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## Postwar Violence in Guatemala: A Mirror of the Relationship between Youth and Adult Society

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# Postwar Violence in Guatemala: A Mirror of the Relationship between Youth and Adult Society

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# Postwar Violence in Guatemala: A Mirror of the Relationship between Youth and Adult Society

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Postwar societies are high-risk contexts for youth participation in violence. However, there is great variation between and within postwar societies. The variation of youth participation in postwar violence can best be understood by focusing on the consequences of war and war termination on youth socialization and transitions into adulthood. Socialization and transitions into adulthood stand at the center of the interaction between youth and adult society and help to explain the variation in youth violence in contexts of high structural risk.

Postwar societies are high-risk contexts for youth participation in various manifestations of violence, including homicide, gang violence, armed conflict, or war recurrence. Although there are important differences regarding level of organization, patterns of mobilization, and goals, the structural risk factors discussed to explain youth participation are similar: marginalization and exclusion, destruction of primary social networks and social infrastructure, personal experience of violence, and state and society's lack of capability to provide opportunities for youth.<sup>1</sup> While these risk factors are present in the majority of postwar societies, youth participation in violence is not omnipresent but differs between as well as within postwar societies. This article argues that these differences can best be understood by focusing on the relationship between youth and adult society.

Youth is a context-specific concept, whose beginning is mostly characterized by the end of primary education, the

physical process of puberty, and growing independence from the family. The end of youth and the beginning of adulthood is more difficult to determine, as it depends on young people being accepted as adults.<sup>2</sup> The termination of war significantly changes the perspectives of society on youth participation in violence.<sup>3</sup> During war youth are mostly considered as victims even if they participate directly in violence (Machel 1996, 2001; UNICEF 2009). Outside of the context of war, on the other hand, youth participation in violence is mostly interpreted as deviant behavior (Heitmeyer and Legge 2008). These contradicting views are related to differences in the conception and framing of youth participation in violence. Young people's participation in war – either as part of a rebel group or as conscripts in the state's armed forces – is mostly seen as subordinate to adult politics and agency.<sup>4</sup> In postwar contexts violent young people are mostly seen as “trouble-makers” (McEvoy-Levy 2006) or a security problem

Thanks for comments on earlier versions of this article go to Sebastian Huhn, Peter Peetz, and the reviewers of the Journal.

**1** On the risk factors drawing children and adolescents into armed conflict see Brett and Specht (2004), Boyden and de Berry (2004), Hart (2008), Blattman (2009), on other contexts Dowdney (2005), Hagedorn (2007, 2008), Eisner (2002).

**2** Most quantitative studies and international organizations use an age-specific definition. The United Nations World Youth Report (UN-DESA 2007) uses the 15 to 25 cohort, the World Health Organization (WHO 2002) those between 15 and 29.

**3** While there are different definitions of war (qualitative and quantitative) there is a consensus that war is a specific form of collectively organized

violence concerning political, economic, or social incompatibilities (Kurtenbach and Wulf 2012).

**4** A recent series of case studies on the participation of children and youth emphasized the options and possibilities young people acquire through participation in war and armed conflict (Richards 1996, Boyden and deBerry 2004, McEvoy-Levy 2006).

(Oetler 2011). Here they seem to act autonomously and “out of control.” These differences in perception reflect the changing relationship between youth and adult society according to different contexts (war or non-war).

This article argues that the variation of youth participation in postwar violence can best be understood by focusing on the consequences of war and war termination on youth socialization and transitions into adulthood. Socialization and transitions into adulthood stand at the center of the interaction between youth and adult society and help to explain the variation in youth violence in contexts of high structural risk. Transitions to adulthood in these contexts are difficult and challenging for young people as well as for adult society and reflect a society’s (in)ability to manage processes of societal change.

### **1. A Framework for the Analysis of Youth in Postwar Societies**

Postwar societies are shaped by a variety of interacting influences due to differences in the specific patterns of war and its termination, external actors, and the historical and cultural context. The legacies of war depend not only on its intensity (regarding the death toll) but also on the geographical distribution of violence, the patterns of victimization, the incompatibilities at stake, and last not least patterns of war termination. Until 1989 military victories were the most frequent pattern of war termination; since then the number of negotiated war terminations has increased significantly (Kreutz 2010). The form of war termination influences not only the capacities of formal state institutions to control violence but also the reconstruction, reform, or establishment of the broader set of secondary institutions of socialization (neighborhoods, communities, religious organizations). A military victory leads to comparatively stable postwar situations (victor’s peace) where one of the armed actors dominates and can establish a specific order (at least temporarily). The argument for peace agreements is that they may end war-related violence before a military victory is possible and provide the basis for consent between the warring parties. However, the resulting orders are shaped by divergent (sometimes contradicting) political, social, and economic agendas and instability (Hartzell and Hoddie 2003; Toft 2010). Regardless of their specific features, war and war termination pro-

duce winners and losers; they can provide social mobility but can also destroy social capital and infrastructure.

