

Interview with Victor Toro Ramirez

Clyde Lanford Smith

LS: How is it that you became an activist for social justice? How old were you and how did you begin? Where are you from, in terms of geography and social class? (Tell us about your parents.)

VT: Well, I was born within a social and family group that was itself within the center of injustice, of social and class discrimination. I am the son of Sebastian Toro, an old miner and canal-worker who died tired and sick during the dictatorship; I was unable to go to his funeral because I lived in exile and was without documentation.

My mother, Rosa Ramirez, was an admirable home-maker, illiterate and visionary, self-instructed in the rearing of many, many children, my siblings. She also died during the dictatorship with much pain and sadness. Again, I was unable to attend her funeral and burial, for the same reasons, but my daughter Rosita did attend.

My origins are the Cocinera Mine in the city of Ovalle, in the North Chico in the old province of Miguel Enriquez, a large extension of land decorated geographically by the Cordillera of the Andes and by the ocean from Arica to Magallanes.

I am a worker “maestro chasquilla y pat’e perro” (master of everything with dog feet—someone who knows a lot about a lot and travels far and wide), as we say in Chile; although I was born in the Cocinera Mine, I was reared in Punta de Teatinos, to the north of La Serena, a little fishing port without a name, that we can call the House of the Rock, a little town with two dozen inhabitants near the ocean. So that, since I was little, I divided my time between the work of my father, the mine-worker, and my love



for the beach and the sea, fisherman and diver. During the high tides I divided my time between agricultural work in the valley and the ups and downs of the iron mines of Tofo, the Romeral, and Juan Soldado, all minerals excavated and sold by foreign companies such as the Anglo Company. One could say that I was born in the social struggle and in the struggle for life. I was able to study only a little, until second grade, so that I began doing very hard work as a very young child. I found myself within the social struggle, the class struggle, exploitation, the union, and with the political “what to do” of the working class.

At 17 years old I had advanced much in the knowledge acquired by my parents and Mama Rosa, of their friends, comrades at work and in the union. I always accompanied my father to union meetings, strikes and protests. I lived and observed the clandestine activities of the workers and social-strugglers in the times of the Regime of President Gabriel Gonzales Videla, a president from La Serena, who betrayed the Communists and who established a law called the “Law of Badness” or “Democracy Defense Law,” and that really meant a repression and violation of social, union and human rights from the years of the 1950’s onward.

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So it was that I began my militancy in the Socialist Youth, the PS—the political party of Salvador Allende.

In 1962, I did my military service in the extreme north of Chile (Arica), in the Infantry Regiment Number 4. It was a year of training and learning concerning the art of arms and of war in an army that was already known as the armed branch of the land-owners, the rich, and the exploiters. It was a very beneficial year for my development.

As soon as I finished my military service I returned where my parents lived in La Compañía Alta, on the other side of the river that separates La Serena from the two Compañías. I quickly then returned north to Iquique and again became part of the Socialist Youth, working in the fishing industry—Leperva. I became active in the union, was converted into a leader of the lowest level (base-leader) and, as a member of the Socialist Youth, was nominated a delegate to the National Youth Congress held in Santiago and from this moment on stayed to live in the capital. I took turns working in textiles, metal-work, and mineral work in Las Condes. Because of my committed activism I ended up unemployed. In the end I worked as a cargo-carrier in the Vega Central Market, one of the few ways I could find to subsist.

During the decade of the sixties many things happened in the world. The Cuban Revolution triumphed. The war in Vietnam advanced. And, in Latin America, the guerillas and the sound of machine gun fire reached the receptive ears of the revolutionaries and the peoples of the continent. So it is that Salvador Allende was defeated overwhelmingly in the elections of 1964, and the “Revolution of Liberty” triumphed in Chile, a proposal of the Alliance for Progress pushed by the United States, put into practice by the Chilean Christian Democrats, eternal boot-lickers of the USA.

In this situation Chile fell into a socio-political crisis and the PS became fragmented. Finally, I abandoned this party and joined several tendencies and revolutionary organizations which admired and were in solidarity with the Cuban and the Vietnamese Revolutions. So it was that in 1965 I participated, together with Dr. Miguel Enriquez and

the Worker Cotario Blets in the Foundation of MIR, the “Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria de Chile” (the Revolutionary Left Movement of Chile), an organization that proposed in Chile to bring about a successful social revolution, construct the Popular Power and advance the Socialist Revolution, establishing a popular government of the workers and campesinos, whose struggle was meant to be a class war that would inevitably be an armed struggle, for which reason it was important to prepare for the foreseen.

