Time as weather: corpse-work in the prehistory of political boundaries

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Insurgent law, an afterlife

‘These things are the mirror’, said the Shining Path leader, who in Wilson’s accounts always stayed unnamed. ‘They are the mirror so the people and masses will know not to commit such errors.’

That, Wilson told me, was the answer one *guerrillero* gave to his question of why the Party left dead bodies in public places to rot ... always with a sign tossed nearby announcing the crime of which the victim had in life been accused. The mistakes the anonymous leader alluded to were any defiance of Party rules. Those same rules were what they would impress upon all who gazed at the physical remains of the condemned.

Wilson described this political pedagogy as a matter of fact, his voice steady and calm as we sat at a table adjacent to the kitchen of his home. There he shared stories of his former days as a river canoe operator ferrying people and cargoes of raw cocaine across the Huallaga river. Like all boat operators of those times, now over twenty years ago, Wilson was ‘organised’ into the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*),¹ which is to say the Party kept him under watch and continually on call. At any moment he and his boat might be commandeered and sent on ‘commissions’. Wilson recalled working all night to pass people back and forth when the guerrillas staged armed stoppages on the Marginal Highway. He recalled too the disastrous 1989 attack on the Madre Mía army fort, when he transported

combatants towards the scene of the battle and then back to the other side with so many dead and wounded in tow. Wilson said the toll on the Party from that single fight – in losses of seasoned fighters and damage to morale – became a turning point in the war. Or so one veteran guerrilla combatant later confided to him. The soldiers, secure in their underground bunkers, ‘won’ without firing a shot, as various groups of *senderistas* converged upon the fort from different locales. Confused about who was who in the dark of night the guerrillas opened fire on each another into the early morning hours, until they had decimated their own ranks. This was the moment of historical revelation that Wilson foregrounded so as to explain how the storm of people’s war had hurtled off course.

In our conversations on Huallaga history Wilson echoed many things I had heard about Shining Path rule during the heights of its power. He said that to reside in rural villages, which were recast as People’s Committees as early as 1982, was to live subjected to the demands of a Maoist-inspired armed struggle. There, it was forbidden to espouse other political doctrines or to do anything that might betray the revolution. Mobility in and out of areas of insurgent control was severely curtailed. One could not enter or leave without permission. Power ostensibly belonged to ‘the people’, yet Wilson insisted that local Party delegates exercised a vertical, despotic control.

Attracted by an ascendant cocaine boom, the insurgency’s political infrastructure and influence spread quickly throughout the countryside of the Upper Huallaga valley. Within a few years all farm land upon which the cocaine trade depended came under Party dominion. Anyone who wished to grow coca had to express support for the insurgency and its armed struggle.²

The Shining Path governed through spectacular punishments meted out for transgressions of Party rules. Through a ritualised practice of revolutionary justice called ‘People’s Trials’ (*juicios populares*), the Party regularly sentenced to death those deemed political or social enemies. Rural communities under *Sendero* control served as prime locations for staging the *juicios* where residents were expected to participate in the executions to show their loyalty and subjection. People’s Trials were a technique for forming a revolutionary public: both in the sense of creating a political community and transforming the people who would populate it. The trial’s public-generating effects did not end with the execution. Afterwards the lifeless remains of the killed would be dumped along a road – generally the Marginal Highway – to send a message to any and all who

encountered them. The Shining Path not only distinguished between advocates and detractors of its revolution but called on everyone to think carefully in choosing sides.³

In these pages I weigh the following question: to what extent have the effects of Shining Path techniques for crafting an insurgent social contract lingered long after the movement's demise? Human corpses served the ends of drawing insurgent territory and forging new law. Once upon a recent time what is now the region's political *pre-history* had profound impacts upon relations between people and property. I say *prehistory* because, for Huallaga communities, that era falls on the distant 'other side' of the new legal situation founded through the Peruvian state's military defeat of the Shining Path – an imposition engendering its own silences and forms of oblivion through different tactics where corpses too played a role.⁴ The historical proximity of that former era is striking, however, less for what is publicly said about it than for how that other time crops up in ordinary, seemingly unrelated, affairs.⁵ In the countryside it is especially around concerns about theft where the disquieting past of Maoist armed struggle insists, though often through signals and gestures that evade direct commentary. There, whether hovering obliquely in knowing glances, elliptical references or the occasional inside joke, murmurs of Shining Path justice resonate, becoming palpable in the rhythms and flows of rural life.

This chapter unfolds around a series of encounters with a long-time resident of the Upper Huallaga valley whom I call 'Wilson'. A trip to see him at a farm provides the narrative thread linking our conversations. My account of that trip also creates opportunities to point out vital markers through which a defeated insurgent legal order can be read from the valley's ever transforming landscape. Those markers appear as material signs – a refurbished road-top; the visual display of rural place-names; and a harsh warning scrawled at a river's edge – all of which indirectly convey an earlier era when dead bodies were common sights. Here my approach to writing is deliberately ethnographic so as to better trace the shared atmospheric, sensorial qualities of this historical place at a specific moment – the year 2010 – in the aftermath of insurgent law. I dwell on what is at once fleeting and tangible in a mundane present of the Upper Huallaga valley in order to ask how the absent corpses of Shining Path law-making circulate still and sometimes come to the fore – if now only *as image*. The way those dead bodies circulate, I argue, accentuates the climatic attributes of political time – attributes that must first be sensed before their importance may be grasped. For if the primary

purpose of political community is to safeguard relations between subjects, time becomes 'weather' precisely when the possibility of property itself is placed in doubt.

