The Ugly Poetics of Violence in Post-Accord Guatemala

John-Andrew McNeish

Senior Researcher, Chr. Michelsens Institute, Bergen

Oscar López Rivera

Senior Researcher, Faculty of Latin American Social Sciences (FLACSO), Guatemala

Abstract

With the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 Guatemala's credentials of democratic governance were re-established, but as media reports and the international community have observed the killing and crimes of the civil war have continued. With thought of the apparent contradictions of continued violence in a time of peace, this article aims to characterise and identify the causes of this violence. The article proposes that whilst carrying some validity, current academic, media and political explanations largely fail to capture the extent and significance of the violence in Guatemala because of their general tendency to disarticulate certain forms of violence from each other and their failure to collectively place these acts of violence in a wider socio-political context that stretches beyond Guatemala and between historical periods of peace and war. In underlining the importance of an interpretative approach to violence strong identification is made in this article with anthropological ideas of a 'poetics of violence'. It is argued that study of the 'poetics' of violence – that is, its generative character – unravels existing statistics and highlights that its origins and solutions are to be found beyond the largely static limitations of dominant combative policies. Ultimately, explanations for the persisting violence in Guatemala do not lie with the presence of gangs and organised crime, or a pathological 'culture of violence' marked by war and by poverty, but in its support and sanction by the continued systemic violence of elites and contradictions of international intervention.

Keywords: Guatemala, violence, poverty, post-accord

Introduction

The bloody 36-year-long civil war in Guatemala ended with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, but as the daily reports in the national press and continued expressions of international concern make clear the body count and violence of these earlier times

are far from over. A number of reports written since the cessation of open hostilities between the guerrillas and the government conclude that Guatemala now has one of the highest indices of violent crime in Latin America (Gaviria and Pages, 1999; Londoño and Guerrero, 1999, 2006). Moreover, what continues to shock and challenge many analysts in and outside of the country is the apparent increase in violent crime and the horrific brutality of the violence seen in the intervening years since the signing of the Peace Accords. A recent report produced by Philip Alston, the United Nations ombudsman on extrajudicial killings, stated that 'the number of people killed extra-judicially in the last few years amounts to an annual figure that is greater that the annual figures of extra-judicial killings during the 36 years of civil war' (*El Periódico*, 24 August 2006).[1]

With thought of the apparent contradictions of continued violence in a time of peace, the aim of this article is to attempt to characterise and identify the causes of this violence, and to further consider whether clear linkages can be found with an earlier time of war. In short, the article aims to consider the possibility and reasons why it now appears that, despite the creation of legal accords and the formation of both nationally and internationally backed democratic institutions for keeping the peace, a disguised civil war appears to have continued in the streets and fields of present-day Guatemala. The article proposes that whilst carrying some validity, current academic, media and political explanations largely fail to capture the extent and significance of the violence in Guatemala because of their general tendency to dis-articulate certain forms of violence from each other and their failure to collectively place these acts of violence in a wider socio-political context that stretches beyond Guatemala and between historical periods of peace and war.

The aim, then, of this article is to produce a more integrated understanding of the character and roots of violence in Guatemala. We demonstrate that by highlighting a fuller panorama of the kinds of violence and their integration in much wider temporal and politicised relationships of class and ethnicity a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this feature of Guatemalan society can be formed. Here the causes of violence are linked to

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1 This conclusion was drafted by the ombudsman in comparison to figures drawn from an earlier report of the Commission for Historic Clarification (CEH). See also http://www.oacnudh.org.gt/ver_noticia.asp?idnoticia=33

war and its enduring effects, but not just with the usual suspects of blame and shame. In this integrated manner responsibility for persisting violence and insecurity lies not only with the poor and state, but with elites and the international community. Through direct involvement, collusion, complicity, or poorly judged policy-making, these higher institutions and actors set the scene for the breakdown of state legitimacy and continuation of criminal impunity. This approach also helps to highlight that more can be made out of the meaning of violence than being merely an emotive subject of study in itself, or an excuse for the blooded rags of media pornography and consumption.

A poetics of violence?

In underlining the importance of an interpretative approach to violence strong identification is made in this article with the theoretical development and directions recently taken by a number of anthropologists in their approach to the study of violence. Although the article draws little on ethnographic methodology and more on sociological practice, in aiming to discursively explain the character and roots of violence in Guatemala, and in doing so recognising the need to bridge the gap between available statistics and phenomenology, it takes account of recent anthropological debates on the nature of violence which appear to have particular salience (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004; Taussig, 1997; Kapferer, 1997; Comoroff and Comoroff, 2000).

In earlier anthropology, questions of why violence takes on particular forms, such as acts of mutilation, 'ethnic cleansing' or other modes of community violence, were poorly addressed, and as a result anthropologists have been unable to counter the oversimplistic media and popular commentary that stresses the 'primitive' or trivial nature of many conflicts through repeated reference to the culturally opaque forms of violence, or 'cultures of violence', being observed. To counter this vacuum of explanation, in recent years emphasis has been placed on the need to examine the meaningful and rule-governed nature of violence – that is, where violence is seen as a discursive practice replete with individual meanings, emotive forces and bodily practices, but where its symbols and rituals are also as socially relevant as its individually instrumental aspects (Whitehead, 2004). In this poetics of violence, the actions, or 'generative schemes' (Bourdieu, 1977), of individuals are found and given meaning in an interactive context

of historical and wider sociological forces. Violent actions, no less than any other kind of behavioural expression, are deeply infused with cultural meaning and can be seen as moments of individual agency within historically embedded patterns of behaviour. Individual agency, utilising extant cultural forms, symbols and icons, may thus be considered 'poetic' for the rule-governed substrate that underlines it, and for how this substrate is given new meanings and forms of cultural expression (Whitehead, 2004: 9–10). Phenomenology, numbers and structure are therefore brought together without recourse to a static notion of culture. Some forms of violence are clearly designed to challenge established cultural norms, but they do so from within a cultural discourse that is shared with the victims or it could not be an effective action in the first place (Whitehead, 2004: 60). Acts of particular cruelty, excess of pathology, emerge from their place in the cultural discourse not as empirical or natural facts of the world that have 'core' meanings but nonethless go on to appear as exceptional or marginal forms.

