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## The Democracy Development Machine

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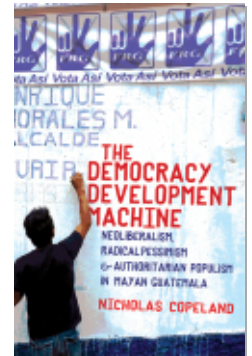
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## RADICAL PESSIMISM

### *Neoliberal Democratic Atmosphere*

An atmosphere is not an inert context but a force field in which people find themselves. It is not an effect of other forces but a lived affect—a capacity to affect and be affected that pushes the present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event. It is an attunement of sense, of labors, and imaginaries to potential ways of living and living through things.

KATHLEEN STEWART, “ATMOSPHERIC ATTUNEMENTS”

A very difficult air is breathed . . . that makes the “organization of pessimism” the call of the hour.

WALTER BENJAMIN, “THE LAST SNAPSHOT OF  
THE EUROPEAN INTELLIGENCIA”

When I arrived in San Pedro just after the 2003 elections, my previous research in Colotenango led me to expect to encounter villagers divided into four main political tendencies largely rooted in wartime divisions:<sup>1</sup> some who feared the FRG, a small number of them nurturing hidden loyalty to leftist politics; a second, more conservative group comprised of Mayas and Ladinos who embraced the FRG as an extension of their support for the army; a third category of villagers who were neutral or sympathetic to the revolution during the armed conflict but generally saw Ríos Montt and the FRG as allied with the poor; and a fourth group of evangelicals who saw him as an avatar of a new moral order.<sup>2</sup> Because

the guerrillas were concentrated in nearby Colotenango and Ixtahuacán, and because I had followed the debates on public memory after the violence,<sup>3</sup> I did not expect to find many outward expressions of support for the defeated revolution. However, given the new democratic opening, I thought I might find muted signs of progressive excitement and fledgling organizations bubbling under the surface.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, unconvinced that a “culture of terror” persisted in rural villages so long after the peace accords, I wondered if development had come to replace violence as a determining force in postwar politics.<sup>5</sup>

Bracketing these preconceptions was the first step in paying close attention to local historical specificity and the actual nature of political alliances in the present, both of which turned out to be far more complicated than I had imagined, with violence playing a far greater role. As weeks passed into months—and I became more aware of practices outside party politics, gaps between public expressions and private feelings, and meanings embedded in everyday talk and rumor—it became increasingly clear that party alliance was a deceptive indicator of political ideology and the nuances of local common sense. Although I met numerous supporters of Ríos Montt and the FRG, I found few who expressed unambivalent ideological support for them, or for most parties. Ethnographic attention revealed a great deal about the narrative frames, affective intensities, and habitual modes of action through which democracy was lived by rural villagers in the long wake of counterinsurgency, a peace process, ethnic resurgence, and post-peace economic and political realities. The terror of the early 1980s had subsided, but villagers felt far from free.

As my investigations into town history revealed widespread spontaneous support for revolutionary demands before the onset of extreme violence, and as my observations revealed clues into the continued salience of violence in political imaginaries, my questions sharpened: What combination of forces had come to bear on the political imaginary and the self-society relations widely shared among Mayan Sampedranos in the late 1970s? What were the lingering, if invisible, effects of extreme violence on political agency in the present? How was counterinsurgent violence different from and similar to violence enacted in defense of the democratic rule of law, both in its targeting and its effects? What kinds of political thought and behavior became normalized under these conditions?

If ethnographic methods are particularly suited at revealing gaps between what people say and what they actually do, studying political violence challenges the ethnographer to ask what people might otherwise have done under different circumstances but did not, and what they may think but leave unsaid. It demands that we look for meanings hidden in silences, constraints on agency, and frustrated desire beneath outward conformity. Violence underscores how ethnographic writing must move beyond documentation to “put into words” things that remain silent in social life (Hirschauer, 2006, 414). Counterinsurgency slaughtered individuals and communities, destroyed the guerrilla movement, engendered silence, and shut down rural society. But democracy is characterized by power, not pure repression. Biopower aims to shape conduct, not prevent it, and to open spaces for life and freedom,<sup>6</sup> whereas spectacles of sovereign violence deployed in the unmaking of bodies close down spaces and render certain kinds of conduct impossible. Power in the democratic period enjoined villagers to participate in civil defense patrols, to learn how to grow new kinds of crops and calculate private futures, and to venture into party politics. Power acts directly on bodies, their capacities and desires. But political violence never went away in the democratic period; it changed form and narrative frame and shifted targets. Violence and its threat infused responses to neoliberal democratic efforts to shape conduct. Violence is not separate from neoliberal democracy or development; it is constitutive of both.

Central to understanding the effects of violence on neoliberal democratic politics was coming to grips with the way that the state is produced in rural communities and how it is perceived and experienced in everyday life.<sup>7</sup> Theorists of the state after Guatemala’s armed conflict describe paradigmatic shifts in this regard. The counterinsurgent state was defined primarily by violence against not only suspected guerrillas but also teachers, catechists, community leaders, and any autonomous forms of authority and organizing. By contrast, the “postwar” state is a source of life and protection and a partner in Mayan cultural revitalization.<sup>8</sup> Instead of fear and avoidance, it incites forms of engagement that many scholars see as strategic.<sup>9</sup> But neither ambivalence nor strategic engagement captured the tormented and tragic—although not terrified—entanglements with the state and adjacent sovereigns that I found in San Pedro.

My investigation into state imaginaries was informed by theories of affect, which insist that consciousness is always embodied, situated, and

shot through with desire. By centering on the body, on visceral drives, sensations, and intensities, theories of affect go beyond meaning-centered analysis to provide a richer understanding of how power and violence reverberate through everyday life. “Political affect” examines how bodies are located in political fields, how desire moves them and enables them to move others (Protevi 2009). As violence courses through a body politic, it makes and unmakes bodies, provokes nausea, closing down social spaces and flooding minds with traumatic memories; it incites feelings of helplessness and outrage and acts of submission and resistance. Making a concerted effort to remain open to the messiness of the phenomena I encountered led me to a nuanced understanding of the effects of violence on political consciousness, affect, and agency in the decade and a half after the peace accords.