The MIR became part of history, acquiring its roots in the people, campesino and Mapuche, in the poor of the countryside and the city, in the populations and the poor neighborhoods, in the schools and the universities. When the electoral triumph of Salvador Allende occurred in 1970, the MIR was not part of the Popular Unity party, but it helped President Salvador Allende in all his initiatives that favored the workers and the advancement toward socialism. Our differences were shown by our two different programs, strategies and proposals—the Way of Peace toward Socialism vs. the program of an Uninterrupted Socialist Revolution, armed in the Popular Power with an Army of the Poor and Marginalized People.

So here it would be good to explore the thesis and analysis of the MIR. The Christian-Democratic Government (presidential period from 1964 to 1970) awakened great hope in large popular sectors. Between 1966 and 1967, it was favored by the increment in the prices of exported goods in the world market, for an important flow of loans and inversions from the USA, and by the growth of the industrial sectors. Both the workers and the petit-bourgeoisie entered into a period of calm. It seemed that the Christian Democrats had inaugurated a new epoch and were called upon to reign for many years. This was the epoch of the Alliance for Progress, an Imperialism tactic to brake the impetus of the revolution and popular rebellion in the entire continent.

The Left entered into a state of retreat and not knowing itself. Contradictions between strategic options resurfaced. The Communist Party, in its XII Congress in 1965, reaffirmed the strategy of a peaceful path, defining the legal mobilization and

elections as the central element of that path. In the first phase of the Christian-Democratic government this party adopted a policy of critical help that created confusion in the Left. The PS, in its Congress of 1965, negated the electoral path as the strategy to gain power, thus rescuing the legitimacy and inevitability of violent revolution, counseled about the limited character of peaceful and legal forms of struggle, and proposed the unity of the workers to bring about a socialist revolution. However, these revolutionary propositions were never put into practice.

It was in this political context that the MIR came about, whose founding congress happened in Santiago the 15th of August of 1965. The MIR formed from the fusion of several tendencies, among them the small revolutionary organizations: the Marxist Revolutionary Vanguard (VRM) and the Popular Socialist Party (PSP). These organizations, in their time, had been created by the convergence of [splinter] groups coming from the Communist Party (of Trotskyist origin, pro-China or influenced by the Cuban Revolution), of radicalized union militants, anarchists, and revolutionary Christians. Among these was a group of young socialist militants who, led by Miguel Enriquez, had marginalized themselves in 1964 from the PS in order to integrate themselves within the VRM.

But more important than the origin of its components, the foundation of the MIR expressed the resurgence of a revolutionary current after three decades of absolute imperialism on the part of the reformist politicians in the popular Chilean movement. And for the revolutionary movement in Chile to become revitalized it was necessary that there be profound social and political conditions to push it. In the decade of the 60's there matured in our country the crisis of the system of domination led by the dependent industrial bourgeois, that coinciding with the historic initiative of the neo-liberal North-American crisis in Latin America. These are the processes that question the existence of an institutionalized economic, social and political order of which the Left was a functional part, those who pushed sectors of these leftist parties to overcome obsolete political concepts that had transformed into an obstructionist factor in the

revolutionary struggle. The conservatism of these popular parties; the deep roots of the reformist conceptions made the renovation of these parties very difficult and forced, dialectically, the beginning of a new revolutionary movement that radically broke with the programmatic and strategic concepts that had guided the Left for decades.

The party was conceived of as an independent political organization. At the national level, it did not immediately put forth the constitution of any political front. In the international, it rescued its autonomy in order to resolve its own national politic, showing its readiness to establish fraternal relations with the revolutionary parties worldwide, and called to: "Form a unified movement of the revolutionary groups and parties of Latin America with the goal to coordinate and accelerate the continental revolutionary process." A later initiative was to create the JCR-Cono Sur, consisting of the Tupamaros of Uruguay, the ELN of Bolivia, the PRT-ERP of Argentina and our MIR of Miguel Enriquez.

