

# Revisiting the Guatemalan Genocide: Crisis of the Ladino Left, Pyrrhic Victory of the “Maya Populares”

by ARTURO ARIAS

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IN 1985 I PUBLISHED AN article titled “El movimiento indígena en Guatemala: 1970–1983” in which I problematized the conditions that led to the insurrection by the Maya population in the Guatemalan highlands from 1979 to 1983. I quoted the *Documento de Marzo 1967*, an evaluation made by Ricardo Ramírez, future commander-

in-chief of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) under the pseudonym of Rolando Morán, of the state of guerrilla warfare after the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) were defeated in the mid-1960s. He argued that one of the main reasons for their defeat was the FAR’s incapacity to mobilize the Maya population. With this statement he launched a foundational critique of the revolutionary/indigenous paradigm that pointed the way to Guatemala’s civil war. Morán proposed a political-military structure whereby Mayas would be incorporated as the base of support for a guerrilla column that centralized all political and military decision-making.

Prior to the mid-1960s, the Mayas had not been on the Guatemalan left’s radar. The pre-1968 belief among Guatemala’s Communist leftists was that Mayas were “feudal leftovers” and, by extension, “a reserve for reactionary landlords.” According to this logic, Communist cadres in the 1960s fully embraced the classical Mexican anthropological notions of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* as originally developed by

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán—and, by extension, justified *mestizaje* and forced acculturation. Such thinking ultimately re-wove the threads of colonialism and racism into the seemingly radical Communist narrative regarding the nation.

During the 1960s, the state simultaneously tried to fulfill the role of agent for development while still repressing the population to keep those modernizing features from bringing about changes in the Ladino power structure. Those attempts at modernization, nevertheless, generated expectations among Mayas, unsettled the traditional order by generating rapid changes, and made for a combustible mix when combined with the work that Catholic missionaries following the tenets of Liberation Theology were doing with Guatemala’s indigenous poor.

These issues generated a full-fledged academic debate at the University of San Carlos in the early 1970s, in which major Guatemalan figures such as Carlos Guzmán Böckler, Mario Solórzano Foppa, and Severo Martínez participated. Their efforts produced an initial theorization about ethnicity on the part of Ladino intellectuals. This theorization, however limited and partial, was the first to configure Maya subjectivity from a Ladino point of view. It thus became a foundational source for two political-military organizations launched in the early 1970s, the EGP and the Organization of People in Arms (ORPA).

The traditional Ladino-led revolutionary leftists saw themselves as the intellectual architects of the revolution. Within the scope of what Rama defined as “the lettered city,” they monopolized leadership posts and power/knowledge relations while Mayas provided most of the cannon-fodder as combatants and logistical support. The Mayas saw it differently. They kept their ethnic goals a secret. They called this *la*

*conspiración dentro de la conspiración* (the conspiracy within the conspiracy). As verbalized by Maya Ixil leader Pablo Ceto in 1981, it consisted of trying to move up the revolutionary ladder as far as possible, but not to further the revolutionaries' goals as a whole; rather, they sought to further the Mayas' own secret goals of agency. Because of their grassroots organizational efforts, they called themselves "Maya populares." Other Maya cadres, however, agreed on agency and empowerment but disagreed on the need to violently confront the Ladino state. Most of the latter were studying in Europe and the U.S. They were later labeled by their rivals "Maya culturales." The Ladino-led revolutionary process became, from a Maya point of view, a mere vehicle for the defense of Maya identity, for gaining agency, and for the future configuration of their enfranchisement, regardless of whether they were members of one tendency or the other. Ladino members of the revolutionary left, however, were blind to this outcome. Their conception remained rooted in the pre-1968 *foco*-theory as developed by Guevara in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. Their ideas about ethnicity were not much more developed than those espoused by Stalin when granting the right of self-determination to the various nationalities within Russia as Commissar of Nationalities in 1917.

According to the Ladino history of the Guatemalan civil war, there was from 1979 to 1982 a spontaneous insurrection in the Maya highlands, within a broader revolutionary effort begun in 1974 when EGP was founded. The Ladino revolutionary organizations were unable to bring the "undisciplined" masses under their centralized control. The revolutionary movement as a whole was neutralized politically by 1982, defeated militarily the following year, and, after lingering in the jungle for more than a dozen more years as a power factor, they signed a peace treaty in December 1996 that enabled them to become a legal political party. In this narrative of events, it is clear that the revolutionaries lost the war.

