

COULD ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY GENERATE RADICAL CHANGE?:

DEBATES WITHIN GUATEMALA'S RADICAL LEFT IN THE 1960s



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Indigenous Dignity

Solidarity with the Oppressed

Turcios

Abstract

Throughout the 1960s, Guatemala's radical left became consumed in an internal debate concerning the revolutionary strategy they believed should be followed to generate radical socio-political and economic changes in Guatemala. Confronting the societal anxieties that accompanied advances in modernity, such as growing wealth inequality, new forms of social poverty, and the marginalization of the fragments in Guatemalan society (primarily, peasants and workers), Guatemala's radical left encountered a fundamental quandary in the development of its revolutionary methodology. Should they work within the confines of electoral democracy to realize radical reforms or, as a militant faction of the radical left increasingly proposed, would radical changes require an armed struggle aimed at toppling the nation's entire system of governance?

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Introduction to the thesis

This thesis explores the strategic divergences that polarized Guatemala's radical left¹ in the 1960s. Over the course of constructing and developing their revolutionary strategies, the radical left debated, above all else, the merit of electoral democracy as a capable venue for initiating revolutionary changes. Throughout the 1960s, some in the radical left negotiated a methodological² shift from democratic reformism to armed insurrection, producing a methodological rupture that challenged the radical left's pursuits of political and revolutionary unity. The diverse set of perspectives regarding this strategic dilemma, reveal the dynamic and non-static mosaic of Guatemala's radical left throughout the decade.

The radical left focused their tactical deliberations on the *forms* of revolutionary struggle; centrally, they debated the merits of electoral reformism as a revolutionary tool. Some in Guatemala's radical left argued that multiple *forms* of struggle, including electoral reformism and popular-front building, should be simultaneously navigated to extend the revolutionary struggle to the more moderate segments of Guatemalan society in order to broaden their bases of support. However, the emergence of leftist militant groups in the early 1960s challenged this oppositional approach of democratic

¹ I define "radical left" by *political* radicalness, as judged relatively and temporally according to the political conditions of particular places and times. In Guatemala, I define the radical left in relation to their political policy positions, which typically questioned the relationship between land and capital. Generally, Guatemala's radical left in the 1950s and '60s advocated for significant agrarian reform, workers' rights to organize into unions and other trade organizations, an end to socio-economic and political dominance of the landowning elite, and a halt to foreign ownership of natural resources and interventionism.

² Throughout this thesis, I use the term "methodological," to mean the strategy and tactic that the radical left argued should be followed to achieve radical reforms. While the PGT and the FAR shared a common vision for a "*nueva* Guatemala," they disagreed on the *methodology* that should be implemented to realize it.

reformism and its prioritization of legal modes of resistance over political violence. The Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), Guatemala's most significant left-wing guerrilla faction in the 1960s, offered what they perceived to be a counter-hegemonic vision for a new oppositional project, fragmenting away from the Communist Party, known as the Guatemalan Worker's Party (PGT). The FAR guerrillas denounced electoral democracy as a farce, arguing in contrast to the PGT, that the road to revolutionary change would not pass through a ballot box.

The PGT and the FAR united around what they perceived to be the breach of Guatemala's national sovereignty by foreign imperialism and U.S. interventionism. They resented the mass eviction of *campesinos*, or Guatemalan peasants, many of whom were forced off their subsistence farmland to open up lands for commercial farming; they objected to the government corruption that administered the purchase of such national lands. In contrast, the PGT and the FAR envisioned a "*nueva Guatemala*," which would be ruled by a worker-peasant alliance; their immediate demands were clear: land reform, protection of worker's rights, and a society that protected dignity and justice for all Guatemalans.³

While the PGT and the FAR claimed to share both a common enemy and a Marxist-Leninist⁴ political line, they diverged on the revolutionary strategy they believed

³ In Edgar Marroquín's biography, *Turcios Lima: Este sí era Comandante* (Guatemala: Imprenta Vasquez, 1998), 32, 69, notes that FAR guerrilla leader Luis Augusto Turcios Lima referenced the revolutionary struggle as a struggle for a "*Nueva Guatemala*." Turcios Lima offered a counter-hegemonic conception of a Guatemalan society that rejected capitalism and the corresponding socio-economic strains it placed upon the fragments of Guatemalan society (*campesinos*, workers, indigenous peoples, and women).

⁴ According to Alfred B. Evans, in his work *Soviet Marxism-Leninism: The Decline of an Ideology* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1993), Marxism-Leninism refers to a political ideology

could produce radical changes; namely, they disagreed on the primacy of electoral reformism versus armed tactics. Throughout the decade, the PGT party persistently looked for electoral openings, arguing that democratic reformism in tandem with sufficient popular will, could *legally* generate radical changes. In contrast, the FAR discarded electoral democracy as a corrupted bourgeois tool, diametrically opposed and inherently incompatible with revolutionary change.

By the mid 1960s, the FAR increasingly vocalized their frustration with their subordinate political and leadership positions on the PGT's Central Committee, the party's political leadership apparatus. Further straining their alliance, the PGT only reluctantly committed resources to the FAR guerilla campaigns, instead focusing on legal alternatives of resistance such as political participation and electoral reformism. According to FAR guerrilla leader Pablo Monsanto, the failure of the radical left to effectively coordinate their revolutionary campaigns made it difficult to "organize the mobilization of the masses," in the absence of a coherent "political organization."⁵ The central methodological issue, then, that challenged revolutionary unity, was how to effectively integrate a traditional Communist political party (the PGT) with a guerrilla movement (the FAR). The problem with orthodox Marxism, FAR guerrilla leader César Montes explained, is that "there was no mention of guerrillas."⁶

that prioritizes the leadership of a revolutionary vanguard, or those who have developed class-consciousness through the realization of the dialectic of class struggle. This revolutionary vanguard directs and leads the "dictatorship of the proletariat" during the transition to socialism.

⁵ Marta Harnecker, "Pueblos en Armas," *Serie Luchas Populares Latinoamericanas* (1983): 29.

⁶ Julio César Macías, *Epitáfio para César Montes: relatos de la guerra Revolucionaria en Centroamérica* (San Salvador: Editorial Guayampopo, 1997), 99.

While the FAR accused the PGT of abandoning the armed struggle, the PGT publically accepted FAR's armed strategy as one methodological form, but the PGT leadership argued that multiple forms of struggle should be implemented simultaneously. The PGT were reluctant to close the door on the possibility of electoral openings, hoping eventual negotiations could shift the armed struggle towards that of a democratic struggle. The PGT viewed armed tactics only as a potential catalyst; they accepted a "brief" insurrection in order to force the government to compromise on an electoral level, but they were not prepared for a "prolonged" war, as advocated by the FAR.

When presidential elections were scheduled for March 1966, the methodological disagreements that were dividing the radical left reached a thunderous pitch. Despite the FAR's firm anti-participatory stance, the PGT decided to support Julio César Méndez Montenegro, a progressive candidate who promised to enact reforms. When Méndez Montenegro won the election, the PGT were cautiously optimistic that they had made the right choice in participating in the elections. However, despite the "democratic" election of Méndez Montenegro, the Guatemalan military remained the ultimate authority in the nation, effectively preventing the Méndez Montenegro administration from passing any tangible reforms. Meanwhile, the military unleashed a brutal counter-insurgency campaign that accelerated social and political violence, leaving the radical left in a state of disarray. From 1966-1970, the PGT and the FAR continued to debate the decision they had made to participate in the elections of 1966. The FAR pointed to the endemic levels of violence that gripped Guatemala following the election as evidence

for the fundamental shortcomings of electoral democracy in Guatemala. Many in the PGT, in contrast, retained a more sympathetic view of the Méndez Montenegro administration, arguing its failures were more a factor of insufficient popular will, a lack of democratic resolve that could potentially force the military to accept Méndez Montenegro's reforms. The PGT remained defiant that electoral reformism should remain a central component of the party's revolutionary praxis of the future; many in the PGT believed that if they were successful in expanding their bases of support, and could rally enough political momentum, then they could force the military to concede their demands.

By the end of the 1960s, the PGT maintained that the ongoing struggles plaguing Guatemala's revolutionary movement was *not* due to a lack of focus on the armed struggle, as the FAR increasingly maintained, but rather as a failure to generate enough political will to gain adequate democratic position. They blamed the FAR's violent revolutionary strategy for the loss of support from the more moderate members of the radical left; namely, urban workers, students, and the middle class, who were alienated and isolated from the struggle. To the PGT, the revolutionary struggle was like a chess match; it would require a thoughtful and well-rounded execution of revolutionary strategy, a strategy that utilized all the pieces on the board in complementary capacities.

Historiography

There have been few scholarly works that specifically aim at unraveling the methodological complexities and strategic divergences within Guatemala's radical left in

the 1960s. The strategic debate between the PGT and the FAR, concerning the primacy of electoral reformism over armed tactics, is generally glossed over without sufficient critical analysis. My primary research suggests that competing notions of revolutionary strategies were the most ferociously debated and internally divisive issues that challenged the radical left's ability to secure revolutionary unity throughout the 1960s. This tactical schism consumed the writings of both movements, with voluminous correspondence penned back and forth, arguing in favor of their particular ideological and methodological visions. This thesis attempts to address a gap in the historiography and to complicate the historical understanding of Guatemala's radical left in the 1960s; principally, this thesis provides a more nuanced analysis than what has been done in the past, concerning the competing strategies of electoral reformism versus violent revolution in Guatemala during the 1960s.

There are a number of scholarly works that elucidate the historical conditions that both informed and shaped the diverse set of perspectives held by the radical left in the 1960s. These scholarly histories illuminate the socio-economic conditions that radically altered land use patterns, primed the acceleration of popular mobilization, and shaped political power dynamics, which were constantly evolving as Guatemala's political rule shifted hands throughout the twentieth century. I will discuss the historiography with the intent of providing a historical framework that facilitates a deeper understanding of what informed the radical left's methodological debates in the 1960s, while critically examining the sources for their bias and intent.

Agrarian transformations

In his work *Gift of the Devil*, historian Jim Handy tracks the historical evolution of agrarian systems and land ownership schemas in Guatemala, connecting a historical legacy of colonial plunder in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the introduction of liberalism in the late nineteenth century, and the growing influence of U.S. imperial interests in the early twentieth century, to the socio-economic plights of Guatemalan *campesinos* by the mid-twentieth century.

Following the Spanish conquest of Guatemala in the early sixteenth century, a minority of land-owning elite profited from the export of agricultural goods, forging a colonial heritage of agrarian inequity. In the 1870s, Handy contends, a series of liberal reforms accelerated even more land-grabs to promote coffee production, and its export infrastructure, resulting in further strain on many *campesinos* to maintain their plots for subsistence farming. Handy explains the consequences that the liberal reforms had upon many *campesinos* and their communities: “The forced labour, the debt contracts, the forced sale of village common land and the confiscation of *tierras baldias* [common land without legal title] had the desired effect...they broke down the autonomy of the highland villages, impoverished peasant agriculture and drove increasing numbers of peasants to labour on the developing coffee *fincas* [large farm estates].”⁷ By the early twentieth century, Guatemala’s Caribbean coast was sold off to U.S. corporations, eager to exploit the profitable banana industry that had accelerated since the construction of a railway facilitated its export in 1904. The United Fruit Company (UFC) created a banana empire whose “domain and power appeared limitless” by the 1930s, owning

⁷ Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 69.

three million acres of land and boasting \$242 million in domestic assets.⁸ Throughout his analysis, Handy demonstrates his interpretation that Guatemala's socio-economic and political landscape of the twentieth century was informed and shaped, principally, by shifts in agrarian systems, land ownership, and land use.

The expansion of agro-capitalism in Guatemala

Much of the historiography on this time period analyzes the socio-economic and political changes in Guatemala in the mid-twentieth century from a Marxist perspective of class relations.⁹ They maintain that before the expansion of agro-capitalism following the Second World War, many Guatemalan *campesinos* maintained small plots of land for subsistence farming. According to political scientist Jeffery Paige, within this traditional servile system, *campesinos* effectively operated outside of the market economy where their passivity was preserved through a system of paternalistic exchange. This subservient relationship, forced upon indigenous and *ladino*¹⁰ *campesinos* since colonialism, was maintained and reinforced through the coercive power of the state. Paige argues that traditional servile systems deterred the ability for

⁸ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 78-79.

⁹ See, for example, Jeffery Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (New York: Free Press, 1978), Susanne Jonas, *Guatemala* (Berkeley: North American Congress on Latin American, 1974), Jim Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1994), Robert G. Williams, *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1986), Richard Adams, *Crucifixion by Power* (Austin: The University of Texas Printing Division, 1970) and John A. Booth, *Understanding Central America* (Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1989).

¹⁰ The term "*ladino*" is traditionally associated with Latin Americans of mixed racial heritage, a blending of white and indigenous bloodlines. However, in his work *Más Que un Indio* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), Charles R. Hale problematizes the historic labeling of the term "*ladino*" as its usage tends to ignore internal difference while promoting misguided homogeneity of a widely varying social class and/or racial identity.

rural peoples to achieve political organization as a result of geographic and structural isolation.

By the 1950s, technological innovations in agricultural production prompted the cultivation of previously unusable lands, greatly modifying existing socio-economic structures. Many *campesinos* migrated out of isolated rural areas in search for wage-labour employment. In doing so, Paige maintains, *campesinos* entered into physical spaces in closer proximity to one another, generating new opportunities for labour organization and mobilization. Augmented population density and increased spaces for exchange produced the conditions for popular organization to accelerate.¹¹

To demonstrate how the shift from subsistence farming to wage-labour facilitated popular mobilization, political scientist Susanne Jonas discusses an interview she conducted in 1966 with a migrant wage-laborer working at a *finca* in the El Quetzal, San Marcos Department of Guatemala. The worker reflected on how working wage-labour awakened him to injustice, enabling him to form new bonds of solidarity. He recounted, "It was when I first went to work on the coast that I began to think about my rights...I began to counsel other workers. One, two, three...until I gathered a group of all the workers...Don't you want to fight for your rights with me?"¹² Jonas, like Paige, explains the acceleration of popular organization in the 1950s and '60s as a function of the changing socio-economic conditions of many *campesinos* who transitioned from subsistence farmers to wage-labourers.

¹¹ Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World*, 42-44.

¹² Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, "My ancestors were born here in Guatemala," *Guatemala* (1974): 40.

In his work *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*, economist Robert G. Williams examines the emergence of cotton and beef as major agro-exports in Guatemala during the mid-twentieth century. To Williams, such case studies demonstrated how advances in agro-capitalism encouraged the transition from subsistence farming to wage-labour. Guatemala's ideal soil fertility, mild climate, and cheap labour made cotton cultivation very desirable to foreign capitalists. Many plots of previously subsistence farmland were converted into viable cotton fields, resulting in mass eviction and landlessness of *campesinos*. By the early 1960s, commercial cotton cultivation created a new class of wage-laborers, who traveled from their villages to work often for minimal food, inferior lodging, and poor sanitation.¹³

Before the cattle boom hit Guatemala in the late 1950s, cattle production was generally small-scale and did not require huge tracts of land. However, a surge in beef demand in the U.S. catapulted the Guatemalan cattle market onto a globalized scale,¹⁴ draining beef from the local market.¹⁵ Williams contends the "beef boom was greedier for land than any of the export booms that preceded it."¹⁶ Unlike the coffee boom of the late nineteenth century, limited by ecological constraints for rich fertile soil in specialized elevations and climates, cattle could be grazed anywhere with grass. The construction of fencing cut off *baldios*, or untitled lands, which were converted from

¹³ Williams, *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*, 59-65.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note the cattle boom shifted land conversion from the Pacific coast to Northeastern Guatemala, specifically to the Izabal and Zacapa Departments, which would later become guerrilla strongholds. The guerrillas capitalized on *campesino* mobilization in these areas of extreme land inequity.

¹⁵ Robert G. Williams notes in *Export Agriculture and the crisis in Central America*, 108, that in 1950, nearly all beef was consumed domestically. By 1970, nearly 75% went for export.

¹⁶ Williams, *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*, 113.

campesino commons to restricted private lands. Thus, the land that *campesinos* managed to retain through other agro-export booms, lands unsuitable for the cultivation of coffee, cotton, or bananas, were now systematically exploited for cattle grazing. Not only were *campesino* communities increasingly denied access to land, *campesinos* also found it increasingly difficult to find steady employment, as cattle grazing did not require the same labour as previous commodities. Williams emphasizes that the rapid socio-economic shifts that accompanied attempts at agricultural modernization, gave rise to a class-conflict over access to land. Williams suggests that the rapidly modified socio-economic conditions that resulted from the expansion of agro-capitalism in Guatemala, generated new levels of civil incompatibility and social turmoil.¹⁷

Other scholarship on the topic, notably Carlos Guzman-Bockler and Jean-Loup Herbert's *Guatemala: una interpretación histórico-social*, describes the generous government financing given to major commercial enterprises, which encouraged the expansion of agro-capitalism in Guatemala. Generally, the introduction of free market capitalism did not inherently favor the landed oligarchy, resulting from centuries of stifled competition and monopolization. Therefore, the landed oligarchy depended on the state for protection in the form of restrictions on land ownership and distribution. Historian Angela B. Anthony describes the disparity in agrarian equity in Guatemala by the mid 1960s, noting that by 1964, 90% of all agricultural credit was given to commercial firms. Contrastingly, Guatemalans categorized as "indigenous," who

¹⁷ Williams, *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*, 117.

accounted for 70% of population, received only 4% of the credit.¹⁸ The resulting agrarian inequity was evident by the 1964 Guatemalan Census findings, calculating that 97.6% of “small” farmers possessed 37% of land, while the largest *finca*, owners, collectively accounting for only 2.4% of the total, possessed 62.6% of cultivable land.¹⁹

In his work *Crucifixion by Power*, sociologist Richard Adams asserts that the agro-export boom also influenced urban areas; many *campesinos* immigrated into cities to search for employment. Between 1950-1964, the number of Guatemalan cities with a population over 10,000 nearly tripled. During the same time period, unemployment rose from 56 to 70% of the urban population.²⁰ Therefore, according to Adams, urban areas also experienced prime conditions for the formation of increasingly radicalized popular movements. As a result of the relative immobility of lower social classes to improve their general living conditions, a growing tension fragmented Guatemala’s societal fabric. For some, the inequity of land ownership fueled a smoldering sentiment that existing schemas of land and natural resource ownership required serious reform. Adams argues that “changing bases of internal power,” in combination with changes in migration patterns, generated a class conflict between “upper sector interest groups” and “campesino organizations.”²¹ In his work *Understanding Central America*, political scientist John A. Booth echoes Adam’s assessment that by the mid-twentieth century class-conflict in Guatemala was rapidly developing, suggesting, “rapid changes in

¹⁸ Carlos Guzman-Bockler and Jean-Loup Herbert, *Guatemala: una interpretación histórico-social* (Mexico: siglo veintiuno 1972), 75.

¹⁹ Angela B. Anthony, “The Minority that is a Majority: Guatemala’s Indians” *Guatemala* (1974): 29.

