
REVIEW ESSAYS

WRITING POLITICAL VIOLENCE INTO HISTORY

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Accounting for Violence: Marketing Memory in Latin America. Edited by Ksenija Bilbija and Leigh A. Payne. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv + 405. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780822350422.

Negreaba de zopilotes: Masacre y sobrevivencia; Finca San Francisco, Nentón, Guatemala (1871 a 2010). By Ricardo Falla. Guatemala City: Instituto AVANCSO, 2011. Pp. xii + 437. ISBN: 9789929809505.

Unveiling Secrets of War in the Peruvian Andes. By Olga M. González. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. xvii + 307. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9780226302713.

To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920–1932. By Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. xxvi + 368. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822342281.

A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War. Edited by Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. 443. \$25.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822347378.

In contemporary Latin America the term *historical memory* is almost always shorthand for “historical memory of political violence,” especially that from the Cold War period. Usually, this type of historical memory is spoken of in ways that echo Walter Benjamin’s permanent “state of emergency”—under attack, at risk of erosion or obliteration, threatened by the flattening power of neoliberalism and

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the legerdemain of the perpetrators of past violence. To be a memory activist in contemporary Chile or El Salvador is to occupy a minority position; those who labor to prevent incidents and structures of violence from being normalized or forgotten are those who, necessarily, swim upstream.

Indeed, much of modern Latin American politics is waged on the battlefield of historical memory, as a struggle to control the production of historical narratives. From Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's war with the media conglomerate Grupo Clarín to the recent decision by Peru's Supreme Court to reduce the prison sentences of the Grupo Colina death squad's members, adjudicating past violence is a way for competing political constituencies to articulate and defend different visions of the present and future. The contest over how political violence is remembered—and punished—is never waged on equal footing, and it is a contest with terribly high stakes.

Scholarly works that contextualize and historicize narratives of past violence can thus make critical interventions. In analyzing the charged relationships between memory and history, the works reviewed here reject the notion that traumatic historical events are “unknowable” or “unspeakable,” as touchstone texts like Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* have suggested.¹ Instead, they draw from historical, sociological, and ethnographic tool kits to give Latin American political violence the serious scholarly treatment that it is due, embedding it deeply in the history of power relations and social struggles in local, national, and transnational spheres.

Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph lay out an agenda for this field of inquiry in their coedited volume *A Century of Revolution*, which deprovincializes particular episodes of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence by situating them within a century-long epoch of what Grandin terms “revolutionary time” (3). Far from having been a long, torturous march of destruction and pain—though it was also that—the twentieth century's arc of political upheaval in the Americas was, as Grandin argues in his introductory essay, a time of accelerated inspiration and imagination, powered by the momentum of “clash, contingency, and passion” (15). The volume brings the innumerable local conflicts of the century, bookended by the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1917 and the ever-sputtering civil war in Colombia, under the same magnifying glass, arguing, as Joseph writes, that collectively they constitute “the very birth pangs of the region's modernity” (398). *A Century of Revolution* offers the field a new way to periodize and organize instances of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence: as points of light and heat within a larger constellation that Grandin and Joseph term *the long Cold War*, a “distinct historical period” (400) that exploded into being seven years before the October Revolution would turn the world on its head, and a period that has yet to be extinguished.

To make their case, the volume's contributors draw on the work of Arno J. Mayer; the influence of his iconic work *The Furies*, which laid out a comparative

1. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

analysis of violence in the Russian and French Revolutions, is felt on every page.² Grandin and Joseph even close *A Century of Revolution* with an interview with the distinguished scholar, to highlight their commitment to a Mayerian vision of history that is open, contingent, dynamic, and multivalent. After 1989, Cold War triumphalists like Francis Fukuyama trumpeted the end of history, positing a teleological take on the century in which agency and contingency were only so much dust to be blasted out of the air lock of Western progress.³ It was “history as containment,” a framing of the past that silenced anew the Cold War’s “losers”—its land reformers, its indigenous peoples, its trade unionists, its intellectuals, and all the rest who dared to imagine a different outcome—by claiming that they were doomed from the start. *A Century of Revolution* provides a powerful corrective, illuminating how world-historical events like the overthrow of Salvador Allende or the *bola* of the Mexican Revolution were anything but predetermined, reconstructing the cycles of escalation and radicalization that produced them, and chronicling the unstable chemical reactions sparked as the twin Furies of rebellion and reaction met. That one of the Furies largely crushed the other was a function of their being “decidedly nondialectical,” which is to say that the Left “generally refused” to meet the Right’s revanchist violence in kind (18).

