

Historical Memory and the Limits of Peace Education:  
Examining Guatemala's 'Memory of Silence'  
and the Politics of Curriculum Design

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Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs  
Fellows Program, History and the Politics of Reconciliation

June 2004

*Let the history we lived  
Be taught in the schools,  
So that it is never forgotten,  
So that our children may know it.*

Testimony given to the Guatemalan  
Commission for Historical Clarification

*Truth is not a matter of exposure of the secret,  
but a revelation that does justice to it.*

Walter Benjamin

## Introduction

Truth Commissions have proliferated over the past decade, amid intense debate over whether they are an essential unveiling of the past, or a weak substitute for justice. We now know a good deal about how such commissions are situated within the particular political configurations and power arrangements of "post-conflict" societies, as well as how the commissions themselves constitute sites of struggle over the construction and narration of "truthful" accounts of violent and painful histories.<sup>1</sup> Less is known, however, about the multifaceted effects of Truth Commission projects over time. This paper seeks to broaden that debate, by examining Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification and the struggles to introduce its report, *Memory of Silence*, into the country's school system.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Tina Rosenberg, "Designer Truth Commissions," *New York Times Magazine*, December 9, 2001 Vol. 151, Issue 519622, p. 66; Pricilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity*, New York/London: Routledge, 2001; Audrey B. Chapman and Patrick Ball, "The Truth of Truth Commissions," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 23, Issue 1, 2—1., pp. 1-45; Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Dorothy Shea, *The South African Truth Commission: The Politics of Reconciliation*, Washington, D.C., The United States Institute for Peace Press, 2000; Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson, *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000; Charles Villa-Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd, *Looking Back, Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2000; Amy Ross, "The Body of the Truth: Truth Commissions in Guatemala and South Africa," Doctoral dissertation, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley, 1999; and Antje Krog and Charlaune Hunter-Gault, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*. New York: Times Books, (1999).

The initial motivation for this research was to begin to form some framework for how we might analyze the social impact of Truth Commissions, using the lens of education. Critics note that the goal of Truth Commission accords is often to put a “final note” to discussions of the past, with the production of a report that would close the books on these efforts. But to what extent can these reports constitute not end points but points of departure? The lens of history education is a useful and important one to begin to examine how Truth Commission reports can help develop new frameworks for public discourse, discussion and analysis. My interest in this issue comes out of my experience as a member of the investigative and writing staff of the Historical Clarification Commission (known by its Spanish acronym, CEH) from 1997-1998.

The CEH was created as part of Guatemala’s multi-year peace process that included a dozen accords and culminated in a cease-fire in 1996. The final peace accord in 1996 put an end to a thirty-four-year war—Latin America’s longest civil conflict—in which an estimated 200,000 people lost their lives.<sup>2</sup> Most of the killing took place from 1981-1983, when the Guatemalan army carried out a counterinsurgency campaign of “scorched earth” that leveled hundreds of villages in the Mayan highlands and provoked the displacement of more than a million people. In February 1999, the CEH presented a twelve-volume report that chronicled the origins, characteristics and consequences of the war, and gave detailed recommendations to promote “peace and national harmony” in Guatemala. The report drew on 8,000 testimonies received by the Commission’s field investigators around the country, as well as a range of historical documents, secondary sources and interviews with key witnesses (*testigos claves*).

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<sup>2</sup> Lawyers and historians collaborating with the CEH debated which terminology to use to describe the conflict, civil war or armed conflict. The term “civil war” connotes a greater acknowledgment of the insurgency as a belligerent force, and appeared more commonly in reference to neighboring El Salvador, where rebels controlled large swaths of territory and counted on a higher degree of international recognition than did the Guatemalan insurgents. In the end, the Guatemalan Commission retained “armed confrontation” (*enfrentamiento armado*), the language used in the accord that created the Commission. In the rest of this paper, I will use simply “war.”

<sup>2</sup> Marcie Mersky, coordinator of the CEH’s final report, “Guatemala: Unanswered Questions on Truth and Transitions,” public presentation at the University of Arizona, Tucson, April 2, 2003.

Although much of the report's analysis covered material that was already publicly available in human rights reports, academic studies and declassified U.S. government documents, a key question was whether this "officializing" of history could open up space for wider public discussion about the recent past. The research that I present here shows that the answer to that question is definitely yes. By officializing history, it's important to state that this doesn't mean necessarily "fixing" a version of that history, but rather, as in this case, it means establishing some parameters within which future discussions can take place. In a context like Guatemala, where in the past speaking out about human rights violations could get you killed, the Truth Commission report makes it much more difficult, if not impossible, to deny certain realities.

At the same time, Truth Commissions have structural limitations: namely, these commissions are likely to disband after completing their report, casting doubt as to how their recommendations can be implemented, or even how (or if) their reports will be distributed. Depending on the nature of the political transitions that give rise to these "truth-telling" projects, the state may or may not take "ownership" of a Truth Commission report. Clearly, then, just as the commissions themselves are sites of political struggle, so, too, will new struggles emerge over how the reports are interpreted and used.

In the case of Guatemala, the CEH's multi-volume report is inaccessible to most people. While the Commission did produce a very good summary that includes the report's conclusions and recommendations, its material still has to be mediated in some way. How is this mediation done? Whose prism is used? Which portions of the report are seized upon by diverse sectors for their own political projects, and which portions are muted? What relationship do the secondary materials produced from the Commission's report (popular and didactic versions, for example)

have to the content of the original? Looking at how these processes are unfolding in Guatemala with reference to school curricula gives a window onto the societal impact of the Truth Commission experience. It also throws into relief important questions about the contested constructions of historical memory, especially how the selective representation of the recent past is related to a contemporary project of political subject formation.

This paper is divided into three parts. After an introduction to the context of the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission, in the second section I present my research findings on how recent history is addressed through the Guatemalan school system. I look both at formal curricula (textbooks and debates over whether and how to include “historical memory” in the national curricular standards) as well as informal methods used by teachers in a range of schools. In this section, I also look at the role of what Elizabeth Jelin<sup>3</sup> calls “memory entrepreneurs,” especially international institutions that are emerging as key brokers in creating “culture of peace” educational projects billed as efforts to disseminate the findings of the Truth Commission. The third section of the paper offers a critique of these peace education initiatives as promoting a particular version of historical memory that reifies the violence, re-packages the conflict in terms more amenable to a contemporary project of “governance,” and expunges a deeper discussion of social and political history.

### Research methods

I used three inroads to develop this analysis. The initial phase of the research included interviews with key people in Guatemala involved in efforts to develop curriculum related to the Truth Commission report. These included: 1) policy-makers within the Ministry of Education;

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory*. Translated by Judy Rein and Marcial Godoy-Anativia. New York, London, and Minneapolis: Social Science Research Council, Latin America Bureau, and the University of Minnesota Press. 2003, p. 33.

2) representatives of international agencies involved in peace education programs (United States Agency for International Development [AID] and UNESCO); 3) Guatemalan human rights organizations involved in curriculum design (the human rights office of the Archdiocese, the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission, and the *Instancia Multi-institucional por la Paz y la Concordancia*, a coalition of civil society groups set up to provide follow-up to the CEH's recommendations); and 4) academic representatives of Convergencia Educativa, a council of research institutions set up to advise the Ministry of Education on curricular reform.

