Enduring Grievances and the Fragmentation of Form: The Digital Displacement of Revolutionary Politics in Guatemala

by Matthew Hernandez

B.A. in Sociology, May 2023, University of Maryland, College Park

A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of The
Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

August 31, 2026

Thesis directed by

Ivy Ken, PhD
Associate Professor of Sociology and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

© Copyright 2026 by Matthew Hernandez
All rights reserved

Dedication

However many nations there are today, innumerable people, they all had but one dawn.

Popol Wuj

Sacred Book of the K'iche' Maya

¿Tiene derecho el hombre a sacrificar sus tesoros naturales en beneficio del progreso?
No lo creo

Juan Carlos Bodoque

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor and thesis director, Dr. Ivy Ken, for her unwavering support, expert guidance, and patience. Dr. Ken helped me navigate the creative process and provided me with a mentor relationship that will impact me forever. She has guided me through this program and has helped me develop into the academic I am today. As I take my next steps into the unknown, I have the wisdom of our many meetings to fall back on. I would like to dedicate Laurie Anderson's "Let X=X" to Dr. Ken, as a sonic representation of our time spent working together on this project.

I am grateful to my reader, Dr. Michelle Kelso, who watched this project grow and change over the years. It was in Dr. Kelso's research methods and genocide courses where I developed the skills, both investigative and theoretical, that I needed to take this project on. Her support helped me grow both as an academic and as a researcher, and for that I am grateful.

I would also like to thank Dr. Laryssa Mykyta for assisting in the reading process and for going above and beyond to provide meaningful feedback and for encouraging me to continuously explore new ideas.

I am thankful for the support I received from the faculty and staff of the Sociology Department at George Washington University. I am also grateful for my peers within the program who encouraged me throughout this process. More personally, I want to thank my friends and family for their endless support and encouragement.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the people of Guatemala. Who, despite facing many challenges, have continued to persevere. Thank you for your warmth and kindness.

Abstract

This thesis examines transitions in Guatemala political expression from the revolutionary print media produced during the civil war (1960-1996) to contemporary digital discourse on TikTok (2023-Present). Through a comparative thematic analysis of four archival guerrilla publications and 215 comments, this study traces the persistence of unresolved grievances and the fragmentation of dissent across nearly four decades. By employing a theoretical framework integrating Avery Gordon's concept of sociological haunting with Marxist conflict, this project reveals a paradox: foundational grievances surrounding economic inequality, political corruption, and state violence remain remarkably durable, while infrastructure for articulating dissent and creating structural change has fundamentally fragmented. While guerrilla print media provided centralized, ideologically coherent infrastructure for revolutionary mobilization, creating political actors through collective organization and rejection of democracy, contemporary digital discourse highlights a new expressive presence that allows the voicing of frustrations and suggestions, but rarely cohering into a unified political front capable of collective action.

This project documents how the transition from print to digital platforms has reconfigured political participation while exposing enduring social issues. The findings challenge the notion that the wartime era's impacts are confined to the past, instead demonstrating that the unresolved issues of the past continue to haunt the present through persistent inequality, normalized violence, corruption, and elite impunity. By highlighting these continuities and disruptions in Guatemalan political life, this thesis contributes to broader understandings of how political expressions evolve, as well as how the consequences of unresolved social issues manifest.

Table of Contents

Dedication ..... *i*

Acknowledgments ..... *ii*

Abstract ..... *iii*

Table of Contents ..... *iv*

List of figures ..... *v*

Glossary of Terms ..... *vi*

List of Tables ..... *vii*

Introduction 1

Literature Review 7

Theoretical Framework 11

Methods and Data 19

Findings 33

Discussion 83

Conclusion: The Paradox of Political Expression 100

List of figures

Figure 1.Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 39

Figure 2. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 41

Figure 3. Solidaridad con los trabajadores del campo..... 43

Figure 4. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 45

Figure 5. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 46

Figure 6. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 48

Figure 7. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 49

Figure 8. Image Created by Guerrillas, Insurrección popular, No. 1, 1982 52

Figure 9. Image Created by Guerrillas, ” Periodico Popular #33, 1982..... 54

Figure 10. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 58

Figure 11. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 58

Figure 12. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33 Cover, 1985..... 61

Figure 13. Image Created by Guerrillas, C.U.C Fyler, 1980..... 61

Figure 14. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 62

Figure 15. Image Created by Guerrillas, Insurrección popular, No. 1, 1982 65

Figure 16. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 66

Figure 17. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985 67

Glossary of Terms

EGP	*Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (Guerrilla Army Of The Poor)
FAR	*Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (Rebel Armed Forces)
ORPA	*Organización del Pueblo en Armas* (Organization of People in Arms)
PGT	*Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (Guatemalan Labour Party)
PGT-NDN	*Núcleo de Dirección Nacional del Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (National Directive Nucleus of the Guatemalan Party of Labour)
URNG	*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity)
CEH	*La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico* (Historical Clarification Commission)
INGUAT	*Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo*
BANDESA	*Banco Nacional de Desarrollo Agrícola* (National Agricultural Development Bank)
INDECA	*Instituto Nacional de Comercialización Agrícola* (National Institute of Agricultural Commercialization)
INAFOR	*Instituto Nacional Forestal* (National Forestry Institute)
BANVI	Banco Nacional de la Vivienda (National Housing Bank)
FYP	*For You Page*

List of Tables

Table 1. Title and Description of GNIB Archive Sources Analyzed 23

Table 2. Topics of Videos on Official TikTok Accounts of Plaza Publica and Quorum and Number of Comments Analyzed 27

Introduction

Since the arrival of the Spanish in 1524, no event has impacted Guatemalan society more than the 36-year civil war (1960-1996). The conflict, which intensified from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, emerged from a complex history of political violence, state repression, and socioeconomic inequality that plagued the country for decades that was rooted in centuries of persecution, inequalities and violence. The roots of the civil war can be traced to the 1944 revolution that overthrew the then U.S. backed dictator of Guatemala that ushed in democratic elections. However, the pushback against these democratically elected leaders was severe. The miliary deemed the elected governments to be "communistic," (Central Intelligence Agency, 1985) and in 1954 ousted the democratically elected president, installing a military junta.

