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An Eruption of History in Peru's Bicentenary

ALBERTO VERGARA

azotado de fechas con espinas
[whipped by dates with thorns]
—César Vallejo

Anyone who visited Peru today would be struck by the starring role of historical discussion in the public sphere. Tuning in to a news broadcast, one would see members of Congress or reporters declaring their positions on the Spanish Conquest and independence, on the 1968–75 military government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado and its agrarian reform, or on the origins of the 1993 constitution and its consequences.

Until very recently, things were not like this in Peru. The past two decades were characterized by a public sphere uninterested in—perhaps even at odds with—history. It was generally thought that the country was fueled by the economy alone, rather than some form of common historical construction. But now the situation is different: history is back, in a strange and unexpected relationship with politics in contemporary Peru.

The evolution of historical and political readings of countries occurs alongside the evolution of the actual histories and politics of these same countries. In the Latin America of the 1960s and 1970s, for instance—marked by revolutionary horizons and the pall of dictatorship—the social sciences tended to center on development-related issues and theories of modernization or dependency, whereas the democratization trend of the 1980s and the collapse of communist regimes around the world coincided with an academic concern for citizenship and democratic institutions. These narratives and realities fed into each other.

In the 2000s, Peru enjoyed unprecedented economic expansion. Between 2001 and 2014, the economy doubled in size and the poverty rate fell from 54.8 percent to 22.7 percent. Peru was the star performer in Latin America, prompting former US Vice President Al Gore to speculate that the world would soon recognize "the Peruvian miracle." As far as the establishment and the official (largely *limeño*) discourse were concerned, this success stemmed from a decisive milestone in national life: the Constitution of 1993, which had done away with the populist state and transferred responsibility for development to the private sector. In this reading, contemporary Peru had vanquished the historical Peru so prone to rebellion, populism, and instability.

It is no coincidence that the state-led multimillion-sol Marca Perú (Brand Peru) campaign of the 2000s promoted the notion of the country as being, above all, one great brand. This brand depicted a festive nation, enriched by and proud of its cuisine, but also shorn of conflicts, history, or intellectuals. In this context, neither the political nor the media, business, or technocratic elites held up any kind of historical lens to the country.

The era's economic growth also coincided with the degradation of political representation. "Peru may be the most extreme case of party collapse in Latin America," political scientists Steven Levitsky and Mauricio Zavaleta said. A majority of representatives lacked both the interest and the ability to explore historical complexities. Urban Peru—the part of the country most attuned to the world and to the benefits of economic expansion—enjoyed a spell of satisfied amnesia.

In 2021, the 200th anniversary of Peruvian independence stirred hopes that commemorations

ALBERTO VERGARA *is a professor in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the Universidad del Pacífico in Lima, Peru.*

would spark a national conversation. But as in the rest of Latin America, where many nations have commemorated their bicentenaries in recent years, there was little interest. Well-intentioned government and private commissions did not appeal to either the general public or the political elites. Planning was disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, which hit Peru like no other country in the world, leaving 200,000 dead. Gross domestic product shrank by 11 percent by the end of 2020. Peruvian society reached the bicentennial in a beleaguered state, and there was nothing to indicate that the milestone would awaken any sort of historical introspection.

Yet as Bob Dylan sang, "Tomorrow is never what it was supposed to be." The presidential election of 2021 altered the trajectory. As if chance and fate were two sides of the same coin, political contingency intermingled with the old social structures.

THE ANDEAN CANDIDATE

In April 2021, the Peruvian citizenry proved apathetic about the first round of the presidential elections, giving rise to highly fragmented results in which no candidate exceeded 20 percent of the votes cast. Pedro Castillo, a political unknown who did not even register in polling ten days before the election, finished first with 19 percent—a share that would have been good enough only for fourth place in any previous election. Keiko Fujimori finished second, with just 13 percent, and advanced to the second round for the third time running. (She had lost the previous two presidential runoffs in 2011 and 2016.)

Many Peruvians still regard the Inca Empire as the nation's golden age.