The core of the project involved interviews with teachers at six high schools (two urban schools and four outside the capital).<sup>4</sup> Most students in Guatemala do not make it as far as high school (the average level of schooling is two years in the rural areas and six years in the urban areas).<sup>5</sup> Yet, I chose to focus on high schools because students at this level are able to absorb more complicated material, but are still subject to national curricular standards and programs of “citizenship formation.”

Finally, I reviewed textbooks produced since 1985, when Guatemala began a transition to civilian government after three decades of nearly unbroken military rule. I was able to review

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<sup>4</sup> Two of these case studies were high schools located in regions of the country heavily affected by the war in the early 1980s (the Ixcán and Nebaj regions of El Quiché). In the first of these two areas, the student body is nearly 100% indigenous; in the second area, the student body is mixed Ixil and *ladino*, or non-indigenous. A third school was located in a municipal town center in southern Quiché where the violence of the 1980s was less massive, and the student body there is also mixed in terms of class and ethnicity. A fourth school was an upper-middle class high school in Guatemala City. I also conducted interviews at the military high school in Guatemala City, and at a high school run by the Guatemalan private sector in the Pacific coast plantation zone. At each school I conducted between two and five interviews, beginning with department heads (social sciences or curriculum development) and including several teachers at each institution. I asked about required subjects, the use of textbooks, use of supplementary materials on recent history, choice of curriculum design, relationship with outside institutions (universities, for example, or other high schools), interactions with parents and reactions of students.

<sup>5</sup> Inforpress Centroamericana, “Guatemala: Reforma Educativa con vicios y retrasos,” Guatemala City: Inforpress, January 31, 2003.

twenty-five textbooks produced between 1985 and 2002; these were a combination of elementary and high school textbooks.<sup>6</sup>

The research was conducted during the summer of 2003 at a time when political events seemed to loop back directly into the issues I was researching. In July 2003, Guatemalan courts ruled that retired general Efraín Ríos Montt, head of state during the worst years of rural massacres in the early 1980s, was eligible to run for president in the November 2003 elections. Ríos Montt sparks intense reactions from detractors and supporters alike, and this really shook up the society (at the time Ríos Montt was head of Congress; he later lost the presidential election to Oscar Berger, a candidate from the modernizing wing of the elite). A related event concerned the government's declared intention to pay war reparations and to begin with members of the rural civil defense patrols, a number of which had participated as paramilitary units alongside the army in the 1980s. Although most people saw this as the ruling party's ploy to gain votes in the countryside, it nevertheless re-sharpened a discursive divide between "victims" and "victimizers," as I observed during my travels in El Quiché that summer (even though the civil patrols were obligatory in many areas, and at the height of the war some 900,000 men participated). Finally, the human rights situation in Guatemala had deteriorated markedly since 2000, when Ríos Montt's party (the Guatemala Republican Front, FRG) had won the presidency and control over Congress, with attacks against human rights leaders, researchers and other activists.<sup>7</sup> **power, but you might want to add a note here updating the situation for the**

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<sup>6</sup> I thank Gustavo Palma, a research director at the Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences in Guatemala (AVANCSO), for letting me into his archives to review the textbooks.

<sup>7</sup> See Patrick Ball, Charles R. Hale, Beatriz Manz, June Nash, Elizabeth Oglesby, Amy Ross and Carol Smith, "Democracy as Subterfuge? Researchers Under Siege in Guatemala," *LASA Forum*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Fall), 2002, pp. 6-10, and Rachel Sieder, Megan Thomas, George Vickers and Jack Spence, "Guatemala: Who Governs?" Cambridge, Mass.: Hemispheric Initiatives, 2002.

All of this created an atmosphere in which discussions over how to represent the recent past resonated more loudly, even while it was evident that Guatemala's incomplete transition away from military rule meant that such discussions continued to be politically delicate.

### Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification in Context

The blueprint for Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification was the 1994 Oslo Accord signed between representatives of the government and the rebel group Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). The CEH was a three-person body that included two Guatemalans (one appointed by the government and one by the URNG) and a German international human rights expert, Christian Tomuschat, who led the Commission. The United Nations oversaw the operation of the Commission, although the investigating and writing staff was half foreign and half Guatemalan.

Of all possible formulas for a Truth Commission, Guatemala's was thought to be one of the weakest. The CEH could not subpoena witnesses or records, nor could it name perpetrators. The Commission did not hold public hearings, but kept its testimonies confidential (and locked them away in a vault afterwards). It was preceded by the passage of a blanket amnesty that offered immunity for all but the most serious human rights crimes. Many analysts predicted that such a powerless commission would produce an insipid report that would be shunted aside by a government anxious to close the books on the past.<sup>8</sup> Actually, neither the government nor the URNG wanted a strong accord.<sup>9</sup> The initial time-frame time was established at six months (this

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<sup>8</sup> See Richard Wilson, "Violent Truths: The Politics of Memory in Guatemala," in *Negotiating Rights: The Guatemalan Peace Process*, London: International Review of Peace Initiatives, 1997; Jonathan D. Tepperman, "Truth and Consequences," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2002, pp. 128-153; and United Nations Office of Project Services [UNOPS], n.d. "The Operations of the Historical Clarification Commission in Guatemala: A Systematization of Support Office Experiences," Guatemala City, mimeo.

<sup>9</sup> Amy Ross, op. cit.



was eventually extended); this was thought to ensure that the Commission would be able to write only the most superficial of reports.

Perhaps because of these low expectations, when the CEH presented its final report in February 1999 before a packed audience in Guatemala's National Theater, its forcefulness shocked observers. One of the most important aspects of the CEH report was its finding that military violence against Mayan populations in the 1980s reached the level of genocide, a conclusion with political resonance, since genocide is not covered under Guatemala's amnesty law.

Another important feature of the CEH report was the attention it gave to the historical roots of the armed conflict. This aspect of the report was part of the Commission's mandate, and it was a contentious arena within the CEH, where discussions reflected the broader debates occurring within Guatemalan society over how to interpret the causes of the war.

This is not the space to go into the internal workings of the Commission, but perhaps a few comments are warranted on how the Commission was able to produce a strong report, given the limitations of its mandate. First, the Commission was able to draw on a cadre of people who had worked with the Catholic Church's multi-year human rights project, Recovery of the Historical Memory (REMHI). Second, as Marcie Mersky, the coordinator of the CEH's final report, notes, the Commission was able to turn one of its key weaknesses into a strength. Since the Commission could not "individualize responsibilities," it focused instead on delineating institutional responsibility and detailing the modus operandi of key institutions that had directed the repression, such as army intelligence, an analysis that fed directly into the report's recommendations.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the Guatemalan Truth Commission experience was bound up with broader societal demands and processes that helped push the Commission's mandate to its limits.

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<sup>10</sup> Marcie Mersky, *op. cit.*

There are multiple memory projects in Guatemala today: forensic anthropologists are exhuming mass graves in the highlands, and some of these massacre cases are being presented in genocide trials; and communities and popular organizations have organized memorials of different types. A range of social organizations helped the CEH draw up its long list of recommendations.