Authoritarian rule employed increasingly deadly tactics to contain t leftist movements. Right-wing governments annulled land redistribution efforts, outlawed left-wing political expression, and repressed thousands of political activists, labor leaders, and peasants across the nation. Revolutionary groups organized to combat government oppression, driven by a desire to change the nation that resulted in nearly 40 years of sustained guerilla warfare. From 1960-1996, the Guatemalan state under various regimes set out to brutalize, subject, and control its population through the use of political violence, committing mass human rights abuses. An estimated 200,000 civilians were killed and up to 40,000 forcibly disappeared (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999). , Indigenous Maya were heavily targeted by the regimes that carried out a sustained genocide against their communities. Additionally, some 1.5 million

Guatemalans were displayed during the civil war. A patchwork of trials, commissions and justice initiatives about this period have had varying results, leaving a complex legacy of trauma and reconciliation efforts.

This project aims to understand the legacies of this period and how they manifest in the contemporary era (2023-2025) through the presence of unresolved social issues and shifts in dissent strategies. The methodological approach adopted in this study involves the examination of four pieces of print media from the guerrilla era and the comment sections of 10 TikTok videos found on Guatemalan digital news platform pages. This approach facilitates the analysis of political media across eras and allows for the continuities and disruptions of Guatemalan political life to make themselves apparent through the words of the Guatemalan public. This approach also allows for the exploration of the issues central to the experiences of the Guatemalan people, reflecting on them as they exist within the broader social, cultural, and political context of their times. Through the manual coding, thematic analysis, and engagement with a theoretical perspective, this research delves into nearly 45 years of political publications, with the objective of:

1. Systematically analyzing the content and themes of guerrilla print media and contemporary social media activity to draw out the ghosts haunting social and political life in Guatemala.
2. Utilize Marxist conflict theory to understand how class struggle and material conditions play a driving role in change creation in both eras.
3. Exploring the dissent and organization strategies utilized by guerrillas and commenters respectively, to uncover any continuities or disruptions in strategy.

4. Contributing to the broader understanding of the changes that have occurred in the transition between these two eras.

This project sets the stage for an examination of the interplay between historical revolutionary politics, contemporary political discourse, social media, and communication technology in a Latin American context. By integrating Avery Gordon's concept of sociological haunting and Marxist conflict theory, this will document the continuities of social issues and their historic origins and make clear the disruptions in the manner in which dissent is expressed.

It reveals significant patterns of political expression and dissent strategies, while focusing on issues and proposed solutions as the Guatemalan people describe them. By exploring the continuities and disruptions of political life in Guatemala portrayed in these resources, this thesis contributes to a better understanding of the current political conditions in the nation and challenge the notion that the wartime era and its impacts are in the past.

First, I will present a brief historical contextualization of the civil war, followed by a literature review. Then I will detail my methods using both historical documents and digital media to delve deeper into the main research questions animating this thesis, before turning to my analysis and findings. This thesis undertakes a comprehensive analysis of guerillas print media and social media comments from the platform TikTok to answer three critical questions: How has Guatemalan political expression transformed from the revolutionary print media of the civil war era to contemporary digital discourse? How are grievances surrounding social issues articulated? Do they remain unresolved?

What strategies and solutions are proposed to combat these social issues and bring chnage?

Brief Historical Background

In response to the state's actions, various armed resistance movements began to emerge in the early 1960s (Kruijt, 2024). The insurgency began when disgruntled former army officers, urban intellectuals, and students took up arms against the U.S.-backed dictatorship in an effort to create change. Fueled by resentment of the U.S. involvement in the 1954 coup, the guerrillas began to aligned themselves with Guatemala's most marginalized groups, including Indigenous Mayan communities, the landless poor, urban workers, and Ladino campesinos, later receiving international support from states like Cuba and Nicaragua (Kruijt, 2024). Although these groups focused on the plight of the proletariat, they initially struggled to gain public support. However, when material conditions worsened, interest in and recruitment for the guerrilla cause increased as the war waged (Boon, 2011; Valentino, 2004). The military reacted with indiscriminate repression using vigilante groups, which became precursors to death/patrol squads, often committing acts of violence with little to no repercussions (Astoundz, 2024). By 1982 under the Lucas Garcia regime (1978-1982), violence peaked, and an estimated 400 to 500 politically-related deaths were occurring monthly. Nonetheless, guerrillas continued secretly organizing the public to create rebellion (Central Intelligence Agency, 1985).

A notable recruitment and solidarity tool of these organization efforts was print media. The print media, which was mainly produced *the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP), *the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (FAR), *the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (PGT), and *the Organización del Pueblo en Armas* (ORPA) was developed with

the intent of producing of newspapers, pamphlets, posters, and political cartoons that voiced political and economic frustrations (Millett 1985). According to the guerrillas, these printed materials served multiple purposes. First, it provided an outlet for political education and mobilization, especially among indigenous and peasant populations in the Western Highlands, where guerrilla operations were centralized. Second, it functioned as a tool for international advocacy, with groups like the Democratic Front Against Repression (FDCR) using these materials to disseminate information about human rights abuses and the legitimacy of the armed struggle abroad (Central Intelligence Agency, 1985). Finally, they served to facilitate cooperation amongst the various factions in the country, despite their varying ideological beliefs. It is clear that the print media functioned as an essential component of their recruitment strategy as well as a tool of national and international solidarity. These publications articulated discontent with government policies and tackled systemic issues like anti-Indigenous racism, wealth disparity, and land displacement. These groups recognized that military operations alone would not suffice, and that they needed to win the "hearts and minds" of the public through propaganda and communication to succeed.

These risky efforts put forth by the guerrillas were not without repercussions. As a result of this growing movement, states forces began to combat the growing influence of the guerillas, turning to media censorship, re-education campaigns and direct killings to stamp out the revolutionary motivations in the public. When General Ríos Montt (1982-1983) came to power, the state apparatus attempted to control the national narrative and developed its own counter-revolutionary communication strategy. A chokehold was placed on media that prohibited publications critical of the state and exiled noncompliant

press. One way the state instilled fear was by using *orejas* or "ears," or citizens who reported any critique of the state deemed as insurgent. Ríos Montt further refined this counter-insurgency program through the utilization of political, military, and psychological methods that sought to increase confidence of the state in peasant and indigenous communities (Central Intelligence Agency, 1985). This included a number of "civic action programs" aimed at diminishing support for guerrilla operations. The state established resettlement programs in the form of "model villages" that acted as centers of re-education and propagandization, and, in many cases, were also centers of extermination.

