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CRUEL POPULISM: COUNTERIN- SURGENCY STRATEGY AND THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE GUATEMALAN HIGHLANDS

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CRUEL POPULISM: COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY AND THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE GUATEMALAN HIGHLANDS

Nick Copeland

Abstract: This essay examines the meanings of democracy for rural indigenous Guatemalans through the lens of electoral support for neo-authoritarian parties. Current perspectives view Mayan participation in neo-authoritarian politics as evidence of democratic free will, complete repression, or the resonance of populist politics. Drawing on ethnographic investigation of grassroots indigenous political organizations in a rural indigenous town, I locate the appeal of neo-authoritarian populism in the ways that counterinsurgency strategies have rearranged the conceptual, spatial and affective terrain of collective indigenous struggles for racial and economic justice and autonomy.

Key Words: [democracy, governmentality, populism, development, state violence, indigenous social movements, Guatemala]

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There is no indigenous movement in Guatemala!

Ninieth Montenegro; Deputy, New Nation Alliance. Remarking on the electoral defeat of Rigoberta Menchu in 2007.

Before going to the ballot box next November 4th, we should reflect well, think about what country we want, not in what the candidates want or offer, rather, what we want ourselves.

Alvaro Pop; Indigenous Activist and Political Scientist. Prensa Libre. October 26, 2007

Reform has proven elusive since the Guatemalan Peace Accords, signed in 1996, ended a 36 year-long internal war that claimed over 200,000 lives and announced the construction of a multi-ethnic democracy. Alongside the opening

of democratic spaces and the emergence of new social movements came corrupt neo-conservative and neo-authoritarian parties that derailed the Accords, continued state violence with impunity, and implemented the standard package of neoliberal reforms that increased poverty and threatened the environment in the indigenous-majority western highlands (Robinson 1998, 2000, 2006). Strangely, a good deal of support for these parties has come from impoverished rural Mayans who were the most affected by the violence, including many who supported the revolutionary left in the late 1970s. Stranger still was substantial indigenous support for ex-dictator General Ríos Montt in the 2003 and 2007 presidential elections. Ríos Montt's populist rhetoric contrasts starkly with his indictment for genocide in the Mayan highlands. Despite the fact that Ríos Montt lost decisively in 2003,¹ he and his party, the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), gained power in the Mayan highlands.² With the 2007 victory of center-leftist Alvaro Colom Argüeta, Guatemala joins the leftward swing in Latin American politics (Rosen and Hershberg 2006, Prashad and Ballvé 2006). However, the revolutionary left, a forceful voice against state repression and inequality in previous decades, is fragmented as revolutionary parties, social movements, and NGOs generate limited enthusiasm in the rural highlands.³ Furthermore, the Pan Mayan

1 In the first round of voting for president of the republic in 2003, Oscar Berger (GANA) won 47.46%, Alvaro Colom (UNE) 26.38% and Ríos Montt (FRG) 11.21%. *Prensa Libre* November 10, 2003. In 2008, however, Montt remained on as the active head of his party in congress.

2 *Prensa Libre*. November 13, 2003 "*eferregistas lideran en alcaldías*". GANA had only 69, followed by UNE with 33, the PAN (Partido Avanzo Nacional) 31. These gains were largely a result of votes in the rural highlands. The results for *municipios* in highland departments are as follows: In Huehuetenango, the FRG won 10 out of 22 elections; San Marcos, 5 out of 29; Totonicapán, 4 out of 8; Quetzaltenango 9 out of 24; Quiché 13 out of 21; and Sololá, 5 out of 19.

3 In the 1998 elections, Alvaro Colom won 12% of the vote in a united left party. The United Revolutionary National Party (URNG) received less than 2% in 2003 and in 2007. In the 2003 and 2007 campaigns, Colom backed away from revolutionary discourses, and sought support from business elites. He also promised to would honor foreign debts and treaties, including the Free Trade Agreement and to respect the property rights of landholding elites during his administration. See *Prensa Libre* "*Los Planes del Alvaro Colom*" October 25, 2007, and also *Prensa Libre* "*Los Pros y Contras del Candidato*" *Prensa Libre* September 16 2007.

The matter of social movements is more complicated. While thousands protested the Central American Free Trade Agreement, the amount of social protest of this far-ranging agreement was minimal, lagging far behind social Opposition to the agreements, and was repressed

movement, the newest and still most vibrant force on the political field, and that had such an impact on the final shaping of the Peace Accords (Bastos and Camus 1995, 1996, 2003; Cojtí Cuxil 1997; Fischer and Brown 1996; Warren 1998a, 1998b), has suffered decisive electoral defeats. Only a small number of Mayans turned out to vote in the (defeated) 1999 referendum on constitutional reforms about indigenous rights proposed by the Peace Accords (Warren 2002). Similarly, in 2007 indigenous Nobel Prize winner and political reformer Rigoberta Menchú won only 3% of the vote in her historic run for president. Although the FRG is in decline at the time of this writing,⁴ the overtly authoritarian Patriotic Party (PP) won a sizeable minority of indigenous support—around 35-40%. Although these elections made history as the first ever decided by the vote of the rural, mainly indigenous, population turnout in the runoff elections was very low—only 20% of all eligible voters. How can we understand these trends in indigenous political behavior?

This essay asks what participation in neo-authoritarian politics reveals about the meaning of democracy for many of Guatemala's indigenous, mainly Mayan-identified, population in the wake of decades of counterinsurgency warfare in multicultural Guatemala. It is based on over a year of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural, Mayan-majority town in the department of Huehuetenango that I will call La Esperanza. On the basis of this research, I locate the appeal of neo-authoritarian populism not in ideological resonance, but in the ways that state strategies have rearranged the conceptual, spatial and affective terrain of collective Mayan struggles for racial and economic justice and autonomy. My aim is to provoke comparative reflection on the extent to which power in formally democratic societies—especially in ones like Guatemala where state violence has been extensive—depends on generating disempowered affects among their citizens.

fairly quickly by state security forces. One exception to this has been widespread support among indigenous communities for the anti-mining movement. But most of this activism has been focused on not letting mining companies begin operations in their communities, and not pressuring the government directly to change the law on concessions. Witte (2006) sees this as a result of state repression of social movements.

4 This decline was not enough to stop Rios Montt from winning a seat in congress as head of his party in the 2007 elections, thereby securing his immunity from prosecution.

I attempt to reframe indigenous participation in neo-authoritarian parties through a genealogy of indigenous political organizing in La Esperanza in relation to three distinct but interrelated mechanisms of counterinsurgency strategy: state violence and surveillance; state-led development; and control of truth. I investigated how these mechanisms were conceptualized, narrated and implemented, and local responses, including endorsement, resistance and re-appropriation. I examine how these processes opened and closed spaces for indigenous political agency by tracking transformations in the following interrelated domains. The first is the field of *political narratives*. These refer to the narratives through which rural Mayans make sense of politics, especially their understandings of how politics should and could be made to work. I also examine how memorial practices and conditions shaping the contemporary circulation of discourses about the political past shape contemporary politics. These rewritings are intimately connected with *political affect*, by which I mean Mayans' sense of the efficacy of their own collective political agency. I emphasize both active and reactive forms. Next, I am concerned with local *desires for development*. Here I am referring to conceptualization of the resources one needs to survive and live securely and comfortably and the means of procuring them. The fourth area is *community*. By community I do not mean a seamless egalitarian unity, essential ethnic identity or bounded cosmopolitanism, but a shared sense of belonging and acting together based in reciprocity, language and kinship and shared experiences of discrimination, poverty and political struggle (Handy 1994; Stepputat 2001; Watanabe 1992). Convergences in these configurations formed the ground for revolutionary politics in 1970s (Grandin 2004, McAllister 2003), and therefore constitute privileged frames through which to evaluate transformations in rural Mayan politics.

