

COMMENTARY

THE SABOTAGE OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS SABOTEUR

What follows is a brief account of arrest and imprisonment while carrying out fieldwork on a rural co-operative near the town of Quillabamba in the Province of La Convención, Peru. Between 1958 and 1962 this particular area in the Department of Cusco was in the view of one observer 'the scene of the most important peasant movement of that period in Peru, and probably in the whole of South America',¹ and thus constitutes a location in which any research addressed to questions of peasant organisation, trade unions, etc., is still regarded by the authorities as suspect and potentially subversive. It must be emphasised, however, that the account is neither a cautionary tale nor a contribution to the literature of prison memoirs : rather, it serves both to illustrate and reinforce the truism that anthropologists engaged in fieldwork are not merely observers of class struggle but also part of the struggle itself, and it is precisely in exceptional circumstances such as those outlined below that the anthropologist-as-participant takes precedence in a dramatic manner over the anthropologist-as-observer.

At 4 pm on the afternoon of 22 March 1975, five students (two male, three female) from La Católica University in Lima, Luis Mamani (then Secretary-General of the Provincial Peasant Union Federation), Enrique Lara (a staff member of the state research organisation CENCIRA) and the anthropologist were

1. E. J. Hobsbawm, 'A Case of Neo-Feudalism: La Convención, Peru', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. I (1969), pp. 31-50, at p. 31.

arrested in Quillabamba and taken to the *Guardia Civil* (hereafter GC) barracks where statements were made and personal effects confiscated. Although at this stage no specific charges were mentioned, from the intense police activity and the tone of their remarks ('We are checking with Lima where your friend X is known for political subversion', etc.) it was clear to us that a process was just beginning; our detention in the barracks (without food, drink or bedding) lasted until 3 am the following morning when we were all transferred to an open army lorry which then set off for a destination still unknown to us. We were later informed by one of the four *Guardias* (armed with light machine-guns) positioned at each corner of the lorry that the destination was Cusco (the Departmental capital), a journey of some 280 kilometres up into the Sierra. During the day the lorry occasionally halted in a small village along the route so that we could buy food and drink; here the local GC would congratulate the escort on their capture of the '*guerrilleros*', and the inhabitants would gather to look at us and comment among themselves. That evening the lorry was met on the outskirts of Cusco by a further escort of armed *Guardias* commanded by very senior officers who (ominously) raised the canvas cover on the back of the lorry over us (to prevent recognition) and accompanied us down into the city to the GC HQ. The women in the group were taken away and the men were shut in an empty stone cell with no light; later we were taken out individually for a body-search and to be photographed for the GC files. As in Quillabamba, no food, drink or bedding was provided, a deprivation compounded by the climatic difference between tropical lowland Quillabamba (3400 feet above sea level) and highland Cusco (11440 feet above sea level); the clothing we had was inadequate to withstand the very low temperatures of the Sierra winter, and that night the five male detainees had to share two sleeping bags (two per bag and one on top). At 2.30 am in the early morning of 24 March I was woken by the GC on sentry duty and taken from the stone cell to the courtyard outside where another GC put a red hood over my head; I was then guided (pushed) by these two up a wooden stairway and along a passage to a room on the second floor where I was seated in a chair and left alone for half an hour. Later someone came into the room and took the hood off my head: the room itself was empty except for the chair I occupied in front of which were positioned two very bright reflector lamps focussed on my face; to one side stood a broad-shouldered 'heavy' in a mask revealing only the eyes, nose and mouth. The interrogator was in an adjacent room connected with mine by a microphone system, and the questioning followed explicitly political themes. At 5 am I was taken to another GC barracks in the city and locked in a small single cell until 7 am that morning when all the detainees (or political prisoners, as we had now been officially classified) were reunited in a larger cell, each one of us having experienced the same form of interrogation procedure the previous night. Later that morning we were taken across the

city to the HQ of the PIP (the Peruvian political police) for further investigation and interrogation.

