

Introduction

Social Struggle in Neoliberal Central America

by
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This issue explores examples of changes in the formations and strategies of Central American social movements in a context that is very different from the one faced by their much-studied counterparts four decades ago. Since the late 1970s, neoliberal models of development and structural reforms have promoted privatization, free-market economics, deregulation, and government austerity in Latin America and around the world. This transformation began in Central America in the 1980s with structural adjustment programs, free-trade zones, and related policies inseparable from U.S.-funded wars, death squads, and other technologies of repression aimed at squelching a variety of resistance movements. Ongoing histories of struggle and repression, with their very different outcomes at national and local levels, shape the context of Central American neoliberalisms and social struggles today. Nicaraguan neoliberalism, for example, followed the end of the Contra War but exists in tension with a lexicon and popular ideology rooted in Sandinismo; in Honduras, targeted death-squad repression in the 1980s left the country without an organized base capable of resisting the ravages of the 2009 neoliberal coup, though Hondurans enthusiastically and valiantly fought it. In Guatemala and El Salvador, highly publicized projects of restorative justice and historical memory are deeply intertwined with current struggles against ongoing violence.

Throughout the region, the 1990s “peace” saw the heightened implementation of World Bank– and International Monetary Fund (IMF)–driven restructuring. With the passage of the Dominican Republic–Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) in 2005, corporate power reached new levels of control over national economies and policy, threatening sovereignty on numerous fronts. Neoliberal policies have dramatically affected national economies, prompted massive rural-to-urban and international migration, increased resource extraction, weakened labor and environmental protections, caused major shifts in agriculture, reconfigured (and in some cases reentrenched) hierarchies of gender and sexuality, and increased wealth disparities. Yet the shape of neoliberalism in any given context is determined by dialectical processes of struggle, and, as several of the papers in this issue show, even local community action can have a profound impact on national and international policies.

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“ROOT CAUSES”

On June 8, 2021, during her first trip abroad as vice president, Kamala Harris issued a clear message to Central Americans considering migrating to the United States: “Do not come.” The trip, which included a visit to Mexico City, was touted as a part of the Biden administration’s “root causes strategy” for preventing migration from Northern Triangle Central American countries (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador). Harris and the White House have identified said root causes in various documents and speeches as “corruption, violence, trafficking and poverty,” “the lack of economic opportunity; the lack of climate adaptation and climate resilience; [and] the lack of good governance,” and “democratic backsliding” and “political leaders’ drift toward authoritarian rule” (White House, 2021; National Security Council, 2021; Harris, 2021). Of course, this discourse is neither *sui generis* nor new, but—as with most foreign policy—it is derived in large part from and has been strongly propagandized by major State Department–allied think tanks including (in this case) the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Atlantic Council, the International Crisis Group, the Washington Office on Latin America, the Inter-American Dialogue, and the Council on Foreign Relations (Runde et al., 2021; McKinley, 2021; Bozmoski and Sadurní, 2021; Zhang, Engelke, and Van Velkinburgh, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2021; Atwood and Modirzadeh, 2021; Angelo, 2021; WOLA, n.d.; Inter-American Dialogue, 2021; O’Neil, 2021).