It was a narrative that I myself had embraced in my aforementioned article nearly eighteen years ago, but it contains significant errors. For one, it soft pedals the guerrillas' paternalistic behavior, instead of problematizing authoritarian manipulations and the inevitable militaristic normativity weighing down political-revolutionary organizations from their

very beginnings. Nor does it address their own exercise of violence when they forced people to join their effort in liberated areas or zones, and when they tried to hegemonize the heterogeneous and fractured leftist movement. The categorical separation between "Maya populares" as peasants, and "Maya culturales" as bourgeois or elite, should also be nuanced, given the two groups' similar goals. Finally, in the official history of the Guatemalan left, the Liberation Theology priests and the organized left considered themselves to be the engine of history. The Maya population remained primarily a reactive object of history, and their struggle for agency was ignored.

Rethinking the Maya narrative from the Maya perspective, we observe decentralized sites of struggle where subjugated peoples contest hegemony, recovering local voices; we discover alternative struggles for agency and self-empowerment. This is as it should be: Mayas remain, in statistical terms, the war's greatest victims. Among the quarter of a million war dead and the hundreds of thousands of refugees, most were Mayas, and the army was officially accused in *Guatemala: Memory of Silence* (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1998) of wiping out more than six hundred Maya villages. But, more important, the apparently absolute division between the group favored by Ladino leftist ideology, the "Maya populares," and their supposed rivals or class oppressors, the "Maya culturales," is greatly attenuated if we read the story from the Maya viewpoint. "Maya populares" were, in general, poorer, illiterate, rural Mayas, such as Rigoberta Menchú and her family, whereas "Maya culturales" were, for the most part, members of Maya elites with high school diplomas from the towns of Quezaltenango or Santa Cruz del Quiché, many of whom had gone on to enroll at the University of San Carlos and, in some instances, had won scholarships to study abroad. Nevertheless, some members of the Maya elite, such as the Alvarez family of Santa Cruz del Quiché, joined the EGP, while many of the sons and daughters of the so-called Maya bourgeoisie in Quezaltenango joined ORPA. Thus, class is not the central issue in this division, which is more conceptual and cultural, one of means, not ends.

In the earlier part of the struggle, from the semi-insurrection of 1979 to the summer of 1983, "Maya populares" linked to revolutionary organizations had more visibility, but this

was because they accepted a subservient role within the ranks of Ladino-led revolutionary organizations. This self-disciplining process often implied a renunciation of their ethnic demands. When the revolutionary war effort stalled, "Maya culturales" poured their energy into reviving their cultural heritage through peaceful, and often institutional, means.

During the years leading to the peace signing in 1996, the tension between "Maya culturales" and "Maya populares" continued to flip-flop as both groups struggled to gain the upper hand. This was most evident in October 1991, when the latter tried to keep the former from participating, or having any say, in the celebration of the Second Continental Meeting of Indigenous Peoples to commemorate five hundred years of indigenous resistance. At this juncture, the "Maya populares," having lost their base of support, which now lay scattered either in refugee camps in Mexico or in the jungle, had become virtual intellectual prisoners of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), which kept a tight party discipline in typical Leninist vertical fashion. "Maya culturales" complained that they either were not allowed to participate in the event or were placed in marginal positions within it, so that "Maya populares," and especially Rigoberta Menchú, could play a preferential role, since she was already a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. Nevertheless, it became the first time that both groups participated jointly in an event. Within a year Menchú won the Nobel Peace Prize, and her initial gesture was to break with the URNG, the Ladino-led Guatemalan revolutionary unity, and to build a bridge to the "Maya culturales" in the hopes of forming a single and unified Maya movement free from any Ladino/revolutionary/Marxist-Leninist tutorial role.

The Maya movement emerged as the one distinctive, rising social movement during the peace accords:

Mayan organizations in the ASC fought vigorously for the Accord on Indigenous Rights and Identity (AIDPI), and grew in strength and stature during the negotiations. Forming COPMAGUA (Coordinating Committee of the Maya Peoples of Guatemala), the largest umbrella group of Mayan organizations, was considered a crucial step for Mayan unity. The peace accords recognized COPMAGUA as an official counterpart of the government in peace implementation. These developments

made many feel that the time of the Maya had finally arrived (*Who Governs? Guatemala Five Years after the Peace Accords*, R. Sieder et al. 2001:21).

The problem with COPMAGUA was that it was still controlled by the URNG, which, rather than allowing free-flowing horizontal relations among indigenous groups, imposed a verticalist discipline through the “Maya populares” they still controlled. “Maya culturales” negotiated bilaterally with Menchú, who had become a third force and a bridge between “Maya culturales” and “Maya populares.” Politically, though, COPMAGUA’s verticalism prevented the emergence of a genuinely autonomous cultural citizenship. This lack meant that public processes to generate support for Maya issues in the public arena never took place. It sufficed that military officers and guerrilla commanders negotiating the peace process behind closed doors agreed. The result was that, whereas the Peace Accords of 1996 established bilingual education for the entire Maya population, and a plethora of rights—such as a land fund, a right to judge and be judged in their own language, or even to implement Maya law at the local level—as well as recognition of their subjectivity, Maya organizations still were absent from the national scene. Very few believed in COPMAGUA because it was perceived as a front for the URNG, even if this was only partially true. Thus, even though in 1996 it appeared that Mayas were ultimately the victors in this war—despite the high cost they had paid in terms of dead, disappeared, and immeasurable psychological trauma for hundreds of thousands—once the euphoria of the peace signing faded, most social trends returned to business as usual.