This work provides a map of governance and state effects that can assist in local political actors' reflections on the pitfalls and spaces of opportunity in state strategies. By drawing attention to the micro-practices through which political common sense, investments, and habits of being and feeling are reproduced and contested, this work opens a space for reflection on alternatives. In particular, it orients thinking towards the political alternatives resonant with Mayans' shifting sensibilities, responsive to their immediate need for resources, and consistent with their long-term struggles for racial justice and autonomy.

La Esperanza

Nestled in the foothills of the Cuchumatanes mountains, La Esperanza is in many ways typical of rural towns in Huehuetenango. The population of about 35,000 generally identify either as Ladinos or indigenous. Indigenous Esperanzans are Mames, Mam being one of the more than 20 indigenous languages spoken in Guatemala. Ladinos, the common name for Guatemalans who do not identify as indigenous, comprise about 6% of the town population. Although the division between the groups is blurry, economic differences, and certain cultural ones, lead most to believe that the differences between the groups are rigid and vast. Ladinos live concentrated in the town center, while most indigenous residents live in outlying villages. The majority of indigenous residents live off a combination of subsistence farming, cash cropping, and day labor, while Ladinos tend to own larger tracts of land, run small businesses, or work as professionals. While most Ladinos are middle class, most indigenous Esperanzans live in poverty, while nearly a third live in extreme poverty.

Historically, Ladinos exerted both economic and cultural dominance over their indigenous neighbors, who they knew as Indians. One telltale sign of this is that most Ladinos speak only Spanish, whereas most Mam speakers are bilingual. Inter-marriage is likewise discouraged and close friendships are rare. This pattern has been altered somewhat due to economic changes, rising rates of indigenous education, and, more recently, the Pan Mayan movement. With assistance from a range of national and international NGO's, the Pan Mayan movement has led some indigenous-identified Esperanzans to reconceptualize and revalorize previously degraded identities, a regional process some have called *mayanización* (Bastos 2004). As more indigenous people enter the middle class, they increasingly do so without changing their ethnic identification, as was more common in previous generations; and they increasingly identify as 'Mayan' instead of 'indigenous.' Without question, local ideas about cultural difference for both indigenous and Ladinos were shaped by the Peace Accords, which recognized the rights of indigenous people to their identity, and officially replaced the ideology of mestizaje for multiculturalism. While these changes have led Ladinos to publicly advocate equality and to condemn flagrant racism, Ladinos in La Esperanza still tend to

think of themselves as “better than Indians” and oppose far-reaching cultural activism, exhibiting what Hale (2006) calls “racial ambivalence.”

Also like most other highland towns, La Esperanza has had a tumultuous political history since the mid-20th century and especially in the last 35 years during which rural life was transformed by the guerrilla movement and state repression. Indigenous Esperanzans responded to all of these processes according to local constructions of risk and social justice. In turn, these grassroots conceptions were deeply affected by these processes. My ethnographic research focused on the rise and fall of several local indigenous political organizations. I mapped three ‘waves’ of indigenous politics in La Esperanza in some detail: organizations that emerged in the 1960s around the activities of the Catholic Church, parts of which then connected with the guerrilla movement in the mid-1970; groups that formed in the immediate wake of genocidal violence; and a new generation of politically involved Mayans, who have begun to challenge the authority claims of the post-violence political organizations.

Many indigenous Esperanzans participated in the democratic revolution of 1944-1954, supporting its goals of agrarian reform and the end of forced labor, only to see democracy and incipient land reform efforts toppled by the CIA-assisted counterrevolution. In the following years, indigenous villagers were attracted to new Catholicism and Protestantism, especially to the discourses of spiritual equality and development that they promoted, which indigenous villagers appropriated to their own struggles for equality with town Ladinos (Brintnall 1979, Falla 1978, Warren 1979). Revolutionary politics found fertile ground in a population aching for a change. Despite significant misgivings about revolutionary strategy and internal ethnic hierarchies, many indigenous Esperanzans, and some Ladinos, participated enthusiastically in the guerrilla movement, both as sympathizers and combatants, viewing the revolution as consistent with their local struggles against racism. Moreover, excitement and confusion generated by the revolutionary movement fueled local struggles against Ladino dominance, whose objectives were irreducible to guerrilla objectives. Revolutionary activism, to the extent it existed, ended with the advent of counterinsurgency terror in 1981 and 1982. After the most active and vocal indigenous leaders publicly tortured and murdered, or disappeared without a trace on suspicion of guerrilla involvement

many others fled to Mexico. State repression targeted indigenous leaders who had never participated in the guerrilla movement. Next came the civil patrol system, which forced locals to hunt down the guerrilla in their midst. This led to more torture, killings and massacres in several villages over the next few years. Since the late 1980s conservative parties' decision to field Mayan candidates has shifted the balance of town power to the indigenous majority—much to the dismay of town Ladinos. The FRG won local elections in 2003. While the FRG had fallen apart in La Esperanza by 2007, right-wing parties, led by indigenous candidates, continue to dominate the political field.⁵

Reframing Mayan Authoritarianism

Current theories provide three ways of making sense of indigenous electoral support for neo-authoritarian politics in postwar Guatemala. The first assumes that rural Mayans have a deep affinity with neo-authoritarian political objectives. The second views participation as a product of fear. The third emphasizes ideological resonance between populist politics and Mayan political sensibilities. But none of these explanations captures the specificity of Mayan participation in neo-authoritarianism politics in La Esperanza.

Conservatives view indigenous participation in neo-authoritarian regimes as “support”—the democratic free will of a group that never supported the revolution. This interpretation has found anthropological support. Lebot (1995) argues that Mayans only participated in the left due to coercion. Stoll (1993) goes further, reporting that Ixiles—a Mayan group in the Ixcán region in the department of el Quiché—blame the insurgency for trapping them “between two armies” and for provoking the army’s genocidal response. But there are many problems with this narrative. It ignores substantial, if uneven, indigenous support for the guerrilla movement from the mid 1970s to the early 1980s (Bastos and Camus 2003, Copeland 2007, Grandin 2004, Hale 2006, Manz 2004, McAllister 2003). It also echoes state discourses and assigns no influence to Orwellian repression on shaping this public memory (Hale 1997). Truth Commission reports describe how the

⁵ The right wing Democratic Union, UD, won local elections in 2007, followed by the right wing National Action Party, then the Grand National Alliance. The UNE placed fourth. In the runoff election, the UNE won over 70% of the vote.

bloodiest counterinsurgency in Latin American history disarticulated the guerrilla movement from its rural Mayan base, silenced all public political opposition, and overwhelmed the population with intense feelings of loss, despair and powerlessness (REHMI 1998, CEH 1999). Counterinsurgency strategy ruthlessly targeted Mayan leaders and organizations (Warren 1999, 2002) in an attempt to create a feminized “sanctioned Mayan” who was both docile and nationalistic (Schirmer 1998). Moreover, this perspective downplays significant vehement criticisms of state violence from indigenous victims (Sanford 2003). And, while many of the guerrilla leaders were killed or forced to flee, certainly not all guerrilla sympathizers were rooted out of rural towns.

On the opposite extreme, many human rights and solidarity activists and politically engaged scholars contend that extreme state violence in the early 1980s and subsequent social militarization created a “culture of fear” that suppresses latent political dissent (Manz 1995, 2002; Green 1999). This theory seems to come close to capturing the immediate devastation of the counterinsurgency and previous state violence must certainly plays an important role in the current political orientations of rural Mayans. However, this description does not seem to fit the post-Accords era, which is characterized by more selective state violence, Truth Commissions, de-militarization and limited democratization. How, then, do reconfigured state strategies shape indigenous experiences of these new political spaces?

