



Title: Black Coffee. By: Stoll, David, New Republic, 00286583, 5/5/2003, Vol. 228, Issue 17

Database: The New Republic Archive

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David Stoll teaches anthropology at Middlebury College. He is the author of *RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ AND THE STORY OF ALL POOR GUATEMALANS* (Westview Press).

**SILENCE ON THE MOUNTAIN:
STORIES OF TERROR, BETRAYAL,
AND FORGETTING IN GUATEMALA**

By Daniel Wilkinson

(Houghton Mifflin, 373 pp., \$24)

IN SEPTEMBER, A GUATEMALAN court convicted an army colonel of ordering the assassination of one of my colleagues, the anthropologist Myrna Mack. Mack had been interviewing victims of counterinsurgency operations when she was knifed to death on a busy afternoon street in Guatemala City. Colonel Juan Valencia Osorio worked for the presidential security staff. That might seem an odd place to find a murderer, except in Guatemala, where army officers are accustomed to getting whatever they want from the country's nominal democracy. The presidential security detail is also where the actual murderer turned up, an army plainclothesman who stabbed Mack twentyseven times. That the police investigator who identified the assassin was himself murdered, that all but one of the witnesses were suddenly struck with amnesia, that a succession of judges and prosecutors received so many threats that they left the country, and that it took thirteen years to convict Colonel Valencia, the assassin's commanding officer--all this suggests why Guatemalans can seem a forgetful lot.

People who study violence learn to brush past the many people who will not tell us much and to hit up those who will. In my own Guatemalan research, ex-mayors and ex-combatants, church leaders and imported civil servants were often the first persons to help me. Whether by accident or design, a Yale law student named Daniel Wilkinson was slow to move up the

social scale to the confident and the talkative. Instead he lingered by a veritable well of forgetfulness, under the peaceful foliage of a **coffee** plantation. In a dumb-smart succession of hopeless interviews and other misadventures, he amplifies the sound of silence in the lower classes of a tropical society.

COFFEE IS ONE OF THOSE TROPICAL commodities with more history than most of us care to think about. **Coffee** and its opportunities were what persuaded Guatemala's horseback caudillos to proclaim a liberal republic in the late nineteenth century. **Coffee** required the land and labor of the country's Mayan Indian population for new plantations. **Coffee** enabled Guatemala's upper classes to claim to be a modern nation on the basis of a semi-feudal labor system. And along with the proverbial banana, it was **coffee** that brought about a national land reform, the CIA's destruction of which in 1954 led to a guerrilla war that concluded only recently.

Ever since the Eisenhower administration ended Guatemala's most credible experiment with democracy in 1954, the country has attracted foreigners looking for a revolution to right this and other wrongs. Despite the **coffee** economy's importance, researchers tend to stay in the capital or to head for picturesque Mayan towns in the congenial, spring-like highlands. And once installed there, they rarely descend to the suffocating humidity of the coast, where agribusiness reigns, or to the **coffee** piedmont, where, until the recent collapse of **coffee** prices, much of the Mayan population spent part of the year as plantation labor. Consequently, little has been published about the conflict between the army and the guerrillas in the **coffee** region.

Wilkinson's entrée was a planter of German descent who married an American college professor and is, for all intents and purposes, an American herself. (I am a friend of hers.) Ever since childhood, the pseudonymous Sara Endler found it hard to enjoy her family's comforts while, just yards away, obsequious dependents were living on dirt floors. Once she inherited the estate from her father, she vowed to treat the workers fairly. As a good liberal, she was also willing to trust an Ivy League radical who, because he was coming to Guatemala on the usual pilgrimage to the heart of darkness, was not likely to portray her family very sympathetically.