Questions

The blunt touch of *Sendero* law-making often raised the question of why? Why so violent? Why so uncompromising? Why did they impose such a rigid political programme?⁶ The movement's extreme secrecy, together with the terrors precipitated by its tactics, tended to dissuade the posing of such questions to Shining Path members directly. Nevertheless, in rural areas of the Upper Huallaga valley, where the Party had an active political presence for over two decades – a far longer period than almost anywhere else in Peru – there were opportunities to ask. Those who lived or worked in rural communities often had intermittent contact with guerrilla leaders and on occasion would speak to them, if not entirely without fear then with a certain degree of frankness, about Party methods. It was from such moments of shared sociality that Wilson drew in order to explain to me the Shining Path's motives and justifications. Wilson identified his sources only indirectly as *el hombre* (the man) or simply *un mando* (a leader) as if to emphasise the prudent distance that one maintained even now by speaking in less than explicit terms.

'Why', he once asked, 'do you kill like that ... I mean, if it leaves people traumatised ...' But before Wilson could finish the *Sendero* leader interjected: 'Like it or not people must understand that everything needs to change.' Words alone, he claimed, would not engender the deep social transformations the Party sought ... only actions. And if they did not show what the Party was willing to do, the new society they hoped to create would be no different from the corrupt, bourgeois state against which they waged people's war.

In the brute presentation of dead bodies multiple kinds of demonstration seemed to be in play. Human remains signalled the Party's determination. They established its laws. They drew the boundaries of political community and defined, if only by negative example, the type of revolutionary subject they sought to craft.

Wilson distilled it down for me to one vital point: 'That's what the mirror was for, so that people would look at themselves through it.'

From then on when we spoke about the routinised rituals of Shining Path justice I would return to the idea that the corpses of

Sendero's victims could somehow possess reflective powers. The notion of a mirror seemed to overflow with significance but without erasing a certain stubborn ambiguity. Through the display of the executed the Party clearly communicated its unequivocal disposition to kill. Less evident was how those lifeless bodies could serve as a catalyst for interrogating the personal behaviour and political allegiances of those who subsequently encountered them. I wondered in what precise sense coming upon a corpse could approximate seeing one's own reflection. For if gazing into a reflective surface refers one back to oneself, that reference is only possible if the image in the mirror is sufficiently similar to conceal its basic otherness – an otherness hovering in places both real and unreal.⁷ How could looking upon the dead body of someone else produce a comparable likeness? And how might the production of such likeness have public-generating effects?

The Shining Path may have intended the act of looking at human corpses to alter subjectivities, but as a self-proclaimed revolutionary movement its broader goal was to modify collective attachments by announcing and reinforcing political boundaries. Bodily remains could be used to accomplish that, perhaps, since encounters with corpses focus attention on borders of the most basic and experientially immanent kind. They focus attention onto the lines separating one bodily self from another, and one human biological life from death.⁸

A mirror in its own way establishes borders too by showing doubles of physical things. Moreover, as a motif for the slain corpse the mirror brings together two aspects of the human dead: the fleshy, decaying thing and the image of the deceased. In death, as Robert Hertz observed long ago, thing and image may at first resemble each other, yet over time they increasingly diverge. And in cases of 'bad death' the image may linger on as a disquieting presence once the corpse is no more. In that regard, whenever the remains of the executed are displayed the figure of the mirror could underscore how thing and image collaborate to deliver a grim warning, with the image extending that warning over time.

The idea of misfortunate events is what threats project into the mind. Upon the imagination the Shining Path strived to impress its rules. But the presentation of corpses served no less to highlight those places where one could be taken to stand accused before a People's Trial. In that sense slain bodies acquired a topographical dimension as they intensely charged certain locales with an atmosphere of unbearable threat.

Two weathers

On the river and along the main road encounters with corpses occurred with great frequency during the 1980s and early 1990s, so much so that they actively shaped not only the legal topography but the political climate of those years. Because such encounters seldom happen any more, considerable stress should be placed on the growing chronological distance between that violent period and the ethnographic present of the Huallaga today. A nuanced grasp of how the corpse-work effects of the past quietly persist in everyday experience requires weighing that ever increasing span in dateable time.

Differences between political eras of then and now are most strikingly expressed by the transformations said to have occurred through the shift away from the inclement political conditions that prevailed not so long ago. In local accounts that former era is spoken of as having had an extreme volatility. People speak as if time itself acquired the mutability of a fierce, dreadful storm ... redolent of how Thomas Hobbes once defined political states of nature. For Hobbes foul weather described the hostile predisposition of all against all that he claimed necessarily prevailed in the absence of a single dominating political order.⁹ And indeed, a climatic language would seem to lend itself to describing the fluid and turbulent circumstances of the Huallaga's past, a past engendered through the commingling of various forms of violence: not only a Mao-inspired 'people's war' or the Peruvian Army's counter-insurgent response, but intermittent police drug busts and raids on coca farms as well as cocaine traders' own conflicts among themselves. Perhaps there is little new in what I am saying here. Michael Taussig in his ethnographic diary of paramilitary violence in Colombia has emphasised the crucial place atmosphere occupies not only in the creation of war machines but in any rigorous attempt to portray them ethnographically.¹⁰