²⁰ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 134.

²¹ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 229.

economic and political conditions,” such as income inequality, unemployment, new forms of social poverty, and popular mobilization, were the central factors that led to the formation of revolutionary struggles in Central America in the 1960s.²²

The October Revolution and the “Ten Years of Spring”

To contextualize how the Guatemalan state negotiated the changing socio-economic landscape that transformed Guatemala in the 1950s and ‘60s, many of the general histories on Guatemala highlight the politically progressive period between 1944-1954.²³ After fourteen “years of terror,”²⁴ President Jorge Ubico resigned from office July 1, 1944 amidst violent student protests. A military junta, led by General Federico Ponce Vaídas, held power briefly until Ponce Vaídas was deposed on October 20, 1944 and presidential elections were scheduled, initiating a ten-year politically progressive period in Guatemala known as the October Revolution and the “Ten Years of Spring.”²⁵

Juan José Arévalo, a reformist teacher in self-imposed exile, returned to Guatemala and was elected president on a platform of making “foreign enterprises... subject to the laws of the nation.”²⁶ Facing overwhelming opposition from an entrenched oligarchy of landowners, foreign imperialist interests, the Catholic Church, and the increasingly powerful military, Arévalo was unable to achieve any major reforms

²² Booth, *Understanding Central America*.

²³ See, for example, Jim Handy’s, *Gift of the Devil and Revolution in the Countryside*, Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and Stephen Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

²⁴ Jim Handy notes in *Gift of the Devil*, 98, that Jorge Ubico was president of Guatemala from 1931 to 1944. His administration was known for its strong relations with the U.S., generous concessions to U.S. foreign investment firms, and its commitment to stifle political opposition. In 1934, he passed the Vagrancy Law, which required landless peasants to work 150 days per year.

²⁵ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 105-106.

²⁶ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 104.

that addressed agrarian inequity.²⁷ However, when Colonel Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán was elected president in March 1951, it was evident that Arévalo's October Revolution would endure. Árbenz established freedom of press, poured money into education (15% of total budget), and legalized lower-sector organization with new labour laws that removed traditional protections for the Guatemalan oligarchy.²⁸

With support of the Guatemalan Worker's Party (PGT), and validation from a U.S. authored International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)²⁹ report, President Árbenz concluded that the principal solution to Guatemala's economic problems was agrarian reform. Árbenz confronted foreign capitalist monopolies³⁰ by positioning the state as a competitor. He challenged the transport monopoly held by the United Fruit Company (and its subsidiaries) by constructing a new rival highway to the Atlantic port of Santo Tomás. Most significantly, he promoted and legislated the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952, which called for the expropriation of 1.7 million acres of non-cultivated land from the 32 largest estates in the country. Famously, *Decree 900* called for the allocation of lands to 100,000 landless *campesinos*, while addressing the colonial heritage of debt bondage by opening up lines for government credit. In all, only

²⁷ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 109, 111. According to Handy, Arévalo withstood nearly thirty coup attempts during his administration.

²⁸ Adams in *Crucifixion by Power*, 145, 477 and Susanne Jonas, "The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power," *Latin American Perspectives* 5, (1991): 63, emphasize that during the Árbenz administration unions thrived, boasting more than 100,000 members in 665 officially recognized union associations. Contrastingly, by 1962 only 16,000 members, or 1.2% of total workers, were unionized in only 100 recognized unions.

²⁹ Handy in *Gift of the Devil*, 115, explains how Árbenz instituted economic reforms influenced by an International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) report, authored by University of Saskatchewan economist George Britnell, which called for the more efficient use of land and the diversification of crops along Guatemala's lower Pacific coast.

³⁰ By "foreign capitalist monopolies," I refer primarily to the "unholy trinity" of the United Fruit Company (UFC), International Railways of Central America, and United Fruit Steamship Company.

16.3% of qualifying land was actually expropriated.³¹ According to Jim Handy, despite frequent reference to Árbenz as a “communist” by the oppositional right, Árbenz actually framed his case for agrarian reform as an extension of liberal capitalism, which aimed to boost productivity by increasing the efficiency of land use. Handy interprets Árbenz’s aims of agrarian reform as a mechanism of bringing democracy to the countryside, while advancing nationalistic capitalism.³²

According to Handy, “The Agrarian Reform Law inevitably caused tremendous political upheaval. Peasant leagues and ‘revolutionary’ political parties had been forming in villages for years before the law was promulgated, but the decree accelerated political organization while polarizing village communities.” Handy continues by explaining how peasant leagues extended their socio-political influence dramatically after agrarian reform was passed, working in rural Guatemala to recruit *campesinos* into labour organizations and strengthen local unions. “It attracted the most radical and the most dedicated of Guatemala’s reformers,” Handy contends, asserting, “Many of these were communists or had links to the communist Guatemalan Workers’ Party (PGT).”³³ In Handy’s work *Revolution in the Countryside*, Greg Grandin’s *The Last Colonial Massacre*, and Marjorie and Thomas Melville’s *The Politics of Land Ownership*, there is notable attention given to the contribution of the Guatemalan Worker’s Party (PGT) to drafting, passing, and implementing agrarian reform in the early 1950s. The PGT rallied the popular masses in support of the October Revolution and advocated, at

³¹ Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, 53-58.

³² Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 127.

³³ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, 130-132.

times openly and sometimes clandestinely, on behalf of progressive public policy initiatives introduced throughout the Ten Years of Spring. Handy and Grandin highlight the PGT's historical contributions to the Ten Years of Spring more than most scholarship on the topic. In the journalistic work³⁴ that discussed the emergence of Guatemalan guerrilla groups, very little attention was allocated to the historical work done by the PGT, regarding the party's role in the passing of agrarian reform legislation, while negating the supply and communication networks that the PGT helped construct in *campesino* communities throughout the 1950s. In contrast, Handy and Grandin offer ample tribute to the work done by the PGT leadership during the Ten Years of Spring, contending their contributions were invaluable to the success of later guerrilla campaigns in the 1960s.

In 1954, President Árbenz was forced from office in a military coup, declaring that Guatemala was being taken over by a "heterogeneous Fruit Company expeditionary force," effectively signaling the end of the Ten Years of Spring.³⁵ Much scholarship³⁶ on the topic explains the coup as a function of U.S. Interventionism within a Cold War lexicon. In this interpretation, pressure from the U.S. State Department, acting to protect their investment interests in Guatemala, became too significant by 1954 and

³⁴ See, for example, Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Oxford: Verso, 1970), Eduardo Galeano *Guatemala: Occupied Country* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), Adolfo Gilly, "The Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala," *Monthly Review* (1965), and Régis Debray, *The Revolution on Trial: A critique of arms* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1974).

³⁵ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 146.

³⁶ See, for example, Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* and Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, and Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1982).

Árbenz was forcibly ousted from office for his “communistic” attempts at social and economic reform in a CIA-backed coup.

However, Jim Handy argues that the CIA’s role in the Árbenz coup may be overblown by the historiography on the topic, ignoring what he calls a “revolution in the countryside” that had empowered *campesinos* and community associations to initiate the process of land redistribution themselves. Handy argues, “much of the unrest that exploded in rural Guatemala during the revolution was a function of the continuing strength of community identification...many communities used the agrarian reform to regain control of land that had been lost years earlier to large landowners...In many instances, this also meant that Indians were reclaiming land from Ladinos.”³⁷ Therefore, according to Handy, the coup that ousted Árbenz was more of a function of “internal tension” than “external sources of pressure,” such as the CIA.³⁸

The end of “spring”

After the Árbenz coup, hundreds of “leftists” were murdered, an estimated 17,000 “radicals” were jailed, unions were abolished, and the right to vote was suspended. Thousands of “leftist” politicians took asylum in foreign embassies or fled the country in exile.³⁹ In October 1954, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas became president through a referendum to legitimize his authoritative rule; it was a fraudulent election, according to Susanne Jonas, in which Castillo Armas received “over 99 percent of the vote.”⁴⁰ Castillo

³⁷ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, 139.

³⁸ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, 169.

³⁹ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 151.

⁴⁰ Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power*, 59.

Armas reversed the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952 and returned the expropriated land to its former owners.

The scholarship⁴¹ on the topic generally agree that while Castillo Armas officially took the presidency, the military increasingly consolidated power within their own ranks, becoming the dominant political force. From 1955-1965, for example, Guatemala increased defense expenditures more than any other nation in Latin America.⁴² This interpretation seems to suggest that the consolidation of military power implied an internally unified military apparatus; however, power struggles and internal dissent ensued regularly, constantly restructuring the military's power dynamics. In 1957, for example, Castillo Armas was assassinated as a result of an internal power struggle within the military, and General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes took power in 1958, an election in which his opponent was bribed \$20,000 by the CIA to concede.⁴³

In contrast to the scholarship⁴⁴ on the topic done by economists, sociologists, and political scientists, who generally correlate the rise of popular organization in Guatemala to the shifting socio-economic conditions produced by structural shifts to the agrarian landscape, other scholarship has nuanced this interpretation. Jim Handy, for example, argues ethnic difference, and the corresponding ethnic conflict that it

⁴¹ See, for example, Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954*, Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, and Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*.

⁴² Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 147.

⁴³ Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power*, 59.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World*, Charles Brockett's *Land, Power, and Poverty: Agrarian Transformation and Political Conflict in Central America* (London: Routledge Publishing, 1990), Booth, *Understanding Central America*, and Williams *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*.

produced, greatly influenced community formation in Guatemala, complicating the politics of land rights and the power dynamics of agrarian reforms.⁴⁵ Handy complicates our understanding of the traditional dialectic of “*ladino* versus *indio*,” arguing regional and ethnic variations produced rivalries that spilled out onto various levels of societal interaction, particularly it made enacting agrarian reform a complex and convoluted process.

Greg Grandin also nuances our understanding of the acceleration of popular mobilization in the 1950s and ‘60s in Guatemala, arguing it was as much to do with a changing *political* landscape as class-conflict. While Grandin acknowledges the profound impact of a “multigenerational land struggle,” on raising popular consciousness, he complicates this traditional Marxist analysis of class-relations, asserting that a sense of “individuality” was beginning to define how *campesinos* perceived their socio-economic condition.⁴⁶ Grandin contends, “it was politics not capitalism that gave rise to the individual in Latin America.”⁴⁷ Proposing a more nuanced perspective of modernity, Grandin moves beyond previous explanations that the radicalization of Guatemalan politics was an attempt to “restore a shattered unity” in the “face of modernity’s pluralisms.” In contrast, Grandin argues, “mass, collective, passionate, and populist political mobilizations...were absolutely essential to bring forth individual, which in turn was key in furthering the liberalization of Latin American society.”⁴⁸ Exercises of electoral participation and union activity, primarily during the Ten Years of Spring, had

⁴⁵ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, 125-136.

⁴⁶ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, xiii.

⁴⁷ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, xvi.

⁴⁸ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, xv.

awakened a political consciousness in *campesinos*, largely transmitted to them via peasant leagues and community organizations. According to Grandin, their experiences of electoral inclusion “began to embody the fusion of insurgent individuality and social solidarity...the twin pillars of democracy,” and produced new forms of radical leftism.

Generally, the scholarship⁴⁹ on the topic all correlate the rise of the *armed* revolutionary struggle in Guatemala as a consequence of a failed military mutiny on November 13, 1960. The military rebels, many of whom later constructed the FAR guerrilla movement in 1962, joined with the PGT in 1961, forming the nucleus of Guatemala’s radical left. In 1960, the PGT had passed a resolution embracing “all forms of struggle,” hinting at widening their revolutionary strategy to include armed tactics, but as Grandin notes there remained a “large gap between theory and practice” on this issue.⁵⁰ Grandin maintains, “its [the PGT] ambivalent stance toward armed revolution put the party at odds with many of its more militant, Cuba-fired members, while its constant attempts to respond to this or that political opening, or this or that potential collaborator, led it to forsake what it had done best during the October Revolution.”⁵¹ The “central tension” within the PGT party in the early 1960s, Guatemalan sociologist Carlos Figueroa asserts, was the “awareness for the need of armed revolution” versus “sensitivity to the possibility of democratic openings.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Jonas and Tobis, “Showcase for Counterrevolution,” *Guatemala*, 75.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, and Jonas, *Guatemala*.

⁵⁰ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 90.

⁵¹ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 92.

⁵² Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 91.

Historian Michael D. Kirkpatrick explains that by the mid 1960s, as a result of Cuba's revolutionary influence, the FAR adopted a post-colonial Marxist critique on their revolutionary struggle. Kirkpatrick maintains the FAR called citizens to action, connecting personal responsibility with the construction of a "*Nueva Guatemala*." Specifically, the FAR implemented rhetorical devices in their armed propaganda education campaigns that attempted to connect the struggles of agrarian inequity, imperialism, and poverty; in doing so, Kirkpatrick claims, the FAR were "synchronizing" Guatemala's "national narrative with an international genealogy of revolutionary heroes."⁵³

Throughout the mid 1960s, the PGT and the FAR entered into a polarizing debate concerning the primacy of electoral reformism versus armed tactics. The presidential election of 1966 brought this methodological schism into blistering view and tensions mounted. According to Grandin, the military's brutal counter-insurgency offensive of 1966-1967 proved to many in the radical left that participating in the election of 1966 was a tactical disaster, which demonstrated the "inability of substantive democracy" to generate revolutionary change, and further radicalized Guatemala's revolutionary movements.⁵⁴

Primary source base

This thesis relies on three central bases of primary research; first, the works of foreign journalists Adolfo Gilly, Richard Gott, Eduardo Galeano, and Régis Debray, all of whom

⁵³ Michael D. Kirkpatrick, "Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala," (MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2006), 57-58.

⁵⁴ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 13.

extensively covered the Guatemalan guerrillas in the 1960s and, in the process of developing personal relationships with the guerrillas, began to represent particular ideological interests, while implicitly advancing certain political and ideological agendas; secondly, this thesis utilizes the work published by a number of North American journalists who covered the FAR guerrillas following the presidential election of 1966, publishing newspaper articles that propagated a romanticized conception of the Guatemalan “guerrilla;” thirdly, this thesis depends upon the primary source research I conducted at the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA) in Antigua, Guatemala. The CIRMA archives include FAR and PGT internal and public documents, memoirs, manifestos, communications, and testimonials from 1954-1995.

Guerrilla journalists

Guatemala’s revolutionary struggle attracted the attention of foreign journalists who traveled to Guatemala in the 1960s and reported on their guerrilla campaigns, often actively engaged in the same historical events they were writing about. The manner in which these sources communicate their version of historical events reveals a great deal about how these active historical actors perceived the historical conditions that surrounded them at particular times and place.

Richard Gott published *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* in 1970, one of the first books to provide a comprehensive history of the FAR guerrillas in the 1960s. In 1963, Gott worked as a freelance journalist for the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, in Cuba. In Cuba, Gott became influenced by Cuba’s brand of revolutionary Marxism, which challenged, in his perspective, the Communist Party’s hegemonic grip over the

global left. His account of the Guatemalan guerrillas in the 1960s reflected his affinity for Cuban revolutionary strategy and guided his analysis of the FAR. Gott was a cultural worker who wrote in support of military confrontation, advocating for the primacy of armed tactics over electoral reformism. As a result, Gott did not allocate nearly any attention to the PGT party nor credit them for their role in the revolutionary struggle; instead, Gott romanticized the FAR and MR-13 guerrilla movements. For example, Gott described FAR leader Luis Augusto Turcios Lima in the following terms: “Though he suddenly found himself in a position of political leadership, Turcios was essentially a soldier fighting for a *new* code of honour: If he has an *alter* ego, it would not be Lenin or Mao or even Castro, whose works he has read and admires, but Augusto Sandino, the Nicaraguan general who fought the U.S...”⁵⁵ Furthermore, Gott’s evidence extensively relied on interviews conducted with Argentinian Trotskyist and MR-13 leader Adolfo Gilly, who by his active participation in the MR-13, was clearly not an objective source of historical information.

Eduardo Galeano, a Uruguayan journalist, writer, and poet published *Guatemala: Occupied Country* in 1967, providing his account of the Guatemalan revolutionary struggle in the 1960s. Galeano was part of a Cuban-inspired cultural project, which aimed to revise the historical narrative of Latin America through various literary outlets. Galeano, like Gott, clearly favored a militant revolutionary struggle, downplaying the utility of the PGT’s electoral reformism in favor of the FAR’s armed tactics. Galeano’s tendency towards romanticizing the guerrillas, and favoring their tactics over the PGT,

⁵⁵ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 12.

was illustrated when he wrote, “The guerrilleros do not think that history began with them, on the day the first rebels chose to install themselves in the heart of the Sierra de las Minas. It was the fallen flags of Arévalo and Árbenz that they raised and unfurled. But this *continuation* of the interrupted anti-imperialist process is not and could not be a *repetition*.”⁵⁶ Galeano’s *Guatemala: Occupied Country* relied heavily on the interviews conducted with the FAR guerrillas, especially FAR leaders Turcios Lima and César Montes. In this thesis, Galeano’s rich and colorful commentary provides insight into the perspective of one foreign leftist who was committed to propagating a revolutionary strategy of armed conflict over electoral reformism.

Régis Debray, a French revolutionary theorist, was a professor at the University of Havana in the mid to late 1960s. His works’ *The Revolution on Trial* and *Revolution in the Revolution?* were written at the time of an intense power struggle for global leftist leadership. Debray was essentially commissioned by the Cuban government to provide evidence and write of the superiority of Cuban *foquismo*, or a military strategy of irregular warfare that could lead to popular insurrection, over the Communist Party’s “peaceful” strategy of reformism. Debray theorized that popular support for the revolutionary struggle would be developed through the course of an armed struggle. According to *foquismo* theory, a popular war could be initiated before all of the “objective conditions” for revolution were satisfied if the struggle was led by a dedicated and moral revolutionary vanguard. According to historian David A. Crain, Debrays’ works provided Cuban President Fidel Castro with the “evidence” he needed in

⁵⁶ Galeano, *Guatemala: Occupied Country*, 17-18.

his debate with the Communist Party over global revolutionary strategy.⁵⁷ Debray used the Guatemalan experience as a case study to prove the theoretical and practical superiority of the *foco* strategy over electoral reformism.

In his work, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, Debray argued that the subordination of the FAR guerrillas, in terms of their political leadership, was an ongoing methodological error that was damaging Guatemala's revolutionary movement. For the Guatemalan revolution to find success, Debray contended, FAR guerrilla leaders should be elevated to prominent leadership positions on the PGT's Central Committee. Debray clarified why the PGT should delegate more political leadership to the FAR guerrillas, arguing:

“the problem with intellectual guerrillas is the speed/adaptability...they are less able to invent, improvise, make do with available resources... thinking he already knows he will move more slowly, with less flexibility... [this] promotes isolation from the masses... Mountain forces depend on city leadership for logistical and military aid... it subordinates guerrilla forces to petty urban politics...”⁵⁸

The guerrillas were the true vanguards of the revolution, Debray contended, superseding the PGT's hegemonic and outdated “old” party maneuvering.⁵⁹ Debray's works' reveal the perspective of someone actively involved in the task of convincing guerrilla groups to abandon electoral participation in favor of extending military operations.

