The Key to Democratic Guatemala?

The stated objective of this work is “to understand how popular organizations responded to the violent climate in which they were forced to operate” (p. 8). Rachel May proposes to show that “political violence has affected the development of at least three particular aspects of popular organizations” (p. 2). These three aspects are their ideologies, structures, and strategies. Any reader with a passing familiarity with Central American issues will wonder how this thesis could possibly fail to prove true. Even a guerrilla movement that ends in unmitigated failure, as in the Guatemalan case, could scarcely endure for forty years (admittedly rising, falling and evolving) without shaping its ideology, structure and strategy in response to the actions of the enemy and the realities of the armed conflict. So the book begins with an unpromising thesis, one that any student of the subject would be hard put to question.

To her credit, the author’s central concern is how real peace and democracy will come to Guatemala, given that the signing of the December 1996 peace agreement cannot alone create this outcome. May states several times that analysis of the popular movement may provide some clues to the potential for true peace and democracy. Surprisingly, however, she does not delve deeply into the culture of the popular movement in an effort to discover what elements of democratic process may have characterized various groups; instead, she stays at the level of ideology, structure and strategy.

The omission of women is striking, since their experience has lately served as a kind of litmus test of democratic process. Of the twelve interviews listed in the bibliography only one is with a woman, Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu—an important source, but hardly a typical representative of women’s experience in the popular movement. The interview with “Campesinos of Suchitepequez” does not mention the inclusion of any campesinas. Analysts of the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan popular movements have shown that the guerrilla struggles in those countries included, even relied on, women and thereby contributed to the disorganization of gender stereotypes and the extension of democratic rights to a formerly disenfranchised group. May might have followed their example and shaped her research to employ women’s experience in support of her claim that “[t]he maturation of popular movements ... is a powerful model for democracy and an enduring reminder of Guatemalans’ capacity for civic responsibility” (pp. 10-11). Unless, of course, closer investigation into the experience of women in Guatemalan guerrilla organizations were to disclose the highly un-democratic nature of those organizations, thus undermining May’s confidence that “this popular struggle ... will prove to be the key to the future of democratic Guatemala” (p. 163). Indeed, she may be exactly on target, as one could argue that it was precisely the failure of the Guatemalan guerrilla organizations to achieve internal democracy and bring that experience into the national dialogue that has proven fatal to the peace process and the construction of a democratic Guatemala, a creature now stillborn, or, the more opti-
mistic view, still in incubation.

To conclude her discussion of the meaning of political violence (chapter 2) May introduces a summary of her “cycles of violence” theory, supported by a schematic table of the four stages of a cycle along with the participants, objects, geographical density, intensity and level of organization of each stage. The four stages are turmoil, counter-attack, internal war and reactionary terror. Is there anything new here? There can be no doubt that there was a confrontation between the post-1954 Guatemalan government and the popular classes and that this dispute manifested various ebbs and flows over the period from the coup/military revolt against Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 to the signing of the peace accords in December, 1996.[1] May’s schematic might be described in lay terms as follows: the war began with popular unrest (for reasons that remain largely obscure in this work) which guerrilla groups quickly sought to organize and direct; this in turn led to repression by the armed forces which escalated into a campaign of terror, or genocide as May quite properly terms it, against a civilian population. Is there something in this “cycles of violence” approach that is not completely obvious in the context of insurgency/counter-insurgency?

Moreover, while the “cycles of violence” argument adds nothing to our understanding of the internal war, it detracts from the author’s effort to hold the Guatemalan military responsible for the repression. May lays the blame for most of the deaths during the war squarely at the door of the military and adduces the findings of the two most respected summaries of the internal war: the report of the Catholic Church’s human rights office that led to the 1998 martyrdom of Monsignor Gerardi, Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI), and that of the United Nations Commission for Historical Clarification in Guatemala (CEH). May points out that both attribute “the overwhelming majority of civilian deaths” to government forces (p. 19). The “cycles of violence,” however, work at cross-purposes to this judgment, at times acting as a kind of Invisible Hand that replaces the military high command as the motor of the terror. “But as the cycles moved toward internal war and ultimately reactionary terror, the organizations submerged” (p. 147). To paraphrase a slogan popular in the U.S. anti-gun-control movement, “Cycles don’t cause genocide; people do”.

The saving grace of the book is its history of a wide variety of groups in the popular movement and the tracking of their activities during the period from 1954 to 1985. This portion of the work is well researched, clearly writ-
through two democratic elections while the Guatemalans never even came close? Why did the other succeed in creating a level of ungovernability in the country that eventually made a negotiated peace the only way out for the government (leaving aside for the moment the question of whether the Salvadoran peace agreement has been effective)? Neither of these popular successes emerged in Guatemala where the peace accords have ground to a halt, and Amnesty International recently quoted commentators calling the past two years "a human rights melt-down." These are important questions, certainly for the majority population of Central America that continues to suffer from a lack of access to the region’s resources and a lack of control over everyday political and economic life. May’s research on the popular movement in Guatemala supplies a foundation for asking, and—dare I suggest it?—even answering, some of these questions, but we await that book. The current one neither raises nor addresses the key questions.

Note

[1]. May’s period runs from the fall of Arbenz in 1954 to the 1985 election of Vinicio Cerezo, the first civilian president after thirty years of overt or covert military governments, although she includes passing references to some of the political high points since that date.