

**Situating Truth Commissions' Historical Narratives in Context: Chile and Peru**

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*Ustedes que ya escucharon / La historia que se contó / No sigan allí sentados / Pensando  
que ya pasó / No basta sólo el recuerdo / El canto no bastará / No basta sólo el lamento  
/ Miremos la realidad / Quizás mañana o pasado o bien / En un tiempo más / La historia  
que han escuchado / De nuevo sucederá<sup>1</sup>*

*Gobierno palacio punkupi / Guardia centinelaschay / Punkuchaykita kichaykuway /  
Belaundiwan rimaykusaq / Presidentiwan parlaykusaq<sup>2</sup>*

Why do some truth commissions produce comprehensive historical narratives, while others limit themselves to writing short context chapters? Why do some narratives try to include as many perspectives as possible, while others seem content with a relatively narrow analysis? Why do some commissions avoid making judgment on politically sensitive issues, while others eagerly join historiographical controversies? What do the exclusions reveal about a particular truth commission's understanding of truth, justice and reconciliation?

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<sup>1</sup> [You who have now heard / The story that was told / Do not just sit there / Thinking it is all over / Remembrance by itself is not enough / The *canto* will not be enough / Mourning by itself is not enough / Let's look at the reality / Perhaps sooner or later / Or even further away / The story you have heard / Will happen again]. Lyrics of "Canción final" [Final Song] in *Santa María de Iquique, Cantata Popular*, composed by Luis Advis (1970). Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> [In the door of the Government Palace / My sentinel guard / Please open the door for me / I'm going to talk to Belaúnde / I'm going to speak with the President] by Fortunato Galindo, "Queja Andina" [Andean Complaint] recorded as title track of Edwin Montoya y Los Heraldos' first LP for Sello Odeon in 1966. Lyrics quoted from Rodrigo and Montoya 1987; courtesy of Ponciano del Pino.

These questions are explored through an analysis of the historical narratives of the Chilean and Peruvian truth commissions. I compare and contrast the historical narratives with respect to depth, breadth, narrative strategies, and exclusions. I argue that the commission creation process simultaneously enables and constrains the commission through the mandate and the appointment of commissioners, which in turn shapes the forensic investigation and the historical explanation. The composition of the commission is of special significance in making sense of the historical explanation, since the commissioners' professional background, ideology, values and experiences have direct influence on the content and exclusions of the narrative.

Thus, I expect an exclusionary commission creation process, such as the one in Chile, to lead to a relatively narrow historical narrative that avoids politically divisive issues and shuns the opportunity to produce a comprehensive account of the underlying causes of political violence and violations. In contrast, the participation of multiple social and political actors in the commission creation process, as in Peru, is likely to enable the agency of those commissioners interested in problematizing the national history. Consequently, such a commission will tend to intervene in social memory struggles more actively, adjudicating on controversial topics and incorporating more voices and perspectives.

A word of caution: I do not claim that participatory commission creation processes produce historical narratives that are completely free from avoidances, exclusions, and silences. Ultimately, even the most comprehensive and inclusionary historical narrative cannot entirely escape avoiding a stance on some historical controversies or leaving some alternative explanations unaddressed – as my critique of

the Peruvian truth commission will make clear. Nonetheless, in line with my main argument, I expect fewer avoidances and exclusions in the historical narrative following a participatory commission creation process than a narrative resulting from an exclusionary process.

### **The Historical Narrative of Chile's Rettig Commission**

Chile's *Concertación* government initiated the truth commission to discover and publicize information on forced disappearances and killings, and to a lesser extent, to put an end to the forced silencing of experiences and memories that refuted the military government's self-justifying narratives. Throughout the military regime, state propaganda and influential media groups portrayed the military coup as a heroic and selfless act of salvation against Marxist tyranny, and denied allegations of extrajudicial killing, disappearance and torture. The Church-based human rights movement had devoted enormous time, resources and energy to documenting and denouncing the violations in the face of threats, but the judiciary refused to investigate the human rights cases, and the mainstream media, in close collaboration with the military government, marginalized the movement. Keeping in mind the fact that neither the judiciary nor the mainstream media changed their postures in the early years of the democratic transition, the hope for revival under democracy rested with alternative fact-finding and truth-telling projects, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The commissioners adopted a unanimous decision rule to confirm the veracity of forensic data and historical explanation.<sup>3</sup> Reflective of the Chilean society at large, each

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<sup>3</sup> David Crocker (2000) lists three approaches to establishing the truth (or truths) through a truth commission. One approach is to forge unanimity through general consensus, which is likely to take place at the expense of discussing controversial issues – his example is Chile. A second approach is to strive for unanimity, but also identify issues of contention. The third approach is to publish disagreements as

commissioner had a particular understanding of the onset of the coup, its justifiability, the historical role of Unidad Popular (1970-1973) and the ways in which the Right and the Christian Democratic Party handled the political impasse of 1973. The extent of divergence within the commission presents a puzzle: How did they reach agreement while coming to grips with such a divisive legacy?

The commission's chief strategy was to leave out those aspects of history in which they "agreed to disagree" (Interview with José Zalaquett, January 20, 2009). As the Final Report states: "The Commission has refrained from taking a stand on whether the use of force on September 11, 1973, and immediately thereafter was legitimate, both by those who sought to overthrow the government of President Salvador Allende and by those who sought to defend it" (*Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, Volume I, 1993, 31).

