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The Democracy Development Machine

Nicholas Copeland

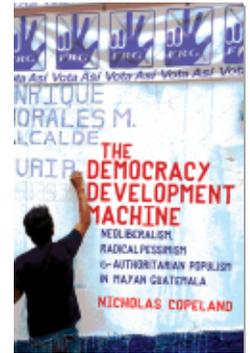
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CRUEL POPULISM

Mutilating the People

When Efraín Ríos Montt's helicopter attempted to land at a presidential campaign rally in San Pedro Necta at the peak of the 2003 electoral season, he was greeted with hostility. Mayan FRG supporters congregated in the municipal *fútbol* field holding blue-and-white party banners were outnumbered by a swarm of angry villagers, mostly indigenous men, armed with machetes and hoes, and throwing rocks.¹ They forced Ríos Montt to make an emergency landing in a nearby town. The enraged crowd consisted of former civil self-defense patrollers ("ex-PAC"), the antiguerrilla paramilitary mustered by Ríos Montt and disbanded by the peace accords. Ex-PAC members were furious because although the FRG had promised them payment for their service—the ex-PAC movement's central demand—they had paid only the party affiliates, even many who never patrolled. Weeks later, the San Pedro ex-PAC kidnapped four journalists from the *Prensa Libre* when they arrived to report on an ex-PAC demonstration at Puente Cable, blocking the Pan-American Highway. The reporters were beaten, threatened with being set on fire, kept overnight against their will,

then released when the FRG-led government promised to honor the ex-PAC payments. Despite betraying a significant portion of what many assumed to be his natural constituency, Ríos Montt and his party won the local election handily. Emblematic of a violent and chaotic electoral season, Guatemala's sixth since the democratic transition and the second since the peace accords, these events raise serious questions about the nature and sources of grassroots support for the authoritarian populists in the rural highlands.

A notorious former dictator who took power by coup just before the worst period of the armed conflict, key author of the scorched-earth campaign, supreme leader of the ultra-right, ultra-corrupt FRG, a noted evangelical who campaigned as a friend to the poor and humble, General Efraín Ríos Montt was an enigmatic presidential candidate to say the least. His vituperative rhetoric blended law-and-order themes with apocalyptic Christian moralizing and populist promises to defend poor indigenous communities against the rich.² Ríos Montt's campaign was resoundingly opposed by the national press, human rights organizations, the United Nations, the Catholic Church, and donor countries (including the United States), all of which saw his rise as a return to the violent past and a threat to democratic reforms.³ Many Guatemalans, especially those on the left, hated and feared Ríos Montt and regarded him as a mass murderer—quite distinct from his populist persona.⁴ Ríos Montt lost in the first round of the national election, but the FRG won a near sweep of the mayoral races in the rural highlands, ensuring his congressional seat and immunity from prosecution. What were Mayas who voted for Ríos Montt thinking? What did he, and other mafia-style politicians, mean to them? Did he represent hope, victimization, or both? Did widespread Mayan support for the far right, and the failures of the left, signal Mayan indifference to progressive politics, as some have suggested?⁵ What did “support” and lofty ideals like “democracy” even mean after decades of counterinsurgency and centuries of colonization?

Guatemalan Populisms

Populism is widely recognized as an enduring feature of political life in Guatemala and most of modern Latin America, but it defies easy characterization because of its heterogeneous contents; the analytical slippage

among populist politicians, movements, and discourses; gaps between rhetoric and policies; and its evolution over time. The entities most closely associated with Guatemalan populism in the mid-twentieth century were the nationalist governments of the Democratic Spring of 1944–1954—led by the Revolutionary Action Party (PAR)—and the various organizations of the revolutionary left after the 1954 coup: peasant and indigenous organizations, labor unions, students, and armed guerrilla factions. It was part of a wave of Latin American nationalism that exploded with the Mexican Revolution in 1910–1917 and included Augusto Sandino’s improbable stand against the US Marines in Nicaragua from 1927 to 1933. The PAR challenged the dictatorship, the oligarchy, and US imperialism, using mass organization of the peasantry and working classes to pursue democratic and redistributive policies. A philosophy professor guided by a moral vision of “spiritual socialism” (not actual socialism), Juan José Arévalo became Guatemala’s first democratically elected president in 1944. He abolished forced labor, created social programs, and legalized unions, among other social democratic reforms. President Jacobo Arbenz, a military officer and Arévalo’s defense minister, issued the bold Decree 900, a law that empowered local unions to claim uncultivated holdings of the United Fruit Company, Guatemala’s largest landowner at the time.⁷

These reforms were vanquished but not forgotten during the decades of military dictatorship that ensued after the 1954 coup. Revolutionary nationalism spread among urban mestizo working classes, unions, university students, and the Guatemalan Worker’s Party (PGT). Taking inspiration from the 1959 Cuban Revolution, these groups formed several armed Marxist Leninist organizations to fight for democracy, economic redistribution, and agrarian reform. Revolutionary and radical populist movements found eager adherents as well as detractors in rural indigenous communities, whose members perceived and responded to them according to their own moral economies, cosmovisions, economic conditions, and political struggles.

Human rights groups and popular organizations advanced cautiously in the miniature democratic space that opened in 1985. Leftist-style populism did not fully reemerge until leftist parties and social movements were legalized by the peace accords more than a decade later. By then, the social composition of the left had changed considerably: Mayanists and feminists had formed separate organizations because of both racism

and patriarchy in the traditional left, as well as the need to better pursue distinctive agendas. In 1999 Álvaro Colom Caballeros—nephew of Colom Argueta, the popular reformist candidate assassinated right before the 1978 election—ran for president with the New Guatemalan Democratic Front (FNDG), a united coalition of former leftists, peasant and indigenous movements, human rights organizations, and feminist movements.⁸ The FNDG placed third, with 12.36 percent of the popular vote in the first round.

Indigenous-rights activist Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, ran for president in 2007 and 2011 with the Winaq Party, an alliance of leftist parties and peasant and indigenous movements. She called for full implementation of the accords, increased investment in rural development and education, taxing the rich, respect for human and indigenous rights, and ending impunity for organized criminals who had infiltrated the state. She also criticized austerity, privatization, and extractivism. However, Menchú won only 3 percent of the vote in both races, a sign that the crisis of the left had only deepened.⁹ After the mid-2000s, the leftist movements expanded their opposition to free trade, austerity, mining, and other faces of “neoliberal extractivism” (see chapter 4).

