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# The Movement, the Mine and the Lake: New Forms of Maya Activism in Neoliberal Guatemala

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Academic Editors: Karen L Thornber and Tom Havens

Received: 13 November 2015; Accepted: 17 December 2015; Published: 15 July 2016

**Abstract:** This article explores the social, economic, cultural and political issues bound up in two matters relating to the environment in the Sololá and Lake Atitlán region of the Guatemalan Mayan highlands in 2004–2005: the violent breakup of an anti-mine protest and the various reactions to a tropical storm that threatened the lake ecosystem. It views these events as part of a historical conjuncture and centers them in a larger discussion of Maya political activism, environmentalism and neoliberal development in Guatemala from the 1990s–mid-2010s. It begins with the transition from war to peace in the 1990s, charting how Maya participation in municipal politics soared even as the official Mayan movement waned as the state turned to neoliberalism. Zooming in on municipal development and politics in Sololá in the early 2000s, it then traces at the ground level how a decentralizing, “multicultural” state promoted political participation while at the same time undermining the possibility for that participation to bring about substantive change. The center of the article delves deeper into the conjuncture of the first decade of the new millennium. By mapping events in Sololá against development, agrarian transformation and rural urbanization, it argues that resilient Maya community structures, although unable to stop the exploitative tide, continued to provide local cohesion and advocacy. Activists and everyday citizens became more globally attuned in the 2000s. The article’s final section analyzes municipal plans made between 2007 and 2012, arguing that creating and controlling community structures became increasingly important to the state in a time when Guatemala’s “outward” global turn was accompanied by an “inward” turn as people confronted spiraling violence in their communities. Critics called young people apolitical, but in 2015, massive demonstrations led to the imprisonment of the nation’s president and vice-president, showing that there is a chapter of Guatemala’s history of activism yet to be written.

**Keywords:** Maya; Guatemala; environment; mining; agriculture; development; globalization; politics; neoliberalism; urbanization

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From the end of 2004 to the beginning of 2006, two very different environmental issues impacted life in the Lake Atitlán region of the Sololá department in the Guatemalan Mayan highlands. In solidarity with a greater Mayan and environmental movement, local activists blocked a highway in December 2004. Worried about cyanide in their groundwater, they stopped a truck from carrying a concrete cylinder to a Canadian gold mine in the department of San Marcos. They held it at a standstill for weeks. By 11 January 2005, the government was fed up. The army and police arrived, and after the ensuing confrontation, one protester lay dead. The cylinder moved on to the Marlin Mine, where open-air gold mining would proceed apace, even as protests intensified<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Footage of the confrontation may be seen in a documentary film produced by Caracol Producciones on the mine conflict [1].

In October 2005, tropical storm Stan battered the highlands. Stan devastated vast regions, but none more so than the Lake Atitlán basin. Stunningly beautiful, Lake Atitlán is ecologically and culturally unique. Flanked by three volcanoes and ringed by towns and villages, it is home to speakers of two of the nation's twenty-one Mayan languages, Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil. Stan's landslides buried one hamlet, Panabaj, alive. Towns below the departmental capital of Sololá, around the lakeshore, were cut off from the outside world for weeks. The damage, however, had only just begun. The storm knocked out the already inadequate sewage treatment systems in place around this precious and irreplaceable environment. By 2008, toxic cyanobacteria blooms fed by human waste and nitrogen-rich agricultural runoff were beginning to spread thick green scum over the waters that since pre-Columbian times had been integral to local Maya lifeways.

Just as no amount of protest was able to stop the gold mine in the years that followed, none was enough to rally the state to launch a full-force effort to save the lake. Paradoxically, at the same time, Maya politicians were emerging as powerful local leaders; ordinary Maya citizens were asserting their presence in the public sphere in ways never before seen; and Maya activists were making ever greater connections with hemispheric and global advocacy and protest movements. This contradictory dynamic of strengths and weaknesses reveals the slippages in neoliberal development as it has played out in Guatemala through years of war and peace.

Genocidal violence committed by the state in the Mayan highlands in the early 1980s was the most brutal phase of a civil war that lasted from 1960–1996. Over the last two decades of that war, a vibrant pan-Mayan Movement emerged that, generally speaking, worked in dialogue with the guerrilla left. From the mid-1990s onward, both the *movimiento Maya* and the anti-capitalist left fragmented. Over the same period, the increasingly neoliberal state embraced “multiculturalism” as an ideology, and NGOs and scores of other institutions expanded through society in complex webs ([2], pp. 225–30). The anthropologist Santiago Bastos attributes the Mayan Movement's decline precisely to this mix of multiculturalism and “NGO-ification,” factors that among others spurred the movement's leaders to embrace “a strategy of not confronting power and constructing various cultural contents of ‘being Maya’ that in the end distanced them from the daily lives of the *Maya de a pie*.” ([3], pp. 4, 18–19; [4–6]).

