increasingly being called into question. The Ecuadorian, Bolivian and Venezuelan governments have been criticized for their reliance on a “neo-extractivist” economic model, in which nominally progressive social policies have been financed by an intensified dependence on the exploitation of primary resources in the context of an unprecedented commodities boom (Burchardt and Dietz 2014; Gudynas 2012). Neo-extractivism has been held responsible for discouraging economic diversification; avoiding
structural reforms; exacerbating environmental devastation; and dispossessing indigenous communities in order to further a neo-colonial form of modernization that remains profoundly vulnerable to volatile global markets (Rosales 2013; Veltmeyer and Petras 2014). In the case of Ecuador, the Correa administration has been accused of expanding the Amazonian oil frontier in order to finance a broad-based increase in consumption that has legitimated the regime to the urban poor without challenging the oligopolistic power structures of Ecuadorian society, while incorporating the country’s diverse indigenous nationalities into a homogenizing colonial modernity (Dávalos and Albuja 2014; Arsel 2012; Kennemore and Weeks 2011; Radcliffe 2011).

From this perspective, the Millennium Cities have been condemned as embodying “the civilizing model of externally-imposed modernization that underpins the political project of the Citizens’ Revolution” (Ospina 2015). Seen from a distance, this does indeed appear to be the case. As we approached it from upriver, the straight lines and clinical order of Playas de Cuyabeno bore an uncanny resemblance to countless modernizing projects that have been implemented by colonial and post-colonial regimes throughout the Global South (Scott 1998; Ferguson 1994; Li 2007). But as our canoe neared the dock, we saw that the iron retaining walls had been grotesquely distorted by the weight of the rushing water. Huge sandbags had been heaped onto the exposed bank, but were collapsing into the river. We scrambled ashore and were confronted, not with a thriving modern city, but with the eerie emptiness of a ghost town... In 2015 we conducted a total of sixty-seven semi-structured interviews with the inhabitants of Playas de Cuyabeno and the second Millennium City of Pañacocha, and with politicians and government functionaries involved in all levels and dimensions of the project. Our research demonstrates that the Millennium Cities are neither a modernizing project for the revolutionary transformation of a marginalized region, as the Ecuadorian government suggests, nor a neo-colonial strategy for the civilization of an indigenous population, as their critics assume. Instead, they are mere facades of modernity – schools without teachers, clinics without doctors, police stations without cells, roads without cars, cities without jobs – which are rapidly being abandoned by their populations and reclaimed by the jungle.
How, then, should we make sense of the Millennium Cities, and what do they really have to tell us about the nature of twenty-first century socialism? In responding to this question, we draw on Bolívar Echeverría’s theorization of the peculiarly baroque nature of South American modernity, in which functionalist rationalism is replaced with mimesis and illusion. Echeverría is an Ecuadorian Marxist, whose theory of ‘the modern baroque’ has been immensely influential throughout Latin America (Peña y Lillo and Piñero 2014). In his early work on the ‘baroque ethos’, Echeverría contributed to the post-colonial affirmation of the baroque as the basis for an authentic Latin American alternative to European modernity (Echeverría 2000; Bartra 2014). Towards the end of his life, however, he developed a more critical iteration of the concept, rooted in Marxist political economy. Our reading of Echeverría draws primarily on this later work, in which he argues that the predominance of ground rent in South American capitalism has given rise to a form of modernity divorced from its productive functionality and reduced to a realm of pure appearance that conceals the lack of development of the productive forces of society (Echeverría 2006: 2011).

Transubstantiated from oil revenues into mirages of modern urbanism springing miraculously into existence in the midst of the Amazon rainforest, the Millennium Cities are what Echeverría has described as “representations, theatrical versions, mimetic repetitions of [modernity]; constructions in which, in unmistakably baroque fashion, the imaginary tends to take the place of the real” (Echeverría 2011: 53). This theatrical performance of modernity, however, not only conceals its immateriality, but also obscures something else. According to Slavoj Žižek, every hierarchical social order is framed by a ‘fantasy of origins’, which structures social reality to conceal the necessary violence of its original foundation (Žižek 1991: 203-209). Beneath the modern spectacle of the Millennium City, our research has uncovered a hidden history of dispossession. The Millennium Cities can be understood as the production of a baroque modernity that functions to legitimate the expansion of the oil frontier, while staging a fantasy of the origins of twenty-first century socialism in such a way that this hidden history remains concealed.

The paper begins by locating the modern fantasy of the Millennium City within the history of Amazonian oil politics. We then explore the multiple absences and illusions of the Millennium Cities in practice, interpreting them as a baroque modernity staged not only for the indigenous population of the Amazon, but also for the gaze of state power itself. The latter sections of the paper build on Žižek’s work on the fantasy of origins in recounting the history of dispossession that the Millennium Cities conceal, which demonstrates that the first two Cities are not symbols of a new mode of socialist accumulation, but the outcome of negotiations between the state and the local indigenous population following a series of violent confrontations over the rights to the oil resources beneath the Ecuadorian Amazon. We conclude by sifting through the ideological rubble of the Millennium Cities, in search of fragments of a real utopia.

Welcome to the New Amazon

In 2014, the Ecuadorian Labour Minister, Carlos Marx Carrasco, published a series of articles in the national press in which he drew on his namesake’s theory of the primitive accumulation of capital in order to propose a socialist form of original accumulation (Marx Carrasco 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2015). Karl Marx, or course, argued that capitalist social relations are founded upon the violent separation of the peasantry from the land, which created a class of people who were forced to sell their labour to survive (Marx 1976: 873-970). Reflecting on the achievements of the Correa regime, Marx Carrasco claimed that “Seven years of the Citizens’ Revolution have laid the foundations... for 21st century socialism”. In contrast to capitalism, he noted, socialism is a “collective construction”, in which “everything that is done has a direct relation to the common good”. This implied that “just
as capitalist production needs its ‘original sin’ – primitive accumulation – the development of socialism necessarily requires its own, which we will call ‘the original accumulation of socialism’

Ecuador’s principle ‘non-renewable resource’ is oil, and prior to the Citizens’ Revolution its exploitation had provided a textbook case of the primitive accumulation of capital. Extensive oil reserves were discovered in the Ecuadorian Amazon in 1967, and commercial exploitation began in 1972. The influx of petrodollars from the global oil boom fueled rapid economic growth throughout the 1970s, which drove the urbanization and incipient industrialization of the metropolitan regions of the highlands and the coast (Larrea 2013; Perrault and Valdivia 2010: 692). The opening of the oil frontier, however, brought few benefits to the Amazon itself. Texaco, which owned and operated most of the initial concessions, built roads and pipelines that opened the northern Amazon to a rapid process of mestizo colonization from the highlands, implying widespread deforestation and the dispossession of the indigenous peoples of the region (Barbieri et al 2007; Sawyer 2002). The corporation was also responsible for numerous oil spills, the burning of millions of cubic feet of gas and waste oil, and the discharging of billions of gallons of highly toxic formation waters into the rivers of the region, resulting in the poisoning of entire ecosystems and high rates of cancers and other diseases in the local population (Cepek 2012; Kimerling 1991).

The collapse of the oil price in the early 1980s brought the boom to an end. The loss of ground rent led to deindustrialization and the neoliberalization of the economy, including the expansion of transnational capital in the oil industry, the decline in the percentage of oil revenues appropriated by the state, and the direction of an increasing proportion of these dwindling revenues to the payment of foreign debt (Purcell, Fernández and Martínez 2015). Nevertheless, Ecuador remained an “oil nation”, in which petroleum consistently accounted for at least 50 percent of export earnings and as much as two-thirds of the budget (Watts 1994: 200). Meanwhile the indigenous nationalities and peasant populations of the Amazon began to develop a network of social movements to defend their communities and assert claims against transnational oil companies and the Ecuadorian state (Becker 2011). Many of these organizations became increasingly involved in the national indigenous movement following the indigenous uprising of 1990, while developing a territorial strategy of roadblocks and site invasions as the basis for negotiations with oil corporations. By the 2000s, Amazonian politics was characterized by a cycle in which the pollutions and disposessions associated with oil activities would initially provoke strikes and blockades, leading to violent confrontations with the security services that were resolved through negotiations, in which oil companies would pledge to provide symbolic development projects such as football pitches or water tanks, with the failure to do so often resulting in a further round of protests.

The 2006 election manifesto of Rafael Correa’s party, Alianza Pais, promised to end neoliberalism and to create a new oil politics in which “part of the oil revenues must be channelled into the recuperation and sustainable development of the Amazon” (Alianza Pais 2006: 45). Once elected to power, Correa created a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, which was approved by national referendum in 2008. Indigenous and ecological social movements were closely involved in

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1 It is important to note that, in setting out his vision for the original accumulation of 21st century socialism, Marx Carrasco neglects to engage with the well documented history of violent dispossession that accompanied the development of ‘actually-existing socialism’ in the 20th century (see Scott 1998; Shilliam 2004).

2 Angel Sallo, director of Ecuador Estratégico in the province of Sucumbios. Interview: 19/06/2015, Lago Agrio

the drafting of the constitution, which became the first in the world to codify ‘the rights of nature’, and which was framed around the kichwa concept of sumak kawsay, (Buen Vivir or ‘Good Living’), understood as “an economic development model that is in harmony with nature” (Arsel 2012: 157). As evidence of this new politics, the Correa administration committed itself to the Yasuni-ITT initiative, in which it pledged to forgo the exploitation of the country’s largest undeveloped oil reserve, located beneath the Yasuni National Park, in exchange for partial compensation from the international community (Davidov 2013; Martin 2011).