Yet what if the apparent affinity of a meteorological language for depicting circumstances of extreme social unrest expressed something crucial about the political nature of time itself? That, at least, is what Michel Serres seems to propose in treating Hobbes' allusion to weather as much more than metaphor. Weather, Serres suggests, is the elemental turbulence from which all more structured (human) temporalities emerge. It is a *meteoric* or 'basic time, close to chaos ... made up of jolts', which antecedes more redundant, clock-like temporalities.¹¹ In that sense 'basic time' or *time as weather* is primordial, and yet, as he explains, it never ceases to be but for ever hovers close

by: 'always there ... at my side or bombarding me with unexpected jostles ... we together are, we and the world, immersed in it'.¹²

The notion of a primal temporality predating the present while running simultaneously alongside it suggests an intriguing framework for weighing how the political prehistory of the Huallaga continues to insist today. As a prior chaos that haunts and ever threatens to return, Serres' concept of meteoric time offers one way of asking how the corpses once fundamental to border-creating activity might linger on *in absentia* though in a manner adjacent to the lived present. Moreover, it offers a way of gauging the differences between historical eras that takes a lateral (as opposed to backwards) glance at the past as it insists in the currents of ongoing social life.

Conceiving of time in a meteorological register also translates well to an ethnographic method of writing – a writing that not only trains attention on the sensorial details of current circumstances but does so with a conviction that what has passed will continually insinuate itself into the contemporary moment. Here such a mode of writing could attempt to grasp the palpitations of the Huallaga's violent past through what jostles and jolts present day experience. This is to say: within the atmospheres of sensations and affects that give social encounters their singular texture, it could search for the precipitations of a basic time – understood as a political prehistory – that would make possible the sideways apprehension of antecedent events.

Thus, two very different kinds of 'weather' but reaching one through the other. Up front: the acute pressing of sensations unfolding. On an adjacent flank: primordial churning. Ethnography, however, as a recording activity must begin by jumping into the movements of a lived present ... on a red Honda, let's say, and the three of us spirited from town to country along a road become amazingly smooth. There Charapa, ever at the helm, accelerates ... until we are racing down the pristine jet asphalt.

This two-lane highway looks and feels brand new though it was first built in the late 1960s. A road-building consortium recently finished a year-long stint of construction in which it dug out the worn, broken surface and rebuilt it again. Where before there weren't even shoulders, neat v-shaped, cement ditches now frame it on either side. Sharp yellow and white lines guide traffic by day while by night red reflectors grab the glare of headlights to trace forward a ghostly ribbon of lanes. The roadside has transformed, too, populated with signs where once there were almost none. Bright yellow diamonds with black lettering advise of upcoming curves. White on green

rectangles announce remote hamlets and turn-offs onto formerly obscure rural trails.

The ordinariness of these details cloaks something remarkable. For many years one could pick up the lay of the land only gradually and with great effort, that is, by actually travelling to areas off the highway or, less directly, through the versions that cycled by hushed word of mouth, versions that often warned against travelling at all. Many villages were hidden from the highway and one learned of them haphazardly and often without knowing exactly where they were. One would hear of them and know strangers were not welcome. But now an instant diagram unfolds, place-name by place-name, for anyone who takes the road. The signs give away freely what before was secret and say 'you can go there' regardless of who you are.

On *this* side of the river the fateful air that hovered over many Huallaga villages has waned, except perhaps in the memories of those still deeply marked by earlier times. On the *other* side roads are not paved and there are few signs.

As we cut along the highway a light mist falls. The waves of tiny droplets feel cool on my face and coat everything: our clutching hands and clothes, all surfaces growing wet to the touch. 'Just like Lima', Tina says, turning her head back towards me. And instinctively we look up at the sky, overcast with grey billowing clouds, for a sense of what is to come. 'Will it rain?' I ask. But Tina shakes her head and insists that no, not a chance. It is the confident voice of one who knows. But as we move on and minutes pass, the mist only thickens. Clouds darken. Tina leans towards Charapa, her voice now sounding concern: 'It might rain.' He nods but says nothing as he presses us forward into the wet air.

This was once the road where the Shining Path left corpses so often that to travel along it entailed confronting the dead. There was no way to avoid them. Using the road meant being exposed to a repeating presentation of putrefying remains. Their display became an idiom of violence – a visual language that crafted anticipations of immediate futures and of one's own place within them.¹³ However, today there is nothing on or about the road that signals former histories of violence, much less the specific work that human corpses once performed. Today road travel traces horizons of expectation that promise possibilities far less intense and threatening.

But back when the Shining Path placed bodies across the highway they did so as a challenge to the political order and orientation of the Peruvian state. After all, the road was a government-built

and subsidised public work: a line of gravelled earth and occasional asphalt that was embedded into the Huallaga landscape to bring some places into communication while bypassing others.