The phrase “*de a pie*,” translated as “on foot,” means ordinary. As a historian who studies the “*de a pie*,” everyday working people who are Maya, *ladino* (non-indigenous) and somewhere in-between, I agree with Bastos's analysis of the Mayan Movement<sup>2</sup>. Looking not at the movement, but at the “*de a pie*” population, however, reveals that the Mayan Movement and the left, despite their decline and diffusion, and despite the deadening effects of neoliberal development, have been successful in unexpected ways.

This article views the mine confrontation and the storm in Sololá and Lake Atitlán in the mid-2000s as part of a historical conjuncture and centers them in a larger discussion of Maya political activism, environmentalism and neoliberal development in Guatemala from the 1990s–mid-2010s. It begins with the transition from war to peace in the 1990s, charting how Maya participation in municipal politics soared even as the official Mayan movement waned as the state turned to neoliberalism. Zooming in on municipal development and politics in Sololá in the early 2000s, it then traces at the ground level how a decentralizing, “multicultural” state promoted political participation, while at the same time undermining the possibility for that participation to bring about substantive change. The center of the article delves deeper into the conjuncture of the middle years of the first decade of the century. By mapping events in Sololá against development, agrarian transformation and rural urbanization, it argues that resilient Maya community structures, although unable to stop the

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<sup>2</sup> A full explication of the term “*ladino*” to refer to non-indigenous Guatemalans is beyond the scope of this work, but it should be noted that the word is used to reference both a light-skinned upper class and a much larger group of *mestizos* (people of mixed European and Native American ancestry) that in general tends to be less economically advantaged. Identities are relational, contingent and shifting, and the *ladino* / *indígena* divide is in many cases a false binary. See Diane Nelson's trilogy of books on a wide range of such slippages and ambiguities in contemporary Guatemala.

exploitative tide, continued to provide local cohesion and advocacy. The article's final section is built around a close reading of municipal plans made between 2007 and 2012. It argues that creating and controlling community structures became increasingly important to the Guatemalan state in an age when a paradoxical "outward/inward" dynamic characterized society: political and popular culture became more globally attuned and cosmopolitan, even as communities turned inward, confronting spiraling violence that ultimately prompted a shift from a left-wing to a right-wing head of state. Many commentators and critics bemoaned the nation's right-wing turn and what they saw as a generation more interested in consumer culture than in progressive politics. In 2015, however, as this article was in production, massive demonstrations led to the imprisonment of the nation's president and vice-president, reminding us that there is a chapter of the history of Guatemalan activism yet to be written.

### 1. Transitions in the 1990s: From the Mayan Movement and Municipal Maya Ascendancy to Neoliberalism and a Changing Political Economy

The process of transformation that would coalesce in Sololá's conjuncture in the mid-2000s began in the first half of the 1990s, when the guerrillas and the government were negotiating peace. The Mayan Movement, later to fragment, worked with the still-active guerrillas to give them leverage in the peace talks, as well as with local Maya politicians who were staging historic takeovers of municipal government. Over the same period, Guatemala filled up with NGOs, even as the state began privatizing infrastructure and opened the floodgates to transnational extractive industries. The left won victories in the peace process, but fragmented in its aftermath.

Historically, the Mayan Movement had never been unified. Betsy Konefal traces the movement's roots to the grassroots Catholic left of the 1950s, when the nation was reeling from the U.S.-planned overthrow of its democratic 1944–1954 revolution. As guerrilla warfare broke out in the 1960s and came to the highlands in the 1970s, Maya activism broadly divided into overlapping, yet distinct spheres: *clasistas* worked with *ladino* groups on issues of class, while *culturalistas* focused on Maya identity [7,8]. Into the genocidal 1980s, a few Maya formed indigenous separatist organizations that the state and the *ladino* left alike rejected<sup>3</sup>. Many more participated in Catholic-left groups, such as the Committee of Campesino Unity (CUC; renowned for its spokesperson, 1992 Nobel Peace prize-winner Rigoberta Menchú). Others joined the guerrillas, whose Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) remained active in the Lake Atitlán basin and elsewhere until the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996<sup>4</sup>. Although the military and its U.S. allies viewed the guerrillas as having been effectively defeated in the early 1980s [16], the URNG's continuing actions, along with pressure from the Mayan Movement [17], molded key peace agreements. The 1995 Accord on the Identity and Rights of the Indigenous Peoples characterized Guatemala as "multiethnic, pluricultural, and multilingual" and guaranteed respect for indigenous peoples' "political, economic, social and cultural rights [18]". The Accord on Socio-Economic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation, signed a year later, was in part built on suggestions from *campesino* groups. It called for the incorporation of the rural population in all aspects of development [19].

As peace approached, Maya around Guatemala rose in municipal government. First, they took over the "official" city hall (*municipalidad* or *alcaldía*), a bastion of *ladino* power. Second, they revitalized an *alcaldía indígena* (indigenous municipal government/"Maya city hall"). Third, they revalidated centuries-old communal leadership positions and local duties (*cargos*).

<sup>3</sup> These included the Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo Ixim and the Movimiento Indio Tojil, which gave rise to MAYAS, the Movimiento de Acción y Ayuda Solidaria, which called for an independent Maya republic [9]. See also ([10], pp. 71–75; [11], pp. 100–4).

