A War of Proper Names: The Politics of Naming, Indigenous Insurrection, and Genocidal Violence During Guatemala's Civil War

Mazariegos, Juan Carlos

During the Guatemalan civil war (1962-1996), different forms of anonymity enabled members of the organizations of the social movement, revolutionary militants, and guerrilla combatants to address the popular classes and rural majorities, against the backdrop of generalized militarization and state repression. Pseudonyms and anonymous collective action, likewise, acquired political centrality for revolutionary politics against a state that sustained and was symbolically co-constituted by forms of proper naming that signify class and racial position, patriarchy, and ethnic difference. Between 1979 and 1981, at the highest peak of mass mobilizations and insurgent military actions, the symbolic constitution of the Guatemalan state was radically challenged and contested. From the perspective of the state’s elites and military high command, that situation was perceived as one of crisis; and between 1981 and 1983, it led to a relatively brief period of massacres against indigenous communities of the central and western highlands, where the guerrillas had been operating since 1973. Despite its long duration, by 1983 the fate of the civil war was sealed with massive violence.

Although others have recognized, albeit marginally, the relevance of the politics of naming during Guatemala’s civil war, few have paid attention to the relationship between the state’s symbolic structure of signification and desire, its historical formation, and the dynamics of anonymous collective action and revolutionary pseudonymity during the war. Even less attention has received the affective and psychic dynamics between proper naming, state violence, and the symbolic formation of the Guatemalan state. This dissertation addresses that relationship and dynamic. Following a historical-anthropological perspective, I argue that, from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s decade, prior to the beginning of the civil war, the Guatemalan state took the form of a finca-state. The Guatemalan finca-state functioned by inscribing, in the form of proper names, lineages and inheritance of colonial and post-colonial origin that came to signify wealth, whiteness, renown, and surplus of pleasure or jouissance, in the form of White-European patronymics, by virtue of which, indigenous proper names were forced to occupy the position of loss. This form of inscription, I argue, produced the foreclosure of the indigenous other. For the indigenous pueblos, nonetheless, state enforced inscription established forms of interpellation that desubjectivized the conditions of their own institutions of proper naming by turning them into mere objects of identification. The politics of pseudonymity and anonymity that proliferated between 1979 and 1981, especially among indigenous people of the Guatemalan highlands, was a refusal of a form of state that excluded the possibility of their recognition beyond identification. In a deep sense, anonymity and pseudonymity enabled revolutionary militants to become truly others, a condition that disorganized previous forms of state identification. In their inability to respond to a sense of crisis under conditions of anonymous collective action and revolutionary pseudonymity, the Guatemalan army responded with massive violence as an attempt at eliminating their sense of threat.

I pay particular attention to the Ixil region, where the UN sponsored Guatemalan truth commission concluded that the Guatemalan army perpetrated acts of genocide against indigenous communities of Ixil descent. This dissertation is based on extensive archival research conducted between the months of October 2014 and May 2015, extensive collective and individual interviews carried out between 2004 and 2007, and ethnographic observation in the Ixil region between May and October of 2015. Its methodology follows the routes of collaborative research, archival reading, and ethnographic participant observation.

Geographic Areas

- Guatemala

Subjects

- Ethnology
- History
- Latin Americans
- Civil War (Guatemala : 1960-1996)
- Ixil Indians
- Genocide
Guatemala’s largely indigenous population say their rights have been violated since the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, dispossessing their communities and driving them into the less fertile highlands. Guatemala gained independence in 1821 and there followed a century of Paraguay Civil War “Febrerista Insurrection”. Repression of indigenous peoples. Egypt Israel Jordan Syria. "Six-Day War" and war of attrition. Ouster of Taliban and continuing civil war. Guatemala’s largely indigenous population say their rights have been violated since the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, dispossessing their communities and driving them into the less fertile highlands. Guatemala gained independence in 1821 and there followed a century of...