Central American and Mexican analysts, scholars, and social movement leaders have been quick to point out the Biden administration’s disingenuousness in identifying as “root causes” issues that would be far more accurately described—in large part—as *symptoms* of the above-summarized violent, neo-liberal U.S. foreign policy over the decades (e.g., Pastor Fasquelle, 2021; Galdamez, 2021; González, 2022; Azteca America, 2021; Alvarado, 2022; Miranda, 2021). “Corruption,” for example, while certainly a reality in Central American governments and business dealings, makes sense as a root cause of emigration only if it is posited as a problem within an otherwise functioning democratic system. In fact, it must be recognized as the operating system (Chayes, 2017) in Northern Triangle countries that are militarily occupied by the U.S. Southern Command and dealing with the unresolved legacies of U.S.-supported wars, genocide, and coups or as a euphemism for the countless forms of wage theft intrinsic to capitalism. Similarly, to posit “violence” as a root cause of emigration is to avoid any conversation about the origins of the forms of physical violence to which we can assume Vice President Harris was referring (the U.S. government rarely acknowledges structural or political violence carried out by its allied regimes, let alone the violence of imperialism). And while physical violence is indeed one of the most common immediate “push” factors cited by migrants, it would seem that in order to ameliorate the situation, it would be necessary to determine the *origins* of that violence—whether it was, for example, extortion by gangs that originated with the mass deportations from the United States of young refugees from U.S.-sponsored wars in the Northern Triangle to their birth countries or the skyrocketing rates of femicide following a U.S.-supported coup that institutionalized misogyny in myriad ways.

Trafficking and poverty, likewise, can be directly and historically linked to policies imposed by U.S.-led international financial institutions and oligarchs operating in nations deeply impacted by U.S.-funded wars and genocide, lacking the sovereignty necessary to develop and implement any sort of democratic process that could enable communities to protect themselves against labor exploitation (including trafficking) and impoverishment. The “lack of economic opportunities” cited as a root cause of migration can also be traced to communities’ being actively prevented—in many cases through land grabs (see Konforti in this issue) and sustained campaigns of targeted assassination—from developing sustainable economic projects and systems and to the systematic international financial institution-imposed dismantling of the public sectors of these nations.

The framing of “lack of climate adaptation and climate resilience” as a root cause of migration is similarly disingenuous when Washington—as the headquarters of capitalist empire—is the primary driver of climate change and environmental destruction in these late stages of the Capitalocene (see Moore, 2017). In typical neoliberal fashion, rather than acknowledge the structural cause of climate change and environmental destruction (the burning of fossil fuels and extractive capitalism in a context of massive deregulation by a corporate-owned U.S. government, which in turn has been exported as imperial policy, in order to increase corporate profits), the U.S. government places blame on its victims for failing to “adapt” or show “resilience” to something that they are neither responsible for nor could possibly adapt to. How could any poor person or community adapt, for example, to the increasingly frequent Category 5 hurricanes that will soon make large swaths of Central America uninhabitable? Or to the wholesale destruction of their communities’ drinking water, air, and (therefore) health through the profitable application of deadly pesticides (see Grandia in this issue) or mining (see Illmer in this issue)?

And it takes a special type of hubris to speak of Central American political leaders as “backsliding” from democracy or “drifting” toward authoritarian rule when the United States has continued—into the twenty-first century—to support coups ousting the more antiauthoritarian administrations in the region in order to install U.S.-friendly neoliberal fascist dictators (see Pine, 2019) and to ensure that candidates promoting greater democracy and transparency in government do not win elections. The fact that, as social movement leaders point out, their countries are ruled from the U.S. embassies rather than from their respective presidential palaces does seem to preclude the development of “good governance.”

Social movement elders in Central America and in the Central American diaspora remember the armed liberation struggles against the U.S.-supported death-squad dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, both the victories achieved and the unbearable losses. Farther back, the memory of major struggles of previous decades (e.g., the 1954 Honduran banana strike, the 1944–1954 Guatemalan Revolution, the 1932 Salvadoran peasant uprising led by Farabundo Martí and crushed by La Matanza) is kept alive through stories, song, popular theater, museums, and other historical memory preservation efforts. But the context in which social justice movements organize and struggle to achieve their objectives has changed, following the late 1980s–early 1990s

