Peace as a Masquerade
Militarization and

EGLA J. MARTINEZ

La militarisation et la terreur d'après-guerre dans le cadre de « paix » minimisent la possibilité d'une paix valable pour la majorité des pauvres et des sans-travail au Guatémala, sérieusement traumatisés par un trop long joug de terreur consciemment planifié et implanté par les pouvoirs en place.

Peace has become a fashionable word used to fulfil different and very often illegitimate agendas, including the continuation of institutionalized political violence implemented as state terror. This is very much so in "post-war" contexts where peace was reached through the signing of agreements that left out the prosecution of crimes against humanity. In those socio-economic geographies indigenous peoples, women, and impoverished populations were not the main signatories of negotiated peace agreements, nonetheless many of them are the most socially engaged actors striving to build a more meaningful peace from the bottom up. While in "post-war" contexts such as Guatemala vertical state terror has been removed as state policy, oppressive and coercive forces are inventing new ways to silence the progressively organized civil society in which women play a pivotal role. Terror therefore does not disappear but rather becomes selectively used to refresh recent repressive memories that taught people that the legitimate exercise of struggling for a better society was punished with persecution, torture, and death.

The main role of these repressive forces in "peacetimes" is to harass, persecute, threaten, and even kill social activists, particularly those engaged in human rights and land-rights struggles.

It was the summer of 2002 when I arrived in Guatemala to continue a complex research journey to dig into the intricacies of the socio-political agency and subject-making processes of diverse Maya women amidst colonial legacies of racism, state terror, economic exclusion, and political marginality. More so than in 1999, I found an increased process of militarization and daily insecurity coexisting with high levels of impoverishment, unemployment, and social despair. Once again I walked the streets of renewed terror and silenced fear in the Guatemala of signed peace. I relived the contradictions of feelings, enraged and inspired while stressed out and terrified. I however, had the possibility to leave—despite having been born there—when bullets were confused with beans and when violent death became so "naturalized" that people had to get used to it, losing our/their ability to be astonished by the horrors of state terror. Human rights activists and other socio-politically active leaders as well as the population—also terrified by the rise of crime and insecurity—had to stay, living at the edge of life and death every single day.

Peace in Guatemala, signed in 1996, has become a governmental populist discourse to disguise an increased yet socially invisible process of militarization. For the majority of diverse and impoverished Guatemalans practical peace is in a dangerous impasse even though human rights movements and community organizations, many led by Maya and *Ladino* women, continue to build a social justice oriented peace-practice from the grassroots in the midst of increased post-war terror. Two of the most dangerous expressions of this peacetime militarization process entail the reactivation of military and paramilitary forces such as the former Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (PACs) (Civilian Self-Defense Patrols) and clandestine death squads. The main role of these repressive forces in "peacetimes" is to harass, persecute, threaten, and even kill social activists, particularly those engaged in human rights and Indigenous land-rights struggles, many of whom are Maya and *Ladino* women. This time, however, this dirty work is not being done in the name of "confronting an imminent and international communist menace," the main ideology behind long-time state militarized counterinsurgency, supported by internal dominant classes and by international super powers such as the United States. (CEH; Jonas).

This post-war terror in Guatemala does not seem to be a vertical state policy as it was from 1954 to 1996. Nowadays political repression is being implemented, paradoxically, in the name of "peace and democracy." Or, as Guatemalan sociologist Manolo Vela points out, to implement a post-war terror which is

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focalized, selective, and directed towards progressive social movements and their leaders, to silence their voices and to teach others what can happen to them if they become active agents of change.

