

War and Cultural Studies: Reflections on Recent Work in Peru and Argentina

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At a recent festival of Quechua theatre in Peru, one of the plays took as its theme the widespread disappearance of people in the Emergency Zones, where the state is engaged in what is known as a dirty war with the forces of the Communist Part of Peru, better known as Sendero Luminoso. Disappearances have occurred over the past two decades in a large number of Latin American countries. How does one investigate their cultural effect? For a start, they imply a network of threats, silences and other invasions of violence into the web of symbolic production. In the play I refer to, the stage is divided into three simultaneous spaces: one of them shows a young man being taken away by the army; in the second, his family are weeping for the absent son; in the third, the dead man himself appears and recounts his experience. Obviously, the multiplication of spaces comes out of the need to recompose a divided reality, where memory, communication and knowledge have been broken into fragments. What is most moving is perhaps the presence of the dead man on the stage; the dead, in this circumstance, are memory and without the accumulations of memory there is no culture. Clearly, without social memory there can be no ethics. Historically the state has presented itself as guarantor of order and meaning, offering itself, as Pedro Morandé shows, as coherent body in the face of the chaos of discontinuity (Morandé 1987, 95-96). And yet if the state cannot exist without its representation of continuities, these are selective, since we find states engaged in the deliberate creation of social amnesia.

These conclusions are obvious, perhaps. But if the debate about cultural studies does not confront the question of memory and violence -military, social and symbolic - then it will become increasingly nostalgic and irrelevant. A study of social amnesia in the shantytowns of Córdoba, Argentina, during the last military government shows that memory does not survive without a social space where it can be articulated. The inhabitants remembered perfectly well the times before 1976, but the period of military government was a kind of blank space. The reduction of the capacity for memory even affected their personal lives. The researchers reached the conclusion that the main cause was the suppression of the usual contexts of communication: 'the forms of continuity most affected were those connected with people's ways of relating to each other, that is with symbolic processes, rather than with modes of economic reproduction . . . people did not get together any more, not even to play cards or to talk about football on a street corner . . . in the schools, the students were not allowed to have

meetings or singing sessions during break, on pain of military intervention.' Predominantly, though, the amnesia effect owed less to direct state intervention than to self-surveillance: "it was a society which patrolled itself" (Mata et. al. 1988, 241-242).

The two examples given draw attention to a conflict between state and culture, not at the level of cultural policy [*las políticas culturales*] but at the more fundamental one of the cultural world and its bases. The term cultural world is the one used by Merleau-Ponty to refer to the way in which the composition of perceptions into a perceived world depends upon and contributes to a shared cultural world (Merleau-Ponty 1989, 23-25, 346-365). In the civil war in Peru, both material and cultural bases of Andean life are under threat of destruction, and in response the indigenous peasantry are inventing ways of reconstituting their universe. More precisely, in the Quechua play, it is a question of reinventing a space in which to reflect upon experience; without that the cultural field becomes simply a network of obediences. Under the Argentine military government, the suppression of social memory appears to have been carried out with considerable success. Quite probably, opposite examples could be found in each country - the aim is not to classify the historical processes. What I would like to suggest is that the study of culture needs to ask the question: what are the conditions of existence of a given cultural field? And in what ways is the cultural field in which we find ourselves currently changing? Clearly these are questions that can never fully be answered, especially the second one; but I believe they are vital for defining the bases for cultural studies.

The destruction of symbolic processes is not the exclusive property of states of open war. In an analysis of the first year of Carlos Menem's government, Beatriz Sarlo has noted that this government imposes 'the idea that politics consists merely in the taking of decisions and not in the construction of the alternatives within whose limits one chooses'; this diminution of the political sphere 'ends up in a government that operates as if it was always having to confront states of emergency. That is exactly what happened with the sending of Argentine troops to the Gulf.' The neutral, de-ideologising [*desideologizante*] appearance of the decisions hides something else, the imposition of a new rationalisation: '*The neutral mask of decisions* expresses both that the politics of rationalisation are the only possible one and that they are not the product of any ideology.' In the final analysis the neutral would be that which is not marked by evaluative codes, in other words an apparently non-cultural sphere; the italics are in Sarlo's original, reflecting the violence implicit in the obliteration of cultural signs, in 'the concealment of evaluative aspects'.

