The Democracy Development Machine

Nicholas Copeland

Published by Cornell University Press
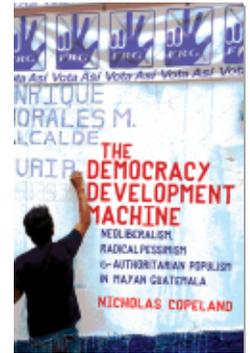
➡ For additional information about this book

3

The Capacity for Democracy

Transforming Democratic Imaginaries

The Government can respond to the needs of its constituents only if it is made aware of these needs. Two elements of the program—expansion of the cooperative movement and group training activities—will open a way for these needs to be proclaimed by the alienated and under privileged rural majority. New interest groups will be able to make demands (more credit, services, better marketing system, favorable prices, etc.). Politicians seeking rural support may well link themselves to these rising interest groups and identify themselves with their demands. The political balance between urban and rural may well change and be reflected in changes in political parties and legislatures tending in the direction of functional democracy.

USAID, capital assistance paper, 1970

Remember that in our countries we have lacked political leaders and if we want to have a real democracy we also need to educate the youth for the future so that they themselves can make political decisions that benefit those countries. And the problem is that farmers [also] need leaders in the local sphere where they can consider if there is some productive project that they are able to make that intervention to achieve those processes. Those processes were the *capacitaciones* of DIGESA.

Former Departmental Director of DIGESA (Interview, 2015)

In 2003 associates of José Antulio Morales, San Pedro's *alcalde* from 1996 to 2003 and the most influential Mayan politician since the extreme violence of the early 1980s, described themselves as *técnicos políticos*

(political technicians), referring to their ability to run political campaigns. Antulio Morales' coalition was backed by modernizing leaders in each village: men with experience on development committees and on the civil patrols, evangelicals and Catholics, former guerrilla sympathizers and detractors. These individuals understood their democratic expertise in terms of *capacidad,* an elusive and context-specific term that referred broadly to technical ability learned through institutions. *Capacidad* was a manifestation of a "will to improve" (Li 2007b), Amartya Sen's (1999) concept of capability, and a key aim of neoliberal development (Philips and Ilcan 2004). It was also the defining attribute of ideal democratic subjects in San Pedro. *Capacidad* was promoted alongside democratization, and the two were treated as naturally coexistent and mutually reinforcing.

Being a *técnico politico* meant *gestionando* projects and turning them into political support by promising them to various villages in exchange for votes. *Gestionar* means to "manage" or "negotiate," which in this context referred to planning and soliciting projects from state and non-state institutions. These self-described *técnicos* remained proud of their skills despite having just suffered a catastrophic and unexpected defeat by a rival organization whose leaders, they thought, "lacked *capacidad*" and were affiliated with the FRG. When I asked how this happened, one replied, "*Eso es lo que no entendemos*." ("This is what we don't understand.") Not only could they not fathom how their neighbors could have voted for Ríos Montt—a notorious mass murderer—they also could not understand how *they* lost to the local FRG candidate, Mariano Díaz, someone they saw as inexperienced and foolish.

How had these individuals become *técnicos* when most of their neighbors had not? In what sense does democratic citizenship require specialized knowledge and technical training? Why in this case had their *capacidad* failed them so miserably? What does this reveal about the effects of neoliberal development on rural grassroots politics and the conditions surrounding Mayan support for the far right?

Chapter 2 explored how discourses of *capacidad* promoted an improvement-oriented, market-savvy individualism in San Pedro. This chapter examines how *capacidad* both articulated and transformed grassroots desires for democracy. Discourses and practices of *capacidad* were introduced as part of a vision of political development and were adopted by certain villagers whose political imaginaries and organizational strategies were shaped as a result. Mayan reappropriation of *capacidad* opened

new horizons for indigenous advancement but produced a regulated form of democratic politics predicated on self-discipline, training, and social differentiation. *Capacidad* supplied the human infrastructure for democracy in San Pedro and reorganized the political field during the neoliberal democratic transition in subtle yet consequential ways that undermined historical struggles and thus had troubling continuities with counterinsurgency objectives.

    Capacidad challenged racial ideologies, enabled limited individual economic autonomy, empowered indigenous political organizing, and legitimated an indigenous right to govern. It aided in the election of the first indigenous mayor since the 1960s, improving the access to development resources in rural villages. *Capacidad* became the foundational creed for a path to indigenous rights and inclusion through market advancement and municipal politics but steadily chipped away at radical imaginaries by reframing poverty as a result of individual choices, not structures; legitimating interpersonal discrimination; and recasting democracy as private economic advancement and electoral participation *within* a political and economic order built on indigenous dispossession.

Development and Indigenous Politics

An influential strain of post-structuralist anthropology condemns development as a central apparatus of postcolonial governance, a hegemonic discourse and set of institutions and practices based on a primitive/modern binary that extends market rationality, bureaucracy, and state power while eradicating traditional lifeways (Ferguson 1994, Escobar 1995). Ferguson argues that, rather than resolving poverty, development depoliticizes it by erasing the historical power relations that produced it, rendering it as a problem for technical management. Critical anthropologists have further shown that even seemingly progressive development projects often uncritically disseminate discourses and practices of self-help, empowerment, and individual responsibility that foster market-oriented subjects adapted to survive in harsh market conditions without state support.[1] Post-structuralist critics focus on indigenous and subaltern resistance to development and antidevelopmentalist alternatives. Development contains many hidden dangers but can also provide critical resources and

strategic advantages for marginalized populations. Antidevelopment critics tend to disregard its diverse forms, its contested and uneven implementation, and the ways that subaltern groups often actively pursue development and adapt it for their own ends.[2] In San Pedro, discourses and programs of *capacidad* enabled modernizing indigenous political organizations to pursue their social and political objectives through market advancement, municipal electoral politics, and village development.

