

“Secrecy, Surveillance and Governance:
the Underground Gaze and Political Crisis in the Northern Peruvian Andes.”

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During the regime of Manuel Odría (1948-56), state officials in the northern Peruvian Andean region of Amazonas experienced a crisis of rule. They came to believe that their efforts to govern were being systematically thwarted by APRA, an outlawed political party forced underground by government repression. In accounting for their own inability to rule, officials concluded that APRA had elaborated a subterranean political apparatus of remarkable scope and power. Making this alternative structure of governance especially dangerous, government officials believed, was that it was largely invisible to the naked eye.

The Odría regime had unleashed a campaign of vicious persecution against the party—had closed meeting houses, banned organizations and discontinued publications, had detained, interrogated and at times tortured untold numbers of party members. As a result, there was virtually no visible evidence of APRA's influence anywhere. Nonetheless, state functionaries continued to see evidence of APRA's nefarious presence everywhere. They came to believe that appearances could not be trusted—that even the most seemingly innocuous and trustworthy of social groups might well be concealing their true, subversive natures, and under a mask of loyalty and patriotism.

In this paper I draw upon these official fears of a dark and dangerous counter-state to cross-examine the literature on state formation. State theory has been predicated on the inevitability of state power. This premise not only makes it difficult to account for state crisis, but also to grasp the highly contingent nature of successful efforts to rule. There is much to be learned about state formation by examining contexts in which political rule falters or fails. For it is during these moments that the lineaments of power and control that otherwise remain masked become visible.

Our conference is framed around questions of off-centeredness—around questions of geographies of legitimate rule, and the politics of instantiating such claims in particular

contexts. My paper engages this issue by exploring two inter-related themes. The first of these is sovereignty, where it is considered to reside, and the conditions under which it might dissipate and migrate to a new domain. The second theme I explore is state formation, which I take to be a cultural process, grounded in violence, which seeks to normalize and legitimize the organized political subjection of large-scale societies.

Before turning to the details of the analysis, a few brief remarks about context. The focus of my remarks today is Amazonas—an agrarian region (and administrative department) in the northern Peruvian Andes—circa 1950. In this remote department the regional representatives of the national government sought to contain the threat posed by APRA, a radical political party with broad support among the general population. During this period Amazonas experienced a crisis of rule; the political authorities came to view their regime as incapable of carrying out even the most basic of government functions. They were being prevented from doing so, they believed, by APRA—the party they themselves had forced underground, by means of the most brutal repression. In accounting for the failure of their own efforts to govern, officials attributed to APRA a subterranean party apparatus with all the powers of state that their own regime lacked—and then some. Indeed, the political authorities came to view their administration as a pale imitation of a sophisticated, complex state structure located somewhere deeply underground. They couldn't actually see the subterranean party state to which they attributed such power and influence. They were certain it was there. But because APRA insisted on remaining hidden from view—on remaining precisely where government officials had left it—the authorities couldn't actually find APRA. As a result, they were left to imagine the contours of their invisible enemy.

Confronting Political Crisis.

In April of 1949 Sr. Manuel Alberto López, Prefect of Amazonas, sent a series of frantic, coded messages to his superiors in Lima, the national capital. Using the same crude, numerical encryption technique to which he had increasingly had recourse locally, the Prefect pleaded with the national government for assistance. His regime was beset on all sides, he explained, by the followers of APRA, who had lodged themselves deeply within the state apparatus. The fact that they had done so, the Prefect believed, had put his entire regime at great risk.

By what means the Apristas had managed to infiltrate his administration the Prefect could not say, for he had erected multiple defenses to protect the state from the party. Despite this fact, however, APRA had overcome all the barriers he had placed in its path. As a result, he said, the Party of the People was poised to seize control of the region on a moment's notice.

It was clear that the Prefect was in a state of near panic about APRA. And while he had failed to prevent the subversives from infiltrating his regime, Sr. López was determined to make up for his mistake; was determined to identify all Apristas in the entire region, and to remove them from government employ and from society in general. He faced one major problem, however, in doing so. All party members went about their daily affairs in disguise, as it were, masquerading as normal, law-abiding citizens. It being so very difficult to distinguish friend from foe by ordinary means, the Prefect had learned to distrust outward appearances. The truth about the party, he believed, was concealed from view. It would therefore be necessary to dig beneath the surface to root out APRA at its core, which Sr. López was deeply committed to doing. Indeed, the Prefect and his administration were on high alert, were in a state of extreme readiness. The difficulty was that they did not know exactly who or what they were looking for.