However, the commissioners were well aware that complete silence on the historical context would undermine the task of learning from past mistakes in order not to repeat them: "... the Commission believes it must take into account the situation of the country leading up to September 11, 1973. That situation led to a break in our institutional life and a deep division between Chileans which made it more likely that human rights would be violated. One of this Commission's assigned tasks is to propose preventive measures, that is, to suggest what should be done so as to prevent the recurrence of the kinds of infractions we have investigated" (*Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, Volume I, 1993, 32).

The chapter entitled "Political Context" (Part Two, Chapter 1) is devoted to

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minority opinions (example is US Supreme Court). The second and third approaches undermine the authoritative character of the final report, although they are more respectful of societal pluralism.

explaining the causes of the military coup and describing the institutional and political context in which human rights violations took place. The historical narrative by and large reflects the contending positions of commissioners José Zalaquett and Gonzalo Vial. Zalaquett, the architect of the commission, brought the sensitivities of a human rights advocate on the table: the accurate documentation of human rights violations, the elucidation of institutional responsibilities, the categorical exclusion of violence from political ethics and practice, and the reconstruction of the nation through respect for human rights and the rule of law. His pragmatic approach to transitional justice, summarized as “balancing ethical imperatives [of truth and justice],” facilitated negotiations with various political agendas, including a conservative one.

Gonzalo Vial, an influential historian whose many volumes covered Chile’s entire colonial and post-colonial periods, had since the 1960s opposed the socialist project and all its potentially violent implications, as perceived by right-wing sectors. He saw in the democratically elected socialist *Unidad Popular* government an insidious plot to destroy the traditional pillars of Chilean society and impose communist tyranny, by force if necessary. He is known to have edited the *White Book of the Change of Government in Chile* to justify the military coup.<sup>4</sup> The book, published months after the coup by the Secretariat-General of the government, claimed to reveal a conspiracy of the extreme Left, called “Plan Z”, to turn Chile into a dictatorship of the proletariat. Vial also served in the military government as the minister of education. Thus, his views not only

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<sup>4</sup> Vial’s views on the justifiability of the military coup are not limited to this highly propagandistic piece with no identifiable authors. He writes: “...Finally, all these evils deepened in the thousand days of Unidad Popular, whose regime and supporters encouraged violence, steering the country toward a shattering crisis. The divisions of civic life threatened to reproduce themselves within the Armed Forces, which finally chose to hear the voice of the vast majority of the country that wished the end of the Allende regime. In that sense, September 11<sup>th</sup> [1973] was not any barrack conspiracy [*cuartelazo*] or military coup, but rather constituted a military uprising in the face of the crisis that was threatening the very soul of Chileanhood” (Vial 1981, 315; translation mine).

reflected, but also actually shaped, the conservative worldview. Nonetheless, his self-distancing attitude towards the military regime with respect to the latter's human rights record, quite rare among the military regime's allies, qualified him to serve on the truth commission.

The commission's historical narrative should be read as the consensus played out between these two positions: categorical condemnation of the human rights violations (the human rights sensitivity advocated by Zalaquett), combined with a right-wing historiography emphasizing the political polarization of the Allende years, while passing no condemnatory judgment on the military coup itself (Vial's position).

The chapter in its Spanish original consists of 19 pages, with the first six pages devoted to the onset of the military coup, and the rest describing the institutional framework of the military regime. There is a strong historical argument coming out of the short explanation of the coup onset, which can be called the "political polarization thesis".<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the immediate causes leading up to the military coup were of a political and ideological nature. While the text acknowledges the deeper social economic causes as subject matter for a broader explanation, they focus on the "clashes of doctrines and attitudes in the realm of politics and ideology, as these have an immediate bearing on the issue of human rights" (*Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, Volume I, 1993, 47). With its focus on the immediate causes, the chapter depicts the *Unidad Popular* government as a period of increasing polarization along political-ideological lines that led many actors on both sides to affirm violence as a legitimate instrument to achieve political ends. The parties to the conflict are identified as

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<sup>5</sup> In one of the rare studies explicitly devoted to the Chilean truth commission's historical narrative, Daniela Cuadros Garland (2006) argues that the contextual chapter privileged consensus-building over historical veracity.

“government and opposition”. Some sectors of the government and its allies advocated the “armed path” to bring about socialist transformation, while the opposition political parties based their strategy on rendering the country “ungovernable”, through violent means if necessary (*Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, Volume I, 1993, 51).

In one of the rare moves towards historical explanation, the text sets out the broader context that caused the “destruction and deterioration of numerous points of consensus ... and shared assumptions concerning social and political coexistence, which served to safeguard respect for human rights” (*Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, Volume I, 1993, 47). Chief among them is the regional polarization conditioned by the Cold War and exacerbated after the Cuban Revolution. The consequence was a disposition towards ideological inflexibility that ruled out political negotiation even when the parties to the conflict lacked power and legitimacy to impose their political projects. Eventually, adherence to democratic procedures began to falter.

