

REVIEW ESSAY

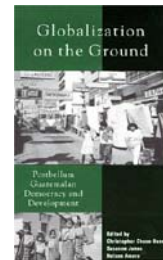
Two Steps Forward and One Step Back: Conflict and Contradiction in Post-War Guatemala

Kristin Marsh

Chase-Dunn, Christopher, Susanne Jonas, and Nelson Amaro, eds. 2001. *Globalization on the Ground: Postbellum Guatemalan Democracy and Development*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 254 Pages, ISBN 0-7425-0867-6 Paper. <http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com>

Jonas, Susanne. 2000. *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala's Peace Process*. Boulder: Westview Press. 299 Pages, ISBN 0-8133-3467-5 Cloth, ISBN 0-8133-3468-3 Paper. <http://www.westviewpress.com/>

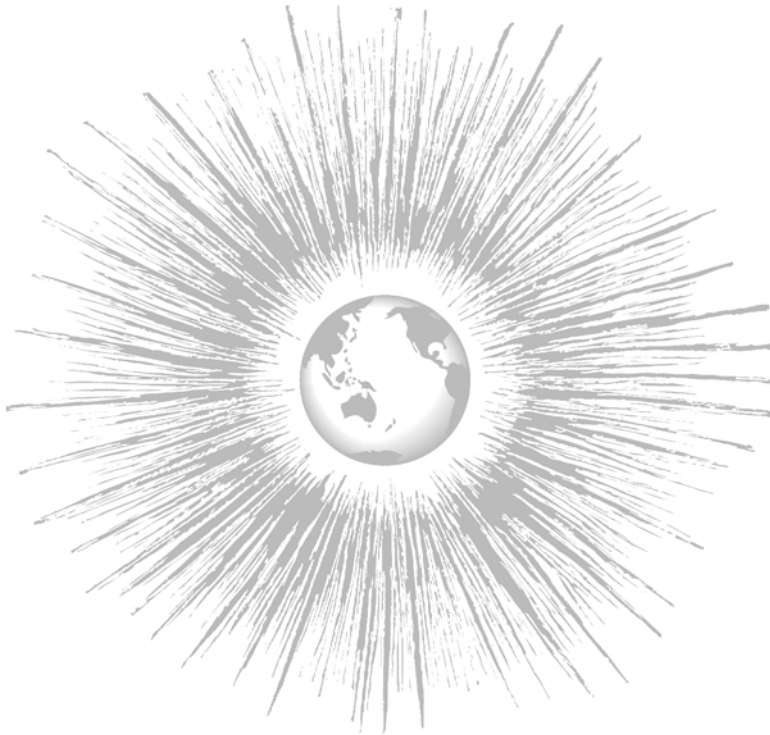
What are the real prospects for lasting peace and greater prosperity in post-war Guatemala? This is the central question underlying Susanne Jonas's *Of Centaurs and Doves* and Christopher Chase-Dunn, Susanne Jonas, and Nelson Amaro's *Globalization on the Ground*. As events continue to unfold for Guatemalans, these scholars tackle the very current issues of democratization, development, justice, and peace in post-war Guatemalan society. The cruel irony is that the very urgency with which these issues must be addressed belies any concrete prediction or even refined characterization of the existing situation.



Post-civil war transitions are never easy or clean, particularly when the outcome reflects a negotiated compromise between committed adversaries. For Guatemalans, whose 36-year conflict finally came to a close with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, the future appears particularly tenuous. Electoral participation remains at a regional low; street violence is widespread; poverty remains high; and constitutional reform has been aborted via a failed referendum. In spite of these setbacks, Guatemalans

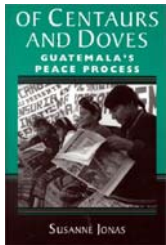
Kristin Marsh
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Mary Washington College
kmarsh@mwc.edu
<http://www.mwc.edu/soan/>

JOURNAL OF WORLD-SYSTEMS RESEARCH, VIII, 3, FALL 2002, 444-450
<http://jwsr.ucr.edu>
ISSN 1076-156X
© 2002 Kristin Marsh



continue to work toward peaceful stability, popular democratic participation and legitimacy, and economic development. The full implementation of peace in Guatemala remains elusive, and it is this very uncertainty that makes the study of this case so crucially important and potentially useful.

