Civic engagement in extreme times: The remaking of justice among Guatemala's 'postwar' generation

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a dramatic growth in the field of youth civic engagement, although little of this work has been conducted in fragile democracies contending with legacies of war and authoritarianism. This study explores how Guatemalan postwar generation youth develop as civic actors under extreme conditions of violence, social and political distrust, and a dwindling space for public expression. Drawing from ethnographic research conducted in rural and urban Guatemala, this study demonstrates how young people's sense of civic efficacy interacts with their interpretations of historical injustice and the civic messages mediated by teachers, families, peers, and communities. Young people struggle to define and enact appropriate civic action, at times working outside unjust systems as a means of fostering change.

Keywords

authoritarianism, Guatemala, legacies of war, postwar, youth civic engagement

Introduction

During my first month in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, I was troubled by the graffiti on a cement wall that declared, 'human rights are dead'. The letters were cleanly stamped with a stencil in black and red ink. One evening while walking home I noticed a group of young people in knit ski masks, hovering under a streetlight. They chatted casually, some twirling baseball bats, others gripping scrap metal. Convinced I had sighted my first gang, I clung to the side of the house and ran to the back door. Soon I came to know this group as one of the self-claimed 'neighborhood watch' vigilantes. Local youths took turns monitoring the streets at night, while community members brought them refreshments as thanks for keeping the streets safe. My middle-aged neighbor assured me, 'They are not delinquents. They are the good ones'. When I asked a young person about the 'death' of human rights, he affirmed that 'rights in Guatemala do not exist. That is why we have the group'.

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This instance brings to the surface several of the central paradoxes regarding youth attitudes toward civic participation in Guatemala today, notably the way outlooks turn on questions of violence, human security, and the right to justice in the face of impunity. It also demonstrates the restructuring of roles that civil society actors take on when they perceive that the human rights and civil contracts do not exist, as well as how these roles are interpreted from within a society whose experience with violence appears to be ongoing. Are these actors practicing civic engagement through decisive, albeit drastic, action—or are they delinquents using extrajudicial violence as a threat to control the community? Does this group demonstrate how youth have inadvertently embraced a culture of violence as a consequence of Guatemala's history of protracted violence—or does it reveal the way citizens intervene when their government is too weak to protect them?

States undergoing democratic transition have increasingly invested in civic education projects, often linking democratic civic participation to peacebuilding goals (Bellino, 2014; Oglesby, 2007). But despite the Ministry of Education's civic education reforms in the years following the civil war, Guatemala's postwar generation remains wary of democracy (Cruz, 2011; Schultz et al., 2011). Just 20 years ago in Guatemala, to critique the state was tantamount to a death sentence (CEH, 1999). Young people today may be born into families who have lost members to state repression, witnessed or experienced brutal violence, or suffer from psychosocial trauma related to the war. Understandably, many of the adults in these young people's lives are fearful of civic participation, distrusting the state and fellow citizens. Moreover, young people's daily experiences reflect a society where deep disparities persist between indigenous and nonindigenous groups. Guatemala is no longer an authoritarian regime, but it is not yet the multicultural democracy its postwar transition has promised.

This article aims to contribute to the theorizing of youth civic development by depicting a complex portrait of civic culture in a fragile postwar democracy. I begin by examining the linkages between historical injustice, legacies of authoritarianism, and the re-criminalization of social movements in Guatemala's 'postwar' era. Drawing from ethnographic data gathered in formal and informal educational spaces, I then explore how young people struggle to define and enact appropriate civic action—at times, stretching the bounds of what has traditionally been envisioned as participation for the common good. I close with a discussion of the implications for formal civic education in societies where young people develop as civic actors in extremis.

Youth civic development, fragility, and the legacies of war

In recent years, there has been a dramatic growth in the field of civic education, youth civic engagement, and an effort to define the contours of 'new civics' (Flanagan and Levine, 2010; Levine and Soltan, 2014; Levinson, 2012; Sherrod et al., 2010). Research has demonstrated that young people shape their understanding of the social contract, fairness, and justice, and a sense of social belonging, through their daily experiences with civic agents and institutions (Abu El-Haj, 2007; Flanagan et al., 2010). Accordingly, schools, families, and communities play important mediating roles in youth civic development, through formal and informal educational exchanges.