Research on the destructive effects of war on children and youth has been very prominent, although there is also an emerging strand of investigations into youth resilience and coping (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006). The ambiguity of the effects of war and war termination need to be taken into account in the analysis of postwar youth. Although there is a growing awareness of the existence of specific risks, youth-specific issues (or needs) do not figure prominently on national and international agendas for postwar reconstruction. While programs target former child soldiers, most policies do not feature specifically youth-oriented interventions (Kemper 2005; McEvoy-Levy 2008; Schwartz 2010).

The analysis of youth participation in postwar violence needs to focus on the main interface between youth and adult society, most of all socialization and transitions into adulthood. Here the consequences of war and the experience of violence shape adolescents’ capabilities to perform transitions as well as the capacities of state and society to reconstruct, adapt, or invent new pathways to adulthood.

#### **1.1. Socialization and Transitions**

Various institutions of socialization prepare adolescents for the transition into adulthood, introducing and familiarizing them with rules, values, and norms (Arnett and Galambos 2003; Arnett and Taber 1994; Arnett 1995; Berger and Luckmann 2009; Hurrelmann 2010). Distinctions can be made between sources of primary (family, school, peers) and secondary socialization (institutions and political processes), which are both important elements of the (re)production of social and cultural patterns of socialization. Political socialization is “the way in which youths are brought into a political society established by preceding generations” (Dawson, Prewitt, and Dawson 1973, 27). As a consequence, socialization has a certain conservative bias. However, young people are not just passive objects; socialization is an active process grounded in social practices “that may be habitual insofar as they are long lasting and become integral to one’s identity” (Youniss and Yates 1999, 8).

Across the globe the transition to adulthood is marked by three interrelated status passages: family formation, economic independence, and political citizenship. While these transitions are quite universal, their specific form and the overall relationship between youth and adult society varies according to the cultural, temporal and historical context, as well as gender, place of residence, social status, political regime, and judicial codes.<sup>5</sup> These status passages are highly interrelated, with family formation for example depending on young men's (and to a lesser degree young women's) economic independence or at least the acquisition of sufficient economic resources to establish an independent household or pay for a dowry or wedding (Mensch, Singh, and Casterlina 2005). At the same time, the economic opportunities and legal frameworks for family formation depend on patterns of political citizenship and the possibilities for participation.

Postwar adolescents have been socialized in a context shaped directly or indirectly by violence. Being a victim, a witness, or a perpetrator of violence in childhood and adolescence has consequences at the individual and collective levels; it will influence status passages, the development of identity patterns, and forms of social organization with peers. The experience of violence strongly influences primary socialization institutions (family, kin, neighborhoods), for example through the death of family members, displacement or migration, or the physical destruction of communities. As a consequence the number of dysfunctional families and single-parent households increases, and adolescents often have to take over adult responsibilities. In war-affected regions access to important social infrastructures, such as health care, is reduced or unavailable. While the experience of violence might come to an end with the termination of war, the legacy of war and violence may persist for much longer. At the individual level traumatization is a case in point; at the collective level group solidarities and identities may be shaped through

the experience of war (veterans are an example here); and last not least, formal and informal institutions of secondary socialization may have been destroyed or modified. The impact of these developments on adolescents is felt long after the end of the war, in a phenomenon first coined by Gertrude Stein as a "lost generation." At the same time, established transitions into adulthood will be difficult to make in postwar contexts and new pathways might need to be developed or accepted.<sup>6</sup> Seen from a conflict perspective, these contexts provide ample room for conflict and violence in the performance of transitions.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.2. Transitions in Postwar Societies

War and its legacies have a significant impact on the possibilities for transitions into adulthood due to the political cost and the material destruction. Transitions into adulthood are not a one-way street where a young person merely needs to have the necessary skills or educational background to enter adult society. While youth training and capacity-building stands at the heart of international youth policy approaches (World Bank 2006), these skills may not always be useful, as capacities and context need to match. In the Middle East, for example, high unemployment leading to a status of "waithood" is a major problem for university graduates, but to a much lesser degree for young people with little or no formal education (Dhillon and Yousef 2010). As a consequence the possibilities for transitions depend on both individual skills and capacities of youth and on the specific opportunities society provides. The match is difficult in most postwar societies due to the impact of war.

Most postwar societies are poor, struggling with the outcomes of war-time destruction, trying to (re-)construct material and social infrastructure. A recent UNESCO study (2011, 2) highlighted the fact that "countries affected by armed conflict are among the farthest from reaching the 'Education for All' goals." As a minimum of education is

5 Most research on these transitions focuses on young people in the industrialized countries of the North, while information on young people in the global South has only emerged recently (Brown, Larson, and Saraswathi 2002; Larsen, Brown, and Mortimer 2002; Lloyd 2005).

