Genocide and State Terrorism in Guatemala, 1954–1996: An Interpretation

CARLOS FIGUEROA IBARRA

Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Mexico

The case of Guatemala is paradigmatic of the enormous capacity for violence that can be unleashed by a state and ruling group faced with the threat of rebellion. Unlike countries such as Colombia where there are a variety of killers, in Guatemala the institutions of the state were mainly responsible for the extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances of approximately 200,000 Guatemalans (ODHA, 1998; CEH, 1999; Ball, Kobrak and Spirer, 1999). If we compare the case of this small Central American country with the crimes against humanity committed in other Latin American countries during the twentieth century, both in absolute and proportional terms Guatemala has the dubious honour of being number one.

According to data from the Commission of Relatives of those Killed and Disappeared for Political Reasons and of the Institute for the Study of State Violence in Brazil, there were ‘only’ 136 disappeared during the years of the military dictatorships, mostly between 1970 and 1975 (CFMDP/IEVE, 1995–1996). A preliminary report from the National Commission for the Protection of Human Rights in Honduras, records ‘only’ 179 cases of disappearances in the country between 1980 and 1993 (CNPDH, 1993). In Argentina, the report from the National Commission on Disappearances, entitled Never Again (see Chapter 7), records 600 cases of kidnappings before the military coup of March 1976 and 8,960 between that date and 1983. The great majority of the forced disappearances in Argentina were concentrated between 1975 and 1978 (Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 1996). These 9,540 victims are from documented cases, especially in four years of the 1970s, during the counter-insurgency ‘dirty war’ carried out by the military dictatorships. In Argentina, these more than 9,000 cases are only a third of the 30,000 disappeared reported in conventional estimates. In the study of what happened during the genocide in Guatemala, it is not a question of repeating the syndrome noted by a specialist in the Armenian genocide: genocidal killing turns genocide itself into a unique experience for
the victim (Dadrian, 2005: 75). Despite its cruelty, the genocide in Guatemala pales in comparison with the Armenian and Jewish genocides, as well as the experiences in the second half of the twentieth century: Iraq (1988–1991) with 180,000 dead, Uganda (1972–1979/1980–1986) with between 400 and 500,000 victims, Sudan (1956–1972) and South Vietnam (1965–1975) with similar numbers, Pakistan (1971) with between 1,000,000 and 3,000,000 dead, Rwanda (1994) with between 500,000 and 1,000,000 dead, and Kampuchea (1975–1979) with between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 victims (Harff, 2005: 179).

Despite those shocking figures, it can be agreed that, with a territory of 108,000 square kilometres and a population from 2 to 10 million during the internal conflict (1954–1996), 200,000 victims is a substantial number. It is the largest number in Latin America. This is one motive for my reflections on Guatemala and a powerful reason making such reflection necessary.

**Violence, Terror, State Terrorism**

In basic terms, violence is an act of power. But not every act of power is violent. Violence is an action that implies the use of physical force, or the threat of it, to impose the will of who is exercising that physical force or threat upon the person who is the object of that action. Thus, violence is an act of domination that expresses a social relationship, at least between the person that exercises it in the interests of an objective of power and the person who is victim of that action. Since violence is a phenomenon that has always existed, it is easy to be tempted to associate it with human character. But there is another answer to the origin of violence: that it is a product of socialisation. The first explanation is based on the assumption that a ‘human essence’ exists, and the second assumes that this essence has historicity (Figueroa Ibarra, 2001: 16).

One argument, worthy of the common sense that is often put forward, lends the violence an ‘animal nature’, or an irrational bad habit that alienates us from what is human. Again we find in this kind of argument a quite common way of thinking: transforming into natural that which is social (Figueroa Ibarra, 2001: 14). In reality, as Santiago Genovés says, the roots of violence are not something innately human, but are in the culture, nor are those roots found in the bad animal habits that we humans still have (Genovés, 1993: 83, 111). As a rational phenomenon, violence is a human trait, since ‘only man can be violent’ (Sánchez Vázquez, 1980: 427–480).

As an act of power, in the broadest sense every act of violence is a political act. Thus, politics is a sphere to which violence is closely linked, because it is almost implied by the very notion of power: the ability to impose one’s own will on others, given a determined balance of forces. This is why there
is no lack of people who define violence as a link in which one of those who is linked ‘exercises his or her accumulated power’ (Izaguirre, 1997: 3). Violence can be an act of domination and also an act of resistance. As an act of domination, violence is a means to impose privileges arising from power and wealth, while as an act of resistance it is also a means to avoid or destroy this imposition.

Just as not every act of power is an act of violence, not every act of violence is necessarily an act of terror. An act of violence becomes an act of terror when it has the premeditated purpose of destroying spiritually the victim or victims, by way of the fear it instills. Violence, like terror, seeks to destroy the will of the person (who is the target of this terror) to do or stop doing something. In the case of terrorism carried out as an act of domination, the violence seeks to destroy the victim’s will of transformation (Figueroa Ibarra, 1991: 37). Like violence, terror can become an act of domination or an act of resistance. Not only those who resist commit acts of terrorism; also those that dominate do so. Furthermore, terrorism is probably an act of violence preferred by the strong and powerful (Chomsky, 2001). By terrorism, it should be understood as every act of violence that seeks to instill extreme fear in the adversary, and which is carried out by means of acts of violence that do not distinguish between civilian and military objectives (Figueroa Ibarra, 2002: 16). Indiscriminate violence carried out with the conscious objective of instilling extreme terror is the essence of terrorism. This definition is valid for those forces in civil society who resist by making use of this evil method, as well as those forces from the state level that use this method to subjugate people.

When we talk of carrying out actions of indiscriminate violence from the state level that seek to instill extreme fear, we are speaking of state terrorism. Generally these actions have counter-insurgency purposes, that is, they are carried out when there is a situation of intense or broad rebelliousness in a society and in a given territory. In these situations, the violence unleashed by the state is intrinsic to it at its most extreme, illegal and illegitimate levels.