As the democratic breakdown was imminent, further causes accelerated the crisis: First, the sense of defeat and threat on the part of the policy elites led the government of the United States to direct efforts to undermine the *Unidad Popular* government. Second, the domestic economic crisis of 1972-1973 destabilized Chile even more, increasing middle class disenchantment with the government. Third, land expropriations (*tomas*) and other radical measures by the government and its allies triggered “justified fears” among some sectors. Finally, some media organizations acted in a totally irresponsible way by vilifying those persons that they saw as political enemies. The text describes these

processes in general terms: it does not give any example of US efforts to undermine Allende's government, and it does not name those irresponsible press and broadcasting organizations. Despite its decision to avoid judgment on politically divisive themes, the memory framework that shapes the Report's analysis is deeply political, albeit selectively. The text identifies the Allende presidency with political polarization, economic crisis, and bad governance to explain the political and social trauma that led to the coup. The periods before and after *Unidad Popular* are spared political, institutional and macroeconomic analysis.

What was the military's role in all this? The Report pictures the Chilean Armed Forces as an apolitical organization that historically respected civilian democratic rule. However, the climate of ideological polarization drew the military into political conflict, as they considered themselves the ultimate bastion of democratic rule in Chile. The Report's reconstruction of history puts emphasis on how the military was "drawn" into the conflict, discarding the possibility that some individuals and cliques within the institution may have shaped the conflict process. Nonetheless, the Report admits that "the subsequent events to which we now turn leave no doubt that there was also an ideological tendency within the armed forces and security forces," (*Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, Volume I, 1993, 57) again without specifying the actors representing those tendencies.

The contradiction that runs through the context chapter is that while it condemns the parties to the political conflict for creating an environment of violence, the commissioners declare themselves unfit to condemn or praise the actual use of violence to overthrow a democratic government. The truth commission's strategy is to remain



agnostic about the legitimacy of the *choice* of using military coercion to overthrow a democratic government, and concentrating condemnatory judgment on the human rights violations during and after the coup: "... whether having recourse to weapons was justified or not, there are clear norms forbidding certain kinds of behavior in the waging of hostilities, both in international and internal armed conflicts," such as killing or torturing prisoners and violating fair trial standards (*Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, Volume I, 1993, 31). In other words, the Final Report condemns the political-ideological environment that *may have* led to violence, fails to condemn the actual decision to use violent means to appropriate political power, but then again condemns the consequence of the decision, i.e. death and disappearance.<sup>6</sup>

Steve Stern notes that the mandate collapsed human rights law with international humanitarian law, and did not address the ethical question of legitimate armed resistance. The definitional ambiguity notwithstanding, "from practical and political points of view ... the mandate made sense. It deferred to sensibilities of the military and the Right, and it recognized that technical distinctions regarding the transcendent value of life would not register with the larger Chilean public. In other words, the inclusions built legitimacy" (Stern 2010, 84).

The context chapter has a clear message: the Chilean society should absolutely not repeat the experience of grave human rights violations. The mechanism for prevention is twofold: one, avoiding the mistakes of radical socio-political transformation

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<sup>6</sup> The commission's strict adherence to the human rights norm to separate justifiability of the decision to use violence from the acts and effects of violence reaches an impasse: the commission includes the deaths resulting from confrontations between security forces and armed resistance movements as "human rights violations". In other words, combat deaths are covered by the human rights investigation, but the commission declares itself unfit to make a judgment on the first and biggest combat (i.e. the military coup itself).

and polarization, embodied in the *Unidad Popular* project, and two, respecting democratic procedures and the rule of law. Thus, it affirms a strictly procedural notion of democracy, excluding substantive notions of social justice and radical change for fear of political mobilization, polarization, and ultimately, violence. Intolerant and violent ideologies motivated by the “ethics of ends” (Interview with José Zalaquett, January 20, 2009), which include both the leftist discourse of the 1960s and 70s and virulent anti-communism, are counterpoised to the procedural, pluralist and tolerant liberal democracy (Grandin 2005).

While Gonzalo Vial was the principal author of the context chapter (Stern 2010, 82), it is a mistake to hold him solely responsible for its strengths and weaknesses. The final report was adopted unanimously, and other commissioners have defended the historical approach of the Final Report in subsequent publications and academic conferences, which points to a high degree of consensus.<sup>7</sup>

I argue elsewhere that truth commission narratives are constituted as much by what is excluded from the text as by what appears in it. Therefore I situate the truth commission’s context chapter in the broader field of social memory struggles in the 1990s’ Chile. Three hegemonic memory camps dominated the public in the early 1990s. The *Pinochetista* social memory, which glorified the military coup and the military regime’s policies while trivializing the human rights violations, had considerable support among conservative politicians, the business community, the media, and a significant portion of the citizenry. The socialist/communist reconstruction of the same past saw in the military coup the bloody destruction of a democratic revolution that had inspired the

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Zalaquett reiterates the basic argument of the context chapter when interviewed by historian Greg Grandin: “[The Rettig Report] is the history of doctrinary justification of ethically unacceptable means in political action” (Grandin 2005, 56, footnote 40).

Chilean public for the pacific way to socialism. Those leftist groups that were excluded from the governing center-left coalition, such as the Communist Party and victims' organizations closely affiliated with them, spearheaded this memory camp. And finally, the socialists, social democrats and Christian Democrats who came together under the *Concertación* banner saw themselves as the defenders of a center-left position, having left behind the radical aspirations and political errors of the 1960s and 1970s. Cemented through encounters between political activists in Chile and in exile, the center-left social memory condemns the military regime's human rights violations, but also distances itself from the *Unidad Popular* dream of revolutionary change. Instead, the lessons from the past are interpreted as the need to uphold democracy, the rule of law, and a market economy with minimal state intervention.

