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The Democracy Development Machine

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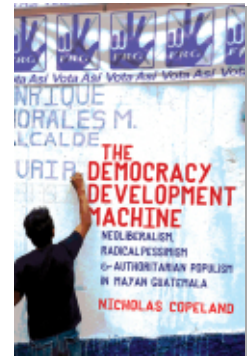
Published by Cornell University Press

Copeland, Nicholas.

The Democracy Development Machine: Neoliberalism, Radical Pessimism, and Authoritarian Populism in Mayan Guatemala.

Cornell University Press, 2019.

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CONCLUSION

Reorienting Democracy

The Sampedranos who formed grassroots organizations in the 1980s and 1990s and who became the protagonists of electoral democracy during the peace talks were qualitatively different from the leaders of the late 1970s. Whereas the previous generation dedicated and sacrificed their lives for collective advancement, by the 1990s, avenues for personal interest expanded to the detriment of the common good. Survivors of state terror were obligated to publicly conform to the military's definition of the guerrilla movement as an illegitimate entity that was doomed from the start and to deny any shred of sympathy for that lost cause. They were also told that their leaders were guerrillas and deserved to die, an effort to suppress all independent activism of this period; this interpretation continued in the decades after the peace accords. Although many still idealized a radical or even revolutionary vision of social justice, most buried all trace of it. Post-genocidal leaders knew that if they were to survive and extend their struggles, they had to present a subservient face to the army and adopt democratic identities whose legitimacy was measured by their

distance from the revolution. Throughout the 2000s, most Sampedranos were still afraid to talk openly about the past and had rewoven postwar identities in relation to official memories, tendencies that shrouded both the past and the present in a cloud of uncertainty.

The moral force of the “two-army” discourse is that it criticizes all violence equally. But upon closer inspection it frames counterinsurgent violence as illegitimate only when it was *excessive*; it held in reserve that some amount of state violence to repress an internal enemy was still necessary and legitimate. State violence also disqualified nonviolent organizing, the repression of which led to the formation of the guerrilla movement. Violence went beyond counterrevolution to vanquish all progressive aspiration, regardless of how it was pursued. After the peace accords, targeted violence against social movements that was previously enacted in the name of annihilating democratic desire was framed as a defense of democratic order.

State violence dramatized the asymmetry of force and reminded Sampedranos that the state was willing and able to kill indigenous citizens and movements that challenged oligarchic power or multinational corporations. It explicitly referenced counterinsurgent performances of violence as a reminder of the state’s capacity for racial terror without reserve. The spontaneous recognition of this extreme foundational injustice and the refraction of this injustice through manifold practices of deception generated an atmosphere of pessimism that hung over everyday discussions of politics and infused villagers’ engagements with state institutions, political parties, and other powerful forces in their midst. So stifling was this atmosphere that many Sampedranos found it nearly impossible to become invested in projects dedicated to building a brighter future. Even while most Sampedranos believed deeply that the prevailing political economic order was unjust and wicked, a violent colonial imposition, most were convinced that it was impossible and dangerous to challenge it. Demobilization in the post-accords era was not a product of a “culture of fear,” but it occurred because social movements required significant effort, entailed real risks, and accomplished little, and because politics had been shifted to new domains. For a small but influential minority of successful villagers, structural change was no longer seen as necessary or as pressing.

Grandin and Klein (2011) argue that state terror during the cold war “trained citizens to turn their political passions inward, to receive

sustenance from their families, to focus on personal pursuits, and to draw strength from faiths less concerned with history and politics” (197). State terror closed down the pursuit of collective well-being through political organizing and alliances, leaving only individual and familial spaces and market discipline. But terror alone was insufficient to describe the forms of agency within this privatized domain. Neoliberal democracy and development opened up a field of productive activity, an entire political and economic world, within the parameters defined by violence. As state violence became increasingly selective and targeted, indigenous citizens were trained to navigate new spaces for democratic agency and development that they helped construct. Violence, democracy, and development were mutually constituted: violence disqualified revolutionary politics while indigenous inclusion in market development and electoral politics made structural transformation seem less pressing and political violence seem increasingly less repressive.

By distinguishing a domain of “legitimate” democratic demands from “impossible” and “undemocratic” ones—especially far-reaching land reform—violence channeled preexisting struggles for resources into delimited spaces of memory, development, and electoral politics. In each area the state mimicked and partially acquiesced to grassroots desires and attempted to harness them into a restricted political field. Market-oriented individual capacity development provided a productive counterpart to repressive violence; it opened opportunities for individual economic advancement and trained villagers as democratic citizens. Capacity development empowered a new class of younger community leaders who led development committees and political campaigns. This reorientation of politics was not simply or even primarily ideological; it was framed by violence, materialized through projects, and taken up by an actively cultivated class of modernizing villagers who possessed the technical capacities to economically advance, win elections, and govern.

After a difficult struggle, these new capacities enabled the village organization to wrest control of town politics from local Ladinos and to procure and distribute hundreds of infrastructural projects. Because of these successes, with the signing of the peace accords and the larger democratic transition ongoing in the background, this post-1985 generation of leaders came to understand local elections, projects, and individual advancement through education and training as a more realistic, sophisticated

path to indigenous empowerment. It was under these conditions, in the wake of genocide and in the context of new discourses about indigenous rights, that the leaders of the Antulio Morales coalition, who had worked hard in the past to stop being “Indians,” came to identify and frame their politics as “Mayan.” They even posited bilingualism and intercultural understanding as qualifications for town governance. The recognition of this developmentalist vanguard as the rightful leadership of the local Mayan population obscured growing class differences among villagers accelerated by market development.