Right-wing populisms have far overshadowed and outperformed left populisms since democratization, raising concerns about the health of Guatemalan democracy. Conservative movements’ rejection of the peace accords and their violent implementation of neoliberal policies did not stop them from gaining a strong following in rural areas. In 1999 Alfonso Portillo, a former leftist who had joined the FRG, won the presidency. Portillo’s candidacy also helped the FRG circumvent a constitutional ban against anyone who had taken power by coup, a provision written specifically to exclude Ríos Montt. Portillo espoused a populist discourse that favored poor, indigenous campesinos over the primarily Ladino Guatemala City in an election that centered on Ríos Montt even though he was not on the ballot.¹⁰ Despite his association with the former general and reports that Portillo had murdered two students while teaching in Mexico, he won in a landslide, taking 63 percent of the vote against the conservative sugar magnate and free market conservative Óscar Berger. In office, Portillo gained a reputation and a durable following as a champion of the poor by raising the minimum wage, fighting monopolies to keep food prices low, launching antipoverty programs, and emphasizing citizen

security, while keeping Ríos Montt, the party's supreme leader, in power with impunity.¹¹

After a term defined by corruption, repression, impunity, a stalled peace process, and deepening neoliberal reforms, Ríos Montt ran for president himself in 2003 in open defiance of the constitutional ban. Like Portillo, Ríos Montt challenged entrenched elites, promised to expand pro-poor policies, and took a hard line on crime. His detractors denounced extreme corruption under Portillo and cited Ríos Montt's responsibility for genocide and warned of a return to the war if he was elected. Progressives, foreign observers, and the traditional elite breathed a collective sigh of relief when he placed third in the first round of voting. Óscar Berger, leading the Grand National Alliance (GAN), an alliance of business-oriented parties, defeated Álvaro Colom in the runoff.

Álvaro Colom Caballeros was finally elected president in 2008 with the center-left National Unity of Hope (UNE) Party. A milquetoast populist, he campaigned on a promise to implement MIFAPRO, a cash-transfer antipoverty program similar to others in Latin America, which won him a strong following in rural communities.¹² He toned down leftist rhetoric considerably, embracing the peace accords (the UNE Party symbol is a dove) and indigenous rights alongside mild criticisms of the economic elite. He defeated Otto Pérez Molina, another former general turned presidential candidate who was accused of war crimes and who campaigned as a right-wing populist promising to use state violence to fight crime to restore order and promote development. Colom Caballeros governed as a pro-market liberal. He implemented MIFAPRO, while selectively repressing rising movements against land grabs and resource extraction, notoriously unleashing state security forces on Q'eqchi' lowlanders in the Poloch'ic Valley who had been displaced by sugar plantations. In 2011, Pérez Molina, having lost to Colom Caballeros in 2007, won the presidency with strong support from the urban Ladino middle class in Guatemala City, who were driven to outrage by a grisly epidemic of crime and violence.

Many Guatemalan neoliberals denounce populism as a threat to national stability, property, and the democratic rule of law.¹³ They see populism as inherently divisive and illiberal, and denounce populist politicians as *caudillos* (authoritarian strongmen). Yet even staunch critics resort to populist appeals in rural areas as they work to forge connections

with poor people and in the process define who the people are and who they are not. In 2011, for example, I followed a mayoral candidate with the center-right Union of National Change (UCN) to a campaign stop in a remote village in the northern sector. To a crowd of mostly male villagers, he spoke of his credentials as a nurse (“Yes, I can save lives!”) and his rural local origins (“I have lived in San Pedro all my life. I was born in [a specific village]. My father was Don X . . .”). His discourse reinforced his links to the area, his honesty, and his work ethic. And by addressing the audience in Mam and describing himself as an “eater of *chunch*,” greens that were eaten mostly by indigenous villagers, he evoked his indigeneity.¹⁴ His followers passed out warm cans of soda, luxury items in rural villages, assisting him in playing the role of benevolent patron.

Following Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005), an eclectic body of critical research examines populism as a political discourse that antagonistically divides the social body between the people and the oligarchy, with “the people” understood as an interpellation, an articulation in the process of constructing hegemony, rather than a pre-given identity or set of demands. Analysis examines how “the people” are constituted and how their demands become linked in an imaginary “chain of equivalence,” and follows the dialectical movement between political rhetoric and strategies and grassroots consciousness. Panizza and colleagues (2005) see populism as a “mirror for democracy” that reveals its deficits and exclusions. Populist leaders politicize social exclusions; claim to defend ways of life under attack; define the people, their grievances, and the threats they face in strategic ways; and pursue the people’s agenda often with loose regard for the rule of law.

Building on these ideas, I ask what the configuration and reception of authoritarian populist appeals in San Pedro revealed about the exclusions and contradictions of neoliberal democracy and development. I also go beyond ideological theories to focus on the material and affective dimensions of authoritarian populist appeals, to reveal how they are constituted by political and economic violence, division, self-interest, and pessimism. This chapter is grounded in a close examination of Ríos Montt’s campaign discourse and strategy in 2003, that of the local FRG mayoral candidate Mariano Díaz in the same year, and the populist campaign of Rony Galicia, a suspected narco-trafficker who won San Pedro’s mayoral elections in 2011.

The combination of unmet political demands and a neutered leftist politics in neoliberal Guatemala creates an opening for authoritarian populists whose appeals hint at structural inequality but focus instead on lower-level social divisions. Paradoxically, these three authoritarian populists combined a critique of the elite with attention to the poverty and suffering caused by and maintained for the benefit of that same elite. They excoriated the perverse effects of neoliberal democracy and development while perpetuating the same practices. Even as many Mayas rejected leftist candidates whose policies they actually endorsed, they supported right-wing populists whose national-level policies and politicians they did not necessarily like or respect but who were seen as far more likely to win and benefit them personally. Predictably, authoritarian populisms did little to resolve frustrations; even worse, they reinforced the lack of alternatives and exacerbated village divisions.

On Populist Resonance

Despite much discussion of the effects of neoliberal multiculturalism on indigenous politics, as well as several attempts to decipher the enigma of Ríos Montt, few have closely examined the specific efforts by parties and movements to compete for followers in rural villages and how villagers perceive and respond to these appeals. Most discussions focus on the resonance of Ríos Montt's populist appeals with grassroots moral economies, even as they interpret this resonance in different ways. David Stoll (2009) reads electoral support for Ríos Montt in the Guatemalan highlands as evidence that the revolution, which Ríos Montt notoriously defeated, did not and does not represent the desires of Mayan people. Conversely, Charles Hale (2006b) argues that rural Mayas found in Ríos Montt's pro-Maya populism a reflection of their progressive worldviews. The most nuanced explanation comes from the historian Virginia Garrard-Burnett (2010, 9–13). Along with favorable opinion polls and eyewitness reports, she cites anthropologists' accounts of Mayas who praised Ríos Montt as an upstanding vision of righteousness who protected their communities from the guerrillas rather than instigating the violence. Garrard-Burnett concludes that Ríos Montt used a combination of violence and moral discourse to elaborate a symbolic universe inhabited by many and that “in

some sectors generated outright enthusiasm for the regime.” However, she claims that this universe imploded by 2003, when his party was implicated in corruption, leading to his poor electoral showing.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, each of these descriptions fits some subset of Ríos Montt’s Mayan supporters, but even taken together, they do not tell the entire story. These interpretations all assume that the success of his populist appeals traded off with perceptions of him as a murderer or as corrupt, and that his support came primarily from people who viewed him positively; they assume a relatively straightforward connection between voting patterns and political desire. But is this relationship always so clear? And how exactly does violence become consent?¹⁶ I found something more complicated in San Pedro, where Ríos Montt won the votes of many villagers who despised him, and he was not unique in this regard.