The use of the term 'poetics' is therefore intended to draw attention to the way in which the meaning of violent death cannot be entirely understood by reference to biological origins, sociological functions, or material and ecological necessities but has to be appreciated for the way in which it is also a cultural expression of the most fundamental and complex kind (Whitehead, 2004: 68). We are then not directly concerned with the formal properties of signs and rituals – semiotics – but how those signs are used performatively through time:

> Ethnic cleansing in Bosnia that emphasized rape and execution with mallets and hammers, civil war in Sierra Leone that took the hands and feet of prisoners, anal impalement that invokes key cultural categories in Rwanda, knee-capping in Northern Ireland' are not the simple products of excess or pathological minds but cultural performances whose poetics (or form) derive from history and sociological relationships to the locale (Whitehead, 2004: 74).

In acknowledging the setting of local history in much wider processes in which the state's monopoly of violence has been lost, part of the performative nature of culture proposed by a 'poetics of violence' is a recognition of the memetic (imitative) processes of interaction and change between isolated local culture and the panoptic global media and political juggernaut of post-colonialism

and neoliberal intervention (Whitehead, 2004: 75). As Taussig (1983) has earlier shown for colonial South America, the memisis of violence in the spaces of death involves not savagery but also the inculcation of those colonial and neocolonial forms of violence themselves. In the discussion of the grounds for a 'continuity of violence' in this article, this insight is used to interrogate and fill out the largely statistical and static portrayal of the role and occurrence of violence in Guatemalan society established by existing analysis.

Rates of violence in Guatemala

Violence remains one of the two main preoccupations (alongside poverty[2]) of the majority of citizens in Guatemala. This is something that it is not only revealed by the daily reports and count of murders[3] in the press or constant reminders by neighbours and advertising to be careful and to buy better security in the form of private security companies. It is also repeated continuously in formal statements by different governmental and non-governmental organisations. On 1 February 2006, Sergio Morales, Guatemala's human rights ombudsman, stated: 'The World Health Organisations states that an epidemic of violence begins when there are 10 homicides per 100,000 residents, and here we are up to 40.'[4] In June 2007 the churches that form the Ecumenical Forum for Peace and Reconciliation warned that the rising levels of violence and poverty would lead to the eventual collapse of democracy and possibilities for peace in the country. These preoccupations signal that Guatemalans see themselves as living side by side with violence, and these perceptions would appear to be backed up in reality by the available statistical records for violent acts committed in the country over the last few years.

Comparative studies of violence in Latin America have identified Guatemala as a country with one of the highest levels of homicide in the region. In the middle of the 1990s a survey of the levels of homicide in the world demonstrated that the annual median

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2   According to the most recent state-led quantitative analysis (ENCOVI, 2000) six out of 10 Guatemalans are poor and 22 out of each 100 Guatemalans live in conditions of extreme poverty. The classification 'poor' is given to a person living on an income of less than 4,318 quetzals per year (c. US$570) and 'extremely poor' to a person living on less than 1911 quetzals (US$250) per year.

3   In some cases presented as a daily statistical chart, e.g. Prensa Libre.

4   See 'Violence grips young population', *Latinamericapress*, 23 February 2006.

was 10.7 for each 100,000 inhabitants. In this same survey Latin America was registered at a level of 22.9 per 100,000 inhabitants, and Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia and Jamaica as exceeding this regional median (Buvinic et al., 2000). More specifically, according to a report produced in 2007 by the national office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Guatemala:

> [I]n the last seven years the levels of homicides have increased by over 120%, exceeding 2,665 homicides in 1999 and 5,885 in 2006. This growth is equivalent to a growth of 12% per year since 1999, and is greater than the 2.6% annual growth of the population. In 2006 the country showed a level of 47 homicides per 100 inhabitants nationally and 108 in Guatemala City. These statistics position Guatemala as one of the most violent peace-time countries in the world' (UNDP, 2007: 9).

Perhaps the most surprising conclusion based on available figures is that there has been a higher rate of killings overall in the time of peace than during the time of war (Briceño, 2002).

Current explanations for violence

As the numbers of homicides have risen in Guatemala there has been a growing effort by both government and the international community to explain and develop suitable responses to this clearly increasingly unstable situation. Most explanations for the high levels of violence in the post-accord period focus on different aspects of recent social development and/or the legacy of the civil war (Moser and McIllwaine, 2000, 2001; Keen, 2003; Cleary, 2002; Peacock and Beltrán, 2003).

With 80 per cent of homicide victims in the country under the age of 30, it has been particularly easy for the Guatemalan government to make a case for blaming the majority of the violence on the existence and steady expansion of youth gangs, or *maras*. The *mara* (a name originally drawn from an analogy with the Amazonian *marabunta* – army – ant known for its destructive behaviour) appeared as a serious social problem in Guatemala and a number of Central American countries in the course of the 1990s. The *maras* were formed in the 1980s, when immigrants (many of whom were demobilised army soldiers or guerrillas) fleeing the brutal civil war in Central America settled in Los Angeles

and San Diego. To protect themselves from already established street gangs, these immigrants banded together and formed their own. They began flooding back to Central America in 1996, when the United States began to deport immigrants convicted of different petty and serious crimes. Many of the *maras* continue to carry the names of, and be connected with, the gangs to which they belonged in the US, such as Salvatrucha, MS-13 and Aara 18. They are described in social terms as representing a sector of the population that is young (female and male), commonly unemployed, and lacking possibilities for economic improvement in the period of peace and reconstruction since the war.[5]

The *maras* are known to be well organised (with linkages throughout the Americas), and with time they have equipped themselves with more sophisticated weaponry, moving from the use of knives and machetes to the now more common use of small automatic weapons, acquired through the large black market in weaponry in Guatemala. As the press and Guatemalan authorities have warned, the *maras* are no longer just an urban phenomenon, but have increasingly spread into rural, local society. The populations controlled by the *maras* live in an environment of constant fear, where nearly all aspects of public life are affected by these groups' practices of selling and enforcing 'security'. It is now common for bus drivers, school children and everyday commuters in Guatemala City to have to pay a toll to the *maras* when passing through the areas controlled by them (*zonas rojas*). Those who refuse to pay are assaulted and sometimes killed. Shop owners in gang-controlled parts of the city must also pay a regular fee to the *maras* for security, any failure to comply meaning that their property and even their own survival are put at risk. The *maras* have also been known to levy 'rape taxes' on the parents of young neighbourhood girls, where the payments are intended to ensure their daughters are not attacked.

