Guatemala: Violence in Peacetime – A Critical Analysis of the Armed Conflict and the Peace Process

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The recent history of Guatemala is interpreted here using an interdisciplinary approach inspired by recent development and conflict studies. The author reflects on his experience in peace-building activities and uses a combination of primary and secondary sources to present the Guatemalan war as a complex political emergency.

The first part (a methodological introduction) proposes an analytical framework, taking into account both the root causes and the different functions of violence, in order to achieve a better understanding of contemporary conflicts. In the second and central part of the article, the integrated framework is applied to Guatemala, trying to understand causes and functions of war and negotiation and underlining the existence of structural obstacles to a lasting peace. The conclusions are dedicated to policy implications: if the signing of peace accords represents only a step towards negative peace, the condition for a lasting peace is a strategy for reconciliation and development based on social participation and social justice.

Keywords: civil war in Guatemala, armed conflict, violence, peace building.

Aim and methodology

The real experience of war is not the shelling and so on, those are just moments, though they are the ones you see on TV. War is what happens afterwards, the years of suffering hopelessly with a disabled husband and no money, or struggling to rebuild when all your property has been destroyed (UNRISD website).

The aim of this article is to propose an analytical framework to understand violence and conflict and to apply this perspective to a particular reality: the history of civil war and the peace process in Guatemala. The critical reflection proposed has the objective of understanding the origins and characteristics of political vulnerability in Guatemala, trying to combine a theoretical perspective on peace and development studies with the professional experience of the author in peace-building activities in the country.

The methodology employed is based both on primary and secondary sources. In relation to primary sources, many insightful elements of analysis have been offered by extensive interviews with some of the protagonists of the peace process, conducted in Guatemala in July 2000. The people interviewed are Guatemalan, differently and deeply involved with war and peace: representatives of the army, the insurgent forces,
the academic sector, the political parties, the international organisations, the indigenous movement and the business sector. In relation to secondary sources, the interpretation proposed is confronted with the main theoretical analysis of the Guatemalan armed conflict: a thorough literature study has been carried out using an accurate search and analysis of the written material related to recent history.

The analytical framework proposed in the first part of the article is based on the combination of two complementary approaches. The first is the positive peace approach, focusing on the concept of structural violence and stressing the root causes of war. The second is the political economy approach, focusing on the rationality and functionality of violence.

**The positive peace approach**

**Assumptions**

According to Johan Galtung (see, in particular, 1969, 1996), one of the founders of modern peace studies, an adequate definition of violence is necessary to understand and explore the different dimensions of peace. Violence is defined as ‘avoidable insults to basic human needs, more generally to life, lowering the real level of need satisfaction below what is potentially possible’ (Galtung, 1996: 197). Violence has three interlinked dimensions. The first is personal or direct violence which is related to the existence of a subject, or person acting; it can be divided into verbal and physical, and violence harming the body, mind or spirit. The second is structural or indirect violence which is built into the economic and political structure of society and shows up as social injustice, defined as unequal distribution of power and resources. The two major forms of structural violence are repression in politics and exploitation in economics. The third is cultural violence which is interpreted as ‘those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence — exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science — that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence’ (Galtung, 1996: 196).

Galtung proposes an integrated vision of peace, composed of two compatible definitions. The first is the static definition: ‘Peace is the absence or reduction of violence of all kinds’. The second is the dynamic definition: ‘Peace is nonviolent and creative conflict transformation’ (op. cit.: 7). The author proposes a further distinction between negative and positive peace. Negative peace is the absence of violence of all kinds (‘a violence-free system’). Positive peace is intended as ‘a cooperative system beyond passive peaceful coexistence’ (op. cit.: 61).

Following the definition of violence, there are three dimensions of positive peace. Direct positive peace: fulfilling all basic needs — survival, well-being, freedom and identity. Structural positive peace: substituting freedom for repression and equity for exploitation. Cultural positive peace: substituting legitimisation of peace for the legitimisation of violence and building a positive peace culture.

**Obstacles to peace and strategies for peace building**

According to this approach, the main obstacle for a lasting peace can be related to the persistence of political, economic or cultural violence. If a peace settlement does not
take into account the structural roots of the conflict, violence can persist in peacetime and undermine the peace accords. To reduce the level of violence in a society it is therefore necessary to promote structural changes fostering direct, structural and cultural peace. The real meaning of peace building is therefore to create ‘structures that remove causes of war and offer alternatives to war’ (Galtung, 1976: 298).

**Critique**

This interpretation is undoubtedly compelling. It has the merit of offering a comprehensive and holistic vision of peace and representing one of the most authoritative analysis of the link between peace and development studies. In my opinion, however, this approach presents some limitations.

In relation to the assumptions made by Galtung, the definitions of violence and peace are too broad, vague and general. In particular there is a lack of rigour in the definition of social justice and exploitation and it is not clear how concretely to understand the unequal access to power and resources. Peter Lawler considers the vagueness and lack of precision, based on a lack of historical analysis and of philosophical foundation, one of the major weaknesses of Galtung’s approach, especially in the first period of his work: ‘Precisely what positive peace consisted in and how it was to be realized remained unclear. … Without historical and philosophical underpinnings, structural violence had no substantive meaning’ (Lawler, 1995: 227–8).

The lack of historical reference is expressed in an almost total absence of empirical evidence. Many abstract assumptions in Galtung’s work are unsupported by concrete historical examples, with the result that his assumptions, even if based on stringent logic and critical creativity, are less convincing.