'The danger of this type of intervention', writes Sarlo as she develops her argument, 'is the emptying of the symbolic [*vaciamiento simbólico*]; once the narrative and myths of historical peronism had been deconstructed, they were only replaced by the bourgeois novel of market rationalisation, very poor material for replacing the political identity which Menemism proposes to dissolve' (Sarlo

1990, 7-8). That thinning of the texture of politics in which Menem and Fujimori (other names could be added, such as Collor) have taken the lead, carries with it an undeclared violence: not only against the economic situation of the millions of inhabitants who are not functional for end-of-century capitalism, but also against those signs of identity which are not functional either. This violence is as legal as the other one of open war, and external war and the use of the methods of war within the nation have become interconnected. The connections had already appeared in the National Security State, but new dimensions have accreted in the past two decades. When Mario Vargas Llosa, whose presidential programme has been adopted in broad measure by Fujimori, resorts to external and internal war in *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, he does not do so in order to condemn war ethically but to bring about an accelerated reduction of political differences. The whole sphere of cultural signs is affected by the debilitation of symbols of difference, and this is done not merely with the aim of demonstrating the unviability of socialist ideology, something he had already attempted in *The War of the End of the World*, but in order to create an ethical and political vacuum, only fillable with neo-liberal rationalisation. *The Storyteller* finishes off the job. Political emptiness becomes emptiness of the symbolic. The parody of indigenism and anthropology destroys the possibility of any linguistic or cultural plurality as constitutive of the nation. In fact the emptying goes further: the possibility of there being a repertory of symbols which could be called national disappears and there remains a scenario capable of being written only in neo-liberal language. The question therefore arises, what are the alternatives to market rationalisation and the weakening of the symbolic? A provocative solution is given by Morandé: if market rationality is not neutral and value free, but actually as sacrificial a form of communality as the traditional Christian notions of the social, which have had a longer history in Latin America, then why not return to the Christian idea? (Morandé 1987, chapters 5,6,10,11)

Some brief points need making here regarding the debate about the effects of the mass media. Until recently, and most often on the basis of the Chilean experience of the Pinochet government, it was said that the mass media, given their imperialist orientation, were bound to debilitate national cultures. Lately, however, there has been increasing recognition that that attitude rested upon the supposed passivity of the audience and ideological omnipotence of the media. It is therefore becoming accepted that criticism should not be directed at the presumed messages in isolation from the larger cultural field, and that it needs to consider the media as cultural mediations - mediations of popular memory, to cite one instance. When codes of reception are taken into account, the *telenovela* for example can be investigated as an encounter between popular memory and the mass imaginary (Martín-Barbero 1987). The question, once again, is that of the continuities and discontinuities of the symbolic. If television converts distances into simultaneities and floods local spaces with global images, it is also capable of reformulating local cultural materials. Of themselves, therefore, the media do not give an answer to the problem.

The emptying of the symbolic field on the one hand, and on the other the reinvention of continuities (whether by subaltern or hegemonic groups) can be understood within a larger historical context. Crucial among the changes that affect the current horizon is the fact that "the notion of an authentic culture in terms of an autonomous and internally coherent universe is no longer viable" either in the Third World or the First, "except perhaps as a 'useful fiction' or revealing distortion."

The statement is made by Néstor García Canclini in *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*. (García Canclini, 1990 a). Among the effects of cultural hybridism is the fact that 'at the end of the century, access to multicultural perspectives is not confined to writers, artists and exiled politicians, but is available to people from all social strata.' A vast migratory process is occurring and it includes cultural materials as well as human beings; you don't have to be a rural Mexican migrant to the USA in order to experience the flows which cross frontiers: it's enough to stay at home and turn on the television. Hybridisation cuts across any polar opposition between continuity and destruction; in this context change as a process requiring chronological interpretation is less important than lateral movements, and these are not unifiable and require multiple perspectives.