Most of my work with the Commission was serving as a liaison between the CEH and a group of Guatemalan scholars known as the “Historical Analysis Group.”<sup>11</sup> As noted above, the inclusion of historical inquiry in the Commission’s mandate was at times contentious during the process of investigating and writing the report. This melding of juridical and historical methods set the CEH apart from prior truth commission projects in Latin America (Argentina in 1984, Chile in 1991, and El Salvador in 1993<sup>12</sup>), and contributed to the strength of the final report. Yet, it was never an easy fit. As the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission noted, there is a key distinction between “forensic truth,” (who did what to whom) and “narrative truth” (why did this happen, what does it mean. Of course, no Truth Commission can (or should) aspire to a unitary narrative “truth;” still, some important methodological guideposts can be identified. In this case, the Guatemalan historians, anthropologists and sociologists working with the CEH wanted to help ensure that, at minimum, the report would help open up debate on the country’s recent history, and not shut it down.

Some of the issues at stake in the historical analysis of the Guatemalan war included whether the war should be seen as primarily a Cold War conflict or whether the internal

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<sup>11</sup> The “Grupo de Análisis Histórico” was created by head commissioner, Christian Tomuschat, who invited all of Guatemala’s universities and major research centers to appoint representatives to the group. At first, this was a mostly symbolic gesture meant to show that the Commission was receptive to input from Guatemalan society, yet it eventually coalesced into a twelve-person, multi-disciplinary group that made recommendations to the Commission and produced documentation and analysis that was used in the writing of the final report. Several members of the group participated directly in the writing of the historical volume of the report.

<sup>12</sup> Greg Grandin, “Chronicles of a Guatemalan Genocide Foretold: Violence, Trauma and the Limits of Historical Inquiry,” *Nepantla: Views from the South*, Volume 1, No. 2, 2000, pp. 391-413.

conditions in the country should be accorded preeminence. The Cold War framework, while obviously important and even determinate at key historical junctures, is also limiting, in that it allows powerful actors to assert that Guatemala was the victim in a global geopolitical struggle, and it makes it easier to elude responsibility for how things unfolded.

A related issue was whether the conflict should be framed as primarily a conflagration between two armed groups (the army and the insurgents), as uneven as that match-up was, or whether the historical analysis needed to be broadened to include other sectors (political parties, elites, social movements, etc.). The first interpretation is known in Latin America as the theory of the “two devils,” or the “two fires,” or simply the “theory of the sandwich,” whereby the bulk of the population is caught rather passively in between.<sup>13</sup> At stake in the debates over how to frame this question is not only that other social actors were involved in the conflict, but also that people have an identity as historical actors beyond their identity as victims of human rights violations. It’s not just that people suffered human rights atrocities, but that they were targeted in the majority of cases because they were members of social organizations, such as peasant leagues, progressive church groups, unions, student groups and so on. The CEH report was very clear on these points:

...the CEH concludes that a full explanation of the Guatemalan confrontation cannot be reduced to the sole logic of the two armed parties. Such an interpretation fails to explain or establish the basis for the persistence and significance of the participation of the political parties and economic forces in the initiation, development and continuation of the violence; nor does it explain the

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<sup>13</sup> See Inés Izaguirre, “Recapturing the Memory of Politics,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Volume 31, No. 6, 1998, p. 8, and José García Noval, “Entre Dos Fuegos: Desde el mundo de los gatos pardos,” in *De la memoria a la reconstrucción histórica*. Guatemala City: Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences (AVANCSO), 1999. In the case of Guatemala, David Stoll expounds this thesis most famously: see *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). See also the responses to Stoll: Charles R. Hale, “Consciousness, Violence and the Politics of Memory in Guatemala,” *Current Anthropology*, Volume 38, Number 5 (December), 1997, pp. 817-837; García Noval, op cit, and Elizabeth Oglesby, “Desde los cuadernos de Myrna Mack: Reflexiones sobre la violencia, la memoria y la investigación social,” in *De la memoria a la reconstrucción histórica*. Guatemala City: Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences (AVANCSO), 1999, as well as many others.

repeated efforts at organization and the continuous mobilization of those sectors of the population struggling to achieve their economic, political and cultural demands.<sup>14</sup>

The historical analysis that the CEH put forward emphasizes multiple causes for the war: structural injustice, racism and the closing of political space, particularly after the overthrow of reformist president Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, and in the early 1960s. The report documents the “increasingly exclusionary and anti-democratic nature” of state institutions from the 1950s to the 1980s, as well as the “reluctance to implement substantive reforms that might have reduced the structural conflicts” (CEH 1999:19, paragraph 12). The report also shows how Cold War policies such as the National Security Doctrine “fell on fertile ground in Guatemala” and “were first expressed as anti-reformist, then anti-democratic policies, culminating in criminal counterinsurgency” (ibid.). As new movements arose to counter the political and structural exclusions, the state’s idea of “internal enemy,” intrinsic to the National Security Doctrine, expanded to include just about every sector that opposed the government or pressed for change. Thus, the CEH concluded that the State countered with a “disproportionately repressive response:”

The inclusion of all opponents under one banner, democrat or otherwise, pacifist or guerrilla, legal or illegal, communist or non-communist, served to justify numerous and serious crimes. Faced with widespread political, social, economic and cultural opposition, the State resorted to military operations directed toward the physical annihilation or absolute intimidation of this opposition...(CEH 1999:22, paragraph 25).

By focusing on the diverse movements for social change that arose in Guatemala from the 1960s through the 1990s, the CEH is painting the conflict in broad yet grounded terms, trying to avoid

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<sup>14</sup> *Guatemala: Memory of Silence: Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, Conclusions and Recommendations*, p. 21, paragraph 23. The entire CEH report is available on-line at [www.hrddata.aas.org](http://www.hrddata.aas.org). Subsequent references to CEH will be in-text citations.

both the sterile “two devils” thesis, and the equally useless slippery slope of “we were all responsible.”

How was this twelve-volume indictment received by Guatemalan society? Grandin has an overview of responses printed in the press in the immediate wake of the report’s presentation<sup>15</sup>, and the United Nations conducted a survey of perceptions of the report shortly afterward.<sup>16</sup> The army as an institution did not respond to the Commission’s report, although several retired military officers expressed the opinion that the report was biased and reflected simply the “perspective of the Commission.” Some members of the elite expressed similar sentiments, and the ruling on genocide struck a raw nerve.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, popular organizations felt vindicated by the report’s conclusions. The numbers were important (93% of the violations the Commission tabulated were attributed to state forces), but more than that, to the extent that the report’s existence became known in communities, it helped people see that what they had faced in their locality was part of a larger phenomenon.

The Guatemala Truth Commission formally dissolved the day it presented its final report to the public. Although the CEH called on the state to establish a commission to oversee implementation of its recommendations, after several years this had still not materialized. The state never took “ownership” of the report; indeed, a few months after the report’s publication, Rios Montt’s party swept to victory in presidential and congressional elections. Looking at things from this angle, it is easy to assume the Guatemala Truth Commission had little social impact.

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<sup>15</sup> Grandin, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> UNOPS, op. cit., pp. 11-24.

<sup>17</sup> The ruling on genocide was complicated, in that it brought to the fore the inherent tensions between a strictly juridical perspective and an historical one. Did the army kill Mayans because they were Mayans, or because they were organizing against the state? Based on a careful reading of cases, the report concluded that in *some* regions in particular periods, the violence had characteristics of genocide. Key here is the separation of motive and intent: the Guatemalan state intended to kill Mayans because it conflated these populations as part of the “internal enemy,” even though the ultimate motivation was to defeat the insurgency (see Grandin, op. cit. ). The section of the CEH report that details the genocide argument is Volume III, pp. 249-423.

