
Rehabilitating Guerillas in Neo-Extractivist Guatemala

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We do not want to forget
Even when we forgive and reconcile
The memory of what happened
It will always be the reference
Of our present and future life
In the testimony of so many martyrs
We will find hope and strength
To open new paths
As it happened with the first Christians
Who found in the martyrdom of their brothers
The strengthening of their faith.

(Bishop Juan José Gerardi, 1995, quoted in ODHAG 2006,
103–104 [our translation])

4.1 Introduction

At a 2014 meeting of anti-mining activists, organized and sponsored by a human rights non-governmental organization (NGO), the *Centro de Acción Legal, Ambiental y Social de Guatemala* (CALAS, Guatemala's Centre for Legal, Environmental and Social Action), a middle-aged male, Alberto,¹ declared: "From a very young age, 17 years old, I was a revolutionary" (our translation). The audience of fellow leaders of Central American anti-mining organizations boastfully applauded and cheered his revelation. From his first days in the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP, Guerilla Army of the Poor), Alberto continued, he "struggled for the rights of (. . .) my people, given the way they mistreated Indigenous peoples, discriminated against us, enslaved us, never listened

¹ When the full name is cited, it refers to the person's real name; when only a first name is cited, it refers to a pseudonym.

to us” (our translation). In the 1990s, however, fearing for his life, he took refuge in Victoria, Canada, with fellow guerillas. Twenty years later, after hearing about the construction of a mine in his hometown against his people’s will, he decided to return to Guatemala. In his words: “My conscience did not leave me free, hearing about all the injustices that my people still faced in Guatemala, so I decided, following a communication with God, to come back” (our translation). Alberto knew that, in coming back, he was risking his life again. During Guatemala’s internal armed conflict (1960–1996), “thousands [of my companions] were disappeared. Nothing was ever found out about what happened to their bodies, (...) because they were executed as ‘XX’” (our translation). Yet, risking his life was a sacrifice he was willing to make because it was for truth and justice. “Dr Yuri,” Alberto concluded: “. . . knew that at any moment they were going to threaten his life. Because it has always been that way, how they killed Jesus Christ. Thousands of men have died for truth and justice. Who am I not to die for truth and justice?” (our translation).

The CALAS 2014 meeting took place just outside Guatemala’s capital in Mixco, at the progressive Catholic *Instituto Mixto Intercultural Santiago* (Mixed Intercultural Institute Santiago, formerly the *Instituto Indígena Santiago*, Indigenous Institute Santiago). It began with the presentation of a seventeen-minute-long documentary featuring Yuri Melini, then director and founder of CALAS. In September 2008, Melini, a medical surgeon by training, was shot seven times as he was leaving his home. The documentary shows Melini celebrating his survival and recovery with close friends and family members at his neighborhood church, one year after his attack. Standing by the altar, with the priest beside him, Melini states:

I spent 22 days in an intensive care unit. I survived 4 surgeries, 18 blood transfusions. (...) The Lord has given me this new life to give his testimony. To fight impunity, to continue building a better country, to defend nature. Not one step back. I can’t be a coward, be thinking about leaving the country. I have a lot to do here. I am called to participate in this country. We cannot allow impunity and violence to destroy this country, and interest groups entrenched within [our democratic] institutions to destroy us as a society. (Caminos del Asombro 2009, our translation)

The documentary presentation was followed by panels featuring male and female activists who, like Alberto, were leading local opposition movements to mining in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. They

denounced the stigmatization, threats, violence, and criminalization they all faced as a result of their political work. In so doing, many of them referred to Melini's testimony to underline not just the legitimacy, but also the sacredness of their political struggle and divine calls to go on. For instance, Anita, a young Guatemalan female activist, declared:

In comparison to what happened to Yuri Melini, what happened to me is nothing, but (...) even if I were to suffer graver consequences, I would continue to fight to defend life, for this is why we are here, what God put us in this world for. (...) Many have ended up on the cross for the same cause, and as Dr. Melini said, (...) as brave men and women we must keep going. We can't stop, we must keep going (our translation).

The themes of divine callings, martyrdom, and calls to go on that Alberto, Yuri, and Anita mobilized, as Peterson and Peterson (2008) note, provide meaningful frames for agency. Not only do they connect people to a common good, by turning personal battles into a sacred struggle that transcends them as individuals, but they also identify "divine power and intentions as acting in human history," thus providing a target towards which their personal battles are moving: "the kingdom of God" (Peterson and Peterson 2008, 512). In addition, Christianity's worship of a god who dies in apparent defeat, yet resuscitates, resonates well with activists like Alberto, Yuri, and Anita who experience state repression. As Peterson and Peterson (2008, 518) argue: "It enables them to view setbacks and painful losses not as evidence that their cause is either unjust or ill-fated, but rather that they are on the correct path, following in fact the trajectory of Jesus who told his disciples to expect difficult times."

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, at the peak of Guatemala's internal armed conflict (1960–1996), these themes were widely mobilized by progressive sectors to both orient and motivate collective action in the name of a sacred revolution for the liberation of the oppressed (Konefal 2010; McAllister 2013). Following the negotiated peace, however, and more particularly humanitarianism's claim on Guatemala's genocide (1982–1983), they were removed from public testimonies of the war. As McAllister (2013) noted in the mid-1990s, and Vanthuyne (2014) later observed in the mid-2000s, "trauma" instead became the dominant frame of genocide survivors' testimonies; their accounts "described the atrocities people had experienced, witnessed, or heard about" (McAllister 2013, 100). As Trouillot (1995) cogently reminds us, silences are as meaningful as what is accounted for in narratives of history. When

McAllister and Vanthuyne much later gained the trust of the survivors they respectively conducted their doctoral research with, they began to hear stories of political mobilization. However, these accounts, as McAllister (2013, 101) notes, “ultimately failed to obey the critical conventions of revolutionary *testimonio*,” since “they treated the revolutionary moment as past rather than future; they were tales of loss rather than appeals to ‘go on’.”