Despite the widely recognised terror caused by the *maras* in Guatemalan society there have been no official investigations undertaken to confirm, or refute, the extent of their blame for the

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5   There is no agreement on the number of young people and adolescents involved in the *maras,* but the National Police estimate there are between 165,000 and 200,000 in Guatemala, the National Youth Coordination (the Guatemala Youth Federation) estimate the figure as 35,000, and a report produced by the University of Argentina estimate the figure as c. 200,000, based on figures published in the press and by the police. According to Mejía (2007) there are about 69,145 gang members in Central America, distributed in 920 groups.

totality of violence in the country. Indeed, a number of human rights organisations and academics now point to the problem of the government's heavy-handed militarised tactics (*mano dura*) and its over-emphasis on the *mara* as the only security issue. These analysts argue that the *maras* should not be understood as the perpetrators of violence, but as victims of the same. Academics have also stressed that gang members do not join a *mara* out of desire to engage in violence. They value the friendship, protection, unity and solidarity that membership brings in communities where families have broken down and state institutions have failed (Levinson, 2003; Winton, 2004). There is also recognition that cases of mistaken identity often occur. 'For the police, the youths' appearance – baggy pants and T-shirts, tattoos – is enough to signal that they are gang members and therefore subject to arrest, despite there being no law to justify this' (Mejía, 2007: 27). The *maras* are also directly on the receiving end of the institutional violence applied by the police forces, military and paramilitary forces in the country, aimed both at their incarceration and elimination.

Indeed, critics of the government's handling of the problem of violence argue that the government itself and the weakness of state legal institutions are responsible for the creation of the climate of impunity in which the *maras* are able to operate efficiently. This climate of impunity is demonstrated by Guatemala's one digit conviction rate (1.4 per cent) for murder in general, and the even more dramatic failure of convictions related to the killing of women in Guatemala in recent years. The implications of these findings are, as a UN rapporteur has commented, obvious: 'Guatemala is a good place to commit murder, because you will almost certainly get away with it (Alston, 2006: 17).

Gendered violence

Since 2001 over 2,200 women and girls have been murdered in Guatemala and the rate of murders is on the increase. Between 1 January and 5 May 2006, according to police statistics 229 women and girls were killed.[6] Although a small percentage of total killings in the country (90 per cent of those killed are men), what is striking about these killings is the frequent involvement of extreme acts of cruelty before the murder takes place. In these

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6   See http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR340192006

cases it is common for the bodies of these women to appear in a public space after a disappearance of several days, and bearing the signs of rape, bodily mutilation, dismemberment and other forms of torture. According to research carried out by the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (Procuradoría de Derechos Humanos – PDH), in the majority (80 per cent) of cases of the murders of men fire arms are used, with no intimate physical contact occurring between the victim and the perpetrator. In the case of women, however, firearms are used in 69 per cent of the murders, and in 31 per cent of cases the attackers use direct physical violence (knives, blunt objects, strangulation). Many victims are raped, tortured or mutilated before being killed. According to the PDH, 'the difference is that in the case of women they are made to suffer more before being killed.'[7]

The alarming number of female killings has caught the attention of the international community and prompted demonstrations across Latin America and hearings in the European Parliament and the US Congress. However, many international and national human rights groups and country analysts have been shocked at the lack of interest on the part of the Guatemalan state, and its reluctance to investigate the circumstances of these deaths properly, despite the level of international concern. The response by the police authorities to reports of missing women or girls, including cases where there are witnesses to their abduction, continues to be inadequate. Amnesty International have received many reports of cases where the police failed in their duty to take urgent action to prevent injury to women and girls believed to be at immediate risk. The failure of the authorities to identify, detain and bring to justice those responsible for the killings of women and girls sends the message to perpetrators that they will not be held accountable for their actions. To further illustrate this, it should be noted that whilst 2,781 women were killed in this manner in the period 2000 to 2008, only 16 sentences related to this kind of crime were issued by Guatemalan courts.[8] In addition, cases have been identified where one or more of the perpetrators were agents of the national police.

The climate of impunity produced by the inaction of the legal apparatus is held by human rights organisations and other analysts as representative of the much greater failure of the state to

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7   Ibid.
8   Report to the UN ombudsman for extrajudicial killiings, Guatemala, 2006.

work as it should have done in protection of the Peace Accords. In a recent paper Handy writes: 'The Peace Accords signed in December 1996 did not pave the road to peace and an end to violence and social dislocation, and the presence of lots of guns[9] led to accelerating rates of criminal violence and decreasing levels of confidence in the police and judiciary' (2004: 534–535). The state's responsibility for the increasing levels of violence is clearly stated in the UNHCR report of 2006. The UNHCR report is explicit in stating that this has stemmed not only out of the failure of successive governments to enforce agreements for cultural, economic and social rights, but the active continuation of a logic of counter-insurgency and the direct connection of powerful sectors of the military, police and government with organised crime in the country. Indeed, the brutality of the violence (often involving torture, rape and humiliation) – common techniques of terror in the civil war – are highlighted by some analysts as telling of the continuation of a 'moral and social' re-education or cleansing project started during the civil war. Rape was also used as a systematic means to terrorise indigenous and peasant communities in the civil war.

Social cleansing and hidden powers

In recent years there have been a series of killings that many analysts of the country now see as being politically motivated. Indeed, questions are asked as to whether the state's lack of response to the general context of violence in the country is an intentional means to cover over the tracks of more pointed acts of political violence. 'While many acts of violence appear to be common crime, the number and patterns of the cases point to a systematic targeting of civil society actors and others involved in "anti-impunity" initiatives' (Peacock and Beltrán, 2003). Lists of these targeted killings are updated by the various human rights and public research centres in the country. Further reports of politically motivated killings also appeared in the 2007 national election campaign in Guatemala. Around 50 people, most of them running for the National Unity for Hope Party and Rigoberta Menchu's 'Encounter for Guatemala' Party, were killed in the course of local campaigning before the elections. According to some reports these

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9   In 2001, the government estimated that there were more than 2 million illegal weapons in the country (*Prensa Libre*, 4 February 2001, p. 2).

killings significantly helped to prepare the ground for the former army general, Otto Peréz Molina. However, despite the support this violence might have given Molina, it was the social democrat, Álvaro Colom Caballeros, running on a platform of reducing violence by tackling poverty, who eventually won the 2007 election with 52.7 per cent of the vote. Since winning the presidency Colom has launched a government- backed programme to ensure that the Peace Accords are finally put into practice. This has not, however, reduced the violent trend in the country.

