Liberal emplacement: Violence, home, and the transforming space of popular protest in Central America

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Abstract: This article is about the changing meaning of home among people engaged in the Guatemalan guerrilla movement. It shows that during the war, the revolutionary committed struggled for home more in terms of communal spheres of insurgent societal transformation than in terms of the defense or reconstruction of family or house. Though the counterinsurgency state was bent on their annihilation, it was only with the implementation of liberal peace that their commitment was ultimately destroyed. Most of them then opted for ‘return’ to their pre-war settlements and they gave up the political project of preserving their progressive civil organization. ‘Home’ under liberal peace in post-revolutionary Central America is continuously held together mainly by the migration of youth in search of opportunities elsewhere as hope for improved living conditions has become a question no longer of transforming but of leaving society in order to save oneself and/or one’s household. The notion of liberal emplacement is brought forward in this article to conceptualize the destruction of political movement through the creation of an individualized necessity of spatial movement.

Keywords: Central America, emplacement, Guerrilla Army of the Poor, liberal peace, violence

From the perspective of a participant observer in anti-regime demonstrations in Serbia in 1996, Stef Jansen notes how demonstrators “disentangled and re-entangled power relations through oppositional spatial practices …, inserting their bodies into public spaces, and thereby probing the limits of regime control” (Jansen 2001: 40). This article draws inspiration from such a focus on spatiality and meaning in and of protest, making the relation of public space to regime control in Europe speak to the relation of rural territories to state power and national space in Central America (cf. Stepputat 1994, 2001). In contrast to spaces where different truth claims collide and feed on face-to-face confrontation, the place in focus here was militarily sealed off during the 1980s when the guerrilla hunt of the Guatemalan army escalated into a scorched-earth mayhem. In a remote mountain region, surviving rebels of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and displaced non-combatants gradually built up a society in resistance, a state within the state with its own institutions like health clinics, schools, an organization for female political par-
ticipation, a tax system, and defense, thereby probing the limits of national security doctrines.

While declared a ‘liberated space’ (cf. Jansen 2001; Routledge 1994) by its people, this area was also effectively kept in isolation by the army until the beginning of the 1990s, when an international presence made it possible for people to cross the frontline. Regardless of the degree of ‘actual liberation’, however, the place remained a bastion of resistance in the political imagery of opposition to the state and the army in Guatemala throughout the war. And, as we will see, regardless of their stated pride in being liberated, its inhabitants were torn between a revolutionary commitment and paralyzing uncertainties. This article is about those uncertainties and the political context in which they grew. It is based on my anthropological fieldwork between 1995 and 1998 in the Comunidades de Poblaciones en Resistencia—or the resistance communities—and on two visits to Guatemala in 2006. I observed local political consequences of regional transformations as the peace agreement was signed in December 1996, the guerrillas were demobilized in the spring of 1997, and people were being split up and relocated, or ‘re-displaced’ (see below), one year later.

While some in the resistance communities occasionally referred to themselves as being displaced from their native communities or from their land of origin—most came from the Maya Ixil town of Nebaj, and now they lived on lands belonging to the neighboring town of Chajul—I never met anyone who saw herself or himself as a helpless victim of army atrocities. Acknowledging a displaced status was rather posed as an argument against those who during the peace process accused them of illegally occupying the land of others. ‘Being in resistance’ meant being in that very place, but it also implied being victorious over if not the enemy then at least over his intentions, and over recruitment into the paramilitary civil patrols in Nebaj and Chajul. ‘Being in resistance’ also marked something highly existential—it meant still being alive.

‘Home’ figures here in complex ways. I subscribe to Ghassan Hage’s (1997) conception of home as a place and condition of physical security (cf. Bauman 1999), where familiarity marks processes of emplacement (Hillier and Rooksby 2002), where we are part of a community (Douglas 1991), and where we are ‘certain’ of our place in social structures to the extent that we can actually make plans for the future, both near and distant. But instead of deductively attaching a specific spatiality to such a set of aspirations and social conditions, I would like ethnographically to explore its possible scale and location. In the resistance communities, home emerged more as a ‘struggle’ (to use an emic label) for large-scale societal changes than as the defense or reconstruction of family, house, or even community.

The championing of home as household is part of a project of emplacement in the neo-liberalizing states of Central America. As argued by Bourdieu (1998) and others (e.g., Larner 2000; Peck and Tickell 2002; Wacquant 1999; see also Kalb 2005), a globally encompassing ‘deepening’ of neo-liberalism not only promotes the extension of market logics to all spheres of human life but also, politically, restrains contentious movements by providing the terms of the debate, or ‘setting the stage’, and thereby producing the very conditions for its own opposition (Gledhill 2005). In the post-war republics of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, household sociality and economy have re-emerged as the shelters, refuges, and strategies of survival they once were. Movement as exit, rather than voice (cf. Hirschman 1970), has become an ever more attractive option to ‘avoid’ poverty and despair. I will come back to this point later.