The authoritarian populist appeals of these three politicians in San Pedro framed the people as powerless, reinforced the effects of state violence on local agency, and fed on the resentments stemming from that sense of defeat. This authoritarian populism did not persuade villagers to share a value orientation with a political movement so much as it carved up political reality in specific ways, foregrounding local grievances and offering ways to even the score. Promising projects *or* abandonment, authoritarian populism operated directly on life processes and bodily anxieties, tapping into pessimism, structural violence, and resentment enjoining villagers into internecine competition with town Ladinos and with one another. Authoritarian populism promised conditional temporary relief for structural violence to poor villagers who had been excluded by patronage networks and were on the bottom of socioeconomic hierarchies of wealth and *capacidad*. It reified and inflamed these divisions and defined them as the primary focus of political contestation without ever questioning the legitimacy of these hierarchies or their structural causes.

In San Pedro the poorest villagers joined authoritarian populist parties to receive limited benefits from the state and to advance their position against local Ladinos and, increasingly, against neighbors who were somewhat better off and politically dominant. Authoritarian populism entrenched interethnic divisions and further disintegrated alliances and trust among a racially excluded class. I call authoritarian populism “cruel” because it promised solutions for poverty and inequality while obfuscating the systematic nature of these failures, blaming them on

individual amorality, blocking national-level reform, and dispersing grassroots organizational capacities. It directly harmed the people whose interests it claimed to defend, and it rendered them complicit with harming others. Right-wing populism in San Pedro was a product of violence that gained traction without ideological resonance and merged democratic processes and counterinsurgency aims, mutilating the people whom it claimed to defend.

The Authoritarian Populism of the FRG

Mayan communities encountered populist discourses and performances through radio, television, billboards, newspapers, word of mouth, and speeches given by national politicians on whistle-stop helicopter tours through mountain towns. They also encountered them face-to-face when candidates visited their villages. Some received fertilizer, projects, cash payments, food, and jobs in advance, and even more were promised those things in exchange for affiliating, voting, helping with the campaign, participating in public demonstrations, and even running for office. National FRG discourse in the late 1990s through the mid-2000s consisted of several main elements: promises to promote the needs of Mayas against the oligarchy; a historical narrative that framed the revolution as a threat and erased Mayan participation in the revolution while responding directly to the criticisms of Ríos Montt, minimizing his role in the violence; a political analysis that foregrounded individual hard work and ignored radical alternatives; and a range of sovereign performances that transgressed the democratic rule of law, including attacks against activists and journalists during the Portillo administration.¹⁷

Ríos Montt presented himself to rural communities as a powerful general, a devout evangelical, and a defender of poor, indigenous Guatemalans against the elite.¹⁸ His political speeches were thunderous sermons laced with calls for moral reform for a wicked country, to transform Guatemala into a New Guatemala, a City on the Hill and a beacon to the world. Billboards in Huehuetenango showed his immediately recognizable mustachioed face, with the words “El General, Sí,” a direct assertion of his wartime identity. Another FRG billboard read “Forget the past; build the future,” a not-so-subtle reference to Ríos Montt’s wartime

atrocities. Ríos Montt seemed eager to make every attempt to evoke his already well-known persona even as he denied responsibility for genocide. At the same time, he sometimes donned indigenous garb to highlight his humble rural origins and identification with poor Mayas. The meaning of the party slogan “Security, Well-Being, and Justice” was somewhat ambiguous but was often linked to anticrime policies and development assistance. These were accompanied by three promises: “I do not lie, I do not steal, I do not abuse [power],” indexed by their symbol of a hand with three fingers raised, the index, middle, and thumb, looking almost like a peace sign. Addressing the rural poor, he proposed funding development by taxing the rich until it hurt, but without ever questioning the general economic system in Guatemala.

Even in his most populist moments, Ríos Montt was explicitly *not* proposing to use his might to transform the political order in the manner once advocated by the guerrilla movement, but to fulfill the counterinsurgency mission. For example, in an interview with a national newspaper in 2003, in response to accusations of grave human rights violations during the war, he said, “What happened was that in the northwest of the country the guerrillas were in power and something had to be done. I armed the pueblo so they could defend themselves against the cruel guerrillas.”¹⁹ Furthermore, he denied any grassroots support for the guerrillas and framed the civil patrols as voluntary. As he had in the past, he called for reform of corruption, which he blamed on individual immorality. This is similar to the early 1980s, when Ríos Montt’s vision of “La Nueva Guatemala required a return to security and the defeat of the guerrillas, but at the same time, the government, so long associated with repression and corruption, had to reestablish its own legitimacy” (Garrard-Burnett 2010, 58). Then and in 2003, this critique of the government was not to be confused with a call for serious economic or political reform. When asked if he thought the system should be changed, Ríos Montt equivocated, “I don’t know, but what we want is to be citizens and stop being servants.”²⁰

Ríos Montt’s populism unambiguously predicated a vision of national refounding on the repression and repudiation of the revolution *and* revolutionary demands. On the campaign trail, Ríos Montt promised to defend “order” and invoked his “rifles or beans” scorched-earth campaign and the civil patrols’ plan as defenses of the pueblo who were

caught “between two armies.” His daughter Zury Ríos, then an FRG *diputada*, also defended the rifles or beans program.²¹ Furthermore, during the 2003 campaign, the FRG government continued to sanction human rights abuses, including the repression of reporters involved in uncovering army massacres.²² Rather than addressing long-standing hierarchies of race and class, Ríos Montt framed Guatemala’s myriad social problems as symptoms of spiritual failings and advocated Christian moral discipline as the path to redemption, an evangelical discourse that drained all historical content from poverty, inequality, and crime. Nothing underlined his reactionary, pro-military stance more than his promise to pay patrollers for their service defending “la Patria” (the Fatherland), which formed the cornerstone of FRG strategy. It is not a mistake that most Guatemalans viewed Ríos Montt’s FRG unequivocally as the party of the army.

