

On the Path of Perpetual Revolution: From Marx's Millenarianism to Sendero Luminoso

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ABSTRACT *Karl Marx's hostility toward religion masked the religious and millenarian aspects of his own thinking, yet behind Marx's political theories stands a distinctly eschatological reading of history. The Shining Path insurgency in Peru represented a coherent development of Peruvian Left political culture and orthodox Marxist concepts of violent struggle in the name of 'progress'. The senderistas were not an irrational Maoist cult, as they have sometimes been depicted, but an ideologically driven movement led by intellectuals and university students who sought to rigorously apply Marx's ideas while rejecting political compromise with the reactionary state. The suffering inflicted upon the Peruvian peasantry as a result of the senderistas' uncompromising stance reveals some of orthodox Marxism's internal contradictions, while the rise of the peasant resistance movements – especially led by evangélicos and women's groups – highlights the importance of categories of belief and human agency in discussions of the relationship between underdevelopment and conflict.*

Introduction

Karl Marx has often been depicted, by his followers and his detractors alike, as an implacable foe of religion and champion of a secular humanism in the rationalist tradition. At one level of analysis, this portrait of Marx contains a great deal of truth. Religion, he believed, was at best the pathetic, though understandable, 'sigh of the oppressed creature'.¹ For him, the idea of the 'Heavenly Kingdom' arose naturally among the workers as an illusory consolation amid their ongoing, material exploitation by the owners of capital. Yet at its worst, religion was itself the means of that oppression, a powerful tool by which the bourgeoisie dampened revolutionary impulses and kept the proletariat suppressed. Development, according to Marx, therefore required a radical critique of all religious institutions and ideas as sources of 'false consciousness'. After the communist society was realised as a historical reality, Marx assumed, whatever remained of the dubious superstructure of religion would vanish before the light of the materialist vision.²

Yet Marx's hostility toward religion, and Christianity in particular, stemmed not merely from his objective analysis of religious devotion as a mask for bourgeois hypocrisy which the church of his day had largely become. It emerged, rather, from a more complex, personal and problematic relationship with the categories of religious thought. The passion, and often venom, of Marx's critique of religion betrays a peculiar form of rivalry: the resentment of indebtedness. Marx was not merely the biological descendent of great eastern European rabbis and

Talmudic scholars; he was, in some sense, the *intellectual* heir of a deeply Biblical vision. In the economy of belief, Marxism functioned, from its founding, as a distinct brand of messianism; as a secular, socio-political eschatology. Ironically, and tragically, Marx's millenarian bargain lies directly behind some of the most catastrophic political disasters of the past century. It is this seemingly paradoxical, but finally explicable, connection between the high ideals of Marxism and political violence that I will explore in this article. My analysis of Marx's writings will then turn toward a case study of *Sendero Luminoso* – the Shining Path insurgency in Peru – as an example of orthodox Marxist millenarianism, fully consistent in theory with many of Marx's most radical declarations, yet disastrously unable to translate revolutionary ideology into economic development for the nation's poor.

Violence in Marx's political eschatology

In his *Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx laid the philosophical foundation for his materialist conception of history. Questions about human nature, he declares, can only be answered in terms of 'the ensemble of social relations' by which humans are formed.³ Implicit throughout the essay is a rejection of both the classical view of man as *homo animal rationale*, and the biblical view of humanity as created in the image of God. 'The essence of man can ... be understood only as "species", the inward, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals', Marx wrote: 'Man is man's world, the state, society'.⁴ Any notion of a soul or mind that is not reducible to 'species life' is thus rejected *a priori* in Marx's theory.

Truth, it follows for Marx, cannot be a logical or objective category based upon reason. It is, rather, the historically contingent product of materially grounded social relationships. 'Man must prove truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice', he asserts; otherwise his thinking is 'purely scholastic'.⁵ Philosophers had long sought to interpret the world, but for Marx 'the point is to change it'. Once 'truth' is seen for what it is, he declared – relative, plastic, philosophically groundless – all social mores, values and structures could be unravelled, altered and finally destroyed: '[A]fter the earthly family, e.g., is discovered to be the secret of the heavenly family, one must proceed to destroy the former both in theory and in practice'. Marx's epistemological views are therefore closely linked to his politics and ethics; notions of morality and goodness, along with truth itself, are no longer seen as 'real' categories, but as socially imposed constraints on human freedom that must be overcome through processes of conflictive struggle.

Already the internal contradiction is clear; for to what ends should people struggle if not precisely those moral ends – greater justice, human rights, truth – cast aside as so much intellectual deadweight in the gears of the materialist machine? Yet Marx believed he had discovered the scientific laws governing human behaviour, and that these laws would prove a better guide to action than outmoded concepts of goodness, beauty or value. His purpose in writing the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, he declared, had been

to show what a crime it is to attempt, on the one hand to force on our Party again, as dogmas, ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish, while again perverting, on the other, the realistic outlook ... by means of ideological nonsense about rights and other trash so common among the democrats and among the French socialists.⁶

Religion, morality, ethics, human rights – all were for Marx ‘ghostly’ projections of an ‘inverted world-consciousness’.⁷ Authentic human consciousness, by contrast, began with the realisation that these words were dispensable scaffolding erected in support of ‘superstructure’: that great façade of justifications which had accreted and evolved over time to mask unequal power relations with an economic base.

Marx himself, one must nevertheless observe, did not hesitate to use old ideals to rally his followers, no matter how devoid of meaning these formulations were in his own mind. In his address to the International Working Men’s Association in 1864, he urged the proletarians to ‘vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations’. The Association, he declared, ‘will acknowledge truth, justice, and morality, as the basis of their conduct towards each other, and towards all men, without regard to colour, creed, or nationality’.⁸ It would be difficult to explain these words had Marx not himself explained them in a letter to Engels. He had not spoken sincerely, he confessed, but opportunistically, as a way of channelling the energies of the masses. ‘I was obliged’, he wrote, ‘to insert two phrases about “duty” and “right” ... “truth, morality and justice” but these are placed in such a way that they can do no harm ... [They are] only a means of making them take shape as “they”, as a revolutionary united mass’.⁹

One therefore finds in Marx’s politics an essentially utilitarian or consequentialist ethic at work, a willingness to use whatever means necessary – even so far as bourgeois morality – to achieve desired ends. Also detectable is a curious dynamic of power just beneath the surface: Marx vigorously unmasks the ‘superstructure’ used by the bourgeoisie to control the working class, but then puts forward, with apologies to Engels, a new superstructure to likewise control the masses – an ideology and rhetoric of liberation for those too simple to understand the more advanced lessons of materialism; noble lies for the greater good. Yet it may be that Marx fell back upon the old language of morality and virtue not merely cynically or as a politically expedient tool, as he claimed to Engels, but from a more dire necessity: the fact that the ideal of the Communist Society, and the critique of capitalism, could have no coherent meaning, could not even be conceived, apart from the very realm of values that historicism was supposed to have supplanted.