In this chapter I combine theories of state imaginaries and theories of political affect to describe what I call *radical pessimism*: a neoliberal democratic political imaginary and affective formation in San Pedro and elsewhere that meshes radical desire with a lack of faith in collective agency and the belief that meaningful change is impossible. Central to this affective imaginary is an apprehension of the state as a remote and uncaring agent that is allied with capital and always willing to destroy indigenous life but that is also a mercurial source of protection and a bestower of rewards in exchange for complicity. Aside from whatever other benefits the state provided, I found that most Sampedranos understood and experienced themselves as entangled in an insurmountable relationship with interlinked sovereigns that maintained their collective subordination. These perceptions were forged by a state that both killed Mayas and allowed them to die but that was also sometimes a source of life. Anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith (2008) describes how Nigerians are preoccupied by both the corrosive effects of corruption on society and by their own corrupt behaviors. He argues that “corruption and the discourses of complaint it generates are at the core of contemporary events, shaping collective imagination and driving social action” (xii). I describe how a political affect of radical pessimism constituted engagements with hostile sovereigns and normalized a politics of personal interest and practices of “selling out.” Sampedranos were viscerally drawn into self-interested politics that they understood as simultaneously normal, inevitable, and a serious problem that they could not overcome.<sup>10</sup> Personal interests overwhelmed collective

interest in San Pedro, fueling a pervasive atmosphere of mistrust that was exacerbated by efforts to hide one's true motives, guilt, and a desire to prevent recrimination. Everyone lamented this situation, but almost everyone was complicit.

Radical pessimism was the contradictory remnant of a radical political imaginary that was unable to find coherent expression in official democratic spaces but that found partial and contradictory fulfillment in the FRG (in ways that I describe in chapters 5 and 6). Radical pessimism was an “atmospheric attunement” (Stewart 2011) to a form of democracy defined by the violent disqualification of long-standing grassroots demands from the field of democratic contestation. This attunement was affected and affecting, produced through historical experience and productive of contemporary reality; it revealed the lingering weight of histories of violent state formation on Mayan engagements with neoliberal democracy. Rather than an exception from the proper functioning of democracy, the situation in San Pedro illuminates the everyday forms of violence involved in maintaining a grossly asymmetrical international capitalist order. I also examine what the emergent anti-extractivist movement in “defense of territory” reveals about the persistence of radical political imaginaries in rural communities and some of the ways that these are being transformed. I conclude with a reflection on the potential for redirecting the force of pessimism to expand political horizons.

## **Radical Pessimism**

By living in villages and talking to locals about politics and town history, and hesitating to take overt political discourses and affiliations at face value, I came to understand that radical sentiments—not to be confused with support for the revolution—were widely shared among villagers, with little regard for party, religious affiliation, age, gender, economic status, or even prior feelings about the guerrillas. Although it was seldom expressed in public, I even found support for the revolution itself in unexpected places. Rogelio Martínez, a prominent FRG activist and a former soldier, explained:

The war was because we were enslaved. The Spanish dominated us. The guerrillas were indigenous people who formed a group. They organized to

make the army of the poor. Right now, they're [the guerillas] in Congress. The Mayan language [sic] is registered. . . . It would be awful [now] if there had not been a war. It would be like the time with the Spanish. . . . The EGP did a good thing.

Rogelio described the revolution as a partial victory of indigenous people against neocolonial enslavement, gained through sacrifice. He admired Ríos Montt and denied his role in the violence. Although he voted for the FRG, he thought that it, like all parties, was corrupt. He admitted with little shame that he voted for personal interest.

Many villagers held an equivocal view of the guerrillas. They liked their objectives but criticized their methods and knew that their defeat had been inevitable. The patrols were another “two-faced” enterprise. Many believed the patrols had a positive aspect because villagers were united in pursuit of state development projects, but even patrol leaders were bitter about the suffering that they endured during the armed conflict. Many former patrollers joined the movement for the compensation that began in the early 2000s and became Ríos Montt's signature campaign promise in 2003, less out of ideological affirmation of the paramilitary's antiguerrilla mission—the movement's official stance—than the sense of having earned it and having been promised payment.<sup>11</sup>

Radical leanings were present in everyday talk and in conversations and interviews. Villagers bemoaned that the country was run by *los ricos* (the rich), who kept poor Mayas “under their boots.” One village leader, a member of Antulio Morales' coalition, commented that “the people from CACIF [Coordinating Committee for Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations] are very clever about tricking the people.” In addition, I often heard the notion repeated that “the rich get richer, while the poor get poorer.” On one occasion, I was drinking a Gallo beer with a few men from a Mayan family who supported the FRG but had once upon a time supported the guerrillas. One of them told me to peel the label off my beer bottle because replacing the labels “gives a job to the poor.”

During my stay in San Pedro, I asked dozens of villagers their opinions on a range of political demands associated either with the guerrillas or with progressive movements before and after the peace accords. The vast majority expressed support for the accords, human rights, democracy,

truth commissions, indigenous rights, and even land reform. The main exception was that many specifically opposed the aspects of human rights that they felt “let [local] criminals free”—free to violate *their* rights. The use of human rights to prevent army assaults on civilians was widely supported. Most indigenous Sampedranos who knew about free trade agreements opposed them, and Sampedranos condemned mining concessions in a near-unanimous 2007 *consulta*.<sup>12</sup> The majority considered leftist parties and organizations reliable sources of trustworthy news and political critique. Crucial vestiges of a radical imaginary were alive and well in San Pedro, despite decades of repression aimed at stamping it out. Most Ladinos did not share radical leanings; neither did the former Mayan spies and military commissioners I met and some villagers who had achieved considerable economic success. Although younger Mayas frequently shared elements of radical common sense, most were unfamiliar with social movements or their demands, much less guerrilla objectives.

However, some Sampedranos were actively involved in leftist organizations and social movements, including the CUC; the National Coordinator for Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA), a victims’ rights organization; and *Asociación Ceiba*, which talked about human rights. Many indigenous teachers joined the Guatemalan Educational Workers’ Union (STEG) after teachers won the right to collectively bargain in 2003, and unionists frequently formed alliances with progressive forces such as the anti-mining movement.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to other political parties, the URNG, the newly legal guerrilla party, appeared exempt from accusations of self-interest. URNG members regularly lamented that everyone who supported “parties of the rich” (read “non-URNG”) “*se vendieron*” (“sold themselves”). Despite never offering projects, the URNG attained more than 700 votes in 2003, placing third in a hotly contested race with numerous projects at stake.