Ríos Montt dramatically reinforced the counterinsurgent orientation of his candidacy by orchestrating a major political spectacle in late July 2003. On June 6 of that year, the Citizens Registry of the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) barred Ríos Montt from registering as a presidential candidate, citing the constitutional rule against former dictators running for office. On July 14 the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) affirmed that decision, raising the case to the Constitutional Court (CC). Civil society organizations opposed to Ríos Montt’s candidacy became alarmed, denouncing that the CC was filled with FRG supporters, and called for FRG members to recuse themselves. In response, Ríos Montt warned that the party leaders would lose control of their supporters, a backhanded call for riots. The FRG leadership, including Zury Ríos, organized a protest in Guatemala City on July 24 and 25 with the aim of pressuring the government to reverse its ruling. The party bused in supporters from around the country, paying for their travel and meals, and encouraging rural FRG leaders to send affiliates. Protestors wearing black ski masks and wielding machetes, sticks, and firearms surrounded the CSJ and the CC. They burned tires and cars, broke shop windows, and blocked roads, shutting down traffic in the capitol and in El Quiché, Jutiapa, and Chiquimula. They also threatened journalists. One, Hector Ramírez, died of a heart attack that he suffered after he was chased through town by a mob. Protestors doused two other reporters with gasoline and threatened to set them on fire. In the end the CC, with FRG loyalists unrecused, ruled in favor of

Ríos Montt's registration. Critics referred to these events as *Jueves Negro* (Black Thursday) and *Jueves de Luto* (Thursday of Mourning).

Jueves Negro, along with ongoing acts of repression of progressive journalists and indigenous political leaders, such as Antonio Pop Caal, who was killed under mysterious circumstances in 2002,²³ dramatized the willingness of the FRG to use fear and intimidation to get its way. Although Portillo and Ríos Montt officially denounced the protests, no one seriously doubted their involvement. Tellingly, this political performance—the centerpiece of the campaign—ran counter to Ríos Montt's moral discourse; the party had violated the law and had undermined one of the central rules of the new democracy with impunity. In this respect the campaign closely resembled the performances of sovereign power during the counterinsurgency, which transgressed the law to defend the social order. As a deliberate display of Ríos Montt's power above the law, *Jueves Negro* reminded many people of the war, which ironically made many in San Pedro believe his victory was inevitable, creating a reason to join the party.

Another highly visible public incident undermined FRG claims to represent Mayan peoples. In October 2003, when Rigoberta Menchú was attending a judicial proceeding appealing the CC's decision, she was accosted by hundreds of FRG supporters, several of who yelled, "Go and sell tomatoes in the Terminal, Indian woman!"²⁴ One of these was none other than Juan Pablo Ríos, Ríos Montt's grandson. This story was visible to villagers, who read the papers, listened to the radio, and discussed news. In 2005 the five individuals involved in those acts were the first to be tried and found guilty of racism under Guatemala's new antiracism law and sentenced to three years in prison or a \$400 fine. The party never publicly disavowed their behavior.

Although Ríos Montt posed as a champion of the poor, Rigoberta Menchú identified him as a "symbol of genocide."²⁵ Many of Ríos Montt's followers in San Pedro remembered bitterly the suffering he caused in 1982, even while he denied it on the campaign trail. For many of his own supporters, his very existence as an unpunished leader and candidate inspired despair. Some reasoned that his violent past was not a reason to refuse to vote for him but indicated that he was invincible. Although I did meet a few individuals who said that Ríos Montt was more likely to help the poor than other candidates, I did not meet any FRG supporters who put much stock in his moral discourse and his plans for governance, or

who believed that he would create a New Guatemala based on “a coherent moral vision of safety and order” (Garrard-Burnett 2010, 12).²⁶ This assessment was based on dozens of conversations with pro-FRG villagers in San Pedro in the months following the 2003 election and in subsequent years. In the following years, most had switched parties (Mariano Díaz joined the center-left UNE in 2007), and former FRG supporters spoke more candidly about their political attitudes and motivations.

FRG Populism in San Pedro

How did populist promises and moral discourses translate into local FRG political strategies at the grassroots? Mariano Díaz was in his early forties when he was elected as the FRG *alcalde* of San Pedro in 2003. After losing the 1999 election to José Antulio Morales, Díaz, acting as the leader of the FRG Party locally, was appointed to the board of directors of DECOPAZ, a World Bank-funded organization in charge of implementing infrastructural projects whose operation had been turned over to the state after the first round of projects was completed. The second round of projects was politicized when the FRG took control of the presidency and Congress in 2000. Díaz used his position and influence to build a political following.

Mariano Díaz was a thin man with longish, slicked-back hair, always sharply dressed, usually wearing a tie and expensive polished cowboy boots. He also sported a “soul patch” and wore a silver wristwatch whose sparkle was visible from a distance. Díaz was an enthusiastic and exciting public speaker; he addressed large audiences in the same tone and with the same intensity as an evangelical preacher delivering a sermon, self-consciously imitating Ríos Montt’s distinctive verbal style. Díaz filled his speeches with jokes and humorous stories, and he was fairly self-aggrandizing, speaking at length about his proficiency in attaining projects and his closeness to God. Supporters saw him as a former teacher who had traveled to the United States, a *buena onda* (nice, cool man) who was connected to powerful groups. Several townspeople told me that the election was more about him as a person than the FRG as a party.

Díaz was reviled by most town Ladinos, who saw him as a disgrace to the *municipio*. Several prominent Ladinos expressed embarrassment that he was their mayor. They longed for José Antulio Morales, whom they had vehemently opposed. Likewise, most *capacitados* and professional Mayas

I spoke with strongly disliked Díaz and resented his political ascendance. Enemies spread vicious rumors in an attempt to sow contempt for his authority. Although he claimed to be a teacher, many swore that he never finished high school, never taught classes, and had simply purchased his diploma. Díaz hails from San Pedro, but he had lived and worked in Cancún for several years. One rumor alleged that he left for Mexico because he was implicated in the robbery and murder of a man who was traveling with cash after just having sold his land.

At several town functions I attended, almost no one in the primarily Ladino audiences applauded after he spoke, withholding a common courtesy. Jokes about his strange personal conduct were commonplace. He was frequently referred to as “Mariano *chiflado*” (crackpot) and also “Mariano *payaso*” (clown). Some used more vulgar words. Most assumed that he just wanted to be mayor for personal interest, calling him an opportunistic liar—a criminal with a taste for power. Many were embarrassed that an idiot like Díaz was their mayor, similar to how I felt about US President George W. Bush at the time, and later about Trump.