All of this is only to remember the original proposal of the MIR, that gave rise to so many struggles and battles afterward, in the pre-revolutionary period and during the government of Salvador Allende, during the long years of the military dictatorship and now in the coordination Christian-Democrat and Social-Democrat of the new administrators of the local capitalism, of imperialism and of the world financial capitalism.

LS: What happened with you and your work when the CIA and Pinochet took control of your country?

VT: On the 11th of September of 1973, the CIA and the United States, with the approval of the dominant Chilean class, ended the dreams of the Peaceful Way to Socialism of the UP and Salvador Allende. A military coup headed by Pinochet and the armed forces also meant the end of our proposals of revolution and of revolutionary changes, including that of the MIR. We lived from this moment a bloody counter-revolution that put Chile in check. A new economic and social formation, a new Political State Constitution, new values (those of the Empire and of the new neoliberalism), accompanied by a

strong strategy of counter-insurgency and extermination of all the social sectors that expressed socialist, MIRist, Guevarrist, and Communist ideals. This brought us to a profound clandestine existence due to the savage persecution with torture, the unemployment, the assassinations done with impunity, the State-sponsored terrorism, the disappeared, the Nazi-style concentration camps, the centers of clandestine torture and secret services of repression like the DINA-CNI (the Chilean Gestapo). In the end there was established in Chile a Military Dictatorship of Big Monopoly Capital and Pro-Imperialist Finance, with help from the Chicago Boys and the US Military "School of the Americas."

The summary of results are dramatic and savage: 17 years of Pinochet-isms that until our days are like 34, since what we have today in Chile with President Bachelet is the same neo-liberalist economy, the same political constitution of 1980 that we inherited from Pinochet, the same armed forces, the same justice system, the same binominal electoral system (with chosen roles), the same repression system (for example: the repression and jailing today of the People and the Nation Mapuche). To rub it in, the majority of the crimes of Pinochet are still with impunity and the criminals pass by on the streets, without punishment or justice. Pinochet himself died and was never prosecuted for his crimes, terrorism and robbery. The actual Armed Forces of Chile are a nest of Pinochet-lovers, torturers, and assassins of the ex-DINA-CNI, the secret services of the Dictatorship of Pinochet-ism and the State.

I lived clandestinely. Afterward in jail I experienced the most savage torture in different torture centers and concentration camps: Ritoque, Academy of War of the Air Force, Three and Four Alamos, Villa Grimaldi, the DINA and SIFA. Then I was expelled from a concentration camp. They put me in an airplane with a document that was not a Safe Conduct nor a passport but which said: "valid only to leave the country."

This exile, which has continued until these days, has been a martyrdom, pulling up roots from one country to another to avoid the death squads of Pinochet that commanded the sinister DINA-CNI and that even outside of Chile assassinated the ex-

commander in Chief of the same Army, the progressive General Carlos Prat and his wife with a bomb in the streets of Buenos Aires, achieved the terror-bomb assassination of Orlando Letelier and a North-American Citizen a few blocks from the White House in Washington, attempted the assassination of the ex-president of the Senate Bernardo Leyton and his wife in Italy, and were responsible for the kidnappings and killings by Operation Condor of Edgardo Enriquez and Jorge Fuentes in Argentina and Paraguay, and the throwing of 119 young fighters of MIR to the beaches of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. Escaping these repressive conditions is how we arrived undocumented here in the USA, which has much to say, respond and explain concerning all that has occurred to us, the People of Chile.

LS: How is it that you came to live and work in the Bronx?

VT: In 1984 I came to help in the solidarity against the dictator and trying to make myself safe from the persecution that I was suffering at the hands of the secret services of the Pinochet dictatorship, of the DINA-CNI, that looked to assassinate me wherever they could find me. I was part of a list that would be killed if found, even outside of Chile. I traveled through a large part of the USA, passing through the Bronx, as well as through the neighborhoods of Chicago and Los Angeles, Washington and Denver, San Francisco and Texas. The Bronx impressed me with its similarities to the neighborhoods and towns of the Third World. I could hardly believe the extremes that one could see here, the difference between what some had and what others had was day and night.