Eulogized space and domicide

Before presenting my ethnographic case in more detail, let me briefly discuss the history of home and violence among mobilized villagers in the Ixil region of Guatemala, and how to conceptually approach the destruction of home—referred to by Porteous and Smith (2001) as ‘domicide’—during the wars of Central America. Greg Grandin writes,
“The military’s 1981–83 scorched-earth campaign [in Guatemala]—which razed hundreds of Mayan communities, committed over six hundred massacres, murdered over a hundred thousand indigenous peasants, tortured thousands more, and drove, in some areas, 80 percent of the population from its homes—was specifically designed to destroy rural support for the powerful insurgent group known as the [EGP].” (2004: 127)

More than ten years later, people in the resistance communities revealed to me the details of how they had survived this campaign. The military destruction of homely spaces occurred in waves—rather than in a singular event of destruction—so that the families who escaped in time, when possible, return to resume their lives in between recurrent army sweeps. Homes thus turned from shelters into temporary hideouts, bases for revolutionary organizing, and the exceptionally harsh practices of wartime everyday life. When eventually these hideouts were burned to the ground, many claimed to already have been ‘on the move’ and that such movement had a political purpose: they were now continuing on the road to freedom and they were not coming back. They were anxious to tell that they did not perceive home as lost, nor that home was awaiting them in a different place, but, rather, that it had to be fought for on a different scale.6

The strategic secrecy surrounding the issue of guerrilla affiliation in Guatemala did hide its history from most observers, including most ethnographers during the late 1980s and early 1990s, with unhappy consequences in the narrow circle of anthropological debate. Some justified guerrilla violence by claiming that the rebels rose to defend people against unprovoked repression. Others reversed that argument and held the guerrillas responsible for having provoked an excessive yet legitimate military response.7 My ethnography does not support any of these positions. Indeed, ambulant army units in the service of the interests of the local land-owning elite were present in the Ixil region before the war, and they did contribute to the quelling of workers’ protests on the estates by private security guards and the police (Löfving 2005; cf. Stoll 1993). But rebel mobilizing built on a broader conceptualization of violence than sheer military repression. Therefore, many of my informants, among them the ones I refer to below as the ‘revolutionary committed’, were engaged in a future-oriented project of re-making, not their own subjective worlds previously ‘un-made’ by violence, but, rather, society itself. They were realists in that sense, seeing revolutionary violence as a continuation of politics by other means (Clausewitz 1976; see Hardt and Negri 2004: 15).

The narratives of the revolutionary committed resemble a radical political philosophy of home, territory, and emancipation. Jacques Lacan conceived of ‘territorialization’ as the process by which parental care-giving charges specific organs and corresponding objects with erotic energy and value. Territorialization programs desire to valorize certain organs and objects at the expense of others. For Deleuze and Guattari (1977), in their reading, both psychological and political, of Lacan, deterritorialization implies both the process of freeing desire from the nuclear family and the process of freeing labor power from specific means of production. Since the 1950s and early 1960s, modernization has brought new sectors of the Latin American population—women and landless peasants—into the labor force, enabling the expansion of transnational companies into Latin America as well as stirring revolutionary uprisings. In response to this emergence of threatening spaces of popular organizing, the US-designed and US-funded counterinsurgency regimes of countries like Guatemala and El Salvador set out to conquer new territory, with people’s homes being the primary targets.

Where others are concerned with the repressive qualities of the family (see Deleuze and Guattari 1977; Engels 1972), Jean Franco (1985) emphasizes its sheltering power. Drawing on Bachelard ([1958] 1994), she defines the home of the family as a eulogized or moral space, capable of resisting state intervention. This notion of home as sanctuary, especially when compared
with ‘church space’ (see Franco 1985: 416) must not be confused with divine protection. On the contrary, it is in spheres of high levels of familiarity and mutuality that the power to protect and the trust in the power of others can be felt and built upon. Whereas national armies and paramilitary organizations—upon targeting and rebuilding it—have converted the sanctuary into a base of operations, insinuating themselves into the most intimate spheres of social power (Feldman 1991), the relationship of sanctuary to revolution was different. Recruitment into the EGP usually occurred at night, within the shelter of the house of the person to be mobilized. Traditions of cooking and serving food, the order in which guests and hosts consumed it, and so forth, were often said to have informed those meetings. I would go as far as to argue that this approach was a precondition for a translation of home into society, making it possible to resist the insecurity of an actual or pending domicide, allowing a ‘sense of possibility’ to partake in the construction of a ‘secure’ alternative (cf. Hage 1997). On the basis of Franco’s state-sanctuary model, I argue that rebel-controlled areas emerged as safe havens, as themselves morally inscribed sanctuaries (rebel-cum-sanctuary as opposed to state-versus-sanctuary)—a point to which I return below. Suffice it to say here that whereas en vogue strategies for the construction of peace would treat the function of violence in society to be the same regardless of the identity of its subjects and objects (see, e.g., Borneman 2002), my approach attempts to qualify not only violence but also the relationship of violence to place in transforming political contexts from open state repression to liberal peace.

Time and re-emerging ‘senses of impossibility’

To me, Pablo qualified as one of the revolutionary committed in the CPR, but in 1997, time, memory, and a transforming political context were challenging his pride and self-perception. He had been a militarily active member of the EGP since the late 1970s but was working in the health sector of the resistance communities at the time we met. In the early 1980s, in the midst of the army’s scorched-earth campaign, Pablo found himself running and hiding, looking in vain for a safe haven:

“When I eventually returned to Nebaj to stay with my parents, my father said to me, ‘Don’t come back here, they [army soldiers] have already returned to look for you. … They were armed and they threatened me, they tied me up.’ They thought that my parents were the ones who kept me hidden. So they hit my poor father and my poor mother. And my father told me that it was better to keep away from home. That’s what he told me. What I did? I left Nebaj. I went to a small hamlet on the outskirts of town where I stayed a couple of weeks, or months. I don’t remember. Since the town does not stretch that far, I thought that they would not come. That nothing would happen. They did come, but later, to commit some massacres. They burned houses. They killed all the hens and chickens …”

The army cleared the inhabited region of hiding places and Pablo was eventually captured. He was held at an army barrack for a period of time he biblically referred to as forty days, and he was tortured and maimed for life before he managed to escape. This part of his story was obscure and the details hidden from me. Once back with his compañeros in the resistance, it turned out that he was not trusted: under suspicion of having turned army informant, he was re-employed not as a fighter but as a health worker without access to information sensitive to the insurgency.

