

After Peace: Guatemalans' Testimonies as Routes to Emancipation

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the psychological impact of sustained, direct violence, and on the psychological dimension of the conflict's transformation. It reviews debates on truth commissions in Western-hegemonic concepts of peace (Kühn, 2015), but delves into practices in post-genocide Guatemala, where testimonies and narratives can have a possibly emancipatory role in structural transformation. Looking at discussions on trauma, truth telling and memory in Guatemala, this essay approaches an inter-disciplinary dialogue through the “liberation psychology” presented by Martín Baró, influenced by Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. Baró challenged psychologists to “understand multiple levels of social upheaval and to accompany a people as they reconstruct their individual and collective lives”. This essay, thus, focuses on the necessary complementation between psychological dimensions and structural transformations for an emancipatory peacebuilding.

Introduction

In Guatemala, almost four decades of violent conflict amounted to genocide and other crimes against humanity (CEH, 1999; García, 2005; FIDH, 2013). Since the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, in 1954, until the 1990s, over 200,000 people were killed, of whom 86% were indigenous Maya, and 45,000 have forcefully disappeared (CEH, 1999: 21). The military regime installed in 1954 viewed the Mayas as allies of the guerrilla, which organized an armed struggle against the regime in the early 1960s (Esparza, 2006). Before the 1996 peace agreements, Guatemala launched a Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) under a 1994 framework agreement, “to clarify, with objectivity, equality and impartiality, the violations of human rights and the acts of violence that caused suffering to the Guatemalan population, in connection with the armed confrontation” (CEH, 1999:11).

The focus of this essay is on the psychological impact of sustained, direct violence, and on the psychological dimension of the conflict's transformation². It reviews debates on truth commissions in the framework of an internationalized and Western-hegemonic concept of peace (Kühn, 2015), but also through practices in Guatemala, where specific and context-related conditions must be taken into account. Looking at discussions on trauma, truth telling and memory in Guatemala, this essay approaches an inter-disciplinary dialogue through the “liberation psychology” presented by Martín Baró (1989 *apud* Comas-Díaz *et al.*, 1998). He critiqued psychology's positivists, challenging psychologists to understand “multiple levels of social upheaval and to accompany a people as they reconstruct their individual and collective lives” (*Ibid*: 779). However, structural

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² John P. Lederach's (1998) and other authors' approach is cognizant of the fact that conflicts in societies are not “solved”, but transformed into different forms of dealing with tensions and contradictions, from violent to other means.

dimensions of the conflict and its aftermath also have to be discussed.

This essay argues that the psychological dimension of peacebuilding, while essential to understand the impacts of violence on communities and to their narratives' development – and, thus, to the communities' humanization and consciousness about their conditions – cannot transform conflicts unless structural change takes an emancipatory form, informed and led by those victims of violence, the oppressed, the world's “tattered”, as put by Paulo Freire (1979). Moreover, if structural and cultural transformation is not undergone, people may refrain from participating in any peace process, skeptic of any possibility for judicial accountability and social justice. This essay brings excerpts of testimonies in Guatemala, where victims have participated..

Historical overview

Guatemala is the scenario of centuries of struggle for the land, since the Spanish colonization, leading up to the 1944 Guatemalan Revolution. Even after its 1821 independence, authoritarian regimes kept conceding lands to the elite *ladinos* – non-indigenous or mixed inhabitants – and the US United Fruit Company, expropriating indigenous lands and minimizing workers' rights (Gleijeses, 1989). A pause, from 1944 until 1954 – the “10-year Spring” – and then, 36 years of official armed conflict, cemented the roots of a struggle for land, paved by terror and silence (Comas-Díaz, 1998). The Guatemalan Revolution deposed Jorge Ubico, who had intensified expropriations and repression, and launched a progressive 10-year cycle with democratically elected governments (Gleijeses, 1989). Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán had elite members in his government, but in 1952 he issued a decree for agrarian reform, one of the red lines for the national elite and the US United Fruit Company (*Ibid*). He was accused of being a communist and those holding monopoly over the lands started mobilizing against his government.