However, much of the existing work on youth citizenship has taken place in stable societies, despite distinct needs of new and struggling democracies, as well as calls for increased international research (Sherrod et al., 2010) (some exceptions include Dyrness, 2012; Levinson, 2007; Reimers and Cardenas, 2010). Findings from a variety of educational interventions in post-conflict contexts suggest that fostering civic agency among young people is essential to instilling democratic principles and practices in the aftermath of violence. Authors conceptualize youth civic agency in various ways, for example, civic culture (Davies, 2004), civic values (Johnson and Johnson, 2005), 'enabling ethos' (Paulson, 2008), empowerment (Schwartz, 2010), and 'upstanding' (Murphy and Gallagher,

2009). Across these constructs, there is consensus that 'post' generations, in general, and young people, in particular, need to (re)gain a sense of control over their own lives, while viewing themselves as important and efficacious members of society. However, growing evidence suggests that legacies of war and authoritarianism inform young people's conceptions of civic agency and efficacy in complex ways (Cesarini and Hite, 2004; McCully, 2012; Quaynor, 2012).

Further complicating the legacies of violence and division that young people inherit, 'postwar' Guatemala ranks as one of the most violent countries in the world. States emerging from mass violence are often considered 'fragile', an increasingly contested, catchall term denoting a state's inability or unwillingness to provide citizens with basic services (OECD, 2007; Shields and Paulson, 2014). In states unable to allocate sufficient resources to citizens, communities have demonstrated extraordinary creativity and resilience in caring for one another, constructing opportunities for education, health care, and local governance. Researchers of youth citizenship have been particularly interested in the role of civil society 'filling the gap' left by weak and fragile states (e.g. Kassimir and Flanagan, 2010). On one hand, these instances conjure an impression of a robust civil society eagerly embracing the potential for community organizing in a struggling state. But filling the gap may emerge from deep and long-standing frustration at the state's incapacity to fulfill its basic duties or deliberate, historical exclusion toward particular populations. In this way, fragility can undermine the relationship between citizens and the state, even inverting the civil contract. When the state does not ensure basic rights such as safety and justice, citizens search for ways to establish their own safety, as well as their own systems of justice (Davis and Warner, 2007; Snodgrass Godoy, 2002).

Not surprisingly, the Guatemalan population questions the validity of constructs such as human rights and democracy (Bellino, 2015). The most recent iteration of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) reveals that Guatemalan youth reported significantly lower trust in their national government, political parties, courts of justice, police, and 'people in general' than their peers in Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Paraguay (Schultz et al., 2011: 42–43). On measures of democratic attitudes, a large majority of Guatemalan adolescents revealed support for dictatorships and authoritarian governments when they stood to bring about 'order and safety' and 'economic benefits'. Moreover, Guatemalan students expressed significant skepticism that peace could be achieved through dialogue and negotiation, supporting appropriations of justice 'if the authorities fail to act' (Schultz et al., 2011: 65–66). Other studies have established similarly high levels of distrust between citizens and state institutions, as well as weakened connections between citizens (Cruz, 2011). Conditions of what Adams (2011) calls 'chronic violence' have yielded widespread vigilance among citizens, shattered social networks, and narrowed safe spaces to the most trusted circles. Communities like those in Quetzaltenango both work together to protect the streets, while scrutinizing the actions of fellow community members. How do young people develop a sense of their civic efficacy under these extreme conditions?

Violence and the criminalization of civic action

From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala was entrenched in a 36-year civil war known as the *Conflicto Armado*, the 'armed conflict', which included ethnic genocide of indigenous Mayan populations. Among other factors, the conflict was set off by the state's increasingly repressive response to land and labor activists demanding redistribution of resources and the assurance of basic rights in a profoundly unequal society. Although the conflict was between the *guerrilla* rebel movement and the state military, paramilitary, and police forces, most of the 200,000 casualties were innocent civilians, a majority of whom were indigenous men, women, and children living in rural areas (CEH, 1999). The truth commission that investigated this period of violence established that state

actors were responsible for the vast majority of human rights violations during the conflict, including acts of ethnic genocide, although very few of these actors have been brought to justice. The 'official' story, as narrated in national curricular resources, details a Communist rebel army that threatened national security, defeated by the protection of a strong government and state military (Bellino, 2014).

Although it is arguable whether the *guerrilla* insurgency, who took up arms and committed some hideous acts of violence in the context of the conflict, could be construed as a rights-based movement, their stance toward social and political reform established certain enduring notions of social justice and collective action. Citizens who are 'active' or 'involved' are presumably radical, left wing, and socialist in their ideology. One need not organize a resistance movement to be cast as a radical political actor; claiming basic rights and even participating in community service can be perceived as meddling and intrusive, outside the scope of one's 'civic' duty. Civic action has been so politicized through the experience of authoritarianism that participation in public spaces is regarded as fundamentally dangerous, disruptive, and violence provoking. Although these tropes stem from the past, they take on new resonance in the 'postwar' landscape.