Most followers of Guatemalan politics attribute the FRG’s popularity to party chief Ríos Montt’s skillful deployment of populist, pro-Mayan rhetoric. Alfonso Portillo, FRG president from 1999-2003, also had leftist credentials and rhetoric. Commonplace understandings of populism prevalent on the left and among many Pan Mayanists paint indigenous adherents as manipulated and ignorant. Several analysts, however, eschew allegations of false consciousness. They read subaltern participation in conservative regimes as agency, not cooptation. Along these lines, some argue that indigenous evangelicals Ríos Montt as the vanguard of a rising Protestant moral order (Annis 1987, Garrard-Burnett 1998). But this does not explain substantial Mayan support for non-Protestant right wing parties, non-Protestant Mayans’ support for Ríos Montt’s party or the substantial hatred of Ríos Montt among many Mayans. How does an ex-dictator, who faces

numerous charges of genocide, sell himself as a born-again Christian? Of course, explanations focused on Ríos Montt do not account for the recent failure of Rigobert Menchú, or the more moderate success of the less-populist authoritarian Perez Molina, a former military strategist who campaigned on promises to use the military and suspend civil rights to crush crime.⁶

Warren, in her analysis of the failure of the 1998 referendum on constitutional amendments concerning indigenous rights, suggests that, “Mayas involved in cultural revitalization were not pursuing their politics through the formal government and party system because of the cynical manipulation of Mayan communities in the past” (2002:176 n.1). The notion of a disjuncture between local and national politics is compelling in light of Guatemalan history. Certainly Mayans have been let down by the state and the left; but this observation does not elucidate how these disappointments shape the ways that Mayans *do* engage in party politics. Hale (2002, 2006) locates Mayan support for the FRG in a move by right wing parties more generally to open a limited space for indigenous politics, part of a strategy he calls “neoliberal multiculturalism.” In this interpretation, by the FRG’s use of a Mayan-centric, anti-rich populist discourse, seeking Mayans to occupy key leadership positions in local politics and the national government, and providing development, Mayans have come to view the FRG as the “Mayan” party, most in tune with and responsive to their desires and sensibilities. But why has the left, the initiators of highland populism, or for that matter, Rigoberta Menchú, proven less capable of working the same political magic with similar themes than this most controversial figure?⁷ Prized leftist issues such as democracy, human rights and land reform are notably absent in Ríos Montt’s populism, as

6 Perez Molina was a military commander in Nebaj, Quiche, the department worst ravaged by military massacres in the 1980s. He was also military intelligence chief when Archbishop Juan Gerardi was bludgeoned to death 4 days after releasing the Catholic Church’s report on the violence that implicated the military in 97% of the massacres. For a detailed discussion of these events, including Perez Molina’s possible involvement, see Francisco Goldman (2007) *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop*.

7 Rios Montt ran for president in 2003 despite a constitutional ban, made for him specifically, that prohibits anyone who has taken power by force to run for president. Also, not only do most indigenous organizations, leftist groups and international development agencies oppose Rios Montt, so did the Catholic Church.

well as that of Perez Molina.⁸ One answer is that racism and authoritarianism in leftist groups, rooted in an inability to appreciate cultural difference, undermines the appeal of leftist political organizations to rural Mayans (Hale 1994; Smith 1990b, Warren 1998b). Another crucial factor is continued state repression. Hale argues that in neoliberal multiculturalism the state actively distinguishes between good and bad indigenous rights groups. Cultural rights claims made by “good” groups—ones that follow a non-confrontational view of indigenous rights and equality—are partially fulfilled by the state, and the groups are allowed to occupy significant positions of authority in local, and occasionally national, positions of authority. More radical political organizations—those whose demands include autonomy and expansive visions of collective rights and resource claims—are routinely ignored or repressed.

This argument highlights important shifts and continuities in the Mayan-state relationship, as well as problems within supposedly progressive political organizations. Mayans in this view are roughly divisible into two groups: those who strategically wait for wider spaces to emerge to pursue broader activist agendas, and those whose political aspirations fit within sanctioned conceptions. However, there is a risk that through inclusion, the former group evolves into the latter. The threat of violence coupled with official marginalization also help explain why right wing parties which are also Ladino-run at the higher levels, and are far from free from racist tendencies,⁹ edge out leftist parties. Neoliberal multiculturalism

8 In a campaign meeting with popular organizations—the *Plataforma Agraria*, Perez Molina stated bluntly that land reform was a thing from the 60s, although he did promise to end corruption in FONTIERRA, the limited mechanism established by the Peace Accords to re-distribute land. *Prensa Libre* October 26, 2007

9 Leftist organizations and political parties—not just the far right—have engaged in a substantial rethinking on the politics of cultural difference, especially since the Peace Accords; and their parties are usually indigenous-run in rural towns. Many Mayan communities consistently support the left. In La Esperanza, for example, the left has a strong, if not politically decisive, following.

Furthermore, there is little to suggest that the internal cultural politics of the FRG have departed much from the racist mentality. One example was when Rigoberta Menchu went to the *Corte de Constitucionalidad* CC to dispute Ríos Montt’s candidacy. In the tribunal building, she was accosted by nearly 200 FRG supporters and party leaders who yelled racist insults. Dr. Sam Colop, an indigenous linguist and outspoken columnist, regularly denounces racism in the FRG. A typical example of FRG racism was witnessed in the Mayan town of Todos Santos Cuchumatanes. Members of the FRG departmental and national leadership came for a rally and then a luncheon in

aptly describes Mayan support for conservative regimes in La Esperanza before and directly after the Peace Accords. Still, this framework does not explain the rise of the FRG in La Esperanza.

The group that organized immediately after the violence of the early 1980s was led by a man I will call Francisco Garcia, was affiliated with the PAN in 1989, the Solidarity Action Movement (MAS) party in 1993 and back to the PAN in 1998 before moving towards the left in the 2003 elections. In 2003 they supported the CASA party, led by Rigoberto Queme Chay the indigenous Mayor of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second city and indigenous capital. After the CASA collapsed, Francisco Garcia's team backed the leftist New Nation Alliance (ANN). Beyond development, FRG populism included payments for ex-civil patrollers (ex-PAC) registered with the FRG.¹⁰ Members of Francisco Garcia's group viewed Ríos Montt as a corrupt assassin, and campaigned hard against him and his local candidate in 2003. They also denounced the ex-PAC payments as unfair and fiscally irresponsible. Many FRG supporters were previous participants or sympathizers with the guerrilla movement, and most of them were members of Francisco Garcia's organization until 1996, when they split off to join the FRG. Were the goals of the FRG supporters the same as the previous local Mayan activists? If so, why did they split? If not, what demands and desires did neo-authoritarian populism satisfy? Members of Francisco Garcia's organization themselves expressed confusion about the motives of their FRG-aligned neighbors.

Current approaches to populism emphasize agency and ideological resonance at the expense of examining other configurations of the political field

a local hotel. While the Ladino leadership lunched on the sunny hotel patio, enjoying a mountain view, the indigenous mayor and his supporters ate cramped together in a back room. I thank Adriana Dingman for this anecdote.

10 It could be argued that massive indigenous mobilizations for the retribution payments to the ex-PAC illustrate that the FRG responds directly to local demands. I am less optimistic. The PAC movement remained small until the decision to pay the ex-PAC was announced by then president Alfonso Portillo. Notably, Esperanzans saw the decision as arising from Ríos Montt himself. Therefore subsequent mobilizations were understood by most to be sanctioned by powerful elements in the state. The largest unsanctioned movement is against mining, but most opposition remains at the level of verbal opposition, and does not translate into broadbased organizing (see Benjamin Witt 2006). Furthermore, high levels of local opposition to CAFTA did not translate into widespread participation in social protests.

on which populist appeals are offered, perceived and accepted or contested. It is unclear how past and present state violence and forms of ideological and spatial control work alongside multiculturalist populist appeals. Emphasis on ‘consent’—forms of which almost certainly exist—tends, ineluctably, to downplay the forms of ‘coercion’ still at work in Mayan towns. It also misses how governance works not only by fulfilling needs and demands, but by generating and shaping them as well. At worst, the focus on agency risks pushing analysis towards the dominant narrative that constructs postwar politics as democratic. To reinforce this point, I will now describe some of the local conditions that functioned as the conditions of possibility for FRG ascendance in La Esperanza.