The word culture itself is affected by these destabilisations. Its traditional referent, bound up with the formation of nation-states, is becoming irrelevant: 'Why go on thinking culture in an etymological sense, as the "cultivation" of a territory, when national frontiers become porous, when the disarticulation of both urban and peasant forms casts doubt on whether the key to cultural systems can be found in the relationship between populations and particular types of territory which would generate particular behaviours?' (García Canclini 1990 b, 9) García Canclini points to two processes which can help to understand this situation: decollection [*descolectación*] and deterritorialisation: 'There was a time when the identities of groups were formed through two movements: the occupation of a territory and the constitution of collections - of objects, of monuments, of rituals - in terms of which the signs distinguishing a group were affirmed and celebrated. To have an *identity* was, above all, to have a country, a city or a neighbourhood, an *entity* within which everything shared by those who inhabited that place became identical or interchangeable. Those who did not share the territory and therefore did not have the same objects and symbols, the same rituals and customs, were the others, the different ones. . . . ¿What is left of that paradigm in the epoch of the decentralisation and planetary expansion of big companies, of the transnationalisation of communications and of multidirectional migrations?'

To respond to deterritorialisation without nostalgia can be difficult, but the difficulty must be faced. Otherwise, if one fails to grasp the movements of deterritorialisation and is drawn into defence of a past which is being destroyed, this is no answer to neo-liberal market pragmatism, increasingly dominant in Latin America. It becomes difficult to explain cultural continuities except one-sidedly, in terms of crass inertia and repetition. Take for example the successful

promotion of the Gulf War as a Just War, a phenomenon which epitomises the continuities celebrated by the dominant Western states. It is not enough to say that the ideology of Just War goes back to the Crusades and to point to its continuities as a theme of Western superiority. It is also necessary to ask what possibilities of redistribution of regional power made necessary its most recent resuscitation, and what were the communicative forms of this resuscitation. The shifting grounds and forms of inscription need to be analysed, not just the context.

As soon as deterritorialisation occurs, pressures for restabilisation, for reterritorialisation also occur. That is why it is difficult to think within the terms of García Canclini's proposition. The pressures for reterritorialisation are immediate and simultaneous and often more perceptible than the movement of deterritorialisation. Continuities and traditions that occur on the back of deterritorialisation are not therefore returns to or of the past, however much they may seem that. 'The force and obstinacy of a deterritorialisation can only be evaluated through the types of reterritorialisation that represent it; the one is the reverse side of the other' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 316, 258-260).

If we consider the actions of Sendero Luminoso in these terms, there are ways in which the attempt to destroy existing political forces and institutions, although carried out in the name of social revolution, could be argued to constitute a form of reterritorialisation. This raises a further issue: what deterritorialisation does the latter coincide with? The most obvious face of its actions is the use of violence. If in some ways this seems merely indiscriminate and excessive, it does on the other hand have an exemplifying and codifying function. That is, the cruelty with which victims who are members of the local population are treated has two sides. There appears to be an attempt to eradicate all cultural signs, leaving mere emptiness and silence. Considered as a tactic, this links with the decision not only to eliminate the presence of the state in the 'liberated zones' but also that of all popular organisations apart from Sendero - to liquidate the officials, the habits and the signs of all other organisation. This seems to have been the aim when the leaders of the mining unions in the central highlands, a key force in the labour movement, were murdered. The other side is the attempt to emplace itself as the sole popular organisation: a new authoritarian territorialisation, through which Sendero takes on the characteristics of a state. This is accompanied by a lack of interest in Quechua culture: Sendero's political programme is concerned only with class, not with cultural differences of an ethnic type.

If the current political violence in the Andean region is accelerating change, the question arises how far is it change towards authoritarianism and dogmatism. The mixture of rapid change with rigid containment can be traced in the ways authoritarian violence has been legitimated. In the first place, Sendero substituted an already existing social violence, connected with the structures of *gamonalismo*, in other words with the power relations of precapitalist commercial capital. Peasants were able to consider this violence as 'normal', while it could

also appear to be 'the foundation of a new order' (Manrique 1989, 165). But if at first the victims were those peasants who had become part of *gamonalista* structures, 'the category "enemies of the revolution or of the party" would later become terrifyingly all-inclusive, referring to anyone who stood in the way of Sendero's aims, or who simply refused to collaborate.' The logic shows considerable symmetry with the rules for a Just War which were used to draw up the notorious Requirement of the sixteenth century. But if an anti-modernising violence resting upon a pre-political violence is the most visible feature of this war, it nevertheless obscures a massive deterritorialisation of Andean culture arising out of the increasing migration of populations and of cultural features. This is the 'time of convulsion' explored in José María Arguedas's later novels and investigated by the historian Alberto Flores Galindo (Arguedas 1960, 10; Flores Galindo 1986, 321-372).

