

Silence as a result of human insecurity: sequels of the internal war in Peru*

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Summary

Based on the tens of thousands of interviews the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation on the internal war in Peru since 1980 (CTR) elaborated an analysis of the psychosocial sequels of the conflict. We find that one of the main sequels is the silence that the war imposed and continues imposing. How to enhance freedom in a postwar situation? This is an ample question, but one of the facets of such an objective is to overcome oppressive silence.

Silence is a complex fact, and whereas it can be an expression of freedom, and an expression of freedom-enhancing activities it can also be the result of oppression and an aspect of human suffering. Sometimes the frontiers are not clear at all. The social and individual, the external and the internal elements interact differently according to the kind of experience, to the context and to the agents involved. The report establishes that oppressive silence is one of the main results of the fear and the distrust created by the armed conflict. In this paper, we recapitulate and present different kinds and sides of the silence such conflict imposed upon all sides. We propose the following distinctions that we hope will be useful to attack the problem in a practical way:

Silence to avoid further individual or family suffering, not to be blamed for what the individual or the family thinks could but did not do, not to be stigmatized by the family and society, to hide resentment, and the inner desire for more domestic or social violence. Silence searched through anonymity. Defensive, socially protective silences, silence with a purpose, instrumental silence we could say.

Silence of humiliations and loss of dignity suffered, of identity and of culture, of political ideas or religious beliefs, of truth about what happened. The first ones are more difficult to control psychologically and manage. Silence of the social silence when the war was taking place is a key political and moral issue because it expresses the enormous spiritual distance between social groups in Peru, and particularly the prevalence of ethnic discrimination.

Silence with the children, with the family, with the dead, specially for lack of due mourning when they are counted among the disappeared and even more when they are not even among those counted as such or when are rightly or wrongly considered terrorists or, simply, are among the defeated. But also the silence of the torturers and killers with all their relatives, and society. , then, to lack of parents, brothers and sisters, of power to change things, lack of social cohesion at the local level; and more deeply into the human self, to lack of a minimum peace of mind, and of the capacity to make sense out of the suffering resulting from killings and torture. Individual silence due to social neglect, to the stigmatized social place, particularly of the sexually violated women, and of widowed, also of the originals from specific regions (Ayacucho). Social and intimate landscapes interact in complex and variable ways.

We have to stress upon some of the above silences may be the result of the inability to decipher the message emerging from his or her suffering and that overwhelms the capacity to name and express the unbearable. This is traumatic silence, and the most difficult to overcome.

The CTR, particularly through public audiences, but also with the nine-volume detailed report, and many public declarations allowed the sincere expression of grief and some partial end of such silence.

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Introduction

Many sequels of any war are human development-reducing factors, both in the immediate and long term. Suffering and fear generally reduce human development.¹ The individual silence emerging from traumatic experiences of pain and violence is a manifestation of lack freedom, and multiplies it in society. The freedom to express oneself, particularly to express the most intimate feelings, is at the foundations of many other freedoms. In this short paper we want to summarize the consequences of the internal war in Peru since 1980, and present in greater detail one of them: the difficulty to communicate the experience of terror and humiliation suffered by hundreds of thousands of individuals and communities.

I.- A short summary of the internal war

In May 18, 1980, after more than eleven years of military dictatorship, Peru held general elections. That same day was the moment chosen by the Communist Party of Peru (“Shining Path”) of a Maoist orientation to start a war. They destroyed the ballot boxes in an extremely small town up in the highlands. This is representative of one characteristics of the conflict: it was mostly in that part of the country that was and still is of no interest to the “establishment”, and to many citizens in the biggest cities, in the coastal relatively most developed regions of the country. To many it was a war in some “other” country. In this sense, it was a silent war.

Among many interesting characteristics of the war, perhaps the most important aspect for our purposes here is that it was purposely designed to concentrate the worst of the violence in the civilian population. Initial advances in a loosely controlled territory and the ruthlessness of the reaction by the Peruvian Armed Forces (AF) led to a terrible counterreaction by the Shining Path (SP) against a population that was not convinced of the communist message, and was always in danger of being lost for the revolutionary cause.

