

# Learning from the past: never again political violence in schools

A school abandoned by the State in its precarious conditions can be kidnapped and to be used for an authoritarian, violent and dogmatic culture. The way public school was used by the Shining Path in the internal armed conflict is not a thing of the past. Reflect on its weaknesses and insecurity - which is not only material but also cultural and pedagogical - is vital to have a stronger public school that educates in democratic citizenship.

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**T**he school is often thought to be as a privileged place of building citizenship and coexistence. During the internal armed conflict in the country, in certain places and circumstances, the school was, however, used as part of the military and terrorist strategy of the Shining Path. How to explain the vulnerability of an institution that we believe, rightly, as a symbol of modernity and citizenship? What happened to our school? What is still going on? These questions are essential if we are to avoid repeating things and return to totalitarian groups use it for evil purposes.

For farmers that in early twentieth century formed the majority of Peru, the school was the great goal, the way by which their children would stop being poor and despi-

sed like them, become "someone" in the country. What in other countries - Mexico, for example - was the result of an asserted state policy, in Peru it was conquered step by step, through the efforts of fathers and mothers building schools from town to town, in the field and in the city, pressing the State to receive educational services. Tenacity and sacrifice are perhaps the great qualities of so many families who put all their hopes for change and social mobility in the school.

Despite great educators such as Jose Antonio Encinas, who in the early twentieth century proposed a different school, in the process of expansion of education, the school has not been generally of good quality. In areas where native languages prevail, the school did not speak - not even now - the language of children. And the fathers and mothers have no choice: accept the abandonment of their language as an apparently necessary cost of learning Spanish. And they end up assuming the dominant discourse for which access to knowledge contain-

ned in books means neglecting their ancestral knowledge. Authoritarian methods of teaching go hand in hand with this linguistic and cultural imposition.

This seems to be the inevitable way to “progress” understood as integration into the national society, albeit in subordinate conditions. Thus, despite the many achievements of the twentieth century, many are also the limitations of an education that, in the process of expansion does not meet a lot of promises. People seek progress for their children, but for most the appropriation of school knowledge is still very partial, if not superficial, urging them to put aside their, apparently, useless ancient culture.

Not that there have not been many efforts to change this. Thanks to dedicated teachers, intellectual pioneers, fundamental policy changes, something is changing. But as a society, we are still dragging our complacency ballasts in the exacerbation of differences and in our desire to assert social hierarchies based in the old colonial ties and a hidden racism. Under which frustrations, rebellion and violence are still simmering.

So, we are all convinced that the school will change our destinies and our children will advance, but the school we have - and what is worse, the one we are imagining as ideal - is still the old school, authoritarian, repeating and ineffective. And that is the school that Shining Path found and used easily for its own purposes.

Summarizing her assessment of literacy materials commonly used in state schools from a diagnosis of 1993, Cecilia Thorne would say that the best seller in Peru was the book *Coquito*, the teacher's favorite, because it taught efficiently reading without leading to reading comprehension, which was not really necessary in the schooling process. A few years later, the PISA international test placed us last among the Latin American countries in reading comprehension.

Long ago, Gonzalo Portocarrero and Patricia Oliart showed that teachers of Peru did not believe in the image of the country that proposed the old school. They had developed, however, the “critical point” of Peru, in correspondence with the classist idea in vogue in the 70's. In this context, the school was seen as an instrument of domination, and authority that teachers sought to impose on it was not supported by the force of their own conviction. With weak educational tools aimed at a simple imposition of school knowledge, and without the conviction of the legitimacy of the underlying ideology, teachers were helpless. The answers ranged from the imposition of discipline by itself and the simple neglect,

back and forth between the two. To combat this trend, there were also many successful stories, samples of the enormous creativity of male and female Peruvian teachers. But without government support, and the suspicions of bureaucracy breathing their necks, these responses had clear limits.

