

Julio Ortega's Peruvian Inferno

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In Peru, as in nearly all Latin American countries, the social structures of the colonial period have survived almost unaltered to this day. The country's politics, economy and culture are directed by a few very rich families; there is no extensive middle class, but a steadily growing mass of the poor and the destitute. In the Andes highlands, the Indian population lives in its *comunidades*, which hardly differ from the *ayllús* of the Inca period. At the same time, as in the days of Spanish rule, there is an hacienda economy that has expanded even further since Peru's independence, to the detriment of the Indian communities. The alien rule of the Spaniards has been replaced by that of the European and North American economic enterprises. None of Peru's constitutional governments and none of her dictatorships has been able to do much about it. Even superficial reforms were always followed, after a short period of time, by a powerful reaction fortifying the country's conservative power.

On October 3, 1968, a military junta under General Velasco Alvarado assumed power in Peru. It came forward with a revolutionary program designed to solve the principal problems facing the country. Radical changes in the distribution of wealth were intended to break down the ancient structures, eliminate the influence of foreign business on national politics and replace the rule of a few with a government supported by the majority of the population. Raw materials and natural resources were to be used for Peru's own development.

Foreign firms whose profits were not invested in Peru were socialized. Before this revolution, 85% of ore production, seventeen of the twenty most important fisheries, six of the ten largest sugar mills, almost all banks, electricity, communications, the majority of trading firms and most of the textile industries were foreign owned. Based on the Yugoslavian model, new property and commerce laws were passed. Over 25 million acres of fallow land were distributed among the county people. And in recognition of the large Indian population, Quechua was accepted as an official language next to Spanish.

The revolution of the military was meant to give Peru a new social order without bloodshed, an order based on national sovereignty—a policy of non-alignment—and the participation of all major population groups in the responsibility of government. But in 1974, the junta assumed control of all Peruvian newspapers, and under the pressure of an increasingly powerful group of conservative generals, General Velasco Alvarado dismissed several members of his government whose aims seemed to be too “socialist.” Soon after, he himself had to make way for General Morales Bermúdez. In 1975, General Leónidas Rodríguez, one of the most significant men in the revolutionary military junta, was dismissed from his post. He had supported the most important reforms and was for many a guarantor of constant revolutionary development. With him had to go all the military and union men and all the journalists who had worked for the Partido Socialista Revolucionario. The PSR was not yet a firmly organized party but rather a gathering of those opposing the Peruvian oligarchy who had cohered around Leónidas Rodríguez. He was expected to become a force in a position to articulate and realize a political alternative to the old system. The elimination of Leónidas Rodríguez meant that the conservative generals were renegeing on the reforms. Along with many of his friends, Ortega left the country.

Julio Ortega's play, *Infierno peruano*¹ (1980), describes precisely this situation: the process of revolution is halted by reaction and threatens to make a full turn. Like many earlier plays of Ortega's, *Infierno peruano* is an essay, a philosophical treatise. His model is the satirical poetry of Juan del Valle y Caviedes (1652-1694), who sees his age as a human tragicomedy. He described life in Lima as a farce, his contemporaries as caricatures; they had adopted the norms and values of the Spanish colonists without objection, aping their behavior, language and fashions like mindless puppets. Ortega goes one step further—he calls the Peru of today an infernal pantomime. His play has no plot. In fourteen scenes, the elements of the Peruvian crisis are satirically introduced: General Morales Bermúdez, taken to court for having betrayed his people; the peasants, trying to organize themselves; the parties in the electoral circus, haggling over power like so many merchants in the name of parliamentary democracy; the rich man and the pauper; the intellectuals; the nightmare of counterrevolution; hopes and fears; pictures of a grotesque carnival, each on its own and at the same time diabolically tied to the others.

Ortega juxtaposes his images associatively. Reminiscent of Dante's circles of hell, they are shown as stations in a process of thought, as an analysis of Peruvian problems in macabre metaphors of a society based on classes. In the center of hell, in the domain of the eternally damned, sits Morales Bermúdez. With the personality of the general who had, as a socialist, supported the reforms of the junta (he had been minister of commerce under Velasco Alvarado) and had later betrayed them to reaction, Ortega comes to the core of his reflections, the question of power. Is power the center of hell? Does it condemn its owner to betrayal of those for whom he has achieved it? Is power the result of the mechanism of politics in general and does it inherently lead to reaction?

In Ortega's mind, power must be linked to justice, which it can be only by being spread as widely as possible. But to Ortega, the model of the junta of a

democracia participatoria seems to have foundered after all. In *Infierno peruano*, he shows the corruptive influence of power, describing the way it robs the powerful of their identity and how it denies the identity of the powerless.

Like many of Ortega's plays, *Infierno peruano* shows no individuals. There are seven principals representing various interests, anonymous voices expressing Ortega's thoughts. The clichéd groups demonstrating Peruvian politics as grotesque caricatures do not, however, estrange the viewer. Instead, in an odd way, they produce excitement, anger and sympathy. Ortega shows the state as an apparatus that leaves little room for the activities of the various groups. Personal conflicts and individual efforts remain unnoticed and without results, as the cliché of the group (in its technical sense as a form for printing) is permanently fixed and remains unaltered.