This contingent outcome aroused the most profound and structural differences in national political life, as the two candidates embodied totally opposite positions. Whereas Fujimori laid claim to the rightist authoritarian mantle of her father, former President Alberto Fujimori (who held office from 1990 to 2000), Castillo's party, Perú Libre, is avowedly Leninist and in favor of the dictatorships in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. Fujimori positioned herself as the candidate of capitalism, whereas Castillo routinely used words such as "nationalization" and "statization."

As Fujimori attracted mass support in Lima, Castillo won over voters in the provinces, especially those in the highland regions. These political differences gave rise to (and were subsequently radicalized by) demonstrations. Racist and classist organizations and discourses emerged in Lima—alongside the Fujimorista right—to contest the legitimacy of Castillo's platform. The political polarization filtered through to society.

And then, it burst into history. Castillo's candidacy called out to neglected, provincial Peru, pitting the high Andes against frivolous Lima, Quechua against Spanish. In the words of historian Raúl Asensio, the myth of the "provincial redeemer" was born. The old Peruvian political and intellectual tradition that historian José Luis Rénique has termed "the radical nation" came to the fore.

In 1888, after the nation's traumatic defeat by Chile in the Pacific War, essayist and poet Manuel González Prada asserted that the "real Peru" could be found not along the coastline but in the settlements of the Andes. Since then, modern Peruvian radicalism has been tied to the highlands, which it depicts as the sole space for national redemption. Its essence was encapsulated in 1927 by José Carlos Mariátegui—the Marxist intellectual and founder of the Peruvian Socialist Party—who endorsed the idea that "the indigenous proletariat awaits its Lenin." From then on, almost all radical leftist projects have been rooted in the Peruvian Sierra, which is treated as the repository of the genuine and lost morals of the nation—a space that reminds Peru of its origins and embodies its long-term trajectory.

Castillo, a rural teacher and trade unionist, personified and aired many of these ideas that the boom years had concealed. As Asensio has argued, these concerns survived in marginal and radical public spaces, above all in the highlands. But they are always present. Some years ago, I published a book titled *Ni Amnésicos Ni Irracionales*, in which I proposed that the Peruvian electorate judges electoral candidates based on simple but important historical reference points (hence the title's dismissal of the suggestion of voter amnesia). The victories of presidential candidates Alejandro Toledo in 2001 and Ollanta Humala in 2011, both of whom had historical and political links to *Perú profundo*, as the geographical, political, and cultural hinterland is known, proved that the soil was fertile for the politicization of these connections, beyond electoral conjunctures.

Paradoxically, then, the 2021 election, with insubstantial candidates who failed to capture the public imagination, presented an opening for the exploitation of social inequalities and the old and debilitated radical tradition—and with them, of history.

IN PRAISE OF THE INCAS

On July 28, 2021, Peru celebrated the bicentenary of its declaration of independence and Castillo took possession of the presidency. The public was surprised to hear the new president devote the first five minutes of his speech to reviewing the country's history—and proposing a historical perspective that had been absent for a long time. For starters, on the national bicentennial, he downplayed the importance of the date, asserting that independence had not brought "real improvement for most Peruvians." He insisted, "Our history goes much further back than that."

For millennia, Castillo continued, the Andean inhabitants had lived in harmony with nature and found ways of solving their problems. The men from Castile did away with that world and replaced it with centuries of subjugation, while the minerals they extracted paid for European development. But now, for the first time, "the country will be governed by a *campesino*, a person who belongs, like many Peruvians, to the sectors oppressed for so many centuries."

The wager on history is manifest. So, too, is the simplism: life was harmonious until the Spaniards arrived to usher in centuries of uninterrupted economic exploitation and political degradation, with a handful of oppressors and throngs of the oppressed. This historical narrative is well known in Peru. In their 1988 book, Gonzalo Portocarrero and Patricia Oliart examined "the critical idea" of Peruvian history—one that was reproduced at the state schools through radicalized leftist teachers. Many Peruvians still regard the Inca Empire as the nation's golden age.