Nearly 20 years after the Peace Accords that formally ended the conflict, Guatemala exhibits one of the world's highest rates of violent crime and a 97%–98% rate of impunity (UNDP, 2012). The main scapegoat is youth delinquency, encompassing gang activity and petty crime, leading to rampant criminalization of youth (Levenson, 2013). Amid widespread violence, some individuals demand, and some officials have been implicated in, carrying out campaigns of social cleansing targeting alleged delinquents, prostitutes, and gang members (Sanford, 2003, 2008). In some cases, social cleansing is regarded as a preemptive deterrent of street crime, while in other cases, it is a volatile response. Like many violent acts, social cleansing blurs the lines between delinquency and vigilantism, while rationalizing the use of violence as a mechanism of crime prevention. Vigilante justice movements have increasingly taken hold across the country (Snodgrass Godoy, 2002), communicating that 'people's justice' is the only effective mechanism for justice in Guatemala. These acts convey justice as a 'common good' rather than within the domain of a weak and dysfunctional state.

Meanwhile, political violence directly and tangentially related to the past continues. Those who seek legal justice for past and present crimes endure daily death threats, violent attacks, and attempts to delegitimize and incriminate the individuals seeking change. Indigenous cultural groups, community leaders, and peaceful protesters of resource extraction projects have all been targets of political repression (Isaacs, 2010b; Sas, 2007). During the *Conflicto Armado*, the repressive state targeted both *political* and *civic* actions, and thus, all 'involvement' in the public sphere could be construed as political, even if its intentions were framed around locally bounded outcomes. Throughout Guatemala's history, community movements have been construed as a threat to state legitimacy (CEH, 1999).

Under these extreme conditions, one might expect social justice advocates and community leaders to be revered by civil society for their courage to question norms and demand rights and protections. But activism and social movements have been criminalized, both in terms of the physical threats they endure and the way popular discourse portrays social justice advocacy as meddling. Actors participating in collective movements are frequently regarded as social menaces, violence provokers, subversive delinquents, and even terrorists (Isaacs, 2010a; 2010b). The act of civic organizing as a valid approach to questioning the existing power structure has become discredited, through discourses of power and in everyday conversations among families and within schools (Bellino, in press). In this high-risk setting, authoritarian legacies come into focus, demonstrating how the realm of the civic has been politicized in profound and enduring ways.

Methodology

This article draws from 14 months of ethnographic research in Guatemala, spanning 2010–2012. I designed the study as a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1999), situated in four communities in Guatemala, two in the urban capital city and two in rural, indigenous pueblos located in the province of Izabal. In each setting, I spent 6–12 weeks as a participant observer, living with families, attending 11th- and 12th-grade classes at local schools, and participating in community events. Additionally, I conducted semistructured interviews with young people (ages 16–24 years) in each community context, some with students transitioning from secondary to university education. Our conversations centered on young people's interpretation of Guatemala's history of authoritarianism, the peace process and democratic transition, and their sense of identity and efficacy as civic actors in today's 'postwar' era.

In this article, I draw from data collected in one urban working-class school community of Guatemala City, where all student participants self-identify as mestizo ('mixed' race), and a rural, Q'eqchi' Maya community called Río Verde, where all student participants self-identify as indigenous Maya. Although the two groups of young people do not physically interact, the issues they embrace intersect in notable ways, demonstrating the way social movements and their discourses are mobilized, appropriated, and critiqued across a divided state. Comparative ethnographic cases illustrate the way that civic identity and strategies for public engagement are locally informed, although not bounded by place and space.

The history of citizenship in each of these communities is distinct, as are the contemporary civic issues facing rural indigenous and urban working-class populations. In drawing together these data, I do not intend to make claims about how or why particular groups of young people are collectively socialized or predisposed to approach civic action in particular ways. Rather, my aim is to explore how young people make meaning of the spaces available to them for civic expression, how they interpret existing social movements in their current society, and how they develop conceptions of good citizenship, often in ways that suggest working outside of unjust systems as a means of fostering change. In this sense, I am actively exploring the interaction between formal and informal educational spaces.