Other related weaknesses in Galtung’s approach are flaws of silence: in particular the structuralist approach to peace implies the overlooking of the role of actions and actors. As Galtung himself observes when describing imperialism, his approach is ‘structural in the sense that no specific actors are indicated, and in the sense that for the concrete actors that have a role in that structure no specific motivation is necessary’ (1980: 183). That means, according to Chris Brown, that Galtung ‘tends to push to one side an important feature of structure, namely the continual interplay of structure and action’ (1981: 223). Another weakness, or silence, of the positive peace approach is the absence of an analysis of functions of violence. In fact a structuralist interpretation of war is particularly suitable for a thorough analysis of the historic and root causes of a conflict. But it is unsuitable for understanding the ways in which violence responds to specific interests and how it functions within particular groups.

**The political economy approach**

**Assumptions**

In recent years a particular approach, defined as the ‘political economy approach’, has been presenting new insightful interpretations of contemporary conflicts and more generally of violence. The objective of this approach is to analyse violence in its political and economic context. This analysis is applied not only to wars but more generally to complex political emergencies interpreted as ‘processes of impoverishment
resulting from the transfer of assets from the weak to the politically strong’ (Duffield, 1994: 50–69). Consequently, the political economy of a civil war is a process in which there are winners and losers, groups that place themselves ‘above the law’ and groups that get positioned ‘below the law’ (Keen, 1997: 71).

The main authors of this approach are David Keen, Alex de Waal, Mark Duffield, Mary Kaldor and William Reno (See, in particular, Berdal and Malone, 2000; de Waal, 1997; Duffield, 1994, 1998a, 1998b; Keen, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2000; Kaldor, 1999; Macrae and Zwi, 1994; Reno, 1995). The present study concentrates on the work of David Keen, with some specific references to other scholars. The analytical focus of the political economy approach is the rationality and functionality of violence. Against the vision of war as irrational, chaotic and mindless, Keen proposes the provocative vision of war as ‘a rational kind of madness’:

what may be particularly helpful, is to distinguish between what is rational (or irrational) for society as a whole and what is rational (or irrational) for groups or individuals within that society. Processes that are dysfunctional for the majority of people may nevertheless be functional for a few (1997: 68).

According to this approach, the contemporary conflicts respond to clear economic, political and social functions. This is a particularly important aspect of Keen’s vision, inspired by Foucault’s functionalist analysis. Keen quotes Foucault’s interpretation of the Gulag question:

If one begins by asking the causes of the Gulag … one makes the Gulag appear as a sort of disease. ... This is to think of the Gulag only negatively, as an obstacle to be removed. ... The Gulag question has to be posed in positive terms. The problem of causes must not be dissociated from that of function: what use is the Gulag, what functions does it assure, in what strategies is it integrated? (ibid.).

In particular, the economic functions of violence assume two different forms. The first is top-down economic violence mobilised by ‘political leaders and entrepreneurs … trying to defend vested interests’ (Keen, 1998: 12). The second is bottom-up economic violence embraced by ‘ordinary people, either civilians or low-ranking soldiers … driven by fear, need or greed, turning to violence for a solution to their economic and social problems’ (ibid.).

The continuation of war can be a consequence of the existence of vested interests, both political and economic, often shared by the parties, so that the objective is not always to win the war but to increase the benefits for the belligerents: this situation of shared aims leads sometimes to forms of cooperation between enemies, defined as ‘cooperative conflict’.

**Obstacles to peace and strategies for peace building**

Following this interpretation, the major obstacle for a lasting peace can be represented as a lack of benefits or incentives for the elites and the ordinary people that resorted to violence. The strategy for overcoming these obstacles should be oriented to reduce the benefits of violence and increase those of peace, taking into account not only the interests of the victims but also those of the instigators of violence. The objective
should be ‘providing realistic economic alternatives to violence, both for those at the top and those at the bottom of a social hierarchy’ (op. cit.: 73).

Critique

In my opinion the political economy interpretation has the merit of challenging the basic assumptions of many conventional models, illustrating the driving force of interests, needs and functions in social conflict. But this approach is not exempt from weaknesses, as is briefly analysed below.

In relation to the assumptions, the major risk implicit in this kind of analysis is the legitimisation of the elite’s power and strategies, on the basis of a detached, realistic, pragmatic acknowledgement of the functionality of violence. In particular, the political economy interpretation is probably too narrowly concerned with the economic interests of the belligerents. The functionalism that inspires the overall construction can be used to legitimise the existing power structures: the analysis of top-down and bottom-up violence tends to rationalise both of them without emphasising the importance of changes in the distribution of power.

Another problem related to the basic assumptions of this approach is the Western bias contained in the concept of rationality. As Thandika Mkandawire observes, the benchmark of this approach is a Western ‘homo economicus view’ of human behaviour, based on the ‘conflation of self-interest and rationality and of individual and collective rationality’ (1999: 32). This kind of approach cannot understand the specific cultural and social context of different societies and ‘there is a whiff of arrogance to the view that a visiting scholar sees “rationality” where no one else does’ (op. cit.: 33). In relation to the evidence presented, the most important and comprehensive studies employing a political economy approach are referred to Africa and Europe. Unfortunately there exists no systematic effort to understand the numerous civil wars in Latin America using a political economy approach.