Post-war terror in peace-time Guatemala does not have to have a "subversive and communist enemy entrenched in guerrilla forces" to justify its existence but it still needs "an enemy." In "peace-time" this enemy has been named an "anti-nationalist traitor" who just happens to be a human rights activist, a community leader, an Indigenous land-rights advocate, an honest and public intellectual, a committed priest and nun, and, a Maya woman who is also a state-terror widow, and a *Ladina* woman whose relatives were brutally killed by those who create state and ruling powers enemies, among others. What struck me the most while doing fieldwork in Guatemala during the summer of 2002,[1] was that post-war terror is so selective and focused on weakening the still fragile and fragmented post-war social movements and organizations that it is invisible to the majority of the population that is striving to get by in a harsh neoliberal and capitalist globalized atmosphere of increased poverty, unemployment, and daily insecurity.

Because post-war terror under peace and democracy is so focalized and selective and steady, it forces average citizens to see and "accept" that "democracy" under signed peace can coexist with institutional and paramilitary terror. What is worrisome is that this coexistence acquires "normalcy" in everyday life in a society so torn by state terror and by the impact of neoliberal globalization that many become "cynical" in order to survive the hardships of everyday life. As a human rights woman activist and representative of the Rigoberta Menchú Foundation reflected:

> The level of social conformity and impotence is such that people who have suffered socio-economically and politically for so long have created a level of social cynicism to survive. (Fieldnotes 2002)

In other words, people are saying, "I know what happened in Guatemala. I know that the government steals, kills. I know that the military and ex-military are in kidnapping gangs, but hey! what can I do to stop it?" (Fieldnotes 2002). This same activist adds:

> "nation from communists and guerrillas." Now when peace has been signed and the surviving guerrillas are inserted into the political game and everything is done in the name of peace, the majority of the people don't know who is behind this terror. But many of us in critical social movements are very aware that the real power structures, especially the military establishment was never touched, least so dismantled as the Peace Accords demanded. My point is that peace is becoming the best discourse to hide the responsibility for the current militarization and terror agenda. (Fieldnotes 2002)

When doubts become social, especially regarding institutional political violence, its perpetrators manipu-

In "peace-time" this enemy has been named an "anti-nationalist traitor" who just happens to be a Maya woman who is also state-terror widow, and a *Ladina* woman whose relatives were killed.

The Peace Accords (with all the positive political things they opened up) also brought a confusing reality in which it is really difficult to pinpoint who is the enemy of the population. In the recent past the majority of Guatemalans knew that the state, its dominant class allies, and the army were against people as a unity. The militarized state agents declared a dirty war against its citizens to defend the late them because what is not closely seen, felt, and touched is difficult to believe. In Guatemala, even during the peak years of state terror (1981-1984), the ruling coalition had the resources through coercion, domination, and the support of mainstream media to convey a message that genocide, torture and other human rights violations were the invention of "communists." Social doubts about current post-war terror are also expressed by self-identified demo-

cratic journalists who affirm that some human rights activists invent persecution and death threats to obtain international funding (see, for example, Fernández). The reactivation of repressive forces and militarization, however, is not solely the work of military master minds, it is also the product of civilian mentalities, those of some former human rights activists, guerrilla commanders, and academics "who thought that to make good one has to [make a] pact with evil ... ultimately serving the forces of terror" (Vela 5). It is a public secret among many human rights advocates that behind the reactivation of repressive forces there are former human rights activists who know how to co-opt the language of human rights and use it locally and internationally to project an image that peace is working in Guatemala. These former human rights activists also know how to manipulate survivors' pain because they were in contact with the victims of the military, heard their testimonies of pain and deep suffering while seating and eating side by side with perpetrators, many of whom hold key power positions. Several human rights activists reflected seriously about the great danger they perceive from co-opted human rights, progressive activists, and former insurgent commanders working for the current government by pointing out:

> Could you imagine all the damage that people like them can cause to the cause of social justice and to the physical being of many of us, this is really scary but real. Here in Guatemala horror fiction has been a tangible reality, the surreal becomes the real. (Fieldnotes 2002)

