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Resocializing Suffering

Neoliberalism, Accusation, and the Sociopolitical Context of Guatemala's New Violence

by

Peter Benson, Edward F. Fischer, and Kedron Thomas

An ethnographic account of the putative shift away from state-sponsored violence and the emergence of new patterns of violence in postwar Guatemala challenges liberal political and moral models that narrowly interpret violence in terms of individual suffering and/or culpability. Such models converge with a resurgence of right-wing political activity. The origins and outcomes of violence are more usefully and accurately conceived in terms of structural and societal conditions. Guatemala's new violence (e.g., crime, gang activity, and vigilantism) is not the chaos of media accounts but a manifestation of enduring legacies of state violence and the social and economic insecurities brought on by structural adjustment policies.

Keywords: *Violence, Structural violence, Neoliberalism, Democracy, Transitional justice, Guatemala*

Anthropologists in Guatemala commonly hear from informants that “things are better now” or “things have improved.” Such statements compare the present with the 36 years of internal armed conflict in which violence and fear became routine aspects of everyday life (Green, 1999; Carmack, 1988). Things have indeed changed. Wide-ranging peace accords signed in 1996 brought a formal end to the conflict and were hailed with grand speeches full of grand promises (Jonas, 2000; Sieder, 1999). Viewed in abstract terms, violence seems to have subsided: the number of deaths and disappearances has decreased, villages are no longer massacred or destroyed, the average income of the country's indigenous Maya population has risen, and average education levels have increased. But peace has proven elusive.

One unpleasant irony of our times is that progress and development often bring with them suffering, inequality, and even violence (Ferguson, 2006; Kleinman, 1999; Sen, 1999). The benefits of globalization touted by proponents of free trade have been accompanied by the intensification of insecurity in vulnerable communities worldwide (McGrew and Poku, 2007). The waning of one kind of violence has sometimes been associated with new kinds of violence or galvanized social residues and collective memories of past traumas and brutalities.¹ It is an understatement to say that Guatemala is still a country

Peter Benson is an assistant professor of anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis. Edward F. Fischer is a professor of anthropology and director of the Center for Latin American and Iberian Studies at Vanderbilt University. Kedron Thomas is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at Harvard University.

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wracked by violence. On a national level, the homicide rate nearly doubled from 2001 to 2006, making Guatemala the second-most-dangerous country in Latin America, after El Salvador (OCAVI, 2006a; 2006b). Guatemala City has become a symbol of urban violence (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004).² On average, 250 people are murdered each month in the capital. Armed robbers attack vehicles on main roads in broad daylight. People who regularly ride public buses (the only mode of transportation available to most) expect to be victimized when they travel. Images of bloody corpses and bullet-ridden cars dominate the mass media. The genuine reality of violence is sensationalized, made into a commodity sold on street corners and on television screens (Moser and Winton, 2002). Guatemala remains a dangerous place, and the question of just who is to blame is the subject of regular conversation.

Foreign embassy reports and the national media emphasize the prominent role of gangs in the new violence and terror (see Moser and Winton, 2002; Winton, 2004). The wide availability of arms in a postwar setting and the demobilization of the military have emboldened armed gangs that control entire neighborhoods in the capital. But it is all too easy to pin the violence on delinquent or highly organized youth (Taussig, 2005). At the same time, while law enforcement presumably hunts drug traffickers and cracks down on heinous crimes, political violence continues apace. Politically motivated (and, perhaps, state-sanctioned) killings continue, as in the 1997 assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera and the campaign-related killings of recent elections. There were 29 killings during the 2003 elections and at least 50 during the 2007 elections, most of local candidates. Yet impunity is the order of the day: only about 1 percent of violent crimes are successfully prosecuted. It is widely believed and credible that the military and law enforcement agencies are tightly connected with drug traffickers and organized crime (Amnesty International, 2006).

Because the new violence is not categorized as *war*, there is the sense that the "something better" promised has been realized (Fischer and Benson, 2005). The very notion of a *postwar* era can have the effect of deflecting attention from the existence of subtler forms of violence and persistent linkages of violence to politics and the state. One link explored in this article is the way the tendency to blame gangs plays into the resurgence of right-wing political activity and the rise to power of former military leaders responsible for "old" violences. This link is vividly seen in widespread support for a politics of the "iron fist" or "strong hand" (*mano dura*) and platforms centered on militarization (i.e., a tough-on-crime-and-delinquency approach) in the 2007 elections. We explore ethnographic dimensions of the way violence works in postwar Guatemala and examine how Mayas in one highland community think and talk about "improvement" in the situation. Our concern is with how Mayas contend with crime, political violence, structural adjustment, experiences of powerlessness, corruption, and other forces that threaten community life and undermine an idea that things have improved. We hope to convey just how staged and insidious "electoral" or "democratic" politics have been in Guatemala in the past few decades (Smith, 1990: 8) while also illuminating the hope for something else that is evident among Mayas and a grudgingly positive commentary about improvement over the days of death squads and genocide.