Throughout the 1980s, army surveillance of the Ixil towns and villages was based on controlling people by keeping them indoors, suspecting them of subversive intentions and contacts if they were ‘outside home’. Pablo said:

“My mother knew that it was very dangerous during this time to speak about whoever roams the mountains, or who isn’t in the house—he will be taken for a guerrilla. My mother could not tell this to my brothers. So when we met
[during a 1992 reunion in Nebaj], one of my younger brothers said, ‘I don’t think we are brothers. Perhaps you are my father’s brother, because you look a lot like my father.’ My mother cried. We were many that time, nine buses. And a lot of people … it was a very big reunion. Many met for the first time in ten years, in twelve years. It was then that my mother told me that my father had passed away one year before. I didn’t see my father before he died. Because … I’m sure that the army would have killed me, if I had gone to Nebaj in those days. At that time the army never bothered to find out about where you were from. The thing was that they killed whom they saw. Many friends of mine died. They settled down in Nebaj and thought that the army would not touch them, but yes, they died.”

On a later occasion, when we were discussing suicide, Pablo said this was completely non-existent during the years of heavy repression, and that it seemed to reappear when military pressures eased. “For example, my father, he committed suicide,” he said.

“My mother gave me one reason why he poisoned himself. She said that I am responsible. To tell you the truth, this thing really gets to me [nervous laughter] … He had been tortured eight times by the army … in their search for me. My father was horrified by this. That is why he killed himself. That’s what they say. That’s what my brothers are saying. Now, my mother says she doesn’t know the reason. While the neighbors tell me that my father got drunk and that he didn’t get along very well with my mother, they say. So, to this day I don’t know the real cause.”

Not knowing ‘the real cause’ of his father’s suicide does not seem to exempt Pablo from the burden of responsibility and guilt. On the contrary, this uncertainty becomes a constant reminder of Pablo’s possible role in the suffering of his family members, not exclusively in relation to past events but also with repercussions into the present. Hence, if ‘home’ is made of hope and capacities to aspire (cf. Appadurai 2004), home can effectively be unmade by fear and anxiety. Reflecting on the effects of torture, Pablo said:

“They tied my arms, they beat me, and finally they broke my bones. And nine days in that position, with broken arms that later healed without any medical attention, left me with deformed shoulders. That is one thing I will never forget. And the other thing is that when I talk to certain people, if I talk about the torture that I’ve experienced, sometimes I lose track of time. … I remember the past, or I think that if those bastards had got me killed, I wouldn’t have had my three children. Now I have my three children, I have one daughter. I didn’t have them yet when I was captured. If they had managed to kill me, I would not have had my three children. But I lived through it, got my children … I come to think about too many things … And then I come to think about the fact that, shit, I had to abandon my father and my mother [silence]. And not just that, but … I wasn’t there when my father died. I wasn’t present at the funeral. I come to think about too many things [his voice is about to break into weeping; he speeds up his talking and laughs nervously]. It isn’t easy, as I just told you, to live in the mountains, without proper food and housing. However, one has to fight the army. If the EGP hadn’t done it, I don’t think that in any case they would have respected the rights, the ones they keep talking about right now, the human rights.”

Living with a sense of guilt, of having failed or sacrificed too much along the revolutionary road, seemed to be intrinsic to the war experience of people in the resistance communities. As expressed in Pablo’s tale, such ‘failures’ were often ‘ours’ and explained through reference to an overwhelmingly powerful enemy. Yet, at times, failures appeared individual and both violence and blame worked through the fragile social tissue of the resistance communities to individualize responsibilities for past losses and present weaknesses.

To Obeyesekere, ‘guilt’ is a personal thing, that is, an inner, individual agony that is not addressed
in social communication, whereas ‘shame’ is a social emotion (1980). In a Mesoamerican context, this divide between the self (guilt) and the social (shame) is complicated by Farley’s take on the sociocentricity of ‘the Maya Self’ (1998), which, by disqualifying the distinction and instead of viewing shame and guilt as mutually exclusive would see guilt as a likely consequence or dimension of shame. The ‘social’ for sociocentric selves is by necessity also inner or personal. Even if Farley mistakenly encapsulates the self within a paradigm of timeless Maya-ness, he interestingly highlights cultural and historical specificities of the relationship between self and sociality and adds to our understanding of the revolutionary experience of war-peace transformations. The question whether grievances and accusations against the guerrillas were delivered from within or outside the sphere of the social (i.e., if my judge was ‘my mother’ or the army) was crucial to their emotional-cum-political effect. It determined whether intended shame would effectively be transformed into disempowering guilt (in Obeyesekere’s sense of the terms) or would, instead, enforce the division between ‘a community of rebellion’ on the one hand and the army—whose evilness explains its atrocities without justifying them and legitimizes any actions against it—on the other. The army had effectively diminished the sphere of the social throughout the war by killing kin, breaking up social networks, and relocating survivors under its control. But not to the extent that it won the war. Pride, not shame or guilt, had characterized the revolutionary commitment. At war’s anticipated end the revolutionary self was repositioned in wider, or ‘trans-frontline’ social contexts, making people receptive to a moral judgment that previously had remained powerless outside the ‘social’.