The Legality, Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of State Terrorism in Guatemala

In normal times, Max Weber has stated, the state is just ‘a relationship of domination that is maintained by means of legitimate violence’; the modern state is an association of domination with institutional character, which has succeeded in monopolising legitimate physical violence as a means of domination in a given territory (Weber, 1974: 45, 92, 184). Actually, a state can exercise violence, legally and therefore legitimately, if it goes along with the rule of law. If the state does so by resorting to methods that the
law endorses and does so following the national and international legal conventions respecting human rights, according to legal theory and political science it may resort to acts of violence that are legal and thus in general considered legitimate. When a state carries out violent actions that become illegal, it risks losing legitimacy, or losing the acceptance and assent of civil society and of the citizenry in general. It is also a fact that things tend to happen, as in the case of regularities: when a state faces periods of rebellion of significant sections of society, it easily falls into illegality regarding the use of violence. In Guatemala, the illegality of the use of violence was manifest in the extreme methods of repression unleashed against the population; these can be described as acts of state terrorism.

As long as a state adhering to legality maintains an internal and external legitimacy, the violence carried out illegally through state terrorism easily becomes clandestine violence. Thus, in these circumstances, the state carries out violence through illegal acts that it seeks to hide. It does so because it does not want to lose legitimacy within the territory that it governs, as well as within the international community. The state that acts in this way violates its own legality, and this act makes it effectively an even larger criminal than usual. It might be that a state openly carries out terrorist forms of violence. Since democracy has become more and more a synonym of good government, open state terrorism tends to be carried out with less and less frequency. Only in those places where democracy is not a commonly accepted value can the state openly carry out acts of terrorism without fearing the loss of legitimacy.

In Guatemala, we have witnessed the above-mentioned regularities or things that tend to happen. Guatemala lies in a region of the world where democracy is usually a commonly accepted value. However, in the context of the Cold War, democracy, in the specific region close to Guatemala, often became an ideological tool wielded by Western capitalism against its communist opponents. Thus, illegal violence, or state terrorism, could not be carried out openly. Furthermore, in Guatemala there was no established democratic tradition, nor a long history of respect for human rights. For that reason, the existence of an internal conflict that developed into an armed one easily led the Guatemalan state to unleash the most abominable repressive actions. However, in order to not lose its national and international legitimacy, the Guatemalan state had to carry out repressive measures, mainly through clandestine means.

The Tools of Counter-Insurgency: Countryside and City

Open state terror always had more possibilities of being carried out in the countryside than in the city. This was because, during the twentieth century, the nation’s capital was the epicentre of the political struggle. There, the
decisive political events were determined in the nation’s most recent history. In general, the cities were nerve centres that the state suppressed, but tended to act as the sites for clandestine state terrorism and, therefore, it kept the democratic cover for the reasons of legitimacy mentioned above. The cities, mainly the largest ones, were showcases where the state made efforts to show the population and the rest of the world that democracy was a fact and that the violence was the work of ‘extremists’.

The extreme signs of structural weakness of the state, seen in the years of the Romeo Lucas García government (1978–1982), meant that these priorities were set aside in the process of building of hegemony – such priorities were established by the degree of difficulty of constituting this hegemony in urban settings – and, thus, open state terrorism tended to replace clandestine terrorism. Nevertheless, because the rural areas became the epicentre of social conflict in the second half of the 1980s, the countryside continued to be the scenario of the most open state terrorism. The Panzós massacre in May 1978, whose most spectacular precursor in recent times was the Sansirisay massacre in May 1973, was but the beginning of a long series of mass and selective murders in which the army, military police, treasury police and military commissioners (civilians attached to the army), as well as elite corps such as the ‘Kaibiles’, participated openly.

Many examples can be given of clandestine terrorism, given the impossibility of using open forms. During the larger part of the various military dictatorships, the Constitution became a material force only in those ways beneficial to the most powerful forces; the democratic and union freedoms in the Constitution had an uncertain existence and, at times they disappeared completely, because, despite union organising being permitted in word, union leaders and activists were murdered, kidnapped or disappeared. Tolerating the registration of a new political party with a democratic character alternated with the murder of its leaders. The officials of the military dictatorships spoke of university autonomy, but at same time implemented new forms of intervention in the universities, so it was not necessary to eliminate university autonomy: employees, teachers, students and workers were murdered, the university president was harassed, the facilities were bombed, and bodies were left on campus with signs of brutal torture, until finally the university institutions were largely dismantled. The division of powers that was constantly spoken of contrasted dramatically with the reality of a parliamentary façade and a president who was just the political power of the army high command personified. The regularity of the presidential, municipal and parliamentary elections contrasted with scandalous electoral fraud.

The state’s need for this democratic façade explains why in large part the so-called death squads carried out the murders, kidnapping and torture. These
squads, which arose between 1966 and 1967, were no more than far-right groups protected by the dictatorship or the army and police apparatus. In civilian dress, they carried out the worst infamies against workers, peasants, students, office workers and intellectuals. Given this situation, the clandestine organisations and regular repressive agencies murdered, in the seven months between 1966 and 1967, more than 4,000 people (Aguilera Peralta, 1969; Maestre, 1969). The Guatemalan state organised state terrorism by trying to appear above it all, and in these years more than ever the legality became a tool of verbal demagogy. This is why the Guatemalan state made what has been called ‘the rupture with its own legality’.

State terrorism, whether open or clandestine, seeks to create, in multiple ways, a certain psychological effect among the people who are its victims. This psychological effect appears as a deep fear, which can even become paranoia, like a sensation of impotence and weakness in the face of the powerful and terrible repressive machine, a feeling of conformity such that one does not try to change what one already knows cannot be changed, a passivity in the face of inequality and oppression, and, lastly, an aversion toward all political or social organisations that reject or oppose the status quo.

In addition to the distinction between open terrorism and clandestine terrorism, it is important to include the difference between selective and mass terrorism. Selective terror was based on the careful selection of potential victims for extrajudicial execution and forced disappearance. Old lists of communists or communist followers, drawn up by the Committee for the Defence of the Nation against Communism, were probably used to draw up the death lists. One of these lists, with the suggestive title ‘Special book for registering the admission and release of individuals of Communist leanings’, turned over to the Committee for the Defence of the Nation against Communism, can be found in the Historic Archives of the National Police (AHPN, 1954–1955). Further, there are police records, lists of criminal histories and reports written by agents from different police agencies. Everything was combined with intelligence work that led the counter-insurgency planners to select victims with a high degree of accuracy.