As Weld (2012, 35) explains, Guatemala’s revolutionary movement was seen to “drown (. . .) in its own blood” by the scorched earth policy of the militarized Guatemalan government (1982–1983). Further, in order to eradicate “any seeds of oppositional thinking,” the government also resorted to discrediting the country’s organized Left both in wartime and afterward by distinguishing between two kinds of Guatemalans: “honorable, patriotic supporters of the counterinsurgency; or else godless, gutless subversives [who] deserved what they got” (Weld 2012, 36). Flyers found in the mid-1980s in the Department of El Quiché, where the EGP was most active, portrayed the insurgents with horns, tails, and claws, blood dripping from their mouths, with words like “death,” “destruction,” “terror,” “treason,” or “deception” accompanying the drawings (Zur 1998). Such processes of demonization, as Ducharme and Fine (1995) note, are difficult, if not impossible to reverse. Rather, they oftentimes become internalized, as Weld, McAllister, and Vanthuyne observed in their respective work. Many ex-guerillas they met in the 1990s and 2000s, as Weld (2012, 44) explains, “had internalized the state’s disdain for their ideals,” and therefore kept silent about it. In the context of the harsh repression their insurrection triggered, several had also become skilled in public secrecy, “knowing what not to know” (Taussig 1999) – to the extent, sometimes, of fully assuming the identity they had borrowed while living clandestinely (Nelson 2009). Hence Vanthuyne’s surprise when, at the 2014 CALAS meeting, she heard revelations of revolutionary past followed by boastful cheers, as well as testimonies of divine callings, martyrdom, and calls to go on. To be sure, some of the activists gathered at the meeting were, like Alberto, ex-guerillas, confirming Bastos and Camus’ (2013) claim concerning the revolutionary origin of Guatemala’s anti-mining movement. Others, however, weren’t, including opponents of the Marlin Mine in San Miguel Ixtahuacán, San Marcos. During Guatemala’s internal armed conflict, many of these opponents or their parents had in fact persecuted the guerillas after joining the Guatemalan Army’s Civil Patrols, labeling them malevolent “thieves.” What had provoked what Serrano-Moreno (2012)

calls a “memory rupture” among the Marlin Mine opponents? What had encouraged them to re-identify Guatemala’s ex-insurgents as “war heroes,” rehabilitating in this way the brutally repressed, and generally silenced revolution as a struggle for the “defense of life”?

Peterson and Peterson (2008, 513) claim that the sacred struggle narrative that progressive sectors mobilized in Central America in the late 1970s and early 1980s was tied to a particular conception of power: the worldly forces that killed martyrs, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, were “specific, locatable and identified with structures of sin and injustice.” However, the notion of “structural sin,” they continue, became obsolete following the socioeconomic policies of deregulation, decentralization, and privatization that accompanied Central America’s peace process. Discursively, the causes of postwar social ills stopped being clearly identifiable responsible agents, such as the state or the army, instead becoming depoliticized forms of violence, such as homicide. Yet, we claim that Guatemala’s version of Latin America’s “extractive imperative” (Arsel et al. 2016) has revived the notion of structural sin and the sacred struggle narrative it was historically tied to. In Guatemala, the state’s involvement in facilitating the activities of the extractive industry (Fox 2015), while criminalizing those opposing it (Rasch 2017; Sibrián and van der Borgh 2014), combined with the Catholic Church’s participation in sustaining the opposition movement to mining (Holden and Jacobson 2009), have encouraged a remobilization of both the structural sin and the sacred struggle narrative frameworks. In turn, this process has, in locations like San Miguel Ixtahuacán, provoked what Weld (2012) calls a “rehabilitation” of the revolutionary past, with locals participating for the first time in Guatemala’s Catholic Church’s truth commission, the *Proyecto de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (REMHI, Recovery of Historical Memory Project), and reclaiming in the process the legitimacy of the guerillas’ struggle, or at the very least, reframing guerillas as “not thieves.”

The analysis in this chapter draws on documentary analysis and collaborative ethnographic fieldwork that Vanthuyne and Dugal conducted separately between 2014 and 2018 with anti-mining activists in San Miguel Ixtahuacán.² In what follows, we first retrace the Catholic

² Vanthuyne conducted collaborative ethnographic research with anti-mining activists in San Miguel Ixtahuacán both in Guatemala (December 2014, March 2016, and April 2018) and Canada (October–November 2015 and May 2018), when some came to Ottawa to raise awareness about their plight amongst government officials, the NGO sector and the

Church's involvement in Guatemala's revolution, focusing specifically on its activity in San Miguel, and the brutal repression of Catholic leaders by the Guatemalan Army in the region. We then examine how public memories of the revolution and its violent annihilation have changed in the wake of mobilization against the Marlin Mine. Through documenting the narrative ecologies that have accompanied the Guatemalan internal armed conflict and its aftermath, we show how past and ongoing sociopolitical conflict hinders the narrative complexity required for long-lasting peace.

4.2 From Eradicating Communism to Adopting a Preferential Option for the Poor

In the 1930s, following six decades of a governmental anticlerical program, Guatemalan Catholic Church officials undertook to reconquer the mostly Indigenous Guatemalan Highlands with the support of the Vatican (Hernández Sandoval 2018). In that region, numerous expressions of popular religiosity, locally identified as *costumbre* (custom), had developed autonomously from the Church in the absence of Catholic priests. Contingents of foreign missionaries were thus sent by Rome to Guatemala to work toward the Romanization and revitalization of rural Catholicism through different initiatives, including Catholic Action (CA). CA was a lay Catholic organization of European origin that, in the context of the Guatemalan Highlands, sought to incorporate Indigenous communities into the devotional and sacramental life of the Church as a means to defeat *costumbre* and, following the 1954 coup orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Glejises 1991), "communism." In a pastoral letter published just a few days after the coup, Archbishop Mariano Rossell y Arellano (1939–1964) declared, "the fight against Communism is not over, it has just begun . . ." (Rossell Arellano 1954, 6), thus signaling the Church's commitment to the new military government's fight against "communists."