As in Nigeria, “debating and analyzing popular woes was [also] a national obsession” in San Pedro (Smith 2008, xii). The main concerns were the nature of the government and the designs of powerful interests: the opacity of these entities provided fertile ground for rumors and conspiracy theories.<sup>14</sup> Of all the ways that Mayan Sampedranos claimed to be deceived, many understood a racialized interstate capitalist nexus (my words, their ideas) as the principal axis of their oppression.<sup>15</sup> These interpretations made sense of lived experience by placing it in narrative



frames that were well established in local memories and common sense, and generated patterned emotional responses to shared circumstances. But grassroots imaginaries were also messy: they included echoes of radical ideology alongside counterinsurgency truth, development discourse, religious understandings, notions of human rights, and rumors and theories that pushed the boundaries of acceptable proof and assumptions of causality and that defied easy political categorization.

Radical discourses resonated with Sampedranos, but most kept their distance from leftist movements and ignored leftist parties at the voting booth in favor of conservatives and even overt authoritarians. The vast majority of Sampedranos viewed party politics as corrupt, divisive, and driven by self-interest—the opposite of respect (Ekern 2011)—and party leaders were commonly understood as racist Ladino businessmen and mafia types who maintained links to the military and exploited indigenous people and poor peasants. Although these investments bore superficial resemblance to authoritarian populist rhetoric, villagers viewed authoritarians with much the same disdain as they did other parties, and frequently more. These remnants of a radical political imaginary were inextricably embedded with embodied memories of colonial victimization and counterinsurgency violence. Violence and the threat of violence weighed upon collective imaginaries, shutting down capacities for collective action and convincing most Mayan Sampedranos that radical change was impossible.

Instead of confrontation with and victory over these forces, or principled refusal, local imaginaries prescribed avoidance or selective engagement with the state and capital in order to obtain small benefits.<sup>16</sup> Commonplace expressions of anger toward the state were deeply imbricated with profound feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and cynicism regarding the possibilities for urgently needed reform. This radical pessimism was a prominent feature of a shared political imaginary, which was not a survival of a premodern indigenous cosmovision, or a seamless whole of any kind, but an unstable, nonrandom assortment of sometimes-contradictory discourses that had been refined and modified through experience. At one level, radical pessimism discouraged participation in radical parties and social movements even after these were legal, and fostered widespread disengagement from party politics. At another, it helped normalize increasingly self-interested, corrupt, and divisive forms of political participation, including support for authoritarian parties.

Miguel Ramírez was a widely respected community leader who had been very active in José Antulio Morales' coalition. Although once a feared patrol leader, like many in the organization he considered himself a guerrilla sympathizer. When I asked his thoughts about agrarian reform, he said it was a "good idea," quickly adding, "but it can't be done. We tried for years. The *finqueros* are too strong." In his estimation, peace and democracy excluded these important revolutionary goals. Regarding land occupations, he explained, "It's fine if you have a title, but if you don't it will bring consequences. Look at what happened in Nueva Linda." Miguel was referring to the recent (2004) headlines about President Berger's administration's (2004–2008) attacks on peasant activists. For him, land redistribution was a good thing, but breaking the law was too dangerous. The rule of law was not neutral but was infused with violence. He withdrew from party politics after becoming frustrated with Antulio Morales' corruption and greed.

Anastasio Bravo, another high-ranking member of Antulio Morales' organization who was still active in party politics, expressed great frustration with the limits of democracy and development. Bravo was a catechist from a relatively well-off indigenous family. He had enrolled in weekend high school classes during my fieldwork, and one of his teachers had assigned readings summarizing the truth commission findings. He explained his understanding of these in the following way:

They want to fix Guatemala, but with each attempt, it is sinking deeper. When a child is born, they already owe money to the United States. They are never going to be able to pay it. Have you heard of the Bishop Juan Gerardi? He published a book about the violence. It's called *Nunca Más* [*Never Again*]. What does that mean? It means that Guatemala is never, never, never going to change. The *diputados* [congressmen] want to raise their salaries, and what do they do? They don't do anything. And then they killed Gerardi, for being in favor of the poor. There's never a government that worries about the people. Here there's a hospital, but there isn't any medicine. They prescribe [medicine], but you have to go buy it, and there's no money. And there are many towns where there isn't even a hospital. Only the church helps with the hospital here. That's why the government in Guatemala is backwards.

Bravo was disgusted and hopeless. *Nunca Más* was the Catholic Church's truth commission and was originally intended to be a renunciation of

the violence, an unequivocal resolution to never permit genocide to happen again, in Guatemala or anywhere else. I was speechless when I heard a Mayan political leader who had recently taken a course on the subject twist the intended meaning into an affirmation of the inevitability of oppressive government. Several village leaders repeated this interpretation. When I asked Anastasio Bravo what he thought about the peace accords, he said that “peace was just on paper with the signing of the government and the URNG. The armed conflict ended, but true peace . . . it doesn’t exist. There’s already violence, and other things, massacres after the accords. There’s still racism and a lot of gangs.”

Bravo was certain that the state cared nothing about justice, especially for the poor. The hospital without medicine was proof of official disregard for local well-being. He also cited the brutal murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi, massacres after the accords, and other unpunished crimes. Although he disavowed the guerrillas for their violence, he agreed with their goals. He relied on the Catholic Church and social movements for unbiased news, but he did not pursue radical politics. He saw no alternative to the status quo. He instead participated in political parties that he loathed in a game that he saw as socially damaging and utterly rigged, hoping to make a small difference locally, but more likely, he admitted, for personal gain. Rather than crime normalizing structural violence (e.g., Benson, Fischer, and Thomas 2008), Miguel Ramírez understood crime as a symptom of larger social problems, but he linked this political reading to pessimism about the possibility of deeper solutions.

Radical pessimism was directly informed by intergenerational struggles for political transformation, including the revolution. Pedro Lázaro was a community leader from Los Altenses and a key FRG backer. A Catholic in his early sixties, with no education, Lázaro had overcome extreme poverty. He and his extended family were proud guerrilla sympathizers in the seventies and eighties, but had publicly—and vehemently—denied it ever since. Lázaro joined the FRG mostly because he was frustrated that his family had been excluded from José Antulio Morales’ favoritism network. But it was not only that. Lázaro explained his current politics in light of his experiences and historical understandings. For him, the motivation for war was direct:

**Lázaro:** Always for rights. Before, when my father was here, an indigenous person couldn’t speak, and couldn’t organize in a group. They couldn’t talk

about their rights. For that reason, they were intelligent people who formed a group. The organization came from another country, and little by little the people organized. Many died for that reason. When there is a strong group, it's like a beehive, strong. The guerrillas were almost the entire town and the villages also. That's why it began, and now, not a lot, but there is a little peace. There's peace. The guerrillas won that right. Many died. But the Bible says that there will be victory with blood.