Big business defines itself: "Somos la clase dominante . . . la negación de todo cambio." Of Peruvian society, this group (loosely following Caviedes) delivers the following outline: "La pequeña burguesía imita a la gran burguesía. La gran burguesía a la clase señorial. La clase señorial al poder de la metrópoli. Y la clase media nos imita con paciencia. Y hace bien. Hereda nuestras modas, nuestras ideas. Son nuestra paciente caricatura. Y el pueblo, a su vez, hereda los hábitos y valores que la clase media abandona cuando recibe nuestras ropas de la pasada estación. Así nuestro poder es terrenal y mental" (p. 32).

The pauper describes himself: "Se me acusa por lo que no soy en nombre de lo que soy. Pero es todo lo que no puedo ser lo que mejor podría definirme. Todo lo que pierdo ignorando que lo pierdo. Porque la pobreza va extraviando una a una las nociones del hombre . . . No se espera que yo lea el libro que estaba escrito para mí. Ni que vea a mis hijos ejercer el placer de su inteligencia" (p. 28).

The rich man stammers, stupidly: "Tengo el poder familiar. Tengo el poder social. Tengo el poder económico. ¡Soy el candidato de siempre!" (p. 35). And cynically, he advises his adolescent son: "Diles que son iguales y ellos sabrán la diferencia" (p. 35).

The liberals imagine: "¡Somos los liberales! ¡Somos nacionalistas! ¡A veces populistas! ¡Somos la tercera posición! Cristianos, humanistas, desarrollistas . . . Y moderados, siempre moderados . . . Somos los árbitros, el arbitraje y el arbitrio" (p. 36). The emphasis falls on the double meaning of those words as justice and arbitrariness. Ortega dislikes the liberals as much as the intellectuals, whom he calls "los opinadores." Of themselves they say: "Si no podemos cambiar el país, cambiemos de tema. O al menos, de religión . . ." (p. 41). In his hell, they sit together as the lukewarm, "que no merecen juicio ni piedad. Los pervertidos por el egoísmo. Y los que venden a los amigos y se venden al enemigo" (p. 39).

Only two figures in this play have a name—General Morales Bermúdez, representing power, and Saturnino Huillca, representing the Indian population. Both are real people and yet they are represented by nameless figures. The fate of the individual is identical here with society's fate. Within their cliché, both are just as interchangeable as the pauper, the rich man, the liberal or the intellectual. Morales is a caricature just as they are. His face is

disfigured: "Su cara de la izquierda no tiene facciones. Es monstruoso. En la cara del centro tiene los ojos. En la cara de la derecha está la boca" (p. 38). Morales Bermúdez was not a conservative general. When he assumed his post, he had sworn in the name of the people to continue the reforms. In fact, he halted them. His defenses: "Tuve que hacer frente a la crisis, corregir los errores, evitar los extremos, buscar una salida . . ." (p. 2). Yo resistí las presiones de la derecha, concedía algunas reformas para defender otras, salvaba lo que se podía salvar . . ." (p. 3). To maintain his power in the state, he had to betray the aims of the revolution. "Sólo diré que la historia misma de mi país se fundaba en la traición. Yo estuve rodeado de traidores, sólo podía traicionarlos a todos. Ser el mayor infiel" (p. 39). Power has made a fool of him, a distorted image of all the Morales Bermúdez before him and all those yet to come. "Soy la horrible conciencia del tiempo" (p. 39).

Saturnino Huillca, on the other hand, is the only living figure in this Peruvian inferno. He speaks his own text, written not by Ortega, but by the Indian people. "Quizá ya he visto a Morales, y de memoria conozco sus palabras. ¿Así se acabarán los peruanos en el gobierno? El gobierno siempre fue extranjero en nuestra tierra. Los soldados con Juan Velasco fueron como nosotros, peruanos que hablaron nuestra lengua. Lengua de verdad. Morales no es palabra peruana" (p. 17). It is not so much the content of his speech as his language, "lengua de verdad," that momentarily puts a halt to the irrational witches' sabbath. In this profoundly pessimistic play, Saturnino Huillca embodies the only positive element. In him, the author's hope for a positive solution is indicated. It is based on the vitality of the Indian population, which has preserved its uncorrupted way of thinking through 450 years of Spanish and European-American alien rule. In his book *La cultura peruana*,² Ortega writes: "Lo extraordinario de nuestra historia es que las poblaciones indígenas hayan salvado la existencia. No menos definitorio es que hayan desencadenado una pauta nacional: la de definir al Perú con formas, inmediatas o no, de su condición cultural" (p. 29). In the minds of the Peruvian Indians, a new period in world history began with Pizarro's conquest of Peru: the age in which everything is upside down. They believe their god Incarrí, who was killed and buried by the Spanish, rests deep down in the soil of the old empire, from which he will one day rise renewed to restore the old order of things.

