

'Dogmatism and fanaticism are enemies of liberty; -An Analysis with reference to the works *'The War of the End of the World'* and *'The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta'*, by Maria Vargas Llosa

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Abstract

Mario Vargas Llosa was devoted to socialist causes and admired the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s and early 1960s. In the broadest sense, he is a political journalist, and who frequently expressed his views on political events, literature, culture, and the arts are a fixture of this region's intellectual life. He eventually realized that armed revolution was not a viable solution to Latin America's socioeconomic problems, and that gradual reform within a functioning democratic polity was the only way to achieve social justice. During the 1980s, he became personally involved in political activism, eventually running for Peruvian president in the 1990 elections. Vargas Llosa adopted Che's revolutionary strategy “did not work anywhere,” and “thousands of young people adopted it and attempted to put it into practice horrifically sacrificed themselves and opened the doors of their countries to cruel military tyrannies.” This shift in Vargas Llosa's political and social thinking was most forcefully expressed in his two major novels published in the early 1980s: *The War of the End of the World* (*La Guerra del Fin del Mundo* [(1981) 1984]) and *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (*Historia de Mayta* [(1984) 1986b]). Both of these novels deals with ideological opponents' inability to understand their opponents' points of view in different ways. *The War of the End of the World* is a sprawling novel with a large cast of characters that can be read on many levels.

Key words: Modernity, Military tyrannies, Post war, Historical, Political Activism, Revolution, Authoritarianism, Myopia.

Introduction

Mario Vargas Llosa, one of the best living novelists globally, was recently given the 2010 Nobel Prize in Literature. This is the latest among many prestigious awards and prizes that recognize his long and successful writing career. However, he is more than just a great novelist in the Spanish-speaking world. He is a public intellectual in the fullest meaning of the term, and his regularly expressed opinions on political events, literature, culture, and the arts are a fixture of this region's intellectual life. His writing is always witty and sophisticated. Furthermore, In a specific point of view, it is considered as a classical liberal. Indeed, he is undoubtedly the most prominent expositor of this point of view writing in Spanish today.

The Young Writer as a Left-Winger

It wasn't always like this. Indeed, given his current prominence as a spokesman for classical liberalism, it is easy to forget that Vargas Llosa was a typical “man of the left” when he was young. Like most intellectuals of the 1950s and early 1960s, he was deeply committed to left-wing causes and admired the Cuban Revolution. This ideological stance was partly influenced by the prevailing intellectual climate at the time, particularly in France, where he spent his formative years as a struggling young writer. A strong dislike of authority was also a factor because authoritarianism in Latin America is often linked to right-wing regimes.

However, he eventually realized that the armed revolution was not a viable option for improving social conditions in Latin America and that gradual reform within a functioning democratic polity was the only way to achieve social justice. Because of this, he became more and more interested in the things that make a democratic society work well.

It was not a purely intellectual or academic interest. During the 1980s, he became personally involved in political activism, eventually running for Peruvian president in the 1990 elections. Alberto Fujimori defeated him and later imposed one of the most brutal and corrupt dictatorships in the country's history. However, Peru's loss was the world's gain because, due to this experience, Vargas Llosa essentially withdrew from active political militancy, and his literary output has continued unabated since then. He has written a steady stream of books and essays. His

list of works includes a remarkable political memoir (Vargas Llosa, 1993) that describes the ups and downs of his political campaign in painstaking detail.

The gap between his early beliefs and his current convictions is exemplified by two opposing assessments of a “canonical” text of the revolutionary left, Che Guevara's “Diary”: “If the Latin American revolution proceeds in the manner proposed by Che, following the stages that he envisioned, the Diary will be an extraordinary document, a historical account of the continent's most difficult and heroic moment,” he wrote in 1968. Even if the revolution fails, the diary will live on as a testament to the most generous and daring individual adventure ever attempted in Latin America “(reprinted in Vargas Llosa 1986a, 214, my translation). That was back then. After twenty-five years, Vargas Llosa concluded that Che's revolutionary strategy “did not work anywhere” and that “thousands of young people who adopted it and attempted to put it into practice [ended up] tragically sacrificing themselves and opening the doors of their countries to cruel military tyrannies.” Instead of providing solutions, Che's ideas and example “contributed more than anything to undermine the democratic culture and to establish in Third World universities, trade unions, and political parties contempt for elections, pluralism, formal liberties, tolerance, and human rights as incompatible with authentic social justice.” This has delayed Latin America's political development by at least two decades “(1996, 295).

