



REVIEW ESSAYS

**Chronicles of a
Guatemalan Genocide Foretold**
Violence, Trauma, and
the Limits of Historical Inquiry

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In February 1999, the Guatemalan truth commission, officially known as the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), released the results of its investigation into over three decades of political repression. The CEH ruled not only that the state bore overwhelming responsibility for the more than two hundred thousand political murders, but that during a particularly brutal period between 1981 and 1983 it had committed acts of genocide. About a month prior to the release of these findings, anthropologist David Stoll published his exposé of Rigoberta Menchú. His book and subsequent press coverage kicked off a controversy that is still reverberating in the pages of U.S. newspapers, conferences, journals, and universities. What follows is less a review of these two investigations than a consideration of the ways in which both use historical inquiry to come to terms with criminal responsibility. (Full disclosure: I worked on the CEH and have already reviewed Stoll's book [Grandin and Goldman 1999].) Even though the CEH and Stoll provide starkly different reasons why Guatemalans have suffered from such intense state violence,

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a comparison of the two highlights some of the promises and difficulties presented by the use of history to explain political repression.

The Return of the Repressive

If the CEH's report, *Memoria del silencio*, has a philosophical predecessor, it is not one of the many similar investigations conducted by previous Latin American truth commissions. Past commissions in Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador focused exclusively on a juridical interpretation of human rights violations—inquiries that limited themselves to asking who did what to whom and how. Why—a question that haunts *Memoria del silencio*—is hardly broached.

The CEH's impassioned search for the meaning of Guatemala's seemingly chronic violence, one that goes beyond a simple tallying up of responsibility for violations, suggests that *Memoria del silencio*'s more direct, if unacknowledged, precursor is Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Many have read the novel as a condensed version of Latin American history. The rise and fall of the fictional town of Macondo, as told through the fortunes of the Buendía family, is often interpreted as a parable of imperialism. The community is formed in a maelstrom of political, economic, and cultural change, only to be destroyed after it dares to challenge the dictates of a U.S. fruit company.

Lately, however, García Márquez has been taken to task for unwarranted literary exaggerations. Historian Eduardo Posada-Carbó (1998, 395), for example, criticizes the novel's fictionalized account of the 1928 killing of Colombian workers striking against the United Fruit Company, noting that “only a handful of people” were murdered in the actual event—not the three thousand reported by García Márquez. He calls for a new inquiry, one with a “more balanced view of the nation's history, less apocalyptic, without heroes or villains, and a better understanding of the conflicts faced by Colombians in their past” (414).

Catherine LeGrand has attempted to do exactly that. LeGrand (1998) identifies *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, with its tales of erased memory and shattered communities, as the cultural correlate to dependency theory, which tends to assign near-omnipotent power to international economic and political interests. The arrival of the foreign fruit company in Macondo “spells the end of the familiar world, and it destroys the capacity of communities to draw on their past so as to create new visions of what the future should be” (333). But LeGrand points out that although the novel

ends with the destruction of Macondo, “in reality the United Fruit Company did not obliterate” (333) the Magdalena banana zone, the region on which Macondo is based. She goes on to describe a society that was neither created nor eradicated by foreign capital, one with complex social relations and cultural identities that creatively engaged with the challenges and opportunities brought by a deepening insertion in a world economy. Yet if it is true that the Magdalena region was neither figuratively nor literally destroyed in an apocalyptic rain, many other Latin American communities, in fact, were.

While critics have commented on the relationship *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has with the Latin American past, few have noted the remarkably prescient qualities of the novel. Compared, for example, with the testimonies of witnesses of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico, the description of the killing that takes place in the book, published a year earlier, is prophetically accurate. As described by García Márquez and Tlatelolco survivors, in both the fictional and the real cases the military closed off streets with machine gun emplacements so people could not escape; in both cases, according to García Márquez and historians, the order to kill was given by a general in the national army; in both cases, individuals experienced the slaughter as if trapped in a dream: García Márquez (1998, 328) wrote that “it all seemed like a farce. It was as if the machine guns had been loaded with caps”; Elvira B. de Concheiro recalls how that night in Tlatelolco “I was so dumbfounded that I said, ‘This can’t be happening, you only see this in the movies. Those can’t be real bullets!’” (Poniatowska 1984, 174). In both cases, individuals took refuge from the incomprehensible by grasping at small details: José Arcadio Segundo recalled Ursula’s “little candy animals,” while de Concheiro remembered that in the midst of the killing a woman handed her an empty bottle of milk before disappearing into the crowd (García Márquez 1998, 329; Poniatowska 1984, 192).

Both LeGrand and Posada-Carbó criticize García Márquez for his apocalyptic (they would say apocryphal) conclusion in which memory of the massacre and eventually all of Macondo is washed away by a relentless storm apparently conjured up by the North American banana company. Yet again, there is a striking concord between the prior fictional and the latter factual event. Compare García Márquez’s famous passage describing José Arcadio Segundo’s first attempt to tell another of the massacre—

“There must have been three thousand of them,” he murmured.