<sup>4</sup> Reports on guerrilla actions appear regularly in [12,13] throughout the early 1990s. On ORPA (Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms) URNG guerrillas, see [14]. On the cultural complexities of the early 1990s, see [15].

The *alcaldía indígena*, a product of early colonial rule and itself built on pre-Columbian structures, had survived waves of attempts to eliminate it over the centuries. A marbled, mixed system of new and traditional governance matured in the 1960s and 1970s and came under attack in the violent 1980s ([20], p. 6; [21,22]). In the 1990s, the “official” municipality, historically *ladino*, became in effect a “*municipalidad mixta*” (that is, mixed between *ladinos* and Maya), while the “*alcaldía indígena*”, unrecognized by the state, worked alongside the official city hall and with leaders in the communal cargo system. In 1996, this rich and complex mix of polities, with officials both elected and appointed, created the Guatemalan Association of Indigenous Mayors and Authorities (AGAAI) ([21], pp. 219–28, 362–70; [23,24]).

All of these trends could be seen in Sololá. In the early 1990s, its unofficial *alcaldía indígena*, linked with left-wing groups, such as the CUC, fought against the presence of army commissioners and secret police, military conscription and forced civilian self-defense patrols (PACs). It won these battles by 1995, in the context of ongoing peace talks and guerrilla actions. In that same year, it made good on plans to elect an indigenous mayor. Maya candidates triumphed in the 1995 elections for both the *alcaldía indígena* and the official *alcaldía*. Pedro Iboy Chiroy, Sololá’s first Maya official mayor, like his counterpart in the indigenous muni (municipal office), had been promoted by a civic committee called SUD (Sololatecans United for Development). Nearly one hundred other Maya won mayoralties in 1995, as well ([22], pp. 19–20; [24], p. 9, footnote 11, pp. 84–86)<sup>5</sup>.

The rise of local indigenous politicians took place during fundamental changes in Guatemala’s political economy. Beginning roughly in 1993 and peaking during the presidency of Álvaro Arzú (1996–2000), the state took a sharp turn toward neoliberal policies, notably privatizing key industries, including energy and telecommunications. At the same time, NGOs and international institutions, such as the United Nations, poured in. Awash with funds and often blind to local complexities (see [27]), they at once bolstered and protected advocacy groups even as they encouraged both these groups and the state to forge consensus based on “multicultural” principles, contributing to the split between “official Maya” and “Maya *de a pie*” that Santiago Bastos notes. The URNG guerrillas soon became a political party, and the Mayan Movement lost its cohesiveness.

By the end of the decade, the left had little political clout. Validated by two “truth commission” reports at the end of the 1990s that documented the state’s culpability for mass killings during the war, activists organized to pass a 1999 referendum to amend the constitution to include key Peace Accord provisions, many of which addressed ethnic relations. They met resounding defeat in the polls ([2], pp. 49–51; [10], pp. 82–86; [28–31]; [32], p. 55). A fragmented, defeated and hard-to-locate-and-define constellation of Maya advocacy groups would be left to confront the issues of the new millennium, among them the effects of gold mining and the pollution of Lake Atitlán that so preoccupied the inhabitants of the highlands in general and of Sololá specifically.

In 1996, even as peace was being finalized, Glamis Corporation, of Canada, won a license to explore for gold in Guatemala, portending the changes to come. Glamis pioneered the Marlin Mine that became the center of activism in the highlands nearly a decade later. According to Michael Dougherty, Glamis was one of a growing number of “junior firms” that did little or no excavation, but that tackled the high-risk task of opening up terrain for investment capital, which over the course of the 1990s was fleeing more moneyed countries in hopes of greater profits in the underdeveloped world. Mining in Latin America grew by 300 percent over the decade, and by 2015, the region as a whole had taken first place in global mineral extraction [33].

Guatemala, barely healed from war, its countryside still militarized and its development infrastructure fully permeated by counterinsurgency tactics (see [34]), would take part in this bonanza. The journalist and economist Luis Solano writes of a spree of new projects that scarred the landscape

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<sup>5</sup> Civic committees, an alternative to political parties, allowed neighborhoods to promote candidates through grassroots democracy [25]. Revitalized cargos were also seen around the region ([26], p. 3).

from 1996–the 2010s. These included not just “mountaintop-removal mining” ([35], p. 124) and oil drilling, but also giant hydroelectric projects, African palm and sugar cultivation, “megaroad” construction, free trade zones and corporate-controlled tourism [35,36].