Sure enough, Wilkinson sees through the family stories of overcoming adversity through virtue to the racial favoritism that gave handsome opportunities to light-skinned immigrants such as the Endlers while suborning local Indians and mestizos into a low-wage workforce. Since labor was scarce, planters settled Mayan families on their property by lending them money, allowing them to grow their own crops, and playing paterfamilias. More than a few peasants were willing to accept lifelong poverty and submission in exchange for stable employment and protection from the government's forced-labor laws, which had been designed with just this end in view. Even today, there are old men who remember the partóns of yore with affection. Planters recruited most of their peons from distant Indian communities, so the workers could not claim ancestral ownership of the land that they worked. Their idea of who they were ethnically was also betwixt and between. While their progenitors were Mayan

Indians, they raised their children in Spanish and looked down on more recent arrivals from Indian communities. "They don't know their history," claimed a local youth who obtained an education and escaped.

When Wilkinson asked the Endler laborers about the land reform of the early 1950s, they did not want to talk about it any more than they wanted to talk about the ongoing army-guerrilla conflict. The usual response to his questions was "Nothing happened here." The local historian claimed to have forgotten about the land reform even though he had presided over it as mayor. Other old-time activists had become fervent evangelicals who answered every question with an appropriate verse from the Bible.

Eventually Wilkinson found local politicians who would talk to him, as well as an archive holding documentary remains of the land reform. The Endler laborers had indeed organized a union and obtained parcels--not the whole estate, just the interstices where they already grew their own crops. When right-wing exiles invaded the country in 1954, three hundred local men volunteered to take up arms to defend the government and the land reform. After the government fell, soldiers jailed a long list of suspected Communists, including the mayor and union leaders, who were saved from execution only by an army officer's timely observation that they were not really Communists. The new American-backed regime returned the land to the Endlers after concluding that their workers had been coerced into petitioning for it. Sara's father banished the union members from his property even though it was the only job and home they had ever known. He also expelled his Guatemalan half brother, Rafael Zamora, the son of his father and a Guatemalan woman. For helping the family's illiterate laborers write their petitions, the unfortunate Rafael ended up as a security guard and died of drink.

In the 1970s, a new organization installed itself in the mountains and the forests above the **coffee** estates. The Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA) was started by local youth and university intellectuals. Of the various Guatemalan guerrilla groups, ORPA seemed the least violent, partly because it was led by the urbane Rodrigo Asturias, the son of Miguel Angel Asturias, Guatemala's Nobel laureate in literature. ORPA was also a group to which, with a few horrifying exceptions, the army did not respond with its trademark village massacres. Why this was so is an interesting question. One possibility is ORPA's decision not to organize villages as publicly declared support bases. Another possible explanation is that planters needed their workers' labor too much for the army to slaughter them en masse.

After the government and a vestigial guerrilla movement signed a peace agreement in 1996, demobilized ORPA fighters told Wilkinson how **coffee** workers greeted them with cheers and applause in 1980-1981. The welcome was brief. While the guerrillas "were always too quick to be surrounded," Wilkinson writes, "the army was surrounding them with something much more powerful than its troops: anguish, fear, anger"--by kidnapping suspected supporters and convincing their bereaved relatives that the guerrillas were ultimately to blame. The army's reprisals sent hundreds of recruits up the mountain to join ORPA--many more than the group could support, because the army had cut off its food supply--from a population that now blamed the guerrillas for the army's murder of their husbands, brothers, and sons. So it came

to pass that when ORPA arrived to burn down the Endlers' place, the workers attacked the would-be arsonists with stones and machetes.

WILKINSON'S TITLE, *Silence on the Mountain*, plays off *Fire From the Mountain*, the mock-heroic memoir of the Sandinista commandante Omar Cabezas. Like other activists who flocked to Guatemala during the peace process of the 1990s, Wilkinson wanted to "uncover the history of revolt and repression that was buried in the shadows of the past." He was arriving with the Guevarista assumption that the poor of Latin America have been waiting for the right leadership to take up arms against their oppressors. Since the land reform of the early 1950s was so promising, and the repression that followed it so undeniable, he makes a good case for guerrilla warfare as an inevitable development in the **coffee** zone. But in the highland communities where the majority of Mayas live, there is ample evidence that the guerrillas had a mixed reception. Even in the **coffee** plantations, there is the old problem of who isn't cheering: when liberators receive a rousing welcome, how many people stay behind closed doors? Studying silence is a great idea, but it also provides an opportunity for projecting whatever you suspected in the first place. Wilkinson's book begins as a record of people who will not talk to him, or who do not provide what he regards as credible answers, but it ends with demobilized guerrillas telling him much of what he had expected to hear.