“What?”

“The dead,” he clarified. “It must have been all of the people who were at the station.”

The woman measured him with a pitying look. “There haven’t been any dead here,” she said. (331)

—with a survivor’s account of the Tlatelolco massacre—

“Look at the blood Carlos, there was a massacre here!” One of the soldiers then said to me, “Oh lady, it is obvious that you don’t know what blood is since you are making such a big deal over the little bit you see.” (Poniatowska 1984, 171)

At other points as well there is chilling similarity. In Macondo, a train arrives to remove the bodies from the plaza. In Tlatelolco, one witness testified that following the massacre the “dead bodies were lying there on the pavement, waiting to be taken away” (Poniatowska 1984, 172). Another reported that “they took the dead to who knows where” (230). Even the torrential downpour that stands proxy for the power of foreign capital in the novel makes an appearance at Tlatelolco: As the tanks rolled in to seal off the exit streets, one witness recalls that “the drizzle turned into a storm . . . and I thought that now we are not going to hear the shooting” (Poniatowska 1984, 209).

Magdalena was not wiped out, but the Mexican student movement was. And while the “official story” was not able to completely erase the memory of Tlatelolco, as it did in García Márquez’s version, the Mexican government’s control over most of the major dailies shaped the way the event was covered (Poniatowska 1984, 164–71). Most national newspapers reported the slaughter as a “shootout” or a “firefight” between unidentified “snipers” and the army; *El Sol de México* ran the following headline: “Foreigners Attempt to Damage Mexico’s Image.” To this day, the Mexican government has not fulfilled its promise to convene a national commission of inquiry—a truth commission. The number of deaths is still not known. The day following the event, Mexican newspapers reported between 20 and 29 deaths. Today estimates range from 100 to 325.

A decade after Tlatelolco and eleven years after the publication of the novel, hundreds of Q’eqchi’-Maya Indians gathered in the main plaza of Panzós, an indigenous municipality located in the Guatemalan department of Alta Verapaz. *Memoria del silencio*’s description of Panzós evokes Macondo’s isolation and vulnerability to foreign capital:

From ancient times it has been inhabited by [Q'eqchi'-Maya]. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the granting of land to the Germans began. From this time, the principal economic activity of the region has been agro-exportation, primarily coffee, cardamom, and bananas. Communal land . . . turned into private property. . . . As such, the fundamental characteristics of the productive system have been the accumulation of property in few hands and a kind of debt peonage. (6:13)

For nearly a century Q'eqchi's fought to recover the land they lost to foreigners. In 1962, with a ruse worthy of García Márquez's fruit company, a wealthy landowner tricked *los ancianos* into signing documents that gave him legal ownership of the land in dispute. Another sixteen years of struggle followed. Finally in May 1978, as a crowd gathered in the town's plaza, a military officer yelled, "If it is land you want, it is land you will have, but in the cemetery." The CEH estimates that when the shooting ended, fifty-three people lay dead, their bodies to be buried in an unmarked grave or dumped in the river. The next day, the headline in Guatemala's official newspaper read: "Mob of Two Thousand Peasants Attacks Military Base at Panzós; Soldiers Gravely Wounded in the Fighting" (*Diario de Centro América*, 31 May 1978). While Panzós was not wiped out (as hundreds of Guatemalan communities would soon be), *Memoria del silencio* reports that the "repression terrorized and paralyzed the population of Panzós. From 1978 to 1996, no public demonstration took place" (6:9).

I am drawing attention to the similarities between the fictional and the historical not merely to point out the predictive elements of the novel, no matter how provocatively uncanny. I make these comparisons because both *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, published on the threshold of a period of intense counterinsurgent political repression that would affect nearly every Latin American nation, and the CEH's *Memoria del silencio*, released in the repression's wake, raise similar problems in the use of history to explain political violence. Indeed, Melquíades' parchments, which in the novel's final passage tell of the preordained destruction of Macondo, could be read as a kind of anticipatory truth commission, a revelation of the political violence to come.

The Usable Past

The CEH was established in the 1994 agreement known as the Oslo Accord and signed by the Guatemalan Government and the Unidad Revolucionaria

Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), the rebel umbrella group comprised of four insurgent organizations. It was part of a series of agreements that in 1996 ended one of the longest-running civil conflicts in the world. Like many of the other accords negotiated by an enervated guerrilla leadership and a victorious military high command, it disappointed national and international human rights organizations. The CEH did not have the power to subpoena witnesses or records. Worse, the CEH's final report could not be used to initiate judicial proceedings against those responsible for designing and implementing the repression. The Oslo Accord mandated, somewhat vaguely, that the CEH could not "individualize responsibility."