What is the situation of the academic disciplines in an epoch of migrations and hybridism? Clearly, they should not be impervious to the transformations their traditional objects are undergoing. One area of difficulty is that the bland aggregation of disciplines, which characterises much of what is currently called Cultural Studies, is insufficient; disciplinary frontiers tend to get reestablished, behind a façade of apparent synthesis. And equally debilitating is the narrow range of materials which are actually studied and taught; often, materials which cannot be called popular are excluded. One of Andres Bello's great insights, in his struggle to assemble a Latin American theory of knowledge, was that if the work of analysis is done thoroughly, it then becomes possible to enter a place where all truths touch each other. The task is to discover the intersections of the different practices of knowledge in order to be able to break down and recompose whole cultural fields.

Cultural criticism, a phrase little heard some five years ago, is becoming a new intellectual fashion. But its current acceptance entails the risk that it can be taken to be a mere updating of previously existing practices, extended to new objects of study. Literary criticism begins to include popular cultures, sociology learns to appreciate cultural texts, historians interpret artistic texts. All of this is happening, and it is valuable that it should be. But to leave it at that is to run the risk of missing out what is most vital: the new importance of cultural analysis does not arise simply from changed relationships between disciplines in the intellectual field, but from changes which are shaking the bases of sociability, politics and of symbolic activity in general. It is becoming increasingly accepted that there is a need to rethink the past, present and future of Latin American societies from the viewpoint of the cultural field.

Let us consider, in this light, the characteristics of two traditions of cultural criticism that have arisen independently in Argentina and Peru but have some interesting similarities. David Viñas's book, *Indios, ejército y frontera* probes those continuities which can be traced between 1879, year when the oligarchic republic was consolidated with Buenos Aires as its centre, and the period of

military government initiated in the latter part of the 1970s. This book documents the genocidal treatment of the Indians in the military campaign to push them south of the Río Negro, known as the 'Conquest of the Desert', and asks what happens when the key historical continuity lies in what has disappeared, in what is not said by public discourses but nevertheless permeates the systems of state power, regardless of different governments. Viñas traces the shift between a fixed and porous frontier based on military forts to a mobile but impermeable frontier resting upon the new speed of the 'holy trinity' of the Remington repeater rifle, the telegraph and railways; and a further shift to internal and internalised frontiers also based in the final analysis on the army ('dieu caché' of Argentine history) and their connection with the socio-economic and discursive homogenisations imposed as a result of 1879. In the process of this oligarchic and ethnocidal modernity, culture becomes, as Viñas puts it, 'ontological', the force of the newly imposed national culture seeming natural and immanent, just at the moment of massive deterritorialisations. 'And the violence exercised against the Indians and their lands turned back and impregnated with all its irrationality the foundations of the oligarchic republic' (Viñas 1982, 105).

Viñas does not locate the continuities implied in this type of statement within a Freudian unconscious nor within ideology. But he does not entirely resolve the problem of where to situate them. He attempts to facilitate transition between material history and the production of meaning by using a vocabulary of relative densifications and statifications, made up of terms like 'calcification' and 'colloidal' (Viñas 1982, 12). Josefina Ludmer, in *El género gauchesco: un tratado sobre la patria*, is concerned with similar problems, which she extends to include the legitimacy of criticism itself. Her text refuses the specialised language of literary criticism and allows itself to be permeated both by common speech and by the language of state power. It parodies the state's use of legal discourse, especially in its dense overcoding and multiple semantic superimpositions, and exposes ironically the complicity of literary criticism insofar as its procedures rest upon the same enunciative statutes.