⁵⁷ David A. Crain, “Guatemalan Revolutionaries and Havana's Ideological Offensive of 1966-1968,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 17 (1975): 193-194.

⁵⁸ Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, 20-21, 68, 70.

⁵⁹ Crain, “Guatemalan Revolutionaries and Havana's Ideological Offensive of 1966-1968,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 193-194.

Adolfo Gilly, an Argentinian Trotskyist⁶⁰, reported on the Revolutionary Movement of November 13 (MR-13), a FAR guerrilla column that split from the FAR in 1964. Gilly joined MR-13 in their guerrilla campaigns through the mid 1960s in northeastern Guatemala, and wrote extensively on the MR-13's split with the PGT in articles such as "The Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala," published in the *Monthly Review*. Gilly wrote from a pro-Trotskyist perspective and framed his argument in complete opposition to the PGT's tendency of favoring electoral reformism over an armed struggle. Gilly wrote with the intent of shedding a positive light on global Trotskyism, trying to extend Trotskyism into Guatemala. His critique of the Communist Party, which he presented as an objective analysis, was motivated by his political affiliation with Trotskyism. For example he recounted an interview he conducted with a *campesino* that recalled:

"In the time of don Jacobo [Árbenz], we all got together and asked for arms, but they didn't give us any, and that finished him. If the peasants had been armed, no one could overthrow him...workers and peasants do not believe in elections, they have no illusions...the electoral experience was thoroughly explored with Árbenz and it failed...it is not enough to have the land; it is also necessary to have a government and the arms...to defend it."⁶¹

In this example, Gilly tried to rewrite the historical legacy of the Ten Years of Spring, downplaying its contributions to the revolutionary movement and re-interpreting its legacy.

⁶⁰ Trotskyism, a theory of Marxism developed by Leon Trotsky, called for "permanent revolution" to be initiated by a mass worker's strike. Trotskyism also theorized that international support was pivotal for the broader success of localized revolutionary struggles.

⁶¹ Adolfo Gilly, "The Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala" *Monthly Review* 17 (1965): 9-12.

The documents, which the aforementioned journalists have left behind, blur the line between secondary and primary sources. Their writings can only relay their subjective interpretations of the revolutionary struggle that they were actively involved in. Despite that their works read like scholarly material, their political motivations and ideological biases informed and shaped their historical analysis and were written to achieve certain ends. Therefore, in this thesis, their work will be viewed only as primary sources, as interpretations of the revolutionary struggle from people at a certain time period, which were actively involved in the revolutionary process. When analyzing their work, I weigh the evidence they offered with careful consideration of the political motivations that guided their writings, constantly questioning their interpretations as politically contrived.

North American journalists fall in love with the 'guerrilla'

In the spring of 1966, the FAR guerrillas invited a series of North American journalists (notably, Norman Gall of *The Toronto Daily Star*, Georgie Anne Geyer of *The Chicago Daily News*, Milan J. Kubic of *Newsweek International*, Ted Yates of *NBC News Special*, and Alan Howard of *The New York Times*) to visit them in the mountains of northeastern Guatemala as part of their public relations strategy. At this time, the FAR were largely demobilized as a result of the PGT's decision to participate in the presidential election of 1966. However, by the time the North American journalists arrived in Guatemala, it was becoming increasingly clear that the new Méndez Montenegro administration was powerless to pass any significant reforms. Therefore, these interviews provide crucial insight into the guerrillas' perspectives on electoral democracy. The FAR's commentary

on Guatemala's corrupted democracy was markedly cynical and they routinely expressed their opposition to electoral participation in favor of carrying out a prolonged armed struggle.

The central methodological challenge of these interviews resides in how enamored the journalists were with the guerrillas; they romanticized guerrilla culture. Clearly, the intent of these publications was to sell newspapers, and until the mid 1960s, their North American readership was largely unaware of who the guerrillas were and what they were fighting for. Many of these North American journalists painted a picture of guerrilla life that read more like a fairy-tale than an account of objective reality. For example, Georgie Anne Geyer wrote in 1966 about how impressed she was with the FAR, claiming the guerrillas were a "well oiled machine...we'd be walking down a rode, and without a sound, two guerrillas would emerge from the forest, and join us," continuing that the guerrillas used bird calls to communicate.

The fundamental issue with these primary sources is the lack of attention given to the PGT. The interviews with the FAR guerrillas seem to reside in isolation from other political conditions and developments that were occurring within the radical left during this time period, developments outside the isolation of the FAR mountain camps. However, these sources can provide crucial insight into a diverse set of perspectives held by the guerrillas on electoral reformism and its relationship to their armed struggle.

FAR and PGT primary documents

The most valuable primary research that provides insight into the internal debate within Guatemala's radical left in the 1960s, regarding the primacy of electoral reformism

versus armed tactics, are the documents written directly by the PGT and FAR in the 1960s. This thesis places a rich collection of documents into dialogue with one another to illustrate what the fundamental points of their divergence were and how their methodological discussion evolved throughout the decade.

In regard to the PGT's revolutionary perspective, I analyze the PGT's Second, Third, and Fourth Congresses in 1954, 1960, and 1969 respectively. The Congressional resolutions and charters associated with the convocation of the party's congresses provide crucial insight into the revolutionary strategy the PGT believed should be followed to generate radical changes in Guatemala. These documents also provide insight into how the party envisioned its role as the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle and how their past previous electoral successes, during the Ten Years of Spring, guided their political line and revolutionary strategy going forward into the 1960s.

To elucidate the FAR's revolutionary perspective, I analyze a series of statements and bulletins released by the FAR throughout the 1960s, documents that demonstrated the FAR's revolutionary development and the subsequent changes to their revolutionary ideology and strategy over time. I analyze a series of letters written from the FAR to the PGT, called Open Letter (1965), The Declaration of the Sierra de las Minas (1964), and the March Document (1967) which explained the FAR's perspective on Guatemala's revolutionary struggle in terms of why they rejected electoral reformism as a capable revolutionary tool. In response to these FAR documents, the PGT released a series of statements responding, although sometimes only implicitly to the aforementioned FAR statements/letters, called Ten Theses on Organizational

Questions (1965) and The Struggle for Unity (1968), and various articles written in the *World Marxist Review* by the PGT leadership.

Lastly, to shed light on how Guatemala's radical left was affected by its decision to participate in the election of 1966, I analyze a series of post-mortem interviews conducted with FAR leaders in the 1980s. These interviews, conducted primarily by Chilean journalist Marta Harnecker in 1981, provide a post-facto reflection on how the elections of 1966 affected the radical left's revolutionary methodology going forward into the 1970s, from the perspective of FAR leaders who were active in both decades.

Chapter breakdown of the thesis

In Chapter One, I analyze the historical conditions that led to the formation of the PGT and the FAR, and how the construction of their alliance in the early 1960s solidified the two groups as the most powerful components of Guatemala's radical left. I explore the PGT's experiences of advocating and implementing agrarian reform in the 1950s, and examine how their experiences working from within electoral democracy guided their revolutionary praxis into the 1960s. Next, I examine how Cuba's revolutionary government influenced the FAR's revolutionary theory and praxis, producing a tactical schism between the PGT and the FAR. I introduce and track the increasing divergences between the PGT and the FAR regarding their perspectives on electoral democracy as a revolutionary tool capable of producing radical socio-economics changes. In doing so, I demonstrate various points of internal divergence, across space and time, concerning how Guatemala's radical left perceived their revolutionary actions as either the *reform* or the *erosion* of state authority.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the Guatemalan presidential election of 1966, using the election as a case study that illustrated the fierce debate that accompanied the decision made by the PGT to participate in the election. This election was particularly divisive for the radical left, which could not agree on the revolutionary methodology they believed should be implemented to realize their revolutionary objectives. Throughout the chapter, I analyze the experiences of the radical left in *navigating* or *abstaining* from participating in electoral democracy. I discuss the degree to which the divergent perceptions of state authority and political hegemony from the early 1960s (Chapter One) factor into the decision to participate or abstain in the presidential election of 1966. Next, I analyze how the acceleration of social and political violence following the election of 1966 was perceived and negotiated by the PGT and the FAR from 1966-1969, and how this shaped their ongoing strategic debate. Finally, I discuss the collapse of revolutionary unity between the PGT and the FAR in 1968, evaluating how their fundamental strategic divergences, regarding the primacy of electoral reformism versus armed tactics, factored into their formal split.

In Chapter Three, I conclude by summarizing how the methodological debate between the PGT and the FAR evolved throughout the decade. To many in the radical left, the shortcomings of electoral democracy had been put on full display in the election of 1966. To demonstrate this, I review the points of internal divergence within Guatemala's radical left, noting how their debate evolved over time. Specifically, I summarize the PGT/FAR deliberations concerning divergent *forms* of struggle and how

differing interpretations of Marxism-Leninism shaped their perspectives on the primacy of electoral reformism versus armed tactics.

Chapter I: ¡Ya Basta! The Guatemalan Revolution Ignites

“Sure, I liked it... We had the officers club, 15-ounce Texas steaks, good clothes, the best equipment. Plenty of money too; every month I sent \$150 to my mother. What worries did I have?⁶² ... I don't think the Yankees suspected they were training a guerrilla.”⁶³

- FAR guerrilla leader Luis Augusto Turcios Lima on his time training infantry at Fort Benning, Georgia

Chapter introduction

The aim of this chapter is to elucidate the methodological divergences that inundated Guatemala's radical left in the early 1960s. First, I discuss the formation and development of the PGT party from the 1950s to the early 1960s, analyzing how their historic experiences of successfully working through electoral democracy, (namely, agrarian reform gains in the early 1950s), shaped the party's revolutionary strategy going forward into the 1960s. Next, I examine the military uprising of November 13, 1960, and its correlation to the formation of the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) in 1962. Then, I analyze the Cuban revolutionary government's tactical influence upon the construction and development of the FAR's revolutionary line. In doing so, I track how the FAR's revolutionary theory and praxis developed into the early 1960s, with specific attention to the emergence of armed tactics within their revolutionary methodology. I end the chapter with an examination of how the political and revolutionary unity of the radical left was tested by the departure of one of the guerrilla columns, the Revolutionary Movement of November 13 (MR-13), from the PGT/FAR revolutionary

⁶² Alan Howard, "With the Guerrillas in Guatemala," *The New York Times*, June 26, 1966, 9.

⁶³ "Turcios Lima," *Cuba Tricontinental* (1969), 147.

alliance. This schism prompted a ferocious debate concerning the merits of electoral democracy as a revolutionary tool.

Historical framework

In June 1960, the PGT celebrated its Third Congress, declaring they had to use all *legal* forms of struggle to fight for socio-economic and political reforms. However, their traditional revolutionary strategy of electoral reformism was challenged following the emergence of the FAR guerrillas, and their militant revolutionary tactics, in the early 1960s.

Following the Cuban Revolution, President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes permitted a counter-revolutionary army, organized by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, to secretly train in Guatemala with the aim of invading Cuba. Guatemalan officers in charge of guarding the Cuban-training base, at a *finca* called La Helvetia, were not allowed entry into the military compound. According to Guatemalan historian Michael D. Kirkpatrick, this segregation produced “patriotic humiliation” in the *Logia del Niño Jesús* (Company of the Baby Jesus), a fraternity of junior officers within the Guatemala military.⁶⁴ Junior military officer Luis Augusto Turcios Lima felt it was a “violation of national sovereignty.” “And why was it permitted?” Turcios Lima asked, “Because our government is a puppet.”⁶⁵ The growing sentiment to revolt within the *Logia del Niño Jesús*, already fueled by what they perceived to be internal corruption, low salaries, and the promotion of “traditionalists” to higher ranks, reached a breaking point; and, on

⁶⁴ Michael D. Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala,” (MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2006), 41.

⁶⁵ Howard, “With the guerrillas in Guatemala,” *The New York Times*.

November 13, 1960 many returned from their posts in the Petén Department to stage an ultimately unsuccessful revolt against the Guatemalan military.

The military rebels returned from exile in 1961 and entered into a political alliance with the PGT. On February 6, 1962 the military rebels attacked two army posts in the Guatemalan Department of Izabal near United Fruit Company holdings. On February 10, they shot down a military jet; a few weeks later, the rebels took control of two radio stations.⁶⁶ From their occupation of *Radio Internacional*, the rebels read a statement proclaiming, “what we are fighting for,” which called for the overthrow of President Ydígoras Fuentes and the installation of democracy in Guatemala.⁶⁷ César Montes, a leader of the FAR guerrillas by the mid 1960s, called February 6, 1962 the “conscious beginning of guerrilla warfare.”⁶⁸

In March 1962, many in the Guatemalan radical left, primarily students from the University of San Carlos, were peacefully protesting in the streets of Guatemala City when they were attacked by the police, leaving 12 killed in what was known as *las jornadas*. The blood spilled during *las jornadas* converted some in Guatemala’s radical left to the perspective that peaceful methods of resistance were no longer viable in the face of violent state repression. In September 1962, a lawyer from Guatemala City approached military rebel leaders Turcios Lima and Marco Antonio Yon Sosa and relayed that Cuban revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara wanted to meet with them. Thus, in the fall of 1962, the young Guatemalan revolutionaries traveled to Cuba to receive

⁶⁶ Louisa Frank, “Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala,” *Guatemala* (1974: 180-181).

⁶⁷ Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala,” 45.

⁶⁸ Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Oxford: Verso, 1970), 17.

“pragmatic guerrilla instruction.”⁶⁹ Most significantly, their trip to Cuba resulted in the creation of a new Guatemalan guerrilla group: the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). The FAR were to be the armed wing of the PGT and they designated the northeastern departments of Izabal and Zacapa as their areas of operations.⁷⁰ FAR leader César Montes explained the choice of their operating zone as more a factor of the isolating “topography” than the “social conditions.” The Guatemalan military found it difficult to pursue the guerrillas in a region perpetually blanketed in mist, where clothes were always damp and boots quickly rotted. However, the guerrillas already contained a vital supply network within *campesino* communities, which provided the guerrillas with food and materials, a network constructed years before by the PGT.

The FAR planned a military strategy that mirrored the Cuban revolutionary model of *foquismo*, a military strategy that political scientist Susanne Jonas defines as irregular warfare that transforms into “popular insurrection... with the ‘subjective conditions’ being created by the exemplary actions of the revolutionary vanguard.”⁷¹ From 1963 to 1966, the FAR conducted various guerrilla activities and armed propaganda education campaigns in the rugged mountains of northeastern Guatemala. Throughout this time period, communication with their revolutionary partners, the PGT, was practically non-existent, and the FAR guerrillas increasingly depended on the *campesinos* who lived in the areas they operated in for food and supplies.

⁶⁹ Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala,” 46.

⁷⁰ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2004), 92.

⁷¹ Susanne Jonas, “The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power,” *Latin American Perspectives* 5, (1991): 67-68.

By the mid 1960s, FAR leader Yon Sosa became increasingly frustrated with the PGT for not providing sufficient financial or material support for his guerrilla campaigns. Looking for other sources of support, Yon Sosa met with Guatemalan businessman Francisco Armando Granados, who was willing to fund Yon Sosa's guerrilla front if he adopted a Trotskyist political line.⁷² According to Argentinian journalist and pro-MR-13 advocate Adolfo Gilly, Yon Sosa agreed and pledged to the *Fourth International* (Trotskyist governing body), and renamed his front Revolutionary Movement of November 13 (MR-13).

While the PGT and the FAR maintained a delicate unity, primarily based in their shared opposition to MR-13 and its Trotskyist ideology, they began to intensely debate the primacy of electoral reformism versus armed tactics. Wanting to capitalize on the FAR's split with the MR-13, the PGT went into a period of internal debate regarding their party's stance on armed tactics. In the end, PGT leadership decided to endorse the armed struggle as their principal revolutionary method by January 1965. However, this was far from a decision of consensus within the PGT leadership. As a result, the PGT reluctantly accepted the incorporation of armed tactics into their methodology, but only as an "instrument of pressure which could force the government to negotiate... on the electoral, democratic level" of conciliation.⁷³ This methodological debate reached a

⁷² In Yon Sosa's frustration with the PGT, and by extension his frustration with the Communist Party, Granados saw an opportunity to extend global Trotskyism into Guatemala. Trotskyism called for a government of workers and peasants and advocated for a revolution that was more than just for the sake of taking power. Specifically, Trotskyism called for the expropriation of foreign companies and a redistribution of land to peasants.

⁷³ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 28.

feverous intensity by the end of 1965, when presidential elections were announced for March 1966.

The origin and evolution of the PGT's political line

Days before Juan José Arévalo became president of Guatemala in March 1944, a new constitution was ratified and approved by the Guatemalan Congressional Assembly, which disrupted the political grip of the landed oligarchy over Guatemala's governance with new opportunities for labour organization. Article #92 of the new constitution hinted at the initiation of agrarian reform, stating: "Private property can be expropriated with prior indemnity to satisfy a public necessity, utility or social interest which has been legally verified." According to Guatemalan historian Jim Handy, "[organized labour] quickly organized under the benevolent protection of the Arévalo government, it became an important element in support of the revolution."⁷⁴

In August 1948, The Confederation of Workers of Guatemala (CTG) was legally recognized as a union and was led by General Secretary Victor Manuel Gutiérrez, a self-taught Marxist schoolteacher, labour organizer, and former Congressman who would also become a principal leader of the PGT in the 1950s and '60s. According to Guatemalan historian Greg Grandin, Gutiérrez's knowledge of Marxism "helped him understand Guatemala's October Revolution within a larger post-World War II global history." The CTG, under Gutiérrez's leadership, focused their labour mobilization efforts and education campaigns in the rural countryside, rallying *campesino* support for

⁷⁴ According to Jim Handy's *Gift of the Devil* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), labour mobilization in the countryside was generally held in check during the Arévalo administration due to the persistence of labour laws that prevented full union autonomy and restricted organization.⁷⁴ Union activity did not flourish until the passing of the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952.

leftist political parties.⁷⁵ The CTG advocated that land taken illegally, primarily, during the liberal regimes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, should be returned to their previous owners.

The CTG became an umbrella labour organization (the CGTG-the Confederation of Guatemalan Workers) that included a coalition of teachers and railway workers. However, political differences between the two interest groups remained an issue, as the more radical teachers' syndicates argued for a leftist political orientation, while the railway workers' were decidedly more skeptical of the involvement of communists in their organization. By the early 1950s, the teachers began to dominate the CGTG and released a statement defending their active political participation: "For us to speak about democracy, civil liberties, free civic institutions, is the same as saying better salaries, better houses and better clothing, better health and, in brief, a better life."⁷⁶ CGTG leader Gutiérrez advocated for the strategic utility of political participation, a tactical position that would later drive PGT revolutionary strategy in the 1960s.