Under the Lucas García government, the selective terror was preceded by a psychological campaign, which laid the foundations for the timing of the murder or disappearance. This psychological terrorism was implemented at first by means of the public appearance of organisations supposedly unrelated to the state, like the Anti-Communist Secret Army (ESA), which announced its plans to begin a campaign of extermination. The publication in the press of lists of people ‘sentenced to death’, the sending of threatening messages to homes or places of work, and phone calls in the small hours of the night that made clear to the target that each of his or her activities during the day was
under surveillance, were some of the aspects of psychological terrorism. All of these were complemented with the photographs and news that every day were published about the discovery of brutally tortured bodies, or about men and women murdered in the street inside automobiles, on highways and in farm fields (Figueroa Ibarra, 1991: 38–39).

In the final days of the Kjell Laugerud regime (1974–1978) and during the Lucas García government, mass terrorism gradually became the main form of terror. Unlike selective terror, mass terrorism was relatively indiscriminate. The massacres of Indian peasants, carried out under the counter-insurgency scorched-earth policy, were clear examples of mass terror. But even despite its indiscriminate use, mass terror was linked with a process of selectivity. As I will explain later, the massacres were carried out based on a selection process preceded by intelligence work that determined which regions were more under the influence of the insurgents. In May 1978, in the last days of the Laugerud government, mass terror was used to contain a movement of peasant masses in Panzós (a region between the departments of Alta Verapaz and Izabal). This terror was renewed at a time when it was necessary to set a macabre precedent so that no revolutionary action would occur again, as with what happened with the massacre in the Spanish embassy in January 1980. Again, in June and August 1980, its purpose was to disarticulate various trade-union and mass organisations with mass kidnappings of union leaders. But during the seventeen-month de facto government of General Efraín Ríos Montt (March 1982–August 1983), mass terror reached its height (Figueroa Ibarra, 1991; ODHA, 1998; CEH, 1999).

It is fitting to conclude this part of the chapter by suggesting some additional hypotheses on the differences between the countryside and city regarding state terrorism and counter-insurgency. At first sight, it can be said that the Guatemalan state found it more convenient to carry out clandestine terrorism in the cities and open terrorism in the countryside. It has been said that the state did this because any repressive action in the cities was more visible, drew more attention, and therefore had more negative repercussions on its legitimacy. Likewise, selective terror tended to dominate in the cities, while in the countryside, particularly in times of heavy repression, it was easier for the state to carry out mass terror. Lastly, the national and international media did not really have access to what was going on in the remote rural areas. So, in these areas, agents from the Treasury police, sections of the army such as the regular troops, elite corps from the army such as the Kaibiles, or the civilian population organised by the state, such as the Civilian Self-Defence Patrols (PAC), and in general the various repressive agents of the state had no qualms in openly carrying out the most atrocious human rights violations.
Finally, it is also fitting to suggest the hypothesis that, in general terms, there was a kind of division of labour in the repressive tasks. The police agencies focussed on counter-insurgency in the urban areas; the army did likewise in the rural areas. Among other reasons, this may have been due to the very operative necessities that the internal armed conflict imposed; ultimately the insurgency had its strongest strongholds in the rural areas. But there also may have been the necessities born of legitimacy: maintaining the army permanently deployed in the urban areas might have generated a perception of extreme crisis of ungovernability, might have made more clear to people that they were living under the rule of a military dictatorship, and might have contradicted the official line that peace was being preserved and that it was the ‘extremists’ who wanted to upset things.

The Tools of Counter-Insurgency: Extrajudicial Execution and Forced Disappearance

For numerous reasons it would take too long to analyse in this chapter the enormous repressive capacity developed by the ruling classes and the state in Guatemala. Suffice it to say that the colonial legacy of plunder, racism and repression, together with the dictatorial traditions, the anti-communism as the ideological glue of the far right, the rise of the insurgency, and the counter-insurgency advisors from the United States mainly gave form to what has been called the culture of terror (Figueroa Ibarra, 1991, 2006).

It can be said that the social phenomenon that made possible the development of counter-insurgency in the form of large-scale state terrorism was the engendering in the Guatemalan state of a culture of terror that was also the result of the combination of various historical events. By culture of terror we mean the political culture that conceived domination as the unchallenged and unquestioned rule of state power, which thinks the solution to any kind of difference basically lies in the elimination of the other side, which imagines the society as a homogeneous space regarding thought and also as a heterogeneous environment in which class and race designate legitimate differences, which thinks citizenry as just a formality that covers a class reality that it has to maintain, and which, lastly, as a result of all of the above, considers repressive violence to be a legitimate tool to preserve the world shaped according to that imagery (Figueroa Ibarra, 2005).

The accumulation and sharpening of conflicts that capitalist development in Guatemala has generated gave rise to two opposed cultures through which the conflicts that this model generated were manifested. The permanent state instability meant that state terrorism took on an economic aspect, because, though it was an ancestral custom, it became a current necessity in the sense
that it was an indispensable tool for giving continuity to an economic model of exclusion. This exclusion was manifest on both sides of the coin: a weak and unstable state and a civil society with tendencies towards rebelliousness. The combination of these two factors was the basic source of state terror as a structural and permanent phenomenon. The cyclical crises of this combination were the basic source of state terrorism as a conjunctural mass event.

Then, extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances were the basic instruments that the state and ruling groups used to deal with the rebelliousness sparked by a dictatorial regime and capitalist model of exclusion. The extrajudicial executions were linked to the selective terror (murder or disappearance of individuals or small groups of people considered specific targets), but it was also linked to mass terror. Apart from their evilness, the extrajudicial executions had the advantage of eliminating people that were active, or supposedly active, in subversive acts or in the opposition to the military dictatorship. By executing such a person a destabilising factor was eliminated.

