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EXPANDED EDITION

Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans

David Stoll

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Afterword to the 2008 Edition
A Parallel Universe

I have to ask, how useful is it to be an august personage if I have to be in a showcase and present an image but cannot do anything?

—Rigoberta Menchú, 2007

Her principal strength, which is her international dimension . . . is, in Guatemala, her principal weakness.

—Ricardo Falla, 2007[1]

What you have read, thus far, came together during the hazy optimism of a bygone decade. Optimism about the 1996 army-guerrilla peace agreement was hazy because, once Guatemalans were no longer distracted by the war, they found themselves trapped in an iron cage of implacability. The majority of them lack the income to meet more than basic needs. Their economy and state are not sufficiently competitive in the global marketplace to provide the purchasing power they desire. Earnings from legal exports such as coffee, sugar, and bananas are anemic. The lifeblood of the economy consists of illegal emigrants and drugs to the United States, the latter moving north from Colombia. Washington's antidrug campaigns enable the cartels to reap super-profits that they invest in corrupting police, courts, and lawmakers. The drug trade has also bred new species of extortionists and murderers, such as the dreaded *mareros* or youth gangs, who have turned personal security into the number-one preoccupation for Guatemalans. Escaping to the U.S., temporarily or permanently, has replaced politics and even born-again religion as their main source of hope.

In 1998 the Catholic truth commission published *Guatemala Never Again.* A year later the UN-sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification

(CEH) published *Guatemala: Memory of Silence.* Based on thousands of interviews, the two commissions hoped to establish a "historical memory" of the violence that would bring Guatemalans together. By and large, Guatemalans did not seem very interested. In 1999 they rejected the constitutional amendments needed to implement the peace agreement that had been signed three years before. Mayan voters supported the amendments but their turnout was weak. Even more dismaying was Mayan support for ex-dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt and his right-wing populist party, the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG). There is no more potent symbol of evil in human rights demonology than Ríos Montt. Yet no one has attracted more votes from Mayas in election after election. In 1999, with a surrogate in the presidency, Ríos Montt returned to power as the head of his party's congressional delegation.

The Ríosmonttistas were strongest in the departments that had shown the most support for the guerrillas and been most ravaged by the Guatemalan army. Did fear of the army explain the general's apparent popularity? That many Mayan peasants regarded Ríos Montt as a *militar recto*—an upright army officer—suggests that they perceived him as a protector against bad army officers. Well after his administration became a disaster of corruption, Mayas continued to vote for him in large numbers. In the 2003 election that ejected the Ríosmonttistas from the presidency, they still won the majority of the vote in Huehuetenango, Quiché, and Baja Verapaz departments. In El Quiché, the home of the Menchú family, the FRG won fifteen out of twenty mayorships. Only in the 2007 election—four years after Ríos Montt was out of power—did the FRG grip on Quiché diminish to eight town halls.

The peace process was supposed to give the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG), the rest of the left, and the Maya movement the space they needed to overcome their distrust of each other, develop new leaders, and become a representative electoral force. Not since the 1940s has the Guatemalan left enjoyed as much freedom to organize. In the 1995 election, the URNG's electoral vehicle won a credible eleven percent of the vote. Over the next decade, this level of support could easily have multiplied. Instead, in 1999 the left split twelve percent of the vote between three parties. In 2003, the left's share of the vote declined to six percent split among five different parties.

What was going wrong? Apart from the destructiveness of particular leaders, the broader answer is that, not for the first time, guerrilla warfare shrank rather than expanded the potential for a broader left. What remained of the rebel organizations after 1983 protected themselves from infiltration and betrayal by sequestering into small, suspicious cells. Their goals shriveled into political litmus tests for distinguishing friends and enemies. Anyone who failed to assume the righteousness of the armed

struggle was a sellout. Only Rigoberta-style symbolism and under-the-table international funding kept up the illusion of a mass base. In actuality, the URNG was a secretive, aging politburo immune to any democratic mechanism, with a popular base in only a few unusual localities. By the time the peace agreement was signed in 1996, a large fraction of the URNG's political cadre had quit in disgust (Bornschein 2000:93). The new wave of foreign funding, as a reward for signing the peace agreement, was the final blow. It produced so much factionalism that, in the 2003 election, the URNG failed to win the five percent of the vote needed to stay legally recognized as a political party.