However, these platforms would ultimately prove to be short-lived. As U.S.-backed military campaigns weakened rebel groups, their publications eventually ceased. In 1996, the civil war ended with the signing of the peace accords in Guatemala City. Guerrillas transitioned away from fighting into politics, forming the party Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) (Keen 2003;Allison 2015). Guatemalans had peace and democracy, but with limited avenues for public political dissent. Slowly, traditional media outlets and members of the press returned to Guatemala. Through the early 2000s, print media was an important platform for the dissemination of political material and public grievances. The advent of the internet and later social media helped level the playing field for individual political expression (Lane et al., 2019), creating a space where grievances could be voiced freely. Despite this new openness, little research exists on Guatemalan digital political expression and its relationship to historical modes. This period of transition between the civil war and peace marks a critical crossroads of historic and contemporary political expression and dissent for the country.

Literature Review

Scholarly work on the Civil War era provides critical insight into the motivations and messaging of the guerrilla resistance in Guatemala. Dirk Kruijt's (2024) oral history interviews with guerrilla "comandantes" offer an intimate view of the insurgents' ideological drivers. His research documents core grievances of the time, specifically social injustice, Indigenous rights, class struggle, and political exclusion. These visible public issues served as the thematic fuel for guerrilla publications. These printed materials were not merely propaganda but a vital aspect of the guerrilla network, aimed at building support and recruiting personnel for an armed struggle against an oppressive state (Kruijt, 2024; Avila and Gutiérrez Valdizán, 2013). The content of this historical media, therefore, can be expected to revolve around themes of state violence, ideological commitment, and revolutionary takeover of the state.

A body of contemporary research demonstrates that, unfortunately, the structural issues that fueled the civil war have persisted and mutated in the post-conflict, neoliberal era. Research on urban centers like Antigua, Guatemala, reveals how modern grievances are rooted in historical patterns of exploitation and displacement. Morales Blanco (2021; 2022) and Trivi et al. (2023) detail processes of "touristification" and "urban extractivism," where state and international policies prioritize foreign capital and a marketable heritage aesthetic over local community welfare. This leads to the displacement of residents, loss of cultural identity, and a sense of "losing their city" in tourist centers like Antigua and Lake Atitlan. Similarly, in rural areas, debilitating poverty, food insecurity, and land inequality remain high, disproportionately affecting Indigenous communities (Covarrubias and De la O Campos, 2024). Liebenguth and Gricius (2024) critique the international securitization of nutrition, arguing that it

obscures the root causes of this crisis, which include colonial legacies, land dispossession, and agro-industrial extractivism. In response, Indigenous and peasant movements have emerged, advocating for food sovereignty and territorial defense, framing their struggle as defiance against privatization.

The decline of guerrilla print media that began in 1983, and created a vacuum for political dissent, which digital platforms have filled. The 2013 Open Society Foundations report by Avila and Gutiérrez Valdizán provides a crucial snapshot of this transition, documenting a highly concentrated mainstream media that marginalizes dissident voices. This report identifies the specific "sensitive topics" avoided by traditional media, including racism, extractive industries, social protest, and army corruption, which are themes that migrate to digital spaces. Scholars have validated the power of these new platforms. Salzman (2015) provides quantitative evidence from across Latin America, including Guatemala, showing that social media use for political information is a statistically significant predictor of protest participation, demonstrating that digital expression is transient but is linked to tangible political action in some cases.

Further research illustrates the diverse forms this digital expression takes. Avalos (2023) analyzes how "citizen-prosumers" on TikTok engage in investigative journalism and challenge political corruption during electoral campaigns, representing a decentralized, citizen-led form of activism. Garcia-Ruano et al. (2013) show how Maya socioenvironmental movements strategically integrate digital tools with ancestral practices to mobilize, share information, and seek international support, creating an "integrated communication toolbox" for resistance. This shift signifies an evolution from the centralized, ideological messaging of the guerrilla press to a more fragmented and

participatory form of digital dissent. The evolution of political expression is not merely a technological change but also a shift in strategy and narrative. Sippert (2022) conceptualizes this through the "platform" model, where organizations like DESGUA provide infrastructure for decentralized, user-driven projects focused on cultural valorization and building alternative economies, rather than seizing state power. This represents a move away from the revolutionary goals of the guerrilla press toward creating autonomous spaces within an oppressive system.

However, this digital landscape is not a utopian free space. Wilson (2022) analyzes "digital authoritarianism," where state-aligned actors use online harassment and disinformation to target human rights defenders, often employing Cold War-era rhetoric labeling them "communists" or "terrorists." This demonstrates a continuity in the state's tactics of stigmatization, now deployed through digital means. Furthermore, the struggle over historical memory continues in the digital realm. As Alvarado et al. (2021) document, the physical archives documenting state violence during the civil war are targeted for destruction, necessitating their digitization to safeguard the truth. This act represents a modern form of resistance where digital tools are used not for immediate mobilization, but for the long-term preservation of memory against state-sponsored erasure, directly linking historical content to modern digital practice.

The existing literature provides a clear framework for analyzing the evolution of political expression in Guatemala. Historical research establishes that guerrilla print media was a tool for organized, revolutionary mobilization against a violent state, articulating grievances rooted in class and ethnic struggle. Contemporary scholarship confirms that these grievances persist, now manifesting as conflicts over land, cultural

identity, and resources within a capitalist economic model. The digital turn has democratized the ability to express dissent, moving it from covert print to open, networked platforms, and shifting mobilization from armed insurgency to protest, cyberactivism, and community building. Yet, their seems to be no steady stream of connections between these eras. The literature, both historical and sociological, seem to respond to the issues of these eras as singular, and unique to the time periods they occupy. They often fail to notice the act of continual metamorphism that these issues undergo. This project aims to challenge this notion and prove that although their veneer might change, in essence these issues are a result of steady unchanging cause. This project will utilize a comparative content analysis of historical pamphlets and modern social media, informed by this literature to trace the transformation of specific language, themes, and strategies, revealing both the profound changes and the enduring struggles that define Guatemalan political life.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this thesis, concerning social issues, public reaction in Guatemala, and its shifts over time, is rooted in the works of Avery Gordon and Marxist conflict theory. This framework aims to provide a multidimensional approach to understanding the origins and transformations of social issues in Guatemala and help articulate the complex, interconnected nature of the social crises that have defined the country's history. To fully understand the depth of the country's turmoil requires a unique theoretical approach capable of illuminating both the structural mechanisms of oppression and the persistence of historical wounds. Drawing on these two complementary theoretical frameworks provides the analytical tools necessary to expose how Guatemala's historical crises are in fact connected by centuries of unresolved political violence and structural inequality, and to demonstrate that the nation's present is perpetually haunted by its past. The following section will elaborate on each theoretical pillar, beginning with Gordon's framework before turning to Marx's conflict theory, ultimately demonstrating how their integration provides a more robust foundation for understanding Guatemala's social reality and the public's shifting response to it.