¹ “Political violence altered seriously the development of the individuals” (VIII 256)

Following a well known Maoist rural guerrilla strategy, the SP killed many small town authorities, storeowners, small landowners and peasants, many of them corrupt, or abusive, but also democratically elected, and created in a very short time what was shown to be a rather artificial and weak “new power”, social and political. All that ended up inciting a reaction of the security forces that attacked as easy and as massively the population to kill the new leadership and all those that protected or were suspect of protecting them. That was not, therefore, a war between armed people confronting in the open or even hiding to each other but attacking mainly non-civilian population. Most of the massive episodes of military violence and terror were against unarmed people. That this was planned by the SP is absolutely clear; it was also part of the official discourse to the militants by Guzman, their leader.²

The social prestige of educated young people was a key element in the initiation of the war. Education was the main tool for social promotion and differentiation in the Peruvian highlands, and it became important because most of the initial militants of the SP were relatively well educated teachers and university students who were returning to their small localities to create the “power vacuum” and to install a “new power”.³ More generally, the internal conflicts and the abuses of power in the rural areas, the neglect by the State and the prestige of the recently returned educated youth were some of the key elements explaining the uprising of the population against the relatively wealthy but mostly still poor landowners and local authorities in the miserable Peruvian highlands.⁴ But a “New State”, and new social relations could not be created in a territory that had already experienced a massive outflow of landowners and on top of that a quite radical agrarian reform in the previous decade. Land structure was characterized by small plots, mainly composed by *minifundia*. Once some small redistribution of goods and cattle took place, life followed as usual with the added difficulty coming from the restrictions imposed by the SP to commerce. Furthermore, geographically speaking, there was no densely populated place that could be isolated militarily; no place to hide in a region

² Expressions as: “Crossing the river of blood”, “One million dead will be needed”, “keep your life on the tip of your fingers”, and many others were very common.

³ The summary of the characteristics of the war are found in the Vol. I of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Peru. The detailed account in the Vol. II-VII.

⁴ Many provinces in the highlands have infant mortality rates similar to the average of many sub Saharan countries.

where there are very few trees.⁵ The result was a competition of cruelty against the local populations that, in the end, took side with the Armed Forces that could stay close to defend them against the permanently mobilized SP. Consequences depend on the type of conflict and this was particularly damaging.⁶

In Peruvian history, long term conflicts have been rare. Sequels depend on duration also. Why did this war lasted for so long?⁷ First, it was a complete surprise and was not taken seriously by the successive governments. Another factor was that the SP did not depend on any external power or source of supplies. Third, the social base of the militants was ideologically well prepared, and many of them radicalized members of other leftist parties that had a quite extensive presence in all the Peruvian territory, and particularly in the provincial cities. Fourth, the State replicated with great cruelty, as the SP wanted and planned, “confirming” the analysis produced by Guzman about the moral nature of the power structure in Peru, and empowering ideologically to the militants. The “debt crisis” during the 80s, the most prolonged, and perhaps the deepest in Latin America was also a factor. An urban society concentrated in the effort to react to an extremely profound economic crisis was not interested in what was happening in the highlands. Traditional racism contributed to that lack of interest and to the absence of democratically deliberated policies against the rebels.

II.- Many sequels⁸

A conflict of such characteristics had many effects. We are going to use the definition of sequels presented by the TRC that understands sequels as “all the damaging effects on the life and the community caused by actions of violence, in that the structural, physical, social and psychological conditions of collective life as well as the physical

⁵ It was more populated and communicated than the China that inspired Guzman. (VIII 48)

⁶ It is considered that in contemporary Latin America only the Guatemalan conflict was more terrible against the indigenous population.

⁷ This is a question asked by the Report. We take some of the factors presented there. (VIII 40-46)

⁸ Different schools in the world of psychologists would phrase many if not most of our sentences in a different, and a technical, way that we are not able to. Perhaps, some of the psychologists would discard various elements, collage others in different ways. However, we hope, our point is made.

integrity of its members were destroyed, broken up and injured either temporarily or permanently.⁹

The TRC explored in greater detail the psycho-social, the socio-political and the socio-economic sequels. The complexity of any analysis of the sequels is great because of, several reasons; at least, due to the difficulty to capture the elements and depth of each one. It also stems from the fact that the three are interrelated, from the difficulty to detect the end or the mutation in time of the immediate and original effects, and from the multiplier social effect of the direct and immediate consequences that are not easy to capture in any analysis.