Despite the fact that he seemed too inexperienced to be mayor, the FRG Party sought Mariano Díaz out. Why? Several facts stood out. Díaz had sought political power in the *municipio* for several years but was not tapped for a leadership spot in José Antulio Morales’ team, which was mainly composed of professionals and highly capacitated leaders. When Díaz joined the FRG in 1999, he lost his first mayoral race to Antulio Morales even when his own party won nationally. My assessment after observing his first year in office and again on visits during his second and third was that party bosses saw in him the perfect combination of characteristics. Díaz was Mayan, so he could speak in Mam and understood villagers’ experiences and needs; he was ambitious, but mostly for personal gain, and eager to partake the fruits of corruption; he was too inexperienced to have political strategies or vision of his own; and last but not least, he was charismatic and energetic enough to attract attention as a candidate.

Mariano Díaz repeated Ríos Montt’s discourse with some modifications. Díaz also played up his evangelical religion and advocated private acts of morality as the mechanism for social change. He also celebrated the populist policies implemented by the FRG under Alfonso Portillo. Moreover, as I described in chapter 1, FRG supporters, including Díaz, denied Ríos Montt’s responsibility for extreme violence, blaming Lucas García,

and argued that Ríos Montt's civil patrols "calmed things down." Both Ríos Montt and Díaz got a last-minute boost by politicizing the patroller payment, including promising payments to people who had never even patrolled. In addition to discourses that attempted to mitigate the negative aspects of voting for Ríos Montt relative to other parties and the politicization of the ex-PAC payment, Díaz crafted a range of positive incentives to persuade his neighbors to support him and the former general.

Most of Díaz's ground strategy was a fascinating tailoring of Ríos Montt's populist appeals into specific matters of local concern. He drew on his evangelical faith to reassure people that he was honest and would not steal once elected. He did not pit evangelicals against Catholics; instead, he successfully wooed blocks of Catholic and protestant supporters with offers of projects. Most significantly, he interpreted Ríos Montt's evangelical-sounding promise to not "make exceptions between people" to mean that no group or village should receive favorable treatment and that no groups should be excluded, especially the neediest. Specifically, he made extravagant development promises in the poorest, most remote villages that had been passed over by Antulio Morales' coalition. He won the most support from villages in "sector norte," the *finca* zone, where villagers owned little or no land, and in villages at too high an elevation to grow coffee. Ironically, the regions where support for the guerrillas was the strongest also provided the base of FRG support in San Pedro, although their perceptions of both entities were quite different.

Additionally, although Díaz had a few Ladino advisors, several Ladinos complained that, when addressing communities in Mam, Díaz promised (or threatened) to cut Ladinos off from development entirely. They accused him of stirring up indigenous villagers' resentments and of provoking conflict, insisting that they, too, had necessities. This reaction overlooked the long history of discrimination by Ladinos that had created that anger, as well as inequalities between town and village. For its part, Díaz's anti-Ladino discourse ignored the fact that most Ladinos were also poor, isolated local antagonisms from national inequalities, thus erasing the origin of the Ladino-Indian divide in postindependence state formation.²⁷

Revolt against *Capacidad*

Of the three main families in Los Altenses, the Ruízes were the strongest FRG adherents. Members of the Ruíz family were on the whole

considerably less educated than the Bravo and the López families, and noticeably poorer. Economic divisions among these indigenous families had widened significantly over the last three decades; the Bravo and López families were increasingly professionalized and had family members in the United States, while the Ruízes were mostly subsistence farmers, often landless, and many traveled annually to the South Coast to work in the *fincas*, a practice that had been long abandoned by their neighbors. At the same meeting with the male members of the Ruíz family described in chapter 2, it quickly became clear that local divisions were not rooted in wartime allegiances but in a pattern of disrespect because of their lower level of *capacidad* and exclusion from leadership positions and patronage in Antulio Morales' political coalition. This was especially painful for Rodrigo, the family patriarch, but felt by all. Rodrigo's nephew, a farmer wearing muddy rubber boots and soiled work clothing, spoke angrily:

They say that there is no one else can get projects like them. No one. Only they can do it. They say they're the smartest. Only they can. There is no one else. That is their pride. In the end when they changed their ways, when they began to take money from the community box. That's where the people separated, and they grabbed their roads, one for one side, the other for the other. The Ruíz family, we met—all 120 of us—and talked about how we could stop them from dominating.

It was not simply the Bravo family's corruption that angered him; it was their pride and arrogance. They seemed to believe that they were somehow smarter and better. Rodrigo's second oldest son, Eriberto, a teacher, continued, seething with resentment:

And bragging too! Bragging that they have *capacidad* to do things! That's how the people realized, with they [the Bravos] getting drunk and saying that they know so much, that they are one way and that we're different. Insults. More than anything they talked about a family. . . . They talked about how more than anyone else the Ruíz can't—that they lack *capacidad*. Because [the Ruízes] lack money and go to the finca or go with a patron to work. That we don't do our own work. . . . With us the main leader of our family is my father. He organized the family. He struggled . . . for them to study. It was to answer them, so that they wouldn't go around criticizing. And the López are also proud. They still are.

NC: But you were divided long before, right, after the murder of Juan López?

Eriberto: Yes. But afterwards we were united to launch Pedro Ramírez [in his 1988 campaign]. Then the people were united again. It was after that that they started to say things about them being the only ones who knew anything. This year is the ninth year of division. In 1996 the division began. . . . We weren't able to win that day. Then we went with another candidate. . . . They have this saying that they're "political technicians" and when we don't win, they criticize us. And we, well, afterwards, we're never going with them. In the next election we helped Mariano Díaz. And Don Rodrigo's friends were in the muni. Then they shut up. That's when we got rid of the "zero." When they have their electoral campaign, only they want to participate. Only they get to be part of the municipal corporation. There's nothing for us. Only them. But not only they can do it.

He was vindicating the family against insulting comments that they were backward, incompetent, and less valuable people who were laughable and deserved disdain, and who did not have the capacity to participate in decision making. In addition to being cut out of resources, a desire to overcome or live down this disrespected identity played a determinative role in their decision to break from the Antulio Morales coalition and join the FRG, whose candidate, Mariano Díaz, offered them a credible path to victory and promised them leadership positions: a shot at respect. This, in addition to the economic windfall that a victory represented for the entire family, overwhelmed their ideological misgivings. The party itself—what it was and what it stood for at the national level—was a source of some guilt and embarrassment, but ultimately worth the sacrifice. Ironically, Eriberto's statement "not only they can do it" was the same criticism that Mayan Sampedranos lodged against Ladinos who had opposed "Indian" advancement in previous decades.