Meeting Latin American Reality

Vargas Llosa's narrative work most aggressively expressed this shift in his political and social thought in two major novels written in the early 1980s: *The War of the End of the World* (*La Guerra del Fin del Mundo* [(1981) 1984]) and *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (*Historia de Mayta* [(1984) 1986b]). Both of these novels deal, in different ways, with myopia that causes ideological opponents to be unable to understand their opponents' points of view. As Vargas Llosa explained later (in a comment on *Mayta*), he started to realize that all ideologies are lies that make problems worse instead of helping to solve them:

Many young people, many intellectuals, many avant-garde politicians were using ideology, were using these political ideas that presumed to describe reality . . . and were, in fact, adding to reality a purely imaginary world. It seemed to me strange that this fiction . . . was a major source of violence and brutality in Latin America; that these sometimes elaborate and com-

plex ideological constructions in which one society was described and then another ideal society was also described as a goal to be reached through revolution . . . were, in fact, a mechanism that was destroying our societies and creating major obstacles to real progress. (1991, 149–50)

Before *The War of the End of the World*, Vargas Llosa's fictional works were set in Peru, his native country. He frequently stated that he was unable to write about any other location. He now proved everyone wrong by writing what many consider his greatest work of fiction, a book he has described as “the author's favorite of his novels” (1991, 123). It is the story of a real event, a peasant uprising in northeastern Brazil during the late nineteenth century, led by a charismatic prophet known as Antonio Conselheiro (the Counselor), who began his career as a wandering preacher in the arid and drought-stricken province of Bah'a, repairing churches, tending cemeteries, and teaching his distinctive version of Catholic fundamentalism. Political changes in Brazil's far-flung power centers, like the end of the monarchy and the start of a republic in 1889, would have far-reaching effects on the people who lived in the backcountry, causing horror and disaster on a scale that is hard to imagine.

The clash of two opposing worldviews initiated the tragedy: Conselheiro and his traditionalist followers felt threatened by the onslaught of modernizing reforms enacted by the progressive elites who now ruled the new republic. The republic had, among other things, separated church and state and instituted civil marriage “as if a sacrament created by God were not enough” ([1981] 1984, 20). It also proposed a census and introduced a new and alien set of weights and measures (the metric system). The latter measure was the final straw, according to the Conselheiro, because it was designed to allow the government to identify freedmen to re-chain them. “The Antichrist is abroad in the world; his name is Republic,” he could only conclude (22). Rebellion in the name of legitimate authority (the monarchy) was thus justified, and the Conselheiro's supporters proceeded to burn the government's mandates, refused to pay taxes, and gathered at the former plantation of Canudos to prepare for the government's assault. The insurgents successfully repelled three military expeditions sent to put them down. The uprising was eventually put down, but only after a fourth expedition armed with heavy artillery besieged Canudos for two months. Thousands of people were slaughtered.

The treatment of this story by Vargas Llosa is a fictionalization of a famous account of the rebellion written by Euclides da Cunha (1892–1944), a journalist who accompanied the fourth and final expedition. According to Vargas Llosa's interpretation of these events, their significance for our time lies in demonstrating the destructive power of fanaticism. The Conselheiro, who sees a vast conspiracy to eliminate the last remnant of true believers in the Blessed Jesus, is a fanatic. But so are his main opponents, most notably the commander of the third expedition, Colonel Moreira Cesar, who believes the peasant uprising is a ruse and part of a larger plot to restore the monarchy by reactionary landlords and British agents. As he tells the conservative landlord, Baron de Can Abrava, “objectively, these people [the Canudos peasants] are the instruments of those who, like yourself, have accepted the Republic to betray it” (217).

Because they [Brazil's progressive intellectuals] couldn't understand what was going on,” Vargas Llosa later explained, “They did what all intellectuals do when they don't understand something: they invented a theory.” The monarchists were the true perpetrators of the rebellion. And England was also to blame because it was the republic's “natural foe” (1991, 128). “What fascinated me about the Canudos phenomenon was how these ideologies, which were completely immune to direct experience, managed to blind those two parts of Brazilian society and bring them to the point of murdering each other in this way?” “I was fascinated by this because it was a phenomenon that we were experiencing in Latin America at the time, those unbridgeable divisions between social groups caused mostly by ideological and political fictions.”

