The Third Wave of Modernization in Latin America

Cultural Perspectives on Neoliberalism

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The Localization of the Global: Contemporary Production Practices in a Mayan Community in Guatemala

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Guatemala has been described as a land of “eternal spring and eternal tyranny” (Simon, 1987). To tourists who hurtle along the Pan-American highway en route to the emerald waters of Lake Atitlan or the famous indigenous market town of Chichicastenango, the landscape is stunning. Along the way, travelers glimpse men bent low under the heavy loads suspended on trumplines or women and their children in the brightly colored clothing—for which the Mayas are renowned—laboring over plots of broccoli and snow peas for export, that have sprung up amidst the traditional milpa. These are the Maya, descendants of the civilization that built the famous temples of Tikal, Palenque, and Copan, attractions that bring tens of thousands of tourists each year to Guatemala. For many tourists the Maya represent a picturesque metaphor of a simpler way of life, free from the demands of the modern world.

The reality, however, is very different for the majority of Mayan people who live in the Guatemalan towns and villages of the altiplano (western highlands). They exist on the darker side of modernity. Rather than enjoying the benefits of technology, these families experience the degrading underside of capitalist economic relations shored up by a repressive state apparatus. They live in grinding poverty where the average life expectancy for Mayas is forty-five years old and where nine out of ten children under five years old are malnourished.

Recent inscriptions of state power and changes in the penetration of global capital in highland indigenous communities in Guatemala have been profound. The counterinsurgency war, which reached its height
between 1978 and 1984, left over one hundred thousand people dead, forty thousand disappeared, one million people displaced within the country, and compelled tens of thousands of men, women, and children to flee across the Mexican border. By the Guatemalan military’s own admission over six hundred rural villages in the highlands were destroyed and countless others were partially razed in an effort, they claimed, to sever the guerrillas from their social base of support. It was the most extensive attack on the indigenous highland communities since the time of the Spanish conquest, five hundred years earlier.

One of the notable side effects of the counterinsurgency war has been not only the physical destruction of communities, but the restructuring of community social relations through the militarization of daily life (Green, in press). In the aftermath of war, it is not only that community spatial boundaries have been transgressed, but that many communities now embody the very mechanisms of state terror under the aegis of military control. Army garrisons, civil militias, spies, forced military recruitment of young boys, and rumors of death lists create deep apprehensions and anxiety. People are afraid to speak out about the terror, violence, and dread that permeate their lives. These imposed silences add more fear to the instability. As a result of these new arrangements a sense of trust among community members has been severely undermined.

While political violence has been undoubtedly destructive to community and familial social relations in the highlands, less striking but important economic shifts have also been taking place simultaneously. New forms of capitalist production practices in the altiplano are affecting the experiences of everyday life for some rural Mayan households in the Department of Chimaltenango through globalization. Globalization is “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. This is a dialectical process because such local happenings may move in an obverse direction from the very distanced relations that shape them” (Giddens, 1990: 63).

Although the restructuring of social relations through capitalist economic arrangements is nothing new to Guatemala’s Mayas—highland families have been involved in part-time wage work for almost a century and the wages earned have in part financed their subsistence livelihood—the degree of penetration into community, cultural, and familial practices is qualitatively different. And the direct intrusion into communities, households and families has been possible, in part, as a result of the political violence (de Janvry, 1981; McCreery, 1990; Smith, 1990).

In many communities in the altiplano today the economic situation is far worse than it was fifteen years ago. The economic destruction and
impoverishment as a result of the political violence has been massive, leading to extensive changes in local patterns of cultivation, trade, and labor movement (Smith, 1990). In the Department of Chimaltenango, for example, there were no corn harvests in some communities between 1981 and 1983 as a result of the counterinsurgency campaign (Krueger and Enge, 1985). During this same period the national economy entered a period of instability, leading to a decline in the production of two of the country's principal agricultural export crops (coffee and cotton) and, as a result, to a decreased demand for the migratory agricultural labor that rural families had provided (AVANCSO, 1994a).