In the end, this "critical idea" coalesced with political faith. Castillo closed the historical section of his inaugural by exalting himself as a liberator in an age-old tradition, the bearer of an umbilical link to pre-Hispanic Peru. This is redolent of the "Andean utopia" that historian Alberto Flores Galindo studied in the 1980s, culminating in the quest for an Inca who would restore the lost original order.

Setting aside the historical simplism of Castillo's speech, it is important to note that this repertoire of arguments persists in much of Peru. Castillo may lack the experience to formulate historical musings of this caliber, but his speechwriter is clearly well aware that the president agrees with them. Above all, he knows there is still a Peru where these ideas are familiar and appreciated. It must be acknowledged that Castillo successfully deployed them to frame a political discussion based on a distinguishable reading of long-term nation-making.

The day after taking office, Castillo swore in his prime minister, Guido Bellido, at La Pampa de la Quinua in the department of Ayacucho. This was where, in 1824, pro-independence forces defeated the Spaniards, drawing the colonial era on the continent to a close. Despite this historical association, Castillo again dismissed the importance of the dawn of the republic in favor of pre-Hispanic symbolism, receiving an Incan *varayoc* (staff) to mark his assumption of power.

The president also stressed that the political subject par excellence is not the citizen but "the peoples," in the plural, and sometimes "the people" in the singular. This is a vocabulary that breaks with the Enlightenment tradition founded on citizenship and its associated rights—granted, a tradition that was only legitimized in Peru with great difficulty. Castillo, alongside "the people" and "the peoples," is rehabilitating an unashamedly fragmentary and communitarian vision of the country.

This can be better understood if we analyze the political doctrine of Perú Libre, the party that nominated Castillo for the presidency, and to which Bellido also belongs. Perú Libre's political manifesto reads: "We are a political party forged in the interior of *Perú profundo*, in the Peruvian Andes, that questions not only the centralism forged by the parties of the right but also the indifference of some leftist parties from the capital that, with their 'democratic' neutrality, enabled the consolidation of neoliberalism in our homeland."

Thus, the party plays up its Andean identity and its animus for Lima's political class, including the left. Accordingly, the historian José Luis Rénique has suggested that Perú Libre belongs to an Andeanist, federalist, and radically anti-Lima left, for which there are only two precedents in Peruvian history: the Tahuantinsuyo Committee of the 1920s, and Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path).

DEATH OF A MAOIST

A few weeks after the Castillo administration took office, the death on September 11 of the

former Shining Path leader, Abimael Guzmán, incited another historical debate. According to data published in the 2003 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) report, this Maoist armed group and the war it waged against the Peruvian state between 1980 and 1993 left almost 69,000 dead and almost $9 billion in economic losses, in addition to untold political and human consequences. Although the most popular narrative of recent years holds that the period of political violence ended with Shining Path's surrender in 1993, the passing of Guzmán revealed that the dust had not quite settled on the conflict.

At any other point in recent history, the death of the terrorist leader would not have generated too much drama. But Guzmán's demise occurred at a time when the proximity of the Castillo administration to leaders and groups with ties to Shining Path was a crucial public talking point. For instance, the press reported that Minister of Labor Iber Maraví had appeared in police reports as a member of Guzmán's old organization in the early 1980s. Moreover, the prime minister, Bellido, had publicly expressed his sympathies for the group. On a public stage characterized for over 30 years by the absolute repudiation of Shining Path, the provincial left was suddenly showing that Peru's internal armed conflict was far from dead and buried; its heirs were very much active. Surprisingly, the contemporary, identity politics–driven *limeño* left, which forms part of Castillo's governing coalition, was willing to back them fulsomely.

Peru's internal armed conflict was far from dead and buried.

The national tension stirred by Guzmán's death has provided two lessons. First, we do not have even the beginnings of a common account of what happened during the internal armed conflict. If the left appeared to sympathize with the heirs and abettors of revolutionary violence, the right reacted with hysteria, rushing to veto any discussion about the period that went beyond adherence to the simplistic progression from Guzmán's blood-fueled madness to Fujimori's heroic pacification—even though Fujimori is still in jail for human-rights crimes. In this conservative version of events, the fact that the armed forces were undeniably part of the brutal violence back then is neither here nor there. Until the arrival of Castillo, this crude discourse had not been challenged by prominent political actors (though this is not to say that it wasn't subject to social and cultural critiques). But now his emergence has made this reading difficult to sustain.