Academics and human rights organisations in the country, such as the Association for Crime Prevention (APREDE), claim that organised and secretive groups, possibly elements of the pre-accord paramilitary patrol groups (PAC), are performing a social cleansing scheme that involves the murdering of supposed delinquents (gang members as well as political leaders) and the targeting of those leading non-conformist lifestyles (homosexuals, transvestites, prostitutes, and so on). During the civil war civil self-defence patrols (*patrullas de auto-defensa civil*, PAC) were formed as a paramilitary force to help the Guatemalan army in its counter-insurgency efforts. Government collusion in these acts is seen to be signalled by the fact that the police and military have made little effort to follow up the well-founded suspicions that the PAC carried out similar acts of state-sanctioned violence during the civil war, and that although officially disbanded and discredited for their role in earlier human right violations these organisations' members continue to receive a state pension.

Peacock and Beltrán (2003) also discuss the evidence for the existence of a series of upper-level 'hidden' and parallel political powers that through informal linkages also influence the official workings of the police, military and government. Operating under a series of pseudonyms (El Sindicato, La Cofradia, the Moreno Network and the Salvavidas) these hidden powers are described as 'networks of powerful individuals who use their positions and contacts in public and private sectors to enrich themselves from illegal activities (organised crime, drug trafficking, skimming, bribery, kickbacks and other forms of corruption) and to protect themselves from prosecution' (Peacock and Beltrán, 2003: 6). An Amnesty International report (2002),[10] claims that there is an 'unholy' alliance between traditional sectors of the oligar-

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10 This report, 'Guatemala's Legal Legacy: Past Impunity and Renewed Human Rights Violations', labels Guatemala a 'Corporate Mafia State'.

chy, some 'new entrepreneurs', police and military, and common criminals. In addition to reaping huge profits, the hidden powers in Guatemala use their connections, with political actors and with the military and police, to intimidate and eliminate those that get in their way, know too much, offer competition, or try to investigate their activities.[11] Many victims are targeted because they seek to investigate and prosecute current or retired government and military officials for human rights abuses committed during the war (Peacock and Beltrán, 2003: 6).

In addition to connections with organised crime, Schirmer's (1999) and Keen's (2003) research also draws attention to the continuing dominance of structures of counter-insurgency in the Guatemalan police and military. The peacetime enemies are defined as criminals and subversives, 'a transition that is in some ways smoother than it might appear, since the rebels were also referred to as criminals and subversives' (Schirmer, 1999: 92–107). Although promises were made in the Peace Accord process of a change in the logic, financing and techniques of the country's security, recent studies demonstrate that little change has occurred, apart from the introduction of new rhetoric. Whilst efforts were made to meet the targets of demobilisation through a reduction of the armed forces from 46,900 to 31,423 soldiers, and a reduction in the numbers of officers, the budget for the armed forces has not been reduced. Indeed, a peace analyst quoted by Keen states: 'The army is supposed to have been reduced by 33% since the end of the war, but the budget is still growing' (2003: 8).[12] In addition to this continuation of high levels of financing no real change has been made in the geographical deployment of the military. As a result the military continues with a deployment oriented towards internal counter-insurgency, and not for the defence

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11 Although investigations assisted by the international community have not reached any conclusions as yet, it may be that the recent attempts to connect the Guatemalan president with the murder of Rodrigo Rosenberg Marzano is a high-profile case in point (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/americas/8047439.stm). The Guatemalan president had run on an electoral ticket of security and anti-corruption in 2007.

12 In 1999 the total military budget was 914 million quetzals, or 0.68 per cent of GDP, marginally more that stipulated in the Peace Accords. However, although the amounts assigned to the military budget in 2000 and 2001 reflected efforts to meet the established targets, the target itself was being overshot as a result of constant financial transfers made by the Executive and circumventing formal channels. This resulted in the transfer of amounts in excess of the targets and similar to those prevailing in the years of the armed conflict (Keen, 2003).

of Guatemala's maritime and territorial jurisdiction and air-space (Keen, 1998: 9).

Security sector reform intentions after the Peace Accords further included the abolition of existing police forces and the creation of a new expanded National Civil Police (PNC). The PNC was meant to give substance to a new way of policing in tune with the building of democratic governance and effective law enforcement. However, despite the efforts to create, finance and equip this new police force, there are many indications from existing command structures and financing that police institutions remain subordinate to central government bodies and militarised to varying degrees. In addition, reports from the Guatemalan media of police involvement in different forms of illegal activities ranging from drug smuggling to murder appear to indicate that they continue to share with the military links to organised crime[13].

Booming echoes of the civil war

With the characteristics described above the violence being carried out in present-day Guatemala is clearly linked to the legacy of the civil war. This was a civil war that is particularly marked in the history of the region for its length and brutality. Guatemala suffered the longest internal armed conflict in Central America, ending in 2006. Over 200,000 people were brutally killed during the civil war that began with a US-backed coup in 1954 of the democratically elected government of President Jacobo Arbenz. At the height of the counter-insurgency campaign led by the ruling military government in the 1970s and early 1980s, approximately 1 million people were internally displaced and hundreds of thousands fled the country from a population numbering a little over 8 million people at the time.

Large-scale repression did not begin until the 1960s, but the army began gathering the names of those who had been active under the socialist administration directly after the takeover. In association with the CIA they put together a list of some 70,000

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13 For example, in February 2007 four politicians from El Salvador were found shot dead in their burned-out car in a field just off the highway into Guatemala City. Clear links to the war and the police have been substantiated by the Guatemalan media because of the revealed facts that the four had links to the war-time Salvadorian Arena party, and that the four policemen arrested for their murders were themselves killed in an apparently staged riot carried out by *maras* in the prison where they were being held.

people that would become a much-used reference source once the killing began. Throughout the 1960s political violence increased, focused not only on the organised guerrilla force in the eastern highlands, but on all political opponents, intellectuals and left-wing sympathisers. Between 1966 and 1977 some 10,000 combatants were killed in a bid to destroy a guerrilla force that at that time numbered no more than 500. In the capital the campaign to eradicate 'traitors to the fatherland' gave birth to paramilitary death squads, such as the *Mano Blanco* (white hand), who took part in a process to eradicate unionists, left-wing and centrist politicians and students. Victims were usually abducted by men in unmarked cars, and later their mutilated bodies were found, dumped in public places by the roadside.

