Reactions to Trauma: The 1976 Earthquake in Guatemala

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> Half of our barrio slid down into the ravine, I mean half, right down, *swosh*! You could not even see where it had gone. It was so dark. This drunk comes down the street a little afterwards, I don't know where he was that he made it back . . . drunks always have luck, and he says, 'those bastards in the municipality finally cleaned up the neighbor hood.' It's not funny really, but that's how bad the place looked before the earthquake and that's how empty and swept clean it looked after.
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> —Resident of El Gallito, zone 3, Guatemala City

Guatemala was already a disaster when a 7.5 Richter scale earthquake hit the country on February 4, 1976. Economic development based on low-wage large-scale capitalist agriculture for export and low wage industrial growth had not improved life for the majority of Guatemalans, who were and are among the poorest people in Latin America. To make matters worse and to protect wealth from the growing protests of the poor, national political power rested on legal and extra-legal state violence. Between the time when the Unites States engineered a coup against the reformist government in Guatemala in 1954 and February 4, 1976, state violence had taken the lives of 25,000 Guatemalans, a figure slightly larger than the approximately 21,000 killed in the 39 seconds of the 3 AM earthquake.

A third of the national territory, containing over 3.5 million people (sixty-four percent of the national population), felt the February 4, 1976 quake and a subsequent 5.5 Richter scale quake on February 6, 1976. The second quake brought down all the buildings that were on the verge of falling and completely disrupted the intense work of saving those trapped in the first quake's wreckage.[1] The final official death count of the two quakes was 22,545. The official numbers of people wounded was 70,000 and of those without shelter, 1 million.[2] Because counting the dead, wounded and homeless was incomplete in the countryside and inside the city's shantytowns, the actual numbers could only have been higher.

The social dimensions of the quake were most obvious in Guatemala City. Guatemala City is on a well-known fault line and it had already suffered several quakes. The well-to-do had built homes and commercial and industrial establishments which were relatively earthquake resistant, and their structures were on the whole unaffected. Poor neighborhoods, where homes were of adobe and often built at a slant on the sides of ravines or dangerously perched at the

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top of ravines, collapsed. Because these areas were full of self-employed artisans, many residents lost their livelihoods as well as their homes. By contrast the Central Capitalist Alliance (CACIF) announced on the third day of the earthquake that production was almost back to normal, called on the population to "Reconstruct by working and not by clamoring or crying . . . God is on our side," and condemned the growing and militant labor movement as "an enemy of reconstruction."[3]

Who is reconstructing what?

At the time of the quake, the Guatemalan State was in open conflict with many sectors of the population, and it did not use the quake to create a stronger sense of citizenship because it was terrified of popular participation. In the days following the quake it had trouble getting beyond a perception of "*el pueblo*" as a crowd of looters. The pro-government press gave greater coverage to the relatively few robberies that occurred than to the many acts of heroism reported by independent relief groups and journalists, and it applauded military patrols that shot presumed looters dead on the spot.[4]

In Guatemala City residents kept vigil against thieves, but they never shot any one. Quickly organized neighborhood groups were as leery of the state as it was of them. Although the spontaneous pooling of supplies, and the mutual aid in evacuating survivors and the dead only lasted two or three days (at which point national and international institutions started to direct relief), temporary neighbor groupings gave testimony to political and social awareness. Looking back, one man remembered how at age fifteen he and his friends stopped emergency municipal water trucks as these entered his ruined Guatemala City neighborhood so that they, the teenagers and not the relief workers, could divide the water fairly among the families and therefore prevent conflicts.[5] These teenagers thought that any government action would be a contrivance to subvert unity among Guatemalans.[6]

The earthquake shook a population that was already relatively radicalized. In the early 1970s, President General Osorio Arana (1970–1974) had waged war in the eastern part of Guatemala against well-known and respected revolutionary movements that had been active since the 1960s. By the time Kjell Laugerud (1974–1978) came to power the state had defeated the guerrillas militarily, but the guerrillas were re-grouping, peasant organization had increased, and in the city the labor movement was taking militant and high-profile actions to win small demands against an exceptionally reactionary elite and an anti-democratic state. Moreover, popular religion was growing. In the 1960s neo-Pentecostal churches spread to become a national force and conflicts within the Catholic Church led to the strengthening and radicalization of the widespread existing Catholic Action groups. At the heart of this discord dwelt the endorsement of Theology of Liberation by many members of the clergy as well as by Catholic Action workers who had started to establish activist Christian Base Communities in the city's shantytowns and in the countryside. In the years before February 1976, the

meaning of messages such as "Yes, we are our brother's keepers" and "We must end social injustice and exploitation, and create God's kingdom on earth" were being weighed by many Guatemalans, including Protestants.