Rigoberta Takes the Generals to Court and Runs for President

Amidst this dispiriting panorama, the mainstream media continued to spotlight Rigoberta because of two developments. The first was universal jurisdiction, in which foreign courts try human rights cases that the judiciary of the offending state has ignored. The signature case was that of General Augusto Pinochet, the retired Chilean dictator, who fortified himself against prosecution by making amnesty a condition for leaving office. In October 1998, while on a medical visit to Britain, he was arrested for crimes against humanity on order of Judge Baltasar Garzón of Spain. The British government was obliged to keep Pinochet under house arrest, pending extradition, until a spurious medical release allowed him to return to Chile. The general never spent a night behind bars, but he did not go home unscathed. Even his supporters were scandalized by the fortune he had stashed in foreign banks, and he was dogged by indictments until his death in 2006.

Back in Guatemala, not everyone on the left was eager to prosecute the army for atrocities. During peace talks, the URNG hierarchy acquiesced to the army's demand for a blanket amnesty after being shown documentation of its own human rights violations (Bornschein 2000:92). But amnesty was unacceptable to the rest of the Guatemalan left, which consists of repression survivors. To their outrage, many Guatemalan conservatives continue to deny the systematic nature of the state's kidnappings and massacres. The CEH truth commission decided to circumvent the 1996 amnesty by ruling that the army committed genocide against the Mayas. Crimes against humanity or war crimes would have been a broader indictment and a lot easier to prove because, unlike genocide, they do not require the intent to destroy a racial or ethnic group. But genocide had more cachet as a fundraiser in Europe and the U.S. It appealed to guerrilla supporters because it seemed to exonerate their side, and it appealed to the Maya movement because it racialized the violence. So genocide it was,

even though many Mayas had voted for, and would continue to vote for, the presumed genocidalist-in-chief Ríos Montt.

Meanwhile, prosecuting the local men who had carried out much of the army's killing was proving politically unwise. For example, when human rights groups obtained the conviction of a Huehuetenango civil patrol chief, hundreds of his neighbors freed him from prison, and he escaped to the U.S. Such backlashes convinced human rights groups that they needed to focus on the army high command, and the Pinochet precedent suggested how to do it. In 1999 the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation asked the Spanish courts to indict eight former dictators, defense ministers, and police chiefs for genocide, terrorism, and torture. Simultaneously, the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) and an association of survivors filed a parallel case in the Guatemalan courts. The endless obstacles in the Guatemalan system would validate Rigoberta's appeal to Spain.

Unfortunately, the Spanish courts rejected Rigoberta's case on grounds that the Guatemalan courts had yet to be given their chance. Her allies griped that she had acted precipitously, in a fruitless attempt to prevent her fellow Mayas from electing Ríos Montt. Ignoring warnings to wait for more favorable conditions, Rigoberta insisted on appealing to a more conservative Spanish court. In 2003 the higher court gutted Spain's Universal Jurisdiction Law, making it impossible to take cases with non-Spanish victims (Roht-Arriaza 2005:172–77). Then Spain's conservative government was voted out of office. Two years later, under a socialist administration eager to project itself through human rights, Spanish courts were again eager to prosecute foreigners even if the victims were not Spaniards. In July 2006, Judge Santiago Pedraz issued international arrest warrants for Rigoberta's eight Guatemalan defendants. But turning the irrefutable bloodshed of dictatorships into indictments against individuals is tricky, especially if one has a casual attitude about factuality. In this case, the Spanish warrants failed to individualize the charges against the eight defendants. As of September 2007, one defendant had died of Alzheimer's disease, two others had been arrested and were making constitutional arguments against extradition to Spain, two others were dodging arrest orders, and three others had won their first day in Guatemalan court because the Spanish warrants were sloppy. Among the latter three was Ríos Montt, who was reelected to the Guatemalan congress in September 2007 and who would therefore have congressional immunity until he left office.

The second development that kept the spotlight on Rigoberta was the election of left-of-center governments elsewhere in Latin America. Three were South American countries with large indigenous populations. Peru elected its first Quechua president, Alejandro Toledo, in 2001. In Ecuador, Quichuas made and unmade several governments through elections and civic strikes. In Bolivia decades of organizing and protest led to the 2005 election of Evo Morales, the son of Aymara peasants and the leader of a coca-growers union, who proclaimed a new era of indigenous political power. In Ecuador and Bolivia, pan-indigenous movements were determined to end free-trade policies that they blamed for mass impoverishment.

Where, then, were the Mayas? The Maya movement has received much attention from scholars, as well as considerable support from international funders, and it claims to represent two-thirds of the population in Guatemala. If that were really the case, then powerful indigenous mobilizations were to be expected there as well. Thousands of Mayan demonstrators did turn out on certain occasions, such as protests against the environmental impact of a new gold mine. But neither this nor any other issue—not even land reform or the genocide case—brought out the indigenous masses that rocked Ecuador and Bolivia. Contrary to the image of Mayas as completely disenfranchised, many are well-integrated into municipal politics. In the 2007 election, indigenous candidates won 129 of the country's 332 mayorships, a representation of thirty-nine percent that is close to the forty-two percent of the population that is indigenous according to the Guatemalan census. At the national level, to be sure, Mayas have little representation. While every new administration recruits Mayan leaders as cabinet ministers and deputies, their political prospects are undermined by the discredit into which each administration sinks.