In his 1850 address to the Communist League, Marx’s consequentialist outlook assumed a darker cast. Vacuous bourgeois moral discourse was not the only tool Marx was prepared to use to advance the worker’s paradise. In this speech, Marx advises the proletariat, on the seeming eve of revolution, to make common cause with the Social Democrats in Germany in order to overthrow the government, but to subsequently turn on these allies and seek their destruction as well. The Party must make sure the proletarians are armed, Marx warned, so that they will be in a position to ‘energetically and menacingly’ confront ‘the forces of reaction decisively and with terrorist methods’ as needed.¹⁰ At the point of victory, ‘[f]ar from opposing the so-called excesses, examples of popular revenge against hated individuals or against public buildings with hateful associations, they must not only allow them but themselves undertake their direction’.¹¹ Then, with the reigns of control in their hands, the revolutionaries should ‘strive for the greatest possible centralization of power’, not being led astray ‘by democratic talk of municipal freedom, self-government, etc ... [T]he task of the true revolutionary party in Germany today is the establishment of the most rigid centralization’.¹²

The violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie was justified, Marx thought, on the grounds that its very existence as a class led to the exploitation of the workers, but Marx also saw that the bourgeoisie as *people* were generally free from blame in what they did; under capitalism, the owners of capital have no choice but to exploit. Hence, Jeffrey Vogel writes, the average member of the bourgeoisie who must suffer the lessons of Marxist revolutionary praxis, 'can never know why they are to be harmed in the name of human development ... They must make the supreme sacrifice without ever knowing why'.¹³ Vogel calls this role of involuntary supreme sacrifice in Marxist theory: 'Marx's tragic understanding of history', and argues that it does not 'undermine Marx's basic optimism about human potential' or compromise his 'grand vision of human progress and human dignity'.¹⁴ Violent struggle is essential at each stage of human development – and in the final stages in particular – so that it is necessary to see all historical progress through the lens of revolutionary class struggle, but also, if I read Vogel correctly, to learn to accept violence, even at times against the innocent, for the sake of the grander vision.

Marx's tragic view of history leads, however, to a peculiar dilemma for both him and many of his followers: the political quandary and the sense of moral ambiguity arising from the fact that not only revolutionary struggle but imperialism, colonialism and capitalism – according to Marx's writings – are all inexorably advancing the cause of socialism by ironically producing the bourgeoisie's own gravediggers. This dilemma is most evident in Marx's early writings on British colonialism in India, which on the one hand he deplored, but on the other, he embraced as a matter of historical necessity.¹⁵

The misery inflicted by England, he wrote, was 'of an infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindustan had to suffer before'; for unlike previous invasions, famines and conquests, British capitalism had 'broken down the entire framework of Indian society'. Yet:

sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness ... we must not forget that these idyllic village communities ... had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies.¹⁶

England 'was actuated only by the vilest interests', but this 'is not the question': 'Has [the bourgeoisie] ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?'¹⁷ What mattered, then, was this alone: 'can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?' If not, Marx declared, 'whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history', unwittingly sowing the seeds of revolution.¹⁸ '[W]hatever bitterness the spectacle of the crumbling of an ancient world may have for our personal feelings', we are wise to embrace the wisdom of Goethe: 'Should this torture cause us anguish since it increases our pleasure?'¹⁹

Because Marx's consequentialism is so heavily oriented toward the vaguely defined good of a not yet existing society, Steven Lukes observes, it is markedly less sensitive toward the welfare of humans in the present than other forms of utilitarianism. John Mill and Jeremy Bentham included, in their calculations of the

greatest good, the goods of actual people in the present. Marxian thought, however, 'holds that such constraints are likely to be class deceptions, lying in ambush to trap the unwary'.²⁰ On the path of perpetual revolution, whether to exercise restraint or to fan violence toward greater levels of excess is no longer a moral question but a *tactical* one to be determined 'through calm and cold-blooded assessment of circumstance and unconcealed distrust' of class rivals.²¹

Marx's entire political and ethical orientation, then, must ultimately be seen in terms of his teleological interpretation of history. Like the eighteenth-century Enlightenment *philosophes*, he embraced the doctrine of 'progress', an unexamined faith in 'the unfolding excellence of fact'.²² Reason and science were to progressively banish all irrational superstitions, ushering in a harmonious city of freedom and plenty for all. Marx's view of history is more complicated and more profound than that of the *philosophes* and their modernist heirs because he has a deeper awareness of what, in older language, was referred to as 'chaos', the darkness of civilisation in a 'fallen' world.²³ Things are not as they should be: there is injustice, exploitation and oppression in the social order. What is more, this injustice is not accidental, but intrinsic and structural. Nevertheless, Marx's provisional pessimism in his survey of the current reality is countered by his confidence that injustice will not last forever, his belief that history is moving ineluctably toward a new situation in which everyone will give 'according to their ability' and take 'according to their need' – and that this certainty in the future somehow validates a course of revolutionary action in the present.²⁴

Marx's optimism in the final outcome of history does not follow logically from 'scientific materialism'. It descends, rather, from the categories of classical Judaism and early Christianity. Marx's 'cosmic optimism', Bertrand Russell observed, is an optimism 'only theism could justify'.²⁵ The 1844 manuscripts, George Steiner writes, are steeped in the very language of messianic promise: 'Even where it proclaims itself to be atheist, the socialism of Marx, of Trotsky, of Ernst Bloch, is directly rooted in messianic eschatology. Nothing is more religious, nothing is closer to the ecstatic rage for justice in the prophets, than the socialist vision of the destruction of the bourgeois Gomorrah and the creation of a new, clean city for man'.²⁶ The base of Marxist history is the superstructure of a Jewish dream.

However, Marx's eschatology is simultaneously an eschatology of Promethean rebellion. In the Preface to his doctoral dissertation, Marx hailed Prometheus as the world's greatest saint and martyr, for having defied the gods on behalf of man.²⁷ 'The proclamation of Prometheus ... "in a word, I detest all the Gods" ... is her [sic] own profession, her own slogan against all gods of heaven and earth who do not recognize man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity. There shall be none other beside it'.²⁸ Indeed, there is an underlying continuity, Eric Voegelin has shown, between Marxism and the ancient heresy of Gnosticism.²⁹ Both perceive the world as a place of unrelieved alienation rather than the fallen but still good work of God's creation; both aim at the destruction of the old world and passage into the new; and both teach that humans must carry out this work of salvation by and for themselves. Marxism, as a form of secular utopianism, is thus twice removed from original Christian doctrine: it not only conceives salvation as immanent – similar to certain medieval millenarian sects which sought to establish the 'Heavenly Kingdom' on earth by means of violence – it promises that the proletariat will soon 'transcend' nature, faith, and the moral law itself by undergoing the convulsions of class warfare, by passing through the door of revolutionary social upheaval.³⁰

Marx's political eschatology, I will now show, was to bear fruit in the socio-historical matrix of Peruvian Left political culture, in tragic but not inscrutable ways.