The medium and the message

Political graffiti is not uncommon in Guatemala City. It is one of the few spaces where citizens can voice deep frustration and distrust toward state institutions without fear of repercussions. In a state known for its silence (Bellino, 2014; CEH, 1999; Oglesby, 2007), scathing messages materialize overnight, often pointing fingers at state actors and institutions for past and present crimes. Cement walls across the city transform the landscape, so that people are physically surrounded by the markers of social and political movements, along with the litany of infractions committed by the state. Public declarations such as the death of human rights simultaneously draw attention to these movements, while normalizing the use of forbidden and marginalized spaces to voice dissent. Although these acts blur the lines between civic action and vandalism, for many young people, voicing critical messages requires a turn to illegal media.

Valeria (20, university student in Guatemala City) describes an antimining protest movement she co-coordinated at her university. She was comfortable parking a borrowed school bus across the highway to block traffic, despite that many of her classmates viewed this as crossing the line between legal and illegal forms of protest. For Valeria, the roadblock tactic was more powerful than gathering along the side of the roads or organizing a protest march. She explains that the

success of a struggle depends on its ability to draw attention and interrupt normal routines, even if the attention comes from going outside the law:

> They [my classmates] say that there are other forms of participation. They only wanted to bring signs and stand on the side of the road … They wanted a more peaceful form, but they never initiated anything, so we decided to block the roads. This is the only way to get attention. We don't want to be violent, but this is how you win a struggle, this is how your struggle will appear on TV and people will hear about it. You need to do something that has an *effect*.

When I ask whether the roadblock feels like a 'middle ground', bending but not breaking the law, she disagrees. 'For many people, blocking the highway is serious. It is like vandalism … They get very angry'. Her involvement in the protest lost her seat in student politics because her classmates viewed her actions as too radical.

Although this distortion between civic and criminal actions carries serious consequences, it is a worthy transgression for many young people. It might even be their only space for civic expression. Valeria's classmate explains,

> In Guatemala, no one listens … No one will listen if we don't go into the streets. This is the only way. Yes we break the law, but we have to break the law to show the people that the law is unjust.

At times, the legality of extreme action is seemingly not in question. Alejandro's father, an active member of the urban student movement during the civil war, explains to his son (17, Guatemala City) that political graffiti is not illegal when it is in the interest of upholding human rights. Together, they decide where 'painting' about indigenous rights issues will carry the most weight in the capital. This father–son lesson demonstrates the way working outside the law is often a calculated measurement of the value of the message, weighed against the cost of the medium of expression.

In some cases, the medium of graffiti or traffic obstruction risks devaluing the message itself. When Ricardo, a 19-year-old Q'eqchi' Maya who lives in his home village, sees urban protests on television, he explains, 'These protests are illegal acts … They are a negative example'. He reasons that breaking the law adds credence to the argument that activists are criminal, thereby weakening 'all popular movements across the country'.

Members of youth activist group HIJOS, Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence, are concerned that social movements are routinely criminalized. This condition requires that their mission extend beyond educating the public about the civil war and its enduring effects; like many activists, they now have the added burden to educate the public about the legitimacy of collective organizing. Despite that their central mode of communication with the public is through '*guerrilla* art', they critique the media for representing them as delinquents. After an annual protest in the capital on 'Army Day', HIJOS members complain, 'Did you see how the media is representing us? Like we are the bad guys …'. Forced into marginal spaces, they worry about the tensions they navigate and generate, often further agitated through media depictions that portray their actions as delinquent. According to these young people, the majority of their interactions with the state are peaceful, but the media only reports on moments of tension. In turn, these representations allow the public to dismiss collective organizers as agitators.

HIJOS members similarly share a code of ethics about what messages merit the medium of graffiti. In order to be painted, the message has to carry sufficient value to the social or political movements that their group supports. When one boy painted the name of his favorite soccer team, two

members chastised him, arguing that the extra time it took to write that message put them in danger for an issue unworthy of the risk it entailed. The conversation centered not only around whether it was a selfish or collective message but also with awareness that the risks they take on to convey their message through an illegal medium requires that the message be worth disseminating.

The significance of political graffiti is further complicated by the prominence of gang graffiti, so that messages are often undercut by the medium and dismissed outright as vandalism, a conflation that is not lost on young people. Young people like Ricardo see graffiti as the defacement of public property, not as a marginalized civic expression. Yet students at an urban high school whose cement walls are lined with political graffiti readily differentiate between political and delinquent messages. They proudly display their 'political wall' with messages that dare to implicate their current president in genocide. Meanwhile, they volunteer at a nearby park to clean gang graffiti, concerned that these messages devalue their school neighborhood.