Under the leadership of Gutiérrez, the CGTG worked to boost unions and raise awareness of workers' rights in the countryside, becoming vocal defenders of the October Revolution. According to Jim Handy, Gutiérrez was instrumental in organizing and mobilizing labour in the 1950s. "Scrupulously honest," Handy contends, "Gutiérrez inspired innumerable disciples with his example of hard work and obvious dedication." Handy emphasizes that Gutiérrez was successful because he was dedicated to staying

⁷⁵ Jim Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1994), 71-72.

⁷⁶ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 118.

“within the constraints of the constitution,” illustrated with his “tireless work” on the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952.⁷⁷ Handy’s high praise for Gutiérrez is not surprising given Handy’s admiration for what future PGT leaders, like Gutiérrez, were able to accomplish on agrarian reform issues in the 1950s.

In May 1950, another peasant league, The National Peasant Federation of Guatemala (CNGG) was founded and led by another schoolteacher, Leonardo Castillo Flores.⁷⁸ The CNGG, led by a group of teachers focused on fighting for *campesino* rights, demanded equitable access to land and pressured municipal governments to apply agrarian reform laws. In a co-authored document by the CNGG and CCTG, called the Camino Guatemalteco (Guatemalan Path), the peasant leagues called for advances in agrarian reform, better working and living conditions for workers and peasants, and an end to feudal and imperialistic monopolies over land.⁷⁹ While the CNGG and CGTG initially had issues maintaining unity, according to Handy, “cooperation was made easier by the sincerity of its two leaders, Leonardo Castillo Flores and Victor Manuel Gutiérrez, in their approach to peasant and worker concerns.”⁸⁰ Handy continues to praise the personal characteristics of these two peasant league leaders and the work they accomplished in the countryside, claiming:

“the CNGG became an important political voice and its leader, Castillo Flores, one of the most powerful men in the country...Flores was an important reason for the CNGG’s success...[He] patiently responded to individual requests for aid,

⁷⁷ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 119.

⁷⁸ Marjorie and Thomas Melville, *Guatemala: The Politics of Land Ownership* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), 37.

⁷⁹ Melville and Melville, *Guatemala: The Politics of Land Ownership*, 71-72.

⁸⁰ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, 120.

the kind of wearying but indispensable organizational work that over the long run resulted in an increased CNCG presence in the countryside.”⁸¹

By the early 1950s, a flurry of socialist and communist political parties began to form, dropping in and out of unity as they competed for ideological and material lines of support. In 1951, communist politician José Manuel Fortuny established the Guatemalan Communist Party, amending its name in 1952 to the Guatemalan Worker’s Party (PGT).⁸² The PGT called itself the party that could organize the masses by strengthening the syndical movement, offering “concrete solutions to each problem.”⁸³ Unsurprisingly, given their experiences working for syndical organization, they declared that unions would play the most significant role in their struggle for revolutionary change. In 1965, Gutiérrez reflected on what it meant for Guatemala to have a socialist political party in the early 1950s, asserting: “The recognition of PGT as a legal party gave the oppressed social classes an instrument of struggle, a way to participate in the political life of the country to advance their positions to defend their rights and assure their future development as a social class in society.”⁸⁴ Gutiérrez clearly believed, as he continued to argue throughout the 1960s, that the revolutionary tool best capable of generating radical changes in Guatemala resided in the free ability to participate in Guatemala’s electoral democracy.

The PGT’s revolutionary strategy was primarily guided by a Marxism-Leninist ideology, an inheritance from the U.S.S.R’s Communist Party. Guided by this Marxist-

⁸¹ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, 72-75.

⁸² Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, 34-35.

⁸³ Guatemalan Worker’s Party Central Committee, *Third Congress* (Guatemala: PGT’s Central Committee, 1960), 21.

⁸⁴ Victor Manuel Gutiérrez, “Para la Prensa: En el XIII Aniversario del Registro Legal del PGT” *El Imparcial*, December 18, 1965, 1.

Leninist political line, the PGT maintained that before Guatemala could transition into a socialist state, the nation would first require a transitory period of state-directed capitalism. According to Marxism-Leninism, part of this transition required satisfying certain “subjective” conditions by raising class-consciousness of *campesinos* and workers. While rallying *campesinos* and workers with the aim of raising social consciousness, the PGT prioritized agrarian reform as the key method for developing the “objective” conditions necessary for transitioning to socialism.

In April 1951, Gutiérrez drafted a law that called for *fincas* containing more than 5,000 hectares to be subject to “partial confiscation with due indemnization.” In defense of this law, Gutiérrez argued the confiscation of unused lands was necessary to establish a “capitalist system in agriculture that would bring economic development to the whole country...no indemnization at all is more just, since these landowners have already profited from these lands.”⁸⁵ Gutiérrez’s legislative draft contributed significantly to the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952. According to *campesino* turned guerrilla, Efraín Reyes Maaz, the PGT and the peasant leagues worked assiduously throughout the 1950s, reflecting:

“even as the countryside militarized, repression grew, and the war escalated, the party continued to work with local Q’eqchi’ leaders and other reformers to end forced labor and redistribute land... in effect, the PGT helped to accomplish in some parts of Cahabon what it had hoped to do for all of Guatemala with its agrarian reform: transform a private fiefdom into a community of small property owners who vote for the left.”⁸⁶

According to Handy,

⁸⁵ Melville and Melville, *Guatemala: The Politics of Land Ownership*, 45-46.

⁸⁶ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2004), 108.

“Much of the success of the agrarian reform can be attributed to the work of the CNCG and the CGTG. During the two years the reform was in effect, both organizations were inundated with requests for assistance in almost all matters pertaining to the law...workers for both the CNCG and the CGTG, especially Leonardo Castillo Flores, responded carefully and courteously to almost all requests for assistance. They explained the provisions of the law; sent commissions to investigate land disputes; held congress to identify the further needs of peasants...their most important role was to insure that local officials upheld the law”⁸⁷

In his commentary, Handy reveals his perspective that the work done by the peasant leagues, and later the PGT party, transformed Guatemala’s countryside in the 1940s and ‘50s, constructing a vital network of support, which ultimately facilitated the success and survival of guerrilla campaigns in the 1960s. FAR guerrilla leader Pablo Monsanto echoed Handy’s interpretation in an interview conducted in 1981, asserting, “Guerrilla support in Zacapa was due to PGT activity years before.”⁸⁸

The PGT: committed to “all legal forms”

In early June 1954, just days before the coup that ousted Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán in late June 1954, the PGT celebrated their Second Congress and declared, “We have to use all possible legal means to organize the masses.”⁸⁹ Their principal goal was to develop, support, and promote the democratic ideals of the October Revolution, arguing that the fostering of popular will in support of the revolution was pivotal for the revolution’s long-term survival. The PGT remained open to varying tactics, as long as they were *legal*; the form of the struggle was flexible, the PGT maintained, depending on the ability for free elections and political determination.

⁸⁷ Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside*, 96-97.

⁸⁸ Marta Harnecker, “Pueblos en Armas,” *Serie Luchas Populares Latinoamericanas* (1983): 24-25.

⁸⁹ Guatemalan Worker’s Party Central Committee, *Second Congress* (Guatemala: PGT Central Committee, 1954), 3.

It is important to note that during the PGT's Second Congress, there was minimal internal dialogue concerning the incorporation of armed tactics into the party's revolutionary strategy. Before the Árbenz coup, the PGT were successful, to some extent, in accomplishing their goals through electoral politics. Therefore, the notion of an armed struggle was not yet relevant as a course of action.

However, it became clear that the subsequent regimes, following Árbenz's coup in 1954, would not tolerate the PGT's communist agenda. The PGT was declared illegal by one of the first decrees of the military junta, forcing many PGT members to flee the country. In 1955, the PGT released a document called Auto-crítica (Self-criticism), which demonstrated the PGT's perspective on why Árbenz was overthrown, connecting the coup of 1954 as a function of imperialism, U.S. interventionism, and anti-communism. The PGT distributed Auto-crítica, along with Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism*, to *campesinos* during clandestine education campaigns. In doing so, Guatemalan historian Michael D. Kirkpatrick maintains, the PGT leadership in the late 1950s sought to reinstitute a "trans-generational tradition" that invoked the memory of Árbenz by linking their current struggle to the October Revolution.⁹⁰ According to Guatemalan sociologist Carlos Figueroa Ibarra, "From 1955 to 1960, the PGT did not pay attention to the armed struggle, proclaiming any form of struggle that fit the subjective conditions of the country should be made— they were focused on the party's reconstruction, not arms."⁹¹ According to Figueroa Ibarra, after the Árbenz coup

⁹⁰ Kirkpatrick, "Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala," 30.

⁹¹ Carlos Figueroa Ibarra, *Insurgencia armada y violencia política en Guatemala* (Guatemala: La Coordinadora Alemana de Solidaridad con Guatemala, 2004), 6.

the PGT were primarily in a state of recovery as a political party. From 1955-1960, the PGT struggled to secure legal recognition for the party; they were not focused on developing an armed struggle.

After four years in exile, many PGT members returned from abroad and began to regroup by 1958, counting 600 members by 1960.⁹² However, when the PGT regrouped in the late 1950s, a new methodological divergence began to fragment the party. The original founders of the PGT party (namely, Huberto Alvarado, Mario Silva Jonama, Alfredo Guerra Borges, Victor Manuel Gutiérrez, and Leonardo Castillo Flores), those who had been actively involved in organizing *campesino* leagues and labour unions during the Árbenz administration, were confronted by a younger, more militant bloc in the party, generally those who joined after the Árbenz coup. These radical PGT members began to call for the incorporation of armed tactics into the party's revolutionary methodology.⁹³ By the early 1960s, PGT leaders Castillo Flores and Gutiérrez shifted their methodological stance on the issue of armed tactics, eventually admitting the need for an armed struggle. Castillo Flores and Gutiérrez began to support the more militant bloc of the party, advocating for a political re-orientation that embraced armed tactics.

Ironically, the FAR chastised the PGT throughout the 1960s for their "conservative" strategy that favored electoral reformism over armed tactics, despite that the PGT was deeply divided on this issue when the FAR formed in 1962. According

⁹² Guatemalan Worker's Party Central Committee, *Third Congress* (Guatemala: PGT Central Committee, 1960), 24.

⁹³ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 90-91.

to Grandin, Leonardo Castillo Flores was “more militant than many of the party’s Arbencista leaders,” eventually leading a guerrilla group in the mid 1960s.⁹⁴ Furthermore, Grandin maintains that Gutiérrez was “misunderstood posthumously as a conservative and traditionalist” by the FAR revolutionaries, despite his calls for armed tactics by the early 1960s.⁹⁵

In June 1960, the PGT celebrated its Third Congress, stating their principal goals were, “developing internal democracy” to generate a “profound change...that gives power to a democratic, patriotic, anti-imperialist government” with the ultimate objective of a “national-democratic revolution.”⁹⁶ The greatest danger to the struggle for revolutionary change, according to the PGT, was the “political immaturity” of the lower classes. “The principal factor that has led to repression,” the PGT asserted, “has been the disorganization of the campesinos.”⁹⁷

In their Third Congress, the PGT reveal that political mobilization and electoral participation remained key components for their revolutionary strategy of the future. Reviewing past political errors, the PGT linked the failure of the October Revolution and the Árbenz coup not to a lack of arms given to the *campesinos* (as the FAR later maintained), but to a lack of political participation of the masses, a failure to generate enough political will to gain a significant electoral and democratic position.⁹⁸ In the PGT’s *Third Congressional Resolution*, the PGT hinted at the demands increasingly being

⁹⁴ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 102-103.

⁹⁵ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 102.

⁹⁶ Guatemalan Worker’s Party Central Committee, “Declaración del Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo,” *El Imparcial*, June 1960.

⁹⁷ Guatemalan Worker’s Party Central Committee, *Third Congress*, 68.

⁹⁸ Guatemalan Worker’s Party Central Committee, *Third Congress*, 21-22.

made by the more militant members of the party for the incorporation of an armed struggle into the party's revolutionary methodology, declaring:

“We have to use all possible legal forms to organize the masses...and only in exceptional cases, where there does not exist to legally organize the masses in a legal and open way, should we navigate other forms...We can't just use one form of struggle at the exclusion of other forms... the form of the struggle depends on the ability for free elections and self-determination, only then should we resort to violence.”⁹⁹

Here, the PGT's *Third Congressional Resolution* demonstrated the lack of consensus within the PGT's leadership concerning the role of armed tactics in their electoral struggle. However, the PGT affirmed that violence should only be used as a last resort, with other forms of struggle superseding any implementation of armed tactics.

By May 1961, under pressure from more radical factions of the party, the PGT's revolutionary line was forced to evolve and the party reluctantly voted to incorporate armed tactics into their methodology of resistance. Reflecting on this new strategy, PGT leader José Manuel Fortuny recalled that, “owing to a lack of experience and uncertainty as to the correctness of the path chosen, we were poorly prepared...”¹⁰⁰ Throughout the early 1960s, a severe lack of internal consensus persisted within the PGT regarding how armed tactics could be incorporated within the PGT's entrenched strategy of electoral reformism—an approach that sought broad inclusion of the masses and which concentrated on the construction of coalitions with liberal-minded parties. To some members of the party, the incorporation of an armed conflict was only to be used as an “instrument of pressure,” ideally forcing the government to negotiate on an

⁹⁹ Guatemalan Worker's Party Central Committee, *Third Congress*, 77, 80-81.

¹⁰⁰ Bernardo Alvarado Monson, “Some Problems of the Guatemalan Revolution,” *World Marxist Review* 9 (1966): 42.

electoral and democratic level. By the early 1960s, this internal tactical schism magnified as the PGT entered into a revolutionary alliance with the FAR guerrillas.

November 13 1960: military rebels or leftist guerrillas?

Reflecting on the political-line that motivated his participation in the failed November 13 coup, Turcios Lima explained that it was a “typical nationalist officer revolt,” aimed at restoring national sovereignty and consumed with anti-imperialism.¹⁰¹ Turcios Lima maintained that there was no ideology other than “patriotism” and “humanity” that motivated the coup.¹⁰² Adolfo Gilly, a pro-guerrilla journalist who covered the FAR in the mid 1960s explains that while in exile, the rebels lived amongst the *campesinos* of El Salvador and Honduras. Gilly, who strongly advocated for a *campesino*-led revolution, shared an anecdote from Augusto Lorca, an officer who participated in the November 13 revolt. Lorca described the generosity he received from a Honduran *campesino* while in hiding, recalling: “the peasant came twice a day to talk with me and bring me food...food that was... much better than he could afford... by protecting a rebel he was running a serious risk... [the campesino said], ‘If you and your people win, please remember this village when you’re in the government.’”¹⁰³ According to Gilly, the period the rebels spent in exile expanded the dissidents’ political consciousness to the extent of *campesino* misery in Central America. Gilly implied that it was a natural transition for the rebels to embrace peasants as their primary base of support because, in Gilly’s perspective, it was the peasant class that represented the heart of the proletariat.

¹⁰¹ Howard, “With the Guerrillas in Guatemala,” *The New York Times*.

¹⁰² Gilly, “Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala,” *Monthly Review*, 13.

¹⁰³ Gilly, “Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala,” *Monthly Review*, 15.

Upon return from exile, the PGT and the military rebels entered into a political alliance. For the PGT, their alliance with the rebels made sense in a time when they hesitantly began to embrace armed tactics as a method of resistance. While the PGT and the military rebels were now working together, they were not unified regarding the decision to take up arms at the exclusion of electoral participation. The military rebels, together with the more radical faction of the PGT, began to advocate for the primacy of armed insurrection. In doing so, they subordinated electoral reformism within their revolutionary strategy. Pablo Monsanto, a FAR guerrilla leader in the late 1960s, reflected on the lack of unity amongst the early 1960s radical left, maintaining they:

“represented the interests of different democratic sectors unified under a common objective...But, they didn’t elaborate on their shared political line, they didn’t have a dialectical understanding of the armed struggle and they didn’t establish a defined strategy...they didn’t interpret the political and military parts of the struggle as unified...they devalued armed action as a mere political instrument...which caused combative groups to lack perspective and forged no unity.”¹⁰⁴

In early 1962, the military rebels established a guerrilla front called *The Alejandro de León-November 13*, with the dual goals of overthrowing President Ydígoras Fuentes while also forging a government that valued “human rights” with a “self-respecting foreign policy.”¹⁰⁵ In late February 1962, *Alejandro de León-November 13* issued a statement explaining why they believed the “objective” conditions in Guatemala required a modification of revolutionary strategy from an electoral to an armed struggle, “Democracy vanished from our country long ago. No people can live in a

¹⁰⁴ The FAR, *La Unidad de las Fuerzas Revolucionarias* (Guatemala: Coordinadora Alemana de Solidaridad con Guatemala, 1971), 1.

¹⁰⁵ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 17.

country where there is no democracy... We must overthrow the Ydígoras government and set up a new government which respects human rights.”¹⁰⁶

In the spring of 1962, the human casualties endured during the *las jornadas* riots left the radical left at a methodological crossroads; for many, the riots served to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of legal modes of resistance, such as peaceful protests, while simultaneously opening up the prospect for many to engage with violent tactics for the first time. In late March 1962, *Alejandro de Leon-November 13* released a statement affirming that the revolutionary movement must fully accept the necessity of an armed struggle, proclaiming “The only road left is the road of uprising...No matter in which part of our motherland we may be, we will take up arms.”¹⁰⁷

Becoming the Guatemalan guerrilla (in Cuba)

In 1962, the military rebels lacked a firm revolutionary direction and sought a new political line that more accurately reflected the national conditions of Guatemala. To the young rebels, the U.S.S.R.’s Communist Party, the ideological guide of the PGT party, was far removed from the Guatemalan situation; it was beginning to become increasingly difficult to relate to their brand of revolution. Likewise, the Cuban Revolution in 1959 was certainly inspiring to the young Guatemalan guerrillas; Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara had achieved what Guatemala’s radical left aspired to. However, it wasn’t until Cuban President Fidel Castro delivered the Second Declaration of Havana that the Cuban Revolution seemed ripe for export. On February 4, 1962, Cuban President Fidel Castro triumphantly declared a victory over the

¹⁰⁶ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 17.

¹⁰⁷ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 19-20.

“imperialists,” attempting to link Cuba’s revolutionary struggle to the struggles ongoing in the rest of the post-colonialized world. Castro called on guerrillas around the “undeveloped” tri-continental world of Asia, Africa, and Latin America to take up arms, declaring Cuba a “free territory” to organize against what he perceived to be a shared tri-continental history of colonialism and imperialism.¹⁰⁸

Kirkpatrick argues that the military rebels, eager to find a revolutionary path that fit the particular political and socio-economic conditions of Guatemala, began to reference their struggle in new terms. They began to revise Guatemala’s historical narrative within a new “genealogy of decolonization,” distancing the Guatemalan revolutionary struggle from the hegemonic influence of the U.S.S.R.¹⁰⁹ But as they distanced themselves from Soviet hegemony, the rebels became increasingly influenced by a Cuban model of insurrection, leading many in the PGT to question the international influence over the young rebels.