Finally, I would like to underline the fact that some silences, partial or total, can reduce the impact of the political economy approach. One is that the focus of the analysis is clearly more on the actors than on the structures. The structure underlining the conflict is clearly identified, in terms of ‘system of profit, power and protection’ (Keen, 2000a: 22), but these authors do not analyse systematically the characteristics and the functioning of the economic and political system. The second is that the political economy approach is more rigorous and convincing in its descriptive and analytical dimensions, not being so exhaustive in the prescriptive dimension. In this kind of study, there are some far-reaching observations related to policy implications, but dealing with violence provokes a sense of pessimism and discouragement.

An integrated approach: causes and functions of violence

My proposition is to combine the positive peace and political economy approaches in an integrated analytical framework. The aim of this analytical insight is to study both the causes and the functions of war, in order to propose strategies of peace building that can take into account the necessity of structural change, without overlooking the importance of creating incentives and promoting ‘a peace more attractive than war for the majority of those involved’ (Keen, 1998: 57). The two approaches are suggested in
### Table 1: Positive peace and political economy approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of war violence</th>
<th>Focus of the analysis</th>
<th>Obstacles to peace</th>
<th>Strategies for peace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive peace approach</td>
<td>Personal violence + structural violence + cultural violence</td>
<td>Root causes of war</td>
<td>Persistence of structural and cultural violence even if direct violence is controlled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political economy approach</td>
<td>War driven by economic interests, benefits, needs for elites and ordinary people</td>
<td>Economic functions of war</td>
<td>Lack of benefits or incentives for the elites and ordinary people</td>
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Table 1. The complementarity of the two approaches resides far beyond some common fields of research, such as the analysis of violence and exploitation. The two approaches are potentially interdependent, and many of their weaknesses could be overcome if the complementarity between them was systematically developed.

There are three main characteristics of an integrated approach. The first is the interaction between actors and structure. In the study of conflict it is not sufficient to understand the particular agenda of actors or social groups; it is necessary to understand how these agendas combine and strengthen a particular economic and social system of power and profit. The second is interaction between functions and causes. There is an overlapping area between causes and functions: when we consider the historic or structural roots of a war, we generally make reference to political and economic inequality, social exclusion, cultural discrimination. But these kinds of causes can be considered functions from the point of view of the social groups interested in maintaining a situation of inequality. The third is the interaction between interests and needs. The language of interests proposed by Keen is not so distant from the language of needs proposed by Galtung, especially when the two authors define interests and needs: for Keen, the basic interests driving violence are long-term (political) or short-term (economic, security, psychological). This list of interests or functions reminds the basic distinction of needs proposed by Galtung: security, welfare, identity and freedom needs (Galtung, 1990: 305).

In the second part of the article, this integrated analytical framework is applied to a critical examination of the armed conflict and the peace process in Guatemala.

### Guatemala from war to peace: changes in the types of violence

Instead of signing peace, they signed violence.
(Quoted in Moser and McIlwaine, 2000: 27).
The internal armed conflict in Guatemala, lasting from 1960 to 1996, has been the longest and bloodiest war ever in the Central American region.

The conflict started as a traditional ideological conflict between a left-oriented guerrilla movement and the counterinsurgency strategy of the army. But if the conflict started in a cold war geopolitical context, the peace process (lasting from 1987 to 1996) evolved in a post-cold war environment. The conflict shared many characteristics of recent complex political emergencies: extreme violence against civilian populations; massive forced displacement; and use of paramilitary structures.

The recent report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH, 1999) documents the extreme and brutal violence that characterised the conflict. There were 200,000 victims of arbitrary execution and forced disappearance; 200,000 refugees; one million internally displaced people. In the most striking part of the report, the commission describes the massacres and devastation of the Mayan people (who form 60 per cent of the population) and typifies as genocide the counter-insurgency policy of the state in the 1980s.

Understanding war: causes, consequences and functions

In general, the studies published on the war in Guatemala apply two basic approaches: the examination of consequences of war and the analysis of historical roots. There is no systematic effort to apply to Guatemala the political economy approach and to understand the functions of war.

The impact of war and its historical roots

Two prominent recent reports about the armed conflict in Guatemala, one by the Catholic church and the other by the UN-sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH, 1999; CEH, 1999), share the methodology of studying the war by compiling people’s testimonies. The Catholic Church Human Rights Office (ODHA) collected 6,500 testimonies which reported a massive 55,000 human rights abuses. Two days after the publication of the report on 26 April 1998, Bishop Juan Gerardi, director of the ODHA was brutally murdered. The CEH collected 9,000 testimonies, which together reported 42,000 victims.

The two reports represent a combination of an examination of the impact of war and a positive peace approach, which stresses the historical roots. In particular the Catholic church is more concerned with describing the consequences from the point of view of victims; the CEH meanwhile focuses its analysis more on the historical causes.

The ODHA report is essentially a report of the victims — ‘a book of martyrs’ (ODHA, 1999: Foreword). The voices of the victims are particularly impressive because they reflect two aspects: the negative effects of the violence on both survivors and perpetrators; and the strategies for coping and the different mechanisms of resistance.

The CEH report underlines the causes of war in these terms: ‘Parallel phenomena such as structural injustice, the closing of political spaces, racism, the increasing exclusionary and anti-democratic nature of institutions … are the underlying factors which determined the origin and subsequent outbreak of the armed confrontation’ (CEH, 1999: 19). International factors are included in the analysis of
causes: ‘The movement of Guatemala towards polarisation, militarisation and civil war was not just the result of national history. The cold war also played an important role’ (ibid.).