The backbone of this agro-export economy has been a latifundia-minifundia system where peasant farmers from the altiplano made the long trek to the south coastal plantations. Initially they were a coerced part-time labor force and later were propelled by the exigencies of capitalist-induced poverty. For the remainder of the year these rural families have subsisted on the small tracts of land that the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano has called “plots of land the size of graves.” Here they have eked out a subsistence survival based on milpa production and local part-time wage labor when and if it is available. Plantation work with its slave-like conditions has always been the least desirable for Mayas, and whenever possible many have sought other alternatives to meet their subsistence needs. By the late 1970s, for example, most municipios in the Department of Chimaltenango were sending less than 10 percent of the work force to the plantations. Mayas were using their surplus cash from their migratory work to invest in other kinds of local labor ventures rather than becoming fully proletarianized when their land base became too small to be tenable (Smith, 1984). Some were engaged in construction, others in rural development projects such as cooperative schemes and local commerce in addition to milpa production (Smith, 1990). However, a decade later, in the aftermath of war, opportunities for nonagricultural production had diminished significantly as had the demand for migrant labor on coastal plantations. Today, in a reversal of the usual predictions, campesinos have become more rather than less dependent on agriculture for their sustenance. Yet the nature of that production has changed dramatically.

Who Are the Maya?

Although the 21 Mayan indigenous groups in Guatemala are the majority of the population, comprising at least 60 percent of the population, they live under minority rule and their lives remain on the margin; 87 percent live in poverty and 61 percent live in extreme poverty. Most Mayas
continue to live in rural towns and villages of the western highlands, although there has been massive internal displacement to urban areas as a result of the civil war (Bastos and Camus, 1994). Despite centuries of disruption and change for Mayan communities, family and community social relations expressed through the weaving of cloth and the growing of the milpa remain central to Mayan material and cultural production practices, not only providing the basis of survival for many, but also the locus of a Mayan epistemology (Green, in press).

Each society has a cultural apparatus through which it transfers and renews cultural values and beliefs. Mayan children receive their education through the milpa and weaving. Young boys learn the importance of corn through their experiences of everyday life. In the milpa they acquire the fundamentals of subsistence agricultural production. It is here where grandfathers, uncles, cousins, and older brothers teach a young boy prayers to the ancestors and spirits at the time of planting. Well before a boy is old enough to wield a hoe on his own he is allowed to drop the corn seeds into the soil alongside his father, who invokes the help of the ancestors and Mother Earth for a successful harvest. Working the soil in this way not only provides Mayas with food to sustain them but reconnects them with the dead and the natural world.

Young girls learn to weave the traditional Maya clothing on a backstrap loom. The production of cloth in this manner has been an important material and cultural expression for Mayan women. Cloth has been used to clothe the body, as a locus of Mayan identity, and has served as supplementary income for women. Weaving has been the site of gender and generational social reproduction where Mayan women produce both art and ideology (Green, in press). As women weave their cloth they are also producing a Mayan epistemology that emphasizes the relationship between human beings—both living and dead—and their universe. In this way a weaver produces, through her labor and her art, a conduit between the past and the future. In this region it is the women who continue to use traje, the distinctive clothing of the Maya, to follow the tradition of dressing like their ancestors and to re-create the thread between the past and the present (Carlsen, 1994).

Nontraditional Exports

In the 1980s the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) began promoting nontraditional export agriculture as one component of its rural development strategies to ameliorate poverty in the western highlands of Guatemala. In the Department of Chimaltenango, for example,
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vegetable production for export had become an alternative for many peasant farmers to procure much needed cash. With the demands imposed by the civil patrol system and the decreased labor opportunities of the coffee, cotton, and sugar plantations, the conversion of part of the milpa to contract farming or hiring oneself out as a field laborer were some of the limited options available to local farmers. However, this new global agricultural strategy of small farmers in the “Third World,” producing fruits and vegetables for export to the “First World,” relies heavily on access to cheap labor (Collins, 1995).