In late 1962, after traveling to Cuba, the military rebels joined with the more radical student-faction of the PGT, and created a new guerrilla movement called the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), which was to be the militaristic wing of the PGT party. The FAR’s militant strategy aimed at overthrowing the government in order to implement a “modern” Guatemalan state, a new society capable of addressing social inequalities and economic inequities. The FAR’s rhetoric was guided by their juxtaposition of a “*Nueva Guatemala*” with an older order, a historical legacy characterized by feudal modes of

¹⁰⁸ Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala,” 50-51.

¹⁰⁹ Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala,” 52.

production and power.¹¹⁰ The FAR aimed to reduce the sway of imperial and oligarchic interests by giving a voice to the historically marginalized fragments (*campesinos, indigenous peoples, women*) of Guatemalan society. To do so, FAR leadership realized they needed to mount a massive education campaign to inform those who they referred to as the “masses” to the “true nature” of the injustices they were enduring.

The development of the FAR guerrilla movement marked a radical break in Guatemalan resistance strategy in its emphasis on the primacy of armed tactics over democratic reformism. Kirkpatrick argues this transformed “geo-political insurgent” strategy in Latin America, challenging the “counter-hegemonic grip over Latin American Marxist ideologues [PGT],” who favored a reformist path.¹¹¹

The delegation of revolutionary duties

Upon returning home from Cuba, the newly established FAR met with the PGT in December 1962, officially detailing the delegation of revolutionary responsibilities within a hierarchal organization of leadership. They agreed the FAR would “supply the moving force and material resources,” for the revolution, while the PGT would “contribute financial support and supply cadres from its own military organization.”¹¹² Many in the PGT did not support the new FAR, anxious over how the FAR would challenge the PGT’s historic strategy of electoral reformism with the FAR’s revolutionary strategy of violence. Similarly, many in the FAR were unhappy playing a subordinate political role to the PGT, a role, according to Gilly, that had to “accept this division of

¹¹⁰ Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala,” 72.

¹¹¹ Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala,” 47.

¹¹² Régis Debray, *The Revolution on Trail: A Critique of Arms, Volume 2* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Inc., 1974), 282.

labour in which their armed struggle was carried out under outside political leadership, in whose decisions they had no direct participation.”¹¹³

Despite that the PGT accepted, to some degree, the FAR’s calls for an armed struggle, they remained firm in their commitment to electoral openings throughout the early 1960s. For example, the PGT supported, and actively campaigned for Guatemala City mayoral candidate Jorge Toriello Garrido in 1963, despite the FAR’s objections that such participation, according to FAR leader César Montes, “distracted attention and revolutionary effort” from the armed struggle, a distraction that brought “foreseeable political defeat.”¹¹⁴

From 1963-1966, the FAR guerrillas were relatively isolated in Guatemala’s northeastern mountains, increasingly relying on *campesinos* as their lifelines of support. As a result, the FAR gradually became disconnected from the bureaucratic affairs of the PGT and began to advocate for a *campesino*-led revolution in the countryside. By the mid 1960s, the FAR also began to emphasize their opposition to any form of electoral participation, explaining to the *campesinos* that electoral reform was not a viable path to radical social change. “The peasant has nowhere to go and accepts death when it comes...” FAR leader Yon Sosa told a group of *campesinos* during an armed propaganda meeting, “We don’t get anything from elections, only bourgeois governments defending the interests of the rich and the imperialists.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Gilly, “Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala,” *Monthly Review*, 18.

¹¹⁴ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 22.

¹¹⁵ Norman Gall, “Impoverished Peasants Make Good Fighters for Red Insurgents,” *Toronto Daily Star*, November 14, 1966, 10.

During the mid 1960s, as a consequence of increasing levels of social and political repression, many Guatemalan leftists became increasingly radicalized, transitioning from peaceful protesters to armed insurgents. Leonidas Reyes, a student turned guerrilla explains, “My political participation began at the student level. In 1960 I saw the army close Communist bookstores...Cesar Montes told me that the ‘guerrilla was not a football pitch to go and observe.”¹¹⁶ PGT leader Alfredo Guerra Borges recalled that this period of rapid radicalization made him feel “that if he did not go out and engage in acts of sabotage, then those from the FAR and the JPT [Patriotic Youth Party] would accuse us of being cowards.”¹¹⁷

Trotskyism and The Revolutionary Movement of November 13 (MR-13)

When Yon Sosa’s FAR guerrilla column adopted Trotskyism in 1964, the PGT and the FAR were forced to re-evaluate their political alliance. Gilly defended Yon Sosa’s decision to abandon the PGT’s revolutionary alliance as a natural consequence to the PGT’s failed leadership of the Guatemalan radical left. For Yon Sosa, Trotskyism provided an alternative to the PGT’s bureaucratic control, and would also provide his guerrilla front with much needed resources for weapons and supplies. French revolutionary theorist Régis Debray, later a vocal critic of Trotskyism and ardent supporter of Cuban *foquismo*, described MR-13 and Trotskyism as a “bizarre marriage between isolated native guerrilla force and an international organization of intellectuals.”¹¹⁸ Debray implied that the MR-13 guerrillas were manipulated by the Trotskyists. In doing so, Debray ignores

¹¹⁶ Carlos Caceres, *Aproximación a Guatemala* (Mexico: University of Sinaloa, 1980), 163,165.

¹¹⁷ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 93.

¹¹⁸ Debray, *The Revolution on Trail: A Critique of Arms, Volume 2*, 290.

other material and ideological factors that may have prompted Yon Sosa to abandon the PGT.

According to Gilly, Trotskyism exceeded what Yon Sosa perceived to be the shortsighted goals of the PGT. As a result, Yon Sosa increasingly “infused” a Trotskyist orientation into the MR-13’s revolutionary political line, transforming MR-13’s anti-imperialist political orientation into the explicit “acceptance of Marxism as a method of analysis and action, and socialism as the goal of the struggle.”¹¹⁹ Gilly went on to criticize the PGT party as an outdated and outmoded extension of the Communist Party that could not adapt to the subjective conditions in Guatemala, contending:

“neither the method nor the programme was drawn up by a group of pure theoreticians [Trotskyism], as a kind of parlor game. If, for the first time in Latin America, a guerrilla movement has sprung up in Guatemala that openly declares its Socialist objectives...[it is] especially due to the deep collective experience of the Guatemalan people, to the defeat suffered in 1954, and to the fact that, since then, workers and peasants, instead of lapsing into resignation or retreat, have gone on fighting the best they can.”¹²⁰

Unraveling unity

In July 1964, an issue of the Trotskyist publication *Revolución Socialista* reaffirmed the MR-13’s criticism of the PGT’s links with the national bourgeoisie, also taking aim at the FAR’s *foco* strategy that advocated for a “prolonged war.” Now, MR-13 had made enemies not just of the PGT, but also had challenged the FAR’s revolutionary line.

The chief point of divergence within the FAR/PGT and the MR-13 concerned the *form* they believed the Guatemalan revolution should take. The FAR advocated for a “democratic” revolution, while MR-13 called for a “socialist” revolution. While both the

¹¹⁹ Gilly, “Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala,” *Monthly Review*, 19.

¹²⁰ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 34.

FAR and the MR-13 prioritized armed propaganda campaigns, they disagreed on what organizational structure the guerrillas should leave behind after they had left the village. The FAR organized *clandestine* resistance cells, operating through underground networks, while the MR-13 declared the villages “liberated zones” and created “peasant committees,” which were aimed to counter ‘real’ authority outside “bourgeois justice.”¹²¹ The FAR claimed such flamboyant peasant committees made villages too vulnerable as targets of counter-repression, arguing that such brazenness put the village at too much risk. In response, the MR-13 countered that without a more developed “political understanding,” the FAR’s resistance cells would not survive in the long-term.¹²² “The function of the peasants was to support and aid the guerrilla army...to defeat the regular army. After...a new government (would be installed) which would bring the benefits of basic reforms to the peasantry,” Gilly maintained, continuing that the FAR’s conception of armed propaganda was “essentially a paternalistic conception...located in a guerrilla elite.”¹²³

In March 1965, FAR leader Turcios Lima sent a letter to MR-13 called Carta Abierta (Open Letter). In the letter, Turcios Lima declared: “He [Yon Sosa] dreams of a socialist revolution when the people have no social consciousness.” Trotskyism, Carta Abierta continued, was only a distraction from the true “revolutionary goal.” Turcios Lima went on to criticize MR-13’s revolutionary praxis:

¹²¹ Frank, “Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala,” *Guatemala*, 182.

¹²² Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 45-46.

¹²³ Editorial Staff, “The Breakthrough in Guatemala,” *Monthly Review* 17 (1965), 6.

“The slogan calling for occupation of land and factories...provokes, when used anarchically, massacres, and tremendous setbacks for peasants and workers who do not yet have the strength to sustain these invasions...it exposes the people’s most vulnerable targets to the enemy’s blows...causing defeats that oblige the people to retreat politically as the only way of protecting themselves against repression.”¹²⁴

However, in Carta Abierta, Turcios Lima also criticized the PGT’s “insistence on electoral reform,” instead calling for the primacy of armed tactics.¹²⁵ Furthermore, Turcios Lima demanded less division between the PGT’s political decision-making apparatus, the PGT Central Committee, and the FAR’s military leadership in the countryside. Turcios Lima asserted that separating the two was like “separating a knife from its blade” and could lead to “serious mistakes.”¹²⁶ Implying that the PGT was out of touch with the national conditions in Guatemala, conditions that required an armed struggle, Turcios Lima wrote that the revolutionary movement “needs to have a revolutionary direction that keeps in mind the national reality of the country in practice and in life, not just in theory.”¹²⁷

Interestingly, much of the FAR’s criticism of the PGT’s revolutionary strategy is strikingly similar to criticism delivered by the MR-13 in their manifesto Documento de las Sierra de las Minas (Document of Sierra de las Minas), which criticized the PGT’s prioritization of electoral reformism over armed tactics, demonstrating how the FAR had been shaped by their ideological debate with the MR-13. With the prospect of a debilitating rift in oppositional unity looming on the horizon if the FAR were to abandon

¹²⁴ Luis Augusto Turcios Lima, “Carta Abierta del Comandante Luis Augusto Turcios Lima del Movimiento Revolucionario 13 de Noviembre” (6 March 1965): 3.

¹²⁵ Rebel Armed Forces, “Comunicado de unificación de las FAR y el MR-13,” (1965), 2.

¹²⁶ “Turcios Lima,” *Cuba Tricontinental* (1969): 145.

¹²⁷ Luis Augusto Turcios Lima, “Carta Abierta del Comandante Luis Augusto Turcios Lima del Movimiento Revolucionario 13 de Noviembre” (6 March 1965): 8.

their coalition with the PGT, the PGT agreed to integrate a more militant position into their revolutionary methodology by March 1965. Thus, while the MR-13 faded into obscurity after their separation from the FAR in the mid 1960s, they fashioned an ideological and methodological debate that would be borrowed and reshaped by the FAR when confronting their strategic divergences with the PGT in the future.

The evolution of the PGT's revolutionary strategy

In late 1964, PGT leader Victor Manuel Gutiérrez released a statement that sought to explain the emergence of the armed struggle in Guatemala as a reaction to the inability for free political determination or sovereignty:

“The armed struggle is a response by the democratic forces to the violence of the dominant classes and imperialists that have closed the door to the electoral possibility of the pueblo...the armed revolution is one of the forms of popular struggle...the political struggle, the syndical movement, and the armed struggle are aimed at modifying the economic structure of this country...and to create the conditions that the construction of a new society demands.”¹²⁸

While admitting the national conditions of Guatemala now required the use of armed tactics, Gutiérrez remained defiant that an armed struggle should be one of many forms implemented in their strategy of resistance. In a press release on December 18, 1965, Gutiérrez defended the PGT's revolutionary strategy of incorporating multiple forms of struggle in tandem with an armed struggle:

“The Party has not underappreciated other forms of political struggle, on the contrary, we have analyzed the value of such perspectives and respect the position of various organizations who think that we can end the military dictatorship through electoral processes. The Party knows that the particular experiences of each organization informs what road they choose....the Party continues to be the only Marxist-Leninist organization in Guatemala, whose

¹²⁸ Victor Manuel Gutierrez, “El Movimiento Sindical Guatemalteco,” (Mexico, 1964), 3.

mission is to end the division of classes, the exploitation of man by man, and the construction of a socialist society in Guatemala.”¹²⁹

In the FAR’s perspective, however, the PGT did not go far enough in their endorsement of the armed struggle, taking issue with the PGT’s continued insistence on looking for electoral openings, while rejecting the “electoral farce of liberal bourgeois democracy.”¹³⁰ To the FAR, there was only one revolutionary path, the armed path.

In May 1965, the PGT clarified their position on armed tactics in a document called Diez Tesis sobre Cuestiones de Organización (Ten Theses on Organizational Questions):

“For us the question of the *way* of revolution is a *strategic* one... forms of struggle change with the changing political situation... we believe that the objective conditions exist in Guatemala only for the armed way...this does not mean however, that this is our immediate objective. On the contrary, we are of the opinion that the Guatemalan revolution will be a long process... will pass through various stages (characteristic of any people’s war).”¹³¹

The PGT retained hopes that a “peaceful” resolution could be reached by fighting for democratic position and initiating reform from within Guatemala’s current system of governance. The PGT argued that they could implement a tactical offensive, while *simultaneously* retaining a policy of strategic self-defense. Diez Tesis sobre Cuestiones de Organización concluded that the party should simplify their organizational structure in hopes that by removing unnecessary bureaucracy they could refocus their time and resources more efficiently. PGT General Secretary Bernardo Alvarado Monson explained that the document demonstrated that the PGT’s “traditional organizational structure no longer answered to the needs of the new conditions” and that “new forms of struggle

¹²⁹ Victor Manuel Gutiérrez, “Para la Prensa: En el XIII Aniversario del Registro Legal del PGT” *El Imparcial* (1965): 3.

¹³⁰ Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala,” 31.

¹³¹ Monson, “Some Problems of the Guatemalan Revolution,” *World Marxist Review*, 40-41.

call for new organizational forms... with regional committees dedicated to organizing the masses with armed struggle.”¹³² The PGT were beginning to realize that they could no longer serve as the sole vanguard of the revolution. However, the notion of multiple vanguards did not necessarily contradict the party’s methodological approach of popular front building, a political strategy that advocated for a multi-class political movement capable of rallying diverse segments of Guatemalan society into the struggle for revolutionary change. According to Debray, the PGT’s insistence on democratic solutions was partially to ensure their participation in any “future negotiations for setting up a civilian-cum-military junta or coalition.”¹³³

However, Monson defended the Party’s utility within the revolutionary movement, proclaiming, “We are part of the continental revolution...however, we know that doubts and apprehensions are being voiced as regards our general line...we believe that the people, and their vanguard, the Marxist-Leninist party, must find their own path of revolution.”¹³⁴ The PGT were committed to securing a middle-ground revolutionary strategy in an attempt to mitigate the internal polarization that was fragmenting the party. Monson declared the ‘far left’

“have a tendency to ‘skip stages’ ...[they] underestimate the need to build a united front. They insisted solely on armed struggle, underestimating other forms as well as the role of the working class and its Party...had this trend gained the upper hand (in PGT rank-in-file) we clearly would have succumbed to sheer adventurism.”

¹³² Monson, “Some Problems of the Guatemalan Revolution,” *World Marxist Review*, 45-46.

¹³³ Debray, *The Revolution on Trail: A Critique of Arms, Volume 2*, 288.

¹³⁴ Monson, “Some Problems of the Guatemalan Revolution,” *World Marxist Review*, 42-43.

However, Monson also maintained that the most ‘conservative’ faction of the party, those who rejected the role of armed tactics completely, were just as dangerous as the “far left” and were “risking isolation from the masses”¹³⁵

Chapter conclusion

In the early 1960s, the establishment of Guatemala’s first significant guerrilla movement, the FAR, and its Cuban-styled revolutionary strategy of armed insurrection, challenged the PGT’s historic leadership of Guatemala’s radical left. This chapter has illustrated why the PGT and the FAR diverged so vehemently on revolutionary strategy by tracking their historical origins and guiding political ideologies (the Communist Party, Cuban *foquismo*, and Trotskyism). While the PGT and the FAR forged an alliance in hopes that revolutionary unity would make their objective of constructing a “*Nueva Guatemala*” easier to realize, they struggled to secure a shared methodology of resistance, one that reconciled the fundamental disagreement on the role of electoral reformism versus armed tactics. The tension between the PGT and the FAR was far from over; in December 1965, with the announcement of presidential elections scheduled for March 1966, the new PGT/FAR leadership would face a serious challenge to their revolutionary unity, consumed in the polarizing debate on whether or not to participate in the election.

¹³⁵ Monson, “Some Problems of the Guatemalan Revolution,” *World Marxist Review*, 43-44.

Chapter Two: Experimenting with Electoral Democracy

“She [PGT] thinks with certainty that tomorrow she will be alive, I [the FAR] on the other hand, know that most likely tomorrow I’ll be dead.”¹³⁶

–FAR leader César Montes on the difference between the PGT and the FAR

“The problem with voting for Mendez in ‘66 was that his political success depended on the eradication of the FAR.”¹³⁷

– FAR guerrilla leader Pablo Monsanto

Chapter introduction

The primary focus of this chapter is the Guatemalan presidential election of 1966.

Utilizing this election as a case study of strategic divergence, I analyze the fierce debate that ensued between the FAR and the PGT regarding whether or not to participate in the election.

Following the 1966 election, the deteriorating socio-political conditions in Guatemala shaped the ongoing internal debate between the PGT and the FAR into the end of the decade. I discuss how the acceleration of social and political violence from 1966-1968 affected the methodological debate between the PGT and the FAR concerning the primacy of electoral versus armed tactics.

Finally, I examine how both the revolutionary perspectives of the PGT and the FAR evolved by the end of the decade, after it became apparent that the new Julio César Méndez Montenegro administration, and by extension electoral democracy in general,

¹³⁶ Julio César Macías, *Epitáfio para César Montes: relatos de la guerra Revolucionaria en Centroamérica* (San Salvador: Editorial Guayampopo, 1997), 57.

¹³⁷ The FAR, *La Unidad de las Fuerzas Revolucionarias* (Guatemala: Coordinadora Alemana de Solidaridad con Guatemala, 1971), 19.

was incapable of generating the radical changes the PGT and the FAR envisioned for Guatemala.

Historical framework

As the FAR increasingly applied pressure on the PGT to embrace armed tactics over electoral reformism, the radical left became embroiled in a larger geo-political debate that was dividing the global left. Historian David A. Crain explains that the PGT was divided between Moscow's Party Communism with its "flexibility towards the peaceful road to socialism which better suited standard operating procedures of the traditional Latin American Communist parties" and the growing influence of Cuba's *foquismo* within the FAR – which called for the preeminence of armed tactics.¹³⁸ PGT leader Bernardo Alvarado Monson attempted to mitigate the methodological divide between the Communist Party and Cuban *foquismo*, declaring: "We manifest our solidarity with all other legitimate groups who oppose and fight North American imperialism, our principle enemy... we sadly regret the divergences between the brothers Cuba and Venezuela."¹³⁹ However, Monson also asserted that while the Cuban Revolution should be hailed, "now Cuba is exerting too strong an influence on Guatemala affairs."¹⁴⁰ This global debate, which was primarily a source of divergence within the FAR and the PGT *theoretically*, concretely manifested when the prospect of presidential elections forced the PGT and the FAR to make a decision on whether or not to participate in the election.