Because the quake had been proceeded by social mobilizations, President Laugerud framed reconstruction as development that safeguarded the rich. He stated that, "Opportunities for progress, for advance in development, for access to better living standards will be achieved without the destruction of wealth already created" In the days following the quake, all state and local institutions joined with international and private relief groups to do what could be done in terms of supplying water, blankets and medical care. But as the days turned into weeks, two decisions made it clear that the state's reconstruction policies would strengthen the power of the wealthy and the military.

The first was the government's decision to allot areas of the country to the distinct relief groups. For example, within the heavily Mayan department of Chimaltenango, which was the worst hit region in the country, Castillo Hermanos (a Guatemalan beer company) was in charge of municipality of San Martin, the Salvation Army was given Tecpan, Oxfam-World Neighbors worked in Santa Apolonia, and the California-based "Wings of Mercy" worked in the cabecera (head town) of Chimaltenango.[7] Joyabaj in Quiche was allotted to the Herrera family, one of the wealthiest ones in the country and owners of extensive properties in the area, including "fincas de mozos" for those who swapped land rights for labor on the adjacent Herrera estates.

The second decision was to put the military in charge. Under Minister of Defense Romero Garcia, the Army formed a new organization called the National Reconstruction Committee (CNR), which would oversee all relief and reconstruction. Thus the military started an organization in charge of civilian life, an event which foreboded trouble.

All of the relief agencies tended to substitute paternalism for popular participation, or, once knowledgeable about local hierarchies, groups, and conflicts, choose to send aid through the local groups which supported the overall policies of the relief agencies.[8] Thus the Herrera aid to Joyabaj, where the guerrilla movement had support, was channeled through a local group with strong political ties to the Herrera family, and this group in turn gave preference to families whose loyalties had been tested.[9] The many Protestant relief organizations directed aid through the local Protestants to the detriment of the many Catholic Action peasants and so forth. But the military was particularly thoughtful about the political value of urgently needed aid.

One of the most important pieces of aid, if not the most important, became *lamina:* corrugated, lightweight sheets of tin that were used to build temporary shelters. There was little *lamina* production in Guatemala, and foreign governmental aid groups and private organizations immediately started importing it from various countries. Oxfam brought in the first sizeable lot, but the military's CNR impounded the 15,000 sheets until it was agreed to distribute it to zones in the city chosen by the CNR. Many critics who feared that the earthquake would strengthen the military welcomed international aid and attempts, however stum-

bling, at some semblance of pluralism in relief distribution. However, the CNR simply appropriated the *lamina.*[10]

While relief organizations such as US-AID had decided that the *lamina* should be sold at subsidized prices, the military announced its 100-Day Plan to shelter all of Guatemala's homeless. In a few areas the military gave away the *lamina* paid for by relief groups, and in others it declared it was selling the *lamina* but that no payment would be expected for two years, a time period which coincided with the lead-up to the presidential elections (the military had a political party). Of course, many recipients understood that they would not necessarily have to pay back the loan if they voted correctly. It is doubtful whether the military won real friends in the villages and towns with its policy, but it was the case that the military strengthened its reach into the countryside and barrios of the city where previously it had little connection. In the years that followed, the CNR remained one of the most important national institutions, particularly in the countryside and inside city shanty towns, where it became a sort of overseer of local life. It actually saw itself as the Ministry of Development.[11] Although the military never claimed that the earthquake was a turning point in its history, it was.

The labor movement and the revolutionary groups did call the earthquake a turning point in mass mobilization and popular consciousness. In the capital, the recently formed Central *Nacional de Trabajadores* (CNT), which affiliated the dynamic unions in Guatemala City, immediately raised in its leaflets and radio broadcasts the question "What's there to reconstruct?" Influenced by the growing revolutionary movement, the union movement envisioned the earthquake as a cataclysmic moment that had the potential to transform disgust for the government and the status quo into revolutionary activism. Their discussion about the earthquake was not centered on the way the earthquake revealed the injustice of class society, hardly a secret to anyone, but on the need to end class society.