Yet, I would argue that we don't have a clear sense of the impact of the Truth Commission experience because we are still learning what questions to ask to discern this.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Guatemala, analyzing the impact of the Truth Commission really means looking at the impact of the report, since the CEH did not hold public hearings, or have any kind of real public process. What does seem clear is that many social organizations have taken up the report's recommendations as their own. In addition, although the report cannot be used as judicial evidence, it has been used as *contextual* background in judicial trials, such as the 2002 Myrna Mack murder trial. These are just two examples of social spaces where the CEH report has had some resonance. Another important example is school curriculum, as the next section details.

One of Commission's recommendations specifically calls upon the state to develop curricular projects on "historical memory." Although no state-led project has emerged, when I conducted this research in 2003, a number of groups were beginning to think about and act on this recommendation. It seemed as though the publication of the CEH report, which carried the imprimatur of the U.N. and the "official" peace process, had created space for teachers and schools to consider treating topics that a few years ago would have been taboo (this "opening of space" was already evident with the peace process itself, and the publication of the Catholic Church's multi-volume report, *Guatemala: Nunca Más [Never Again]*).

At the same time, the actual use of the CEH report was minimal, in part because of the lack of curricular materials and guidelines, and in part because the notions of "historical memory" in various follow-up projects were conflated to mean simply the grim profile of the violence, as the following section of this paper describes. In the recent textbooks and in material produced by both human rights groups and international institutions, the inclusion of material on

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<sup>18</sup> I have benefited from many conversations with Marcie Mersky on this topic.

the war is a brief prelude to a much longer elaboration of other topics related to civic education and citizen formation.

### Teaching About the Recent Past in Post-War Guatemala

The Guatemalan peace accords were supposed to improve the country's dismal educational system by raising government spending on education and mandating curricular reform to treat issues of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.<sup>19</sup> The increased investment in education has not materialized, and Guatemala continues to have the lowest ratio of state spending on education of any Central American country.<sup>20</sup> Half of the school age children in Guatemala do not attend school. The Educational Reform progressed as far as primary school, with new standards that mandate multiculturalism in these grades. As Foster notes, however, while the new standards were supposed to correct traditional depictions of indigenous cultures as relics of history (with lists of Mayan figures from the pre-Conquest period, for example), the new texts have gone far in the opposite direction and have washed out history almost entirely, in favor of "social studies."<sup>21</sup> This is true for high school texts, as well.

According to Gustavo Palma, a leading scholar of the Guatemalan educational system, the state is committed to public education only at the primary level. Roughly 80% of Guatemala's elementary schools are public, while only about one-third of high schools are.<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>19</sup> Gustavo Palma and Ajejandro Flores (eds.), *Los Contenidos de los Cursos de Estudios Sociales en el Contexto de la Reforma Educativa: Aportes para el Debate*. Guatemala City: Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences (AVANCSO) and National Council for Mayan Education (CNEM), 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Inforpress Centroamericana, op.cit., p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Kristel Foster, "A Tug of Post-War: History Education and the Politics of Reconciliation in Guatemala," M.A. thesis in Latin American Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Gustavo Palma, research director at the Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences, interview, Guatemala City, August 1, 2003. According to Palma, the historic lack of attention to investment in education was rooted in the economic structure of the country, whereby rural labor was needed for the plantation economy (and thus there was not much need to educate the labor force). Now, with economic modernization, a functionally literate workforce is needed; hence, the attention to primary education only. It's a functionalist analysis, but quite credible.

private high schools must follow the national standards set out by the Ministry of Education, however.

There is no national project to address the teaching of “historical memory.” In some ways, of course, one could argue against the need for a national project. A state-approved textbook would likely emerge out of such levels of political compromise that it probably wouldn’t be much improvement over what already exists. On the other hand, the obstacles to teaching about the recent past are formidable (lack of resources and guidelines, conservatism toward adopting new subjects, apprehension about the possible reaction of parents or other community members), and if national guidelines were set, it could be easier for teachers to introduce these sensitive topics into their program of study. Even if the national standards simply required a more rigorous examination of Guatemalan history, this would be an improvement over allowing history to be subsumed by social studies.

The development of national standards for teaching about historical memory had become an arena of struggle by the time I began this research, as consultants working within the Ministry of Education had attempted various proposals to teach the CEH report. In 2002, a textbook and a teacher development guide based on the CEH report were produced under the auspices of the Ministry; the text was called “Social-Historical Context of Guatemala and Educational Reality,” and it followed fairly closely the topics of the CEH report. It included an introduction called “Why Are We the Way We Are?” followed by a section on the multiple forms of exclusion that underlay the conflict, a section on racism called “Mayans as Enemies of the State,” and a section drawing on cases documented by the CEH. Thousands of copies were printed, but a sector of the Guatemalan Congress reacted vehemently against the books, and they were recalled.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Education consultant, Guatemala City, August 4, 2003. Similarly, in 2002 the United Nations Development Program produced a popular version of its annual *Human Development Report* on Guatemala,



Several human rights groups have attempted without much success to develop proposals to the Ministry of Education to mandate “historical memory” as part of the national curricular standards. One Ministry of Education plan did gain currency, however. Called “Citizenship Formation in the National Curricula” and funded by UNESCO’s Culture of Peace Project (see below), the approved plan recommends that children study the conditions that led to political polarization in the past, and the “insurgent and counterinsurgent actions,” along with the peace process, multiculturalism and the dangers of drugs and alcohol.<sup>24</sup> At the time I carried out this research, the human rights groups I interviewed were drawing up curricular proposals and organizing workshops with teachers, based on both the CEH and REMHI reports, but were waiting for a new (post-Rios Montt) government to take office before re-approaching the Ministry of Education.

### *Textbooks before and after the peace accords*

Most teachers choose from about half a dozen common textbooks produced by private editorial houses in Guatemala City.<sup>25</sup> Textbooks prior to 1986, the year the country initiated a transition to civilian rule, had no mention of recent history at all. Textbooks produced after 1986 but before the culmination of the peace process offered a chronology of the military dictatorships of the early 1980s, but did not discuss the armed conflict. Prior to the 1996 signing of the peace accords, none of the widely used textbooks mentioned the conflict, although some schools began to teach about the war even before the peace accords, especially after Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchú won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. But teachers were on their own for curriculum

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designed for use in the classroom. The private sector raised a hue and cry, however, about the report’s inclusion of land tenure data, and after an initial printing the report was discontinued.

<sup>24</sup> Raúl Zepeda, “Formulación de Propuesta del Area de Formación Ciudadana para la Transformación Curricular,” Guatemala City: Ministry of Education and UNESCO, mimeo (October), 2002.

<sup>25</sup> According to Gustavo Palma, the most common social sciences [?] textbooks are *Protagonistas* and *Estudios Sociales*, and the editorial houses are Santillana and Grupo Editorial Norma Guatemala. Palma interview, op cit.

development; there was no effort on the part of the Ministry of Education or any other organized sector to provide material.