In the end the manipulation of peace as a discourse to reactivate militarization makes post-war terror an invisible process to the eyes of the majority but a deadly reality for those who are engaged in social justice struggles, a deadly reality I felt every time I visited the Rigoberta Menchu Foundation during a time when the Foundation's staff was trying to recover from the brutal assassination of one of its dedicated members, Guillermo Ovalle, killed in May 2002, by "heavily armed men dressed in civilian clothes." I watched as men disguised as homeless people kept the Foundation under close daily surveillance, a surveillance that increased since the current government took power in 2000, and intensified in the weeks before Ovalle's assassination. As another woman human rights activist from the Rigoberta Foundation noted:

> We have been constantly watched along with the most active and critical human rights organizations since peace was signed in 1996. But before the current government took power there was a real sense that at least the first roads towards a political peace could be built up with the close contribution of the organized civil society. Now we do not feel that and you can sense this more in the countryside, especially in areas formerly called *conflict zones* such as the Ixil Triangle. Since 2000 and particularly last year we [in the Foundation] have noticed the intensification of control. In 2002 this control became a very tangible reality for all of us ... they killed one of us. The target was not specifically Guillermo as a person but the Foundation as a human rights institution that has not given up the struggle for humanity and dignity, against impunity and for the right to historical memory as a living project. And this commitment is what the fucking genocide killers cannot stand (Fieldnotes 2002).

During the four decades of state terror, the slogan of the death squads was *"a communist seen is a communist killed."* In 2002, in "peacetime," their slogan is *"an activist seen is an activist killed."*

Assassinating a worker from the Rigoberta Menchu Foundation had the clear purpose of breaking down this important social justice project and sending a terrorizing message to other potential targets, especially human rights and Indigenous-land rights activists.

In June 2002, post-war terror reached another level in urban settings with the reappearance of death squads, which have historically been groups of heavily armed men, trained in counterinsurgent strategies linked to the military and powerful businessmen[2] and right-wing politicians. Death squads were created in 1966 and since then they have been used at different moments as another clandestine paramilitary organization in charge to persecute, harass and kill social movements' leaders particularly those active in cities. During the four decades of state terror, the slogan of the death squads was *"a communist seen is a communist killed"* (CEH 112). In 2002, in "peacetime," their slogan is *"an activist seen is an activist killed."* Peace-time requires a change of discourse for the anti-communist language is a discredit even among right-wingers, at least in public. For example, in a public 1988 flyer of *La Mano Blanca* (The White Hand)—one of the most terrifying death squads in Guatemala's history—their targets are named "...traitors of the fatherland, Marxist-Leninist and killers who want to give up our country to international com-

munism" (qtd. in CEH 117-118). In 2002, a dead squad flyer reads:

> In recent months the pseudo-organizations of human rights and their sympathizers have been dedicated to discredit the image of our country and the triumph of democracy over communism won with the blood of our heroic soldiers.... These devil persons are a disgrace of society and parasites of human rights that must be exterminated like a cancer ... these liars must pay with their blood. The first who will feel the taste of our bullets will be: Clara Arenas, Miguel Angel Albizures, Miguel Angel Sandoval, Nery Rodenas, Frank LaRue, Mario Polanco, Abner Guoz, Marielos Monzón, Ronaldo Robles, Rosa Maria Bolaños and the damn Chinese of Helen Mack. (Signed by Truly Guatemalans, June 2002)

What former and current death squads have in common, however, is total freedom to act with impunity and intimidate, persecute, kidnap, torture, and kill social leaders when it is convenient for the military establishment and other ruling powers to appear distant from political violence. There is not a better mask than death squads for those who oppose concrete peace but manipulate it as a populist discourse for they can say these squads are formed by "the extremes" that want to destabilize the country and the peace process—what an irony! The reappearance of death squads is a chilling sign of militarization and post-war terror in the name of peace.