As these changes were remaking the economy and the ecosystem, the first term of Maya mayors was underway around the nation. In Sololá, the two SUD administrations marked many firsts. Together, they achieved the closure of the local military base, which later became a university campus. For its part, the SUD official muni under Pedro Iboy (1996–2000) made great strides in improving infrastructure, aiding cooperatives and in promoting the Kaqchikel language. SUD officials also worked to make *ladinos* (who were beginning to accept power-sharing with the Maya majority) feel represented. The Mayan Movement as a whole, to be sure, was waning. Its attempt to pass the 1999 referendum went down in defeat. In 2000, the Coordination of Organizations of Mayan Peoples (COPMAGUA) collapsed. COPMAGUA had represented more than one hundred groups and helped to influence the Peace Accords; its demise would be hailed both as the end of the guerrilla-indigenous alliance and as a sign of the turn to neoliberal multiculturalism and the neutering of the movement. Given their vibrant participation in municipal politics, however, as Timothy Smith notes, the Maya of Sololá felt anything but defeated as the new millennium dawned. Soon, though, changes in the national political landscape, especially in the breakdown of the alliance between the Mayan Movement and the guerrilla left, would bring conflict to the muni ([21], pp. 375–77; [24], pp. 95, 107–9; [37], pp. 16–18).

## 2. Dreaming in Kaqchikel: SWOT<sup>6</sup> and the Body Politic in the Early 2000s

Sololá’s conflicts in the early 2000s speak to the lived reality of NGO-ification, neoliberal transformation and the challenge of forging consensus in an ever-more fragmented political environment. As the 1999 National Referendum on Indigenous Rights was losing in the polls, Sololá celebrated acrimonious municipal elections that many decried as fraudulent. In the previous year, the government had allowed the inscription of the URNG, the guerrillas’ umbrella group, as a political party. Named URNG-Maíz, it peeled ex-guerrillas and some other leftist constituencies away from the SUD coalition. As these groups vied for control of the muni, they broke down loosely along urban-rural lines, with the URNG representing *campesinos* and SUD drawing most of its support from more citified areas. The local, national and transnational came together in this bitter contest. SUD accused the URNG of being too allied with the “neocolonial” Spanish international cooperation agency, AECID (Agencia Española para la Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo, or Spanish Agency for International Cooperation for Development); SUD supporters shot back that the URNG was in the pocket of the United Nations, whose permanent mission to oversee the peace process had still not fully withdrawn from the nation. The URNG-Maíz coalition won, installing Pedro Saloj as official mayor from 2000–2004 ([24], pp. 107–9; [37], pp. 21–25).

During Saloj’s administration, Sololá participated in a vast experiment in municipal development planning that was going on around the nation. Over the first half of 2001, community development experts from AECID were working with a team from Sololá’s city hall. The goal of the project was to foment broad-based popular participation in creating and implementing a community development plan. Its analysis of local problems was also meant to serve the municipality, governmental organizations and NGOs in long-term planning ([20], p. 2).

A newly-created team of municipal planning experts, officially the Municipal Technical Planning Unit (UTMP), worked with six pairs of locally-selected development promoters to study the urban center’s four neighborhoods, as well as the municipality’s sixty-five rural communities. After promoting their project on television, radio and with flyers, they convoked neighborhood assemblies. Using brainstorming techniques, such as FODA (Spanish for SWOT, “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats”, a technique seen in many future projects), these assemblies addressed economic development, health

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<sup>6</sup> SWOT is a commonly used technique in business to assess “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.”

and housing, education, urbanism and infrastructure, community organization and the environment. Once neighborhood assemblies catalogued local concerns and made plans to address them, they helped to prioritize and implement them. While AECID found its original goal of creating a set of sixty-five rural plans too ambitious, it did produce a voluminous set of community development plans (PCDs) in 2002.

Neoliberal multiculturalism had resulted in an alphabet soup of agencies that at once promoted and, by their very complexity, undermined meaningful political participation at the local level. Even as citizens encountered an ever-growing number of institutions in which they could participate or to which they could petition, the institutions they encountered were part of a greater political and economic landscape that rendered the wishes of citizens, many of whom were engaged with politics in ways never or rarely before seen in their communities, increasingly irrelevant, as evidenced by local residents' inability to stop the mine or save the lake. Consider for a moment the sheer complexity of the institutional landscape. The PCD for central Sololá listed twenty-three governmental organizations active in the city, including peacekeeping, planning, community development and human rights offices, as well as those of various government ministries (judicial and criminal justice organizations were listed separately). It also counted twenty-three active NGOs (certainly an underestimate), ranging from MINUGUA, the Mission of the United Nations in Guatemala, to smaller organizations formed at the municipal and even canton (district) levels, as well as seventeen active neighborhood associations just in the urban center. Not included in these tallies were the *alcaldía indígena*, which the report said worked in a "circular, not vertical, manner", or traditional organizations, such as the "council of elders, the council of *cofrades* (lay confraternities), the Coordination of Maya Organizations of Sololá (COMS), and auxiliary mayors ([20], pp. 26–27)".