In those days encounters with rotting corpses were not only a commonplace of everyday experience, they directed thought onto the existential limits of one's own human life. They indicated something utterly basic about the self. Of all the kinds of demonstrations in which dead bodies could take part, perhaps this one was the most elemental. Indeed, as Julia Kristeva has eloquently noted, 'corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live'.¹⁴ That thrusting – for Kristeva, the visceral repulsions elicited by decomposing human waste – is a force that draws strict boundaries between life and death. Successfully kept at a remove the corpse becomes an object marking that border. There, as object, it would also be image. For image, as Blanchot once remarked, is what enables one to sustain a distance from things.¹⁵ Image in this sense would be a corollary and even an ally of the thrusting force of bodily repulsions. Because as long as human remains are only image they can do no more than gesture across the distance manifested by the image itself.

The base materiality of putrefying things, however, presses at the borders of human life and threatens to overrun them. If that happens, Kristeva says, what was object for the subject becomes abject: an invasive presence that can no longer be held at bay. If that happens, she says, 'It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled'.¹⁶ In other words, putrefaction enables corpses to 'act' though not as subjects with agency, but as the abject that disturbs the relational borders upon which subjectivity presumably depends. Of course, this is not to exclude the possibility that death may be simply a transition or to ignore that with the loss of life many other kinds of non-human life spring into action. Strictly speaking, what transitions or springs is rarely if ever treated as a mere continuation of the life that was.

Precisely because corpses indicate and place visceral accents upon boundaries to the human, they can be turned into tools for challenging or reasserting political order. Such is one interpretation of what happened in the Huallaga: that the Shining Path used the abjective powers of corpses to unsettle subjectivities but in hopes of enacting transformations at the level of political attachments. Then again if the ultimate goal was to sever affective ties to the Peruvian state and rebind those affects into a new, emergent political collectivity, the corpse had to do more than simply reiterate threats of death. It had to inscribe those deaths within a legal-moral order. Turning the corpse toward those ends required over-coding it with a message,

which is why the Shining Path routinely left paper signs on or beside the bodies. Those signs, professing Party authorship but always placing blame for the killing on the victim, expressed an intent to redirect the powers of the corpse. Harnessing those powers meant investing the person slain with responsibility for the killing event. It meant locating the originating cause of death in the victim's own transgressions. In this way slain corpses could take on a strange self-referentiality with regard to who and what had killed them.

Shifting terrains

At the village of Pueblo Nuevo, Charapa barely slows as he hangs a right onto a well-packed dirt road. Suddenly we are being bounced around and Tina complains, demanding he knock it off. Charapa just laughs, and if anything accelerates more down the straight 200-yard stretch until the Huallaga comes into view. A murky green-grey expanse rippling under ashen skies. We have left the mist and the immediate threat of showers behind. Charapa brakes to a halt. Tina and I hop off at the top of the bank, as he coasts the bike down to one of two long, wooden canoes waiting at water's edge. This is Puerto La Roca. Here we cross for Venenillo.

Here dirt road meets river under a thick mat of clouds. Volvo trucks come to carry crates of bananas off to the highway and across the Andes. Farmers and farm hands arrive as they move back and forth from one side to the other. Beyond that little more than a name marks this place. Puerto La Roca is but one of many points of passage linking left bank with right. It is one of many sites where river, trails and dirt roads come together. Here small movements and rhythms within moments of waiting create a sense of utter stillness, a stillness where the world of things sometimes takes on an extra charge. Within such moments a silence redoubles and there is a sense of air thickening, which might well be the shared, unspoken knowledge that illicit life-ways linger near. Or it might well be nothing at all.

Tina and I wait our turn, taking small steps down the bank as a boat operator and his teenage assistant help Charapa lift the motor-bike up and into a canoe painted deep cobalt blue with thick bands of red and white. Once both wheels have been securely planted on the floor of the craft, Charapa sits atop his bike again, leaning forward slightly, gripping the handlebars, looking proud. On a wooden plank behind him Tina finds a seat and motions for me to come on.

Figure 10.1 Crossing over to the left bank.

This is Puerto La Roca in 2010: two lean-to shelters on a pale alluvium bank that descends abruptly into the water. On the other side there are no major towns, no regular police and little institutional presence of the state, only tiny hamlets anchoring constellations of scattered farms. Here and there the Peruvian Army operates small counter-insurgency outposts.

Little over a decade ago the left bank was still the 'red' side of the Huallaga river and that made crossing not only politically significant, but affectively charged. Crossing the river entailed going over to an other world with its own regime of rules, with its own highly tensed fields of force. This river, the most prominent topographic feature of the valley, became a political boundary unmarked yet felt, a threshold which gave onto another legal order. To inquire how that happened is to ask about the means through which moral-political forces fuse with natural historical landscapes to project an atmosphere ... in this case, an atmosphere of threat that imposes lines and shapes movements.

What once made Puerto La Roca a remarkable point was its geographic location on the right bank roughly across the water from a series of sparsely populated villages collectively known as the *Bolsón Cuchara*. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s the Cuchara basin was a Shining Path stronghold, and as such it became

a regular target of incursions by the Peruvian military and police. But unlike the army, which slaughtered en masse to provoke a generalised flight of all who lived on the left bank, the Shining Path practised a far more selective violence within its territorial zones. The Party killed just enough to control the contours of its civilian 'bases of support'.