Ludmer formulates a strategy for an interrogation of enunciation (more precisely, of the enunciative field) within specific limits, those of the gauchesque genre. She analyses the foundational genre of Argentine national literature as a double embedding of literature in the organisation of war and civil life, and vice versa. In this sense she traces a superimposition of law in the sense of literary code and of law as code within the legal system; the whole process allows the penetration of the state in literary production and reception and sets up a connective stabilisation of epic potential (Ludmer 1988, 236). The major dilemma, given all this, is where can criticism speak/write from? What are the alternatives, if it is not going to embed itself within the statifications it analyses? Ludmer's approach to the problem is ironical, rather than offering a positive alternative.

There are two stories by Borges that belong to the margins of the gauchesque genre and can help reveal its limits and those of Ludmer's study as well. In 'El

otro duelo', body and code become disconnected: the race between two beheaded men, the crass inertia of bodies turned into corpses which still uphold the rules of the game, unpeels the code from its material supports. The bodies die, the code lives on, grotesquely. In 'Funes el memorioso', infinite, undifferentiated recall prevents memory and the story not only places the gauchesque at a limit where it collapses Funes is called a 'compadrito' but his mentality entirely resists identity - it also challenges all stabilisations, continuities, incorporations and overcodings which make the production of a state possible. A massive decodification (deterritorialisation) pushes readers not only outside the genre but outside any genre and in some ways outside culture itself, placing on the agenda the necessity for a renegotiation of cultural fixities in order to escape the other stasis, that of extreme decodification, that of Funes's immobilised body.

Beatriz Sarlo, in her book *Una modernidad periférica, Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930*, seeks to avoid fixities of genre and discourse and defines the culture of Buenos Aires between 1920 and 1930 as a mixture, not in the sense of a passive aggregate of elements, inherited from the past or received from outside, but as forms and discourses which become refunctionalised (Sarlo, 1988). The result is not single focus but a multiplicity of readings which modify each other mutually. Paradigms and ideological frames such as national versus cosmopolitan literature are excluded; this type of schematics is replaced by a densification of the literary and cultural field, achieved not through the consolidation of law but through an extraordinary richness of writings and readings. Sarlo allows texts and not theoretical procedures to define both the field and the methods of criticism. The ideal model of her approach, if one can speak in such terms, would be not so much the multiple location of the critical voice as allowing it to vary and move according to the heterogeneity of the field under study, making use of a fertile tension between monograph multiple writings. What is demonstrated is the possibility of a plural modern culture, resistant to the homogenisations sought by current power systems; and a possible resolution to the incarceration of criticism within the institutions and languages of imposed continuity.

The examples mentioned, to which other names could be added, are distinguished among other things by a multidisciplinary openness. In Peru, the need to break down discursive frontiers has had a different dynamic, while also being response to the current historical conjuncture, in particular the experience of violence. 'Sendero Luminoso covers the whole national territory, the intellectuals do not', in the words of the Peruvian anthropologist Rodrigo Montoya (Montoya 1990). For Montoya, there is an urgent need to achieve an integral vision of Peru, beyond existing fragmentations. Among the resources available for this task are 1) the tradition of mestizo writing, whose key figures are the Inca Garcilaso, Felipe Guaman Poma and José María Arguedas; 2) anthropology as the study of marginalised cultures from inside their own autonomy; 3) economics, history and sociology for their capacity to discuss society globally. But there is no question here of constructing a hierarchical totality: 'there are two ways of seeing totality. One, if you retain the metaphor of a building and therefore of the vertical

structure of society; the other is to do with thinking totality in horizontal terms, where economic, cultural and political phenomena would occur in the same plane, at the same time and not superimposed like ecological floors within a vertical structure' (Montoya 1989).

