

## RESOCIALIZING SUFFERING: NEOLIBERALISM, ACCUSATION, AND THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF GUATEMALA'S NEW VIOLENCE

Anthropologists in Guatemala commonly hear from informants that “things are better now” or “things have improved.” Such statements compare the present to the 36-year internal armed conflict in which violence and fear became routine aspects of everyday life (Green 1999; Carmack 1988). Things have changed. Wide-ranging Peace Accords signed in 1996 brought a formal end to the conflict and were hailed with grand speeches filled with grand promises (Jonas 2000; Sieder 1999). When seen 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 living the peace has proven elusive.

One unpleasant irony of our times is that paths of progress and development often carry with them varieties of 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 given way to new kinds of violence or galvanized social residues and collective memories of past traumas and brutalities.<sup>1</sup> It is an understatement to say Guatemala is still a country wrought by extreme and mundane 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).<sup>2</sup> 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 mass media. The genuine reality of violence is sensationalized, made into a commodity sold on street corners and

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television screens (Moser and Winton 2002). Guatemala remains a dangerous place and the question of just who is to blame is a source of regular conversation.

Foreign embassy reports and national media emphasize the prominent role of gangs in the new violence and terror.<sup>3</sup> The wide availability of arms in a postwar setting and the demobilization of the military have emboldened armed gangs who control entire neighborhoods in the capital. But it is all too easy to pin violence on delinquent if highly organized youth (Taussig 2005). Besides, while the army presumably hunts drug traffickers and cracks down on heinous crimes, political violence continues apace. Politically motivated (and perhaps state-sanctioned) killings continue, as seen in the 1997 assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera and campaign-related killings in recent elections. There were 29 killings in the 2003 elections and at least 50 during the 2007 elections, most local candidates. Yet, impunity is the order of the day: only about 1 percent of violent crimes are successfully prosecuted. It is widely and credibly believed 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 how the tendency to blame gangs actually plays to 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” and platforms centered on militarization (i.e., a tough on crime and delinquency approach) in the 2007 elections. We explore ethnographic dimensions of how violence works in postwar Guatemala and delve into how Mayas in one highland community think and talk about how much “improvement” there has or has not been in the situation. Our concern is

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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 evident among Mayas and a grudgingly positive commentary about improvement from the days of death squads and genocide.

We find it useful to conceptualize the new violence in light 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 though responses most often seek to pin praise or blame on individual actors or groups, a tendency 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 adversely impact poor and

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marginalized groups because of the uneven distribution of material, social, and symbolic capital (Farmer 2003). Anthropologists have highlighted experiences of economic insecurity wrought by structural adjustment as a conduit of violent behavior in groups and individuals (e.g., Bourgois 1995; Godoy 2002; Klima 2000; Moody 2006, 2007). 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 those 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 root causes of violence, including those 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, non-Indian, ladino minority has historically exerted disproportionate control over local government and commercial institutions, buttressed by racist ideologies and colonial inequalities. But 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).<sup>4</sup> Tecpán itself underwent major cultural changes: a pair of large supermarket-style stores opened (one now owned by Wal-Mart); 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.

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As in neighboring towns, processes of class differentiation and entrepreneurial economic activity in Tecpán have partially been fostered by (or at least emerged within the context of) the aggressive national program of privatization and liberal economic reform and a new attitude toward Maya peoples that arose in the postwar period. Yet, opportunities for social mobility and economic advancement have gone hand in hand with 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 accessing export markets. While some benefit and see export production 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 also 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. Farmers have sought to mitigate these risks by joining cooperatives and combining export with subsistence production (Fischer and Benson 2006; Fischer 2004; Goldín and Asturias de Barrios 2001; Goldín 1996).