6 The studies on Rwandan and Burundian youth by Sommers (2012) and Uvin (2009) provide empirical evidence on the resulting problems and on possibilities for handling these. Honwana (2012) develops a similar argument for adolescents in Mozambique, South Africa, Senegal, and Tunisia.

7 Although violence can play a role in family formation, this would have to be conceptualized as domestic violence, which is not included here.

necessary to enter the labor market outside rural agriculture, this is a serious barrier to economic independence for many adolescents specifically in urban contexts. Barker (2005, 115) summarizes the resulting problem: “If work is an imperative to achieve a socially recognized version of manhood, the syllogism is that no work means no manhood.” In postwar societies the impossibility of performing the school to work transition makes family formation difficult or even impossible as a certain degree of economic independence is the central prerequisite for this. Sommers’s (2012) study on Rwandan youth shows how this leads to increasing levels of frustration.

The current debate on the negative impact of “idle young men” on violence is based on a twofold argument: (a) a pool of unemployed young men lowers the opportunity costs for recruitment into armed formations; (b) participation in violence (ranging from war to armed conflict, gangs, and homicide) provides young men opportunities for personal and/or collective enrichment and economic independence. These assumptions stand at the core of the “youth bulge” hypothesis, which portrays young men as the main group responsible for high levels of violence and a security risk for society.<sup>8</sup> Most postwar contexts feature a young population and a lack of economic opportunities. From the perspective of transitions into adulthood, participation in violence can provide opportunities for social mobility and economic independence and may thus be a rational choice. However, the functions of violence for youth have only received attention in the last decade (Brett and Specht 2004; Coulter, Persson, and Utas 2008; Peters, Richards, and Vlassenroot 2003; Richards 1996).

The main recipe for economic recovery and reconstruction in postwar societies is macro-economic growth (Collier et al. 2003, 152–57), education (for children and adolescents), and job creation (for adolescents and young adults). The

underlying assumption is that a successful transition from school to work is the main mechanism for young people’s integration into society (UN-DESA 2012). But the effects of growth on the labor market depend more on the specific development model and its need for skilled or unskilled labor, as well as on possible alternatives like migration. This has received little attention, although the drama of youth unemployment has at least been acknowledged for countries like Spain and Greece. A report by the International Labor Organization states: “It is fairly safe to argue, therefore, that the true ‘lost generation’ of youth is the poor in developing regions” (ILO 2010, 2) and warns against the dramatic consequences of failed transitions for both youth and society. Many postwar societies provide empirical evidence for this.

Transitions to citizenship are also complex. Patterns of citizenship, political participation, and civic engagement are highly dependent on the characteristics of the political regime young people grow up in. Experiences of repression, marginalization, or participation have long-enduring consequences (Youniss and Hart 2005). Longitudinal research shows that political engagement during adolescence has lasting effects on norms and values and is the most important predictor of adult political attitudes.<sup>9</sup> The political regime has been an important cause for the onset of many wars. At the same time political regimes tend to militarize during war, reinforcing hierarchical and authoritarian structures of control. After the termination of war, most contemporary postwar societies experience dramatic changes in their political regime, at least at the formal level, due to external and internal demands for democratization (Jarstad and Sisk 2008). This has important implications for transitions into adulthood, as democratization gives young people a set of rights (for example, to vote and to be elected) and formal equality with their elders. As the political sphere continues to be

8 A youth bulge is a product of demographic change that occurs when mortality fall before fertility rates; in this case, the cohort between age 15 and 24 is disproportionately large compared to the adult population. Fuller (1995), Huntington (1997), and Cincotta, Engelman, and Anastasion (2003) have popularized the “youth bulge thesis” in security

studies. While there is no linear relationship, there is some evidence that an excess of young males without prospects might increase violence or at least lead to conflict-prone environments. Urdal (2006) argues that youth bulges are related more to less organized forms of low-intensity political and intra-state violence than to large-scale wars.

9 For a similar argument see the special issue of *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* (Flanagan and Christens 2011), especially Flanagan et al. (2011) (Flanagan et al. 2011) with evidence from developing countries.



dominated by adults, existing patterns of youth integration or exclusion can be an important factor of tension (or even violence). Any analysis of transitions to citizenship in postwar contexts needs to include the formal possibilities of youth participation and integration as well as other patterns of civic engagement such as youth participation in civil society organizations and/or religious groups.