peace accords implemented alongside dramatic neoliberal reforms that significantly diminished the legal and economic rights of Central American *pueblos*, exacerbating the aforementioned “root causes” cited by Vice President Harris. Today’s Central American liberatory movements may not be as well-known or well-understood in the United States as their predecessors four decades ago. However, as is indicated by much of the recent overlapping scholarship dealing with contemporary Central American social struggles (e.g., Almeida, 2014; Ybarra, 2017; Shipley, 2017; Broad and Cavanagh, 2022; Nolin and Russell, 2021; Frank, 2018; Roux and Geglia, 2019; Phillips, 2015; Fúnez-Flores, 2020; Sagot Rodríguez, 2012; Murcia, 2020; Barahona, 2018; Díaz Arias and Viales-Hurtado, 2021; Velásquez Nimatuj, 2005; Burrell and Moodie, 2020; Manz, 2008; Pine, 2013) and analyzing regional and broader processes of human mobility in the neoliberal context (e.g., Chomsky, 2022; Stoll, 2012; McGuirk and Pine, 2020; Walia, Estes, and Kelley, 2021; Miller, 2017; Pérez-Rocha, 2021; Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey, 2020; Dahlstrom, Loor, and Sherman-Stokes, 2019; Holmes, 2013; Mendiola, 2021; Menjívar and Walsh, 2019; Coutin, 2010; Frank-Vitale and Martínez d’Aubuisson, 2020; Hanlon and Nolin, 2021; Burrell and Moodie, 2019; Castillo, 2019; Garibo García and Call, 2020), many of them are arguably operating in even more hostile territory.

Indeed, in an interview conducted a year before being murdered in her home by Honduran military hitmen in the pay of powerful local interests with connections to international financial institutions, Berta Cáceres, the leader of the militant Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras and of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (the broad-based movement formed in opposition to the 2009 coup) observed (quoted in Castellanos and Pine, 2020):

From the eighties to today we are living the same situation. The imposition of structural adjustments, which they call modernization of the state, has meant that a state that is very militarized, backward and conservative, gives off an appearance of modernizing through its discourse, through technology. But what it really means is giving away all collective property and natural resources and more militarization, only in a more technocratic way, more structured, more planned, with better financing, and completely tied into transnational capital and the mandates of capitalist financial organizations.

So the democracy that we have here, for me it’s just a discourse that the politicians roll out every four years; it is governments that hand over the country’s sovereignty and identity, that destroy its liberatory identities, that have institutional and legal structures that they themselves have created and solidified but with precisely the intention of catering to the interests of big capital and powerful economic, political and military organizations—not to the people.

I believe things have actually gotten worse since the eighties. Even though there was armed conflict in Central America, there were certain norms that were still respected. But today, the level of impunity—if we compare it with that era—the level of impunity, of social injustice, of denying the right, for example, to land. The concentration of lands, of territories, the plunder, in comparison with what was happening in the eighties; today it’s done in a way that is shameless and the institutions, the laws, the system of justice that is carried

out in this country only exist to support that process, not to support the peoples. So for me, what they call democracy here, which is actually something else, has gotten worse.

Central American social movement organizers and politicians who stand up to neoliberal imperialism have been, like Cáceres, consistently criminalized and targeted for violence and assassination by (generally U.S.-supported)¹ right-wing governments, oligarchs, and state security forces. Like other Central American movements engaged in local and regional struggles against the forces of neoliberal imperialism, Cáceres's organization, COPINH, prioritizes collective action in the fight against the national and international actors, organizations, and states that are poisoning, impoverishing, and otherwise injuring Central Americans. It has also worked, like so many other movements, unions, and fronts, to build new models for community and democracy even as it struggles against the powers trying to prevent it from doing so. This corresponds with their analysis, which, in stark contrast to neoliberal ideology, foregrounds place-based, intergenerational communities (in Central America, as *pueblos*) over individuals or corporations.

Perhaps the best-known expression of the neoliberal agenda of simultaneously destroying and erasing from public discourse collectivities that could challenge neoliberalism (Bourdieu, 1998) comes from Margaret Thatcher's 1987 interview in *Woman's Own* magazine, beginning with the words of an imagined poor person (Keay and Thatcher, 1987):

"I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!" or "I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!" "I am homeless, the Government must house me!" and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.