Avery Gordon's Ghostly Matters

Avery Gordon's concept of sociological hauntings, and the terms "ghosts" and "hauntings" as presented in her 1997 work *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* are essential aspects of this framework. Gordon argues in this work that the forces of presence and absence play an equal role in the creation of the social world. She contends that what is visible and present in social life is always shaped and structured by what is forcibly made invisible, most notably historical wounds,

unresolved injustices, and the erasure of what has been denied, repressed, or excluded from the official narratives of societal memory.

For Gordon, these forces of absence are not passive voids of empty space, but rather active, pressing "presences" that continue to exert material effects on the living, manifesting as "ghosts." She insists that "life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted" (Gordon 1997:7) and that conventional social science, with its attachment to empirically verifiable data and detached objectivity, is structurally ill-equipped to apprehend the complex ways the past folds aggressively into the present.

Central to this framework is the concept of ghosts, which Gordon describes not as supernatural entities but rather as "social figures" that embody what is missing and represent the unresolved wounds of history. Gordon elaborates that these ghosts are revealed in the process by which something that is lost, barely visible, or not there to our trained eye, makes itself known or apparent. For instance, in a Guatemalan context, a large and ever-present ghost impacting society is the ghost of those who have disappeared or been disappeared during the civil war. Although forced disappearances have ceased to and that chapter of history has "closed", the communities and families impacted by this still feel the absences of those who were taken. By acknowledging these disappearances and demanding answers, communities affected by this violence are making the haunting visible and drawing out the ghosts. This has manifested materially as the uncovering of mass graves and the repatriation of remains to communities. By challenging state narratives communities impacted by disappearances reveal the lasting effects of haunting. As social figures, these ghosts act as the point of contact between

past and present, while simultaneously existing in both. They carry the weight of historical violence while gesturing toward a future of potential justice and solution. According to Gordon, “the ghost presents itself as a sign to the thinker that there is a chance in the fight for the oppressed past”(Gordon 1997:65). Ghosts are symptoms of what is missing from our social landscape; they are the living embodiments of those who have been erased from our society, and they return precisely because their stories remain unfinished and their grievances unaddressed. Importantly, Gordon argues that ghosts are neither purely psychological projections or metaphors; instead, they are objectively real social facts that demand a response. When a ghost appears, she explains, it is calling us into a relationship of accountability, forcing us to acknowledge that the past is not over and that we are implicated in the very systems that produced the ghost in the first place. This figure also carries a utopian dimension, because its presence suggests that things could have been, and could still be, different, opening a space for transformative social change.

In addition to ghosts, Gordon utilizes the term “hauntings” to name a methodological practice, defined by “a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening” (Gordon 1997:8), positioning it as an epistemological process that disrupts linear, progressive notions of time. Haunting reveals that the past is not merely behind us, in an immaterial state, but actively exists in the present, and that these layers of history are shaping our institutions, our bodies, and our social relationships in ways that we often fail to recognize. Hauntings are an active and unsettling state of being disturbed and drawn into a different relationship with our reality, one that requires social scientists to abandon the pretenses of neutral observations and instead adopt a practice of

deep listening and careful reading to draw out the ghosts. For Gordon, ghosts both promote these hauntings and are named by them. Gordon argues that hauntings draw us "affectively, sometimes against our will, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition"(Gordon 1997:8). As a methodology, haunting demands that researchers attend and focus on the absences, silences, and the nearly disappeared that official records leave out, learning to sense the presence of an absence and to follow the disturbances that ghostly matters produce. It also requires reflexivity, compelling the researcher to recognize their own implication in the historical processes under investigation and to let themselves be fundamentally altered by what they encounter. For Gordon, haunting is thus not merely a descriptive concept but a critical practice that transforms the act of research from an impersonal pursuit of facts into an ethically charged engagement with the open wounds of the social world.

Applying Gordon's concepts to an analysis of social issues in Guatemala, the reaction from the public in Guatemala, and their shifts over time, helps reveal that Guatemala's social crises of either era are not novel problems bound by temporal jurisdictions, but rather spectral presences produced and connected by centuries of unresolved political violence. Gordon's framework is particularly fitting for this project because the materials I analyze are making visible what the state has rendered invisible, giving a voice to the seething presence of historical injustice that the ruling class desperately tried to suppress. Furthermore, this framework treats these pieces of media, whether print or digital, as so much more than words on a page or screen, but instead as a

key to understanding that Guatemala's crises are haunted by centuries of historical violence that the modern state cannot escape or make disappear.

While Gordon's sociological haunting framework is a methodological lens for making visible and confronting what society has tried to hide, infusing it with a layer of Marxist analysis provides a systematic, structural, and historically materialist explanation for why those injustices occur and how they are reproduced. In combination these theories aid in creating a holistic image of prolonged and ingrained suppression that has plagued Guatemala. A plague that evolves and changes as it folds into itself, but remains singular in its economic origin. In essence, Gordon's work focuses on the lingering nature of oppression and how its impacts are never truly gone, while Marx focuses on economic origins and the formation of these persistent issues. Marx' work in this framework acts as the seeds that grows into the hauntings that Gordon describes. In essence to better understand these issues one must also understand the seed and what grows into, and acknowledge how they interact. In this case Gordon and Marx will interact to show us both origins and the incarnations of what society is attempting to hide.