Guatemala's military government and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) promoted development in rural indigenous communities as part of a cold-war counterinsurgency strategy to combat regional instability understood to derive from inequality. In 1970 they launched the Public Agrarian Sector and two five-year national development plans, the stated aim of which was to include "Indian" peasants into national life. Agrarian modernizers disseminated green revolution technologies, new organizational forms, and skills associated with individual market advancement: an assimilationist alternative to revolution. Planners hoped that new seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and credit would render agrarian reform—the popular objective of revolutionary nationalist movements across the continent—obsolete (Copeland 2012).

USAID wanted "apolitical" cooperatives to aid "nonconfrontational" dialogue between rural indigenous communities and the state as a pressure valve to reduce tensions created by unmet demands.[3] USAID cooperatives were imagined as displacing autonomous, politicized co-ops in remote rural areas. The Rural Cooperative Development Project (RCDP) would extend state authority into highland villages and resolve the "Indian problem" with only minimal modifications to the social order. Rather than "bracketing political economy" (Li 2007b), the RCDP and DIGESA promoted an incremental plan to ameliorate poverty and inequality in Indian communities through hard work and market-oriented advancement.[4]

Program officers for DIGESA, the main institutional manifestation of the RCDP, trained community members to be market subjects. They were encouraged to take loans, to save money, to reinvest, and to calculate the future in terms of risk and reward: habits and dispositions assumed to be lacking yet transmittable through targeted governmental intervention. These programs resembled Catholic development initiatives and existing cooperatives, but they were better organized, with more expert personnel;

a disciplinary pedagogy; funding to support credit, training, extension, and input subsidies; and even modest salaries for village representatives.

DIGESA arrived in San Pedro in 1978, too late to prevent many of the residents from joining the guerrillas, and closed during the extreme violence of the early 1980s, during which time the army viewed *any* rural indigenous organization as a threat.[5] DIGESA reopened after the violence abated and began preparing the ground for a democratic transition that army and economic elites now viewed as inevitable and intended to control through party-led development under continuous militarization.[6] DIGESA was a major purveyor of discourses and practices of *capacidad* focused on scientific and market-oriented agriculture. Local and regional development agents pushed market rationality, new technology, credit, and new seeds and fertilizers. They also disparaged subsistence agriculture and Indian culture while treating historical structural inequalities as inevitable and ignoring the more radical political demands within indigenous communities. Training was administered by local Ladinos who were wholly unaware of the strategic implications of their labors, which were riddled with overtly and implicitly racist and essentialist assumptions, with assimilation to Ladino and North American culture being the unquestioned goal.

As an additional component of these programs, training was provided to villagers who learned how to organize, navigate state institutions, and manage development projects, knowledge that individual leaders applied to planning and executing electoral campaigns. This was in fact a central goal of USAID and DIGESA's directors, whose intention to use agricultural modernization to build rural political leadership in order to strengthen the incremental inclusion of rural communities in the political process is evident in this chapter's epigraphs. This plan required indigenous participation in forms of training that provided a narrow pathway for addressing economic and political exclusion.

Rather than reject development, Sampedranos viewed discourses and practices of individual capacity development and market rationality as extensions of, if not explicit concessions to, their economic and political struggles. Their engagement was similar to David Gow's (2008) conception of "counterdevelopment," by which he means both of a form of "resistance to the state" and a pragmatic, critical reworking of development to strengthen community "demand[s] to be recognized as indigenous

and treated as citizens, to become a vital part of the nation" (3). Events in San Pedro reveal the perils of counterdevelopment and counterdemocracy, which constituted central elements in postwar regimes of power.

Many Sampedranos eagerly embraced new technologies, market-oriented pedagogies, and conceptions of *capacidad,* and underwent difficult processes of self-discipline, often taking great personal risks because they viewed development as a way out of economic marginalization and discrimination. Indigenous leaders saw in *capacidad* an alternative to annual migrations to coastal plantations and wage labor for local Ladino bosses, both of which were highly exploitative (Copeland 2015b). Where many Ladinos feared and resisted what they viewed as a threat to the natural order and to a cheap labor supply they took as their right, indigenous leaders saw a path to dignity and equality through hard work and personal transformation. Modernizing villagers embraced *capacidad* and market rationality as a way to "stop being Indians," to escape a devalued identity category, a path that remained open after the violent repression of more-radical alternatives.

By the 1990s, indigenous individuals with *capacidad* ran village development committees, worked for development agencies, and ran for office, and there were a growing number of indigenous professionals, teachers, and successful small business owners. Most but not all of these individuals lived in the town center or in nearby villages. In the villages, many individuals had gotten ahead through commercial agriculture (mainly coffee) and through business, although even more had not. In the process, villagers resignified *capacidad* and applied it to their own ends, but rather than subvert development planners' designs from within, Sampedrano appropriations of *capacidad* completed them, at least in part. Through the successful adoption of development, *capacidad* exacerbated socioeconomic differentiation, reoriented revolutionary imaginaries, and limited the horizons of Mayan advancement to individual *superación* and local political power within a neocolonial political and economic order.

Democratic Organizing after *La Violencia*

After 1983, as the most horrific chapter of the war was drawing to a close, a group of indigenous leaders from villages near the town center

formed a new organization in order to acquire development projects and to elect an indigenous *alcalde*. Antulio Morales' organization was led by development-minded villager headmen, both guerrilla opponents and sympathizers who had set aside differences under the civil patrols and had the trust of the majority of villagers. Despite this mixed composition, Antulio Morales told me that "the idea to have a campaign for mayor came from the guerrillas—to end the discrimination." The organization focused primarily on rampant discrimination in the distribution of municipal development resources. In the 1970s, villages had formed development committees in hopes of getting potable water, schools, and roads but found little support. In the aftermath of the extreme violence, the army put forth security and development initiatives, focusing on food assistance, road building, and sometimes village school building, but these efforts were sporadic and short term.[7]

In 1985 the government instituted the 8 percent municipal tax, the funds from which were to be used to finance public works projects. These funds were monopolized by Ladino *alcaldes* and directed to the Ladino-dominated urban center. The new indigenous political organization eyed these funds as a way to raise the standard of living in rural villages where the need was more urgent. An opportunity arose when representatives of the conservative National Advancement Party (PAN) approached the organization in 1988, offering to finance a mayoral campaign and promising projects for the indigenous communities. However, one of Antulio Morales' lieutenants explained that there was always a condition:

> When we entered into PAN, they gave us opportunities for projects; the only thing was that they told us that we couldn't participate in or help social movements, like the URNG or CUC. They made this very clear. If we were going to help groups like the URNG, there would be no projects. We were taking advantage of them, but they were also taking advantage of us.

