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Rejoinder

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From the tone of Mr. Stoll's response to my article it appears that he is deeply troubled, and I appreciate the passion of his concern. Assuming that his concern is at least partially related to the fear that circumstances may develop which "could turn [Mayas] into refugees again," I would share equally passionately in that concern. Where I would strenuously beg to differ is in the claim that "What could turn them into refugees again is the kind of reductive attitude displayed by Rogachevsky." Even were one to grant, as Stoll claims, that in my analysis of his book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, I have missed important nuances of his argument, I find it hard to believe that my bad arguments in and of themselves could provide an occasion for genocidal violence. I am left with the troubling sense that David Stoll is reacting like the frenzied mob in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which, after being incited by the oratory of Mark Antony, comes upon the hapless figure of Cinna the poet, and first sets upon him believing him to be one of Caesar's assassins by the same name, but later discovering its mistake decides to "Tear him for his bad verses."

That Stoll would choose to set upon me in such a fashion is symptomatic of the curious manner in which he attempts to deflect responsibility for the recent genocidal violence in Guatemala away from the security forces which, according to the U.N.-sponsored Historical Verification Commission report, were responsible for 93% of the roughly 200,000 victims, to the insurrectional left and its "revolutionary sympathizers." My challenge of Stoll's argument rests on the assumption that the systematic policy of genocidal violence against Maya civilians carried out by the Guatemalan government in the late 70s and early 80s demonstrates that, from the perspective of the latter, the former were not considered to be legitimate members of the Guatemalan polity. Genocide is only carried out against the "other," the barbarian in one's midst who threatens the assumed legitimate community with some form of cultural or social contamination. That the virus which so troubled the Guatemalan State may initially have been carried into indigenous areas by "guerrilla organizers" does not in any way reduce, or change the implications of the type of responsibility that falls upon that state. I would venture to say that the Guatemalan government showed less concern for the Maya victims of its state-sponsored genocide than was recently demonstrated by other authorities in the mass extermination of cattle that had potentially been infected with hoof-and-mouth disease.

One of the clear implications of this genocidal violence is that in Guatemala, Maya communities were considered to be "beyond the pale." As such, the type of "legalistic, ameliorative and sometimes successful petitioning" that Stoll ascribes to Vicente Menchú was not going to change the highly oppressive social relationships that Guatemalan society had comfortably codified. In Guatemala in 1980, the year that Vicente Menchú lost his life in the Spanish Embassy conflagration, out of a population of slightly over 7 million people, more than 5 million lived in poverty and almost 3 million of these in extreme poverty--almost 71% and 39% of the total population respectively--and in the countryside, where the great bulk of the Maya population lived, matters were still worse, with the poverty level at 74% and extreme poverty at 44%.¹ How many INTA petitions would Vicente Menchú have had to file to help secure a minimally adequate standard of living for the three quarters of the Maya population which lived in poverty?

Were there, and do there continue to be severe social, political, cultural and economic grievances on the part of the Guatemalan Maya population against its society? The incontrovertible answer to that is: Yes! Is David Stoll justified in "question[ing] portrayals of the Mayas as 'a rebellious class with its own agenda and activism'"? As Stoll points out, "the Mayas are not a single social class, [and] their response to the guerrillas was varied and complex." Anyone who would assume the Maya population to be a single and univocal social class is mistaken, and should be corrected. Who such a person might be in this context is unclear, since Stoll does not reference this particular quote in his response, but clearly has not extracted it from my text. Stoll and I are in agreement that the Maya are not a single and univocal social class; obviously then, as a class, this population can neither be of a rebellious, nor of any other single type. Have there been perhaps well intentioned but nevertheless ill informed assumptions of this type made about the Maya population? No doubt that is so. Is Stoll correct in chastising such assumptions as romantic, deficient, at best counter-productive, and at worst damaging to the people it intends to support? This is also no doubt true. Nevertheless, such attitudes certainly do not justify Stoll's textual strategy of rejecting the political agency of Maya protagonists.