Second, these discussions have shown that beyond the major cities—and especially in the highlands—the discourse of a conflict confined to the past is precarious. As anthropologist Kimberly Theidon has shown in her pioneering study on the legacies of the conflict in rural contexts, the rigid boundaries between former *Senderistas* and non-*Senderistas* are blurred. The anonymity of the big cities can mask old animosities, but in the villages victims and perpetrators are compelled to see one another every day. In these environments, the conflict did not end in 1993; there, to borrow William Faulkner's celebrated phrase, the past is not even past.

LANGUAGE AND LAND

This brings us back to the matter of the nation-making process. The CVR report found that Quispe and Huamán were the most frequent surnames in the lists of the dead and the disappeared during the internal armed conflict. Both originate in Peru's poorest indigenous areas, which in itself calls attention to the country's entirely unequal construction of citizenship. How could Shining Path and the armed forces commit such atrocities against this population? And worse still, why did the country officially register only a portion of these deaths while leaving the rest in obscurity? These questions are all the more painful because they concern events that are only possible in an openly unequal social and legal order.

The debate over the national question surfaces every day. When Bellido attended a session of Congress to request a vote of confidence, he began his speech in Quechua—an indigenous language that the Constitution recognizes as one of the country's official languages, alongside Spanish and Aymara. The opposition—in the bicentennial year of the republic—responded by shouting down the prime minister, and the president of Congress demanded that he continue in Spanish. The upshot of this episode, just as the government had calculated, was that media attention fixated on the linguistic clash, and not on the prime minister's proposals. Since the government is fragile, it usually attempts to play the symbolic card.

Once again, nation-making and historical exclusion had come under the spotlight. The

opposition, for its part, came across as high-handed and bound to odious privileges. The incident led to a public debate about the status of Quechua and the indigenous languages—and, in turn, to another debate about the criteria that gave shape to the Peruvian nation. Predictably, in the next round of polling, the executive's approval rating rose while that of the legislature fell.

In one more instance of this unexpected incursion of history into politics, on October 3, 2021, the Castillo administration launched a "second agrarian reform." The first agrarian reform was the work of the leftist military dictatorship headed by General Velasco Alvarado five decades earlier. It culminated in one of the most radical land redistributions in Latin American history, putting an end to the premodern rural labor regime and leading to a reappraisal of the role of the Peruvian *campesino* in the public sphere. Notably, the Castillo administration chose to propose its agrarian reform on the anniversary of Velasco's 1968 coup d'état rather than of the introduction of the first reform.

In a speech to announce the "second agrarian reform," delivered at the Incan fort of Sacsayhuamán in Cuzco, the president evoked pre-Hispanic Peru and vowed to unite the voices of Huáscar and Atahualpa—the sibling heirs to the Inca throne, who fought a civil war when the conquistadors arrived. As with every other history-related posture of this administration, we are in the realm of history as sentiment rather than knowledge. For all its frequent invocations of the past, this government overlooks the historical canon of the Peruvian left: figures such as José Carlos Mariátegui, Hugo Blanco, and Alfonso Barrantes—to mention but a few obvious names—are absent from the speeches. The force and the priorities of Andeanist history as sentiment lie in another sphere.

In concrete terms, the initiatives that comprise the new agrarian reform are considerably less bombastic than the history-centered speechifying that surrounds it. This is a set of measures that have either been attempted before or are already practiced, such as cheap loans and technical support for small farmers. As various specialists in agricultural policy have pointed out, however, the measures do not deal with climate change or any other future challenges. This is another indicator of the use of history by the Castillo administration: grandiloquence hiding the absence of a substantive project.