In Maya communities and other villages in the countryside another strategy is being put in place, the reactivation of former Civilian Self-Defence Patrols (PACs). These were paramilitary forces created through the coerced participation of peasant and Maya men during the worst years of counterinsurgency. Although the majority of Maya and Ladino peasant men coerced to participate in PACS, there were many, particularly their chiefs, who had had a previous alliance with the military and they were the ones who became deadly torturers, rapists and killers of their own people. This time the reactivated PACs not only include former direct Maya male members but also men who were Ladino military commissioners and clandestine army informants but also women related to "civil patrollers," military commissioners and army informants. However, Maya women mobilized under these militarized agendas do not hold leadership positions. Reactivated PACs are not named as victims of the conflict that need to be compensated but as patriotic defenders of a free nation against communist forces.

The Truth Commission (CEH) found that 18 percent of all documented human rights violations were perpetrated by the PACs and that 95 percent of those crimes were committed in less than a three-year period (1981-1983). This 18 percent is part of the 93 percent of human rights violations perpetrated by agents of the state that include the army, security forces, military commissioners, death squads and PACs; three percent rests with the guerrillas and the remaining four percent rests with the other unidentified armed groups, civilian elements, and other public officials. The PAC crimes included extra-judicial executions (including participation in the massacres), followed by torture, forced disappearance and rape (Dill). Nobody knows this terrible reality better than Maya widows because many of them are the surviving relatives of the majority of men, children, and elders killed by PACs in conjunction with military officers.

What is stunning is that "reparation" and monetary compensation have been offered to these killers but not to the survivors of state terror. Prizing perpetrators of genocide is the new strategy of the current Guatemalan government and its civilian ideologues, not only to secure thousands of votes for the forthcoming election but "to form a populist party whose main base sector will be former civilian patrollers manipulated as Indigenous peasants" (Fieldnotes 2002). In June 2002, when all of a sudden (at least to the public), thousands of PACs organized and paralyzed a northern department, President Portillo promptly responded to the paramilitary's demands while completely ignoring the precarious situation of thousands of impoverished Maya and Ladino widows of state terror.

While PACs were mostly made up of impoverished men, currently it is a Ladino woman, Rosenda Perez, who identifies herself as "a natural leader of those who defended the fatherland from the communism's claws" (Fieldnotes 2002).[3] This tells us that women can exercise an agency oriented toward achieving social justice as well as an agency that is against positive social change and, therefore, against other women's human rights.

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PAC members and their leaders who seek compensation as heroic patriots and defenders of democracy along with the army and the state are responsible for having created a new social reality in Guatemala: massive and violent widowhood. This violent widowhood has left thousands of women and their children at the

edge of survival and deeply wounded, psychologically and socially. It has altered and changed social relations within families, communities, and society. The claiming of compensation by these mass murderers and rapists evoke the most terrifying and unhealed memories in widows and orphans. Many Maya women who survived state terror were forced to watch the torture and killing of their husbands and other relatives as well as their own children. Violent widowhood is not a natural part of the life-cycle but a direct result of the militarized ruling coalition's counterinsurgency that targeted primarily men as its direct victims, killed at the hands of other men, many of which were members of PACs. This same state that in 2002 wants to "prize" mass murderers and rapists is, in fact, responsible for the crimes perpetrated by its military and paramilitary agents and helpers.

In many Maya and peasant communities the militarized state targeted male residents as being primarily responsible for local socio-political mobilization, equating them with "guerrilla supporters." Thus, as the Maya community inhabitants in the highlands:

> began to understand the logic of repression, men especially younger men, would often flee the village at first sign of army approach or would sleep in the fields or forests to avoid a predawn army attack. In the absence of men, the military attacked any villagers they could capture, including women, children, and the elderly. (Ball *et al.*)

Many women encouraged their male relatives to leave hoping that their female gender/sex would be seen as weak and less politically active in the Ladino and military elite mentality, and that it could, therefore, save them and their children. Nevertheless, state agents and paramilitary forces targeted women and children equally and women were also direct victims of the army and PACs' crimes. As state terror escalated in the 1970s and 1980s during the assault of mostly Maya communities, women became a greater percentage of the dead and disappeared (Ball *et al.*). According to the International Center for Human Rights Investigations (CIIDH) (a U.S. based research centre on human rights),