Convinced of the ineffectiveness of popular movements, and eager to win elections and begin development, they accepted these terms. However, the leaders of the organization, including Antulio Morales, were afraid to run.

Pedro Ramírez was a large and gregarious villager who become the first indigenous candidate for *alcalde* after the extreme violence. After initial

support, Ladinos began a smear campaign, calling Ramírez and his allies guerrillas. Ramírez lost to a Ladino who had been the first head of the civil patrollers in San Pedro. Frustrated but determined, the group continued in the next round, in 1993; this time their candidate was Natanael Aguilar, a teacher from the village of Canoguitas, still the only indigenous contender and also with the PAN. By then, there was a ceasefire and preliminary peace agreements were being negotiated, making it harder to mount a credible scare campaign against Aguilar, who, in a shock to town Ladinos, won by a landslide. By then the organization had mushroomed into a broad base of indigenous leaders in various communities near the town center. With José Antulio Morales as his first councilor on an all-indigenous team, Aguilar began to work. As promised, he sent numerous projects to communities that had supported him and was reelected after a two-year term, this time with the center-right Democratic Union.

According to Antulio Morales and many others, Aguilar's decision to seek a third term as *alcalde* created a rift, violating the agreement of the group to serve only two terms each. Aguilar argued that the first term was only two years and that the *alcaldía* term had been extended to four years only for his second period, justifying a third term. Nonetheless, Morales, who had spent more time in the municipal building than Aguilar, who resided in Huehuetenango, split off and became the recognized leader of the growing organization. Morales defeated Aguilar in the next election.

Morales had the good fortune of being *alcalde* at a time when international development funds earmarked for postwar reconstruction in war-torn indigenous communities poured into Guatemala. The government had established the Social Investment Fund (FIS), the Indigenous Development Fund of Guatemala (FODIGUA), and the Secretary General of National Planning (SEGEPLAN), among other national groups involved in infrastructure development. Internationally administered funds came in from Community Development for Peace (DECOPAZ) and the National Peace Fund (FONAPAZ) and various other groups. These programs supplemented the funds the *alcalde* had at his disposal from the municipal tax, which by then had risen to 10 percent.

Antulio Morales won the 1998 elections, this time against six other indigenous candidates and more than ten parties. Several Ladinos had joined Morales' team, including some town civil patrol leaders. By the time his second term ended, Morales had transformed the physical landscape: in eight

years he had helped with more than seventy infrastructural projects, many of them large, at least one in each *aldea* and several in the town center, most notably a new municipal building. These accomplishments represented a dramatic change in the distribution of municipal resources and the balance of power between the mostly indigenous rural villagers and primarily Ladino townspeople.

In the 2003 campaign, Morales, keeping with the two-term agreement, left the mayoral race and joined the Center for Social Action (CASA), an indigenous political party headed up by Rigoberto Quemé Chay, the then-*alcalde* of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second-largest city and the indigenous capital. Morales wanted to be a *diputado* (congressman), and CASA gave him the chance. He also liked CASA because it was fielding an indigenous candidate for president. When Queme Chay left CASA over internal divisions, the party collapsed, and Morales and his followers—he had helped pick his replacement mayoral candidate—joined the progressive New Nation Alternative (ANN), which Morales described as the "sister party" to CASA, and which had offered him a spot as a *diputado*. The election went badly for Morales. The FRG won locally, and he lost his bid for *diputado*.[8] In October 2004 he died in a accident on the Inter-American Highway during my fieldwork, prompting wide-ranging reflection on his political career and its legacy.

With the rural development plans, USAID collaborated with the Guatemalan government to empower a modernizing indigenous leadership with the skills, confidence, and encouragement to navigate state institutions for development projects and to run political campaigns, and whose conception of advancement and well-being was more consistent with neocolonial inequality and free markets.[9] In the late 1990s in San Pedro, it seemed that the dream of USAID planners had finally materialized. Had it really? What political vision were these Mayas putting into practice? And why did it fall apart?

Capacidad, Leadership, and Electoral Politics

Opposition to DIGESA from the army, from some Ladinos, and even from villagers worried about army reprisals initially limited participation in the program. However, many early opponents of the program changed

their tune when DIGESA reopened in 1984, by which time the army was less hostile toward development because the guerrillas had been largely defeated and villagers were organized into civil patrols. Despite heightened interest, access was extremely limited as state investments in subsidies, credit, and extension remained quite modest.[10] Even decades later, only a small percentage of villagers, mostly but not exclusively men, were recognized as having attained *capacidad*. Despite uneven access, by the late 1980s, developmentalist leaders had converged with the civil patrols, and *capacidad* had become a necessary qualification for community leadership.

Under the *cofradía* system, men in the village occupied leadership positions for a year term, and almost everyone interested served at least once. Elders had a higher status than younger men, and a council of elders made decisions that applied to the entire village. Since the disruption of *cofradía* authority and ancestor worship by the actions of the Catholic Church, village leadership positions "depended neither on age nor on service in the village hierarchies" (Brintnall 1979, 147). Younger male villagers emerged as leaders. Writing about Aguacatán, Brintnall was unclear what was to replace the vacuum created by the fall of the hierarchies.[11] He focuses on schools, agricultural cooperatives, political parties, and peasant leagues as new sources of community authority, each with their local correlative affiliate: the bilingual educator, the catechist, the labor organizer, and the party representative. Village authority was linked to these outside groups and institutions. The war soon shut down many of these spaces in San Pedro, targeting bilingual educators, catechists, labor organizers, and politically active Mayas. All that remained were the leaders of new development committees, the civil patrol, and, after 1985, party leaders—who were frequently the same men.