However, exclusion and inclusion are not caused by a single factor or set of factors; they are the product of the accumulation of risk. Economic opportunities for youth are important, but the political contextual factors that result in blocked transitions and functional equivalents to blocked transitions are seldom analyzed. While most research accepts the importance of the political regime, patterns of governance, and politics in general, the importance of these factors for youth transitions is primarily analyzed in relation to youth in the industrialized and democratic countries of the West (Youniss and Yates 1999, Youniss and Hart 2005, Youniss and Levine 2009, Sherrod, Torney-Purta, and Flanagan 2010, Sloam 2012). Here civic behavior such as voting or participation in civil society organizations is shaped by a variety of influences during adolescence: family interest and involvement, school climate and civic education, community engagement, media, religiosity, class, and race (Sherrod 2006, Hart and Lakin Gullan 2010). With respect to developing countries, research on youth activism and political engagement has tended to focus on young people's engagement in anti-colonial and independence struggles during the 1960s and 1970s (Honwana 2012, 14-15). There has been little recent research on youth civic engagement in developing countries (Kassimir and Flanagan 2010). Although the "mediating institutions" influencing youth civic engagement are context-specific, we can assume that they fulfill similar functions in different contexts. However, to date there is

little evidence about how these mediating institutions play out in the developing world.

Blocked transitions to adulthood produce high levels of insecurity and tension. Participation in violence can provide possibilities for youth to overcome exclusion and to acquire status, recognition, and resources. Research on youth participation in armed conflict and other forms of violence (gangs, crime, homicide) increasingly investigates this relationship.<sup>10</sup> But many case studies on youth transitions in high-risk environments show that even under the most difficult circumstances only a minority of young people participate in violence; most of them cope or "navigate" otherwise (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006). The following case study on postwar youth in Guatemala provides empirical evidence for the added value of the approach outlined above. The underlying hypothesis is that variations in participation of youth in postwar violence are shaped by the experiences of socialization during war and the possibilities of transitions into adulthood. Guatemala's postwar violence is mostly analyzed under the perspective of rising transnational and petty crime. Young males are seen as the main group of perpetrators (Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2009; Oettler 2011). However, variation of adolescents participation in violence is high and shaped by the different experiences with socialization and transitions into adulthood as the following sections will show. Evidence stems from field research 2007 and 2013, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of state and civil society organizations, youth organizations, human rights defenders, and aid agencies, as well as with local social scientists researching violence, postwar developments, and youth transitions.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Guatemala's Youth during and after War

Guatemala is the largest country in Central America, with a long history of violent conflict. The social and political

10 Nevertheless, research on youth and violence is highly gendered. While young men are discussed as perpetrators of violence, women and children are mostly conceived as victims. More recent approaches show a more differentiated picture, where young men are not only perpetrators but also the biggest group of victims, and in some contexts girls and young women may also be perpetrators, using viol-

ence for example to break out of traditional roles or age hierarchies. On female fighters in African wars see West (2004), Coulter, Persson and Utas (2008), Specht (2006); on girls in gangs see Moore (2007).

11 Original field research on youth in postwar Guatemala was funded through a research grant from the German Peace Foundation funding for the

project "Social and Political Fractures after Wars: Youth Violence in Cambodia and Guatemala" at the Institute for Development and Peace at the University of Duisburg-Essen from 2006 to 2008. An update in the field was possible thanks to the participation in the University of Denver's (Korbel School) project on "Religion and Social Cohesion in Conflict-affected Countries."

marginalization of the poor, rural, and mostly indigenous population is the major grievance driving these conflicts.<sup>12</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century the opposition against authoritarian regimes formed various guerrilla groups. The first phase of the war was mostly restricted to the east of the country; during the second phase in the 1980s the military used a scorched earth tactics to subjugate the indigenous population in the Western Highlands. More than 200,000 people died and more than a million and a half were internally or externally displaced. However, international pressure and regional dynamics led to a political opening in 1986 and a peace process during the 1990s. The war ended formally with the signature of a comprehensive peace agreement in 1996 (CEH 1999, Jonas 2000, Kurtenbach 2008, 2010). The current youth cohort (age 15 to 29) is the first generation of Guatemalans to grow up in a formally democratic regime after the end of the most repressive and violent phase of the war.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.1. Youth and Direct Participation in War

During the twentieth century Guatemala's youth has participated in different forms in the social, political, and armed opposition (Handy 1984, 224ff.; Levinson 1988). After the first guerrilla groups were defeated at the end of the 1960s, state repression was relaxed a little. During the 1970s young people and adult regime opponents again mobilized in a variety of social movements. In the rural areas *Acción Católica* sowed the seeds for the organization of cooperatives and community programs. In Guatemala City students and professors at the public University of San Carlos were the most active. Students took to the streets to protest the suspension of constitutionally guaranteed rights and supported the demands of trade unions and reform-oriented political parties (such as the Christian Democratic Party). Students provided legal assistance for free in public places as well as in slums. Even young people

that did not go to school but had to work for their living were politically active founding trade unions. The roots of many current human rights organizations date back to these years. Young people were part of a broader opposition movement, but often the main protagonists as in the first protests against bus price increases in Guatemala City in 1978, which ended with the deaths of more than fifty protesters.