In our interviews with opponents to the Marlin Mine in San Miguel Ixtahuacán, however, participants remembered not so much the anti-communist but the anti-*costumbre* stance of CA. Crisanta Perez, for

general public. As Vanthuyne's research assistant and for her own doctoral research in history on Maya Peoples' struggles and memories in Guatemala, Dugal conducted collaborative ethnographic research with anti-mining activists in San Miguel Ixtahuacán in May–June 2015.

instance, a middle-aged woman now involved in the revitalization movement of *costumbre* within the Catholic church of San Miguel, shared in an interview with Dugal (June 19, 2015, San Miguel) that whenever her grandmother talked about her former beliefs and practices, she did so secretly, as if transgressing the established order. Convinced that it smacked of paganism, CA strove to undermine *costumbre* and the authority of *costumbristas* (Hernández Sandoval 2018). Yet, while this attack challenged local power structures, it eventually encouraged new forms of emancipation.

Following the 1954 coup, and with the financial support of the US Alliance for Progress (Streeter 2006), the Guatemalan militarized state combined repression and developmentalism to stop the expansion of “communism.” While engaging in the modernization of the rural economy, it arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and oftentimes killed the political leaders it presumed were “communists” (CEH 1999). The Catholic Church got closely involved in the first component of this program, but eventually became the target of the second one (Hernández Sandoval 2018). In seeking to develop the Highlands, the Church first sought, like the militarized state, to assimilate Indigenous peasants to the market economy. However, confronted with the multitude of social and economic injustices Indigenous peasants faced, its missionaries came to give priority instead to creating a more just society – a progressive approach, claims Hernández Sandoval (2018), that the Second Vatican Council did not initiate, as some scholars argue (see for example Cleary 1990), but strengthened. Inaugurated by Pope John XXIII (1958–1963), the Second Vatican Council encouraged clerics and lay Catholics to engage people’s spiritual and social realities. In Latin America, this new orientation coalesced in 1968 during the second meeting of the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (Latin American Bishops’ Council) in Medellín, where a “liberation theology” based on a “preferential option for the poor” was born (Gutiérrez 1972). Inspired by Paulo Freire’s (1970 [1968]) pedagogical approach, this theology moved away from the historic paternalistic approach of the Church toward the indigents, to instead focus on their “conscientization.” Following the Freirean “judge–see–act” method, it more specifically aimed, in the words of a former CA leader involved in aiding parishioners’ group discussions in the Guatemalan Highlands, “to facilitate their gaining of consciousness of reality, their problems, and the need to develop solutions” (cited in Konefal 2003, 35). In addition to these study groups, the missionaries began to offer literacy workshops and leadership training in local,

regional, and national educational institutions, such as at the *Instituto Indígena Santiago*, where the CALAS 2014 meeting took place. As part of the Catholic Church's anti-communist crusade, the Instituto was created by Archbishop Rossell y Arellano to "modernize" the Highlands through the training of Indigenous rural teachers. In the 1960s, however, it was turned over to the progressive Catholic La Salle Order and as a result, became the "center of an emerging [I]ndigenous consciousness," as "committed priests, nuns, and young *indígenas*" discussed issues of social injustices (Konefal 2003, 35). This development contributed to the emergence of Guatemala's first organizations of Indigenous peasants, such as the *Movimiento Campesino del Altiplano* (MCA, Peasant Movement of the Highland) in the department of San Marcos.

The MCA was a laic movement that aimed to "improve the peasant family in all aspects of life" (MCA brochure, cited in Gutiérrez 2011, 265). Organized in *cuadrillas* – the groupings that Indigenous peasants had been forced to form until 1944 in order to provide "free" labor to the government or plantation owners (McCreery 1994) – its members met weekly in each of San Marcos's municipalities (Gutiérrez 2011), including in San Miguel Ixtahuacán. These meetings were complemented by intensive courses at a school in Tejutla, a municipality adjacent to San Miguel, the Catholic Church's *Centro de Capacitación e Investigación Campesina* (Peasant Training and Research Center) in Quetzaltenango, the capital of a neighboring department, as well as the *Centro de Adiestramiento de Promotores Sociales* (Training Center for Social Promoters) of the *Universidad Landívar*, a Jesuit university in Guatemala's capital. By training health and education promoters, as well as future administrators of credit and agricultural production cooperatives, the MCA sought to develop self-sufficient farming communities that would no longer need to temporarily migrate each year to San Marcos's *Costa* (Pacific Coast) coffee plantations to make ends meet. MCA leaders, however, soon suffered harsh armed repression.

4.3 Catholic Church Leaders Become "Subversive"

The rise of Marxist-inspired guerillas in the Guatemalan Highlands in the mid-1970s led to the growing militarization of the region and the "disappearance" and arbitrary execution of all presumed revolutionaries, including members of MCA and CA (CEH 1999). As late Archbishop Próspero Penados del Barrio recalled while discussing the brutal armed repression his priests and catechists (lay CA leaders) suffered during the

years he served as San Marcos's Bishop (1971–1983): “A good catechist named Napoleon – who did not know the great musician of San Miguel Ixtahuacán! – they disappeared him; I intervened for him at the military base, because [his neighbors] had seen how they took him, but [the militaries] never gave any reason” (ODHAG 2005, 5, our translation). In his travels to San Marcos parishes, the bishop recalled that he was frequently stopped by the Army to have his identity papers inspected. Once, at one of these checkpoints, a colonel warned him: “Look, Monsignor, we do not forbid you to say Mass, to baptize, but imitate the evangelical pastors. They only talk about God. You talk about cooperatives, unions . . . It's all politics . . . It's subversive.” (ODHAG 2005, 5, our translation).

For the first time in Latin American history, Catholic Church leaders became the target of political violence for their work on behalf of the faith. The military government considered their consciousness-raising efforts to be “subversive.” While some CA members and residents from San Miguel joined the ranks of the *Organización del Pueblo en Armas* (ORPA, People's Organization in Arms), the guerilla movement that was active in the region (Forster 2012; Gutiérrez 2011), others, according to our interviews with them or their relatives, refused to do so. They either disapproved of the insurgents' use of violence to meet their political ends or disagreed with the rebels' reading of their situation. They were not, as the guerillas claimed, exploited by the owner of the *Costa* coffee plantations they worked at seasonally, but rather believed they were well treated there. Nonetheless, one's positioning toward the insurrection movement did not matter; in the eyes of the Army, all of those who carried a Bible were considered “subversives.”