Unlike the cell walls in the GC barracks, the walls of the cell in the PIP HQ were covered with graffiti containing messages and political testaments of past detainees, dates of arrest and torture, and references to political events unrecorded in the official Peruvian press. Here we remained without light or bedding and only small amounts of food, (bought by the women in the group and passed to us on the rare visits they were allowed to make), awaiting the commencement of another round of interrogations. No outside contact was possible, a PIP officer informed us, until the investigation was complete; meanwhile we would stay incommunicado. At 11 pm on the night of 25 March the interrogations began: now guilt of political activity on our part was assumed, merely to be confirmed. The object of the interrogation had changed, since for the PIP the problem was no longer just one of identifying a political position but rather to establish the existence of concrete activity deriving from and in furtherance of this political position. To this end the more sophisticated questioning of the PIP attempted to locate the inconsistencies and contradictions in the prisoners' chronological sequence of dates, times, persons and events, a tactically superior approach when compared with the narrowly political and less subtle questioning of the GC designed only to elicit political position and opinion. Where the GC interrogation method had attempted to instil terror, the method of the PIP was designed to create confusion: the menace of the GC was explicit (and therefore resistable) while that of the PIP was implicit (and unpredictable, making apostasy a certain resolution to an uncertain situation). Two PIP officers would rapidly and simultaneously ask questions on different themes (sometimes related, sometimes not): to most of these questions no complete response was either required or permitted, since the method sought precisely to expose the incipient contradiction of the half-formed answer, the recognition of which by the prisoner reinforced his uncertainty and undermined his argument while instantly uniting his interrogators in common exploration/exploitation of this discovered theme; i.e. the object of this method was the destructuring of the prisoner's concept of temporality (its element of continuity). When each one of us had been interrogated in this manner, we were returned to the cell below from where it was now possible to hear the deliberations of the PIP upstairs concerning the variant forms (the legal constructions) that might be taken by the political indictment; this related particularly to the interpretation of and acceptance by a military court of what in the current political context constituted anti-government activity. Accordingly, at 11 am on 26 March we were taken to the offices of the military tribunal in Cusco: here we were informed that the charge was 'sabotage of the agrarian reform' (a common holding charge employed against political opponents of the junta; cf. Amnesty International's *Peru: Briefing Paper No.15*,

1979, p.6), and that we would be detained in Quenkoru Gaol until the tribunal was ready to hear the case against us. At mid-day we were handed over to the *Guardia Republicana* (the prison police) and taken by prison van to Quenkoru Gaol, where we were to remain for the next seven days.

Situated eight kilometres outside Cusco, Quenkoru Gaol consists of a single open-air compound surrounded by wire fencing and watchtowers and contains two cell blocks, one for convicted prisoners (*culpables*) and the other for those awaiting trial (*inculpables*). We were incarcerated in the latter, in a special section reserved for political detainees who at the time ranged from student leaders (who had been in detention for nine months) to twenty male *comuneros* still untried for killing their landlord six years previously. The members of our group occupied themselves with political discussions and the organisation of a legal defence, a process which entailed the hiring of politically sympathetic lawyers who offered to defend us for nominal fees. After the others had been through a similar procedure, Enrique Lara, Luis Mamani and myself were taken to the offices of the military tribunal on the morning of 3 April, where further statements were made and cross-examinations carried out: that evening the officers composing the military tribunal arrived at the prison and presented us with their written judgments, in all cases a conditional discharge (which indicated that the detainees were released from custody but nevertheless confined to the city of Cusco while the PIP continued with the investigations). As we collected our belongings from the cell block other prisoners informed us that PIP personnel had been seen at the prison entrance, a warning ignored by us in the euphoria of imminent release; accordingly, the *Guardia Republicana* escorted us to the prison gates and pushed us through the narrow exit into the street beyond, where we were instantly rearrested by the PIP, hustled into a van and driven back to their HQ.

During this second period of detention the PIP were more openly hostile, threatening to use torture and confining us for long sessions in standing positions with hands behind our heads. The next day (4 April) we were taken to the offices of the Commandant of the XI Military Zone (the Departments of Madre de Dios, Cusco and Puno) and political boss of the whole region, General Luis Montoya y Montoya, who in a lecture to us on the objectives and achievements of the Peruvian 'revolution' made explicit the reasons for our initial arrest and subsequent rearrest (i.e. the separation of political thought from political action), after which we were returned to the custody of the PIP where we remained for the next three days. Renewed activity on the morning of 7 April indicated, we thought, that in the interim the PIP had formulated new charges, and we were as a result being taken once again to the offices of the military tribunal in the south of the city, the direction in which the PIP vans were travelling; instead, the vans continued on toward the airport, finally coming to a stop on the side of

the main runway to await transport to Lima. Amidst the now familiar security procedure we went aboard the plane and were seated at the rear of the aircraft under heavy guard; half an hour later we arrived in the national capital and were loaded into police vans and taken to the State Security Section (*Seguridad del Estado*) in the Lima HQ of the PIP. Although the questioning process continued as before, it was now more rigorous and co-ordinated; each detainee was simultaneously interrogated by a combination of PIP officers, two or three of us being questioned in this way at the same time. The walls of the interrogation rooms were covered in complex charts and diagrams which purported to trace connections between each detainee; after every interrogation the material content of these charts increased, but no new line of questioning was introduced nor charges made (a new charge of 'illegally attending a political meeting during the state of emergency' was subsequently formulated). As the routine established itself once more, it became clear that the only development in my particular situation would be expulsion (the Peruvian nationals might still be handed over to military intelligence, SIM); on 16 April I was summoned to the office of Sardo, the chief of the Lima PIP, where I was informed that my case had been decided by the Minister of the Interior (General Richter Prader) and that I was required to leave Peru within forty-eight hours (an expulsion order which precluded flying over Peruvian national territory, since if a plane in which I was travelling was compelled to land, the expulsion order would be technically infringed).

