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# The Politics of Testimony and Recognition in the Guatemalan and Peruvian Truth Commissions: The Figure of the ‘Subversive Indian’

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## **The Politics of Testimony and Recognition in the Guatemalan and Peruvian Truth Commissions: The Figure of the ‘Subversive Indian’\***

This text analyzes the politics of testimony in the Truth Commissions in Guatemala (the Historical Clarification Commission – CEH) and Peru (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – CVR) and its effect on the narratives contained in their respective final reports. Recognition for victims involves taking into consideration the *narratives established* to interpret the process of violence, which decisively influence the production of ideas and practices of citizenship central to the discourse of both Commissions. In these narratives, ideological representations of the “subversive Indian” directly affect the status of the main victims/individuals affected by the conflict (the indigenous peasant populations) as well as the role which ethnic and racial inequality, and racism in particular, plays in the interpretation of the armed conflicts offered by the Commissions. Thus, the work of both Commissions and the preceding academic debates reveal the complex relationship – deeply rooted in history – between *Indian-ness* and politics.

**Keywords:** Truth Commissions; Guatemala; subversive Indian; Peru; indigenous population; racism; recognition; testimony; victims.

In this paper I present an analysis on how the Truth Commissions<sup>1</sup> (TCs) – bearing in mind the political contexts in which they appear – produce, based on the doctrine of Human Rights, a discourse and a practice of recognition towards the *victims* of processes of violence. In general, the TCs that have been established in Latin America have tried to report, from a state viewpoint, on the systematic human rights violations committed by the state itself, by investigating the facts and the corresponding responsibilities. Based on the cases of Guatemala (Historical Clarification Commission – CEH) and Peru (Truth and Reconciliation Commission – TRC), this analysis intends to open the discussion<sup>2</sup> on the status of ethno-racial discrimination and racism within the framework of this type of processes, considering that in both cases interpretations were offered for *historical* injustice and discrimination practices. Therefore, it is important to underline that in such processes public recognition towards those who have been the main victims of armed conflicts – the peasant-

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<sup>1</sup> On the work and repercussions of the truth commissions in other contexts see, among others: Hayner (2001); Minow (1998); Popkin and Roht-Arriaza (1995); Rotberg and Thompson (2000); Steiner (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Truth Commissions are complex processes involving a large number of professionals from different fields and viewpoints, therefore they should not be regarded as monolithic wholes. The aim of my analysis is not to assess the work carried out by the Truth Commissions, but rather to understand certain aspects which have configured the politics of testimony in each context.

indigenous communities – proposes not so much *restitution* but *production* of citizenship, thus emphasizing the need to refound the principles and practices of democracy in each national political community.

In this context, the testimonies collected by the TCs, apart from providing knowledge on cases of human rights violations, were considered to be the main vehicle for the recognition of the victims' *right* to tell their own truth and hence restore their *dignity*. TCs are established as institutional frames, sanctioned by the state, for victims to tell *their* histories in their own words; as such, they acquire the status of producing-legitimizing spaces for political agency and citizenship. The speech delivered in Andahuaylas (department of Apurímac, Peru) by the head of the regional office of TRC in Ayacucho is paradigmatic in this respect:

Every time we collect testimonies [...] we find horrifying cases. A huge number of mass graves, denounced over and over again and ignored by the state, though listened to by the NGOs defending human rights [...] and some grassroots organizations. Hence, the TRC does not emerge exclusively from the legal mandate that gave birth to it, but from a historical need to explain why we have reached such a level of savagery, of rights violations among Peruvians, of citizenship denial [...]. Not so much in order to explain the legal truth but a historical one – this is the reason for one of the thematic areas of the TRC: to explain the causes and political processes in order to define our responsibilities as political parties, as organizations, as institutions and as civilian population in general, and as armed forces and national police. (*Centro de información para la Memoria Colectiva y los Derechos Humanos*, 2002, Audio REG N° 01004001000012)

The testimonies are assumed to be the essential moments that encapsulate the “historical truth” told from the viewpoint of those who suffered the horrors, savageries, the “denial of citizenship.” It is from this viewpoint that the TCs analyzed here, although established as institutions offering all the stakeholders the opportunity to tell their experience in the armed conflict, gave a central position to the victims' accounts:

In order to establish a practical truth, as understood in this Report, it was necessary, evidently, to listen to and to process the voices of all the participants. The TRC has especially emphasized this dimension of truth, and has thus focused its work on organizing public audiences across the country. For strictly ethical reasons, the priority has been to listen to the victims of violence, to whom the entire country is indebted in terms of justice and solidarity. (TRC, 2003, volume I, Introduction: 33)

The testimonies of the people who suffered human rights violations or other acts of violence are the primary, most relevant source of the Commission's work. The CEH itself has used several media to send a call to all the victims and their families, without distinction, in order that they may convene to give their account of the events. Their testimonies, given under the rules established by the CEH, have been an essential source of information to investigate each one of the cases submitted and, overall, they have meant an invaluable qualitative and

statistical input for the general analysis of the subjects contained in the core chapters, leading to the conclusions of this Report. (CEH, 1999, Mandate and working procedure: 53)

Bearing in mind the circumstances in which the TCs were established, I consider the politics of testimony to be the power relationships that take part in configuring the context of the denunciation; that is to say, the narrative itself of the testimony is produced within the conditions of possibility for negotiation between the state and the victims and their families. Recognition for the victims is therefore established by taking into account the *narratives established*<sup>3</sup> to interpret the process of violence (Rodríguez Maeso, 2009), as well as what lies outside of them, conditioning in a decisive manner the production of an idea and practice of citizenship as was carried out by the TCs. In such productions of meaning, the ways in which to interpret the processes of armed struggle are interrelated with the historically produced ideological representations of the actors in the conflict (e.g., the “subversive” actors, the peasant communities) as well as with certain uses of the categories of social class and ethnicity.

This text is divided into five sections. In the first one I provide a brief description of each one of the commissions in terms of their constitution, working methods and main results of the investigation. In the second one, I focus on an analytical proposal to interpret the ways in which recognition is made, based on a comparison between the figure of the “detained-disappeared” in the context of the Southern Cone, to adopt Gabriel Gatti’s formulation (2008) in the form of a “paradox,” and that of the “subversive Indian” in the contexts of Guatemala and Peru. In sections three and four I consider two interrelated aspects that condition the link between the politics of testimony and recognition towards the victims in the discourse of the TCs: one refers to the place of political action and militancy and how they affect directly the status, of the main victims of the conflict and of those affected by it; the other focuses on the way in which ethno-racial inequality, and particularly racism, are brought to the interpretation of armed conflicts in the final reports. Finally, in my

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<sup>3</sup> I refer mainly to the establishment, from the beginning of an armed conflict, of certain narratives to explain the emergence and relative success of armed struggle among peasant communities. These narratives interweave, among others, accounts by local authorities, members of the communities, representatives of the Armed Forces, journalists and academics. In their testimonies and accounts, the peasant communities have had to manage a complex relationship with the state authorities, largely characterized by mistrust and fear, and conditioned by their participation – at different levels – in the “subversive” struggle, especially during the first years of the conflict.

conclusion, I discuss the relationship between Indian-ness<sup>4</sup> and politics, within the field of human rights and academic work.