The guerrilla projects in Central America viewed the historical predicament in which the poor found and still find themselves as a condition not of their own making (see Brockett 2005; Morán 2002; Wood 2003). The propaganda-like ending of Pablo’s narration, where the termination of war and the present-day emphasis on human rights exemplify some of the EGP successes, demonstrates a move away from traditional morality in the highlands, where misfortune has generally been conceived as an effect of the immoral deeds of the unfortunate themselves (see Colby and Colby 1981). His storytelling usually began in a similar fashion. But in between the politically correct beginning and end, the story gravitated toward a theme that he said “really got to him,” toward an accusation from as close a social distance as his mother. This made him repeat statements in sentences like, “And my father told me that it was better that I kept away from home. That’s what he told me.”

Despite its isolation, leaflets with anti-guerrilla propaganda were distributed from helicopters over the area throughout the 1980s, and on the roads and markets where pro-guerrilla villagers resumed their market exchanges in the 1990s. Innumerable drawings and statements that told about the evils of guerrilla warfare and the role of the resistance communities in its continuation had been delivered to everyone by the civil patrol on the frontline. In her ethnography, Judith Zur includes drawings depicting the EGP as the embodiment of the devil, with tail and horns, and the soldiers pushing him back with Christian crosses (1998: 265f.). I was given a similar drawing at a roadblock close to Nebaj in the early 1990s. After having body-searched all the men on the bus, the soldiers gave all the passengers a small drawing of a gang of thieves running away from a cozy hamlet. On their backs was written EGP and CUC (the name of the radical peasant league). Soldiers were chasing the group.

Several stories I heard during my fieldwork indicate that such messages assisted the army project of ideologically reconstructing Ixil sociality on both sides of the frontline. The weekly town square speeches of the army-backed mayor of Chajul were colored by poetic allusions to rebel ‘inhumanity’. When, in the early 1990s, the CPR members were finally able to pass army-controlled frontlines for the first time and go to the market in the town of Chajul, they stood out as the most ragged and skinny people on the scene. They were thus easily identified as the people who had been living in the mountains, like animals. For a decade, the propaganda-fuelled
rumors had been saying that life in the wilderness had affected the guerrillas to the extent that they had even turned into animals. They were no longer humans with the capacity to switch between good and evil. They had transformed into evil. To their surprise and grief, the visitors noticed how people in Chajul tried to get a glimpse of their behinds in order to find out if they had really grown tails (cf. Wilson 1993).

Regardless of how stubborn their resistance to a far more powerful enemy had been, I argue that events like this contributed to a gradual change in people’s perception of themselves. New patterns of movement during the peace process diminished their space of autonomy and opposition by bringing the army-dominated national society closer, both geographically and socially. This process represented a war-peace continuum: When the army acquired new information from captured guerrillas, it informed the relatives who remained in the resistance by broadcasting speeches in Ixil through megaphones from helicopters that circled the area. By making the messages personal, the army insinuated itself into communal spheres of social power by violently exploiting the notion of familiarity. Hence, military demonstrations of power and successful attempts to demoralize the resistance resulted in what Obeyesekere (1980) would call the inner, personal emotions of guilt.

Liberal emplacement

Whereas military authority sought to violently control or close spaces of popular protest, thereby generating a certain kind of resistance, armed and non-armed, the current era of liberal democratic reform in post-war Central America confronts its opposition in a different way. In this section, I focus on people’s relation to politics and place in those transformations, before I return, in the next section, to the literal break-up of the Guatemalan resistance communities.

The concept of emplacement has only recently received some anthropological attention. In an effort to come to terms with the role of place for ethnographies in contexts of global flows, Englund argues that neo-liberalism itself is ‘emplaced’, which to him means that it can only be understood if viewed as ‘embodied and situated practice’ (2002: 261). Here, I shift the focus to see how subjects become emplaced in and by the neo-liberal regime. With this I resort to a more conventional connotation of the term emplacement. By far the most common sphere in which the concept is used today is the field of geology. Emplacement designates the intrusion of igneous rocks into particular positions, or the development of an ore deposit in a particular place. Being emplaced could accordingly mean to be spatially fixed to degrees far beyond sedentarism (see the introduction to this special section)—roots in earth become stones or minerals in rock. The other conventional usage of the term emplacement is military—it means a clearing on which heavy artillery is placed. If we combine these meanings, emplaced people become part of a political ‘battle’ with very specific aims. What stands out in contexts like the Guatemalan one is a lack of opportunities for the poor to position or place themselves in a political structure of influence (see Badiou 2001; Colburn 2002). What remains is the possibility of moving to make a living rather than staying to make a political change. Being emplaced thus means ‘being placed by others’ and becomes a direct counterpart to displacement. Emplacement is re-displacement.

The ‘warring parties’ in Central America perceived violence as instrumental. It was a means toward an end. They turned to it with the alleged purpose of ending war—of disorder and revolution as seen from the perspective of the authoritarian state, of poverty and exclusion as seen by the state’s opponents. But the international blueprint for the contemporary post–Cold War architecture of peace has it differently. Here, violence is not the instrument but the cause, not the road to peace but itself the vicious circle. What ends war is neither the eradication of poverty nor the defeat of rebels, but instead the departure from violence, and more specifically the departure from military violence in increasingly transparent polities (see, e.g., Borneman 2002; Collier et al. 2003). This approach presents an attractive third way, not only to policy makers in national
and international contexts, but also to people in war-torn societies who might prove ready to try other routes, or who reject the terms in which the conflict has been construed and their own alleged association with a military organization.