The state responded with repression and many young activists (Ladinos as well as indigenous) joined the guerrilla groups regrouping mostly in the Western Highlands. There were various reasons to join the guerrilla: to avoid military conscription (Arias 1990, 252), to struggle for social change, or as a means of everyday survival.<sup>14</sup> Although the Guatemalan guerrilla never matched the military power of its Salvadoran or Nicaraguan counterparts, state repression was fierce and directed overwhelmingly against the indigenous population, in particular young males (CEH 1999).

Ladino and indigenous youth were also involved on the government side through (voluntary and forced) recruitment into the armed forces and the paramilitary PAC (Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil). In 1981 twenty-four-month conscription for young men aged eighteen to twenty-four was introduced, and extended to thirty months shortly afterwards. This affected between 7,000 and 8,000 adolescents per year.<sup>15</sup> While in the rural areas 10 to 20 percent of an age cohort had to do their military service, youth from better off strata were able to circumvent conscription (Smith 1990, 10). At the same time young men hanging around the street corners of marginalized suburbs of Guatemala City were simply picked off the street by the military, put into uniforms, flown to the Highlands to fight (interview with youth organization, Guatemala-City, June

12 Guatemala's indigenous population consists mostly of descendants of the Mayan peoples who are divided into twenty-four language groups plus numerically small groups of Xinca and Garífuna. Although Guatemala's conflict is classified as "ethnic" in some databases such as Cederman, Buhaug, and Rød (2009) the differences between the indigenous population (40–60 percent) and the Ladinos (of both indigenous and European ancestry) are a

mostly a matter of self-identification. Using one of the Maya languages and wearing traditional clothing are the main characteristics for being perceived as indigenous. However these habits change according to different contexts (e.g. rural and urban).

13 Two excellent surveys on this age cohort inform the following empirical section (SESC 2012, PNUD 2012) together with interviews conducted during field trips, mostly in 2007 and 2013.

14 Kobrak (2003, 42–45) writes that in Huehuetenango the EGP (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres) did not as a rule accept members under the age of 15.

15 There was also forced recruitment into the PAC, which according to the Truth Commission also affected twenty thousand children (CEH 1999).



2007). Hence the war affected youth differently according to social status: while marginalized, socially and politically excluded adolescents had to fight, those belonging to the better-off social strata were able to just live their “normal” lives.

## 2.2. The Impact of War on Socialization and Transitions

Besides direct participation, the war had profound consequences for youth socialization and transitions to adulthood in certain geographical areas of Guatemala and during the most violent years. During the first phase of war in the 1960s the east of the country was most affected, leading to a wave of internal migration towards the capital (Poitevin 1990, 92). The second phase during the 1980s forced over one million people to leave the Western Highlands. “Migration had two negative consequences on society. It destroyed families as the primary structure of society and promoted cultural fragmentation”. Those displaced to the cities needed to hide their indigenous identity, as the government equated being indigenous with supporting the armed opposition (interview, Universidad Rafael Landivar, Guatemala City, May 2007). Only a small percentage of refugees (around 10 per cent) were able to reach camps run by the UNHCR providing basic social infrastructure. The majority had to resettle under military control or in the marginalized sectors of Guatemala City where even the most rudimentary forms of social infrastructure like water, energy, and sanitation were absent, likewise access to education.<sup>16</sup>

As a consequence the war had a strong impact on primary and secondary socialization sources in the war-affected zones:

- Families and primary social networks: Migration, displacement, and violence tore apart the nucleus of stable social relations for young people. During the second phase of the war around 50 percent of refugees were children and adolescents, and between 100,000 and

500,000 children were orphaned (CDHG 1986, 95–96). The related lack of even rudimentary forms of security affected the development of stable personalities and trust in others.

- Schools: Public resources were spent on the war rather than on education. Massive recruitment of children into the armed forces and paramilitary organisations increased educational disparities between the indigenous and nonindigenous populations, as well as between indigenous populations in war-affected and non-war-affected areas (UNESCO 2011, 136). As a consequence public schools were not able to provide even minimal formal education.
- The political regime was authoritarian during most of the war. A process of political opening began with elections to a constitutional assembly in 1985. However, most of the military’s prerogatives were preserved and civilian government and parliament (elected in 1986) had little influence. While the peace agreements included significant provisions to strengthen civilian power over the military, Guatemala’s transition remained stuck at the level of electoral democracy with high levels of political volatility and populism (Jonas 2000; Kurtenbach 2008). Young people’s political socialization is shaped by the fragmented and volatile political environment.
- Religion and identity groups: After Spanish colonization Catholicism had a religious monopoly in Guatemala. The war increased the influence of Protestant sects from the United States, which emphasize extreme forms of individualism and undermine existing forms of social control and solidarity (Gros 1999; LeBot 1999). This increased the overall fragmentation and lack of social cohesion in Guatemalan society. On the other hand, the shared experience of repression was an important driver for the establishment of a common Mayan or indigenous identity across the different linguistic groups.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the war reinforced existing divisions and exclusionary patterns of social cohesion.