In the Bronx I saw a neighborhood with the highest indices of school abandonment, children in gangs, drug-addiction and AIDS, unemployment and uncontrolled violence, of everyone against everyone, especially the violence against women and minorities. The police brutality and racial discrimination one saw as in slave times, as if nothing had changed. For that reason I came here. I had to learn and to assist with what I was able, my knowledge as a worker, as a social and political organizer. It was in these times that all the walls and

real socialisms began to fall, but it was a good place to find cover from the repression of Pinochet, become in solidarity with the people in the struggle in Chile and work together with the marginalized and poor people of the South Bronx, a battle for our utopias now coming about in every corner of the world again.

LS: What does your work in the Bronx include?

VT: There near Saint Ann's and 140th Street there was a church with progressive priests, an advanced theater, the Theater of Pregones, groups of Puerto-Rican Independence Leaders, and within itself everything was a complex social movement without a compass. We thought of the idea of "The Peña," we proposed it to the priests and they said, lets go, and in the basement of the church we began to bring together local community garden-singers (singers of "Yardas") and those who were singing in the trains, parks and streets, we began with a variety of events marked in their beginnings for being folkloric and Indigenous and quickly we converted into a multicultural Peña, after that multi-racial and multi-ethnic, rapidly we understood the earth on which we were walking. These Peñas began to multiply. We built upon what we had done in terms of the social as well as the cultural, we put-together a Platform of Common Struggle and so the Peña converted itself into a very complex Movement, ample and representative of the "wants and feelings" of the very poor and marginalized in the neighborhood.

So it was that our struggle amplified to concern itself with problems in health, education, immigration, youth, discrimination, unemployment, and police brutality. Each front functioned as a workshop or a commission that provoked struggles in each sector and we pushed these forward through the Peña: theatrical acts, fairs, festivals, marches, protests, and assemblies that made us into one of the few autonomous organizations, independent of the State, of the Government at all levels. The idea was and is to build a new idea of the political, a new form of organization at the basic level, of the POPULAR POWER, communal and territorial.

LS: Could you tell us a little of your family, please?

VT: Well, I met my companion, Nieves, a long way off, in one of the concentration camps of the dictatorship, in Tres Alamos, but our friendship became deeper after the first years of bitter and repugnant exile. But, this encounter was the best thing that could have happened to me, afterwards Rosita came and after heights and valleys, including of life and of the struggle for life, the three loves are inseparable. Nobody other than the two of them can understand my wanderings, risks and total giving of myself to the struggle for my sisters and brothers of classes, for the poor and marginalized of the earth. All this family group, social and revolutionary in its own way and each one in their way, has much love to share, because without love we cannot gain a single victory in our struggles, nor be fruitful nor happy.

LS: What has your relationship been with Montefiore Medical Center and Albert Einstein College of Medicine?

VT: Definitely, the centers of Montefiore in the Bronx are a blessing, for the services that they bring to the community in terms of health, attention, remedies and sanitation. Every summer we have Health Fairs in the South Bronx streets, and we have always counted on their help and participation, with orientations, attention, and education of the doctors and medical students, a unique type of contribution to our community, and Montefiore has always been present, this is one mission of the Peña that gets larger every time, because there is much more that we can do in this area which is so important, health.

Daily, we find neighbors who are ill, and we bring them to any of the centers of Montefiore and they are attended to without major problems. The community is very grateful. I can feel it in my daily relation with the people in the streets and places where I do my daily work.

Concerning the encounters, classes and expositions we have had in the School of Medicine Albert Einstein, in the classes with doctors and students it has been my honor to be able to speak about the desires and thoughts of our peoples and our struggle. I believe they have been activities of

great use for all (students, doctors, teachers and myself as a community activist). There is always an open ear that will understand that their service and learning should always be with the social world and with the people who need it the most. There have been some initiatives which should multiply at all levels of society, so we can have thousands of doctors like Miguel Enriquez and Ernesto (Che) Guevara.

With respect to my health in the middle of all there is to do, I even forget the pains and complaints. I remember when I left one of the torture centers, after being months without eating adequate meals nor liquids, after suffering the more horrible of tortures, such as being hung from things, electrical current throughout the entire body, blows of all types, simulated firing squad killings, after being almost one year in the condition of a disappeared person, hand-cuffed and blindfolded, when I left this inhuman reality, to enter into another concentration camp where I was able to speak freely and where my family could visit me, well, I could not even walk or hold myself up by myself. I was thin and all bones. I am definitely a survivor returned from the tombs of the dictatorship of Pinochet.