In the earthquake's wake, both progressive and reactionary politics intensified. The labor movement stepped-up its work, so did the revolutionary groups, and, in response, so did clandestine death squad operations in the city and the open military operations in the countryside. All of this probably would have happened without the earthquake, but clearly the quake created more poverty and anger, the government won no new adherents with its reconstruction policies, left-wing groups gained momentum, and so did every reactionary social force that was already in motion. Factory owners hell-bent on destroying labor unions by any means utilized the slightly lowered production in the immediate aftermath of the February 4, 1976 earthquake as an excuse to legally lay-off union members.[12] In fact the number of labor unions that workers formed in Guatemala City after the earthquake was only slightly greater than the number of those dismantled by employer and state actions in the same time period.[13]

What did the heavens say?

The majority of Guatemalans accepts and even relies upon religious explanations and frameworks. In the village of 270 families in the central highlands

not far from the capital, out of 101 families polled by an anthropologist, seventy-nine attributed the quake to God's power, but what did the quake mean? Twenty-one of those families thought it was God's punishment. But for what?[14]

The Archbishop of Guatemala, Mario Casariego, a man who had turned his back on ordinary Guatemalans for decades, declared the quake God's just punishment for demonstrations, strikes and radical movements.[15] Some Protestant groups argued the quake hit people who had "built their castles on sand," nonbelievers who now needed religion. These organizations, such as the Nazarenes, Presbyterians, and independent local Pentecostal groups, gave aid to and rebuilt only the churches and homes of their members. Because the Nazarene churches were particularly conservative, the military's CNR gave them special priority for construction materials to rebuild their churches in Alta and Baja Verapaz, areas of conflict between peasants and the military where the guerrillas had support. According to historian Virginia Garrard-Burnett, membership in Evangelical churches grew by an unprecedented fourteen percent after the quake.[16] In some cases it is likely that people joined because of issues associated with aid distribution—"*lamina por anima*"—and in others they affiliated in their search for consolation.

Theology of Liberation clergy had another interpretation of the earthquake's heavenly message: it was God's statement that Guatemalans should create "*Tierra Nueva,*" God's reign on earth. And this was widely heard, and it was a message in concert with those of leftist groups. The revolutionaries claimed Christianity and argued that "a true Christian can only be a revolutionary in our country."[17] Important labor leaders also defined their commitments to workers as Christian choices. Theology of Liberation's messages and messengers were condemned by the Archbishop, and the most common target of death squad activities in the weeks following the quake were those priests and nuns who had "opted for the poor."

In the city many of these Liberation workers were already embedded within poor neighborhoods and had worked since the mid-1960s with residents in local neighborhood improvement committees (*Comites Pro-Mejoramiento de los Barrios*) and within the politicized housing group *Movimiento Nacional de Los Pobladores* (MONAP). The quake transformed the housing movement: before the quake precarious shelters in Guatemala City numbered over 90,000 and 20,000 of these were built within garbage dumps or in areas without any services whatsoever; after the quake many of these homes disappeared from the face of the earth and for residents of these areas the quake presented the opportunity to get better housing.

In the days following the quake, Liberation Theology priests, nuns, and lay workers led land invasions. A priest who organized one explained that "the intense joining together of people-church in relation to the housing problem resulted from our theological contextualization of the earthquake. We said that the earthquake was God's signal that we should leave the ravines to search for a communal identity."[18] These religious leaders affirmed that land invasions

were part of the creation of the reign of God on earth: "*un hombre nuevo en una tierra nueva.*"

An *asentamiento* named Tierra Nueva, one of a number of such communities started by land invasions, was an example of the "intense joining of people-church" in February 1976. The decision to seize unoccupied lands twenty-two kilometers from the city's center was taken by a group of neighbors in the barrio El Gallito, the barrio referred to in the quote which opens this essay. On March 21, 1976, after a few weeks of planning under the leadership of a Theology of Liberation priest, over 400 families left El Gallito in trucks full of building materials and belongings and drove the twenty-two kilometers to the deserted Finca de Santa Cristina on the city's outskirts. They arrived, drew lines to make lots on a portion of the Finca, and started building makeshift shelters. By evening, the community of Tierra Nueva was a fact, and within a few short weeks over 800 more families had arrived to establish homes there. The religious nucleus that led Tierra Nueva (which had almost been named "*Exodo 76*") wished to promote "a little socialism," including cooperatives of producers and a life "without bars or houses of prostitution."[19]