We find it useful to conceptualize the new violence through the lens of a social theory of violence that has been advanced in medical anthropology. Through useful concepts and keywords such as “social suffering” (Bourdieu et al., 2000; Kleinman, Das, and Lock, 1997; Singer, 2006), “structural violence” (Farmer, 2004; Farmer et al., 2006), “everyday violence” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992), and the “social course” of suffering (Benson, 2008; Kleinman et al., 1995), medical anthropologists have emphasized the systemic constitution of much violence and suffering. Whereas violence is typically thought about in terms of physical harm and responses to it most often seek to praise or blame individual actors or groups—a tendency that Farmer calls “the erosion of social awareness” or “desocialization” (2004: 308)—this literature emphasizes the institutional and structural dimensions of suffering, including the role of markets and governments. One concerted goal has been to “resocialize” violence and suffering by tracing their origins to sociopolitical and economic conditions and by analyzing experiences of violence in the context of everyday social engagements and attitudes. The concepts, although differing in important ways, call attention to three key features of contemporary social life. First, physical and mental health dilemmas, socioeconomic inequities, political oppression, racism, and other forms of domination are often clustered and mutually constitutive. Second, forms of suffering are conditioned by the institutional and political economic organization of a society at a given time, as are responses to suffering (Das and Kleinman, 2001). Third, in modern societies and capitalist economies suffering tends to impact poor and marginalized groups adversely because of the uneven distribution of material, social, and symbolic capital (Farmer, 2003). Anthropologists have highlighted experiences of economic insecurity caused by structural adjustment as a conduit of violent behavior in groups and individuals (e.g., Bourgois, 1995; Godoy, 2002; Klima, 2002; Moodie, 2006). It is our contention that Guatemala’s new violence is a symptom of changes brought about by neoliberal reforms and amplified by residues of trauma from decades of armed conflict. If lasting peace and a robust democratic civil society are to be achieved, then structures that systematically place poor and vulnerable populations such as the indigenous Maya majority and the urban and rural poor in harm’s way will need to be reorganized in ways that address the root causes of violence, including causes found in policies promoted as solutions to violence, poverty, and the country’s other woes.

MARKET REFORMS: A VIEW FROM THE HIGHLANDS

The ethnographic setting for our study is Tecpán, a town of about 10,000 located 80 kilometers west of Guatemala City. Tecpán has a reputation as a progressive and affluent place. In the city proper, about 70 percent of the residents are Kaqchikel Maya. Although the Spanish-speaking ladino minority has historically exerted disproportionate control over local government and commercial institutions, buttressed by racist ideologies and colonial inequalities, Tecpán is home to an exceptionally strong indigenous bourgeoisie that has long supported ethnic consciousness, the value of education, and economic

experimentation. In the 1990s this group became increasingly assertive in local as well as national politics (Fischer and Hendrickson, 2002; Fischer, 2001; Hendrickson, 1995).³ Tecpán itself underwent major cultural changes: a pair of large supermarket-style stores (one now owned by Wal-Mart) opened, the town's handful of telephone lines was expanded to several thousand, Internet cafes and video rental stores opened, and many households began to tap into cable television lines. Foreign fare became commonplace in town and especially popular among youth.

As in neighboring towns, class differentiation and entrepreneurial economic activity in Tecpán have partially been fostered by (or at least emerged in the context of) the aggressive national program of privatization and liberal economic reform and a new attitude toward Maya peoples that arose in the post-war period. Yet opportunities for social mobility and economic advancement have been accompanied by the partial erosion of economic control and security for many people (Smith, 1990). In the countryside, Tecpán has seen a major shift away from traditional *milpa* (corn and beans) agriculture toward nontraditional export crops such as broccoli and snow peas. Farmers have sought to earn extra cash by producing for export markets. While some benefit from export production and see it as compatible with traditional agriculture, family life, and community organizing, most farmers report mixed results. Along with quality-control issues owing to import regulations and inspection in foreign markets, there is the pressure of global competition. Maya farmers have little information about and no control over these forces and are often at the mercy of ruthless local contractors and middlemen. They have sought to mitigate these risks by joining cooperatives and combining export with subsistence production (Benson and Fischer, 2007; Fischer and Benson, 2006; Fischer, 2004; Goldín and Asturias de Barrios, 2001; Goldín, 1996).

Such economic change is also evident in the urban core. Indigenous families in Tecpán have established a vibrant garment industry with roots in the 1960s. Most operations are small-scale, family-owned businesses that sell shirts, pants, and sweaters in the capital and in rural markets. Manufacturers grapple for market share and rightly complain that the Guatemalan state courts foreign capital and puts its own citizens at a competitive disadvantage. Maquiladoras—foreign-owned factories in which brand-name clothing is assembled for export—were welcomed in the 1980s as part of Guatemala's industrialization and liberalization efforts (see Green, 2003; Goldín, 2001; Pérez Sáinz, 1996; Petersen, 1992). Apparel manufacturers fear that the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), implemented in 2006, locks in maquiladoras' dominance of the export market and allows them to take over domestic sales. They claim that maquiladoras drive down prices by selling apparel in Guatemala that was earmarked for export. At the same time, foreign-owned retail chains in the highland region sell imported clothing at lower prices than local producers can sustain. Maya apparel producers have responded to market pressures in numerous ways. Some have created brands based on indigenous symbols, including Maya hieroglyphs and terms from their native Kaqchikel—an entrepreneurial strategy of market differentiation that seeks to capitalize on the revitalization of

indigenous identity in the postwar context. Such producers benefit from computer skills and access to financing to support their ventures. Some have incorporated their businesses as legal entities, a process that requires literacy and knowledge of bureaucratic procedures and therefore is unavailable to many producers (Thomas, 2006). In sum, in both agriculture and apparel, economic production is a powerful means of social and class mobility for Mayas. Yet international and national trade can reinforce or create class hierarchies and cleavages of community and produce significant pressures related to competition. This context of shifting economic practices and mixed outcomes is an important part of the larger picture of insecurities and inequalities that shapes contemporary forms of violence and the way people think about and react to them.