In the coup's visible front there were Guatemala's conservative Military and the reactionary elite³. However, “Operation PBSUCCESS” was the first US covert operation promoting a coup d'État in Latin America, where other operations add to a “time-line of atrocities” connected to the US foreign policy (McClintok, 1992; Cullather, 1994; Barrett, 2007; Rearden, 2012; Kangas, 2015)⁴. The US was involved in campaigns to overthrow “red” leaders and trained or propped the resulting authoritarian regimes and their repressive forces, which persecuted those considered subversive – leftist and communist, but also indigenous, religious or rural leaders (Navarro, 2014: 162)⁵. According to a de-classified study, in “America's backyard” the operation used an “intensive paramilitary and psychological campaign to replace a popular, elected government with a political non-entity” (Cullather, 1994:1). This was part of President Dwight Eisenhower's New Look Doctrine, and the operation's “triumph confirmed the belief of many in the Eisenhower administration that covert operations offered a safe, inexpensive substitute for armed force in resisting Communist inroads in the Third World” (*Ibid*).

Referring to non-aligned countries, a 1953 US National Security Council's (NSC) report states that “although largely underdeveloped, their vast manpower, their essential raw materials and their potential for growth are such that their absorption within the Soviet system would greatly, perhaps decisively, alter the world balance of power to our detriment” (NSC, 1953:13). Its authors were also

³ Reactionary forces are groups countering progressive transformation and revolution, violently or not, to the benefit of the status quo, led by bourgeois interests. See: Lenin, Vladimir I. (1964) *Collected Works – June-September 1917*, 25. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 368.

⁴ These accounts are based on de-classified documents, released by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) after numerous petitions under the Freedom of Information Act.

⁵ Operation Condor, of which a document written by US Ambassador Viron Vaky suggests that Guatemala was an initial experiment, is an example (Navarro, 2014: 162). It was a joint operation among dictatorships in Latin America to persecute those opposing the regimes, with the US participation and training, conducted in the 1970s and 1980s.

concerned with popular mobilization (*Ibid*:14), or social conflicts resulting from inequality and exploitation. US motives for backing the coup were not only ideological, but also economic: private interests of the US United Fruit Company's were at stake under Guzmán's "economic nationalism" (Bucheli, 2006; Chapman, 2007).

The coup and a Military Junta were succeeded by Carlos Castillo Armas' authoritarian rule and a regime that lasted decades under other leaderships. Armas' first acts were to reverse Guzmán's agrarian reforms, which had benefited 100,000 families, and to issue a decree: the Preventive Penal Law Against Communism, listing dozens of thousands of people (FIDH, 2013). These acts set the stage for deepening structural and cultural violence in Guatemala. In 1981, General José Efraín Ríos Montt assumed power and employed a tactic of "scorched earth", codenamed *Plan Victoria 82* (*Ibid*:10). Documents reveal that the 1982 Operation Sofía of counterinsurgency aimed at the Ixil region, with the goal of killing the fighters and destroying their "support basis", the Maya Ixil population (*Ibid*). From then on, "government efforts to control civilian populations suspected of supporting guerrilla warfare included razing entire villages, resettling peasants from razed villages into a network of approximately 36 organized 'model villages', and establishing 'civilian patrols'" (Stoll *apud* Comas-Díaz, 1998:781).

After the genocidal regime and formal peace agreements, in the early 1990s, cultural and structural violence were persistent. Guatemala had one of Latin America's most unequal distributions: approximately 65% of arable lands were held by 2% of the population; concentration is still overwhelming, while almost 30% of Guatemalans live in extreme poverty and 62,4% in "average poverty" (UNDP, 2013). One year after peace agreements were signed, in 1997, a committee established a mechanism, *Fondo de Tierras*, aimed at helping families to buy portions of insufficient and often poor land, leaving many indebted, lacking subsidies, technical assistance, information and basic infrastructure (Gauster and Isakson, 2007). Given these figures, it is important to consider debates on the work of truth commissions as a way of ensuring consent in the process of building Western and capitalist institutions in "post-conflict" societies, where structural change is not an actual goal (Kühn, 2015:37). However, it is also relevant to question how can both work together and how can people be the subjects of their own history, of the transformation.

Truth and the psychology of liberation

'No more crying, now fighting' – Rigoberta Menchu's mother, after being forced to watch her son be tortured and buried alive (Burgos-Debray *apud* Comas-Díaz et al., 1998:780).