Except for finally managing to burn down the Endlers' house, Wilkinson's guerrillas never do anything that wasn't a justified reaction. The actual war was not so simple. ORPA's most horrendous crime--which the human rights movement mistakenly attributed to the army for many years--occurred near the gringo hangout of Antigua in 1988. To protect the identity of a couple of his men who were local, an ORPA commander ordered the strangulation of twenty-two of their unarmed neighbors who had stumbled upon the secret. Most of the victims were family men who left behind scores of fatherless children.

But Wilkinson does acknowledge the terrible cost that guerrilla strategy exacted on nearby civilians, who took the punishment that the guerrillas nimbly dodged. He also faces just how completely the army seems to have won the war, not just militarily but also politically. As he recruits witnesses for a truth commission, many of their neighbors are petitioning the army to re-occupy the area to suppress a crime wave. As one of his allies explains: "They're still scared of the army. But they're more scared of the criminals. So they're choosing what seems less bad. [The army] is less bad because it's predictable. The robbers rob anyone. The army won't bother you so long as you don't provoke them."

Back under the **coffee** trees, the war hastened decisions that estate owners probably would have made anyway. "The only way to have a more humane plantation," Wilkinson says of Sara Endler's mounting financial difficulties, "was to get rid of the workers." The plantation's dependents had doubled since the 1950s, when her father already had more workers than he could use. So she fired them all, gave them plots of land as severance pay, and re-hired the workers she needed. Caught in an industry-wide credit squeeze, other plantations were doing the same. After more than a century of playing partón, they were freeing their workers to face an overcrowded labor market on their own.

For the ex-guerrillas, who are now struggling to compete at the ballot box, the ultimate blow was that "the reality they had fought so many years to change ceased to exist. When the guerrillas had shown up on the plantations in 1980, they had not talked so much about a utopian future as about an unjust past. Specifically, they talked about reclaiming what had been taken away in 1954." But by the end of the war, Wilkinson continues,

workers no longer lived on the plantation their forebears built. Often they no longer even worked on it. Rather, they were hired by several different plantations over the course of a year, and only on a temporary basis. They could no longer ... sense that the plantation where they were working was also theirs. All they had claim to was the day's wages.... Today young people in La Igualdad no longer see a future in the plantations--and therefore care little about the plantations' past.... Like the plantation owners, their expectations and tastes are increasingly shaped by what is being marketed from the world's metropolitan centers. Even if they can find work in **coffee**, they aspire to better things. And so they set out to expand their horizons in the sweatshops and burgeoning shantytowns of Guatemala City, while the more ambitious among them head off to carry the bricks, vacuum the offices, and mow the lawns of the great White Cities to the north.

No book can sum up an entire country, but some have to be pressed into service. I, Rigoberta Menchú, the story of a counterinsurgency survivor who won the Nobel Peace Prize, used to be taken as the book that summed up Guatemala; but Menchú was a guerrilla cadre when she gave her account, and her stock villains and militant tone did not do justice to the many Guatemalans who weren't revolutionaries. Silence on the Mountain provides a wider cross-section of the society because Wilkinson's quest for information takes him from the upper to the lower to the middle classes, through the different tiers of Guatemala's dependent export economy, all the way to your morning latte.

Wilkinson is also frank enough to pose questions that he cannot answer, such as when he helps the truth commission line up reluctant witnesses to testify about what the army did. What will happen to these people if and when the army returns to its old methods? At that point, human rights lawyers and foreign embassies may prove of little help. The same week that a court convicted Colonel Valencia of Myrna Mack's murder, a Guatemalan appeals court threw out the conviction of three other military men for the murder by bludgeon in 1998 of Bishop Juan Gerardi, head of the country's Catholic truth commission. This is another case where witnesses have been murdered and prosecutors have been intimidated into leaving the country. Unfortunately, there is still something to be said for silence on the mountain.

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By **David Stoll**

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