In the late 1960s, developmentalist reformers in the Guatemalan and US governments dreamed of cultivating a modernizing, apolitical peasantry, oriented toward high tech and market agriculture and productively connected to state institutions. Army reformers imagined market democracy as the political field these “permitted” Mayas would occupy, as the completion of the counterinsurgency project. By the late 1990s, judging by Jose Antulio Morales’ career and the wave of primarily local indigenous empowerment through the highlands, it looked as if the army had succeeded. But neoliberal democracy in San Pedro produced an outcome that army reformers never envisioned: an authoritarian, kleptocratic party gaining power on the strength of indigenous votes, driven by the intertwined failures of democracy and development.

Caught in the Democracy Development Machine

Attaining legitimate victimhood, market advancement, and electoral spoils required villagers to betray their reciprocal obligations to their neighbors and extended kin along with their hopes for national reform. Market integration replaced generally horizontal relationships of mutual support with antagonistic class divisions and increasingly blamed poverty on individual choices. *Capacidad* was a nearly unquestioned norm but also a source of frustration for the majority, whom it classified as lesser. In a grating, interminable electoral process that favored the more developed, dozens of political parties competed for Sampedranos’ votes, each offering development, access to corruption, and political power. Clientelist electoral politics ramified shared concerns about poverty and discrimination into competing party factions focused on projects that succeeded

only by excluding others. Elections were widely criticized as orgies of personal interest and deception in which most Sampedranos participated despite serious misgivings. Many simply opted out. Because neoliberal democracy and development required villagers to deceive and abandon their counterparts, it eroded the trust and solidarity required to engage in self-governance and collective action against the Ladino state and the transnational corporate allies that deceived and betrayed them all. Elected officials also sidelined indigenous forms of authority.

These observations echo critiques leveled by indigenous political organizations, such as the Council of the Peoples of the West (CPO), an alliance of ancestral authorities united in defense against extractivism. They view electoral democracy as a mechanism of colonial power that shatters indigenous communities:

In election years, municipalities fill with shell and phantom parties shouting demagogic solutions, and often compete between nine and fifteen parties literally provoking the fragmentation of our communities and the atomization of the vote. And the vote becomes so local that we are left alone, without unity among indigenous peoples. (2014: 32–33)

Similarly, the Mayan Coordinator, Waqib' Kej, a convergence of indigenous authorities and organizations, women's groups, and indigenous youth, argues that the "system of political parties as a democratic medium to make incursions inside the state is vitiated and does not respond to the needs of the Pueblos" (2015, 63). The situation resembles Harry West's (2008) description of Muedan villagers in Mozambique, who after a transition from socialism to free markets, "experienced democracy as a regime that promoted irresolvable conflict in their midst and provided cover for dominant political actors to forgo the responsibilities of authority and to feed themselves at the expense of others" (118).

Although political inclusion and market advancement became a reality for some, most were left behind. Some migrated north, and many were landless, unemployed, and out of options. Most villagers lived in a constant state of vulnerability: exposed to economic downturns, rising prices, crime, natural disasters, and sickness, situations that could leave them without land, food, or shelter. They lived in a condition of semi-abandonment, where the threat of complete desertion was never

far off. They worried that they could not afford to fertilize their crops or that they would have to sell their coffee for less than it was worth. They worried that their precarious houses might slide into a ravine in a heavy storm or that their tiny coffee plots would wash away, taking borrowed money with them. They worried that they could not afford medicine for their sick children and elderly parents, or an operation that they needed to survive. They worried that they would be forgotten and that they would have nowhere to turn, betrayed by politicians whom they had no choice but to trust. Post-accords optimism about political inclusion and development quickly soured when local needs outstripped patronage, campaigns were based in lies and corruption, and poorer, more remote villages were denied access. Many development-oriented villagers lost sympathy for their neighbors or saw no alternative while pursuing individual and familial well-being and controlling leadership positions and development funds, always speaking on behalf of community and indigenous rights.

Lubkemann (2008) argues that the commonplace use of the term *uncertainty* to characterize life during wartime “fail[s] to account for the sum of experiences that together make up war as a social condition” (249). The same holds true for neoliberal democracy. Although rural Sampedranos do live with a great deal of uncertainty, blanket assessments may obscure the “tacit knowledge” that informs their charged engagements with the sovereigns in their midst: that the state and corporations do not value indigenous people, that powerful entities deceive and control them, that democracy is limited to competition for scarce projects, that resistance is useless and dangerous (Elyachar 2012). For most Sampedranos, these truths were so obvious that they were usually left unsaid.