POPULAR PROTEST AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF BLAME

Guatemala has recently seen numerous popular protests over contentious issues from resource exploitation to free trade to democratic process.⁴ In 2006 and 2007, in and around the highland town of San Miguel Ixtahuacán, communities protested the operations of the multinational mining company GoldCorp. The company had cunningly persuaded hundreds of people, many of them illiterate, to sell their lands for a pittance. Eventually local people began to witness the destruction of their ecosystem and experience air and water contamination. They held protests and a public referendum to signal disapproval of the company's presence and demand that it either leave altogether or alter its relationship to local communities and the environment. In early 2007 a handful of indigenous men met with company officials and were told that their demands would not be accepted. The men were apparently attacked by members of the company's private security forces and accused of assaulting its chief, an event that led to further community-level protest. By claiming to be the victim of violence, the company turned popular protest and collective disapproval into a case of individual wrongdoing and criminality. This was a strategic way of setting a precedent for other communities that had conducted municipal referendums and voted against open-pit mining (Velásquez Nimatuj, 2007).⁵

The strategic framing of blame and violence by powerful social actors is a way of accusing less powerful resisters of being undemocratic and achieving the moral high ground on a contested sociopolitical terrain. The flow of criticism is turned on local communities that struggle to advance their own moral and political claims with an eye toward remaking threatening conditions. Something similar happened some years earlier in Tecpán. In June 2002 thousands of residents marched into the municipal center to protest a new property and estate tax passed down as part of structural adjustment programs mandated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The role of collecting and administering the tax was to be devolved from the Ministry of Finance to local municipal governments—a neoliberal approach to improving accountability and transparency while empowering local populations. But this new tax was an added burden for poor agriculturalists from the town's outlying

areas. The protest involved anywhere from 3,000 to 45,000 participants, according to local estimates. Whatever the number, it was a remarkable show of public dissent, something that could not have occurred a decade earlier, given the climate of fear. Not all protesters were there because of the tax; the demonstration was enlivened by a more general spirit of dissent and dissatisfaction with the town's mainly ladino leadership, especially the mayor. "The mayor treated us poorly. We tried to discuss the tax with him," said one man. "We said it was impossible to afford, but he was rude and would not hear our demands."

Marchers carrying banners and documents demanding the mayor's resignation were met in front of his office by a phalanx of local police. Then, as locals recount the event, a youth said to be a gang member hurled a rock through one of the town hall windows. Others followed, and the protest became chaotic. The municipal building, police station, and mayor's home were torched. Police threw tear gas bombs into the crowd, and protesters readily recovered them and returned them to their senders. Protesters used cell phones to provide family members back home with live reports of the action or to contact each other and organize movements on the spot. Some police were stripped naked and beaten and then dragged through the streets. The mayor, protected by bodyguards, fled town as protesters peppered his vehicle with stones and, some said, tried to kill him.

Protest organizers and participants (except perhaps those eager to loot buildings of televisions and appliances) had not wanted the protest to turn violent, but "gang members" were not the only ones rioting, looting, and torching. Protesters tell us that when they approached the mayor's house and demanded an audience, his giving them the cold shoulder provoked a deeply negative response. "That is why the people got angry," one man says. "Many say it was just gangs acting violently. If the mayor treated the protesters badly when they went to see him, they had their reasons for becoming violent."

The category "gang member" functions as something of a scapegoat in contemporary Guatemala. By attributing violence to delinquent youth, people distance themselves from feelings of complicity and resignation. This is especially important in the case of the Tecpán protest given the moral climate that quickly took shape in the national press afterwards. Protesters lamented that the *Prensa Libre* dubbed the event "chaotic" and portrayed the people of Tecpán as undemocratic rabble-rousers. "We were interested in resolving real political issues," said one participant, noticeably upset. "The gangs are to blame, not the protesters. We didn't start the violence in this town; the violence has been here, but we are blamed, and we are the ones who suffer." It is useful to think of gangs as a discursive "limit point," a point, within the communicative sphere of Guatemalan civil society, at which violence becomes explicable (Fischer and Benson, 2006). Here popular feelings of complicity are disavowed while responsibility for violence is attributed to a nebulously defined group.

Locals say that it is dangerous to walk around Tecpán at night because gangs come out looking for victims. Sometimes there are groups of rough-looking teenagers in the town plaza, and spray paint tags increasingly adorn walls around town. We have heard stories about gangs robbing shoppers and vendors on market day. But the lines between gang activity, mischief, and ordinary loitering are blurry and constitute a terrain ripe for anthropological

research. We wonder whether these youth consider themselves to be part of a gang and about the social geography of delinquency, petty crime, and gang membership in Guatemala. What are the territorial contours of gang activity? What is the relationship between space and sociality in the constitution of gangs and perceptions of their presence and threat?⁶ A decade ago domestic violence and petty theft were Tecpán's most pressing crime problems. These days the perception is that danger levels have risen as a result of an influx of gang activity from Guatemala City. Youths have traveled to the capital to look for employment opportunities not available in the highlands, and, as elders and families view the situation, many have returned corrupted. Some people blame the globalization of Western popular culture for bringing images of gangs and delinquency to the highlands. Others blame a breakdown in moral structure, the erosion of families, and a declining work ethic. Blame is an ironic partner of reconciliation in postwar times (Benson, 2004).