**NC:** Was there a time when the people were against human rights?

**Lázaro:** Ah. Yes. But that changed with the peace accords.

**NC:** Many people don't have any confidence in political parties. Do you think that there are political parties that are in favor of the people?

**Lázaro:** Yes, the party URNG. That's the guerrilla party.

**NC:** But you're in a different party.

**Lázaro:** Look, I have always worked for the parties for the poor. But they never win. Even good guerrilla leaders change parties; it's always for personal interest.

**NC:** So you were struggling before, but now you want to win?

**Lázaro:** Look, I'm illiterate. Ever since my childhood I have never known regular pay. I worked from 7 A.M. to 5 P.M. for 40 centavos every day. Really suffering! When I got married, I worked for two months in the coast in a plantation. In two months I barely saved 20 quetzales (\$2.50). I was malnourished, my shirt was ripped, and my pants were ruined. That is the life of an "Indio," of a peasant. Now I am saving the money I make helping the party. If God gives me health, I can make money the entire four years.

**NC:** What changes do you think would be necessary in the government of Guatemala?

**Lázaro:** When the government was in his campaign, they tell us that Guatemala is going to have change. Only in their campaign. When they get into power, they leave it to one side. That's what I think. There's never going to arrive the change that needs to be made. Why? Well, right now, the day laborers are making 20 quetzales each day. And what's happening right now? The price of fertilizer just went up to Q150 (\$20). Right now, the people feel very much like slaves. And because only those rich, well, those businessmen, they don't go stopping every day; every day they're moving up. The poor every day get poorer. Why? Because the prices are rising.

To change the government? That's difficult. He is in his power. Now there are a lot of organizations. Many go to protest in front of the president's house. But he, what pain does it give him? He is there in his power, just listening. He never makes good.

**NC:** So, you don't think that changing the government is possible?

**Lázaro:** It's impossible.

Here is an example of a strong FRG supporter—a municipal-level party leader—who saw the FRG as an anti-poor party, just like the rest. He rehearsed key elements of radical pessimist common sense, blending radical ideas and concepts with local understandings. His use of the racial slur “*Indio*” alongside “peasant” highlights his understanding of the inherence of racial discrimination in class exploitation. Lázaro also valued human rights, framed as material economic improvements for the poor. The motor of this indigenous vision of social democracy was organization, which he described as a beehive, the whole of which was more powerful than any individual part. Their bloody struggle won some peace, and some rights, which the people saw as legitimate. In his imaginary, the left still represented collective indigenous political desire. However, he believed that the changes needed to satisfy that desire would never transpire. He understood collective indigenous and popular agency to be virtually ineffective. Lázaro imagined the state as an agent with clear intentionality: the pure calculated self-interest of a man (“him”) sitting in a government building, indifferent to protest and never following through on campaign promises. He stopped supporting leftist parties and movements because they never won and shifted his loyalties for personal interest, joining the FRG because it had the best shot. Lázaro was painfully aware that Ríos Montt was a mass murderer and that voting for him ran counter to peace, justice, and democracy, although Lázaro publicly denied it during the campaign. He knew that Ríos Montt’s victory would cement Mayas as second-class citizens, but he saw his participation as insignificant in the broader scheme of things.

Regarding the participation of former leftists in the FRG, Nelson writes that “those who are lashing in to these state-related identities are challenging their own assumptions about the world and power. They are assuming identifications that challenge the old divide of the war years between the good popular movement and the enemy state” (2009, 71). Many see these “old” categories as of limited use in the reconfigured post-war milieu. Engaging the state, she suggests, especially as it opens new spaces for indigenous and human rights, multiplies agency beyond what is usually possible through collective agency. But in San Pedro, most alliances with authoritarian parties, and especially the FRG, were characterized by pessimism and *interes*, not an uncritical acceptance of populist rhetoric or a calculated “struggle from within.” Bleak options motivated others to distance themselves from politics entirely.

Mayan Sampedranos were not *afraid* to vote for radical parties, although many feared what might happen if they joined political protests. But most did not see the point. In their perspective, the left still had nice ideas but was unlikely to win elections or change the country. For many Sampedranos, this point was so obvious it was hardly worth discussing: organizing and protest that challenged the existing powers were ineffective and could bring violence. The turning point in this imaginary was the violence of 1982, when collective political struggle hit a wall. McAllister (2003) argues that counterinsurgency violence interrupted Chupolenses' sense of how to continue to be "good people" who would fight for their rights and forced them to focus on local ethnic politics. In San Pedro indigenous leaders opted to abandon national reform and class politics and to focus on ethnic advancement through party politics and individual *superación*, and in the process altered their conception of what good people should be. Guarded optimism in the immediate postwar moment faded as the limits to democracy became more apparent.

### Imagining the Guatemalan State

Nelson (2009) contends that "if the state represents the interests of the elites, it looks strong. . . . But in the postwar it also claims to represent the people . . . and there it looks pretty pathetic" (218). Most Mayan Sampedranos imagine the state as a tool for the wealthy, willing and able to transgress the law to violently crush political reform. They view it as an all-encompassing and insuperable force. Against this imaginary backdrop, "new" violence in defense of neoliberal democratic order was continuous with counterinsurgency terror, marking similar limits on political agency. This imaginary replaces the angry and empowered dissident subject position with that of the abused victim, who is also enraged but frustrated in relation to the state. Within this imaginary, most Mayan Sampedranos did not see the vote as a mechanism for meaningful political change, especially not at the national level. Restless energies were invested elsewhere, such as trying to migrate, lining up projects, criminal activity, or seeking salvation in evangelical *cultos*.

Campaign rhetoric aside, almost no one I spoke with—including party higher-ups—explained their support for authoritarian parties in terms of

agreement with their party's plans for government or ideology. Indeed, I met no one who voted for Ríos Montt primarily because of his evangelism. In fact, many FRG supporters, even evangelicals, were very critical of Ríos Montt's past, and many doubted his Christianity. Furthermore, no one I spoke with saw the FRG as more "Mayan" than any other party. Instead, almost everyone cited concrete, immediate, community, or personal benefits: usually development projects. Most voted for the candidate who promised them the most and who seemed most likely to win; some individuals joined for leadership positions. Only URNG members expressed ideological loyalty. Mariano Díaz, who identified as a conservative when we spoke in 2004, joined the center-leftist UNE in 2007 in a failed attempt to win another term. When I asked him why, he told me that after the war ideology no longer mattered.