In the urban core, such economic change is also evident. Indigenous families in Tecpán have established a vibrant garment industry with roots to the 1960s. Most operations are small-scale, family-owned businesses that sell shirts, pants, and sweaters in the capital and rural markets. A surplus of manufacturers grapple for market share and rightfully complain that the Guatemalan state courts foreign capital and puts its own citizens at a competitive disadvantage. Maquiladoras – foreign-owned factories where brand-name clothing is assembled for export – were welcomed in the 1980s as part of Guatemala’s industrialization and liberalization efforts.<sup>5</sup> 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

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sales. They claim maquiladoras drive down prices by selling apparel in Guatemala that was earmarked for export, while foreign-owned retail chains in the highland region sell imported clothing at lower prices than local producers can sustain. Like export farmers, 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 so is not viable for 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, cleavages of community, and entail significant pressures related to competition. This context of shifting economic practices and mixed outcomes is one important part of the larger picture of insecurities and inequalities that shape contemporary forms of violence and how people think about and react to them.

## POPULAR PROTEST AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF BLAME<sup>6</sup>

Guatemala has recently seen numerous popular protests over contentious issues from resource exploitation to free trade to democratic process. In 2006 and 2007, in and around the highland town of San Miguel Ixtahuacán, communities protested the operations of a multinational mining company, GoldCorp. The company cunningly persuaded hundreds of people, many of whom are illiterate, to sell their lands for 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 leave altogether or alter its relationship to local communities and the environment. In early 2007, a handful of

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indigenous men met with company officials and were told their demands would not be accepted. The men were apparently attacked by members of the company's private security forces and then accused of assaulting its chief, an event which 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 to set a precedent for other communities that had conducted municipal referendums and voted against open pit mining (Velásquez Nimatuj 2007).<sup>7</sup>

The strategic framing of blame and violence by powerful social actors, such as a mining corporation, is a way to accuse less powerful resisters of being undemocratic and achieve moral high ground on a contested sociopolitical terrain. The flow of criticism is turned on local communities who struggle to put forth their own moral and political claims with an eye toward remaking threatening conditions. Something similar happened 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 improve 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 prior given the climate of fear. Not all protestors were there because of the tax; the manifestation 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."

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Marchers carrying banners and documents demanding the mayor's resignation were met in front of his office by a phalanx of local police. Then violence erupted. 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 protestors readily recovered and returned them to their senders. Protestors 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, dragged through the streets. The mayor, protected by bodyguards, fled town as protestors pegged his vehicle with stones and, some said, tried to kill him.

Protest organizers and participants did not want the protest to turn violent, except perhaps those eager to loot buildings of televisions and appliances. But "gang members" were not the only ones rioting, looting, and torching. Participants tell us in interviews that protestors were angry because the mayor "was rude and would not hear their demands" for a long while. When the throng approached his house and demanded an audience, 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."

Despite gangs' concrete effects, the category *gang member* functions as something of a scapegoat in contemporary Guatemala (see below). By attributing the cause of violence to delinquent youth, people distance themselves from feelings of complicity and resignation. This is especially important given the moral climate that quickly took shape in the national press afterwards. Protesters lamented that the Prensa Libre dubbed the well-intentioned protest "chaotic" and portrayed the people of Tecpán as undemocratic rabble rousers. "We were interested in resolving real political issues," said one participant, becoming noticeably upset as he added, "the gangs are to

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blame, not the protestors. 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 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 canvas walls around town. We have heard stories about gangs robbing shoppers and vendors on market day. But to what extent are these groups "gangs"? 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 threat and presence?<sup>8</sup> 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 many have returned corrupted – this is how elders and families view the situation. Some folks 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 declining work ethics. 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). But they have

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become larger than life, a synecdoche for violence and insecurity writ large. This mythos reflects a shift in how 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, who 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 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 take distance 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 comprised the mass protest. The majority of protestors were campesino 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 due to the climate of fear that defined the armed conflict and lingered in the 1990s. Though the tax structure that was the protest’s target was implemented as scheduled, many protestors regard it as a success because it is said to have taught local politicians and others in the ladino population an important lesson about 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) between the mayor, protest organizers, and the departmental governor. “We got what we wanted,” says one organizer, “a chance at a meeting with

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the mayor. At least we got that.” This is a common term, por lo menos [at least], used among protestors 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, regardless of the outcome of such meetings, 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 how political commentary stops at a certain point [por lo menos] that establishes a horizon at which critique comfortably rests and political action is deemed a success, even apart from real evidence that social structures are 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 freedom that it purports to enable.