> In 1981 and 1982, a period of the counterinsurgency characterized by rural mass killings, the proportion of women amongst all named victims reached 21 percent, its highest point since the expansion of the conflict in the 1960s. For the entire armed conflict, women represent 15 percent of the named dead in the CIIDH database. (cited in Ball *et al.* chapter 16: 6)

The Comisión del Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) (Commission for Historical Clarification) confirmed that a large number of children were also direct victims of arbitrary execution, forced disappearance, torture, rape, and other violations of their fundamental rights. Many children were left orphaned and abandoned, especially among the Mayan population. State official accounts and a study done by the U.S. report that

> between 1980 and 1983 at least 100,000 and as many as 200,000 children, mainly in the western highlands (where the majority of Mayas live) had lost at least one parent to the violence, and that 20 percent of these youth lost both their parents. (Krueger and Enge qtd. in Ball *et al.* chapter 16:2)

It is difficult to know how many children were direct victims, however, the years where massive state terror reached its peak, are also the years with the highest proportion of child victims (Ball *et al.*).

Violent widowhood is a new social and complex phenomenon with unknown consequences for the long term, especially for Mayas. In Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala's (CONAVIGUA) (Guatemalan National Coordination of Widows) report, the National Coordination of Widows of Guatemala, pointedly notes:

> We, Indigenous women of Guatemala have been, for centuries, subject to institutional violence of a state strange to our culture and organizational forms, a patriarchal state which triply oppresses and discriminates against us because we are women, Indigenous and because of our situation of poverty. Within the internal armed conflict, we suffered specific forms of violence directed toward us such as rape, forced pregnancy, sexual subjugation and slavery... crimes used as weapons of war against our families our communities and us. Because of our ethnic origins, violence against us was perpetrated massively with impunity and permission under the strategy of state terrorism. We still do not know the long term consequences that violence against women have on women and on our communities because victims were left affected by shame, humiliation and false feelings of guilt, a trauma that gets extended to our families and communities. (18)

The reactivation of PACs, however, is taking place not only to seek "reparation" and monetary compensation but, more importantly, to instil more fear and social control in already wounded and traumatized communities. By organizing the widows of military and paramilitary men in Maya communities, the current government is also seeking further divisions in fragmented and shattered spaces by pitting Maya women against other Maya women. In Santiago Atitlán, for instance, an out-

sider dentist has came back to instigate widows of military commissioners and army informants against widows of Tzutuhil peasants, Catholic promoters, artisans, and community leaders assassinated by the army and its local forces. What these outsider instigators want is to present a picture in which "uncontrollable" civilians are in conflict with other similar civilians in order to justify militarization and the transferring of more funding to the army. Nevertheless, despite harassment and deadly threats many Maya widows and community leaders are resisting the reactivation of PACs. Many of these Maya women assured me that they:

> ...will not allow these killers to be compensated because they are also responsible for the kind of miserable lives we are living and because the blood of our beloved cannot be forgotten. Their sacrifice gave us this poor peace but this peace is better than what we went through escaping bullets on every day life. We will continue our struggle for human dignity because our relatives were not stones thrown in the middle of an abandoned road, they lived with us, they loved and fought us, they existed and they were not criminals. (Fieldnotes 2002)

The courage of these women and others in the local-national progressive social movements is the more concrete and meaningful step to a process of building a social justice oriented society, so much needed in Guatemala. The manipulation of "peace" as a populist discouse by powerful hegemonic forces, old and new, further curtails the possibility of a meaningful peace for the majority poor and unemployed in Guatemala who are severely traumatized for a long-standing culture of terror, consciously planned and implemented by ruling powers.