Two types of new agricultural arrangements predominate in this region: contract farming and field labor. Contract farming—that is, small plots of land previously used for milpa production by peasants and now being used for cultivating broccoli, snowpeas, and cauliflower for sale to intermediaries—has proliferated. While some small farmers have profited, recent studies have shown that this is a risky business since many farmers suffer crop failure due to the vagaries of weather (too much or too little rain or frost) or a glut in the market (Rosset, 1991; AVANCSO, 1994b). As a result many farmers have had to default on their loans and have lost their land. Peasants bear the brunt of the failures. Intermediaries provide high-interest loans, seed, and fertilizers which are then deducted from the price of the harvest. Yet, prices are notoriously unstable and it is not uncommon to see vegetables that have been rejected for their poor quality, or for having pesticide residues that are too high, dumped on the side of roadways. Only a few farmers with significant land holdings are able to sustain profits.

Access to land, credit, technical assistance and markets vary considerably according to the size of a farmer’s holdings, with the moderately well-off being favored over the poor. Social differentiation, food insecurity, overuse of land, deforestation and an increasing rural proletariat are the realities that characterize economic life in Chimaltenango in the 1990s. One of the structural effects of this shift in land usage is that land that had been utilized previously to produce basic grains for an internal market is now being devoted to export crops (Garst and Barry, 1990). In addition, with an influx of imported basic grains, the local market value of corn and black beans has been undercut, eroding the independence of the peasant farmer.

Contract farming reworks social relations of production. While the peasant farmer continues to own the means of production and to have control over his own labor, it is the contractor who dictates the conditions of that labor and the “pace and rhythm of work” (Watts, 1992: 82). Snow peas in particular are extremely labor intensive and therefore the success of their cultivation involves the use of unpaid family labor. Under these
conditions contract farming disguises the exploitation of peasant farmers vis-à-vis their status as independent rural entrepreneurs.

The second agricultural strategy that has been introduced is field labor used in the cultivation of crops such as tomatoes and lettuce for export. On larger land holdings local elites or foreign owners have converted production of domestic crops for local consumption to production of export crops. With the high costs of transport and marketing, low labor costs are crucial for the owners to maintain a competitive edge. The men who work the fields earn U.S.$2.50 for an eight-hour day while young boys earn only U.S.$1.25. The work entails planting, weeding, and fertilizing as well as spraying the plants with pesticides without the benefits of protective safety equipment.

The shift in the commercialization of local agriculture has altered the nature of patron-client relations locally. Although Mayan men often worked for local wealthier ladinos (non-Indians of mixed ancestry) in relations that were undoubtedly exploitative, these relations allowed for negotiations with regard to fulfilling labor obligations. For example, if a family member or neighbor was ill or needed assistance, a worker could petition the owner for flexibility in the work schedule. Under the new conditions of production with the more fragile and labor-intensive export crops, labor demands are more rigid in terms of time. Patron-client relations are being replaced by those of capitalist owner-worker relations that are less responsive to worker needs. While the peasant laborers still may be working the land and even performing activities similar to what they have done in the past, the conditions under which the work takes place have been altered. What is different in these new relations is that the personalistic contract between owner and worker, often from the same region, is replaced by the logic of the market.

Rural Industrialization

Each evening several thousand Maya-Kaqchékel adolescents, both boys and girls—many as young as fourteen years old—leave the dozens of cement-block factories that since 1989 have sprung up along the Pan-American highway in the central highlands of Guatemala. The girls in their colorful traje mingle in small groups with adolescent boys as they wait their turn to board recycled American school buses that will carry them home to their villages for the night, a ride that may take them one and one-half hours.