The reasons for these restrictions are made clear in a recently declassified memorandum drafted by the U.S. embassy in Guatemala City a few months before the signing of the agreement. The memorandum reveals that the Guatemalan military high command, alarmed by the purging of the military that followed the 1993 release of El Salvador's Truth Commission report, feared that even a commission that did not name names "would allow the identification of alleged violators and the ruination of their careers and reputation." Officials were not about to win the war only to lose the peace: "Guatemalan officers," the memorandum states, "have not been shy about asserting that the Salvadoran army agreed to a commission since it did not win its war. In contrast to the Guatemalan army victory." Guatemalans concerned with such matters, therefore, expected the worst from the CEH.

The strict restrictions the military imposed on the CEH proved to be, if not a blessing, then at least a challenge that pointed the way toward a more comprehensive understanding of human rights violations: limited in their judicial scope, the commissioners and support staff broke with the strict legal investigative methodology used by past Latin American truth commissions. Both the Argentine and Chilean reports restrict themselves to an analysis of the *modi operandi* of the institutions responsible for carrying out the violence. The Argentine *Nunca más* (1984) provides no historical context, while the Chilean *Rettig Report* (1991) gives a cursory summation of the political polarization leading to the 1973 coup that ushered in the Pinochet regime. Both reports present the violence as resulting from the equally intransigent extremism of the Left and the Right.

Based on the collection of over eight thousand testimonies from victims and their relatives, the CEH concluded that the state was responsible for 93 percent of the violations and that the military committed 626 massacres (the guerrillas were assigned responsibility for 3 percent of the

violations and thirty-two collective killings). Extrapolating from the testimonies presented to the commission and crosschecking with other sources, the CEH concluded that during the course of the conflict over two hundred thousand Guatemalans disappeared or were killed. Yet *Memoria del silencio* goes well beyond divvying out responsibility for the violence to the state and the guerrillas. The report, in contrast to previous truth commissions, dedicates most of its first volume to the “causes and origins of the internal armed conflict.”¹ It is damning narrative that indicts not just the nation’s ruling elite, but its culture and history as well.

Starting with an introduction that lays out staggering statistical evidence of social inequality—the country’s health, education, literacy, and nutritional indicators are among the most unjust in the world despite an abundance of national wealth—the CEH identifies three interrelated historical causes of the war: economic exploitation, racism, and political exclusion. The historical section traces how Guatemala’s “colonial inheritance” produced a profoundly exploitative society:

From independence in 1821, an event led by the country’s elite, an authoritarian state was created that excluded the majority of Guatemalans; it was racist in theory and practice and served to protect the interests of a small, privileged elite. . . . State violence has been fundamentally aimed against the excluded, the poor, and the Maya, as well as those who struggled in favor of a just and more equitable society. . . . Thus a vicious circle was created in which social injustice led to protest and subsequently to political instability, to which there were always only two responses: Repression or military coups. (5:21–22)

Although the CEH does not explicitly affirm that the insurgency was a morally just struggle (as does the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee’s report), this conclusion is implicit in its analysis: The “insurgency arose as the response of one sector of the population to the country’s diverse structural problems. Faced with injustice, exclusion, poverty, and discrimination, it proclaimed the need to take power by force in order to build a new social, political, and economic order” (5:22). Confronted with movements demanding “economic, political, social, or cultural change, the state increasingly resorted to violence and terror in order to maintain social control. Political violence was thus a direct expression of structural violence” (5:22).

The CEH rejected the position of previous truth commissions that repression resulted from political polarization at either the global or national level. *Memoria del silencio* states that, considering the tenacity and diversity of political resistance as well as the brutality of the state's response,

It is not possible to present simple explanations that situate the armed conflict as a manifestation of the Cold War confrontation between the East and the West. . . . If the most visible actors of the conflict were the military and the insurgency, the historical investigation realized by the CEH provides evidence of the responsibility and participation, in different forms, of segments of the economic elite, political parties, and diverse sectors of civil society. . . . In this sense, any reduction to the logic of two actors is not only insufficient, but misleading. (1:80)

Defining the internal conflict in the broadest possible sense allowed the CEH to investigate violations committed in social struggles not directly related to the war. For example, the commission concluded that many human rights violations were committed by the military in rural areas in order to support landowners in their struggles against peasants, as in the case of Panzós (5:55). Likewise, in the city the state terrorized union members and labor advisors in order to protect business interests (5:55).

Dying in Macondo

Between June 1981 and December 1982, the Guatemalan military committed 415 massacres in indigenous communities. During this period, hundreds of towns were, like Macondo, wiped off the face of the earth. Their inhabitants were either killed or herded into military-controlled model villages. Those who escaped fled into Mexico, took refuge in Guatemala City, or lived a hidden, nomadic existence in hard-to-reach jungles and mountains.

Despite the massive violence visited upon Maya communities recorded by the CEH, the question remained: Was the violence genocidal? In other words, were Maya being killed because they were Maya, or because they represented the real or perceived support base of the insurgency? The CEH's decision that certain aspects of the violence were in fact genocidal raises a series of related concerns: Does labeling the massacres *genocide* overshadow the fact that the state was being challenged by a powerful, multiethnic coalition demanding economic and political reform? Does the charge of genocide eclipse the destruction and violence

inflicted on ladinos (Guatemalans not considered indigenous), who until 1981 comprised the majority of the victims of state repression? Likewise, does it overstate the racial dimensions of the insurgency while downplaying its class component? Does it deny indigenous participation in the popular movement and reduce the repression to a simplified tale of ladino violence heaped on defenseless Indians? To put it another way, does the charge of genocide deny history in order to establish moral culpability?