The reorganization of village authority into development and the civil patrol system provided a framework for participating villagers to establish a set of seemingly neutral standards for community leadership organized around *capacidad*. The PAC imbued these new norms with a compulsory tenor. When I asked what he thought about the civil patrol system, Arturo Bravo explained:

> For a part, it was always necessary. There were always people who took advantage [of the situation] in that time. Many people don't want to help

the community. But when the patrollers were there, that's when all of the people got together. Whoever did not show up, commits a crime or gets punished. All of the people got more organized. There was more respect in the entire community. Whatever happens, the people are there united. But there was a bad side to the patrols too. We always lost a lot of time. Always, even to our crops. All work was left abandoned.[12]

The primary reason for the ascendance of *capacidad* as a norm for leadership was because DIGESA program leaders received a form of training that would prove incredibly important in terms of access to resources in the early post-violence years. Bravo explained that "DIGESA didn't have [infrastructural projects], but they always oriented us in other meetings, how to get them. [They would tell us] 'This institution helps with such and such.' We learned how to gain projects." Creating political leaders was a central program objective. Negotiating development projects with the state, although slow and frustrating, gave villagers faith in the postrevolutionary generation of leaders, whose claim to political authority consisted primarily in their role as development brokers. Certain individuals gained reputations for their ability to successfully navigate institutions and bring projects to the villages. The few leaders trained by DIGESA since the late 1970s gained a particular advantage in this regard. As state resources became available, *capacidad* and leadership were synonymous.

For several decades, Sampedranos had imagined municipal politics as an interethnic competition for control of town resources and institutions. As new decentralization laws investing *alcaldes* with authority over the distribution of the 8 percent municipal tax raised the stakes, *capacidad* became a central weapon in the efforts to elect an indigenous mayor. Beyond training individuals to find projects, *capacidad*'s insistence on a neutral scale of evaluation gave moral force to Mayan desires to govern, provided that candidates had adequate preparation. Rigoberto, a high-school-educated Maya, a professional, and a high-ranking member of Antulio Morales' political coalition who had also run for office, explained:

Before there wasn't a lot of *capacitación*. Before, indigenous people were more discriminated against. Before in San Pedro, there were only Ladinos. Natanael was the first indigenous person. Afterwards José Antulio, then Mariano, so the people are preparing themselves. Now, the majority of

indigenous people have studied. There are doctors. There are more edu-
cated people. Year after year there are more people who have studied. I have
analyzed this. Ladinos have another form, another culture to live. Ladinos,
they are, well, now not so much, but it still exists . . . they think that they
are more able . . . that they are the ones that . . . but it's not that way. They
always think they are better than the rest. But it's not true.

Rigoberto imagined *capacidad* as steadily eroding the ability gap between
indigenous and Ladino. After the defeat of the guerrillas, Mayas used this
discourse, which was previously used to justify their marginalization, and
expanded it into a moral argument against continued exclusive Ladino
control. The idea shared among Maya Sampedranos was that Mayas who
were educated deserved the right to govern, the same as Ladinos, espe-
cially given that Ladinos had almost always controlled town politics, even
when indigenous men had won the elections.[13] *Capacidad* allowed them to
"be recognized as indigenous, and be treated as citizens" (Gow 2008, 3).

The idea of equality through *capacidad* resonated with prevalent reli-
gious discourses—evangelical as well as Catholic—that insisted on univer-
sal brotherhood. It could not simply be any indigenous person, however,
because not everyone possessed *capacidad;* a qualified candidate, regard-
less of race, had to have the technical capacity to govern. *Capacidad* pro-
vided a color-blind method of assessing legitimate authority. The more
capacidad they received, the more Mayan leaders were emboldened. For
most, however, this discourse of equality applied exclusively to men; a
woman (Maya or Ladina) has never run for *alcalde,* and town politics
remains a hostile terrain for women. However, Antulio Morales used
the logic of *capacidad* to justify women's participation in town politics,
despite criticisms from his own followers.

In 2003 Pedro Ramírez, the former mayoral candidate, worked as
a municipal policeman, a position he had held since his friend Antulio
Morales was *alcalde*. When I asked him why he decided to run for office,
he began by describing his involvement in DIGESA's youth-oriented 4-S
program (like 4-H in the United States) when he was fifteen. Later on,
he established leadership credentials by helping locate funds for a road
project. When political parties began looking for indigenous candidates,
they looked for organized groups. Pedro explained that he did not ini-
tially want to run because he felt he lacked experience, and the group

searched for an indigenous candidate with sufficient *capacidad*. José Antulio Morales and Natanael Aguilar, while more trained, were afraid they would be denounced as guerrillas. So Pedro Ramírez volunteered. It seems clear that the increased level of *capacidad* among the organization's members was helping to reduce their fear. After Ramírez lost, the group chose Aguilar as the next candidate because he was an elementary school teacher; they hoped the villagers would trust an indigenous professional.

José Antulio Morales—the most prominent Sampedrano politician of the 1980s and 1990s—provides an excellent illustration of the political significance of *capacidad*. Antulio Morales was a skilled orator and political operator who had earned a high school degree, socialized with party elites, maintained investments, and owned residences in San Pedro and the department capital. Before he entered politics, Antulio Morales was considered without question the most *capacitado* individual in his village. He had participated in DIGESA's 4-S program and had a sixth-grade education—a rare accomplishment for his generation—and later finished high school while working in the *municipio* with Aguilar. In his mid-twenties, at the prompting of Arturo Ramírez, an indigenous leader from the 1960s and 1970s, he trained as a *promotor sociale* (social promoter) at Rafael Landívar University in Huehuetenango.