Since the peace accords, all of the leading textbooks address the conflict to some degree. There is not much difference between elementary school textbooks and high school textbooks in terms of the topics presented to students, although a high school book will include units on international themes. Again, an important point is that with the exception of some of the very good private schools, Guatemalan students do not study history, even in high school. They have social studies, with texts that present a formulaic list of topics that varies little from one grade to the next. For example, the common high school textbooks will introduce post-colonial Guatemalan history with a few pages on nineteenth and early twentieth century military governments, continuing with a paragraph on the post-WWII reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz and a paragraph on the Cold War and the rise of the early guerrilla movements in the 1960s. Invariably, the texts then drop the historical narrative and continue with thematic entries, usually about one or two pages in length, such as “peace accords,” “culture of peace,” “human rights,” and the “rights of children.” There is some variation from text to text, for example, some texts are more sympathetic to Arbenz, but the list of human rights themes that follows the brief historical timeline is nearly identical in all the texts. The most recent textbooks include references to the report of the Truth Commission, although the references are brief and limited to the basic data of how many deaths and disappearances the CEH tabulated. Some textbooks include more visual elaboration, such as an image of Guatemalan refugees or a photo of Rigoberta Menchú.

### *Schools and the “agency” of teachers*

As more material about the recent past hits the public consciousness, some teachers are motivated to develop alternative, autonomous curricular projects. Students in Santa Maria Tzejá, a returned refugee community in the northern part of the country, read supplementary materials about local history. Some teachers ask their students to write poems or conduct an interview with a relative or someone in the community who lived through the years of repression. In one upper middle-class school in Guatemala City, teachers developed an integrated lesson plan, whereby students read about the conflict in social studies, and in their Spanish classes they read testimonial literature such as the memoir of Rigoberta Menchú and poetry from the 1960s and 1970s.

There are more curricular initiatives going on than one might expect, given the obstacles. In the capital, there is a strong network of private high schools, mainly Catholic, which organize debates regularly on human rights topics ; these attract students from many different schools, including the military high school. Universities provide resources, such as video libraries,<sup>26</sup> and popular organizations sometimes participate with the schools in these activities. Videos, novels and theater productions that treat the violence also circulate throughout other parts of the country. Since there are no guidelines for teachers, it is the exception rather than the rule that high school teachers (especially in the rural areas) deal with topics not presented in the textbooks. Still, there are lots of exceptions.

Of course, the individual teacher or school that assumes this sort of initiative takes on a certain risk. In the rural areas, teachers might face students from communities that were at odds with each other during the war. Juana, a teacher in Santa Maria Tzejá, described dealing with

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<sup>26</sup> Guatemala has two masters-level programs related to political violence: a program in political violence and mental health at the national University of San Carlos, and a program in human rights at the Jesuit-run Landivar University.

parents from a neighboring village who complained about students reading books detailing the massacres that had occurred in the area: “But after a couple of years, they calmed down about it,” she said. International support helped the Santa Maria Tzejá school develop a groundbreaking project commemorating the experience of the early 1980s: students there produced a play and later a video, called *There is Nothing Hidden That Will Not Be Revealed*, about the 1982 massacre in their community and the villagers’ flight into Mexico. The play continues to be produced by successive generations of high school students in Santa Maria Tzejá, who tour the country performing in schools and municipal salons.

Teachers at other schools have also found ways to respond to parents uneasy about their children studying topics related to the war. In the upper-middle class high school cited above, a teacher told me how the school deals with having students from military families:

Maybe their grandparents were protagonists, and the mothers would come in and say, “I don’t want my kid reading that, my father was Minister of Defense during that time.” But the school administration didn’t back down; they gave us the freedom to introduce what we wanted. We tried not to individualize the history; we tried to separate history from the person of the grandpa, to look at the army as an institution and how it responded in certain historical periods. We also told the family members they could come in and present an alternative viewpoint. No one did, but having the option seemed to satisfy them.

Teachers recounted that sometimes students will ask why they are learning about the war, but said that in general there was significant interest. Often, students’ interest stems from incredulousness, since, while some may have heard stories at home, many others have not. In southern El Quiché, when I attended a photo exhibit about the exhumations set up by a team of forensic anthropologists, one of the organizers told me that several teachers had come in with their students:

The kids were asking all sorts of questions, like how do the forensic anthropologists know how many bodies are in a pit, and what happened during the war. Many of them don't know anything about this. Maybe their parents have talked about it, but they can't believe it was real; they think it's like something that happened in a movie, somewhere else.<sup>27</sup>

The forensic anthropologists I interviewed (from the Equipo de Antropología Forense de Guatemala) explained that although they don't have a formal program of outreach to students, at times they have to conduct exhumations near schools in the rural areas (the army often occupied these buildings during the war). In those cases, they have a psychologist on hand to work with the kids. In addition, especially in the capital, teachers often assign the forensic team's publications as supplementary reading material (for example, *Las masacres en Rabinal*, 1997), and invite the group to give presentations to classes.

#### *The Adolfo Hall Civic-Military Institute*

The Adolfo Hall military high school in Guatemala City reveals both the recent openings for the educational system to treat topics related to the war, and the limits of these processes. Located adjacent to the air force base in Guatemala City, with canons flanking the entrance, and camouflaged cadets inside, the forty-five-year-old institute looks like the setting for a Mario Vargas Llosa novel. I was able to spend half a day there, talking with the vice director (a colonel), the head of academic programs (a captain, and a woman), several teachers and a group of cadets. The school serves mostly middle and lower middle class students (co-ed in the last few years), and a shrinking percentage of these kids go on to join the military (the army is not considered as attractive a vehicle for upward mobility as it once was). As a "civic-military" institute, the school has to follow the curricular standards set out by the Ministry of Education.

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<sup>27</sup> Interviewed in southern El Quiché, July 19, 2003.

The curriculum at Adolfo Hall is more liberal now than it was before the peace accords. Teachers have wide discretion to choose their texts, and they use books that are common in other public and private high schools. Although the cadets are exposed to human rights material at every grade level, they do not read the CEH report. The academic director explained:

We're not ready for that. A few years ago, we couldn't talk at all about the war or the peace process. It's a gradual change. Now we talk a lot about the origins of human rights, the Geneva Conventions and their Protocols, the peace accords in Guatemala. We deal with topics from the perspective of the peace accords (*desde los acuerdos de paz se tocan los temas*).<sup>28</sup>

The army major in charge of mandatory afternoon military classes at the institute (*iniciación militar*) insisted the lack of attention to the pre-peace accord history was because “there isn't any documentation of the war, there isn't a book about the war.”

Well, there is the Church's book [the Catholic Church's 1998 multi-volume report], but that is biased (*parcializado*). The Clarification Commission's report is biased, too. [The CEH report] isn't in the curriculum standards of the Ministry of Education, so we're not reading it. Maybe if there were more books from the right as well as the left to give a balanced view, maybe it would be a good idea to include this, but not now. We need a commission to evaluate this.

When the origins of the conflict *are* addressed, this is within the context of the afternoon military classes, and the discussion is inevitably framed as a Cold War struggle in which the left put itself on the side of attacking democracy, and the army on the side of saving it.