Karl Marx's Conflict Theory

Conflict theory, as articulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their 1848 work the *Communist Manifesto* is the second central aspect of the theoretical framework and is intended to articulate the economic origins of social issues in Guatemala. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels establish capitalist society not as a cohesive, singular unit, but as a fractured social terrain, dominated by class interests and more importantly by class conflict. Marx asserts in the opening of this work "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle (Marx and Engels 1848:14)" asserting that all of written history has been the preparation of class antagonization.

Central to this perspective is the idea that social order is not a product of shared values or mutual agreement of the masses, but instead imposed and maintained through the power of a dominant class over a subordinate one. Marx argues that within every society, these groups are determined by their relationships to the means of production. Within a perpetual struggle over scarce resources, the ruling class or bourgeoisie--who are the minority class that owns the means of production, control wealth, and the productive apparatus--leverage their control over resources and the means of production to exploit the proletariat, or the majority class that owns no means of production and must sell their labor power to the bourgeoisie in exchange for wages to survive.

This system allows the bourgeois class to continuously extract surplus value and perpetuate systems of inequality meant to defend their control over society and its resources. Beyond economic control, the bourgeoisie class controls political and governmental life. They use the many governing and disciplinary bodies of the state to preserve and protect this system of exploitation, and by extension, their own interests. Marx writes “The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie. (Marx and Engels 1848: 15). Beyond political and economic life, the bourgeoisie also controls many of the social aspects of society. Marx explains that the bourgeois ideology plays an active role shaping the ideas, values, religion, education, and media of a society as well. They use this shaping to reduce the values and relations of society into a money relation. (Marx and Engels 1848: 16). Ultimately they cement these ideals into the dominant ideology, which legitimizes inequality by portraying it as natural, inevitable, or meritocratic. Marx explains the internalization of these ideas by the working class as a sort of false consciousness, or a

state where the proletarian fails to recognize their own exploitation, no matter how obvious it may appear.

Applying Karl Marx's conflict theory to this project provides a crucial viewpoint for dissecting Guatemalan society, and takes into account how the long history of extraction and land dispossession, and bourgeois-oligarchic control has ingrained profound structural inequality that persists into the contemporary era. Furthermore, Marx's theory helps to contextualize social institutions as not neutral arbiters but instruments through which elite interests are safeguarded, and the disadvantaged classes are systematically marginalized. Marxian theory compels researchers to look beyond surface-level social arrangements and ask critical questions: Who benefits from this social arrangement? Whose interests are being served? How is inequality reproduced and legitimized? Its enduring usage lies in its insistence that power, exploitation, and material interests are at the root of most social issues.

The theoretical framework established through the integration of Avery Gordon's sociology of haunting and Karl Marx's conflict theory provides a multidimensional lens for examining Guatemala's social crises and the shifting nature of public reaction to them. Together, these complementary perspectives form a dialectical framework for social critique. Rather than operating as competing or contradictory paradigms, they function as mutually to better capture the origins and continuation of social issues. This framework not only focuses on the origins of class-based struggle as structural oppression, but also comments on its lasting impacts. Allowing this framework to aid in the diagnosis of these issues, while tracing their causes and their symptoms. I understand it as such, whereas Marx states "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history

of class struggle", Gordon's theory documents the rippling impacts of this class struggle in all its incarnations, both material and immaterial, specter and physical. By focusing on the simultaneous operation of material structures of oppression and the spectral persistence of historical violence, this framework provides a way of understanding the multi-layered challenges facing Guatemala. This tandem focus on the issues of the present and the issues of the past, drives the comparative aspect of this project, while providing the ability to document the continuities of key issues such as economic inequality, violence, and suppression.

Following the creation of the theoretical framework, I began to develop my methodological framework to interact with the data. In the section that follows I will detail my data collection and analysis process

Methods and Data

The framework for this project is historical-comparative sociology that draws upon two data sources: guerrilla printed material (1980-1985) and TikTok comments (2023-2025). These materials represent content from the war and post-war periods, respectively. By employing these primary source materials, I sought to uncover historical continuities of social issues, understand public reactions to government policy, and document dissent strategies used by guerrillas. The governmental periods examined were of Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia (1978-1982), José Efraín Rios Montt (1982-1983), and Óscar Humberto Mejía Víctores (1983-1986). TikTok data are from commenters during the 2023 Guatemalan election period and the current administration of Bernardo Arevalo (2023-present). These sources reveal prominent themes such as persistent economic issues, corruption, violence, and insecurity emerged across eras. The interaction of the data has allowed me to trace societal issues and their continuation over time, as well as document evolutions and devolutions in resistance and dissent strategies utilized in Guatemala between eras. All source materials for this thesis are in Spanish. As a speaker of Spanish, I analyzed the materials in the original language and I have translated into English excerpts used in this paper. This chapter details the data sources, data collection procedures, and analytical approach I used to understand these topics.

Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive (1963-2000)

In 1978, The Guatemala News and Information Bureau (GNIB) Archive was founded in San Francisco, California as a solidarity organization dedicated to raising international awareness and support for Guatemalan struggles for peace, justice, Indigenous rights, and labor equity (Princeton University). This group sought to support the people of Guatemala by collecting a wide variety of materials documenting all

aspects related to the civil war, including human rights abuses and social and political responses to state-sponsored violence (Princeton University). The archive contains materials produced from 1963 to 2002, which were collected during Guatemala's civil war and the post-war peace-making process (1960-present). The collection provides multi-perspectival records, including the positions of activist groups, governments, political figures, journalists, international observers, and revolutionary organizations. It contains printed media such as flyers, press releases, political comics, magazines, and postcards, among other items.

In 2002, Princeton University acquired the archive and shortly thereafter began digitizing. This digital corpus offers an extensive and crucial look into the dynamics of the Guatemalan Civil War and the political transition in contemporary Guatemala. The public can access the GNIB archive through Princeton University Library online, which provides users with four ways to search: (1) thematically via keyword tags, (2) chronologically via date created, as well as by (3) language and by (4) publisher or producer of media. Items in the archive can hold multiple keyword tags, including politically relevant terms such as *revolutionaries, national liberation movements*, *guerrillas, politics*, and more. A search bar option exists as well. Key terms can be input into the search bar, and related content will appear. The order in which they appear is related to the relevance of the search term.