Aspects of Mayer’s framework do not hold in the Latin American context, the editors concede, especially regarding religion and rural revolt. But Mayer’s emphasis on a sociological approach to analyzing political terror, one that pays “close attention to the chronological unfolding of radicalization as it takes place within a hierarchy of overlapping fields of power” (14), does, and this approach constitutes the volume’s manifesto. Jeffrey Gould, Thomas Klubock, Carlota McAllister, and Peter Winn document the speeding up of revolutionary time in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Chile, and Friedrich Katz compares revolutionary and counterrevolutionary terror in Russia and Mexico. Michelle Chase and Lillian Guerra perceptively examine the roles of both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence, respectively, in the consolidation of the Cuban revolutionary state after 1959. Gerardo Reñique argues that traditional accounts from both Right and Left exclusively blaming the Sendero Luminoso for Peruvian political violence elide the structural violence of the country’s “highly exploitative and exclusionary social system” (312) and the violence of the counterinsurgent state. Forrest Hylton traces the “paramilitary modernization” of Medellín, a conservative state within a state, and Corey Robin and Neil Larsen reflect on conservatism’s revolutionary, dynamic nature and on the relationship of violence to Latin American modernity. The contributions are uniformly excellent, the editors’ framing is persuasive, and the conclusions and programmatic suggestions are certain to be debated and deployed by historians for years to come.

Ethical historical studies of political violence can never be separated from questions of accountability, and *A Century of Revolution* maps its trajectory of twentieth-century tumult onto two other historical time lines: the rise of the United States

2. Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

3. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

as an imperial power and Latin Americans' contests to dislodge their oligarchies, both of which had tremendously bloody consequences for Latin America's popular classes. While the contributors do not minimize the political terror of Sendero or the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), they demonstrate that such bloodshed was largely aberrant on the Left while constituting the *modus operandi* of the counterinsurgent Right. With the exception of Cuba, Moscow merely flirted with Latin American socialists and social movements, meaning that Latin American Lefts were essentially "*sui generis* and autonomous" (402), whereas the United States spent the century married to the most antediluvian of Latin American reactionaries, whether at the state (e.g., Pinochet, Ríos Montt) or the nonstate (e.g., Miami Cubans, Contras) level. This is crucial to the editors' periodizing of the long Cold War: what was at stake in the twentieth century was not a strict midcentury debate over Marxism versus capitalist democracy per se, but rather, they argue, the US neocolonial containment of Latin American popular economic nationalism, a broader ideological project shared by local elites and one in which even the most modest aspirations of peasant cooperatives were tarred as Bolshevik in order to justify their destruction.

The criminalizing of Latin Americans who stood up to assert their rights in profoundly undemocratic contexts became, over time, internalized by the survivors of the violence such defiance provoked. "Look, don't you ever get involved in any organization," the Salvadoran Reynaldo Patriz recalls his father instructing him during his teenage years, as recounted in Jeffrey Gould and Aldo Lauria-Santiago's masterful *To Rise in Darkness*. "I mean it! Never! Remember what happened with *el Comunismo!*" (ix). Patriz's father had survived the peasant massacres of 1932, and when political polarization ratcheted up to fever pitch again during the late 1970s, he remembered the lesson he took away from *la matanza*: to demand land and rights was *comunismo*, and anyone foolish enough to become involved with it would face—and perhaps for his impudence deserve—similar consequences. This retreat from politics, which Grandin refers to as the severing of the connection between "individual dignity and social solidarity" (399), produced, according to Gould and Lauria-Santiago, the enduring myth of Salvadoran peasants' passivity (xxv). But Reynaldo Patriz's cousin Juan Antonio, a sugar-mill worker, drew a different lesson: that while state terror annihilated the peasant movement in 1932, by 1978 the uprising was regional rather than merely local, a revolutionary fervor that he saw consuming all of Central America. The terror of 1932 foreclosed any sense of political possibility for some, but it made that sense of possibility positively incandescent for others.