From theory to praxis: the case of Sendero Luminoso

For nearly 300 years, Peru fell under Spanish colonial domination, suffering all the attendant deformations of authoritarian and mercantilist politico-economic control. Colonialism embedded new patterns of exploitation and oppression deep within Peruvian identity, which persisted into the twentieth century and included the marginalisation of a large percentage of the indigenous population.³¹ According to a 1964 study, 0.1% of the population controlled over 60% of Peru's arable land, with land owners often conducting themselves in the manner of feudal lords.³² Andean peasants were obliged to serve as grooms, shepherds, housekeepers – even bearers of the hacienda owners themselves when they did not feel like walking. During the 1920s and 1930s, several mass-based political movements, including the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA) and *Partido Comunista del Peru* (PCP), arose in response to conditions of gross inequality and subjugation for the majority of the population by commercial and military elites. APRA and the PCP mounted trenchant critiques of the aristocracy and pressed for more inclusive state structures.³³

These radical programmes developed, however, within extremely narrow constraints. Political pressure and periods of military repression forced the radicals to compromise on their revolutionary agendas in order to ensure their political survival. While focusing on the needs of urban workers in coastal areas who formed their social base, the PCP abided by 'an implicit pact'³⁴ with the aristocracy, one felt that left oligarchic land control and servile treatment of *indigenismos* in the rural areas unchallenged. APRA, Peru's most popular political organisation from 1931, transformed itself into a 'centrist party willing to make almost any compromise to gain greater formal political power'.³⁵ By the end of the 1950s, the radical movements of the 1920s, through a Faustian bargain of moderation and political prudence, had thus not only become ineffective vehicles for mass change, but were themselves part of an exclusionary 'reconstructed Old Regime'.³⁶ This set the stage for the rise of the *senderistas*, a drama that is best presented in three acts: (a) development of the logic of revolutionary violence; (b) rejection of alternatives and the testing of thresholds; and (c) the implosion of a millenarian movement under the weight of its own internal contradictions.

Exhaustion in the Legal Fold, Exhilaration in the Jungle: The Logic of Revolt

At the start of the 1960s, the exhaustion of the 'reconstructed Old Regime' led to increasing agitation and fissures among Peru's political left. An older generation of intellectuals contented themselves with bitter theoretical feuds, producing 'a phylogenetic thicket' of splinter groups, ranging from Leninists and Maoists to Trotskyites and pro-Albanians.³⁷ However, the younger generation of radicals – electrified by the 1959 Cuban Revolution, in which a people's army had defeated an American-backed dictator – was determined to prove their thinking not merely in theory but in *practice*, just as Marx had insisted was necessary. A large number of these young Marxists – including Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, a new professor of philosophy in Peru's impoverished Ayacucho Department – broke

from the legal Communist Party to prepare for armed revolt. 'After participating in the internal struggle, which became antagonistic, it became impossible to remain in a single party', Guzmán later recalled. 'At that time, we arrived at the conclusion that an armed force had to be formed during the 5th Conference [of the Communist Party in 1965] giving up electoral districts in favour of armed struggle that we, the party, had to undertake. The armed struggle would be the main concern of the party around which everything would revolve.'³⁸

Many of the radicals who broke with APRA and the PCP in the 1960s embraced the 'Cuban model' as articulated and exemplified by the Argentine physician, Ernesto Ché Guevara. Although Marx had declared that industrialisation was a necessary precondition of socialist revolution, Guevara urged Third World Marxists to take up arms in the present rather than waiting for capitalism to play out all of its internal contradictions. 'People must see clearly the futility of maintaining the fight for social goals within the framework of civil debate', Guevara wrote in his 1960 manual, *Guerrilla Warfare*.³⁹ Guevara believed that the solution to poverty across Latin America lay in small, mobile vanguards trained in Marxist ideology – revolutionaries who would penetrate isolated parts of a country to educate and radicalise the rural poor. The ideal fighter would be absolutely ascetic, always maintaining 'an austerity born of rigid self-control' while appearing before the peasants as 'a sort of guiding angel'.⁴⁰ As peasants learned the causes of their oppression, they would join with the guerrillas in resisting the local authorities. The government would then be forced to respond with iron-fisted tactics of repression that would expose its true nature to the masses. As violence escalated, workers in urban areas, seeing the suffering of their comrades, would launch strikes and join the rebellion, leading finally to the collapse of Latin America's dictatorships and bourgeois pseudo-democracies. However, victory would not come easily. Revolutionary praxis would therefore need to be continually submitted, in dialectical fashion, to the rigors of Marxist theory, which would then generate new paths for action: 'The revolutionary laws should be discussed, explained, studied in every meeting, in every assembly wherever the leaders of the Revolution are present for any purpose'.⁴¹

A majority of the Peruvian people remained disconcertingly uninterested in penetrating the dialectical 'revolutionary laws' of Marx and Engels, but the concepts set forth in Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* exhilarated and emboldened many Peruvian university students, professors and other aspiring revolutionaries, some of whom travelled to Cuba to study the tactics of insurgency warfare alongside Ché. Inexperienced, ill-equipped and unprepared for prolonged struggle, most of these guerrillas were easily suppressed by Peru's military. Nevertheless, important lessons were being stored for the future: 'The key phrase taken up by Peruvian followers of Che was "revolutionary audacity" – the willingness to risk everything to serve as a catalyst for radical change'.⁴²

Guzmán disagreed with Guevara's emphasis on military leadership and challenged the 'pro-Cuban tendencies' of Peruvian Marxists in important regards. The Party did not need to take instructions from Havana, he insisted, and guerrilla action was secondary to political agitation. Insurrection would only succeed through the creation of ever-expanding 'base areas', where the Party functioned as the *de facto* government until the state finally shrank to the point of collapse.⁴³ Unlike its abortive rivals, Guzmán's 'Red Flag Faction' – which grew into the *Partido Comunista del Perú-Sendero Luminoso* (PCP-SL) in 1969 – also saw that revolutionary audacity would only succeed if tempered by extreme self-control. The

Shining Path would patiently bide its time, methodically building its base in Ayacucho while refraining from violence for nearly 15 years. However, the decision to bring armed struggle from the countryside to the city, along lines spelled out by Guevara, Lenin and Mao, was taken by Guzmán and his fellow *senderista* ideologues at the start of these critical years, and it was a decision from which they never wavered.