When Dugal asked Maudilia López Cardona, a middle-aged Mayan-Catholic nun who led the opposition movement against mining for a few years in San Miguel, what she remembered about those years of armed repression, she shared:

It was dangerous to go out, to walk at night, to go out on the roads. (. . .) [The Army was looking for] the catechists, because they handled liberation theology as a way of denouncing injustices. So, the catechists were the ones who were wanted. In my house, (. . .) we made a hole big enough to bury the Bibles that my parents had. Because if the army came to search (. . .) a house (. . .) [and found] a Bible, they would kill [its residents]. So a lot of people hid their Bibles. (June 9, 2015, San Miguel, our translation)

With the arrival of General Romeo Lucas García (1978–1982) as President, the repression's death toll increased dramatically. Not only

did the daily disappearances and arbitrary executions of political activists double (Manz 1988) but, in 1981, Lucas García adopted a “scorched land policy” to exterminate the supposed guerilla bases of civil support: the Indigenous villages of the Guatemalan Highlands. His successor, General José Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–1983), carried on this policy. Between 1981 and 1983, 440 Indigenous villages were erased from Guatemala’s map (CEH 1999). San Miguel’s villages were spared this tragic end, but, according to our interviews with anti-mining activists, these “acts of genocide” (CEH 1999, §122) nonetheless led to the exodus of most of the remaining MCA and CA members to Mexico, and the involvement of those who stayed behind in the Army’s counterinsurgency operations. They were forced, along with all the other Indigenous peasants from the Highlands that survived the scorched earth policy, to form Civil Patrols in order to keep watch at the entrances to their villages and report any “suspicious activity” to the military.

4.4 Claiming the Truth, Re-sanctifying the Church

The “disappearances” and other “deniable forms of repression” that took place in Latin America during the Cold War stimulated growing mobilizations around the “right to truth” (Ross 2006). In Guatemala, social protests for claiming this right began in 1984, with the formation of the *Grupo de Apoyo Muto* (GAM, Mutual Support Group) – an association which gathered family members of the “disappeared” (Wilson 1999). However, the visible protests GAM organized in front of the National Palace, with pictures of missing relatives, were rapidly repressed; two of its founding members were assassinated in 1985. It was only when the Cold War ended and American support for Central American governments shifted toward calls for negotiated settlements that the movement for “the truth” gained momentum (Ross 2006).

The guerillas negotiated peace accords with the Guatemalan government between 1991 and 1996. During those negotiations, civil society groups, including GAM, pressed the revolutionaries to request the conduct of a truth commission. Of all the issues debated during Guatemala’s peace process, however, the creation of a truth commission was the one that encountered the most resistance from the Guatemalan Army and government (Mersky 2007). The Army, on the one hand, opposed the idea that human rights violations were subject to investigation. The government, on the other, did everything it could to ensure that the agreed commitments were weak enough to elude them. The guerillas, for

their part, were losing the war, and thus in a very weak position to push for a strong commission (Jonas 2000), or not inclined to do so for their own strategic reasons (Ross 2006). Whatever the case, the Peace Accords that resulted in June 1994 provided the UN-mandated truth commission they were to create with a very weak mandate and a very short timeline. The *Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico* (CEH, Historical Clarification Commission) would lack the power to search, seize, or subpoena. It would also not be allowed to reveal the identity of the authors of the human rights violation it would document, nor to prosecute them. Besides, it would only have six months to complete its mandate, with just one possible six-month extension.

Many human rights and victims' organizations were so disappointed by the CEH's mandate as it was defined in the Peace Accords, reports Mersky (2007), that they declared themselves against it even before it had begun its work. It is in this context that late Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera, who was heading the *Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala* (ODHAG, Office of Human Rights of the Archdiocese of Guatemala), sought the support of Guatemala's bishops in order to promote an alternative truth-seeking project: the *Proyecto de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (REMHI, the Recovery of Historical Memory Project).³ Established in October 1994, just a few months following the signature of the truth commission peace accord, the REHMI Project had two central objectives: (1) the psychosocial support of victims, through the recollection of their testimonies and (2) the production of a scientific report on Guatemala's internal armed conflict, to help the CEH achieve its goal of "clarifying the truth" in record time (ODHAG 2006). REHMI, therefore, not only embraced the therapeutic goals that the growing number of public truth-telling initiatives that have since been launched throughout the world have adopted (Moon 2009). It did not solely seek, through listening to victims speaking their truth about the tragic loss of their loved ones, to relieve them of their trauma. It was also concerned with reclaiming the sanctity of the Catholic Church's struggle for the liberation of the oppressed through "venerating our martyrs and dignifying our dead" (ODHAG 1997, 18). In other words, it aimed to transform those who had been accused of being "subversives" back into "good Christians."

³ The ODHAG was created by Guatemala's late Archbishop Próspero Penados del Barrio (1983–2001) in 1990.

To enable it to reach this second objective, the REHMI Project employed an array of professional techniques and tools of collection and systematization of data in order to guarantee the authenticity of its results, such as different types of forms, and the use of recorders and numbered field books (ODHAG 1997). Of the eleven (out of fourteen) dioceses in Guatemala that agreed to participate in REHMI's Project, the Diocese of San Marcos was one of six that promoted it the most (ODHAG 2006). Nonetheless, when some of REHMI's 600 "animators of reconciliation," as the parish workers who were trained by ODHAG to collect testimonies were called – 83 percent of them Indigenous and 33 percent female (Azmitia 1998) – came to San Miguel Ixtahuacán, no one agreed to speak with them. ODHAG expected this kind of reluctance and had therefore organized a national awareness campaign to help mitigate it. This campaign included: television and radio ads; posters in Spanish and Guatemala's six most widely spoken Indigenous languages (including Mam, the Indigenous language spoken in San Miguel); and a 15-minute radio show that involved two characters, *Doña REHMI* (Mrs. REMHI) and *Don Olvido* (Mr. Oblivion), who discussed to what extent it was suitable to remember the history of atrocious events (ODHAG 2006). This campaign, however, did not manage to break the wall of silence in San Miguel Ixtahuacán among the relatives of those who, like Napoleon, had been "disappeared" by the Army. When REHMI's animators came in 1996, most of these relatives were still in exile in Mexico, and the few that remained were too scared to share their stories. According to our interviews with them, they had been warned by the Army that they too would be brutally arrested, tortured, and "disappeared" if they pronounced their family members missing.

