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Author(s): David Stoll

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## Rigoberta Menchú and the Last-Resort Paradigm

by  
David Stoll

Many people have asked whether I am surprised by the furor over my book. The answer is no, not really—except for the reaction from some of my colleagues in Latin American studies. I am surprised that, 17 years after Rigoberta told her story and 2 years after the Guatemalan peace agreement was signed, Carol Smith, Victoria Sanford, Norma Chinchilla, and Georg Gugelberger object to my reexamination of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Ordinarily a Nobel peace laureate is subject to scrutiny much earlier in her career. In Rigoberta's case, she expects to run for president of her country. Truth commissions, exhumations, and the declassification of state documents are providing courtroom-quality evidence about the violence that turned her into an international figure. When it comes to the army's crimes, my critics welcome the search for facts. But they have doubts about interrogating the single most widely read book about Central America. While they expect Guatemalan army officers to consent to being tried for mass murder, they do not think Rigoberta should have to face the fact that she went to middle school.

On second thought, there is no reason to be surprised. After returning from a year of fieldwork in northern Quiché Department in 1989, I was full of what violence survivors had told me so many times. They wanted the war to end. Unfortunately, that was not on the horizon because a vestigial guerrilla movement was holding out for concessions that a powerful army was unlikely to make. I could have decided that peasant neutralism was just a function of conquest and hegemony. On the grounds that peasants were too afraid of the army to tell me how they felt, I could have discounted what they said. Perhaps this was just another tough chapter in the popular struggle—so what if it wasn't very popular? Instead, I decided that what peasants said about their experiences challenged our usual presumptions about the war. Was this

David Stoll teaches anthropology at Middlebury College. His other books include *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?* (1982), *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (1990), and (with Virginia Garrard Burnett) *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America* (1993).

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insurgency really driven by the needs of Maya peasants? Not from what they told me. Right or wrong, I thought that questioning the usual assumption that the violence came out of the very structure of Guatemalan society might help end a stalemate for which Ixils were paying a high cost. So I published a book called *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*.

For anyone whose thinking has been shaped by the solidarity movement, the international support network for the Central American left, the idea that Maya peasants could be caught *entre dos fuegos* was controversial, even though this is an expression they often used. Since solidarity thinking has had an obvious impact on Guatemala scholarship and human rights work, my book was more excoriated than read. Therefore I decided to examine the popular roots of the insurgency in a second case, that of a particular family who became the war's best-known victims through the pages of a beloved book. Was the guerrilla movement that Rigoberta joined, and whose version of events she gave us in 1982, a grassroots response to oppression? Should the conflict be understood primarily in social terms, as the inevitable outcome of centuries of oppression suffered by Guatemala's indigenous population? Or is it better explained on the political level, as the result of particular decisions by particular groups? Was this a disaster that could have been avoided?

Such questions disturb four of the contributors. They would have you believe that to ask how our thinking has been affected by sympathy with the guerrillas and revulsion against the army is to discredit the victims and become an apologist for the army. So what about the specifics of Rigoberta's story—is my evidence really ludicrous? What are the implications of my argument for how we understand the violence in Guatemala? Am I trying to deflect the army's responsibility for mass killing? Finally, what does the anger over my book tell us about the room for disagreement in Latin American studies?

My impression is that Smith, Sanford, Gugelberger, and Chinchilla were so offended by my book that they invested the rest of their time in composing denunciations, without checking the result against what I wrote. It is hard to think of another explanation for some of Sanford's assertions, for example, that I "obliquely acknowledge" the army's violence against civilians. Did she read Chapter 9 ("The Destruction of Chimel") and Chapter 10 ("The Death Squads in Uspantán")? Her attack on Uspantán's former town secretary Alfonso Rivera is ill-informed and unfair; while it is true that Alfonso went to jail for graft, so did four other members of the pro-Rigoberta town council. While the *New York Times* quoted him as criticizing Rigoberta, he was always a defender of the Nobel laureate, her father, and her family in his conversations with me.