Indeed, in many ways Guzmán's ideas about class struggle represented a thoroughly orthodox development of a central theme running through Marx's writings: the idea that revolutionary violence, even when apparently wasted in defeat, can actually serve a progressive function by *unveiling* or *unmasking* the bourgeoisie's true character. After 'the process of dissolution ... assumes such a violent, glaring character', Marx wrote, those bourgeois capable of 'comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole' would see the truth and join the proletariat.⁴⁴ 'The proletariat, by making its grave the birthplace of the *bourgeois* republic, at once forced the latter to appear in its true colours';⁴⁵ and again, 'At every revolution marking a progressive phase in the class struggle, the purely repressive character of the State stands out in bolder and bolder relief'.⁴⁶ It is no small irony that the tactics of escalating violence employed by the Shining Path would not primarily unmask the repressive character of the state – which was real enough, as the army's counterinsurgency campaign showed – but the underlying untruth in Marx's violent equations for a hopeful solution to fundamental human needs. Through the 1960s and 1970s, however, the harsh realities of insurgency warfare had yet to impinge upon the *senderistas'* theory.

Guzmán's innovation was to follow important elements of Marx's thought through to their logical conclusions, and to adapt the latter's conclusions to a specifically Peruvian situation: if unleashing violence was necessary to unmask the true face of bourgeois tyranny, the more total the violence, the more complete the unmasking. The revolutionaries were not simply locked in a defensive fight against their class enemies, Guzmán saw, but in an active campaign to completely destroy the state and all its supporting social, economic and political structures. Marx's writings on *The French Civil War*, composed in the aftermath of the fall of the Paris Commune, provided doctrinal support for this uncompromising view. The state was an 'unnatural abortion of society' controlled by 'parasites', 'desperados' and 'richly paid sycophants', Marx wrote in 1871.⁴⁷ The rise of the Commune would 'arouse violent reactions and just as violent revolutions', but violence was necessary to smash the instrumentalities of parasitical state control – the police, the judiciary, the army, the clergy, and the bureaucracy. One of the lessons Marx took from the Paris Commune's defeat, and which Guzmán took from Marx, was that moderation leads to disaster. Sentimentalism, sympathy and compromise were dangerous weaknesses that must be continually guarded against.

Orthodox Marxism thus sees itself as being guided by the coolly rational philanthropy of the surgeon who does not hesitate to cut, to cauterise, to amputate for the ultimate good of the patient. At the same time, the hardened rationality of the technicians, their 'scientific' pursuit of 'dialectical efficiency', conceals a burning passion, for the 'goal was utopia, society built on unparalleled justice: communism'.⁴⁸ Such an extreme goal, Guzmán understood, would require extreme measures. After one notorious Shining Path massacre of a recalcitrant peasant community in Lucanamarca in April of 1983, Guzmán explained why his party's tactics were justified.

There more than 80 were annihilated, this is the reality, and we say it, here there was excess [But] our problem was to give a bruising blow to restrain them, to make them understand that the thing was not so easy ... I reiterate, the principle thing was to make them understand that we were a hard bone to chew, and that we were ready to do anything, anything.⁴⁹

In the larger scheme of things, Guzmán pointed out, Shining Path extremism would be vindicated by being seen to be far less horrific than the extremism of capitalism, which condemned '60,000 infants a year to death before the age of one'.⁵⁰ Guzmán's tragic view of history thus suggests an unsettling, mimetic rivalry between orthodox Marxism and versions of free-market capitalism – with both willing to accept 'shocks', high levels of suffering and social upheaval in the present in the name of future 'development'. For both rest upon the same moral assumption: the ends justify the means. Guzmán simply claimed to have found a better way of doing the maths.

'Force Them to Carry Out Their Terrorist Slogans': Rejecting Compromise

The student struggle of the 1960s, the civilian government's failure to enact promised reforms, and growing economic difficulties over 1967 and 1968 all strengthened the hand of members of the Army's officer corps, who believed more radical measures were needed to achieve development. Thus in 1968, the army staged a bloodless coup. Yet whereas the military had historically intervened to protect the interests of the country's elites, it now appeared – to the surprise of many Peruvians – to be sincerely committed to progressive change along socialist lines, and particularly to agrarian reform. The military *docenio*, or 12-year rule, lasting from 1968 until 1980 and led by Generals Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–75) and Francisco Morales Bermúdez (1975–80), was marked by: nationalisation of oil holdings; expropriation of foreign companies; diversification of the economy to reduce international dependency; increased government control of the private sector; expansion of the government bureaucracy; and the redistribution of highland haciendas to approximately 360,000 families.⁵¹ For a time, all of these policies of state-led 'armed vanguardism' appeared likely to produce economic development.

Unfortunately, the *docenio* was also marked by: overly ambitious schemes; mismanagement of resources; growing foreign debt, as the regime sought to prop up state-led projects with short-term loans; authoritarianism; industrial bias; alienation of rural communities by Lima technocrats; on-the-ground confusion; perverse undermining of peasant economies as a result of land reform itself; and general failure to translate policy into reality.⁵² In 1977, under increasing economic and political pressure, the military announced a phased return to civilian rule, with democratic elections scheduled for 1980. It was at this moment, as other leftist organisations prepared to enter the field of democratic electoral politics, that the *senderistas* decided the time had come to launch the 'People's War'.

The Shining Path's rejection of the electoral process and insistence upon revolutionary struggle, at a time when most of the nation was looking forward with hope to a democratic future, grew out of the Party's 'principled' stand for communism and its all-too-perceptive reading of history. 'Elections have never given the working class or the people power and it can only be conquered through prolonged and hard armed struggle', Guzmán declared: 'The state's foundation has fractured. The substantive problems ailing the country have to do

with this ... The crisis derives from there.⁵³ To enter into a process of revitalising the state in the name of healing the body politic would thus be tantamount to ingesting the poison at the very heart of the nation's ills, namely, the state itself. As a university student, Guzmán had observed, and been sickened by, the behaviour of his fellow Marxists during election periods: 'Everybody was attracted by the elections, by the candidates for deputies, senators. I could see repulsive electoral paraphernalia ... it was repulsive because their main objective was not the revolution but to get a seat in Congress'.⁵⁴ Communism could not succeed, Guzmán concluded, unless 'revisionism ... was wiped out'.⁵⁵