Politics was José Antulio Morales' talent and passion, and friends and foes alike remember how he astutely tailored appeals to woo prominent and influential supporters. A venerable war widow told me that Antulio Morales promised to build a statue of her deceased husband in the park. She was delighted that he would finally get the public recognition she thought he deserved, and she also felt used when Antulio Morales never delivered.[14] He told Juan Jiménez, the aspiring papaya farmer, to "forget about coffee. Get coffee out of your head," promising that if he won he would send an agronomist to the village to figure out what exotic nontraditional export crops would flourish at Juan's precise elevation and soil type. Juan joined the campaign, but the agronomist never materialized, a fact that still perturbed him months later.

Although official definitions of *capacidad* were assimilationist, members of Antulio Morales' coalition redefined the term to include specific indigenous concerns. Another coalition member, a middle-aged Mayan man named Geraldo, a former guerrilla sympathizer turned civil patrol leader, explained an interesting difference between the way that Mayan activists and

Ladinos defined *capacidad:* "For me it is important, because he dominates two languages. They give their speeches in Spanish and then in Mam. The people understand. Indigenous people are simpler, they are more humble. More . . . how can I say it? They have more patience to work with the people." Geraldo redefined political *capacidad* as including the ability to speak a Mayan language and possession of an interethnic sensitivity. The *alcalde* has to be able to speak to and serve two cultures on their own terms, which requires a special understanding and patience to understand a difference that Geraldo was at a loss to put into words. One must also know how to deal with Ladinos, who are assumed to be more clever and arrogant.

Valuing this type of sensibility in a public official exemplifies a Maya redefinition not only of *capacidad* but also of what constitutes legitimate government. Geraldo was not saying that only indigenous people should hold office; Ladinos could also conceivably possess these abilities. Geraldo was pointing to the reality that no Ladino in local politics met this standard. This revised norm recognized and satisfied demands for equality—anyone can be *alcalde*—and difference—an *alcalde* has to recognize the needs of citizens whose differences are meaningful.

Poststructuralist development critics argue that discourses like *capacidad* posit a gap between "developed" and "underdeveloped" that can never be surpassed; the subaltern will eternally be "underdeveloped," always needing to "catch up."[15] Li sees a fundamental contradiction in that "programs of development designed to reduce the distance between trustees and deficient subjects reinscribe the boundary that places them on opposite sides of an unbridgeable divide" (2007b, 31). Nevertheless, this gap was bridged at least momentarily in practice in San Pedro when indigenous leaders seized on the notion of *capacidad* using their own "moral imagination" (Gow 2008) to advance their collective struggles for political and cultural equality with Ladinos and to pursue economic advancement. But *capacidad* reorganized local conceptions of advancement and had unintended effects on political imaginaries and organizational forms.

The Privatization of Well-Being

One of the most significant effects of the rising salience of discourses of *capacitación* and *superación* involved how villagers conceptualized

well-being and its attainment. Romanticized images of historically har-
monious and unchanging Mayan villages overlook heterogeneity and long
histories of conflict and change. But it remains true that communal land
tenure and the *cofradía* system, combined with the general absence of
opportunity, held socioeconomic differentiation in indigenous communi-
ties to a minimum. Life was more mutual, egalitarian, and interdependent,
and well-being was understood in terms of maintaining reciprocity, bal-
ance, respect, and protection from external forces, not individual improve-
ment or advancement. Politics in the mid-twentieth century reflected a
rise of individualism balanced with emphasis on collective well-being and
focused on redistributive justice and social democracy. State terror aimed
to destroy redistributive movements and reduce freedom to market spaces
(Grandin and Klein 2011).

Individual capacity development was central to habituating rural indig-
enous political subjects to this restricted model of cold-war freedom. It
trained villagers engaged or invested in collective struggles for well-being
to redirect their struggles for advancement through the terms of individual
market activity and party politics. A small but visible number of villagers
took DIGESA's (and subsequent groups') training to heart; they began to
understand themselves and their well-being in new ways. They took loans,
diversified production, bought more land, grew cash crops, and reinvested
profits. Arturo Bravo explained that "no one got rich, but there were your
centavitos, little by little." Some failed, but many found success, not out
of poverty all at once or at all, but as a buffer from indifferent market
forces. Rising coffee prices and the relatively inexpensive cost of land and
chemical inputs further aided upward mobility. A growing number of
indigenous youths graduated from high school and became teachers with
modest salaries.

An important aspect of the shift to reconceptualize economic well-being
as a private responsibility of individuals and families through market activ-
ity was the manner in which Sampedranos came to talk about the causes
of and the solutions to poverty and social stratification. In the 1970s, dis-
courses of development in the autonomous cooperatives and in the guer-
rilla movement emphasized individual hard work, new technology, and
education but also treated material redistribution—especially land and
state services—as a prerequisite for economic well-being. Individuals *and*
collectives were subjects of development. DIGESA's programs and those

of subsequent organizations taught villagers that well-being was achieved by individual farmers using chemical inputs and training, calculating the optimal combination of inputs and crops to maximize yield on their parcel. In San Pedro the primary mechanisms for wealth redistribution and risk sharing were private generosity among extended family at weddings and funerals or during medical and economic catastrophe.[16] Farmers were encouraged to critically assess their individual and family choices and their outcomes. NGOs that received public funding for service provision after state privatization were prohibited from discussing politics, such as the historical causes of poverty, or criticizing the government.