Revolutionary Pessimism

Assuming that rural Mayans support neo-authoritarian parties out of their free will or affinity, it follows that their deeply embedded commonsense understandings would reflect a shift away from revolutionary politics. One might expect, for example, that the public repudiation of the guerrilla movement, along the lines described by Stoll (1993) would be accompanied by a critique of their ideological underpinnings (e.g. democracy, human rights, and the Peace Accords) and that this would be evident in not only in public discourse, but also in everyday talk, shared narratives, commonsense conceptual frameworks, pervasive affective dispositions and popular cultural references. One might even expect for indigenous Guatemalans allied with neo-authoritarian politics to celebrate their ability to translate their political will into reality through free elections.

However, what I found in La Esperanza was that even today, most indigenous residents in La Esperanza—and in rural Huehuetenango more generally—regardless of party affiliation, share a Marxist-inflected poetics—a mix of indigenous and revolutionary nationalism embedded in communal and familial struggles for dignity and well-being. This imaginary is characterized by a deep feeling of distrust for the state and multinational capital. My field notes are full of examples of town political leaders who would espouse beliefs in many ways consistent with revolutionary politics. Village leaders and rank and file villagers—regardless of party affiliation—would often bemoan that the country is run by a small group of “*ricos*” and corrupt businessmen who keep poor Mayans “*under*

their boots.” One day I was sharing a Gallo (rooster)—the national beer—with a few male members of a family who ardently supported the FRG in the 2003 elections, but who had just as ardently supported the guerrilla in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As we swapped stories, they instructed me to peel the label off of my beer. When I asked why, one explained that, “*it gives a chance [for work] to the poor.*” In addition to such small rituals of class solidarity among indigenous Esperanzans, there is widespread support for the Peace Accords, most conceptions of human rights,¹¹ democracy, and standard revolutionary goals like land reform. And Esperanzans—indigenous and *mestizo*—have been highly critical of military violence, as have many highland Mayans (cfa Sanford 2003). Moreover, these standard reformist, anti-army, and at times outwardly Marxist, sentiments were frequently refracted through the anti-racist idea that indigenous people are poor *because they are indigenous*. These sentiments are continuous with the revolutionary imaginary from the 1970s, and provide the basis for the URNG in La Esperanza.

This line of argument raises an obvious question: if indigenous groups retain revolutionary desires, why support neo-authoritarian regimes at the very moment when radical ideas have become legal? Why does resistant consciousness not translate into resistant politics? Part of the answer lies in the ways that this subaltern imaginary has shifted in the intervening decades. One important difference is the addition of a Mayan nationalist sentiment that goes beyond the anti-racist conceptions central to indigenous politics in the 1960s and 70s. This is especially pronounced among younger, better-educated Esperanzans, including many self-described Pan-Mayanists. But the change most relevant to the question of political alignments, I think, involves the way the state is figured in deeply embedded political narratives.

Aretxaga (2000) argues that states come into being “through a world of fantasy thoroughly narrativized and imbued with affect, fear, and desire, that make it, in fact, a plausible reality” (2000, 52). Her concern is with “how the state as a phantasmatic reality operates within a political imaginary to constitute political reality

11 While many Mayans conflate human rights with the physical office of human rights, and specifically oppose this groups’ efforts to let local criminals free, other ideas about human rights are not controversial, although public discourses on these matters remain limited.

and political experience and to produce concrete effects” (53). Together political fantasies and political affect index the limits of imagined understandings of the politically possible. Therefore, careful attention to the ways in which widely held state fantasies arising from particular patterns of state activity rework deeply embedded political narratives and affect could illuminate shifts in political behavior. How have past and continued state violence impacted Mayan understandings of the revolutionary narrative?

Although Mayans today reflexively criticize the nexus between the state and capitalism as the root of their problems, they express little confidence that this situation can change, and much less that they can do anything about it. Most Mayans I met were angered and disgusted by their victimization as indigenous people, but at the same time are cynical, and feel powerless and demoralized. Collectively, Mayans tend to see themselves as the hapless victims of pernicious forces outside of their control. While revolutionary desires boil under the surface, they are smothered under a heavy cloud of pessimism. A Mayan mayoral candidate for a non-FRG right wing party in the 2003 elections explained his perspective on politics like this:

They want to fix Guatemala, but with each attempt, it is sinking deeper. When a child is born, they already owe money to the United States. They are never going to be able to pay that debt. Have you heard of the Bishop Juan Gerardi? He published a book about the violence. We studied this in my class. It’s called *Nunca Mas* [REHMI]. Never Again. What does that mean? It means that Guatemala is never, never, never going to change. The diputados (legislators) want to raise their salaries and what do they do? They don’t do anything. And then they killed Gerardi, for being in favor of the poor. There’s never a government that worries about the people.

Nunca mas means never again. The title *Nunca Mas* was originally intended to be a renunciation of *la violencia*, an unequivocal resolution to never permit what happened in Guatemala to happen again, in Guatemala or anywhere else. Hearing the intended meaning twisted by a Mayan who had studied the subject into a definitive statement of the inevitability of oppressive government left me speechless. This was not an exceptional sentiment. This pessimism was best encapsulated by a former guerrilla sympathizer turned active FRG supporter.

When I asked if he thought there was a political party in favor of the people, he answered with the following:

A: Yes, the party URNG. That's the guerrilla party.

Q: Then why are you in a different party?

A: I have always worked for the parties for the poor. But they never win. Even good guerrilla leaders change parties, it's always for personal interest.

Q: So you were struggling before, but now you want to win?

A: Look, I'm illiterate. Ever since my childhood I have never known regular pay. I worked from 7 am to 5pm for 40 *centavos* every day. Really suffering! When I got married, I worked for two months in the coast in a *finca* (plantation). In two months I barely saved 20 *quetzales*. I was malnourished, my shirt was ripped and my pants were ruined. That is the life of an *indio*, of a peasant. Now I am saving the money I make helping the party. If God gives me health, I can make money the entire four years.

Q: What changes do you think would be necessary in the government of Guatemala?

A: To change the government? That's difficult. He is in his power. Now there are a lot of organizations. Many go to protest in front of the president's house. But he, what pain does it give him? He is there in his power, just listening. He never makes good.

Q: So, you don't think that changing the government is possible?

A: It's impossible.

Here is an example of a strong FRG supporter—a party leader—who defines the FRG as an anti-poor party. The core elements of the revolutionary imaginary are clearly present: Power is in the hands of the few, rich people and rulers who oppose reform and are indifferent to local concerns. Interestingly, the state is personified. The state is a man, sitting, one imagines, in a government building in the capitol. The state has a clear intentionality, which is pure calculated self-interest. The pessimism is unmistakable. The man-state is indifferent to protest: he sits in his power, listening but not acting, never making good on his promises. Indigenous and popular agency is figured as basically nil. Oppositional organizations can exist, while legal, is useless. Electing different officials is different than changing the government, which is impossible. The best that one can do is to take

advantage of what the powerful deign to offer the poor and excluded.

The state, and the social order it maintains, is imagined as an all-encompassing and insuperable force, always ready to step in and humiliate social movements and their participants—especially Mayans. The subject position of the revolutionary narrative, of the enraged and rebellious “insurgent,” is replaced with the subject position of “victim,” who is also enraged, but at the same time helpless, frustrated, and passive in relation to the powerful state. Contemporary revolutionary sentiments of mistrust and anger articulate pervasive pessimism and a profound sense of impotence, foreclosing in the popular imagination the possibility of revolutionary political change. These implicit understandings of the relationship between the state and the populace regarding the limits to democracy, constitutes an affective force field marking the line beyond which democracy must not tread. For many FRG supporters, this cynicism means that the FRG is just as bad as any other party.