It is not surprising that in a postwar environment, the proliferation of institutions and the resultant division of people into vying constituencies exacerbated conflict, a trend unabated despite consensus-building techniques, such as FODA (SWOT). This is especially true given the context of the nation's changing politics, as seen in the case of the 1999 Sololá municipal elections. The 2001 elections to choose the *alcalde indígena* for the 2002–2004 two-year term, meanwhile, turned violent. Alberto Orozco of SUD was elected in early December. The URNG alleged fraud, and in new elections a fortnight later, its candidate, Manuel Tuy, came out on top. SUD refused to turn over the *municipalidad indígena*. After several attempts to dislodge them, URNG supporters demonstrated and threatened to burn sixteen people alive, including the SUD mayor-elect. In the wake of these events, the *alcaldía indígena* closed for over a month. When it reopened, the URNG-Maíz candidate was in charge. The party held the seat well into the next decade ([22], pp. 26–28; [24], pp. 107–9)<sup>7</sup>.

As these events illustrate, the political landscape around Guatemala was fractured, fragile and fractious in the years following the Peace Accords. It was in this context that in 2002, Guatemala enacted legislation that "decentralized" government [38–40]. While local authorities would have much more sway in issues that affected their constituents' lives, controlling, for example, the local schools through newly-empowered municipal branches of the Ministry of Education, they would also have much more responsibility for solving the kinds of problems identified in the 2001 surveys. The state backed up its commitment to local governance with funding. Budgets not only included funds for municipalities, but also for new, interlocked sets of regional development councils (called COCODES, COMUDES, and CODEDES, at the community, municipal and departmental levels, respectively) [38]. Meanwhile, municipalities formed regional alliances, called *mancomunidades*, or commonwealths, to better organize and coordinate their efforts, even as the number of governmental organizations and NGOs continued to multiply into the middle of the decade. This profusion unfolded as the first huge wave of a baby boom dating to roughly the early- to mid-1980s was coming of age. For many of that

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<sup>7</sup> SUD retook the official municipality during 2004–2008, followed by URNG-Maíz again in 2008–2012; SUD won the 2015 elections and has held the mayoralty since 2012.

new generation around Lake Atitlán, the anti-mine protest and the storm of 2005 would be the first experience with politics on a national and global scale.

### 3. The Movement, the Mine and the Lake: The Violent Conjuncture of 2004–2005

The conjuncture seen in Sololá in 2004–2005 shows how protests against mining, free trade zones and other neoliberal projects intersected with NGO-ification in an age of social change and social perseverance. On the one hand, agrarian transformation and rural urbanization were creating new cities through the Mayan highlands. On the other, despite all of the social problems born of urbanization in a postwar environment, Maya community structures proved resilient. Although they were unable to stop the tide of neoliberal development, the Maya continued to advocate for their rights and fight for their communities.

The fight got harder beginning in 2004. Four years of relatively populist government (2000–2004) under Alfonso Portillo of the right-wing FRG (Guatemalan Republican Front) party had slowed the tide of neoliberal policies and irritated the elite. In 2004, a pro-business candidate, Oscar Berger (2004–2008), took office, marking, among other things, a resurgence of licenses for extractive industries. As new exploration in other areas in gold, copper, nickel and petroleum moved forward, Glamis Gold, the pioneer of open-air mining in Guatemala and a symbol of 1990s global “cowboy capitalism,” went through a series of buyouts and mergers. The Marlin Mine that Glamis opened in 2004 has been owned since 2006, the year it started producing, by the Canadian firm Goldcorp.

At the time of the 2004–2005 anti-mine protest in Sololá, a second URNG-Maíz administration was in control of the *alcaldía indígena*. It had made history in a patriarchal society with the election of Dominga Vasquez (2004–2005), the first woman ever to lead it. She bore the brunt of the elites’ blame for the anti-mine confrontation; they even accused her of terrorism. In retaliation for the activism, writes Rigoberto Ajcalón Choy, a Kaqchikel scholar who grew up in Sololá, Berger’s government slashed municipal funding for Sololá’s development committee by 50 percent, distributing the funds to more complaisant populations around the lake. By January 2006, Dominga Vasquez was *alcaldesa* no longer. She had not run for reelection in 2005, and she had received so many death threats that she was surrounded by a human shield provided by Peace Brigades International ([24], pp. 112–15; [41], p. 10).

By 2006, anti-mine protests had included not only the cylinder-blocking events in Sololá, but numerous protests in Huehuetenango, as well [42]. Most spectacularly, a series of “*consultas comunitarias*” began in May 2005 in San Marcos, in which community after community voted, unanimously or nearly so, to reject the mine. These local movements, horrified by the threat of cyanide in their groundwater, were also anti-globalization. In Guatemala, issues included opposition to CAFTA (ultimately passed as CAFTA-DR, the Dominican Republic and Central American Free Trade Agreement) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the rising price of now-privatized electricity and a vaunted transnational superhighway program called Plan Puebla-Panamá ([34], pp. 188–91; [43–45])<sup>8</sup>.