Although the Apristas found it prudent to conceal their identities, the signs of the party's profound influence were incontrovertible. Indeed, the government found itself unable to control

the party's underground activities. It was as if the Party of the People was aware of the authorities' every move before they actually made it. Armed with this knowledge, it seemed, the terrorists were able to make themselves invisible whenever danger threatened.ⁱ

While APRA had succeeded in remaining largely illegible to the authorities, the party seemed able to read the government like an open book. It was common, for example, for the people of Amazonas to awaken in the morning discover that APRA had been very busy the previous night. At times the populace would find freshly-printed handbills, covered with party propaganda, slipped under every door. At other times they would encounter APRA slogans painted in large letters in prominent public places—locales that were in theory being patrolled by the police. On still other occasions they would learn that party propaganda sheets had been nailed to the very door of police headquarters—a location that was protected by armed guards around the clock.ⁱⁱ

It was not just the inability to control the Apristas' nighttime activities, however, that was troubling the Prefect. His regime was also finding it increasingly difficult to carry out even the most basic of governing functions—especially those concerning conscription and taxation. Behind all of these difficulties, the Prefect was certain that he saw the hand of APRA.

The police were finding it impossible to locate enough military conscripts to serve in the army, or enough labor conscripts for public works projects. The personnel of the National Bank, who were responsible for collecting rural excise taxes (a key source of tax revenue), were complaining bitterly about their inability to control contraband trade. The governors and mayors of the rural districts found that their efforts to call out the population to repair roads and bridges were met with growing (if passive) resistance. The Prefect received a steady stream of correspondence from his subalterns claiming that APRA was encouraging people to resist complying with their obligations.

Such reports were anything but difficult to believe. The Party of the People had declared itself deeply opposed to the multiple ways that government officials coerced the rural population, and had characterized all of these “obligations” as thinly disguised forms of exploitation and abuse.

The authorities were deeply alarmed by the party’s ability to survive and even thrive in conditions of such extreme repression. Officials were equally concerned about APRA’s success in undermining so many key government functions. It seemed nothing short of miraculous that party members, forced to operate in secret, could defy every effort to apprehend them. It seemed equally miraculous that a persecuted political movement could be so effective in thwarting the authorities’ efforts to govern. Especially alarming was the fact that the party seemed able to confound the government all over the region, in town and country alike, at the same time. Indeed, the Prefect would often find himself confronted with evidence of APRA’s subversion coming in from all over the department, on the very same day!ⁱⁱⁱ

Officials thus found themselves confronted with the most alarming evidence of the party’s powers. At the same time, they had been frustrated in all efforts to gather the intelligence that would reveal how APRA was managing to do all of this. Indeed, the authorities were confronted with major gaps in their understanding of the party. The very survival of their regime being at stake, they had struggled mightily to fill in these gaps. But they had failed.

In the absence of reliable information that would have answered the many weighty questions they had about APRA, the authorities were compelled to provide answers of their own—were left to make inferences about APRA. The less the authorities actually knew, the more they were compelled to imagine. And imagine they did. Faced with mounting evidence of their own impotence, and of the terrorists’ ability to thwart the government’s every plan and

to achieve the party's every goal, the authorities let their imaginations run wild. They began to indulge in the darkest of fantasies about APRA.

The region's high-ranking officials concluded that APRA's seemingly miraculous abilities were enabled by a party structure of exceptional complexity—one that spanned the entire region, and was able to coordinate the subversives' activities in the most detailed of manners. The authorities were also convinced, however, that such a party structure alone would not be enough to confound them. Only if it were staffed by a deeply fanatical membership would APRA be capable of such amazing feats. What was so alarming to consider, however, was how this political structure could orchestrate party affairs with such secrecy and efficiency, and how APRA could produce such fanaticism in its members. Officials speculated at length about these questions. They had only fragmentary bits of evidence to suggest answers.

Precisely because the Apristas did not expose themselves to visible scrutiny anywhere, government officials began to see evidence of the party's nefarious hand everywhere, even in the most seemingly innocent and innocuous of places—elementary schools, Church groups, volleyball teams. The authorities also began to suspect everyone of being an Aprista. It was not just the usual suspects, like radical teachers and impoverished Indian cultivators, that came under suspicion, but also the most unlikely of candidates—school children and single mothers, policemen and officers of the Court. Even staunchly conservative, religiously devout members of the old landed elite came to be viewed as suspect by the forces of order.