Right-wing circles and the military were the first to criticize the truth commission on the grounds of limited contextualization. For the Pinochetista understanding of political history, "context" meant the radicalization of the socioeconomic question and polarization of politics under the reformist Christian Democratic government of Eduardo Frei-Montalva (1964-1970), followed by the destruction of democracy at the hands of radical Marxists (1970-1973). It was against the backdrop of this history that the coup, receiving widespread endorsement from right-wing and Christian Democratic sectors, took place. Thus, they objected to the commission's periodization that only included the military regime.

The *Concertación* politicians for their part left the terrain of contextual explanation to their political rivals, and instead focused on the human rights question before, during and after the truth commission process. They insisted on the legitimacy of

the limited periodization for the commission mandate, and did not argue with the right-wing opposition over the legacy of the 1960s and the 1970s. The internal composition of the *Concertación* played a crucial role in understanding this decision. This political coalition had its origins when Christian Democrats and the moderate sectors within the Radical and Socialist parties began to regroup in the limited political opening of the early 1980s. All relevant actors knew all too well that the Christian Democrats had initially supported the coup that explicitly sought to eliminate the political Left. Influential Christian Democrats adopted an oppositional stance against the military government only after they realized that Pinochet was consolidating power, with no democratic transition in sight, and that the human rights violations had reached an intolerable degree – at which point Christian Democrats found themselves targeted by state repression, too (Fruhling and Woodbridge 1983, 521). In the light of this divisive political history, the only way that the new political coalition of Christian Democrats and leftists could hold together was if the troubling past was somehow forgotten, and the two central values of democracy and human rights were affirmed time and again as the unifying principles of the *Concertación*.<sup>8</sup> The coup onset and the early years of the military rule, therefore, stood out as inappropriate topics to discuss publicly, while the human rights issue served the double function of delegitimizing the right-wing opposition and providing cohesion for the ruling coalition. Hence the commission's limited mandate.

The commission entirely ruled out discussions of the underlying historical, socioeconomic and cultural factors that made political violence and violations possible. Chilean and North American historians, in particular those on the Left, have discussed

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see Patricio Aylwin's 1993 speech entitled "La Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia: desafíos y perspectivas" (Aylwin 1994).

class conflict at the root of political violence at length, but the truth commission ignores this scholarship completely. Accordingly, the coup coalition consisted of those sectors (including the Christian Democrats) that defended their class interests against the socialist experiment underway. It was no surprise that they welcomed the military regime that destroyed Chile's democracy, disbanded leftist organizations, and crushed popular sectors in a wave of repression and neoliberal restructuring. Thus, human rights abuses cannot be understood in isolation from the economic and political project carried out by Pinochet, the business sector, the Chicago Boys, and generously supported by the American government.

This Marxist-inspired concept of history stands in sharp contrast with the truth commission's view of the military regime as a rupture in Chile's history of democratic and peaceful political development. The stark distinction between the nation's liberal democratic traditions and the Pinochet dictatorship breaks down if one pays close attention to the longer trajectory of class conflict. While the dictatorship was particularly long, bloody and lawless, it was not an exception in Chile's long history of repression against the labor movement and other forms of social protest.<sup>9</sup> Pinochet was but a more radical and uninterrupted phase of this pattern of repression. It was more brutal because it was developed as a response to a socialist project that had ascended to political power for the first time in Chilean history. What matters for the purposes of this paper is less the merits of this alternative historiography than the fact that, presenting the history of the dictatorship in contradistinction to the democracy and tolerance of previous governments,

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<sup>9</sup> Historian Sergio Grez names the Santa María School massacre in the north province of Iquique (1907), the massacre against workers in Marusia, Antofagasta (1925), and the criminalization of the Communist Party (1948) as the examples of class repression throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the systematic repression of the indigenous Mapuches in the South (interview with Sergio Grez, February 23, 2009).

as well as the *Concertación*, the truth commission excludes an alternative and plausible explanation of the nature of political conflict and violence in Chile, past and present.<sup>10</sup>

Why did the commission ignore this alternative historiography? The tightly controlled commission creation process was premised on achieving numeric balance between human rights defenders and the representatives of the political Right. Those individuals who could problematize the nation's long historical trajectory of violence, bring up the question of social justice, discuss the political virtues of the Allende presidency, or make a strong statement against the military coup, were left out.<sup>11</sup> The extra-parliamentary Left, represented by the Communist Party and major victims' organizations, had suffered the most from human rights violations, and they were also deeply disappointed in the early transitional experience in which the essentials of the neoliberal economy, installed by Pinochet and technocrats surrounding him, was completely maintained by the *Concertación*. However, they were too weak to count as major actors, and the truth commission allowed their participation only as victims, not as mandate-makers or commissioners. Therefore, the Marxist conception of history was at the margins, trying to remind the public of what the hegemonic discourses were concealing, but this conception was by no means a major determinant of the truth and justice processes in Chile.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The erasure of class conflict is not unique to the Chilean transitional justice model. Critics have taken issue with existing transitional justice models for failing to challenge the neoliberal status quo (Laplante 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Contrast the government's avoidance of Unidad Popular experience with with a statement by Sola Sierra, a leading figure of AFDD: "We loved [our disappeared relatives] because they were free in their thinking and just in their decisions [*determinaciones*]. We loved them because they were leaders of popular political parties, because they were union leaders, ..." (quoted in Lefranc 2003; translation mine).