Meanwhile, Correa took advantage of a renewed boom in petroleum prices to renegotiate oil contracts and strengthen the role of the state in the Ecuadorian oil industry. A 2007 law imposed a 99 percent windfall tax on oil companies, and the 2010 Hydrocarbons Law increased the government’s share in oil revenues from 13 to 87 percent, with companies forced to comply or face expropriation. Most companies agreed to these terms, while the newly formed state oil company Petroamazonas took over the abandoned fields of those that did not (Escribano 2013; Ruiz 2013). These reforms resulted in a significant increase in state revenues, which were channelled into infrastructure development and health, education and welfare programs throughout the country. A clause in the 2010 law stipulated that 12 percent of the royalties of every barrel of oil extracted from the Amazon must be directed towards social investments in the region (diverted from the 15 percent that had previously been allocated to oil workers). In 2011 a new public company, Ecuador Estratégico, was created to administer these funds. The government now claims that it is the Amazon that has benefitted most from its development policies. In Correa’s words, “In the Amazon we have constructed roads, sports facilities, hospitals and schools. There is a radical transformation underway in our Amazon” (quoted in El Comercio 2012b).

These progressive reforms, however, were combined with an aggressive expansion of the oil frontier and the repression and criminalization of peasant and indigenous social movements. In November 2007 Correa was confronted by his first major Amazonian blockade, when local inhabitants of Dayuma in the region of Yasuni seized control of several oil wells, demanding support for economic development. In contrast to the established ritual of confrontation and negotiation, Correa deployed the military to retake the oil wells with an unprecedented display of state violence. Forty-five people were arrested and charged with terrorism for attempting to disrupt petroleum extraction, and the Prefect of Orellana, Guadalupe Llori – a prominent figure in the struggles against the oil industry – was imprisoned for eleven months for her involvement in the protests (Aguirre 2008; Becker 2013a: 109). This was followed by the passing of a new mining law that opened the sector to transnational investment, and the opening of a new round of oil concessions (Davidov 2013; Iturralde 2013). The most prominent national indigenous organization, the CONAIE, accused Correa of continuing the neoliberal project of previous governments, and organized the Plurinational March for Life, Water and Dignity of the People in 2012, which demanded respect for the principles of the 2008 Constitution (Becker 2013b 58). Correa, however, dismissed the indigenous and ecological movements that had turned against him, describing them as “an infantile left, which can only legitimize the right”, and asserting that he was unaware of “where Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh or Castro said ‘no’ to mining or natural resources” (Correa 2012). A further critical moment in the rupture with these movements came in August 2013, when Correa announced the abandonment of the Yasuni-ITT Initiative, and the exploitation of the oil reserves beneath the Yasuni national park, sparking national protests and international condemnation.

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4 Guadalupe Llori, Prefect of Orellana. Interview: 24/03/2015, Coca
(Latorre et al. 2015). It was in the context of this tense conjuncture that the Millennium Cities project was launched.

In October 2010, Correa officially opened the Pañacocha oilfield, the first new oil extraction project to be undertaken by the recently created state oil company Petroamazonas (Correa 2012). At the launch he claimed that the field would provide US$650 million of annual income for the Ecuadorean state, and presented the local communities of Pañacocha and Playas de Cuyabeno with a symbolic cheque for US$21.2 million for their development (El Universo 2010). Soon afterwards it was announced that these communities would be the sites of the first two Millennium Cities, financed by the revenues from the Pañacocha oil field, and implemented by Ecuador Estratégico (El Comercio 2012). The rationale, as one of the managers of Ecuador Estratégico explained to us, was to “create a vision... of what could be done with strategic resources... We have to make sure that people living near strategic projects are content”.

On the 1st of October 2013, less than two months after announcing the abandonment of the Yasuni-ITT initiative, Correa inaugurated the first Millennium City of Playas de Cuyabeno. In his inaugural speech, Correa eulogised the modernity of the Millennium City, listing its attributes in extensive detail, and praising “the great dreamers and promoters of this marvel that today is a reality”. He recognized that “Without doubt our Amazon was once a territory of plunder and abandonment”, but emphasised that the “curse” of the Amazon had not been oil, but rather “the corruption of the long sad neoliberal night”, insisting that “when managed well, our natural resources can be a blessing... they can construct the Buen Vivir of all peoples, and here is the proof” (Correa 2013). The speech concluded with a rallying cry that resonated with the concept of ‘the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism’:

The Ecuadorian President, Rafael Correa, during the inauguration of the Millennium City of Playas de Cuyabeno.

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5 The Pañacocha oilfield is located in a remote region of the northern Amazon, between the Napo and Aguarico rivers. It is estimated to contain 42 million barrels of crude oil (Petroamazonas 2011).
6 Cristian Torres, Assistant Manager of Planning, Ecuador Estratégico. Interview: 12/12/2014, Quito
“Extractivism does not condemn us to capitalism anymore that non-extractivism could deliver us directly to socialism. Everything depends on political power. And the Ecuadorian People knows that with the Citizens’ Revolution the power is finally in its hands! ...This is the new Amazon! ... Hasta la victoria siempre!” (Correa 2013).

Reporting on the inauguration, the state newspaper described the new town as “a modern indigenous community constructed in the midst of the Amazon rainforest” (El Telégrafo 2013b), and containing “seventy-one houses, a Millennium School, a market, two laboratories (one for computing and the other for science), a health centre, an administrative area, sports fields and viewpoints” (El Telégrafo 2013a). The total cost of the City was calculated at US$14 million, with each house valued at US$60,000, and coming fully equipped with water, electricity, sanitation, an induction cooker, pots, pans, a refrigerator, a computer, beds, modern furnishings, a telephone, and a computer with an internet connection. The state newspaper quoted one grateful inhabitant as saying that “Now that I have a dignified dwelling it feels like I am dreaming” (El Telégrafo 2013a), while another is reported as saying “I feel like I’m in one of those big hotels. This is my American dream!” (El Universo 2013a). These sentiments echoed the words emblazoned across government-sponsored billboards throughout the Ecuadorian Amazon: “Dreams are converted into reality with the Citizens’ Revolution!”

Diagram depicting the Millennium City of Pañacocha, published in the state newspaper, El Telégrafo.8

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The simulation of civilization

What is the nature of this new ‘modern’ reality? At first glance, the Millennium Cities resemble the idyllic small towns of rural USA, magically transposed into an isolated corner of the Amazon: neat rows of identical white houses are regularly spaced along wide, straight streets; there is the local police station, the local school, the community soccer pitch; and there are grassy lawns, picnic tables, and a little red fire hydrant on every corner. As such, the Millennium Cities recall Fordlandia, the company town built by Henry Ford in the 1920s to house the workers on his Brazilian rubber plantation. Like the Millennium Cities, Fordlandia was set in the midst of the Amazon rainforest, and has been described as “an oasis, a Midwestern dream, complete with electric lights, telephones... indoor plumbing, manicured lawns... and electric refrigerators” (Grandin 2009: 8-9). In common with many company towns constructed across the Americas in the twentieth century, Fordlandia was a utopian project (Dinus and Vergara 2011). By sponsoring a wide range of social programmes in fields such as healthcare, education, and sanitation, and by imposing cultural regulations such as a ban on alcohol consumption, Ford sought to reproduce the happy, healthy, productive workforce that he was simultaneously striving to engineer in his factory towns in the USA (Clarke; Esch 2011). In his own words, Ford considered Fordlandia to be “a work of civilization” (quoted in Grandin 2009: 17).

The Millennium City of Playas de Cuyabeno, complete with little red fire hydrants (Photograph: Manuel Bayón, 2015)

The apparently ‘civilizational’ dimension of the Millennium Cities has been noted by leftist opponents of the Correa administration, who draw on Foucauldian and post-colonial critiques of modernity in their interpretations of the project. Alberto Acosta, who was president of the constituent assembly that drafted the 2008 constitution and is now among the most vocal critics of the Citizens’ Revolution, told us that the Millennium Cities aim “to empty the territory of [indigenous] communities and construct another social relation – not peasants but urbanites – cities
where the state has control”. Another critic describes the Cities as “aggressively developed”, considering the presence of the police station as proof that they are “designed for domination” (Goldaraz 2014). The Cities have been labelled “a civilizing model for the Amazon”, with schools designed “to create uniform members of civilized society” (Coba et al 2014). One prominent critic of the Correa regime has gone as far as to call them “concentration camps for indigenous and peasant populations stripped of their lands, with the aim of controlling and disciplining them” (Dávalos 2014). This “accelerated modernity” (Coba et al 2014), it is argued, “equates the [indigenous] mode of life to be abandoned with poverty and marginalization, when in fact it also implies greater autonomy, a better use of local resources, and alternative civilizational values appropriate to a jungle community” (Ospina 2015).