The maquilas, or export apparel assembly factories, also have flourished over the past decade in Guatemala. In 1984 there were 6 factories
with less than 2,000 workers, and by 1992 there were 275 factories and over 50,000 workers employed. In 1995 the maquilas were contracting with more than 80,000 workers. In 1992 garments worth U.S.$350 million were exported to companies such as The Gap, Leslie Fay, and Levi-Strauss. Just two years later those earnings had increased to U.S.$590 million—worth of clothing being exported to the United States. The majority of the investments in the maquila factories involve domestic capital, followed by Korean and then North American capital. The young workers, laboring under deplorable conditions, earn on the average U.S.$100 per month (Peterson, 1992; AVANCOS, 1994).

While most of the maquilas have been based on the outskirts of Guatemala City, beginning in 1989 maquilas were being built increasingly in the newly created free trade zones in the Department of Chimaltenango. One of the largest of these maquilas is Sam Lucas, which employs about 1,200 workers. At 6:30 A.M. each morning three school buses leave the central plaza of the town of San Andres Itzapa filled with Mayan adolescents, and return in the evening between 8:30 and 10:30 P.M., depending on the quota demands of the factory that day. The workers are charged U.S.$.80 per day for transport, a significant portion of the U.S.$4 per day that they earn.

The factory, built from cement blocks with aluminum roofing, is the size of a football field. Inside, long wooden tables divide the workers into lines of about 30 people. Each person repeats the assigned task over and over, whether it is to sew labels on pants, fasten sleeves to a shirt, or cut threads. Production goals are established for each line. For example, one line may have to complete 1,500 shirts each day, while another may be expected to sew on 1,000 labels per day. If the production line reaches its goal, then the workers are paid extra; if not, money is deducted from their wages. Workers complain of harsh working conditions—poor ventilation, the intense heat generated from the ceiling lamps, leg and back pain from standing for long hours—and verbal and physical harassment and abuse by the supervisors and managers for perceived laxity in work habits.

Work discipline and control of time, not unexpectedly, seem to be very important managerial techniques in inculcating these adolescents in capitalist labor practices (Thompson, 1967). Managers continually admonish the workers to not waste time, to finish the work on time, and to arrive on time. If workers arrive late, one half of the day’s pay is deducted, and in some instances, they are not permitted to enter the factory. If a worker does miss a day, U.S.$8 is deducted from their salary and if they miss two days they are dismissed. The workers say they often do not
receive money for overtime that they are promised. The work hours vary according to the production schedule, so if there is a large order to fill the manager may announce that everyone is obligated to stay until 9:30 P.M. instead of leaving at 6:30 P.M. Before entering and upon leaving the factory, the workers must line up for inspection by the manager and supervisors. This formality requires forty-five minutes and, as a result, buses do not leave to transport the workers home until 7:30 P.M., an hour past paid working hours.

There are no maquila unions since people are afraid to organize. Labor union workers who have tried to organize the maquilas have met the same fate as the forty trade union leaders who have been murdered or disappeared in Guatemala since the early 1990s. The case of Yovany Gomez is illustrative. Gomez was a twenty-four-year-old organizer who was threatened repeatedly by the Korean manager of a maquila she tried to organize in Guatemala City. She was murdered in March 1995. To date, there is not one organized union in the maquila industry in a country long noted for its abusive labor practices. Both young workers and their families are well aware of the exploitative conditions under which they are working. Yet the necessity of procuring cash coupled with the lack of a sufficient land base on which to subsist in an economy marked by high inflation has left many families with few options.

However, in some cases adolescents are using their earnings for personal consumption. Girls are using their wages to buy either their traditional woven blouses or the thread to make them, and to purchase the long wrapped skirts worn by the women. Because of financial constraints within the family and the rising prices of textiles, it is difficult for families to provide these girls with their traditional clothing. Through factory work they are able to garner the resources they need to maintain an important symbolic expression of their identity. Adolescent boys may spend their wages on electronic equipment. In some maquilas the vendors come right into the factory to sell to the workers. Popular items for purchase include hair dryers, cassette players, radios, and televisions. One father complained that his son left the factory at the end of the month with his paycheck already spent. However, what was more distressing for this father was the fact that his son no longer wished to work in the milpa alongside his father, uncles, and grandfather. Instead, the young man preferred modern factory labor to working the corn fields of his ancestors.