Significantly, the protagonists of the peace process interviewed for this investigation share a common vision of the causes, very similar to that presented by the two reports. According to Humberto Preti, a representative of the powerful agribusiness and landowning sector, the main cause of war has been ‘the closing of political spaces, the impossibilities for some groups to express their ideas, aggravated by the pressure of the cold war’ (Interview: July, 2000). In the opinion of the economist Juan Alberto Fuentes, there are three interlinked causes: ‘the halting of the democratic process in 1954 due to North American intervention; economic modernisation during the 1960s of an exclusive nature that created inequalities and imbalances; and all of that in the context of a bi-polar world during the cold war’ (Interview: July, 2000). The political and human rights activist Nineth Montenegro affirms: ‘the causes of the war are essentially poverty, lack of opportunities, racism and social injustice. These structural roots have precluded the possibility for the Guatemalan people of defining their own project of state and society’ (Interview: July, 2000).

**The functions of violence: a political economy of war**

Among the different actors involved with the peace process there is a certain resistance to interpreting the Guatemalan conflict in terms of functions. General Balconi, former defence minister (1996–7) excludes the existence of specific functions beyond the ideological struggle: ‘the war was fought for political reasons and the foreign geopolitical interests played a significant role, but I do not believe that the army had any different interest from defending the state and the people’ (Interview: July, 2000). The former leader of the insurgent group Rodrigo Asturias is clear to deny the existence of short-term interests:

> the war lasted for 36 years because social conditions would not let it end. Some say that war was like a business for the army, and that is why they didn’t defeat us. But I don’t believe that it was artificially prolonged. The truth is that they did everything possible to defeat us, and they were not able to (Interview: July, 2000).

Significantly, the representative of the landowners strongly agrees with the idea of economic functions, but attributed only to the army and the guerrillas the existence of vested interests:

> It is true that the guerrillas and the army had reason to prolong the war, because they both benefited from the conflict. I remember that often plantation owners got angry because they passed information to the army about the guerrillas’ location, and the army did nothing: obviously they were not interested in finishing off the guerrillas (Interview: July, 2000).

A systematic study of the political economy of war in Guatemala is clearly too ambitious in this context, but it would be useful here to present some possible paths of analysis, showing how promising a more substantive effort to understand the functions of war might be.
Cooperative conflict

David Keen has posited a hypothesis about the possible existence of forms of cooperative conflict in Guatemala, noting that ‘some 40,000 Guatemalan soldiers, plus around 500,000 members of army-backed civil patrols failed to bring under control the 2,000-strong URNG rebel group, despite the fact that it had not posed a major threat to the government since the mid-1980s’ (Keen, 1998: 20). This hypothesis cannot be confirmed on the basis of the analysis of secondary sources: the most important historical interpretations of war in Guatemala do not include any references to examples of direct cooperation between the parties.

If, on the one hand, the cooperative conflict did not assume the form of open collaboration; on the other, there has been undoubtedly a long period of peace negotiations in which the major interest of the two parties was continuing the war in order to assure a more convenient political settlement in the future. In other words there were no shared economic aims, but there could have been shared political aims.

It is very dangerous, however, to apply to Guatemala any interpretation which tries to associate the two parties in a common framework, as it could be seen as an attempt to balance the responsibility for the different crimes committed. It is impossible to deny that, as stated firmly by the CEH, the state of Guatemala — particularly the army — holds an historic responsibility for crimes against humanity including genocide.

Rationality of war

The horror and magnitude of violence unleashed in Guatemala during the civil war could give the impression of a situation of lack of control, dominated by mindless and irrational acts of brutality. But this interpretation serves as a justification for those who are interested in maintaining the silence, because these acts were planned coldly and rationally. As Jennifer Schirmer observes:

Without a structural analysis of violence as intrinsic to the logic of counterinsurgency, a regime that violates human rights seems to occur simply because of uncontrollable, bloodlusting commanders. … Rather than being irrational and out of control, many of these militaries are precisely in control and acting in their own best interests (1998: 4–5).

Economic interests of the army

The main interest of the army in driving the war of counterinsurgency was essentially political, in terms of control of state power. But some military officers clearly benefited economically from the continuation of war. It is generally recognised that during the military government in the 1970s, some military officers received rewards for loyalty to the dictator (General Carlos Arana, 1970–74) in the shape of numerous lands in the northern regions of Petén and Franja Transversal del Norte (ODHA, 1999: 207).

The situation of corruption and the multiplication of economic benefits for the army was even more evident during the regimes of General Kyell Laugerud (1974–8) and General Lucas Garcia (1978–82). Different analysts document the situation of ‘economic institutionalisation of the army’; in particular Jennifer Schirmer remarks:
These high-ranking military officers took charge of some 43 semi-autonomous state institutions, created their own Department of Radio and Television, and created a financial network that today still includes a publishing house, credit institutions, cement works, parking garages, the Institute for Military Social Security and the Army Bank (1998: 19).

Importantly, in the 1990s the excessive economic power of the army created a situation of tension between the military and business sector, as reported by ODHA:

A silent tug-of-war was taking place between businessmen and army officers. Since January 1991 the business community had realised that any attempt to adjust or reduce the public sector would run up against the army’s economic interests, which were apparent at every level of government. Moreover the peace process … offered an opportunity to try to dislodge the army’s economic power while avoiding direct confrontation (1999: 276).

Economic interests of the guerrilla leaders

In the case of the guerrilla leaders, the different investigations conducted so far do not detect a profiteering attitude. Probably only some local leaders profited from their new powerful status garnering personal and economic advantages, especially during the early 1980s, when following the rapid expansion of the guerrilla movement, many combatants took on leadership tasks without having the necessary political background and profited from their power for short-term aims.