TAKING THE NATIONAL QUESTION SERIOUSLY

That returns us to the central argument of this essay: paradoxically, it is Peru's political bankruptcy—in terms of parties, policies, and leadership—that has enabled this resurrection of history in the nation's political life. In the first two months of his presidency, Castillo opened up a debate about the place that the poorest and indigenous populations have had in the Peruvian nation-making process. Regardless of how inaccurate his interpretations may be, Castillo's presidency has fleshed out a bicentennial that had seemed gray and lacking in depth. Unexpectedly, Peru is currently being subjected to a kind of shock therapy of historical argument.

How has the conservative opposition responded to the challenge? Rather than promoting an alternative reading centered on nation-making, they opted for the primal scream of denouncing "communists!" and, in so doing, effectively abandoned the debate on the national question. Instead, they attempted to discredit their opponents based on an appeal to a sort of internationalism. The Peruvian rightist parties have supported the Spanish far right (particularly the Vox party) by joining an emerging alliance in defense of "Hispanicity" and against "communism".

This is particularly unfortunate because there was once a Peruvian right that took the national question seriously—or, to be more precise, a right that was anticommunist, but not just anticommunist. For example, the conservative intellectual José de la Riva Agüero's *Paisajes Peruanos* described and analyzed a journey in 1912 to the Peruvian highlands in search of the "national soul," whereas his ideological bedfellow Víctor Andrés Belaúnde penned more than one volume dealing with *Peruanidad* (the title of an essay he published in 1943). One might take issue with their interpretations, but these conservative politicians and intellectuals did not shrink from debating the national question by resorting to hysterical denunciations of communism.

The strategy of opposing the Castillo administration with a rhetoric based on "Hispanicity" and anticommunism has had a predictable outcome. Fuerza Popular and Renovación Popular, the right-wing groupings that have embraced this strategy most fervently, have registered the lowest public backing of all parties in recent polling.

Thus, the political polarization that Peru is presently experiencing has an intellectual correlate: a nativist left and an anticommunist right. Overcoming this polarization poses a major political challenge in a context in which social-democratic and liberal platforms have all but vanished. But it is also an intellectual challenge. It is important to stress that there may be an alternative to the predominant narratives, one founded on national integration through the classic agenda of citizenship.

The Peru of today is a largely urban country, with 79.3 percent of the population residing in the cities, and the remaining 20.7 percent in rural areas, according to the 2017 census. Moreover, the same census found that 13.9 percent of Peruvians are native speakers of Quechua and 1.7 percent of Aymara. These figures show that the Peru directly represented by Pedro Castillo is of undeniable relevance, and every effort is required to ensure that these Peruvians receive the equal opportunities that they have long been denied. But they also signal that a nativist reading of the nation, such as the one favored by Castillo, is subject not only to intellectual limitations, but also to demographic ones.

There is room, therefore, for a national vision that conceives of the citizen, rather than "the peoples," as the main political subject—a vision that is based on the reality of a predominantly urban and interconnected country, and that stresses the gradual and unfinished building of a common national substrate. Given the intellectual anemia nowadays suffered by all political camps, it would be naive to believe that a perspective of this type could take shape anytime soon. But it is worth highlighting the possibility all the same.

The radical historicization of the Peruvian political sphere may well abate soon. This is not only because the inertia of everyday politics could consume overly ideological administrations. As I finish this essay in mid-October 2021, Castillo has just replaced his prime minister, Guido Bellido—*Cusqueño*, Quechua speaker, and senior Perú Libre cadre—with Mirtha Vásquez, a member of another leftist group, marking a growing gulf between the administration and the party. Even though Castillo has positioned himself as the "provincial redeemer," it has already become clear that this has much more to do with the objective circumstance of his rural background than with any ideological work carried out by the president.

Without Perú Libre and its leader and main ideologue Vladimir Cerrón in command, the nativist discourses could lose vigor—even if a symbology targeted at the modest rural base endures. Which, after all, would not be so bad. To put it another way: I hope Peru doesn't return to an amnesic public sphere, but I likewise heed Albert O. Hirschman's still-valid warning that the more structural and over-intellectualized the diagnoses of Latin America's problems, the more governments will be compelled to attempt Herculean reforms for which they are ill-equipped—and will end up sowing frustration among the population they profess to favor.■