So it was that heads swiveled to the subject of so many accolades, Rigoberta Menchú. The euphoria over the 1996 peace agreement, followed by the 2003 crusade to eject the Ríosmonttistas from power, had sunk into another national malaise. Only the sturdiest optimists were anything but demoralized about Guatemala's prospects. Of the fourteen candidates running for president in 2007, none aroused enthusiasm. Could this be the election when Rigoberta showed that she could attract voters? No one else on the left had her name recognition. When survey researchers asked Guatemalans what they thought of her, sixty percent said something positive. Celebrity such as this could translate into high office because of two features of Guatemalan politics: first, parties are organized around personalities rather than ideologies or enduring coalitions; second, voters become so disgusted with every ruling party that they vote it out in the next election. Runners-up have a good chance of winning on the second or third try.

Rigoberta has long dreamed of becoming Guatemala's first indigenous and first female president. Now that her old bosses in the URNG were deceased or discredited, could this be her golden moment to pull together the left? Just such an effort was underway with a Broad Movement of the

Left (MAIZ), which sought to unite several URNG splinters and a mysterious new entity called Winaq. Winaq ("our people") claimed to represent the Maya movement but did not seem to include anyone but friends of Rigoberta. The Nobel laureate, for her part, insisted on fifty percent of the nominations for Winaq. Two members of the old URNG directorate, Pablo Monsanto and Miguel Angel Sandoval, refused to set aside their own presidential candidacies. Guatemalans who wished to vote for a united left could therefore choose between these two men and Rigoberta, who ran under the banner of both Winaq and another leftist party, Together for Guatemala.

Collectively, the left's three candidates attracted 5.8 percent of the vote in the first round of the 2007 election. Rigoberta's 101,316 votes (3.1 percent) on September 9 put her ahead of her two rivals but far behind the fourth place she occupied in pre-election surveys. In first place was the social democrat Alvaro Colome (28.2 percent), who had assured elites that he would not be disruptive but still attracted center-left voters. In second place was the retired general Otto Pérez Molina (23.5 percent), who stressed the "iron fist" toward criminals and who would face a run-off election with Colom on November 4. In third place was another iron-fist candidate, the former prisons director Alejandro Giammattei (17.2 percent). In fifth place was the Riosmonttista candidate Luis Rabbé (7.29 percent), who received twice as many votes as the Nobel laureate even though his name was synonymous with corruption. Because of all the attention that Rigoberta's candidacy had received, she seemed like the election's biggest loser, finishing as she did in seventh place. Why did she do so poorly?

The Indian Is Always Right— Until You Check with Another Indian

Since this was the Nobel laureate's first campaign for public office, the only way to visualize her as president was in the medium term. Given that every ruling party discredits itself, she hoped to grab a second or third place on the electoral escalator. Then, over the next four to eight years, she could pull the rest of the Guatemalan left and the Maya movement into a coalition that could bring her to the presidency. There are two obvious problems with this scenario. First, Rigoberta's showing was so weak that it calls into question the entire structure of representation surrounding her. I am referring to the structure of representation that I questioned in the first edition of this book, that her apologists rallied to defend with considerable success, and that has now produced such disappointing results. Second, she and the rest of the Guatemalan left will probably continue to be hamstrung by factionalism. For example, the founder of the

Together for Guatemala party, Congresswoman Nineth Montenegro, plans her own run for president in 2011. The widow of a labor unionist kidnapped by the army, Nineth has a record of human rights activism surpassed by none. She is not only brave but capable; she somehow manages to appear both pragmatic and principled, and she could be a far stronger candidate than Rigoberta. But nothing in the Nobel laureate's record suggests that she will set aside her own ambitions.

Loyally, Nineth has suggested that Rigoberta's campaign was hindered by racism. This is doubtless the case, yet racism has also enabled Rigoberta's career in important ways—she would not be a public figure without it. As to the immediate issue, racism does not explain why her support in her own predominantly indigenous department of Quiché (2.8 percent) ran slightly behind her support at the national level (3.1 percent). Rigoberta also did poorly in other heavily indigenous departments, reaching only sixth to eighth place.