This phenomenon has been called ‘criminal drift’ by Ivon Le Bot (1992: 249) and described in these terms by Camacho and Menjivar: ‘in 1981, year of revolutionary enthusiasm, the organisation spread without ideological orientation. Some regional leaders were converted into powerful local chiefs, abandoning the revolutionary ideals and becoming criminals, involved in rape, racketeering and abuse of the solidarity funds’ (1985: 106–7).

Economic needs of the population

One of the main reasons why members of the poor rural population were receptive to the message of the first guerrilleros and collaborated with them was the hope of improving their economic prospects.

The army understood perfectly that the real motivation for the growth of the guerrilla numbers was not ideological but essentially economic. For this reason General Rios Montt’s regime (1982–3) designed a comprehensive National Plan for Security and Development, as an essential element of its counterinsurgency campaign. The main objective of the plan was to provide ‘development within a context of rational and effective security’. One area of action was called Economic Stability and its objective was ‘to reverse the economic hardships that have contributed to the subversion’ (Guatemalan Army, 1982).

The militarisation of daily life and the creation of paramilitary groups by the army created the conditions for increasing not only control of the population but also new mechanisms and processes of exploitation and self-enrichment:
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Obligatory participation in the Civilian Self-defence Patrols (PACs) shattered community life. The patrols’ militarised hierarchical structure imposed new forms of authority. … This militarised authority elevated the social status of some community members and was frequently used for personal gain’ (ODHA, 1999: 45).

Political functions of war

It is important to underline that a major goal throughout the Guatemalan conflict has been the weakening or elimination of political opposition. David Keen draws on the analysis of the Commission for Historical Clarification to note that in Guatemala guerrilla groups did not have the strength or numbers to pose a serious threat to the Guatemalan state: the widespread attacks on civilians served a much wider function than simply suppressing the guerrillas, namely the suppression of a wide band of political and cultural opposition (2000b: 6).

These observations about the functions of war in Guatemala are not exhaustive. The task of understanding the civil conflict in terms of the political economy remains an interesting challenge for future research. In the next section an analysis of the peace process will be attempted using the analytical framework proposed.

A critical analysis of the peace process: can it be ‘firm and lasting’?

On 29 December 1996, the insurgent forces and the government of Guatemala signed the ‘Agreement for Firm and Lasting Peace’. To see if the promise of lasting peace has been converted into reality, it might be useful to study the process in Guatemala applying a both a positive peace and a political economy approach.

Guatemala after the civil war: a structural analysis of violence

Following Galtung’s interpretation, one can analyse the situation of direct, structural and cultural violence in Guatemala after the end of the civil war.

The direct violence has not stopped with the end of the war but has assumed new forms: in particular, crime and delinquency. A World Bank study paints an alarming picture of the country: ‘With homicide rates of 34 per 100,000 inhabitants, Guatemala is currently considered the most violent country in Central America … these figures signify that Guatemala has become a substantially more violent country since the end of the internal armed conflict’ (Moser and McIlwaine, 2000).

While the World Bank report employs qualitative methodology and participatory assessment, other studies on violence in Guatemala reach similar conclusions on the basis of statistical elements: in particular the UNDP (1999: 88) observes that the overall crime rate in Guatemala has risen constantly since 1995.

The UN Verification Mission for Guatemala (MINUGUA), in recent reports, has studied the violence, observing that ‘one of the main factors militating against the
enjoyment of human rights is criminal violence’ (1998). Three aspects are serious sources of preoccupation for MINUGUA: the existence of illegal security forces linked with the paramilitary structures of the past; the tendency of people to take justice into their own hands, whether through lynchings or through ‘social cleansing’ operations (1998); the recent increase in human rights violations.6

**Structural violence**

In the period between July 2000 and July 2001, the UN mission registered 88 cases of lynchings, with 190 victims and 37 fatalities: ‘lynchings are taking place in particular in the communities that were most affected by the armed conflict. Frequently local authorities, ex-members of civil defence committees or military commissioners have been under investigation’ (MINUGUA, 2001a). The definition of structural violence proposed by Galtung includes inequalities in the distribution of resources and power: different studies have shown the persistence of economic and political structural violence in Guatemala.

The most recent available figures show a critical situation of great poverty and inequality. Guatemala ranks at number 120 on the 2000 Human Development Index (HDI), making it the second-least-developed country in the Americas after Haiti (UNDP, 2000a). The UNDP observes that 54 per cent of the Guatemalan population live below the UN-defined poverty line and up to 23 per cent live in extreme poverty (UNDP, 2001). Life expectancy in 2000 was 64 years — the lowest in Central America (UNDP, 2000a). The illiteracy rate in 2000 was 33 per cent, the second highest in Latin America, again after Haiti (ibid.). The infant mortality rate was 52 per 1,000 in 1998, the highest in Central America (ibid.). The Gini Coefficient, measuring income inequality, in 1998–9 was 0.55, one of the worst in Central America. In 1998, the wealthiest 20 per cent of the population attracted 30 times more income than the poorest 20 per cent (UNDP, 2000a). More precisely, the richest 20 per cent of the population shared 60 per cent of national income; with the poorest 20 per cent sharing 2 per cent (UNDP, 2000b). Guatemala, together with Brazil and South Africa, has the most unequal income distribution in the world (UNDAF, 2000). Another problem in Guatemala is that the land tenure distribution is the most unequal in Latin America (Jonas, 1999: 181). In fact, 65 per cent of private land is held by only 2 per cent of productive units (Accord, 1997).