During the meetings, the mayor strategically appropriates the idioms of critique and democratic process that had driven the protest. At one meeting he tells protestors, “We are all completely in agreement. You have the right to protest.” Then he shifts blame for violence onto the protestors 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 says that the outburst of violence on June 10 was contrary to democratic principles of deliberative, rational, and communicative action. By association, so were the protestors. “We too want a dialogue,” one of the organizers immediately responds, “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, an elderly and outspoken campesino, struggles here to justify the eruption of violence given the mayor’s failure to listen to the public’s voice prior to the protest. He also seeks to distance himself and other participants from the violence that had delegitimized that voice in light of uncontested ideals of

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harmony and dialogue. “The same problems we are discussing here right now,” he says, “we already met with you about this . . .”

At this point, the mayor interrupts and moves 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,” the governor reinforces the mayor’s position. “The law is 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 positions himself as the victim and the protesters appear to blame him, whereas he insists that his own hands were tied. This pushes the organizers into an apologetic posture. “We are not here to accuse you,” an organizer says. “When we’re talking we are on an even level. It is a democratic process.” Because the organizers do not want to be blamed (by the mayor or the media) for causing violence, they are forced to limit their critique and take on some of the blame that has been shuttled their way 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, which are said to be undermined by acrimonious troublemaking. Such discourse operates as an exemplary form of hegemony that Nader calls “coercive harmony,” a controlling process that eschews scrutiny about the fundamental terms of discourse (e.g., ideals such as harmony and dialogue) and encourages active acceptance by opposition (Nader 1997: 712-715). The mayor acquires a privileged rhetorical footing when he positions himself as a victim of undemocratic procedures (namely, violence), while the protestors, if they do not acquiesce to this framing, are seen as stubborn and undemocratic. Consider that the same protestor who was 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

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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 in which rational communicative action trumps differences of race/ethnicity and social power. The composition of civil society occurs partly alongside the reproduction of varieties of symbolic violence (e.g., coercive harmony) that empower only certain voices and agitate against the expression of oppositional sentiment if it takes 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 then limited by a discourse that equates violence with moral culpability and political incorrectness. In order to save face the protestors had to resort to this very discourse, blaming gangs for the violence, even though, on a fundamental level, this is the same idiom of blame that disadvantaged the protestors during reconciliation meetings and in media accounts. Practical shortcomings of the reconciliation process reveal a particular 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 has not come to an end in the postwar period but endures 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

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Efraín Ríos Montt, the former military dictator. In 1989 he founded the hard line conservative FRG party and in 1994 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 has swept in 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 brought Ríos Montt to power in 1982). On this basis, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal ruled in June 2003 that he was ineligible to run for president, a decision 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 city 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 he could not control his supporters, the people must be heard and their will heeded. In the wake of this event the Constitutional Court overruled itself and, citing international accords, decided that retroactively applying the 1985 Constitution to Ríos Montt's 1982 actions would violate his human rights.

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 Maya, 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

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campaign two decades ago) who formed the base of Ríos Montt's popular support. Much of this support has to do with the fact that as the majority leader of congress Ríos Montt cultivated allegiance by pushing through huge subsidies for fertilizer, increases in the minimum wage, and making large payments to those who served in the country's notorious army-led Civil Auto-Defense Patrols of the early 1980s.<sup>9</sup>

In June 2003, the Ríos Montt campaign made a stop in a hamlet on the outskirts of Tecpán. Thousands turned out, many because they were promised information about the next installment of payments the government was promising to men (or their widows) who had served in the civil patrols. Ríos Montt arrived in a red helicopter, accompanied by a fanfare of 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 with Pedro Palma, a former guerilla leader, holding his hand tight, while declaring that "the past is behind us and we must leave it there. We must move forward. Together." Palma, who 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 one day later, the campaign made an ill-timed stop in Rabinal, a Maya town in the K'iche' region where forensic anthropologists have been working for some time, excavating clandestine graves and identifying victims' bodies in order to document what happened there during the violence and to bring some closure to still-grieving families who never knew for sure the fate of "disappeared" loved ones. On the day 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 Ríos Montt. He