Despite debates on not granting amnesties and on establishing institutional, rather than individual responsibilities, the CEH's 1999 report, *Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio*, which also counted on the Church's Project *Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, was embraced as the official account (Esparza, 2006; REMHI, 1998). Both it found that the Guatemalan state had committed genocide against the Mayan population (REMHI, 1998; CEH, 1999). Works like Esparza's (2006) address the genocide's effects on indigenous leaders' and communities' mindset, effects that were still vivid due to lack of structural change, the persistence of militarization and persecution of human rights advocates after the adoption of formal peace agreements. The destruction of communities' cohesiveness represents the invisible legacy of the war, what the REMHI project's report calls "symbolic wounds" (*Ibid*: 378).

Besides the two documents mentioned, there are at least two others, including one authored by the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), which was issued in 2004. There are surely disputes on what is "the truth"; Rigoberta Menchú, for instance, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and human rights advocate in rural and indigenous areas, was accused by international media of having lied in her powerful testimonies about her brother's murder and other accounts,

while the essential in the testimonies and facts confirmed were overlooked⁶. There is not a lack of stories on the genocide's horrors or the terror on which the dictatorship was sustained, but structural change is limited. Furthermore, despite truth-telling and reports, which are part of the official peace process in Guatemala, there is “little indication that legislative or judicial reforms will provide the structures necessary to bring to justice those accused of some of the most heinous massacres of the 1980s or subsequent murders and disappearances” (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998:781).

Even so, according to the Agreement on the Establishment of a Commission for Historical Clarification on the Violations of Human Rights and the Violent Acts that Caused Suffering to the Guatemalan Population, signed by the Government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG) in 1994, efforts to clarify history were considered a contribute preventing “the repetition of these sad and painful pages, and to strengthen the democratic process in the country”. However, there is still a lack of accountability and dissemination of the results to the population, for instance, through publicity and education, in an attempt of cultural transformation (Kox, 2013:24).

'By giving my testimony, I feel relief, because I told everything I have suffered, thanks to you who come and visit us, to hear our testimony; this way we are relieved because we are too oppressed, thanks God we feel relieved this way. I wish they would give us a book, which is left as history, so our children understand our suffering' – Case 7462, Massacre at the Chichupac village, Baja Verapaz, 1982 (REMHI, 1998:289).

Bearing in mind the relevance of psychological impacts of violence on the promotion of structural changes and emancipation, Martín Baró proposed new elements: “(a) a new horizon focusing on the liberation of a whole people as well as personal liberation; (b) a new epistemology in which the truth of the popular majority is not to be found but made, that is, in which truth is constructed 'from below'; and (c) a new praxis in which psychologists place themselves within the research-action process alongside the dominated rather than alongside the dominator” (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998: 779). Influenced by Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, and Franz Fanon's post-colonial, psychology writings, he advocated for a theory built on embedded experience, explaining that:

psychology of liberation attempts to work with people in context through strategies that enhance awareness of oppression and of the ideologies and structural inequality that have kept them subjugated and oppressed, thereby collaborating with them in developing critical analyses and engaging in a transforming praxis (*Ibid*:778).

Freire addresses an “original inter-subjectivity” as the “collaboration between men for constructing the world”, since man “only humanizes himself in the dialogic process of humanizing the world”, and the word spoken by the oppressed reflects the act of consciously assuming the function of a subject of history, breaking the dominants' monopoly over the word (1979:13-16). “Learning how to take over [speech] from those who possess it and refuse it to the others is a difficult, but a vital learning – it is the 'pedagogy of the oppressed'” (*Ibid*:16).

Silencing the population through terror was a government strategy during the dictatorship in Guatemala (REMHI, 1998; CEH, 1999). “Silence in response to counterinsurgency is often an adaptive strategy for survival. At the same time that it saves their lives, silence exacerbates people's feelings of isolation” and also meant “interferr[ing] with Mayan communities' traditional forms of organizing and structuring authority” (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998: 782). For psychologists working in Guatemala through Baró's suggestions, the effort has been to *accompany* communities in their healing process, which here

⁶ See Eduardo Galeano's criticism of those accusing her while neglecting the main story in Guatemala: Galeano, Eduardo (1999) “Disparen sobre Rigoberta” *Página 12*, <<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/1999/99-01/99-01-17/contrata.htm>> [20 April 2016]

means standing alongside people (...), seeking to develop collaborative relations that recognize power inequities within the relationships as well as within the contexts in which one is working, and seeking to transform them when the people themselves see that as part of the transformative task (*Ibid*).