The problem with revisionism in all its forms, from the German Social Democrats to Peru's leftist coalition party, *Izquierda Unida* (IU), was that it transformed authentic radicals into members of a 'loyal opposition'. As workers won seats in parliamentary elections, they also suddenly acquired a stake in the *status quo*. Revolutionary slogans notwithstanding, socialists would now struggle not for the complete transcendence of capitalism, but for a greater share of capitalism's profits.⁵⁶ Democracy, history showed, would cause Peru's Marxists to pragmatically soften their zeal. However, once the process of compromise had begun, the slide from revolutionary socialism to respectable liberalism would prove irresistible and irreversible. The one-time radicals would be dissuaded from carrying out their 'terrorist slogans' and assimilated by democracy, just as Marx had warned they would be during the revolutionary days of 1848, and again after the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871. The *senderistas* saw no reason to read their Marx metaphorically. According to Shining Path ideology, leftists who engaged in cooperation and compromise with the government – including election campaigning and legislative reform, but also NGO-based development projects – constituted dangerous enemies of the revolution. They fostered illusions, they diverted energies, and they encouraged 'treasonous negotiation, coexistence, or alliance with a reactionary state'.⁵⁷ Some of the Shining Path's most angry denunciations were therefore reserved for their fellow radicals who had decided, after agonised debate, to take part in the 1980 elections. These stinging rebukes deeply pricked the consciences of many Marxists in the legal fold, since they shared Sendero's formative background and commitment to armed struggle.⁵⁸ Some of the newly formed political parties felt obliged to justify themselves by declaring that they fully intended to use elected office as a tool to provoke violent conflict – later. Such equivocations in the Marxist camp helped to create a 'zone of tolerance' for the Shining Path that in the early years of its terrorist activity enabled it to maintain critical support.⁵⁹ Beginning in 1984, the London-based multilingual Marxist magazine, *A World to Win*, provided an enthusiastic international platform for Shining Path propaganda. Later, the 'legal' Marxists would unambiguously condemn Shining Path atrocities, though 'repudiation occupied only a small and grudging portion of its energy'.⁶⁰

Another source of dangerous compromise identified by the Party, beyond democratic elections and parliamentary government, was the schools. Teachers who refused to provide platforms for Marxist instruction in their classrooms were among the first to be assassinated, sometimes by their own students. Once more, the roots of these actions trace back to Peru's vibrant but turbulent intellectual life in the 1960s, when Marxism became so deeply embedded in the public university system that professors whose views were deemed politically incorrect could be dismissed from the classroom by students.⁶¹ The idea that Socialist Man must absolutely eliminate intellectual rivals, rather than win them over through

reasoned persuasion followed, reasonably enough, from some of Marx's key writings when read in a certain light. The act of criticism, according to Marx, must be removed from the strictures of reason and made into a matter of political praxis: 'Its object is its *enemy*, which it wants not to refute, but to *destroy* ... Criticism is no longer an *end in itself*, but now simply a *means*. *Indignation* is its essential pathos, *denunciation* its principle task.'⁶² Although Marx condemned the use of his ideas as dogmatic formulas, and while he could always humorously declare 'As for me, I am no Marxist',⁶³ Marx's openness in this regard was sharply qualified by his revolutionary commitments. Epistemologically, Marx forged an axiomatic belief system that cannot be falsified and that demands a high degree of political assent as a precondition for entering fully into its particular intellectual understanding.⁶⁴ Vigorous debate over tactical or theoretical concerns employing the Marxian language system was thus permitted, even encouraged, by the Shining Path in the early stages of its development.⁶⁵ This was what it meant to be 'anti-dogmatic'. However, these debates served primarily to reinforce belief in Marxism itself as the unquestionable frame of reference. Soon the frame would narrow to debate within 'Gonzalo Thought', the ultra-orthodox brand of Marxist interpretation set forth by Guzmán alone.

The political utility of 'free' yet rigidly circumscribed debate for reinforcing powerful ideological commitments helps to explain the intensely intellectual quality of Sendero, which was created and sustained not by the poorest peasants it claimed to represent but by an elite group of relatively privileged professors and students centred at the Universidad Nacional de San Cristóbal de Huamanga (UNSCH) in Ayacucho.⁶⁶ When the university reopened in 1959 (after having been closed in 1880 during the War of the Pacific with Chile), faculty were contracted on a full-time basis with salaries high enough to attract some of the country's best academics.⁶⁷ Here, the Shining Path expanded rapidly through reading circles, study groups and research projects to analyse the developmental effects of government reforms and small-scale development projects in the local community.⁶⁸ One influential *senderista* theorist at UNSCH was Antonio Diaz Martinez, a professor of agronomy and author of *Ayacucho: Hambre y Esperanza* [*Ayacucho: Hunger and Hope*]. Martinez stressed the unacceptable role of bourgeois education in perpetuating the agrarian problem. Illiterate peasants, who by hard work managed to send their children to universities to obtain degrees, liberated their descendents from subsistence farming, it was true. Yet this was an invalid survival strategy since it locked the peasants into utilitarian western lifestyles, created greater class differentiation among the rural poor and destroyed native culture. Instead, Martinez declared, Indians needed to discover revolutionary, class-based paths to development.⁶⁹ Intellectuals like Martinez and Guzmán, who had already achieved class-consciousness by studying western thinkers, evidently understood both indigenous and western culture profoundly enough to determine what was in the peasants' best interests – and to shield Indian youth from exposure to dangerous bourgeois ideology. However, the Shining Path was never a 'peasant war', 'agrarian revolt' or an organic 'uprising of the downtrodden'; it was a methodically orchestrated campaign led by a white intellectual who quoted from Kant, Shakespeare and Washington Irvine, as well as Marx, Lenin and Mao, in his most famous speeches.⁷⁰

The goal was to bring revolutionary theory and practice into a dynamic, mutually reinforcing 'dialectical' relationship by baptising Peruvian students into Sendero thought and the tactics of confrontation. Teachers trained at the university

helped to spread the message among their secondary and even elementary school students throughout the region. The Education Department of Ayacucho came under more or less direct Shining Path control. Sendero's promise of total social transformation was instantly attractive to the impoverished youth of Ayacucho, who had little hope of achieving progress by way of the 'free market', and for whom university education was usually an unattainable goal.⁷¹ In contrast to the dysfunctional public school curriculum, Sendero offered a pedagogy that was 'internally coherent, exhaustive in explaining a wide universe of experience, and simple to understand'.⁷² At the same time, the seductive attraction of Sendero was due in no small part to its raw appeal to youthful dreams of power and recognition.⁷³ In the late 1970s, violent clashes with local authorities, organized by UNSCH students and teachers, began to occur with increasing frequency and intensity throughout the Ayacucho region. When a rival student organisation attempted to hold a rally at the university, they were denied access to the campus by students loyal to Sendero armed with clubs and stones. No platform was to be granted at this school for politically unacceptable ideas. In November 1978, students and teachers forcibly expelled police from the Vischongo and Pomacocha districts.⁷⁴ Traditional boundaries of passive assent to civil authority – and plain civility – were being tested and breached as the *senderistas* prepared for the onset of revolutionary war. The first official attack would be the burning of ballot boxes in the town hall of Chuschi on 17 May 1980, the day of the general election, by a group of youths led by one of their teachers.⁷⁵