I was introduced to half a dozen cadets of different ages, who astonished me with their command of the Geneva Conventions and all the major international human rights declarations and conventions. They knew the twists and turns of Guatemala's peace process and the content

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<sup>28</sup> Interviewed in Guatemala City, July 24, 2003.

of the various peace accords, except the one that created the CEH. One sixteen-year-old, a distinguished student with plans to go on to medical school, told me he believes it's important to learn about the past because "in Guatemala, there is still a lot of fear, and it's important to know how the country got that way." Some of the cadets had just returned from a city-wide high school debate on the concept of preemptive war, and according to this young man, other participants questioned the Adolfo Hall students aggressively: "They asked us, why was the army genocidal? And we reacted like, well, you can't blame us for the past, we're not responsible. And then we said, well, the army did what it did to defeat the insurgents. People get killed in wars; that's why wars are bad." He reiterated his belief in the importance of knowing the truth: "For example, a lot of people accuse Rios Montt of genocide, but there isn't any proof." I asked him if he had seen or heard of the CEH report, and he said he had not, although he knew about all the other peace accords.

#### *USAID and dissemination of the CEH report*

As part of its human rights and reconciliation program, AID created a multi-million dollar peace fund in Guatemala, channeling a large amount of aid to human rights groups around the country.<sup>29</sup> At times, the influx of AID money into the countryside produces a sharp irony that even the AID administrators joke about: every AID-funded project has to display the agency's

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<sup>29</sup> Examples of these AID-funded activities include an organization of formerly displaced refugees in Nebaj, and a traveling photo exhibit of exhumations sponsored by one of Guatemala's forensic anthropology groups. In other parts of the country, AID funds a Mayan organization that sponsors mental health programs for communities affected by the war, with programs directed specifically at young people. All of these are terribly important programs. The issue of whether to accept funding from AID has been hotly debated by Guatemalan popular organizations. In some ways, this financing reflects the increasing dependence of popular organizations on international donors, and a sort of "governance through NGOs" (see, for example, Hale, *op. cit.*). In other ways, it reflects a deepening sophistication on the part of these organizations as they gain experience negotiating with state and international institutions. This program is implemented in Guatemala by a subcontractor, Creative Associates International. CAI has done a lot of work with civil society groups, and in 1998 helped fund a forum for social organizations to make suggestions to the Truth Commission on the content of the report's recommendations.

traditional logo (two clasped hands under a stars and stripes pattern), an image associated in many Guatemalans' minds with the sacks of U.S. food aid that went to the army-run 'model villages' (strategic hamlets) during the 1980s: in other words, from the same folks who helped deliver counterinsurgency...now we have human rights and peace projects!

One of this program's largest new initiatives is a project to disseminate the CEH report. This includes running television ads in Guatemala City and the production, in 2002, of a *radionovela* (radio soap opera) broadcast in five regions of the country that were severely afflicted by the war. The television ads show a blindfolded man crossing a city street, as a voice-over pronounces, "we are all blind unless we know the truth."<sup>30</sup> AID designed the TV ad to demonstrate to an audience in the capital that it wasn't just poor, rural Indians who were killed, but urban professionals as well (professors, politicians, lawyers, students, etc.). "We want to reach those who aren't already convinced, to encourage them to pick up and read the report," AID's program director told me.<sup>31</sup>

The *radionovela* is a thirty-one-chapter saga aimed at young people in the countryside. It takes place in the fictional community of "El Trapiche," and revolves around the story of an adolescent named Pablo. Pablo's father disappeared during the violence, and his mother is seeking an exhumation of a nearby "clandestine cemetery" to locate the body. The introductory segment notes that the residents of El Trapiche are highland peasants who used to plant sugar cane (*trapiche* means sugar press) but now plant "non-traditional" export crops such as broccoli (just the sort of rural economic transformation AID has been promoting since the 1980s). As the story develops, Pablo and his friends receive lessons on various topics, such as the history of

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<sup>30</sup> This ad was in the final production stage when I was in Guatemala in summer 2003. AID was looking for national organizations to co-sponsor the campaign, but some groups declined, fearing the ad could be interpreted as an effort to sway the upcoming presidential election against Rios Montt.

<sup>31</sup> Guatemala City, July 23, 2003.



human rights, the rights of children, conflict resolution, tolerance and multiculturalism, the problem of lynchings, the Guatemalan peace process, the role of the army in a democracy, and the social importance of exhumations. When the *radionovela* hit the airwaves in early 2003, AID says it reached 25% of the population in the five target departments. During the months of the broadcast, the program director told me, the office received letters from people in various parts of the country moved by the saga's content, who wrote: "This really happened; it's not fiction."

Although the *radionovela* delves into the consequences of the war as experienced by the child protagonist's family, there is very little historical content in these broadcasts. The initial radio broadcast had no historical component; later, in response to comments, AID produced a segment that includes a brief mention of the structural causes of the war. The textbook that AID produced as part of this revision to add historical content contains 100 pages, of which ten pages discuss structural issues such as inequitable land tenure, a history of authoritarian governments, and racism. Another three pages discuss the reformist governments of Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz in the 1940s and 1950s, and one page describes the rise of the first guerrilla movements in the early 1960s. The bottom of this page has a drawing of a soldier torturing a victim and next to it a guerilla fighter torturing another victim; the only difference is that the guerrilla fighter has a beard and wears a beret. The text declares that the population was "caught between two armies," although it acknowledges the "army committed more violations." The text then passes right away to: rights of children, violence within the family, international human rights, the peace agreements in Guatemala and the need to promote a culture of peace. AID supervisors in Washington took out any mention of U.S. involvement in overthrowing the government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, which the CEH report had pointed to as a watershed

event for political violence in the country. There are plans to reproduce several thousand copies of this text and to organize workshops with teachers.

AID's materials are about "introducing the concept of rights into the countryside," the human rights and reconciliation program director explained. "AID is looking to foster a more peaceful, responsive democracy; they are not interested in accountability for past crimes."<sup>32</sup> The program's director is a North American who came to Guatemala from Bosnia. He is both enthused and cynical about the peace curricula formula, believing the AID administrators in Washington are attempting to instrumentalize these programs: "Before, aid was used to defeat communism; now the thrust is to promote a "culture of peace" to lay the groundwork for free trade in the region."<sup>33</sup> As a new project to win hearts and minds (or "hearts and Mayans"), a new framework for governance put forth by powerful political actors, what are the implications of the "culture of peace" discourse for constructions of historical memory?

### Historical Memory and the Limits of Peace Education

Since history is basically washed out of the school texts in favor of civics, recent events are framed in two ways: as an exposé of brutality or as the triumph of democracy. Indeed, the first framing is the hook that moves us along to the second. This is akin to what Todorov<sup>34</sup> cited called "exemplary memory," or using the past as a guide for action in the present and future, in this case, the creation of new subjectivities consistent with the goal of internalizing and institutionalizing limited notions of democracy through culture of peace curricula.

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<sup>32</sup> Guatemala City, July 23, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Guatemala City, July 23, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Les abus de la mémoire*. Paris: Arléa, 1998, cited in Jelin, *State Repression and the Struggle for Memory*, 2003, op. cit., p. 35.

“Culture of peace” is everywhere in Guatemala, from little supplements for children in the newspapers, to school textbooks, to the language of funding proposals by civil society groups, to the website of one of the key private sector development foundations. As an AID administrator described to me, the rights discourse and culture of peace lexicon has displaced “reconciliation” as the buzzword for new projects: “Even though we call our effort the human rights and reconciliation program, we did a survey and found out that “reconciliation” had become a controversial term.”<sup>35</sup> “Culture of peace,” on the other hand, seems to have general appeal.