In their desperation to distinguish wholesome from dangerous social elements, officials insisted that everyone offer proof of their loyalty—that they sign loyalty oaths, swear (before a Notary!) that they did not belong to the party, and repeatedly affirm their commitment to the status quo. After insisting on these affirmations of truth, however, officials then discounted the very declarations they had insisted people make. No matter how proper one's behavior, no

matter how law-abiding one appeared, the authorities were still left with doubts. Indeed, because the Apristas were seeking to deceive the government by masquerading as ordinary citizens, the authorities came to view as suspect the very act of presenting oneself as loyal.^{iv}

In a desperate effort to restrict the flow of information, an inner core of officials began using coded messages to communicate with one another (see Figure 1).^v As they sensed the party closing in around them, officials changed the codes with increasing frequency. They imposed extra surveillance on the personnel who delivered secret messages between government offices in different parts of Amazonas. Their decision to restrict the use of code to a select few represents their suspicion that the broader arena of government activity within which their inner circle was embedded was not autonomous of APRA influence, but rather had been infiltrated by the Party—reflects their fears about just how lacking in autonomy they considered the state to be. It also reflects their decision to surrender to APRA the outer domain of the state, and to re-inscribe state boundaries further inward—to create a state within a state.

To the misfortune of the authorities, however, this attempt to redefine the limits of the state (Mitchell) was deeply flawed. APRA remained opaque to the authorities, while even the most secret of government plans seemed to leak out to the subversives. Officials remained utterly confounded by the Party of the People, and seemed unable to make any headway whatsoever against the enemy.^{vi} In desperation, the Prefect appealed (in code!) to the national government for assistance. No one was to be trusted, he reported. Everyone was an Aprista.

In short, the political crisis that unfolded in the context of the failed campaign against the party unleashed upon the authorities a plague of fantasies (Zizek 1997). Faced with the certain knowledge that they knew so little, government officials took to imagining much. They came to regard everyone as a potential subversive, came to see signs of APRA's presence everywhere.

In an effort to help his subalterns imagine the contours of their invisible enemy, in late April of 1949 the Prefect circulated a very important but rather dated document to a select group of government officials who he trusted above all others.^{vii} In addition to sending the memo in code, the Prefect also marked his communication “Secret” and “Confidential.”

The document in question was entitled, “Organización del Comando Departamental” (OCD).^{viii} It had been seized 2 decades prior, in 1931, but had since been forgotten. According to OCD, APRA’s structure was indeed elaborate; it took the form of a nested hierarchy of cells that mimicked the structure of the state; there were APRA cells or committees for each administrative division in the country, from the smallest to the largest. As OCD made clear, however, the underground APRA state was far more developed than the formal state apparatus.

APRA, it appeared, had organized itself into nine ministries—of the interior, propaganda, discipline, culture, etc.—throughout Peru. As these names suggested, each ministry was responsible for particular sub-groups and/or activities. Furthermore, party Secretaries were to be on hand to provide people with key services that they otherwise lacked—medical care, legal help, financial assistance, etc. By drawing on this structure, it seemed, APRA had been able to involve itself directly in the everyday lives of the populace despite its proscribed status.^{ix}

OCD provided the authorities with something of which they were in desperate need—a kind of blueprint that allowed them to imagine the shape of their underground adversary. But officials were not content to interpret this document in literal terms. Their worst fears about the complexity and sophistication of the party structure having been confirmed, the authorities could not resist the temptation to make additional inferences based on this document, and on others they had in their possession—inferences concerning APRA’s followers.

Government officials reasoned that only a membership of great size would be capable of maintaining such an extensive party structure—and of shielding it from official scrutiny. On

the one hand, government officials were convinced that this membership was widely distributed through space, that Apristas were to be found in every corner of the region. On the other hand, the authorities were equally certain that APRA had supporters among all social classes and groups—among the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the uncouth and the cultivated, among women and men, peasants and hacendados, etc.

It was not just the size of APRA's following, however, that alarmed government officials. Of equal concern was that party members seemed willing to make virtually any sacrifice for the terrorist cause. For most of its existence APRA had been subject to vicious persecution. Its members had been hunted down and arrested. Many had suffered torture. Thousands had been killed. Nonetheless, the Apristas seemed as committed as ever to the subversive cause. They appeared willing to stop at nothing to realize their plans for revolutionary change.

Government officials thus came to view themselves as under siege, by forces that were at once profoundly dangerous but also invisible to the naked eye. In the process, they came to regard the state apparatus of which they were a part in a different light. They came to see their own regime as less and less like an ordered, principled mechanism for preserving public order and advancing the common good—and more and more as an incoherent, uncoordinated set of activities and processes with no common goal, that often worked at cross-purposes.^x

At the same time, however, the authorities came to view APRA as having all the attributes of "state-ness" that their regime lacked—order, consistency and logic, unity, discipline and purpose. In this context of crisis, officials came to view their own administration as a pale imitation of a sophisticated, complex state structure that they could not actually see. They were confident that it was there. The problem was actually finding it.