Although with different cycles of intensity and geographical focus, this kind of violence continued throughout the period of the civil war. Driven by a desire to escape this violence, drawing inspiration from Catholic liberation theology and receiving some Cuban military assistance, the guerrilla movement grew and became increasingly established as a counter-weight to the military. Four main guerrilla organisations were created: the PGT (Guatemala Workers Party) who operated in Guatemala City and on the Pacific coast; the FAR (Rebel Armed Forces) who fought in the lowland jungle of the Petén; the EGP (Guerrilla Army of the Poor) who had several fronts in northern Quiché; and the ORPA (Organisation of People in Arms) who functioned in San Marcos and Atitlán. The last two of these organisations were the most open to the entry into their ranks of the country's majority indigenous population,[14] who would receive the brunt of military oppression in the course of the 1980s. Important new grassroots organisations, such as the CUC (Committee for Peasant Unity), were also formed at this time. However, while some were involved in efforts of active resistance other members of indigenous populations were forced to participate in the PAC, in the process themselves becoming part of the system of repression and responsibility for the intimidation, murder and abductions of the period.

In 1988, two years after the return to civilian rule the level of violence did not to decrease, but rather increased sharply. Many of the people's worst fears were confirmed when 22 bodies were

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14 Approximately 60 per cent of Guatemala's population is indigenous. The vast majority are Mayan, part of a wider community of some 8 or 9 million people who speak a Mayan language across four countries – Mexico, Honduras, Belize and Guatemala.

found in a shallow grave near a village in the department of Chimaltenango. The killings continued throughout President Cerezo's term in office and there was no real effort either to find the bodies of the disappeared, or to bring the guilty to trail. In 1990 Cerezo handed power to President Serrano, but the human rights situation in the country remained bleak under the Guatemalan governments of the early 1990s, with daily abductions, torture, intimidation and extrajudicial execution still common place. According to a number of US human rights groups five hundred Guatemalans either 'disappeared' or were killed in extrajudicial executions in 1992 alone. The persistent failure of the civilian government to control the military, together with a rising international interest in human and indigenous rights and development policy, celebrations of the quincentenary of the 'discovery' of the Americas and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Rigoberta Menchu in 1992, helped, however, to focus increased international attention on the ongoing violence and plight of Guatemala's indigenous population. New international pressure (accompanied by financing) was brought to bear on the Guatemalan government and the then-dominant guerrilla group, the URNG (Guatemalan National Guerrilla Unity), to continue peace talks started in the late 1980s and to reach an agreement on peace.

In 1995 the Indigenous Rights Accords were signed as a part of these new peace talks, and as a means to end the oppression and marginalisation of the indigenous population through the legal security of the international ILO Convention 169's stipulations of participation and prior consultation. This agreement was to form the start of a series of accords that were designed ostensibly to defend and realise social, political and economic rights in the country under the banner of the 1996 Peace Accords. A Truth Commission, overseen by MINUGUA (the UN Verification Mission to Guatemala[15]), was also established to investigate human rights abuses committed during the war. In all, 2,928 URNG combatants were demobilised and issued with temporary identification cards, and 535,102 weapons and rounds of ammunition were handed over to MINUGUA. However, despite these successes and setting the scene for tackling the post-war climate of impunity described above, the Commission lacked legal teeth and was short-lived (January to May 1997), and the legal stipulation that only abuses 'linked to the armed conflict' should be investigated

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15 La Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Guatemala.

meant that its powers were limited from the outset and no names were named. Despite this, MINUGUA did manage to conclude that 93 per cent of the violent killings during the civil war were carried out by the army, civil patrols, police and death squads commanded or defended by the government. Other efforts to attribute blame also ended in similar frustration and disappointment. The Catholic Church-backed research team REMHI (Proyecto lnterdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica), painstakingly documented the civil war atrocities over a period of three years, proving that government military forces were responsible for 90 per cent of the killings between 1980 and 1993, and the guerrillas responsible for the remainder. Two days after the report was presented, Bishop Juan Geradi, the leader of the REMHI project was found beaten to death at his home in Guatemala City. The assassination outraged the nation and provoked widespread demonstrations, but the investigation was allowed by the government to drag on for three years before charges were finally made against three military chiefs and a priest. The Geradi case confirmed the weakness of the nation's justice system, and the continuing threat of political violence that remains in the post-war period.

It is evident from the above that war is far more than a memory in Guatemala. Indeed, suggestion is made and supported here of the idea that in many respects the Peace Accords failed to end more than the formalities of war. Although there are no simple connections of cause and effect made today, an awareness of the past highlights the linkages between present-day violence and the relations and violations of the past. The existence of clandestine groups and organisations of crime in present-day Guatemala is clearly linked to arrangements for political loyalty and counter-insurgency in war. Indeed, many of the techniques employed and much of the extremity of violence seen today (kidnapping, rape, torture, bodily dismemberment, lynching, and so on) have their inspiration in the violence used by the military as brutal terror tactics during the civil war.

As a result of the longevity of the war and what many see as the failures of disarmament and demobilisation, and with it the joint conditions of a lot of guns and little work, these kinds of violence have also remained a part of Guatemalan society. Indeed, they have become socialised mechanisms that express meaning and needs at different levels of life. In this way they represent *everyday* violence in the sense expressed by Nancy Sheper-Hughes (1992) as experiences that normalise petty brutalities and terror at

the community level and creates a common sense or acceptance of violence. 'The normalisation of internecine violence in the broader context of political violence makes sense if the extent of the pain and terror that political repression causes is fully appreciated as a 'pressure cooker' generating everyday violence through the systematic distortion of social relations and sensibilities' (Bourgois in Scheper Hughes and Bourgois, 2004: 431).