If Gugelberger had grasped my argument, he would realize that I am the first to minimize the significance of a detail like whether four chimneys or one blew up at Auschwitz. However, the most systematic distortions of my argument are by Smith, one of our senior scholars on Guatemala, from whom we have the right to expect better. When I argue that rapid population growth as well as inequitable land tenure are factors in poverty, she accuses me of blaming poverty on population growth. When I show that peasant support for the guerrillas was more limited than we supposed in the early 1980s, she accuses me of arguing that there was little or none. When I quote Ixils and K'iche's who blame the guerrillas as well as the army for the violence, she accuses me of blaming the guerrillas. When I insist on comparing Rigoberta's version of events with others, Smith scare-quotes me for claiming to be "objective"—a claim nowhere to be found in my book.

Before going further, I should correct the misapprehension that it took me ten obsessive years to track down the problems with Rigoberta's story. Half an hour with a relative or neighbor is enough to raise major questions. The bulk of my interviewing occurred between 1993 and 1995; even then, half my time was in Ixil country. As I have often pointed out myself, oral testimony from a repressed town like Uspantán could be affected by fear of the army or distrust of the interviewer. That is why I checked what Uspantanos told me against other sources. Smith, Sanford, and Chinchilla complain that I rely on mere hearsay (i.e., oral testimony like Rigoberta's), but they ignore the documentary evidence backing up my assertions. The reason I doubt that Rigoberta's father belonged to the *Comité por la Unidad Campesina* (Committee for Campesino Unity—CUC) is not just the denials by his relatives and other Uspantanos. The reason is also that when the CUC published obituaries for the five members who died at the Spanish embassy, it failed to include Vicente. Even though the *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (Guerrilla Army of the Poor—EGP) elevated him to the revolutionary pantheon by naming a new organization of revolutionary Christians in his honor, no one claimed him as a CUC member until his daughter did in Paris, two years after his death.

In contrast, the evidence connecting Vicente to the EGP is anything but thin. Everyone agrees that the EGP visited Chimel. Of the four persons who told me that they had witnessed the first meeting between the guerrillas and the villagers, three said that Vicente welcomed the visitors, for reasons that I carefully explain did not necessarily include pleasure at their arrival. The reason that Vicente died as a guerrilla collaborator is that the fatal occupation of the Spanish embassy was led by EGP cadres from the *Robin Garcia Revolutionary Student Front*. Even if Smith wants to maintain the old circumlocutions in how we refer to guerrilla political structures, the Vicente of *I,*

*Rigoberta Menchú* is a guerrilla supporter: have I committed some indecency by showing that his involvement was later, and perhaps more tentative, than portrayed by his daughter?

The fire at the Spanish embassy can be attributed to the Molotov cocktails of the occupiers—probably wielded by the students rather than the peasants—thanks to the sole survivor, the Spanish ambassador, who was so sympathetic to the protesters that the Guatemalan right scapegoats him for the incident to this day. To understand the debate over who started the fire, readers must visualize Dr. Máximo Cajal y López pleading with the riot police not to break into his office, into which the protesters have herded him and the other hostages. As Cajal argues with the police through the crack between the door and the frame, the 37 people in the room behind him are going into panic.

According to Cajal—as he reiterated to the international press, to the Spanish government, and to me—he saw a protester smash a Molotov cocktail on the floor and throw a match that he himself stomped out. Some minutes later, as the police began to break in, he was propelled through the doorway and out of the room by an explosion that occurred behind him, among the protesters and their hostages. When I asked about a rumor that the riot police had shoved a red canister through the door where he was arguing with them, this is what Cajal faxed me: “I never said that I had seen . . . a policeman with a red, metal artifact. I only saw axes, revolvers, and the barrels of machine guns. I believe that it was the magazine *Cambio* that spoke of it; perhaps those who were outside in the street (the public, firefighters) saw it.”<sup>1</sup> If the fire started among the protesters behind the ambassador’s back, how could it have been started by an incendiary device that he never saw being shoved through the door?