¹³⁸ David A. Crain, "Guatemalan Revolutionaries and Havana's Ideological Offensive of 1966-1968," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 17 (1975), 176.

¹³⁹ Bernardo Alvarado Monson, "EL PGT y las divergencias entre los partidos venezolano y cubano" *El Imparcial*, March 28, 1967.

¹⁴⁰ Crain, "Guatemalan Revolutionaries and Havana's Ideological Offensive of 1966-1968," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 196.

On September 15, 1965 Guatemala passed a new constitution, which called for “democratic” elections to be held in March 1966.¹⁴¹ The constitution included a new electoral law that required political parties to submit a list of 50,000 members if they wanted to run a candidate in the election. This clause prevented most political parties, including the PGT, from directly participating in the upcoming elections. It was a “tool of electoral fraud,” Guatemalan historian Jim Handy asserted; and, in the end, only three political parties were permitted to participate in the presidential election.¹⁴² The *Revolutionary Party* (PR), the most progressive of the three, fashioned a political platform that promised socio-economic and political reforms. The PR selected its leader Mario Méndez Montenegro as its candidate, a career politician who contributed to the passing of a new Guatemalan Constitution in 1945, igniting the politically progressive period in Guatemala known as the “Ten Years of Spring” from 1944-1954. However, before the election Méndez Montenegro was found dead from a “suspicious suicide” on October 31, 1965.¹⁴³ As a result, his brother Julio César Méndez Montenegro took his place and began campaigning for the presidency.¹⁴⁴ César Méndez Montenegro, like his brother, ran a campaign promising “cautious reform,” but he also pledged not to interfere with the military.¹⁴⁵

In early January 1966, while the PGT and the FAR were debating whether or not to support Méndez Montenegro, FAR leader Luis Augusto Turcios Lima traveled to Cuba

¹⁴¹ Louisa Frank, “Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala,” *Guatemala* (1974), 184.

¹⁴² Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 158.

¹⁴³ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 158-159.

¹⁴⁴ Frank, “Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala,” *Guatemala*, 184.

¹⁴⁵ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 159.

to participate in the first Tri-continental Conference of Solidarity against foreign imperialism from January 3-15.¹⁴⁶ While Turcios Lima was abroad in Cuba, the PGT's Provisionary Revolutionary Leadership Center voted to formally support Méndez Montenegro and participate in the upcoming presidential elections.¹⁴⁷ The PGT leadership was encouraged by Méndez Montenegro's campaign of reform, and began actively advocating on his behalf in the hopes that this election could be the electoral opportunity that could transform their revolutionary struggle back into democratic form. Historian Greg Grandin contends that the PGT believed the election of 1966 "could reproduce the October Revolution" and could return the Communists [PGT] to legal status and influence," to establish a democratic and patriotic regime.¹⁴⁸ César Montes, acting leader of the FAR in Turcios Lima's absence in Cuba, voted against participating in the election but was outnumbered by the mainly-PGT pro-participatory lobby. The PGT's decision to participate in the elections of 1966 infuriated the FAR leadership, particularly because the decision was voted upon in Turcios Lima's absence.

As the PGT and the FAR ferociously debated the merits of participating in the upcoming presidential election, the U.S. assisted the Guatemalan military plan

¹⁴⁶ In his work, "Manufacturing the Nueva Guatemala," (MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2006), 64, Michael D. Kirkpatrick explains tri-continentalism sought to "explain the process of decolonization and resistance to imperialism" and served to provide the organizational framework capable of forging new conceptions of society that could "eradicate traces of neo-colonial servitude and the yoke of foreign economic dependency." From the perspective of the Guatemalan guerrillas, tri-continentalism, by way of its conferences and publications, provided a new frame of reference for their struggle - one that expanded beyond national borders. According to Kirkpatrick, the development of tri-continental ideology equipped the FAR with a more developed understanding of "post-colonial Marxist analysis" concerning "relations of power in Guatemala."

¹⁴⁷ Frank, "Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala," *Guatemala*, 184.

¹⁴⁸ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2004), 12.

“Operation Cleanup,” a military operation designed to eradicate the guerrillas in a major counter-insurgency surge.¹⁴⁹ On the day before the presidential election, March 5, 1966, “Operation Cleanup” came into full effect; at least twenty-eight “communists” were rounded up, tortured, and killed including most of the PGT leaders who had worked for revolutionary change during the Arévalo and Árbenz administrations. However, the next day on March 6, 1966 the Guatemalan electorate went to the polls without any knowledge of what had transpired the day before. To the surprise of most observers including the CIA, Méndez Montenegro won the election, indicating that the majority of the Guatemalan electorate desired reform.¹⁵⁰ As a result, the PGT were cautiously optimistic that they may have succeeded in bringing democracy back to Guatemala.

In the mid 1960s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) ranked Guatemala’s tax system 71/72 on “effectiveness” and “equality,” with the Guatemalan National Planning Council calculating 90% of rural families were “landless” or “lack enough to subsist.”¹⁵¹ Furthermore, as of 1964, Guatemalan government revenue was a mere 7.9% of GNP, and tax revenue only constituted 7.1% of total government revenue, a percentage that was the lowest in Central America. To address these serious fiscal issues, Méndez Montenegro proposed a “modest property tax,” but his efforts at tax reform were quickly abandoned when he was labeled a “communist” and faced overwhelming opposition.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 96.

¹⁵⁰ The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “Information Report” (1966).

¹⁵¹ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 193, 209, 212.

¹⁵² Susanne Jonas, “The New Hard Line: U.S. Strategy for the 1970s,” *Guatemala* (1974): 105.

On July 15, 1966 the PGT accepted a government ceasefire and truce. As a result, the FAR guerrillas demobilized and made permanent camps. By September 1966, FAR leader Turcios Lima began to question whether the decision to demobilize might be a costly error, anticipating the military's counter-insurgency offensive. However, before Turcios Lima could see if his premonition of a counter-insurgency offensive would come true, he was killed on October 2, 1966 in a car crash. On October 3, 1966, Turcios Lima's forewarning of a military offensive proved to be true; from 1966-1967, the Guatemalan military initiated a scorched earth campaign that left an estimated 8,000 civilians dead to defeat only 100 guerrillas.¹⁵³

On December 1, 1966 president Méndez Montenegro declared martial law and suspended constitutional liberties.¹⁵⁴ From 1967 to 1968, violence continued to escalate in Guatemala, leading Handy to claim the "level of violence reached epidemic proportions by mid-term of the Méndez Administration."¹⁵⁵ Facing a brutal counter-insurgency offensive, on January 10, 1968, the FAR formally withdrew from its alliance with the PGT.¹⁵⁶ For the first time since the two oppositional movements united in 1962, they would be working completely independently of one another. Fresh from their split with the FAR, the PGT called for their Fourth Congress to be held from December 20-22, 1969 where they discussed the future of the party.

¹⁵³ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 98.

¹⁵⁴ General Secretariat of the Tricontinental, *Tri-continental Bulletin* 9 (Havana, 1966).

¹⁵⁵ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 162.

¹⁵⁶ Crain, "Guatemalan Revolutionaries and Havana's Ideological Offensive of 1966-1968," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 198.

By 1970, the FAR guerrillas were too weak to continue battling the Guatemalan military and were unable to sustain significant guerrilla operations. Reflecting on the FAR's collapse by the end of the 1960s, FAR leader Mario Sánchez explained:

“the division of the FAR in '67 and '68 was practically the temporal defeat of the armed revolution movement...There will always be organizations with more power than others... some organizations have many resources but a limited political understanding, some have good military organization but have organic weaknesses. Hegemony fuels rivalry and lack of consensus.”¹⁵⁷

The election of 1966

When presidential elections were scheduled for March 1966, Guatemala's radical left had a crucial decision to make: continue to exclusively develop the guerrilla war (as proposed by the FAR), or participate in the elections (as advocated by the PGT). The PGT, led by Victor Manuel Gutiérrez from exile in Mexico City, believed the elections could shift the revolutionary struggle back onto an electoral and democratic stage, arguing that the elections could serve as an alternative to guerrilla violence.¹⁵⁸ In January 1966, Gutiérrez published a statement explaining PGT's decision to participate in the elections, contending “the principal task” of the revolutionary struggle was to “end the military dictatorship and establish a democratic regime that is respectful of human life.”¹⁵⁹ And, in the perspective of the PGT, participation in the presidential election of 1966 was the best opportunity they had to achieve these goals. Inspired by their memories of the October Revolution, the PGT believed that the election could

¹⁵⁷ Marta Harnecker, “Pueblos en Armas,” *Serie Luchas Populares Latinoamericanas* (1983), 46 and *The FAR, Comandante de las FAR: El Pueblo de Guatemala Lucha por Tomar el Poder* (Guatemala, 1981), 29.

¹⁵⁸ Victor Manuel Gutierrez, “El Movimiento Sindical Guatemalteco,” (Mexico, 1964), 5.

reproduce the democratic reformism that the party had helped Guatemala achieve from 1944-1954.

In contrast, guided by Cuba's non-compromising revolutionary strategy of *foquismo*, and its related calls for revolutionary stamina, the FAR refused to believe that a corrupt democracy could produce any of the revolutionary objectives they had committed to achieving. The FAR reaffirmed that only road for the Guatemalan revolution was the armed road, and that they must stand firm in their revolutionary fight within a "prolonged war."¹⁶⁰ In the perspective of FAR leader Turcios Lima, if the FAR and the PGT participated in the upcoming presidential election of 1966, their strategy of a "prolonged war" would not have had time to run its course. Therefore, the FAR diametrically rejected any utility of participating in the upcoming election.

When Turcios Lima learned of the PGT's formal endorsement of PR candidate Julio César Méndez Montenegro, he released a statement from the Tri-continental Conference, contending the debate between the PGT and the FAR demonstrated the:

"Sharpening crisis... between old and the new, between a conservative and opportunistic perspective versus a Marxist-Leninist line and a static, dependent, revisionist line of the PGT. The PGT, as a result of their origin in class, reflect a right-wing, conservative, and compromising organization willing to negotiate with the counter-revolution... The bourgeoisie influence of PGT is enormous...[it] reflects their methodological errors... [the PGT] are determined to fight for legality under a bourgeoisie constitution, they are only interested in strong a electoral movement...they are incapable of incorporating a clandestine fight with the legal...and even less capable of creating the militaristic instruments capable

¹⁶⁰ Since 1964, FAR leader Turcios Lima strongly advocated for a "prolonged war," a war that progressed "naturally" from the countryside to the city. In his defense of a 'prolonged war' strategy, Turcios Lima routinely referenced the ongoing war in Vietnam as a model for the FAR's revolutionary strategy, perceiving the militaristic successes of the Vietcong as a result of a 'prolonged' and 'clandestine' tactic.

of fighting imperialism...In reality, they are addicted to bourgeoisie habits of compromise.”¹⁶¹

Turcios Lima attacked the PGT’s exhaustive commitment to electoral participation, suggesting that electoral participation was not a valid form of revolutionary struggle because it demanded compromising with counter-revolutionary forces, namely the bourgeoisie. Turcios Lima declared that “no pacifist or legal possibilities” exist in the Guatemalan revolution; instead, he called for violence to be met with violence. “The road to our revolution doesn’t pass through ballot boxes,” Turcios Lima proclaimed. Turcios Lima went on to explain why the FAR did not believe that participation in the elections could translate into *radical* changes: “Reform is not an option, only a tricky vicious circle of apparent change and illusions of democracy, history of this is repeated time and time again.”¹⁶² In an interview with French journalist Marcel Niedergang at the Tri-continental Conference, Turcios Lima described his perspective that the PGT were incapable of leading a guerrilla war, proclaiming: “For us, guerrilla warfare is basic, and that’s what brings us against the Communists, who are too often timid and cautious...”¹⁶³ However, despite the vigorous protests of Turcios Lima, the FAR ultimately accepted the PGT’s decision. At the Tri-continental conference, Turcios Lima explained:

“We do not propose to prevent the elections from taking place, because as yet we do not have sufficient strength to do so. Quite a lot of people remain who still naively expect something from the electoral game. But let it be clear that we are strong enough...we shall forcibly prevent this vile deceit of the people from

¹⁶¹ Rebel Armed Forces, “Comunicado de unificación de las FAR y el MR-13,” (1965).

¹⁶² Edgar Marroquín, *Turcios Lima: Este sí era Comandante* (Guatemala: Imprenta Vasquez, 1998), 51, 67-70.

¹⁶³ Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Oxford: Verso, 1970), 46.

continuing...If we revolutionaries were to participate in these elections, or if we called upon the people to participate in them by voting for the Revolutionary party or any of the other opposition parties, we would be giving our backing, our principled support, our revolutionary approval and the support of the masses who believe in us, to people who we know have no scruples, who we know are the accomplices of reaction and imperialism.”¹⁶⁴

Turcios Lima perceived the PGT’s decision to participate in the elections of 1966 as a triumph for the counter-revolution, only serving to distract the radical left from the principal conflict, that is, the armed conflict. The FAR deemed Guatemala’s democracy as a hegemonic farce, where elections could only produce one possible outcome – where there could be only one possible winner: that is, the dominant classes: the landed oligarchy, urban bourgeoisie, foreign imperialists, and the Guatemalan military machine. “There never really existed the possibility of a new government,” the FAR said in an official statement in 1967—maintaining that the PGT was incapable of escaping their propensity for legality—perpetually clinging to unrealistic notions of democracy. “No reformists have been permitted to take *power*...even if they did take office,” FAR and Cakchiquel indigenous leader Emilio Román López (Pasquel) asserted.¹⁶⁵

Orlando Fernández, a FAR guerrilla, further criticized the PGT’s insistence on electoral reformism because, in his view, it subjected the fate of the *campesinos* in the countryside to urban politicking: “cities are easy traps of reformism ...it should be the countryside and guerrilla fighters that form the base nucleus of the worker-peasant alliance”¹⁶⁶ In an armed propaganda campaign in late 1966, MR-13 leader Marco

¹⁶⁴ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 56-57.

¹⁶⁵ Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, “A Source of Great Lessons Painfully Learned,” *Guatemala* (1974), 7.

¹⁶⁶ Crain, “Guatemalan Revolutionaries and Havana’s Ideological Offensive of 1966-1968,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 195.

Antonio Yon Sosa demonstrated the MR-13's position on the participating in the election, proclaiming: "The peasant has nowhere to go and accepts death when it comes...we want to live like in socialist countries, where there is food. We don't get anything from elections, only bourgeoisie governments defending the interests of the rich and the imperialists."¹⁶⁷ Like the FAR, the MR-13 maintained that electoral democracy was not capable of generating radical changes for the *campesinos* in the countryside. In Yon Sosa's perspective, by compromising with counter-revolutionary forces, electoral participation only solidified the dominant classes' consolidation of power.

Turcios Lima elucidates why the FAR were unequivocally opposed to electoral participation by 1966, arguing reformism was not sufficiently radical, maintaining "economic problems can not be solved with partial reforms but with the revolutionary transformations, diametrically opposed to the subservient policy of deferring to the interests of the Yankee monopolies...Guatemalan guerrillas are not a sporadic occurrence"¹⁶⁸ In the perspective of the FAR, reform was not synonymous with revolution, and they were not willing to compromise on this ideological distinction. According to Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano, a FAR sympathizer, participating in the election of 1966 would merely serve to give the "dictatorship democratic form."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Norman Gall, "Impoverished Peasants make good fighters for red insurgents," *Toronto Daily Star*, November 14, 1966.

¹⁶⁸ General Secretariat of the Tricontinental, *Tricontinental Bulletin 4* (Havana, 1966).

¹⁶⁹ Eduardo Galeano, *Guatemala: Occupied Country* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 10.

The “Case of 28” and the evolution of the PGT’s revolutionary line

The disappearance, torture, and murder of at least twenty-eight of the PGT’s leaders on the eve of the presidential election in March 1966 had a profound impact on the PGT party and their commitment to electoral democracy. Among those killed were PGT leaders Victor Manuel Gutiérrez and Leonardo Castillo Flores. Without these leaders, who had been active proponents of electoral participation and viewed electoral democracy as a capable venue for radical reforms, the PGT’s political line defending electoral reformism became problematic. While the PGT continued to advocate for the merits of electoral reformism as one form of revolutionary struggle, the “case of 28” radicalized many in the party, converting them to a more militant position regarding the future of the revolutionary struggle. Despite the “case of 28,” the PGT, at least publicly, initially retained their position that the elections had been a triumph for the revolution. However, it quickly became evident that the Méndez Montenegro administration was not capable of implementing most of the reforms that it had promised during the presidential campaign; the military had consolidated power and Méndez Montenegro was unable to escape its authoritative directive. In an article published in the *World Marxist Review* in October 1966, PGT leader Bernardo Alvarado Monson maintained that many in the PGT retained their position that electoral participation was a valid revolutionary tool; but, at the same time Monson asserted, the PGT had become increasingly disillusioned with the lack of any tangible reforms:

“Montenegro’s victory does not refute the fundamental conclusions of the Party because, among other things, it has in effect led to no appreciable shift in the balance of class forces...Montenegro cannot, even if he wanted to do so, carry

out the revolutionary changes needed by the country and demanded by the people...”¹⁷⁰

PGT leader José Manuel Fortuny further clarified the PGT’s position on the Méndez Montenegro administration in late 1966, contending:

“The newly installed government styles itself the ‘third revolutionary government’ ...But at the same time it would be an oversimplification to qualify, as some people do, the new Montenegro administration as the ‘fourth government of the counter-revolution’ ...The government has little room to maneuver and the prospects are that the noose in which it is caught will be drawn tighter by the top brass ...doomed to inactivity both by reasons beyond their control and by a lack of any volition of their own, the men in the government have but one objective – to retain their grip on the machinery of the state.... Paradoxically enough, the government was far more interested in an amnesty than the revolutionaries for whom it was intended.”¹⁷¹

In Fortuny’s view, the election of Méndez Montenegro represented the political will of the marginalized fragments of the Guatemalan society. If such fragments were “class conscious” and “economically stronger,” Fortuny argued, they could pressure the government into democratic reforms. However, Fortuny maintained that the Méndez Montenegro administration was incapable of doing so because of the military’s grip on power, which represented the will of the dominant classes who rejected reform.¹⁷²

The FAR believed that the failure of Méndez Montenegro to enact any tangible reforms was making it increasingly clear that he was a “slave to the system,” and not all too dissimilar to the authoritative dictatorships that came before him.¹⁷³ Furthermore,

¹⁷⁰ Bernardo Alvarado Monson, “Some Problems of the Guatemalan Revolution,” *World Marxist Review* (1966): 47.

¹⁷¹ José Manuel Fortuny, “Guatemala: the Political Situation and Revolutionary Tactics” *World Marxist Review* 9 (1967), 56-60.