But unlike Saturnino Huillca, these people's representatives in Lima speak a dead, formalized language. Although he quite obviously is on their side, Ortega thereby puts them on the same abstract level as all the other previously introduced groups. "Compañeros, la derecha pretende que la crisis económica se origina en la baja de la producción . . . Es preciso identificar, en seguida, las tácticas de la contrarrevolución. Y acordar nuestra propia estrategia de respuesta . . ." (p. 9). "En efecto, el paro nacional será una demostración de fuerzas sindicales . . . Compañeros delegados, es preciso consultar con las bases este acuerdo . . . Empieza el debate, compañeros. Debemos organizar los equipos. Hay que precisar los reclamos denunciando la situación laboral. Pido la palabra a nombre de mi base" (p. 46). With such passages, he shows their inability to express themselves naturally, stressing the pomposity with which they adopt the empty phrases and stereotypes of the

world in which they are trying to have a say. While these ambitious officials are verbally organizing the political front in party jargon, Saturnino Huilca simply says: "No nos quitarán la tierra. Antes, moriremos peleando" (p. 16). Have those who use the language of power and its forms of organization, those who want to learn the mechanism of power (in order to break it), not already entered its vicious circle? Are they not all already potential Morales Bermúdez?

Infierno peruano is a plea to the consciousness of Peruvians. From the Spanish Conquest until today, the majority of the population has not been respected in public life. The culture and language were denied, the people despised. As in almost all Latin American communities, the result in Peru is a lack of authenticity. Ortega says: "No hay identidad sino máscara."³ The search for identity is a characteristic of contemporary Latin American literature, but in Ortega's works, it is an imperative. All his plays are essays on this subject. In her analysis of the play *La campana*, Graciela Palau describes how Ortega with a minimum of dramatic action and with sparse sober language, formulates the serious problems facing Latin America in an "irónico comentario de la situación del hombre de Hispanoamérica."⁴ *Infierno peruano* is more temperamental, bitter and angry than all of Ortega's earlier plays, but the last sentence of the article on *La campana* can literally be applied to this play as well.

A steady and direct development can be traced from the treatment of the individual's struggle for his own ego (which can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the culture clash between Europe/North America and Latin America) in *El intruso* or in *Varias voces de verano*, to an abstract description of social conflict in *La campana*, to an increasingly explicit depiction of the problem as a whole in *Mesa Pelada* and *Infierno peruano*. These plays could be read as dramatized chapters of his book *La cultura peruana*. They are descriptions and analyses; they are "el discurso de la derrota," which must now be followed by "el discurso de la resistencia." But resistance against oppression by an alien culture, by a power directed from outside, can only be offered if one knows oneself. In order to defend one's own identity, one has to be aware of it. Some Latin American writers believe they must "integrate the people into the culture" from which it has been excluded since the arrival of the Spaniards and Portuguese; they must "educate the people" to achieve the Latin American identity. Ortega believes this to be nonsense. History should have taught a clear enough lesson. It is precisely the integration into a foreign culture without taking into account indigenous cultures that has made Latin America what it is: an imitation. "Más bien, se trata de manifestar la cultura popular como la otra conciencia del país. No somos un lector único sino varios públicos de lectores: cada uno con experiencias distintas del país, que al objetivarse como conciencia ensayarán su articulación mayor, que será nacional."⁵ If the Latin American people want to make a stand as nations, they must put an end to the Herodianization that has led to the facelessness of Latin American states. In *Infierno peruano*, Ortega uses the Biblical metaphor: "(Ellos) han comido los ojos de nuestros padres" (p. 19).

Reforms, even revolutions, remain ineffective and can even make a full turn if participation is denied to the majority of the population. In *La cultura*

peruana, Ortega says: "La posibilidad de que una cultura nacional emerja modernamente *desde las fuentes convergentes* del país, es también la alternativa mayor de que el Perú configure finalmente su vida histórica como una realización del cambio que la define" (p. 30). As the process of emancipating the majority of the population, introduced by the military junta, was brought to a halt by the conservative powers, Ortega, with *Infierno peruano*, is appealing to this majority to defend that which has been gained so far, and to be mindful of its own power, especially the "lengua de verdad."

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Notes

1. Julio Ortega, *Infierno peruano*. Ms. Subsequent quotations from the play are listed in the text.

2. Mexico: 1978.

3. *La cultura peruana*, p. 23.

4. *Latin American Theatre Review*, 14/1 (Fall 1980), 53.

5. *La cultura peruana*, p. 21.

Teatro peruano por radio

Sara Joffré comunica a los interesados que ha conseguido un espacio en la radio, Teatro Peruano. Tiene una duración de 30 minutos y está dedicado a informar sobre el quehacer teatral en el Perú. Se transmite los sábados a las 19.00 horas por la Radio del Pacífico 640 KH 102.5 MHZ 9.475 KH.