In addition, these interpretive inclinations and affective dispositions suggest that supposedly neutral attempts to enforce the law have the additional effect of reproducing the specter of state as an immovable force in the imaginations of many rural Guatemalans. Mayans imagine a vampiric and predatory state with a fixed intentionality and unmatched strength whose violence goes unchecked. Without question, this predatory state is the narrative backdrop against which current state violence is interpreted, allowing the re-inscription of previously understood limits in the evolving political context of the post Accords period. Contemporary political cynicism is the vestige of past state violence, its continued effects.

Almost no one I met—including many party higher-ups—explained their support for right wing parties in terms of agreeing with their ideologies or their plans for national development. Instead, they cited plans that boasted of immediate results that also carried personal benefits. In fact, most politically active Mayans were quite critical of all these parties, including their own, for their lack of concern for the poor and corruption, and remained pessimistic about finding a solution to poverty through projects. Furthermore, while critical of the guerrilla’s strategic missteps, indigenous Esperanzans do not unilaterally blame them for endangering them during the war, and do not view today’s left as fundamentally

racist. Neither are they afraid to join leftist organizations. They simply do not see the point anymore. In their perspective, the *guerrilla* is now just another political party with nice ideas, perhaps, but doomed to fail. They lost, and that is that. For many, the fundamental impotence of popular movements is so basic a fact it is hardly worth discussing. Twenty-five years ago, political desire hit a wall, and was forced to choose between obviously flawed alternatives, each aimed at short-term gains. This is not to say that past errors of leftist organizations and existing racism on the left do not serve as obstacles for Mayans who are otherwise reform-minded. However, these missed opportunities, problematic as they are, are insufficient to explain the contemporary Mayan support for neo-authoritarian parties. Still, violence alone does not explain support for the most authoritarian and bloodstained parties. Other processes linked to state repression but not reducible to it, helped make conditions ripe for a FRG victory in La Esperanza.

Project-Centered Development Populism and Community Autonomy

Under the infamous Plan Victoria '82, Ríos Montt gave villagers a choice between *frijoles o fusiles* (beans or rifles). 'Good' Mayans were spared by state violence and became eligible for state benefits, while 'bad' Mayans faced extermination. The Guatemalan army provided infrastructural development to war-displaced Mayans who "surrendered" and agreed to live in "model communities" where they were surveilled and re-educated in military ideology (Nelson 1999, Schirmer 1998, Smith 1990a). Most indigenous communities that were not displaced became eligible for large-scale infrastructure and individual assistance programs with the advent of the 8% municipal tax in 1985, both during the time of militarization and the period since the signing of the Peace Accords. Today, development populism, propagated by all right wing political parties, rather than violence, is the primary modality through which rural Mayans encounter the state.

Remarkably, new indigenous political organizations continued to emerge in La Esperanza in the mid-1980s, a few years after *La violencia*. These post-violence organizations united former guerrilla sympathizers with those who had opposed the guerrilla—prior divisions were neutralized by the military defeat of the guerrilla. Meanwhile, new development funds dramatically increased the power of being *alcalde* (mayor). In La Esperanza, infrastructural development

immediately became an arena of struggle between competing ethnic groups as Ladino mayors directed nearly all of the money from the development tax to the Ladino dominated town center.¹² So, a specific goal for these new organizations was electing an indigenous *alcalde* who would channel development to the indigenous villages. Like elsewhere in the highlands, conservative parties responded to indigenous organizations with offers of development and mayoral positions, provided that they forswear leftist politics and affiliate with their parties. Consistent with Hale's reading, indigenous political leaders accepted this deal and waited for political openings.

State development agencies, political parties and their local indigenous allies idealize apolitical development—the centerpiece of state multiculturalism—as the route to Mayan inclusion in national life. This narrative holds up infrastructure and assistance programs as proof of the state's image as benevolent provider of resources for impoverished rural Mayans. When indigenous leaders in La Esperanza won the mayorship for the first time in 1993, projects began to flow to rural communities. After the signing of the Accords, a wave of internationally financed projects targeted at rural Mayan villages. Before the law of decentralization in 2002 (Decreto 14-2002) established Community and Municipal Development Councils (COCODES and COMUDES), these funds were controlled almost exclusively by the *alcalde*. While these steps have cemented development as a viable route to social and political advancement, the constitution of these programs, their daily administration, and their effects tell a different story.

Ferguson (1994) argues that rather than resolving poverty, development renders it in purely technical terms, making its political and historical roots invisible while spreading bureaucracy and increasing state power. Others insist that development resources are vital (Edelman 1999), and that subaltern groups resist and selectively appropriate development according to local knowledge and conceptions of social justice (Pigg 1993, Crush et al 1995, Gupta 1998, Haenn

¹² Historically, indigenous communities were left to fend for themselves or perish. In the 1960s and 1970s, individual capacity development promoted by the Catholic Church, the cooperative movement and later some state programs opened a narrow path for indigenous economic mobility and parity with Ladinos. Development gave form to local desires for social justice. Although village leaders formed development committees in the 1970s, early demands for schools, roads and potable water went largely ignored.

2003). Rather than rebuilding communities or alleviating poverty, development is the principal means of extending the effects of counterinsurgency into democracy. Postwar development extends the effects of state violence, creates dependency, divides communities and reshapes political demands, while increasing the power of political parties.¹³ However, it also creates and legitimates a new field of politics and language of contestation.

The Dirty World of Development Populism

Neo-authoritarian development populism is characterized by several patterns and shared understandings, many of which are deeply embedded rather than publicly proclaimed. I will first describe them and then discuss their effects. First, development means projects. ‘Project’ is an umbrella term for any kind of assistance, including potable water, roads, jobs and medicine—precious commodities indigenous villagers could not otherwise afford. New programs trained villagers to think of development in terms of discrete projects. Communities create prioritized lists that they present to the mayor and to development institutions. These lists expanded over time, and now include such items as mills, latrines, and stoves. An indication of the intensity of the project focus was its influence on village governance structures. Over time, a new generation of Mayan leaders became experts in profiling projects, navigating institutions, and making deals with political parties. After the civil patrols were disbanded in 1996, development committees were the pre-eminent decision-making body at the village level (Stepputat 2001). Initially it was primarily men that were trained by Guatemalan state institutions to procure projects, and community leadership continues to remain male-dominated (cfa Cervone 2002).

Second, projects come from the “state.” Not only are projects narrated as proof of this fantasmic entity’s commitment to the role of benevolent provider for Mayan communities, the state is also viewed as the preeminent agent of deve-

¹³ Nancy Postero (2007) describes very similar effects of neoliberal development in Guaraní communities in Bolivia. As I argue here, the effects are different in the Guatemalan context, largely due to the deployment of development alongside extreme state violence and repression. I suggest that the relative durability of the development regime in Guatemala, while more nefarious and damaging, stems from the more pronounced effects of state violence in the rural highlands.

lopment. In addition, development discourses depict the state as surrounding the communities, looming above them and peering down into the intimate contexts their lives as “it” did through the spies, military commissioners, and civil patrols, only now to see and attend to their needs.

Third, projects are conditional on party affiliation. As previously mentioned, in the mid 1980s, communities suspected of supporting the guerrilla were excluded from projects and those that enthusiastically performed their patrol duties were rewarded. Today, conservative parties collectively act as development brokers and as intermediaries between communities and the state. Community leaders pledge the political support of the entire village, or at least a significant faction. Many are told they would receive projects if they kept their promise, often even if their party lost. Indigenous leaders selected to be *alcaldes* by neo-authoritarian and conservative parties receive explicit under the table instructions not to participate in, and when possible, to disparage, popular or indigenous movements that contest state authority. They are told that the projects will stop if they support these groups.

