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Examining the Political and Military Power in Latin America: A Response to Christian Gudehus

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Perhaps it is too soon to proclaim a theory of perpetrator research.[1] This is certainly what Christian Gudehus indicates in his response to the first editorial of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* (JPR). Gudehus criticizes the theoretical framework offered by the JPR editors, Kara Critchell, Susanne C. Knittel, Emiliano Perra, and Uğur Ümit Üngör, particularly the concept of 'political violence', because 'political', according to Gudehus, excludes other forms of violence 'not covered by a definition expressing a very specific moral and legal standpoint'. Gudehus also refutes the term 'democratic perpetrators', which the editors use to conceptualize those perpetrators outside of the political realm. Gudehus relies on micro-level analysis, except when he calls for an examination of the context in which violence takes place. Context, he indicates, 'should by no means be separated from the action', further stressing that context 'be [considered] collective violence rather than political violence'.

While Gudehus's views have opened up a necessary theoretical debate about categories used to analyse perpetration, we should be cautious when considering such arguments, particularly when examining the concept of political violence. Hence, in this response I argue that Gudehus's claim that 'political' is too narrow a concept when accounting for episodes of collective violence might not hold when examining the Latin American experience with extreme forms of violence, such as genocide. By 'political' I mean, in the words of Philippe Bourgois, 'the violence directly and purposefully administered in the name of a political ideology, movement or state, such as the physical repression of dissent by the army or the police as well as its converse, popular armed struggle against a repressive regime'.[2] Maintaining the specificity of the 'political', which in Latin America includes deeply rooted racial, ethnic, and class inequalities, can shed light on the ultimate goals of state perpetrators.

As I ponder Gudehus's and the editors' considerations about the status of the field with the advancement of theoretical concepts, particularly Gudehus's criticism that 'political' is too limiting, I cannot help but think about the many examples that come to mind from Latin America. In Chile, Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) has documented how state repression was used to eliminate the gains made by elected

1 In a similar vein, in 2004 Henry R. Huttenbach, the founder of the *Journal of Genocide Research* (JGR), asserted that proclaiming a theory of genocide was all too early since, as I also have argued in *State Violence and Genocide in Latin America* (2009), more comparative studies are needed to account for lesser-known forms of extreme violence. See: Henry R. Huttenbach, 'From the Editor: Towards a Theory of Genocide? Not yet! A Caveat', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6.2 (2004), 149-150.

2 Philippe Bourgois, 'The Power of Violence in War and Peace: Post-Cold War Lessons from El Salvador', *Ethnography*, 2.1 (2001), 5-34 (p. 7).

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socialist president Salvador Allende's government in 1973.[3] Through a coup d'état, General Augusto Pinochet's *junta* imposed a reign of state-sponsored terrorism to implement neoliberal policies privatizing health, education, pension plans, and, more broadly, the economy. In Argentina, Daniel Feierstein long has shown how the military's process of national reorganization, *proceso de organización nacional*, transformed the country into a neoliberal experiment.[4]

In my own work I look at the intersection of postcolonial theory and politics in Guatemala. I examine how local armies adopted and adapted ideologies the United States propagated through its direct intervention in the region, in connivance with oligarchies, landlords, *terratenientes*, and political elites, which led to the decimation of hundreds of thousands of *campesino* leaders, trade union workers, students, intellectuals, musicians, and lawyers. Militaristic campaigns effectively wiped out a generation of Maya *campesinos* and urban leaders. These included counterinsurgency plans – scorched earth campaigns, civic action, and psychological operations – aimed at eradicating leaders advocating for land reforms and social justice. Underpinning the killings was the National Security Doctrine, which criminalized social protest in addition to fabricating half-truths by claiming that an internal enemy within the border of each country was threatening families, communities, and the country's national security.[5] We can trace this doctrine back to the 1823 Monroe Doctrine opposing European colonialism in the Americas, 'the Americas for the Americans', and nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny that propagated the belief that the US had the right to expand its frontiers using settlers. An in-depth understanding of this political continuum can account for the layers of historical contexts that enable states' security forces to carry out extermination policies with the aim of maintaining the status quo. Without an awareness of the continuity of a colonial-like political context in which perpetrators of human rights abuses dehumanize their victims in the process of eliminating them on a massive scale, we will obliterate the nuances of a region's genocidal processes. That is, perpetrators' actions need to be situated within a broader historical process so we can question, for example, how perpetrators will be remembered by future generations. This is discussed in a recent *Journal of Genocide Research* (JGR) article by Sévane Garibian which examines the deaths of perpetrators, suggesting that post-mortem contexts also matter because they reveal the ways in which perpetrators of human rights crimes are either glorified or despised after death.[6] Today, generals killed by

3 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007).