Getting back to the main issue, solidarity explanations derived considerable plausibility from the army massacres of the early 1980s. Why would the army do so much killing unless the guerrillas had lots of popular support? As Sanford points out in her analysis of several declassified documents, this was not necessarily the case. But even after many of us grasped the limitations of the Unión Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union—URNG), the coalition of the EGP and several other guerrilla organizations, we continued to assume that masses of peasants joined because they saw no other way to escape poverty and oppression. We continued to believe that the EGP and the rest of the URNG had ridden a groundswell in Guatemalan society. So did I—until I had the privilege of interviewing hundreds of violence survivors in a former EGP stronghold.

Since Smith, Sanford, and Chinchilla are reluctant to distinguish between solidarity work, human rights investigation, and sociohistorical analysis, let

me repeat why this is important. Human rights is the most effective arrow in the solidarity quiver. But while the goal of solidarity work is usually to support a political movement, the goal of human rights work is to increase respect for law. The two often go together, but they can also collide, putting activists into an awkward situation. In Guatemala, solidarity/human rights supporters were sometimes embarrassed when the guerrillas turned out to be committing violations of their own.<sup>2</sup>

As a legal discourse, human rights focuses on specific acts of commission or omission by agents of the state or a presumed state-in-formation like the URNG. Since a human rights violation is a specific criminal act, why the perpetrator did it, or what he was reacting to, is a secondary issue. Ignoring motivation is reasonable in many legal proceedings, but it is not a good way to understand a history of violence because it isolates acts from their context. Recently the Guatemalan truth commissions have gathered a staggering array of testimony about the violence. They have had to juggle a human rights focus on specific criminal acts with a broader focus on sociohistorical process. The latter requires as much context as possible. But that complicates the moral simplicities of solidarity and the criminal responsibilities of human rights violations, as becomes apparent in my account of how political killing spread to Uspantán.

Solidarity ends up being a poor basis for scholarship because of the need to justify a political orientation and its claim to innocence. For scholars accustomed to justifying their presence in Guatemala through solidarity, it has been hard to deal with evidence that, for example, the guerrillas committed the first political murders in Rigoberta's municipio or that student protesters started the fire at the Spanish embassy. That puts the blame on the wrong side, the guerrillas, when the purpose of solidarity thinking is to put all the blame on the other side. Significantly, the issue of "blame" that so concerns Smith, Sanford, and Chinchilla matters only in solidarity work, not in human rights investigations or sociohistorical analysis. Whether or not villagers collaborated with the EGP, the army had no right to kill them in noncombat situations. Even if the student protesters started the fire at the Spanish embassy, the dictatorship was still responsible for the incident because it stormed the embassy over the ambassador's protests.

Solidarity work in Guatemala has always been broader than support for the URNG party line. But it has always been difficult and unpopular to challenge certain convictions that seemed to be validated by the mass killing of the early 1980s. It has also been too easy to discount peasants who fail to live up to expectations. One hallmark of solidarity writing about peasants is frequent reference to "silence," exemplified here by comparing them to mute

rocks. While some indeed have been silenced, others have lots to say. Here are several assumptions they led me to question:

1. Did support for the insurgency spring from the steady immiseration of the poor? As Smith herself has reported, along with Paul Kobrak, myself, and others, many Mayas felt they were making modest political and economic gains through the Catholic Church and other institutions in the 1970s. No one claims they were not poor, so I do not see the point of stuffing my mouth or theirs with a World Bank report. The point is that the tapestry of conditions that Mayas faced is not compatible with the ideological requirements for justifying the enormous cost of armed struggle—that the poor are being pounded into the ground.