TikTok

Originally launched in 2016 under the name Musical.ly, TikTok is a social media and short-form video platform used to create, share, and watch user-generated content. The platform is accessible from mobile devices through a downloadable application

(known as an “app”), as well as from the web through the platform’s website. On TikTok, users can watch a personalized stream of videos organized by the “For You Page” or “FYP.” The app is known for its video recommendation system or algorithm, which continuously suggests videos based on the users’ likes and dislikes, as well as shares and watch duration (TikTok Support, 2026). Users can generate and post short-form videos, in addition to engaging with live streams, long-form content, a digital marketplace, an AI-fueled search engine, and several video effects such as filters and audio. As of early 2026, TikTok has amassed almost 2 billion users globally (Iqbal 2021).

Designed to be simple and user-friendly, TikTok facilitates rapid interaction between users and content (Omar and Dequan 2020). TikTok allows users to create usernames that function as identifiers within the platform, and are crucial for the social aspect of the app such as “following.” Usernames are typically user generated, but when they are not, they appear as “@user” followed by a sequence of numbers. When users generate comments, they are connected to their usernames. Other members of the platform can comment directly by using the “@” followed by the user’s username.

The primary media interaction tools are located on the right side of every video. These interactions include liking, commenting, sharing, and saving. The most relevant features for this project are the liking and commenting features. When liking, users will tap the heart icon to like a video. This action is used to communicate to video creators and, less visibly, to inform the platform’s algorithm, which refines the content on the user’s FYP on the basis of these “likes.” The total number of likes on any video is publicly visible and is displayed under a heart icon. Commenting is another major aspect of TikTok. A speech bubble-shaped button to the right of a video allows users to access

the comment section, which is a compilation of the comments that users have posted in reference to that video. The comment section is divided into threads of comments and "sub-comments," which are replies to original comments. These threads can be sorted by "popularity" using the comment sorting feature built into the app, or in chronological order. Popularity is determined by the number of likes and dislikes a comment receives. The number of likes is visible, while the number of dislikes is not.

Once a user dislikes a comment, the comment is removed from view for that individual user, and the TikTok algorithm shows that user fewer comments that are similar to it. A comment can be "pinned" by the video creator, which makes that comment the most visible in viewers' comment threads. Beyond interaction tools, creator playlists on TikTok are another essential feature for this project. Creators can group their own videos into themed collections or "playlists" that are visible on the landing page of the creator's account. This feature allows users to find thematically related videos produced by a selected creator without having to navigate the creator's account.

Data collected from the GNIB archive

The GNIB Archive is extensive, and I immersed myself in the full set of materials over a period of six months. I selected four pieces of media for analysis that were generated by guerrilla groups. I made these selections by using the archive's filter feature, limiting search results to those that contain the keyword "guerrillas" and that appear in Spanish. Utilizing this keyword prioritizes print media produced by guerrilla forces, and focusing on content exclusively in Spanish ensures that the media was created by and for the Guatemalan public. From this search, I identified the first 20 pieces of

media listed and used a random number generator to select four pieces of media for analysis. Table 1 below titles and describes the four items analyzed for this project.

Table 1. Title and Description of GNIB Archive Sources Analyzed

Item 1. *Campesino de Huehuetenango te invitamos a unirte al Comité de Unidad Campesina : para conquistar tus derechos*	A two page letter-flyer produced by Comite de Unidad Campesina (C.U.C). Made up of a hand drawn image on one side and a letter addressed to the peasants of Huehuetenango on the opposite. This letter details the many issues facing rural Guatemalans and encourages them to organize and join the C.U.C to fight for their rights as laborers. The main image of this piece depicts the peasants of Huehuetenango, a department in the western highlands, embracing the C.U.C
Item 2. *Periódico Popular, No. 33: Guatemala CA De Sol a Sol*	20 page document produced jointly by the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT) and the Partido Comunista (PC). Focuses on describing social issues, organization strategies, and current affairs in Guatemala.
Item 3. *Insurrección popular, No. 1*	20 page document produced by Comite de Unidad Campesina (C.U.C) and Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP). Very radical, calling for the use of violence tp create revolutionary change. Highlights the role militarization in the increase level of violence in Guatemala.
Item 4. *Solidaridad con los trabajadores del campo*	A three-panel comic produced by Comite de Unidad Campesina (C.U.C) depicting the struggles of coffee cultivators and systemic economic exploitation. This piece of media offers suggestions for revolutionary organization.

To simplify the discussion of these printed materials each item will be referred to by shortened name. Item 1 the two page letter-flyer produced by Comite de Unidad Campesina (C.U.C) shall be referred to as “Campesino de Huehuetenango”. Item 2, the 20 page document produced jointly by the *Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (PGT) and the *Partido Comunista* (PC) will be referred to as “De Sol a Sol”. Item 3, the 20 page document produced by *Comite de Unidad Campesina* (C.U.C) and *Ejército Guerrillero*

de los Pobres (EGP) will be referred to as "Insurrection Popular". Finally, item 4, the three-panel comic produced by Comite de Unidad Campesina (C.U.C) shall be referred to as "*Solidaridad con los trabajadores*".

The four items included in the analysis compose 37 pages of text, with 54 images. In the analysis that follows, I refer to these by their item number, with specific reference to images as panels within each item. For instance, Panel 5 on page 6 of Item 3 depicts a skeleton wearing a mask of the Guatemalan military dictator Ríos Montt. I requested and received permission from the Princeton University Digital Library to analyze and reproduce these images under fair use policy, which does not charge any permission or usage fees for the publication of images of material in their special collections, including those provided by Princeton University Library, via their website, catalog, or directly from staff.

Data Collection on TikTok

To understand how social issues are discussed among contemporary Guatemalans, I chose two popular news outlets that have official TikTok accounts: *Plaza Publica* and *Quorum*. *Plaza Publica* is a Guatemalan digital newspaper founded in 2011 by Rafael Landívar University in Guatemala City. The news outlet was established as a journalistic project dedicated to editorial independence and freedom from the influence of advertisers and politicians. *Plaza Publica* describes itself as an organization focused on the advancement of human rights, democracy, and equitable development. The self-described editorial focus is on investigating social justice issues such as poverty and inequality, as well as structural issues such as state reformation and restructuring (Plaza Pública, 2026). The periodical's reporting often highlights the actions of elites and the exercise of

power, grassroots organizing, social movements, violence, migration, culture and identity, gender, and the environment. It produces interviews and reports, investigative journalism and opinion columns, as well as essays, and most recently, TikTok videos, covering several pressing local and international issues. *Plaza Publica* also provides commentary on current affairs, but its emphasis is on investigative journalism, data journalism, and fact-checking. Plaza Publica's core mission is rigorous journalism that illuminates the forces shaping Guatemalan society.