In *Centaurs*, Jonas continues her contribution to our understanding of Guatemala, providing an interpretation of the peace process and assessment of the Peace Accords themselves. The book is divided into two major sections. First, Jonas traces the background and summary of the conflict period (Chapter 1); the period leading to negotiations and settlement (Chapter 2); and the various peace accords signed between 1994 and 1996 (Chapter 3). In Chapter 4, Jonas tackles the questions of democracy and social justice; in Chapter 5, she focuses



on the changing role of the U.S. These chapters contextualize her analysis, but do not quite fit in the overall logic of the book. In the second major section, Jonas addresses the implementation phase, from 1997 to mid-1999, including broad interpretation of the period as a whole (Chapter 6), as well as focused discussions of the struggles over tax reform (Chapter 7) and constitutional reforms (Chapter 8). In her conclusion, Jonas weighs the successes and failures of the

peace process in view of the larger global and comparative context. And in the Epilogue, she reports the results of the 1999 November referendum, considering implications for the peace process.

The roots of insurgency in Guatemala can be traced directly to the U.S.-sponsored overthrow of the Arbenz government in 1954, ending the democratic nationalist Revolution of 1944. Not unlike conditions elsewhere in Central America, the revolutionary impulse in Guatemala was deeply rooted in class relations following the organization of coffee production, but furthered by dependent relations with, and interference by, U.S. interests. The important difference, however, is the added centrality of race in Guatemala, where the indigenous population is much larger than in neighboring El Salvador or Nicaragua. In addition, the Guatemalan conflict is notorious among recent Central American conflicts for both its duration (36 years) and its death toll (over 200,000 civilian casualties). It was also the last to be resolved, following Nicaragua's 1990 elections and El Salvador's 1992 settlement. Negotiations began with initial dialogue between the insurgency (URNG) and the government in 1986, continuing through the signing of the final accords in 1996. During formal negotiations, the U.N. served as moderator of the negotiations and via the U.N. verification mission (MINUGUA). Terms of settlement included agreements concerning democratization, human rights, refugee resettlement, historical clarification, socioeconomic reforms, and reforms of the armed forces.

Challenging the usefulness of prevailing models of democratization to the Guatemalan experience, Jonas distinguishes between procedural and popular democracy. While contested elections now prevail, political legitimacy is quite low, as evidenced in low electoral participation rates. She also addresses the compatibility of peace and social justice, a question that can be seen as linking the concerns of area specialists and world-systems theorists. In recognizing that socio-economic justice is the common sacrifice of compromised insurgencies, Jonas implicitly pinpoints the contradiction of post-war Guatemalan society *and* the essential contradiction of the role of the international community as mediator and guarantor of peace processes in developing countries. For war-weary Guatemalans, however, the U.N.-brokered peace settlement provided the only hope out of conflict. In recounting the half-hearted role of the U.S. in the Guatemalan peace process, Jonas tells a familiar story of U.S. intransigence in regional peace making, evident in both Nicaragua and El Salvador. Continuing to display entrenchment in military interests throughout the region, the U.S. is increasingly willing to take a back seat to organized expressions of international interests and norms via the U.N., regional organizations, and international financial organizations.

If Part I of *Centaurs* reflects her optimism at the signing of the peace accords, Jonas admits that Part II reveals her growing discouragement in the 2 1/2 years since settlement. The settlement itself departs in important ways from other compromises in which political democratization has been traded for postponement of the economic goals of the revolutionaries. In Guatemala, the insurgents seem to have won nearly all the issues in principle, but very little in concrete terms of accountability and guaranteed implementation. In principle, all parties agreed to historical clarification, progressive and increased tax liability, and constitutional reforms. In practice, implementation proved difficult because none of the details had been worked out prior to settlement. For example, the accord on socioeconomic issues established crucial reform principles, particularly an increase in the tax ratio, intended to help underwrite modest social spending targets and implementation of other aspects of the accord. Nevertheless, the government and the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations (CACIF) successfully resisted the very changes to which they had agreed. Further, the problems with tax reform paralleled other socio-economic issues, and Guatemala's failure to implement adequate taxation, land tenure, social services, and job provision places severe restrictions on the state's ability to foster programs of sustainable development.