### 1. The Commissions in Guatemala and Peru: A brief characterization

- **The Historical Clarification Commission (CEH, 1997-1999)**

This commission was established within the framework of the Peace Agreements (1991-1996) under the auspices of the United Nations.<sup>5</sup> The commitment to establish the CEH was adopted under the Oslo Accord, on 23 June 1994, with the aim “to clarify with all objectivity, equity and impartiality the human rights violations and acts of violence that have caused the Guatemalan population to suffer, connected with the armed conflict.” Finally, the Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace, signed on 29 December 1996, as a result of negotiations between the state, the government of Guatemala and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), led to the establishment of the CEH, which became formally constituted and operational on 31 July 1997. The Secretary General of the United Nations appointed the German jurist Christian Tomuschat as coordinator of the CEH, and he in turn appointed two Guatemalan nationals as commissioners: Alfredo Balseáis Tojo (jurist, former member of the Constitutional Court) and Otilia Lux de Cotí (renowned leader of the native Maya movement, former Minister of Culture in Alfonso Portillo’s government, and elected Member of Parliament in 2007 for “*Encuentro por Guatemala*”). The UN, acting as coordinator of international cooperation, supported the operations and financial management of the CEH and all the supporting staff, with Fernando Castañón acting as Executive Secretary.

The CEH investigated a period of 34 years, from 1962 to 1996. Its work was based on the legal categories pertaining to International Law on Human Rights and on International Humanitarian Law; nevertheless, it defended that, besides applying the legal categories, it would also use those relevant to disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, economics and military science, in order to allow “to unravel complex aspects specific to the Guatemalan reality, which is different from that of other countries, even in the Central American region” (CEH, 1999: 52). The CEH interviewed approximately 20,000 individuals,

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<sup>4</sup> By the concept of *Indian-ness* I am referring more to a condition than to an identity, constructed historically by means of certain kinds of ideological representation in each context; such a condition of *Indian-ness* places certain populations, defined racially, as inferior and lying outside of *politics*.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala – MINUGUA.

visited some 2,000 communities, and collected 7,338 testimonies (individual and collective). The total estimated number of victims was of 132,000 individuals executed during the period from 1978 to 1996. Since 1960, it is estimated that there have been 160,000 executions and 40,000 persons disappeared. In terms of percent distribution by ethnicity, 83% of the victims of human rights violations and acts of violence belonged to the Maya ethnic group and 16% were *ladinos*.<sup>6</sup> As to the geographical distribution, 46% of the victims were concentrated in the department of El Quiché. 626 cases of massacres attributable to the Guatemalan Army were counted. Finally, the attribution of responsibilities for human rights violations and acts of violence was as follows: 93% of violations were attributed to state forces (85% Army; 18% Civilian Self-Defense Patrols – PAC; 11% Military Commissioners; 4% other security forces), 3% to guerrillas<sup>7</sup> and 4% unidentified.

- **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2001-2003)**

In December of 2001, during the “transition” government presided over by Valentín Paniagua, after Alberto Fujimori's regime collapsed and he fled to Japan, an *Inter-institutional Working Group* was established to propose the creation of a Truth Commission. When Alejandro Toledo won the ensuing presidential elections in 2002, he ratified and supplemented its designation as Truth and Reconciliation Commission by means of a complementary legal instrument (Decree No. 101-2001-PCM). The Supreme Decree 065-2001-PCM established the TRC with the remit to “clarify the process, the facts and responsibilities of terrorist violence<sup>8</sup> and human rights violations occurred from May 1980 until November 2000, attributable both to terrorist organizations and to state agents, as well as to put forward initiatives destined to strengthen peace and harmony among Peruvians.”

The TRC was presided over by Salomón Lerner, a philosopher who then was the rector of the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP), and included 11 commissioners among whom were representatives of the human rights movement (Sofía Macher and Enrique

<sup>6</sup> Mestizo, non-Indian.

<sup>7</sup> There were four main subversive forces: *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (FAR); *Organización del Pueblo en Armas* (ORPA); *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG) and *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP).

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the use of the term “terrorist” in the Final Report of the TRC, it is stated that “its use [...] at the end of a prolonged armed conflict is full of subjective meanings that render it difficult to analyze the behavior of those who decided to uprising against the State and in doing so committed violent crimes. For this reason, the TRC has made a distinction between acts of subversion whose aim was to terrorize the civilian population and others of a different nature, and has sought to use the concepts of ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ with caution and strictness” (TRC, 2003, Volume I, Introduction: 25).

Bernales); academics (anthropologist Carlos Iván Degregori; sociologist Rolando Ames; independent researchers, such as engineer Carlos Tapia; Alberto Morote, former rector of the University of Huamanga); representatives of the Catholic Church (Father Gastón Garatea) and of the Evangelical Church (Humberto Lay); representatives of the Armed Forces (Luis Arias Grazziani, retired Lieutenant General of the Peruvian Air Force); and Beatriz Alva Hart<sup>9</sup> (a lawyer, former congresswoman during the administration of Alberto Fujimori).

The Commission focused on investigating the following facts: a) assassinations and kidnappings; b) forced disappearances; c) tortures and other serious injuries; d) violations of the collective rights of the Andean and native communities in the country; e) other serious crimes and violations of individual rights. One of the major difficulties encountered by the TRC, and more specifically, its legal team, was identifying the most relevant legal grounds to categorize the criminal acts attributed to the subversive organizations. The legal discourse of the TRC recognizes that, legally speaking, human rights violations may not be attributed to non-state agents, as only states are bound by international treaties and conventions on Human Rights. However, it considers that the role of the TRC must not only be legal, but also ethical, and thus terrorist crimes should be classified as human rights violations (TRC, 2003, volume I, chapter 4: 201). The TRC also assigned a fundamental role to the work of experts in the social and human sciences, to bring forward an interpretative analysis to the causes of the facts.

16,917 individual and collective testimonies were collected, given by 18,217 deponents, of whom 61% were close family members of the dead or missing persons. From said testimonies the figure recorded for dead or missing Peruvians added up to 23,969, while the number of victims estimated statistically was 69,280; 74.9% had Quechua as their mother tongue and 79% lived in rural areas. The department of Ayacucho, an Andean region situated in the center-south of the country, accounted for 40% of the reported victims. Based on the statistical estimates of the number of victims, responsibilities were attributed as follows: 46% to the Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path (PCP-SL); 30% to state agents; 24% to other agents (armed peasant patrols, self-defense committees, Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, paramilitary groups, unidentified agents or victims of

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<sup>9</sup> Beatriz Alva Hart's appointment was highly controversial because of her political ties to Alberto Fujimori, and she was harshly criticized by the National Coordinating Committee for Human Rights and by the Broader Women's Movement.

confrontations or situations of armed combat). Of the 23,969 victims reported to the TRC, 53.68% were attributed to the PCP-SL and approximately 33% to state agents.

The core narrative of both TCs emphasizes that the overwhelming majority of victims were peasants and indigenous peasants, concentrated, moreover, in the same geographical region of the country. Experts in social and human sciences played an important role (anthropologists, sociologists and historians), in addition to the experts in law who had traditionally controlled other commissions such as those of the Southern Cone. The political protagonism of the indigenous movement favored the emphasis placed by CEH on the violation of the rights of existence, integrity and cultural identity of the Maya people, as well as on confirming acts of genocide perpetrated by Guatemalan state forces. Nevertheless, the analysis of the acts of genocide was limited to the period 1981-83<sup>10</sup> – during which 81% of human rights violations took place – and to the events in certain regions of the country.

## **2. Violence and citizenship: the “paradox of the detained-disappeared” and the figure of the “subversive Indian”**

[T]he project to discipline the population deployed in the 1970s [in Uruguay and Argentina] targeted its own product – the modern, rational individual – to break it up; and this inverted civilizing machinery had demolishing effects. (Gatti, 2008: 132-133)

As opposed to the countries in the Southern Cone, here [in Peru] the victims did not belong mostly to urban sectors, either connected to the intellectual or professional middle class, or to the paid working-class, both of which sectors have a clear experience of citizenship and prior awareness to their rights. Similarly to Guatemala, the victims in Peru were mostly poor peasants from the Andean region, a sector of the population with less awareness of citizenship and much less voice and visibility in society. And not only for their rural condition or their poverty, but also for their ethnic and cultural ingredients. (Basombrío, 1999: 127)

Gabriel Gatti's work has investigated the effects of state terror in the decade of the 1970s on the ways of thinking about and experiencing identity in the Argentinian and Uruguayan contexts. As a theoretical-analytical premise, he considers that forced disappearances must be understood in a direct relationship to the peculiar way in which the identity of these territories was historically constructed: the obsessive application of the modern project whose main executor is the state. In the light of this historical process and based on historiographical works (Blengino, 2005), he explores the idea of the indigenous people as the “disappeared” of the 19th century, and hence the state progressed from acting upon

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of how the CEH counted human rights violations in the period 1960-1977, see Chapman and Ball (2001: 37-38).