2. Was the Maya population on a collision course with the state? Was armed struggle a “last resort” for peasants with their backs to the wall? The last-resort paradigm fits some local situations, but regionally it is not compatible with what we know about the origins of the Maya movement, which is led by people who are taking advantage of expanding opportunities. Nor is the last-resort paradigm compatible with the typical Maya critique of the guerrillas as well as the army—that both sides imposed the war on them. If the insurgency was an inevitable response to centuries of oppression, then the guerrillas would hardly be guilty of imposing it. Finally, last-resort claims are contradicted by our knowledge of how difficult it often was to recruit Mayas.

3. Should blame for starting the violence be laid exclusively at the door of the Guatemalan army? Here I must insist on what so many peasants have told me: while the army did most of the killing, the first people they saw in uniform were often guerrillas who wanted to spread the war into new areas. Contrary to Smith, I do not use the word “natural” to describe the army’s response to guerrilla organizing. But it is very likely given what we know about how armies respond to an irregular enemy, that is, one that makes up for its lack of military strength by blurring the distinction between itself and nearby civilians. In the absence of an identifiable enemy, counterinsurgents tend to retaliate against nearby civilians. While the Guatemalan army is a particularly brutal example, there is no shortage of others.

I question how well the violence is explained by racism because (1) this is a conflict in which the first shots were traded inside the officer corps of the Guatemalan army (the first guerrilla commanders were rebel army officers) and (2) the army could be just as brutal to ladino peasants as to indigenous ones, as corroborated by the truth commissions.<sup>3</sup> As for why guerrilla leaders should have known what would happen to their civilian collaborators, Chinchilla forgets that what the army did in western Guatemala in the 1980s was only a replay, on a larger scale, of what it did in eastern Guatemala in the 1960s. While she and Sanford accuse me of failing to put my local studies

into historical context, this is an example of how I provide more history than they wish to remember.

My books are controversial because they portray more of the intense localism in rural Guatemala than will fit into the assumption that armed struggle was a last resort. However, my findings are hardly unique. While the EGP was stronger in the Sierra Cuchumatanes than elsewhere, the region's other ethnographers (Davis, 1988: 24-26; Watanabe, 1992: 179-183) have had doubts about the depth of its support, as has Smith (1992) herself. Paul Kobrak's dissertation (1997) provides the most convincing evidence of all: it is the finest local study of the violence to date, which is why I have been badgering him to publish it and why my book about Uspantán imitates it. His account of how K'iche's learned to use the civil patrols and neutralist rhetoric to distance themselves from the war built and improved on mine. Far from contradicting my portrait of how peasants responded to the EGP and the army, Kobrak reports hearing from K'iche's what I heard from Ixils, doubling my evidence. As I do, he reports that most land conflicts were between peasants (1997: 70-71), that they looked to the future with guarded optimism (1997: 76-77), that there was little continuity between prewar activism and the guerrilla movement (1997: 113), and that peasants complain about how the guerrillas maneuvered them into confronting the army (1997: 111-112).

If Chinchilla thinks that even guerrilla leaders could not be expected to foresee the army's vicious reprisals, why does Smith think that peasants like Vicente Menchú could? Does Smith think that EGP cadres warned men like Vicente that they were risking everything they had? What my critics refuse to face is the military/political reality of guerrilla warfare, which depends upon deceiving friends, foes, and ultimately oneself. They also fail to acknowledge that, as a revolutionary model applied to one country after another, guerrilla warfare became a self-destructive form of antipolitics. We shall see whether the Zapatistas in Mexico are an exception. Instead of building up the grass-roots left, guerrilla warfare usually destroys it.

The gap between the stories told by Rigoberta and her neighbors raises questions about what Yvon Grenier (1999: 9-17) calls the "dominant paradigm" in scholarship on contemporary Central America. This is the assumption that injustice + reactionary governments = revolution. Political development never strays far from socioeconomic reality in this structuralist conception of history. Analysis tends to consist of filling in the boxes of a functionalist model, in which inequality leads the poor to demand change, whereupon they meet with repression and realize that armed struggle is the only path forward. In Guatemala there are indeed locales where individuals, factions, and villages were quick to welcome the guerrillas as a solution to intractable problems. One that I describe is San Juan Cotzal, where Ixils hoped that the



guerrillas would help them recover a large coffee plantation (Stoll, 1993: 68-71). But once you descend to the local level and listen to the recollections of lived experience, the generalizations of the early 1980s become very hard to sustain. More often than not, large-scale support for the guerrillas came only in reaction to the army's indiscriminate reprisals. Even then, much of the population escaped to the coast, hung back, or went over to the army.