Although grassroots faith in the revolution was obliterated by the counterinsurgency, the modernizing indigenous leadership retained elements of a radical political imaginary. In an interview in 2009, then-*alcalde* Julio Ambrocio, who had become a regional leader of the anti-mining movement, eloquently expressed a widely held sentiment:

But I have seen, I have known and I have studied the impact of the political processes that have happened. The pattern is that in all of them, the state has become the worst enemy of all of the people. . . . Because the state is a monster for all of us. . . . The people that occupy those spaces approach with very personal interests. . . . It is the children of the same twenty-two families that generate the government of this country . . . who . . . haven't even known poverty. They are people who sit at a desk and resolve everything technically because in the end it does not matter to them. Because here we have never heard of a government minister or functionary who actually evaluates the needs of a community. . . . There is no direct contact with the people. It is a complete monster that cannot be removed. Look, when the people rise up and protest . . . they want to protest against many things, for example, the case of mining. They put up a wall of soldiers, a wall of police, and a wall of everything. . . . This creates *malestar* [unrest] in the society because it does not get where it needs to go. There is no table for dialogue. There are no direct compromises with the government. The offerings come during the campaign, of course, but those are for problems that the people are going to always have. How are we going to break this? This is why I say the state is a monster.

Ambrocio thinks that the state behaves like a monster because it violently blocks reforms and rules from a distance in an uncaring manner (“People’s safety does not matter to the agents of the state”).<sup>17</sup> Repeated performances of violence, such as the intensification of attacks on peasant land-rights activists and assassinations and arbitrary incarceration of political leaders and unionists, clarified for Sampedrinos the low value of indigenous life in state and corporate calculations and reinforced the foundational violence of the state, the root of popular discontent, by fostering resignation. But more than resignation, a mix of radicalism and pessimism best defines local conceptions of their shared democratic predicament (“the state is the enemy of the people” . . . “how are we going to break this?”). Sampedrinos reluctantly accepted that democracy was limited to ameliorating “problems the people are always going to have” to the exclusion of fundamental reforms, and the even lesser goal of implementing the peace accords, which were commonly viewed as more radical than they really were.

Many Sampedrinos experienced neoliberal democracy as a continuation of historical oppression, not liberation from it. Guatemala’s violent history is the main reason that Mayas have not elected a leftist president and that many avoid radical movements. Frustration and disempowerment are hardly unique to Guatemala, but arguably more pronounced there: violence constitutes the conditions of emergence and operation of neoliberal democracy in most of the world, and electoral options are limited even in Western nation-states. Although indigenous Sampedrinos were less organized with the revolution than villagers in Colotenango, Ixtahuacán, or Chupol, and abandoned it soon after the massacres and the civil patrols, many nonetheless regarded democracy in light of the failure of prior struggles and as explicitly excluding the revolutionary demands that they shared.

Kay Warren (2002) suggests that Mayas engage in politics outside of state and political parties because of long histories of mistreatment. Perhaps this helps explain regional abstention rates of about 40 percent and the large number of null votes. Many indigenous Sampedrinos avoided party politics altogether, while others drew the line at voting for Ríos Montt. But many saw such principled stances as luxuries they could not afford. Many null votes for president were refusals of the farce of neoliberal democracy.



Felipe Gutierrez was a teacher in his late thirties in 2004, whose father ran as part of the FRG ticket. After emphasizing that the people had strongly supported the guerrillas' fight against discrimination, he explained why he thought people who had participated in the guerrillas had turned against them, and then moved to the FRG:

**Gutierrez:** Almost everyone was in favor [of the guerrillas]. Some have the pride, the older ones. But when we talk about the present . . . '82 and after were tremendously hard. The people closed themselves up.

[During the campaign] every person had to think [about] whom they were going to support. They say that it is true that Ríos Montt killed people in '82, but that the war can't come back again. It's not so easy that the war will come back again. So it's OK to join the FRG.

**NC:** Many say that he wasn't responsible for the violence, that it was Lucas García.

**Gutierrez:** I imagine it was Ríos Montt who killed the people. I know the history. He gave the order in the [military] zone. The soldiers were under the order. I didn't vote for him. I told my father clearly, "I'm not going to vote for Ríos Montt. For Mariano Díaz, yes." I marked a "null" for that reason, because I didn't agree.

After the popular guerrilla movement was crushed, people closed up, and, for most villagers, pride turned to silent shame and self-recrimination. Gutierrez sadly recalls preelection debates that turned on the fact that, although everyone knew Ríos Montt was a murderer, voting for him was unlikely to make the war return. Gutierrez found Ríos Montt too repulsive, so he voted null, even though Ríos Montt's victory would help his family. His was a vote of conscience, a mix of heartbreak and principle that showed respect for what he thought the ritual should mean: choosing what was right over personal interest, a refusal to be duped or to dupe others. Voting for the URNG was so futile as to go unmentioned.

Jennifer Burrell (2013) describes uncertainty as a central part of a post-war structure of feeling in Guatemala, and many scholars have noted the unpredictable nature of social life in an age when capital flows are reorganizing local lives and livelihoods. And although uncertainty was also pervasive in San Pedro, it was accompanied by numerous certainties: surfaces deceive, far-reaching political change was off the table, institutions benefit the wealthy at their expense, the state works with corporations to

exploit and harm indigenous people, accepting resources from these entities comes with strings attached, indigenous villagers are singled out for discriminatory and harmful treatment by interlinked sovereigns that hide their true motives behind humanitarian pretenses, and indigenous life can be extinguished without consequence.

Harry West (2005) describes how rural Muedans in Mozambique used discourses of sorcery to scrutinize successive regimes of state power. He sees sorcery as a language of power that is a kind of anti-knowledge: an ever-present, proactive suspicion of people who exercise power by entering into an invisible domain. Pessimism bleeds into skepticism and mistrust of any institutions and individuals claiming to improve and protect local lives. Muedans, then, are like cynics who maintain a “permanent negative and critical attitude towards any kind of political institution, and towards any kind of *nomos*,” or law-making entity (Foucault 2001, 105). Noting the prevalence of discourses of *engaño* (deception) among rural Mayas and post-genocidal Guatemala in general, Nelson (2009) argues that a habit of suspicious accusation born out of decades of manipulation guides interpretations of the nontransparent actions and intentions of various groups and institutions in the postwar moment. Sampedranos also perceive hidden self-interested motives behind most discourses of truth they encounter in the postwar terrain. Although some may read skeptical expressions as resistance—and there is little question that they reveal highly sophisticated critical understandings of the workings of power—these do not typically translate into radical political agency. Pessimism and mistrust can inform engagement as well as disengagement.