¹⁷² Fortuny, “Guatemala: the Political Situation and Revolutionary Tactics” *World Marxist Review* 10, 56-60.

¹⁷³ The FAR, *Comandante de las FAR: El Pueblo de Guatemala Lucha por Tomar el Poder* (Guatemala, 1981), 12.

FAR leader Turcios Lima began to realize that the ‘truce’ and ‘pacification,’ which the Méndez Montenegro government offered the guerrillas, was just a political guise, a ploy to conceal the military’s true objective: the eradication of the guerrilla. In a publication of the *Tri-continental Bulletin* in late 1966, Turcios Lima publically rejected the military’s “truce,” declaring, “We do not accept the ultimatum. Our struggle will continue. Our objective is to conquer power.”¹⁷⁴ To prevent an all-out blitz, Turcios Lima called on the FAR to remobilize and to prepare for war.¹⁷⁵ He called for revolutionary unity on armed tactics, increased military training and equipment, and the re-establishment of supply lines. Turcios Lima explained his understanding of “present-day Guatemala” a few months after the election and why the subjective conditions required the primacy of armed tactics:

“Even though the election took place in relative tranquility, it was tinged with a variety of political colors, which were the immediate outcome of the complicated situation in present-day Guatemala. One must not forget that in this country of ours, which has long been under dictatorial rule, it is unavoidable that not a few people are tired of so many deaths and so much bloodshed. Thus, these citizens sought and expected a final change of the system though peaceful means. It was precisely because of this that the revolutionary FAR leadership...decided to vote for Julio César Méndez Montenegro – not because we supposed this distinguished lawyer would be able to modify the present situation...voting for Julio César Méndez Montenegro represents a form of struggle against the arbitrary behavior of the government and also a demonstration of public opinion...Therefore the victory of the candidate of the Revolutionary party signifies a political victory of the FAR, for the Guatemalan people have through the voting expressed their irrepressible desire for changing the system. However, it is necessary to repeat and stress the point that the guerrillas do not have the slightest doubt about what road to take, for there is

¹⁷⁴ General Secretariat of the Tricontinental, *Tricontinental Bulletin* 6 (Havana, 1966).

¹⁷⁵ Frank, “Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala,” *Guatemala*, 185.

only one road. This is by no means the road of elections but the road of armed struggle.”¹⁷⁶

After witnessing the failure of the Méndez Montenegro administration to achieve any real reforms, even PGT leader Fortuny agreed with Turcios Lima that the armed struggle would have to continue, maintaining that:

“Some people feel that the present political situation affords grounds for changing the line of the Party, for turning to the peaceful path as the only possible alternative for the present line. Those who think so confuse, at best, the *forms of struggle* and the *overall course of the revolution*... PGT holds that in the present situation/conditions of the revolution can only be carried out by armed struggle. Those who fail to see this will be caught in a vicious circle... The form of the struggle is another matter.”¹⁷⁷

After Turcios Lima’s death, César Montes was appointed commander of the FAR. César Montes had been isolated in the mountains at the time and some believed that he was elected FAR Commander because it was thought he could easily be manipulated. However, this notion soon proved misguided as César Montes continued Turcios Lima’s outspoken opposition to electoral reformism. “Nothing has changed since Turcios died,” Montes said to foreign journalist Georgie Anne Geyer in late 1966, “We gradually indoctrinate the peasants until a strong peasant army is formed... a long war.... Montenegro is not a guerrilla, but a gorilla.”¹⁷⁸

Post-1966 reflections upon Guatemala’s electoral democracy

In an interview in 1981, FAR guerrilla leader Pablo Monsanto reflected that the “guerrillas made a huge mistake by endorsing Méndez during armed propaganda...in the

¹⁷⁶ César Montes, “Rupture and Logic,” *Global Digest* 3.10 (October 66).

¹⁷⁷ Fortuny, “Guatemala: the Political Situation and Revolutionary Tactics” *World Marxist Review*, 56-60.

¹⁷⁸ Georgie Anne Geyer, “The Peasants: Montes’ Future Army,” *Chicago Daily News*, December 16, 1966.

early months of 1966 the guerrillas actually carried the sign 'Vote for Méndez' ...the choice to endorse Méndez cost the guerrilla movement everything."¹⁷⁹ On March 7, 1967 the FAR released a document called the Documento de Marzo (March Document), which argued that the PGT's decision to participate in the elections of 1966 was a tactical catastrophe, and called for unity around fully embracing armed tactics. In the Documento de Marzo the FAR explained that the

"central determinant that led PGT to support Julio César Méndez Montenegro was his personality...they did not take into account the essence of the social classes that led and influenced his politics...the fundamental objective of this perspective was to constitute a hegemonic power of the oligarchy in favour of the dominant classes who are against the pueblo...the political survival of Méndez Montenegro depended on military victory over the FAR...If they beat the the FAR in the countryside...they could initiate minor reforms that gives ultimate authority to the military and oligarchy.... The problem with electoral participation is that it justifies the Méndez administration to commit acts of repression with the facade of the people's popular will."¹⁸⁰

The FAR maintained that not only did participating in the election of 1966 fail to deliver radical changes, it also gave the military the ability to claim they held a popular mandate to continue its counter-insurgency offensive. The Documento de Marzo emphasized the FAR's opposition to the PGT's revolutionary strategy of electoral manoeuvring and prioritization of legal modes of resistance, declaring:

"The PGT is too focused on how to make the best use of legality...and in doing so lose the perspective of the moment and of the process... In doing so, the PGT are saying they want to return to 'normality' and are thus surrendering...And what were the results of supporting this? We haven't had one significant advance to the syndical movement."¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ The FAR, *Comandante de las FAR: El Pueblo de Guatemala Lucha por Tomar el Poder* (Guatemala, 1981).

¹⁸⁰ FAR. "Documento de Marzo," *Documentos Básico del FGEI* (Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra) de las FAR (7 March 1967): 2-3, 6.

¹⁸¹ FAR. "Documento de Marzo," *Documentos Básico del FGEI* (Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra) de las FAR (7 March 1967): 8-9.

The FAR took particular exception with the PGT's continued hesitance to fully embrace the necessity of an armed struggle, instead clinging to a strategy of strategic "self-defence." The FAR maintained:

"The adoption of 'self-defence' by the PGT in 1966 does not reflect a revolutionary perspective...it only lets the enemy go on the offensive...Our struggle has to be on the offensive, always extending to new geographic zones to convert the war into a national war, to incorporate new sectors of society into the struggle."¹⁸²

The FAR argued that the central methodological issue with the PGT's strategy of "self-defence" was that it abandoned the *campesinos* in the countryside, who were facing the brunt of the military's offensive. "We reject the superiority of the working class over *campesinos*," the FAR declared in 1968.¹⁸³ The PGT defended their strategy of "self-defence" as a mechanism to extend the revolutionary struggle to more moderate segments of Guatemalan society who had become alienated with the FAR's violent tactics. However, to the FAR, the PGT were sacrificing the involvement of the *campesinos* in the countryside to do so. This methodological incongruity concerning what segment of Guatemalan society should lead the revolution was a divisive one; the FAR blamed the PGT for abandoning the *campesinos* in favour of urban workers, though this dialectical accusation was largely a mechanism for rallying *campesino* support for the guerrillas in the countryside.

In the Documento de Marzo, the FAR increasingly hinted that a split with the PGT was imminent, proclaiming that "the weaknesses and absolute sense of a military line

¹⁸² FAR. "Documento de Marzo," *Documentos Basico del FGEI (Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra) de las FAR* (7 March 1967): 15.

¹⁸³ "19 years of revolutionary struggle," *Guatemalan Letters* 5 (October 1968): 3.

and the predominance of a bureaucratic political line has made FAR and PGT incompatible,” adding that the PGT was too focused on the urban middle class at the expense of the rural campesino to continue leading the revolution: “No longer will the fight be led by political leaders who don’t know how to conduct war, we will manage ourselves without bureaucratic apparatuses...the organization of the proletariat is in fighting, not in debate club.”¹⁸⁴ The FAR emphasized that their lack of political leadership on the PGT Central Committee would have to be modified if the PGT were interested in sustaining their revolutionary alliance, contending:

“Many have discussed the difference in ‘political work’ and ‘military work’...‘political spaces’ and ‘military spaces’...creating a ghost of militarism that is used to justify indecision, opportunism...we have to end this because these are our greatest errors and weaknesses...Our struggle is political process because it’s a military process in method and dynamics...this is the concept of a ‘guerrilla war of the people’...therefore, it is impossible to have an exclusively political organization...in the future we will not have political leaders who don’t know how to conduct war, nor make military leaders part of political commissions...The separation of the political struggle and the military struggle is artificial and dangerous... the PGT has demonstrated it’s out of touch with the present.”¹⁸⁵

In response to the FAR’s Documento de Marzo, Fortuny defended the PGT’s historic contributions to the armed struggle in a publication of the *World Marxist Review* in July 1967:

“On weighing the national realities and the problems and prospects of Guatemala’s development...our Party embarked on armed struggle aimed at a popular anti-imperialist revolution and its subsequent growth into a socialist revolution. The success of the guerrilla movement and the armed resistance groups under leadership of FAR, in which our Party plays a prominent part,

¹⁸⁴ FAR. “Documento de Marzo,” *Documentos Basico del FGEI (Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra) de las FAR* (7 March 1967): 11, 16, 27, 29.

¹⁸⁵ FAR. “Documento de Marzo,” *Documentos Basico del FGEI (Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra) de las FAR* (7 March 1967): 27-29.

shows we have chosen the right course...We know that revolutionary war entails bloodshed and sacrifice.”¹⁸⁶

However, the PGT continued to defend their methodological position that the development of the armed struggle should be simultaneously implemented in tandem with the deployment of electoral tactics.

Internal implosion

The PGT’s insistence on “multiple forms” and their hesitance to fully embrace armed tactics finally tested the FAR’s patience for too long. On January 21, 1968 FAR leader César Montes issued a statement on behalf of the FAR explaining their decision to split from the PGT as a:

“Necessary and profoundly revolutionary measure... because it means moving out, once and for all, of a bogged-down phase of incipient guerrilla development...a phase sidetracked by the incorrect, opportunist line of general orientation laid down by a small group of old PGT leaders...who managed to influence the revolutionary ranks with their policy... the break with PGT is culmination of a weeding-out process that is perfectly natural in the historical development of a revolution...On one side is a revolutionary idea, which sees war as the peoples instrument and method of taking power ...a radical vision, audacious, young, dynamic...on the other side the pseudo-revolutionary idea, no confidence in the peoples ability to take power, confidence in the bourgeoisie to direct a democratic regime of state capitalism progressing peacefully, evolving tranquilly toward socialism...it would try to use a political argument to make the bourgeoisie recognize its right of participation in the government. This is a submissive, opportunist, faint hearted, outmoded, passive vision.”¹⁸⁷

César Montes painted a polarizing picture contrasting the PGT and the FAR, portraying the PGT as a group of outmoded politicians, out of touch with the national conditions that made Guatemala yearn for revolution and incapable of directing military

¹⁸⁶ Fortuny, “Guatemala: the Political Situation and Revolutionary Tactics” *World Marxist Review*, 47-48.

¹⁸⁷ General Secretariat of the Tricontinental, *Tricontinental Bulletin* 25 (Havana, 1968): 37-38.

campaigns. The FAR questioned the PGT's revolutionary strategy in the midst of prolific social and political violence, rejecting the PGT's notion that it was possible to achieve a "peaceful" transition to socialism. According to César Montes, the PGT were incapable of enduring the bloodshed that accompanied war while the FAR, on the other hand, were enduring heavy casualties. Furthermore, the FAR argued that the PGT was too comfortable making alliances with the bourgeoisie to "direct a democratic regime of state capitalism," at the expense of solidifying *campesinos*, and to some extent workers, as their primary bases of support.

César Montes juxtaposed this image of the PGT with a radically different image of the FAR, which he described as "audacious" and "dynamic," willing to sacrifice everything for a "*Nueva Guatemala*," including their lives. He essentially offered Guatemala's radical left a choice: the PGT or the FAR, implying one could no longer support both groups as their revolutionary strategies had reached a point of irreconcilable divergence.

In March 1968, the PGT released a statement responding to the FAR's departure from their revolutionary coalition called Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca (Circumstances and Perspectives on the Guatemalan Revolution), which named "ultra-leftism" the worst enemy of the revolutionary movement. The PGT urged "all forms of struggle, including elections" to be pursued.¹⁸⁸ "After four years of armed struggle, active participation of the masses...have yet to be secured," the PGT declared, arguing the FAR's insistence on violent tactics had lost the revolutionary movement the

¹⁸⁸ PGT Comité Central del PGT, *Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca* (Guatemala, 1968), 17.

support from less radical segments of the movement including workers, students, and peasants.¹⁸⁹ Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca embodied how the debate between the FAR and the PGT had evolved by the end of the 1960s, with the PGT increasingly focused on alleviating their blame for the strategic misstep of participating in the election of 1966, instead laying blame on the FAR's violent tactics that had cost them invaluable support from the moderate fragments of the movement.

Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca sarcastically responded to the FAR's assertion that "they give the dead bodies, while the PGT gives the ideas," by publishing a list of names of all the PGT members who had died throughout the decade. Interestingly, in addition to listing Victor Manuel Gutiérrez and Leonardo Castillo Flores as fallen PGT members, they also list FAR leader Turcios Lima, implying he had supported and died representing the PGT.¹⁹⁰ Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca continued by listing historical cases in which they directly supported, and/or compromised, with the FAR in an attempt to demonstrate they were not culpable for the collapse of revolutionary unity:

"We gave FAR leadership roles on Central Committee in '66 and '67 – what more could we do?" We financed FAR when we could; we have endorsed the armed struggle. We don't have to follow the Cuban Model; there is a role for the Party. "Documento de Marzo" is simply not true, all our public documents and private documents have endorsed the armed way... Radio Havana spreads lies... PGT supports the armed struggle as the only way not for a love of violence, or romanticism, or imitation of other struggles. Without mass support, through moderate strategies of inclusion, our struggle is easily

¹⁸⁹ Richard V. Allen, *Yearbook on International Affairs 1968* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1969), 266.

¹⁹⁰ PGT Comité Central del PGT, *Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca* (Guatemala, 1968), 17.

countered – this is a prolonged war, in FAR’s own words...the armed way is the fundamental strategy but combined with other forms.”¹⁹¹

The PGT defended the party’s utility to the revolutionary struggle; suggesting Cuba’s influence over the FAR had skewed historical facts and undervalued the historical contributions made by the PGT to the Guatemalan revolution. In the PGT’s perspective, electoral reformism was just one *form* of revolutionary struggle, arguing electoral participation did not contradict the FAR’s armed tactics, as multiple forms of struggle should be incorporated in order to extend the struggle onto multiple democratic levels and popular fronts. The PGT proclaimed, “the FAR are ultra-leftists, militaristic, sectarian, immature...the PGT’s strategy is not just to include the most radical segments of the population but also more moderate fragments to strengthen the movement.”¹⁹² To the PGT, the FAR’s “militaristic” strategy had cost the radical left support from the more moderate segments of the citizenry. The PGT maintained that the Méndez Montenegro government could have potentially passed more reforms if there had been enough pressure applied by a more *united* citizenry to realize such reforms. However, according to the PGT, the FAR had alienated their bases of support with their non-compromising tactics of violence, causing the moderate bases of support to quiet their calls for radical change.

From the FAR’s perspective, compromising with what they termed the “bourgeoisie” was merely a hegemonic conception of reform, not the revolutionary

¹⁹¹ PGT Comité Central del PGT, *Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca* (Guatemala, 1968), 18-23, 26, 29, 32.

¹⁹² PGT Comité Central del PGT, *Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca* (Guatemala, 1968), 18-23.

change they envisioned. In late 1967, the FAR released a document that responded to the PGT's accusations that their violent tactics had cost the revolutionary movement their bases of support:

“The PGT's 1967 resolution talks about internal differences but they just maintain their hegemonic direction of the revolutionary movement. They don't offer the pueblo a correct conception of the strategic development of the armed fight. But, we aren't going to talk about the Party unless the topic is developing a guerrilla and popular front war– if PGT fails to be the vanguard of the people, other revolutionary groups will fill the void.”¹⁹³

The FAR were not willing to compromise in order to achieve, what they predicted would be, only inconsequential reforms. The FAR were committed to their strategy of conquering power by an armed struggle, and any suggestion that they should soften their rhetoric, they argued, was a distraction from the revolution. On January 1, 1968, in coordination with their announcement of withdrawal from their revolutionary alliance with the PGT, the FAR released a statement criticizing the PGT's “opportunistic” revolutionary line. The FAR proclaimed “The PGT's policy has always been to decide which is the main enemy, not in order to concentrate against this main enemy, but with the aim of making deals with the ‘lesser enemies’...termed ‘united-front-work.’”¹⁹⁴

In April 1968, the FAR released a document further explaining why the PGT's links with the bourgeoisie, and their half-hearted embrace of armed tactics, made the two movements fundamentally incompatible:

“The bourgeois influence over the PGT has been enormous and reflects their conception of the revolution...the PGT organized a party under legality, a syndical movement which formed under the illusion of evolutionary development of the revolution, within a bourgeois constitution... To the PGT, the

¹⁹³ Rebel Armed Forces, “Comunicado de unificación de las FAR y el MR-13,” (1965), 7.

¹⁹⁴ Allen, *Yearbook on International Affairs 1968*, 266.

armed struggle is a necessary tactic, an instrument of agitation, an element of negotiation that can guarantee the survival of the power... We no longer will talk about the Party, only the development of the guerrilla and popular army... PGT only talks rhetorically about worker-campesino alliance- but they are just addicted to hegemonic bourgeoisie tactics. We have arrived at the hour to change the consigna from 'everyone should be ready to fight at any movement' to "Everyone fight now!"¹⁹⁵

To the FAR, the PGT's historic acceptance of the armed struggle was only a tactic to force the government to negotiate. As a result, the PGT never fully developed or supported the armed struggle, undermining the FAR's strategy within their broader revolutionary methodology that prioritized legal modes of resistance and electoral reformism. In doing so, according to the FAR, the PGT distracted energy from the armed struggle and prevented the development of the Guatemalan revolution.

In March 1968, the PGT responded to the FAR's withdrawal from their coalition of revolutionary unity, declaring:

"After more than four years of the armed struggle we have not achieved the active incorporation of the masses... The development of the struggle is not just constituted in military action...but also definitely in the result of a political work, working to constitute the masses...the revolution needed work on all sides, on all fronts...not just in the mountains..."

The PGT continued by criticizing Cuba's influence over the FAR, particularly French revolutionary theorist and pro-FAR advocate Régis Debray, who:

"Planted the unilateral idea that the guerrilla is fundamental, that the party needs to wait, that it's [the party] not necessary to develop the armed struggle. Based on the subjective conditions of the country, there does not exist another road for the Guatemalan revolution than the way of the armed revolution."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Rebel Armed Forces, "Comunicado de unificación de las FAR y el MR-13," (1965), 95-99

¹⁹⁶ PGT Comité Central del PGT, *Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca* (Guatemala, 1968), 12, 19-20, 21, 26.