The CEH resolved this question by adhering to the definition set out by the United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, ratified by the Guatemalan state in 1949. The convention defines genocide as the "*intent* to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group" (5:48).² This separation of *intent* from *motive* is a key distinction, for it permitted the CEH to focus on the acts of ethnic violence themselves rather than historical or social explanations (or rationalizations) given for those acts. In other words, it allowed the CEH to explain, historically and socially, Guatemala's legacy of political repression without abdicating the moral authority to judge those directly responsible for individual acts of repression.

The CEH used historical analysis to understand the motive that informed the military's actions. The commission concluded that military officials drew on deep-seated assumptions regarding Maya culture to "single out [Maya] as the internal enemy . . . both a real and potential support base for the guerrillas" (5:49). Guatemalan military analysts had long believed that the "closed," isolated culture of highland indigenous communities made Maya susceptible to communism: "The enemy has the same sociological traits as the inhabitants of our highlands" (3:322), according to a 1972 intelligence manual. One Guatemalan military analyst put it clearly: "The existence of diverse ethnic groups, with different languages and dialects, demonstrates the partial nature of national integration due to a lack of a common identity" (Sánchez 1985, 23). To these assumptions, military strategists added the ladino tendency to interpret all indigenous political mobilization—which had been on the rise since the 1960s—as the product of outside manipulation.

The military's scorched-earth campaign, therefore, was designed to brutally cut off the indigenous population from the insurgency and break down the communal structures which analysts identified as seedbeds of guerrilla support. This explains the singularly savage nature of the Guatemalan counterinsurgency: In the majority of massacres, the CEH reports

evidence of multiple ferocious acts that preceded, accompanied, and followed the killing of the victims. The assassination of children, often killed by beating them against the wall or by throwing them alive into graves to be later crushed by the bodies of dead adults; amputation of limbs; impaling victims; pouring gasoline on people and burning them alive; extraction of organs; removal of fetuses from pregnant women. . . . The military destroyed ceremonial sites, sacred places, and cultural symbols. Indigenous language and dress were repressed. . . . Legitimate authority of the communities was destroyed. (5:43)

Maya were identified as the enemy and killed *as* Maya, even if the *motivation* was to beat the insurgency.

Repetition Taken for Fate

The report's use of history is a breakthrough in human rights documentation. The delight with which it was received by human rights groups in Guatemala, despite their previous fears, calls to mind one of Walter Benjamin's historical theses: "To articulate the past historically . . . means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (1969, 255). If any country lives in a perpetual moment of danger, it is Guatemala, as demonstrated by the killing of Bishop Juan Gerardi in April of 1998. Gerardi was the head of the Catholic Church's historical memory project, a three-year investigation of human rights violations committed during the war. Two days after the project released its report, *Guatemala: Nunca más*, Gerardi was bludgeoned to death. Despite compelling evidence that the military was involved, no indictments have been issued so far.

Alternative histories such as the CEH report can cut two ways. Marx himself was less sanguine than Benjamin regarding the salutary effects of revisiting the past: The "tradition of all the dead generations," he famously warned, "weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (1969, 15). Any history that attempts to come to terms with Latin American political repression has to deal with the problem of repetition—both of the violence itself and of memories of the violence. It would be comforting to believe that the prescient nature of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* derives from the literary talents of García Márquez.³ Yet the kind of political repression described in the novel and, to a more extreme degree, in *Memoria del silencio* has been a common fact of Latin American life, and its reoccurrence is all too prosaically simple to describe and predict. This testimony

from a witness to the days following the Panzós massacre is as eloquent as it is obvious: “Every day when I went to work, I dreamed that they were the same bodies that floated down the river. Even though I knew it wasn’t possible, it was too awful to believe that each day the river brought new dead” (6:19). The past keeps intruding on the present; not, however, in the form of memory—even though we would like to convince ourselves that political violence is a thing of the past—but in reality, in the form of new victims.

Repetition can easily be taken for fate. As one reads the historical section of the CEH report, as well as the historical background to the cases it studies in detail, the same feeling emerges that grips the reader at the close of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: inevitability. After reading of the deeply exploitative, racist, and chronically violent nature of nearly four hundred years of Guatemalan history, what other possible outcome was there except that the military would kill over one hundred thousand people in 1982?⁴

The challenge that Ariel Dorfman has identified as presented by *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is likewise the challenge offered by *Memoria del silencio*. The essential philosophical problem of the novel, according to Dorfman (1991, 205), is that it insists on the “freedom to narrate from within the world of a family historically determined and condemned to extinction and failure, and yet at the same time to find a perspective outside that history so that the telling itself is not so determined or condemned, so the telling does not become entangled in the very forces that destroyed the chances of the Buendías to succeed and prosper.” Despite the forces that led, unavoidably, to the final destruction of Macondo, Dorfman notes that what has repeatedly led readers back to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is its “exuberant vitality, its sense that life was made for laughter and love, [with] each new generation renewing its pledge of innocence and youth as if the stagnation and futility awaiting their descendants were mere illusions” (206). And yet each new generation meets the same repeated fate. Why, Dorfman asks, does the novel have to end in the way it does?

