PERU: AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

Essay #2

Brennan W. Fieck
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Anderson and Llosa have fairly similar ideas about what holds a nation's identity together. Anderson contests that a community is formed from shared concerns and values, as well as methods of communication and acting upon those concerns and values. Likewise, Llosa's description of Peru speaks of media holding popular interest throughout the nation (and occasionally beyond), but he also discusses subcultures within the nation that fragment it further, in some respects in direct contradiction with Anderson's description of emergent states. At their most basic level, any society is defined primarily by a distinction that can be drawn between its constituents and those that lay outside its bounds. Simply put: a society may be loosely understood as a concept of "us" and "them". Anderson outlines several mechanisms that served to sequester the proto-South American communities from one another and the world at large, as well as bind them internally into a national identity.

Firstly, Spain's holdings in the Americas became disjoint from her over the course of roughly three hundred years - funnily enough effected largely by Spain's own policies. Intriguingly, many of the modern South American nations overlay administrative divisions of the old Spanish American Empire[1]. The boundaries thereof were originally somewhat arbitrary, but soon changed shape to match natural barriers, political impetus, and economic practicality. This had the effect of constraining the political career of those with such aspirations. They could change postings and positions, but remained largely encapsulated; unable to "climb the corporate ladder".

Furthermore, in addition to the natural barrier posed by the Atlantic Ocean, other obstacles barred upward mobility via relocation to Spain. Without going into too much unrelated detail, it is important to note that with rapid European technological advances and territorial expansion came a certain, pervading attitude toward the indigenous peoples of settled lands. In particular, it was commonly held that the environment (ecological, cultural, etc.) one was born in bore monumental, definitive impact into one's character and ability - both physical and mental. So the mere act of being born on the uncivilized side of the Atlantic forever

marked a *creole*[1] as innately distinct from (inferior to, in many minds) "true Europeans".

Additionally, the period of time leading up to the eventual revolt of the American colonies, and indeed for some years afterward were tumultuous for Europe to say the least. Possibly because of this, Spain undertook aggressive trade regulation policies in the Americas that considerably favored domestic coffers. Specifically, outside of small, local regions, intra-continental trade was prohibited. This facilitated the division of Central and South America into these "market zones"[1] where goods did not need to travel all the way to Spain on their way from producer to consumer. The people living within these "zones" had a natural need of the same general information about daily affairs, being grouped as they were by shared commerce, law, and climate. With the advent of newspaper as a vehicle for this information, the communities of South America were knit together by common interest and common intrigue. Perhaps most interestingly, these communities were formed by an amalgam of conquerer and conquered, with creoles identifying the previously-subjugated and even enslaved indigenous people as fellow countrymen, rather than feeling any connection to Spain.[1]

In Peru, as described by Mario Vargas Llosa, the novellas serve a similar purpose to that of the newspapers Anderson discussed. The chief difference being that the novellas conveyed information that was entertaining rather than strictly pertinent. Like the newspapers, the novellas were widely distributed and consumed by the populace, at one point even drawing the eye of a foreign government. However, it also wouldn't do to consider the 1970's Central and South American nations disconnected in the same ways as they were in the early 1800's. Scripts for the novellas were imported from Cuba[2]- and writers from Bolivia - which indicates a degree of globalization. This is offset, of course, by all the work put in by studios to "translate" common Cuban sayings and references to their rough, Peruvian equivalents. There is also a notion of these other nations being mutually incompatible, on some level. There is a quality to Aunt Julia's humor that Mario describes as specifically "Bolivian"[2].

[1] "A person of (at least theoretically) pure European descent but born in the Americas (and, by later extension, anywhere outside of Europe)."[1]

He also mentions briefly a stereotypical view of Cuba as a tourist trap and crime den (*a la* Hollywood). All of this is to say nothing of Pedro's lengthy and colorful tirades against the entirety of Argentinean existence, which will not be repeated here. It's seems the proverbial window for a single South American state has closed by the time Vargos's novel is set (Anderson partially blames insufficient technology to maintain effective lines of communication for this) and they now see each other as disparate communities; the manner in which they once saw Spain.

Internally to Peru, Mario seems to experience a world that is connected across narrow gaps rent by class and race. In Lima itself there is a startling difference between the restaurants, coffee shops and movie theaters frequented by him and his friends and the abject poverty researched and detailed in novella form by Pedro for some of his plots. He paints imagery of "grown men and women... paw[ing] through piles of filth" in their efforts to procure food. It can be difficult to reconcile this with the capital of a nation, particularly a capital with the aforementioned amenities held commonplace. Of course, this is a fictional artwork embedded within a fictional artwork, so some embellishment could reasonably be expected - despite the novel's heavy basis in Mario Vargas Llosa's personal life.

Peru in the '70s also appeared to have suffered from some ingrained racist tendencies (not entirely surprising, given the era). In the novel, a mayor, a mayor's wife, and a (fictional) police officer find very casual use for the word "sambo," which today would be considered rather offensive[2]. It also seems that either by choice or necessity, ethnic minority groups tend to form exclusive communities. This is made most obvious by the exploration of the tiny villages surrounding Chincha by Mario and his wedding party. In Chincha itself, it would seem that anyone of importance to the story was of an un-noteworthy, likely common ethnicity (presumably Latino), but in the smaller outlying villages the wedding party only encountered people who were black or mestizos. One mayor commented that it was highly unusual for a "white couple [to] come to get married in this godforsaken village"[2], further implying a

[2]To the best of this white, middle-class, American male's understanding.

general lack of association between ethnicities.

Both Anderson and Llosa describe a system of mass-media binding together groups of people, causing them to have a common identity. However, where Anderson asserted that creoles and natives saw each other as countrymen - or at least that creoles did more so than they thought of Spain as their country - in Mario's experience there was much disparity between the different ethnicities. Of course, this was nowhere near enough to fragment the nation; neither racial nor class tensions were violent (excepting the Shining Path, which was guided by a political agenda). The groups still shared interest in novellas and information about the world they lived in.

It's important that an anthropologist's analysis of a system coincide well with the story of someone living in it. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* is a work of fiction, but draws significant interest from the life of a Peruvian. Even if this were not the case, it was set in Peru and written by a man who experienced Peru, so the novel ought to reflect in some way what Peru is like. Or at the very least what someone in Peru thinks of life in Peru, however subjective that may be. In this case, Anderson's description of the importance of communication holds up well, and it was likely not his intention to discuss internal fragmentation in any great detail, so it seems his analysis is plausible. Of course, he did give limitations of technology available to use for communications. He may however, be neglecting other important factors. Once independence has been won Spain no longer stood as a common foe, and it becomes not unusual at all for a Bolivian man to hate all of Argentina with every fiber of his being. Or for communities to naturally separate due to a sense of racial or socio-economic identity.

Bibliography

[1] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991

[2] Vargas Llosa, Mario. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. Editorial Seix Barral, S.A., Spain, 1977