Based on the 6,493 testimonies it ended up collecting by 1997, REHMI concluded in *Guatemala: Nunca Mas* (Guatemala: Never Again), the final report it published in 1998, that the Guatemalan Army was responsible for 85 percent of the human rights violations that had been committed during the internal armed conflict, while the guerillas were responsible for 9 percent (ODHAG 1998). The report also named some perpetrators and military structures responsible for these violations. A year later, the CEH (1999) confirmed these proportions but augmented the Army's responsibility to 93 percent, decreased the guerillas' to 3 percent, and only identified the military structures responsible for the violations. Two days after launching REHMI's report in Guatemala's cathedral, on April 24, 1998, Bishop Gerardi was brutally murdered by military personnel, transforming him into a new key martyr for the

Catholic Church's sacred struggle for the liberation of the oppressed. In his 2000 homily at the mass that commemorated the assassination of Bishop Gerardi in Guatemala's Cathedral, Monsignor Cabrera Ovalle (Bishop of El Quiché between 1986 and 2001) stated:

What happened to Monsignor Gerardi happened to Jesus: his mission in favor of the life and dignity of the people, above all, of the poorest and those that suffer the most, led him to death, meticulously planned. His death was perpetrated, and impunity was planned. But we know the end, it is the good news of Easter – it is not written in a sepulcher but is proclaimed with the most liberating action of all: Jesus has risen! (FAMDEGUA 2000, 11, our translation)

As Nelson (2009, 77) notes, the assassination of Bishop Gerardi had a chilling effect: "Gerardi's murder was terrifying for many people, especially those who had participated in REHMI, often against their family's wishes. They fully expected to be murdered too." To counter that effect, we argue, the Catholic Church reframed the premeditated murder of Monsignor Gerardi and its impunity into elements of a divine history. The sacrifice of the life of such a devoted man as Gerardi, proclaimed Monsignor Cabrera Ovalle in his homily, would necessarily be followed by the "good news of Easter" – humanity's salvation from sin. The earthly path toward that salvation, however, would from now on not focus on raising people's consciousness about the socioeconomic causes of their plight (their exploitation in the *Costa's* coffee plantations) in order to encourage them to address it (through organizing cooperatives), as was the case during CA's years. As Vanthuyne (2014) has detailed, it would instead focus on raising their consciousness about the politico-legal causes of their misfortune (impunity for the internal armed conflict atrocities) in order to bring them to claim truth and justice. At the end of his homily, Monsignor Cabrera Ovalle stated: "The Catholic Church ask[s] the justice system, (...) the instances that have the serious duty to facilitate this process, that they thoroughly investigate this crime. Our people will be strengthened when impunity is banished from our soil and justice shines like the sun." (FAMDEGUA 2000, 13, our translation). In 2001, following years of seriously flawed investigations and twisted plots (including imprisoning a dog that prosecutors claimed had taken part in Gerardi's murder), three Guatemalan justices sentenced four people, including three military officers, for the Bishop's assassination despite very little evidence that they were in fact guilty (Miller 2001). The killing in a 2016 prison attack of one of these officers, Captain Byron Lima Oliva, raised suspicions that the actual culprits, or at least some of them, had not been found. Before his

killing, Lima Oliva “had reportedly started to talk about the involvement of the son of Álvaro Enrique Arzú Yrigoyen, who served as president of Guatemala from 1996 through 2000, in the Gerardi murder” (McVicar 2018). Since Lima Oliva’s conviction, several additional militaries have been sentenced for atrocities committed during the internal armed conflict, including Rios Montt in 2013. These sentences have nonetheless been repeatedly challenged by the accused, and the struggle against impunity in Guatemala remains one of the Catholic Church’s key struggles.

4.5 “Defending Life” from Extractivism, Becoming “Terrorists”

En la época de la conquista nos llamaban “Indios”, en la época de la guerrilla, nos llamaban “comunistas”, y ahora nos llaman “terroristas”. ¡Pues, si por ser defensores de derechos humanos, somos terroristas, somos!

(female anti-mining activist, CALAS meeting, December 10, 2014,
Mixco)

In the wake of Guatemala’s internal armed conflict, the right to truth and due process has been the new battle horse of not only the Church, but a growing number of local and international human rights organizations in Guatemala (Vanthuyne 2014). The same organizations, however, were quickly asked by the genocide survivors they mobilized for justice to also help them defend their “right to life” against Guatemala’s extractive imperative. Just a few months following the signing of the final Peace Accord, the government adopted new mining legislation. The 1997 Mining Code reduced the royalty rate from 6 percent to 1 percent, eliminated the previous prohibition on 100 percent foreign-owned mining operations, implemented a series of tax exemptions for mining companies, as well as established a very weak system of environmental and public health impact assessment (Nolin and Stephens 2010). Under the 1997 Mining Code, mining companies are put in charge of leading impact assessment studies but given no specific instruction as to what such studies should cover. Moreover, Guatemalan environmental authorities are only granted thirty days to review a mining project; once this delay is passed, the project is automatically approved, and the company is granted an exploitation license. From 1998 to 2008, metal mining and exploration licenses in Guatemala increased by 1,000 percent (Dougherty 2011), the majority of licenses being granted in Indigenous territories. Meanwhile, given the general lack of recognition of the Indigenous right to consultation and Indigenous land rights, and the high risk of mining’s

negative impacts on subsistence agriculture (still a key economic activity in Guatemala's Indigenous Highlands where San Miguel is located), social protest against mining has grown exponentially (Aguilar-González et al. 2018), including in San Miguel Ixtahuacán, where the Marlin Mine operated between 2006 and 2017.