Unlike the elaboration of an ethnographic text, where the guise of 'objectivity' mediates reality through the intervention of the anthropologist as its necessarily external interpreter, the events outlined above represent an antithesis to this customary attempt at objectification: the anthropologist is instead absorbed within (and becomes part of) the social process under examination. The distinction between the social components of a process observed and the observer of that process is the ideological product of the separation of the 'professional observer' from the 'subjects observed' in terms of class and social formation: given the concreteness of this ideological construct, the observer (in the capacity of anthropologist) possesses a guaranteed autonomy in relation to the activity of the subjects being studied. During the period of the events, however, this element of externalised that-sidedness specific to anthropological practice was transformed into its opposite, the corollary of the subsequent internal this-sidedness being that the autonomy of the observer was guaranteed no longer. In the course of this transformation the distinction between observer and observed was deprived of some of its more important constituents, the power of a new and hitherto unknowable situation erasing pre-existing ideas and attitudes and in the process creating new alliances and possibilities (political, social). This element of restructuring was both determined and

necessarily preceded by the *de*structuring of distinct identities which gave rise to the observer/observed polarity; the synthesis entailed the development of significantly similar identities, a conflation resulting from the imperatives of the new political context (the state of emergency). The elimination of previously distinct identities was doubly determined by mutually reinforcing processes; on the one hand the establishment of a common political identity *for* the detainees (the object of interrogation) and on the other the construction of a common political identity *by* the detainees themselves (the effect of imprisonment). Both these processes were based on the eradication of originally significant political differences between the detainees and a corresponding emphasis on common elements (constructed during imprisonment): i.e. the creation of a new subject fulfilling the opposed requirements of the protagonists. The site of this conflict/contradiction/transformation was the interrogation room (the domain of the state and *its* definition of identities) where agents of the state sought either to mould the subject into a pre-given identity or merely to confirm the pre-existence of this same identity; and the prison cell (the domain of the detainees and *their* definition of identities) where the process of displacement and the political relocation of the subject was confirmed and reinforced. This transformation of the individual identity and its subsumption under a group identity did not, of course, affect each detainee in the same manner: for those already committed politically, the events served as confirmation of that commitment; for those not similarly committed, the events acted as a catalyst in the change of political consciousness. An example of the latter was Luis Mamani, whose original reaction was hostility toward the students, identifying them as the principal cause of his own arrest (i.e. had the students not been present in Quillabamba and attracted the attention of the authorities, he himself would not have been arrested). During the course of the interrogations and discussions with the students themselves, however, Luis's analysis of the situation changed, as did his ideas about its political significance and determinants; the locus of blame for his arrest was accordingly shifted from the students and their presence in Quillabamba to the reformist politics of the legal adviser to the Federation, Dr. Augusto Medina, criticised by Luis for politically restraining and weakening the Federation and consequently enabling the state to move against its leadership, an impossible act had the Federation possessed political strength. Throughout the period of imprisonment Luis contributed his knowledge of Federation politics to the general discussions of the agrarian reform program, adopting the theoretical viewpoint of the group as a whole. For their part, the PIP encouraged this development since the increasing similarity in views (evidenced in the course of interrogation) appeared to sustain the concept of a pre-existing conspiracy, thereby confirming the correctness of the PIP's action in rearresting the members of the group.

The transformation of identity results in conflict within

the subject(s) experiencing this: hence the discarding of autonomy by the anthropologist shifts the latter into the realm of social activity usually occupied by the objects of anthropological practice, i.e. a subject materially constrained and oppressed by the same elements of (legal, political) coercion in general and state repression in particular. This point has been noted elsewhere with respect to a similar set of circumstances:

...the affair had positive aspects too. The workings of the structure of power in the [Brazilian sugar plantation] had been brought out much more clearly than would have been the case under normal circumstances. I had been made to *feel*, rather than simply *understand*, something of the process of intimidation of workers and peasants, and something about the reasons for their passivity in the face of the powers that be. (E. de Kadt, *Catholic Radicals in Brazil*, Oxford University Press 1970, p.288)

Paradoxically, 'abnormal circumstances' uncover a fundamental contradiction not only at the level of the individual subject but also within the nature of the repressive apparatus of the state: *in order to destroy the existing opposition to itself, the state necessarily creates and extends the conditions of the existence of this opposition.* The formation of a new political consciousness in this manner is, in short, determined by the operationalisation of the state repressive apparatus; it makes possible a situation in which a peasant union leader can be made aware by students of political events (and their significance both in general and specific terms) beyond his immediate sphere, and can in turn make those same students aware of political events, conditions and activity that in other ('normal') circumstances would never be revealed to them.

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