4 See Daniel Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Junta* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

5 Ejército Argentino, RC5-I y RC5-II: Reglamento de Operaciones Sicológicas, Buenos Aires, Instituto Geográfico Militar, 1968; in Guatemala see, Ejército de Guatemala Operaciones Sicológicas (OPSYC); in Peru, see, Ejército del Peru.

6 See Sévane Garibian, 'Death of a Perpetrator, or the Uncountable Time of his Eternity', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 20.2 (2018), 197-206.

rebel forces in Argentina are remembered with public ceremonies, strengthening the theory of 'two evils' (*dos demonios*) that propagates the notion that Cold War bloodshed was perpetrated by two equal armed forces.[7] The armed forces have managed to keep this Cold War myth alive.[8]

Without accounting for the experience of a region with political violence, a global theory of perpetrators is ill-equipped to deal with, for example, states' reliance on the rise of death squads, or paramilitary forces carrying out acts of violence against their own countrymen. Over the past years, I have often been perplexed about the dearth of research focusing on Latin America that attempts to understand, as the JPR editors argue, 'how perpetrators are made and unmade'.[9] As Tzvetan Todorov insightfully recalls: 'There is no DNA specific to murderers. The past, and the present shaped by that past, also matters […]. Humans are all made of the same material, but they all have different stories.'[10] Scholarly knowledge about how states manufacture political violence could uncover, for example, the failed disarmament of sectors of the population previously armed by the military to collaborate in joint army-led operations to eliminate an alleged enemy; it also could uncover the training of 'ordinary' people recruited to round up their own countrymen to take them to concentration camps.[11] Adopting universal themes and all-encompassing concepts is a dangerous approach because often this universality tends still to be dominated by Eurocentric notions, despite scholarly efforts to undertake more critical studies of genocide where power relationships are seriously questioned. Moreover, I am convinced that it is through the lens of political and state violence, paramilitarism, and militarization that we can understand ideologies enabling fanatic loyalty, and unquestioned obedience to a criminal chain of command.

Why study paramilitarism, militarization?

Since we know that larger forces shape, and in some cases determine, which groups will be encouraged to perpetrate crimes through ideological indoctrination and militaristic propaganda, we need to emphasize an analysis of the State and its armed forc-

7 See Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice*.

8 Mariano de Vedia, 'El Ejército recordará a militares muertos por ataques guerrilleros en democracia', *La Nacion* (January 18, 2018) <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/2101716-el-ejercito-recordara-a-militares-muertos-por-ataques-guerrilleros-en-democracia>

9 Kara Critchell, Susanne C. Knittel, Emiliano Perra, and Uğur Ümit Üngör, 'Editors' Introduction', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 1-27 (p. 9).

10 Tzvetan Todorov, *Memory as a Remedy for Evil* (London: Seagull Books, 2010), pp. 33, 36.

11 In Argentina, between 1976 and 1983, some 1,000 clandestine detention centres were set up across the country, the ESMA, now a site of memory, being one of the most important ones. See Wolfgang Sofsky, *La organización del terror. Los campos de concentración* (Buenos Aires: EDUNTREF-Prometeo, 2016).

es. This is particularly true for Central America, where the political context stretches back to even before the United States' involvement in the region during the Cold War years, including the funding, organization, and indoctrination of generals in the School of the Americas.[12]