From its very beginning, the anti-Marlin Mine movement took on a multi-scalar character (Urkidi 2011). As similar anti-mining movements throughout the world (Kirsch 2014), it mobilized individuals and organizations in different geographical locations, various types of political spheres, and multiple social processes and regulations. Yet, while this upscaling gave way to "increased flows of information and resources between scales" (Urkidi 2011, 557), its main actors nonetheless remained San Miguel residents and the local Catholic Church (Holden and Jacobson 2009). The Diocese of San Marcos was the first organization to provide information workshops on mining's ill environmental and health impacts. San Marcos's bishop, Monsignor Alvaro Leon El Ramazzini Imeri (1988–2012), also sent a letter to every municipality in the department to raise awareness about the risks of cyanide leaching and desertification around the Marlin Mine. Further, the Diocese helped residents denounce to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the violation by the mining company of the Indigenous right to consultation enshrined in ILO 169. They also assisted in the organization of demonstrations to condemn this violation. In a 2005 press conference that followed one of these demonstrations, Bishop Ramazzini justified the Church's political work in this way: "We cannot remain silent when we see that in the very near future, this type of metal exploitation will cause an ecological catastrophe in Guatemala, with fatal consequences for life and health."⁴ In San Miguel's parish, the Belgian priest, Padre Erik (1983–...) and Maudilia López Cardona, the Mayan Catholic nun quoted in Section 4.3, also began integrating consciousness raising about the ill impacts of mining in their activities. During mass, for instance, they circulated pictures showing skin diseases caused by mine contamination, as well as sang songs the parish choir composed to denounce them – including the following one:

*Could it have been You who sent the miners?
They rape the womb of the Mother Earth
They take the gold, destroying the mountains;
A gram of blood is worth more than a thousand kilos of gold.*

⁴ Available t: <https://larepublica.pe/economia/315188-iglesia-catolica-de-guatemala-critica-mineria-a-cielo-abierto/> (last accessed May 21, 2020).

*What is happening with my people?
 And you, my god, where are you hiding?
 Fear has paralyzed us,
 My people have been sold and we don't even realize it.*

*The water is drying up, it's the same color as hell;
 The air we breathe is already polluted;
 We seek miracles, but it is too late;
 We seek to cure the sick and the mortally wounded.*

*A poor people are easy to buy,
 Gifts quiet suspicions and doubts;
 Paychecks disappear in the town's cantinas,
 Homes grow dark and my people live divided.*

*You created a garden and not a desert;
 We want progress but with respect for the environment;
 Hunger for gold consumes more and more of the earth,
 And You, my god, you wonder, What are my people doing?*

(as translated from Spanish by Nelson 2015, 190)

This song illustratively summarizes how the Marlin Mine's oppositional movement analyzed its plight (see Vanthuyne and Dugal submitted). The movement's main concerns and sources of mobilization were the mine's environmental, social, and health consequences – the desertification (“You created a garden and not a desert”), the air and water's contamination (now the “same color as hell”), the social division between those in favor and against the mine (“my people live divided”), increased alcoholism (“paychecks disappear[ing] in the town's cantinas”), children neglected (“homes grow dark”), and local residents now sick or “mortally wounded” as a result of the mine's pollution. While enumerating these negative impacts, the song contests the Marlin Mine's claim to be a source of “progress.” When opposition mounted against the mine, its owners launched an important publicity campaign that claimed it was socioeconomically and environmentally benefiting not only San Miguel, but the whole country. Under the slogan “valuable development,” giant, colorful posters erected in Guatemala's capital and its main highways boasted about taxes paid, jobs created, and trees replanted by Goldcorp Inc., the Canadian company that then owned the mine.⁵ Opponents to Marlin, Padre Erik included, have continuously been accused of being “anti-development” by those in favor

⁵ The Marlin Mine first belonged to Glamis Gold, which was then acquired by Goldcorp in 2006.

of the mine's presence in their municipality. The song repudiates that accusation, asserting, "We want progress." In so doing, it challenges the valuation system that equates progress with "rap[ing] the womb of Mother Earth," "tak[ing] the gold, destroying the mountains," to argue instead that "a gram of blood is worth more than a thousand kilos of gold." The song also identifies who the main culprits of this violation and destruction are. While it suggests, at its beginning, that God may have "sent the miners," it soon clarifies that it rather is "fear [that] has paralyzed us," and "my people" having been "sold out" without "even realiz[ing]" it, that have allowed the Marlin Mine to be built and to pursue its exploitation activities in San Miguel despite growing evidence and awareness of its negative impacts. In an interview with Vanthuynne, another Catholic nun working for the parish theorized: "The mine found a good environment to enter [the municipality of San Miguel]. (. . .) People were very afraid. (. . .) With the war, they learned to cover their mouths and to not defend themselves. This atmosphere was like an environment prepared for the mine to freely enter with no one to bother it." (Catholic nun, March 14, 2016, San Miguel, our translation). Hence the focus of the Diocese of San Marcos and the Parish of San Miguel on raising awareness about the mine's ill impacts among the local affected population, using the same "judge-see-act" method that the Catholic Church missionaries and CA leaders employed in the 1970s. In an interview with Holden and Jacobson (2009, 161), Bishop Ramazzini explained that his purpose in attempting to inform the villagers about these impacts was "to help them see the reality in which they find themselves, help them to judge the reality in which they find themselves and help them act to try to change the reality in which they find themselves."

The petitions, demonstrations, *consultas populares* (community plebiscites), direct actions, and legal activism that this conscientization work gave way to, however, did not halt the Marlin Mine's construction and subsequent operation. As in the rest of Latin America (Rasch 2017), it instead unleashed a new cycle of stigmatization, criminalization, and violence in the region (Sibrián and van der Borgh 2014). In San Miguel, as in other municipalities affected by the extractive imperative, numerous mining opponents have been assaulted or murdered in impunity by the state or private actors, accused of "terrorism," "sabotage," or "aggravated usurpation" by the judicial authorities, or demonized by the press. From the oligarchy's point of view, the dominant voice in the Guatemalan media, popular mobilization against extractive development