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was met with a barrage of bottles, sticks, and rocks. After getting hit on the head with a stone, he retreated to his helicopter holding a handkerchief on his bleeding forehead. Reasoned editorials of the national press highlighted the foolishness of Ríos Montt's Rabinal stop, but also condemned protestors for using tactics of intimidation in a free election. But who can really blame them? "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.<sup>10</sup> But his campaign has had an enduring impact. In the 2007 presidential election, security was a dominant buzzword. Leading presidential candidates, including 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 utilize coercive power in the process. Pérez Molina, also a former military 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 to bring an "iron fist" (mano dura). In conversations with a number of Maya, we found support for the Patriotic Party, even among people well aware of Pérez Molina's role during the armed conflict, when he oversaw military operations 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 such a culture does not necessarily need to be understood as an enduring national psychological character rooted in the conquest. Here it seems a strategic part of a political platform specially

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framed to overcome the seeming paradoxes of resurgent military leadership in the highlands and 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 vision of what security means. His party now faces the difficult task of addressing conditions of structural violence that pervade Guatemalan society, which have been largely ignored in right-wing political discourse, mass media, and everyday talk. The Patriotic Party's campaign propaganda encouraged citizens to believe that targeting gangs and delinquents is the key to bringing order. Again, gangs are singled out and blamed for many of Guatemala's problems, as they offer a quick and sensible explanation for violence. This has become a handy scapegoat, one actively promoted by politicians.

## HISTORICIZING VIOLENCE AND POPULAR CONSERVATISM

Someone assaulted on his or her daily bus commute experiences that violent act as an episode caused by a gang member or otherwise delinquent individual. Yet, to adequately understand such episodes and develop effective social responses, it is perhaps advisable to forgo this tendency to pin praise or blame on individual actors and focus on underlying systemic conditions that may not be immediately visible when violence occurs. They are not "ethnographically visible," to use Farmer's words. Guatemala's new violence is not 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 "iron fist" platforms looks less like categorical support for a new militarized state and more like an understandable desire to no longer live with insecurity.

Thinking about the paradoxes of violence and popular conservatism in contemporary Guatemala, Angelina Snodgrass Godoy (2002) examines the case of vigilante justice, which blurs the distinction between victim and victimizer, popular mobilization and mob rule. She describes an incident that occurred in a Quiché community in 1999. Thousands gathered to witness the execution

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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. 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 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 embodied trauma that has become collective experience in many communities. Since lynchings can be explained in light 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 (Godoy 2002: 641-642).

Guatemala City has not become a locus of intense and routine violence in a vacuum. The city’s violence has historical roots, despite the tendency of the mass media, politicians, and ordinary citizens to look for more immediate explanations. 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 define as “precarious settlements.” In slums of squalid housing lacking basic services, gang membership now thrives as an ordinary social arrangement. An enormous underclass experiencing high unemployment in the formal sector has

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turned to thriving informal economies, often linked to organized crime (Morán Mérida 1997).<sup>11</sup>

Across the country, market liberalization has coincided with a decline in formal sector employment. Meanwhile, the state responds to pressures from the IMF and 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 recent 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 (Krznaric 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.