Studying the political role of the state's military and irregular forces (i.e. paramilitary) can help us elucidate the 'grey zones' discussed by the editors of JPR in their editorial: 'It is […] the proliferation of grey zones and the necessary acknowledgement of the complexity of the issues at stake that have given rise to the field of perpetrator studies in its current form'.[13] Furthermore, an examination of the social composition of those recruited into the army can reveal the underlying power dynamics behind this recruitment. In a recent article in the journal *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Daniel Bultmann argues that: 'The social and organizational structure of armed groups during civil war(s) […] should be seen as a dynamic system, as a structure that is a constant process of both reproduction and change, even during times of massive societal upheaval, such as violent conflict'.[14] Within this dynamic, it is imperative to consider how colonial legacies and extreme forms of discrimination and poverty help shape what groups are called to join the state's army — even when serving goes against their own political, racial, ethnic, and class prerogatives.

In my book, *Silenced Communities* (2017), which examines the lingering effects of long-term militarization in Guatemala in the aftermath of war and genocide (1981–1983), I analyse these colonial and Cold War legacies.[15] I argue against categorizing the plain clothes Guatemalan Civil-Self Defence Patrols (*PACs – Patrulleros de Autodefensa Civil*) as a 'paramilitary group'. They were accused by the United Nations' Historical Clarification Commission of perpetrating eighteen percent of all human rights violations during the genocide, acting against their fellow neighbours in forests and ravines, leaving behind the footprints of extreme militarization and militarism. Most of the time, PACs carried out atrocities without the presence of the army, but under its direct control. I argue that classifying Mayan peasants recruited by the army to persecute, torture, disappear, and kill their own neighbours obscures the postcolonial ties binding sectors of impoverished Mayan groups with the army, perpetuating a relationship of dependency on, and obedience to, the army because of its control over their lives, their families, and their communities and what could happen if they did not obey orders to enlist.

12 General Augusto Pinochet and General José Efraín Ríos Montt are just some examples of high-ranking military men trained at the School.

13 Critchell et al., pp. 1–2.

14 Daniel Bultmann, 'The Social Structure of Armed Groups. Reproduction and Change During and After Conflict', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29.4 (2018), 607-628 (p. 607).

15 Marcia Esparza, *Silenced Communities: Legacies of Militarization and Militarism in a Rural Guatemalan Town* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

The Cold War patrol system is just one example of a subaltern group exhibiting overlapping identities under extreme life and death situations: between victims and perpetrators and between civilians and soldiers. In Northern Africa, *the Regulares*, Moroccan forces recruited by General Francisco Franco to launch his coup d'état against Republican foes in July 1936, are yet another example of subaltern groups drawn to serve the political and economic interests of a colonial power. These groups may be comprised of Indigenous, poor, and working class people and often are ignored by states, but called to defend the country, *la patria*, on behalf of oligarchies and powerful economic groups. Dirk Moses has long suggested moving beyond these binaries to view war and genocide roles in less rigid terms. He warns us of the danger of representing 'passive victims, wicked perpetrators, and craven bystanders', as Gudehus also suggests.[16] Similarly, when examining perpetrators in highly militarized societies (such as in Latin America), we need to ask on what basis a distinction is drawn between the military and the civilian population, who is a defined combatant and who is not. These questions have been posed by Martin Shaw and others studying these grey zones.[17] As Shaw notes: 'The civilian category has been highly contested in both law and military practice. Although mostly the difference between a person who fought and one who didn't was clear, several developments compromised the distinction and 'blurred' civilian identity'.[18] In Latin America during the Cold War there also had been extensive, non-military civilian participation in armed conflicts, dictatorships, and genocides, where uniformed civilians also participated in the extermination of political enemies. In sum, without proper contextualization to discuss the political power that the military holds, we might overlook the socio-economic relations underpinning military-civilian relations.

Gudehus's suggestion that political violence be dropped in favour of collective violence is rather ill-equipped to deal with analysis of armed forces, irregular forces, or paramilitary forces within the Latin American context. Finally, an engaged approach, where scholars are not just passive spectators of the political, but combine ethnographic and archival research, is warranted if we really want to approach the immediacy of criminal acts during extreme forms of political violence and become more critical and more reflective.

16 See A. Dirk Moses, *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), p. 6.

17 Martin Shaw, *What Is Genocide?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 113-130.

18 Ibid., p. 119.

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