### Defending Territory against Neoliberal Extractivism

Free market reforms were promoted alongside the peace process as a path to prosperity and modernity after Guatemala’s long war.<sup>18</sup> Foreign investment capital was believed to create jobs and free trade to lower the cost of imports and increase exports. Planners predicted that entrepreneurialism and new economic opportunities would transform the countryside and that decentralization would encourage rural villagers to govern themselves according to traditional cultural values as austerity and privatization reduced the state’s responsibility for social welfare.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the

result was sharper inequality and expanding financial and physical insecurity. Unemployment and violent crime rose precipitously, fueling unprecedented migration to the United States. Rural communities felt increasingly left out of new opportunities and abandoned by the state, left to fend for themselves in a hostile landscape.

Amid a rising level of precariousness in the decade after the peace accords, changes in the global political economy that increased global demand for land-based resources coincided with free market regulatory frameworks to set the stage for Guatemala's extractivist boom.<sup>20</sup> Conflict over the extractive industries soon overshadowed contestation over the stalled accords. The World Bank had made multimillion-dollar loans for rural roads, conservation projects, and land titling programs (through market-led agrarian reform) that would literally and legally prepare the ground for extractive industries, while making other, more-sustainable projects untenable. Eric Holt-Giménez (2008) describes how the exorbitant costs of creating a mine shed through "territorial restructuring" were borne by Guatemalan taxpayers, while the 1997 Mining Law required mining companies to pay an astonishingly low 1 percent of royalties to the state. Private interests responding to rising energy prices grabbed up large swaths of land to plant African palm and sugar cane, "flex-fuel" crops that could be marketed as food or fuel. These chemical-intensive crops displaced thousands of subsistence farmers who found themselves on the outside of the extractive economy, unlike national elites who profited immensely.<sup>21</sup>

Many rural communities have organized to stop the advance of neo-liberal reforms. In 2005 regional social movements in rural Huehuetenango blocked the Inter-American Highway at the Naranjales Bridge in Colotenango to protest the ratification of CAFTA, a Pandora's box of pro-market reforms that was never voted on by the population. The National Police advanced and fired live rounds at the protestors, wounding over a dozen and killing a Mayan teacher, Juan Lopez Velásquez, demonstrating an aggressive disregard for Mayan lives and rights to free assembly. Fabiana Ortíz and Anna Maria Ramos, indigenous women from *Asociación Ceiba* participating in the march, stood up to the army and were joined by several other women. Their courageous stand ended the shooting, and retellings of Fabiana and Ana Maria's bravery evoked stories about CONAVIGUA's confrontation of civil patrollers on that same bridge in 1993.<sup>22</sup> But the National Police had also made its point.

By far, the most contentious aspect of neoliberal reforms has been mining, which most communities see as a clear and present danger of permanent damage to the environment from which they would benefit little, despite the government's and the mining companies' promises of employment and proper safeguards. In 2005 the town of Sipacapa, San Marcos, held a highly publicized community *consulta* (consultation) vote in which 98 percent of the population opposed the operation of an open-air gold mine, setting off a string of *consultas* in the region.<sup>23</sup> The right to *consulta* is based in International Labor Organization Treaty 169, which recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to make decisions regarding development and policies that affect the natural environment in their territories. This right is also enshrined in many municipal codes. When surveyors began work on dozens of mining concessions and machinery was put into place, communities began to organize to defend their territories.<sup>24</sup> Since 2005, more than a hundred communities have carried out *consultas*, and all of them have rejected mining, as well as other mega-development projects such as hydroelectric dams, which rural residents see as dedicated to providing energy for mining operations or remote sale rather than local consumption. These efforts have stalled many, but not all, projects. In response, the state and the mining companies have tried to undermine the right to consultation and have claimed that the constitution grants the state subsoil rights. Stuart Kirsch (2014) calls efforts to prevent new mines before they start the “new politics of time,” made possible by activists in collaboration with international NGOs (the “politics of space”), a strategy that is much more effective than fighting to mitigate environmental harms once they are allowed to exist.

Activists have united the various strands of resistance to the neoliberal project—increasingly called “neoliberal extractivism”—under the “defense of territory” umbrella, the dominant movement frame since the peace accords.<sup>25</sup> The defense of territory draws on language from ILO 169 and discourses of indigenous rights and sovereignty. Proponents frame the movement against mining, land grabs, and megaprojects as a “continuation of resistance against colonialism, genocide, and neocolonialism” and as a “new way of practicing citizenship,” a form of direct democracy with connections to the radical politics of the late 1970s (Rasch 2012: 161).<sup>26</sup> The defense of territory frame represents a local resignification of democracy, defining it as the popular will, manifested through *consultas* and

ancestral authorities, outside of party politics, rooted in a fundamental right to indigenous territorial self-determination in pointed contrast to the sovereignty of the Guatemalan state. The *consulta* process has reinvigorated indigenous forms of self-government, such as the *Alcaldías Indígenas* (indigenous mayoralties) that are recognized in the peace accords, and the movement proposes an alternative territorial project rooted in conceptions of sustainability and indigenous cosmovisions, known as Buen Vivir. It is a form of “indigenous cosmopolitics” that exceeds the terms of traditional leftist discourse by refusing a division between humans and Mother Earth, embraced here as a sentient being (see de la Cadena 2010, Escobar 2016), and also by insisting on the primacy of indigenous authority and governing structures. The defense of territory in Guatemala emerged as a dialectical reaction to the aggressive expansion of an extractivist project in a context where indigenous-rights discourses had recently gained official recognition in the wake of genocide and where peace accords and state multiculturalism had failed to resolve fundamental social contradictions. Indigenous environmentalism provides a language from which to politicize the social and environmental harms externalized by extractive industries that would not be profitable otherwise. It draws attention to trade-offs, such as the fact that growing sugar cane requires so much water that rivers are diverted, subsistence farmers go without, and fisher folk lose their livelihoods.

Activists in the journalist and social scientific collective *Prensa Comunitaria*, have made good use of social media to garner national and international attention to local struggles against state repression, such as arbitrary arrests and the imprisonment of “territory defenders.”<sup>27</sup> Movements for the defense of territory enjoy widespread support among rural residents, social movements, and progressive NGOs. The defense of territory unites Ladinos and indigenous interests despite historic antagonisms by focusing on their shared need for clean water and attachments to place. Assertions of indigenous territorial rights and the sentience of nature transcend the territorial boundaries of nation-states as well as the logic of capital that reduces nature to exchange values.