And yet over the last fifteen years there has been a widespread if uneven contraction of Shining Path influence. So much so that Tina and Wilson tell me there is now only one place, Magdalena, also on the left bank and 30 kilometres north of the Cuchara basin. There, insurgents still control who comes and goes, and Tina and Wilson are able to tell me this because in Magdalena they have a farm. Today, however, we are headed to Venenillo, the entrance for the Cuchara, and where an army fort transforms the terrain as it guards against the unlikely return of the Shining Path.

A resonance in time

The boatman ferries us up river for a good ten minutes before bringing the canoe alongside the shore. Tina and I step out onto the bank. As she waits there for Charapa I walk several yards to set the bags down on drier ground. I then turn around to take a few snapshots: of the boatman and his helper heaving the motorbike onto shore, but also of the lone remaining passenger – a man in an orange jersey and dark jeans, who sits perched on the boat's edge, casually flipping the pages of a newspaper.

While I have this man in my frame, Charapa rides by and up the bank. Tina follows behind on foot towards a dirt trail that disappears from view into a grassy thicket. After handing the boatman a ten-sol note I pick up our bags and tread quickly in pursuit.

Upon reaching the top of the bank I see Charapa and Tina paused before the high grasses. But as I start down the trail something curious catches my eye. Ahead, a compact group of fruit crates are standing alongside the narrow path, six columns in all, and each one stacked five crates high.

In that there was nothing strange at all. What grabbed my attention was an odd inscription scrawled across one of the crates. *No Robar* (don't steal), followed underneath by three individual letters: an uppercase 'G' (or possibly a 'C') and then a 'C' and another 'C', and below that the words *Te Violo* (I rape you).

Figure 10.2 The crates.

Charapa and Tina had passed right by them, seeing only empty crates ... even though the 'message' appeared at eye level ... counting ... one, two, three, four crates up from the ground of the stack placed closest to the trail.

I lingered there a moment, just long enough to document my discovery and then I started towards my friends again, faster now to make up for lost time, leaving the columns standing there above the shore to look out towards the water. For to that extent the writing addressed solely those who approached from the bank, the crates were turned to 'face' the river ... As if in anticipation of canoes that would pull up to shore and tempt someone to haul them swiftly away.

Perhaps this inscription was nothing at all. For me, though, it resounded within a larger political history and referenced a long-

time practice of posting menacing statements along routes and crossroads. What mattered here, I suspected, was not only the explicit content of the words but the temporal resonance or echo they set in motion. What they invoked was not merely a general commandment against stealing. They seemed to allude to a well-known maxim that the Shining Path had frequently laid on the dead bodies of its victims so as to convert them into criminal types and thereby serve notice to all who came upon them:

‘This is how thieves die ...’ *‘Así mueren los rateros ...’*

With messages like this, Maoist insurgents transformed corpses into a means of rural governance.

Though the warning on the crates indirectly referenced a regional genre of political threat, there was no corpse nearby. Nor did the warning explicitly appropriate that threat, speaking in the name of the insurgency, let’s say. Instead it acted upon that genre through a crude artistry of sorts. Into a well-worn logical relation of cause and effect it injected an unexpected twist: theft no longer traced a straight line to death but to a humiliating and explicitly gendered bodily violation, one that left the thief alive but also marked and transformed.

The message was coarse. However, its playful transposition of a common refrain not only alluded to times when another political-legal order was still massively present. By upsetting a generic expectation it produced a darkly comical effect.

For it amused Tina to no end, when we were on the bike and in movement again heading towards Venenillo. I told her what had held me up. The words surprised her and she immediately told Charapa, who turned his head enough to beam us a grin. So! Tina said, ‘No Robar ... *Te violó, ah!*’ and later she would tell her husband Wilson all about it.

The words on the crates were humorous for Tina, for Charapa, and possibly for others who would walk that way. But I could not help thinking they became a joking matter only in the absence of *Sendero* law, that is, to the extent those words offered testimony to the radical waning of its force: a decisive turn of events that had an enormous impact on current conditions in the countryside. For there was a direct relation between the Shining Path’s current weakness and the ability of the government to wage a continual campaign of coca eradication against Huallaga farmers. For the first time the police were no longer afraid of *Sendero*. And evidence of the police’s new-found boldness could be seen in their freedom of

movement: that there was no place, no place except for Magdalena perhaps, where they wouldn't escort work crews to tear up fields of coca. And there was evidence of a more superficial sort, too, though not for that any less revealing, in the freedom the police now felt it had to actually make fun of the insurgency, through the whimsical alteration of the inscriptions *Sendero* painted on visible surfaces to reaffirm its presence.

On and along the main highway the Party's slogans, its acronym and its hammer and sickle symbol appeared from time to time. But its painted messages no longer packed the intensely frightful charge they once did. With the Shining Path's military capacity largely destroyed, the territorial coverage of its law had dissipated almost completely. The inscription on the crates, therefore, spoke, if obliquely, to the fading of *Sendero* power, and on more than one register: for the withdrawal of that law was now causing common theft and robbery to return to the forefront of everyday anxieties afflicting Huallaga farmers.

Escarmiento

We reached the farm half an hour after crossing the river thanks to Charapa, who deftly manoeuvred us up muddy trails and over small streams, the largest of which came last. It was there that we had no choice but to traverse on foot, with Charapa insisting on pushing the bike alone against the current through the rocky muck that lay beneath. Up the other bank a path led us through an intimate forest of cacao and fruit trees until we reached a small clearing. To the far left of what was a dirt patio, Charapa's wood-slat cabin came into view, and through the doorway we could see Tina's husband Wilson at the table sharpening a machete, oblivious to our approach. As we walked towards him Wilson looked up, welcomed us with a smirk and then met us at the door, machete hanging loosely at his side.