<sup>12</sup> Several left-leaning historians published in January 1999 a document called *The Historians' Manifesto* as a rejoinder to Augusto Pinochet's "Letter to Chileans", published a month earlier as Pinochet's self-defense. The *Manifesto* does not mention the truth commission, but heavily criticizes Gonzalo Vial's interpretation of Chile's political history (Grej and Salazar 1999).

## **The Historical Narrative of Peru's CVR**

In sharp contrast, the truth commission in Peru produced a broad social history to contextualize political violence and violations. From the beginning the commissioners were aware that their narration of historical memory would shape public debates on collective identity, truth and justice. As the commission's chair, Salomón Lerner, states in the abbreviated version of the final report: "in a country like ours, the struggle against forgetting is a powerful form of doing justice" (Hatun Willakuy 2004; translation mine).

The composition of the commission played a crucial role in that decision: most commissioners were historians, social scientists or political activists who had devoted themselves to understanding and transforming the social reality. Furthermore, the commissioners appointed a large group of Peruvian and foreign scholars, junior as well as senior ones, as their advisers and fieldwork researchers. The staff introduced a rich array of methodological approaches, ranging from ethnographic studies of the highlands to the statistical estimation of the death toll.

The CVR's statistical estimation of the death toll at 69,280 has shocked even the informed observers, including the commissioners themselves. The commission used reports from a number of human rights organizations and state institutions, and they could identify 23,969 victims as dead or disappeared. The statistical estimation revealed not only that the magnitude of violations was much larger than suspected, but also the gap between the number of identified and projected victims also demonstrated that governmental and civic initiatives failed to account for the overwhelming majority of the victims. Part of the failure owes to the fact that the crime of forced disappearance is intrinsically secretive. However, the enormous mismatch between numbers also points to

the political and cultural center's inability to administer, let alone deliver justice to, the rural highlands.

The findings debunk wartime propaganda, much like other truth commissions. Its findings suggest that all parties to the conflict committed systematic human rights violations, although the commission held Shining Path responsible for a greater proportion of violations resulting in death than state agents. It rejects the notion that Alberto Fujimori's repressive counter-insurgency tactics were necessary, legitimate or even effective. The final report also adjudicates between various memory-narratives that had dominated public discourse throughout the conflict. For example, it finds that the police had no involvement in the 1983 massacre of eight journalists in Uchuraccay – confirming the 1983 Vargas Llosa Commission's findings. Likewise, it states that it has not found any evidence to indict former president Alan García for criminal charges concerning the 1986 prison massacres, much to the dismay of the human rights community.

Unlike its Chilean counterpart, the Peruvian truth commission combines forensic investigation with several volumes devoted to putting violence and violations in context. The first volume describes in broad terms the kinds of violations and actors involved. The second volume deals with the parties to the conflict: the Shining Path receives most attention, but there are chapters on the armed forces, the police, the MRTA insurgency and self-defense patrols, as well. The third volume positions all major political, institutional and actors, from various presidents to the Church, vis-à-vis the process of political violence (interview with Ricardo Caro; 25 May 2009). Then, volumes IV to VII analyze different types of human rights violations and examine illustrative cases. Volume



VIII goes back to social history: half the volume is devoted to the “factors that made violence possible,” and the other half to the psychosocial, socioeconomic and political effects of violence. The final volume summarizes the truth commission’s recommendations, which move beyond political-institutional reform to encompass wide-reaching sociocultural and political transformations.

The CVR distinguishes between the immediate and underlying causes of the conflict. The immediate cause is the Shining Path’s decision to initiate a so-called “people’s war” against the State. “The historical or long-term factors that explain the conflict” can be summarized as the “unequal distribution of wealth”, as well as “political and symbolic power” (*Hatun Willakuy* 2004, chapter 6). Society is sharply divided between those “who have the right to speak” and those whose grievances go unheard. The CVR presents three sets of divisions that explain the cultural and geographical cleavages: (1) Lima and the provinces; (2) the coast [*costa*], the highlands [*sierra*] and the forest [*selva*], and (3) the ethno-cultural categories of *criollos*, *mestizos*, *cholos* and *indios*, an enduring legacy of the colonial caste system.

The final report states that poverty and social exclusion are closely related to the probability of being victimized during the internal conflict (*Informe Final* 2003, Conclusión 4)<sup>13</sup>. As historian Cynthia Milton notes, the commission made the connections between its human rights investigation and historical narrative: “The Peruvian commission firmly placed the internal conflict –1980-2000– as a period in a longer national history of racism and centralism that was both the cause and a consequence of the violence” (Milton 2007, 149). The emphasis on socioeconomic

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<sup>13</sup> The “General Conclusions” of the final report are translated into English, and are available at [www.cverdad.org.pe](http://www.cverdad.org.pe).

inequality, poverty, ethno-cultural exclusion and marginalization gives coherence to the final report, as these factors inform the report's main findings, narrative on the causes of conflict, and the recommendations agenda.<sup>14</sup>

The Peruvian truth commission could not be further from its Chilean counterpart in its willingness to condemn a fateful political event, namely Alberto Fujimori's civilian coup on April 5, 1992: "Fujimori became an authoritarian ruler who sought to remain in power consolidating a corrupt autocracy" (*Informe Final* 2003, Conclusión 36). The final report lauds the presidencies of Belaúnde and García for upholding democracy, but criticizes them for failing to develop a comprehensive and inclusive strategy to tackle armed violence in an effective and democratically legitimate way (*Informe Final* 2003, Conclusión 38). This analysis is in line with the truth commission's finding that the two democratic presidents held political, but not criminal, responsibility for the crimes committed under their governments. Moreover, it demonstrates how the mixture of willful repression (under Fujimori) and political neglect (under Belaúnde and García) operated in conjunction to perpetuate the state's failed response to the threat from the Shining Path.