One day I met Rodrigo Ruíz while walking the road to the village, and he pulled me into a cantina that a family operated from behind their house. We ordered a drink, and as the tangy warm mix of *aguardiente*, soda, and lime burned my throat, Rodrigo said, "You have a lot of experience, a lot of studies. You're a *gringo licenciado*. You have more experience than me. I am illiterate. I never studied. But now, where am I? On

top!” He then pulled out his FRG Party affiliate card, which named his job in the party:

The gringos say that Guatemalans are only good for having children. I only have one daughter; the rest are boys. One time, José Antulio in a reunion in front of everyone, heard that I had had another boy. He said, “Good! Now I will have another *mozo* [peon].” But now you see, I have two children who are teachers, and another one who is going to be a teacher. All of them went out [*salieron*]. They’re not farmers.

I asked him, “But being a farmer is honorable work, right?” His answer? “Yes, it is. But now I am working for development.”

Rodrigo was ashamed about his family having less *capacidad* and education because it made them feel like less valuable people. Educating his children eventually paid off, but only after years of mockery. The FRG provided an opportunity for Rodrigo, as an uneducated, illiterate man, to be a leader like he had been in the 1970s, vindicating his own and his family’s dignity. I detected a pattern: numerous FRG village leaders were former members of the Antulio Morales coalition who had been denied leadership positions and the spoils of corruption because they lacked *capacidad*. Their ascension was aided by the fact that projects had become much easier to acquire after the peace accords. With fewer bureaucratic obstacles and more sources, it required less experience and fewer technical skills. Implementing a strategy in close consultation with party bosses, Mariano Díaz built a coalition by offering leadership positions to village men who had been ignored by the Morales coalition. Díaz was selected by the party himself in part because of his lack of *capacidad*, which they associated with malleability.

This practice of targeting less-capacitated leaders who were also typically poorer than their counterparts in other parties added another dimension to the FRG and Díaz’s pledge not to make exceptions between people. FRG populism defined exclusion from patronage networks—which roughly corresponded to class divisions and divisions over *capacidad*—as key foci of political contestation. Resentment about leadership hierarchies based on *capacidad* gave the FRG additional pull with some trusted local leaders, but the party never questioned the legitimacy of *capacidad* as a

neutral measuring stick. Nor did they challenge in any meaningful way the root causes of the general condition of exclusion of indigenous villagers. Nor at the national level did the FRG go beyond superficial indigenous inclusion. Despite a few Mayan *diputados* and several Mayas in symbolic government posts, urban Ladinos controlled most high-level positions in the party, and the FRG ignored the Accord on Identity and Rights.²⁸

At one level, excluded and less capacitated FRG supporters wanted resources and respect. At another, their criticisms of favoritism and exclusion questioned *capacidad* as the prerequisite for political and material inclusion. Douglas Brintnall (1979) described Mayan abandonment of traditional religion of ancestor worship in the 1970s to pursue cash cropping as a “revolt against the dead” that opened new opportunities for political and economic advancement. Decades later, many Sampedranos revolted against *capacidad*, not always explicitly and not rejecting the will to improve in itself, but objecting to its use as a justification for exclusion and interpersonal discrimination. The critique of *capacidad* formed part of a larger critique of neoliberal democracy and development from a standpoint of equality and fairness, which found expression in local FRG discourse and in FRG governing practices in limited and contradictory ways. Rather than resolve these issues, this temporary electoral inversion of the hierarchy of *capacidad* did not point to clear alternatives to neoliberal development and only hardened resentment and divisions between individual villagers and extended families.

My Needy People Who Have Been Deceived All Your Lives

The 2011 national election focused on a contest between Otto Perez Molina, campaigning as an anticrime hardliner, and Sandra Torres, the ex-wife of sitting President Alvaro Colom, from the UNE.²⁹ Torres was a neoliberal centrist best known for spearheading and administering the popular MIFAPRO program. Critics faulted Torres for politicizing MIFAPRO payments and for a scandalous divorce of convenience that intended but ultimately failed to render her eligible to run.³⁰

I returned to San Pedro in June 2011, the peak of the electoral season, with the intention of observing local political processes. To my amazement, and to the amazement of many Sampedranos, Rony Galicia, a

Ladino widely suspected of being a narco-trafficker, was in the lead in the mayoral election and went on to win, representing, even more surprisingly, the URNG. Galicia's name was on everyone's lips when I arrived. Locals were astounded by how much he was spending. He had delivered an improbably large number of projects in the communities already, financing them out of his own pocket, they said. A friend told me that Galicia had spent over one million quetzals, a hefty sum that far surpassed previous campaigns. Most notably, he had procured dynamite to open a road to *Siete Cerros* (Seven Mountains), the village at the highest altitude, previously unreachable by car in the rainy season. Numerous houses were painted with URNG propaganda, yellow and green with an image of a *mazorca* (ear of corn). Such excessive expenditures fueled the narco rumors, according to which Galicia planned to use elected office to gain immunity from prosecution and to avoid police scrutiny. He dismissed this as a *campaña negra* (smear campaign). His involvement in the drug trade was the converse of Taussig's (1999) "public secret": it was something that no one knew for certain but that almost everyone believed and talked about, although few dared to say anything to his face. Narco-conspiracies are common in the remote border region, which is a major overland shipment point to the United States.³¹ Narco-money flows through political campaigns, but it was rare for suspected narcos to win elections. These were not idle accusations. Several URNG members quit the party both because they believed the rumors and because they objected on principle to Galicia's project-centered, clientelist strategy.

Galicia's decision to run with the URNG, the revolutionary party that had never won in San Pedro, compounded the strangeness of his suspected drug dealing and the fact that he was the first Ladino to win local elections since 1990. In addition, Galicia beat a respected incumbent, Julio Ambrocio, a wealthy indigenous lawyer representing the UNE, whose solidarity programs were popular among poor villagers. Ambrocio was also the leader of Antulio Morales' coalition. Why in the world would thousands of indigenous Sampedranos choose a Ladino that almost everyone believed was a narco-trafficker above a leader of unquestionable ability? Was this politics driven by fear of crime or by something more complicated? Rony Galicia's populist discourse and strategy proved quite effective in building a bi-ethnic coalition that included many ideological opponents of the URNG. His success revealed how politicians can navigate a political field

of *engaño* (deception), division, and mistrust to gain followers, and how this process further decimates local organizational capacities.