“the Indian and the wilderness” to acting upon “the subversive and subversion” (Gatti, 2008: 43). According to this author, the civilizing biopolitics developed in Latin America was “perfected” in the Southern Cone by way of conquest and destruction of the indigenous cities and populations, whereas in other contexts, for example in the Andean region, its modern history cannot be told without the “pre-colonial tradition.” From this viewpoint he establishes what he calls “the paradox of the detained-disappeared,” which is defined by two key aspects: “(1) forced disappearance is one of the specific tools used by the modern/civilizing order to build and manage populations; (2) forced disappearances apply to the most finished products of the modern/civilizing order” (*ibid.*: 132).

Such an “inverted civilizing machinery” applied forced disappearance on the modern/rational individual by dismembering him/her – the missing person leaves behind a name without a body – and thus, annihilating him/her. How can such an analytical framework help us to address the armed conflicts and the logic of state terror in countries like Peru and Guatemala, where rural communities and indigenous-peasant populations were the most affected? We can think that the aim of the devastation policy applied by the Peruvian and Guatemalan Armed Forces was to annihilate the subversive Indian, whereas in the Argentinian and Uruguayan cases there would be two figures – “the Indian” and “the subversive individual” – belonging to two different historical moments. If we consider that, in Latin American states, the strategy of disappearances has republican, post-colonial roots, but that in the cases of Guatemala and Peru the citizen never came to replace the native, two possible ways of analyzing the different contexts arise: one, to think of the victim of human rights violations as embodying different figures (the modern, white, city-dweller individual on the one hand, and the indigenous-peasant *comunero* on the other); and two, to think of the “political attribute” that turned them into victims of state terror – “subversion” – and how it relates to each “type” of victim. Thus, we would have on the one hand the modern, literate individual whose attachment to “subversion” is construed in terms of the existing ideological and political circumstances; and on the other the indigenous-peasant communities, illiterate or possessing low formal education levels, whose attachment to “subversion” is not construed as a strictly political or ideological adherence, but as relating to local and family interests.

<b>Modern individual</b>	Questions the state directly	Participates in “subversion” for ideological reasons	<b>State Terror: “Inverted civilizing machinery”</b>
<b>Indigenous-peasant population/community</b>	On the margins of the state	Participates in “subversion” for local/family interests or situations, or is coerced to do so	<b>State Terror: Continuation of the “civilizing machinery” of colonial roots</b>

Following this logic of “types” of victims and their connection to “subversion,” the relationship between the state and the victims is addressed, in the first case, in terms of the *restitution* of the annihilated individual identity, which means rebuilding the connection between the name and the body;<sup>11</sup> in the second case (the indigenous peasant population), restitution entails the need to generate state institutions that acknowledge the condition of these populations as full-fledged citizens, while these “historically denied citizens” engage in intra- and inter-communal processes which do not necessarily involve state structures (Theidon, 2004; 2006).

How may we approach the politics of testimony and recognition in the TRC and CEH based on this typology? I will consider that the “civilizing machinery” with colonial roots operated from an *ambivalent ideological definition* of the indigenous-peasant population: they were considered to be ignorant, illiterate, and thus alien to subversive ideologies, though at the same time it was thought that, since these populations were living in conditions of extreme poverty, resentful of the *white* city-dweller citizens, they could easily fall prey to the promises of subversive groups and give them their support. It is because of this ambivalence that the figure of the “subversive Indian” is present, albeit implicitly, in the different ways of representing the armed conflicts and the disputes surrounding them, as well as in the central narrative of the testimonies and reports by the TCs. What frames such narratives is precisely certain ways of thinking and of *telling* the relationships between the community and the state, on the one hand, and the political participation of rural populations in the armed conflict, on the other.

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the possible productions of meaning, from a political and social viewpoint, that was the mainstream during the first decades of struggle within the human rights movement, and that has marked state policy in Argentina (Gatti, 2008, chap. III-IV).

Rigoberta Menchú Tum was an activist of the Guatemalan peasant movement<sup>12</sup> in the 1970s and 1980s, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. She stood for the presidential elections in Guatemala in 2007 leading the indigenous political movement *Winaq*, allied to the party *Encuentro por Guatemala*. In 1983, her biographical testimony was published with the title *Moi, Rigoberta Menchú. Une vie et une voix. La Révolution au Guatemala*, edited by the ethnologist Elisabeth Burgos, based on the material compiled after several hours of conversations she held and recorded with Menchú in Paris. Rigoberta Menchú's testimony denounces the counter-subversive policy of the Guatemalan government and army, especially the genocide of the indigenous-peasant population, in the name of the fight against the expansion of communism, telling the experience of her family, especially the death of her father and brothers. In 1999, the U.S. anthropologist David Stoll published the book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* in which he states that some of the facts told by Menchú are incorrect and/or that she was not an eyewitness to them. What seemed to concern David Stoll most was the political transcendence that Rigoberta Menchú had achieved, and the fact that she had become a "subaltern" icon for an important part of academia and for those who sympathized with the insurgent armed groups in Guatemala, which lacked, according to Stoll, much support from a part of the peasant population: "I wanted to challenge preconceived and romantic ideas about indigenous peoples and guerrilla warfare. Based on my interviews with peasants, I don't believe they were the revolutionary avant-garde that others claim they were" (Stoll, 2001: 68). According to Stoll, the fact that Rigoberta Menchú was a militant of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) – "she believed in the ideology and used it to frame the experience of her family and people" (*ibid.*: 67) – and therefore not just an indigenous peasant, casts a shadow over the validity of her testimony as representing the situation of the indigenous populations in Guatemala.

On 26 January 1983, eight journalists, their guide and a *comunero* were murdered by inhabitants of the community of Uchuraccay, situated in the highlands of the Huanta province, department of Ayacucho (Peru). The journalists, mostly from Lima's newspapers, were on their way to a neighboring community, Huaychao, where the inhabitants of several communities in the area had murdered seven members of Shining Path on 21 January, and the newspapers in Lima wanted to know if a peasant uprising was taking place against the

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<sup>12</sup> Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC), to which her father, Vicente Menchú, also belonged.

PCP-SL. On 2 February, president Fernando Belaúnde established an Investigatory Commission to inquire into the events of Uchuraccay, presided over by the writer Mario Vargas Llosa. The report submitted by the Commission one month later concluded that the peasants of Uchuraccay were guilty of the murders. The conclusions of the report by the so-called “Vargas Llosa Commission” caused an immediate polarization (which continues to this day) regarding the responsibility of the Armed Forces, and hence of the state and Belaunde’s administration in the massacre of the eight journalists. The journalists’ families, as well as sectors linked to left-wing parties, argued that the peasants had been led directly by the Armed Forces, and defended the hypothesis that there were undercover members of the army present in the community who had participated directly in the events. Between 1980 and 1984, 135 *comuneros* died, which led the survivors to abandon the community until several families returned in 1993 (TRC, 2003, volume V, chapter 2: 2.4; Del Pino, 2003).