Smith is right that of the three revolutionary movements in Central America, the Guatemalan proved to be the weakest. In Nicaragua the Somoza dictatorship was overthrown in a national revolt; in El Salvador the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front came much closer to victory than its Guatemalan counterpart. Still, Yvon Grenier asks an interesting question: why have Latin America scholars lagged behind others in studying revolution in terms of culture, ideology, and agency? Why are "structuralist, mostly economic and often mechanistic approaches to political change" still celebrated in Latin America? Grenier's study of the role of the Salvadoran universities and political-military organizations suggests an answer. The dominant paradigm removes important actors from scrutiny. Ironically, the Cuban model was premised on the idea that making a revolution depended less on objective conditions than on commitment and vision. Yet mechanistic Marxism relieved the comandantes of responsibility for disasters. So do structural explanations for insurgencies. This is part of the stubborn legacy of Guevarismo in Latin American studies—not *foco* theory exactly, or enthusiasm for guerrilla warfare, but a pessimistic, self-righteous structuralism that wards off embarrassing questions.

My book makes no sense in terms of Guatemalan politics, Chinchilla argues, and she may be right on the level of Guatemala City, where there is little room for peasants except as they serve the needs of other groups. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is important to question precisely because of the monumental confidence that it inspired in how the left views peasants. This is a book that we knew was true because it was what we expected to hear. It made a disastrous political strategy look like an inevitable expression of peasant needs. It allowed us to discount peasants who did not measure up to a high-cost agenda. It enshrined a mythology that, in the name of serving peasants, served the urban left.

Even if am wrong about important points, it ought to be possible to argue that guerrilla warfare was an avoidable tragedy without being subject to an anathema from Carol Smith. Her concluding remarks on "positionality" illustrate one of the ironies of postmodernist thought. The same reflexive lexicon that can be used to open up discussion can also be used to shut it down. The telltale sign is the dismissal of unwelcome evidence on the grounds that the bearer has fallen into a colonialist story line or, more crudely,

is not of the correct class, ethnicity, or gender to get a hearing. If someone wants to throw you out of court, no amount of self-positioning will save you. While more can always be said on the subject, my book on *I, Rigoberta Menchú* contains as much of it as most readers are going to tolerate. If you overindulge, they get the impression that you care more about your soul than your subject.

Since one of my book's arguments is that solidarity assumptions have made it hard to look at the Guatemalan violence critically, I feel vindicated as well as disappointed. The debate over my book suggests that room for disagreement in Latin American studies is smaller than we make out to peers, institutions, and funders. To stay on good terms with some of your colleagues, you must be prepared to suppress information and questions that they will find offensive. There was no shortage of good reasons to document the problems with *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, but this is surely one of them.

One of the final issues I should address is the book's authorship. Because Rigoberta told her story to a Parisian intellectual, skeptics have wondered whether Elizabeth Burgos put words in the mouth of the future Nobel peace laureate. The evidence that this was Rigoberta's story is considerable, as laid out in my book. But Georg Gugelberger takes me to task for failing to listen to all the available tapes of the January 1982 interviews. Now that I have been able to listen to the 18 hours, I am pleased to report that they bear out my earlier conclusion, as well as the most recent of Rigoberta's own statements, that this is indeed her story. In view of Elizabeth's explanation that she shifted some of the episodes to maintain chronology, what most surprised me about the tapes is how closely the book ended up following the order in which Rigoberta laid out her life.<sup>4</sup>

What do my findings mean for *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in the classroom? This is a work that many students find accessible, that some find inspirational, and that can be used to introduce a range of issues in a memorable way.<sup>5</sup> Precisely because of the many questions it raises, the book is just the kind that we should be assigning and debating. However, my findings have complicated the task of teaching it, especially in the short span of a week or so that is usually the only time available in introductory courses. The problem with presenting it as a testimonio, as Gugelberger and colleagues have defined it, is that the genre carries a strong connotation of eyewitness truth that he and other advocates have not wanted to see put to the test.<sup>6</sup> Instructors have been left dangling between the book's basis in fact and its imaginative qualities.