Fourth, the prevailing development delivery process constructs Mayans as dependent on outside assistance for resources. Racist patterns of interaction plague the delivery of development assistance. Evidence for the symbolic asymmetry of the relationship between community leaders and development agencies and party representatives is prevalent in daily interactions, from meetings with development agents to project celebrations and in populist discourses. Otherwise proud community leaders typically approach development institutions and even their own *alcaldes* as if they were beggars—hats in hands and eyes focused toward the ground. These gendered rituals rehearse the subordination and infantilization of Mayan communities previously inscribed by state violence.

A fifth, inescapable local understanding about development is that projects are scarce; and, therefore, that community members must compete with their neighbors to receive them. Even when a community keeps their promise to a party and that party wins, the projects that arrive are insufficient for community needs and arrive irregularly. Institutions and politicians respond to community demands, or not, at their leisure. It often takes years for a project to go through institutional channels. The bigger the project the longer it takes. False promises

of aid are the norm. The most common excuse given by *alcaldes*, who repeat what they hear from party officials, is scarce resources. A corollary to the notion of scarcity is the shared understanding that development in the form of projects will not, and cannot, provide a solution for poverty. Solutions for poverty are simply not on the table in the political game.

Many of these understandings were illustrated on a fairly routine trip by the FRG *alcalde* to a village whose leaders had demanded his presence. The villagers were angry and refused to accept one of his councilors as a replacement. They wanted to discuss with the *alcalde* why some of the projects he had promised during his campaign, had, over a year later, never arrived. They were also frustrated because other community needs were going unmet. Health concerns were at the top of their list. The *alcalde* was very clear in response to these questions. He first told them that “*the municipal budget does is insufficient for everyone. Imagine, there are 56 communities in La Esperanza.*” He told them that they could certainly make a request:

“[...] but I can’t tell you that right away today, but rather than perhaps we can help you in some part. I can’t give projects like this, continuously, because other communities are also getting them and it depends on the necessities more urgent in other communities.”

There are simply not enough resources for every community to have every project that they want, or need. He reminded them that, “*Projects are not the solution for poverty.*” For that, he counseled, everyone has to pray to God, work hard and give a good education for your children. These more “realistic” admissions mark the deep ambivalence in development discourses. After promising the world, *alcaldes* admit what everyone already knows: that these promises are just what the *alcalde* says to get elected. The *alcalde* is viewed simultaneously as a strong provider of development and as limited by a state unwilling to provide more funds. In this narrative, La Esperanza appears “just another” town full of poor people, each village with their needs and wants. It is only one poor town of many in Guatemala. Villagers are told to accept what the parties offer—even if it is less than they promise, or simply not enough. State violence removed solutions to poverty from the political agenda. Projects are offered, intermittently, as a substitute.

Outcomes of State Development Strategies

Project-centered development altered the way that Mayans experience and imagine the state (Nelson 1999). These programs made it possible for Mayans to imagine the state as a productive force in their worlds, a protector of life. Progress is visible. Communities have been transformed by the wave of projects, which represent needed improvements in the quality of life. However, not only does the state's new image as protector have built in limits; neither does it displace its prior incarnation as destroyer of indigenous life. In fact, it is another reminder of sovereign power over life and death. The state can give development or withhold it. Development helps maintain an image of the state as "vertically encompassing" Mayan villages (Gupta and Ferguson 2002). Its knowledge of and ability to act on community desires reinforce its claims to dominate social force relations.

These understandings were essential to the efficacy of the FRG's vote-getting strategy of promising to pay 500 US dollars to each Mayan who had served in state-mandated civil patrols (anti-guerrilla militias) if they joined the party. Names were collected on a laptop computer. The FRG candidate assured them that the computer would "know" how they voted, adding that God would too. The basis of this strategy is linking a promise for resources to a threat of punishment, the certainty of which is ensured by a high-tech fetish: a laptop, a mobile panopticon, especially for folks who know little about computers. The gift of resources is an unobtrusive, if often un-remarked, reminder of the state's capacity for violence. An FRG party leader said the computer never went to the villages but admitted that "*manipulacion hubo*" (there was manipulation).

Another effect of project-centered development is dependency. Economic insecurity is the norm for rural Mayans, most of who live in poverty or extreme poverty. Conditioning insufficient, irregularly delivered, and often-personalized aid on obedience and party affiliation conjures the specter of scarcity and transforms widespread insecurity into pervasive feelings of dependency on the state for survival and fears of abandonment. When I asked what would happen if the state stopped subsidizing fertilizer, many said they would "*just not eat.*" Villagers expressed similar anxieties about food assistance. Even while notions

of individual development constitute a norm in thinking about economic advancement, right behind immigration to the US, there is little discussion on what the community could do *collectively* to ensure community well-being. Most of this energy is channeled into the pursuit of projects.¹⁴

It is widely commented by development officials and members of Guatemala's leftist and Pan Mayanist organizations that rural Mayans are "accustomed" to receiving projects, and that projects have displaced more radical political demands. Training communities to articulate their needs in terms of development projects from the state domesticates their political demands and makes them visible and susceptible to manipulation by state and party bureaucracies. This is also called "*proyectitus*" (projectism). It was evident that projects now exhaust community political aspirations; and most village political-organizational energy is invested in procuring or planning projects. When seen as evidence of Mayan backwardness or laziness, however, the notion of projectitus forgets that communities were actively conditioned to receive projects, in extremely vulnerable conditions, by a state who had closed off other political alternatives and that wanted to foster this desperation in order to selectively manage it. This sheds a different light on the notion that indigenous people blindly "sell their votes" for projects, personal favors, or cash. Rather than ignorance, this choice is based on the knowledge that all parties capable of winning are crooked. One might as well get whatever one can out of the situation, or risk losing out on the only benefits that politics brings.

The most tragic effect of project-centered development is community division. Politicizing insufficient development in this insecure climate gives rise to a reductive conception of politics as a zero-sum competition for scarce resources. Most Mayans feel obligated to compete with their neighbors and Ladinos for projects. As one man explained, "*Joining a party is how a person can find a job. If you don't join a party, you are left out of work.*" By the time I arrived in La Esperanza, villagers habitually looked upon many of their own neighbors as threats, people competing against them for access to basic resources that everyone needs

¹⁴ Although villagers stress the need for individual capacity building development, most seem to have given up on entrepreneurial activities, which often only produced modest results.

to survive. Even when the parties that they supported changed, this fundamental division remained. Several made an analogy between politics and sports. One of the political leaders in La Esperanza told me that, *“Politics is like soccer. There has to be a winner and a loser.”* Someone from a different party concurred, *“That is how politics is. You help your friends and the people who helped you win when you come into power. There is not one party any different, even if they say they are.”*

In this context, most pay more attention to what some describe as a war with their neighbors than to previous political struggles. Families, village sub-sectors, religious groups, and ethnic groups are increasingly reified as political divisions. Single villages can be divided into ten or more political parties. In numerous cases, favoritism led to violent confrontations among Mayan villagers. Most Mayans are more concerned with what some describe as a war with their neighbors than past struggles. In addition, this has led to a heightening of tensions between Ladinos and Mayans, which is to be expected since Ladinos have lost their privileged position in relation to project administration. Some Ladinos complain that now that only Mayans win as mayor they want to do away with the Ladinos. However, I found little evidence of this; and Ladinos still remain on top of the town’s cultural hierarchy.

The final negative effect on Mayan politics produced by the wave of development is widespread corruption. Development funds are loosely controlled, making corruption a huge temptation for everyone, especially the *alcalde* and his cronies, who deftly bypass new legal regulations.¹⁵ Outside institutions often require bribes, and party bosses and construction firms also routinely give them, making some corruption inevitable. There is no independent auditing body to regulate the *alcalde*’s spending.¹⁶ Many honest, highly educated Mayans eschew politics because they do not want their names to get dragged through the mud.