But the population was also affected psychologically by the extrajudicial executions as well as the forced disappearances. They generated fear as long as everyone who had played any leading role or was an important activist in the democratic political parties, revolutionary organisations, trade unions, peasant leagues, and neighbourhood or student groups were presumed to be ‘list-able’, and therefore feared that they might be liquidated at any time. Probably, to liquidate a person, state terrorism had among its more valued criteria the determination that the future victim was active in opposition or subversive activities. But, as extrajudicial execution not only sought to liquidate but also to intimidate, it was very probable that the counter-insurgency leaders considered a future victim to be valuable when he or she was broadly known and esteemed and had a wide range of personal relationships. This was done for the simple reason that it created more fear among the people who knew the victim than among those who did not. On the other hand, in the case of the murder or disappearance of leaders, in a way, among broad sections of the people, it was possible to create a sensation of lack of protection, of leadership and, of course, of organisation. As long as the counter-insurgency sought not only to disarticulate opposition and subversive activities, but also to sow terror, it is quite probable that another criterion for selecting victims was the clear lack of active participation in political activities or other struggles. When the victim had no relation to political activities, this increased the terror among those with some degree of participation.

Regarding forced disappearances, it is necessary to begin by saying that it is quite probable that an important number of these disappearances in Guatemala were carried out in the context of some kind of violence
unrelated to political violence. Nevertheless, when the statistics on terror are examined, the quantitative variations of forced disappearances in general coincide with the periods and regions of the country characterised by big societal confrontations, and thus it can be deduced that this has been true in the great majority of cases counted as forced political disappearances.

The forced disappearances in Guatemala during four decades were acts of power mainly carried out by state repressive agencies to stop the subversion of the political and social order imposed after the 1954 counter-revolution. With the forced disappearance of individuals, and even of groups of individuals, the political regime achieved several objectives: to dispose of the body and spirit of the disappeared person, avoid international discredit and internal upheaval caused by the existence of political prisoners, avoid this same discredit as a result of the increase in official figures on deaths for political reasons and, lastly, sow terror among the people and thus destroy the people’s will for transformation. The basic objective of state terrorism, whether through extrajudicial executions or forced disappearances, was to obtain passive consensus in the face of the impossibility of achieving active consensus.

Thus, we can say that, using an extremely evil rationality, the military dictatorships and limited or restricted democratic regimes in Guatemala from the 1960s until the larger part of the 1990s carried out actions of terror, including the forced disappearance of individuals or groups. Two cases of collective forced disappearance were paradigmatic in the recent history of Guatemala. The first occurred on 21 June 1980, when 27 leaders and activists of the National Union of Workers were kidnapped in the union headquarters in downtown Guatemala City. In the second case, seventeen union and student activists were kidnapped on 24 August 1980 while in a meeting in a Catholic centre called Emalús, in the department of Escuintla (Ball, Kobrak and Spirer, 1999). The state violence followed a logic that rationally adapted the means (the terror) to the ends (political re-stabilisation and disarticulation of subversive activity). It can be accepted that this rationality was not based on humanist ethics, but it is not acceptable to deny the rationality of the monstrosities that the Guatemalan people have seen in the past four decades. For example, by having control over the body and spirit of the disappeared person, the state repressive agencies succeeded in obtaining the potential information needed by the counter-insurgency. By making total use of the body of the disappeared man or woman, the repressive apparatus turned torture into an enormously productive means to get the information it needed. This productivity was only limited by the pain thresholds (and also the convictions) of the victim, or by how much time the victim could hold up under torture before dying.
Probably many of the disappeared ended their lives without suffering physical torture. This also illustrates another act of perverse rationality. In this kind of situation, the objective of the disappearance is not to get the necessary information for carrying out the repression more effectively, but rather to eliminate the opponent without political cost, or to be able to freely eliminate the opponent, because if the opponent had been turned over to the judicial apparatus for punishment, it would not have been possible to do this. Until the systematic forced disappearances became part of the political violence, in the cases of opponents or subversives who were captured and imprisoned, they were freed after a certain time. Thus, the quantitative increase of forced disappearances went along with the clear decrease of the role of the political prisoner. In the last third of the twentieth century, in certain circles the phrase was popularized that ‘in Guatemala there are no political prisoners, only disappeared persons’.

The kidnapping and disappearance of thousands of people was an act of political violence. It was an act of power, carried out mainly by the state repressive agencies, in order to stop the subversion of the political and social order that had been developing since the 1954 counter-revolution. With the forced disappearance of individuals, and even of groups of individuals, the Guatemalan state achieved several objectives: the necessary information for the counter-insurgency, the liquidation of political enemies, and the intimidation of the population overall. Thus, the forced disappearances were acts perpetrated essentially by the state or, in concrete terms, by military dictatorships and, from 1986, by the first civilian governments. This was not a capricious act but a political option, because the objective of the different regimes was to annihilate an enemy or make it negotiate within the very unfavourable balance of forces. So it is not surprising that a very important number of the disappeared were people who had decided to carry out peaceful or violent acts of resistance against the situation created in the country from 1954.

Lastly, regarding extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances as instruments of the counter-insurgency operating in the countryside and the city, it is surprising to see that the empirical references to the latter are overwhelmingly in the cities. Relatedly, it can be thought that these acts of forced disappearance seemed more news-worthy for the media than those carried out in remote rural areas. Ball, Kobrak and Spirer state the following: ‘Testimonies and documentary sources from the data bank of the International Center for Research on Human Rights (CIIDH) establish that the violence had an alarming increase in rural areas in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The press in Guatemala missed this completely.’ They go on to confirm the supposition made earlier concerning the considerable data on forced disappearances in the cities: ‘few journalists who live in the capital have managed to report on
the life of the majority of the rural population in Guatemala. Particularly, for reporters with no local contacts, it has been difficult to get to and enter the geographically—and culturally—isolated Mayan communities’ (Ball, Kobrak and Spirer, 1999: 58–61).

However, irrespective of the fact that this may have biased the available empirical information, it might be hypothesised that again this has to do with the necessity of a state forced to wage a dirty war and at the same time conserve its strength, pressed to preserve its legitimacy. If it the hypothesis is plausible that, in the cities, any act of counter-insurgency involving terror had a higher political cost than that carried out in the countryside, then forced disappearances might have been politically more profitable. One of the advantages of forced disappearances is that the state that perpetrates them can claim innocence, or put forward many reasons for the disappearance of a person, not necessarily as a result of an action of counter-insurgency. There are numerous stories of relatives of disappeared persons that record the responses of the authorities to their desperate efforts when they were asking if their loved ones were charged instead of being disappeared: ‘Perhaps they went to the United States without telling you’, ‘Maybe he went off with another woman?’ or ‘Your relative must be in the mountains with the guerrillas’ (Figueroa Ibarra, 1999: 193).