The central preoccupation for many of the families and workers, however, is the way in which factory work affects the perceptions of time and social relations. The effects of these labor practices have the greatest potential for reshaping Mayan cultural practices. Most young workers feel
that they have abandoned their families for the long hours of factory work. They have very little time to be at home—rising as early as 4 A.M. and often not returning home until after 9 P.M. in the evening. Sundays are the only days that they have to share time with other family members. The factory production schedule is also at odds with a Mayan sense of mutual aid and obligations to family and neighbors. The young people are unable to participate in any community events and, in effect, their work severs the daily connections between themselves, their family, and their friends. Thus, they are put in the difficult situation of choosing between their individual needs and their commitments to their family and their community. To cope with these pressures many young workers have devised a strategy of intermittent factory work. Several workers quit the maquila after a year or two, only to return again after they have stayed home for six months or more to rest and be with their families. Yet, for many, the exigencies of poverty drive them back once again to seek maquila work. It is too early to tell whether this will become a cyclical employment pattern and whether this type of strategy will remain acceptable to the maquila owners.

Conclusion

What is unique about the present situation for rural Mayan people in the highlands of Chimaltenango is that there has been a substantial weakening of the spaces that they have long utilized to survive. The land surrounding their communities where for centuries they have grown their milpas is being penetrated by new forms of global capitalism. Their communities are militarized in unprecedented ways and daily life is under surveillance. While political repression should not be a necessary factor in disciplining the poor for the introduction of new capitalist work practices, in the case of Guatemala it must certainly be implicated. Today, Mayan communities as refuges from the outside world—whatever their shortcomings, factions, and cleavages—have been reshaped under the weight of violence and repression.

Likewise, the nature of their work practices have also been transformed. It is crucial to locate Mayan culture in work, that is in the milpa and weaving, to understand how culture is produced and what the current changes may signify. As adolescent boys and girls as well as entire families no longer have time and in some cases the desire to do that cultural work, the struggles surrounding culture, power, and social relations at the community and household level take on new meanings locally and globally.
Notes

1. In Guatemala the milpa refers to a plot of land where corn and usually beans and squash are grown together.

2. The latifundia refer to landholding units which range between 45 to over 900 hectares and which usually contain the most fertile agricultural lands in Guatemala. Minifundia refer to the small, fragmented holdings which are less than seven hectares and usually are not sufficient to sustain a family all year (Lovell, 1985). The relationship between latifundia and minifundia can be characterized by the inequality of that relationship, as George Lovell notes: "the fundamental characteristic of landholding in Guatemala in the present day is the concentration of sizable amounts of cultivable land in the hands of the small, wealthy (mostly non-Indian) minority, while an impoverished, but dignified peasant majority, predominantly Indian, ekes out an existence on a tiny percentage of the total national farm land" (Lovell, 1985: 27). Guatemala has one of the most inequitable land distributions in all of Latin America; 2 percent of the population own over 65 percent of the arable lands.

3. A municipio is a township usually comprising a principal town and surrounding villages. See Sol Tax for an early discussion of the municipio (1937).

4. The civil patrol system was created in 1982 and constituted a rural militia of over a million men by 1985, over half the highland male population over fifteen years of age. The PACs, as they are known in Spanish, function to augment military strength and intelligence in areas of conflict, and more importantly to provide vigilance and control over the local population. Although the Guatemalan constitution states explicitly that the PACs are voluntary, failure to participate or opposition to their formation marks one as a subversive in conflictive zones in the altiplano (Americas Watch, 1986).

References