The addition of Galileo Gall, an expatriate European radical who seeks to make common cause with the rebels, adds a third foreign element to Vargas Llosa's deadly brew of confusion and misunderstanding in *The War of the End of the World*. He despises religion as a modern free thinker. Still, he sees rebellion as a pro-revolutionary force that should be encouraged and, if possible, guided: “Those poor devils represent the most worthwhile thing there is on this earth, suffering that rises in rebellion” (249). Gall considers him a scientist, but he can't help but see events through the lens of his ideological preconceptions. In the novel, the character who plays da Cunha is an extremely nearsighted journalist who can only see through thick glasses. Jose

Miguel Oviedo observes,

when the journalist arrives in Canudos and discovers the truth of the matter, so different from what he thought when he wrote his dispatches

from Bahía, he is almost literally blind: his eyeglasses are shattered and he moves around groping among shadows . . . that is, he cannot *see* the physical reality that he alone appears to understand better than anyone. . . . [This depiction] serves to illustrate one of the novel's great themes: the inability to see without ideological lenses and understand reality as a chiaroscuro that defies our rational concepts. The drama of Canudos is the blindness of the human spirit, which refuses to accept that which does not fit into the mold of its convictions or prejudices, inventing [instead] a reality fit to measure. (1982, 650–51, my translation)

Although the issues involved in the Canudos war are long forgotten, Vargas Llosa's observations and intuitions about the distorting lenses of ideology are much more broadly relevant and applicable as anyone who looks at our post-9/11 world should see. There are a lot of similarities between Canudos' story and the rise of Islamic jihadism and the neoconservative response in the US.

The portrayal of Galileo Gall is aimed at today's progressive intelligentsia, and it reflects Vargas Llosa's gradual shift away from the left. Even more symptomatic of this transition is his portrayal of the novel's fourth major character, the aristocratic Baron de Can Abreva. Indeed, some critics argue that Vargas Llosa's treatment of the Baron shows that he has finally made peace with the Latin American elites. In any case, the Baron is, without a doubt, one of the few truly sympathetic characters in the entire story. He appears to be the only one at times.

The Baron felt a shiver down his spine; it was as if the world had taken leave of its reason and blind, irrational beliefs had taken over, “says the most rational and clear-headed person around (246). The Baron's key characteristics are flexibility and willingness to compromise, which are always portrayed optimistically. In the face of the twin fanaticisms that engulfed his world, his pragmatism sounds like the voice of sweet reason: “We must make our peace,” he tells an associate. “Let us not allow our Republic to become what so many other Latin American republics have become: a grotesque witches' sabbath of chaos, military uprisings, corruption, and demagoguery” (349). He is not hopeful, however, and he realizes that the events he is witnessing are a foreboding of things to come:

“We're at war,” Gall says, “and every weapon counts.”

“Every weapon counts,” [the baron] repeated softly. “That is a precise definition of the times we’re living in, of the twentieth century that will soon be upon us, Mr. Gall. I’m not surprised that those madmen think that the end of the world has come.” (250)

The War of the End of the World is a large, multilayered novel with a large cast of characters that can be read on multiple levels. It can be read as a meditation on the clash of modernity and backwardness; after all, the protagonist is rebelling against the very concept of progress. However, it can also be read as a rejection of a false dichotomy that afflicted Latin America throughout the twentieth century: revolutionary violence versus military repression. Vargas Llosa believed that neither of these approaches would solve Latin America's problems. At a more fundamental level, the novel calls for tolerance and a rejection of all forms of fanaticism and dogmatic belief: “The Baron distinguished that tone of voice.” He heard the tone of absolute certainty, those who are never shaken by doubts “(245).

Vargas Llosa had crossed the threshold of open society when this work was published served as his manifesto.

Making Peace with the Left: Historia de Mayta

Mayta describes the tale of a failed insurrection in a small Peruvian highland town a year before the Cuban Revolution. It is also the story of the narrator's attempt to piece together the history of the insurgency and the background of its leader, Alejandro Mayta, is a romantic, if somewhat inefficient, middle-aged Trotskyite. It's also a chance to think about why the people involved did what they did from a distance of several decades and to show how subjective memory it is.

The narrator is a fictionalized version of Vargas Llosa, and he masterfully adapts the medium of fiction to tell a story about the making of a story. Although the story is structured as an investigation of real events, the investigation's purpose is to gather materials for a fictional version of those same events. The result is the book the reader is currently reading, which is clearly and explicitly a work of fiction. This setup, of course, means that we never know whether the Mayta we are reading about is the “real” Mayta or the “fictional” Mayta (even when we meet the “real” Alejandro Mayta near the end of the story). Malta is a literary tour de force, and as

such, it is worth reading as a study of the possibilities of narrative exploration. It is more than that, though, because it is also a vehicle for the author's (the "real" author's) views on society and the role of ideology.