These unintended outcomes discredited the indigenous-rights movement that state multiculturalism had midwived into power, smearing it with self-interest, divisiveness, and incompetence, and confirming long-standing racist platitudes casting indigenous people as incapable of self-governance. Neoliberal democracy staged a mockery of indigenous rights and inclusion, even though the democracy development machine actively undermined autonomous structures of communal governance. Mutual accusations of self-interest contained a potent critique of neoliberal democracy and development, but also rendered nearly every action and actor suspect, impeding trust and the search for alternatives.¹

Why did villagers remain entangled in such a noxious regime and resigned to its products? Paley (2001) suggests that Chilean democracy rendered the people complicit with market policies that remained outside of democracy. For their part, Sampedranos played small, enabling roles in a machine that they viewed as malevolent. With their participation and votes, Sampedranos gave an official, if ambivalent and conditional, stamp of approval to parties that they knew would steal public money and endorse policies that actively harmed them, such as mining and austerity. Sampedranos did not confuse national policies with the popular will but saw it as the cumulative result of countless self-interested acts, including their own. Although Sampedranos were collectively abandoned by the state, democracy parceled out power to distribute the brunt of this abandonment—the sovereign power to let die—over to villagers themselves, who become intimately complicit in their neighbors' misery so that they themselves might live better. Electoral politics shared an elective affinity with market rationality because of the emphasis on self-interested competition among private individuals and factions in a zero-sum framework.

Tania Li (2007a) draws attention to the complex, multilevel operability of governing assemblages, which produce subjects engaged in self-improvement, create alliances between governing institutions and target populations, render complex problems technical (e.g., apolitical and ahistorical) by using self-reinforcing official knowledge, smooth out social and operational contradictions, and reformat prior discourses and demands to fit new frameworks. Li's concept invites empirical specification regarding the composition of different assemblages and how they gain traction and produce effects among governed populations in diverse social and historical conditions. I have argued that the strategic appropriation of democracy and development by Sampedranos under highly difficult conditions helped to produce subjects who pursued circumscribed forms of freedom within a political economic order founded upon their continued and wholesale subjugation. In San Pedro, democracy and development tailored to the neoliberal terrain achieved counterinsurgency goals through both repression and empowerment without substantially legitimating the political economic order in the eyes of most villagers.

The reason that this was so effective was precisely because rather than bracketing political economic reform (Ferguson 1994, Li 2007a, 265), democracy and development were presented in San Pedro as ideal and

safe modes of social transformation; they promised resources, empowerment, and dignity. They were designed to resemble, connect with, and absorb historical struggles, to appear as hard-fought victories (which they were) even if they eventually disappointed villager expectations. Meanwhile, democracy and development in San Pedro reorganized prior struggles—against discrimination and for land and social democracy—by reformatting them to fit an unequal market framework and by focusing them on local concerns and achievements, such as individual struggles in the marketplace, election to local office, and projects earmarked to specific villages, families, and sectors. Indigenous ascendance in municipal politics and the market was framed and experienced as a collective victory, but it primarily benefited individuals and private groups.

Democracy and development were celebrated as the solutions to Guatemala's deeply encrusted social contradictions; the path to prosperity, equality, and inclusion; and the foundation of a long and lasting peace. They opened a field of political contestation that excluded long-standing political demands yet were still framed as manifestations of popular desire. It is undeniably true that democracy and development constituted a major transformation of rural Guatemalan political society, despite its limitations. But they also defended national and international asymmetries and created new ones. My findings provide ethnographic specification to Susanne Jonas's prescient observation that "in a country marked by such extreme inequalities, even limited political democracy cannot be meaningfully obtained in the absence of structural reform" (1988, 28). They also demonstrate the suffering produced by the fact, noted by Mayan intellectual Demetrio Cojtí (2007) and others, that despite a transition to multicultural democracy, "the state, as well as the democratic system, remains structurally colonialist and racist" (124).²

Democracy and the Politics of Redistribution

These findings complicate interdisciplinary discussions of the "politics of redistribution" (Li 2014; Ferguson 2015): a global trend to provide basic income directly to poor populations that has emerged in the wake of the failure of free market reforms. The advance of democracy is a principal driver of this development, as politicians compete for votes among poor

citizens harmed or left behind by free market policies. Cash-transfer programs “work” on their own terms to reduce poverty, but their acceptance requires new thinking about labor and productivity beyond the narrow, and increasingly obsolete, frame of jobs. Ferguson argues that unemployed people are not unproductive or lazy but are engaged in various forms of “distributive labor” (97), such as networking with political patrons. These theories resonate with the ideas of Marxist Indian economist Prabhat Patnaik (2010), who advocates a politics focused on the incremental accumulation of basic material rights as an alternative to growth-based development.

A different model of redistribution is central to the political program of La Vía Campesina, the transnational peasant movement that formed in reaction to the spread of free market frameworks, specifically the agenda that strengthened transnational corporate control to the detriment of peasant and indigenous subsistence. Unlike cash transfers, La Vía Campesina’s alternative proposal—food sovereignty—is far more extensive, emphasizing local control over food production and a significant redistribution of land-based resources and state support to subsistence agriculture (Nyéléni Declaration 2007; Borras 2008). Food sovereignty involves putting productive resources into hands that will best use them and emphasizes ecological sustainability over extractivist development. It incorporates indigenous knowledges along with conceptions of territorial sovereignty and rights-based claims to universal access to resources (Borras, Franco, and Suárez 2015; McMichael 2015).

The guardedly optimistic assessment of the shift to provide basic income deviates from narratives of inexorable abandonment under neoliberalism. It also lines up closely with positive reassessments of patronage networks in the fields of political science and anthropology that frame such structures as a more or less benign means of accessing vital resources among marginal populations.³ Writing about Zero Hunger programs in rural Brazil—an early, influential model for basic income programs—Aaron Ansell (2014) describes how the anti-patronage component of these policies disrupted “intimate hierarchies” in which “mutual sympathy and vulnerability between the partners becomes the basis of a shared humanity that transcends structural hierarchy” with the potential to “socialize the political class towards the challenges of a region’s poor” (194). Ansell and others ask us to take seriously nonliberal claims to resources from patrons as a viable means to ameliorate economic brutality.