These critiques have a certain basis in the discourse of the Millennium Cities themselves, which includes a distinctly disciplinary dimension that represents a rupture with the ways of life of the peasant population. Houses are only allocated to married couples; dogs and chickens cannot be kept; food crops cannot be grown; the exterior of the houses cannot be modified; chicha – the local drink – cannot be brewed; and the sale of alcohol is banned.10 There are also local historical precedents for interpreting the Millennium Cities in neo-colonial terms. In the 16th century, for example, Catholic missions constructed a series of reducciones in what is now the Ecuadorian Amazon – settlements in which indigenous communities were assembled and put to work in agriculture and the mining of gold. Similarly, in the 1950s, an American evangelical organization, the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, created new towns called protectorados for the concentration of the indigenous population in the context of oil exploration by American corporations (Wilson and Bayón 2015; Wilson, Bayón and Diez 2015). The promotion of “‘orderly living’ in nucleated communities” has likewise been identified as a defining characteristic of neoliberal governmentality in the region (Wilson 2008: 135). Such similarities have led post-colonial defenders of sumak kawsay to argue that “modernity and progress continue to have the same value as they did under (neoliberal) development” (Radcliffe 2012: 247).

At the inauguration of Playas de Cuyabeno, Correa dismissed such criticisms as the anti-modern prejudices of the ‘infantile left’, insisting that “Misery is not part of culture, it is a consequence of injustice... and it must be overcome as quickly as possible... We are constructing the nation of tomorrow, and we must not reject the future for the sake of those who want to return us to the past” (Correa 2013). Despite their diametrically opposed positions, however, Correa and his leftist opponents share a common understanding of the Millennium Cities as a modernizing project. Yet our research demonstrates that this shared assumption is mistaken, and that the Millennium Cities are mere facades of modernity, which are rapidly falling apart.11

The Millennium Schools, for example, boast modern buildings and facilities, including science laboratories and classrooms filled with computers. But far from being factories for the transformation of indigenous children into docile modern subjects, as the post-colonial critique of the Millennium Cities suggests, we found that these schools were barely functioning. In both Playas and Pañacocha, the internet connections to the schools had been lost soon after their inauguration, and the computers sat untouched. Both schools were severely understaffed, as teachers left and were not replaced, with members of the school administration and ground-staff obliged to take over

10 This was explained to us by local political functionaries and managers at Ecuador Estratégico.
11 The information presented in this section is based on extensive interviews with occupants of Pañacocha and Playas de Cuyabeno and local politicians and functionaries, as well as our own observations during time spent living in the Cities.
their classes. By the time we visited Playas de Cuyabeno in July 2015, less than two years after its launch, the school had only twelve teachers to cover eighteen positions, and classes were being taught by the secretary, the librarian, the security guard, and the caretaker. In Pañacocha, which we visited in June 2015, and which had been inaugurated only eighteen months previously, the situation was much the same. The security guard was teaching fourth grade, the operator of the school canoe was covering literature classes, and the librarian was teaching chemistry, despite having no knowledge of the subject.\footnote{12}

We found the other ‘modern’ institutions of the Millennium Cities to be in similar states of dysfunction and disrepair. The health clinic in Pañacocha was only providing first aid, with anyone requiring further treatment forced to travel five hours upriver to the city of Coca. In Playas de Cuyabeno the clinic was shut. We were told that the doctor had left two months previously and had not been replaced.\footnote{13} The police stations, furthermore, were not functioning as mechanisms of neo-colonial domination, as critics of the Millennium Cities have insisted. On the contrary, they have no cells, and there are no police launches to transport detainees elsewhere. The policemen

\footnote{12} This information compiled from interviews with teachers at the Millennium Schools at Playas de Cuyabeno and Pañacocha, and inhabitants of both Cities.

\footnote{13} This information compiled from interviews with a nurse at the Pañacocha clinic, a teacher at the Millennium School at Playas de Cuyabeno (the clinic was closed), and inhabitants of both Cities. The closure of the clinic in Playas was not only depriving people of primary care, but was also causing them to be turned back from the nearest state hospital in more serious cases, as the hospital requires a referral from their local doctor before accepting patients for treatment.
consequently have little authority, and are reduced to trying to mediate when violent conflicts arise. In the case of Playas, this has led to a failure to impose any of the stipulated regulations. People keep dogs and raise chickens, alcohol is sold in most shops, and many people are building new structures in the open spaces beneath their raised houses. In Pañacocha the regulations are more strictly enforced. However, as one local functionary explained, this is not in order to ‘civilize’ the population, but rather to “avoid damaging the image, the surroundings, so that the houses remain the same. We have to maintain a clean image”.

The wide streets and raised sidewalks of the Millennium Cities would seem to be designed for motor vehicles. But there is no road access to either of the Cities, and the streets simply run to the edge of town before stopping short at the verge of the jungle. Correa has explained that these are “ecological communities”, and that motor vehicles are therefore banned, while every house comes complete with two brand new bicycles (Correa 2013). In Playas, a local man maintained the bikes, but in Pañacocha there was no equivalent service and most of the bicycles had fallen into disrepair. In both Cities, the telephone and internet had failed, with only a handful of people maintaining individual connections with a private provider. People also reported problems with the housing. Irregularities in the electricity supply had destroyed refrigerators and induction cookers, and the houses had allegedly been constructed with cheaper materials than had been promised – hollow steel frames and plaster walls instead of concrete – which were already starting to deteriorate. In Pañacocha the park benches along the riverside all face away from the river, as if the inhabitants would prefer to gaze back at the wonders of their newfound modernity. They were always empty. And no-one in either City had any idea what the little red fire hydrants were for…

The great majority of people in both communities had requested that their houses be built on their existing plots of land, most of which are scattered along the river banks for several kilometres in either direction of the Millennium Cities. The company contracted to construct the Cities, however, had employed ‘sociologists’ to visit community members and convince them to accept homes in the City. This was not a strategy for transforming an autonomous peasantry into disciplined urban subjects, but a cost cutting exercise for the company to avoid the additional expense of constructing each house in a distinct location. And the reason that most people had wanted to remain on their land was not due to a cultural attachment to their traditional way of life, but because that was the location of their subsistence and social reproduction. At the launch of Pañacocha, Correa had assured his audience that “there will undoubtedly be an economic boom, because the whole world would love to live in a community like this” (Correa 2014). But this boom has not been forthcoming. Jobs and productive projects had been promised at the time of the transition, but none have materialized. And although water and electricity had been provided free of charge until the time of our research, inhabitants had been informed that service charges were soon to be introduced, despite the fact that few had the monetary resources to afford them. One inhabitant of Pañacocha explained the situation in the following terms:

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14 Police Officer, Playas de Cuyabeno. Interview: 17/07/2015, Playas de Cuyabeno
15 Member of the Municipality of Cuyabeno. Interview: 16/07/2015, Tarapoa
16 The community of Playas de Cuyabeno has also requested that the city be constructed on a different sight away from the river, which was rapidly eroding the bank on which the City was planned. But local politicians and functionaries explained that the land had already been cleared, and to avoid further investments the company constructed the city at the rivers’ edge. An iron retaining wall was installed to prevent further erosion, but is now collapsing, and people fear that the City will eventually be consumed by the river.
“They say the houses are pretty, so our situation has improved. But they aren’t worth anything to us, because we’re just sat here. What are we supposed to do? There’s no work... [They told us] everything was going to improve... that we would all have work... that education, health, our lives were going to get better. But things have gotten worse and now we don’t know how we are going to pay [the bills]... People are asking ‘What we are doing here?’ The houses are being abandoned.”

Faced with a lack of employment and the threat of charges they cannot afford, people are returning to their land, and many of the houses now sit empty. Many others are only inhabited by school children and their mothers during the week, while the fathers and other members of the family work the land. Had the Millennium Cities been a strategy to dispossess and modernize the indigenous population, as the predominant critical discourse insists, then the state would presumably have intervened to obstruct this process. But on the contrary, since the Cities were inaugurated, the national government has ceased to be actively involved in their development. As one local politician explained, “the government came and completed the project and that was that... Now they’ve just left us here.” In other words, this is not a civilizing project, for the simple reason that there is no project. The recently appointed president of the parish government of Playas de Cuyabeno told us that “there was never any explanation. There aren’t any documents that explain how to manage [the City].”

The streets are becoming overgrown in the Millennium City of Playas de Cuyabeno, and many of the houses have been abandoned (Photograph: Manuel Bayón, 2015)

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17 Inhabitant of the Millennium City of Pañacocha. Interview: 22/06/2015, Pañacocha, Ecuador
18 Without exception, the reason that people gave for living on their land instead of in the Millennium City was the fact that there were no employment opportunities and that they therefore needed to be close to their crops and livestock to maintain their livelihoods. Despite this fact, in our interviews representatives of government at all levels persisted in explaining the abandonment of the Cities on the basis of the indigenous population being unable to adapt to an urban way of life. This constituted an interesting inversion of Correa’s original assertion that ‘poverty is not culture’. It seems that poverty is culture when the government wants to place the blame for the failure of its projects on the cultural preferences of the poor...
The local municipal governments have been charged with maintaining the Millennium Cities, but have not been provided with the budget or guidance to do so. In practical terms, the maintenance is therefore increasingly the responsibility of the inhabitants themselves. In Playas, the community organises regular minkas – communal work days – for the upkeep of the City. In Pañacochocha, however, the community is divided between a predominantly indigenous commune and a community formed by mestizo colonizers, as a consequence of long-running land disputes. The City has been constructed in two separate sections to house the two communities, and they are refusing to cooperate with one another in its upkeep. Pañacochocha is therefore notably more degraded than Playas. By the time we visited the City, grass was growing through the streets; the sports field was a mass of thick vegetation; the market was deserted; and the public toilets were broken. One of the two water pumps had broken five months prior to our visit and water was only available once a day for two or three hours in the morning. The drainage system was frequently blocked, causing roads to flood and mosquitoes to breed in stagnant pools. The sewage system had also broken, and a stream of effluent filled the road beside the Millennium School.