Although the investigation takes place in Peru in the late 1950s, the narration starts in a dark and violent version of Peru in the early 1980s. Things were bad enough in Peru at the time: a debt crisis, raging inflation, and rogue terrorist groups detonating bombs and murdering at random. The novel's fictional Peru is, if anything, in even worse shape, as the narrator makes abundantly clear. The novel begins and ends with images of Lima, the capital city, as a massive garbage dump: "The spectacle of misery was once limited exclusively to the slums, then it spread downtown, and now it is the common property of the entire city, even the most exclusive residential neighborhood" ([1984] 1986b, 4). People, I suppose, throw it out their windows, resigned to the fact that no city garbage truck will ever come to pick it up. In a nutshell, Peru is in big trouble. The question is what caused this dire situation?

Now we know that Vargas Llosa, had abandoned the old Marxist explanations by the time he wrote this novel. Mayta and his colleagues, despite their good intentions, were misled by a preliminary diagnosis of their country's ills. The novel depicts the 1950s leftist cliques as clueless and irrelevant but harmless enough, and the doctrinal squabbles in which Mayta engages as ridiculous but not particularly dangerous. When a member of a rival Marxist party mocks Mayta's splinter group as "twenty-odd Peruvian Trots," Mayta responds, "Actually, there are only seven of us" (152).

Nonetheless, as the story progresses, it is established that the underlying premise shared by all of these groups, the notion that revolutionary violence is the only solution to the country's problems, has been disastrous for Peru and Latin America in general. Mayta's attempted insurgency was a dismal failure. Still, by establishing a precedent for the use of violence, "it charted the process that has resulted in what we are all living through now" (59). Again "the message is that ideology is an illusion that ultimately leads to catastrophe" (Martin 1987, 224).

Vargas Llosa is open and honest about his sense of personal responsibility for the ideological delusions he once held. This personal apology can be seen, for example, in the following interview:

[Raymond] Williams: What about that young Peruvian intellectual I

remember from 1966, that Mario Vargas Llosa who publicly supported guerilla movements as the possibility of change for Peru? How do you see that Vargas Llosa now?

Vargas Llosa: Well, I was totally engulfed in this collective enthusiasm that the Cuban Revolution had aroused among us. That was really the situation. And yes, I clearly recognize my own responsibility. The problem is that in Peru at that time it was impossible to imagine that this concept of violence as vehicle for social change could lead twenty years later to a phenomenon such as Shining Path. This is abstract violence, blind terror. Consequently, if you still believe that violence is a solution, you must accept blind terror. There are intellectuals and artists in Peru who are supporting violence. (Williams 1987, 205)

The Knight of Errant Liberal Imagination

Vargas Llosa credits much of his shift in perspective to the influence of Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, both of whom he began to read and study seriously in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of the things he likes most about Berlin is that he doesn't believe people who say that they have the final answers to the world's problems.

A constant in Western thought is the belief that one true answer exists for every human problem, and that once we find this answer, then all others must be rejected as mistaken. A complementary idea, as old as this one, is that most noble and inspiring ideas justice, freedom, peace, pleasure, and so on are compatible with one another. For Isaiah Berlin, these two beliefs are false, and many of the tragedies that have befallen humanity can be laid at their doorstep. From this skeptical base, Berlin produced a number of powerful and original arguments in favor of freedom of choice and ideological pluralism. (Vargas Llosa 2008, 139)

In the case of Popper, a famous analysis of him by Vargas Llosa begins with a strong statement: "Truth, for Karl Popper, is not discovered: it is invented" (2008, 160). Even allowing

for “poetic license,” this statement appears to be an extreme formulation of what is, in fact, a very complex and nuanced theory, despite Vargas Llosa's usual elegance. This essay says that Popper is less interesting than what it says about Vargas Llosa. “Popper's theory of knowledge is the best philosophical justification for the ethical value that most identifies democratic culture: tolerance,” writes Vargas Llosa. If there are no absolute and eternal truths and the only way for knowledge to grow is through making mistakes and fixing them, we should all realize that our truths might not be right and that what we think is our opponents' mistakes might be right.

Conclusion

Thus, in Vargas Llosa's worldview, both Berlinean skepticism and Popperian uncertainty serve as antidotes to dogmatism and fanaticism, the two major enemies of liberty. The struggle against dogma and fundamentalism is a major theme in his literary work and an important component of every one of his intellectual and political commitments. As he stated recently in his Nobel lecture, Mario Vargas Llosa was dubbed “the errant knight of the liberal imagination” (Martin 1987). It's encouraging to know that the liberal tradition in Spanish letters is still alive and well. It's also heartening to know that the Swedish Academy has finally paid tribute to a true literary giant.

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