At another level these gruesome acts also represent *symbolic* violence, or the internalised humiliations and legitimations of inequality and hierarchy that Bourdieu sees as being 'exercised through cognition and misrecognition, knowledge and sentiment, with the unwitting consent of the dominated' (1992: 162). However, in verifying these connections to a legacy of violence we think it is also important to question whether the civil war is sufficient explanation for the extent and severity of continued violence in Guatemala. Recognising that the kinds of violence described above are only a partial picture of the total panorama of violence in the country, we feel it is pertinent to question whether another interpretation of events can be created when other facets and types of violence are revealed, as in the following pages. Indeed, in the course of highlighting this wider panorama it also worth considering whether it is possible to escape the dangers of the largely static portrayal of the role and occurrence of violence in Guatemalan society in existing 'continuity of violence' explanations.

A culture and enviroment of violence

In Guatemala, and in Latin America more generally, there has been a tendency to over-mythologise the embodiment of violence, to the extent that it has become a static metaphor for the nature not only of individuals and their culture, but of the nation itself. In the process of disputing and attempting to critically reform understandings of society in the region, connections have been built between mutually sustaining relationships of *cultures of violence* and the *violence of the natural environment*. The result has been that political instability is connected to the extremes (mountains, volcanoes, earthquakes, floods and hurricanes) of the Latin American landscape in an effort to form an alternative nationalism that is both naturally brutal and entirely naturalised by the

population.[16] The problem with this characterisation of the Latin American nature is that it cuts both ways.

> While it unveils the criminal acts of government that seem to exist merely to serve the interests of a blessed minority, it also has the danger of portraying Latin Americans as children of Cain, unable to erase their father's mark and unable to escape a land where brutality is bred in the primal bone' (Grandin, 2004: 172).

The Guatemalan sociologist, Edelberto Torres-Rivas, states for example that during the 1970s and 1980s Latin America 'passed through one of those authoritarian cycles, to which the region appears to be fated, in its oscillating path between democracy and dictatorship. Dictatorships have been a recurrent element in the region, and up until now there is no evidence to suggest that… we shall not see them in the future' (Torres-Rivas, 1999). In Guatemala, observers describe victims of the civil war's genocide both as descendants of Cain and as children of Abel, incapable of escaping the temptation and weight of centuries and centuries of violence.[17] By not disaggregating or historicising Cold War repression, these scholars naturalise it, evoking an image close to Walter Benjamin's famous aphorism of a 'state of emergency' that is not the exception but the rule (Grandin, 2004: 172), or Agamben's thesis of a 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2005).

A closer look at the changing nature and spread of violence in Guatemala indicates a socialisation of violence that is not locked into an essentialised, or easily recognisable culture of violence, but where history and political processes in the *longue durée* continue to have clear importance. In the last few years new kinds of violence have developed alongside those apparently embedded in Guatemalan society. In the last few years, embedded violence has also taken on a more intense character. The *mara*s are part of this changing complex of violence that at once reminds the

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16   Examples of this can be found in many of the great literary works of Latin American from Gabriel Garcia Márquez to Pablo Neruda. For example, Pablo Neruda wrote after he was driven from Chile into exile in 1948 'From the ancient cordilleras (mountains) executioners protruded like bones, like American spines on the hirsute back of a genealogy of catastrophe: they were encysted in the misery of our communities' (1991: 200).

17   The 'most recent brutal period of violence against the Mayas in Guatemala is neither an aberration nor a blip in the historical record', wrote anthropologist Linda Green recently: 'the dirty war in Guatemala is a piece of a whole that extends from the arrival of the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in the early 1500s to the present period' (1999: 172).

observer of the past and the present. However, so too are other types of violence – that is, land invasions and evictions,[18] political protests,[19] drug-related crime,[20] the abuse and smuggling of children and women for prostitution,[21] kidnappings, hangings and vigilantism.[22] These acts of violence are embedded in the country's history of war, but are also part of a new political economy of violence produced by much more recent and ongoing processes of international trade liberalisation, multicultural and other internationally inspired development reforms, urbanisation and international migration. The acknowledgement of this makes us realise that violence in Guatemala is not only the result of the civil war. To identify the perpetrators of this violence it is necessary to look beyond poor street youth and the links between organised crime and the state, to national business elites and the too easily ignored collusion and varies of the international community.

History as an ongoing process forces an appreciation of the catalytic power of political reaction to breed accelerating rhythms of frustration, fear and extremism. Indeed, it shows that violence in Guatemala is a product not only of a national past, but of dif-

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18 There are currently approximately 52 plantations that are officially considered 'occupied', the majority in the departments of Izabal, Alta Verapaz and Baja Verapaz. In the displacement of these peoples little attention was given to the differing circumstances of poverty, or justifications used by peasant farmers to defend land they had previously been granted permission to work before the economic crisis hit the coffee industry at the end of the 1980s.

19 Guatemala has witnessed a series of wider public clashes and protests primarily on natural resource use and access. Between 2000 and 2007 militant actions explicitly opposed to the government's politics of extraction and liberalisation have multiplied. These actions have bracketed together the specific issues of high-level discussions on the formation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the ownership and use of natural resources and political participation.

20 Drug-related crimes have a variety of forms in Guatemala, involving the transit of drugs, production, sale and consumption. Heroine and about 25 per cent of the cocaine consumed in the US are produced in Guatemala.

21 One report estimated that 1,000 to 1,500 children are trafficked from Guatemala annually under the guise of illegal adoptions. This trade is further interlinked with the *coyote* trafficking of women and children to and from Guatemala for prostitution purposes, and of illegal immigrants on route to Mexico and the US more generally.

22 The now defunct United Nations Verification Commission in Guatemala (MINU-GUA) reported 421 cases of lynching in the country, with 817 victims and 215 deaths between 1996 and 2001 (Handy, 2004). In 2001 the minister responsible for the decentralisation of government services declared that one-third of the municipalities in the country were 'ungovernable'. A study conducted by the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala has calculated that the incidence of hangings and other vigilante action represents 33 per cent of all recent deaths in the country (Figueroa Ibarra, 2005).

ferent time frames that are further compounded by global political and economic processes, from the Cold War to the present. Indeed, external forces have as great a role to play in the character of violence in Guatemala as internal historical memories and structures. After all, many of the brutal techniques of violence seen in Guatemala today did not originate there. The Guatemalan military forces were taught the use of torture and rape as tactics of terror by members of the CIA, sent by the Reagan administration to assist efforts of anti-communist insurgency in Guatemala during the civil war (Cullather, 2004). In the same way present-day structures of violence in Guatemala are not just a product of internal historical processes, but rather the outcome of their combination with external political and economic pressures. In recent years the most important of these external pressures has been the arrival of neoliberalism and national adaptation to it.