I stand by my criticism of the figure of Vicente Menchú that Stoll constructs in his text. It's not that Vicente Menchú is a "hollow drug store dummy" because "the man described by his neighbors was rather different [from] the revolutionary hero depicted by his daughter." I am sufficiently experienced with the multifariousness of personality, and the over-determined nature of any type of narrative construction, be it that of Rigoberta Menchú, or that of the neighbors that Stoll interviewed, or that of Stoll himself, and in particular narrative construction that is related to highly traumatic and contentious events, to understand that Vicente Menchú would have been and will continue to be many different things to many different people. However, it is Stoll who chose to insert into his narrative construction a particular depiction of Vicente Menchú, provided by a single unnamed source, which portrays him as a dumb, ignorant peasant who merely mouthed the political rhetoric that others drilled into his head. Stoll is mistaken in asserting that I'm "offended by a student's recollection" of this image. The recollection is that particular individual's personal concern. What does offend me is the incorporation of that recollection, being nothing more than that, into a narrative construction for the apparent purpose of de-authenticating the political agency of a man who unfortunately cannot defend himself. Stoll is responsible for this construction. He wishes to portray himself as someone who will give us "just the facts" (and yes, despite his protestations I do believe that Stoll at a certain level plays at being a "facts-for-their-own-sake objectivist"), and refuses to accept responsibility for his own constructions and the ideological implications these carry.

Is Stoll correct in revising Vicente Menchú's political curriculum vitae? I would venture that we can reach no certainty about the precise biographical elements of Vicente Menchú's specific political protagonism either from Rigoberta Menchú's account nor from Stoll's, and this doesn't mean that we should call either one of them a liar. However, can we know whether Vicente Menchú had a political protagonism? This is indisputable from the events themselves. Nobody suggests that he went into the Spanish Embassy to ask for a visa. Was his political protagonism, and that of his *compañeros(as)*, unacceptable within the context of the Guatemalan society in which he lived? How else to understand the flagrant violation of international law and of universally accepted diplomatic norms on the part of the Guatemalan government when it carried out an armed attack upon that embassy against the wishes of the Spanish government? If responsibility for the death of the occupants of the embassy is to be lodged against the "student leaders" who allegedly hurled "Molotov cocktails inside a crowded room,"² one might wonder who then was responsible for kidnapping the severely wounded only surviving member of the protest delegation from a Guatemala City hospital and dumping his dead body on the grounds of San Carlos University? And what does this action suggest regarding: 1) how the event was understood by those responsible for 93% of the atrocities committed during the Guatemalan civil war; and, 2) the rights of indigenous people to exercise political agency in Guatemala in 1980?

In conclusion, let me say that despite the heated rhetoric that may be exchanged back and forth, I welcome Stoll's contribution to the debate because it encourages all of us who are concerned about the past, present and future of Guatemalan society to clarify our understanding and to become more rigorous in our analysis. In this regard, let us not forget that the Historical Verification Commission report held the United States government responsible for abetting genocide in Guatemala. And it doesn't suffice for a U.S. president to go to Guatemala City and apologize, no matter how practiced at apologizing that particular president was. Even though this was perhaps somewhat afieid of Stoll's purpose, it's a pity that he in no way looks to the shared responsibility of the U.S. government, and by extension U.S. society, especially since he does blame some of the people who perhaps innocently or mischievously were victims of the atrocities. The violent and illegal coup that the U.S. orchestrated in 1954 was a very dramatic instance of U.S. efforts to squelch the independent political agency of Guatemalan society. Until we as a society come to terms with that fact and begin to change our attitudes towards those that may seem to stand "beyond the pale" of our own acceptable collective political discourse and social agenda, we will continue to have either direct or indirect responsibility for the atrocities committed in our name.

Notes

1 Menjívar, Rafael and Juan Diego Trejos. *La pobreza en América Central*. San José, Costa Rica: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), 1990. [Return](#)

2 Stoll bases his allegations, attributing responsibility for the fire to one of the occupants who hurled a Molotov cocktail, to comments made by the Spanish Ambassador who survived the fire, Máximo Cajal, and to an analysis made by arson investigators in California to whom Stoll showed newspaper photos of the incident (David Stoll. *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Boulder: Colorado, 1999, pp.79-86.) However, Stoll does not make mention of the written report that Máximo Cajal presented to the Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister on February 12, 1980, where he questions his own initial remarks and proposes that the fire may have been started by one of the police agents (Máximo Cajal. *¿Saber quién puso fuego ahí! Masacre en le Embajada de España*. Madrid: Siddharth Mehta Ediciones, 2000, p. 36.). In the above mentioned book, Cajal also makes reference to the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas, which in a press release on November 26, 1980, rejects the notion that the fire could have been started by a Molotov cocktail, adducing as evidence the condition of the cadavers (Cajal, p. 52). Finally, it should be noted that in its investigation of the incident, the Historical Verification Commission concludes that the available evidence suggests that the fire was started by the use of a flame or gas

thrower on the part of the police, and holds Guatemalan government forces responsible for the arbitrary execution of those who died in the attack (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico. *Guatemala: Memoria del silencio*, Tomo VI. Guatemala: Oficina de Servicios para Proyectos de las Naciones Unidas, 1999, pp. 163-182.) [Return](#)

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