Conclusion.

In the final section of the paper I draw upon the authorities' paranoid fears of a dark and dangerous counter-state to cross-examine the literature on state formation. While many scholars acknowledge the fragility of rule and the contingency of state forms, most analysis of the state concern themselves with contexts in which organized political subjection has in some sense been accomplished. Their main concern is with the formation and operation of 'functioning' polities.

State theory has been predicated on the inevitability of state power. This premise not only makes it difficult to account for state crisis, but also to grasp the highly contingent nature of successful efforts to rule. There is much to be learned about state formation by examining contexts in which political rule falters or fails. For it is during these moments that the lineaments of power and control that otherwise remain masked become visible. The present paper is intended as a preliminary effort to explore this topic.

ⁱ On numerous occasions, for example, the authorities had sought to apprehend the Apristas. After meticulous planning, and acting on the most reliable of information, the police had attempted to surprise groups of subversives during their clandestine, nocturnal meetings. With disturbing regularity, however, the party seemed to have known in advance of the authorities' intentions. With few exceptions, the Apristas had been able to avoid capture.

ⁱⁱ The degree of planning and coordination necessary to carry out these tasks gave credence to the rumors that were circulating widely—that the party continued to hold regular meetings in secret cells throughout the region. Everyone knew that the authorities had been stymied in their efforts to discover when or where the meetings took place, or even who attended them. What was clear, however, was that Apristas were able to roam through the streets, striking at will. It was equally clear that the police were powerless to catch the subversives.

ⁱⁱⁱ From one rural community he would receive a report that APRA slogans had appeared overnight on the public buildings surrounding the central plaza. From another he would learn that the Guardia Civil had located only a fraction of the number of labor conscripts needed for public works. From yet another he would hear that witnesses called to testify before the Superior Court could not be located. And in Chachapoyas itself, he would discover that APRA had once again littered the streets with propaganda

^{iv} Furthermore, government officials came to question the “truth-value” of people’s declarations of loyalty even though they insisted that everyone offer them, continuously—or else find themselves under suspicion of being an Aprista! [renuncias]

^v By means of this measure, they sought to delineate a sphere of communication that would be unequivocally privileged, that would be restricted exclusively to “trustworthy” members of the current regime, and that would allow these officials and their subalterns to operate without the risk that APRA would be aware of their activities. Officials sought to establish this domain of privileged exchange by communicating about “sensitive” political matters (especially about those related to APRA) in coded messages.

The fact that an elite, inner circle of government officials felt compelled to communicate in coded form about matters of pressing urgency indicates just how much at risk these officials felt the state to be from APRA, shows just how close they suspected Party members were to information that should have remained beyond their grasp.

^{vi} The police continued to be ineffectual in apprehending Apristas in their nocturnal meetings. Party members grew ever more daring in leaving public evidence of their night-time sojourns. And government officials continued to struggle with their administrative duties in the countryside.

^{vii} These included the heads of the Guardia Civil and the PIP (the Secret Police), the President of the Superior Court, the Subprefects and Judges of the region’s five provinces, and the governors of the department’s many rural districts. The Prefect suspected that many of the justices of the peace, who worked alongside the governors in the rural

districts, were in fact Apristas (see below). This may explain why he did not have the “Organización Vertical” document sent to them.

^{viii} It had been seized almost two decades prior, in 1931, from a party member who was carrying it from APRA’s Central Committee in Lima to the party’s local membership in Amazonas. It contained a description of the structure the local Apristas were to adhere to in establishing the party in Amazonas.

Regarded as being of only passing interest when first seized, “OCD” had languished in the archive of the Prefecture ever since. Faced with political crisis in 1949, however, the Prefect came to regard this document as an absolutely **key** piece of intelligence; for it appeared to answer many of the government’s most pressing questions about APRA. Furthermore, it did so in a way that confirmed the authorities’ worst fears about the enemy they faced

^{ix} Indeed, according to OCD, the party was to establish Secretaries for all of its ministries as possible in every party cell, whether that of a remote rural district or a large urban center. This suggested that the “bureaucracy” that the party had generated was considerably thicker than the formal state apparatus, whose representatives were sparsely scattered about the national territory

^x Furthermore, the general public came to see the ruling regime in like terms. In other words, under pressure from the party, government officials found it increasingly difficult to sustain (to themselves or to others) the illusion of the state. What Philip Abrams (1988) has famously referred to as “the state effect” began to dissipate.