Two years after the events at Uchuraccay, the newsmagazine *Caretas* published the report “Sendero bajo la Lupa” [Shining Path under scrutiny] (Lima: 25 February 1985), which included the discussion among four academics (Cynthia McClintock and David Scott Palmer, from the U.S., Carlos Iván Degregori, from Peru, and Henri Favre, from France) on the nature of Shining Path and the support it enjoyed in rural and urban sectors. Scott Palmer and McClintock argued that the phenomenon of the PCP-SL should be qualified as a “peasant rebellion” with hardly any support in urban areas, whereas Favre and Degregori developed a more detailed differentiation between the cadres of the PCP-SL and the populations of the communities that supported them. They considered that the cadres were made up of young, “de-peasantized” individuals, with average or university-level education, whom “modern Peru” had failed to integrate successfully; in turn, support in the communities was to be closely linked to local reality and intra- and inter-communal conflicts.

These two controversial scenarios, in the contexts of Guatemala and Peru, illustrate the political and academic arguments over the figure of the “subversive Indian” and, in my opinion, point towards how the different – and in some cases diverging – ways of interpreting the involvement of indigenous-peasant populations in armed struggle have modeled the politics of testimony and recognition in both cases. In addition, in these contexts, human rights violations and the political participation of these populations are interlinked with structures and situations of ethno-racial discrimination. From this standpoint, Victoria Sanford (2003: 200-210) has argued that, for the Guatemalan context,

we must avoid interpretations that blame Maya communities and populations for the army's violence due to their links to the guerrilla, rendering the army's massacres into mere reactions to potential subversive violence. In the context of Peru, Kimberly Theidon's works (2004; 2006a; 2006b) have shown the need to go beyond the view of peasant communities caught "between two fires," between the state forces and the members of Shining Path, in order to understand how they became involved in the conflict, and the consequences of the political decisions they made, as well as their role in the constitution of the PCP-SL and of the Self-Defense Committees (CAD). I believe it is this kind of reflection that we must make in order to understand the contexts of the denunciation that mark the politics of testimony and recognition in both TCs, taking also into account the two aspects that I expound in the following sections: the victims' political "militancy" and the role of racism in the explanation of both conflicts.

### **3. The de-politicization of the victims: Denunciation and *innocence***

The production of the condition of victim/affected by the processes of violence (armed conflict and state terror) is both a cause for as well as a mitigation of political agency. In this respect, we must bear in mind that there is a certain narrative pattern in the reports by the commissions in which one may appreciate the tendency to "neutralize" the victims' political discourse by favoring a narration in which, in a way, "violence" appears to be outside of the victims' political motivations and of society itself.<sup>13</sup> This aspect is analyzed by Emilio Crenzel (2008) for the case of the report *Nunca Más* (Never Again), drafted by the National Commission on Missing Persons (CONADEP) in Argentina and published in 1984:

The heterogeneous character of the knowledge and recognition of the nature of disappearances among those who denounced them was parallel to the configuration of an increasing homogeneity in the way in which they were denounced. The revolutionary key with which political repression and disappearances had been denounced prior to the coup in 1976 was gradually displaced by a humanitarian narrative that called, from a moral imperative, for empathy with the extreme experience without historicizing the crimes nor establishing links among "the exercise of evil, its perpetrators and their victims". [...] the denunciation in historical-political terms of state violence and its relationship with the social order or with power groups was replaced by the detailed, factual description of the kidnappings, the tortures inflicted, the characteristics of the places of captivity, the precise names of the captive persons and of those responsible for the disappearances. (Crenzel, 2008: 44-45)

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<sup>13</sup> For an interesting discussion around the disputes for recovering the figure of the "revolutionary militant" in conflict with a humanist, more de-politicized discourse on human rights in the case of Argentina, see Lorenz (2002).

The way in which the “denunciation in historical-political terms” is more or less dampened in the Guatemalan and Peruvian TCs has to do with the construction of the image of the “subversive Indian” and the position that armed struggle takes in this imaginary, beyond the humanist discourse of human rights violations. More specifically, the testimonies show different ways of discursively mobilizing the ideological representation of peasants and natives as “ignorant” and “innocent,” and hence alien to politics.

### **Armed struggle and the “awakening” towards politics in the CEH**

The narrative that structures the CEH and the testimonies it cites confirms the acts of violence against the *civilian population*, in particular against the Maya people, as well as the mechanisms used by the guerrilla to “extend its grassroots support and gain followers to its cause.” Emphasis is also placed on why “many Maya leaders saw the insurgent movement as a channel to further their own movement. Others, in turn, joined when their attempts to bring change using other channels did not bear fruit or were repressed” (CEH, 1999: 181). Thus, the fact of underpinning the concept of an *unarmed civilian population*, victim of the devastation actions (massacres) by state forces, does not preclude the presence of a political discourse among a part of the aforesaid indigenous-peasant population. A series of testimonies cited in the report reveal political motivations, linked to specific life experiences, in order to explain the relationship between the indigenous-peasant population and armed struggle:

In 1960 Catholic Action was fashionable there in Santa Cruz. I went from the mountain of Zacualpa, from there to Santa Cruz, to learn... they told us a little about injustice, they taught us the catechism, songs and prayers. Most of us were Maya people, there were only two *ladinos*. We knew about poverty, we have suffered it always as Mayas, little by little those of us in Catholic Action spoke to the community about injustice, little by little we awakened, understanding the nature of things. (CEH witness, T.C. 276; CEH, 1999: 168)

They, the community leaders, were promoting revolution to claim the lands... good education, respect for dignity [as] [there was] no right to speak, to freedom of organization, etc. (Witness CEH, T.C. 61; CEH, 1999: 180)

I am a poor peasant... my father and my mother are but poor peasants and travelers on the coast. I was seven years old when I started to travel with my father to work on the coast. I spent a long time on the coast because my father had no land to till... When I was 19 years old... I participated in a strike at the estate of Pantaleón de Escuintla... most of us sugarcane cutters were fired together with other workers at the Pantaleón sugar refinery. That was the last time I worked for the employers on the coast... on the 12th of December of 1980 I joined the guerrilla. (CEH witness, T.C.254: Excerpt from the document submitted to the CEH by this informant titled: “Relación historial durante 16 años de mi entrega personal en la lucha

armada en el Frente Guerrillero Ho-Chi-Minh” [sic] [The story of my 16-year personal dedication to armed struggle in the Ho-Chi-Minh Guerrilla Front]. CEH, 1999: 181-182)

The recurring discourse of the “ignorant” indigenous peasant is used in many of the testimonies collected by the CEH in order to highlight that it was precisely their participation in “subversive” organizations that led to their “awakening” and “engaging in politics” to claim their rights. Thus, this points to the need to avoid the denial of the victims’ political agency, i.e., to avoid constructing an image of their identity as mere “puppets” following the orders of two major actors, the guerrilla and the army. The testimonies quoted here show how certain political discourses and certain actors identified as “outsiders” to the communities (e.g., Catholic Action) are appropriated by the victims on the basis of their life experiences and knowledge (i.e., “being poor peasants”; “participating in strikes”). Arturo Arias has analyzed this aspect from the testimonies gathered in the book published by Ligia Peláez (2008), *Memorias rebeldes contra el olvido: Paasantzila Txumb’al Ti’ Sorteb’al K’u’l* [Rebel Memories Against Oblivion: Paasantzila Txumb’al Ti’ Sorteb’al K’u’l], a compilation of accounts by indigenous women of the Ixil and K’iche ethnic groups, veterans from the department of El Quiché. Arias works from the word *txitzi’n*, an Ixil term appearing repeatedly in the testimonies, which seeks to “express the unspeakable condition of surviving genocide” beyond physical pain:

Feeling *txitzi’n* does not preclude empowerment or managing power. On the contrary, it is a prerequisite for significant empowerment, one that is capable of contextualizing these women’s struggle and that turns them into intelligible subjects. The need to speak about the profound pain, never before addressed by any of them through discourse, or by the majority of Maya women, was followed by the joy in getting together again, by the memories of their adventures and feats, their courage and their ability to make decisions and enact them. *Txitzi’n* allowed them to speak of the past as a mechanism to speak of the future. (Arias, 2009: 2)

The analysis by Arias points to a fundamental aspect of the relationship between the indigenous-peasant populations, in this case the Mayas, and the armed struggle that various Latin American left-wing groups have engaged in since the 1960s: how can we understand political projects anchored in certain ideological positions when they incorporate groups whose means of political intervention regarding state structures are, and have been, historically different? In order to reply to this question, we need to acknowledge the fact that “the Mayas [...] were not innocent victims trapped between two fires” (*ibid.*: 9), and thus seek to understand how power was managed in an extremely violent process in which they actively took part, albeit with different levels of commitment.