16 For a description of life under these circumstances see Bastos and Camus (1994, 61–93).

17 As indigenous identities in Guatemala depend mostly on self-identification, the distinction

between indigenous and nonindigenous tends to be rather fluid. While indigenous people tried to hide their “ethnic” identity during the war due to state repression, in recent years there has been a strong

revival of indigenous identities (Bastos and Cumes 2007).

These war-related influences on socialization sources are an important factor for blocked transitions into adulthood after the end of the war. In the cases of economic independence and political citizenship this is obvious.

After the end of the war Guatemala experienced a phase of impressive macro-economic growth (PNUD 2010, 321) that did not, however, translate into better opportunities for the school-to-work transition. The Latin American Opinion Survey (Azpuru 2012, 17–20) reveals the impact of place of residence and ethnic identification: Urban residents have more formal schooling (8.8. versus 5.3 years) and can translate this into higher income. The National Youth Survey (SESC 2011, 51–79) provides information on the relationship between education and labor market: Youth with only basic school education show the lowest participation in the job market (26.5 percent), while those with a university degree perform best (83.5 percent). In 1995, one year before the war ended, 35 percent of Guatemala's fifteen-year-olds were illiterate (Walter 2000, 17), while 44.5 percent had just three years of schooling. Family and personal relations remain the most important factor for entering the job market after leaving school (74.7 percent) and for survival. Around two thirds of working youth give more than half their wages to the family they live with; at the same time, wages are the primary source of income for only 36 percent of young people, while 56 percent depend on transfers from parents or spouses and are thus in a situation of economic dependency. In this situation a government program was designed to promote first employment for youth. "As it only included one thousand young people it was doomed to fail" (interview, Human Rights organization, Guatemala City, May 2007).

While deficits in public schooling are one factor, the economic development model and the related political priorities are at least as important. Poitevin and Pape (2003, 94) point out that education has not been a priority for any Guatemalan government during recent decades because it was unimportant (or even counterproductive) for the agro-export economy, which is based on cheap labor. Guatemala's elite only agreed to the peace agreement because the economic and social status quo was maintained. Although one of the peace agreements announced

moves toward more inclusive economic development, there has in fact been little change and patterns of exclusion have become even more pronounced. The few existing possibilities for upward social mobility have been curtailed as the state bureaucracy (including the armed forces) was downsized due to the end of the war (reducing the manpower of the armed forces) and the neoliberal structural adjustment policies pursued by all post-war governments. Youth employment statistics (age 15 to 29) show a seven percentage point reduction in formal employment between 1989 and 2011 (PNUD 2012, 120). But although this is a general trend, indigenous youth and young females were less affected than non-indigenous male youth. The changing patterns of Guatemala's export sector explains this in part, as textile and agro-industrial maquilas overwhelmingly employ female youth (over 60 percent are young women between age 14 and 25; PNUD 2012, 130).

To summarize, a combination of factors including the impact of war on education and the lack of job creation hamper the school-to-work transition and economic independence. As a consequence male urban Ladino youths seem to have more problems in the school-to-work transition than rural indigenous youth, as the latter survive in the remnants of subsistence agriculture. For some Ladino youth migration provides an escape. According to the Human Development Report (PNUD 2005, 356), 78.9 percent of Ladinos have family outside Guatemala (but the highest proportion in the indigenous population is in Quiche with 6.9 percent). At the same time 59.1 percent of internal migrants are Ladinos (PNUD 2005, 354).

Political participation could be an important means of change. Since the political opening a set of formal civil rights for young people are at least formally guaranteed, specifically the right to vote and to be elected (age 18 and older), as well as the right to assembly and association. But youth participation in these processes is rather limited: During the first decade of the twenty-first century 60 percent of youths (here age 18–29) did not vote although this age cohort constitutes over one third of the country's electorate (PDH 2004, 22; PNUD 2012, 142). If they organized, youth could thus gain a significant share of parliamentary seats. Participation in national political parties is even

lower and most governments have ignored youth as citizens.

However, young people do participate in other social spaces. According to the national youth survey (SESC 2011: 131–47) around 45 percent of youth (age 15 to 29) are members of youth organizations (religious, sport, community) with differences regarding gender (more males than females), geography (more urban than rural), and level of formal education. These patterns of engagement reflect confidence in the related organizations as political parties and the parliament come last in surveys of “positive” confidence (PNUD 2012, 141). Not surprisingly, young people with a higher level of education and a better economic background have most confidence in their personal future and in the government.