Could indigenous voters fear a resurgence of political repression, and could that explain her poor showing? The 2007 election was Guatemala's most violent in twenty-five years, with the murder of more than fifty candidates, activists, and relatives before the first round of voting. Rigoberta's coalition alone lost seven candidates and activists—three of them gunned down in the last days of the campaign. Could this kind of intimidation have diminished her vote? Certainly it could have, for the entire left as well as for Rigoberta, but intimidation does not explain a puzzling gap between the number of votes received by Rigoberta and the number of votes received by her partner in Together for Guatemala, Nineth Montenegro. In 2007 Nineth headed the party's national list for congress, meaning that she went before the entire electorate like Rigoberta did. From that national electorate, Nineth and her congressional list received twice as many votes (6.17 percent).

This gap is why racism, political violence, and the lack of campaign funding do not, in and of themselves, explain Rigoberta's lackluster performance. Certainly she was handicapped by her inability to buy campaign advertising, but the Guatemalan press gave her the coverage of a major candidate. Everyone was aware that she was the first Maya and the first woman to run for the country's highest office. Since both Mayas and women vote in large numbers, just a fraction of these sectors could have uttered a mighty roar. Pre-election surveys never gave Rigoberta more than five percent, but she could have had a stealth constituency which, on election day, would suddenly reject the usual menu of upper-class males.

As it turned out, neither ethnicity nor gender worked in Rigoberta's favor. Neither women nor Mayas felt compelled to support her for a variety of reasons. Either they associated her with the guerrillas whom they rejected; or they thought that she had sold out to the upper class

whom they rejected; or they disbelieved that a woman could exercise the authority needed to fight the crime wave; or they were disappointed that she had not brought them an aid project; or they just wanted to vote for the winning party. Voting for the expected winner, in the hope of being rewarded after the election, is still probably the single most important determinant of the Guatemalan peasant vote.

It was easy to blame Rigoberta for the poor showing, and many did. That Rigoberta has long been deferred to in public has not prevented her from making many enemies. I refer not to her opponents on the Guatemalan right, but to her ostensible allies on the Guatemalan left and in the Maya movement. In the URNG, for whom she carried so much water over the years, she was viewed as an upstart whose international contacts attracted more attention than her actual record deserved. Much of the Maya movement never stopped regarding her as an opportunist because of the URNG line that she maintained until 1994, then her belated embrace of Mayanist positions and undiplomatic assertion of seniority. When the Ríosmonttistas came to power in 2000, security risks prompted Rigoberta to leave Guatemala again, underlining her position of privilege (Reischl 2004:79–80, 95–96). At too many key moments, she was out of the country collecting honorariums.

By accident or design, Rigoberta announced her candidacy as the Third Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples was meeting in the Kaqchikel Maya town of Tecpán. This was a meeting of delegates from all over the hemisphere, not just Guatemala, and a motion to support her candidacy was shouted down. "We don't see ourselves represented in her movement," declared Rafael González of the National Coordinator for Peasant Organizations. "She has remained apart from the problems facing the autochthonous people." In the eyes of activists such as this, Rigoberta had compromised herself by serving in the administration of President Oscar Berger (2004–2008) in the symbolic role of goodwill ambassador as he ejected peasants from disputed estates. Rigoberta's critics on the left also disliked her choice of running mate, the coffee grower Fernando Montenegro. Montenegro was an agreeable figure on the campaign trail, but he was also a former president of CACIF, the national business association that the left regards as a killer octopus. Like most other candidates, Rigoberta and her advisers had decided to aim for centrist voters. Her platform consisted of creating jobs, protecting citizens from crime, improving tax collection, integrating Mayan culture into schools, and helping peasants obtain land without provoking large landowners. For critics on the left, Rigoberta was failing to articulate lower-class demands. But does a large vote really exist to the left of her platform? That is an open question. Only Miguel Angel Sandoval and Pablo Monsanto outflanked Rigoberta to the left, and together they received even fewer votes than she did.

It is so easy to criticize the Nobel laureate that we must remember the expectations that inflated her to such unsustainable proportions. In no other Latin American peace process has a single personage been promoted like she has been. Given that her actual role in the peace negotiations was minimal, her importance resides at the level of symbolism. Like the tomb of the unknown soldier, Rigoberta is supposed to represent people who are absent—Guatemalans who have been murdered or who, still alive, are unable to speak for themselves. Solidarity activists are extremely fond of this trope of "voicelessness" because it establishes their right to intervene; yet few people are completely voiceless. It does not take a lot of listening, to the poor Guatemalans whom Rigoberta is supposed to represent, to realize that many of them have different agendas than she does.