15 In particular, they find specific ways to outmaneuver the Community and Municipal Development Councils (COCODES and COMUDES respectively). In La Esperanza, the FRG mayor recognized them, but appointed his own party representatives to many of community leadership spots. Some communities elected their own representatives, but many communities were unaware that they could do so. Others were convinced that letting the *alcalde* pick would help them get projects.

16 While I was in La Esperanza in 2004 the head of oversight for the entire department was murdered.

The dominant view among rural Mayans, and perhaps most Guatemalans, is that everyone is in politics for personal interest. Corruption has gotten so bad that it has begun to disqualify the entire project of Mayan political inclusion. These concerns were expressed by an older man, one of the first *catequistas* in the town and a former sympathizer with the guerrilla movement. He commented grimly on the state of the local Mayan movement:

The struggle now is that a Mayan should govern. For years only Ladinos were in the government. Now there are indigenous, but perhaps it is the same as before, or even worse. We have an example with the *alcaldes* here in La Esperanza. The problem now is embezzlement of money. They just come to steal. Before there were only three candidates and one would win. Now there are 14 because everyone wants to get some money. That is why Guatemala is fucked. We don't know what to do to resolve this. As for elections in this context, the conventional wisdom is that "*He who lies the most, wins.*" Part of the FRG's success derived from their exorbitant promises, which in La Esperanza included roofing for everyone in the village, jobs, laminated roofing, shoes, and, the final touch—payment for everyone in the party who participated in the civil patrols. This last move precipitated a come-from-behind victory over the *Partido Avansco Nacional*, (PAN) (the FRG was already a close second).

As violence wanes, signs of resistance to these development politics have emerged. Mayan leaders across the political spectrum invoke the state's responsibility for development and its failure to deliver. Concerned citizens have formed Civic Committees (local parties) or joined leftist parties for the express purpose of addressing these concerns. More groups invoke the new laws on decentralization to pressure *alcaldes* for more transparency and to let communities establish development priorities. If the promise of development helps explain Mayans alignment with the PAN in La Esperanza in 1993 and after, that plus local opposition to the negative outcomes I have just described led to an FRG victory in 2003.

Many voted for the FRG as a way to resist corruption. One FRG advi-

sor—a young college-educated Mayan man—put it this way, “*We are refundidos (sunk to the bottom) in corruption. There are no good guys. Yes, Rios Montt is bad, but this is a double-edged sword. We are doing something good here while the country gets worse.*” Villagers responded enthusiastically to the FRG candidate’s vehement critique of corruption and favoritism in prior administrations and promises of aid to groups excluded from past rounds of projects. Despite the nobility of these distressing claims, the FRG’s own tactics further enshrined the project-centric notion of politics, state dominance, dependency, political divisions and, of course, corruption.¹⁷

State-Imposed Truth and Political Disorientation

Another factor in the rise of neo-authoritarian politics is state attempts to control the truth, and the hold of state-imposed truth on historical memory in indigenous communities. The army narrated incessantly over events during the internal war with an intensity that would shock Orwell (CEH 1999, Falla 1994, Manz 2003, Montejo 1987, REHMI 1998, Wilson 1991, Warren 1992, Zur 1998). The specifics of the army’s discourse varied by location, but included many of the following elements: Mayans did not want the military, but they never wanted the guerrilla in the first place. Guerrilla supporters were either coerced or tricked; only a very few were involved in the guerrilla, and those were the ones who were killed. Moreover, the guerrilla never had a prayer of changing power at the national level. Even if they did, the guerrillas’ final goal—communism—was utterly bankrupt. It would require a rationing system that would take half of the land, chickens, and anything else of value from everyone, forcing them to go to the *alcalde* to ask for their weekly ration—no matter how much work a person did or how little they had. Communism was just a sham: guerrillas were subversives, terrorists, atheists, delinquents, and thieves. They stole money and food, knocked down light posts, blew up bridges—everything against the interest of the people that they supposedly were fighting to support. For these reasons, violence against

¹⁷ After being voted out of power and exposed in corruption, the FRG *alcalde* was chased out of town by community members angered about corruption. His brother, a lawyer and close advisor, was hospitalized after being beaten by a mob that was waiting for the mayor.

the guerrilla was completely justified. The army came to protect the people from ideological misdirection and moral perdition. Before democratization, army narratives shifted, admitting that the massacres were excessive and that many killings were indiscriminate (Hale 2006). However, in this narrative, the violence was still the guerrillas' fault for placing Mayans between "*dos fuegos*" (two fires). After inviting military repression, the cowardly guerrilla fled, leaving the population defenseless.

Most scholars agree that Mayans today tend to disassociate themselves—at least publicly—from both the guerrilla and the army. Given the massive military defeat of the left, and the constant and overwhelming pressure to disavow the revolution, this is hardly surprising. They disagree, however, about why this has happened, how blame for the violence is assigned—to the army, the guerrilla, or both—and the implications of these memories for present politics. LeBot (1995) and Stoll (1993) support the *dos fuegos* theory, arguing for a strict division between Mayan and revolutionary politics. Hale (2006) describes a complex and fluid relationship between leftist and indigenous ideologies that was strategically disavowed during military repression. He argues that the two armies narrative legitimates a form of Mayan politics at the expense of recognizing a complicated history of cross-fertilizations class politics. Also at stake is the electoral credibility of authoritarians like Ríos Montt.

Despite some changes, army narratives continued to dominate public discourse in La Esperanza in 2004, creating much confusion about the political past—especially during the years 1978-1982—still uneasily masked under a veneer of silence.¹⁸ This confusion allowed the FRG, to weigh in with their own narratives. A common one holds that when Ríos Montt took power in 1981, "*se calmo la cosa*" (the thing calmed down). Here, the massacres are all blamed on Lucas Garcia, the dictator before Ríos Montt, at a time when state violence was more visible. Opportunistic young Mayans affiliated with the FRG—some of them unwittingly—circulated this discourse. As if to ensure the silence, FRG sought out politicians who lacked experience, education, historical awareness, or who were just otherwise corruptible. This excerpt from a speech given by a young FRG *alcalde* at the inauguration of the first Mayan-centric NGO in La

¹⁸ My research into public memories of *La Violencia* in La Esperanza suggests that this decision was not necessarily strategic or conscious, and involves the emergence of new identities and investments. However, how rural indigenous Esperanzans narrate the past, and the conditions under which they have come to do so, are beyond the scope of this essay.

Esperanza speaks volumes:

For thirty five years there was war. We ruined this country. And why?...*I don't know!* But now we are at peace. How do we achieve peace? Being at home, with the family. As parents we give good educations to our children and they go developing in the future. La Esperanza has a hospital, it has a bank, it has various development associations—now it has one more—there will be a road with asphalt. Everything is going to bring more money, more business to La Esperanza.

The mayor had no idea why the war started and apparently did not care. Whatever it was, the war is irrelevant now. His version of peace entails individual, private acts of familial bonding and education. Collective political struggle has no place in this narrative. Interestingly, the NGO itself framed its politics in terms of projects, development, and culture and its mission statement made no mention of a commitment to structural political reform.

However, the memory of indigenous engagement with revolutionary politics has not died. There are signs that new democratic spaces have allowed a thaw in state-sanctioned truth. Two national truth commissions and many human rights groups provide a decidedly anti-military interpretation. Left-oriented NGOs and political parties circulate a counter-narrative, albeit one that often uncritically heroizes the guerrillas. Still, during the time of my fieldwork, these had not translated locally into a critique of the two-army narrative.