projects is proof that “Guatemala’s internal enemy, the violent and retrograde leftists, still operates” (Roy Grégoire 2019, 691). This elite even claims that mine opponents ought to be “neutralized” through “the same decisive and ‘courageous’ methods employed during the [internal] armed conflict” (Roy Grégoire 2019, 691). Activists, as we have seen in the introduction, have for their part denounced this repression, stigmatization, and criminalization. They have also decried the arbitrary use and application of the law to their disadvantage, as the following excerpt from the CALAS 2014 meeting illustrates. During a panel featuring female anti-mining activists, Crisanta Pérez Bámaca, a middle-aged woman from San Miguel Ixtahuacán and active opponent to the Marlin Mine, detailed the numerous legal actions she and fellow opponents had initiated to claim justice for the violation of their right to consultation and a clean environment. For the last decade, she explained: “We haven’t been quiet. We didn’t stand by. Why? Because the government, together with the municipality and the company have violated our rights. (. . .) So we keep rising up. We keep filing complaints [with the judicial authorities]” (our translation). Yet, remarked Crisanta, “justice, it’s not for us. Justice is for the rich, the businessmen” (our translation). In 2008, as a result of direct actions she initiated to defend her proprietary rights from being violated by the mining company, Crisanta was accused of “aggravated usurpation.” Threatened with arrest and imprisonment by the police, she lived in hiding for six months, pregnant, only returning home to give birth, where she lived in fear until the warrant was dropped in 2012, thanks to the legal aid of the *Movimiento de Mujeres (Tz’unija’ Women Movement)*. When the legal actions are against us, Crisanta continued at the CALAS meeting: “. . . justice is expedited but quickly. But when they are against the businessmen, when they are against the state officials, justice is not expedited at all. Instead, it is resting [descansando]. As if there were no lawsuits. As if everything was fine” (our translation). Despite this injustice, Crisanta claimed that she and the fellow activists present at the CALAS meeting ought to continue standing up for their rights as it is their divine calling to do so. As she put it, “This is the work that God, the Creator of the universe, destined us to do, from the beginning [of our lives] in our mothers’ womb” (our translation).

4.6 Rehabilitating Guatemala’s Revolutionaries

In the wake of both experiencing state persecution as a result of standing up for their rights and remobilizing the Church’s sacred struggle

narrative to make sense of their plight, some anti-mining opponents in San Miguel began revisiting their experience of the internal armed conflict, as well as reinterpreting, in the process, the guerilla struggle. In contrast with most official and non-official truth projects (Bickford 2007; Hayner 2011), REMHI did not disband following the publication of its final report. Rather, it continued to have a strong presence in Guatemala's Highlands, pursuing its campaign for truth and reconciliation through the distribution of pamphlets and posters, the organization of meetings led by locally trained "animators of reconciliation," as well as the commemoration of Bishop Gerardi's murder. In San Miguel, however, it was only in 2011 that residents (around forty in total) agreed to participate in REMHI's meetings. At these meetings, they were introduced to the plain language version of REMHI's final report (ODHAG 2000). Moreover, while commemorations of the Bishop's assassination commenced right after his passing, it was only in 2013 that they began being celebrated in San Miguel with local radio testimonies about Miguelenses' experience of the internal armed conflict.

In a 2015 interview with Dugal, Doña Eulalia, an opponent of the Marlin Mine who participated in San Miguel's REMHI meetings, shared the powerful impact they had for her.⁶ During the internal armed conflict, she had been told by her parents that the Army was forcing an increasing number of young men to join its ranks because their communities were rampant with "thieves." Hearing in REMHI's meetings that it was not "thieves" that had plagued them but the Army itself, she was deeply hurt, became very sad, and then enraged:

... how is it possible that our people [believed it]? (...) The government declared that there were many thieves and that it was necessary to kill them, but it was not like that, it was the other way around. (...) Here in San Miguel, there were orphans without fathers, without mothers (...), and I discovered that many died, many were tortured, [by the Army] and what hurts me the most is that when women were pregnant and the Army passed by, they raped them (...) and then they would tear these women to pieces, and they would tear the children to pieces (...) That's what hurts me the most. (Doña Eulalia, June 10, 2015, San Miguel, our translation)

Interestingly, Doña Eulalia's reinterpretation of Guatemala's internal armed conflict happened around the same time she became involved in the opposition movement against the Marlin Mine. Doña Eulalia had

⁶ This section is further developed in Dugal's PdD dissertation (to be submitted).

moved to Guatemala's capital for work. While residing in the city, she regretfully confided to Dugal, she was heavily influenced by the television news in how she saw those who opposed mining in her hometown. On TV, these opponents were portrayed as "animals" or "troublemakers" (*bochincheros*) working against "development," and Doña Eulalia therefore came to identify them herself as "bad people" (*mala gente*). However, increasingly concerned by the mine's potential ill health impacts following her return to San Miguel in 2010, she eventually joined the ranks of its resisters. Distancing herself from the prevalent discourse about mine opponents as a result of embracing their cause, she came to condemn the insurgents' stigmatization. While the mine opponents were not *mala gente*, the Army, not the guerrillas, had been the "thieves."

The experience of state repression as a result of their mobilization against mining led other Marlin Mine opponents to reinterpret the insurrectionary movement as legitimate. Don Enrique, for example, suggested in a 2015 interview with Dugal that it was thanks to being engaged in the struggle against mining that he eventually re-examined what happened during the internal armed conflict, and came to very different conclusions as a result. ". . . these people who were in the URNG⁷ at that time. I [now] believe that these brothers too were in a struggle in defense of rights and territory" (Focus group, June 2, 2015, San Miguel, our translation). Following the Army's scorched earth campaign, Don Enrique had to serve in the Civil Patrols. As a member of these patrols, he explained, he believed that he was ensuring the safety of his neighbors against guerrilla attacks. Since his involvement in the opposition movement against the mine, however, he had come to the realization that he had not been fighting enemies, but "brothers" who were, like him, "in a struggle in the defense of rights and territory." "By enrolling us in civil patrols," reckoned Don Enrique: ". . . the state got us to defend the rights of the rich. Because here, we ought to be clear: they made us defend capitalists' interests." From the vantage point of experiencing state repression as a result of his opposition to the violation of his people's rights by capitalists' interests, Don Enrique came to reidentify the insurgents as "brothers" who, as he described in that same interview, "had started to understand the country's issues like those we are seeing now."

Don Manuel, another opponent of the Marlin Mine who served in the Civil Patrols during the internal armed conflict, also deplored to Dugal

⁷ The separate guerrilla organizations in Guatemala, including the EGP and the ORPA, formed the URNG in 1982.

the fact that he and his neighbors had sided with the Army, not the guerillas. The insurgents, he acknowledged, were fighting for his people's "rights to be respected in the country." Yet, while reappraising the legitimacy of the revolutionaries' struggle, Don Manuel lamented their use of guns; it created a situation where "the same people from Guatemala" ended up "clashing" with each other.