The General Dynamics of the Insurgency in Guatemala: The Cycles of Terror

In an original argument about this kind of violence in Guatemalan sociology, an interpretation of state terrorism was attempted that viewed the level of violence as a direct result of the greater or lesser degree of capitalist development observed in a given region. The regionalisation of the country, based on the different degrees of capitalist development within it, and its correlation with the levels of terror, became crucial in this interpretation.

In summary, the argument goes as follows: in Guatemalan society the system of capitalist production has arisen unequally, and this has generated regions or zones with a greater or lesser degree of capitalist development; in those regions where capitalism has been clearly established, there is an extreme sharpening of class contradictions and, therefore, political violence becomes more likely, including, obviously, state terrorism. This interpretation was based on the analysis of the regions of the country that were affected by the rise of political violence. This analysis confirms that these regions coincided with those where capitalist production had developed more deeply and broadly. So, according to this interpretation, the terror was a predictable result in any class society with large social groupings with antagonistic
political and economic interests, which were exacerbated by the sharpening of the contradictions generated by capitalism and resolved via the class struggle in its highest form (CIDCA, 1979: 40; Aguilera, Romero Imery et al., 1981). ¹

What happened in the period following the years covered in the aforementioned research and publication enabled us to know more about the general dynamics of the counter-insurgency. At the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, the figures on state terror indicate that the regions that previously had not been affected by state violence now were common scenarios of this violence. It is not accurate to argue that a lesser capitalist development generated a less acute class conflict and, therefore, that a marked development of this conflict generated a greater social confrontation.

With what happened in the 1980s it could be confirmed that state repression is something that in general terms has a directly proportional relationship to the level of disobedience or rebellion in civil society. From this we can draw a conclusion that perhaps is a valid regularity or tendency beyond the Guatemalan and Central American cases: the sharper the conflict, the greater the resistance of the people who suffer the most in society, and the greater the violence from the state. The explanation for the selective terror as a constant in the country’s political life and for the big waves of mass terror is to be found in the persistence of rebellions in the second half of the twentieth century. Although among the victims of state terrorism in Guatemala there were people unrelated to the rebellions, it would be a historical injustice to say that essentially they were passive objects of dictatorial cruelty. The big waves of terror in the second half of the twentieth century were the necessary and inevitable response, according to the counter-insurgency logic, to important expressions of mass rebellion and uprising. Selective terror as a constant can be explained by the repressive habits, but also by the fact that in those years the opposition and subversive activities were a constant part of reality.

Since 1954, Guatemalan society has experienced two large insurgent cycles (1962–1967; 1973–1982) and three major waves of terror (1954; 1966–1972; 1978–1983). These periods in the political life of the country were clear signs of the crisis that was generated beginning with the 1954 counter-revolution. Terror as a constant in the political life of the country was the most palpable proof of the necessity of state terrorism for the perpetuation of the society in Guatemala. The first wave of mass terror occurred in the months after the overthrow of the Jacobo Arbenz government in 1954. In addition to the thousands of victims that it left (it is said that there were 3,000 dead and

¹ It is useful to point out that the sociologist Jorge Romero Imery was one of the victims in 1982 of the extrajudicial executions in Guatemala.
disappeared), it had a powerful effect that would become very useful in later years: the propagation of anti-communist paranoia.

The second wave of terror that occurred between late 1966 and 1971–1972 left thousands of dead and disappeared, along with the defeat and almost total destruction of the first guerrilla uprising. There are no records of the number of dead and disappeared for that period, but some estimates affirm that state terrorism murdered 18,000 Guatemalans, in order to annihilate a few hundred rebels (Torres Rivas, 1980). The characteristics of the terror at that time and the histories of horror can be found in the works of Aguilera Peralta (1969) and Maestre (1969). The second wave can be seen in Figure 6.1, which shows what happened in those years. It shows that the figures for the dead and disappeared began to increase in 1966, reached their high point in 1967, and began to decline in 1969. Regarding extrajudicial executions, this maximum seems to extend into 1968, but it also begins to drop the following year (Figueroa Ibarra, 2004, 2006).

The third wave of terror began in 1978, reached its height under the Efraín Ríos Montt government (1982–1983), and ebbed in 1984. In 1978, it began with the Panzós massacre in May, the violent breakup on 4 August of the mass demonstration for economic demands and democratic freedoms, and the murder of student leader Oliverio Castañeda de León on 20 October. Confirming the regularity or tendency mentioned above, the third wave of terror was a response to the rise of a second revolutionary cycle that began with the teachers’ strikes in 1973. This cycle can be divided into two periods. The first is made up of the huge, mass urban and rural struggles between 1973 and 1978, which were dramatically crushed by the first phase of the big wave of terror, begun in 1978. This first phase, based particularly on
selective terror, was aimed at mass, open and peaceful struggles. But there also was a contributing factor to unleashing the second period in this cycle: the widening of the guerrilla insurrection in the country between 1979 and 1982. This second guerrilla cycle was born of the reorganisation process and development of a new conception of the insurgent struggle that occurred within the insurgency after its defeat in the 1960s. In this new cycle, of particular importance was the re-insertion of a new detachment of rebels in the Ixcán area in January 1972 (Payeras, 1981).