The Shining Path is responsible for the violence it inflicted on the Peruvian people to advance its totalitarian and fundamentalist agenda. The final report rejects the

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<sup>14</sup> It seems that the commissioners were cautious about using a more assertive causal language to describe the relationship between poverty, ethno-cultural exclusion and political violence. Instead, the language emphasizes a "well-known relation" [*relación notoria*] between these factors. I believe that the commissioners did not want to use a strong causal language to link poverty and ethno-cultural exclusion to violence because this could have led to the misperception that political violence was in fact an ethnic conflict or class conflict. Such a characterization would be scientifically misleading: despite the high rate of victimization among the Quechua-speaking peasants, the internal conflict did not turn into a war of ethnic secession at any point, and despite the Shining Path's rhetoric of class warfare, the parties to the conflict could not be distinguished with respect to their class positions and interests at any point. Furthermore, the mischaracterization of the conflict may have led to the even more problematic misperception that the truth commission adopted the Shining Path's depiction of the conflict as class warfare. Therefore, the final report invokes correlation and association rather than causation to characterize the internal conflict.

Shining Path's self-justificatory narrative: the insurgency reproduced the relations of racism and cultural supremacy, and its supposed "peasant war" took the form of confrontations between peasants. In other words, while the final report argues that social injustice has been the major factor that aggravated the conflict, it rejects that the notion that the Shining Path promoted justice in any way. The final report also points to the "potential for genocide" in the Shining Path rhetoric, although it does not specify whether acts of violence by the insurgency in fact amounted to genocide.

The Peruvian commission was a bold intervention into public discourse on the nation's past. One of the widely circulating memory narratives reduced the internal conflict between the government forces and the Shining Path to the confrontation of the forces of good and evil. This narrative minimized the violations committed by state agents, and treated any criticism of the state's conduct as collaboration with terrorists. The allies of Fujimori used media power to justify the former president's pacification policies, and accuse the truth commission of collaborating with foreign donors and terrorists to destabilize Peru. Other political actors who had been involved in the internal conflict, most notably the political parties *APRA* and *Acción Popular*, were more careful not to endorse the *Fujimoristas'* inflammatory rhetoric, and were supportive of the CVR's critique of Fujimori's dictatorial presidency, but their interpretation of the past tended to emphasize the heroic struggle against the Shining Path at the exclusion of the human rights question. The Shining Path leadership, for its part, regarded the CVR as state propaganda to denigrate their "people's war". Although many of its members testified before the commission during jail visits, the defeated insurgency never endorsed the commission's historical narrative.

The politically motivated attacks against the CVR were at least as much about the present as about the past. The collapse of Fujimori's civilian-authoritarian regime had pushed the major parties and politicians out of the political system. Fujimori's supporters retained control of the yellow media, while APRA, under the direction of Alan García, held on to a minority in the Congress. The interim government of Valentín Paniagua and the succeeding elected government of Alejandro Toledo relied on centrist and center-left constituencies' frustration with corruption, and hope for social and political transformation. These governments appointed well-known human rights advocates and academics for ministerial posts, and the truth commission was composed of this class of intellectuals. Its enemies, therefore, attacked the truth commission as the mouthpiece of the cultural elite that was ignorant of the Peruvian reality at best, and in close collaboration with terrorism at worst. The *Fujimoristas*' constant invocation of the word "caviar"<sup>15</sup> to describe the commissioners was an attempt to persuade the public of the insurmountable cultural gap separating them from the commissioners, and to take the issues of human rights and social justice off the national agenda through anti-leftist and anti-intellectual rhetoric.

The Chilean truth commission presents the Pinochet dictatorship (quite problematically, as I discuss above) as a rupture in the nation's democratic and civic traditions to argue that the transition's challenge is to recover these traditions. The Peruvian truth commission, by contrast, claims to advocate an unprecedented political and sociocultural project: to overcome the centuries-long legacy of racism, inequality and

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<sup>15</sup> Several of my interviewees mention that "caviar" is used as an adjective to insult the CVR and the human rights movement in general. Although a precise definition is lacking, "caviar" denotes a group of intellectuals who act against the nation's best interest to obtain foreign funds and lead extravagant lives (interview with Salomón Lerner, June 3, 2009; interview with Susana Villarán, May 19, 2009; interview with Rocio Santisteban, May 20, 2009).

discrimination. Ironically, the democratic transition (2000-2001), as well as the truth commission that grew out of it, is one among many projects that claim to represent a new beginning in the modern history of Peru. The creation of a participatory democracy from the ashes of the Aristocratic Republic (1895-1919), the mobilization unleashed by the leftist-populist APRA in the 1920s and 1930s, the first election of Fernando Belaúnde in 1963, his overthrow by a reformist military regime in 1968, the return to democracy in 1980, the first APRA electoral victory in 1985, and Fujimori's 1990 election campaign to save Peru from political and economic collapse: every single one of these political projects promised rupture with the past, were greeted with national euphoria, and ended in deep disappointment. In a way, the CVR rewrites an old trope – revolutionary new beginning against the backdrop of crisis, corruption, and collapse – with a new vocabulary. The “new social pact” requires the acknowledgment of serious human rights violations as the consequence of a long history of colonial and post-colonial exclusion, racial discrimination, and social inequality. Thus, the commission reconfigures the link between the past and the present in the interstices of immanence (i.e. the social embeddedness of the narrative trope of “new beginning”) and transcendence (i.e. redefining the “new beginning” with the language of human rights and social justice).