This framework shaped Sampedranos' attitudes toward one another, their attitudes about inequality, and their actual agricultural practices. Mayas used notions of development, and especially *capacidad,* in numerous ways to blame other individuals and themselves for their own poverty: failing to diversify their crops; planting corn, not coffee; failing to save, or spending unwisely, especially on alcohol; having too many children; failing to send their children to school; not wanting to take loans and investment; failing to take advantage of development programs; burning their *milpa* (as a fertilization technique); not wanting to apply chemical inputs; being lazy; "not wanting to develop"; failing to plan. These faults were frequently attributed to adherence to backward cultural practices rather than as being seen as structurally inevitable in situations where more than a third of residents lived in extreme poverty. Moreover, discussions of shared economic struggle were nonexistent; people developed for themselves and their families.

The extent to which this kind of thinking penetrated everyday relationships between villagers—which were increasingly marked by class domination and subordination—became clear on an afternoon I spent with a young married couple, Santos Bravo and Elvira Mendez. Santos was handsome and was well off by community standards; he owned one of only four trucks in his village and earned decent money running *fletes* (freight runs) for other villagers. He played in the band for the Catholic church and was director of the potable water committee. Although Santos mostly kept out of party politics, his eldest brother was a high-ranking member of Antulio Morales' coalition. Elvira was a bright, attractive woman from the same village and an excellent weaver who hailed from a large family of moderate means.

In response to my request for an interview, they invited me to visit their coffee field in a nearby *aldea*. After walking for about an hour, down the valley and up the other side, we arrived. Santos proudly showed me their coffee plants, saying that he had nearly thirteen *cuerdas*. Many villagers had only one or two, some had none, and a few had dozens. It was all chemical coffee, not organic, he said, and he explained that he was able to get between two and three *quintales per cuerda* annually, much better than average. "This is good land," he assured me. Then, somewhat suddenly as we were admiring their plants, Santos seemed angry or annoyed, and he walked to the door of a small, dilapidated adobe house fifteen meters away. Upon entering, a smoldering fire signaled that whoever was staying there had been around recently. He became upset and spoke in an annoyed tone to Elvira in Mam, apparently not wanting to involve me in the matter. We then left the house and began to pick fruit, which instead of the interview was the point of the trip for Santos and Elvira. We gathered nearly 20 pounds of *limones mandarinas* (mandarin limes), knocking the pale-yellow fruit out of the tree with a long stick.

As we were finishing, a stern, deep voice bellowed from behind some nearby trees in Spanish, "Who gave the order to pick fruit?" Santos jumped out of the tree and identified himself as the owner of the land. The voice was Esteban's, trying to sound intimidating. Santos had hired Esteban to live in the house, protect his land, and to work as his *mozo* (peon). Esteban was defending Santos's fruit. Esteban was about forty years old and very poor. He had several missing teeth, his clothes were tattered and stained, his hair was disheveled and unwashed, and he was very thin. The contrast to the well-kempt and healthy Santos and Elvira was stark. Right away, Santos began to lecture Esteban in Mam. Listening closely, I understood some of what Santos was saying, mostly Spanish words: *"No me gusta"* ("I don't like it") and, in Mam, *"At puac"* ("There is money"). Esteban did not concede it easily. He repeated the phrase *"Min ti puac"* ("There is no money") several times and, in Spanish, *"No me alcanza"* ("It doesn't last me"). This interaction lasted about five minutes. Santos listened for several long moments to Esteban's concerns but never wavered. Esteban finally conceded.

Later that evening, when I asked Santos what had happened, he explained that Esteban was an alcoholic and that they let him live in the house because he was poor and they felt sorry for his wife and child.

However, the expectation was that he would work—not just guard the property—in exchange for the use of the house and a small payment. But he did not do very much. Santos wanted to ask Esteban to leave the house today because work was not getting done. He was also angry that Esteban yelled insulting things to Santos and to his parents when he got drunk and also spread rumors that Santos did not pay him for his work.

Esteban and Santos occupied antagonistic class positions, a reflection of the ways in which capitalist relations had taken hold among indigenous villages, in the sense that some owned land and hired the labor of others who sold their labor for a wage (Li 2014; Copeland 2015a).[17] More than an interpersonal conflict, this situation showcased local frustrations emerging around growing class divisions among indigenous villagers, some who had gotten ahead and some who had not, and had perhaps fallen further behind, as well as the ways that class divisions are normalized. Local perceptions of this situation were likewise bifurcated (at least), although interpretive tendencies did not necessarily follow along class lines. The next week, I asked Esteban his perspective on that event. He explained:

> Santos got angry because I hadn't done all the work. But Santos only pays me Q10 a day, and he wants me to work every day. He only pays ten because I live in his house. But the money is not enough for me. Corn is expensive. Sugar is expensive. There is no food for my family. I don't have any *milpa*. I don't have any other place to live. Santos says that there's money, but there is not. I don't know what to do. There is no work here. And how am I going to work elsewhere when he wants me to work for him every day? It's hard. [long pause]. Is there work in the United States? I'm thinking about going because here there is no *chanca* [opportunity].

Later in the conversation, Esteban asked if it was true that he needed a set of false teeth to fit in in the United States, self-conscious about his snaggle-tooth smile. In Esteban's view, he would still be very poor no matter how hard he worked, knowledge that gave him little incentive to follow Santos' advice. Instead of encouragement, it left him bitter, and he expressed anger when he was drunk. Perspectives like Esteban's, which pessimistically recognized structural limitations to advancement, were generally excluded from serious public discourse, which optimistically championed individual initiative and blamed failure on individual choices.

At the same time that norms for *capacidad* were becoming crucial to village leadership, they were underwriting discrimination against people who were seen as less *capacitados* or as not wanting to develop. Carlos Ruíz was a teacher who worked on a contract basis. He was thirty-three in 2004, married with a young child. We met at his new house, one small room with fresh adobe and white pine. Although it was "*muy humilde*" ("very humble"), he was proud to have built it on his salary. He told me that friends and followers of José Antulio Morales had criticized his father, Rodrigo, the family patriarch, for being poor and uneducated. Carlos talked about life before schools:

> Before there were people whom although they had not gone to school, but still more or less knew a little. Plenty. But now education is a great advantage. . . . I see a lot of illiterate people. If you give them a piece of paper in the hand, they can't read it. This means a cloth is blinding their eyes.