In response to the widening of the revolutionary armed struggle, state terrorism increased in a phase of mass terror that, along with an important political realignment within the state, which began to be seen after the 1982 coup d’état, managed to force the revolutionary movement into a new stage of decline beginning in that year. An indication of the counter-insurgency behaviour regarding state terrorism can be seen in Figure 6.2 (Ball, Kobrak and Spirer, 1999; Figueroa Ibarra, 1999). This graph shows that, in the case of forced disappearances – and everything indicates that a similar behaviour can be seen in the extrajudicial executions – two big peaks can been seen in the case of counter-insurgency terror. The first is between 1966 and 1968 and after a decline between 1969–1970, rises again in 1972 and 1973, then declines up to 1977. In 1978, when the General Romeo Lucas García government took power, the counter-insurgency terror figures began to increase, until reaching very high levels during the General Efraín Ríos Montt government of 1982 and 1983.
After 1983, the forced disappearances figures shown in Figure 6.2 begin to decline, but that does not mean that they ended. The third wave of terror declined, beginning with the Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo government (1986–1991), but to say so is somewhat relative. The counter-insurgency terror figures declined under the Cerezo government, but this is only true if we compare the figures on the disappeared at that time with the figures from the previous governments, those of Ríos Montt and General Humberto Mejía Victores. This shows that whether or not the waves of terror subsided does not imply that, in the intervals between these waves, there were no important acts of terror. Nor does it mean that, under the governments after the third wave of terror, there was a significant decline in terror. In terms of disappeared persons, for example, the figures from the government of the feared General Carlos Arana Osorio (1970–1974) are very similar to those from the civilian governments of Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo and Jorge Serrano Elías (1991–1993).

Strategy and Tactics of Counter-Insurgency, 1978–1986

To understand the general sense of the counter-insurgency strategy in the second half of the twentieth century, the first question that must be answered is related to its basic objective. Among the hypotheses developed along these lines is one that suggests that the genocide in Guatemala in reality was ethnocide. If this was so, the 150,000 extrajudicial executions and 45,000 disappearances would have been the result of a desire for what erroneously has been called ‘ethnic cleansing’. In fact, the figures from the records on the terror in Guatemala show that the great majority of the dead and disappeared were people from the different ethnic groups existing in the country. Thus, inevitably, it is concluded that the great majority of the victims of terror were from the Mayan peoples. Even so, these figures do not show that the genocide in Guatemala was ethnocide with the aim of making the Mayan peoples disappear.

In reality, it was another basic objective of the state and ruling powers by carrying out both open and clandestine mass and selective terror as part of the weaponry in the counter-insurgency repertoire. The objective was to disarticulate the forces that opposed or sought to subvert the order bred by the Guatemalan military dictatorship. This order implied an economic and social model of exclusion, as well as a political and ideological regime of exclusion. The counter-insurgency terror was inexorably aimed at all those sections of the people in disagreement with this order, who opposed it, criticised it, conspired against it and subverted it, irrespectively of whether they were Indian or ladinos (as the mestizos are called in Guatemala), men or women,
young or old, poor or well-off, or urban or rural inhabitants. If perhaps the genocide in Guatemala had ethnocidal consequences, this was particularly so because, in the third wave of terror, the greater part of those people who joined the subversive activities against the military and exploitative order came from the Mayan peoples. The counter-insurgency sought to annihilate, intimidate and disorganise the rebels, and it did so effectively, irrespective of ethnic group, gender, age, social position and geographic location. More than the dominance of an ethnic group, what the counter-insurgency defended was a complex model of privileges, pillage and oppression.

Having clearly determined its strategic objective, in general the counter-insurgency applied terror in an organised way and established tactical objectives. The counter-insurgency strategy must have begun to be forged in January 1978, when, as a result of the murder of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro in Nicaragua, a deep political destabilisation began to unfold, first in that country and later in El Salvador and Guatemala. Unlike what had happened previously, this political destabilisation was driven by broad sections of society who were putting forward revolutionary objectives. The triumph of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in July 1979 sparked even more rebellion and the revolutionary thirst that fed it.

There were two periods in the third wave of terror. The first was characterised by terror aimed at destroying the mass movement and, therefore, at annihilating the mass organisations such as trade-unions, peasant leagues, squatter movements, and student and university associations. It is clear that the state terrorism at that time constituted a sharp response to the peaceful, open and legal struggles, which reached their height in October 1978. During this month, the urban masses, particularly in the capital, took to the streets in protest against the price increase for urban transport. State terrorism was used heavily to suppress the people. The tragic toll was 30 dead, 400 wounded and 800 arrested (Figueroa Ibarra, 2010: 72).

So, during the first period of this third wave of terror, approximately between 1978 and 1980, the overall function of state terrorism was to destroy the mass movement that arose in the 1970s, based on forms of struggle that were not necessarily armed or violent. Beginning in 1980, when the mass urban movement born in the 1970s was essentially disarticulated, state terrorism began its second period. Unlike the previous period of state terrorism, this time the emphasis was no longer on the mass organisations but was basically aimed against the insurgent organisations. From late 1979, repression was unleashed against the mass bases of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) in the department of El Quiché. To stop this attack, the Robin García Student Front (FERG), the Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC) and other organisations responded with actions, which ended in the occupation of the Spanish embassy and the resulting tragedy on 31 January 1980.
A very important phase of this second period lay in the disarticulating actions carried out by the counter-insurgency in the infrastructure that the guerrillas had developed in the country’s capital, for example the encirclement and suppression of the so-called urban ‘cores’ of the guerrillas, carried out in 1981. This offensive began in July 1981 and caused serious losses for the EGP and for the Organisation of the People in Arms (ORPA). This latter organisation recognised that, besides the destruction of the greater part of its urban infrastructure, the offensive annihilated 33 cadres of various ranks (Payeras, 1981). Besides the capital city, the insurgent organisations were based in various parts of the country and, unlike what happened in the 1960s, these regions were inhabited by Indian peoples. Thus, the counter-insurgency terror no longer involved only the central area of the country, particularly the department of Guatemala, where the nation’s capital is located, but was much broader, including many departments, often those where previously the terror had been minimal. Given this situation, the first period of the wave of terror was aimed at annihilating the open, legal and peaceful struggles. The second period sought to destroy the guerrilla movement.