It is tempting to view the nontrivial redistribution associated with electoral democracy in rural Guatemala as an enshrinement of a basic right to resources mediated by intimate hierarchies oriented toward mutual care. Indeed, the pull of neoliberal democracy in rural Mayan communities, especially electoral politics, derives from its function as a mechanism of redistribution, typically framed in the language of the rights to state resources that “belong to the people.” This was a marked improvement over previous decades when the state invested little in rural welfare, and the institutionalization of cash-transfer programs in the mid-2000s lends further credence to an incrementalist narrative. But cash-transfer programs in rural Guatemala are widely criticized—from the right and the left—for maintaining poverty and creating dependency, although they are popular at the grassroots. Unwilling to risk votes, Perez Molina promised to continue the program during the 2011 election, although funding dwindled under his administration and poverty rates increased.⁴

While preferable to exclusion, the conditions, degrees, and mechanisms of redistribution matter greatly. Despite the veneer of citizenship and rights, redistribution in rural Guatemala is one of the primary mechanisms through which “inequalities are socially institutionalized” (Ferguson 2015, 155), occurring via norms established by competitive electoral politics in which villagers play an active role. Rather than a right to resources, democracy extends a lesser “right”—if it can be called that—to compete for *access*. My findings support the contention that limited redistribution in conditions of scarcity and political violence may supplant substantive claims to resources by excluded populations asserting fundamental equality: the crux of what Jacques Rancière (2010) calls true democracy. Clientelist redistribution networks form important parts of governing assemblages that materially impede the emergence of organized transversal politics that challenge foundational inequalities. Vertical patronage structures can erode relations of horizontal reciprocity and the trust, sense of togetherness, and hope for a better future that they sustain: all key conditions for collective action.

The parallel between democratic redistribution and counterinsurgency becomes all too clear when one recalls that in 1982, Ríos Montt offered Mayan villagers a choice between “rifles or beans,” slaughter or development, the latter a pittance conditional on surrendering revolutionary demands. As important as it is to “deal pragmatically with (rather than

just deploring) the social world we have got” (Ferguson 2015, 155), we must also think idealistically, but no less pragmatically, about how to expand the political horizon beyond neoliberal democracy. In Guatemala this implies thinking beyond the limited vision of the peace accords while at the same time demanding their implementation.

Decolonizing Democracy and Development

Decentering normative neoliberal democracy and development means attending to three elements: the ways that they operate together in disparate historical and political conjunctures within different projects of rule; how they intersect heterogeneous forms of life, geographies, and political struggles; and how subalterns selectively rework and reimagine them for a range of ends. Ethnographic methods are ideally suited to show how democracy and development are taken up and operate in locations far removed from national politics, and to explore their narrative temporalities and material and affective dimensions.⁵ I have described how democracy and development in Guatemala operate as a governing assemblage alongside state violence to fashion new political subjects and demands to extend counterinsurgency through a political and economic transition. I have also attempted to illuminate how Sampedranos occupied these spaces in pursuit of decolonized citizenship, how they were transformed as a result, and what they think about these processes today.

Mayas across the highlands are reimagining democracy through efforts to revitalize traditional indigenous governance structures that gained legal recognition through the peace accords and that have received support from a range of donors and institutions, national and international. Revitalization of indigenous governance is often driven by frustration with party politics and the rise of extractivism. They are exploring the extent to which traditional indigenous authorities can exercise sovereignty over their territories and interact on par with the monocultural Ladino state,⁶ which continues to violently assert its supremacy (Cojtí 2007). In these spaces, democracy is reimagined through indigenous epistemologies. Stener Ekern (2005) describes how the actions and deliberations of the *alcaldía indígena* (indigenous mayoralty) in Tonicapán, known as the forty-eight *cantones* (districts), were guided by a “vision of right order.”

In contrast to a state order focused on the supremacy of individual rights, this “right order” was based on a principle of respect and selflessness: “the Mayan community does not accept the idea that a person can put his/her own interests first” (289). They also embrace an understanding of territory as a space of identity and becoming rather than an extractable commodity, and they do not recognize a secular-spiritual division. Sampe-dranos expressed similar values, and in their criticisms they also advanced a shared conception of neoliberal democracy as the “wrong order”: they decried the displacement of collective well-being for individual interest in the form of party competition and illegitimate corruption and growing divisions of class and relations of exploitation backed up by state violence.

Critical scholarship typically presents indigenous lifeways, cosmologies, and governing structures as antithetical to logic of capital and the state.⁷ Similar to Ekern, Alpa Shah (2010) writes that in the newly autonomous indigenous state of Jharkhand, India, Munda villagers—the poorest of the poor—participate in a sacred democratic polity organized around notions of reciprocity, with rotating leaders, no status hierarchies, and consensus-based decision making. She describes how Munda villagers’ shared allegiance to the sacred polity compelled them to avoid the state, and to access it only through local indigenous elites, even though this further marginalized them from the political process. Shah advocates building a postcolonial democratic ethics from the values and practices in these separate spaces. At the same time, she is critical of indigenous-rights narratives that depict indigenous peoples as environmentally conscious, egalitarian, and connected to place, and thus free from the contaminating entanglements of modern life, narratives that often ignore internal hierarchies in indigenous communities and can constrain indigenous lives and livelihoods. The same can be said for understandings of subaltern political imaginaries as radically divergent and wholly separate from Western practices.