The situation of uneven distribution and inequality seems to worry the international institutions quite seriously. According to the World Bank, ‘lasting peace and faster growth require not only the cessation of violence, but addressing Guatemala’s poverty and social inequality’ (World Bank, 1997: 14). UN institutions in Guatemala recognise that ‘the main obstacle in Guatemala is combating social exclusion … which has three basic roots: the uneven economic model; the weakness of the democratic rule of law; the discriminatory culture, marginalising indigenous people and women’ (UNDAF, 2000: 5, 8).

**Political structural violence: a fragile democracy**

The transition from authoritarianism to participatory democracy is clearly one of the most ambitious aims of the peace process. Opinions on the democratisation of Guatemala are contrasting. One author, Susanne Jonas, considers that even if the
question of social justice has not been totally addressed, ‘the negotiation process was a
great step forward for Guatemalan democracy’ (1999: 96), in particular for its
contribution to demilitarisation. Jennifer Schirmer thinks that the democracy currently
existing in Guatemala is actually a new form of violence, resulting from the military
and political project started by the coup of 1982: the Peace Accords ‘represent for the
army the final institutionalisation of their strategic project to win the war militarily and
politically by ‘neutralising’ and reinserting the guerrilla into political life’ (1998: 270).

It is evident that social participation has not been a fundamental pattern of the
peace process, despite the important role played by the Civil Society Assembly (ASC)
during the negotiation: actually the three main actors of the peace process: the
guerrillas, the government and the UN, represent the interests of particular elites,
conducted the negotiations secretively and are still the major protagonists of the
implementation process. The challenge of implementation consists in creating
conditions of real participation for the sectors traditionally excluded, in particular
women and indigenous people.

Cultural violence
Following Galtung, we can consider cultural violence as a process of legitimisation of
direct and structural violence. In particular, in relation to Guatemala, there are two
aspects of legitimisation of violence: one is related to the situation of discrimination
against indigenous people, the other to the legacy of war.

Discrimination against indigenous people
In terms of discrimination, it is important to emphasise that the figures related to the
social indicators are more extreme in relation to indigenous groups. Only 10.5 per cent
of the indigenous population lives above the poverty line in contrast to 26 per cent for
the Latino population (UNDP, 1998). The illiteracy rate for the indigenous population
is 56 per cent (versus a national illiteracy rate of 36 per cent) (UNDAF, 2000). The
exclusion from public services is also much more prevalent among the indigenous
people. Only 55.2 per cent of these have access to potable water (as compared to 70.4
per cent of the non-indigenous population). Further, 18.8 per cent of the indigenous
population has access to the sewage system (versus 43.7 per cent of the non-indigenous
population). Finally, only 50.9 per cent of the indigenous population have access to
electricity (in contrast to 74.8 per cent of the non-indigenous population) (UNDP,
2000b).

The Agreement on Indigenous Rights recognises very clearly the situation of
historic discrimination: ‘indigenous people have been particularly subject to de facto
levels of discrimination, exploitation and injustice, on account of their origin, culture
and language’ (Armon et al., 1997: 41). In Guatemala the subtle and structural
discrimination represents one of the major obstacles to the achievement of a lasting
peace. As Rachel Sieder states, ‘a new indigenous consciousness has emerged and a
degree of political consensus has been achieved. The national process of realising
indigenous rights, however, has only just begun’ (op. cit.: 73). According to the UN,
‘almost five years after the signing of the Peace Accords ... the country’s ethnic
diversity is still not recognized and valued as one of its sources of wealth, and
indigenous people continue to be subjected to strong racial, ethnic and cultural discrimination, which undermines their basic human rights’ (MINUGUA, 2001b).

**Legacy of war: a culture of fear and impunity**

One particularly important dimension of cultural violence is related to the impact of the conflict in Guatemalan society. Terror followed by impunity for its perpetrators have been two interlinked dimensions of the counterinsurgency. The combination of terror and impunity has created the culture of silence and fear, probably the most pervasive and destructive aspect of cultural violence. An interesting recent study considers Guatemala as ‘one of the most significant examples of society of fear … fear as the institutional, cultural and psychological repercussion of violence’ (Koonings and Krujit, 1999: 15).

Anthropologist Linda Green proposes a challenging description of daily life in war-torn Guatemala, observing that the routinisation of terror and the socialisation of violence still dominate in indigenous communities:

> A war continues in Guatemala today, even though it is a war called peace. The 1996 Peace Accords failed to address the fundamental problems in Guatemalan society, those of land and impunity … Such violence and impunity have become embedded in daily life. … In the communities of Guatemala today fear remains a way of life (1999: 172).

The UN Verification Mission is particularly worried about the persistence of impunity:

> the Mission, which from its very earliest reports identified impunity as the main obstacle to the effective enjoyment of human rights, notes with profound concern that it is an entrenched phenomenon. No real progress has been made in the prosecution of the majority of the most serious and representative cases of human rights violations (MINUGUA, 2001a).

**A political economy of the peace process**

In order to apply a political economy approach to the analysis of the peace process, we should ask some key questions. One is: how have the interests of elites and ordinary people been taken into account in the peace process? Another is: what does the reconstruction offer in terms of incentives to those who were promoting top-down and bottom-up violence?

It is important to recognise that a negotiation process is necessarily a process dominated by elites: as Susanne Jonas affirms, ‘a peace negotiation is a matter of cold calculations of power and advantage by two warring parties, by all standards the most Machiavellian of events’ (1999: 1). In the case of Guatemala it is clear that the interest of the elites representing the groups dominating the state, the organised private sector and the army, have been seriously considered.