If I had to pick out the most constructive suggestion of the past few months, it would be Gary Gossen's in this journal. Maybe it is time to liberate Rigoberta's 1982 story from the category of testimonio. That is how the story

started out, but it seems to have turned into something else. Let us instead teach it as an epic, and not just as a Maya one, because no small number of ladinos identify with it too. According to Gossen, epic narrative is about a time of tribulation, has a basis in historical fact, and is told from a very partisan point of view yet becomes a charter for national identity. This is how most Guatemalans hear Rigoberta's story—as an Exodus narrative about a village girl who loses her parents to the army, flees abroad, and returns home in triumph. As a national epic, her story is indeed beyond refutation, but that does not mean that we should avoid historical exegesis of it. Latin American studies is no place for fundamentalism. If *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is becoming national scripture for Mayas and other Guatemalans, that is all the more reason for scholars to be producing the historical criticism for which they will be asking us.

## NOTES

1. "Nunca dije haber visto—ni ví, naturalmente—a un policía con un artefacto metálico rojo. Solo ví hachas, revólveres y bocas de cañones de metralletas. Fue, creo, la revista *Cambio* la que habló de ello; quizás lo vieran quienes estaban en la calle siguiendo desde fuera los acontecimientos (público, bomberos)." Fax sheet from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Embassy of Spain in Paris, January 31, 1996.

2. The final, most devastating case occurred in October 1996, on the eve of the final peace agreement, when a ransom kidnapping was traced to a Unión Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union—URNG) comandante. The United Nations truth commission did not accept the URNG's claim that it did not know about the operation (CEH, 1999: Caso ilustrativo 103).

3. One of the largest massacres of the war was of 178+ ladinos in the Petén village of Dos Erres in December 1982 (CEH, 1999: Caso ilustrativo 31).

4. Gugelberger also brings in the role of Arturo Taracena, the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (Guerrilla Army of the Poor—EGP) liaison in Paris who introduced Rigoberta to Elizabeth, then participated in other ways that were not acknowledged at the time to avoid implicating his organization. Arturo never responded to my requests for an interview. Before Gugelberger reassigns the book's authorship on the basis of Rigoberta's new memoir *Crossing Borders*, he should guide us through the differences between what Rigoberta and Arturo say happened.

5. This is not to say that all the reasons that the book appeals to students are the best ones. Here is what John Watanabe (1999) has to say. "I ceased teaching the book a good number of years ago precisely because I found it rang true for students for all the wrong reasons by playing on their romanticized stereotypes of egalitarian—and oppressed—Indians who spontaneously rise up against their oppressors, just as we would like to imagine we would do in their place. No community, Indian or otherwise, could prove as ideal as Ms. Menchú describes before the violence, or as spontaneously mobilized once it began, but her story had the power to erase an entire term's discussion of the more complex ways such communities could be both cooperative and divisive, nasty and nice to themselves and others as complex, contradictory collections of 'real' human individuals."

6. While Gugelberger and his associates want us to take *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as a valid representation of Maya experience, they are not amused by the idea of comparing it with what other violence survivors say. Hence the false accusation, repeated here, that I hold Rigoberta to objectivist truth standards. Buried in Gugelberger's essay is a significant concession: that testimonio is "much closer to literature than documentary." That was not obvious from his previous contribution on the subject, a book with Rigoberta on the cover called *The Real Thing* (Gugelberger, 1996).

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