Such war fatigue was prevalent in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala at the time their presidents signed the 1987 Esquipulas II Accords, emerging from the troubled Contadora process in which Cold War divisions had hampered any real progress (Chernick 1996; Child 1992). The accord called for a ceasefire, national reconciliation, amnesty, democratization, termination of external aid to insurgency movements, and free elections. As more or less direct results of ‘Esquipulas’, settlements were eventually reached between the Sandinista government and the US–funded Contras in Nicaragua in 1989; between the right-wing government of El Salvador and the FMLN guerrilla in 1992; and between a neoliberal business coalition then (as now) governing Guatemala, its oligarch-backed army, and the guerrilla movement in 1996.

Just like the civil wars themselves, the war-peace transition was part of an international process. However, the obsession with security embedded in Cold War geopolitics gave way to a more explicitly economic incentive for external involvement. Despite their many differences, the UN-monitored peace-building operations in the world from 1989 onward all initiated transformations of war-shattered states into liberal market democracies (Paris 2004).

Enlightenment philosophy is at the roots of this model, and in particular Kant’s 1795 essay in which he envisions three ‘building blocks’ of peace: a republican constitution to protect citizens from both despots and anarchy, alliances between such republics for collective security and cooperation, and free flows of people and goods between them in a true ‘spirit of commerce’ (Kant [1795] 1995: 114; see also Doyle 1983; Parish and Peceny 2002). These elements found their way to the post–Cold War reconstruction of war-torn societies by way of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, where Woodrow Wilson "became the first statesman to articulate what is now called the liberal peace thesis, … including the assumption that democratization and marketization foster peace in countries just emerging from civil war” (Paris 2004: 41). No peace conference ever ended the Cold War, but the influence of Wilson’s approach is obvious. Hence, the Central American peace process beginning with the Esquipulas II Accord and culminating in the Guatemalan Peace Accords of 1996 was only the first part in the double transformation of Central America, the second being the economic structural adjustment of the region (see McCleary 1999).

In Nicaragua, following the 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, the Chamorro government immediately embarked on a program of economic reform. This included extensive layoffs of government employees, privatization of most state-owned enterprises, reductions in social spending, and so forth. And while successful in restoring fiscal balance and economic stability, and also hailed as a ‘remarkable success’ by the World Bank, the IMF, and the USAID (which had jointly designed the structural adjustment program), the austerity measures deepened inequalities and played a significant part in the declining living conditions of many Nicaraguans (see Veltmayer, Petras, and Vieux 1997). The rapid increase in crime rates and social fragmentation has since continued unabated and is continuously posing a serious threat to peace in the country, challenging the liberal peace assumption that economic liberalization and political stability go hand in hand. The Salvadoran scenario of the past ten years is remarkably similar. Liberal orthodoxy has thus not only neglected the issues that once sparked the civil wars of Central America—poverty and inequality—in favor of macroeconomic stability and growth but has actually exacerbated social cleavages (see Robinson 2000; Vilas 2000).

Guatemala, the last Central American country to sign a peace agreement, has been able to learn from the mistakes of its neighbors. As a result, and under pressure from the UN, a so-called socio-economic agreement was signed as part of the peace treaty. It endorses liberalization, but it also commits the Guatemalan government to increasing the levels of social welfare
spending (Jonas 2000: 167). However, the socio-economic agreement was soon up against apparently irresistible pressure from the domestic business sector (Krznaric 1999; Stanley and Holiday 2002). As a result, the government fulfilled its commitments to liberalize the economy while failing to make headway in redressing social inequality. Guatemala has recently seen the resurfacing of paramilitaries (Sáenz de Tejada 2004) and is experiencing unprecedented levels of criminal violence. The phenomenon of lynching suspected troublemakers is not new to the Guatemalan highlands, but its frequency has become a phenomenon suspiciously connected to the post-war situation (see Remijnse 2001, 2005).11

In an early work on the magic of state power, Taussig (1992) explores the fetishism whereby the state itself becomes an object of desire, magically holding out the promise of change. He writes, "[By State fetishism] I mean a certain aura of might as figured by the Leviathan in Hobbes' rendering as that 'mortal god'; or, in a quite different mode, by Hegel's intricately argued vision of the State as not merely the embodiment of reason, of the Idea, but also as an impressively organic unity, something much greater than the sum of its parts" (ibid.: 111f.). Hage's view of society as that which produces and distributes hope is perhaps a more straightforward phrasing of what is at stake, and it comes very close both to the magicality of profane power and to people's attempt in the Guatemalan resistance communities to attach previous expectations of the sheltering power of home to society at large (2003). According to Hage, in shrinking the shared space of 'the public', neo-liberal policies also shrink the domain of hope, which in turn foregrounds paranoid social tendencies like xenophobic nationalism and gated communities in wealthier countries. In Guatemala, currently the third poorest country in Latin America and with a public sector yet to be built, citizens' hope for radically different opportunities in peace seems to be what in fact eventually brought the revolution to an end (Löfving 2004). Disappointments with the lack of concrete steps toward a true 'implementation of peace' have not led to new popular uprisings but to unprecedented social fragmentation.

The end of the road

Back in 1996, the guerrilla leadership, soon to become a legitimate political party leadership, presented its position at the negotiating table as a very strong one when it sent information to what it perceived as its future constituency in the resistance communities. Every step in the negotiation was being discussed and debated in homes and political meetings during the first part of my fieldwork, and it is fair to say that the optimism many expressed (see Pablo's discussion of human rights as proof of an EGP success above) took on a certain power of its own—a peace fetishism. However, once in the implementation phase, peace and the government's tempting offer to award a limited number of rebels an economic compensation for surrendering their arms created enmities within past alliances. In this section I will present what actually took place in 1997 and 1998 when people negotiated their future residence with the government, when they eventually headed for other places, and when most of them, against the will and intention of their political leaders, returned to Nebaj.