Some of the first of those sequels, specifically that of silence, will be analyzed in greater detail in the next section. Among the ones at the individual level we can distinguish here: a) fear that remains to this days due to the feeling that a new upsurge of the conflict is still possible; b) distrust and the isolation following the weakening of the bonds at the communal and even family level; c) abandonment and helplessness that resolves quite often in frustration and lack of hope; d) confusion that impedes explanations, and prolongs the difficulty to make sense of the experience; e) feelings of guilt resulting from many decisions that are perceived as costly in terms of suffering to others; f) negation trying not to know what happened; g) sadness deriving in emptiness, and lack of energy to participate in social life; h) humiliation imposed upon centuries old humiliations, and a loss of the sense of dignity; i) hate and resentment, both quite dangerous for those that live with those suffering them; h) illness reflecting inner sufferings; i) loss of cherished goals in life and frustration are also among the many sequels that have been presented as open and frankly as possible to the TRC in Peru.¹⁰ All these have produced in different combinations a profound impact in hundreds of thousand lives.

At the family level, we find many social sequels that have psychological consequences that are also common to many wars. Among them, fragmentation, violence,

⁹ (VIII 183) For this Report and the analysis of the consequences, it took into account, among others, the following sources: the testimonies compiled, stories recorded by the interviewers, focal groups, workshops on more in-depth studies that were part of the data base, the findings of the TRC, reports from the regional offices. It also took into account other activities that the TRC used to gather additional information such as the public hearings, exhumations, working documents that were commissioned for researching the problem." (VIII, 183)

orphanhood, loss of one member of the married couple, disappeared members, lack of mourning, prolonged life in jails have been mentioned many times in the interviews.

The socio-political sequels concentrate on the structure of government at the local and communal level, and the main consequences are divided by the Report in three components. At the communal level, the displacement and resettlement of the population has been very important due to the weakening of the links of the population to the land. To the decades old existing migration, the war added very strong motives to abandon the towns. The report stresses a second effect: the lack of norms and the increase in daily violence at the local level. The breaking down of the existing social norms, and the absence of new ones replacing them, resulted in the expansion of delinquency and gang formation in the cities most affected by the war. In the third place, the war exacerbated the traditional, and many times, subtle conflicts between communities, and also between families, and neighbors many times for small plots of land. The initial actions against the locally powerful individuals by the SP, and the arbitrariness of the AF in the appointment of new authorities in the territory dominated by them allowed the surge of centuries old claims, and also of the violence between local towns, and between neighbors. The organization of the self-defense groups by the AF contributed to the retreat of the SP but also to many atrocities committed by those groups, and to widespread impunity.

The killings of political authorities was massive in the regions where there was a concentration of the war. Approximately 2,267 authorities and social leaders were killed or are disappeared.¹¹ Many new ones were installed by the AF against their will. Local social participation in the political sphere was also destroyed by the military approach of both the SP and the AF.

The socio-economic sequels included in the Report are related to the impact on “human capital”, agricultural land, cattle, and other goods, and also to the institutional base of the productive activity.¹² Human capital in the regions has been seriously affected by the displacement and the migratory process. Most of the victims (dead and disappeared) were men between 18 and 34 years age. Massive displacements also

¹⁰ This list, based on the Report, is taken from Tovar and Bazán (2004)

¹¹ The whole country has around 1.900 districts.

reduced the population in the most affected provinces. In spite of the still large birth rates, the Economically Active Population in the whole Department of Ayacucho diminished from 154 thousand in 1981 to 131 thousand in 1993.¹³ Out of the 22,507 victims reported by direct witnesses, 73% were active in the market.

In terms of the communal institutions, distrust is a new feature. Traditional collective arrangements (*ayni and minka*)¹⁴ to repair the infrastructure, cultivate the land and other tasks were replaced by strong individualism¹⁵ that affects negatively above all to widows and orphans.¹⁶ Trade was disrupted and many traders could not go to the countryside. In general, if many of those most affected provinces were stagnant, the war accelerated their decay, and some progressive towns lost perspective.

III.- Silence as a sequel of horror and humiliation

Based on the more than twenty thousand interviews the Truth and Reconciliation Commission elaborated an analysis of the psycho-social consequences of the conflict. We find there that one of the main sequels is the silence that the war imposed and continues imposing on many of those affected directly and indirectly by the violence of those years.