I often asked myself, after long interviews or a conversations with human rights and community leaders, what makes these people get up every morning feeling stressed and fearful but willing to fight back even when they have been threatened. Maybe there are no neat answers, just the immemorial practice of resisting for centuries, an ancestral practice taught by Mayas through their struggle against European colonial invaders. And, perhaps, this is the difference between those who use peace as a masquerade to reactivate terror and militarization and those who are genuinely committed to building a meaningful peace from the grassroots, to construct a society that strives for social justice with a final goal of eradicating impunity and at least guaranteeing basic socio-economic, political, and cultural rights for all. This is not a closing academic argument but a concrete commitment that I observed in nationally and locally active women in Guatemala, some of who do not consider themselves human rights activists but, who in practice, are amazing keepers of the fires of social justice and true peace. This collective sense of hope, despite being constrained by post-war terror, is what makes Guatemala a place of so many contradictions, a place where complex consciousness is what makes agency and resistance not old-fashioned revolutionary concepts (very much in disarray in several academic halls) but everyday symbolic materialities. These symbolic materialities should inspire international solidarity and North American policy-makers to support the struggle for integral human rights in Guatemala and in other post-war societies.

Egla J. Martinez is completing a doctoral degree in Sociology at York University. She has done work on human rights, popular education, and women's issues in Mexico, Guatemala, and Canada. In Canada she has worked as a counsellor for abused women and their families and was a member of the Latin American women community radio collective Tejiendo Rebeldías. She is a Mestiza (Indigenous from a Xinca, Garifuna, and Spanish speaking backgrounds) from working- class origins.

[1]This fieldwork was possible through a doctoral research award granted by IDRC and exemplifies the great importance of funding public research.
[2]The death squad named *La Mano Blanca* (The White Hand) collected a million U.S. dollars from businessmen during its first year of functioning (*Life* 31/4, February 26, 1968 cited in CEH 112).
[3]Although during the active repressive work of PACs women could not be members, in the current "peacetimes" several women who are wives of former PACs as well as others whose husbands were army informants, military commissioners, or soldiers are being recruited to demand state compensation. Many of my interviewees recognized that there may be very real cases of women related to men coerced into PACs that deserve compensation but not at the expense of the majority of women who are direct victims and survivors of state terror.

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THERESA MOORE

A Daughter's Visit

I've brought you pudding
again. Chocolate fudge this
time.
Finding you as I'd left you—
slumped in the blue haze
of a blaring television
and the meagre rays
of a north-facing bread-box
window. Your only
companion
an English Ivy barely
clinging to life.

Your grey stubble cracks
with a crooked grin of
recognition. Revealing
dentures
studded with the remains
of some forgotten meal.
You peer intently through
cloudy lenses as I peel
back the foil, slip a tiny
silver spoon into
sticky sweetness.

As you grip the cup
with long shaky fingers
I fall silent. Not daring to
distract you. To chance
another choking episode.
You scrape and slurp.
I watch and listen.
Are your clothes getting
looser? Is that a new
bruise blooming beneath
your plaid cuff? Do I
detect a faint gurgle—
the protest of lungs against
foreign invasion?
Wondering again what
you would have wanted—
to move to a better, brighter
place or stay in this grim
familiar one that you chose
so long ago. Round and
round you go, circling
the plastic cup, first with
your spoon, then with
your tongue. Until
you're satisfied that
nothing is left.

I pull out some photographs,
tell you the latest tale
of the warring squirrels
at our feeder. Carefully
steering a course that won't
expose your losses. On good
days you might rally with
a whole sentence. Manage
something more than *Holy
Smokes!*
or *Gee Willakers!* Even
remember that I'm not just
a kind-hearted stranger.
But not today.

When I can't think
of another thing to say,
we sit in mute solidarity.
Then, a kiss goodbye
and, just in case, I ask what
you'd like me to bring
next time. Your head
tilts in thought. I wait.
Finally, you fix me with
watery eyes and say *Just
yourself just yourself.*

Theresa Moore won the Scarborough Arts Council's national poetry contest. She uses poetry when teaching nursing and therapeutic touch.