Carlos recognized the importance of education:

> Sometimes there are insults. I realized because of my father. Before, before, he was very poor. He didn't have any possibilities to buy something for the week or to dress us, his children. [They would say] Don Rodrigo is ignorant; he's an Indio. That word already died. Yes, it was used between families. [He] gave this some thought. "My children are not going to be like me." Through the insult, my father began to analyze. [Rodrigo said,] "Thank you for making fun of me. This is going to be an idea for me, an experience."

These stories exemplify how discourses of development recoded individual economic differences and misfortune as an individual failure. I was taken aback when Carlos discussed villagers using the racial slur *"Indio"* to talk about their own neighbors. He explained that the word became prevalent in the 1980s and was discarded after the peace accords.[18] Apparently, the recent emphasis on human rights enshrined in the accords and elsewhere precipitated a rethinking of local discrimination. He continued:

> Let's go for the constitution of the Republic. One person cannot be less than another. Many times there is ridicule or discrimination. But if we go with the law, the person has value. Some people always say, "You don't have *capacidad*; you have no schooling." But for me this is illogical. It's not good to say to a person that [they] don't matter. It's very illogical.

Was the category gone, or did it continue to operate in a disguised way through terms such as *capacidad,* which marked as "Indian" people who lacked or refused *capacidad*? *Capacidad* created a path for Mayas to become equal with Ladinos provided that they adjusted to the norm, while at the same time legitimating discrimination against the majority of indigenous people who did not. Significantly, neither Carlos nor his father disputed the value of *capacidad,* only the extent to which it was used to devalue others. The elimination of "Indio" from the local lexicon did not prevent discrimination against their family; they took discrimination to heart as an incitement to personal and familial improvement.

Eroding Radical Imaginaries

Although many Sampedranos clearly understood that their poverty was related to historical dispossession and ongoing discrimination, capacity development offered a new way of thinking about the origins of poverty and inequality and paths to well-being within existing structures. These individualizing explanations diverged markedly from the direct confrontation with social hierarchies prescribed by the revolutionary narrative. Sometimes this divergence took place in individual minds. Juan Jiménez once said that the people were poor and the country so unequal because "the rich want it that way" but quickly added, "They [poor people] don't know how to work."

In addition to fueling victim blaming, the lens of *capacidad* jaundiced memories of local participation in the guerrilla, which Fernando Bravo, a leader in Antulio Morales's coalition, attributed to

> the ignorance of the people. Because the people were not learned. For example, we, in our family, we analyzed it thoroughly. Because it is not simply deciding on a thing. For example, if someone comes right now, I can listen, but I'm going to ask for their identification, where they come from, what institution, what it is that they want.
>
>   Likewise, when the guerrillas visit a family and start telling them "Look, *señores,* we're the guerrilla army of the poor. We are going to give you land. We're going to take it away from the rich and give it to you as a gift. Don't you want that? We want you to help us, to give us food, clothes, or a place to stay." It sounds nice, right? It's the same if someone comes who wants to give a *capacitación* to the people. A coffee expert, for example. The people

say, "We don't want *capacitación*." But if he says, I come on behalf of a
bank, or a company, or a business and there's money for loans, credit, then
the people come. Worse if there's no guarantee [of repayment]. The people
come quickly. They don't analyze . . . we don't analyze. That's how it hap-
pened before. I have analyzed it thoroughly. The people listened to the guer-
rillas out of ignorance. They offered and offered. It's the same as a candidate.
I'm going to give you something, a *lamina* [corrugated tin roofing]. And then
nothing comes. The army had a political objective, and so did the guerrillas.
They were offering. And for that reason the people went to them. Then when
the army came, the situation changed. There was war. So, more for igno-
rance, they didn't understand how it was, how it is, what results will follow.

   It sounds good. A person gets to talking with his wife, between friends:
"Hey, let's go with them. They're going to give us land. They're going to
take it from the *finqueros,* and they're going to give it to us." This was the
main part of the problem. The people aligned with the guerrillas to help, but
they didn't know what would happen afterward.

Instead of recognizing revolutionary demands as legitimate or affirming
indigenous investments in them, Fernando thinks that they were too good
to be true and that Mayas had been duped into believing because they
were ignorant, just as they continued to be duped by political parties or
development agents. *Capacidad* thus reinforced fatalism about the revolu-
tion originally inscribed by state violence by framing the movement as im-
mature and unsophisticated. Unlike revolutionary fantasies, development
produced something concrete, but it involved hard work, which "igno-
rant" people avoided, or so it was said.

   Discourses and practices of *capacidad* and the narratives of *super-
ación* they support permeated thinking about political alternatives for the
post-1983 generation of Mayan leaders. When José Antulio Morales died,
the entire village, even some of his most bitter political enemies, mourned:
"There was no one else like Chepe." On the day before the funeral, I met
with Mateo, one of his closest friends, who was just back from two years
in the United States, where he had saved a reasonable sum working land-
scape and construction. Our conversation that evening ranged from his
thoughts about work in the United States, to the limits to Maya-Ladino
relationships, to Chepe's political dream:

   Chepe worried a lot about education. [Pretending to be Antulio:] "Let there
   be more Mayan professionals!" That was his goal. He would speak of the

year 2010, when there would be more professionals than now. His people
were, for the majority, *gente campesina* (peasant people), but with experi-
ence, with preparation—the entire group was *superado*!—and they also had
professionals participating. . . . His goal was that there was *superación* in
San Pedro Necta and in all of Huehuetenango.

This was not idle political rhetoric; Chepe preached education and indi-
vidual capacity building as the ideal route to Mayan advancement. He be-
lieved in *superación,* which he himself had accomplished. For Chepe, as
for many other Mayan professionals of his generation, personal develop-
ment and *superación* overshadowed prior interest in revolutionary poli-
tics, especially in the wake of extreme state violence.