Silence is a complex fact, and whereas it can be an expression of freedom, and an expression of freedom-enhancing activities it can also be the result of fear and oppression, as well as an aspect of the suffering experienced. Sometimes the frontiers among those silences are not clear at all. The social and the individual, the external and the intimate elements interact differently according to the type of experience, of the context, and of the agents involved. Silence includes not saying but also not asking.¹⁷

The report interprets that oppressive silence as one of the main results of two factors: the fear and the distrust created by the horror during the conflict. “Fear and distrust generated silence”.¹⁸

¹² (VIII 184-5)

¹³ (VIII 324)

¹⁴ Reciprocity among families and collective work for the community.

¹⁵ (VIII 343)

¹⁶ (VIII 344)

¹⁷ (VIII 290) Roman notes indicate quotations that are in Spanish, and not presented to the 4th Conference on the Capability Approach.

¹⁸ (VIII 199)

Fear was general. “During the time of the violence, fear was the more generalized feeling. After being a personal and subjective experience converted itself in a reality shared by all, transcending the sphere of the private, and becoming a collective experience and a social climate.”¹⁹ According to the Report: “A decisive factor of the traumatic character of such experiences has been the imposition of silence.”²⁰ In this part, we recapitulate and organize the kinds or aspects of silence such conflict imposed.

Even though they juxtapose in many cases, and each particular silence can be viewed from most or all of those perspectives we are going to present, we propose the following classification in order to evaluate practical forms of overcoming it:

1.- Protective silence, *silence to*

We can distinguish some silences that are consciously protective. One of the main reasons to keep silent is to avoid further individual or family suffering, intended to protect oneself or to others. Many expressions of this silence have been presented.²¹ It has been common to keep silent when you do not want to inform to those you consider your enemies. Ideological, religious reasons strengthen the tortured to limits sometimes unimaginable. This may be a relatively “easy” form of silence; it has a deliberated purpose, it is, generally, conscious. The consequences of such silence, its cost for the individual and the relatives and neighbors may be, however, quite high. Killings and torture have resulted too often from this type of silence.

Silence to hide, searched through anonymity has been very common and quite massive, and it implies some greater or lesser loss of identity.²² This search includes many of those that had to migrate to the cities.²³

More individually traumatic silences tend to be, for instance, those resulting from the need not to be blamed for what the individual or the family thinks you could but did not do. Guilt feelings lead to silence.²⁴ Silence to avoid shame is also widespread.²⁵

¹⁹ (VIII 188)

²⁰ (VIII 187)

²¹ (VIII 282)

²² (VIII 242)

²³ (VIII 250)

²⁴ (VIII 238)

Another common source of silence is the attempt not to be stigmatized by the family and society. This has happened more commonly with women who suffered sexual violation,²⁶ widows,²⁷ and also orphans that are seen as symbols of something that tries to be forgotten. The stigmatized include most of those that are borne in some region where the violence was greater or where most of the defeated lived or live. In Peru, that region is Ayacucho.²⁸ One of the famous peasant communities because they killed 6 newsmen (Uchuraccay) had to silence the identity of their dead. That was one way of ensuring their own anonymity, ... and their already restricted freedom. Also the anonymity of those family members or friends that stayed alive.²⁹

Some declared that they preferred staying silent in order to hide their own resentment³⁰, and their inner desire for more domestic or social violence.³¹

These are, mainly, cases of defensive, socially protective silences; silence with a purpose, instrumental silence we could say.

2.- What is silenced? *Silence of*

The content of what is silenced is sometimes clear enough. That is the case of some information, of the truth about what happened in some circumstance.³² The hiding the information about one's own identity or culture may be particularly damaging in certain circumstances; for instance, when one is not conscious of such an act. The identity may take the form of political ideas³³ or religious beliefs.