Despite all of the activism in the mid-2000s and beyond, the mine and CAFTA-DR have gone ahead, and superhighway plans continue under other names. Activists’ failure to turn the tide on these projects can be mostly attributed to the sheer power of transnational capital. Too, NGO-ification has played a role. In general (although there are of course exceptions), NGOs are not interested in funding activism that might generate serious structural change. Thus, issues that are important culturally, but less so economically (such as Maya cosmovision, for example), come to be profitable in a way that, say, pushing for progressive taxation or for unionization are not. However, other factors have been important in dulling activism’s edge. Evangelical conversion, a topic beyond the scope of this work, but one that has affected roughly half the population in recent decades, has arguably contributed to a more conservative electorate. At the same time, even as neoliberal policies have contributed to the expansion of a pauperized underclass, they have also help to give rise to a growing middle class in an

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<sup>8</sup> Two documentary films have been released on anti-mining activism, one in 2005 and the other in 2011 [1,45].

urbanizing and diversifying agrarian landscape. Born of transitions in agriculture in the late twentieth century, this new highland middle class is also not necessarily interested in anti-capitalist activism.

It is impossible to understand highland Guatemala without considering its sea change in agricultural production. Beginning in the 1970s, non-traditional agro-exports (NTAs) began to take root, in part complementing and in part replacing traditional highland corn and bean (*milpa*) cultivation. Broccoli, snow peas, macadamia nuts, cardamom, flowers and other crops transformed the highlands in the following decades. Over time, NTAs came to eclipse coffee, the nation's main agro-export since the 1870s, in their profitability ([34], pp. 124–53; [46,47]).

The labor demand created by the new crops was one of a number of key factors that contributed to astonishing rates of rural urbanization, especially from 1996 to the present, giving rise to what I have dubbed a new “agro-urban” landscape (this, together with an analysis of popular youth culture and popular alternative nationalism, is the subject of my forthcoming book [48]). Many large, but once-remote villages have become bustling towns, while provincial towns are now small cities. Rural urbanization, Carlota McAllister points out, has been paradoxically accompanied by “ruralization,” since the high cost of living forces people to rely increasingly on subsistence agriculture [49]. Fueled as well by remittances from migrants in the U.S., agro-urbanization has occurred in tandem with, and in part because of, the baby boom that has made Guatemala's population one of the youngest on Earth. As NTAs helped to spur rural urbanization and an associated spike in smallholdings, many of them Maya-owned, less and less of the exponentially-growing and very young economically-active population worked in agriculture [50].

Given the sea changes underway, a national rural development policy was desperately needed. The Peace Accords had mandated incorporating the rural population into the development process, and during the Portillo administration (2000–2004), a national, multi-sector roundtable had deadlocked in its goal to reach consensus on an Integrated Rural Development Law. When Berger took office in January 2004, at least seventeen rural development proposals were in circulation. Berger created a new roundtable to reach consensus even as his administration's actions, including issuing far more mineral exploration and exploitation licenses than had Portillo, infuriated *campesino* groups. In particular, the administration began forcibly evicting settlers from rural land invasions around the country, provoking *campesinos* to call a national strike on 8 June 2004. In the same month, the government convoked its roundtable ([50], pp. 14–15, 112–13, 119–31)<sup>9</sup>. Agribusiness's intransigence and complex politics ultimately caused negotiations to fail. Efforts were still underway, however, in the months surrounding the government's breakup of the Sololá 2004–2005 anti-mine demonstration, an act that among others spurred the *alcaldes indígenas* of Huehuetenango, El Quiché, San Marcos, Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán and Sololá to create an advocacy group, the Regional Council of Indigenous Peoples ([44], p. 46; [51]). As levels of conflict reached the boiling point in the first half of 2005, representatives from the state, civil society and the political parties kept working on a development plan. Among their tools was FODA (SWOT), a technique that evidenced the NGO-ification of the body politic from bottom to top.

NGO-ification, agrarian conflict and agro-urbanization formed the backdrop of the 2005 anti-mining confrontation in the Sololá department, as well as of the threats to the lake in the years ahead. These factors also help to explain why the lake was so damaged in the first place, why efforts to save it have gone so unnoticed while anti-mine activism has captured the world's attention and why the lake in 2015 continues to die and mining proceeds unabated.

Agricultural runoff, as well as sewage overloads and riverside garbage dumps born of population growth had already stressed the Lake Atitlán environment when tropical storm Stan hit on 4 October 2005. The region's urbanizing towns had all grown rapidly over the past decade or so, while farmers

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<sup>9</sup> The Berger administration's roundtable was called the MDPDRI, Mesa de Diálogo y Participación sobre el Desarrollo Rural Integral (Roundtable of Dialogue and Participation on Integrated Rural Development).



diversified their crops, hoping to participate in the changing agro-export market (see [52], for example). Besides polluting the lake, population growth also exacerbated the trend of creating settlements in unstable areas. No example is more poignant than the Tz'utujil town of Panabaj, where a landslide buried more than 1200 people alive. Like Panabaj, many of the newer impoverished "suburban" hamlets in the area were located on land known to be at grave risk, bespeaking the area's rapidly growing population. On the other hand, on the Kaqchikel-speaking side of the lake, in towns such as Panajachel, for example, swollen rivers washed scores of poor, self-constructed neighborhoods into the lake.