Forget pleasantries, Tina's first question was 'The chickens?'

Wilson deadpanned, 'They're not here.'

For a split second alarm flashed over Tina's expression, spreading to her shoulders on its way down her arms ... only to dissipate as soon as a wry smile on Wilson's face made her realise he was pulling her leg.

Visibly reassured, Tina turned to me and explained: the eighteen chickens they brought to the farm a month ago had dwindled already to twelve. What they didn't know for sure was what had happened.

This much they assumed: while the six chickens might have been plucked from the air by birds of prey, most likely they had been stolen by human hands. Such was the beginning of a refrain I would hear throughout the rest of the trip about the petty thefts and even armed robberies to which they and other farmers were continually exposed. These days having property stolen was *the* concern.

The most recent incident at the farm involved the disappearance of a large plastic tub filled to the brim with harvested cacao: a batch of white fleshy seeds Wilson had removed from their pods and left outside the cabin when he returned to town. Thefts of cacao seemed all the more cruel because the crop was supposed to be their future. Only a year before, coca was mainly what Charapa and Tina grew here, that is until in the month of May, when a police-escorted eradication crew arrived and razed their coca plants to the ground. From all sides the same worry pressed down upon area farmers: how to hold on to the fruits of their labour? Later that day Tina would confide that the previous month a close friend of Charapa's had been gunned down by two men for several kilos of raw cocaine.

I could not help but wonder if any of this would have occurred in a *Sendero* zone (if any were truly left). And I wondered to what extent such threat gathered here because the guerrillas stayed far away. For the explicit reference I had seen on the crates to theft and rape made for an odd coupling: odd and compelling. It brought to mind something Wilson had explained to me one morning, four years before, regarding the curious legal situation that prevailed at their other farm – the one in the zone of Magdalena. I remember we were sitting at a table in his home when he began to speak of *Sendero*. I remember how he carefully prefaced his comments with the insistence that everything has a good side as well as a bad.

'Out there on the highway', he said, 'there are robberies and rapes.' But in Magdalena, there is none of that. 'It's different.' Over there, other rules are in force. 'One cannot just enter.'

One can't just walk in, Wilson said, and there was no need to explain. *Sendero* law meant boundaries to free circulation, but also a space imagined as sheltered from 'common' robbery and at least one form of sexual violence. That is to say, through my recollections of our conversation four years before, the connection between *Sendero* and the words on the crates today resounded all the more.

Tina and I set down our bags on the long table inside, as Charapa parked the red Honda across the room along a clothes-line sagging with old work shirts and trousers. He then headed out to inspect the cacao groves, leaving Tina to take charge of the kitchen. Turning

to stoke the fire, Tina asked her husband to sit down and talk with me while she prepared breakfast. 'Tell him about your story', she said, and that was enough for Wilson to settle into something much broader: a long, hour and a half talk about the history of the region, beginning decades before the highway was built, when the valley was a refuge, he said, for dissidents of the political left. He told of the era of absentee landlords and the times of agrarian reform and the process of land titling that began with the construction of the road – a process still in its infancy when *Sendero* appeared in the early 1980s. Wilson had much to say about the Shining Path but it is the point about property that bears directly upon what I have been exploring here.

Wilson recalled that when the Shining Path arrived to organise villages on the left bank of the river, Party leaders announced that any land deeds issued by the government were no longer valid. They promised, however, once their revolution had triumphed there would be plenty of land to go around. Until then, *Sendero* would decide who could stay and harvest, and how much. In essence, the Party claimed the underlying title of all arable land and thereby forced all farmers into a relationship of subjection. Access to land depended on maintaining a (good) relationship with local Party leaders.

Four years earlier Wilson had stressed to me that the Shining Path should not be viewed as an utterly negative movement. Today at Charapa's farm he could find no redeeming virtues and spoke only of *Sendero*'s many flaws. His perspective had hardened, ever since Party leaders in Magdalena had banned him from entering the area again. He could no longer go with Tina to their farm. And so exiled from that property, Wilson divided his time between Charapa's farm in Venenillo, where he tended the chickens and pigs, and the house he shared with Tina in the town of Aucayacu.

Stung by this most recent of harms at Shining Path hands, Wilson was now thoroughly dismissive of everything the insurgency had ever been. Nonetheless, he liked to talk about the conversations he had shared with Party leaders – about their ways and the reasons why their revolution had failed. This time, though, when our discussion turned once more to the practice of displaying dead bodies, Wilson claimed, 'That was for teaching a lesson.' The exact term he used was '*escarmiento*', which spoke not merely to pedagogical intent but to a specific act: an exacting punishment or correction that served to warn of a danger.

Escarmiento described making an example of someone but in a manner that assaulted the senses, offended sensibilities and, in so

doing, gave visceral definition to a fault or error. But to the extent that both *escarmiento* and *espejo* (mirror) presupposed an experiential encounter that demands contemplation, the conceptual distance between them was not far. Yet *escarmiento* was also etymologically related to *escarnio* – a tenacious form of taunting with the intent to affront and humiliate¹⁷ – which was precisely the gist of what I had earlier seen written near the river bank.