For that, psychologists also engage in trying to understand meanings, beyond listing symptoms of trauma, looking at the Mayan collective body, which is constituted in the individual lives of survivors and is profoundly communal (*Ibid*). Here, Freire's concern for the collective construction of the world through speech is the concern for the human subject as free from the objectified oppressed, and it implies “recognizing de-humanization (...) as historical reality” (1979:30). And in this recognition, men can ask themselves about the “possibility of their humanization”, which has been denied to them “through injustice, exploitation, oppression and the oppressor's violence” (*Ibid*). Thus, turning to the link between the symbolic meanings of trauma and the need for cultural and structural change in Guatemala, the importance of the indigenous plight and land distribution is emphasized: “The cry for the land is, undoubtedly, the strongest, the most dramatic and the most desperate cry heard in Guatemala. It springs from millions of Guatemalan chests, which wish not only to possess the land, but to be possessed by it” (Episcopado Guatemalteco, 1988:1).

Conclusion

The house remained under surveillance. She moved on with her life, but she stopped seeing friends, not to cause them trouble. She was threatened twice. She sought psychological support: she was very young and was deeply impacted by what she saw in the morgues (REMHI, 1998: 6).⁷

Psycho-social programs are considered a pillar of peacebuilding programs, for these seek to deal with and possibly heal traumas, enabling a “healthy” reconstruction of the social life in a post-conflict context, in which the actors are part of a same society and also of recent violent events (Kelman, 1999). However, many have brought positivist and de-contextualized insights (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998), also playing a part in a broader framework whose goal is reconstruction and peacebuilding to maintain status quo (Kühn, 2015).

Guatemala had one of Latin America's most unequal land distribution and most of the population lived in “average poverty” in 2013 (UNDP, 2013). One year after the peace agreements were signed, a committee established a mechanism, *Fondo de Tierras*, in 1997, aimed at helping families to buy portions of insufficient and often poor land, leaving many indebted, lacking subsidies, technical assistance, information and basic infrastructure (Gauster and Isakson, 2007). The project is over-viewed through the Land Governance Assessment Framework, a methodology developed by the World Bank's Development Research Group, in partnership with other institutions, to assess legal instruments and practices related to land use (López, 2015).

Structural change and recognition of rights are not top priorities in this “market-assisted land reform” that “disembeds land from its political and cultural contexts and envisions it as nothing more than a transferable commodity” (Gauster and Isakson, 2007). Moreover, the country is in a regional context where oligarchies had historical privileges through land-ownership, where US companies and promoters of an interventionist US foreign policy are the main actors and insurgency is countered through brutal repression, especially if resistance groups are viewed as part of a broader anti-imperialist movement, as showed in Cullather's de-classified study.

According to the REMHI report, those who gave their testimonies showed great clarity about the

7 Testimony cited by the Inter-Dioceses Project for the Recuperation of the Historical Memory, Case 5080, 1980.

measures needed to prevent violence from repeating itself: respect for human rights, knowledge of the truth, de-militarization and social changes were among their main claims (REMHI, 1998:263-264). It is not by chance that, as other truth commissions, each with their respective shortcomings and insufficiencies, the main motto is “never again”. The aim is not merely reconstructing bonds and overcoming challenges in national reconciliation, but also accountability and transformation. For those experiencing direct violence, social injustice and inequality, issues such as Guatemala's persistent concentration of land ownership, are structural manifestations of the violence turned direct at some point in history.

Measures of truth, justice or de-militarization have to be accompanied by others of socio-economic characteristics, which can diffuse some of the conflict's roots. From many victims' perspective, violence will only be solved when the problems of land-ownership and the people's living conditions are solved (*Ibid*:282).

Hence the importance of developing on proposals such as Baró's psychology of liberation, when the goal is not only healing, so that communities can rebuild in the status quo, but especially emancipation, an emancipation in which, as proposed by Freire, they are the subjects of their history. To bring forth the Guatemalan people's own testimony, the reports mentioned in this essay underline their strong claim for dignity and respect for human rights, seeking truth not only for the sake of memory but also to respond to a wish for justice, while exposing the country's need for transformation. This essay sought to address the historical context and symbolic meanings of the psychological impacts of the genocide in Guatemala as rooted in cultural and structural violences, which are not overcome with truth-telling only, however important this process may be, but especially through emancipatory practices.

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