The history of collective organizing is relevant in each of these discussions, both transgenerational conversations among young people and intergenerational conversations between youth and their parents or teachers, whose experience during the conflict plays a significant role in their willingness to embrace civic action. Alejandro's father who encourages his son to paint and embrace 'the struggle' was a student leader and remains active in social justice issues. Alejandro embraces the idea that the popular struggle did not fail but is ongoing in that the same root inequality and injustice continues to divide the people and deny particular groups their basic rights. He is less concerned with breaking the law than 'breaking the silence':

> Graffiti could work well. It could teach the people about [justice] struggles happening in the country that they don't know about … But I think the biggest problem in Guatemala is apathy. First, people do not know—this is a problem, and breaking the silence is important. But then when they do know, they do not care. This is another issue.

However, parents' commitment to the resistance movement during the war does not unequivocally lead to a transmission of their struggle to the next generation. Ricardo's mother and father were members of the *guerrilla*, and today they adamantly forbid their son's involvement in transgressive political acts. Ricardo carefully aligns his beliefs with theirs:

> It is like my father says. The [protestors] are breaking the law. This is not the goal of the struggle. My parents struggled during the Armed Conflict so that we could have the right for peaceful dialogue. They should be having a dialogue, not a protest … they should stand on the side of the road and hold signs, not interrupt traffic … They should respect the law.

Meanwhile, Valeria views her mother as her 'partner' in the struggle. Although she is cognizant of breaking laws to be heard, she explains that these transgressions are not essentially violent. It is the response of the state that turns peaceful protests into violent conflicts, and this is how the myth of political 'involvement' continues to scare people into silence and inaction:

> It is exactly like during the Armed Conflict. The students are being aggressive, maybe, because they are blocking the roads. But are not being violent. The response of the state, the police, bringing soldiers to scare the students—this is what is causing more conflict.

By design, activism is meant to be public and collective, but a cluster of adolescents in Guatemala is routinely perceived as a gang. Performative displays further complicate this public perception, as the visual and discursive nature of activist performance is intentionally disruptive. The need to

be provocative in order to generate a reaction, coupled with the lack of public space to safely dissent, has forced many young people into unofficial spaces of protest where they can be vocal while remaining anonymous.

Remaking justice

In urban areas, neoliberal reforms have shifted everyday security from the realm of the state to the market. In many rural areas, these market-driven security mechanisms do not exist. Instead, rural citizens have identified strategies for working together in order to 'fill the gap' left by a weak state, giving rise to illicit expressions of civic engagement and community organizing. Rather than report criminals to a corrupt police force and funnel them into a dysfunctional justice system, citizens make their 'own justice' (Burrell, 2013; Snodgrass Godoy, 2002).

Oscar (18, Guatemala City) and I drive along the curving, unpaved street to San Juan Sacatapéquez, where handmade signs nailed to trees start small: white squares of poster board with thick block lettering that says, 'We are organized'. Further in, the signs become larger and more precise, 'We are organized for a San Juan without delinquency' and the explicit warning, 'No delinquency. We are organized'. One of the signs says, 'SWAT', referencing the US acronym for 'Special Weapons and Tactics', and displays a local phone number. Signs are posted at each curve of the road, nearly every 20 m. Closer to the town entrance, there is a billboard-sized display, 'We are safe because we are organized here'. Painted images surround the letters, flaunting faces hidden behind black ski masks. These signs are meant to deter criminal and petty violence from entering the village borders, but they also serve as a proud display of peoples' ability to come together as a community in the face of a shared threat. Furthermore, it signifies the autonomy of the pueblo in a state that has historically marginalized and excluded indigenous peoples and cultures. Oscar says with a note of envy, 'The people here are organized … they don't need the police'. Like Quetzaltenango, this community does not trust that state police have the skill or the will to maintain order and justice.

Accordingly, villagers have found ways to pick up the slack and rely on one another, rather than the state. Oscar explains, echoing the logic of the young boy in Quetzaltenango, 'Communities make their own justice … They would not organize if it weren't necessary. If the state was … *just*, then the group would not have a purpose'. These statements reason that in the absence of state security and the guarantee of basic rights, citizens are forced to take care of themselves, even if it requires going outside the law. The range of lawbreaking within the category of popular justice is great, from 'benevolent' neighborhood watch groups to public lynching, but the moral logic of these extreme actions is shared by youth across the country, even when they do not condone the acts themselves. The reason that popular justice exists is because there is no justice at the state level. The police are immoral, prisons are havens of corruption, and criminals can buy their freedom. Even wealthy elites agree that in Guatemala, 'They sell justice'. Accordingly, *justicia propia*, 'one's own justice', is regarded as the only recourse and in many cases a duty to the community in a weak state.