The reaction to suffering, fear and humiliation has been a main source of silence, and a more complex and traumatic one. Silence after having killed their own children has been recently reported.³⁴ Silence of humiliations and loss of dignity suffered has been quite extensive. The psychological mistreatment, nudity, insult while being tortured, or

²⁵ (VIII 199)

²⁶ (VIII 244, 245, 250, 258)

²⁷ (VIII 209)

²⁸ (VIII 229)

²⁹ (VIII 230)

³⁰ (VIII 267, 274)

³¹ (VIII 196)

³² (VIII 290)

³³ (VIII 250, 258)

³⁴ (VIII 214)

sexually violated is important in itself.³⁵ Culture and identity have been and still are in many cases the matter of the insulting or degrading. The relation between being “indian” and being treated “worse than animals” was permanent. Most of the soldiers and policemen were quite difficult to differentiate from the ones they mistreated.

The women were affected in special ways. However, most of them just dead in mass killings, executed or murdered, but many arrested, tortured, kidnapped, disappeared, and many also sexually violated.³⁶ The AF were the responsible of most of the violations.³⁷ Women with children had to “proof” to their neighbors they were raped.³⁸ All this has been an important source of silence. “If there a subject capable of producing muteness is sexual violation” says one researcher of the process.³⁹

Individual and collective silence of the clamorous social silence when the war was taking place is a key political and moral issue in the Report because it expresses the enormous social and emotional distance between social groups in Peru, and particularly the prevalence of ethnic discrimination. The media es particularly responsible for this type of silence.

3.- With whom?: *silence with*

Silence with the enemy, with the torturer, to hide information was normal, at least up to certain point.⁴⁰ It was the last refuge of dignity. In too many cases, silence did not imply lack of words; many had to declare and sign what they were told by the interrogator.

Some silences hurt more than others according to the kind of “other” is missed or affected by them. In many cases there has been and still it is common the silence for lack of parents, brothers and sisters you would trust; mostly because they are dead. Dreams, visions are common. Silence with your own children, and with the family is particularly damaging, very extensive, and still, after so many years, a fact. The time dimension is

³⁵ (VIII 250)

³⁶ (VIII 79)

³⁷ (VIII 244)

³⁸ (VIII 199)

³⁹ (VIII 244) There are compilations, essays and reflections about the way women suffered violence during those years. See, for instance: Varias (2002) and Varios (2003).

important in this respect. Many times, individuals have to take some time looking for the right interlocutor, and then find the right moment. In any case, it is not easy to inform about close relatives disappeared, or in jail, and even less to explain what happened and why. One may think that those that could help most in principle will not understand, will not be capable of processing the information, and be ready to help.

It is also common the silence with their wives and friends of those that tortured and killed. The silence of the old men and women that survived and have remained alone at home in the peasant communities has also been reported.⁴¹

The lack of social cohesion at the local level is another factor that emerges very often. Social fragmentation has been widespread.⁴² Distrust is very common in the localities that have survived the war, and where some were on one side and others in the opposite, or some in both depending on circumstances.⁴³ Many times that psychological and social distance impedes the return to collective forms of work.⁴⁴

A very common type of silence where so many have been disappeared and killed is with the dead. People want to “communicate” with them offering a decent burial. A type of silence that has emerged quite often is that resulting from lack of due mourning when they are counted among the disappeared and even more when they are not even among those counted as such or when are rightly or wrongly considered terrorists or, simply, are among the defeated.⁴⁵

4.- Deepest silences. ...*silence*...

Still many are intimately afraid. Some of the most difficult experiences have created more traumatic types of silence. These are deeper forms of silence; they are installed into the human self. And such silences are in themselves damaging. For instance, silence for lack of memory about what happened.⁴⁶ To stay silent for lack of

⁴⁰ (VIII 290)

⁴¹ (VIII 265)

⁴² (VIII 219, 228, 256)

⁴³ (VIII 212)

⁴⁴ (VIII 199)

⁴⁵ (VIII 212, 230, 233-5)

⁴⁶ (VIII 278)

energy, for lack of liveliness has been reported.⁴⁷ Also silence for lack of a minimum peace of mind, for the uneasiness that fills the days. Silence inside is mentioned as “vacuum”.⁴⁸ More intellectually, silence because of the difficulty to make sense out of the suffering resulting from witnessing killings and torture.⁴⁹ Lack of meaning leads to deep silence.⁵⁰

Individual silence due to social neglect,⁵¹ to the stigmatized social place, many times internalized, particularly of the sexually violated women, and of widowed, or of the originals from specific regions.⁵² Social and intimate landscapes interact to produce such silences. Some referred to situations where there were “too many thoughts”, and others to the “lack of thinking”.⁵³ Both can coexist.