Certainly, I continue to carry with me the results of the tortures, with a spinal column that seems to be an accordion that stretches and comes together with pain, these consequences I will carry with me until the last day of my mission on this earth. The help of all of you has for me been so great, perhaps without your aid I would have been like many of my comrades and friends who passed through the concentration camps, we would all be dead.

LS: What is the actual situation of immigrants in the United States of America?

VT: Immigration is one of the subjects more poorly treated by the former immigrants of this country, by its legislators and by the system. Immigration is nothing more than a sacrificial goat for the politicians and the corruption of the multinational and imperialist domination of this country. The White House's killer bird-men, fenced in for their errors in the Iraq war, its consequences and the

international terrorism that it has produced, use the situation of immigrants for their political agitation meant to cover-up their failure in politics national and international, concerning which both parties of the country act the same, when the dye is cast, as one front. We are part, in this Twenty-First Century, of a state of discrimination and racism; this is shameful for the citizens of this country, who have authorities that they themselves elect.

Concerning Immigration and National Security:

Although by New York law health providers in clinics must offer translational assistance for patients with limited English, 75% of the hospitals in New York City do not give consistent or adequate access to translation. The informal sector of society works in conditions of exploitation with little protection in their labor, and is comprised mostly of persons of color. Of every five immigrants in the city of New York, one is undocumented, and thus forced to work in the informal sector. Ninety-five percent of domestic workers are persons of color, 99% were born outside of the United States and 93% are women. Similar to the above are housing conditions, the application of justice, domestic violence, the Welfare system and the system of wellbeing of the child, the right to vote, etc.

At the national level the situation in all these aspects is dramatic. It is our inheritance from the Bush counter-revolution, with legislation addressing socio-political, economic and immigrant themes, which have demonstrated incapacity and failure. For example we have the last elections where the US people voted against the war and for legislation that favored immigrants, such that the Democrats won both houses of Congress and yet continue giving the go-ahead to the war and negating legislation for unconditional amnesty for the more than 12 million immigrants of whom I am one. Therefore draw your own conclusion: a disastrous and inconsequential politic of the two big political parties of this country. Further, the various proposals of laws before Congress seem to deal more with national security and anti-terrorism than concerning worker immigration. About 300 million persons in the USA would be most affected by these laws and should be concerned about their proposal. When one looks

there is a proposal to build a wall [on the Mexican border] with taxpayer money, limit civil and human rights, pull down achievements of the Magna Carta and rights sacred to the democracy of this country, achieved with blood since the Civil War and the struggle with Martin Luther King, Malcom X, and Rosa Parks. That is why we, the new immigrants, are only a sacrificial goat, in the middle of a crisis that threatens all of US society.

LS: What is the actual situation of the Government of Chile?

VT: Chile passed from a military dictatorship imposed by blood and fire to a parliamentary dictatorship that gets its orders through elections and an institutional system that Pinochet left very well tied-up. All the governments of the Concertación have administered the state and the power in accord with the great capitalist and financial bourgeoisie, the neo-liberalism pro-imperialist of the Chicago Boys, the social economy of the market. The political constitution established by the dictatorship of Pinochet in 1980 is what still rules today in Chile, with patches in back and in front but Pinochet-essence through and through. The FFAA has not had a single change and are a nest of little-Pinochets, torturers, and criminals of the secret services of the dictator, the DINA-CNI. The systems of justice, education, housing, and labor, name it: the Pinochet cityscape is what predominates in the country of the Concertación and the parliamentary dictatorship.

That is why there is a people in struggle, a resistance and revolutionary action of the youth, the poor, and marginalized since the same 1973. The people of Chile have not said their last word. We are seeing it as time passes. We were present at the heroic struggle of the Mapuche People's Nation, more recently at the Penguin revolution of the student youth, the miners, fisher-people and forest-workers. The other Chile of the homeless and of the women--triplely discriminated against and mistreated; the other Chile, silenced and oppressed for 34 years--begins to get on its feet. And it will stand up, history tell us so. Although 100 years pass, the struggle continues. Since the massacre of the Saint

Mary's School in 1907, today in 2008 the struggle of the worker, the campesino, the Mapuche and the entire population led by the rebellious and revolutionary youth continues and will continue.