In light of these conditions, the predicament of Guatemala's urban violence seems like 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 healthcare, 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 uninvolved in the new violence. Quite the contrary, these groups have emerged and continue to thrive amidst societal conditions shaped by state policies, extra-national political influence, and global economic restructuring. The degree to which the state and its agencies are complicit in the new violence remains unknown and is a topic of ongoing inquiry and scrutiny. But explanations that narrowly focus on gang activity understandably resonate within a context in which

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the state no longer has a monopoly on coercive force. Violence is “neoliberalized” (Fischer and Benson 2006) or “democratized” (Godoy 2002), transferred into the hands of private entities (e.g., private security forces, urban gangs, and rural mobs).<sup>12</sup> 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. Popular fears about being robbed and terrorized that circulate in Tecpán are not, from a phenomenological standpoint, linked to state actors. When dissent and aggression are directed toward state actors or private entities, as seen in the case of vigilante justice or popular protest, local communities are blamed as solely responsibly perpetrators. 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 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 than what anthropologists working in Guatemala faced during the armed conflict (Stoll 1993; Carmack 1988). Foreign observance of and attention to the situation in Guatemala can decline because the kinds of suffering that now dominate the scene do not, perverse as it may be, carry the cultural capital, humanitarian value, or international media appeal that warfare or genocide do. 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 website 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 systemic problems constituted in relation to U.S. foreign policy and free trade agreements. It is therefore important that researchers

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working in Guatemala historically and socially contextualize the new violence affecting urban and rural people to counter both a sense that this violence is random and prevailing explanations that narrowly ascribe blame away from those 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, as when Victoria Sanford identifies a patterned femicide taking place in Guatemala City, one lost in the portrait of chaos found in media accounts and government websites (Sanford 2006).

Robert H. Holden (1996: 435-459) has argued that endemic violence in Central America tends to be theorized reductively as a simple byproduct 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 violence, while no doubt stubbornly unwavering in much of the region, is variably embedded in a shifting nexus of macro and micro processes. Rachel A. May argues that Holden's assessment also neglects the resistant and resilient efforts of populations affected by violence and the extent to which the region's residents "have been better adapted to violence and possessed of a more practical and more radical long-term strategy for changing the country's political, social, and economic structure" (1999: 86). This counterargument speaks to the abilities of ordinary people to cope with sometimes overwhelming violence and mobilize social movements of resistance and protest, phenomena we have also documented. Yet, it also seems overly optimistic in light of the material and symbolic limits that resistant efforts face within a sociopolitical context geared toward blaming dissident behavior and linking it to the moral illegitimacy of purposeless violence. Appreciating moral and cultural meanings

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of blame in contemporary Guatemala, while also 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 how violence is experienced in communities and strategically managed by state actors. To view violence as a social production emergent amidst structural violence and embedded trauma is to resocialize violence in light of societal and historical forces without naturalizing or discounting cultural variables that contribute to its persistence.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is an inherent feature of the concept of “structural violence” that researchers and advocates agitate against 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 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, too. “Structural violence,” Paul Farmer writes, “is violence exerted systematically – that is, indirectly – by everyone who belongs to a certain social order,” which runs against “a moral economy still geared to pinning praise or blame on individual actors” (2004: 307). 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 how violence impacts populations differently positioned by historical forces. While the structural violence of poverty and eroded social structures impacts Guatemala on whole, Mayas continue to live under adverse social, economic, and political conditions as compared to the ladino population. A structural violence approach emphasizes the

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deeply racial, geographic, and sociopolitical patterning of violence in Guatemala, which reflects definite continuity between the past and the postwar period. As Carol Smith writes:

[W]hile 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 organization, 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. [1990:8-9]

Based on this analysis of economic restructuring and market liberalization in the highlands on the verge of the intensified industrial production and assembly boom, Smith argues that poverty holds 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,” she writes. “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 1990: 33). 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. Smith astutely noticed that such social and economic conditions provided a context in which political protest thrived, pointing to increasing levels of popular urban protest in the late 1980s. She also notes the extent to which 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).

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Smith's suggestion that economic restructuring and the continuous reproduction of structural violence (e.g., poverty and economic insecurity) 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 how accusation and other cultural factors, such as media representations and political rhetoric, factor into this equation. Market liberalization, the increased transfer of state functions to localities, the increasing presence of NGOs 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, this is a contradictory situation in which the state's authority and potential use of force are actually and potentially extended on the basis of intractable cultural stereotypes, scapegoating practices, a moral economy of blame that limits political protest and its resistant impact, and the paradoxical rise of popular conservatism among victims of the armed conflict amidst feelings of insecurity and threat fostered precisely by economic restructuring. This clustering of processes enables what Smith presciently diagnosed as "militarized-state-capitalism" (1990: 36).