The settlement of Tierra Nueva and variations of it were perhaps the most concrete, popular, and effective responses to the earthquake. A housing movement had grown slowly before 1976. After the quake it mushroomed: prior to February 1976 there existed thirty-four *asentamientos* in Guatemala City; between February and May 1976 alone, 126 new asentamientos were established, and at the heart of most of the asentamientos were notions of social change through immediate empowerment and ethical behavior.[20]

What happened?

In the "long run" of a few years, the military and those who followed the military's benefited the most from the quake. In Tierra Nueva, the military's CNR quickly became involved in skillfully negotiating the occupation's legalization, and it got the state's national housing bank to arrange loans for more long term construction projects. So the "leftist" community gained from the protection of its worst enemy. The CNR, as the de-facto civilian national development agency, encouraged a number of non-governmental organizations from UNICEF to the Salvation Army and the Lion's Club to start projects in Tierra Nueva: health, day-care, and sports centers, schools for children, and sewing and cooking classes for women. Instead of cooperating with one another, these outside organizations competed for residents' affiliation. Each new outside group drew to it a new set of local leaders, and bit by bit the residents were divided up into adherents of different agencies which had a greater capacity to immediately deliver goods (such as *lamina*) and services than had the old religious leadership core. Short-range material interest defeated radical theological ideas, and so did fear. By 1980, the military's the death squads had disappeared most of the important leaders of the 1976 invasion.[21]

By 1984, military terrorism had defeated all but a few of the progressive

groups that had grown so rapidly following the earthquake, such as labor unions and the revolutionary movement. A year earlier, the Army had started to airlift reactionary Evangelical groups into the "development poles" or resettlement towns in which it grouped peasants who survived its massacres; thus the Army relied on an alliance tested since the days of the earthquake. In a similar vein to what they said following the earthquake, these Evangelicals explained that the massacres had been God's punishment, not the Army's. By 1993 when a peace was negotiated between the defeated revolutionaries and the government, the quake's legacy seemed to be no more or less than a military made more powerful by its control of civilian affairs, the growing strength of Evangelical fundamentalists, and *lamina.*

After the quake, *lamina,* an apolitical, human-made building material, revolutionized construction in Guatemala. Those who could afford to continued to build expensive and well-reinforced buildings, but the best the majority of the people had was *lamina. Lamina* had not been in widespread use as a building material of dwellings before the earthquake because it had to be imported and because it was known to create terrible interior heat in the hot dry months and a cold interior in the chilly wet season. International and national aid organizations blamed adobe, and not poverty and the inadequate fortification of adobe, for the many deaths in February 1976, and all these organizations promoted *lamina* as *the* answer to earthquake problems.[22] While it is the case that the majority of deaths resulted from the collapse of heavy clay tiles roofs and adobe walls, there remained and remain other answers to earthquakes besides *lamina.* One of these is a technologically appropriate reinforcement of adobe, which was successfully tried and tested by Frederick Cuny in one area of the Guatemalan highland and by the Regional Seismology Center for South America (CERESIS) in Peru.

Since the 1980s, the "right to housing" has not been a citizen's right. A housing crisis exists in Guatemala today, and it is worse than the crisis either before or after the 1976 quake, at which time the national state at least envisioned housing as a national problem and not a personal one, as it does now. The "post-quake" years (1976–1980) saw the greatest growth of *asentamientos,* and in those years the government gave "assistance" to the *asentamientos* through the military institution of the CNR at the same time that it destroyed the politics of the *asentamientos* through its death squads. The neoliberalism of the 1980s basically put an end to any sort of state aid, and so-called "informal" ways of life and livelihood have spread.