West (2005) writes that indigenous villagers in Mozambique “enacted democracy” not by creating an alternative form but “by critically engaging with democracy in a language that differs profoundly from the one spoken by democratic reformers” (118). In San Pedro, as in many rural towns, the sway of electoral politics made it nearly impossible for the *alcaldía indígena* to wield meaningful decision-making power. Rather than being cordoned off from political society, it was through their engagement

with state and corporate models of democracy and development that Sampedranos formulated alternative conceptions that emphasized ethics of redistribution and concern for the most vulnerable, local authority, collective rights, and connections to place. Unlike the revolutionary imaginary, the premier villains of grassroots democratic imaginaries were not exploitative Ladino landowners and abusive labor bosses but the corrupt politicians and the mining companies. The moral failure common to all was the pursuit of self-interest to the detriment of the collective. Such alternative democratic imaginaries are not pure survivals of indigenous cosmologies, but complex reactions to imposed realities, from refusals to creative reworkings, grounded in preexisting and heterogeneous forms of life and histories of struggle that are continually adapting. I propose grounding a postcolonial political ethics in the values expressed through experiences with the state and corporate sovereigns, social movements and NGOs, and different paradigms of democracy and development.

Rather than reject these concepts as colonial impositions, indigenous political organizations in Guatemala propose decolonized models of development and democracy. The CPO's vision (2014) of good municipal government and democracy focuses on free, prior, and informed consultation; active participation of communities through indigenous authorities; transparent budgeting; a fair distribution of public funds; more money for indigenous municipalities; and respect for indigenous sovereignty in a pluri-national state. The CPO's aim is to "create unity to change Guatemala from the municipalities to the national level, based on a principle that enhances democracy: municipal autonomy must respect the consultations of good faith and the open town council" (35, my translation). Waqib' Kej views corruption, exclusion, and violence not as aberrations of neoliberal democracy but as expressions of structural contradictions of a state and economy founded on the dispossession of the indigenous majority. It understands political democratization (fully implementing the peace accords, reducing the size of the army, and other reforms) as a necessary precondition for the creation of a pluri-national state founded on principles of *Buen Vivir* (living well): harmony between humans and with Mother Earth.

Buen Vivir is a concept of Andean origin that has spread through indigenous movements throughout the continent. It offers a civilizational alternative to capitalist forms of democracy and development in which

individuals seek to “live better” through self-improvement, perpetual economic growth, private wealth accumulation, a model based on competitive individualism, consumerism, and the extraction of natural resources that threatens the ecosphere and life within it. Buen Vivir is the political proposal of the defense of territory, a form of social and economic relations rooted in interdependence, nonviolence, and respect. This indigenous anticapitalist vision articulates widely in a conjuncture defined by the aftermath of genocide, the recognition of indigenous rights and the rise of autonomous indigenous movements, the failure of market-oriented development and “green” revolution technologies that have contributed to a crisis of subsistence agriculture, and a wave of rapacious extractivist development that exposes indigenous lives, territories, and livelihoods to harmful contamination.

These considerations bear on the thinking of M’ek To’m Torres, a Mayan Ixil activist and agronomist who works in sustainable agriculture for FUNDEBASE, a progressive NGO.⁸ Torres is a graduate of Ixil University and participates in Waqib Kej’, the Social and Popular Assembly, and local and national defense of territory politics. He offered this reflection on the politics of development:

There is much uncertainty about the political situation . . . that affects . . . our regions in the prelude to the election year, and the old partisan policies and politicking without us. And we worry, we worry but do not propose actions. If we began to generate proposals from our generation, to address the . . . issues of our region, always with our own identity, it would be a challenge from us. Offers come from many sisters and brothers who . . . practice the tricks of old politicians offering “changes and improvements” in our villages when we are not even clear on the term “development.” Is this the development that we really want? Is it based on our needs or just what they tell us must be done? Let us analyze before exercising that right and do it responsibly. It falls to us to make the present and future conditions we want (my translation).⁹

He believes that communities should define development for themselves and issue proposals based in their own needs and identity, rather than external agendas. He calls for communities to exercise the right and responsibility to imagine a type of development that would be a direct challenge to politics as usual. These proposals and analysis, part of ongoing

decentralized efforts to decolonize democracy and development, are themselves enactments of sovereignty directed toward the construction of indigenuous futures.

A key question in these reflections is the relation between the ancestral authorities of the pluri-national state and the Guatemalan state. One reaction to widespread dissatisfaction with neoliberal democracy is for communities and movements to opt out altogether. The Zapatista experience is instructive here, as is its desire to “change the world without taking power,” abandoning the state as a key objective for radical politics. Although opting out of party politics deprived Zapatista-aligned villages of state funds and projects, autonomous municipalities have pursued alternative paths to development, expanded self-governing capacities, promoted gender equality, formed new external alliances, taken control of assistance from international solidarity organizations, and preserved internal cohesion, allowing the autonomy movement to survive and grow.¹⁰ The Zapatistas are well-known for decentered, horizontal organizing methods and rotating leadership positions; for weaving traditional forms with Catholic social teaching, indigenous-rights discourse, and neo-Marxist and feminist perspectives; and for innovating political concepts such as *mandar obedeciendo* (leading by obeying).¹¹ They have made major contributions to the radical reinvention of democracy, inspiring and influencing a generation of activists. Although they have not defeated neoliberalism, they slowed its advance in their territories while still playing a role in national politics and sparking the antiglobalization movement.