For Alberto Flores Galindo, the young Peruvian historian who died recently, it has only been possible 'to think and imagine Peru as a totality' since the middle of the twentieth century (Flores 1986, 322). The historical changes which have made this possible are new mercantile flows, the extension of the road network, urbanisation and migrations. Another factor needs adding to those mentioned by Flores; though its relationship with modernity is more ambiguous it is implicit in all of his argument: the political violence of the past decade. Its context is the failure of the creole state, whose framework has proved incapable of containing current social forces or of offering political structures which do not oppress the ethnic populations. Montoya invited a group of primary schoolteachers to report on how they perceive their identity. One of them asks, 'Am I Peruvian? We really do not know why this land is called Peru . . . I personally am a Quechua, I live as a Quechua but my heart is not big for this territory which is called Peru because this Peru is the property of . . . those who control economic power' (Montoya and López 1987, 39). From what place can the creole state be confronted critically, given that its ethnocentric (and ethnocidal) bases have penetrated the majority of cultural criticism in Peru? In the struggle to create alternative enunciative spaces Andean culture has been a key resource. Here is another testimony from Montoya's book: 'I am thinking that Peru is no longer ours. The head of Peru is in Lima; its mouth forgot its language and doesn't speak it any more because it learned another "more perfect" one. Its eyes don't know any more how to look at the other parts of its body . . . Is it that Peru has been cut into pieces? Will it look, hear and speak again when the head returns to the body?' (Montoya and López 1987, 80) The idea of the broken and scattered body articulates an Andean mythical substrate, the cycle of Inkarrí, a utopian figuration of the Inka. Here once again the capacity of the Andean social imagination to recompose a fragmented reality and give meaning to experiences is evident. A particular difficulty is to grasp this necessary totalisation alongside the cultural hybridisations taking place.

A further problem is whether it might not be impossible to imagine, within the terms of Western political reason, a new culturally plural state, not dependent upon an ethnically oppressive modernity. One line of thinking passes through a reconsideration of magic, taking its direction from the popular re-use of magical images and practices in new social contexts. These latter include intersections between the experience of generalised violence (economic as well as political) and the inadequacy of public languages, of the dominant social imagination, and of traditional political formulae. In this scenario, Andean magical beliefs have appeared in resemantised forms in the cities. This is the case, for example, of the *pishtaku* (sometimes pronounced pistaco), a figure originating in colonial times. The *pishtaku* beheads human beings in order to extract grease from them. In

previous periods the grease was said to be used for casting bells and manufacturing candles; in the nineteenth century, for locomotives; in the nineteen sixties, for the NASA space programme. But in 1987 *pishtakus* appeared in Huamanga, a city flooded by migrants escaping from the violence the armed forces or Sendero. They wore yellow raincoats and carried machine guns, machetes and an identity card provided by the President of the Republic. The grease extracted by them was sent away for the manufacture of medicines and beauty products, and the profit obtained would be used for paying the foreign debt. But, as Isbell has pointed out, for peasants in some parts of Ayacucho, the *pishtaku* (known there as *ñakak*) is believed to carry off fat in order to 'feed the Sendero army on the flesh of peasants' (Isbell, 1991). The *pishtaku* is an obviously vampiric figure whose magic is far from being a merely archaic and folkloric nostalgia; on the contrary, it can be used for diagnosing capitalist modernity. Moreover, the symbolic effectiveness of the *pishtaku* cannot be interpreted from the viewpoint of the social and economic rationality subscribed to by the dominant groups, the educational system and even the majority of intellectuals. It implies a society of colonial social relationships, an ethnic rather than a class logic and a magical not an instrumental rationality.

When *pishtakus* began to appear in Lima in 1988, metamorphosed into a group of gringo doctors with assistants wearing white coats who went through the shantytowns kidnapping children and removing their eyes for transplants, a debate arose as to whether the eye-stealers (*saca-ojos*) could be interpreted as a regression to ethnic as opposed to class identities. According to this viewpoint, the transition from ethnic to class identities, a precondition for the creation of a genuinely national society, had been interrupted by Sendero, and was causing the social fabric to collapse and bringing about a return to local and ethnic identities. The opposing argument maintained that if the renunciation of ethnic identities was necessary for modernity, then this was an ethnocidal modernity. If such widespread magical perceptions are responses to an emptying of the symbolic field, do they also imply a return to premodern identities, do they indicate a possible resource for an alternative rationality, or are they simply projections of an anxiety which can find no other outlet? The answer is not yet known; but it is also clear that the question can only be pursued from a new attitude to the cultural field.

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