Most readers of the novel recognize the power of foreign capital to determine the fate of Macondo. Dorfman, however, also points out that the very existence of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, despite its own denouement, is proof that local history survives. He is of course right. After the decades of state repression, today in Latin America local memorials, popular history projects, books, plays, documentaries, and truth commissions fight to tell “autochthonous versions of those lives [that] did manage to find their way into the future” (1991, 208). That this is so means that there “must be

internal factors that have led to that disastrous outcome, choices that the Buendías made or did not make. If these are inscribed in the way they organized their existence, in a history of their own embedded with reasons that did not allow them to break out of their solitude, those reasons and mistakes could be indeed understood by readers in the hope that they will not be repeated” (208). Class and race prejudice, sexism, machismo, and rapid recourse to violence are the “internal factors” Dorfman identifies as responsible for Macondo’s, and Latin America’s, fate.

Memoria del silencio insists, too, on local agency: “Internal causes are fundamental” in coming to terms with the magnitude and length of the war, the CEH writes, “even though they were conditioned by external influences” (1:80). The objective of the historical chapter therefore is “to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which Guatemalans have made their own history as the only way of understanding and explaining the origins and course of the prolonged internal armed conflict” (1:81).

In trying to understand how “Guatemalans made their own history,” *Memoria del silencio* carefully shows how “external causes” played out locally: Guatemala’s colonial heritage and nineteenth-century insertion into a global economy created a *sector terrateniente* (landowning class) that ruled the country as if it was its own private *finca*; Cold War anticommunism found fertile ground among military officers, politicians, economic elites, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the press, and a small but politically important rural and urban middle class; the 1954 U.S.-orchestrated overthrow of a reform regime (in another parallel to Macondo, encouraged by the United Fruit Company) and the subsequent imposition, at the behest of U.S. advisors, of the National Security Doctrine were taken advantage of by local politicians and economic elites to close out their competitors; and the hope offered by Cuba, Marxism, and liberation theology was seized upon by the disenfranchised—which eventually came to include everybody from rural Indians to urban intellectuals and politicians—to press their interests.

It would be unrealistic to expect the CEH to resolve a debate that has long perplexed historians, yet the conflict between “agency” and “structure” speaks directly to the issue of responsibility. Who is to be held accountable for the atrocities that took place in Guatemala if history is to blame? The CEH, which drew on social analysis to explain the context but used established jurisprudence to investigate specific violations, was careful to avoid this trap: the causes of the war may have had deep historical roots, yet the violations the CEH was charged with investigating had individual authors. Nevertheless, the question remains: If history is not to be repeated,

what is it in history that could have been different? After all the controversy has died down surrounding the facts of Rigoberta Menchú's life, this is the question that we are left with from David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999a).

The Abusable Past

In his book and in subsequent interviews, David Stoll (1999a, 1999b) has repeatedly stressed that his motive in investigating the truth of Menchú's story was to present an alternative interpretation of the war. The dominant version of the war, he argues, is ideologically biased. It presents, according to him, the guerrillas as organically emerging from the desires of a unified *pueblo* to free itself from class and ethnic exploitation. Stoll contends that in this narrative, state repression is usually understood as being carried out to uphold an unjust and racist social system.

By highlighting contradictions in Menchú's testimony, Stoll's work (1993, 1999a) has been concerned with offering an alternative version of events: Social conditions in the indigenous highlands were improving until ladino guerrillas showed up in the early 1970s; the state conducted widespread political repression merely "to get at" the guerrillas, not to uphold an exploitative system (1993, 20); guerrilla activity actually preempted the possibility of peaceful reform and brought to power the "homicidal wing" of the military (1999a, 279); and the Maya, for their part, joined the rebels in droves only to escape the violence of the military, not because they wanted a revolution (1993, 14–21).

This version presents a number of factual and analytical difficulties that I will mention here only briefly (cf. Grandin 1995, 1998). Stoll provides only anecdotal evidence that economic conditions were improving in the highlands. His argument that peaceful political reform was possible is based on an astonishing ignorance of Guatemalan history. The CEH describes in minute detail how, since 1954, the progressive closing of political space was aimed not just at fighting communism but at preventing all reform. The exclusion of political elites from power not only gave rise to the guerrilla, but eventually led prominent social democrats, Christian democrats, and other noncommunist reformers into alliances with the armed movement. Further, Stoll's contention that the political repression was conducted solely to root out the guerrilla ignores both the racist nature of the campaign and the close ties the military had with economic elites. The case of Panzós alone, where there were no armed guerrillas operating, contradicts Stoll's argument.