In 2014 the Guatemalan Congress passed the “Monsanto Law,” which extended intellectual-property-right protections to genetically modified vegetables. This incited wide-scale indigenous protests that shut down the country and forced the law to be revoked (Grandia 2017).<sup>28</sup> Given

this potential to challenge the political order, it is not surprising that the defense of territory has provoked a strong counterreaction. As community opposition to the neoliberal project became more vocal, it was met with state violence, reaching its worst (so far) under former President Otto Perez Molina (2011–2015). The army hard-liner declared states of siege in numerous communities throughout the country to repress local opposition to mining and mega-development. When, in 2011, leaders in Santa Cruz Barillas burned the equipment belonging to a hydroelectric company, the army arrested dozens of residents and leaders during a state of siege.<sup>29</sup> Protestors who block roads and work areas are frequently dislodged in violent *desalojos* (evictions), and a growing number of community opposition leaders have been assassinated. The army and national police opened fire against indigenous residents of Totonicapán, Sololá, whose autonomous government organized a blocking of the Inter-American Highway to protest rising electricity costs. The attack killed seven and wounded dozens. Territory and human rights defenders denounce this pattern of violence and repression as the “criminalization of protest,” an attempt to silence and intimidate dissent. Repression continued even after Perez Molina’s regime was overthrown because of corruption revelations from the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).<sup>30</sup>

The defense of territory faces many challenges, foremost of which is translating it into an alternative territorial model with a relevance to a wide range of working people and also taking concrete steps toward building durable alliances with existing movements for redistribution and against neoliberalism (Reina 2008). The 2016 March for Water was one effort to raise awareness about and build broad-based opposition to the common practice of diverting rivers to irrigate private plantations, which results in water scarcities downstream and contamination. The 250-kilometer march was a response to the poisoning of the Passion River in Sayaxche, Petén, with agrochemical runoff from African palm plantations. It drew thousands of participants from dozens of communities and organizations and garnered significant urban support for a rural-led initiative.

The defense of territory in Guatemala and elsewhere parallels the formulation of alternative projects within La Vía Campesina, the global peasant movement, whose influential conception of food sovereignty centers around the significant redistribution of land-based resources, understands local access and control as human rights, and draws heavily on

indigenous worldviews (Desmarais 2007, Nyéléni Declaration 2007). Food sovereignty and the defense of territory overlap significantly, but also differ, with the former more committed to traditional peasant struggles and demands and the latter to indigenous tradition and worldviews. Activists are engaged in ongoing dialogue around alternatives to neoliberalism. Finding a movement frame and programs of action with wide relevance is no small task given the fragmentation of the peasantry through decades of market integration that have increased social stratification and displacement.<sup>31</sup>

How long can communities keep up the fight against corporations lured by visions of mega-profits and prepared to use a combination of violence and incentives to gain access? Communities can be worn down by constant threats. Pessimism is one of the greatest obstacles to the defense of territory. I was in Huehuetenango in July 2009 as popular organizations planned anti-extraction roadblocks nationwide. A few weeks prior, I watched as the crowds in the Sunday market listened closely to the URNG Party members perched atop the municipal building with a bullhorn, criticizing mining and urging Sampedranos to join the protests. Several people I spoke with that morning said they planned to attend, which was not surprising because Sampedranos had almost unanimously rejected mining in a recent community *consulta*. When the day arrived, however, only members of URNG and the CUC (small and heavily overlapping groups) showed up. Even though most villagers in San Pedro opposed mining and austerity, few showed up at the protests or at the following demonstrations against the attacks on protestors. Many were worried, for good reason, about retaliation. I interviewed Anastasio Bravo again soon afterward and asked him why he did not participate. He explained, “It’s already decided; we can’t stop it,” and rehearsed the defeated interpretation of *Nunca Más* that had become familiar. His sister, a local women’s leader, put it more bluntly: “We don’t go because we are afraid of getting shot, like what happened at Naranjales.” Violence pitted the desire for self-preservation against the desire for social justice. Insidiously, collective conformity in the face of imposed policies creates an appearance of consent and frames dissent as a minority opinion, further legitimizing the use of violence.

Despite widespread opposition to extraction, villagers vote for parties whose leaders fully support it, parties that will side with extractive

corporations and use violence if necessary. Through elections, resource extraction gains a claim to democratic legitimacy and the force of law, however lawless and antidemocratic mining appears to local residents. Leaders of the anti-extractivist movement worry about losing momentum during political campaigns when participants are distracted by local contests and bought off by party bosses. Even though pessimism limits the defense of territory, the movement frame helps communities learn to trust and rely on one another, see connections between their local struggles, gain regional and international support, and feel the power of their actions reverberate while they imagine a common future: a greener and more inclusive economy resonant with indigenous cosmologies, under indigenous authority, and out of the shadow of extractive industries and the state that supports them.

### **The Politics of Pessimism**

Sampedrano political imaginaries demonstrate the failure of army and neoliberal hegemony and underscore deep affinities between Mayan and radical politics. But major elements of their political desires have been illegible in official democratic spaces, blurring the line between war and postwar. Rather than consider this a feature of failed democracy in a backward “elsewhere,” indigenous imaginaries in San Pedro urge us to recognize dense, mutually reinforcing interconnections among the Guatemalan state, the US government, and national and multinational capital that constitute the unquestioned background to neoliberal democracy.

Many Sampedranos maintained their desire for collective rights and redistributive policies characteristic of the radical democratic imaginary of twentieth-century Latin America. Yet the distinctive demands and forms of political agency associated with that imaginary were missing, excluded a priori from neoliberal democracy. Mayan Sampedranos who engaged the state and other violent sovereigns were not dupes or “collaborators,” and they did not vote for murderers such as Ríos Montt out of fear or straightforward ideological resonance. They mainly did so to survive and get by, but they felt far from strategic; they saw opportunities for individual and small-group gains without the possibility of radical reform. Pondering tensions between neoliberal restructuring and dreams



of the good life in the North American context, Lauren Berlant (2012) describes “cruel optimism” as a tragic condition in which an object of desire undermines the possibilities for its own attainment. Although some are content with individual market advancement, desperate resignation, not false optimism, better summarizes Sampedranos’ relationships with the violent sovereigns in their midst.

Powerlessness and resignation were the preeminent goals of counterinsurgency throughout Latin America. Benson and Kirsch (2010) describe how corporations strategically generate resignation when they respond to critique by reinforcing the belief that harm is inevitable and change is impossible. David Graeber (2013) sees the denial of alternatives as a central tenet of neoliberalism. Resignation in Guatemala is thus part of a global structure of feeling manufactured at different scales through distinct processes of state formation and capital accumulation in efforts to forestall organized dissent. Understanding specific configurations of pessimism and mistrust is critical to disentangling them and constructing alternatives, lest they become fodder for authoritarian populists, which appears to be the new global trend.