Worse, once poor Guatemalans learned who Rigoberta was, many misinterpreted the hubbub about her to mean that she would bring them all aid projects. This was never within her means, even after she organized the Menchú Foundation, and even after she agreed to sponsor a business scheme to benefit the masses. I refer to her 2003 partnership with "Dr. Simi," the Mexican entrepreneur Víctor González Torres, who promises to deliver low-cost medicine to the poor. As it turned out, the Guatemalan franchises of Farmacias Similares failed to prosper and seem only to have heightened the disappointment surrounding the laureate (Hurtado 2007). At a peasant meeting in Quiché Department, a woman from Rigoberta's old organization the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC) stood up, extolled her accomplishments, then blasted her for abandoning her people in order to profit from business magnates and land barons. "Rigoberta tells lots of lies," an old associate charged. "She makes lots of promises, receives lots of money and then doesn't carry through." Hence all the suspicion, among the laureate's supposed constituents, that her international fame was overshadowing their own pleas for help.

The hopes that Rigoberta raised, and that then backfired on her, come out of a basic weakness in human rights thinking. As the anthropologist Jane Cowan has pointed out, human rights groups construe situations "through a tripartite structure of victim (passive, innocent), violator (active, deviant) and witness/advocate (active, heroic)." That is, human rights groups perceive a situation in terms of a dualism between victim and victimizer, then turn it into a triangle with their own intervention. This kind of reductionism may be defensible in an emergency, to save lives, but justifying it thereafter requires discounting, denying, or demonizing facts that don't fit such a simplistic structure. In the case of Guatemala, foreign activists used the dualistic guerrilla propaganda exemplified by *I, Rigoberta Menchú* to cast themselves as rescuers. Even after most political violence came to an end, foreigners were loathe to give up their heroic role because

they had become dependent on such portrayals, not just for their sense of who they are, but to keep attracting volunteers and donations.

The same game—setting up moral dualism as a stage upon which to arrive as tribunes of the oppressed—has ennobled and then humbled the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attracted to Guatemala and the Maya movement. In no other Latin American peace process have NGOs played as central a role as they did in Guatemala. What gives the NGOs their leverage is the weakness of the guerrilla movement, the broader left, and Guatemala's return to democracy. Since the idiom of human rights allows survivors, activists, and lawyers to speak for others, NGOs claim to represent broad sectors, yet they lack the elections or other consultative mechanisms that would be needed to substantiate their claims. NGO funding is a privilege rather than a right, which continues only if recipients meet the conditions of donors. Because even long-term funding is relatively short-term, local leaders tend to become more responsive to their foreign funders than to their domestic constituencies. Neighbors who do not benefit directly become jealous of the financial flows, as if these were unfair windfalls cornered by the local coordinators. Thus NGOs tend to aggravate competition within the larger collectivity they wish to support. The most obvious result of community building can be community splitting.

The number of organizations claiming to represent the Mayas—and of short-lived coalitions claiming to bring these organizations together—is beyond counting. The competition for foreign funding has been tremendous. While foreigners are impressed by the apparent egalitarianism of Mayan organizations, all but the best are run by exclusionary cliques of relatives and friends. Most are far less representative than they claim to be, which motivates the next split. Meanwhile, in the view of all but the most sophisticated funders, real Mayas are still Catholics but not evangelicals. They still consult with traditional Mayan priests. They supported the guerrillas but not the army, and they consider themselves victims of the army but not of the guerrillas. They support political parties identified with the left but not the right. In contrast, the many Mayas who have joined Pentecostal churches, who distrust the guerrillas, and who have voted for the former dictator Ríos Montt—these Mayas are suspect. But of course you can find Mayas who do fit your criteria, more or less, and these become the Mayas who deserve funding—antagonizing others who feel excluded.

This is how many NGOs have, quite unintentionally, made it more difficult for the Guatemalan left and the Maya movement to relate to local indigenous leadership, especially in former war zones. The simple moral polarities of Rigoberta's 1982 story are a poor guide to the paradoxes of such populations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in polemics over

the army's *patrullas de auto-defensa civil* (PACs), the huge militia into which the army conscripted all the men under its control. The civil patrols disbanded officially in 1996, but ex-patrollers and ex-patrol chiefs continue to bedevil human rights groups and populate their press releases. Unfortunately, the same oppressed peasants whom the Guatemalan left wants to represent and who are supposed to welcome human rights with open arms, are also ex-patrollers whom the left and human rights NGOs demonize when they fail to behave the way they are supposed to.