People invoked a variety of reasons when I inquired about why they had opted for their respective future settlements. Below, I discuss the incentives associated with the four options available to them: first, migrating to new land by the coast, with prospects for maintaining their political organization; second, migrating to new land in the highland areas, also with prospects for a sustained organization; third, remaining in the area occupied up to then by the resistance communities, and coexisting with settlers from Chajul who in the peace talks had managed to establish their right to a previously forested mountain area, now cleared and cultivated by the resistance communities; and, last, returning to pre-war settlements primarily in and around Nebaj.12

Those in favor of the first option, the coast and a communal resettlement on the level of organization (not family), argued that there were
likely to be roads by the coast due to the flat topography. This was connected to hopes for improved infrastructure in general and access to nearby markets, which would promote ‘development’—a concept that was used with notably greater frequency in local post-war political rhetoric and seemed, along with ‘democracy’, to be the most recent code word, replacing ‘negotiation’. What emerged was a chronological sequence in which each core political concept was replaced by a new one. It read: revolution, resistance, negotiation, development, and democracy.

The people who favored resettlement with a sustained political organization seemed to be motivated by violent experiences in the past as well as by their revolutionary commitment to societal change. Many interviewees expressed a fear of going back to their land of origin due to ‘mortal enemies’ in army-controlled areas. When asked to specify this fear, people referred to an array of accusations and past threats from patrollers and the military. Another reason to opt for the coast had pragmatic undertones: a growing number of heirs in refuge and resistance left people with tiny landholdings with bad prospects in Nebaj. In contrast, the negotiations provided opportunities to start afresh with a certain area/territory for each household. This led people to divide households in order to maximize the amount of arable land for household members. If a father and one son returned to Nebaj, it was likely that the other sons turned to the other offerings of the deal with the government. Gaspar, my neighbor, decided to follow his politically active peers to the coast, and his daughters and wife went with him. His two eldest sons, however, were to take care of the small landholding inherited from Gaspar’s father in the Nebaj village of Palop (see the fourth option below). Throughout the conflict it had been guarded and cultivated by Gaspar’s two brothers and his mother. The geographical division of the extended family was a common sacrifice to secure a maximum amount of land.

Those in favor of the second option, migrated to nearby fincas (estates) in Cobán and Uspantán, emphasizing the familiarity of highland ecology. They too had mortal enemies in Nebaj. Moreover, when pragmatically dividing their present households in order to maximize land tenure (like those favoring the first option), members of these soon-to-be-divided families would be able to maintain contact and meet frequently because Cobán and Uspantán were nearby. This ‘closeness’ was also related to the land of origin of the many Maya Quichés in the area of the resistance communities known as Xeputúl. The new fincas were thus seen as strategic new locations in the political project of connecting past struggles with the present and the future.

Impatiently waiting for the new life to begin in another place, few devoted their efforts to agricultural production in the spring of 1998. Francisco, in the resistance community of Pal, could ascertain that his coffee plantation would give him a good yield. The profit would be divided between himself, his family, and all the mozos (day-workers) who waited to be paid for the processing of the plants. And Francisco had already planted new fields. He belonged to the core of revolutionary committed who had faithfully served in the various committees over the years and who now planned to follow the organization to one of the new settlements. The newly planted trees would not bear fruit for another four years, but Francisco hoped to be able to use them in the bargaining with the incoming Chajuleños. Others were cleaning their cafetales (coffee plantations), also with the goal of using them as economic assets when the negotiations got under way. Yet, others were weaving baskets or making furniture that was easy to dismantle and transport to a new location.

Those in favor of the third option, remaining in the area of the resistance communities, also based their planning on a continued political project, though without a military wing. The expected wave of ‘army-indoctrinated’ Chajuleños—so the argument went—had to be met by organized communities. The elders remembered the lowland heat, the mosquitoes, and the hardships of seasonal work on the plantations. ‘Never again’ was a phrase invoked in the motivation of a decision to stay put. And people who had invested much time and energy in the very prac-
tical construction of the new communities were reluctant to leave and start all over again. For example, the carpenters whose profession was in a sense their home, decided to stay put. In their case, there was usually no land and no ‘back home’ in Nebaj left to return to. Home villages had been erased, reconstructed, and repopulated with new settlers.

Finally, those choosing the fourth option, the ‘returnees’, represented a growing number among the CPR villagers; among them was Pablo, now hoping to be able to continue with his health work and to move back with his wife and three children to live close to his brothers in Nebaj. Two years earlier, in 1996, my other neighbor Juan had shown me his field of pineapple plants. He was then scheduled to harvest in three to four months and was very satisfied with his previous initiative of creating a more diversified stock of crops. For me, this was an excellent opportunity to confront him with the CPR plans to move everybody to new settlements, and, surveying his piñas, Juan claimed that he would never ever abandon what he had built up here in the resistance community of Cabá. “If the authorities force us to leave, there will be problems,” he said. At that time, in the autumn of 1996, Juan calculated that at least half of the people in resistance shared his opinion.