If *Memoria del silencio* goes to great pains to emphasize internal dynamics to explain the violence, Stoll traces the origins of not just Guatemalan repression, but all of Latin American political violence, to the Cuban Revolution.⁵ Despite the fact that he cites few actual Latin American scholars, Stoll presents his work as a corrective to the influence the Cuban Revolution holds among Latin American intellectuals: “Facing the limitations of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, will, I hope, help the Latin American left . . . escape from the captivity of Guevarismo” (1999a, 282). Stoll concludes that for the

better part of four decades, a misguided belief in the moral purity of total rejection, of refusing to compromise with the system and seeking to overthrow it by force, has had profound consequences for the entire political scene. It has strengthened the rationales for repression, poisoned other political possibilities that might have been more successful, and repeatedly been fatal for the left itself . . . by guaranteeing a crushing response from the state. (282)

While it is unclear if in the above passage Stoll is referring to Guatemala or all of Latin America, in both cases he is wrong. Stoll’s counternarrative not only misrepresents Guatemalan and Latin American history (the case of Chile, for example, would contradict his argument that guerrilla movements are responsible for bringing to power U.S.-supported counterinsurgent states), but also ignores the multiple relations of causality and consequences that drive history. Simply put, he assigns historical “agency” and hence moral responsibility to urban intellectuals while portraying rural peasants and Indians as caught between two armies: “Middle-class intellectuals can set off a revolution [driven] by the moral simplicity of the just war. The bill will be paid by the peasants who are turned into military targets” (1999, 281).

Despite the obvious problems with Stoll’s formulations, it is worth pursuing his premises a bit further. The extension of Stoll’s argument suggests that the best way to avoid the tragic repetition of political violence in Latin America rests in the decisions urban middle-class intellectuals make as to how best to achieve political reform. It likewise follows that in Guatemala, especially after the first wave of counterinsurgent violence of the 1960s, the individuals who reorganized the guerrilla organizations in

the indigenous highlands should have known that the military was not only able but willing to do what it did in 1982.

Seen Too Late

In 1982 everything changed in Guatemala. The year marked the climax of escalating state repression that began with the 1954 U.S.-brokered overthrow of a reform regime and ended with the military unleashing a counterinsurgency campaign the barbarity of which is matched solely by historical images of the *conquista*. Not only did the army decimate the social base and military structure of the guerrillas in 1982, it transformed the terms of the debate. While the war would persist for another fourteen years, not only was a guerrilla victory no longer possible, but the national narrative had been disrupted. Well before the fall of the Soviet Union or the defeat of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in Nicaragua at the polls, the rhetoric of the popular movement changed. The struggle was no longer a progressive, historically inevitable fight for a more socially just nation—a fulfillment of the promise offered by the 1944–54 democratic spring. It became a rearguard defense of human rights and a fight for the reestablishment of the rule of law. While the guerrillas may have won the international public relations campaign (of which Menchú played a crucial role) by successfully painting the Guatemalan military and state as repressive and corrupt, the military won the battle over the limits of the nation's future.

In *Memoria del silencio*, or, indeed, any account of recent Guatemalan history, all the signs of the coming climax are present: the massacres of the 1960s, the escalating repression of the 1970s, the growing number of disappeared, Panzós, the Spanish Embassy massacre. Yet successive generations of Guatemalan activists go about their business, as do the Buendías, apparently unaware of the “stagnation and futility” of their hopes and actions.

“How could they not have known?” In informal conversations I have asked that question to a number of Guatemalans who had either helped found or worked with the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP—the strongest and most confrontational of the rebel groups) in the 1970s during its ascendance. Judging from their quick, defensive responses, it is clear that this was a question that they had asked themselves many times over. Answers adhered to a similar structure. First, they often recounted what is generally referred to as a “closing of political space” that allowed no alternative for reform. Arturo Taracena, a historian and one of the original

founders of the EGP, has told me repeatedly that “if there had been any political opening whatsoever between 1963 and 1966, there would have been no guerrilla movement” (Taracena 1999). Indeed, a progressive narrowing of political options for reformists starting with the 1954 coup is described in convincing detail by *Memoria del silencio*. Beyond this, former members of the EGP usually give a close reading of the political moment—the *coyuntura*—of the 1970s: the defeat of U.S. imperialism by guerrilla movements in Cuba, Vietnam, and Nicaragua; the 1977 cutting of direct military aid by the United States to Guatemala; the rise of revolutionary movements in Central America; bitter divisions among the national elite; demoralization and corruption in the Guatemalan military; the fall of Nicaragua’s Somoza regime; incorporation of Indians, workers, and students into oppositional organizations; alliances between noncommunist intellectuals and reform politicians; and a national and international repudiation of the venal and discredited Romero Lucas García regime (1978–82). All these at the time seemed an overwhelming array of indicators heralding victory.