### **“Shining Path” violence, ideological proselytism and peasantry in the TRC**

The construction of the idea of “innocent victims” appears clearly in many of the testimonies collected by the TRC. Thus, it is stressed that the narrative on “violence” must make it clear that those affected were not a part – at least willingly and for ideological motives – of the subversive parties and movements, mainly the PCP-SL. The two examples that follow illustrate this aspect:

a) Ms Julia Ramírez Orozco gave her testimony at a Public Audience in the coastal city of Trujillo in September of 2002; in her statement she denounced her arbitrary arrest by members of the National Police at the Piura police station, on 13 May 1993. She was accused of being a member of the *Socorro Popular* of the PCP-SL<sup>14</sup> by a reformed member of the PCP-SL, and presented to the media as an actual member of Shining Path. During the public audience she declared: “We ask for moral restitution, dignity, to live in dignity, to be able... to feel ourselves at peace, not with the finger pointing at us, calling us “*Huantinos, Ayacuchanos*: terrorists.”<sup>15</sup>

b) In an interview conducted in Lima, the president of the Association of Family Members of the Affected by Political Violence in the District of Accomarca<sup>16</sup> (Department of Ayacucho) stated the following: “thanks to the investigation by the TRC, it was proven that we were right, and it was proven that there were no *Escuelas Populares*<sup>17</sup> in Accomarca” (Interview by the author, Lima: April 2008).

Both examples account for the need, when denouncing state crimes, to disavow the stigma of having had any kind of connection to subversive groups. Hence, we must understand how the narrative sustained in the final report of the TRC – a narrative gestated from the start of the armed conflict by various actors and discourses, among them the peasants themselves (Rodríguez Maeso, 2009) – and which shows up repeatedly in the testimonies, emphasizes the idea of the PCP-SL as a sort of “unknown politics” in rural communities, having had some acceptance initially, due to the weak institutionalization of the state in the region and the strong growth in schooling experienced by the Andean region

<sup>14</sup> “Socorro Popular” (“People’s Aid”) was created within the structure of PCP-SL to cater for the health and legal assistance for militants.

<sup>15</sup> URL: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGdu1KL1How](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGdu1KL1How) [accessed on 12 February 2010].

<sup>16</sup> The case of the massacre committed by the Peruvian army in the community of Accomarca was investigated by the TRC (TRC, 2003, volume VII, chapter 2–2.15).

<sup>17</sup> The *Escuelas Populares* [People’s Schools] was an educational project of the PCP-SL in such communities where local teachers or having family ties with the community, as well as other teachers and young students from outside, taught and discussed the party’s doctrine, its political project and the need for armed struggle.



in the 1960s and 1970s. This account is full of gaps and discontinuities that are used not so much to deny participation by the communities in armed struggle, but rather not to make their political motivations explicit, always highlighting the moment of dissent, of breakaway from Shining Path:

Interviewer: How did they arrive [the members of Shining Path]?

Deponent: First it was comments only, even in our place there were people who said: “this is what we’re going to do, we’ll change our lives, we’ll all dress alike, eat the same, there’ll be no more exploitation, we’ll all be equal, there won’t be money either, we’ll all work for the state and the state will provide for us all”, they said.

I: The people from Mollebamba<sup>18</sup> or the Shining Path”?

D: The people from the same community. Suddenly that person had already been with them, those people spoke at the assembly.

[...]

I: And how did you feel about it? Did you like that kind of politics, equality, working for the state?

D: Well, in my view it was not feasible, right now we are well, calm, I said so to the people who spoke, besides, I said, “what are the means or the ways?” And he said to me: “you are still in your infancy, you do not know reality, you are ignoring it, now we have to change our lives, change the situation, for example, there’s no work now, how much do you earn? They give you two or three miserable *soles* and you have to work all day, but with this new life we’ll all flourish” (Testimony no. 201205).

I don't think the people were actually aware and knowledgeable [...]. They didn't really know what Shining Path was all about, did they? [...]. And so, taking advantage of the problems and the situation lived by the people, Shining Path was there [...] *Señor*, we will rise to fight for our rights! So who would say no? A few, suddenly. Those who said no were not forced by Shining Path, but they reached the weaker ones. (TRC, BDI In-depth interview P3. Focus Group, Vicashuamán; TRC, 2003, volume V, chapter. 2-2.1: 20)

Both testimonies show the circulation of political discourse among the communities, though participation in armed struggle is pointed out and noted as the moment of the community’s “disagreement” towards the PCP-SL, or as a moment of “weakness” or “ignorance” or of a “not fully aware knowledge.” Thus, the interpretation provided in the final report of the TRC constructs the PCP-SL as the differentiated actor in the community, acting upon it with devastating effects, as may be seen in the chapter titled “El PCP-SL en el campo ayacuchano: los inicios del conflicto armado interno” [The PCP-SL in rural Ayacucho: The start of the internal armed conflict], where there are many statements such as: “the PCP-SL arrived proclaiming a discourse of equality among rich and poor”; “the PCP-SL began its proselytism through the schools”; “the PCP-SL managed to impose itself in the schools and then activated the establishment of people's committees” (TRC, 2003, volume V,

<sup>18</sup> Community in the province of Huanta, department of Ayacucho.

chapter 2-2.1: 15-50). Such a narrative relates to an analysis of the PCP-SL and, more generally, of the major peasant movements of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on the one hand on how some discourses became rooted among the population and community leaders, and on the other, on accounting for the reasons that led to the failure of a class discourse that denied indigenous cultural identity and its organizational peculiarities:

It might be worthwhile to remember that the Peruvian Left of the 1970s did not invent the problematic relationship between Peru's oppositional groups and indigenous culture and communal institutions more generally, which has existed throughout the twentieth century. [...] The Peruvian Left has thus had a long tradition of "de-Indianization" to draw from, and the discourse of the 1960s, which emphasized class struggle, capitalist exploitation, and proletarianization, was only one in a long line of attempts to create a nonethnic popular political identity. Yet [...] this historically constructed blindness to indigenous political and cultural practices doomed the inclusive and democratic nature of the 1960s and 1970s mobilizations. (Mallón, 1998: 114-115)

There seems to be some sort of consensus in considering that the blindness of the PCP-SL's ideology regarding the cultural factors of the indigenous-peasant identity would gradually become its Achilles' heel, an aspect highlighted by one of the commissioners at one of the working meetings of the TRC:

[O]ne of the blind spots that led to the defeat of Shining Path is that one, when I said "they didn't see the cultural specificity," it's... not taking into account the cultural dimension in general; for them as a block, everything was the feudal superstructure and they didn't pay attention to that... it's a tremendous blind spot. [...] [In the documents of PCP-SL] there is not a single word about cultural diversity, not a word on such an issue, and that was, I think, one of the reasons for their downfall. (TRC archive, Audio: REG nº: 050101001000001#1)

However, though I share some of the opinions of this analysis, I think that it has also reinforced a blind spot in the sociological and political analysis of these processes: by emphasizing the ideological dimension of the PCP-SL (Degregori, 2007; Manrique, 2007) and its nature contrary to the community's stakes, what has not been analyzed is precisely the work of re-appropriation of the political discourses and practices by and on behalf of the communities. Such an absence is obviously underpinned by the political need of the populations most affected by armed violence to rebuild a collective memory that emphasizes its distancing from the PCP-SL, resorting to an ideological representation of the "ignorant Indian" who knows nothing of ideologies, and hence is "deceived" by those who belong outside of their world.