Gangs are no doubt real and their presence menacing. On a national level, some estimates put gang membership higher than that of the national police force (Painter, 2007). Gangs have, however, become larger than life, a synecdoche for violence and insecurity writ large. This mythos reflects a shift in the way violence is imagined and talked about in the highlands. A key existential feature of the armed conflict was uncertainty, the experience that things (security, survival, whom to trust) were never clear (Manz, 2004; Sanford, 2004). With the peace process this lack of clarity has given way to a climate of assured accusation and directed blame, even though the sources of the new violence are much less clear than in the past. Such a climate can be politically useful for various actors because directed blame allows people such as *tecpaneco* locals to distance themselves from and come to grips with violence. Blame can also be useful for state actors because it allows culpable governments to scapegoat segments of the population as singularly culpable, limit the legitimate expression of dissent, and moralize against the eruption of violence among disadvantaged groups.

THE LIMITS OF RECONCILIATION

The category "gang member" belies the diversity of intentions and social types that made up the mass protest. The majority of protesters were farmers from outlying hamlets. There were also teachers, curious onlookers, aspirant politicians, restless gang members, and other youth. Remarkably, the protest demonstrates the emergence of new political spaces that people have not entered for nearly a generation because of the climate of fear that characterized the armed conflict and lingered in the 1990s. Though the tax structure that was the protest's target was implemented as scheduled, many protesters regard the protest as a success in having called attention to the force of the indigenous community in Tecpán, its capacity to mobilize, and its critical stance with regard to local corruption and political control.

In the months after the protest, there were town hall "reconciliation" meetings in Chimaltenango (the capital of Tecpán's department) involving the mayor, the protest organizers, and the departmental governor. "We got what we wanted," says one organizer, "a chance at a meeting with the mayor. At

least we got that." "At least" (*por lo menos*) is a term commonly used by protesters to describe the meetings. "The protests didn't work out as planned," says another, "but at least we can sit down with the mayor." In this discourse, the opportunity for having a reconciliation process, whatever its outcome, is put forth as the desired goal even though, as it turns out, the deck was already stacked in favor of the powers that be. Returning to the concept of "limit points," we see that political commentary stops at a certain point ("at least") at which critique comfortably rests and political action is deemed a success, even apart from real evidence that social structures have changed. It is often just such a democratic concession—the idea that people *at least* have a chance to participate in a political process—that, paradoxically, limits the very terms of the freedoms that it purports to enable.

During the meetings, the mayor strategically appropriated the idioms of critique and democratic process that drove the protest. At one meeting he told the protesters, "We are all completely in agreement. You have the right to protest." Then he shifted blame for violence onto the protesters themselves. "But what about those honorable people screaming 'Kill him! Kill him!'" he went on. "I want to work with these honorable people, but I don't want to lose democracy." He said that the outburst of violence on June 10 was contrary to democratic principles of deliberative, rational, and communicative action. By association, so were the protesters. "We too want a dialogue," one of the organizers immediately responded, "but with no direct accusations. When you look at the press, it says we have no law here, there is chaos in Tecpán, the organizers are to blame, there is no difference between what we did and what the gangs do." This man tried to justify the eruption of violence in terms of the mayor's earlier failure to listen to the voice of the people and to distance himself and other participants from the violence that had delegitimized that voice. "The same problems we are discussing here right now, we already met with you about this."

At this point, the mayor interrupted and moved to the center of the hall, insisting that there was nothing he could do about the tax. "The law is the law and the tax is the tax," said the governor, reinforcing the mayor's position. "The law is nice (*bonito*) because it provides the mechanisms for dialogue and equal exchange." Local authorities in Tecpán occupy a "tenuous position between constituent mandates and state authority" (Fischer, 2001: 57). The mayor positioned himself as the victim, insisting that his hands were tied, and this pushed the organizers into an apologetic posture. "We are not here to accuse you," an organizer said. "When we're talking we are on an even level. It is a democratic process." Because the organizers did not want to be blamed (by the mayor or the media) for causing violence, they were forced to take on some of the blame shifted to them by the mayor and his backers.

Discourses and practices of reconciliation are customarily intended to benefit marginalized and victimized groups. Such gestures can also favor established interests when democratic process is strictly framed in terms of harmony, dialogue, and efficiency. Such discourse operates as an exemplary form of hegemony that Nader (1997: 712–715) calls "coercive harmony," a controlling process that eschews scrutiny of the fundamental terms of discourse (e.g., ideals such as harmony and dialogue) and encourages active acceptance by all participants. The mayor acquired a privileged rhetorical footing when

he positioned himself as a victim of undemocratic procedures (namely, violence), while the protesters, if they had not acquiesced to this framing, would have been seen as stubborn and undemocratic. The protester who had been so enthusiastic about the meeting beforehand admitted afterwards, "I am disappointed. The mayor just kept talking about his bad character. Yeah, that's a problem. But we all know that. That's why we protested in the first place. What is he going to do about it? That's my question. Apologies are nice, but so are results."

The reconciliation meetings suggest that the constitution of civil society in Guatemala is not a neutral process in which voices are liberated regardless of subject position and rational communicative action trumps differences of race/ethnicity and social power. It involves the reproduction of varieties of symbolic violence (e.g., coercive harmony) that empower only certain voices and agitate against the expression of opposition if it takes a violent form. This process is seen in the mining incident and the Tecpán protest alike. That people feel powerless and threatened by changes beyond their control is crucial to the context in which violence erupts. The force of the political critique that initially spurred protest was limited by a discourse that equated violence with moral culpability and political incorrectness. In order to save face the protesters had to resort to this very discourse, blaming gangs for the violence even though, on a fundamental level, this was the same idiom of blame that had disadvantaged them during the reconciliation meetings and in media accounts. The practical shortcomings of the reconciliation process reveal a linkage of blame and violence that contributes to an uneven distribution of democratic voice and social power in the postwar period, while a blanket ideology of harmony covers over the foundational differences and exclusions upon which Guatemalan civil society is built. If we are willing to concede that coercive harmony is a mode of symbolic violence partly sponsored and fostered by the state, then we must also admit that structured violence against indigenous communities survives in the postwar era as a legacy of the long history of ethnicized and racialized discrimination in Guatemala.