It is worth recognizing, however, the significant advances in poverty reduction obtained by anti-neoliberal Pink Tide governments in Latin America through taking state power, even as they have posed new dilemmas for peasant and indigenous movements through their commitment to extractivist development. Avoiding the state in favor of self-sufficiency often leaves communities without basic resources with limited impact on the neoliberal project.¹² Holding the successes of the Zapatistas and Pink Tide governments in mind, especially as the latter face crises precipitated by imperial interventions and reactionary resurgence, the lesson for radical movements is not necessarily to avoid the state as a site of struggle but of the importance of maintaining organizational autonomy as they interact with states and to shape state policy in

ways that can strengthen, or not obstruct, grassroots alternatives which demonstrate that another world is possible.

Populism without Hegemony

In less than a decade after the peace accords, lack of faith in mainstream parties to deliver resources to the poor; the routinization of corrupt, self-interested politics; and growing economic inequality created openings for authoritarian populists who peddled solutions for precisely these kinds of grievances, even as they defended the political economic order that drove local dissatisfaction and competition. For Laclau (2005), hegemony, populism, and politics are synonymous; politics is a struggle for hegemony, and populism is hegemony in action, the formation of the people through the education of consent and the articulation of demands.¹³ The basis of authoritarian populism in San Pedro was not ideological resonance, not shared faith in a leader to deliver on the people's demands, not a unified popular identity, but raw need, pessimism, and resentment among a fragmented electorate. But its discursive components produced important effects. Populism asserted meanings, identities, and narratives as it distributed resources: it struck nerves, shaped understandings, and moved villagers to action. It mimicked commonly held criticisms of the political economic system and displaced them onto local divisions they expressly would not solve and would in fact make worse. It presented historical injustices as irresolvable, reinforcing the core counterinsurgency and neoliberal truth that no better future was possible and redefining neighbors as enemies.

These findings caution against reading subaltern participation in illiberal populist politics as straightforward resistance. Jeffrey Witsoe's (2013) examination of lower-caste politics in Bihar, India, suggests that political society, despite its naked violence and absence of rights, produces positive forms with the capacity to challenge dominant social relations. While defying liberal democratic norms, he describes how lower-caste support for the criminal Rashtriya Janata Dal Party challenged the developmentalist state and institutions that were used as mechanisms of caste domination and incapable of fairly delivering resources or protecting rights. Lower-caste Biharis, he claims, viewed this usurpation of class dominance

as true democracy. Witsoe uncovers a radical ethics motivating behaviors that are often framed as pathological and antidemocratic. It is important to appreciate the many ways that subalterns exercise agency through subverting democratic politics in ways that violate liberal norms for citizenship. However, these alliances are premised on stark power imbalances and often entail profound misrecognitions, such as white, middle-class Trump supporters, who are hardly subalterns but often imagine themselves as racially oppressed victims of a corrupt establishment.

Mayan Sampedranos used authoritarian populism to challenge local hierarchies and to redirect resources to excluded groups. Along the way, they were obligated to use illegal means, which did not violate local moral economies as long as they benefited poor people. Support for Ríos Montt in San Pedro and later for Rony Galicia was driven primarily by desires to break the grip of an indigenous political elite on municipal power and state resources, not to challenge the power or property rights of national oligarchs and transnational corporations. These populisms offered a diminished appeal to a grassroots conception of democracy focused on redistribution, honesty, and care for the less fortunate, combined with a harsh promise to abandon nonsupporters. Authoritarian populisms did not meet the material needs of the vast majority of party affiliates or end the cycle of favoritism; they only intensified local competition for projects and corruption. FRG supporters in San Pedro celebrated their success and welcomed the resources they obtained, but did not view their victory as democratic fulfillment. Most Sampedranos were frustrated by party politics, worried about their livelihoods, deeply suspicious of the state and corporations, and cynical about the future. They lacked faith in alternatives and one another. Yet behind the division, many shared a sense of identity based in a common history of struggle and a pride in resilience. Many villagers longed for lost unity, which nostalgically overstated past harmony but also pointed to something that felt very real.

In the global North, authoritarian populism more closely tracks hegemonic ideology, even as it rails against the establishment. Right-wing populists' ability to channel anger against politically expedient scapegoats (e.g., minorities, immigrants, the government, and liberal elites) and to wedge issues, rather than foundational and widening inequalities, is aided by spontaneous faith in free markets and militaristic nationalism, especially among whites and shared by the Democratic Party #Resistance.

Authoritarian populists thus encounter few obstacles in an effort to present themselves as extensions of the law, common sense, and national culture, as an iconoclastic defense of familiarity or a “return to normalcy.” Authoritarian populists displace the unintended effects of neoliberalism onto a perceived weakness of the physical and imaginary borders of the nation and onto liberal cultural politics, foregrounding national victimization and prescribing cultural reassertion and racialized violence (as if these were not already the norm). The revolt against *capacidad* in San Pedro mirrors resentment that many working-class whites in the United States harbor for the college-educated, technocratic elite: the liberal middle managers of neoliberalism who are shielded from its rough edges while chiding them for intolerance. Even in contexts with stronger ideological resonance than in San Pedro, authoritarian populist appeals still work on bodily desires, even if they exceed abstract rational calculations of interest and must be understood in relation to historically configured landscapes of memory and identity.