When the depth of the damage suffered is great it cannot be expressed.⁵⁴ There are no words or symbols that can do that. Contradictory signal impede the expression of the suffering.⁵⁵ “The great majority of the individuals that have suffered due to the violence has been continuously exposed to contradictory messages that are impossible to be processed without putting in question their psychological equilibrium. The denial of many of the facts by the authorities, the lack of consciousness about their responsibility, the hiding of the guilty of violations, the impunity that wanted to silence and forget everything as if nothing had happened, the neglect and ignorance by the rest of society of what they lived through and continue living today clashes disconcertingly with the certainty and forcefulness of their injuries, with the intensity of their crying, of their indignation. To thousands of individuals, the society, the institutions and the State have refused the first word of consolation, that is the recognition of their pain, of their losses.”⁵⁶

⁴⁷ (VIII 278-9)

⁴⁸ (VIII 289)

⁴⁹ (VIII 204, 218)

⁵⁰ (VIII 288)

⁵¹ That point is permanently stressed by the President and other members of the Commission. There were, however, some reactions. (I 40, 44, 50; III 314, 361, 421; IV 286;)

⁵² (VIII 229)

⁵³ (VIII 277)

⁵⁴ (VIII 261, 269)

⁵⁵ (VIII 288-9)

⁵⁶ (VIII 288-9)

IV.- Concluding

Violence creates silence in many different ways. Any war produces many different silences without pretending it. But it is also true that the silence we have presented has been a cultivated silence by all the active parties in the conflict. The SP was specially keen stressing their power over the minds of their victims. Many times torture included de smashing of the brain in front of everybody, cutting the tongue, destroying the eyes, excising the ears.⁵⁷ Many times this was the way the SP killed those that were considered capable of informing the AF.⁵⁸ Not only the SP practiced this kind of torture and killings. Also the peasants organized in “rondas” with the backing of the AF.⁵⁹ Small children did not escape this fate.⁶⁰ Animals and torturers shared such practice. Destroying the capacity to think was the objective of all types of terrorists, and also the result of terror and panic.⁶¹ The “eyes and ears” of the SP were everywhere⁶², in the rocks, in the air, in nature.⁶³ As one declared referring to the SP: “They had a maximum law: be blind, be mute, be lame.”⁶⁴

The entries we have proposed to the silence resulting from the internal war in Peru could be used to establish different fronts of attack. The purposeful and protective silence can be reduced eliminating most of the reasons nurturing such purposes. Eliminate or reduce the reasons for being afraid about the security of others. The effectiveness of individual rights would reduce the need to lie, or to hide. Just registering the newborn in the highlands would be a huge step toward social recognition and respect. The facts being silenced should not happen again. The silence that results from the fragmentation of the family can be confronted with policies towards their reunification. Finding the graves scattered around peasant communities is also extremely important. The deepest one has an obvious psychological content that in many cases

⁵⁷ (VIII 205)

⁵⁸ (VIII 248)

⁵⁹ (VIII 227)

⁶⁰ (VIII 253)

⁶¹ (VIII 194)

⁶² (VIII 317)

⁶³ (VIII 317)

⁶⁴ (VIII 313)

requires direct treatment. The recognition of the suffering has to be expressed economically, politically and social to reduce the damage done. But these are part of a different topic; a more policy oriented one.

The task is not an easy one. The Report of the TRC is being ignored by most of the social, and economic establishment of the country. The main political parties are also ignoring it. The secular tradition of neglect toward the indigenous people living in the highlands is coming back after the few months when the TRC was inserting through public audiences the experience of the affected in the public media. The poor, the “non-existent”⁶⁵ are becoming again invisible. It appears as if the war did not “teach” any lesson to most of the Peruvian elites, who felt that that was not their affair.⁶⁶ The great divide in Peruvian society, the distance between different cultures is still there, and with it the lack of freedom of expression.

⁶⁵ The non-existen, the insignificant for society inspired important theological work in Latin America .The relation between the “development as freedom” in the Capability Approach and the “development as liberation” in such theology are analyzed in a short working paper (2002) and in my recent small book. (2004)

⁶⁶ That is the conclusion of Macher (2004)

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