In 2021, the digital newspaper *Quorum* was founded in Guatemala City with the mission of making journalism accessible to irregular consumers of the news. As such, Quorum primarily creates short, entertaining, and easy-to-understand content for viewers in an effort to better inform the public (Quorum, 2026). Quorum prioritizes working directly with Guatemalan communities to understand the problems that impact the country and to investigate their possible solutions. *Quorum*'s main methods of information dissemination are through social media platforms such as TikTok and WhatsApp. I chose this platform and these two news outlets account for their status as Guatemala-based and Guatemalan-focused content producers who prioritize brief, engaging videos meant to generate highly active commentary. I chose not to analyze other, more mainstream news outlet accounts, such as *Prensa Libre* and *La Hora Guatemala,* due to their limited user engagement on TikTok and low activity across their comment sections. My choice was further motivated by the desire to focus on content producers who began in the digital era to create more distance between the two eras of media. Most mainstream news outlets do not meet this standard, as they typically operated in print before switching to digital and eventually to social media style posts.

To understand social issues and the public's reaction to them, I analyzed the comment sections of 10 TikTok videos: five from the Plaza Publica TikTok account and five from the *Quorum* account. Both accounts have politically-focused playlists, which are created and made available on the landing page of each account, with videos sorted thematically and covering a number of interrelated issues related to the broader topic of the playlist. For *Plaza Publica*, I chose the playlists *Ley de Competencia*, *Populismo*, and *Radar Electoral.* For *Quorum*, I chose the playlists *Memoria Política, Elecciones USAC, Entendé el poder*, and *¿Agua para quien?.*

I listed all videos that appear in these seven playlists as of 11 July, 2026 and selected each fifth video as a form of random selection. I then sorted the comments of the 10 selected videos by "popularity" using the built-in sorting feature provided by the platform. Popularity is determined by the number of likes a comment receives as well as the number of sub-comments made by other users. For each of the 10 videos, I collected the first 10 most popular comments that appeared, along with their sequential responses or "sub-comments." The total number of comments and sub-comments that resulted is 215. The 10 videos from *Plaza Publica* and *Quorum* are summarized by topic in Table 1 below, along with the number of comments and sub-comments for each video (shortened to "comments").

Table 2. Topics of Videos on Official TikTok Accounts of Plaza Publica and Quorum and Number of Comments Analyzed

Topics of Videos	**Number of Comments Analyzed**
Plaza Publica	
¿Por qué está cara la luz?	49 comments
¿Funcionaría el modelo de Bukele en Guate?	15 comments
¿Por qué en Guatemala todo está caro?	11 comments
¿Cómo es el problema de desnutrición de Guatemala?	13 comments
La ciudadanía batalla contra un enemigo poderoso: la corrupcion estructural	11 comments
Quorum	
Empagua o Nimajuyu: ¿Quién se cansa primero?	15 comments
¿Qué pasará con los criminalizados por Consuelo Porras?	16 comments
Rony López: De Aliado a Opositor del Ministerio Público	22 comments
La Alianza de Mazariegos No Quirere Soltar el Poder	30 comments
¿Por Que Usan El Nombre de Dios?	33 comments
Total Comments from *Plaza Publica*:	99 comments
Total Comments from *Quorum*:	116 comments
Combined Total:	215 comments

Collecting a dataset from news outlet accounts on TikTok in this manner is designed to focus on some everyday Guatemalans' perspectives on current social issues. Their comments and the resulting discourse may be controversial, supportive, mundane, repetitive, or unique. By analyzing 215 total comments on 10 different videos, I sought to include the most possible diversity of perspectives on a range of contemporary political topics. Additionally, my inclusion of only the first 10 comments (including sub-comments), alongside the sorting via popularity feature, is meant to ensure data integrity; oftentimes, the deeper into a comment section a user goes, the more likely comments are to be unrelated, short, and not as valuable for the purposes of this thesis. In all, the comments on these videos allow me to analyze a number of pertinent social issues facing the country today as described by Guatemalans. It also allows me to understand the

patterns of reactions from the public and understand the discussion and development of dissent strategies. All of this within the context of the contemporary era of Guatemala.

Data Analysis

The analytic framework for this project is rooted in grounded theory as articulated by Kathy Charmaz (2006), and the foundational work of Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1967). Rather than testing a fixed hypothesis, this approach prioritizes the generation of a framework that emerges from the materials themselves, which can then be placed in conversation with existing theoretical and empirical work. I employed this methodology to avoid imposing pre-existing assumptions and categories onto the data. Using this approach is particularly helpful given the lack of a unified sociological theory that can directly bridge the gap between the revolutionary print media era and contemporary digital dissent in Guatemala. While the research questions and literature provide a general orientation, my specific coding framework was not predetermined; instead, the codes and categories were permitted to arise directly from the data, allowing for the emergence of unexpected patterns, contradictions, and nuances.

The analytic process began with open coding (Charmaz 2014; Chun, et al. 2019). This initial examination breaks the data into broader units of meaning. For the print media, for example, this meant the analysis of both text and images created by the guerrillas. For TikTok data, the analysis focused solely on the text-based comments produced by users. During this phase of analysis, I focused on one piece of data at a time, documenting the broad range of topics and patterns that were apparent. To try to remain faithful to the data, I utilized *in vivo* or verbatim coding often during this phase. It was

important to focus on the "people's" voice and language as often as possible, since their words best expressed the major topics and perspectives apparent across the two datasets.

Following this initial phase of open coding, the analysis moved into axial coding (Charmaz 2014; Chun tie, et al. 2019), where the broader list of patterns, topics, and words was reassembled and reduced into more focused conceptual categories. This stage was defined by the development and application of a limited and focused set of codes that allowed me to identify and compare what is being communicated in each item. General topics in the guerrilla print media included collective action, armed resistance, and the overthrow of the state, while topics in the TikTok video comments focused on individual lament, dismissal of politicians, and frustration without a cohesive pathway to structural change. These topics helped create a set of codes I was able to use to analyze this cross-media dataset. These codes include Revolutionary Language/Imagery, Suggestions and Solutions, Sources of Issues, Call to Action, Depictions of Race and Ethnicity, Depictions of Socio-Economic Class, and Reaction to Policy.