The periodisation and regionalisation of what happened between 1978 and 1986 show concretely which insurgent organisation at each point was considered to be a priority by the dictatorship. Clearly, in the first stages of this second period, the genocidal and scorched earth actions were the result of concentrating the military forces to attack those areas that (on the counter-insurgency map) appeared to be under the influence of the EGP. Among the 249 massacres recorded in 1982, 73 percent (which in absolute numbers meant 182) were carried out in the departments of El Quiché, Huehuetenango and Chimaltenango. In El Quiché alone, 80 were carried out, which amounts to 32 percent of all acts of mass terror carried out that year. The mass terror was very broad and deep in these regions, if we analyse the number of victims. As has been said, in 1982 the massacres left almost 7,000 dead (obviously this figure is only an indication, because only the recorded victims are counted). Of this total, the massacres carried out in those departments left 5,311 dead, which means 77 percent of the total victims of genocide in 1982. Furthermore, to strengthen this evaluation of the regionalisation of terror and its objectives regarding a particular organisation, the data on genocide and scorched earth policies in different towns in the departments of Alta and Baja Verapaz must be taken into account. In Alta Verapaz, 35 massacres were carried out (14 percent of the 1982 total) leaving 709 dead (10 percent of all victims) while in Baja Verapaz just seven massacres left 448 people dead (6.5 percent of all victims). Besides these departments, the genocide was not very significant in relative terms, although in some cases it was in no way insignificant. For example, in Sololá, eight massacres were carried out in 1982 that left 90 dead, while in El Petén four massacres left 228 dead and disappeared, and in
San Marcos and Escuintla, six massacres left 50 dead (Figueroa Ibarra, 1991: 231–261).

In 1983, evidence indicates that the Ríos Montt dictatorship varied its tactics of mass terror. First, the number of massacres and massacre victims dropped significantly. Some 82 massacres were carried out that year, which is a low figure compared with the 249 massacres the year before. The number of victims also dropped significantly, with only 957 recorded, while in 1982 there were almost 7,000. Second, the intensification of terror began shifting to other regions, even though the focus continued on El Quiché and Alta Verapaz. Of the total of massacres carried out in 1982, almost 30 percent were in El Quiché (24), while in Alta Verapaz sixteen were recorded (or almost 20 percent). Of the 956 victims of mass terror that year, 588 were concentrated in these two departments, which means almost 62 percent of the total; but other departments also began to feel the effects of the scorched earth and genocidal policies. In Quetzaltenango, six massacres left 51 dead, in San Marcos twelve massacres left 77 dead, and in Izabal one massacre left 30 dead. In particular, San Marcos and Quetzaltenango experienced a wave of selective terror during 1983, which was more significant that year than the mass terror. On the other hand, in all departments, a process of diversification of the mass terror actions took place, although on a minimal level. Thus, departments such as Sacatepéquez, Totonicapán, Retalhuleu, Jutiapa and Chiquimula, as well as Izabal, which in 1982 did not record any acts of mass terror (at least given the data we could get), in 1983 clearly became centres of state terror. Other departments, which in 1982 had been punished by this kind of terror, experienced less of it in 1983; examples of this were in Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango, El Petén, and Baja Verapaz.

The counter-insurgency’s variations in tactics are clear in the analysis of the particular case of terror in the department of Baja Verapaz during 1982 and 1983. Even though the level of this terror there remained the same in 1982 and 1983, within it there were changes. So while, in 1982 the genocide and scorched earth policies in villages were applied in the north-west and central parts of this department, by the end of that year they had begun to extend toward the north-east. It seems that this shift was a result of the military priorities of the Ríos Montt government. Once they had finished the job against the most dangerous enemy, the EGP, the dictatorship began to attack enemies considered to be of less military importance, such as the Guatemalan Party of Labour (PGT). In October 1982, the army began a wave of massacres (between 20 and 30) in the municipalities of Cahabón, Senahú, Panzós and Lanquín, which continued into the beginning of the second half of 1983. For the same reasons, we can say that in 1983 the selective terror began to focus at first on San Marcos, Quetzaltenango and in the nation’s capital, and later it turned the capital into its preferred scenario, at the same
time as it was becoming the main form of terror. Lastly, in 1984, when the military dictatorship was headed by Mejía Víctores, it focussed on selective terror, although that did not mean that the mass terror had ended. In just the first three months of 1984, seventeen massacres were carried out leaving 200 dead (Figueroa Ibarra, 1991: 231–261).

The sense of all this periodisation and regionalisation of the counter-insurgency between 1978 and 1986 can be foretold. Beginning with the outbreak of a revolutionary situation in Nicaragua, the high command of the Guatemalan army must have proposed the annihilation of an internal enemy. This internal enemy was not of a regular nature, and thus not only were the insurgent organisations seen as military objectives, the mass organisations and civilian population, but also were viewed as the centres in which the insurgency was able to have a real or supposed influence.

Given this situation, broadly it can be said that the first tactical period of the counter-insurgency strategy was to disarticulate the mass urban movement that had developed in the 1970s. It focussed on this in 1978, 1979 and 1980. In late 1979, this focus was combined with the attack on the social base of the EGP in El Quiché and in 1981 proceeded to disarticulate the insurgent infrastructure in the capital. The targets of this offensive in the capital were the EGP and ORPA. In late 1981 it began to carry out scorched earth policies and massacres, which continued in 1983 and 1982 and whose main targets were the EGP and, secondarily, the other insurgent organisations such as the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). The northern and central highlands became the preferred scenarios for mass terror, although this does not mean that the other regions went untouched. In March 1982, with the coup led by Ríos Montt, the state and army made a significant readjustment in their strategy, and the counter-insurgency terror was alternated with active efforts for legitimacy in order to re-stabilise the state (Figueroa Ibarra, 1991: 193–317). In 1984, the terror again became the focus in the capital and sought to disarticulate the clandestine network of organisations such as the PGT, which must have been considered of minor importance. From 1985, the mass terror declined and the focus shifted to selective terror, which would continue until the end of the conflict in December 1996. In this context, the strategy decisively shifted towards the establishment of a civilian government and democratic discourse, with which it sought to deprive the insurgency of a key argument: the existence of a military dictatorship. Formally the military dictatorship ended in January 1986, with the beginning of the Vinicio Cerezo government.