In Río Verde, students in a 12th-grade social studies class explain that *justicia propia* is a form of resistance against state laws, and the racial exclusion, corruption, and impunity that hollow these promises. Álvaro (18) reasons that every pueblo has 'its own form of fighting back. This pueblo burns'. Although extreme, these expressions of extrajudicial justice mediate the people's anger at being gravely neglected on a national level (Snodgrass Godoy, 2002). Yolanda (17) explains,

> If the people don't respond, who will punish the criminals? … Here, someone can kill a child, or ten children, and never get caught or go to jail. He can keep killing. This is why people respond in this form … We have the right to safety, but the state does not give us this right. This is why people must respond.

State police collect bodies and bribes but do not initiate investigations, less so in rural areas where there are few accountability mechanisms. Yolanda and Álvaro's classmates agree, 'Maybe it is not right, but it is how we keep our streets safe'. Others add, 'The law does not work here'.

Acts of *justicia propia* do not always conform to this model of collective action. At times, they have led to violent public murders and the physical destruction of state property and symbols of state authority. The echoes of the war are striking: the state's anti-insurgency campaign included both public displays of punishment for subversion and the desecration of Mayan cultural and spiritual symbols (CEH, 1999). Yet *justicia propia* is not a mere reversal of wartime power structures and learned expressions of violence; nor are they straightforward articulations of 'Maya justice' (Burrell, 2013; Levenson, 2013). These instances of punitive 'justice', implemented in the absence of state authority, transgress categories of civic and criminal actions. They obscure and complicate motives, resistance, and historical injustice and its legacies, creating a 'grey zone' (Levi, 1989; Sanford, 2003) in the civic space between enacting justice and perpetrating injustice.

Their teacher, César, holds up a newspaper and says he can hardly bring himself to read about Guatemala anymore, things have gotten so bad. Students embrace this rare opening for dialogue in what is traditionally an authoritarian classroom. César leans against his desk as students recount recent instances of mob violence, including lynching of criminals and arson of the local police station and police vehicles. There is a mix of shame and defensiveness in their comments, as students are well aware of the dangers of reacting too quickly. Victor says, 'Sometimes the people just do it to do it… There is no dialogue'. Another says, 'They don't open the space to talk. They just come with gasoline and start pouring it in the road. They don't listen to what people have to say'. As the conversation gets heated, César exits the room to meet with other teachers in the hallway. Students continue the discussion, educating me about the limits placed on justice in their pueblo. Gregorio explains that it is impossible to stop the escalation, 'If you say anything—if you say, for example, *let's call the police instead of all this*—they will say you are working with him too'.

But considering the dangers of taking justice into one's own hands leads the students back to their instinctive beliefs, that some justice is better than none. Rosa says, 'On one hand, I'm in favor of taking justice in your own hands, because what does justice do here? Right now, here, justice doesn't do anything'. David agrees,

> It's true. Even if you capture a criminal, they let them go … And when they are set free, they say, 'Tomorrow we steal'. This is how the cycle continues. This is why people have to take justice into their own hands.

This conversation, notably taking place in the absence of their teacher, demonstrates how young people struggle to make meaning of *justicia propia*, and how the moral valence of these extreme acts shifts depending on how it is situated. When I ask students about the kinds of violence that affects their community, they list domestic abuse, gangs, and the range of street crime that the neighborhood watch groups and flash mobs respond to. Not one student includes *justicia propia* as a form of violence. The violent nature of people's justice reveals itself only through careful examination, and even then it remains tied to exclusion, neglect, and victimization. Students fear it, but they understand it.

Not all acts outside the law are collective or public spirited, as Oscar romanticizes them to be, but youth voices demonstrate that these transgressions are both acts of resistance and acts of order. Young people talk about *justicia propia* as both acts of despair, revealing deep frustrations with the state, and as acts of autonomous collaboration, a 'making' of justice, even if what is generated is more damaging than constructive. These are simultaneously 'stories of failure' (Santamaría, 2012: 45) and stories of people coming together. In the process, young people negotiate the lines they are willing to cross in a state too weak or corrupt to guarantee basic protections. At times, proud of

their willingness to come together as a community, they are also ashamed and fearful that violence is the default.