A wider panorama of violence

Bourdieu has argued that 'the violence exerted in families, workshops, banks, offices, police station, prisons and even hospitals and schools…is, in the last analysis, the product of "inert violence" of economic structures and social mechanisms relayed by the active violence of people' (1997: 233). Whilst we agree with Bourdieu's emphasis on economic structures and social mechanisms, the argument we make here aims to emphasise that these structures and mechanisms are not 'inert', but actively violent in their own right. Whilst some social structures and mechanisms remain present, their character and therefore role in either the direct application or indirect formation of spaces of violence are seen to change. In the case of Guatemala, a further key example of this is the development and transformative role played by the transformation of the country's economy.

Burdened with a growing debt and at the behest of the World Bank, its principle lender, Guatemala shifted course and began implementing neoliberal development policies in the 1980s. In line with that in other Latin American states this shift ended a trend in national import substitution industrialisation (ISI) and opened the doors to international trade liberalisation and the scaling-down of the national government bureaucracy. Following the signing of the Peace Accords neoliberalism became further established in the country through a new discourse of development formed with the assistance of the international community in which human rights

are balanced by decentralisation, the creation of new free trade zones and assistance to the poor through policies aimed at privatisation of land and their connection to the formal international market. For the elites and traditional landowning oligarchy in the country neoliberalism opened up new opportunities and channels for the reorganisation of their previously stagnating economic interests and the possibility for some to diversify into new forms of production and business. Neoliberalism allowed sectors of the Guatemalan oligarchy to become transnational, moving beyond national borders in both their investments interests and residential patterns.

However for the country's majority poor, the shift to neoliberalism failed to generate improvement in their lives and further increased the already enormous gap between the upper and lower echelons of society, and between ethnic groups. Although the richest segment of the population saw their share of national GDP grow from 62.7 per cent in 1989 to 64 per cent in 2002, the poorest sector of the population saw their share decrease from 2.7 per cent to 1.7 per cent (UNDP, 2002). According to the National Institute of Statistics (INE), from 1989 to 2004 there was a decrease in the general levels of poverty in the country (62–57 per cent). However, according to UNDP (2004) these improving figures must be nuanced by recognition that almost three-quarters of the indigenous population remain poor.[23]

Although neoliberalism has enabled the conditions for national economic growth, the form of these new economic activities – that is, industrialised agriculture and *maquila* industries (sweatshops) aimed at North American markets – and their placement on the boundary between the formal and informal sector have furthermore meant that they resulted in few benefits for a society still predominantly reliant on communal or familial *minifundia* (small-scale agricultural production). Here the systemic violence of capitalism cannot be reduced to the 'evil' intentions of individuals, but to frequently objective, often uncanny and anonymous acts (Žižek, 2009: 11). By setting the context for new forms of economic exploitation (no ownership of the means of production, low wages and poor labour conditions), neoliberalism can be seen to have further contributed to the existing structural conditions for violence in the country, and not only at the macro-level. Although economic reforms and policy are distant and vague to most Gua-

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23　That is, surviving on less that US$2 per day.

temalans, many people are nonetheless aware that a series of very real links can be made between new forms of economic production, smuggling and mixing of legal products with illegal products and the violence of those responsible for keeping this illegal trade unchecked by border controls, or the curious. Indeed the geography, – that is, the location and character – of violence in the country has clearly been transformed by diverse processes of economic liberalisation.

The changing geography of violence

Although a process started in the 1960s, the changing nature of the economy has also led to the speeding-up of migration from rural areas to the cities, or beyond the borders of the country. Guatemala is a major recipient of migrant worker remittances, registering US$2.6 billion in 2004, and US$3.6 billion in 2006 – that is, more than the total channelled to the region by overseas development assistance.[24] A fall in coffee prices and the changing land usage connected to the development of agro-industry have left people without jobs or land. Added to this, the new *maquila* industries in urban centres, and their attraction in terms of work, urban services and lifestyles, have tempted people away from their land and into ever growing urban slums. However, rather than finding connection with the benefits of globalisation through this process many find themselves expelled from the formal economy. As Davis argues, 'rather than being the "engines of growth"… cities are rapidly becoming "dumping grounds" for those who are excluded from globalising and increasingly technological and informational production processes, with slums emerging as a fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing the twenty-first century's surplus humanity' (2004: 28).

Today's slum dwellers are seen to serve no purpose for the dominating groups in society, who feel no qualms in engaging in increasingly violent ways to keep them out of their lives (Rodgers, 2007). In Guatemala City, as in other Latin American cities, urban morphologies now demonstrate a form of 'splintered urbanism' that underlines social, racial and class divisions. Cities are now built to reinforce class differences and to physically divide the poor from the rich through the construction of walled and gated

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24 See http://www.iadb.org/mif/remesas_map.cfm?language=Englishandparid=5and item1d=2.

communities, high-rise office buildings, life-zones (*zonas vivas*) and shopping malls (Caldeira, 2000). The access to and safety of these fortified non-spaces are supervised by private security companies and externally strengthened by heightened public security measures in the poor and frequently physically isolated areas of the city.

The structural violence of these processes and consequences of marginalisation from these processes are now obvious to any voyager in the Latin American city. However, whereas urbanisation is easily connected with violence, care must be taken in characterising the role and identity of citizens in its expression. Contrary to common perceptions, there are no easy connections between urban poor neighbourhoods and acts of violence. In Guatemala, available statistics demonstrate that 33 per cent of the hangings and 40 per cent of the *femicidios* (killings of women) have taken place in the capital. This is a situation that has been readily used by economic and political elites to criminalise poverty and penalise poor areas. However, a closer look at the available statistics reveals, however, that there is no clear match between acts of violence and poorer neighbourhoods of Guatemala City. For example, the UNDP reports that 'the poorest municipalities, where over 25 % of the population live in conditions of poverty, are not the places where concentration of…homicides take place (2007: 29). It is therefore not possible to establish a positive relation between poverty and violence. Whilst there are clearly high rates of violence in poor urban neighbourhoods, some kinds of violence (such as drug-related violence) also occur with high frequency in the playground life-zones of the rich and wealthy communities outside the city (such as Escuintla).