Thirty-five years later, with national social safety nets around the world largely destroyed thanks to policies that Thatcher and her close friend Ronald Reagan so enthusiastically (and violently) promoted, Vice President Harris addressed the CEO Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, meeting in parallel with the Summit of the Americas,² with an updated iteration of Thatcher's speech (Harris, 2022):

So, picture this. Imagine a woman in Honduras who lives in a small rural town. She's a single mother. She has two children. She does not have a formal education and has never had steady work. Instead, she takes on an odd job here or there. She often lays awake at night, worried about whether she can put enough food on the table, wondering if her children can break the cycle of poverty that is all too common where she lives.

Then, let's imagine a beverage company announces new investments sourcing coffee from her hometown in western Honduras. Imagine that the company then offers her a job cultivating that coffee. Imagine an international aid program provides lunch for her children at school, improving their nutrition and their health; that a financial company helps her open a bank account in the

form of a digital wallet. Imagine that she now has some disposable income, and she saves, and she starts moving up the economic ladder.

And then, a telecommunications company makes an investment and connects her town to the Internet, and she gains access to new information and online tools that will help her really reach into her imagination about what she can achieve. And so, she then starts to think about an entrepreneurship based on her vision for herself and her community.

Imagine that USAID provides her with a grant to establish her own eco-tourism business and that she accesses credit for the first time, and she hires employees, and her business grows, and she thrives.

As so often is the case, a brown woman lacking agency and education (presumably as a result of cultural machismo, ignorance, and a dearth of local opportunities to take advantage of the “ecosystem of opportunity” that capitalism has to offer) is featured here as the object of the neoliberal development imaginary. This “bare life” (Agamben, 1998; Fassin, 2007) portrait obfuscating the violent capitalist processes of impoverishment simultaneously serves as a justification for the U.S. imposition on the Central American working class of foreign industries that neither contribute to national infrastructure through taxes nor provide sufficient wages or humane working conditions (see Crossa Niell in this issue) in the guise of “Development.”

The difference between this image and the framing by movement leaders like Berta Cáceres of the challenges faced by poor Central Americans could not be more stark. Central American movements engaged in social justice struggles also, of course, identify gendered precarity, rural impoverishment, and lack of access to education as problems. But as the articles in this special issue that are focused on Honduran and Guatemalan communities at home and abroad emphasize, Central American social movements do not share the Thatcherian Biden/Harris worldview positing the path to improved Central American living conditions and an end to migration as consisting of corporate-sponsored capitalist ladders that each Central American family and/or individual must climb to survive.

Rather, these articles describe Central American social justice movements that recognize the power structures and histories of the societies they live in and the need for communities to come together to fight for a future that prioritizes human life and the environment over profit, where they can enjoy the right not to be impoverished, injured, or displaced by the violence of capitalist empire or to embark on a journey with no guarantees and tremendous risks (see Rodríguez and Stoll in this issue). They analyze the creative ways in which Central American communities have strategized to improve their living conditions in situ and in transit and to challenge the *real* root causes of the many manifestations of their structural vulnerability that have persuaded so many Central Americans over the past decade to make the difficult and often deeply painful choice to leave their communities and/or countries.

REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL AMERICAN STRUGGLES

In his overview of the maquiladora sector in Honduras, Mateo Crossa Niell examines the widespread social impact of this quintessentially neoliberal industry, which since the 1980s imposition of “Reaganomics for Honduras” has been held up by a triumphalist development narrative—virtually indistinguishable from that used today in the Biden/Harris root-causes strategy—as a symbol of economic progress. Crossa Niell shows instead how the industry helped implement the international financial institution–led transformation of the Honduran economy from a relatively more equitable national development model (thanks to 1974 redistributive agrarian reform) to an export-oriented market exclusively benefiting the transnational capitalist class—including the Honduran oligarchy—to the dramatic detriment of maquiladora workers and the vast majority of the Honduran people. He demonstrates that at the same time that the industry has increased dispossession and gendered precarity throughout Honduras, it has played a key role in diminishing Honduran sovereignty vis-à-vis international financial institutions and the United States, contributing significantly to the 2009 U.S.-supported coup d’état and the narco-dictatorship that followed. Yet he shows that, despite and in response to the violence of the industry, over the course of the past three decades organized maquila workers have played a key role not just in pushing back against the abuses of the transnational corporations for which they labor but in translating their analysis and experience to effective solidarity with workers in other industries and communities in localized struggles as well as in the broad fight against the dictatorship of Juan Orlando Hernández (2014–2022).

In her essay, Adrienne Pine analyzes organized labor in a very different sector—Honduran psychiatric hospitals—that also participated in the broad-based resistance movement against the 2009 coup and subsequent dictatorship. While, in contrast to the maquiladora industry, psychiatric hospitals in Honduras have been operating in one form or another for a century, the implementation of international financial institution–led neoliberal and neoliberal fascist policies from the 1990s through the coup era had dramatic negative impacts on the experiences of patients and workers in these institutions. The members of the wall-to-wall union of Honduran psychiatric hospital workers confront the effects of neoliberal fascism—which has corresponded with heightened incidences of trauma and associated mental illness nationwide, on the one hand, and budget cuts and the militarization of psychiatric facilities, on the other—on a daily basis. She argues that workers’ embodied labor experience in this unique context has been central to their militance as an anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, and internationalist union.

In the first of his two essays for this issue, Patrick Illmer shows how the water crisis in Guatemala City has contributed—in the postgenocidal context of rapid neoliberal, market-led urbanization—to the production of specific socio-spatial power formations, deepening preexisting patterns of marginality and domination and limiting possibilities for collective action. Illmer analyzes the challenges faced by marginalized Guatemalans living in precarious reconstituted urban

communities and confronting a neoliberal hydropolitics that frames water as a commodity (rather than a right), following the disarticulation of revolutionary class struggle that accompanied the genocide. He argues compellingly through ethnographic examples that state and gang violence in the current neoliberal moment contribute to the social reproduction of spatialized and increasingly individualized challenges faced by the urban poor, both by limiting access to water and by rendering ever more vulnerable those who are organizing against the structures that have produced both its shortage and its deeply inequitable distribution.

In his second essay, Illmer maintains that, in contrast to the more limited horizons of urban-based water rights and territorial and anticorruption movements, sustained collective activism in rural areas has had demonstrable success in pushing back against neoliberal forms of violence. Using as a case study the Peaceful Resistance La Puya in its years-long community opposition to the mining project led by the powerful U.S. mining corporation Kappes, Cassiday & Associates (KCA), he argues for the strategic importance of using horizontal processes in confronting neoliberal power. Indeed, at the time of this writing, Peaceful Resistance La Puya has just celebrated a decade of struggle through which—despite facing violence and numerous threats from the corporation and the Guatemalan state security forces and the ongoing KCA lawsuit against the Guatemala state (claiming losses of US\$400 million under the terms of CAFTA-DR)—the movement has successfully defended its territory.

Lazar Konforti explores the long-term struggle of communities evicted by the Chabil Utzaj corporation (producing biofuels for foreign “ecological” consumption) in the Polochic Valley—another instance of successful rural community mobilization. He outlines the territorial precarity produced by neoliberal land governance structures that facilitate land grabs by powerful corporations and families, violently displacing indigenous and ladino peasant communities that are systematically denied the possibility of acquiring titles to their land. He lays out the evolution of strategies employed by organized campesino groups in the Polochic Valley to regain and secure the rights to their lands—first mounting a public pressure campaign with the support of national and international allies to demand accountability through international human rights mechanisms and then, when that proved only marginally successful, pursuing more militant direct action, reoccupying stolen lands and ultimately forcing the company to cease operations. Konforti concludes that under a neoliberal land governance regime that systematically prevents a majority of campesinos from gaining title to their lands through the legal mechanisms available to the powerful, the strategy of collectively rendering those lands “ungovernable” and thus undesirable for potential outside investors has been a particularly successful one.