The government had no emergency plan. What little help that did come did not arrive for days. In Panajachel, where I was living at the time, neighbors organized relief themselves, creating a shelter in the town gymnasium. My job was to open and sort locally-donated aid packages, many of which were being carried down the mountain from Sololá by Maya using tumplines. On 5 and 6 October, robbers began to loot abandoned properties; community patrols put a stop to it. Townspeople also informally, but effectively prohibited price gouging and arranged the rationing of gasoline and other essential goods.

*Campeño* organizations around the highlands were so angered by the state's weak response to the disaster that they derailed the national agrarian development roundtable and ultimately forced through agreements to increase relief funding and develop better emergency plans ([50], pp. 152–53). Politics and activism may be atomized in this small nation. Crime and folk justice may indicate a shattered body politic, and new class divisions may be arising in an urbanizing society. Guatemalans responding to Stan, however, proved that their tightly-woven, if conflictive, community structures have survived war and neoliberal assault alike.

#### 4. Green Lake, Green Movement: Plans, Peril and the Pink Tide's Failure in Agro-Urban Guatemala, 2006–2015

From the mid-2000s–the mid-2010s, creating, bolstering and controlling community structures became ever more important to the Guatemalan state. This was the result of a paradoxical "outward/inward" dynamic. On the one hand, activists were looking outward, expanding their links with an evolving global anti-neoliberal movement, even as an increasingly cosmopolitan and networked population became ever more aware of the outside world. This "outward" dynamic showed up not only in spreading consumer culture, but also in increased bitter awareness of Guatemala's shortcomings in providing for its citizens. At the same time, spiraling violence and insecurity underpinned an "inward" turn that threatened to tear communities apart and ultimately prompted the election of a right-winger who promised to battle crime. Both outward activism and inward community-based violence threatened the state. A new spate of consensus-based planning was one attempt to reign in, channel and control these forces.

Particularly alarming to the elite was the possible resurgence of the left. During the second half of the first decade of the new millennium, community-based actors participated in hemispheric and global efforts to fight for indigenous rights, the environment and social justice, as well as to oppose neoliberal globalization. Guatemala had a short-lived moment of hope that it would join the "pink tide" that was signaling the return of the left in South and Central America. In the 2007 elections, the Maya left failed miserably to elect Rigoberta Menchú to the presidency. The country did, however, choose Álvaro Colom (2008–2012), the most left-leaning *ladino* head of state since the 1950s. In the same period, Maya activists hosted the third Continental Summit of the Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala, spoke of indigenous "*Buen Vivir*" and drew inspiration from leaders, such as Bolivia's Evo Morales [53,54]<sup>10</sup>. Although Colom introduced conditional cash transfer

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<sup>10</sup> On social movements, environmental activism and reparations (as well as many other postwar "calculations"), see the brilliant analysis in Diane Nelson's works; thorough information on social movements may also be found in FLACSO's *Cuadernos de debate* No. 6, 7, 8, y 9, ed. Simona Yagenova, all published in July 2008, the first of which covers links with the World Social Forum. FLACSO is the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences).

programs loosely modeled on those seen in Brazil, his administration in general was not regarded from below as a success, nor did it threaten big business.

By this time, the baby boomers of the 1980s had begun having children of their own, the first of whom were in their teens by 2015. Trends that had begun in the 1990s accelerated. These included outmigration to the United States, widespread evangelical conversion, rural urbanization and Internet-inflected transnational cultural expressions. Most of all, they included exploding crime and insecurity, helping to explain why Guatemalans elected the right-wing law and order (“*mano dura*,” or iron fist) candidate, Otto Pérez Molina (2012–2015), in 2011.

The violence was alarming. As in other towns around the lake and the nation, crime spurred increasing vigilante lynchings in Sololá from the middle of the 2000s to the middle of the 2010s. Spectacular examples include the public burning in 2009 of two men and a woman who had assaulted a bus, killing the driver and a passenger. In 2012, just months after local indigenous authorities had ordered the public whipping of two people accused of robbery and fraud, SUD mayor Andrés Iboy and other local leaders just barely managed to save an accused criminal from the flames. Throughout the entire period, kidnapping rings were periodically active in the lake basin, leading to several lynchings and close calls<sup>11</sup>.

Efforts to address the changing landscape continued at a breakneck pace. A new spate of “strategic plans,” built on the consensus models and using techniques, such as FODA (SWOT), emerged in the second half of the 2000s and into the 2010s to address the issues the new generation was confronting. Among others, these plans included a PDM (Municipal Development Plan with Territorial Focus) and PET (Strategic Territorial Plan) from all of the nation’s municipalities (for example, see [56,57]). These were tied to the central government through SINPET, the National System of Strategic Territorial Planning (see [58]).

In 2011, Sololá published a PDM with a special focus on gender and cultural belonging [59]. The unpublished PCDs, or Community Development Plans, that underpinned this document all evidenced a desire to belong, socially, economically and politically. Residents stressed the high number of young people in their communities, areas that they universally reported were growing. They planned for better inclusion for their culturally-threatened children and hoped to link to wider economies. Furthermore, the local community members who participated in writing the PCDs demonstrated a keen awareness of environmental problems and evidenced a desire to save the lake, in urbanized, urbanizing and still-rural areas alike.