The CVR has produced one of the most comprehensive social histories of Peru. The attentiveness to long-term sociocultural and political-institutional developments, the thorough analysis of all relevant individual and institutional actors, the incorporation of a host of factors (such as ethnic identity, gender, educational resources, and geographic variation), and the breadth of methodological approaches to explore these factors, combine to make the CVR unmatched among truth commissions. Are there exclusions

and silences even in such an inclusionary historiographical project?

Development analyst Javier Torres argues that the major source of bias in the truth commission narrative was the insistence that the civilians were victims caught up between state repression and the Shining Path violence.<sup>16</sup> The “between two fires” [*entre dos fuegos*] discourse, characterizing the human rights movement’s approach to victimhood, takes away the political agency of the peasantry in the name of protecting them. Torres states that the “rural reality is more complex” than what the CVR final report portrays. In fact, there was a history of micro-conflicts in many localities before the insurgency, and the new set of actors, such as the Shining Path, the security forces, and the self-defense patrols, interacted with the local conflicts in complex ways.<sup>17</sup> The already existing cleavages were redefined in the context of the new conflict.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, Torres warns against the tendency to see the Shining Path as an exogenous factor in the history of local and regional politics: “The Shining Path was not an occupation army.” Torres reaches the conclusion that a disciplinary shift is necessary to comprehend the full picture: “anthropology helps to understand the Peruvian conflict better than sociology.” This paper cannot adjudicate the debate on how much choice and agency the Peruvian peasantry exercised during the internal conflict, as such judgment would require numerous ethnographies of peasant communities. It would be unfair to say that the commission did not pay attention to micro-histories, as there were numerous researchers who perhaps produced the most complete account to-date of violence in the rural highlands. To be more precise, the commission’s broad message, embodied in the

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<sup>16</sup> This and the following quotes are taken from interview with Javier Torres; April 27, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Stathis Kalyvas (2003) warns against the tendency in civil war studies to reduce the dynamics of local and private conflicts to those of the master cleavage.

<sup>18</sup> For examples of recent scholarship that incorporates micro-level conflicts, see: Tucno 2003; del Pino 1998.

conclusions and recommendations, prioritizes broad social history (what Torres refers to “sociology” in the interview) and adopts a “protectionist, almost paternalist” stance towards the Andean peasantry (interview with Javier Torres; April 27, 2009). The emphasis on vulnerability and exclusion as the cause *and* consequence of violence guides the conclusion that national reconstruction requires a “new social pact” based on equality, mutual respect, and social justice. The chief mechanism to achieve reconstruction is considered to be the promotion of an enlightened approach to nationhood, which will ideally transform the values and worldviews of top decision-makers, as well as the urban middle classes.

Although the commission did not have indigenous members, “the sensitivity expressed by the white intellectual elite leading the transition and shaped by international indigenist sensitivities seemed at least partly to make up for the weaker role of indigenous groups” (Rubio-Marín et al. 2011, 46). The sociological imagination of the truth commission is captured in its visual representations. The abbreviated version of the final report, called *Hatun Willakuy* (which means “great story” in Quechua, although the volume was published in Spanish only)<sup>19</sup>, has on the front cover the photo of an indigenous person, distinguishable by his dark skin color and the traditional hat, grieving over a coffin. Grabbing him by the wrist is a hand of light color, adorned with a shiny watch. The allegory is unmistakable: the fair-colored, urban and educated Peruvian finally overcomes the “emotional distance” (interview with Susana Villarán; May 19, 2009) imposed by centuries of racism and exclusion, offering her helping hand to the victimized indigenous man whose sorrow is too great to even lift his head. Arguably, the

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<sup>19</sup> The CVR sensitized the human rights groups to the use of Quechua. Several books and reports published after the commission process had Quechua names (Jelin 2011, 194-196), although they were written in Spanish.

helping hand represents the human rights movement and the truth commission that came out of it, or perhaps it is this movement's projection of how the urban middle classes should assume their civic obligations.

Likewise, the movie *State of Fear: the Truth about Terrorism* narrates the period of political violence and the truth commission experience in a way that stresses the urban *limeño*'s (and *limeña*'s) cathartic acknowledgment of the Peruvian reality. Although the movie is not a truth commission production, I believe it captures the commission's spirit of benign paternalism. The document singles out Beatriz Alva, the young, blonde member of the truth commission who had once served as a minister under the Fujimori regime, as a role model. The movie portrays her privileged, carefree life in sharp contrast to the process of internal conflict. As her shock at the gruesome details of violations against the mostly Quechua-speaking victims transforms her consciousness, she expresses resolve to change the conditions of life in her country and joins the truth commission: "I definitely can't be the same Beatriz anymore. I can't continue my life as it was, just thinking about business and legal matters. I have responsibilities now. I've seen a reality that I can't ignore. And if I can't do something about that reality, I'll never be happy."<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The city of Santiago woke up to a special occasion on September 10, 1990. Former president Salvador Allende was accorded a proper burial at the General Cemetery, where a number of Chile's dignitaries and public figures found eternal rest. It was a government initiative, which brought together Christian Democrats, their Socialist

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<sup>20</sup> *State of Fear* transcript. Available at: [http://skylightpictures.com/images/uploads/SOF\\_fact\\_check.pdf](http://skylightpictures.com/images/uploads/SOF_fact_check.pdf), retrieved February 18, 2011.



allies in government, but also the opposition Left (the Communist Party in particular). Allende's reburial was the first of several such commemorative activities to restore the dignity of the victims of the dictatorship, followed more than a decade later by the reburial of Pablo Neruda<sup>21</sup> (2004) and Victor Jara (2009).