Strategic withdrawal

Given the landscape of violence, limited public spaces for civic expression and dissent, and the risks associated with civic participation, inaction has increasingly become the duty of the 'good' citizen in a struggling, 'postwar' democracy. Despite consistent, cross-cultural findings that positive youth development and civic participation mutually reinforce one another (Sherrod et al., 2010), under extreme conditions, young people in Guatemala articulate the ways that attitudes of civic distancing and *dis*engagement serve to benefit both individuals and collectives.

Abstaining from civic participation stems from fear of physical harm, skepticism that systemic change can begin with popular movements, and the conviction that good citizens abide by the rule of law. Twelfth grader Yolanda explains that people had mixed feelings when the international mining company arrived in Río Verde. Like other indigenous communities, they initially organized a resistance movement, concerned about pollution, displacement, and land dispossession. Their concerns have not been alleviated, but the prospects of peaceful, democratic dialogue evaporated as resource extraction companies across the country grew increasingly associated with repressive acts. Meanwhile, the state has intervened in these conflicts by instituting martial law to 'stabilize' subversive communities:

> It has been years since the mine arrived in our town. They promised to bring jobs, to employ the people of the village … They have hired no one. I know many qualified men who have dropped off their papers, and the mine has not hired any of them … We want to have a dialogue with them, but this is not possible. If we organize, or if we arrive at the mine, they might kill us. We have seen it happen in other towns.

Yolanda's classmate, David, agrees that the student protest in a nearby town 'was a good attempt at resistance, but the companies are powerful'. These statements speak to the challenge of youth civic development in contexts where holding state or nonstate actors and institutions accountable is 'beyond the reach of most young people' (Kassimir and Flanagan, 2010: 254). Over time, citizens of Río Verde have adjusted their expectations, from wanting to expel the mine to hoping that it becomes a 'good neighbor'. Yet there appears to be no safe way to pressure the mine into dialogue without endangering individual organizers, jeopardizing village autonomy, and risking the prospect of the mine becoming a 'bad' neighbor that intentionally diverts resources away from the community. Although antimining protests continue to mobilize popular support in other rural communities and even from afar in the capital, the civic space for engaging with the mine in Río Verde has never opened—in part, due to fear. Most young people in the village agree that the future of this relationship is not in the hands of citizens but at the whim of the companies and their entanglement with state power.

In many cases, young people deny feeling afraid, instead describing sentiments of intense anger and impotence. Distancing themselves from perpetual injustice is not grounded in apathy and desensitization, but an impression of fundamental powerlessness—what Kaiser (2005) designates as a 'culture of impunity', where citizens habitually experience 'impotence and anger at the absence of justice' (p. 21). Romeo (16, Guatemala City) describes how he felt the second time he was robbed at gunpoint for his cell phone:

> I wasn't scared. I remember feeling powerless … I had to let it happen and wait for it to end, and I knew that whatever he did, it wouldn't matter, because no one would do anything about it. Not the police, not anyone.

After this incident, Romeo avoided public buses and stopped going out beyond his gated community, reconstituting his social network to the physical space of his neighborhood. Most days, he stays within a two-block radius of his family home. Luisa (17, Guatemala City) describes being assaulted several times in her home neighborhood, so that she rarely goes outside for anything other than school. 'I can't even walk to the store down the street. I can't go anywhere'. When I ask about the role of police, she explains that, 'If they come, they plant drugs on you and then arrest you. Because they just want money, they want you to pay them to not arrest you … There is no one you can call, nothing you can do …' Urban youth in particular have adjusted their 'socio-spatial freedom' (Winton, 2005: 173) in efforts to remain safe and interact in the most trusted, 'atomized' social networks (Winton, 2005: 180). As Luisa makes clear, walking down the street is a liability in a society where 'the state does not protect its citizens'. Urban working-class students, habitually exposed to street violence and often mistaken for criminals themselves, repeatedly allude to what Luisa says very plainly: collective, civic, and public-spirited action is impractical under extreme conditions where 'All you can do is take care of yourself'.

Yet cynicism toward civil society's transformative potential is not synonymous with civic apathy. Indifference to rights violations has been argued to be a natural human condition, an emotionally protective response to trauma, and a psychosocial consequence of political violence (Jelin, 2003). It is also related to discursive practices that legitimize indifference as a valid response to widespread injustice, so that 'doing nothing' becomes an active choice (Seu, 2003; Tester, 2002). In Guatemala, distancing and inaction are validated through discourses that criminalize social movements and link collective organizing to social agitation and unrest.