In the city neighborhood of Barrio El Calvario, residents expressed their adherence to *paq’ uch*, “an ancestral value and originary form of solidarity among the *pueblo* Maya.” Their planning process had included not just officials from the NGOs, governmental agencies, COCODES and the “official muni”, but also Maya elders, *principales*, “*ajq’ijab*” spiritual guides, midwives and the *alcaldía indígena*. Together, these groups reached consensus that technologies, such as television, radio and the Internet, were causing the loss of values in an age when poverty was forcing people to migrate. Gangs, alcoholism, drug addiction and organized crime rings were proliferating, neighbors said, as they planned for sports facilities to keep young people occupied. As in other neighborhoods, they noted that the lack of drainage, sewer systems and a sewage treatment plan polluted both their immediate environment and Lake Atitlán. Pollution had been barely mitigated by the central government’s agency to save the lake, which worked with the local municipal commonwealths and a collection of relatively ineffective homegrown environmental organizations (see [60], pp. 1, 6–13, 35)<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> I was in the Sololá area during kidnapping incidents and the 2009 lynching. For a sample of the incidents to which I refer, see postings on the Facebook page of *Noticias Sololá (NS)* [55], including: “*Aplican castigo comunitario a dos personas acusados de robo*,” posted 28 February 2012, and “*Disturbios en Sololá*,” posted 5 May 2012.

<sup>12</sup> The government agency is AMSCLAE (Autoridad para el Manejo Sustentable de la Cuenca del Lago de Atitlán y su Entorno); its history may be found in [61,62]. A second storm, Agatha, damaged the region in May 2010 and exacerbated the lake’s problems. Besides suffering repeated cyanobacteria blooms, the lake’s waters also rose, swallowing beaches and shoreline homes. Residents in mid-2015 hoped that the recent piecemeal opening of sewage treatment plants might help.

The urban Barrios El Carmen and San Bartolo had concerns similar to those of El Calvario. They noted that “activities against human values and integrity” ([63], p. 8) were going on in unlit parks, where antisocial groups and delinquency were proliferating. They added that people were losing the Kaqchikel language [63,64]. Rural *caseríos* (hamlets) also spoke of infrastructure and the environment. They decried the utter lack of a social safety net, clamored for better access to education and training programs and complained of pollution caused by the lack of a garbage collection system and by chemical fertilizers. As is typical in the area, they were supplementing corn and bean cultivation with NTAs, but they were selling these largely in local markets and wanted access to agro-export markets for their crops. Like the urban neighborhoods of the municipality, they reported young and growing populations. Not surprisingly, they noted less delinquency and loss of culture among their children than their urban neighbors had, but they worried about the effects of migration on their communities and families [52,65].<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Conclusions: Youth, Insecurity and Citizenship in the Age of the Internet

Young people growing up in this atmosphere of violence and insecurity began to organize their own associations during this period. Many of these, to be sure, were born of a craze of association making led by the multicultural state. Others, however, were linked to Maya advocacy groups, many of them openly anti-capitalist, as well as to a global indigenous movement and anti-globalization movements, such as the World Social Forum (see [66–68], the last of which is the Facebook page of the Council of Indigenous Youth). Some associations, however, were different kinds of groups: sports teams, garage bands, rave collectives and other clusters of youths interested in rapping, break dancing, painting (see [69]) and blogging. The confluence of historical forces seen in Sololá in the middle of the first decade of the first millennium had unfolded in a globalizing, yet still intensely local (see [70]) agro-urban Guatemala. The youngsters who populate these areas are the subject of great national concern. Some critics fret that they are apolitical. Others point out, with reason, that “Maya” is not necessarily an identity to which many of these young people hew, especially the everyday, *de a pie* folk who make up a significant percentage of the population and whose main interests do not include politics. Whatever their politics and whatever their evolving and diverse senses of identity may be, however, agro-urban youngsters participated in the national protests of 2015 that ultimately drove the vice-president and president out of power and into jail for corruption.

While the obstacles they and their society face are significant and while class-based and even culturally-based politics of the older Mayan Movement may, like the movement itself, be in decline, these two astonishing postwar generations, showing as they do the fractured, but still very real legacy of the Mayan Movement and the organized left, give everyone plenty of reason to hope; so too does their parents’ history. In the 1990s, a time of intense conflict and neoliberal transition, local Maya activists took over city hall and reactivated community cargos that had survived the centuries. Paradoxically, this process itself was in part fostered by NGOs and government policies of multiculturalism and decentralization in the new millennium. The children of these postwar politics, just coming or still to come of age, cast these processes and paradoxes into sharp relief. Perhaps they will be the complaisant consumer-citizens envisioned by neoliberalism’s best laid plans. More likely, they will not.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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<sup>13</sup> In 2011, Sololá *campesinos* received a certification that they hoped would lead to a deal to sell their crops to Wal-Mart, a national newspaper reported ([12], “Red de agricultores obtiene certificación,” 27 November 2011).

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