There is no question that the civil patrols contributed to the death and destruction. The shares of violence that the UN-sponsored truth commission attributed to government forces (93 percent), and specifically to the civil patrols (18 percent), are much larger than the share that it attributed to the guerrillas (3 percent). But the guerrilla forces were so much smaller that, per capita, the average guerrilla could have committed more abuses than the average soldier and patroller.[2] This did not prevent peace negotiators from agreeing on concessions to the guerrillas. The civil patrollers were not treated as generously. Because they were junior partners in the army's crimes, and because they were not represented directly in the peace talks, they did not receive the modest severance packages that the guerrillas did. As former patrollers observed aid flows to returning refugees and guerrillas, or heard exaggerated and envious accounts of same, they demanded payment for their many months of militia duty. Human rights groups decided that, because patrollers were human rights violators, compensating them would be an abomination. And so the former patrollers became the bad conscience of the peace process—constantly invoked to explain why Mayas have failed to cooperate as planned.

The Controversy Over This Book

There is an easy way to avoid thinking about the issues I have raised. It is to invoke the name of Rigoberta Menchú. I only grasped the magical power of these six syllables, in the most sophisticated circles, after this book nearly died in manuscript. For the English edition, I had to query more than thirty publishers. The explanation, if any, was that the book was not right for their program. Friends suggested I try their New York literary agents—the book was not right for their program either. University press editors at Yale, California, Cornell, and Stanford consented to look at the manuscript, as did Verso (the publisher of Rigoberta's 1982 and 1997 life stories), but they never sent it out for review—at least officially. Later I learned that at least two editors did obtain reviews, but without telling me or following protocol and sharing the results. At an informal gathering of Guatemala scholars, an editor explained that he couldn't take the book because of how Native Americans would react (as

it turned out, there were almost no reactions from Native Americans north of the Rio Grande, and surprisingly few from south of it either). After two years of this, I was thinking of putting the entire manuscript on the Internet when Karl Yambert at Westview Press came to the rescue. With the help of several academic reviewers, Karl convinced his press that my manuscript was not a vendetta against the Nobel laureate.

Upon seeing the Westview packet, the *New York Times* correspondent for Central America asked to see the galleys. Larry Rohter spent a few days in Uspantán, confirmed my findings on that level, and set off the controversy with his December 15, 1998, report. Once my findings were in the media, the only issue that seemed to matter was that a Nobel laureate had faked part of her story. "Whether her book is true or not, I don't care," stated Marjorie Agosín of Wellesley College. "We should teach our students about the brutality of the Guatemalan military and the U.S. financing of it." That was all the political right needed. Leading the pack was David Horowitz, the California journalist who flipped from hard left to hard right after he sent a friend over to the Black Panthers to fix an accounting problem, and they murdered her. For the rabid right, Rigoberta was a liar and her story was a phony projection of the academic left. For the dogmatic left in Latin American studies, anyone who brought ridicule on Rigoberta was an apologist for the Guatemalan army. Neither side had much interest in digesting my argument, which is why I'm grateful to Latin America scholars such as Mario Roberto Morales, Emil Volek, Daphne Patai, and Daniel H. Levine for taking the time to explain my position better than I could.

The laureate's own contribution to lowering the level of discussion was large. In June 1997—a year and a half before my book appeared—I sent her a copy of my manuscript. In response, she began to accuse Elizabeth Burgos of distorting her testimony. She also cut the Guerrilla Army of the Poor out of her 1997 retelling of her life story. When the scandal broke, Rigoberta responded that questioning her shifting version of events was an attempt to discredit all victims of the violence. On one occasion a roomful of foreign journalists induced her to admit that she had added other people's experiences to her own. But that was not what drew applause from her supporters. It was instead that David Stoll is "an example of how racists cover up and distort the crimes committed against the Mayas."[3] This was her standard response to my findings until 2007, when her campaign advisers came up with a more diplomatic rejoinder. If anyone has problems with her book, Rigoberta now says, they can take it to court.

Few Mayan intellectuals came to the laureate's defense. However, she did succeed in pressuring the Mayan publisher Editorial Cholsamaj to kill the Spanish edition of my previous book about the violence, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. The Spanish translation was to

appear in early 1999. For the complete text in that language, see www.middlebury.edu/~dstoll. Both there and at the website of the Fundación Gustavo Bueno of Oviedo, Asturias (www.nodulo.org/bib) is a Spanish translation of the book in your hands—it too has been impossible to publish thanks to the magical power of those six syllables, Rigoberta Menchú.