While Guatemalan society offers young people formal possibilities to engage in politics, the majority of youths do not make use these options. One explanation lies in the nature of Guatemala’s clientelistic political system. Personal experiences illustrate the frustration of young people. In Huehuetenango – a majority indigenous department bordering Mexico – young people active in human rights organizations advocated the rule of law and promoted civil conflict resolution. But their work was not very popular with the authorities dominated by the older generation. Members of the Commission on Children and Adolescents report that they were only able to do advocacy work when the governor was sympathetic to their proposals. Support from international development organizations enabled them to organize assemblies of children and adolescents and develop projects for the municipal development plan. But even if approved at the local level, realization of the projects depended on support from the national congress. In this process priorities formulated at the local level were changed according to clientelistic and electoral considerations (interviews, Huehuetenango, May 2007). Another interesting experience is the organization of indigenous adolescents affected by war and violence. After living in refugee camps, communities in resistance or even par-

ticipating as child soldiers, they began to organize and founded the Maya Youth Network (Red de Jóvenes Mayas, RENOJ) in 1999. However, RENOJ does not have an explicit political agenda but does mostly advocacy work regarding indigenous youth needs and international networking (interviews, Huehuetenango, May 2007).

To sum up, the new opportunities of political participation provided by – at least formal – democratization offered limited possibilities for change. However, success depends on the mobilization and organization of youth as well as on the ability (and the political will) of political actors to acknowledge and prioritize youth participation, agency, and needs. Neither the Guatemalan state nor civil society addressed youth-specific problems such as education and unemployment.

### 2.3. Youth and Postwar Violence

Guatemala’s war termination is considered a success, as there was no recurrence of war. However, Guatemala has high levels of postwar violence. Interpersonal violence (homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, UNODC 2011) declined between 1996 and 1999, but increased until 2009 and then declined again until recently. After the end of war there was some reduction in state repression but the overall level remains high according to international human rights reports, such as those by Amnesty International or the US Department of State ([www.politicalterroryscale.org](http://www.politicalterroryscale.org)). Although age-specific data on perpetrators in these manifestations of violence are not available, discourse in media and politics has been dominated by the scandalization of youth as the main perpetrators of violence, focusing mostly on gangs (*maras*).<sup>18</sup>

But while postwar Guatemala is one of the most violent countries worldwide, the amount of violence varies significantly at the sub-national level (CIEN 2002; PNUD 2007). Currently the country’s south-eastern departments bordering Honduras are the most violent exhibiting homicide rates of 79 per 100,000 inhabitants, Guatemala City comes second with 54 per 100,000, followed closely by the

18 This was a regional trend, see Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2009).

department of Petén bordering Mexico with 50 per 100,000.<sup>19</sup>

Young males participate in these different manifestations of violence but are neither solely responsible nor the only perpetrators; they also make up the majority of victims.<sup>20</sup> Youth gangs provide a feeling of belonging, solidarity, and identity. They have a long history in Guatemala but have changed significantly over time (Levenson-Estrada 1988, 2013; FEPAZ 2005). From the mid-1980s to 1996 they operated almost exclusively in the capital and delinquent activities were mostly related to petty theft and drug consumption. Between 1996 and 2003 these groups consolidated and expanded to other regions, increasing violence and criminality (assassinations, territorial conflicts, assaults). Since then there has been an increasing transnationalization with Salvadorian and US gangs, as well as an escalation of violence.

While blocked transitions into adult society are an important structural risk factor for participation in gangs, they seem to be more important for the transition to economic independence than for political participation, as most of Guatemala's maras have no political agenda. However, youth involvement in violent crime seems to be smaller than politicians and media assume. The only quantitative study on gangs finds that 57 percent of Guatemala's gang members work in the noncriminal economy and 45 percent of gang members need to support their families financially. At the same time they supplement low incomes with criminal activities like theft and drug dealing (Demoscopia 2007, 47–60).

The increasing levels of violence are mostly a result of the state's repression and "hard hand" approaches. Over the last decade human rights organizations report an increase in extralegal executions of marginalized youth by members of the police, private security companies, and local security councils (Flores 2013; Samayoa 2007). Like other Central

American governments, different Guatemalan governments have introduced strategies of zero tolerance and criminalized not only gangs but marginalized youths in general. Gang members are rarely jailed; instead they are the preferred victims of "social cleansing" policies (PDH 2004). These policies are not carried out officially under the auspices of the state, but instead resemble the counterinsurgency strategies of the war, when the military murdered anybody suspected of collaborating with the insurgency.