The deterioration of the Millennium City of Pañacochocha. Clockwise from top left: sewage running on the street; deserted park benches with their backs to the river; unused market; abandoned football pitch (Photographs: Manuel Bayón, 2015)

The level of dysfunction is even greater in Tereré, a section of Pañacochocha that was constructed several kilometres upriver from the main town to house members of the community who lived a great distance from the City, and who insisted on having their dwellings built closer to their land. Their wish was granted, but in an absurdist form. Tereré is a single ‘L’ shaped street, with one end jutting into the rainforest, and the other petering out near the riverbank before reaching a port that was promised but never built. There are fifteen houses in Tereré, and only one of them is occupied. There is no water or drainage, and when it rains the faeces rise out of the toilet bowls. There is no electricity either, and yet each house has been equipped with the standard issue refrigerator and
computer. Each of the houses also has its two allocated bicycles, despite the fact that Tereré only has 200 metres of overgrown road, which lead nowhere in both directions.¹⁹

Tereré (Photograph: Manuel Bayón, 2015)

**Potemkin modernity**

Our research demonstrates that the Millennium Cities are not modernizing projects in either the positive sense of the term deployed by Correa in his celebration of the Cities, or the pejorative sense intended by their post-colonial critics. Instead, they resemble the Potemkin villages of 18th century Russia – fake villages constructed to give the fleeting impression of a flourishing economy to passing dignitaries. In a similar sense, the Millennium Cities are mere pastiches of modernity that conceal the absence of a genuinely transformative agenda, progressive or otherwise. This was recognised by the inhabitants of the Cities themselves. One man had moved back to his land on the opposite side of the river from Playas de Cuyabeno, with a view across the City. Reflecting on the deterioration of the town, he told us that “all of this has made us feel that it is like a screen, and in the end [the government] have forgotten about us... At first it was bonito but now it is falling apart”.²⁰ This sentiment was shared by an inhabitant of Pañacocha: “They come and say ‘Wonderful! 

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¹⁹ This section is based on interviews conducted with several people with houses in Tereré, none of whom lived there. In order to speak to them, (and to many of the people allocated houses in Pañacocha), we visited them on their original homes, connected by a footpath that runs along the river bank for several kilometres up and downriver from the City. In contrast to the deserted City, the path was filled with activity, with groups working in *minka* (communal labour) for the cacao harvest. It was here, and not in the ‘city’, that the material reality of everyday life was to be found.

²⁰ Member of the commune of Playas de Cuyabeno. Interview: 20/07/2015, Playas de Cuyabeno
What lovely houses! How bonito...’ But all the same it is just an appearance [and] now the facade is being destroyed.”

The Millennium Cities not only resemble Potemkin villages in their production of a false reality, but also as a performance staged for the gaze of state power. Just as Potemkin created his fake village on the banks of the Dnieper River to deceive Catherine the Great as she sailed past on her way to the Crimea, so Petroamazonas and *Ecuador Estratégico* have staged these spectacles of progress and modernity on the banks of the Napo and Aguarico Rivers, while ensuring that Correa’s experience of the Cities is meticulously controlled. Both of the Cities were inhabited prior to their inauguration. At Playas de Cuyabeno, residents had complained for some time about problems such as the absence of lighting on the dock and the unreliability of the internet in the school. We were told that on the day of Correa’s arrival, Petroamazonas installed the lighting and then removed it again as soon as he had departed, while in the school the internet worked perfectly while Correa was there but collapsed again soon afterwards. In the words of a member of the municipal government, “It’s a joke... What does the President do? He inaugurates something and thinks that everything is fine, but there are things that escape his notice. If he could see the sad reality... but anyone who said anything would be punished for it, so they keep him in the dark.”

By the time of the inauguration of Pañacocha in January 2014, the president of the parish council had already sent an official letter of complaint to the construction company, detailing many of the multiple problems with the town. Inhabitants of Pañacocha and Tereré arrived at the ceremony with placards designed to draw Correa’s attention to these problems, but representatives of Petroamazonas removed them and prevented anyone from speaking to Correa, apart from one woman who was selected to say “Thanks to Petroamazonas we have everything”. Prior to the President’s arrival, the City swarmed with Petroamazonas workers, and “even the bosses who never turn their hand to anything came to clean and sort things out”. One inhabitant of Pañacocha recalls that the company led Correa to a house in which the telephone connection had been prepared in advance: “The President arrives, makes a call, sees that the internet works, and there you have it! And afterwards there was nothing. It all went.”

Correa was suitably impressed by his experience, and gave an impassioned speech announcing that “we will continue sowing the Amazon with Millennium Communities. Just as Pañacocha has been transformed, just as Playas de Cuyabeno has been transformed, so we will radically transform the reality of our Amazon” (Correa 2014). Meanwhile the managers of Petroamazonas were getting increasingly nervous that heavy rains would prevent the departure of the presidential helicopter and reveal the drainage problems in the City, and as soon as his speech was over, Correa was whisked away. The situation was summed up by one inhabitant as follows:

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21 Inhabitant of the Millennium City of Pañacocha. Interview: 22/06/2015, Pañacocha
22 Inhabitant of Playas de Cuyabeno. Interview: 17/07/2015; Member of Municipality of Cuyabeno. Interview: 16/07/2015, Tarapoa
23 Member of Municipality of Cuyabeno. Interview: 16/07/2015, Tarapoa
24 Letter from the president of the parish council of Pañacocha to the managing director of CVA (the company that constructed the Millennium Cities of Pañacocha and Playas de Cuyabeno), dated 17/12/2013
25 Inhabitant of the Millennium City of Pañacocha. Interview: 22/06/2015, Pañacocha. While the direct quotations from this section are drawn from this interview, this version of events was confirmed by several other inhabitants of Pañacocha and Tereré.
26 Inhabitant of the Millennium City of Pañacocha. Interview: 22/06/2015, Pañacocha
27 Inhabitant of the Millennium City of Pañacocha. Interview: 22/06/2015, Pañacocha
28 Member of the commune of Pañacocha. Interview: 23/06/2015, Pañacocha
“They didn’t even let the poor guy walk the streets... the Petroamazonas people were stuck to him like glue to make sure he didn’t wander off anywhere. They had selected a specific house for him to visit, and that was it. They led him around like he was blind... He went to the field and gave his speech, and he thinks that everything has been sorted out and that everyone is happy.”

The Potemkin metaphor returns us to the question of the nature of the modernity constituted by the Millennium Cities. In one of his final published works, Bolívar Echeverría presented a particularly critical articulation of his theory of the modern baroque, in which he described South American states as “Potemkin Republics” (Echeverría 2011). The role of South America in the capitalist world system, as Echeverría emphasised, has historically been defined by the provision of cheap primary resources to the centres of industry, which has facilitated the accumulation of surplus value by fuelling industrial processes and reducing the cost of subsistence in these centres, thus simultaneously increasing productivity and lowering the value of labour power (Echeverría 2011: 53-55). A proportion of this surplus value has been ceded to the landlord classes of South America as payment for the natural resources that they control, and it is this “false social value” that has formed the basis of capital accumulation on the continent (Purcell, Fernández and Martínez 2015 4-6). As Burchardt and Dietz (2014: 476) have noted, “we are dealing here with economic bases of production built not on labour but on the commodification of nature, which requires little in the way of investment, development of an internal economy or an increase in productivity”. During commodity booms, Echeverría argues, the ground rent accumulated by landlord states such as Ecuador has been “sufficient to lend verisimilitude to the feeble imitation that allowed the latter to play at being what they were not” (Echeverría 2011: 54). The performance of the modern nation on

29 Inhabitant of the Millennium City of Pañacocha. Interview: 22/06/2015, Pañacocha
the basis of the accumulation of ground rent is therefore what characterizes the ‘Potemkin Republic’, and this performance is enacted through the staging of a peculiarly baroque modernity, understood as an “aesthetic reproduction of reality... [that] does not reproduce an image of the world but an imaginary substitution of the world as a simulation of itself” (Echeverría 2006: 166).

This is the modernity of the Millennium City, which stages “the city itself as the fundamental form of the Utopian image” (Jameson 2005: 4). Such performances are destined to fail, for the precise reason that they are not underpinned by surplus value production, and that the transition towards such production is rendered apparently superfluous by the performances themselves. As Fernando Coronil has noted of the seductive power of oil wealth, “By manufacturing dazzling development projects that engender collective fantasies of progress, [oil] casts its spell over audience and performers alike” (Coronil 1997: 5). Correa is aware of the dangers of “Ecuadorian growth being based on the consumption of an asset, oil, instead of the generation of added value and productive employment” (quoted in Ruiz 2013: 12). Yet at the launch of Playas de Cuyabeno, even he appeared entranced by the seemingly magical properties of oil, exclaiming “Look at the marvels that our oil and mines create! Look at this Millennium Community!” (Correa 2013).