This was in 1996, when a final solution was being worked out in political meetings and in the homes and the equation between an identity of resistance and the territory where resistance ‘took place’ was striking. To return to Nebaj still implied selling out the struggle, and it represented a contradiction to the notion of a revolutionary commitment. Two grand estates, one by the coast and one close to the Ixil region, were finally bought with government funds in February 1998 for the relocation of about four hundred families on each. The search for purchasable estates had been under way during 1997, but due to the delays, the original number of one hundred families that chose to return to their ‘original land’ in the town of Nebaj had increased to nearly four hundred by April 1998. The need to sow in the spring forced people to return without guarantees of access to land. This often led to conflicts between spouses. My host family became a telling example of this. The elder couple, as well as the overwhelming majority of their generation, had decided to go back to Nebaj and their land of origin. This was met with tensions between men, who seemed to be eager to go to the coast with the organization, and women, who wanted as eagerly to follow their parents and older relatives (and each other). My host planned for migration with his brother, while his wife had already gone with her mother and grandparents back to the old village. Empowered by the presence of her family’s elders, she simply left. When he was on his own in a nearly deserted community in 1998, my host finally decided to follow his wife, and he too returned to Nebaj to try to save his marriage.

Returnees emphasized the bad prospects of the other alternatives, in much the same vein as others had done. The new experience of being disarmed and thereby defenseless did play a role, but ‘the object of fear’ differed. Whereas all the others seemed to fear their ethnic compatriots back in Nebaj, the returnees invoked fear of the coming Chajuleños. People were thus locked in a precarious situation. Wherever they turned, they would face enemies. There was simply no place for them, and with a disarmed resistance, neither the peace nor the future looked too promising.

Hence, it was no longer the struggle to prevail as a revolutionary example that motivated people’s decision about final settlement after the break-up of the resistance communities from the region. The principal focus of identification and the object of economic maximization was not the individual, nor the political community of resisters, but rather the extended family. At the end of the revolutionary road, the road to liberal peace effectively closed this space of popular organizing and protest.

The transforming space of popular protest

‘Home’ is one pole in a spatial opposition. “Home is ‘here’, or it is ‘not here’” (Douglas 1991: 289). But as has been argued in the essays of this spe-
cial section, ‘home’ is also one pole in a moral opposition. ‘Coming home’ is a moral movement, ‘building a home’ is a moral act, and when homes turn bad they become unhomely. I have not taken the spatiality of this morality as a given, but have instead explored how scales are shifting over time and how the conditions for people’s ability to conceive of home as a eulogized, moral space in social spheres wider than family and household was challenged by war but undermined and ultimately destroyed by liberal peace.

As the spatiality of moral space seems to be shrinking, in Guatemala as elsewhere, I am going to end my tale with a perspective on youth, life trajectory, and contemporary migration. Both young people and the image of a rebellious youth informed the Central American revolutions. Materialist explanations of the revolutionary potentials of disgruntled youngsters emphasize the limited access to land that by virtue of its relative abundance had constituted the local power base of the elders in previous generations. Demographic expansion presupposed territorial expansion, and the division of plots among heirs remained possible in the Guatemalan highlands as long as new land could be cleared on the outskirts of villages and towns. The changes brought about by an earlier wave of liberal capitalist penetration of the peripheries in the late nineteenth century put an end to this development. The privatization of communal land was a precondition for the inclusion of Guatemala in the then expanding global economy. By the mid-twentieth century, indigenous communities were thus territorially curtailed and overpopulated to the extent that the local institution of the gerontocracy lost the very condition of its own reproduction. The massive mobilization of young people like Pablo into the rebel ranks during the 1970s was part of a double logic of this economic change on the one hand, and of geopolitical concerns on the other. In support of both the regimes and the big corporations operating in Central America, the US turned the region into one of the hottest spots of the Cold War—its main enemies being the Central American young people who had recently revolted, primarily against their own elders.

However, neither agricultural space constraints nor the economic incentive alone can explain the phenomenon of revolutionary mobilization in Guatemala (cf. Collier and Hoeffler 1998). The revolutionaries in the resistance communities shared and nourished a number of human ideals, one of them centering on youth—purity free from the falsehood of tradition and corruption and strength required to construct a new society. But as the members grew older, central facets of the political structure established in war by the once pure and strong did not stand the challenges posed by the expectations of a peace. In the resistance communities, for example, a political class, clearly marked by higher levels of literacy, networks within and beyond the revolutionary movement, and a political know-how that guaranteed their continuous political re-appointments, maintained its leadership positions, indeed marginalizing its own youth and, for this reason among others, seeing its popular support gradually diminishing (Löfving 2002a).

Parallel to the weakening of the revolutionary project in Guatemala, a different kind of popular mobilization began. This one built on an opposed project of culture instead of class, and of constitutional reforms instead of revolution. Many activists within the movement of Maya revivalism in contemporary Guatemala do in fact have a history in the rebel movement. From positions both abroad and at home, many of them found it necessary to re-evaluate the aims, means, and content of struggle as times changed, and eventually they replaced an ideal of youth and purity with one of old age and ancient wisdom—a development coinciding with their own life cycles.13

So, what is the role of ‘place’ in this change, and what about young people today? In cultural and social ways, the perceived distance between an affluent society up north and the economically downtrodden home countries of Central American youth has shrunk dramatically since the 1970 and even the 1980s. During the past fifteen years remittances developed into the single most important source of income for millions of Salvadorsans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans in particular. These three countries alone received USD
7.23 billion in remittances in 2005, a sum equivalent to 10 percent and 17 percent of Guatemala’s and El Salvador’s GNP, respectively (Latin American Regional Report 2006). There are currently around 1.2 million Guatemalans working in the US, 60 percent of whom are illegal immigrants. During visits to villages in Sololá in March and November 2006, people told me about the ‘necessity’ and the difficulties of illegal migration. Every village had stories of failures—people who had died during the journey or been sent back, now ruined by having sold their properties to afford the trip—and every village had one or two families who were much better off than their neighbors due to a successful journey of a family member across two state borders.