Finally, Shining Path's rejection of any compromise with the 'reactionary' state included its rejection of human rights, as understood in western liberal and religious traditions and set forth in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Guzmán described as an instrument to establish 'the expansion, domination and influence of imperialism'; at home, the government covered its sins 'with a "humanitarian" varnish ... cunningly hiding that human rights are one instrument more for imposing its reactionary ideology ... all for the defence of the expired imperialist system, bloody parasitic barbarism that scorches the Earth, contrary and totally opposed to the socialist system'.⁷⁶ Guzmán's point was not merely that the government used a hypocritical discourse on human rights belied by its actual practice: it was that, for true revolutionaries, human rights do not exist as such: 'For us, human rights contradict the rights of the people because we base ourselves in man as a social product, not in an abstract man with innate rights ... *the rights of the people are the rights and obligations of class*, superior to so-called human rights'.⁷⁷ In his 1844 essay *On The Jewish Question*, Marx declared that the individual would only become free by being made into 'a *species-being*'.⁷⁸ The criticism of religion, he wrote elsewhere that year, 'is the premise of all criticism' – it begins with the realisation that '*human being* has attained no true actuality'.⁷⁹ If there are no human beings, only 'species-beings', Guzmán deduced, to whom or what could a 'human right' possibly attach?

The Culmination of Internal Contradictions

The 'People's War' had begun, though most of the people still did not know it. In a secret planning meeting on 27 March 1980, Guzmán read lengthy selections to Shining Path cadres from Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. The passages dealt with the necessity of unyielding rebellion, and the importance of sacrificial bloodshed

in binding the masses to the rebels.⁸⁰ Bombings of provincial police stations and other public buildings followed in the months after the meeting. Blood was first shed on 24 December 1980, when a group of approximately 40 *senderistas* – led by Dr Eduardo Mata Mendoza, director of the Cangallo Hospital – occupied the San Agustín de Ayzarca ranch, torturing and then beating the 60-year-old owner, Benigno Medina, to death. Two days later, citizens in Lima then received a startling message from their liberators: several dogs had been strung up from lamp posts in the centre of the city wrapped in sheets, upon which had been written: ‘Deng Xiaoping, son of a bitch’.⁸¹ Most observers interpreted the macabre display as little more than the bizarre agitprop of an utterly marginal sect. The dogs of Deng Xiaoping quickly entered media folklore and contributed to later characterisations of the Shining Path as an irrational cult of death. In fact, Sendero represented the culmination of frustrations deeply felt by many Peruvian Marxists, as they confronted the programmatic exhaustion of revisionism and their movement’s general failure to redeem the world from capitalism through non-violent means. The *senderistas* were not irrational so much as hyper-rational, determined to play out the internal logic of their millenarian script to the final curtain of capitalist history at whatever cost necessary, both to themselves and to the nation.

The final toll, according to Peru’s Commission of Truth and Reconciliation, was 69,280 dead between 1980 and 2000. The Shining Path committed 53% of the killings, while the brutal and ineffective counterinsurgency campaign unleashed by the military in 1983 was responsible for approximately 37% of attributable deaths.⁸² The goal of the *senderistas* had been to escalate bloodshed to precipitate the collapse of the bourgeois state. Yet in the end, Sendero collapsed under the weight of its own internal contradictions as large numbers of Andean peasants reclaimed their own agency and took up arms against the *senderistas* themselves. To understand why the Shining Path was finally driven from its strongholds in the countryside by the *rondas campesinas* [peasant or farmer patrols who ‘make the rounds’] we must begin by understanding why it initially attracted significant levels of support beyond the organisation’s base of disaffected intellectuals and malleable youth.

Guzmán and his inner circle were true believers, but a majority of the rural poor may be seen as more modest ‘rational choice’ agents who accepted or rejected the rebels as their perceived needs changed over time. The *senderistas* initially gained popularity in rural areas by enacting a severe code of vigilante justice against thieves, delinquents, drug dealers, bosses and landlords who were already resented by many villagers.⁸³ They set about destroying the model agricultural societies established by Velasco’s government in the 1970s which, by the early 1980s, had become a source of tension between their occupants and the peasants who had no access to them.⁸⁴ In regions occupied by the Asháninka Indians, Shining Path attacked the hated *colonos*, whose farming techniques were turning vast areas of pristine forest into arid deserts. Some Asháninka, who already possessed their own messianic eschatology and history of millenarian rebellion,⁸⁵ saw in the Shining Path an ally in the former’s struggle against outside pressures.⁸⁶ In each of these cases, peasants accepted Sendero’s presence in the pragmatic hope that the Shining Path would prove a better patron than the absentee state and local tyrants.

For women, the Shining Path offered unprecedented freedoms and political visibility in Peru’s highly patriarchal society. Key leadership positions were held

by women, and female militants were often given the most ruthless terrorist assignments, including the task of political assassinations.⁸⁷ Brutal violence committed by poor *indio* women against powerful *mestizo* men demonstrated, in perhaps the most dramatic way possible, that women were no longer bound by traditional gender roles. Isabel Coral Cordero shows that the Shining Path's internal treatment of women was often instrumental and replicated patriarchal norms in ambiguous ways, but in turn, Robin Kirk suggests that one of the reasons the organisation proved so successful at recruiting large numbers of women was that it allowed them to become 'better' than whites, the rich, and women outside the party: 'They went from the bottom of Peru's social pyramid to the top of the Shining Path's'.⁸⁸

While the Shining Path proved adept at deepening social 'contradictions' and eliminating potential rivals, its programme of violent struggle nevertheless failed to provide poor people with viable alternatives that could sustain them over time. The problem lay in part in the very nature of orthodox Marxist thought. Because of his 'belief in the inevitability of progress', Bertrand Russell notes, 'Marx thought it possible to dispense with ethical considerations'.⁸⁹ Eric Hobsbawm similarly discussed the poverty of Marxism as a constructive political theory: 'With hindsight, one might say that Socialism was either a utopian dream or little more than an agitational slogan ... Socialist theory was a critique of capitalist reality rather than a real project for the construction of a different society'.⁹⁰ Marx's failure to define concrete paths to feed hungry people in the present led Guzmán to seize upon revolutionary violence as the most creative solution for every immediate social need. 'There is no construction without destruction', Guzmán declared, 'these are two sides of the same contradiction'.⁹¹ Polarisation, conflict, struggle – these were the necessary elements in capitalism's fall and so, *mutatis mutandis*, in communism's victory. Even soup kitchens run by Christian charities in the *barriadas* of Lima, on the other hand, were 'shock absorbers' that 'dampened revolutionary consciousness'.⁹² Such extreme views, as well as the failure of the Shining Path to advance enduring social alternatives instead of the institution of self-perpetuating violence, rapidly cost the movement many of its early supporters.