NEW VIOLENCE AND THE IRON FIST

In the past decade, Guatemala has seen the resurgence of right-wing political activity involving some of the leading culprits of the genocide. Most prominent was the 2003 presidential run of General Efraín Ríos Montt, the former military dictator. In 1989 he founded the hard-line conservative Frente Republicano de Guatemala (Guatemalan Republican Front—FRG) party, and in 1994 he was elected to congress, where he served as majority leader. In 2003 the FRG government (which held the presidency, a majority in congress, and great sway over the judiciary) was troubled by corruption scandals involving hundreds of millions of dollars. Ríos Montt began to campaign for president on a platform of greater security (to combat the wave of crime that had swept the country) and an end to corruption. The legality of his candidacy was in doubt because Article 186 of the Guatemalan Constitution bars those who have participated in coups from being president (a military junta had brought him to power in 1982). On this basis, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal ruled in

June 2003 that he was ineligible to run for president, and this decision was at first upheld by Guatemala's Constitutional Court, but he continued to campaign. On July 24 the campaign organized mass demonstrations that shut down the capital and cost millions in property damage. Thousands of rural supporters were bussed in and armed with machetes, sticks, tires, and gasoline by campaign workers (wearing black ski masks). The throng was directed to target government buildings and private businesses, a number of which were looted. On what became known as "Black Thursday," Ríos Montt announced to the press that he could not control his supporters, that the people had to be heard and their will heeded. In the wake of this event the Constitutional Court reversed its ruling and, citing international accords, decided that retroactively applying the 1985 Constitution to Ríos Montt's 1982 actions would violate his human rights.

The ironies of this decision did not go unnoticed in the international community. Ríos Montt's return to power was sharply criticized by human rights advocates and scholars. Human rights monitors hold him largely responsible for the displacement, torture, and death of tens of thousands of noncombatants during the height of the armed conflict. Because the victims were overwhelmingly rural Mayas, the United Nations Truth Commission declared the violence a case of genocide. But, paradoxically, in 2003 it was poor Maya peasants (i.e., the very targets of his scorched-earth campaign two decades before) who formed the base of Ríos Montt's popular support. Much of this support had to do with the fact that as the majority leader of congress Ríos Montt had cultivated their allegiance by pushing through huge subsidies for fertilizer, increases in the minimum wage, and large payments to those who had served in the notorious army-led civil self-defense patrols of the early 1980s.⁷

In June 2003 the Ríos Montt campaign made a stop in a hamlet on the outskirts of Tecpán. Thousands turned out, many because they had been promised information about the next installment of the payments that the government was promising to former members of the civil patrols. Ríos Montt arrived in a red helicopter, accompanied by firecrackers and campaign songs. During his speech, he railed against corruption and political patronage: "Who does your mayor work for? Who does your congressman work for? Who does the President of the Republic work for? You, that's right. And so why should you have to enter their offices with your head bowed and hat in hand to beg for a little favor? This is wrong. You are their boss." He stood hand in hand with Pedro Palma, a former guerrilla leader, while declaring, "The past is behind us, and we must leave it there. We must move forward. Together." Palma, who had lived for years in the jungle fighting the Guatemalan army, appeared unbothered by the irony of running for congress on the ticket of his former mortal enemy.

But a streak of skepticism, bitterness, and fear has also been evident among rural people. Just a day later, the campaign made an ill-timed stop in Rabinal, a Maya town in the K'iche' region where forensic anthropologists have been excavating clandestine graves and identifying victims' bodies in order to document what happened there during the violence. When Ríos Montt arrived, several bodies were being reburied in marked graves. A group of townspeople arrived at the rally with a coffin painted black and began to jeer at him, and this was followed by a barrage of bottles, sticks, and rocks. After getting

hit on the head with a stone, he retreated to his helicopter holding a handkerchief to his bleeding forehead. Reasoned editorials in the national press highlighted the foolishness of Ríos Montt's Rabinal stop but also condemned the protesters for using tactics of intimidation in a free election. "I don't care what he says," declared a Maya man at the Tecpán rally. "We remember who he is and what he has done. We have suffered enough. I will never vote for him no matter how much money he promises."

In the end, Ríos Montt's vows to end crime and corruption in Guatemala by using overwhelming force did not carry the day. He finished the presidential race in third place.⁸ But his campaign has had an enduring impact. In the 2007 presidential election, security was a dominant buzzword. Leading presidential candidates, including the runner-up Otto Pérez Molina, adopted a "tough-on-crime" platform. They portrayed themselves in stump speeches and on roadside billboards as eager to stamp out violent crime and potentially use coercive power in the process. Pérez Molina, also a former general, garnered 47 percent of the vote. Amidst other candidates focused on security issues—one party promised "*Seguridad Total*" and another "Security, Welfare, Justice"—Pérez Molina's Patriotic party stood out with its promise of an "iron fist." In conversations with a number of Mayas, we found support for the Patriotic party even among people well aware of Pérez Molina's role during the armed conflict. (He was a commander in the Guatemalan intelligence agency in the department of El Quiché, where some of the worst atrocities took place.) "We have no other choice," asserted a 32-year-old Maya woman. "As a *capitalina* [a resident of Guatemala City] I support whichever candidate will clean up the streets and bring security."