Still, swelling currents of postwar violence do not only burden and threaten the Maya or poor people. Societal transformations impact everyday life across economic strata, social sectors and networks, and ethnic groups. How people with social, economic, and political power or the evolving middle-classes respond to an abiding sense of danger and insecurity sensationalized for them in daily tabloids thereby 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 less privileged sectors of society and those on the hither side of fortified enclaves. Anthropologists of gated urban communities find anxieties about crime, security, and violence persist beyond and are often compounded by the construction of walled barriers and segregated residential environments. The

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walls themselves become a constant physical reminder of the presence of violence and a dominant response focused on the privatization of risk rather than collectivized 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 barbwire and glass-sharded walls cast into the cordoned courtyards of Latin America's mega-cities.

Guatemala is a dangerous place. Equally dangerous are 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 problems. Political and social responses that do not attend to postwar violence as a broad-scale condition in which endemic poverty, rapid structural adjustment, and a lack of law enforcement are clustered risk compounding rather than ameliorating violence and insecurity. Rather than address root causes of violence, including deepening inequalities linked to structural adjustment policies or desperation and despondence among populations victimized by armed conflict, the iron fist approach, along with other responses that emphasize punitive measures and the assignation of blame onto individuals (responses which are evident among Mayas as much as ladinos and politicians) reorganize violence as something that the state and private security forces can legitimately use to establish a sense of security. Given that this situation would resemble the long internal armed conflict, a crucial part of the ongoing peace process involves the implementation of programs that cut to the heart of violence's social origins and transform the sociopolitical context of accusation.

NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> On violence and memory in postwar Guatemala, see testimonios by Menchú (1984) and Montejo (1992). See also Green 1999, Sanford 2004, Manz 2004 and others on postwar memory projects and collective experiences of trauma in the aftermath of the armed conflict.

<sup>2</sup> A panel at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association in 2006, organized by Kevin O’Neill, Tom Offit, and Kedron Thomas, explored symbolic and material dimensions of violence in Guatemala City and the extent to which the city has become an icon of danger within and without Guatemala.

<sup>3</sup> On sensationalist media accounts of gang activity and violence, see Moser and Winton 2002 and Winton 2004. For a comparison with the Nicaraguan case, see Rodgers 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The broader context of indigenous activism in Guatemala in the 1980s and 1990s is also explored in Warren 1998 and Warren and Jackson 2002.

<sup>5</sup> On the growth of the maquila sector in Guatemala, see Green 2003, Goldín 2001, Pérez Sáinz 1996, and Petersen 1992.

<sup>6</sup> The discussion of popular protest in this section and the discussion of reconciliation meetings in the next section are a revised and updated version of a more extended discussion found in Benson 2004 and Fischer and Benson 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to 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 D.C.

<sup>8</sup> Researchers are beginning to investigate such questions in Guatemala and other parts of Central America (see Rodgers 2006; Winton 2004; Portillo 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Organized in Civil Auto-Defense Patrols, villagers were charged with protecting their towns from “subversives,” 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 extra-judicial 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, the civil patrollers were also victims, forced into their position under the threat of persecution and death themselves. 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, twenty years earlier, oversaw the expansion of PACs and sanctioned their atrocities), authorized compensating former civil patrollers with cash payments. The payments were to be disbursed in three parts. The first payout of 5000 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 appear in the official, but incomplete, government registry of patrollers are eligible for payment. Even still, this represented a half billion dollar cost that Guatemala could ill afford and the program was frozen in 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Ríos Montt’s loss in the 2003 presidential campaign did not end his political career. In the 2007 national election, he won a congressional seat with the Guatemalan Republican Front.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Kevin O’Neill for this citation.

<sup>12</sup> 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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