Being 'involved' was a strong discourse during the war, denoting sympathy with the *guerrilla* movement (Sanford, 2008). It became a way for the state to justify political violence, and for people to distance themselves from the conflict by blaming the victim, a strategy that continues to serve these psychosocial purposes today. For example, David's mother (Río Verde) explains that today's violence 'does not apply to everyone … It is the ones who are involved in something'. This rhetoric of blame serves as a distancing mechanism, so that David can assure himself that he will be safe as long as he does not become 'involved'. Simultaneously, this act redraws the lines of normalcy, so that violence inflicted becomes a rational, predictable consequence for high-risk actions, such as participation in social movements. The resilience of this discourse is an indicator of undisturbed authoritarian legacies, wherein citizens are expected to acquiesce, rather than resist, when the system they are embedded in is fundamentally unjust.

It becomes the domain of the good citizen to abstain from acting for the sake of individual security, national harmony, and state stability. Young people point to flawed and untrustworthy institutions, as well as flawed and untrustworthy fellow citizens, as their reasons for not taking action. It is both the state police who 'sell justice' and local citizens who terrorize public spaces that contribute to conceptions of good citizens as compliant and apolitical. Their concerns reflect the complexity of nonparticipation, revealing that inaction and professed disengagement do not necessarily imply a lack of knowledge or civic attachment. Nor do citizens withdraw from public spaces without care, concern, and contemplation. Decisions about how and when to act, and how and when to remove oneself, are often fraught with anxieties about efficacy, physical risk, and power.

Implications for civic education *in extremis*

As the field of youth civic engagement has 'come of age' (Sherrod et al., 2010), research has shifted from an emphasis on political socialization to recognition that young people develop as civic actors in constant dialogue with cultural resources, actors, and contexts (Torney-Purta and Barber, 2011). Authoritarian legacies persist in 'cultural repertoires' (Rogoff et al., 2007: 490), 'the

formats of (inter)action with which individuals have experience and may take up, resist, and transform'. Civil society's engagement with the state through resistance movements has become a powerful cultural repertoire across Latin America (Cesarini and Hite, 2004), both a remnant and a response to decades of state terror and authoritarian rule. In turn, these repertoires frame and constrain conceptions of good citizenship today.

At its extremes, good citizenship in 'postwar' Guatemala either requires distancing, disengagement, and self-reliance or breaking the law in order to access a civic voice. Eerily reminiscent of wartime repression, civic 'involvement' remains a dangerous forum for exercising one's voice. Consequently, collective action is construed as dangerous for individuals, as well as damaging to state cohesion. Meanwhile, 'filling the gap' veers into vigilantism and extrajudicial violence. These are not merely unconscious reproductions of cultural repertoires but also new sites of contestation, representing profound neglect and exclusion from the civic space. In the process, breaking the law to *fill* gaps creates new voids. The persistence of blame placed on social movements and youth criminals reinforces the cultural repertoire that good citizenship resides in nonparticipation.

Educational actors and institutions have an important role to play in dismantling these authoritarian legacies and facilitating young people's understanding of the civil contracts that underlie democratic arrangements. Yet schools are embedded institutions and are not always in a position to lead change, especially when challenging the status quo carries threats to personal security. How can educators promote messages of youth civic empowerment when there is strong evidence that civic action is dangerous—when young people fear rather than trust state actors, when young people are vigilant rather than reliant on their neighbors? Teachers visibly struggle to reconcile democratic civic ideals with the everyday realities they share with their students, and at times, they become complicit in promoting conceptions of good citizens who acquiesce in the face of unjust systems. César leaves the room as his students delve into an honest reflection of community violence, admitting that he is not sure 'what to tell them'. Additionally, most students regard this conversation as atypical and not indicative of school learning, because they 'already know' their reality. Young people, too, have come to believe that civic dialogue has little value when authentic openings for civic participation are absent.

Young people's interpretations of civic opportunities and obligations in 'postwar' Guatemala force us to reconcile with several fundamental questions. Notably, does civic action have to fall within the realm of the legal in order to be *civic*? At the other extreme, can strategic withdrawal from public spaces be construed as acts with lasting civic value, in that they avoid public conflict? To what extent do extreme times call for extreme measures and new ethical criteria for what constitutes civic action? For too many Guatemalan youth, the only world they know is one of extreme conditions. However, civic discourse alone is an insufficient criterion for breaking the law, when mass violence is frequently carried out in the name of security and the common good. This study demonstrates the need for further research on the qualities of civic engagement, as well as the underlying logic governing young people's decisions about participation in states that are no longer authoritarian but not yet democracies.

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