To sum up, youth violence in Guatemala seems to be a result of dysfunctional families and failed school-to-work transitions. Here urban male Ladino youth are most affected. This happens in a context where Guatemalan society is unable (and unwilling) to provide channels for social change and upward social mobility. The main sources of disconnect between youth and adult societies are closely related to processes of agency, subordination, and control. Violent adolescents serve as scapegoats supporting the continuity of repressive answers leading to "perverse patterns" of state formation (Pearce 2010). Like other places with high levels of youth violence such as El Salvador and South Africa (Heitmeyer and Legge 2008; Jones and Rodgers 2009, Marks 2001), urbanization and migration are important factors influencing the relationship between state, society, and youth producing high levels of fragmentation and the erosion of social cohesion. State and society have been unable (and/or unwilling) to replace traditional patterns of youth integration or to empower youth to accomplish the transition into adulthood without violence. In the indigenous highlands, the situation for youth has been slightly better as decentralization and indigenous empowerment seem to provide young people with more options for the future.

### 3. Postwar Violence as a Mirror of Youth–Society Relations

The impact of war and patterns of war termination shape youth socialization processes and the opportunities provided by state and society for the transition into adulthood.

19 <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/guatemala-murder-hotspots-mapping>, January 31, 2013; Moser (2001, 104) compiled a (non-representative but quite plausible) timeline showing a significant increase in violence from Friday to Sun-

day and a strong correlation with the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. On the broader relationship between drugs and violence see Eisner (2002).

20 Research on youth violence and gangs in Central America focuses mostly on the causes, micro-

level dynamics, and policy responses. See among others ERIC et al. (2001ff.); Rodgers, Muggah, and Stevenson (2009). The first and only comparative quantitative study is Demoscopia (2007).

While the personal experience of violence is important, in the case of Guatemala the main factors for blocked transitions are related to the broader structural processes in politics and economy. Despite the signing of comprehensive peace accords, provisions aiming at profound societal change were implemented either partially or not at all. Guatemala's traditional economic and political elite blocked every initiative to change the existing economic development model until today.

While the debate on risk factors for youth violence focuses on the influences of war and violence on social capital (Coletta and Cullen 2000), the impact of different patterns of war termination and reconstruction for youth socialization and transitions remains under-researched. The case study of Guatemala shows that the reconstruction or reproduction of youth integration might be feasible in those (mostly rural) contexts where the war supported processes of ethnic self-identification ("mayanization"; Bastos and Camus 2007). Youth transitions are much more difficult in urban spaces, where they are subject to rapid social change and high levels of disintegration. Here ethnic identities get lost or (in the case of Ladino youth) never existed. The spatial concentration of interpersonal violence and state repression in Guatemala's urban centers and frontiers shows how the legacy of war-related migration and the lack of legal economic opportunities merge to generate high levels of postwar violence. Focusing just on youth as the main perpetrators of postwar violence neglects the political responsibilities of other actors in state and society, namely Guatemala's economic elite and its refusal to implement a more inclusive development model. The case study on Guatemala shows that the analysis of the broader relationship between youth and adult society is a much more important explanatory factor for different levels of youth participation in postwar violence than the mere existence of risk factors at the individual and collective levels.

Experiences in other postwar societies seem to support this perspective. Nicaragua, for example, is a deviant case regarding youth violence in Central America. While some argue that gangs are an increasing problem (Rodgers 2003), the relationship between youth and society is quite different to the other countries. Nicaragua's government

and state institutions such as the police have promoted inclusive, not mainly repressive, policies towards youth (Rocha 2008). South Africa, on the other hand, is an example of a country where youth/society relations have been strained since the end of apartheid, thus leading to a high level of youth violence (Marks 2001). Cambodia exemplifies how an authoritarian regime may direct "youth violence" for its own purposes, when young demonstrators destroyed the Thai embassy in 2003 (Hensengerth 2008). Comparing Burundi and Rwanda, Sommers and Uvin (2011; Sommers 2012; Uvin 2009) observe significant differences in societal response to the problem of performing traditional status passages into adulthood. In both countries the most important prerequisite for marriage is to build a house, which is hindered by high levels of unemployment and lack of access to resources. But while Burundian society interprets existing norms in a rather flexible way, Rwanda's government policies on housing aggravate young people's problems. Although (at least until now) this has not led to mounting levels of violence, it is an important source of young people's frustration about their future perspectives.

Although these examples and the case of Guatemala only offer preliminary evidence, they point towards the necessity of a shift in focus: Academic research as well as policy approaches should analyze youth participation in postwar violence less from a perspective of deviant behavior and more as the result of youth/society relations. We need to analyze the different patterns of youth economic and civic participation beyond the use of violence. This is essential not only for understanding the challenges in intergenerational relations and the blockades in the transition towards adulthood, but also for the formulation of youth policies by governments and NGOs, as well as by external donors.



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