The modernity of the Millennium City is therefore a Potemkin modernity – a simulation of progress and modernization that materializes the social fantasy of the Citizens’ Revolution. In contrast to the substantive modernity that Ford attempted to realize in Fordlandia, based on generalized wage labour and the total subsumption of everyday life to capital (Clarke 1990), we have seen that the Millennium City is a city without work, filled with roads without cars, schools without teachers, clinics without doctors, police stations without cells, computers without internet, and little red fire hydrants without any discernible function whatsoever. As Ryszard Kapucinski writes in his account of oil-driven modernization in 1970s Iran, “Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free” (cited in Watts 1994: 203). This is the illusion at the heart of ‘the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism’, which promises the production of social wealth based on the appropriation of nature instead of the exploitation of human labour, but which is fulfilling this promise in the Millennium Cities in the perverse form of a limited redistribution of ground rent combined with mass unemployment. This illusion functions ideologically to legitimate the expansion of the oil frontier and the reproduction of the rentier capitalism that sustains the baroque modernity of which the Millennium Cities themselves are an expression. But it also has a second, secret function. In the remainder of this paper we uncover the hidden history of primitive accumulation that this illusion is concealing.

**Behind the facade**

The petroleum from the Pañacocha oil field is piped under the Napo to the processing centre at Eden-Yuturi. Sat outside his hut on the other side of the river, a member of the Eden commune could not understand why Pañacocha had been chosen to receive a Millennium City. As he pointed out, “Pañacocha doesn’t have any wells [in its immediate vicinity] and Eden has a hundred and fifty. But since they started drilling they’ve never given us anything”.31 The president of the parish council of Playas de Cuyabeno similarly noted that “for the other communities of the parish it’s unjust, because they’ve spent US$20 million [on Playas]... while the other communities have received nothing.”32 When we asked the inhabitants of Pañacocha why they had received the City, they were

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31 Member of the commune of Edén. Interview: 02/10/2015, Edén
32 Member of the parish council of Playas de Cuyabeno. Interview: 17/07/2015, Playas de Cuyabeno
generally nonplussed. “We haven’t got a clue”, one old man replied.33 “I don’t know why they gave it to us,” another man admitted, “No other president has ever given me as much as a bottle of water”.34

At lunch one day at the port of Pañacocha, we were suddenly provided with an unexpected explanation. We sat next to a member of the parish council who was briefly visiting the City, and mentioned the fact that no-one seemed to know why it was there. “They wash their hands of it and say that the houses were a gift from God. But that’s not the case”, he replied. “Those houses are the outcome of a long blockade on the Aguarico, where the communities of Playas and Pañacocha were united”.35 He gave us the names of the key figures in the struggle, and over the following days a hidden history emerged. We then went to Playas de Cuyabeno to continue our investigations. The president of the commune had played a central role in the struggle, and allowed us to revise its archives. We borrowed his keys and let ourselves into a dark little office with a broken air conditioning unit chugging pointlessly in the corner. Scattered amongst piles of mouldy documents, we discovered the secret origin of the Millennium Cities.

It may seem odd to end the story of the Millennium Cities at the beginning. But this is precisely the case in Marx’s Capital, in which “the secret of primitive accumulation” is only revealed in the final chapter (Marx 1976: 873). According to Žižek, Marx’s method in Capital was to begin by presenting capitalism as it represents itself – as a unified social order that operates without an external cause. Yet to represent itself as such, capitalism requires a ‘fantasy of origins’ that closes the circle of this apparently synchronous system in order to conceal the foundational violence through which it is necessarily established (Žižek 1991: 203-214). Marx identifies this fantasy as Adam Smith’s account of the original accumulation of capital, according to which the emergence of capitalism was a harmonious process in which private smallholding farmers accumulated capital by dint of their own frugality, and put it to work in the process of further accumulation. He then shatters this fantasy with his historical account of primitive accumulation – the violent separation of the peasantry from the land. Žižek argues that the role of the final chapter of Capital, and of historical description as such, is therefore “to ‘go through’ the fantasy... to denounce the mythical narration by means of which the synchronous system retroactively organizes its own past, its own origins, and to render visible the contingent reality full of blood and brute force” (Žižek 1991: 212).

As Žižek notes, the fantasy of origins operates by assuming the presence of the subject “at the very act of its own conception”, that is, by silently asserting the prior existence of that which it purports to explain (Žižek 1991: 197). In the case of capitalism, this is achieved by means of a narrative in which peasants are already operating as capitalists, and in which the violence of primitive accumulation has thus already taken place (Žižek 1991: 211). As we have seen, Carlos Marx Carrasco (who is arguably to Karl Marx as the modern baroque is to modernity), presents ‘the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism’ as the founding of an alternative mode of accumulation that avoids the violence of primitive accumulation. But it is better understood as an alternative fantasy of origins, which conceals a similar process of dispossession beneath a different narrative. Recall that, according to this fantasy, the ‘rational appropriation’ of natural resources is to be achieved without the dispossession or exploitation of the peasantry. But just as the naturalized figure of the capitalist farmer conceals the violent process through which this subject was produced,

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33 Inhabitant of Pañacocha, but living on his finca. Interview: 23/06/2015, upriver from Pañacocha
34 Inhabitant of Pañacocha, but living on his finca. Interview 25/06/2015, near the Yanaurco oil well, upriver from Pañacocha
35 Member of the parish council of Pañacocha. Interview: 24/06/2015, Pañacocha
so the apparently self-evident availability of a stock of natural resources conceals the process of dispossession through which these resources are made available in the first place. The Millennium Cities are the stage upon which this fantasy is performed, and the role of historical description in this case must be to render manifest the dispossession that underpins their very foundation – the “contingent starting point that eludes dialectical grasp, [the] ‘missing link’ whose exclusion the dialectical totality endeavours to fill out by means of a fantasy-scene” (Žižek 1991: 212).

The histories of Pañacocha and Playas de Cuyabeno are marked by successive waves of dispossession. People began to migrate to the region from downriver in the 19th and early 20th centuries, fleeing enslavement by Peruvian rubber barons; others moved to the area to escape the 1941 war between Ecuador and Peru; some were displaced by the armed conflict in Colombia; and others had abandoned oil-polluted lands in other parts of the Amazon. As with many communes in the region, Pañacocha and Playas de Cuyabeno were formed in the 1970s to defend their territorial claims in the context of encroachments of oil companies and mestizo colonizers. The Pañacocha oil field was opened in 1972 by the American corporation Oil Grace and Minerals, which drilled exploratory wells throughout the territory (Petroamazonas 2011: 10). Inhabitants of the Millennium Cities recall being fascinated by the oil. People painted their houses with it, and children would open the spigots and bathe in the crude. The company left the field unexploited, but oil and formation waters continued to leak into the environment, poisoning water sources for decades afterwards.

In 1985 the American oil corporation Occidental was granted the concession for Block 15, which at that time contained the Pañacocha field (now incorporated into Block 12). Their activities in the region exacerbated intra-community conflicts which led to the division of the Pañacocha commune. But Occidental did not exploit the field, and when their contract was rescinded in 2006, Block 15 was opened to bidding once again. From that moment onwards, the communities of the region began to receive visits from the community relations officers of the state oil company Petroecuador, which was now pursuing the concession. At the same time, however, they were invited to join Sacha Petrol (Sacha means jungle in Kichwa), an indigenous oil company that proposed to take control of the natural resources of the Amazon and use them for the benefit of the local population. Sacha Petrol was created in 2005, under the management of the influential Kichwa leader Rafael Alvarado. It incorporated seven indigenous nationalities, including the Amazon Kichwa, the Sumbios Kichwa, the Cofán, the Siona, the Secoya, the Shuar, and the Zápara, and had the support of the principal Amazonian indigenous association, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE), as well as the Interprovincial Federation of Kichwa Communes and Communities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (FICCKAE) (Presidencia de la República de Ecuador 2007). The company was being advised by indigenous oil companies in Canada, and was negotiating with several oil multinationals, including the Canadian corporation Talisman. Following the election of Rafael Correa in late 2006, Sacha Petrol began to promote itself as an embodiment

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36 The information in this section is compiled from interviews and documents contained in the archives of the parish council of Playas de Cuyabeno.
38 An important antecedent to Sacha Petrol was Amazonia Gas, in which Alvarado, the leadership of the CONFENIAE, and Canadian indigenous oil companies were also involved. Amazonia Gas was created in 2000, with the intention of processing the gas produced as a byproduct of oil extraction in the Sacha oil fields, which was being burned off or simply released into the atmosphere. The company collapsed in 2003, and Sacha Petrol was formed out of its ashes. (See Fontaine and le Calvez 2009 for a comprehensive account of this company, which these authors claim was the first attempt for the indigenous movement to actively take control of the hydrocarbon resources in its territories).
39 Canada’s indigenous peoples have pioneered this form of engagement with extractive industries in their territories (see Anderson, Dana and Dana 2006; Anderson and Giberson: 2003).
of the spirit of the Citizens’ Revolution, proposing a division of revenues in which the state would receive 56 percent, the partner company 21 percent, and Sacha Petrol 23 percent. Preliminary discussions were held with the newly appointed Vice-President Lenin Moreno, himself an Amazonian. Meanwhile Alvarado and other company representatives began to promote their project to the indigenous population of the region, issuing bonds with the promise of distributing dividends on future oil profits, while pledging to use the majority of their revenues to implement development programmes throughout the Amazon (Alian Petrol 2007).40

In the words of Alvarado, Petroecuador “wanted everything for themselves, nothing for the indígenas. Just little gifts, but little gifts are worthless. Forty years of oil exploitation in Ecuador and the indigenous population is poorer than ever”. He recalls visiting the communes of Playas de Cuyabeno and Pañacocha, and the nearby commune of Pukapeña, and encouraging them to “join our indigenous company and participate in the oil wealth, otherwise we all know that you will be poor for the rest of your lives”. All three communes responded by rejecting the overtures of Petroecuador and endorsing Sacha Petrol’s proposal to collectively exploit the Pañacocha oil field.