The laureate's apologists—those who reject comparing *I, Rigoberta Menchú* with what her neighbors have to say—have consisted mainly of white academics. The reason they are so attached to the 1982 story is that it props up their vision of what Latin Americans want. Their basic arguments are:

1. Rigoberta should not be held accountable for discrepancies in what she says because of some combination of collective revolutionary consciousness, Mayan culture, and the inherent truth value of *testimonio;* and
2. The oral history and documentary evidence assembled by David Stoll is not to be trusted because he is an apologist for, if not an actual agent of, the Guatemalan army.[4]

Noteworthy in developing this second argument were the Mayan educator Demetrio Cojtí; the poet Dante Liano, editor of Rigoberta's 1997 revision of her life story; the novelist Eduardo Galeano; Arturo Arias, a professor of literature who has since been elected president of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA); and Charles R. Hale, an anthropologist who has also been elected president of LASA.

The people who accused me of being an apologist for the Guatemalan army were very effective in producing a boycott of my book in Latin American studies. Except in seminars at elite colleges, my research seems to have had no impact on how *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is taught to undergraduates. Most instructors who assign the 1982 story seem to have concluded that, if David Stoll's information is politically tainted and if Rigoberta's story reflects her culture, then which version you believe is a function of your politics. Consequently, whatever it is that I came up with doesn't matter very much. This is the logic that has convinced the laureate that she is not subject to the truth standards she would like the Spanish courts to apply to Guatemalan army officers. Thanks to all the excuses that apologists have dreamed up, Rigoberta not only refuses to answer questions about her 1982 story, she refuses to acknowledge that she was ever a political cadre of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor.

There is just one instance in which new data casts doubt on my findings: the origin of the fire at the Spanish embassy. Was it started by a student

guerrilla who threw a firebomb inside the roomful of hostages, as stated by Ambassador Cajal in the immediate aftermath? Or was the fire started by the riot police battering down the door? The guerrilla movement decided that it preferred to blame the police and turned this version into a loyalty test for the solidarity movement. The CEH truth commission (1999) decided to go with Ambassador Cajal's second account of how the fire started—a version that he had forgotten when I queried him in 1995–1996, but that he then rediscovered in his papers and forwarded to the CEH. According to this second version, which Cajal (2000) has since published along with other valuable data, the fire originated in a "red-colored canister" that the police shoved through the door of his office. The ambassador's recovery of his second account of how the fire started calls for further investigation, but it is not without problems (see Luján Muñoz 2007 for more detail).

Recently a reader has alerted me to a long-ignored 1980 account of the fire by the Spanish journalist Soledad Cano. The week before the fire, Cano was being squired around Guatemala by the Democratic Front Against Repression (FDCR), the EGP front in whose name the students led the occupation of the embassy. After the fire, Cano (1980:125–38) interviewed Ambassador Cajal in his hospital bed and again after he returned to Spain. Despite her solidarity with the FDCR and with the embassy dead, Cano came to the same conclusion in 1980 that I did sixteen years later: that the fire was probably started by a Molotov cocktail thrown by one of the occupiers.

How Rigoberta and Her Apologists Have Preempted the Mayas

Rigoberta and her 1982 story are still very popular on American college campuses. She continues to collect honorary doctorates (more than thirty according to her website) and seems to be attracting more overflow crowds than ever. Typically she is invited to address a topic such as healing violence and racism, is introduced by a professor of Latin American studies, and at the end of her talk agrees to answer two questions. On one such occasion, at Amherst College in April 2007, the audience gave her a hero's welcome and reached out to touch her as she processed down the aisle. According to a news report, here is what she said:

- Humans must "connect with their ancestors and . . . thank them for all they have given." . . . "Even though they're dead, they wish to be remembered."
- "Our youth would like a better world" because "each day they see the mirror of global free enterprise and the unity of countries and they know the future is there, but if they don't reach it, there is a problem."
- "We have two great fortunes in life: material and spiritual, and . . . the spiritual fortune is what makes us human and forms the values that shape society."
- "We all must reach equilibrium with the material and spiritual fortune. With too much material wealth, the spiritual wealth suffers from egotism, indifference and intolerance, a spiritual illness grows."
- Racism is a form of spiritual illness that is also a product of a system and one's environment.
- "What I learned, I learned from suffering and therefore, I could apply that to others later in life."
- My grand dream is to create a multicultural system, unified in understanding of each other's humanity. "We must allow everyone to fit in the same space."
- "We live in a lack of equilibrium between male and female, for two hundred years only men have been rulers, there will come a new time of equilibrium."
- The Mayan calendar predicts a reunification of the world's male and female forces in 2011[5] . . . which just happens to coincide with Rigoberta's next run for president.

