

DANGER, FULFILLMENT, AND RESPONSIBILITY IN A VIOLENCE-PLAGUED SOCIETY

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Something was not right about the bustling and vibrant market district of Huancayo, the commercial heart of the central Andean highlands of Peru. I had been away for several days, and my spirits usually soared when I returned to Huancayo's busy streets. Its streets teemed with *ambulantes* (street vendors) selling nearly every type of product and offering almost any imaginable service. Despite the dire material conditions of most *ambulantes* and the economic crisis and political violence that gripped Peru in the late 1980s, the colors, sounds, and smells of the market were infectious. I knew many *ambulantes* and savored the warmth with which they enveloped me. Although the streets appeared as crowded as always today, the air was dense with tension.

When I turned the corner to Mantaro Street, I was relieved to see my *comadre* (relative through baptism), "Mamita" Quispe Colonio.¹ Her stand shimmered as the high-sierra sun reflected off a colorful display of tomatoes, peppers, onions, limes, and other fresh produce. We greeted one another with an embrace, but Mamita held me more tightly and longer than usual, her weatherworn face more somber than I recalled. She pushed the thin and worn cushion on which she had been seated to her side and patted it, indicating that I should join in her morning routine of peddling vegetables to the consumers hurrying by.

Sitting down, I asked Mamita about her morning sales. "*Mala, muy baja*," she answered. Sales for everyone were down. Certainly the national economy was in deep crisis as Peru was ostracized from the international financial community. It was also embroiled in a brutal civil war that was especially severe in the highlands. But then she pointed diagonally across the street to an empty stand. A tragedy had befallen the *compañera* who usually sold low-cost manufactured items: toilet paper, shoelaces, toothpaste, and thread. During my absence her *compañera's* two young children had pulled out a package stashed at an otherwise unoccupied stand. The package had exploded, killing the children as their mother and other *ambulantes* looked on.

This tragedy occurred in 1987, while I was conducting fieldwork for my dissertation on the process of economic informalization in Latin America, drawing on case studies of street commerce in seven Peruvian cities (Figure 1). Lamentably, the tragedy was not out of the ordinary at the time. Unwittingly, I found myself conducting fieldwork among those who were living within a "low-intensity" conflict. In little time I was convinced that a painstakingly devised research methodology was inadequate to capture what I had elected to study.

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