It's too bad people didn't understand at that time that the revolution (...) [was] for [our] rights to be respected in the country. But [the revolutionaries] handled guns. And the same people from Guatemala [ended up fighting] against people from Guatemala. Because the [Army] soldiers are our people. And those who went to war [as guerillas] [we]re also our people. So, there was a clash between them.

Don Manuel did not specify how his opinion about the insurgents came to change. He just referred to his new interpretation of Guatemala's armed conflict as something him and the other San Miguel residents involved in the opposition movement against the Marlin Mine were now "studying" in their meetings. We hypothesize that his own experience with criminalization also played a role. In 2003, a year before the construction of the Marlin Mine began, Don Manuel was hired as a community relation officer by Glamis Gold, the Canadian mining company that then owned the mine (see footnote 5). Tensions between him and the company, however, grew quickly, as Don Manuel became increasingly vocal about the mine's negative impacts in his municipality. In 2006, when San Miguel residents blockaded the mine's entrance in protest, Don Manuel was not only accused by his employer of having organized the action, he was soon charged by Guatemala's *Ministerio Público* (Public Prosecutor Office) with "abandonment of work, threats, coercion, incitement to commit a crime, [as well as] minor and serious injuries" (March 19, 2016, San Miguel, our translation). Yet, whatever the source of his rupture of memory about the insurgency, Don Manuel remained critical of how they struggled to defend his people's rights. When Dugal asked him if he would have joined their ranks if they hadn't carried guns, he enthusiastically replied: "Without weapons! (...) Like now, we are challenging [the state and its commercial allies] (...) with wisdom, we are not challenging [them] with weapons." While rereading his country's revolutionary past from the critical point of view of his current struggle against the extractive imperative, Don Manuel regretted not having sided with the guerillas. Yet, in so doing, he maintained his disapproval of their use of "weapons" instead of "wisdom" to revolutionize the country.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the narrative ecologies that have accompanied the Guatemalan internal armed conflict and its aftermath, focusing more specifically on the stories that have circulated in San Miguel Ixtahuacán, San Marcos. The demonization of the organized Left during the war, a key component of the Army's counter-insurgency strategy, succeeded in delegitimizing the insurrection movement in the eyes of most of San Miguel's residents; they were "thieves" that, as Civil Patrols, they ought to eliminate for the good of the nation. One of Guatemala's two truth commissions did not at first manage to challenge that narrative. It is only in the wake of San Miguel's mobilization against mining that the "thieves" became rehabilitated as "brothers," or at the very least, like in the case of Dona Eulalia, as not the "thieves" the Army accused them of being.

In his work on the politics of memory of Spain's civil war (1936–1939), Serrano-Moreno discusses how various Spaniards came to critically reinterpret their country and their own family history and, as a result, change their relationship to politics – a process he calls "ruptures of memory." According to him, it was following their meeting with some of the war's witnesses, or reading critical historical essays, that some people radically changed their understandings of that violent past and engaged themselves in progressive struggles. In this chapter, we have identified similar processes of rupture in San Miguel Ixtahuacán regarding the memory of Guatemala's insurgent movement. However, in this case, it is not so much as a result of having become acquainted with alternative readings of the violent past that this rupture happened. It mainly took place, as we have shown, through Miguelenses' political mobilization against the extractive imperative. Experiencing stigmatization, threats, violence, and criminalization as a result of their fight against the Marlin Mine, some opponents, like Don Enrique or Don Manuel, came to strongly identify with the guerillas' struggle. For Don Enrique and Don Manuel, the guerillas, like the mine opponents, were children of God who had been called to defend their people's rights from being violated by capitalists' interests. The different layers of oppression Miguelenses have faced – the negation of their rights to consultation and a clean environment, as well as the demonization of their oppositional actions – have all aligned in favor of rehabilitating the insurgents as "brothers" or "not thieves."

Weld (2012) has documented similar processes of rehabilitation of the revolution in her work on the participation of former Guatemalan insurgents in another truth-seeking initiative, the Project for the National

Police Historical Archives. These ex-guerillas, she explains, were spending hours painfully reading police surveillance activity records not with the sole objective of finding the compromising information that would allow them to prosecute those responsible for their brutal repression. Their main goal, Weld (2012, 42) argues, was *reivindicación* (rehabilitation, recognition, vindication), the “retrospective conferral of dignity and agency upon historical actors tarred as traitors engaged in subversive activity.” To reverse their ongoing demonization by the Guatemalan army, government, and oligarchy, these ex-insurgents amassed documentary proof of the state’s abuses to demonstrate “that their fight against the dictatorship and social inclusion had been commendable, not criminal” (Weld 2012, 43). Yet, in so doing, continues Weld, they did not seek to paper over the past, but to learn from it, hoping that, by sharing their histories and opening them for debate, “they could help future progressives avoid repeating their mistakes” (Weld 2012, 45). In this chapter, we have documented similar processes of critical *reivindicación*, with Don Manuel’s acknowledging the legitimacy of the guerillas’ struggle while questioning their resorting to weapons to realize the revolution. It is important to note that in critiquing the insurgents’ use of “guns,” while praising the mine-opponents’ focus on “wisdom” (consciousness raising), Don Manuel was not merely idealizing the revolutionaries’ capacity to enforce the respect of his people’s rights through peaceful means; in his interview with Dugal, he acknowledged that the Guatemalan state and their commercial allies would never become “conscious,” since they never had the “poor’s” wellbeing at heart. In the aftermath of a genocide that “disappeared” or killed so many of his people, Don Manuel rather claimed that consciousness raising was, in hindsight, the *only* viable option. This is a conclusion that, through its ongoing conscientization work in the region, the Catholic Church has prominently participated in articulating.

Peacebuilding, as this volume argues, requires “narrative complexity,” or “better formed stories (. . .) that make visible intentions and actions that led to various, sometimes undesirable, outcomes” (see the Introduction, 27–28). This complexity, as we have seen, was definitely present in San Miguel, with Don Manuel’s critical rehabilitation of the guerillas’ struggle. However, in a post-war, extractive imperative context marked by the remobilization of the “Leftists as internal enemies” narrative by the Guatemalan state and mass media, this complexity tends to be downplayed, giving way instead to the counter-narrative of both revolutionaries and anti-mine opponents as having been/being called on to build God’s kingdom on earth.

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