In her research, Rachel McClearly analyses the transition in Guatemala as a process dominated by the power and the interests of two major elites groups: the organised private sector and the military. They reached a strategic unity around two major transitions, from authoritarianism to democracy and from import-substituting
industrialisation to economic liberalisation: ‘The two transitions in Guatemala did not occur through a bottom-up violent revolution. Rather they occurred through elite accommodation’ (1999: 195).

The army has benefited from the process in many ways. First, the military agreed to get involved in the negotiations, obtaining the guarantee of a wide-ranging amnesty for human rights violations committed during the armed conflict; second, the army has maintained the hegemonic power in society. The role of the army during the transition from war to peace has been carefully studied by Schirmer who considers that ‘the politico-military project which arose from the March 1982 coup reconfigured the bureaucracy of the state for a co-governance of military and civilians alike, leaving unchanged the structures of military autonomy and power’ (1998: 258).

This interpretation probably does not take into account the important process of demilitarisation promoted by the Peace Accords, but it is substantially correct in underlining the hegemonic power of the army. Demilitarisation is happening in terms of reduction of personnel, but without changes in the military doctrine and budget. It is particularly worrying to see the process of multiplying functions that involves the army: in particular the increasing cooperation of the army with the national police in the fight against crime is clearly opposite to the spirit of the Peace Accords. Recently, the UN mission and the human rights organisations have observed that there has been a notable increase in the national budget for the army. This is completely unjustified in a time of ‘peace’.

The other social actor representing the elite is the organised private sector. The modern business community accepted the peace process recognising that there were significant economic incentives to end the war such as: the possibility of overcoming international isolation; the opportunity to qualify for international aid; the integration in the global market. Rachel McClearly has underlined the indispensable role of the Co-ordinating Committee of Farming, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations (CACIF): ‘the umbrella organisation representing the elites became the negotiator par excellence for the private sector … The organised private sector by remaining united contributed to the transition to democracy’ (1999: 189).

This analysis is correct in understanding the central role of the business sector, but overlooks the ambiguous participation of this sector in the peace process: although invited, CACIF refused to participate in the Civil Society Assembly (ASC), but during the talks on the Socio-economic Accord, the business sector exerted a strong pressure on the government to influence the negotiation. As a result, the interests of landowners are clearly reflected in the Socio-economic Accord: ‘there are no provisions for structural changes in land tenure, while the notion of social property is entirely absent. In terms of underlying philosophy it is CACIF’s vision which predominated’ (Accord, 1997: 78).

The guerrilla national leaders of the former insurgent force URNG were clear beneficiaries of the peace process. We can consider in particular the following four benefits. Political legitimisation, in terms of obtaining a political space for the creation of a party. An important share of the international co-operation, especially funds for demobilisation and incorporation into the legal sphere. Guarantees concerning the security of former commanders. The application of a partial amnesty referred to the sufferings caused to the civilian population by the insurgent forces. The price to pay for these advantages has probably been very high, as noted by Anne Vinegard:

seeking insertion into the political process as a party of the moderate left with Guatemala’s socio-economic problems still unresolved, URNG may find it
difficult to escape association with the status quo … if the re-incorporation of this left results in no more than an expanded electoral politics which fails to attend the needs of the vast bulk of the population, the alternative that the URNG claims to represent may not be much of an alternative after all (1998: 225).

While the elites have substantially benefited from the peace process, the same cannot be said for ordinary people. It is evident that the Peace Accords do not offer clear benefits and evident tangible results in the short term for those historically excluded from the political process. In particular the condition of extreme poverty in rural areas has not substantially changed since the end of the civil war. The absence of any tangible effects resulting from the peace process in terms of improvements to the conditions of life for ordinary people seems to be the principal concern of the UN:

The deep-seated resistance with which those who benefit from the status quo greet any attempts to bring about change is fuelled by the absence of tangible, visible effects of the peace process. … For that reason it is essential … to pay special attention to those areas where the social debt is most pressing (MINUGUA, 1999a).

The situation of the historically excluded social actors is particularly critical:

It has not been possible to ensure for the population the widespread enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights and to fulfil the expectations generated after the signing of the peace agreements. ... For that reason, a large part of the population, especially the most disadvantaged sectors, such as indigenous people, women and poor peasants have yet to feel the benefits of peace (MINUGUA, 2001a).

This situation creates an increasing feeling of disillusion towards the peace accords among the ordinary people, clearly interpreted by the indigenous leader Rosalina Tuyuc:

Ordinary people have not benefited from the peace accords, especially not the direct victims. Maybe there has been some reconciliation, some rapprochement between the heads of the army, the guerrilla, and the economic elites. But there has not been any real reconciliation with the victims. Out in the communities there is still a breakdown in communication and trust. There is an atmosphere of fear and impunity (Interview: July, 2000).

The recent electoral success (in December of 1999) of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) political party, founded by the former Dictator General Rios Montt, increases the sense of frustration and disappointment for the war victims and survivors. Significantly, the Guatemalan Nobel Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú started a legal battle in the Spanish courts against Rios Montt, currently president of the congress, and other high officers accused of genocide, claiming that a people who forget the past and accept the impunity are not able to build a future of lasting peace.