40 These plans are laid out in detail in a letter from the presidents of the communes of Pañacocha, Playas de Cuyabeno and Puka Peña to Tania Masson, Minister of the Amazon and Executive Secretary of the Institute for the Regional Development of the Amazon (ECORAE), dated 18/03/2008 (this document is discussed in greater detail below).
In an official letter sent to Correa in February 2007, the leaders of these communes denounced the fact that “far from the paradise promised by the oil companies, the provinces of the northern Ecuadorian Amazon are the most deprived and excluded regions of the country, and the territories that we inhabit have been irreparably damaged in social and environmental terms”. They celebrated the Citizens’ Revolution, asserting that “we can finally say that the nation is in the hands of Ecuadorians”, while reminding Correa that “the indios of the northern Amazon are also Ecuadorians”. The letter declared that they “roundly oppose” the presence of Petroecuador in their territories, and demanded that the government grant the concession of the Pañacocha oil field to Sacha Petrol. It concluded with a single phrase in capitals: “This is justice”.

In April 2007 the presidents of the parish councils corresponding to the communes in question wrote to the President of Petroecuador to inform him that they would not permit “any operations related to oil exploitation in the areas of Cuyabeno and Pañacocha on behalf of Petroecuador and its affiliates.” At around the same time, Sacha Petrol changed its name to the more overtly political Alian Petrol – standing for Alianza Indígena (Indigenous Alliance). Over the following months the company rapidly gained support, not only from the communes surrounding the Pañacocha field, but from indigenous people throughout the Amazon. According to an ex-director of the FICCKAE, as many as 18,000 people submitted applications for an Alian Petrol bond, and people would spend all night sleeping in the doorway of the FICCKAE offices in Coca to present their details. In November, the CONFENIAE convened the sixth parliament of the Indigenous Amazon, attended by 260 representatives and 700 delegates, which resolved to support Alian Petrol’s plan for “the development and exploitation of the Panacocha oil field... in the territories of the communities Playas de Cuyabeno, Pañacocha, and Puka Peña... based on the fundamental principle of breaking with the capitalist system”.

The growing popular and political support for Alian Petrol was problematic for the Citizens’ Revolution. In ideological terms, the vision of the collective appropriation of the natural resources of the Amazon for the direct benefit of its inhabitants in the name of an anti-capitalist project was a more radical proposition than the Correa administration’s own proposal for a limited redistribution of oil revenues. And in material terms, Alian Petrol threatened the control of ground rent on which the Citizens’ Revolution was constructed. The government’s unease was visible in an early draft of the 2007-2010 National Development Plan, dated August 2007, which referred to Sacha Petrol not as a potentially emancipatory project, but as “an element of socio-environmental conflict”, which it criticized for “demanding the concession of the Pañacocha field as if it were a question of indigenous rights as opposed to professional services” (Presidencia de la República de Ecuador 2007). This section was subsequently removed from the final draft of the Plan.

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41 “Considerations and Resolution with Respect to the Proposed Exploration and Exploitation of the Pañacocha Oil Field”: letter signed by public notary and addressed to President Rafael Correa, Vice-President Lenin Moreno, and Minister of Energy and Mines Alberto Acosta, dated 22/02/2007.
42 Letter to Carlos Pareja, President of Petroecuador, from the president, vice-president, and treasurer of the parish council of Playas de Cuyabeno, dated 20/04/2007
43 The name was changed when it emerged that ‘Sacha Petrol’ was already the name of a small oil services company operating in the region (Lyall and Valdivia 2007).
44 Valerio Grefa, ex-president of the FICCKAE. Interview 15/07/2015, Coca
On the 3rd of October 2007, Guadeloupe Llori, the influential Prefect of Coca, pledged her full support to Alian Petrol,⁴⁶ and the three communes and their respective parish councils issued a statement declaring that “Alian Petrol will be the door through which the indigenous and peasant population of the Amazon will seize control of our own destiny”.⁴⁷ The very next day, however, the national press announced that the concession of Block 15 had been granted to Petroecuador, and that the Andean Finance Corporation (CAF) has provided the state company with a US$150 million loan to initiate operations in the Pañacocha oil field (La Hora 2007). In November the Dayuma conflict (discussed above) marked the beginning of openly hostile relations between the Citizens’ Revolution and the Ecuadorian social movements, and Guadeloupe Llori was imprisoned. Meanwhile Petroecuador intensified its public relations campaign in Block 15. One leader closely involved in Alian Petrol recalls that the Petroecuador began visiting her “day and night”, pleading with her to abandon the project and offering development projects for the community.⁴⁸ Another leader claims that he was offered a US$20,000 bribe to remove his commune from the project.⁴⁹ Petroecuador printed leaflets denouncing Alian Petrol as a “phantom company” and distributed them to the scattered inhabitants of the region, who began to receive weekly visits in which these warnings were combined with promises of future employment.⁵⁰

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⁴⁶ Act of the Assembly of the Province of Orellana, dated 03/10/2007.
⁴⁷ Resolution of the Cuyabeno, San Roque and Pañacocha parish councils, also signed by the presidents of the comunas of Pañacocha, Puka Peña, and Playas de Cuyabeno, dated 03/10/2007.
⁴⁸ Member of the Pañacocha commune. Interview: 24/06/2015, Pañacocha
⁴⁹ Member of the Playas de Cuyabeno commune. Interview 17/07/2015, Playas de Cuyabeno
⁵⁰ This information compiled from interviews with inhabitants of Playas de Cuyabeno and the ‘environmental association’ of Santa Elena (discussed below).
These activities were denounced by the presidents of Playas, Pañacocha, and Pukapeña, in a strongly worded letter sent to the Minister of the Amazon on the 18th of March 2008. The letter alleged that Petroecuador had organized a meeting of the three communes earlier that month, in which the company demanded that they sign a document claiming that prior consent for exploitation had been sought and granted. This demand had been unanimously rejected on the basis that “we have organized our own company, Alian Petrol, and this company will favour the most dispossessed sectors of the country”. Their company had “perturbed the mafias... who consider themselves owners of our oil, and who believe that, as indios, we do not have the right to struggle for a better future for our children”. Adopting an increasingly confrontational discourse, the presidents insisted that “The first necessary step in the transformation of our country is the recuperation of the sovereign development of the natural resources of our ancestral peoples, not the ceding of the small part that still remains to us.” This, they noted, “was the central proposal of the electoral campaign of our President Rafael Correa.” Alian Petrol had challenged Correa and vice-president Moreno to “deepen their rhetoric about a humanistic future and a more egalitarian society”, but it was now apparent that “they are the same as all the others... and the snobs (pelucones) continue to run the show”. The letter concluded by setting out a vision for the future of the company, which would not only include all the indigenous nationalities of Ecuador, but also mestizo peasants and “our Afro-Ecuadorian brothers”, united in “a struggle of the dispossessed and displaced... a New Model that will revolutionize Ecuador and Latin America”.

First page of the letter sent by the presidents of Playas de Cuyabeno, Pañacocha, and Pukapeña to the Minister of the Amazon on the 18th of March 2008 (Photograph: Manuel Bayón, 2015)

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51 Letter from the presidents of the comunas of Pañacocha, Playas de Cuyabeno and Puka Peña to Tania Masson, Minister of the Amazon and Executive Secretary of ECORAE, dated 18/03/2008
The secret of the vanishing mediator

Alian Petrol was now articulating a truly radical vision for ‘the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism’, and was placing this politics in direct confrontation with the Citizens’ Revolution. On the 11th of April 2008, less than a month after this letter was sent, Wilson Pastor, the Manager of Block 15 (and future President of Petroamazonas and Minister of Non-Renewable Resources) warned public entities to ignore petitions from companies that “make baseless assertions that they will be awarded the Pañacocha oil project”, and “denounced a supposed company, Alian Petrol, for making false offers to the communities near the Pañacocha field” (La Hora 2008). This statement was supported by the Ministry of Energy and Mines at a press conference held on the 12 of May 2008, in which ministers presented a document signed by the Superintendent of Companies that declared that Alian Petrol had no legal existence. A national newspaper reported that this document “proves that the supposed company Alian Petrol cheated various Amazonian communities… mounting a dishonest publicity campaign in which it declared itself responsible for the exploitation of [the Pañacocha] oil field” (El Diario 2008).

According to Alvarado, these statements convinced many supporters of Alian Petrol to dissociate themselves from the project. “But what did their dissociation serve?” he asked, “It served to ensure that the poor would continue to follow the same old path”. It was around this time that the Pukapeña commune withdrew from the project. During this period Petroecuador also succeeded in convincing Santa Elena – an isolated section of the Playas commune located near the principle Pañacocha oil well – to secretly form a separate ‘environmental association’ and sign a document that allowed the company to begin oil operations. Unaware of this development, the Playas de Cuyabeno and Pañacocha communes continued their defence of Alian Petrol.