As the official procession was underway, a choir of women outside the official protocol began to recite a Pablo Neruda poem dedicated to the victims of the 1946 massacre against communists at Plaza Bulnes. Some participants joined the recitation. This anecdote, narrated in Sola Sierra's biography, is perhaps the best metaphoric description of the way the victims' organizations and the extra-parliamentary Left participated in Chile's struggle for truth and memory: they were always the choir that was not included in the program. They were there to commemorate, but their voice came from outside the stage. Quite unlike the Greek *choros*, they did not summarize the general plot; rather, their role was to remind the principal actors of what they might be forgetting, of the exclusions of the general plot that hegemonized the shared collective memory. And among those who occupied the center of the stage, "some participants joined the recitation" some of the time, as they were reminded and inspired. Those participants knew what memories they shared with the choir, but also they knew that they could only recite insofar as the deviation did not ruin the general plot.

The choir at the Allende reburial reminded the principal actors of a discomfiting exclusion of the democratic transition discourse. Allende's death on September 11, 1973 and the subsequent human rights violations cannot be conceptualized entirely outside of the history of socioeconomic inequality and class repression in Chile. While the

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<sup>21</sup> Neruda died of ill health two weeks after the military coup, and soon after soldiers raided his house. He was not a direct victim of the dictatorship in the strict sense, but his funeral in 1973 took place under heavy police surveillance, which explains the motivation behind the reburial in 2004.

democratic transition wanted to exorcise violence through its unifying message “never again!” and its attentiveness to the victims of death and disappearance, forgetfulness of the underlying causes of violence became the foundational symbolic violence upon which the Chilean democracy was built. If the ones who fell at Plaza Bulnes in 1946 did not set an example to stop others from falling at La Moneda twenty-seven years later, what redemptive power do such contemporary truth and memory practices as the Allende reburial and the Rettig Commission have over the future generations? Advocates of social justice kept bringing up this question in a variety of ways throughout the democratic transition, as outsiders to the political mainstream.

This paper demonstrates that the commission creation process has implications for cross-national variation in how truth commissions reconstruct the past. The inclusions and exclusions of the truth commission narrative are best understood through the ways in which the mandate and composition shape the commission’s agency. Chile’s Rettig Commission, established under a high degree of government control in the interest of reconciliation between opposing political positions, produced a limited account of the underlying causes of political violence and violations, blaming the national tragedy on the political radicalization and polarization of the 1960s and early 1970s. It avoided taking a stance on the legitimacy of the 1973 coup. The stress on political and institutional failure informed the recommendations, as well. Ultimately, the Rettig Commission’s strength lies in its impeccable documentation of facts, but its narrative exclusions, reflecting the priorities and expectations of the transitional elite, have limited its capacity to take part in public debates over the meaning of the past.

By contrast, the participatory commission creation process in Peru allowed the commissioners to exercise agency in the area of historical explanation. Although CVR's final report is not free from exclusions, it is among the most comprehensive truth commission narratives. The commissioners broadened the scope of historical investigation to the patterns of social exclusion and marginalization permeating the long trajectory of nation-building, including economic and sociocultural variables in their explanatory framework. The final report emphasizes not only political-institutional reform, but also draws attention to the need to overcome the historical legacy of poverty and racial exclusion to prevent the recurrence of violence and violations. In the end, the CVR aimed for greater social impact, but politically, it proved more difficult to integrate into policy than its Chilean counterpart.

The exclusions of truth commission narratives bring into question the construction of victimhood in transitional justice discourse. Even the most comprehensive accounts, such as the one produced by the Peruvian CVR, tend to prioritize innocent victimhood (Theidon 2010) at the expense of acknowledging the ideas and actions of those affected by violations. Commissioners do not want to appear as endorsing particular political ideologies and projects, and realize that the public is more likely to condemn abuses if they downplay those aspects of the victims' lives that might reignite the divisions within society. Keeping in mind the politically motivated attacks truth commissions face, this approach is perhaps prudent, but ultimately it relies on a moralization of the human rights norm, which otherwise identifies a violation regardless of the prior political and moral acts of the affected. In terms of historiography, it amounts to the silencing of experiences key to understanding national tragedy, and in many cases, reducing the complexity of

political conflict and violence into artificially neat categories of victim, perpetrator, bystander and collaborator, where they “overall and apply to the same people or social groups” (Murphy 2010, 166). I believe, instead, “acknowledging shades of gray, not only in various forms of complicity, but also in acts of protest, resistance, and refusal” (Leebaw 2011, 147) would greatly strengthen truth commissions’ claim to provide an evenhanded and comprehensive account of the past in light of human rights awareness.