Even more politically costly was the gratuitous savagery with which *senderistas* killed their victims, and their increasingly oppressive treatment of the very people they claimed to be fighting to save. The *senderistas* viewed themselves as an elite vanguard that would, if necessary, dispense with the people's support to preserve the doctrinal purity of the 'People's War', but when the *senderistas* ordered the peasants to produce only enough food to feed themselves, and to cease sending crops to the market in order to choke the capitalist economy, abstract revolutionary calculus directly threatened the complex strategies of survival and reproduction established by peasant communities over decades.⁹³ *Senderista* political violence, compounded by indiscriminate military reprisals, proved far more severe than the structural violence of the old economic order, and this was a clear catalyst for Peru's only authentic peasant rebellion of the decade: the rebellion *against the Shining Path* that emerged in the mid 1980s.

There is, however, a curious wrinkle to the story of the *rondas campesinas* that confounds simple 'rational choice' explanations of peasant behaviour. Like the philosopher Guzmán himself, Andean subsistence farmers – even before Sendero's arrival, and in the midst of their depredation – possessed narratives of solidarity, value and meaning that enabled them to transcend their immediate material

suffering and fight for change. These included both religious and familial narratives that directly challenged the reductive Marxian narrative of class struggle; resistance to the Shining Path did not first emerge among the poor in general, but from two key groups within the battered *indio* communities: Evangelical Christians and mothers.

Persons killed by the Shining Path often had their throats slit and skulls smashed with stones. Moreover, from the war's beginning, *senderista* violence was methodically directed against *evangélicos*, usually dark-skinned members of small Protestant churches in the rural regions. Attacks were often conducted as the Christians gathered for worship. In July 1984, six Evangelicals were killed in a church of Santa Rosa. Their crime had been to defy local orders and practise their faith.⁹⁴ Through the mid-1980s, the *senderistas* waged a fierce campaign to wipe out Pentecostal churches in the Apurímac Valley.⁹⁵ In February 1989, 25 believers were killed near Huanta, and two years later 31 members of a Protestant congregation were gunned down while attending a service in Lima.⁹⁶ Around the same time, another 33 were machine-gunned and then set on fire in a church in Qano.⁹⁷ In the Ené Valley, *evangélicos* were prohibited from speaking the name of God under pain of death. At first, Sendero did not attack Catholic churches, which claimed more adherents than the Protestants but also held little appeal among the young.⁹⁸ However, Catholic priests, nuns and catechists soon became targets as well. In November 1989 *senderistas* attacked a Franciscan mission in the territory of the Asháninka Indians, kidnapping a Belgian volunteer and three Asháninka Christians. The next day their bodies were recovered. One of the Asháninkas had been crucified.⁹⁹

Christians were singled out for attack for both political and ideological reasons. According to Shining Path ideology, religion was 'the opium of the people' (no matter that the decision to become an *evangelico* had historically meant additional hardship, social ostracism and threat of violence).¹⁰⁰ Religious faith, for Guzmán and his fellow orthodox theorists, could *only* be a reflection of feudal, pre-scientific thinking, symptomatic of capitalist oppression and without redeeming social or cultural value.¹⁰¹ The Marxian script predicted that religion would quickly erode as the masses were taught the deeper truths of historic materialism and class struggle. Yet after many years of aggressive proselytising, Christianity had failed to disintegrate on cue before the gospel of these new evangelists. The mere presence and growth of Christianity among the peasantry was therefore an affront to orthodox Marxist doctrine.

Yet the *senderistas* had other reasons to be threatened by the Evangelicals, who won many converts in the countryside who refused to 'serve two masters'.¹⁰² At funeral services, the Christians offered prayers for the dead in open defiance of Sendero prohibitions. When the Sendero ordered them to participate in attacks and executions – the essential rite used by the organization to bind and implicate ordinary people to its cause – they refused on grounds that these acts went against their deeply internalised values of not stealing and not taking life.¹⁰³ For their part, the *evangélicos* were sharply divided on the question of taking up arms, since many believers embraced a Christian ethic of non-violence, but even where they did not actively fight against the insurgents, pastors, Bible instructors and other church leaders emerged as rival community organisers who inculcated alternative values and fostered what Carlos Iván Degregori describes as resistance 'on the basis of another "total identity"'.¹⁰⁴ If people were 'created in the image of God' like the *evangélicos* claimed, then human rights were something

real that had to be defended, whether non-violently or by arms. Thus the *rondas campesinas* that eventually proved decisive in challenging the Shining Path had a strongly Christian component; they were often led by believers, and comprised largely peasants who viewed resistance in terms of biblical solidarity with their suffering brothers and sisters.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps even more significant in the rise of peasant resistance against the *senderistas*, though, was the role played by mothers. For some women, Shining Path's invitation to violent struggle offered the chance to achieve a kind of equality with men, but this was equality at a steep price. Women were accepted as militants to the extent that they suppressed their 'feminine' traits, as killing without emotion or remorse required *machismo*. This was 'equality' on masculine terms, with Shining Path enemies still being derided as *maricones* [fags] and *mujercitas* [little women].¹⁰⁶ Further, within the gambit of Sendero thought and Marxist hermeneutics, the very notion of 'family' was seen as a dispensable brand of 'superstructure': '[A]fter the earthly family, e.g., is discovered to be the secret of the heavenly family, one must proceed to destroy the former both in theory and in practice'.¹⁰⁷ Women entering the Shining Path were therefore often forced to give up their children for the sake of the 'greater good'. Yeny Mariá Rodríguez Neyra, a social worker who studied psychology at San Marcos University, was typical of Shining Path cadres: after an early arrest, she and her husband Eduardo Mata sent their infant child to be raised by an acquaintance before disappearing into the mountains in order to continue armed attacks. 'Apparently', Gorriti observes, 'abandoning one's progeny for the proletariat, or the hypothetical abstraction that goes under that name, could prove one's commitment to the cause'.¹⁰⁸ As one captured Shining Path woman explained to Robin Kirk, the matter of caring for one's own children was 'secondary'; family ties had to be subordinated to final solutions: 'The greatest inheritance one can leave – a new society. That's what makes us happy. We not only fight for our children, but the thousands of children who will benefit from the New Society'.¹⁰⁹