The story of constitutional reforms has no happier a conclusion. Judicial reform and indigenous rights depended on a legal basis for such changes. By the time Congress passed the constitutional reforms and the package came up for

popular referendum, the populace had grown increasingly disillusioned with the whole process, and the reform package was rejected by a vote of 55 to 45 percent. However, a full 81% of registered voters (only 60% of those eligible to vote are registered) did not participate in the referendum: The “no” vote represented 9.4 percent of registered voters.

Jonas concludes that institutional structures curtailed realization of the peace settlement’s full potential. What she neglects is the extent to which the Peace Accords themselves structured both limitations and strengths as they reflected the mix of interests and the proximate balance of power existing between the state, the opposition, international actors, and various civil organizations at the time of negotiations. Compared with the opposition in El Salvador, for example, the URNG was much less a threat to the state and wielded insufficient bargaining power at the table to give it a sufficient voice in determining terms of implementation.

The strength of *Centaurs* is its contribution to our understanding of the difficulties of the Guatemalan peace process. As a whole, the analysis is somewhat fractured, but this reflects not only Jonas’ own shifting perspective as events unfold, but also the currency of the questions addressed and her unwillingness to see the many setbacks as indicative of failure. In this, she implies a critique of the international community’s tendency to assess peace processes in dichotomous terms of success vs. failure—do we have peace or war? democracy or dictatorship? justice? inclusion? Peace implementation can neither be pure success nor pure failure, but contains the same inherent complications reflective of the conflict and the compromise itself and the same contradictions inherent in the larger global order within which all compromises are constructed. Finally, foreshadowing some of the central themes in *Globalization*, Jonas concludes in *Centaurs* exactly where she, Chase-Dunn and Amaro begin in *Globalization*—with the balanced assertion that post-war Guatemala represents a great advance over the previous forty years of authoritarianism and political violence while simultaneously coming up quite short of the cooperative consolidation of peace and popular democratization that so many had hoped for.

While *Centaurs* focuses on the trajectory of settlement implementation, *Globalization* addresses current and future needs of Guatemalans working toward political democracy and economic development. Based on the proceedings of the 1998 Seminar on Guatemalan Development and Democratization held at the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, Guatemala City, *Globalization* brings together the perspectives of Guatemala specialists (both U.S. and Guatemalan), world-system and development scholars, and social scientists as well as policy makers and practitioners. *Globalization* is organized into four main sections. In Part I, following the brief introductory chapter by Jonas and Chase-Dunn,

Gert Rosenthal argues for the potential for development in the context of social justice. Rosenthal sets forth the basic premise underlying many of the selections to follow: The success of the development project in Guatemala depends on the corresponding implementation of policies for sustainable growth, as well as greater social equity.

The contributors in Part II tackle the institutional issues facing Guatemala—demilitarization, security, and local vs. centralized governing structures. John Booth (“Global Forces and Regime Change”) places the Guatemalan transition in regional context, assessing the potential for democratic consolidation in terms of the geo-political context and relative strength of the country’s economy and political culture. Public opinion indicators in the 1990s show low levels of commitment to democratic processes; nevertheless, in context of Guatemala’s recent and ongoing turmoil, this should be taken as healthy skepticism. The long-term trajectory, Booth argues, is likely to favor a consolidated democratic regime. In “Democratization through Peace,” Jonas echoes Booth’s analyses and many of the themes underlying *Centaurs*, particularly her critique of the democratic transition literature and the peace/justice tension in peace settlements. Likewise, Nelson Amaro (“Decentralization, Local Government, and Citizen Participation”) calls for greater decentralization of political power, increased citizen participation, and the professionalization of local government office. And A. Douglas Kincaid argues that the experience of El Salvador provides reason for optimism regarding the immediate future of civil-military relations in Guatemala, but that the long-term maintenance of public security in both cases depends on the embeddedness of security issues within a larger strategy of sustainable and just development.

Edelberto Torres Rivas and Stephen Bunker both emphasize the relationship between the state and the economy. Pointing out the contradictory logic of expanding political democracy within neo-liberalism, Torres Rivas argues that the supremacy of the free market assumes a weak state, limiting political participation to the economic elite. Instead, a strong state is needed—one that is free to act independently of private military and economic interests. Stephen Bunker provides a potential test case. Recognizing that sustained development depends on a reversal of patterns of land distribution, labor control, and environmental degradation, Bunker points out that bulk coffee (produced on larger plantations typical of Guatemalan coffee production) is experiencing a drop in prices, while the market for premium, higher priced coffees (better suited to smaller holdings) has expanded considerably. These unique sectoral market opportunities could conceivably allow for reorganization of production that would be politically feasible both domestically and internationally.