When pushed further on the question, many often return to defensiveness, displacing the blame for the premature escalation of the war onto either indigenous communities or radical Christians. One former member active since the early 1970s told me that “responsibility has to be taken, but what nobody talks about is the responsibility of the communities; they approached the guerrillas. . . . The priests and nuns had too much influence. Their triumphalism and martyrology, and their slogans—‘the future is ours’—created a military problem.” Arturo Taracena recalls that the military and political strategy of the EGP was calculated to avoid the mistakes made by the guerrillas of the 1960s, who, according to him, had no mass base. It was theorized that political work and building a social base within indigenous communities would actually prevent the kind of repression that took place in the 1960s: “The rapid incorporation of the masses into military structures was not part of the strategy of the EGP. It was pushed by the pressure of indigenous communities and Acción Católica” (Taracena 1999).

Cathy Caruth, among others, has defined trauma not as the psychic repetition of the harmful experience itself, but as the chronic reliving of the events leading to the event: “Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (1996, 91–92). This inability to know entails a constant irresolvable reworking of the events leading to the event, and trauma partly entails the realization by the victim that she or he has “seen too late” the causes of the

injury (100). It is this “failure to see in time” that haunts these accounts of events leading up to 1982.

As does *Memoria del silencio*, these accounts privilege history in explaining what went wrong. In defense of decisions taken, former participants in the guerrilla movement will provide a detailed analysis of the political context. Further, what is at the core of their countercharges of triumphalism or millenarianism on the part of Maya or Catholic activists is essentially an accusation of a tragic failure to read history correctly, a failure which in turn “provoked” the repression. But does not this privileging of history—especially a version of history where the line between “structure” and “agency” is so porous—ensure a constant return to the site of trauma as defined by Caruth? The CEH report highlights the historical causes of the violence in such a way that it seems to preclude other possible outcomes. At the same time, the report insists on the morality of agency—the responsibility held by individual decisions. If ex-members of the insurgency justify or explain their decisions based on a reading of the political moment, doesn’t the CEH report ultimately reinforce their guilt? After all, their reading of history, as presented in *Memoria del silencio*, was no more correct than the alleged triumphalism of Christians and indigenous communities. Ronald Reagan was elected; the U.S. State Department regrouped; Guatemalan elites did not abandon Lucas García; and the army responded with genocide, which, read in retrospect in the pages of *Memoria del silencio*, seems to be the logical outcome of centuries of racism.

A Second Chance

No matter how far the comparison with the Buendía family goes, and it goes far, society is not a family. As *Memoria del silencio* has convincingly documented, over the course of decades, indeed centuries, endemic political and social violence, despite its circumstantial specificity, ultimately served to benefit the interests of a small, privileged economic and ethnic elite. Notwithstanding the elusive link between structure and agency—as manifested in the CEH report, in Stoll’s counternarrative, and in the constant return to history by those implicated in the violence—it is this elite that is morally responsible for Guatemala’s tragic past and present. *Memoria del silencio* indeed gave Guatemalans an opportunity to interpret their own lives. Many, however, have refused to read it.

The government’s response to the report has so far been disappointing. Unlike in Chile, where President Patricio Aylwin formally apologized on behalf of the state for the crimes committed during the Augusto

Pinochet years, the Guatemalan government has not claimed the CEH report as its own. During the official presentation of *Memoria del silencio* in Guatemala City's National Theater on 25 February 1999, victims, their relatives, and members of popular and human rights organizations greeted each conclusion with clamorous applause. Guatemala's president, Alvaro Arzú, his close advisors, and military officers, however, appeared stunned. Arzú did not personally receive the report, instead delegating the government's secretary of peace to the stage. Following the presentation, he exited through a back door without comment.

In the days that followed, official reactions were ambiguous at best. While the president (in a radio broadcast, *Guatemala Flash*, 2 March 1999) begged for time to "read, analyze, and study in meticulous detail each and every word" of the report before he would make an official statement, Raquel Zelaya, the government's secretary of peace, stated immediately following the presentation that while the work of the commission was laudable, it was important to keep in mind that "those responsible for the massacres will not be brought to justice" (radio broadcast, *Noti-7*, 25 February 1999). Guatemala's minister of defense, General Héctor Barrios, remarked that the report was "a partial truth, since its version of history is nothing more than the point of view of the commission" (*El Periódico*, 26 February 1999). Roberto Robles, head of Guatemala's official tourist institute, complained that the report would result in more "damage than reconciliation" since its negative portrayal of Guatemala would cause tourists to cancel their travel plans (radio broadcast, *Noti-7*, 2 March 1999).

Subsequent official responses have been piecemeal. President Arzú has remained steadfastly loyal to the military, rejecting the CEH's recommendation that a follow-up commission be established to investigate the actions of active military officers during the internal conflict. On National Army Day, 30 June, Arzú took the opportunity to reject what many feel is the most damning charge of the commission: "Genocide is the desire to exterminate an ethnic group, and this was not the cause of the conflict" (*El Periódico*, 1 July 1999).