If "a culture of fear" exists in Guatemalan political life as Piero Gleijeses (1988: 4) has said, then it need not be understood as an enduring national psychological characteristic rooted in the conquest. Here it seems a strategic part of a political platform specially framed to overcome the seeming paradoxes of resurgent military leadership in the highlands and to marshal political support among unlikely allies. The winner of the 2007 election, Álvaro Colom, ran on a left-center platform that included social programs to end corruption as part of a broader view of the meaning of security. His party now faces the difficult task of addressing the conditions of structural violence that pervade Guatemalan society, which have been largely ignored in right-wing political discourse, the mass media, and everyday talk. The Patriotic party's campaign propaganda encouraged citizens to believe that targeting gangs and delinquents was the key to bringing order. Again, gangs are being singled out and blamed for many of Guatemala's problems, as they offer a quick and sensible explanation for violence.

HISTORICIZING VIOLENCE AND POPULAR CONSERVATISM

People assaulted on their daily bus commute experience that violence as caused by a gang member or some other delinquent individual, but to understand such events and develop effective social responses to them it may be advisable to focus instead on underlying systemic conditions that may not be immediately "ethnographically visible" (to use Farmer's terms) when

violence occurs. Guatemala's new violence cannot be adequately understood apart from important historical and societal factors. Against the backdrop of decades of counterinsurgency warfare and embodied memories of trauma and terror, popular support for an "iron-fist" platform looks less like categorical support for a new militarized state and more like an understandable desire no longer to live with insecurity.

Thinking about the paradoxes of violence and popular conservatism in contemporary Guatemala, Angelina Snodgrass Godoy (2002: 641) examines the case of vigilante justice, which blurs "the distinctions between victim and victimizer, popular mobilization and mob rule." She describes an incident that occurred in a K'iché community in 1999, when thousands gathered to witness the execution of four men suspected of robbing a local merchant. The men were rounded up by an enraged local mob and stood before a "hastily convened" public tribunal. Police and human rights authorities were held at bay, and the sentence was immediately carried out. According to the United Nations, there were nearly 500 lynchings in Guatemala from 1996 to 2001. Resocializing this violence, Godoy notes that lynchings are undoubtedly a legacy of state terror and that the sociopolitical and moral climate in which lynchings occur demands new ways of conceptualizing violence and its social origins. Against a tendency to view violence as something that afflicts or is perpetrated by an individual (or group) in isolation, Godoy (2002: 641) argues that "certain forms of massive violence," such as the country's armed conflict, "cause a type of social trauma that is more than the sum of the individual traumas suffered." Drawing on in-depth ethnographic interviews with Mayas, Godoy implicates "uniquely sociological effects of state terror, which affect not only individuals but the social spaces they inhabit" in the social production of new violence. Lynchings, she argues, are a manifestation of the embodied trauma that has become collective experience in many communities. Since lynchings can be explained in terms of historical forces and sociological factors, Godoy argues that the new violence is a complicated scenario in which the state simultaneously is and is not the primary force behind human rights abuses.

Guatemala City has not become a locus of intense and routine violence in a vacuum. Its violence has historical roots. A devastating earthquake in 1976 and Ríos Montt's scorched-earth campaigns of the early 1980s dislocated rural communities and created massive unplanned squatter settlements on the outskirts of the capital. Even today, about 25 percent of the city's residents live in what state authorities call "precarious settlements." In slums lacking basic services, gang membership now thrives as an ordinary social arrangement. An enormous underclass experiencing high unemployment in the formal sector has turned to thriving informal economies often linked to organized crime (Morán Mérida, 1997).⁹ Across the country, market liberalization has coincided with a decline in formal-sector employment. Meanwhile, the state responds to pressures from the IMF and the World Bank by reducing social service expenditures and lifting price controls on basic necessities, which leaves many Guatemalans vulnerable to poverty, chronic unemployment, health problems, crime, and violence (Green, 2003: 52; Chase-Dunn, 2000; Pérez Sáinz, 1996). According to World Bank (2007) figures, nearly 60 percent of Guatemalans live below the poverty line and 20 percent live in extreme poverty. The United

Nations reports that Guatemala has one of the most unequal income distributions in the world: one-fifth of the population controls 60 percent of national income, while the poorest fifth shares just 2 percent of that total (Krznicaric, 2005). Economic inequality runs together with health and education disparities. Guatemala has the lowest life expectancy and highest infant mortality rates in Central America, while a deplorable public education system yields the hemisphere's highest illiteracy rate after Haiti's.

In light of all this, Guatemala's urban violence seems a symptom of historically shaped conditions and structural problems (e.g., a legacy of state violence, deep socioeconomic inequality, the penetration of extractive industries, the erosion of political and social infrastructures, and disparate access to health care, education, and life chances) rather than simply the product of itinerant youth, organized crime, and/or other stereotyped and pathologized subsets of the population (Thomas and Benson, 2008). This is not to say that gangs and organized crime are not involved in the new violence. On the contrary, they have emerged and thrive amidst societal conditions shaped by state policies, extranational political influence, and global economic restructuring. The degree to which the state and its agencies are complicit in the new violence is a topic of ongoing inquiry and scrutiny, but explanations that focus on gang activity resonate in a context in which the state no longer has a monopoly on coercive force. Violence has been "neoliberalized" (Fischer and Benson, 2006) or "democratized" (Godoy, 2002), placed in the hands of private entities such as private security forces, urban gangs, and rural mobs.¹⁰ The bulk of the murders that occur in Guatemala City are not carried out by the thinly veiled heavy hand of the military or secret police. The fear of being robbed and terrorized that circulates in Tecpán is not, from a phenomenological standpoint, linked to state actors. When dissent and aggression are directed toward state actors or private entities, as in the case of vigilante justice or popular protest, local communities alone are blamed. The state and its partners (e.g., a multinational mining corporation) transcend accusation (Goldstein, 2004). This sociopolitical context deflects attention from the reality of politically motivated violence and the state's likely links to organized crime. It also provides a platform for "tough-on-crime" policies and the promotion of the idea that troublesome local communities impede economic and democratic development.