Like the corpse-work of *Sendero* justice, the letters and phrases written on the crates presented a reflective proposition though without any material guarantee. Whoever stood before them would receive a command as well as a threat calling on the viewer to ‘see yourself’ placed in a dreadful condition. No corpse accompanied the inscription. Nonetheless, the history of a former political use of dead bodies hovered nearby to create a murmur-like effect. That murmur pointed to a force seemingly past but lingering as a co-presence from another time. And so by alluding in part to that other work the inscription elicited a laugh in the absence of the corpse, which was enough to imagine that the coupling of theft and rape could return precisely in the withdrawal of *Sendero* law, perhaps even to mock its fall.¹⁸

Yet maybe that murmur of co-presence happened less through a generic resemblance than through the notable differences that distinguished these statements of threat. That much occurred to me when I later looked over the photograph, scanning for what else the crates’ message might convey for local matters of law and property. Here was a composite figure formed by three lines of text that acquired a humble poignancy when viewed within the current rural concerns about theft.

On the middle line between the inscription’s proposition appeared three letters. Were these letters initials claiming the crates as someone’s own? Assuming they marked a personal identity, then the ‘author’ did not speak in the name of a collective – much less of an insurgent movement. As such, the warning was at once limited in range and weak in force. Tina and Charapa, who travelled that way several times a week, had no idea who the author might be. And without such knowledge the message took on a levity that ran counter to the seriousness of its threat.

The potential intensity of this speech act, thus, owed much to the author’s identity. A lot depended as well on the disposition of those who actually saw and read the inscription. What gestured to *Sendero* justice was the harshness of the proposition combined with *its public expression*, even though the exact wording diverged from admonishments often accompanying bodies of Shining Path

Figure 10.3 The warning.

victims. That *public* aspect seemed pivotal and was largely why I did not read from the message any reference to the state security forces. For while regionally the Peruvian Police and Armed Forces had a far greater reputation for sexual violence than the Shining Path, they did not brazenly admit it, much less frame such acts as public statements of law.¹⁹

TE VIOLO (*I rape you*) spoke to the violent intimacy of a 'private' justice. Following the impersonal commandment NO ROBAR (*Don't steal*) it was filled with the personality of a conjugated act, located in some present future encounter between unknown and still undetermined subjects ... This third line delivered the threat but as if in waiting and still in store.

The full proposition said: you violate these objects, which as my material property are the extension of 'me', I violate your person in its most contracted state, namely, in your body, and of that body, the most 'private' of parts. The proposition expressed a simple exchange, bringing into rough equivalence two forms of personal property, but here there was no attempt to 'make a people'.

No robar, te violó directed 'sight' towards oneself not as physically dead but as violated in life. Shifting the promised outcome from a lethal to a sexual violence was, therefore, a strategic displacement that in these specific circumstances made the message crudely

witty – as opposed to merely nonsensical. However, a more revealing difference from the *Sendero* maxims of old was how this proposition implicitly traced an imaginary barrier beyond which all propriety could threaten to fall apart. For the statement *no robar, te violó* conjured an image of unconstrained right where ‘*I*’ could do anything to ‘*You*’, but in a manner that if taken to extremes would unsettle the very distinction between the two. Much as Hobbes described the state of nature where lines demarcating *mine* from *thine* fall away.

Right without limits suggests an endless spiral of uninvited appropriations: a raucous state of affairs seemingly outside law, where relations of hospitality and extended sympathy no longer obtain. Real or unreal, such a situation invokes a Hobbesian fantasy of all against all where time itself becomes a weather most foul. Real or unreal or precisely because somewhere in between, ‘time as weather’ names a circumstance where titles to property (understood as durable, enduring possession) become neither secure nor presently possible. While a fictional condition, it is a fiction with sufficient force to captivate imaginations and haunt social relations.

‘Time as weather’ haunts because property itself presupposes temporality, or rather a particular manner in which duration comes to be fused with things. As David Hume once observed, property is engendered through time. Though he was also careful to add that time is ‘not any thing real in the objects, but is the offspring of our sentiments’ – which is to say how our sentiments are directed towards objects.²⁰ Stabilising possession, Hume speculated, was the critical step not only in creating property but more broadly in making possible the relations of hospitality upon which collective existence depends. In other words, not only property but peaceful cohabitation required injecting duration into the possession of things.

An echo of Hume’s theory of property can be heard in Michel Serres’ depictions of meteoric time: ‘Our relationships, social bonds, would be airy as clouds were they only contracts between subjects ... [T]he object ... stabilises our relationships, it slows down the time of our revolutions.’²¹ Objects, for Serres, are what allow social bonds to become substantial enough to withstand the tumultuous vicissitudes of life and of the world. But, if that turbulence is, as he insists, a mode of temporality – and Serres says it is the most primary and free-flowing of all – then objects would play an vital role in how social groups segment, divide and apportion time. Objects would enable contracting subjects to corral and partition the unruly flows of ‘basic time’, while pushing most of the turbulence *out*, as it were, to the margins of collective life.

Out in the margins basic time would still persist to hover before and beside the segmented temporalities or steady durations that make property possible. 'Out there' basic time would become a noise disturbing enduring possession and the social bonds that enduring possession objectifies. It would be that all against all fictitious state of affairs where furious winds or floods could at any time sweep through and carry everything away.