The PGT maintained their methodological orientation that the armed struggle should be just one of many forms of resistance, arguing that the FAR's radical militarism has failed to transition from a guerrilla to a "popular war." Thus, without such a "popular" war, the PGT argued, "political work" was still necessary to expand the struggle to other segments of the country.

The concept of "subjective conditions" began to show up in both the PGT and the FAR correspondence with increased frequency during this period, forging a theoretical debate on Marxist-Leninism, which sought to define what it meant for the "subjective conditions" of Guatemala to require an armed struggle. To the FAR, global Marxism could not be blindly applied to the "subjective conditions" of Guatemala.¹⁹⁷ However, the PGT maintained the FAR were misinterpreting Marxist-Leninism and what it meant for the "subjective conditions" of Guatemala to require armed tactics. To the PGT, it did not mean abandoning the potential for electoral reformism completely, but to implement both forms simultaneously.

In August 1968, the PGT released a statement admitting an internal schism within the party about embracing the primacy of armed tactics over electoral reformism. However, they stressed it was only *tactical* divergence and retained unity concerning the need to continue developing the armed struggle, contending:

"There is a difference which might be called merely tactical, for the different Guatemalan revolutionary organizations have made it abundantly clear that the only road is the armed road, a thesis always upheld by the party. What has happened is that a group of our companions, some of them members of the Central Committee, do not agree with fomenting a people's revolutionary

¹⁹⁷ Julio César Macías, *Epitáfio para César Montes: relatos de la guerra Revolucionaria en Centroamérica* (San Salvador: Editorial Guayampopo, 1997). 164.

war...there are no differences of opinion on the road to be followed, for the party began and continues to support the armed road. The difference concerns the way of carrying on this armed struggle...The Revolutionary Armed Forces will turn our already blood-soaked Guatemala into another Vietnam.”¹⁹⁸

The PGT’s Fourth Congress, 1969

The PGT held their Fourth Congress on December 22, 1969, which reflected on the party’s split with the FAR and re-affirmed the Party’s methodology for the future. The congressional resolution began by referencing the party’s origins in 1949, self-proclaiming the PGT as the “Party of the Revolution.” The PGT emphasized how pivotal the party was in the passing the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952.¹⁹⁹ In doing so, the PGT wanted to reiterate that they had had been around since the beginning of the revolutionary struggle and remained the historical vanguard of the proletariat.

The PGT continued by reiterating their methodological position that the armed path was their principal method of resistance, but insisted the Guatemalan revolution should develop “all possible forms of political, economic, social, ideological struggle.”²⁰⁰ This demonstrated how the PGT still believed that electoral inclusion and political sovereignty were valid objectives of the revolutionary struggle, contrasting themselves further with the FAR who had wholly discarded electoral inclusion and reform from their revolutionary strategy. The PGT’s congressional resolution contained a list of statutes, with the first reading:

“In every society with divided classes, the development of an intense class struggle has economic, ideological, and political forms. The decisive form is the

¹⁹⁸ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 80.

¹⁹⁹ PGT Comité Central del PGT, *Situación y Perspectivas de la Revolución Guatemalteca* (Guatemala, 1968), 4.

²⁰⁰ The PGT, *Programa de la Revolución Popular, aprobado por el IV Congreso del PGT* (Guatemala, 1969), 20.

political struggle, which strives towards political power...to utilize power to progress, liberate the masses from exploitation. To develop the class struggle with success, we must organize...the political struggle is the most important.”²⁰¹

Here, the PGT not only defended the utility of a *political* struggle, but they also prioritized it in their list of party statutes, implying electoral reformism would remain central to the PGT’s political and revolutionary platform. The PGT explained their position on this issue:

“The fundamental work of the Guatemalan pueblo is to struggle and advance the revolutionary process...that will permit the taking of power to achieve agrarian reform...to pass into socialism. But, at the same time...It is necessary to unite organize, and struggle through all mediums, to achieve all of the immediate political, economic, and social changes...As a result of utilizing all forms of struggle, the combination of the political struggle and the armed struggle...the dominant classes have to listen to the demands of the people.”²⁰²

The PGT’s Fourth Congressional Resolution took aim at the FAR’s claims that they were the *real* vanguard of the proletariat, not the PGT. The resolution declared:

“We are the vanguard of the working class... FAR/MR-13 say they are part of the revolution and adhere to a Marxist-Leninist line but their conceptions, strategy, methods of struggle, say otherwise... FAR has mutilated true Marxism-Leninism...”²⁰³

The PGT resolution continued by responding to what they perceived to be incongruities in the FAR’s revolutionary theory and praxis:

“FAR thinks that there is no existence of a legal oppositional party, us, but by ignoring the role of PGT and their legal alternatives they make the word ‘opposition’ synonymous to ‘reformism’... FAR always says we are part of the bourgeoisie, out of touch with the subjective conditions of the country, but it is not PGT who are constantly referencing the Vietnamese experience,

²⁰¹ The PGT. “Proyecto de Estatutos del Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo,” *Materiales IV Congreso* (1969): 1.

²⁰² The PGT, *Programa de la Revolución Popular, aprobado por el IV Congreso del PGT* (Guatemala, 1969), 39.

²⁰³ The PGT, *El Camino de la Revolución Guatemalteca* (Mexico, 1972), 45.

wanting to copy their success... How they distort history! The FAR accuses us of being part of the bourgeoisie – hegemonic obstacles to the protection of the proletariat – but the very language they use is an affirmation of bourgeoisie language – they are the ones who are unknowingly victims of bourgeoisie influence.”²⁰⁴

While the PGT attempted to distance themselves from the FAR in its Fourth Congress, Carlos González, General Secretary of the PGT, claimed in 1970 that the Fourth Congressional Resolution of 1969 was more an ideological defense than an issue of revolutionary praxis. While the PGT continued to stress their position that multiple forms of struggle should be implemented simultaneously, the PGT all but adopted the line of the revolutionary guerrilla. “In the 1960s, PGT was practically diluted in the FAR,” González reflected, “with this period ending in ’69 and PGT’s IV congress where we ratified the armed way”²⁰⁵ Although the PGT were not quick to admit it, their revolutionary strategy had been heavily shaped by the FAR’s radical militarism, essentially forcing them to accept the primacy of armed tactics over electoral reformism. By the end of the decade, the debate between the PGT and the FAR had evolved from a debate on the revolutionary strategy they should employ in the *future* (electoral versus armed tactics), into a debate defending the historic legacy of the revolutionary strategies they had implemented in the *past*.

Chapter conclusion

By participating in the elections of 1966, Guatemala’s radical left had conducted a costly experiment in electoral democracy, an experiment that resulted in an irreconcilable

²⁰⁴ The PGT, *Algunas Manifestaciones del Oportunismo de los Voceros de as FAR en el Seno del Movimiento Revolucionaria Guatemalteco* (Guatemala, 1977), 22, 25-27.

²⁰⁵ Marta Harnecker, “Pueblos en Armas,” *Serie Luchas Populares Latinoamericanas*, 69.

fracture in revolutionary unity. As a result, the FAR guerrillas were unable to counter the military's anti-guerrilla insurgency and sustained debilitating losses.

Based on their writings during this time period, the role of electoral democracy as a revolutionary tool was the most contentious issue that inhibited revolutionary unity between the PGT and the FAR. To the FAR, the failure of the elections of 1966 to deliver radical political, social, and economic changes unequivocally proved that revolution and electoral democracy were incompatible. To the PGT, the failure of the Méndez Montenegro administration to deliver reforms was primarily a consequence of the FAR's alienating and isolating militarism, which drained the movements of their bases of support and inhibited the formation of a popular front capable of forcing the government to concede their demands of reform.

Through the end of the 1960s, the FAR and the PGT continued to debate their methodological differences. While both groups were quick to defend their position as the *true* vanguard of the revolution and the proletariat, the failure of electoral democracy to deliver revolutionary change in Guatemala forced the PGT into accepting the primacy of armed tactics by their Fourth Congressional Resolution in 1969. However, the PGT continued to retain their revolutionary position that advocated for the simultaneous implementation of multiple *forms* of struggle.

Chapter 3: *Infinita Tristeza* (Infinite Misery)

Throughout this thesis, I analyzed points of strategic divergence that fragmented and polarized the Guatemalan radical left throughout the 1960s. At the heart of their strategic divergence was a methodological dispute concerning the function of electoral reformism within Guatemala's struggle for revolutionary change. The PGT and the FAR vehemently disagreed on the ability for electoral democracy to generate radical socio-economic and political changes. The radical left's polarizing methodological debate throughout the 1960s, demonstrated the wide heterogeneity of their perspectives and the dynamic and non-static mosaic of Guatemala's radical left throughout the decade.

I conclude by examining the central elements in the formation and development of both the PGT and the FAR to evaluate how these historical circumstances influenced their methodological positions throughout 1960s. I also summarize the arguments made by the PGT and the FAR in their defense (in the case of the PGT), or their disposal (in the case of the FAR), of electoral democracy as a revolutionary venue capable of generating radical changes.

Divergent origins mould divergent revolutionary paths

To conceptualize why the FAR and the PGT diverged on the issue of electoral reformism as a revolutionary tool, it is useful to examine how each group evolved over the course of the 1960s in terms of their political-lines and revolutionary strategies. The PGT were an oppositional political party that had experience working within electoral democracy during the Ten Years of Spring. The PGT defended their historical contributions to the Ten Years of Spring and rhetorically shaped the revolutionary struggle of the 1960s as a

continuation of that same struggle they had helped ignite a decade earlier. Their position on electoral and democratic reformism was largely an inheritance from their time successfully fighting for reform from within electoral democracy. The revolutionary conditions they helped ferment during the Ten Years of Spring guided their political and revolutionary lines into the 1960s, influenced by both their electoral successes and the undemocratic overthrow of President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán.

By the early 1960s, the extent to which the diverse factions of PGT wished to embrace armed tactics was a divisive issue; unity quickly diminished along generational lines as an ideological rift began to fragment the PGT. Generally, the older generation of the PGT tended to articulate moderate positions, stressing diplomacy and electoral participation as their key methods for inciting change. Contrastingly, the younger bloc of the PGT, especially the Patriotic Youth Worker's Party (JPT), began calling for the development of an armed struggle; they demanded a political reorientation along military lines, with many beginning to question if petty-bourgeoisie intellectuals could direct military operations.

In 1962, after receiving pragmatic guerrilla instruction and ideological inspiration from the leaders of the Cuban Revolution in Havana, a radical faction of the PGT joined with the military rebels who led a failed coup on November 13, 1960, forming a new militaristic wing of the party, which called itself the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). The emergence of the FAR, and their calls for an armed struggle, challenged the PGT's engrained revolutionary leadership, and called into question the PGT's strategy of reformism and its emphasis on peaceful modes of resistance. In 1966, FAR leader Luis

Augusto Turcios Lima declared that “the vanguard position is won in daily struggle, the [right to] leadership is gained through skillfully executing it.” Turcios Lima continued that if “other organizations of revolutionaries with greater political vision” develop, then they “will assume its role... [and] lead the revolution.”²⁰⁶ The FAR argued that the PGT’s insistence on the primacy of electoral and legal alternatives over guerrilla violence was a flawed strategy given the subjective conditions of Guatemala.

While the PGT was guided by its previous electoral successes during the Ten Years of Spring, the FAR was a movement of youth not formed until 1962. The FAR guerrillas were too young to remember the electoral successes of the Ten Years of Spring in a meaningful way. In contrast, most came of age within a politically repressed and socially oppressed Guatemala—where the idea of traversing a corrupt democracy to achieve *radical* social, economic, and political change was unimaginable. The FAR defied, and later rejected, what they perceived to be the traditional opportunism of an “old left,” arguing the PGT were too cozy with the national bourgeoisie to generate any real radical change for *campesinos* in the countryside. Revolutionary change would be won through an armed struggle, the FAR maintained, not through a corrupted ballot box.

Throughout the 1960s, Guatemala’s radical left was unable to maintain a revolutionary partnership that could reconcile their divergent political and economic origins; backgrounds that helped shaped each of the movements’ revolutionary strategies. Despite an obsessive attitude towards securing revolutionary unity, the lack

²⁰⁶ David A. Crain, “Guatemalan Revolutionaries and Havana’s Ideological Offensive of 1966-1968,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 17 (1975), 195.

of such unity inhibited their ability to maintain a revolutionary opposition capable of challenging a dynamic and multi-dimensional Guatemalan state.

The fundamental source of divergence between the PGT and the FAR resided in their strategic visions for the Guatemalan revolution. Throughout the mid 1960s, the FAR became increasingly unsatisfied playing a subordinate role on the PGT's Central Committee. In March 1971, the FAR released a reflective statement on this issue, contending the PGT lacked a "a dialectic understanding of the war, interpreting the political struggle and the armed struggle as one...devaluing armed action as a mere political tool... For us, the armed struggle is our political expression... the two are not separated. Our military action is political." The FAR went on to explain why they insisted that armed tactics must supersede any electoral or legal struggle: "We don't believe that the principal way to rally the masses is reformism, we can't use the tools of the bourgeoisie...political violence is the stimulus that develops the consciousness and catalyzes revolutionary organization."²⁰⁷

The FAR proposed a new-armed strategy of resistance, one that discarded the utility of electoral reformism and its compromising with the dominant classes. In 1973, the FAR reflected on their failed experiment participating in the 1966 election, proclaiming:

"Elections are a bourgeoisie game...Supporting Méndez was 'collaboration' with the system... a clear instrument of reaction...their [PGT] programs of reform do not propose in any way to destroy the system of capitalist exploitation...the vanguard of the proletariat must be those who destroy capitalism and construct

²⁰⁷ The FAR, *La Unidad de las Fuerzas Revolucionarias* (Guatemala: Coordinadora Alemana de Solidaridad con Guatemala, 1971), 21.

a socialist state...Political reform is a tool to sustain economic power so that capitalist economies can continue uninterrupted.”²⁰⁸

Furthermore, the FAR perceived the PGTs electoral manoeuvring and popular front building as a betrayal to *campesinos*, who the FAR believed should lead the revolution.

“The campesinos...the exploited and oppressed pueblo,” FAR guerrilla leader Pablo Monsanto declared, “do not believe in political parties, nor in electoral processes”²⁰⁹

Electoral democracy, the FAR maintained, was inherently incompatible with the revolutionary change that could forge a “*Nueva Guatemala*.”

By the mid 1960s, in stark contrast to the FAR, the PGT consistently argued that multiple *forms* of struggle, including both democratic and legal modes, should be incorporated into their revolutionary strategy as a mechanism to extend the revolution into diverse segments of the nation. In October 1966, PGT leader Bernardo Alvarado Monson summarized the PGT’s position on implementing multiple forms of struggle:

“The *way of the revolution* is closely linked with the *forms* of struggle, but the two are not identical. The forms of struggle change with the changing political situation. However, change in tactics occurs within the framework of the revolutionary process determined by the basic, long-term trends of national development...the theoretical concept of the peaceful way of the revolution admits the use of armed force under certain circumstances....On the other hand, peaceful and legal forms can and should be used, whenever this is possible, side by side with armed forms.”²¹⁰

The PGT argued that without broadening their bases of support, to include less radical segments of the Guatemalan population, they would never gain enough political will to force the government to concede their demands. In 1973, the PGT reflected on their

²⁰⁸ “Que significan las elecciones burguesas” *FAR Direccion Nacional Ejecutiva* (September 1973): 29-30, 38, 56.

²⁰⁹ Marta Harnecker, “Pueblos en Armas,” *Serie Luchas Populares Latinoamericanas* (1983), 28.

²¹⁰ Bernardo Alvarado Monson, “Some Problems of the Guatemalan Revolution,” *World Marxist Review* 9 (1966): 40.

split with the FAR, arguing the FAR “don’t understand who the principal enemy is” and that “the FAR’s lack of political experience leads them to fall into dogmatism.”²¹¹ To the PGT, their political experience during the Ten Years of Spring was an asset to the revolution, not a quality or strategy that should have been demonized or devalued by the FAR.

By the end of the 1960s, the PGT began to attack the FAR’s interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. To transition Guatemala from a capitalist to a socialist nation, the PGT argued, certain “objective” and “subjective” conditions must be fulfilled. Without a long-term political vision, the PGT maintained, simply overthrowing the government without harnessing the nation’s *objective* conditions (land, resources, modes of production) and developing the *subjective* conditions (raising class-consciousness and rallying popular support for revolutionary change) via democratic reformism, would send Guatemala into a state of anarchy. In 1973, the PGT declared the FAR had a

“Bad digestion of Marxism-Leninism...They don’t think its necessary to develop legal forms of struggle...They think communism is a degeneration of reformism...The FAR perceive the legality of our movement as isolation from the masses...They ignore the need for a transitory period between the construction of socialism...socialism requires a material-base, a historical process that creates the objective and subjective conditions for the development [of socialism], without such conditions socialism can’t be developed... They don’t understand that you can’t just overthrow the state without a transitory vision... a socialist state can’t develop out of nothing... It’s a utopian vision.”²¹²

The PGT believed that they had to play the bourgeois political game in order to conquer it. According to the PGT, the transition to socialism in Guatemala required proper

²¹¹ The PGT. “Algunas Manifestaciones de Oportunismo de los Voceros de las FAR,” *Redacción de la Verdad* (1973): 6-7, 14.

²¹² The PGT. “Algunas Manifestaciones de Oportunismo de los Voceros de las FAR,” *Redacción de la Verdad* (1973): 20, 25, 48, 54.

objective conditions—modes of production had to be harnessed, not broken. Therefore, the PGT believed they needed to take control of the state, democratically, in order to control the economic and political apparatuses that dictated the nation’s material revolutionary conditions. The FAR’s non-compromising violence, and its unilateral goal of toppling the government, was short-sighted in the perspective of the PGT, and ultimately weakened the radical left’s ability to advance the struggle for revolutionary change in Guatemala.

Final remarks

While the FAR and the PGT generally opposed the same enemy throughout the 1960s; namely, U.S. interventionism and imperialism, agrarian inequity, economic inequality, and social/political violence, Guatemala’s radical left was often fanatically focused on delivering internal criticism at one another. In the process, the PGT and the FAR increasingly failed to secure revolutionary unity, enabling the Guatemalan military to capitalize on a fragmented and disorganized revolutionary movement. Reflecting on the methodological schism that consumed the radical left in the 1960s, FAR guerrilla Mario Sánchez recalled, “[the 1960s] was a period in the revolutionary process where there was a huge distrust amongst one organization to another.”²¹³ The inability to maintain political and revolutionary unity throughout the 1960s resulted in parallel movements that operated largely in isolation from one another. In the process, they divided their bases of support and battled for limited financial and material resources. Without a

²¹³ Marta Harnecker, “Pueblos en Armas,” *Serie Luchas Populares Latinoamericanas*, 48.

unified revolutionary front, they were easily defeated by a well-trained and well-equipped military.

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