It is not the aim of this article to analyse the role and the impact of international institutions such as UN and international cooperation in the peace process. It is important to observe, however, that the international actors have been strongly
implicated in the war and the peace, with a particular agenda and interests. Although the presence of the international community has undoubtedly contributed to the end of isolation for Guatemala and to the opening of democratic spaces, an interesting study conducted by Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce shows clearly that the international agenda has not always brought benefits to the majority of people in Guatemala. According to these authors, the international financial and development institutions began in the 1990s to incorporate ‘civil society strengthening’ into their portfolios. But ‘the civil society discourses from above and from the outside can marginalize and even supplant aspirations from below’ (Howell and Pearce, 2001: 147). There is particularly the risk of ‘depoliticization: the institutional logic of donors leads them into a “project” focus inappropriate to highly complex sociopolitical processes’ (ibid.). In conclusion:

international donors have helped preserve and expand fragile political spaces in Guatemala, but many of the organized voices among the poor of Guatemala know that this comes as part of a package that includes the country’s deeper integration into the global capitalist economy (op. cit.: 172).

Conclusions

The theoretical aim of this paper was to explore and understand the links between peace and development studies, between causes and functions of violence. In the first part the emphasis is on how promising such an integrated and interdisciplinary perspective could be. The second part of the article proposes an interpretation of war and peace in Guatemala both in terms of the multiple dimensions of violence and in terms of winners and losers in the different processes. This analysis leads to challenging policy implications.

If on the one hand we apply a positive peace approach, we can highlight some strategic areas for peace building related to the different dimensions of violence. In particular, peace building should deal with two basic aspects of violence: the violence of the past (legacy of war) and the violence of the present (violence in peacetime). Dealing with the past means promoting the reconciliation process, overcoming violence in peacetime means defining a development strategy.

If on the other hand, we apply the political economy approach, we have to take into account when defining the concrete policies for each strategic area, both the interests and needs of the elite and of ordinary people. Considering the conditions of extreme inequality and poverty of Guatemala, however, the needs of the ordinary people should be prioritised and not all the interests of the elites can be taken into account. On the basis of this analysis, we can trace possible paths for a lasting peace. First, in relation to reconciliation it is important to look for a pragmatic approach, taking into account the necessity of rebuilding new relationships and trust in society, without offending the dignity of victims and survivors. A possible suggestion formulated by the Commission for Historical Clarification is the application of the right to justice for the most serious violations (crimes against humanity), accompanied by the full respect of the rights to reparation and the right to truth. Second, in relation to development, it is essential to propose a long-term strategy that takes into account the root causes of war. In fact in Guatemala large-scale violence has been accompanied by structural repression, so that reconciliation is directly related to the distribution of
power and resources: the truth-telling process must be then complemented by a focus on social justice.

There are four essential structural changes needed. One is an integral strategy for public security that assures the progressive demilitarisation of the society and the eradication of poverty. The second is a strengthening of mechanisms, processes and institutions for participatory democracy. The third is a more equal distribution of resources through a progressive tax reform and an even redistribution of land. Finally, there needs to be the building of a multicultural society based on the effective affirmation of indigenous rights.

Two general aspects of a strategy for lasting peace should be underlined. The first is that any policy should be based on a rigorous analysis of the causes and functions of violence: overcoming the structural roots and understanding the benefits of war are essential elements for building peace. The second is that despite the tendency of the international community to impose a model of reconstruction based on universal recipes (democratisation, free markets, rule of law), solutions cannot be imported and peace has to be built by the people themselves: the role of civil society in defining the priorities of a peace process is crucial. In particular it is necessary to promote the active participation of the excluded sectors of the society in a construction of a ‘common project of nationhood’ (CEH, 1999: 48). If the almost 80 per cent of the population living in poverty remain marginalised from the process, for them peace will be only another form of violence, as sharply expressed by an indigenous community leader:

The armed conflict, yes it is over — the war of guns, the war of armies — but for us this doesn’t mean very much because the war of hunger, misery and poverty still goes on in our community (Guatemala Solidarity Network, 1999).

Notes

1. The author worked in Guatemala in the United Nations Verification Mission (MINUGUA) and in the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) from December 1994 to August 1999. After a period of research and study at the London School of Economics, LSE, the author returned to Guatemala in July 2001, working in a development programme with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

2. Galtung combines the analysis of positive peace with the theory of human needs (see Galtung, 1990).

3. In the critique of the positive peace and political economy approaches it is employed a methodology proposed by David Keen: 1. What assumptions are the writers making? 2. Do they present sufficient evidence to support their case? 3. What evidence have they not taken into account (which silences should we note?)?

4. As Wiberg observes commenting on Galtung’s work, ‘empirical results are mainly relegated to footnotes, with little claim to provide proofs’ (Wiberg, 1997: 199–200).

5. This critical assessment is addressed particularly to the work of David Keen.

6. The decline of political violence was being accompanied by a reduction of human rights violation since 1996. However, since 1999, this decline has come to a halt: ‘the number of confirmed violations was considerably higher than in the previous period’ (MINUGUA, 1999b). In the most recent MINUGUA report it is observed: ‘It is the State’s inability to safeguard human rights that has made the public feel defenceless and has increased tolerance for illegal, increasingly violent phenomena such as lynchings and “social cleansing”... The Mission’s overall findings confirm that the human rights situation is not
improving and that...there are renewed signs that it might be deteriorating’ (MINUGUA, 2001).
8. The Law of National Reconciliation, approved in December 1996, does not offer blanket amnesty: for the crimes of genocide, torture and forced disappearance, the extinction of criminal liability is not allowed.
9. See the definition of ‘just and lasting reconciliation’ proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Impunity Joinet (UN Document E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/20/Rev.1).

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