I wasn't able to attend but heard reports from three people in the audience; they were disappointed by the lack of content and taken aback by the thunderous applause. Rigoberta is intelligent, she has a salty peasant humor, and she could tell Americans a lot more than the above. Yet all that she dares to share are platitudes. What she excludes is any reference to social reality that could upset her audience's admiration for model Indians. Rigoberta never mentions that peasants are multiplying their children out of any possibility of maintaining their traditional way of life; that Guatemala has become so crowded that redistributing even plantation land invariably pits peasants against peasants; that their struggle for survival usually kills off wildlife and forest; that a popular solution to the lack of state authority in Mayan communities is to soak criminal suspects with gasoline and burn them alive; that large numbers of Mayas vote for rightwing candidates; that born-again Protestant churches continue to reduce the Catholic Church; and that Mayan youth tend to be less interested in Mayan traditions than in following global fashions and going to the United States. All of this is too unpleasant for Rigoberta to share with her foreign audiences, which is one of the reasons they will continue to adore her.

Literary heroes and victims have often been more attractive than real ones. Consider the autobiographies of Arab women that play up how

they are victimized by evil Muslim patriarchs. The Australian historian Thérèse Taylor (2007) has summarized several such bestsellers in the United States and Europe:

- *Forbidden Love: A Harrowing True Story of Love and Revenge in Jordan*, Norma Khouri's memoir of her friend Dalia, whose family murders her for ruining its honor. The author turns out to be an American living in Chicago, not a Jordanian, whose friend Dalia never existed.
- *Burned: The shocking, true story of one woman's escape from an "honor" killing*, by the pseudonymous Souad. The author claims to be from a West Bank village but developed her story in a European psychiatric ward through recovered memory. She does not speak Arabic.
- Jumana Hanna's account of being raped by Sadam Hussein's son Uday. Following a front-page story in *The Washington Post*, which earned Jumana a hard-to-get refugee visa in the U.S. and a book contract with a major publisher, her newly assigned coauthor concluded that Jumana's story is completely false (Solovitch 2005).

Unlike these, Rigoberta's story is not a fabrication. A substantial portion of her family and village was in fact murdered. Yet her story is sufficiently inventive, and her defenders have been sufficiently indulgent, that Thérèse Taylor's conclusion about the Arab cases is worth pondering: "One of the most disconcerting features of books such as *Forbidden Love* is that they are often more convincing than real life stories. As memoirs have taken over from novels, in terms of popularity with readers, this has created a market that demands a similar level of sensation and entertainment as from fiction. Hence we find dozens of fake memoirs about AIDS, the plight of indigenous peoples or living through the Holocaust that are notable for their vivid imagery and cinematic detail. They may tell us a lot about ourselves, but not about their purported subjects. . . . These memoirs conform to the reader's pre-existing picture of the exterior world, and offer the reassurance of recognition and confirmation. Little effort is required to understand the text—it is the text that understands its reader. The narrative immediately begins its work by appealing to its audience's prejudices, assuring them that their likes and dislikes are justified, and offering a harmonious picture of contrasts between good and evil, self and other. The fake memoir is a shield against the tiresome disappointments of real life, where nothing is ever quite as it seems, and later ambivalence is the ruin of many early enthusiasms."

In Guatemala the end of the army-guerrilla conflict has also ended the possibility of analyzing that country's problems in terms of simple dichotomies. Yet the majority of Americans and Europeans who care about Guatemala do not have the time and patience to explore the many paradoxes, so the dichotomies seem as strong as ever. For example, I am struck by how successfully many scholars and NGOs continue to revive the guerrilla movement's army vs. the people paradigm with its radical simplification of history. The invitation that this dichotomy offers, to North Americans and Spaniards who wish to see themselves as rescuers, is too tempting to resist. And so Rigoberta's simplification of reality will continue to have enormous appeal.

Revered by outsiders, not by the Mayan population, Rigoberta is the political saint who invites foreigners to participate under terms of reference that they find completely congenial. What her acolytes find hardest to grasp is that their unqualified admiration harms both their hero and the people she is supposed to represent. They fail to see that making excuses for her has subjected her to the bigotry of low expectations. As a result of their paternalism, the laureate has been obliged to continue meeting their authenticity tests rather than make the admissions and compromises that would be needed to become a credible politician, that is, a political agent for poor Guatemalans rather than for well-off outsiders. The Rigoberta whom these thinkers inflated will always have a serious credibility problem, not because of my findings, which mainly have been ignored, but because they want her to be Super-Indian—a surrogate for all the indigenous people who fail to meet their expectations.

Where are the Guatemalans whom Rigoberta is supposed to represent? They are missing. They have never been invited to the party because, if given the chance to open their mouths, they would ruin everything. This is why so many Mayas and other Guatemalans feel marginalized by their Nobel laureate—they sense that she prevents them from being heard. From the world of poor people whom she is supposed to represent, Rigoberta has retreated to a parallel universe defined by the wishes and money of her admirers in North America and Europe.