Gould and Lauria-Santiago have, with *To Rise in Darkness*, written the definitive account of *la matanza* by detailing the agrarian mobilization that preceded it. The book is an innovative collaboration between Gould and Lauria-Santiago combining archival research and oral histories—the latter owing significantly to the participation of informant-turned-interviewer Reynaldo Patriz. The authors painstakingly reconstruct the chronology of events that produced such fatal polarization, analyzing the relationships between these local incidents; international factors like the 1929 economic crisis and the Comintern; and evolving national notions of *mestizaje*, land tenure, proletarianization, and political agency. To read

this work is to feel the rumbling power of a gathering storm, as western El Salvador ruptured into near civil war by January 1932; however, Gould and Lauria-Santiago point out, as per the thesis of *A Century of Revolution*, that in this conflict, while “one side was hesitant about killing individuals . . . the other rarely hesitated before firing at those who shared the class or ethnic markers of rebels—at point-blank range” (208).

In conversation with analyses of ethnicity and political militancy in Guatemala, including the work of Charles Hale, Carlota McAllister, and Betsy Konefal, *To Rise in Darkness* confronts the canard that, as McAllister describes in *A Century of Revolution*, indigenous peasants were the “mute and terrified cannon fodder” (276) of an ideological contest between Ladinos.⁴ As Gould and Lauria-Santiago write, the movement was powered by a host of Ladino and indigenous leaders with roots in local microcommunities; often, the most militant of communist organizers were themselves rural Indians, of whom many more were sympathizers with the cause (xxiii). The misplaced notion that indigenous peasants act politically only when “manipulated” by Ladino leaders is further disproved in the book’s powerful fifth chapter, in which the authors show how Marxist language and praxis permeated the campesino movement, empowering the rank and file to embrace armed rebellion “against the wishes and better judgment of most leaders” (137), as the explosion of rural strikes leapfrogged the standard developmental stages of traditional labor movements. This was a case in which, like that of the Chilean workers discussed by Peter Winn in his contribution to *A Century of Revolution*, the revolutionary momentum of the rank and file could not be contained by the Left’s more sober strategists.

After the massacre, the strikes, the revolt, and the mass graves were made to disappear “beneath the scars of memory” (239), and the civil war of the 1980s would add more scars still. Gould and Lauria-Santiago, in their contribution to *El Salvador’s historical memory of both moments*, do not stop with their monograph. Instead, in a parallel initiative that other scholars of political violence might consider emulating, Gould and Patriz went multimedia: they videotaped a series of their oral histories and, in collaboration with San Salvador’s Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, produced *Cicatriz de la memoria*, a documentary film based on testimonies from the municipalities of Izalco and Nahuizalco. In an afterword, Gould discusses the project and its reception; it is a thoughtful reflection on memory, the ethics of representation, and the electric connections between the present and the past.

It is an approach echoed in Ricardo Falla’s indispensable *Negreaba de zopilotes*, which analyzes the Guatemalan army’s 1982 massacre of some 350 campesinos at the Finca San Francisco in Nentón, Huehuetenango, a stone’s throw from the Mexican border. Falla, a well-known Jesuit anthropologist, provides a *longue durée*

4. Charles R. Hale, “Consciousness, Violence, and the Politics of Memory in Guatemala,” *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 5 (1997): 817–833; Charles R. Hale, *Más que un indio: Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2006); Carlota McAllister, *The Good Road: Conscience and Consciousness in a Postrevolutionary Guatemalan Village* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming); Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960–1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010).

analysis of the finca's history, its most violent hours, and how the community has processed the events of 1982 in the decades since. The book comes with a compact disc featuring a wealth of extra photographs—images of the witnesses around whose testimonies Falla weaves his account, of the community of San Francisco before and after the massacre, of the inhumation of excavated remains decades later, and of the daily lives of area residents in the aftermath. It also includes the audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews Falla conducted, which suggests a new publishing practice wherein interviewees no longer simply deposit their tapes at a local archive of their choice but rather include the recordings, confidentiality permitting, with the finished work.

Andrés Paiz García, one of three witnesses to the massacre interviewed by Falla, cried as he staggered from the smoldering finca to a neighboring community, "San Francisco has been destroyed!" (3); Falla makes it his mission to uncover whether or not this statement is in fact true.⁵ The facts suggest that it is so: the finca and its houses were wiped off the map, and nearly all the campesinos living there were murdered. And yet, Falla argues (147), San Francisco lives on in the memories of its survivors (162), who scattered to refugee camps across the Mexican border; returned to the area in 1992 with their children; and today live the precarious lives of subsistence farmers, labor migrants, and justice seekers—all stages narrated in detail in the book. *Negrecaba de zopilotes* is intended precisely in order that San Francisco may live on, particularly in the historical memory of Guatemalans too young to remember the war firsthand.