Because they defend the structures of power in the societies where they operate, rather than attribute scarcity as a problem of a vastly unequal distribution of wealth, authoritarian populist appeals almost always normalize private property and assume zero-sum logic. This is why the definitive affect of authoritarian populism is resentment of racialized and gendered others rather than class solidarity. Reports that racial resentment and cultural anxiety rather than economic hardship drove support for Trump tend to see such identifications as immutable, rather than effects of long-standing strategies of cultural governance that have encouraged whites to identify on the basis of their race rather than class.¹⁴ The contradictory, unstable nature of political imaginaries and identities makes alliances with authoritarian populists at once more malleable and more deceptive than we might assume; at a minimum, critiques of the politics of white racial and masculinist resentment should recognize the deeply fragmented nature of political discourse¹⁵ and how the absence of meaningful electoral options and leftist narratives and organizations kindles the flame of fascist politics.

In the global North, neoliberal democracy crowded out leftist populism by promoting multicultural diversity and adopting the language and symbols of radical grassroots movements while its free market and militarist policies exacerbated inequality, environmental harm, and migration

(accelerated by free trade and wars on terror and drugs). Likewise, corporations used similar strategies to selectively include women, nonwhites, LGBTQ, and environmentalists—pink, brown, green washing—while legally blocking deeper reform and promoting corporate science to sow doubt about the harmful effects of industrial activities.¹⁶ The rupture of neoliberal multicultural hegemony and the rise of reactionary movements in capitalist core nations may force liberals to redouble organizing, make common cause with radical groups, and rethink allegiance to capital. But it can also incite spirited defenses of the exclusionary model of neoliberal democracy that produced the reaction in the first place, and a concomitant hostility to left populism.

However abhorrent, the shocking success of Trump and Brexit and the weakening of the liberal world order remind us that neoliberal democracy contains deep contradictions and rests on weak foundations. The predictable failure of authoritarian populism to resolve widening economic inequality wherever it manifests, and the needless suffering it inevitably produces, could reinvigorate radical movements. Progressives in the global North should not feel constrained by conventional wisdom about the limits of politics, which must be transcended in order to develop coalitions powerful enough to implement just and lasting solutions to the interconnected problems of our time. The latter will require civilizational transitions away from imperialism, settler colonialism, militarism, socially and environmentally unsustainable economic growth, dependence on fossil fuels, and the nation-state as the limit on belonging and justice.

Democracy against Neoliberalism

Sampedranos find neoliberal democracy so perplexing in part because it confronts them with the unintended effects of a state of affairs they worked so hard to bring into existence, even if they did not decide its parameters. Neoliberal democracy and development have, alongside violence, transformed prior paradigms of political consciousness and solidarity; but hegemony existed only to the extent that they disavowed radical politics and viewed electoral politics and market development as reasonable avenues for advancement. Even as Mayas resignified new spaces, the conditions that led to decades of armed conflict remained unresolved, new

threats emerged, and communities were poisoned by self-interest and divisionism. As a regime of control that relies neither on terror or consent but a mix of violence and participation, neoliberal democracy eludes criticism from a space of purity. This ethnography aims to further discussions among communities, activists, academics, and policy makers about what has been gained and lost through democracy and development in rural Guatemala and how to build alternatives.

I have argued against neoliberal democracy and development as a neutral or desirable basis for a post-conflict settlement by ethnographically depicting how they are predicated on the exclusion of wide-scale redistributive politics, and how they divert radical desire into sterile domains, deepening class divisions, eroding trust and social solidarity, and creating fodder for authoritarian populism. Divisions in rural towns mirror progressive politics at the national level, where divisions between sectors of the popular left and the Mayan movement,¹⁷ among Mayan organizations,¹⁸ and among peasant movement factions¹⁹ impede the formation of alliances capable of challenging national elites. These fractures reflect ideological and strategic differences, battles for protagonism and leadership, NGO competition for international funding, the effects of state cooptation “divide-and-conquer” strategies, and the grinding toll of political violence.

Authoritarian populism constitutes the reactionary organization of pessimism, the victory of resentment and the substitution of revenge for empowerment. The radical organization of pessimism, by contrast, would harness disillusionment into movements for transformative goals such as territorial autonomy and far-reaching redistribution. How, practically, could the radical organization of pessimism come about? Rural Guatemalans are searching for ways to alter their relationship to political parties, the state, and corporations by attempting to revindicate identities, recover traditional institutions, remember ancestral authorities, use the law of community development councils, organize civic committees and community *consultas*, and engage in nonviolent civil disobedience. Sometimes these efforts prevail, and even when they fail, they push political limits; resignify democracy, development, and national identity; reweave community; and build collective power.

An important variable in neoliberal Guatemala is the political articulation of indigeneity. Discourses of indigenous rights initiated a reconsideration

of social and political identities throughout the highlands, among Ladinos and mestizos as well as Maya, Xinca, and Garifuna, as many find value where they did not see it before. In the wake of a failed revolution, indigeneity provided a political language safer than Marxism to contest marginalization and largely compatible with dominant models of development and democracy. In San Pedro, notions of indigenous rights provoked shifts in ethnic identification and provided a moral language for Mayan advancement, even though it limited what advancement could mean. But attempts to cultivate a domesticated indigenous politics have proven unable to contain the expansion of political imaginaries and projects assembled under that sign, especially the opposition to extractivism.