On the 3rd of September 2008, approximately thirty members of the Playas commune were in minka, when they saw three barges approaching from downriver with a military escort, laden with oil machinery. The oil company that they had banned from their territory was arriving uninvited, to exploit the resources that they were determined to appropriate for themselves. One member of the commune remembers that “We saw the barges coming and we said ‘No! Not a chance! … We immediately organized ourselves, grabbed our canoes [and intercepted the barges]… The soldiers launched tear gas… We were armed with spears and when we saw them firing at us we threw [our spears at them].” There were only about twenty soldiers present at this point, and the comuneros (members of the commune) succeeded in detaining the barges at the curve of the river where the Millennium City now stands. The next day two more barges arrived, and were also detained. During the standoff it emerged that Santa Elena had signed the agreement to allow the entry of Petroamazonas (the newly formed state oil company, to which Block 15 had been reassigned just a few weeks earlier). The comuneros, however, insisted that any such agreement had to be

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52 Rafael Alvarado, ex-managing director of Alian Petrol. Interview: 22/07/2015, Quito
53 Member of the commune of Pukapeña. Interview 20/07/2015, Pukapeña
54 The details of the Santa Elena case are compiled from interviews with members of the communities of Playas de Cuyabeno and Santa Elena. One member of Playas de Cuyabeno explained his understanding of the process as follows: “They [Santa Elena] formed an environmental association. Ask them if they are complying with their environmental mission. They aren’t. The only thing they have done is used Petroamazonas to enrich themselves. Petroamazonas provided them with a lawyer [and] transportation [to establish their ‘environmental association’], all with the objective of weakening the community and they achieved it” (Inhabitant of Playas de Cuyabeno, but living on his finca upriver from the Millennium City. Interview: 19/07/2015, upriver from Playas de Cuyabeno).
55 Inhabitant of Playas de Cuyabeno. Interview: 20/07/2015
56 Block 15 was assigned to Petroamazonas on 12 August 2008 (as detailed in the convention signed by the general Manager of Petroamazonas and the president of Playas de Cuyabeno on 10/01/2011).
approved by the commune itself in order to be legally binding. Together with their families they encamped on a broad sand bar in the middle of this curve in the river, from which Playas de Cuyabeno (The Beaches of Cuyabeno) takes its name. In the evening they visited their lands to gather food, before returning to the beach to maintain their vigil.

Military reinforcements arrived a few days later. By this time, members of the Pañacocha commune had also arrived to support the blockade. Now there were approximately one hundred soldiers, and in the late afternoon the barges began to advance again. The comuneros intercepted the barges once more, boarding them and fighting hand to hand with the soldiers. According to their testimonies, five of the comuneros were taken hostage on one barge, while others succeeded in seizing control of another of the barges. At nightfall the battle drew to an end. The stolen barge was returned in exchange for the hostages, and all three barges were detained in the same place one again, with wires stretched between trees across a narrow point in the river to guard against any sudden advance. Over the next few days, sacks of rice and other supplies were sent in support from communities further upriver, and members of Pukapeña and representatives of other indigenous nationalities involved in Alain Petrol arrived to join the struggle, including the Shuar, the Siona, and the Cofán.

Approximately three weeks after the initial confrontation, hundreds of heavily armed soldiers were flown in by helicopter to the site of the blockade. The final battle began at around 9am. By this time there were approximately eighty comuneros and four hundred soldiers at the scene. The comuneros had armed themselves with the pumps that they use to spray their crops, which they had filled with aji – a condiment made with chilli peppers – to spray in the eyes of the soldiers. On this occasion, however, the soldiers began firing live rounds, while tear gas canisters were launched from helicopters circling overhead. The man who had seized control of the barge during the previous confrontation told us that this time “We fled in fear... They were firing at our canoes from a great distance.” By 3pm the battle was over and the barges had continued upriver to install themselves at the oil well. One of the members of Playas allegedly received a bullet wound in the battle that has left him partially blind. And a leader of the blockade informed us that an elderly woman who inhaled teargas during the confrontation had died as a result of respiratory problems a few weeks later.

As soon as the comuneros had reassembled their forces, they went in pursuit of the barges. By the time they arrived at the site of the oil well, the company was already felling trees and constructing the camp. The comuneros halted their operations and once again demanded dialogue. The leaders of the blockade travelled to Quito, where they met with Wilson Pastor and – according to those we interviewed – with Correa himself. One of the leaders recalled telling them: “It’s not that the indígenas are opposed to oil exploitation. We are opposed to the fact that the Amazon never develops, that we never see any projects, and yet the oil comes from here. How many years has the oil been taken from here and yet we receive nothing?” On the 14th of October 2008, Wilson Pastor – by this time President of Petroamazonas – announced “the postponement of all oil activities in Pañacocha” until a full consultancy had been conducted with the affected communities, and an agreement had been reached (El Universo 2008). An indigenous assembly was then held in Playas de Cuyabeno, attended by representatives of several indigenous nationalities armed with spears.

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57 Inhabitant of Playas de Cuyabeno. Interview: 18/07/2015, Playas de Cuyabeno
58 This account of the blockade is based upon the testimonies of members of the Playas, Pañacocha and Pukapeña communes, and from interviews with members of the ‘environmental association’ of Santa Elena.
59 Inhabitant of Playas de Cuyabeno. Interview: 17/07/2015 Playas de Cuyabeno
and Wilson Pastor and government ministers under military guard. This was the first of a series of negotiations over a period of months, during the course of which the leadership of Pañacocha and Playas de Cuyabeno finally consented to abandon Alian Petrol and accept the exploitation of the Pañacocha oil field by Petroamazonas in return for a comprehensive development project. This project, of course, was the Millennium Cities.

And so we return to Correa’s opening of the first Pañacocha oil well in October 2010, and his presentation of a $US21.2 million cheque to the community leaders of Pañacocha and Playas de Cuyabeno (described above). At the ceremony, Correa announced that “This new [oil] field marks the beginning of a new petroleum era, in which oil will not be a curse, but rather a blessing that will drag us out of underdevelopment” (quoted in El Universo 2010). One of the central figures in Alian Petrol and the blockades was also invited to speak. He recalls that “I had to say to the government, for one thing ‘thank you’, and the other was to ask them for forgiveness, that it was not the intention of the indígenas to organize the blockade, but that we had been crushed (atropellado) by so many governments in the past, and that we are also human beings who deserve respect”.

After the speeches, this leader of the resistance claims that he was instructed to walk alongside Correa to the pumping house from which the first barrel of oil would be symbolically extracted. Standing in front of the machine, they pushed the button together...

The blockade at Playas de Cuyabeno embodied what Žižek calls “the political”, understood as “the moment of openness, of undecidibility, when the very structuring principle of society... is called into question... the moment of global crisis overcome by the act of founding ‘a new harmony’” (Žižek 1991: 193). The signing of the cheque and the opening of the oil well, accompanied by a public apology for the blockade on the part of the comuneros, and the declaration of a new oil era by the President of the Republic, was the act by which this ‘new harmony’ was founded. From this moment onward, the blockade was erased from history. No mention of it was made by Correa at his inaugural speeches at the Millennium Cities of Playas de Cuyabeno or Pañacocha. No reference can be found to it in the countless official declarations and newspaper reports concerning the Millennium Cities. And the great majority of their inhabitants explain the Cities without once discussing the violent struggles and utopian dreams that lie buried beneath them. This was not necessarily a consequence of the unconscious repression of a traumatic event. In some cases, it was due to intra-community rivalries between those involved in the struggle and those who opposed it, while in others it was based on a fear of criticizing the government, and potentially being deprived of the benefits they had received. Yet it remains the case that these struggles and dreams were the necessary condition for the construction of the social compromise that now represses their existence. Concealed by ‘new harmony’ of ‘twenty-first century socialism’, the violent breaking of the blockade performs the same function as primitive accumulation in the foundation of the apparently synchronous system of capitalism:

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60 This scene was described to us by Pablo Gallego, a catholic priest who served Playas de Cuyabeno between 1987 and 2011. Interview 02/10/2015, Coca
61 The story of this period was related to us by several of those involved in the blockade. During this period, Alian Petrol collapsed, as a result of factors including the public denouncements that it received from Petroecuador and the Ecuadorian government, and its failure to secure the necessary financial backing from international investors.
62 Following the secret signing of their agreement with Petroamazonas, and their acrimonious separation from Playas de Cuyabeno, the community of Santa Elena requested that their Millennium Houses be built in a separate place. Like Tereré, this complex has been left without water or electricity, and only two of the nine houses are occupied.
63 Member of the Playas de Cuyabeno commune. Interview 17/07/2015, Playas de Cuyabeno
“These external presuppositions – the Real of a violence founding the system and nonetheless disavowed once the system reaches the level of its self-reproduction – play the role of a ‘vanishing mediator’: they must disappear, become invisible, if the system is to maintain its consistency and coherence... since it is constituted by means of their ‘repression’” (Žižek 1991: 215).

Within the symbolic universe of the Citizens’ Revolution, the hidden history of the Playas blockade operates as a ‘vanishing mediator’ of precisely this kind. The Millennium City is both the fetish object with which this “traumatic social antagonism [is] obfuscated by the experience of society as an aestheticized organic whole” (Žižek 1997: 123), and “the aftermath, the ‘gentrification’ of [this] forgotten excess of negativity” (Žižek 1991: 195). The parish councillor who first told us the secret of the vanishing mediator had finished his lunch and his boat was ready. “People say that the Millennium City was a gift from the President” he said as he was leaving. “[But] all the advances of the pueblo have been achieved through struggle, nothing has arrived like just ‘here, this is for you’. Everything has been obtained though violent conflict (golpes de lucha).” He jumped aboard the boat and sped out across the river, cutting a wide arc beyond the sand banks, away from the set upon which a fantasy had been staged, and beneath which a violence had vanished.