After several months, from an initial seven parties the local race had boiled down to a duel between Julio Ambrocio and Rony Galicia. Ambrocio was delivering five *laminas* to each supporter as promised, asking his supporters for patience, and promising new projects. His other major argument was that San Pedro would be cut off from the state solidarity program, MIFAPRO, if his party lost: a threat of economic coercion. Galicia insisted that MIFAPRO would continue regardless, and Ambrocio's warning undoubtedly meant less when Torres was removed from the national ballot late in the campaign. But as with most rural mayors, Ambrocio's main weakness was that he had betrayed and abandoned many communities to whom he had promised projects during his previous campaign. Galicia was attempting to capitalize on that resentment when I accompanied him and a caravan of followers to a remote village in July.

Galicia targeted his populist appeal to "humble indigenous people," whom he depicted as uniquely vulnerable. He took pains to demonstrate that he was on their side and that he respected them, even though he constantly referred to himself in the third person. He even lamented that he couldn't speak Mam, referring to "the desire that Rony Galicia has in his heart is to share with his humble people, his indigenous people, his people that speak Mam, his people that love him." These acts underscored the strength of this indigenous identification and the lengths to which politicians, including Ladinos, would go to demonstrate their desire to govern on behalf of the indigenous majority. This in itself was a sign of the way that social relations had changed in the past thirty years. However, Galicia contended that both Mayas and Ladinos could be crooked and argued that a candidate's respectfulness was more important than their ethnicity. Despite the third person, he lambasted politicians who "act like kings of the planet" and "drive around with their windows up": two thinly veiled jabs at Ambrocio, who had a reputation as somewhat of a snob. Similar criticisms were leveled at José Antulio Morales, who some villagers complained treated them with disdain like the Ladino *alcaldes* had in the past.

Galicia's discourse followed the definition of the political held by most parties: that helping indigenous people meant providing specific development projects, anything from potable water for a village, to a job, to corrugated zinc roofing. Development was at the heart of most populist

appeals and was framed as what Mayan people lack and how politicians should show their care and concern. Development marked the horizon of indigenous political inclusion; discussion of structural reforms was non-existent. On this visit, Galicia gifted the villagers with an amplifier, worth several thousand quetzals, as a show of his wealth and generosity. He also repeated a laundry list of projects completed during his campaign and promised to build a *casa de posada* (guest house) where poor families could sleep when their loved ones visited the town hospital, instead of “on the cold street.” The audience was impressed by his deeds and promises, although undoubtedly skeptical. The *posada* idea underscores how development populism involves regularly referencing the vulnerability of the villagers, a reminder of their status as “bare life”: completely expendable as far as the state is concerned (Agamben 1998).

Galicia’s campaign strategy upended standard URNG orthodoxy, which derided project-centered politics as a practice that tricked foolish villagers out of supporting revolutionary candidates who represent their “true” interests. Such criticisms, it should be noted, did not take into consideration the coercive forces that shape calculations of interest and hastily conflate these situated and overdetermined actions with political consciousness, or lack thereof. One longtime URNG member said that Galicia was winning because people “want honey in their mouths,” adding that “this is no longer the URNG.” Another man, amid snickers, blurted, “El URNG ya se chengó!” (“The URNG has fucked itself”). These supporters had given up the moral high ground. They thought it was impossible for the URNG to win on ideas, so they might as well win dirty if only for the opportunities for corruption, even if this ruined the party’s prior reputation as uncontaminated by self-interest.

Rony Galicia framed his candidacy as a means for villagers to defend themselves from a variety of forms of *engaño*, stating, “I want to work for you, my needy people, my people that have been deceived all of your lives.” He repeatedly warned the villagers not to let themselves be tricked, always referencing their vulnerability. He promised to defend the interests of poor, remote villages against closer-in villages and the Ladino urban center. Another aspect of his critique of *engaño* aimed at politicians who took personal credit for projects bought with public money. Galicia painted a strong contrast, claiming that the money he spent on projects was his own. In a shocking display, his wife stood by his side holding up

a fistful of cash to emphasize the point. Here too, his double identity as a narco-trafficker gave him an edge.

Galicia's discourse and strategy reaffirmed the truth that party politics was a space of self-interest, deception, and corruption, a mix of *engaño* that gave it both a bad name and a compelling allure. His manner of defining *engaño* was contradictory, however, and his proposed solutions were limited. He naturalized the commonsense notion that politics was limited to competition with neighbors for scarce resources. His critique of abandonment focused on individual politicians, not the structural shortage of projects or historical inequalities. Like other politicians, Galicia engaged in divisive clientelist politics while simultaneously excoriating it as a *mala costumbre* (bad habit) and a "defect": the typical URNG line. Right before the election, he denounced Julio Ambrocio for attempting to "buy votes" by offering supporters a coupon worth Q400 that would be valid only if he won. But he himself offered projects and gifts in exchange for votes. The cynical double-speak was motivated by and reinforced the belief that this quid pro quo was simultaneously unavoidable and ethically problematic because family and personal interests contradicted with community interests.

Galicia admonished villagers "not to be hypocrites" and said that if they did not help him get elected, they should not pretend they had, and that they could forget about any projects or favors if he won. His speech was laced with threats:

If I lose, they're going to say Rony Galicia lost. But Rony Galicia is not going to lose. He's not going to lose his hands, his woman, his children, his mother, his family, or his house. You, the pueblo, are going to lose, if your sick family members go to the hospital, you're going to freeze to death, "*y que me importa?*" [and what do I care?] If the people from [a village] don't support me, their school can fall into the ravine.

With this speech, Galicia stoked and played upon villagers' very real fear of abandonment: the fate consigned to those who lose elections. He mentioned specific bodily vulnerabilities typical among rural villagers, making clear that he did not share them and could cruelly disregard them. His threat was the instantiation of the sovereign power to let die by the withholding of development projects, violence that in this case would be

carried out by him in his official capacity, for the benefit of his followers with cold indifference to the rest. Galicia's populist discourse did not challenge the national oligarchy but the local political elite. He treated the everyday suffering and vulnerability of the villagers as background information, an inevitable fact that served as leverage for politics, not as something to be addressed by politics. Galicia's candor about his willingness to sentence his opponents to abandonment perhaps made him seem more honest than other candidates because this was an accurate picture of what they had grown to expect from political parties.

Emphasizing the discursive construction of the social as a central aspect of politics, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) describe new forms of conflictivity beyond traditional class politics produced by new forms of perceiving cleavages and lines of power. Their project for a new socialist strategy was to draw connections between diverse new (at the time) social movements (environmentalism, feminism, antiracism) to unite them into a counter-hegemonic project. Laclau (1977, 2005) argues that the central cleavage of populism is the people versus the powerful, and he focuses on the political construction of the people through discursively weaving aggregative linkages between discrete demands. Populist discourses in San Pedro invoke a range of intersecting lines of social division and political contestation: rich versus poor, indigenous versus Ladino, Mayas versus the state, *capacitado* versus no *capacitado*, urban versus rural. Each presents unique risks of *engaño* and self-interest and serves as fodder for populist strategy. Sampedranos have varying feelings about each of these divisions, and also distinguish between axes of contestation worth pursuing and those that lie outside the realm of political possibility: actionable versus inactionable antagonisms.