Poor communities and their inhabitants defy easy assumptions linking cultures of poverty with cultures of violence. As Gledhill has correctly highlighted, 'Latin American social structures cannot be reduced to an undifferentiated "people" confronting a tiny elite' (2006: 331). No matter how disappointing it might be to academics of a radical bent, the relationships of poor, marginalised and working people cannot always be accurately depicted as positioned in opposition to, or reflecting the desire or possibility of opposition to, the ruling elite. Whilst a reflection of social divisions, and with an architecture violently sustained by a series of dangerous rumours and prejudices (Caldeira, 2000), the new urban geography does not, however, necessarily reflect any real

contrast of aspiration and values, or of one social group's desire to dismantle the barriers that separate them from the other.

As Rodgers (2007) underlines, through the process of urbanisation political and social violence have become joined together. Although Rodgers overemphasises the separation of the urban from the rural and misses the fact that gangs now stretch from urban slums into rural communities, his works draw attention to important aspects of the recent economic transformation of the landscape of violence in Central America (Rodgers, 2007: 2). Using urbanisation as a point of departure, Rodgers nuances the picture of the *mara* created by earlier writers by arguing that the gangs provide 'micro-regimes of order as well as communal forms of belonging to definite, albeit bounded, collective entities, in a wider context of chronic insecurity and social breakdown' (2007: 10). In many ways, he argues, they correspond to forms of 'insurgent citizenship' (Holsten, 1999: 158), attempting to violently construct new spaces for 'possible alternative futures'. This underlines the importance of the turmoil and possibilities they cause, but also the repeated failure to challenge the system as a whole. In their drive towards self-sufficiency and turf-war survival the gangs, just as peasant rebels before them, fail to question the basis of the existing social order. Here, further parallels can be drawn with the observations of Caldeira (2000) that differentiation is made in working-class attitudes towards *favelados* (Brazilian slum dwellers) and 'police who kill', that disarticulates the 'popular subject' and reinforces the violence with which class domination is maintained. Parallels can perhaps also be made with Goldstein's (2005) observation that the same people who stridently contested the restructuring of their lives by transnational capital and the neoliberal state simultaneously adopt practices that 'express and enact' the same neoliberal rationality that pervades the rest of civil society. For example, the 'popular victory' of the Bolivian Water War against privatisation coincided with an upsurge in lynchings in which poor people of indigenous origin kill other poor of the same origin.

Recent economic changes and globalisation have also had violent unforeseen consequences for the projects and actions of the middle classes and previously powerful. In Guatemala, as elsewhere in the Americas, middle class people 'lament the limited "popular" enthusiasm for human rights and often act, through politics, churches, charities, NGO and citizens groups, to build a more caring society' (Gledhill, 2006). Yet they also contradict

these values on a daily basis through actions in defence of class interests, for example in questions of urban development. Everyday violence is expressed here as an enforcement of the right to accumulate. It is, however, also possible to further link this everyday violence with more organised expressions of crime and violence rooted in a sectoral sense of betrayal. Whilst some elites have managed to capitalise on the transformation of the national economy, others lesser well suited to the qualifications of the time have felt betrayed by the failure of reality to meet their expectations of and aspirations to new prosperity. This is particularly the case amongst military elites. In an era of thawing Cold War tensions, where human rights and investment climate concerns have taken precedence over earlier paradigmatic struggles, the Guatemalan private sector and the US have tended to retreat from their earlier unquestioning support of the army. For some elites this will have left a sense of betrayal and marginalisation, and may help to further explain the deviation of some of the upper echelons of the military into criminal activities and an apparent symbiosis with organised crime (Keen, 2003).

Conclusions

It should now be evident from the above description of the wider panorama of violence in Guatemala that whilst there is evidence of a connection between the past and present, the wave of violence observed in Guatemala today is not simply the product of recent civil war, but the outcome of a much larger range of historical and sociological forces. As we have demonstrated, a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of current violence requires recognition of the wider temporal and politicised relationships of class and ethnicity in the country. It requires recognition of the excessive extent of social divisions in the country and of demographic change. It also requires attention to the cultural impact and violent transformative impact of external forces such as the Cold War and more recent economic change produced by neoliberalism. The current wave of violence in Guatemala must therefore be understood as a product of disjuncture as much as it is of continuity.

As set out in the article's introduction, acknowledgement of these forces helps to highlight that more can be made out of the meaning of violence than a series of shocking statistics or abstract phenomenology. The representation of violence and its production

as an object of meaningful contemplation run the risk of giving the impression that it is justified. As Žižek writes, 'there is something inherently mystifying in direct confrontation with [violence]: the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking' (2009: 3). However, it should also be clear in contemplating the above that refusal to engage with the fleshy detail of the violent acts themselves, and a dispassionate focus on the statistical body-count, would run the risk of missing the context that makes them meaningful to others, and ourselves (Whitehead, 2004). In this Žižek is also in agreement – the cold analysis of violence reproduces and participates in its horror (2009: 3).

On a closer look, the shocking brutality of contemporary violence in Guatemala emerges as intelligible, meaningful and rule-governed. The violence demonstrates a 'poetics' where the responsibility for persisting violence and insecurity lies not only in the hands of a pathological 'culture of violence' marked by war, or by poverty. Nor does responsibility lie only in the hands of the usual suspects of explanations for violence in post-accord Guatemala. Indeed, the lack of solutions to violence in Guatemala does not only rest with the failures of immediate post-accord measures of commissions and decommissioning. The links between, and sometimes contradictory identities, of the poor, the gangs, the state, organised crime and clandestine groups, are responsible for ongoing violence in the country, but their acts are made possible and given everyday reason, if not sanction, by the systemic violence (Žižek, 2009) of elites and the international community. Through direct involvement, collusion, complicity, or poorly judged policy-making, these higher institutions, actors and processes set and continue to set the scene for the breakdown of state legitimacy and continuation of criminal impunity.

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