

Book Review: On State Violence in Guatemala

Lisa Kowalchuk

Robert M. Carmack (ed.), *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*. London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988. 334 pp.

Harvest of Violence documents the impact of Guatemalan state terror on that country's indigenous peoples during the 1980s. The explicit intention of the book was to dispel the gross misconceptions among U.S. policy makers and voters of the Reagan administration concerning the civil war in Guatemala. Six years after it was published, the book continues to provide an indispensable account of the social, cultural and economic repercussions of genocidal counterinsurgency in Guatemala.

The contributors to *Harvest of Violence*, mostly anthropologists, rightly claim a special credibility based on years and even decades of experience researching and living with the Maya Indians in Guatemala. They reveal a depth of knowledge and trust unattained by foreign journalists or the Guatemalan government and military officials upon whom U.S. policy makers relied for information. The authenticity of their grim accounts comes from the forceful intrusion of state violence into the authors' own lives. They witnessed deaths and disappearances of their indigenous informants and experienced mounting danger to themselves. The escalating violence and repression caught some by surprise. Robert Carmack recalls his sudden realization in the early 1980s "that many, perhaps most, of the... Indians and *ladinos* being killed in Guatemala were innocent." The counterinsurgency campaign was also destroying the material and cultural conditions of many Maya communities indirectly. It was inevitable that the authors' otherwise traditional ethnographic research would become dramatically reoriented and politicized.

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The book is organized according to the levels of violence experienced by indigenous communities—reflecting the Guatemalan army's "colour coding" of the central and western highlands according to the level of suspected guerrilla activity. The book documents the "red zones" of generalized violence, where the military's scorched earth policy wiped out entire communities in the early 1980s; the "pink" and "yellow zones" where violence was applied selectively against Mayan peasants; and the "green zones" of indirect violence. A fourth section deals with the experience of Indians forced to flee their places of origin, displaced both internally and across the border into Chiapas, Mexico.

The contributors to *Harvest of Violence* usually manage to marry an analytical focus with an informal language and largely narrative style that make their essays readily accessible to those outside their discipline. One of the analytically strongest pieces in the collection is Carol Smith's account of the economic and cultural devastation that counterinsurgency has wrought on a Mayan community removed from the worst of the army's direct violence. Smith captures the complexity of the long-standing economic interdependence of the Guatemalan indigenous communities, and the inextricability of their cultural and material vitality. In the community of Totonicapán, Smith demonstrates that the decline in regional demand for traditional clothing, now a dangerous marker of ethnic identity, is destroying a means of indigenous livelihood. The military's system of civil patrols has further sapped the income earning capacity of all adult males, and introduced suspicion and disharmony to a once solidary community.

The introductory and concluding chapters situate the case studies in the broader social, historical and political contexts. Among the misconceptions maintained by the Reagan administration which Carmack and Adams directly confront, was the belief that the indigenous peoples were accidental victims of violence. Their accounts clearly show that the indigenous peoples were deliberate targets of the Guatemalan government's counterinsurgency campaign. Given that the explicit objective *Harvest of Violence* is to promote a change in U.S. policy toward Guatemala, the one shortcoming of the work is its failure to delineate that policy, beyond a few unsystematic allusions. The assumption that even American readers will already be familiar with the history of U.S. military support to Guatemala is not necessarily a safe one. ■

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