Indigeneity is central to the “defense of territory,” the master frame for a heterogeneous array of movements against extractivism. The defense of territory draws connections among diverse struggles against mining, hydroelectric dams, land grabs, and other spatializations of capital, recoding these markers of progress as expressions of an ecologically unsustainable development model led by a national and transnational elite. The defense of territory is a cosmopolitical populism that echoes revolutionary struggles but goes beyond the human to include Mother Earth as part of “the people.” Guided by a conception of *Buen Vivir*, the defense of territory contrasts indigenous connectedness with nature to anthropocentric, extractivist neoliberalism and connects these cosmological ecopolitics to movements for human rights, feminism, and peasants’ rights. By 2014, seventy-eight municipalities in Guatemala had held *consultas* against resource extraction under ILO treaty 169, overwhelmingly rejecting extraction, suggesting a wide resonance of this frame.²⁰ Territorial-defense movements have strengthened indigenous identifications and governing structures, and encourage Mayas and Ladinos to find common cause against corporate intrusions, often attracting people with no prior involvement in politics. Although the defense-of-territory rhetoric is sometimes ethereal, at its most concrete it connects peasant movements for land and for food sovereignty and articulates a compelling alternative vision of how to allocate and manage natural resources.²¹

The challenge is to build cross-sectoral organizations and alternative projects that include a wide range of working people and peasants. Beyond dividing radical from “sanctioned” Mayan politics, a central preoccupation of post-accords statecraft has been to prevent alliances from forming

among movements in defense of territory, teachers unions, peasant movements, labor, the urban poor, human rights organizations, and movements against austerity and privatization. The political crisis unleashed by the CICIG's revelations of corruption rising to the highest levels in the government created a unique opportunity to plant the seeds for precisely these kinds of alliances with the potential to expand the political horizons. Protests in the capital led originally by the Ladino middle class were quickly joined by rural and peasant organizations that shut down the country, forcing the resignation and imprisonment of President Otto Perez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti, and the collapse of the candidacy of Manuel Baldizón, a Peten-based businessman from the right-wing Renewed Democratic Freedom (LIDER) Party, who was leading in the polls. Outrage coalesced around the entire political system and all major parties as the investigation uncovered a massive criminal network and led to dozens of arrests. Protestors assembled in Plaza of the Constitution and organized through social media under the hashtag #EsElSistema, and issued coordinated calls to boycott the 2015 elections. Nevertheless, the elections went forward, and Jimmy Morales, a comedian with no political experience, ran as a populist protest candidate against the corrupt establishment. He represented the National Convergence Front (FCN), a far-right party formed by ex-military officers who wanted to revindicate their role in the armed conflict in response to the victims' rights movement. Morales narrowly defeated Sandra Torres from the center-left UNE Party, prompting comparisons to Donald Trump's surprising victory the following year. Not surprisingly, Morales was soon embroiled in scandals over illegal campaign financing and bribery.

The organizations comprising Guatemala's Social and Popular Assembly believe that the path to the radical organization of pessimism is an articulation of diverse movements rooted in the lives and experiences of the poor and marginalized, all treated as equal partners (ASP 2016). It formed in 2015 out of the movement for a constitutional convention as an effort to unite the anticorruption uprising with rural political struggles. Rather than oppose identity politics to class politics, or urban to rural, these organizations attempt to connect diverse movements within a radically democratic, cross-sectoral alliance. Their ultimate objective is a constitutional convention to refound the state as a decolonized, egalitarian, noncapitalist, and ecologically sustainable polity. Such a goal might

seem ambitious, but it is within reach if the reformist sectors of the urban middle class join rural demands for full implementation of the accords, territorial autonomy, real land reform and development, and the cessation of privatization, austerity, and extractivism.

As disillusionment with neoliberalism expands, alliances grow, and strategies sharpen, Guatemalan activists face intensified repression that attempts to sow pessimism about the prospects of even moderate social change, that aims to destroy hope itself. In closing, I want to return to the countless acts of defiance, big and small, to political and structural violence in Guatemala: rural villagers who fought for development and against discrimination during the dictatorship; those who joined the guerrilla movement; those who did not but fought to protect their neighbors from the army; human rights activists who denounced state violence and militarization, many who lost their lives; victims and survivors who testified in genocide trials; indigenous activists who demand recognition, respect, and self-determination as they revitalize traditional governing structures; women who fight for equality and respect in their homes, communities, workplaces, and national politics, and for an end to domestic violence; rural villagers from all over the country who block highways to oppose privatization and biopiracy or to stop the entry of mining equipment into their territories; farmers who squat land and face eviction; citizens who protest corruption; and rural workers who strike for better wages and conditions. In each moment, ordinary people are using nonviolence—and sometimes violence in self-defense—to achieve the collective good by putting their bodies on the line. Every refusal constitutes a counter-performance against the inevitability of politics as usual. Risking death and harm, they enact control over their own bodies and define themselves as legitimate sovereigns, avatars of the spirit of the people and a radical democracy against the neoliberal authoritarian state and its elite and corporate cronies, if only for a flash. Guatemalans from various social locations wonder what it will take to develop a form of democracy that does justice to these alternative visions.