Increasingly blurred lines of agency and accountability pose a set of problems (and promises) of representation that is different from what anthropologists working in Guatemala faced during the armed conflict (Stoll, 1993; Carmack, 1988). Foreign observation of and attention to the situation in Guatemala have declined because the kinds of suffering that now dominate the scene do not carry the cultural capital, humanitarian value, or international media appeal of warfare or genocide. The shifting vocabulary of violence and blame in Guatemala might impede efforts to raise awareness about violent acts that are politically motivated, state-sanctioned, or systematic but that fall outside the scope of what counts as warfare. The web site of the U.S. State Department warns travelers about the general level of violence in Guatemala and gives an impression of random gang activity. Guatemala is portrayed as a place from which outsiders must maintain cautious distance because of internal subcultural problems rather than because of systemic

problems linked to U.S. foreign policy and free-trade agreements. It is therefore important that researchers working in Guatemala historically and socially contextualize the new violence affecting urban and rural people to counter both the idea that this violence is random and the deflection of blame away from structures influencing violent behavior. Such analysis is seen in Godoy's work on the social origins of vigilantism. It is also important to document systematic or patterned dimensions of the new violence such as the "femicide" identified by Victoria Sanford (2008).

Robert H. Holden (1996: 435–459) has argued that endemic violence in Central America tends to be theorized reductively as a simple by-product of political and economic conditions in the region. His remedy is to look at political violence as an independent variable that can be documented across more than a century of regional history. We too have emphasized looking beyond what is ethnographically visible about violence to consider its historical constitution. But treating violence as an independent variable risks naturalizing its enduring presence in terms of a static regional psychological character and neglects the intimate ways in which violence is embedded in a shifting nexus of macro and micro processes. Rachel A. May (1999: 86) argues that Holden's assessment also neglects the resistance of populations affected by violence and their "more practical and more radical long-term strategy for changing the country's political, social, and economic structure." This counterargument speaks to the ability of ordinary people to cope with violence and mobilize social movements of resistance and protest—phenomena that we have also documented. Yet it seems overly optimistic in light of the material and symbolic limits to resistance in a sociopolitical context in which dissident behavior is linked to the moral illegitimacy of purposeless violence. Appreciating the moral and cultural meanings of blame in contemporary Guatemala while taking into account the weight of history in shaping present forms of and responses to violence allows for a theoretical explanation that accounts for the complexities and contradictions of the experience of violence in communities and its strategic management by state actors. To view violence in this way is to resocialize it in light of societal and historical forces without naturalizing or discounting the cultural variables that contribute to its persistence.

CONCLUSIONS

Researchers who use the concept of "structural violence" reject the accusation of individual actors in favor of an indictment of structural conditions in the broadest (and, therefore, most collectively transformative) sense. This perspective can be challenging in a postwar context, given that truth and reconciliation efforts necessarily focus on identifying the scope of wartime atrocities and bringing the responsible parties to justice (Sanford, 1999; Schirmer, 2003). Such efforts are an indispensable aspect of larger social-justice struggles in Guatemala. Here we are also concerned with an expanded understanding of violence that includes symbolic and structural violence. "Structural violence," Paul Farmer (2004: 307) writes, "is violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order," and this runs against "a moral economy still geared to pinning praise or blame on individual

actors." This theoretical perspective links an ethnographic analysis of the inherently collective and deeply contextual nature of contemporary forms of violence, suffering, and inequality to a social theoretical analysis of power and political economy. This framework provides a basis for a kind of political engagement that attends to the specificities of the impacts of violence on populations differently positioned by historical forces. While the structural violence of poverty and eroded social structures impacts Guatemala as a whole, social, economic, and political conditions continue to be worse for Mayas than for ladinos. A structural-violence approach emphasizes the deeply racial, geographic, and sociopolitical patterning of violence in Guatemala and the continuity in this respect between the past and the postwar period. As Carol Smith (1990: 8–9) writes,

While economic control has replaced military coercion as the Guatemalan state erects a democratic veneer for international consumption, the current pattern of economic restructuring in the highlands, whether guided directly by the military, by international funding organizations, or by the market, has been extremely successful in reducing the economic and political autonomy of Indian communities. . . . This pattern of economic restructuring implies significant changes in the role of the state and military and their relationship to each other.

Drawing on this analysis of economic restructuring and market liberalization in the highlands on the verge of the industrial production and assembly boom, Smith (1990: 33) argues that poverty has political value for the state and corporate actors:

The key point here is that the economic health of the . . . highlands is not necessarily advantageous to big capital in Guatemala. In fact, the severely deteriorated condition of people who were once autonomous peasants can only work to the advantage of capital, even if it does not work to the advantage of most Guatemalans. In short, the long-term effect of economic restructuring . . . will be the creation of a large reserve army of unemployed who, for both security and development reasons, will have to be controlled by an ever-expanding state apparatus.