Legitimised Genocide and Terror in Guatemala

What occurred in Guatemala between 1954 and 1976 can be described as genocide. However, if we go by the legal definition adopted by the Convention of
the United Nations Organisation on Genocide, the lawyers of the Guatemalan genocidal killers could argue that what happened in Guatemala does not qualify as such. There was no national, ethnic, racial or religious group that was destroyed totally or partially in an intentional way (Harff, 2005: 172). The case of Guatemala reveals the truth according to some specialists, but they also argue that the concept is problematic and tricky. Since the legal definition is exclusionary, in the Guatemalan case sometimes people who have argued that it was genocide have argued that the slaughter was aimed at ‘disappearing’ the different Mayan ethnic groups that exist in the country. Finally, it is argued, the great majority of those killed and ‘disappeared’ by state terrorism in Guatemala were people who belonged to these ethnic groups (Bjornlund Markusen, and Mennecke, 2005: 21–23, 47). The argument can be refuted with two equally true facts. First, an enormous number of victims were people who did not belong to any of these ethnic groups, that is that they were ladinos. Second, on the killers’ side, there were enthusiastic Indian killers at many different levels of the genocidal apparatus.

Certainly Guatemala experienced much that was seen in the Armenian, Jewish and Rwandan genocides (Dadrian, 2005: 75–121). The slaughter was preceded by the creation of a negative otherness that generated the necessary conditions for legitimacy to carry out the massacres (Feierstein, 2000: 36–40). In the case of the region that includes Chiapas and Central America, the creation of a negative otherness manifest in the racism towards the Indian peoples was indispensable for legitimising the pillage and terror. The Indian was viewed by the ruling classes and ladino population – which arose beginning in the sixteenth century – as a lazy, dirty, two-faced, treacherous beast for whom there was only one remedy: the whip. But in twentieth-century Central America, especially after the insurrection in El Salvador in 1932, there arose a new negative otherness: communism. The new treacherous beast, equally two-faced and sneaky, sought to rob the honest citizens of the benefits of their efforts in favour of the state; it sought to rob them of their house in order to put several families in it, break up marriages and families, and even snatch away from parents the tutelage of their children, in order to cede it to the state. The anti-communist paranoia that the Cold War unleashed fitted perfectly into the extremist logic and totalitarian pretensions of the culture of terror. The Indians and communists embodied the otherness that had already been intolerable since before the beginning of the Cold War (Figueroa Ibarra, 2004).

The exclusivism of the legal definition of genocide has led some authors to develop other categories such as politicide (Harff, 2005) or gendercide (Jones, 2005). But if we set aside the legal definition and take up an inclusionary outlook, it is easy to detect genocide. The addition of the political and social groups to the national, ethnic, racial and religious groups, frankly, would place Guatemala on the list of countries where genocide is clearly obvious.
Also, this viewpoint is more solid if we base ourselves on the fact that the targeted group does not necessarily have to exist as such: it suffices that this group has taken form in the mind of the killer (Bjornlund Markusen, and Mennecke, 2005: 34, 40). What happened in Guatemala might seem to be a combination of the concrete existence of the group that was targeted for destruction (Indians and communists) and a subjective construct of them: the term ‘communist’ was applied with great flexibility to many individuals and social groups who hardly could be described as such.

The matter of negative othernesses is enlightening because genocide is only possible if it benefits from the passive or active legitimacy at least of part of society. This was examined by Eric Johnson (2002) when he studied the degree to which the German people knew of the genocide taking place in their own country, and concluded that it is very hard to believe that they were not aware of what was happening. The problem of the bonds of society and the counter-insurgency terror does not end with the question of the after-effects of the repression that continue to be felt among the victims, their families and society in general even after many years. In Guatemala, the fact must be directly confronted that, if the state was able to carry out the horrors recorded in the above pages, it was able to do so because there was a significant part of the society that passively, by simply looking the other way, or actively, by supporting and legitimating the terror, acted as a political prop for these actions (Calveiro, 1998; Figueroa Ibarra, 1999; Feiernstein, 2000).

The above text suggests that, when a state carries out violence that becomes illegal, it risks losing its legitimacy, or the acceptance and general assent of civil society and of the citizenry in general. But, what happens when this general assent is not lost or is not totally lost? What happens when at least a part of society actively intervenes with money and political support for these actions? Actually, you would then have to agree that the counter-insurgency terror not only was the work of a group of high-level military officers, but that there was also the involvement of a section of the business community. However, beyond that involvement, what happens when a section of society justifies the extrajudicial execution or forced disappearance of a person because he or she is a subversive or communist? The answer to these questions, and surely to others, must be given with painstaking care and precision in order to finish untangling the roots of the state violence in Guatemala. This is true because a good part of the origin of the counter-insurgency terror is to be found in the political culture that exists broadly in Guatemalan society; this political culture tolerates illegal acts of violence against certain people or groups of people as long as there is a consensus that they represent a danger. First, there were the members of different ethnic groups called, with racist disdain, ‘Indians’. Then, there were the ‘communists’, however they might have been defined. Now there
are delinquents, the *mareros*, that is, the members of the so-called *maras* (see Chapter 9 of this volume). The illegal actions carried out unofficially by police agencies, by death squads that probably operate within them, have a similar legitimacy to when in the past Indians and communists were assassinated. For better or worse, what is legal is not always legitimate, nor is what is illegal always illegitimate. In the sphere of vileness and evil, the extrajudicial executions of delinquents are legitimated by calling this legal monstrosity ‘social cleansing’.

This subject, whose roots go back to the times of the dirty war in Guatemala, is very topical today. The press is already beginning to speak about it, saying that ‘during 30 years the state was becoming criminal in order to defeat the subversive delinquency. Now, once more, a criminal state is being built to confront common criminals and organised crime’ (Zamora, 2007). The worried journalist adds that ‘the upper levels of the security forces in the Guatemalan state have always opted for efficiency and pragmatism and have proceeded to organise death squads composed of active police agents and professional goons contracted to murder delinquents, mafia gangsters and mareros’. It is discouraging that:

> these extrajudicial actions often have the support and sympathy of the people. In other words, they are popular causes, because the great majority of the people experience vulnerability and defencelessness when faced with criminality and are convinced that in the case of hard-line criminals there is no other way but to give them some of their own medicine. Hence, the desperation and fear of the citizenry ends up giving a certain kind of legitimacy to this variant of state terrorism. (Zamora, 2007)

This is the point at which Guatemalan society finds itself, at the beginning of a long road that remains to be taken. Along that road, on 28 January 2013, a pre-trial hearing started against Efrain Rios Montt for genocide and crimes against humanity.