For these reasons, I argue that the verticalist imposition of Maya rights by “Maya Populares” acting on behalf of the URNG was a pyrrhic victory. At a time when Mayas could have generated a movement similar to the one that led to Evo Morales’s presidency in Bolivia, the URNG’s traditional understanding of politics as an agreement exercised exclusively among top leaders behind closed doors caused this moment to dissipate. Instead, Guatemala slid into an era that Charles R. Hale has labeled that of the “indio permitido,” one controlled by Ladino forces across the political spectrum (*Más que un indio*, 2006:298). Hale states: “It is more accurate to view the COPMAGUA debacle as a punctuating episode in the long-term cycle

of alliance-estrangement between Mayas and the *ladino*-controlled left” (296).

The split between “Maya populares” and “Maya culturales” was part of the heritage of 1968. In other words, it is emblematic of the differing political views for which 1968 stands as a divide. “Maya populares,” though providing the backbone of revolutionary resistance and insurrection in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were tied to a pre-1968 vision of politics. This was a modern, verticalist, ultimately Eurocentric vision, whereby Mayas were the masses behind an avant-garde party that thought and decided in their name, but which also instrumentalized them, deploying ethnic animosity as a driving force behind revolutionary violence. In other words, the political-military structure of guerrilla organizations politicized ethnicity, without ever reflecting on the implications of the colonial nature of power within their very own organizations. Indeed, to a large extent, we could go so far as to claim that the manipulation of Maya populations by political military organizations could very well have had a basis in colonial attitudes and practices.

“Maya culturales” on the other hand, who were originally elitist and nonbelligerent in their approach, slid more comfortably into the spaces of the local and into the articulation of indigenous identity as a site of contestation, even when they were participating in the process that would conform to the era of the “indio permitido,” when, in Hale’s words, “‘Maya culture’ lost its claim to being a singular, or even predominant, political valence and became the site of constant, profound contestation” (296). By virtue of their affirmation of Maya rights and identity in the context of a Maya cultural struggle, they had a better basis for redefining their terms of engagement with the state and with Ladino political forces. Thus, without ever conceptualizing themselves as a post-1968 model of multicentric networks, they de facto ended up behaving as just such a network, a loose affiliation of the type that has emerged in the context of the World Social Forum (*The Historical Evolution of World-Systems*, Chase-Dunn et al. 2007). By returning to the local to reanchor their identity within a valued identitary horizon that spelled “roots” from within an imaginary or ideational space that bolstered the legitimacy and the self-worth of the community,

they became better equipped to reposition their locality within newer global designs that have emerged since 1968. After all, in Latin America today, indigeneity (from the Zapatista to the Mapuche) “is a historical formation characterized by its eloquent embrace of modern and non-modern institutions” (*LASA Forum*, de la Cadena, Fall 2007: 9). According to this logic, an indigenous neo-developmentalism could very well point the way toward a new left, one very different from the outdated, verticalist authoritarian model inherited from the Jacobins. This more radical possibility, still to be named, combines features of postcapitalist, postliberal, and poststatist society, which some Maya thinkers linked to grassroots efforts embody and are beginning to theorize, albeit in a tentative way. What these communities might be producing is *un modo de futuro* (a model of the future; prologue to *Dispersar el poder*, Raquel Gutierrez and Luis Gomez 2006:17). We can, of course, wonder if the communal system can achieve a stable expansion of their noncapitalist practices and nonstate forms of power. Can these practices of economic, ecological, and cultural difference be institutionalized in some fashion, without falling back into dominant modernist forms? Can communitarian models ever be the basis for an alternative, and effective, institutionalization of the social? Can the new worlds envisioned by the Zapatistas, the World Social Forum, and many other social movements, be reached through the construction of nonstatist, postcapitalist, and postliberal local and regional autonomies? And can these alternatives find a way to coexist, in mutual respect and tolerance, with what until now have been dominant, and allegedly universal, modern forms of life?

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Arturo Arias is a Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Texas at Austin.

NOTES: 1) The best known books that came out of this debate are *La patria del criollo* by Martínez Peláez, and *Guatemala: Una interpretación histórico-social* by Guzmán Böckler and Jean-Loup Herbert, but it also produced seminal articles such as “El nacionalismo indígena: Una ideología burguesa” by Mario Solórzano Foppa. 2) Personal communication. Mexico City, Spring 1981. 🌟