UNESCO launched this phrase when it declared 2000 to be the “Year of Culture of Peace” (now this has been stretched to a whole decade).<sup>36</sup> In Guatemala, UNESCO’s culture of peace project is working to bring this framework into the educational system and vis-à-vis civil society more broadly. The project produced booklets on various inter-related topics: culture of peace; democracy and citizen participation; inter-culturalism; conflict resolution; peace accords; and human rights and the rule of law. These booklets are just the right size to be inserted as a two or three-page unit in school textbooks. Sprinkled throughout are references to the CEH report and to the “culture of violence” that led Guatemalans to commit “terrible and painful acts” during the war and which continues to plague the country.

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<sup>35</sup> Interviewed in Guatemala City, July 23, 2003. See Hans Petter Buvollen, “National Reconciliation and Civil Society in Guatemala,” presented at the international conference “Guatemala: Five Years After the Peace Accords,” Oslo, December 4-5, 2001., for the arguments about the use of the word reconciliation in Guatemala (this piece draws heavily from Marcie Mersky, “History as an Instrument of Social Reparation: Reflections on an Experience in Guatemala,” *The Ignacio Martín Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights*, Volume V, No. 1 (Spring), 2000, pp. 1-4. Adapted from a paper presented at the XXI annual meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Guadalajara, Mexico, April 19, 1997, 2000.) A common critique in Latin America is that “reconciliation” has been linked closely with Church-infused ideas of pardon (see, for example, Anonymous, “La utopia cristiana de la reconciliación,” *Estudios Centroamericanos*, 51, 1996 pp. 567-568; Elizabeth Lira and Brian Loveman, “Reconciliación chilena: entre el pragmatismo y la condena,” *Mensaje*, 48 (Aug.), 1999, pp. 41-45). In Guatemala, some Mayan groups protested the use of “reconciliation,” saying the conflict in Guatemalan society was not a matter of the last forty years, but of the past 500; in other words, Guatemalan society has never had “conciliation” so it is difficult to talk about re-conciliation (Buvollen, op cit., p.7).

<sup>36</sup> See [www.ibe.unesco.org](http://www.ibe.unesco.org) for information on other countries where UNESCO has sponsored curricular reform in conflict societies.

One of the core problems with the culture of peace curricula framework is that it gives the impression that the cause of the conflict in Guatemala was this “culture of violence,” a tautological interpretation that obscures more than it illuminates. For example, a sixth grade textbook from 2001 gives this explanation of why the “culture of peace” should be practiced in Guatemala: “to avoid the violence that our society suffers. This violence occurred because during thirty-six years of civil war many people practiced a culture of violence.”<sup>37</sup> While it might be argued that contemporary Guatemala has a violent culture, to posit this as the cause of the conflict ignores central issues such as how and why the armed movement began and how repressive practices evolved.

A second problem relates not to the teaching of rights per se, but to the narrowing of possibilities for what else can be talked about. You can talk about the war now in Guatemala, but you can’t talk about the specific conflicts that caused the war. The culture of peace materials frame the conflict as either limited to two opposing armed groups or as so broad so as to be meaningless (“the culture of violence is responsible”). This redefines the conflict in ways that preclude discussion of the broad social forces aligned on both sides, the deep social and political cleavages, and the diverse forms of social mobilization that the “two fires” paradigm cannot capture. As Izaguirre<sup>38</sup> argues, the question we should be asking when we look at the politics of memory in Latin America is: what happened to the memory of politics?

Hale shows how neoliberal modes of governance in Guatemala have opened new political space in terms of a discourse of rights that in previous moments would have seemed out of reach. Yet, he argues, “these initiatives also come with clearly articulated limits, attempts to distinguish

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<sup>37</sup> Santillana, 2001, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> Op. cit.

those rights that are acceptable from those that are not.”<sup>39</sup> As part of this “cultural project” of neoliberalism,<sup>40</sup> the culture of peace framework is very powerful in that it not only helps instill a highly individualized doctrine of rights, it also draws explicit and implicit boundaries (by eradicating traces of collective or class mobilization, for example) for what is acceptable in the current context. What is also important here is the way in which multiple institutions, including human rights groups, participate in this effort at political subject formation built around abridged notions of historical memory.

Part of the problem lies in the way in which the whole concept of historical memory has been framed in Latin America. As Argentine sociologist Elizabeth Jelin writes, the concept of historical memory in Latin America has a particular genealogy linked to the rise of human rights movements that confronted authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and into the 1990s. Conjoining the terms “history” and “memory” may seem anathema to historians, but in Latin America, the term means a certain privileging of direct testimony by victims of human rights violations.<sup>41</sup> In the 1980s, the language of human rights helped create political “space” for these victims’ movements to emerge. Yet the positing of human rights language as a framework for

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<sup>39</sup> Charles R. Hale, “Does Multicultural Governance Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 34, 2002, pp. 485-524, p. 490.

<sup>40</sup> For other examples in Latin America, see, Julia Paley, *Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-Dictatorship Chile*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; Florence E. Babb, *After Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neoliberal Nicaragua*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001; Arturo Escobar, Sonia Alvarez and Evelina Dagnino, *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998; Robert Gwynne and Cristóbal Kay (eds.), *Latin America Transformed: Globalization and Modernity*. London: Arnold, 1999; and Lynn Phillips, (ed.), *The Third Wave of Modernization in Latin America: Cultural Perspectives on Neoliberalism*. Wilmington, DE.: Scholarly Resources, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> Jelin, 2003, op. cit.; Mauricio Gaborit, Mauricio, “Memoria histórica: relato desde las víctimas,” *Estudios Centroamericanos*, 57 (November-December), 2002, pp. 1021-1032; Dora Schwarzstein, “Memoria e historia,” *Desarrollo Económico* (Argentina), 42:167 (October–December), 2002, pp. 471-482; María Sonderéreguer, “El debate sobre el pasado reciente en Argentina: entre la voluntad de recordad y la voluntad de olvidar,” *Hispanamérica*, 29:87 (December), 2000, pp. 3-15; Leigh Binford, *The Massacre at El Mozote: Anthropology and Human Rights*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996.

understanding history is deeply problematic. Jelin writes: “For the interpretive framework of human rights violations, the polarity is between human rights violators on one side and victims on the other.” In this discourse, a victim is depicted as a “passive being, harmed by the actions of others. The victim is never an active agent.”<sup>42</sup>

These notions of historical memory infrequently take into account broader histories of life that can give a fuller sense of identity to victims, but instead are reduced to what I call “histories of death” (*relatos de la muerte*,<sup>43</sup>) or what Jelin called the “ritualized repetition of the traumatic and sinister story.”<sup>44</sup> For example, the cover of a 2003 educational project proposal to the Guatemalan Ministry of Education shows a skeletal hand reaching up, under the caption: “Historical Memory in the National Curriculum.”