#### 4. The role of racism in the denunciation

Another aspect related to the politics of testimony, directly linked to the previous point, refers to the role played by ethno-racial discrimination within the narratives of the CEH and the TRC, and more specifically the role of racism. This is a core element in the narratives of the final reports of both commissions when analyzing the differentiated impact of violence in both societies: the vast majority of victims were peasants, indigenous peasants and natives.<sup>19</sup> Besides, in both cases the validity of such data is defended against the criticism that aimed at “distorting them” by arguing, in the Guatemalan context, that the vast majority of victims were Mayas because they are the majority population in the country, and in the Peruvian context because the *Quechua* peasant population is the majority in the regions where armed conflict had the greatest incidence. In order to counteract such assertions, the data from the census are compared to the data produced by the TCs relevant to the number of victims. Thus, in the case of Guatemala, according to the 10<sup>th</sup> Population Census (1994), 43% of the population was indigenous (non-official data raise the number up to 60%), whereas 83% of the victims reported to the CEH were indigenous Mayas. In the case of Peru, only 20% of the population spoke native languages or had Quechua as their mother tongue according to the census of 1993, while 75% of the victims reported to the TRC had the above linguistic features. Both reports also insist on racism as a structuring element in social, political and economic relations in the two countries, and especially as structuring the relationship between the state and society. More specifically, emphasis is given to racism in the armed forces and how it structures the strategic action plans (*devastation*) against indigenous-peasant populations.

#### Racism and political agency in the CEH: Between denial and “archaic violence”

The process of indigenous mobilization that has taken place in Guatemala since the 1960s and the protagonism, as I highlighted in the previous section, of the political discourse of a large part of the indigenous population in the testimonies collected by the CEH may be considered to be factors which have fostered the centrality of racism in this commission’s

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<sup>19</sup> Although there is hardly room in this paper to expound on this issue, it must be specified that categories such as “campesino”, “nativo” and “indígena” (peasant/native/Indian) do not have exactly the same meaning in the two national contexts. In the case of Peru, the state acknowledges “Nativo” populations and communities as being those living in the Amazon region, whereas the term “campesino” is used to designate the rural Andean populations.

narrative. More specifically, racism is treated as an essential aspect in two parts of the report: one, in the chapter addressing the “historical reasons” for the internal armed conflict (chapters I and II: 86-94), and two, in the analysis of the massacres and, particularly, in the categorization of acts of *genocide* against the indigenous population (chapters XX and XXI). Racism is analyzed as a structuring element of Guatemalan society in general and of the army in particular, with its origins lying in the process of colonial domination:

In the racist mentality, any indigenous mobilization brings to mind the atavistic image of an uprising. In this respect, it may be considered that racism was also present at the bloodiest moments of the armed confrontation, when the indigenous population was punished as if it were an enemy to be vanquished. (CEH, 1999, chapters I-II: 93)

On the other hand, racism nurtures the belief, in the imaginary of a large sector of *ladinos*, that “the Indians are going to come down from the mountains to slay *ladinos*.” Such a fear exists because some *ladinos* believe that the indigenous peoples feel historical resentment towards them, for the experiences lived during colonial times. Therefore, as an ideological element of context, racism led the Army to conflate the indigenous peoples, a sort of ancestral enemy, with the insurgents. On the other hand, racism influenced nurturing a feeling towards the indigenous peoples as being different, inferior, almost less than human, alien to the universe of the moral obligations of the perpetrators, making it less of a problem to eliminate them. (CEH, chapters II–XXI: 325)

Both quotes from the report of the CEH are inscribed in one of the ideological definitions of the indigenous-peasant population to which I have referred: the Indian historically resentful towards non-indigenous citizens has now become the “subversive Indian” that must be eliminated. This ideological representation is reinforced by the paternalistic vision of the Indian that needs to be “helped,” “won back” by the state to prevent them from falling into the hands of the “guerrilla”: “Naturally, if a subversive operation exists in which the Indians are involved with the guerrillas, the Indians are also going to die. However, the army’s philosophy is not to kill the Indians, but to win them back, to help them” (Efraín Ríos Montt, *apud* CEH, 1999, volume III, XXI: 324).<sup>20</sup>

Two sides of the same coin, a sort of semantic tension between “subversion” and indigenous population that facilitates, on the one hand, the legitimacy of the devastation operations by state forces when both signifiers become equivalent (Indian = subversive) and on the other, the criticism directed precisely against such an equivalence. The problem that arises here is bringing racism into the analysis without producing, to paraphrase Arias, the “preclusion of empowerment or the management of power.” This is the concern of the

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<sup>20</sup> Originally in English, translated into Spanish by the CEH. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central America: “Ríos Montt Views on Peasant Killings, Communism” (2 June 1982).

ethnographic work of Victoria Sanford (2003), who collaborated with a forensic team in the exhumation of mass graves in rural communities.<sup>21</sup> Sanford collected testimonies and life histories of peasants – many of whom were engaged in grassroots organizations and “subversive” organizations – offering a new perspective in order to understand the histories of the survivors of massacres and the ways in which ethno-racial discrimination also structured their experiences:

In my village, men would always to say, “I’m the man and I can do everything. You can’t do anything. All you can do is bear children.” So, in the mountains [with the guerrilla], it was all different because everyone knows that each one is capable of doing anything that a man can do. I suppose this means a psychological challenge for men – in that they have to consider their female “comrades” as equals, that they cannot discriminate them. This is one of the things that we learn – that everyone is equal, men and women, Indians and *ladinos*, that no one is behind anyone. (Account by Esperanza, who joined the “guerrilla” at the age of 15, *apud* Sanford, 2003: 199-200)

When I mentioned my name [in the army], they [fellow soldiers] would laugh at me because my surname was Indian. I even changed my name for a while, but it made no difference, I was an Indian because of my features and because that's what I am, whether I like it or not. This was a great conflict for myself and I started to see the division between what is *ladino* and what is Indian. I felt so humiliated that I started to hate *ladinos*. [...] The army would always recruit in the park, in the cinema, anywhere where there were youths assembled. [...] I found out that the world is made up of the abusers and the abused and I didn't want to be further abused. So when I was 16, I let the army take me, but they didn't really capture me because I decided that I wanted to be a soldier, I did not wish to be abused again. [...] When I was recruited, there were many Indian recruits too. They were beaten up and called “stupid Indians” for not being able to speak Spanish. The soldiers that beat them up were Indians too. (Account by Gaspar, recruited by the army from which he eventually deserted, *apud* Sanford, 2003: 183-184)

Racism is present in most of the life histories collected by Sanford, marking the power relations inside the communities and between them and the army, as well as gender relations. What is fundamental for my argument is that they show that violence is not only an “external” process that affects those who suffer it, but also that it constitutes their identity and political agency. This is of the essence in order to address the relationship between the state, the guerrilla and the civilian population. Generally speaking, the justifications offered by state forces pursuant to their actions point to the difficulty to discern who is actually “subversive,” but the problem we face is, rather, the difficulty to establish clearly which is the civilian population that is caught between “two fires.” The

<sup>21</sup> Specifically, with the Foundation for Forensic Anthropology of Guatemala (FAFG), an independent NGO since 1997. Sanford followed closely the work of some researchers of CEH and collaborated in drafting the FAFG report for the commission.

racist ideologies that demean the Indian population underlie such interpretations that consider “both the apparent as well as the real political belonging of the Mayas as being determined by external forces” (Sanford, 2003: 208).