Conclusion: Beneath Populism and Democracy

Counterinsurgent strategies aimed to separate Mayans from the revolutionary movement and to create a new “sanctioned Mayan” who was docile and nationalist (Schirmer 1998). These strategies, which continued well past the transition to democracy in 1986, did not achieve their desired effects. However, the official embrace of multiculturalism notwithstanding, persistent ‘revolutionary’ and Mayan nationalist political desires remain thwarted; they lack expression in the democratic political sphere. Grassroots political imaginaries are plagued by an unshaking belief in an omnipotent and sinister state that endows the social or-

der with an aura of inevitability, reinforced by state violence targeted against autonomous social movements. Many rural Mayans believe that pursuing meaningful reform is much more dangerous than staying inside the lines. Few believe—even remotely—in the power of the vote to produce radical social change. Voting for Colom Argueta was largely seen as a defense against a return to military rule, not a sign of confidence in his party or mission. Most Pan Mayanists were very disappointed by his candidacy.¹⁹ The low turnout in the runoff election is more evidence of the “narrowing of options for voters” (Warren 2002: 174). These limits are integral to what Hale (2004) refers to as the *indio permitido*. Of course, this defies the spirit of democracy, whose only acceptable limit is, supposedly, the ability for human beings to imagine a version of a brighter political future upon which at least a plurality of the population can agree.

In addition, this pessimism and sense of powerlessness give rise to a development politics that extends the effects of violence and further erodes the conditions for collective political struggle. Once united against the state, Mayans now compete with each other for access to limited state resources. Complicating matters, grassroots indigenous political imaginaries are over-determined by state-imposed truth. Many younger indigenous Esperanzans have never imagined the possibility of far reaching social change in Guatemala. Official discourses have rendered utopian dreams, in Trouillot’s (1995) terms, “unthinkable.”

These continued effects of counterinsurgency serve as reminders that Guatemalan “democracy” was part of a military strategy (Schirmer 1998). They also clarify the limits of neoliberal multiculturalism, particularly its complicity with colonial governance. In the neoliberal world order, where procedures make democracy and the market is the only measure of all else, abysmal standards for human rights, and the daily suffering that these low standards maintain, have become the new normal. “Good enough” human rights records—dismal, but on the “right” side of the war on terror and trade issues—are increasingly commonplace among US allied democracies.

So where does this leave Guatemala? Guatemalan elites—both military

¹⁹ See for example several articles in the *Prensa Libre* by Sam Colop, the popular Pan Mayanist columnist, weeks before the 2007 election.

and neoliberal—perceive postwar social movements as threatening much more than an abstract legality. Grassroots desires for deeper democracy are fundamentally incompatible with the neoliberal world order and unacceptable to most Guatemalan elites. In this context, postwar Guatemalan governments have experimented with selective use of violence against social movements in hopes of establishing a precedent for the legitimate use of force, using the tortured logic in which terror is seen as defending rule based democracy, and civilization itself.

These findings highlight the need to connect theories of populism with theories of governmentality. Inspired Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Ernesto Laclau's (1979, 2004) defines populism as a political discourse that divides the social field into the "people" and the "power bloc" and purports to fight for the former against the latter. Society in this view is not knowable outside of the discourses or forms of knowledge that constitute it. Political identities, therefore, cannot be derived, in the Marxian manner, from their objective location in the mode of production—they must also be imagined. In his telling, equivalent links between unmet demands foster a grassroots identity of "the people." (2005: 72-75). Once constituted, populist appeals to the "people" can be used by regimes intent on preserving the dominant social order as well as by those who aim to subvert it. Furthermore, subaltern participation in conservative populism is read as agency, not cooptation, as (some of) their political demands are included and they can continue to struggle from within (cfa Alvarez 1998). Right-wing populism plays with fire because recognizing specific claims can raise expectations for "the unified whole" (Laclau 2005: 82). Repression is used to prevent this overflow (ibid.).

Theories of governmentality focus on the political regulation of conduct carried out in the name of the wellbeing of the population—defending, enhancing and extending life and freedom (Foucault et al 1991, Rose 1999). This analysis focuses on the structural configuration of the political field that opens and closes spaces for subjectivity. In emphasizing agency and consciousness, theories of populism often downplay the effects of governance.²⁰ However, theories of

²⁰ It is telling that Laclau does not unpack the more complex political function of repression, and tends to see "demands" as emerging from an autonomous space.

governmentality that focus on the governmental colonization of agency evacuate resistance, and often reduce consciousness to an effect of power. While perhaps ultimately incompatible, both theories together can help make sense of the appeal of neo-authoritarian populism among rural Mayans. Research that examines how governmentality not only disciplines bodies, but also remakes political imaginaries by rewriting political narratives and reconfiguring affective states (Aretxaga 2000, 2003; Brown 1995) clarifies this connection.

In the Guatemalan highlands, the effectiveness of populist appeals among rural indigenous populations in Guatemala depends not only on their ideological resonance with pre-existing demands, but also on the ways that regimes of governmentality have reshaped the political field and the subjectivities and political demands of the political actors within it. State violence created collective disempowerment as it closed off political alternatives and fostered political amnesia. Development allowed the state redefine local political desires in a way that allowed them to manage and capitalize on the forms of suffering that it creates and maintains. The FRG prevailed primarily because they offered solutions to problems that their own counterinsurgent strategy had created in the communities. They provide first aid for victims its own creation, only to victimize them again. Perez Molina is no different. His promise to crush crime with the hard fist of the military—which certainly is appealing to many of Guatemala’s poor who are the most victimized by crime on a daily basis—gained strength from the devastating effects of brutal neoliberal policies, pervasive governmental corruption, and the ineffectiveness of the police—all of which has created a cauldron of desperation and lawlessness. These are cruel populisms, constituted in violence. Attention to these less visible aspects of our shared political imaginaries—a profound sense of disempowerment that finds no relief—is vital to the anthropology of democracy (Paley 2002).

However, this arrangement remains contingent and unpredictable. Mayans, after all, are not “authoritarians,” even if some are willing to pursue their ends through these parties. Even the defensive use of democracy—to stop the return of the *mano dura*—is an exercise of power with the potential to inspire more far-reaching experiments. And there are many other reasons for hope. The widespread pessimism towards Colom Argueta’s political agenda does not

diminish the significance of his victory for grassroots efforts of democratization. He seems much less likely than his predecessors to use state violence to repress social movements, or to continue the policy of exorbitant and unsupervised financial support for the military—the country's most powerful and secretive institution. State violence is an important lynchpin of Guatemalan society; and Colom Argueta could significantly expand political spaces for indigenous and popular social movements if he restricts its use. Without regular violence, a new generation of Guatemalans will likely have greater faith in their political agency than their parents. But even if Colom confirms the worst fears his critics on the left and selectively uses violence, this will entail risks for the regime. On the one hand, continued violence is necessary to reproduce the Guatemalan social order, reaffirming both the state's totality and brutality in the minds of those who might otherwise oppose it. Violence has arisen recently as a means to silence opposition to mining operations (Witte 2006). On the other, each use of violence generates refusals of previously acceptable uses of force, especially in the context of democratization, and when used by a president who ran as the pro-peace candidate.

Furthermore, new steps toward democratization have the potential to renew memorialization processes, holding the possibility of creating new subject positions in relation to the political past. Previously occluded memories continue to emerge. Indeed, the recent campaign centered on a debate about the political past, which broke from the military's exculpatory narrative. Adding to this instability, the state's shift to inclusive political strategies—especially development—opens new avenues for Mayan agency. Mayan activists increasingly critique contradictions between the state's new role as defender of Mayan life and culture and state strategies that maintain the apartheid-like social order by crushing indigenous hopes and dividing their communities. The stakes of these contestations could scarcely be any higher. Although many rural Mayans remain convinced of its impossibility, successful indigenous and popular social movements in Latin America, especially in Bolivia and Ecuador, demonstrate that Guatemala's colonial social order is more vulnerable than ever to a widely supported non-violent political movement, or an electoral coup.

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