As could have been expected, Guatemala's prolific opinion columnists judged the report based on their political persuasions. Some applauded the work of the CEH and urged the government to recognize the results. Many, however, complained that the report was biased. Fernando Linares represented the opinions of more than one writer when he complained that "not the introduction, not the information, not the conclusions of the report are impartial. It is an ideological instrument of the Left" (*Prensa Libre*, 26

March 1999). Alfredo Klatschmitt lamented that the report would serve only to “open wounds in the memory of a people tormented by both sides” (*Siglo Veintiuno*, 1 March 1999). What was not expected, however, was the relatively little amount of debate that the report generated. After an initial flurry of news reports, editorials, and opinion pieces, media interest in *Memoria del silencio* rapidly tapered off.

It seems that for the CEH, “agency” happens, hopefully, in the present. The force of the report’s historical analysis gave the CEH the authority to issue a series of sweeping recommendations designed to address the economic, political, and cultural causes of the war. Beyond calling on the government and the URNG to issue a public and sincere acceptance of responsibility, the CEH recommended that the state create national holidays and name public buildings to honor victims of the violence; reform the civilian, police, and military educational system; decrease military spending; carry out an official exhumation policy; conduct vigorous investigations into unsolved cases of forced disappearances; ratify pending international conventions protecting human, social, and cultural rights; abolish the Presidential Military Guard (the EMP—considered to be the nerve center of army intelligence, through which the military still maintains surveillance over the civilian government and society); initiate an active policy to end racism and cultural inequality; and fulfill all the terms of the peace accords, particularly those calling for progressive tax reform, subordination of the police, military-to-civilian control, and judicial reform. The CEH also called for the establishment of a number of commissions to carry out these reforms, including a National Reparations Program (which would entail not only monetary compensation to individuals, but increased social services for victims, families, and communities); a presidential commission that would investigate active military and police personnel and purge those responsible for human rights violations; and a body to promote and monitor the implementation of the CEH’s recommendations.

While the report’s findings are not legally binding, *Memoria del silencio* called for the full application of Guatemala’s 1996 Law of National Reconciliation. While this law allowed human rights violators to apply for amnesty—a provision criticized by human rights groups—it exempted acts of genocide, torture, and forced disappearances. By ruling that aspects of the military’s 1981–83 scorched-earth campaign were genocidal, the CEH opened the door to prosecution. The final report called for the application of “all of the terms of the Law of National Reconciliation, prosecuting and judging those crimes that the law does not exempt” (5:72).

The government's preliminary response to the recommendations, however, has not been encouraging. Immediately after the report's release, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Eduardo Stein said that the CEH's recommendations "seemed to have surpassed its mandate" (*Siglo Veintiuno*, 26 February 1999). As the report itself concludes, the military, to a large degree, maintains a powerful hold over the state, and it is unlikely that it will allow a civilian government to carry out many of the CEH's recommendations. Indeed, the murder of Bishop Gerardi, as well as a flurry of threats against human rights activists following the release of the report, indicate the continued operational strength of the institutions and individuals responsible for past violations.

Despite the limitations specific to Guatemalan politics and the trouble in defining the distinction between historical and individual responsibility, *Memoria del silencio* marks a turning point in human rights investigation. Originally conceived as a hollow institution—a marker as to where the imposed limits of the peace process lay—its sophisticated analysis provides an alternative to past Latin American truth commissions and an escape from the impasse generated from the Menchú controversy. The question is, to paraphrase what was so eloquently stated by Ariel Dorfman (1999, 217), will those responsible for the violence leap outside their ambiguous relation with death, decipher the repression, read its causes, and work to make sure that the next hundred years do not repeat themselves?

Notes

1. The whole report, twelve volumes in all, is available on-line at <<http://www.hrdata.aaas.org>>.
2. See vol. 3, pp. 249–423, for an analysis of the scorched-earth campaign and the ruling of genocide.
3. Although García Márquez came of age in Colombia in the 1930s and 1940s—a period of unremitting bloodshed—I would argue that the repression described in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, with its accompanying silences and solitudes, is more of a kind with the repression that followed the novel's publication. Cold War counterinsurgent states did not just seek to physically eliminate their opponents, but used repression to root out any possible ideological alternative to the established order—hence the metaphoric power of the novel's use of amnesia, solitude, and oblivion.
4. I thank law professor and theorist Ruti Teitel, who first suggested that the historical analysis of *Memoria del silencio* is "overdetermined" during the conference

“An American Killing Field: The Work and Conclusions of the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission,” New Haven, Conn., 7 April 1999.

5. Stoll actually traces the original sin to “factional struggles in the revolutionary coalition that brought Fidel to power.” As a result, Che’s theories of guerrilla warfare gave unwarranted legitimacy to “rural guerrilla strategies [that] are an urban romance, a myth propounded by middle-class radicals who dream of finding true solidarity in the countryside” (1999a, 281).

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