### **Racism and identity of the victims and perpetrators in the TRC**

The statistical analysis of the socio-demographic profile of the victims (the chapter titled “Rostros y Perfiles de la Violencia” – Faces and Profiles of Violence) allowed the TRC to confirm that violence “was concentrated in what we might call the *margins of society*, that is, such areas and groups which were less integrated into the centers of economic and political power of Peruvian society” (TRC, 2003, volume I, chapter 3: 155). Racism is treated mainly in the chapter dedicated to the factors that made the conflict possible, and, more concretely, to the connection between violence and racial and ethnic discrimination (TRC, 2003, volume VIII, chapter 2: 2.2.). In its conclusions, the TRC stressed that the armed conflict reproduced to a great extent the *ethnic and social gaps* characteristic of Peruvian society, and that although “the conflict did not have an explicit ethnic nature, it was laden with racial, ethnic and regional elements that interacted accentuating violence” (*ibid.*: 159). I wish to highlight two aspects of this analysis: one, the idea that the Andean rural context was prone to the multiplication of “the violence unleashed by Shining Path” in that it was a society located *in between* the demise of *traditional order* and *modernization*:

[T]he subsistence of some elements of traditional Andean society, such as authoritarianism, paternalism, ethnic discrimination and racism, provided the socio-cultural context that facilitated a certain acceptance of Shining Path’s call among the social sector of enlightened, rootless youths of provincial origins. Suffering the experience of discrimination and racism, product of a society that despite its modernization maintained many traditional features, generated among many such youths a strong awareness towards offense and exclusion. (TRC, 2003, volume VIII, chapter. 2-2.2:108)

This analysis favors an understanding of racism as a remainder of *traditional* ideological structures, and therefore diminishes its relevance as a constitutive element of the *modernity* of Peruvian political structures and democracy. Such a perspective is clear in the observation of the presence of an anti-Indian racist ideology in the relations both between the peasant communities and the army and between the communities and the PCP-SL, an ideology that is seen as deriving “from traditional Andean society.” From this approach, the humiliating, racist treatment is analyzed in the deprecatory use of categories such as “*cholo*,” “*indio*,” “*indígena*,” accompanied by adjectives such as “dirty” or “ignorant,” which were used to

justify the violence by state forces (TRC, 2003, volume VIII, chapter 2-2.2: 111). According to this analysis, racist ideologies also fostered the construction of a certain “ideal profile” of the Shining Path member: “[...] living in a low-income neighborhood, being young, student and provincial were considered to be suspicious. The social and ethnic origin, revealed by physical traits, constituted the evidence for presumed membership of Shining Path” (TRC, 2003, volume VIII, chapter 2-2.2: 119).

In this respect, an important process pointed out by the TRC was the enactment of Law 25880, whose aim was to punish those who “making use of their condition of instructors or teachers influenced their students by defending terrorism”; this law furthered the aggravation of the existing stigmatization of teachers:<sup>22</sup> “First of all, the ethnic stereotypes whereby Indian features were equivalent to being suspicious of being a subversive agent, more so in a society in which teacher bodies are made up of locals, for whom such racial features are common” (TRC, 2003, volume III, chapter 3-3.5.3.1.4: 593).

The final report points out that the testimonies use certain “racial images” in order to describe the distance between members of the army, the cadres of Shining Path and the peasant population:

Many of the testimonies collected by TRC refer to the fact that among the members of Shining Path there were men and women who were “gringos” and “blond.” The color of hair, skin and eyes was related to other phenotypical characteristics such as being “large” or “tall,” as well as to the fact of being “foreign.” [...] Such kind of ethnic and social identification based on physical traits does not only stem from the witnesses’ awe, surprise or fear, but also from a reality in which ethnic differences between “whites,” “mestizos” and “Indians” were always deeply connected with the differences in status, wealth and power. (TRC, 2003, volume VIII, chapter 2: 2.2: 115-116)

Kimberly Theidon (2006a; 2006b) has pointed to the “externalization” of Shining Path by means of racial features and body marks, as well as through anonymity (the members were “hooded” persons), as a strategy to keep the distance from violence and to build “moral binaries characteristic of a code of conduct in times of war” (Theidon, 2006b: 444), thus separating the community from those who introduce violence into it. In this respect, the politics of testimony in the TRC lies at the middle of these discursive strategies of the communities’ resistance and survival. It is from this perspective that we may understand why the TRC’s narrative is dominated by an interpretation of ethno-racial discrimination as a

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<sup>22</sup> Regarding the complex relationship between race, racism, ethnicity and political militancy among the teachers in Andean communities during the armed conflict, see Wilson (2007).

constituting factor in the condition of victims, whereas it does not appear to be equally relevant for political agency. The hegemonic narrative on what the PCP-SL was makes it difficult to ascertain the extent to which racism – apart from being an aspect that influenced decisively the way in which human rights violations were perpetrated and legitimated – was a reason for a part of the peasantry to engage in political struggle. Today, the ways in which this aspect could be addressed by peasant populations are very limited. In this respect, it is interesting to revisit one of the first research studies on the armed conflict made by Roland Berg in the peasant community of Pacucha (province of Andahuaylas, Apurímac), whose fieldwork was carried out in two periods (1981-82 and 1985). Berg describes the nature of the support to the PCP-SL during the initial years of the conflict as well as its relationship to the position of power of various actors in that regional context:

[...] Overall, then, sympathizers believed the guerrillas were fighting for economic justice – and against the people of the towns, the upwardly mobile peasants and merchants in the communities, and the cooperatives. There was also great resentment, and fear, of the police who, from the peasant point of view, behaved in even more cruel and arbitrary fashion than did the guerrillas. When the guerrillas struck, it was against people whose “crimes” were well-known, or against specific targets such as cooperatives and/or alleged informers. On the other hand, the police would arrest and interrogate blindly, and those who had had relatives taken away were extremely bitter. Aggravating the situation even more was an underlying class/ethnic conflict between the Quechua-speaking peasants of the highlands and police forces who looked down on Quechua speakers and poor peasants. Thus, by 1985, sympathy for the guerrillas was stronger than ever. One indication of this is the changing terminology used by peasants when referring to members of the Sendero Luminoso. In 1982 they were known as “terrorists” (*terroristas, terros, terukuna*), or sometimes (sarcastically) as *los universitarios*. By 1985, they were often called “the comrades” (*los compañeros*). (Berg, 1986-87: 188-89)

What Berg describes indicates the need to approach what the PCP-SL was from a different viewpoint that neither demonizes nor mythicizes the armed struggle. This would allow us to discern the processes of political identification that occurred in the local contexts, which, according to most of the testimonies and social sciences analyses, emerged whenever the peasant populations “evolved from being victimizers to victims in resistance” (Del Pino, 2007: 6).