In addition to his embrace of divisive, project-centered clientelism, Galicia's populism left out almost every recognizable element of leftist discourse. There was no coherent critique of the oligarchy, transnational corporations, free trade, or even extractivism, and no mention of human and material rights or even the peace accords. With all the talk about projects, there was no focused discussion on a lasting solution to poverty, malnutrition, and the general state of abandonment in which most villagers lived. In other words, it was as narrowly focused as most campaigns. Galicia's populism treated the economic and political order as inevitable and focused on tertiary divisions in the local body politic. This ignored the

ultimate *engaño*—the nexus between the state and capital—recognized by many villagers as the one from which the others grow. It was not the people versus the powerful, but the people against one another.

Populist discourses navigate and reinforce a field of shared common sense and political affect shaped by decades of repression and zero-sum party politics. Villagers were interpellated by representations of themselves as deceived, vulnerable, and powerless to change the social order, and channeling these affects and perceptions was crucial to Galicia's success. His populism did not so much challenge state sovereignty as mimic it. The fact that he was rumored to be a narco inspired hope that he would actually be able to deliver projects, just as many villagers also saw Otto Perez Molina as a narco, despite his anticrime rhetoric. Such political thinking was not limited to rural communities. In 2014 I met a *Ladina* vendor in a market in the department capital. She was a no-nonsense, working-class woman in her sixties who lamented the recent capture of narcos in the border town of la Democracia: "They say they are bad people, but they are not. They are the ones maintaining us. They buy our products, and they give people jobs. Now the government arrested them, and we don't have anything." Perez Molina found support among middle-class Ladinos in Guatemala City who were fed up with crime and gang violence, also products of systematic social failures. His supporters felt betrayed when CICIG, the anti-impunity commission, uncovered that his administration had institutionalized unprecedented corruption and systematically looted state coffers, so much so that they launched a protest march and allied with rural and indigenous social movements that they usually opposed in order to remove him from office.

Powerlessness, pessimism, and vulnerability drove a corrupt, self-interested politics of development linked to the state. These violently restricted models of citizenship, vital to the reproduction of state order, were mediated in part through contradictory populist discourses. Neoliberals who deride populism as a threat to the social order disavow their active and violent reinforcement of the inequalities and exclusions that create conditions for populist politics. Laclau and other theorists (see Panizza and colleagues, 2005) treat populist appeals as primarily about interpellation: success means resonance that happens when populations come to imagine themselves as belonging to "the people" and as sharing a common stock of grievances and demands

represented by the movement. This understanding equates political affiliation and voting with support, or belief in the populist message, however interpreted. This meaning-centered formulation misses the role of political violence in populist appeals in places like San Pedro, as well as the corporeal and affective dimensions that motivated otherwise radical-minded Sampedranos to support the FRG and a suspected narco-trafficker.

Beyond generating a political following, we must also understand populism as a potent mechanism of reinscribing effects of sovereignty and governance, accomplished in this case by denying Mayan political agency and history, focusing politics on projects, insisting that deeper change is impossible, and inflaming anger and division between poor villagers. Order-defending violence was the point of departure of authoritarian populism, a foundation that it did not question. Rather than threaten the oligarchy, the FRG and Rony Galicia selectively and symbolically addressed national and structural divisions—rich versus poor and Maya versus Ladino—and then divided indigenous people internally. Politicizing these secondary divides is not necessarily wrong and is in many ways integral to the project of organizing a counter-public out of a fragmented populace; the problem is evoking them as a means of obscuring shared forms of oppression that are more pressing in order to fracture community solidarity. Authoritarian populisms normalized and perpetuated trade-offs between forms of political agency: from active to reactive, collective to individual, class to ethnic, and national to local. These trade-offs were at the heart of ambivalent attachments to the FRG in San Pedro. Although this cruel populism worked to mystify and smooth out the contradictions of neoliberal democracy and to outmaneuver opponents, it left social problems unresolved and created new ones.

In San Pedro authoritarian populist discourses and strategies were crafted to appeal to subjects whose social worlds were shaped by material and symbolic exclusion, state violence, and inequality while disqualifying radical alternatives and pitting villagers against one another. FRG populism in 2003 promised to include Sampedranos as full citizens and provide “security, well-being, and justice” but instead provided partial, palliative solutions to the symptoms of structural violence while mustering grassroots energies into complicity with a political economic order that systematically exposed indigenous communities to disproportionate levels of harm. Rony Galicia followed a similar path in 2011 but with less pretense

about justice and security, no veneer of evangelism, without an exclusive appeal to Mayan identity, and with the baggage of personal criminality rather than genocide.

Instead of framing local problems as expressions of structural contradictions in Guatemalan society, linking them together in a movement to challenge these realities, authoritarian populism addressed intrapersonal and familial resentments in isolation and as private concerns. Rather than resolving these concerns, it made them more rigid and reinforced the system that made them inevitable. Electoral antagonisms between excluded groups exemplifies what feminist theorist Christine Keating (2011, 1) calls “compensatory domination,” a situation in which “political authorities seek to build consent to their rule by consolidating and/or enabling forms of intergroup and intragroup rule.” But this is not consent; repressive violence rendered electoral politics the only feasible option. Even though villagers did not consent to the social order, they did consent to competition with their neighbors; in democratic politics, villagers appeared to one another as the enemy next door. Authoritarian populism shifted attention away from the forces that placed villagers into the antagonistic relationship that incited them to injure one another and toward a cycle of payback.

Lauren Berlant (2012, 1) defines cruel optimism as a relation in which “the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that draws you to it initially.” Building on this understanding, I highlight cruelty as a feature of authoritarian populism in that it mobilizes a following by promising partial solutions to problems generated by the constitutive exclusions and police mechanisms of the social order while striving to render the violence of that order invisible and more endurable, and actively working to repress or neutralize alternatives. Such populist appeals are increasingly common on the neoliberal landscape, do not require ideological resonance, and can also erode extant political imaginaries. Authoritarian populism is the reactionary organization of pessimism and social and political violence, but it is not the only way. In San Pedro the conditions that provided traction for authoritarian populism also inform reimaginations of democracy that promote large-scale economic redistribution, local control, and equality. What is missing is a populist appeal that would provide shape and force to these unmet desires in ways that might reverse the polarity of pessimism.