In that context Shining Path emerged. Abimael Guzman was able to operate a type of pedagogy that had nothing else to offer: the pedagogy of repetition, the “memorizing” of ideas until they come into the minds as thoughtless speeches repeated ad nauseam. Based on the many frustrations stands a speech reduced

to a simplistic point that explains everything clearly and without doubt in the name of “Science”. It is the fascination of the word itself, validated and of which direct reference is violent action. The terrorist character of Shining Path derives not only from its actions, but that they have been supported by a deep fear: the one who is not with them is against the people's cause, history, natural evolution of matter. The discourse is imposed by force based on supposed evidence: all violence is justified because we are making the revolution. It thus imposes a totalitarian pedagogy which is difficult to escape because it relies on the failed authoritarian pedagogy that carries the “red light” of the new Sun that lights Shining Path revolution.

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Back to the early 80's, the education reform of the 70's has just been dismantled. In the context of a military government, the reform had a resolutely modern vision of the country and education. Among other central things it criticized repetitive education and sought to develop a critical view in students. But politicians were scared of these changes and everything returned to an authoritarian, conservative and inefficient education. It is also the time of the expansion of education, including university, in which dogmatic thinking usually prevails. Science is then confused with absolute truth. Shining Path would take this trend to its highest and most irrational expression.

In this context, and as part of its military strategy, Shining Path was able to use schools for personal gain. Rural schools were key points for the party to report and move around the country, especially in their slogan of going "from the countryside to the city" and for that Shining Path had contingents of young graduates from the Faculty of Education. They also learned to take advantage of corruption in bureaucratic agencies (the USE - Education Service Units – of that time) to place their members in rural schools that suited them. In the classroom, every teacher has ample room to develop their own ideas. But, except in the "liberated zones", Shining Path teachers were careful to be very explicit, but rather mediocre teachers who were often repeating the lessons of the books. The relationship with young people was mostly an opportunity to invite them to other activities, particularly the "popular schools" which were places of indoctrination that worked precisely with the described pedagogy of "memorizing" simplistic formulas of the idea of revolution efficiently. The notebooks found show that clarity and accuracy many teachers, no doubt, would have envied for their own formal classes in school; opposite, of course, to a democratic citizenship education.

Shining Path found frustrated young people doubtful about their future through the education they had been receiving. They were offered an overly simplistic discourse which was said to be "science", proved by the success of actions.

The other side of this logic of revenge was the sense of power young people felt whose experiences had been in contempt for not having anything in society. Now, however, they were very powerful as part of armed groups to whom all feared, and sometimes even teachers who had been mistreated were subjugated. Bringing goods round to their houses is another significant element in order to understand the enthusiasm of these adolescents.

Faced with the onslaught of Shining Path in the schools, the trend from the State and the politicians was trying to militarize schools. For some, the pre-military instruction was the way. Fortunately good sense prevailed: in the context of the growth of Shining Path and the discrediting of the State among the young, what a militarization of the schools could get was to train future cadres for Shining Path. With the recent capture of "Comrade Artemio" we have learned, in that sense, the fond memories he had of his experience in the Army. REgarding this process, we should read more the VCR (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) Final Report and the work of Carlos Ivan Degregori.

This is not a thing of the past. While there have been changes in some structural conditions that fueled the potential growth of Shining Path, they have not disappeared. Social gaps and discrimination are still marked in the country. Education remains in many respects, authoritative and repetitive, and does not form democratic citizens. Neglecting public schools by the State is particularly serious. Indirect privatization is taking place in schools because public schools are not given the necessary resources, with the result of the increase of private schools, as seen in Lima. Consequently, in relation to the education of various socio-economic sectors gaps have been widening. And if education remains poor quality and does not teach students to think for themselves, at some point the risk that a political group use education again as an instrument, as Shining Path did, remains very high. It is not an imaginary risk: we know of the great activity of teacher groups close to Shining Path right now. 🇵🇪