LS: They have tortured you. But you seem to have tremendous resistance. You are still a man with clarity and energy, it seems that Pinochet could not break your spirit. What motivates your spirit? Why do you continue in the struggle, and how?

VT: Sisters and Brothers, when one's convictions and ideals are true and come from a child of the working class, there is nothing that can beat them. My struggle for justice and equality goes to the end, until the victory, always. Although we fall in the path, others will continue. One must take on the cause of the people and the poor, without asking for anything and with giving everything, living the struggle together with those who are called by history to make the changes and to be the leading class of the revolution, the workers and the poor of the countryside and the city.

LS: Recently, the US Immigration Service arrested you. They put you in the same orange clothes that the people tortured in Abu Ghraib were famously forced to wear. Could you tell us what happened in that experience, the details, and the implications for your life and the life of any immigrant?

VT: On 6 July of 2007, when I was traveling from California to New York in an Amtrak train, when we had just passed the city of Buffalo, in one of the stations, the Immigration service entered the train with dogs producing great alarm and upsetting the English-speaking passengers, asking for papers from everyone and acting especially rude and hateful toward the persons who had Hispanic features or looked as if they were from some other part of the world than the USA. I was among these persons, among them I was traveling and had lived nearly 25 years in this country. Without many questions I was hand-cuffed and forced with blows from the train, then handcuffed to the others and taken to the regional immigration offices, afterwards to the Cayuga jail, where I was stripped and forced to wear

the orange prison jump-suits, which are the same that everyone in the world saw on the prisoners tortured and tied-up in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. This squeezed and cramped all the fibers and vibrations of my body, it took me immediately to sessions of torture and mistreatment that I lived through in Chile, in the torture centers and the concentration camps of Pinochet. It was horrible, I cannot even talk about it and just thinking about and seeing the photos of the prisoners in Guantanamo converted into animals by the authorities of the United States, this has no name. It is pure savageness, a total lack of humanity.

It is not easy to leave this situation again, I don't desire it for anybody. It is better to die than to be taken to a jail in the United States. The year 2008 has to be one of the biggest battles for immigrants. There must be a large protest movement with bases of general amnesty for all immigrants. On 1 May 2008 there must be a national protest of all workers for Amnesty, against the round-ups and to put an end to deportations. In this year the Bushites must leave house, the war in Iraq must stop and the revolution in Latin America must put itself as the order of the day, and this will happen with or without us. If we have the honor and privilege of being in this hour of struggle and in this place, welcome it will be. If not, we will participate wherever we find ourselves. In this struggle to the death against imperialism there are no borders.

LS: For many of us the way you have lived your life is an inspiration that elevates and motivates. Could you please give counsel how other persons can arrive at your spirit of struggle and so better live our lives?

VT: It is very important to feel ourselves owners of the wisdom of our ancestors, the first ones who

populated the world and that as time passed left footprints and examples to rescue. We assume with humility and dignity, with bravery and from anywhere that we are this responsibility. We live it especially within the family group and we act at the height of new challenges to assure the liberty and equality of all humans. No one person is worth more than any other person. All of us who arrive will leave as we arrived, the only thing that we will take with us will be a little fistful of earth. Yes, this is what the persons with big egos and the multimillionaires must know. They and we will carry with us more than a fistful of earth.

That is why in life nobody can put a boot over us. Studying and interpreting the daily changes of social and political happenings, we can help with ideas, organization and in collective, change that which is to us negated. If what is needed for that change to happen is a revolution, rise to it. Jesus Christ was the first in preaching by example and Che followed, we are only their disciples.

Always this struggle will be from the simple to the complete, it will be of generation. After generations the world transitions of one state to others, show that when you struggle with truth and for social justice, one day humanity will be free of the Birds of Prey, of world contamination, of oppression and of inequality, for which I continue dreaming and as legacy I leave to the youth a great mission and homework: continue struggling for socialism of equals and without a state, nor rich nor poor, nor exploited nor exploiters, the Socialism of the Popular Assemblies and of the Popular Power.

And I say with much seriousness and as a challenge to comfort and to the living dead! I am very thankful for the ability to speak and live, that persons listen to me and accept me critically, in a constructive and educational way. Everything else is a gain, but extra.