In Part III, Kay B. Warren, José Serech, and Michael Richards and Julia Richards focus on the Guatemalan signature issue of indigenous rights, includ-

ing cultural rights and the central importance of indigenous access to development and democratic processes. Warren (“Pan-Mayanism and the Guatemalan Peace Process”) speaks to the extent to which citizen groups participated in the negotiation process. Popular and Maya groups coordinated efforts in articulating and demanding inclusion of their concerns, while the economic elite recognized the link between international norms of indigenous human rights and the necessity to regain external legitimacy. Success of the settlement continues to depend on cross- and intra-class coalition building and meaningful institutional reform, but the efficacy of such popular mobilization among ethnic groups in Guatemala is evident.

Serech (“Development of Globalization in the Mayan Population of Guatemala”) considers the impact of globalization and regionalization on the construction of ethnic identities. The future role of Mayan populations will reflect a directly negotiated position with the centers of economic and political power, nonetheless displaying persisting inequalities and uneven adaptation of groups previously excluded from the global project. Clearly, language is a central aspect of adaptation, and Richards and Richards (“Linguistic Diversity, Interculturalism, and Democracy”) identify recent shifts in language patterns, including a growing bi-lingualism that maintains advantages of Ladinos while simultaneously advancing the use of English and Spanish at the expense of a number of indigenous languages. In order to prevent the extinction of these spoken languages, intercultural educational programs must explicitly work to preserve them.

Part IV places the current crisis in Guatemala in its global context, incorporating the effects of broader structures and processes as they shape potential outcomes “on the Ground” in Guatemala. Alejandro Portes (“Theories of Development and Their Application to Small Countries”) claims that world-systems theory has never been very good at explaining the unique historical experiences of single societies. Aside from ignoring the extent to which world-systems theory was built on historical and case specificity, Portes’s argument undermines the analytic necessity of bringing the broader political-economic context to bear on the uniqueness of historical trajectory. The point is not to privilege the “broad strokes” of world-historic processes when trying to understand particular phenomena, but to take the larger economic and political structures seriously as constraining factors. In spite of Portes’s insistence that world-systems theory has been blind-sided by the experiences of certain individual cases (in this experience, world-systems theory is in good company), there are also many instances in which the world-systems perspective has furthered our understanding considerably. Guatemala is one example, and the scholars who have contributed to this volume, while not all identifying as world-systems theorists, nevertheless

understand the extent to which the logic of global capitalism shapes the interests and options of relevant actors.

The articles by William I. Robinson and the Christopher Chase-Dunn and Susan Manning illustrate the usefulness of the world-systems perspective in locating the contradictions facing Guatemalans today. Robinson is poignant in his critique of the neoliberal project. In fact, we owe the clarity of this critique as incorporated by other authors throughout *Globalization* (as well as in *Centaurs*) to Robinson. Neoliberal ideology is so incipient and so internalized that it shapes the language of our dialogue. Robinson reminds us that we mistake polyarchy for democracy; Chase-Dunn and Manning concur that debates on development assume neoliberalism, rather than contest its form. In particular, it is not enough to understand that the agro-industrial elite is the emergent economic/political actor throughout Central America; rather, in order to understand this elite segment’s shifting interests and power, it must be recognized as a fraction of the transnational elite. Thereby, negotiations are seen in their global context: There are never only two oppositional parties at the bargaining table, but many interested actors (class segments) weighing in on terms of settlement—indigenous groups, external state powers, INGOs, IFIs, in addition to the insurgency and the state.

Is comprehensive, cohesive analysis too much to expect from an edited volume of conference papers? This one comes impressively close, effectively bridging local realities with a global logic. *Globalization* represents an important complement (in some ways, a corrective) to Jonas’s view, from within Guatemala, of a unique and internally driven historical experience. Further, Jonas takes us through the Constitutional referendum of 1999, while *Globalization* is explicitly forward looking, with concrete discussion of current organizational and policy issues. Taken together, these volumes reflect the long-term nature of post-conflict transitions. Successes and disappointments continue along the way, and the longer-term projects are really just emerging. Still, while the prospects for social justice and popular democracy appear few, it helps to recall the 36 years of political violence and just how far the people of Guatemala have come.