At least in the city, the practice of building with adobe is dying out. The poorest of the poor construct their homes with cardboard, twigs, leaves, and plastic—nothing that would kill you in a quake. The less poor of the poor build with imported *lamina*—nothing that will kill you in an earthquake and a miserable material for housing in Guatemala's two seasons.[23] Engineers who try to get residents to consider reinforced adobe encounter the legendary stories of death by adobe in 1976 and the deep sense that because *lamina* is imported and "more modern" it is better.

Once there existed a vision of a "*tierra nueva*" or of socialism. Unions asked a brilliant question "What's to recontruct?" because they wanted to construct anew. Theology of Liberation workers created hope for a better life on earth out of a national disaster. Up to this point in the twentieth-first century, the only *Tierra Nueva,* and the only "new" for Guatemalans, have been the dingy sections of Los Angeles.

NOTES

1. The most severely affected departments were primarily rural: Chimaltenango (where the municipalities of San Jose Jilotepeque, Zaragoza and Tecpan were completely destroyed); El Progreso, Baja Verapaz, Zacapa, Sacatepequez, Quiche (where Joyabaj was devastated), Izabal and Totonicapan. As well the most urban area, the department of Guatemala, was badly hit: the earthquake destroyed the towns of San Juan and San Pedro Sacatepequez, and about forty-five percent of Guatemala City, the capital.

2. United Nations, "The Damage Caused by the Earthquake in Guatemala and its Repercussions on the Country's Economic and Social Development" Economic Commission for Latin America, March 16, 1976, mimeo.

3. Roger Plant, *Guatemala Unnatural Disaster,* Latin American Bureau, London, 1978.

4. *Imparcial,* February 11, 1976.

5. The relief workers gave equal amounts of water to all families, regardless of the size of the families. This instantly created a situation wherein families that had been helping one another a few hours previously were screaming at one another. The teenagers distributed according to the number of people per family, and took questions of illness and age into account.

6. From an oral history collected by the author in the 1980s and used in *Trade Unionists Against Terror, Guatemala 1954–1985,* University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

7. Robert Himshaw, "Assessment of the economic, social and political implications of the Guatemalan earthquakes and relief operation, to the American Friends Service Committee," mimeo Bibilioteca CIRMA, file D-1107.

8. There were exceptions to this such as the politicized students groups which tried to use the cleaning and reconstruction operations as a way to boost local participation and power vis-a-vis other agencies, such as the military. Robert Carmack, "Final Report: An Anthropological Analysis of the Earthquake in Western Guatemala" mimeo report prepared for AID, Bibioteca CIRMA, File 1045

9. Author interview with a Save Our Children staff member in Joyabai, 1983.

10. Hinshaw op cit.

11. Author interview with CNR military official, 1986.

12. Although the CNT was basically an urban organization, it broadcast nationally on the radio, and after the earthquake, people from the countryside would show up at the CNT office, whose address was advertised on the radio seeking advise. Author interview with Frank Larrue, labor lawyer at the CNT. August 1985, Washington DC.

13. Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists Against Terror, Guatemala City, 1954–1985,* University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

14. "Damages Caused by the Earthquake in Santa Maria Cauqui" mimeo, Bilbioteca CIRMA, Antigua Guatemala, D-1260. The answers to the question "what caused the quake" were God's command (26 families); God's punishment (21 families); Only God knows (17); God's word (13), God's lesson (2), Because of a volcano (10), geological fault (1) and no response (11). It is not clear how the poll was done.

15. Pepe Mansilla, *Guatemala 3; 3'3*" Liberia Platon, Guatemala, 1977.

16. Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in New Jerusalem,* University of Texas Press, Austin 1998.

17. EGP communique 1977, author's possession.

18. AVANCSO, *Aqui Corre la Bola, Organizacion y Relaciones Sociales en una Communidad Popular Urbana.* Guatemala City 1993

19. Ibid. page 14.

20. Gisela Gellert and Silvia Irene Palma C. *Precariedad Urbana, Desarrollo Comunitario y Mujeres en el Area Metropolitana de Guatemala,* FLACSO, Guatemala, 1999.

21. Ibid. page 15–20.

22. All the United Nations and A.I.D. reports underlined that adobe was responsible for the high number of deaths, which in a sense it was.

23. Instituto para la Superacion de la Miseria Urbana de Centroamerica, Dinamica de las Condiciones de Vida Urbana: El Caso Especifico del Area Metropolitatna de la Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala, 1998.