Eric Sippert’s essay centers around Sustainable Development for Guatemala (DESGUA), a U.S.-Guatemalan organization in Western Highland Guatemala involved in fair-trade, migrant, and solidarity organizing that he argues is better understood as a *platform* serving many functions facilitating the work of social movements. Sippert proposes analyzing platforms like DESGUA (in contrast to a framework of networked social movements) to better understand

how movements in Guatemala and elsewhere are adapting to confront new challenges in a changing technological, social, and political economic context and to explore the ways in which platforms themselves are actively reconfiguring power relations. He draws on extensive fieldwork conducted in the physical and online spaces of DESGUA and with its founders, users, volunteers, and members to show how platforms differ (in logic, form, and practice) from—and how they can expand the organizing potential of—more traditional movements, organizations, and networks. He demonstrates the utility of platforms in connecting people, communities, movements, and organizations in physical and online spaces and compellingly argues the need for scholars of social movements to develop theoretical frameworks that perceive and facilitate the productive analysis of the key roles that platforms play in a wide variety of today's social justice struggles.

In her intimate and devastating essay, Liza Grandia presents a damning portrait of the powerful neoliberal forces responsible for the widespread, deadly impacts of the ongoing use of industrial pesticides long banned in the United States, in indigenous and (other) peasant farming communities throughout Petén. She explores the reasons communities with long histories of struggle have not organized systematically to confront this existential but “slow” threat and challenges internationally based environmentalists to decolonize agriculture and conservation by developing inclusive approaches to environmental justice struggles aligned with peasant movements.

The articles by María Teresa Rodríguez López and David Stoll analyze different aspects of the imaginaries and life experiences of Central American international mobility. Rodríguez López presents her research based on extensive interviews with undocumented Hondurans in “permanent mobility” in Xalapa, Veracruz, analyzing their experiences from the perspective of a continuum of violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). Stoll argues, on the basis of ethnographic research conducted in the Ixil Maya municipio of Nebaj, Guatemala, that the narratives of community members with family living in the United States complicate stories told by U.S.-based asylum advocates, who portray asylum seekers as merely victims of dislocation by neoliberal capitalism. To the contrary, his interlocutors give a more optimistic narrative of their experiences based in the tremendous dollar power of the remittances they receive (or, as Stoll argues, extract as rentiers) from family members and the opportunities that they perceive to be provided by neoliberal capitalism. However, as Stoll demonstrates, this “American Dream” is based in an understanding held by family members in Guatemala of wage labor in the United States that conceals the violence experienced by their migrant worker family members in the U.S. labor market and renders the latter, as well as potential future migrants, increasingly vulnerable to human trafficking.

Finally, Márcia Alves da Silva presents a feminist, decolonial analysis of indigenous Kuna artisan women in Panama who produce intricate embroidery for tourist markets. She argues that Kuna women have created a decolonial, popular economy based in values of solidarity and autonomy, allowing them to thrive within a matrilineal, collectivist community even in a national and international context structured by capitalism and ongoing violent and racist legacies of colonialism.

NOTES

1. Though Bukele's repressive governance in El Salvador certainly strays from the mold in his performative opposition to U.S. intervention in Salvadoran politics and in the limited sanctions imposed on select officials in his administration for charges of "corruption."

2. Notably boycotted by the presidents of Honduras, Mexico, and Bolivia (along with over a dozen Caribbean countries) following the Biden administration's refusal to invite Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela and also boycotted by the presidents of Guatemala and El Salvador for different reasons.

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