Remittances are thus interesting, not only from an economic but also from a social point of view, because they preserve household economies precisely by breaking up households both geographically and socially (cf. Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991). Young people leave their homes with, if nothing else, the promise of contributing to their families’ income once they have settled in the US. Along with the consumption of North American popular culture in Central America, this pattern of migration generates stories, images, and experiences of a different and more attractive life than the one they can lead back home. If society is the distributor of hope, and the health of society is measured by the success of this distribution (Hage 2003), then hope in contemporary Central America is associated with the possibility of escaping from society in order to save the household.

The liberalization of politics means, apart from the promotion of elections, also the advancement of basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly, and conscience. I have argued in this article that the parallel processes of political and economic liberalization in postwar Central America are undermining these latter aspects of the liberal project (Chase 2002; see also Kalb 2005). The apparent closeness to prosperity is a deceptive one. Legally excluded from the licit market and the social advantages of North American citizenship, Central Americans in the US and on the roads connecting these two nodes in the economy of the Americas turn to the illicit means of income available to them. While contraband activities involving drugs, weapons, and bodies, and work opportunities in the US for illegal immigrants make some people better off than they were before, they represent the antithesis to citizenship and the social contracts and safety nets of the welfare state (Zilberg 2004). This speaks in dismal ways to Hirschman’s now soon to be forty-year-old analysis. The units in his focus—firms, organizations, and states—depended on ‘voice’ to prevail and declined when members opted for ‘exit’ (Hirschman 1970). In a contemporary contrast, ‘exit’ from semi-sovereign polities now works to stabilize an ongoing liberalization of world economy while simultaneously undermining political opposition in such polities, creating in the process the very semi-sovereignty on which liberal globalization depends.

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Notes

1. Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres, one of the four member organizations of the National Revolutionary Unity of Guatemala (URNG). For intro-
ductions to the history of the EGP, see Brockett (2005: 119–22) and Löfving (2006a).

2. In involving decisions with practical social consequences, what people referred to as ‘sacrifices’, a revolutionary commitment transcends the related notions of revolutionary consciousness, ideas, and convictions.

3. For a history and ethnography of the Comunidades de Poblaciones en Resistencia, see Löfving (2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2006b).

4. At the time, the mayor of Chajul belonged to the army-supportive political party Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) and drew popular support from anti-guerrilla agitation combined with promises of guaranteeing people land in the region now allegedly occupied by the CPR.

5. As John Gledhill (1997) notes, liberalism is far from a uniform doctrine and encompasses a wide range of perspectives on the role of state and politics in controlling market dynamics and on the relation of the economy to social justice (see also Burchell 1996: 21–30). In this article, I use ‘liberal’ when referring to the literature on current peace building and its often implicit economic precondition for political reform, whereas I use ‘neo-liberal’ for a more aggressive and politically far-reaching individualism. For neo-liberalism, Burchell notes, “the rationality of government must be pegged to a form of the rational self-conduct of the governed themselves [like for classical liberalism], but a form that is not so much a given of human nature as a consciously contrived style of conduct” (1996: 24; see also Gledhill 2005; Paris 2004).

6. This experience is not representative of the majority of victims of army atrocities in Guatemala. Doing fieldwork among the displaced people in the Ixil highlands implied spending time with a ‘selection’ of those who had survived to tell, and those who had stayed defiant of the state and its army for ten to twenty years. While an estimated number of 20,000 people abandoned the resistance communities during the first half of the 1990s, approximately 10,000 remained until war’s end (Löfving 2002a). Thus, it was not surprising to find an unprecedented ‘revolutionary commitment’ among them.

7. For this latter view in the case of El Salvador, see Grenier (1999), and in the case of Guatemala, see Stoll (1993).

8. People do not appear with their proper names in this article.

9. Hannah Arendt (1958) famously assessed the relationship between individualism and social solidarity in her discussion of the modern divisions of society and the simultaneous emergence of the public sphere. Similarly universalist, the liberals in political philosophy would see individualization as a precondition for the emergence of rights-bearing individuals (see Taylor 1989), while their critics (see Grandin 2004) single out individualization as a precondition for the rise of oppositional mass politics. My take on ‘the Self’ here is aimed rather at understanding the fluctuating spheres of social solidarity in a specific place over time and the relation of individuation to violence.

10. Elsewhere, I analyze the remaining tensions between the civil patrol in the village of Chel and CPR members passing the frontline on their way to Chajul, and what those tensions meant in terms of a preserved military might in ‘peace time’ (Löfving 2004).

11. Guatemala has become a showcase in a more general discussion on post-war violence, lynchings, ‘popular justice’, and economic decline in Latin America (see, e.g., Handy 2004; Snodgrass Godoy 2004, 2006).

12. Overlapping and conflictive legal systems inform land conflicts in many parts of Latin America. The CPR evoked traditional law (the rights of the users of untitled land) whereas the mayor of Chajul capitalized on promises to the people in his overcrowded municipality that the CPR were occupants and that the territory, even if previously uninhabited, belonged to the municipality and was his to distribute. The government, the army, and eventually the guerrilla leaders signed up for this perspective in the negotiations of 1996 and 1997. The CPR dissolved and their members had to move.

13. For a critical analysis of the ethnification of politics in Guatemala, and of the relationship between ‘the Maya movement’ and the resistance communities in the mid-1990s, see Löfving (2002b, 2006b).

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