Yet for the vast majority of villagers living under Shining Path control, the materialist programme to replace human affection with 'class consciousness' simply revealed the Sendero's perverse insensitivity to their actual needs as human beings. At Sendero 'base camps' their children were forced to undergo military and ideological training from the age of eight or nine years. The guerrillas sought to mould the children into fighters who would kill and die without question, who did not know the meaning of pity and who retained no sentimental family ties. Terms like *mamá*, *papa* and *señora* were prohibited and replaced by the nomenclature of *compañero* and *camarada*, though the older terms of affection kept re-emerging in the children's vocabulary.¹¹⁰

Confronted by the fate of their children, as well as their husbands and brothers, del Pino writes, it was among the mothers of Ayacucho that the idea of resistance first developed: 'Mothers, the most sensitive to the daily drama and pain, showed the greatest resolve to resist and to question the viability of the whole Shining Path project'.¹¹¹ This included some mothers within the Shining Path cadres who had volunteered to fight while still unmarried or childless, but formed families during the struggle. These women suddenly 'found their dormant or "repressed" feelings of affection rising to the surface and becoming important in their relationships'.¹¹² Revolutionary and class values, even among heavily indoctrinated militants, had failed to fully erase fundamental human emotions, and the rediscovery of such basic feelings as the desire to protect and nurture one's children led in

turn to rational questioning of Sendero ideology. 'One cannot help wondering' Gorriti concludes, 'if things would have been different if Guzmán and [his wife] Augusta La Torre had managed to have children'.¹¹³

The women's movement of Ayacucho emerged around 1986 with clandestine groups meeting spontaneously in the homes of victims to lend moral support, share information and organise searches for the missing. These informal groups soon began to educate themselves about legal mechanisms and to exert pressure on local and national authorities. The women learned how to use the media to project their grievances, partnered with NGOs and formed networks to protect one another from danger. Sendero responded with surprise attacks on entire communities, razing approximately 300 villages and massacring scores of women, children and elderly persons,¹¹⁴ but the women's solidarity movement would not be deterred. Some writers stress the importance of Guzmán's surprise capture in Lima in September of 1992 to account for the Shining Path's rapid collapse in the early 1990s. While the significance of this event, which thwarted Sendero's plans for an unprecedented terror campaign in the city, should not be underestimated, the beginning of the insurgency's end may be better traced to 1988, when 270 women's organizations joined together to found the *Federación Provincial de Clubes de Madres de Huamanga*. The organisation's first action was a rally for peace, in which women carried placards reading 'Because we give life we defend it', and 'The fear is gone'.¹¹⁵ Guerrillas at first tried to end the rally with sticks of dynamite. When this failed to disperse the crowds, *senderista* strongmen attempted to seize the microphones. At this critical moment, it was not the mothers of Ayacucho who appeared before the nation as *mujercitas*. Isabel Coral Cordero recounts what followed. 'I have never seen such strength, decision and fury as when those women leaders went up to the dais and screamed and hit the intruders until they had to recede'.¹¹⁶

Conclusions

The case of the Shining Path does not fit many standard social scientific explanations about the roots of violent conflict. First, conditions of persistent economic misery and social marginalisation were a necessary but not sufficient cause of the insurgency. Although rural poverty helped the *senderistas* to recruit followers and gain a sympathetic hearing, the movement was led by relatively privileged intellectual elites who launched their war immediately after a period of extensive land redistribution to benefit the poor, as well as in the midst of an economic recovery.¹¹⁷ Shining Path violence continued unabated for almost a decade before the economic collapse of the late 1980s and the harsh structural adjustment policies enacted by President Fujimori in 1990.¹¹⁸ Nor had Peru experienced, prior to the eruption of Sendero terrorism, the kinds of massive human rights violations committed by right-wing military juntas in other Latin American countries. For the first time in the region's history, an insurgent force on the left greatly surpassed the military in systematic violence against the civilian population.¹¹⁹ Third, although the Shining Path financed its operations through illicit cocaine trafficking,¹²⁰ greed factors do not appear to have been a major part of the conflict as in some African internal wars where diamonds, oil and timber are powerful incentives for violence. Finally, the unleashing of violence in Peru cannot be explained as a result of Shining Path's exclusion from the national political process.¹²¹ For Guzmán and his followers, the invitation to freely participate in

democratic elections was the last temptation to be overcome before entering the crucible of armed struggle.

What, then, were the origins of Shining Path bloodshed? Without dismissing the dynamic and complex interplay of economic, social and political factors present in any historical event, the *senderistas'* embrace of ruthless violence as the key to Peru's redemption must ultimately be understood in terms of the development of Peruvian Left political culture, factors of human agency and the latent possibilities contained in Marx's political eschatology. Sendero Luminoso was a fundamentalist expression of Marx's ideas, but it was also a coherent attempt to actualise the Marxist metanarrative of progress by violent struggle. The internal war in Peru, then, was the result of a consciously and rigorously enacted millenarian ideology, pursued by self-consciously moral beings to its logical, and absurd, conclusion.

The case of Sendero lends support to Hannah Arendt's view that violence is the antithesis of power, the end rather than the beginning of government. Violence can obviously generate its own universes of language, commerce, politics and meaning. Arendt understands that pyramids may be built upon the backs of slaves, but she also sees that, in the realm of human social relations, violence triggers forces of automatic reaction and revenge that can be broadly predicted and so no longer constitute 'free' or authentically creative acts. Trapped within the logic of revolutionary violence, Sendero could not create, it could only calculate and escalate. It could shock, but it could not *surprise*. In contrast to the principles of revolutionary violence, Arendt proposes the necessity of forgiveness. Forgiveness 'is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven'.¹²² Forgiveness is a word that does not seem to exist in the Marxian lexicon, and when villagers sought to spare the lives of thieves captured by the Shining Path, the militants insisted upon the need to overcome the impulse of mercy: 'We have to cut off their heads, because the bad weed has to be completely exterminated, because if we are going to be forgiving the bad weed we are never going to triumph, we are never going to exceed ourselves'.¹²³ In a surprising number of cases, however, Sendero guerrillas who renounced violence were reincorporated back into village life by the very people they had formerly terrorised. 'We lived in misery, and it was understandable that some would make the mistake of joining the Shining Path', explained one Apurímac leader.¹²⁴ The statement offers both cause for fear and grounds for hope. As long as conditions of misery and poverty persist in Peru and elsewhere, the appeal of violent millenarian ideologies, both religious and secular, will remain. Indeed, resurgent Shining Path activity in recent years testifies to this fact.¹²⁵ Yet as long as people continue to find ways to creatively forgive their enemies – as seen in the villages of Ayacucho, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Jubilee campaign for debt forgiveness, and countless nonviolent solidarity movements – the possibility of new and more just social realities may yet, perhaps, not be lost.

Notes

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