Historical memory in Latin America also privileges testimony because of the perceived psychological benefit to victims of telling their story.<sup>45</sup> One of the obvious pitfalls of relying on testimony to reconstruct history, however, is that testimonies are highly subjective constructs. People are often reticent to talk about militancy or social activism, for instance. In Guatemala, as elsewhere in Latin America, social organizing was stigmatized through years of repression and the manipulation of language (even unarmed activists were often called “subversives”), producing both fear and “clandestine habits.”<sup>46</sup> The failure of the revolutionary movements

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<sup>42</sup> Jelin, 2003, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> Oglesby, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Jelin, 1994. “The Politics of Memory: The Human Rights Movement and the Construction of Democracy in Argentina,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 81, Volume 21, No. 2 (Spring), 1994, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Gaborit, op. cit; Mersky, 2000; Carlol Martín Beristain, *Reconstruir el tejido social*. Barcelona: Icaria, 1999; Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado (ODHA), *Guatemala: Nunca Más*. Report of the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI). Guatemala City, 1998; Igancio Martín Baró, *Psicología social de la Guerra: trauma y terapia*, San Salvador: UCA, 1990.

<sup>46</sup> Carlota McAllister, “Asking too Much: Anthropological Manners and Clandestine Habits,” paper presented at the workshop ‘Revisiting Guatemala’s Harvest of Violence,’ Duke University, March 26-27, 2004; Wilkinson, op.cit.; Mersky, [which 2000?]; Oglesby, op.cit; García Noval, op. cit; Beatriz Manz, “La importancia del contexto en la memoria,” in *De la memoria a la reconstrucción histórica*. Guatemala City: Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences (AVANCSO), 1999; Linda Green, *Fear As a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala*. New

produced yet another layer of distress: given the psychological complexity of memory construction, it can be difficult for people to talk about their decisions or indecisions in a given moment that may have had serious consequences. The effort to justify what one did or did not do in a situation of crisis can lead to a constant reinterpretation of memory. This critique does not mean that there is a “silent majority” of revolutionaries out there waiting for a chance to speak out, only that we need other categories more fluid than “victim” to talk about this history.

In Guatemala, the uncritical equation of historical memory with histories of violence carries the danger of perpetrating racist stereotypes about the past, for example, that Mayan Indians were passive victims of violence, caught between two armies, or manipulated by outsiders. This is a powerful trope that persists to this day in Guatemala. For example, in July 2003, following riotous demonstrations in support of Rios Montt in Guatemala City, in which the ruling party bused in supporters from the countryside, a television anchorman asked Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú her opinion on why Guatemala’s Indians were always so prone to manipulation. In part this trope is born of a legacy of racism in the country, but it is also reproduced by notions of historical memory that collapse and erase any sense of the history of collective politics. As McAllister argues, it is impossible to think about national integration in Guatemala until this history is acknowledged, that is, until Mayans are fully recognized as historical protagonists, along with other social sectors.<sup>47</sup>

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York: Columbia University Press, 1999; Hale, “Consciousness, Violence and the Politics of Memory in Guatemala,” 1997, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Carlota McAllister, *Good People: Revolution, Community and conciencia in a Maya-K'iche' Village in Guatemala*, Ph.D thesis in Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, 2003.

## Final Considerations

Truth commissions can serve an important function by “officializing” a history of violent conflict and human rights violations. This does not mean fixing an unassailable historical narrative, but rather, providing a benchmark and framework out of which further discussion can take place. We don’t really know yet how important a truth commission can be to a society, as this will need to be measured over time. Yet it is important to begin to develop frameworks for how to ask this question.

In the case of Guatemala, the CEH report has helped open up social “space” for discussion of the recent past. Although relatively few people read the multiple volumes of the CEH report, key parts of the report, such as the basic contours of the violence and the important recommendations, impacted the public consciousness through a variety of mechanisms (press coverage, forums, educational initiatives) and became crucial touchstones for many different social organizations. The publication of both the CEH report and the Catholic Church’s four-volume report, *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, generated interest on the part of many teachers and schools to include material on the recent past in their program of study.

Of course, the underlying reality of truth commissions is that these projects are born of political discord and treat material that is highly sensitive. This creates new arenas of struggle over how the reports will be mediated and used, and, as in this case, over whose interpretation of the report will be taught in schools. A lesson for future truth commissions is that these commissions should produce their own didactic guidelines. This won’t make the conflicts disappear, but it could help dissemination efforts remain truer to the content of the original reports. In the case of the CEH, educational efforts would have fallen outside of the mandate; nevertheless, the Commission could have produced a guide.



The current struggles around the Truth Commission report in Guatemala are about how to insert minimal information about the war into the school curricula. Yet, this “common denominator” vision of historical memory emphasizes that the war produced victims, but does not elucidate that in the majority of cases these victims of human rights violations also had identities as social and political actors, as members of organizations (some revolutionary, some not) involved in projects of social change. International agencies did not create this tension around historical memory, but under the banner of projects to disseminate the CEH report, they are emerging as key brokers in sustaining it.

The culture of peace curricula is valuable in the current context, in that it spreads information about the peace accords and human rights, but it is insufficient vis-à-vis the longer-term issues of constructing frameworks for understanding the past. In “Reconciliation for Realists,” Dwyer contends that in the end, what might realistically be expected from reconciliation processes is tolerance for a limited set of public narratives about the past.<sup>48</sup> This paper has shown how the culture of peace framework, as part of a project of neoliberal governance, displaces historical analysis and expunges alternate narratives, with the effect of delimiting, not expanding, the options for public discourse about the past. This type of peace education may be the most that can be achieved in the current context in Guatemala, and it may be impossible in the near future to think that alternative frameworks for understanding history can emerge.

Yet, there may be some ways out of this impasse. One of the useful methods the CEH developed was to elaborate over 100 “illustrative cases” meant to show in greater detail the characteristics of the violence as well as the different sorts of victims. These illustrative cases are five to ten pages each and are published in several appendices to the main report. They

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Dwyer, “Reconciliation for Realists,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, Volume 13, 1999, pp. 83-98.

encapsulate the horrific patterns and consequences of the violence, but they also give insight into the life of the person or community and the context in which they lived and acted. An illustrative case of a kidnapped Coca-Cola worker, for instance, gives background on the labor movement, and illustrative cases of massacres in the highlands show the history of land struggles these communities faced and how they organized. The illustrative cases also give some sense of the local histories of the war, and the relationship between diverse local contexts and conflicts and the national scenario. These cases could, with relative ease, be integrated into school curricula, and one or two of the human rights groups I interviewed are turning toward this method. This would help do justice not only to the Truth Commission report, but also to the lives that the report chronicles.

#### Acknowledgements

I thank the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs for support of this project, especially Lili Cole, head of the History and the Politics of Reconciliation Program. The members of the Council's international study project on history textbooks provided me with valuable comments and useful comparative analysis. I am, of course, deeply indebted to the many people in Guatemala who generously shared their time and expertise with me, a number of whom requested to remain anonymous. A few friends went beyond the call of duty to give me much appreciated intellectual, moral and logistical support while I was in Guatemala; these are Diane Nelson, Marcie Mersky, Clara Arenas and Gustavo Palma. I have benefited from conversations on these issues with Greg Grandin, Daniel Wilkinson, Carlota McAllister, José García Noval, Deborah Levenson, Amy Ross, Carlos Beristain, Matilde Gonzalez, Paula Worby, Luis Solano, Arturo Taracena and, from 1986 until 1990, Myrna Mack I am also grateful to Rachel Bengtson, a graduate student in Law and Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona, for excellent research assistance.

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