**Between two fantasies, the beach**

The Millennium Cities have played a crucial role in consolidating the hegemony of the Citizens’ Revolution. In the context of the breakdown of the alliance between Correa and the indigenous and ecological social movements that brought him to power, the Millennium Cities constitute “a vision of a society which does exist, a society which is not split by an antagonistic division, a society in which the relation between its parts is organic, complimentary” (Žižek 1989: 126). In place of the dispossession, despoilment, and violence of the neoliberal era, the Cities seem to promise a peaceful and prosperous future for the Ecuadoran Amazon. As such, they have proved extremely effective in gaining acceptance for the expansion of the oil frontier from communities that had long been committed to its rejection. A member of a community downriver from Playas de Cuyabeno told us that they had selected the location to escape from oil spills elsewhere, and had always been opposed to the oil industry, but that “having seen the benefits of an oil company exploiting your lands, a strong group [within the community] is now convinced that having a Millennium City would be the best thing in the world.” The Waorani of Yasuni have accepted exploitation in return for a Millennium City. (El Universo 2013a). And even the Cofán, who had steadfastly resisted oil activities for years following the impact of Chevron’s activities on their territories, have now signed up for the same agreement (El Universo 2013b).

The ‘original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism’ is framed by the Citizens’ Revolution as a development of Marx’s critique of the primitive accumulation of capital, as the inspiration for the founding of a society based on the appropriation of nature without the dispossession and exploitation of the peasantry. The Millennium Cities appear as an embodiment of this project, in which the historical relationship between the Amazonian oil industry and the dispossession of the indigenous population is replaced by a harmonious and egalitarian social order, symbolized by the modernity of the Millennium Cities themselves. Despite the revolutionary discourse of ‘twenty-first century socialism’, however, the ‘new Amazon’ is based on the maximization and limited redistribution of oil rents, rather than the revolutionary transformation of capitalist social relations. And we have seen that the modernity of the Millennium Cities is a distinctly baroque modernity, which possesses the symbolic attributes of modern life, but which lacks the material foundations to

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64 Member of the parish council of Pañacocha. Interview: 24/06/2015, Pañacocha
65 Member of the parish council of Playas de Cuyabeno. Interview: 17/07/2015, Playas de Cuyabeno
sustain them. Rather than materializing a new mode of accumulation, the Millennium Cities embody the simulated modernity of rentier capitalism, in which accumulation is premised upon the control of natural resources and the appropriation of surplus value produced in other spaces of the global economy. This implies the production of nature itself as a stock of resources available for exploitation, which in turn necessitates the dispossession of the populations in whose territories these resources are located.

The Millennium Cities stage a fantasy of organic social order that conceals this constitutive antagonism beneath an illusory materialization of modernity. They fix our gaze upon the mirage of a modern future to distract us from the rubble of a repressed past, in a baroque inversion of the flight of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, for whom “the storm [of progress] irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward” (quoted in Jameson 2005: 281). We have seen how the first two Cities of Playas de Cuyabeno and Pañacocha have buried their own foundational violence – the dispossession of the natural resources beneath the territories of their respective communes, and the negation of their project for the autonomous appropriation of these resources on behalf of the indigenous population of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Far from constituting a revolutionary application of Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation, the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism should therefore be read as a variation on Adam Smith’s fantasy of the original accumulation of capital, which was itself the target of Marx’s critique. From this perspective, the Millennium Cities appear as the staging of a fantasy of origins that conceals the violence of primitive accumulation, which must be erased from history in order for these Cities to appear as the symbolic foundation of the harmonious social order of ‘the new Amazon’.

The case of the Millennium Cities demonstrates the profound limitations of the post-neoliberal project in Ecuador and across Latin America. This project has been financed by the ground rent derived from the long commodities boom of the early twenty-first century. Rather than utilizing this unprecedented influx of social wealth for the transformation of the social relations of capital, the post-neoliberal project in Ecuador and elsewhere has been limited to the progressive distribution of these rents within the existing structures of rentier capitalism itself. This project started from the low base left by neoliberalism, and achieved impressive levels of poverty alleviation in the short term. But it is now meeting the structural limits that it has failed to alter, and the end of the commodity boom has brought it into crisis. In the context of the prolonged collapse of the oil price that began in 2014, the Ecuadorian economy has entered into recession, accompanied by budgetary austerity and a political economy of privatization and liberalization that spells the end of the post-neoliberal project, even as it continues to be articulated in the language of the ‘Citizens’ Revolution’.

In this context, the Millennium Cities have been all but abandoned. Of the two hundred Millennium Cities planned for the Amazon, only Pañacocha and Playas de Cuyabeno have been completed and only one other, in Cofán Dureno, is currently under construction. The vision of Alian Petrol had been to use the resources of Block 15 for the benefit of the entire population of the Amazon. In the scale of their original ambition, the Millennium Cities reproduced this vision, if only in a dysfunctional and paternalistic form. For the leaders of the blockade, the end of the resource boom means that even this perverse distortion of their dream will not be realized. Yet while many of the inhabitants of the Millennium Cities prefer not to speak of their secret history of resistance, these leaders remain proud of what they have achieved, emphasizing that it has been gained through struggle and bloodshed. We visited the most prominent of these leaders in her Millennium house.

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66 Angel Sallo, director of Ecuador Estratégico in the province of Sucumbios. Interview: 19/06/2015, Lago Agrio
She recounted the history of Alian Petrol, the blockade, the negotiations, and the multiple inadequacies of the Cities, and insisted that “things would have been much better” if Alian Petrol had succeeded, “because it would not only have benefitted my community but many more as well”. But her house was immaculate, the Millennium computer and refrigerator had been given pride of place, and she was sat on her standard issue sofa, watching an American chat show on cable TV. “I am content”, she said at last, “as you can see…” The ‘modernity’ of the Millennium City is therefore not only a baroque modernity, but an expression of “modernity... as the ‘shadow’ cast over bourgeois society by the failure of revolution, at once a compensatory substitute and the ineliminable trace of vanquished hopes” (Kouvelakis 2009: 711).

In contrast to the fantasy of origins staged by the Millennium City, Alian Petrol had developed an increasingly radical vision for the collective appropriation and egalitarian distribution of social wealth, which embodied the spirit of the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism. The thousands of indigenous supporters of this project were inspired by the dream of a genuinely emancipatory modernity, in contrast to both the simulated modernity of the Citizens’ Revolution and the rejection of modernity by its opponents on the post-colonial left. As one indigenous leader who had been closely involved in Alian Petrol recalls, the company “had a very social vision. We intended to capitalize in order that the capital would help our people with... healthcare, education, culture... It was not just about the ambition to make money”. This same leader, however, went on to explain that despite the progressive and egalitarian aspirations of many of the people who became involved in the project, the company was ultimately revealed as a sham. According to him, the comuneros all eventually realized that “there was nothing, it was all false, a lie.” Other members of the indigenous movement condemned Alian Petrol as at best misguided, and at worst a manipulative and fraudulent con-job. In the words of one indigenous leader, Alian Petrol was “a phantom... a huge dream without any basis whatsoever... People dream... but these things must be based in reality, not in the dreams of a dog.”

If this verdict is correct, then both the Millennium Cities and the indigenous oil company are baroque modernities, mere fantasies that appropriate revolutionary energies for the staging of pastiches of emancipation that facilitate the reproduction of capitalist social relations. If there is a genuinely utopian moment within this miasma of illusions, then it exists in the space that was fleetingly opened between these fantasies – after the dream of the collective company had been dashed, and before the Millennium City had emerged to structure ‘reality’ its place. That is to say, in the lost space of the vanishing mediator itself. In Playas de Cuyabeno, one of the leaders of the blockade agreed to show us his mobile phone footage of the standoff on the sand bank. Instead of the tense scenes of militant mobilization that we had expected to see, the flickering screen showed glimpses of people laughing, drinking chicha, playing football on the beach, and frolicking in the sand. The barges were moored against the riverbank beneath the setting sun. No-one worked during this period, and it is remembered as a time of joy and unity as well as struggle. On this beach, for the few brief weeks of their resistance, the utopia of non-work promised by ‘the original accumulation of twenty-first century socialism’ was briefly realized. As Mladen Dolar (2012) has noted of the creative moment between the dreams of sleep and those of waking life:

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67 Member of the Pañacocha commune. Interview: 24/06/2015, Pañacocha
68 Member of the Pukapeña commune. Interview 20/07/2015, Pukapeña
69 Valerio Grefa, ex-president of the FICCKAE. Interview 15/07/2015, Coca
“There is this encounter in the gap between two fantasies... It embodies the break between two worlds, and in that break something comes up for a moment that doesn’t belong to either... How to make it endure? How to hold onto something utterly vanishing? ... [What is required is] a persistent attempt to show fidelity to what emerges between two dreams.”

Images from mobile phone footage of the blockade at Playas de Cuyabeno. Clockwise from top left: men and women talking on the beach, with two of the detained barges visible in the background; a woman sharing out the chicha; a woman playing in the sand; a football game in the evening sunshine (Photograph: Manuel Bayón, 2015).

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