'You' steal. 'I' rape. Time goes meteoric ... property vanishes.

And, of course, this is fiction. Or perhaps an ur-mode of social time is something quite real that only becomes tangible and thus available for reflection by embracing the powers of the imagination. Did not Hobbes and Hume say as much, each in his own way? Hume's remarks about time and property seem worth pursuing, because instability of possession is often considered a prevailing characteristic of both war and illicit economies. Certainly the Peruvian state drives home that point every time its agents rip up coca fields or set rustic drug labs aflame. Those remarks also bring to mind something I heard in the Huallaga valley when I first began going there in the mid-1990s. People had this to say then about the early era of coca/cocaine prosperity. I refer to the late 1970s, when the drug trade first animated the regional economy. Back then making money, lots of it, was suddenly no longer difficult. And that made an impression on local farmers, who were seeped in the wisdom and common sense that simply getting by invariably demanded back-breaking labour. The burgeoning drug economy sparked migration from all corners and walks of life. Among those who arrived, from Lima some say, was a clever, ruthless criminal class – professional con artists, petty thieves and violent thugs – keen to use their skills to cash in on the new-found wealth. For the boom was a time of easy money: easy to make, frustratingly hard to hold on to. Make a fortune today. Have it stolen at gunpoint tomorrow.

The boom was a period of spiralling transgressions, but often of a tragic sort, even for the professional criminal set. For they, like most people, did not anticipate the sudden rise of the Shining Path, which was a criminal racket of a wholly other order – much like the state, you could say – but with the winds of revolution infusing its actions with a sort of legitimate title. At the forefront of its Maoist political programme was 'cleansing' the Huallaga valley of all manner of human folk deemed scandalous and crooked: corrupt politicians, abusive landlords, adulterers, rapists, drug addicts, *travesties*, thieves. The Shining Path sought to discipline the social life of the boom while using the cocaine economy to raise funds for its armed

struggle. So serious and effective was the programme of '*limpieza social*' that in some Huallaga towns it was said not even a pickpocket could be found for years to come.

Crucial to the communicative work of *Sendero* law-making was the use of dead bodies, freshly killed and displayed on paths and roadways in order to send a shudder into all who found them. This is to say, they operated first and foremost at the level of affect: by delivering a blow to the sentiments in order to turn them in a different direction.

Now jump two and three decades forward. That former corpse-work is part of the political prehistory that in the Huallaga presses at the edges of the lived present. Even when people do not speak of those earlier times directly, traces of how dead bodies were once politically displayed resonate in the movements and soft noise of ordinary life, sending ripples into humble encounters and prosaic non-events. Those ripples unsettle, but sometimes barely enough to notice ... such as when a threat appears scribbled on a stack of crates overlooking the river.

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Notes

- 1 The Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path (*El Partido Comunista del Perú – Sendero Luminoso*). In 1980 *Sendero Luminoso* initiated an armed insurrection that spread in the coming years across Peru. Though defeated militarily by 1994, factionalised remnants of the insurgency would continue to have an active presence in the eastern coca-growing regions of the Upper Huallaga and of the Apurimac/Ene river for many years to come.
- 2 Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación 2004: 109.
- 3 Meanwhile, in the towns bordering those rural areas that came under direct Party influence, enforcement of *Sendero* laws often took the form of unceremonious hit-and-run killings. Executioners rarely failed to leave a scrawled placard behind to take credit for the death-giving act to announce the rule that had been transgressed.
- 4 See Kernaghan 2009: 188–212.

- 5 As a trans-historical force that 'exists', as Nietzsche suggested (1994), 'at all times or could possibly re-occur', political prehistory can be considered here a mode of temporality that belongs to the foundational violence of a prior legal order but which secretly inheres in the everyday life of the present.
- 6 A significant scholarly literature has attempted, if not to answer these specific questions, then to provide abundant historical and ethnographic contexts to understand the distinctiveness of the Shining Path as a Latin American insurgency and the social dimensions of Peru's internal conflict. See especially: Burt 2007; Degregori 1989, 1990; González 2011; Heilman 2010; Poole and Rénique 1992; Portocarrero 2012; Starn 1995; Stern 1998; Taylor 2006; Theidon 2012.
- 7 Fittingly, Foucault (1986: 24) described the mirror as combining utopic and heterotopic dimensions: unreal to the extent that one sees oneself in a placeless place, real in that its reflective surface belongs to an actual object: 'From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there.'
- 8 Kristeva 1982: 3.
- 9 Hobbes 1996: 88–9.
- 10 Taussig 2003b: 11–12.
- 11 Serres 1999: 100.
- 12 Serres 1999: 100.
- 13 See Kernaghan 2009.
- 14 Kristeva 1982.
- 15 Blanchot 1989: 254.
- 16 Kristeva 1982: 3–4.
- 17 Coromines and Pascual 1980.
- 18 And no doubt one should be attentive here to the at times intimate proximity that violence has to humour, a point Taussig (2003a) foregrounds in a brilliant essay on the 'language' of mutilated corpses and the vertiginous forces dead bodies may bring into play.
- 19 But see Theidon 2012.
- 20 Hume 1978: 509.
- 21 Serres 1999: 87.

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