The book is an arresting, sophisticated, and profoundly empathetic analysis of how Maya villagers experienced state crimes against humanity. Falla does not shy away from the contradictions in his witnesses' memories, the ways in which local memories of what transpired have changed over time, or the role of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor in the escalation of tensions leading up to the massacre. On this last point, he writes: "When we speak of the guerrilla, composed of many cadres who were lucid, committed, and self-sacrificing to the extreme, I also include myself, even though I did not organically belong to it. We collaborated with its tactics. We all have some involvement in the Guatemalan holocaust. . . . Between completely innocent victims and completely criminal assassins there is no possibility for reconciliation" (145). In fact, the author argues, it is only in excavating what Primo Levi might call the "gray zones" of local conflict that any social reconstruction might be made possible, all while recognizing the larger responsibility of a military state that executed what Falla calls an ongoing "low-intensity genocide" (148).⁶ Falla concludes with an account of the reparations process and the efforts to prosecute top generals. Despite everything, he writes, "we maintain a hope, that we will be motivated to act in order that genocides can be prevented. It is a utopia. But as we have said in this book, the victory of the witnesses who managed to escape the genocidal army alive shows us that the forces of death will never achieve totality" (409). One might call this a Pyrrhic victory, but it is nonetheless deeply meaningful to those left alive to celebrate it.

5. All quotes from this volume were translated by the reviewer.

6. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

In *Unveiling Secrets of War in the Peruvian Andes*, Peruvian anthropologist and psychologist Olga González also delves into the gray zones of political violence in her examination of *manchay tiempo*, the “times of fear” (37), in the Ayacucho peasant community of Sarhua. Her ethnography centers on her careful reading of a series of Sarhuino paintings (*tablas pintadas*) called *Piraa Causa* (*Who Is Still to Blame?*) that document incidents of violence in Sarhua. González is thus drawn into Sarhua’s enduring mystery surrounding one Sarhuino’s disappearance and its connection to the escalation of violence—both counterinsurgent and Senderista—in the community. With these two narrative threads running through the work, González examines the role of what she calls “public secrecy” in Sarhuinos’ efforts to rebuild their community. As a participant observer, she seeks to shed light on the “dialectical relationship between remembering and forgetting that is intrinsic to the work of memory, as well as that between visibility and invisibility that characterizes the concept of the visual” (10), arguing that these dialectics do not necessarily compete with Andean cultural understandings of social reality. To do so, González uses the *Piraa Causa* series—created in the early 1990s by a cooperative of Sarhuino painters in Lima called the Asociación de Artistas Populares de Sarhua, and reproduced in gorgeous full color in the book—as a tool to provoke both speech and silence from her informants (70). Despite the fact that the paintings depict the central acts of violence in the community’s most conflictive period (1981–1983), no Sarhuino had ever seen them; they had been purchased by a Swiss collector living in Costa Rica, who kept them in storage. González’s decision to introduce these potentially destabilizing images of past violence into the community for the first time and then to chronicle her interviewees’ reactions seems more like a therapeutic intervention than a conventionally ethnographic one. In so doing, she seeks to reveal both the value and the potentially corrosive effects of public secrecy and communal complicity in postconflict settings.

Unveiling Secrets of War makes nuanced interventions, particularly in chapter 4, an analysis of the relationships among tradition, authenticity, memory, testimony, and the fraught production of historical knowledge. González also highlights the extent to which Sarhua’s conflict pitted individual and collective notions of land tenure against one another, echoing several of the contributions in *A Century of Revolution*. Throughout, the author evinces a sensitive understanding of Andean religious and cultural mores, with psychotherapeutic twists (e.g., her analysis of dreams, or her treatment of Sarhuino’s understandings of *envidia*, which she interprets via Klein’s theory of object relations [64]).⁷ Though González is after the truth of Sarhua’s best-kept secrets, hers is not a crusade to prove or disprove a particular interpretation of Sarhuino history; she takes pains to distinguish her approach from that of anthropologist David Stoll vis-à-vis Rigoberta Menchú (9).⁸ Instead, she seeks to cast light on how Sarhuinos remember what they remember and why they remember and forget certain things and not others. Yet the book’s principal strength—the intensity of its focus on Sarhua, on one series of paintings, and on a small number of events in the community’s history—is also its princi-