It is difficult to identify one specific kernel uniting the diverse expressions of pessimism on the neoliberal landscape, but post-conflict pessimism most frequently derives from a sense that official democratic spaces constitute the disappointing upper limit on social transformation, signaling change without delivering. Pessimism regarding neoliberal democracy in Western Europe and North America often grows from an inability to imagine a world beyond corporate control, as white North Americans in particular perceive a host of attacks on the American Dream from the “outside”: minorities on welfare; immigrants stealing “American” jobs; liberal politicians and “big-government” regulations; the national debt; Barack Obama’s alleged socialist, Muslim, and antigun agenda; and fears of Islamic terrorism.

White Americans in the United States tend to see economic and social problems as deviations from “true” capitalism, limited government, and the rule of law rather than as effects of capitalism, globalization, austerity, and deregulation, all of which are legally sanctioned. Most refuse to consider alternatives to capitalism, even as it victimizes them and conflicts with their moral sensibilities. Such aggrieved perceptions are evident in profound ambivalence toward avatars of free market capitalism, such as

Walmart, Wall Street, and insurance companies, which are suspected of hiding great harm beneath promises to do good (Copeland and Labuski 2013). Mistrust in the global North is produced by many of the same processes of nontransparent government and economic predation that inspire pessimism (and rebellion) among many poor, peasant, and indigenous communities in the global South, even as the harms, conceptions of justice, and histories of struggle differ.

Although many Mayas may have given up on radical change, others continue to fight for it, both through and against the system. Dissatisfaction with the deteriorating post-conflict state of affairs festers among Mayan youths who have grown up exposed to idealistic discourses of democracy, human rights, and universal religious brotherhood, positive images of Mayanness, and life in the United States. Their frustration and collective power animate national teachers' strikes, the anti-extractive movement, and protests against austerity, state violence, and corruption. New forms of agitation may reflect, and provoke, changes in political affect and a shifting of the political horizon beyond the thinly blunted oppression of neoliberal democracy. By drawing connections between long-standing injustices and common frustrations, challenging violent sovereigns and their proxies, and rejecting promises to protect life conditioned on the preservation of violent structures, new movements hold the potential for radical collective action as well as far-reaching redistribution and autonomy.

### **The Radical Organization of Pessimism**

In an essay on the politics of poetry, Walter Benjamin (1999 [1929]) distinguishes the “absolute” pessimism informed by the surrealist profane illumination of bourgeois freedom and everyday life from the optimistic imagery that unites bourgeois and socialist poetics. He calls for an “organization of pessimism,” with pessimism defined as follows:

Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals. And unlimited trust only in . . . the peaceful perfection of the air force. (217–18)

Only pure pessimism, he wrote, could “expel moral metaphor from politics” and replace contemplation and “metaphysical materialism” with direct “contact with the proletarian masses,” an encounter that changes circumstances rather than attitudes. He imagined surrealist art as a technology designed to make “body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge” (56). He continues:

The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, only be produced in that image sphere to which profane illumination initiates us.

Rural Mayas do not lack for “innervation” or profane illumination; mistrust of powerful and interlinked forces is a deeply engrained habit of social and political perception rooted in countless experiences of abjection. Rather than incite revolt, as it did in the 1960s and 1970s, this profane illumination is more often suffocated by repressive violence that generates pessimism about the very possibility of liberatory collective action. The affective force of violence overwhelms reactions against suffering and injustice by insisting that resistance only brings worse pain. But these reactions do not simply disappear; they remain a source of tension and conflict, and they continue to build, even though some individuals have found relief through market advancement. Many bottle up their frustrations in stress and worry; others prey on those more vulnerable. Systematic targeted violence clamps down the lid on the pressure cooker that is Guatemalan society, but it is not enough on its own to stop the eruptions, signs of which are everywhere.

Authoritarian organizations of pessimism through neoliberal democracy and development channel frustration with everyday violence and defeat into movements for the continuation of the political order.<sup>32</sup> In the following chapters I describe how electoral politics and authoritarian populism achieve this outcome. By contrast, the radical organization of pessimism channels frustration with suffering and exclusion into political movements to dismantle the structures that produce them and to create more-just and more-inclusive social arrangements. In Guatemala these structures are the liberal (and now neoliberal) economy and

the Ladino state, the former systematically dispossessing and exploiting indigenous and poor people, the latter gracing this misery with the stamp of legality and excluding Mayas from positions of power (Cojtí 2007). Both were founded on violence and require violence to persist. Many Mayan Sampedranos, like many other poor and indigenous Guatemalans, fought for redistributive social democracy and suffered the consequences. Reorganizing pessimism in a society like Guatemala involves forming alliances across lines of difference—between Mayas and Ladinos, men and women, rural and urban populations—lines that are tense and difficult to cross in Guatemala’s authoritarian political culture, where bodies are strictly mapped onto hierarchal social roles (Nelson 1999). It also requires overcoming increasing stratification and antagonism within Mayan communities.

Certain moments testify to the potential of this radical organization to come into being: the revolution of 1944, the guerrilla movement, and more-recent movements in defense of territory and against corruption. These examples also speak to the difficulties in forming cross-ethnic, cross-class alliances for meaningful and lasting social change, and also to the shape-shifting powers of forces that maintain injustice. Reorganizing pessimism in Guatemala also involves taking action despite the knowledge that resistance will sometimes be met with sheer brutality. In moments of rupture, the belief that resistance is futile is overwhelmed by the knowledge that maintaining the status quo guarantees incessant assaults on bodies and lives, as powerful interests will concede nothing without a fight. Everyday suffering and flagrant exposure to harm reach a point of unbearability, where even potentially futile action seems better than doing nothing.

Foucault (2001) discusses the courage of the *parabesiastes*, the truth teller, who places herself or himself at risk by saying “something dangerous—different from what the majority believes” or is at least willing to say such a thing (15). In Guatemalan democracy, dissident speech becomes coded as threatening when connected to concrete efforts to alter the political economic order that runs on the broken bodies and dreams of the indigenous majority, not only imagining but attempting to bring into existence a new set of social relations that is based in reciprocity and equality, and that directly challenges entrenched hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Embodied dissident speech beyond the fear of pain or death

was on display in the defiance of the gunfire of the National Police at Naranjales Bridge and in the courage of many other Guatemalan activists who protest despite the risk of beatings, abandonment, imprisonment, and assassination. These examples of the radical organization of pessimism are enduring features of neoliberal democracy in Guatemala.