Discourses of *capacidad* influenced indigenous leaders' perceptions of
leftist organizations long after the latter became legal. Antulio Morales
criticized the URNG because it did not offer him a post as a mayoral
candidate, or later as a *diputado*. He complained that the URNG favored
ex-combatants and neither recognized nor appreciated the *capacidad* he
had accrued over many years in the *alcaldía*. On a deeper level, however,
for some of San Pedro's most influential and successful indigenous leaders,
development made revolutionary politics seem unnecessary. Revolution
was antithetical to *capacidad* and redundant. What is more, they believed
that revolution was impossible and that development could produce tan-
gible results in people's lives. I met more than a few prosperous farmers
who saw genuine opportunity in free trade agreements for nontraditional
crops.[19]

In addition to the other ways that notions of *capacidad* shifted politi-
cal reflection away from structural reform, the concept was deployed to
explain and present a technical solution to problematic voting patterns.
Reflecting on his recent defeat by the FRG, but speaking more generally,
the well-educated Fernando attributed the deficiencies of democratic poli-
tics to a lack of *capacidad:*

> If the people think it through. If the government were to worry about the
> people, and trained them about what it means to vote. Perhaps things could
> be fixed. It would be great if the government came in to explain what vot-
> ing is. If the Tribuno Supremo Electoral put more people to work, then
> yes. But what happens? They send a few in the months just before the elec-
> tions. Only in the closest areas. And so the people always vote for personal
> interest.

Fernando suggested that people should be trained to vote for candidates with plans and *capacidad* rather than for personal interest. He depicted Mayas as democratic novices who do not understand voting, much less have the ability to distinguish between candidates and political platforms; they need training. When a candidate dropped out because he was tired of lying about projects, he ceded his slot to Fernando, who made many false promises but lost anyway. Now he longed for a campaign that focused on *capacidad,* which would give him an edge.

This is the same point of view shared by many international NGOs and the Guatemalan left, whose organizations give *capacitaciones* and *talleres* (workshops) on *el voto consciente* (informed voting), which villagers might find helpful but are tainted by images of gullible villagers believing in lies and mindlessly stuffing ballots into boxes.[20] This perspective on voting, as much as voting behaviors themselves, is an element of emerging democratic sensibilities in a society where free and open elections were recent innovations, among a people who have historically been excluded from citizenship and for whom electoral politics and procedures were still relatively alien.[21] The problem with attributing party alignments to ignorance is that it obscures the myriad constraints on indigenous agency in electoral politics that make such training irrelevant and confound any easy external determination of supposedly objective political interests.

Limits of *Capacidad*

Capacidad did not deliver collective advancement in the way that many Mayan Sampedranos had hoped; its effects were simply overwhelmed by structural forces. The vast majority of people remained untrained, market access and economic success were unevenly distributed, and unemployment was rampant. The global decline in coffee prices that started in 1989 persisted for most of two decades, pushed many farmers into bankruptcy, and forced others to sell land to pay back loans. Families lost meager savings for medical emergencies or for natural disasters that destroyed homes and crops. Furthermore, subsistence farming was threatened by a lack of fertile land, rising costs and decreased effectiveness of chemical inputs, the closure of state extension programs, and declining fertilizer subsidies. Although some Guatemalans successfully adopted

nontraditional agricultural export (NTX) crops or found work in *maquilas* or in tourism, many were economically the same or worse off than before.[22] I heard more than a handful of stories of farmers, who, overcome with debt and desperation, had attempted suicide by drinking Gramoxone, a Paraquat-based herbicide. Even relatively successful small producers had trouble breaking into monopolized markets, particularly after the privatization of public-sector agrarian programs. What seemed like an entire generation of young professionals and wage laborers migrated north to look for work in the 2000s. Some sent remittances to their families, but many did not.[23] Cuts in state services and subsidies—already bare bones—raised prices for basic goods, especially electricity. Nevertheless, as economic inequalities widened alongside the implementation of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, they came to be understood less as an inevitable feature of a political order founded on indigenous dispossession and exploitation and more as an index of individual effort and *capacidad* against a market reality whose existence and pressures were taken for granted.

Not surprisingly, there was significant overlap between economic success and political power; *capacidad* fostered a local indigenous leadership stratum. *Capacidad* did more than train individuals to become agents of their own self-improvement; it also created a new hierarchy of value used to discriminate between types of subjects, and it enshrined the individual as the privileged site of agency in economic and political life. As O'Neill (2010) argues about evangelical Christianity in Guatemala City, it presented private, individual transformations as the mechanism to change society. It departed from revolutionary conceptions that viewed the dissolution of the feudal plantation economy and imperialism as preconditions for democracy. On the contrary, *capacidad* was introduced to safeguard the existing order, to deepen its cultural roots by opening a path to access material benefits of citizenship through the diffusion of disciplinary market norms and outlooks. *Capacidad* reinforced the privatization of social life and politics and rationalized structures of extreme racial inequality, even as it stimulated interest in indigenous rights.

Benson, Fischer, and Thomas (2008) argue that discourses about crime which blame individuals rather than social causes and prescribe a hard-line response reveal the extent to which Guatemala's violent unequal social order has become normalized. In San Pedro, counterinsurgency,

religious conversion, and discourses of *capacidad* had not entirely displaced the radical political imaginaries of the 1970s, turning Sampedrano leaders into *indios permitidos* who normalized structural violence. After the defeat of the guerrillas, the path of *capacidad* provided modernizing indigenous leaders with what they understood as a safer, smarter mechanism to achieve at least some of what the revolution had promised but failed to deliver: development, empowerment, and an end to discrimination. But the partial inclusion of select individuals relegated Mayas in the collective to the status of permanent second-class citizens, multicultural rhetoric notwithstanding.