Smith's analysis suggests that the conditions for the emergence of a politics of the "iron fist" were present and intertwined with international political economic processes years before the peace accords were signed. She astutely notes that such social and economic conditions provide a context in which political protest thrives, pointing to increasing levels of popular urban protest in the late 1980s. She also points out that the scope of protest is often confined to "localized economic issues," while "dissidence of any kind only reinforces the need for a strong military and state" (33–34). Smith's suggestion that economic restructuring and the continuous reproduction of structural violence is intimately associated with state power and the state's legitimate claim to coercive force—what she calls the "militarization of civil society"—dovetails with and is extended by our ethnographic analysis of the way accusation, media representations, and political rhetoric factor into this equation. Market liberalization, the increased transfer of state functions to localities, the increasing presence of nongovernmental organizations in the highlands, and the putative end of directly state-sponsored modes of violence do not add up to a simple

picture of decentralization and the waning of state power. Rather, the state's authority and potential use of force are actually and potentially being extended on the basis of intractable cultural stereotypes, scapegoating, a moral economy of blame that limits political protest, and conservatism among the victims of the armed conflict induced by feelings of insecurity and economic restructuring. This clustering of processes makes possible what Smith (1990: 36) presciently diagnoses as "militarized-state-capitalism."

Still, the burden of postwar violence is not limited to the Mayas or the poor. Societal transformations impact everyday life across economic strata, social sectors and networks, and ethnic groups. The way people with social, economic, and political power respond to the insecurity sensationalized for them in daily tabloids influences policies aimed at counteracting violence. Guatemalan and expatriate elites who live behind gates and walls in Guatemala City are always entwined in some kind of relationship—social, political, economic, and/or moral-emotional—with members of less privileged sectors of society. Anthropologists of gated urban communities find that anxieties about crime, security, and violence persist beyond and are often compounded by the construction of walled barriers and segregated residential environments. The walls themselves become a constant physical reminder of the presence of violence and a dominant response focused on the privatization of risk rather than collective solutions (Perry, 2000; Caldeira, 1999; Low, 1997). Gates may keep chaos and crime out of enclaves, but sensational newspapers maintain danger as a constant presence even for the most sheltered, like the shadows of barbed wire and glass-sharded walls cast into the courtyards of Latin America's mega-cities.

Guatemala is a dangerous place. Equally dangerous are the patterns of response that have arisen in the postwar period. The "iron fist" seems like a commonsensical approach: militarize the streets and round up the bad guys. Guatemalans are scared and want to live in safe communities. But violence and insecurity are multifaceted. Political and social responses that fail to recognize postwar violence as a broad condition in which endemic poverty, rapid structural adjustment, and a lack of law enforcement are clustered risk compounding rather than ameliorating it. Rather than address the root causes of violence, the iron-fist approach, along with other responses that emphasize punitive measures and the assignment of blame to individuals (responses that are evident among Mayas as much as ladinos and politicians), reorganizes violence as something that the state and private security forces can legitimately use to establish a sense of security. A crucial part of the ongoing peace process is the implementation of programs that cut to the heart of violence's social origins and transform the sociopolitical context of accusation.

NOTES

1. On violence and memory in postwar Guatemala, see Menchú (1984) and Montejó (1992). See also Green (1999), Sanford (2004), and Manz (2004) on postwar memory projects and collective experiences of trauma in the aftermath of the armed conflict.

2. A panel at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association in 2006, organized by Kevin O'Neill, Tom Offit, and Kedron Thomas, explored the symbolic and material dimensions of violence in Guatemala City and the extent to which the city has become an icon of danger within and outside Guatemala.

3. The broader context of indigenous activism in Guatemala in the 1980s and 1990s is also explored in Warren (1998) and Warren and Jackson (2002).

4. The discussion of popular protest in this section and of reconciliation meetings in the next are revised and updated versions of more extended discussions found in Benson (2004) and Fischer and Benson (2006).

5. We thank Stuart Kirsch for bringing this case to our attention. A more detailed account of the protests and violence is found in *Sipakapa No Se Vende* (Sipakapa is Not for Sale), a documentary film produced by Rights Action, Washington, DC.

6. Researchers are beginning to investigate such questions in Guatemala and other parts of Central America (see Rodgers, 2006; Winton, 2004; Portillo, 2003).

7. Organized into patrols, villagers were charged with protecting their towns from "subversives" and often given quotas of suspects to hand over to the local military garrison for "questioning" (see Carmack, 1988; Montejo, 1992). The civil patrols were responsible for thousands of extrajudicial killings (as the Guatemalan legal code delicately phrases it), working with the army to instill a quotidian terror in Guatemalans that we can scarcely imagine even in this age of terrorist threats. Yet their members were also victims, forced into their position under the threat of persecution and death. Poor Maya farmers were forced to turn on their neighbors and friends, also poor Maya farmers. It is for this suffering that the Guatemalan congress, led by Ríos Montt (who, 20 years earlier, had overseen the expansion of the patrols and sanctioned their atrocities), authorized compensating former patrol members with cash payments. The payments were to be disbursed in three parts. The first payout of 5,000 quetzales (about \$640, a year's income for a poor farmer) per claim was made in April 2003. Over 600,000 applications were filed, but only the 250,000 whose names appeared in the official but incomplete government registry of members were eligible for payments. Even so, this represented a half-billion-dollar cost that Guatemala could ill afford, and the program was frozen in 2004.

8. This loss did not end his political career. In the 2007 national election he won a congressional seat with the FRG.

9. We thank Kevin O'Neill for this citation.

10. Amidst impunity and in the absence of law enforcement, the employment of private security forces by firms and individuals has exploded (Dickins, 2006). Less affluent segments have resorted to neighborhood watch groups that eerily recall the civil patrols of the war era (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004: 188; Kincaid, 2001).

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