7. Melanie Klein, *“Envy and Gratitude” and Other Works, 1946–1953* (New York: Dell, 1975).

8. David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999).

pal weakness. How the circumstances of this memory microclimate relate to the larger panorama of political violence in Peru during the Senderista period (to say nothing of international political dynamics) receives minimal consideration. Nonetheless, the volume makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Sarhuino community life during and after Peru's dirty war.

It is the aftermath of Cold War violence that concerns Ksenija Bilbija and Leigh A. Payne in *Accounting for Violence*, and specifically the marketing of historical memory that neoliberalism engenders. What exists today in Mexico and the Southern Cone, the editors and contributors argue, is a "memory market" characterized by the "brand" or slogan of "Never Again" (2), as evidenced by "trauma tourism" (99), gentrification, memory-themed *telenovelas*, corporate advertising, kitsch, and transactions in "memory inventory" (313), including memorabilia (provocatively illustrated by the Pinochet key chain on the book's cover). The memory economy does not necessarily result in amnesia, the editors argue in their introduction. Rather, the memory economy gives new life to experiences of atrocity by forcing past acts to be "accounted" for in various ways, thus keeping uncomfortable and unsettling traumas in the public sphere, however ambiguously.

Accounting for Violence, by rethinking memory through the lens of market logic, picks up on a debate begun by Elizabeth Jelin and others.⁹ The book coheres well, and its individual contributions are superb. However, Bilbija and Payne's introductory essay depicts a Latin American memoryscape oddly drained of politics. The book's market framework leaves little room for certain trenchant avenues of inquiry: the title leads one to imagine that the volume might critique the transnational political dynamics of the international nongovernmental organizations and foreign development agencies working on memory and transitional justice in Latin America (it does not), or perhaps offer a somber reflection on the fact that a half century's worth of social movement activists have ended up as permanent elegists, with the socioeconomic changes for which they sacrificed so much having failed to materialize. But those social movements do not make much of an appearance in *Accounting for Violence*; it seems that what is being bought and sold in this memory market is not popular agency or alternative visions for society but rather the dictatorships that crushed them. In Chile, say, tourists with their guidebooks might visit the Villa Grimaldi interrogation center, but not a museum about the Revolutionary Left Movement (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria), were one to exist.

Is this depoliticized version of historical memory—one not confined to Latin America, as radical politics have similarly been stripped from the public memory of Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela—the result of the memory market's logic of supply and demand? Has "memory," in its public form, come to signal the memorialization only of counterrevolutions, excising the revolutions from history? The volume could profitably have addressed such questions, because if memory tourists (like those discussed in the chapters by Laurie Beth Clark and Leigh A. Payne, Susana Draper, and Cynthia E. Milton and Maria Eugenia Ulfe)

9. Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

come away from memory sites (like those examined in the chapters by Cath Collins, Nancy Gates-Madsen, and José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra) understanding only the ferocity of counterinsurgency, then “memory” has failed as a political project.

In any event, the memory economy is a worthy topic, and *Accounting for Violence* has intervened into an increasingly lively debate among memory scholars and practitioners. However, it may necessarily be a debate confined to those countries where memory can be successfully “transacted” without significant risk of further bloodshed. In Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Colombia, for example, such a conversation would be superfluous, perhaps dangerously so. Falla’s book, to name but one example, is testimony to the fact that “never again” remains far more than a “brand” to many Latin Americans.

Ultimately, these works on violence and memory remind us that political violence is the stuff of state formation, whether during a conflict or in the years hence. Political violence is never “senseless,” and in the twentieth-century Latin American context, violence has been not antithetical to liberalism or democracy—rather, it has constituted the very foundation on which (neo)liberal institutions have been built. As Neil Larsen writes in *A Century of Revolution*, “Those who die for ‘liberty, fraternity, and equality’ are, so it is said, redeemed by the fact that these ideals become enshrined in the institutions of the state and civil society. But what of those who die at the hands of these very ideals and institutions themselves . . . those who die at the hands of such ideals and institutions, while still believing in them?” (391). *This* is the memory project that must be undertaken.