##### **5. Final considerations. Racism, recognition and denunciation from the field of human rights and social sciences**

The analysis of the final reports by the Guatemalan and Peruvian TCs from the perspective of the politics of testimony present across such processes, as well as in relation to various academic studies, reveals the complex relationship – with deep historical roots – between



*Indian-ness* and politics. Based on the differentiation between two “types” of victims of state terror – the *modern* individual and the indigenous peasant – we may see that both the discourse and the doctrine of human rights, as well as the work of the social sciences in the TCs, are anchored in certain ideological representations of the indigenous-peasant population, of its relationship to the state and of its political agency. It is in this sense that the work of the TCs as producers of legitimate spaces to denounce human rights violations reveals the problematic relationship between power, political representation and ethno-racial differences. The political and moral foundations of the TCs have been based on their capacity to provide recognition for the victims that is not ensured by legal justice, i.e., public recognition of the “undeserved suffering” they experienced, and to offer them a space legitimated by the state to tell their histories (Allen, 1999; Du Toit, 2000). Paraphrasing Lyotard (1993), a process such as that of the TCs seeks to reintegrate victims into the “speech community” and thus reinstate their right to speak, and especially to be listened to.<sup>23</sup>

My aim in this paper was to show what happens when those who are relegated to the margins of the “community of citizens” actually *speak*, and more concretely, when the problem is transferred from the “truth” about what happened to the possession of the authority to narrate (Beverley, 2001). What both TCs analyzed here show is that such an authority is destabilized whenever the “victims” leave the position *between two fires*, between the “guerrilla” and the army. Such a destabilization of authority becomes evident in the discursive mobilization of racist ideological representations of peasants and Indians in the testimonies. Such representations refer not only to the definition of Indians and peasants as “ignorant” and “innocent” but also as populations involved in archaic forms of political action, which may be reactivated by “outsiders” to the communities, thus profiting from the supposed historical indigenous-peasant resentment against “whites” and “mestizos.” We may then ask ourselves: what *political* space is left for these populations when, through testimony, they acquire the condition of victims? That is to say, the key issue here is not whether the indigenous peasants joined the guerrilla or not, but rather the

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<sup>23</sup> These viewpoints tie in with the pragmatic idea defended by Richard Rorty (1993) who considers that any progress in the dissemination of a culture of human rights will be due mainly to progress in the “sentimental education” of citizens, i.e., education for empathy towards the suffering of others.

restriction of their political discourse to a *humanist* semantics which, as in other commissions, enhances their identity as “innocent victims.”

Although this narrative, focused on the experience of suffering and on the *facts* of violence, may have been similar to that of the commissions that dealt with the persons who went missing due to state terror in the Southern Cone (Crenzel, 2008), the implications acquire a different tone when the victim is the “subversive Indian.” The aspects of the Guatemalan and Peruvian TCs analyzed here, and more concretely the politics of testimony in each context, reveal different modes of addressing political militancy and the participation of indigenous-peasant communities in armed struggle. Thus, the politics of testimony that structured the processes of these commissions show clearly that the testimonies of the victims and their families must not be seen linearly, as a transition from “silence” to a citizens’ “speech community” from which to denounce violations of rights and claim restitution. Rather, the politics of testimony reveal power relations that enable certain kinds of subjectivity and narrative forms (i.e., the humanist discourse) and tone down others (i.e., political militancy).

Coming back to the controversy surrounding Rigoberta Menchú Tum’s life testimony and the work by the controversial anthropologist David Stoll, Arturo Arias refers to how she was able to exit from the “peripheral silence to which the Mayas have been sentenced due to racism” (2001: 24), which required acknowledging her as a political subject, as a leader of a national and international movement. However, for Stoll the political agency of the Maya population is confined to *reaction* in face of state terror and suffering the pressure of the *guerrilla*:

Any sample of peasant testimony will show that army kidnappings, massacres and scorched-earth tactics played a large role in building support for the guerrillas. What is harder to find in testimony are pre-war grievances – such as conflicts with labour contractors and plantation owners – motivating Ixils to welcome the guerrillas as a drastic but necessary solution for their own problems. This is why I believe that the guerrilla movement in the Ixil area did not grow out of pre-existing social struggles in the way that the EGP claimed. (Stoll, 1997: 193)

In the case of Peru, the discussion around the nature of the PCP-SL, as noted before, reveals the problematic status of the political when referring to peasant populations. This is how I construe the article published in 1991 by Deborah Poole and Gerardo Renique criticizing the analysis made by two U.S. academics, Cynthia McClintock and David Scott

Palmer, on the process of violence.<sup>24</sup> McClintock and Palmer refer to the existence of a “peasant rebellion,” and this is extensively criticized by Poole and Renique, who argue that such analysis is informed by theories of “failed modernization” in the Third World and the construction of “terrorism” as a threat to the “Democratic West,” as sustained by U.S. foreign policy. Poole and Renique especially criticize the fact that the PCP-SL is seen as a logical extension – in cultural and political terms – of the peasant mobilizations in the Andean region, and therefore they defend the need to approach the relationship between the peasantry and this movement from a different perspective:

We do not wish to deny the fact that Sendero did and does have the support of certain sectors of the Andean peasantry in Peru. This is particularly true of Ayacucho, where Sendero's community of political sympathisers and militants is greatly expanded by networks of kinship, *compadrazgo* and *paisanaje*, as well as by the undeniably authoritarian and violent persuasion methods through which they ‘influence’ both voting behaviour and gain ‘support’. The nature of the ‘support’ offered to Sendero by differently situated actors within these networks is, however, neither uniform nor consistently ‘political’. This is even more true of the ‘support’ and ‘sympathy’ offered to Sendero by peasants in different provinces of Ayacucho and in different regions of Peru. These peasants’ perceptions of Sendero's military and political agenda are conditioned by the quite specific local and regional experiences with, and knowledges of, the Peruvian state, national political parties and the capitalist economy. (Poole and Renique, 1991: 147)

What exactly do these two authors mean when they say that “the nature of the ‘support’ offered to Sendero is [...] neither uniform nor consistently ‘political’”? What does Stoll mean when he argues that it is difficult to find testimonies where the Ixil communities linked their political and socio-economic problems to having joined the guerrilla? We face two interrelated issues: on the one hand, defining the space of the political, and on the other, considering certain populations as having always been subjected to the influence of external agents. In the cases analyzed here, the peasant-indigenous populations have a history of constant tension with the state administration, and in a way we could say that they have managed their “marginality” politically in order to maintain, in many cases, such an ambivalent position regarding the state and thus safeguard some degree of autonomy. This situation has fostered viewpoints that situate these populations “outside” of politics, meaning forms of political struggle that have been “standardized” in the formation of the national state and in the different processes which take place in such a political space –

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<sup>24</sup> See, among others, Palmer (1986) and McClintock (1984).

“revolutionary” or not – or also in pendular situations in which state forces and “subversive” forces engage in battle to achieve their adherence.

If we start with the premise that “to a great extent, the *Senderistas* were themselves [the peasant population]” (Theidon, 2004: 174) and that “the Mayas [...] were not innocent victims caught between two fires” (Arias, 2009: 9), we must then face the challenge, both in the struggle to defend human rights and in academic studies, of considering and acknowledging the “victims” as political subjects, and therefore, in the cases expounded here, approach the representation of armed struggles and “subversive” movements from perspectives which, as Victoria Sanford argues for the Guatemalan case, do not lose sight of the “distinctions among guilt, responsibility and representation” as well as between “beliefs and political actions” (2003: 202). I believe that in this respect the Peruvian armed conflict and the way to understand what the PCP-SL actually was are a great challenge for us. How to understand the political participation of the peasants in the process of armed struggle without idolizing nor demonizing Shining Path, and thus, how to think of the participation of a large part of the population that most suffered the consequences of violence not in terms of innocence/guilt but of political responsibility?

[T]he previous generation will have to wait ten years to forget... because we don't know how to acknowledge our mistakes, that is the serious problem here in Santiago de Lucanamarca, despite the fact that it has been seen, proven, we continue to insist on that 'I am innocent'. They're incapable of acknowledging, intentionally or not, or out of ignorance, I acknowledge my mistake and then I correct it and keep on working... (Interview to an inhabitant of San Martín de Tiopampa, Santiago de Lucanamarca<sup>25</sup> in Falconí *et al.*, 2007: 169-170)

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*Revised by Teresa Tavares*

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<sup>25</sup> District of the province of Huancasancos, department of Ayacucho. The armed conflict in this community was investigated by the TRC (volume V, chapter 2-2.2.; volume VII, chapter 2-2.6).

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