Revolutionary Language and Imagery refers to the specialized, often inflammatory language and phrases used to challenge established authority, promote radical change, and foster a unified proletariat identity. This also extended to anti-capitalist and anti-state language, as well as conversations around revolutionary topics such as land reformation, state corruption, and exploitation. The application of this code to images found in print material also highlighted the occurrence of symbols such as machetes and hammers, unified workers, and depictions of revolutionary action.

The Suggestions and Solutions code highlighted any suggested policy or reforms put forth by the revolutionary forces and contemporary commenters, as well as what they saw or proposed as solutions to the country's problems.

Next, the Source of Issues code focused on who and what the print and digital media deemed the sources of issues in the country. This included their ideas surrounding the origins of specific and broader structural issues, their process of assigning blame, and their justification for doing so.

The Call to Action code captured what actions were being suggested by guerrilla forces and TikTok commenters. This code was especially important because it helped highlight what actions the guerrillas and TikTok users saw as necessary action, as well as their suggestion of what everyday people could do.

The Depictions of Race and Ethnicity code is one of two identity-based codes, along with Depictions of Socio-Economic Class. Specific attention was paid to the relationships between social classes, as well as the confluence of race and ethnicity with class, as these dynamics appeared as important topics across the digital and print media.

Finally, the Reaction to Policy code pointed to how guerrilla forces and TikTok commenters discussed the implementation of policy. It also focused on their reactions to implemented policies over the years.

Following the procedures identified by Charmaz (2014), I applied these codes systemically to both data sets, which helped reveal patterns of social issues and a colorful mix of reactions to the actions of and the policies enforced by the state. Once coded as individual items, the data were then collapsed by code, which allowed me to interpret the data thematically.

Finally, in the third phase, I utilized selective coding techniques (Charmaz 2014; Chun tie, et al. 2019) . This layer of analysis allowed me to identify a single overarching narrative or story that integrates the accounts, patterns, categories, codes, and finally, the themes across the datasets. Through data write-ups, the core theme that emerged centers on what I call the "endurance of grievance, and the fragmentation of form." This concept suggests that while foundational grievances remain remarkably durable fixtures of Guatemalan society, the dissent infrastructure used in the creation of change have fundamentally mutated since the time of the guerrillas into the modern era for the worse. The historical media provided a material infrastructure for revolutionary becoming, transforming passive readers into political thinkers through coherent, ideologically driven narratives. By contrast, the contemporary digital ecology provides an infrastructure for expressive presence, allowing individuals to voice personal frustration but rarely cohering into a unified political subject capable of collective revolutionary action. Recognizing the multimodal nature of the sources, I adapted the grounded theory procedures accordingly.

My final analytical procedure was the refinement of this core category through consideration of "negative cases," or instances in the digital data where collectivity does emerge, or instances in the historical data where individual lament appears. This technique ensures the explanatory power of the core theme across the full spectrum of the data, confirming the robustness of the overarching pattern. By adhering to this rigorous grounded theory framework, the findings will present a theory of political transformation that is not merely descriptive but explanatory, rooted directly in the voices and images of Guatemalan political actors across two distinct historical moments. Further, my

interpretation of these empirical findings will be placed in conversation with existing theory in a complementary approach to explaining the endurance of grievance and the fragmentation of form in Guatemala.

While digital platforms have increased political activity, the demands of the population are less organized and less revolutionary than during the civil war era. Furthermore, my analysis contends that while the manner of expression has changed, the root causes of political dissatisfaction remain largely the same. To explore this relationship, I conduct a thematic comparative analysis between the printed media of the guerrilla presses and modern Guatemalan political discourse online. This analysis identifies causes of political discontent and examines how the public reacts to these socio-political issues in print and digital ages by focusing on how commenters discuss key issues such as economic issues, corruption, violence, and insecurity, while also documenting dissent strategies and how they transform over time.

Findings

The guerrilla print media and TikTok comment sections, through their politically themed content, illustrate a narrative of social issue continuity, along with a disruption in the political dissent strategy with the passage of time. These combined works describe difficult economic conditions, a dysfunctional state, and the desire to create change. The findings section is divided into two parts: the first covering the guerrilla printed materials, and the second covering the materials collected from TikTok. Once the findings are detailed, a comparative analysis of the major findings draws out the continuities and ruptures of political life between eras.

GUERRILLA PRINT MEDIA

The guerrillas offer an in-depth and uncensored account of Guatemala during the tumultuous wartime period. In an era defined by press censorship and political repression, they prioritize clarification, truth, and material improvement for the Guatemalan public. In their pursuit of these ideals, the guerrillas emerged as a voice of dissent, challenging state narratives regarding the economy and the material conditions of the laboring class but also denouncing physical, sexual, and economic violence perpetrated by the state and the bourgeois elite. Their critiques are paired with a demand for concrete action to create national change and justice for those who have been brutalized by the state. Central to the guerrilla project is the prioritization of popular education and class solidarity. This, coupled with a call for a unified front in pursuit of revolution, birthed these print materials. The guerrillas' writings emphasize the importance of a strong and unified dissenting voice and use it to encourage coordinated resistance from the public. These texts represent a form of subversion, embodying the guerrillas' efforts to enact change at multiple levels through education of the public. For them, revolution is not solely a

physical struggle. Class consciousness and educational outreach are necessary for success. The guerrilla media express a desire to improve the lives of those experiencing the most oppression.

It may be suggested that these writings are overtly biased and infused with their authors' political beliefs, and I would agree. These writers are doing so intentionally; with such suppression going on in the country, it would make sense that most politically active actors would be the ones producing and releasing these kinds of secretive, subversive materials. Nevertheless, such critiques must be understood in the operational realities of the time. In late 20th-century Guatemala, the absence of outlets for state criticism and the vanquishing of almost all members of the press created a desert of dissenting voices. Naturally, the guerrillas represent an important resource for state criticism during this era. The volume and detail of guerrilla writings on these issues strongly suggest that the abuses they describe occurred with frequency and with impunity. While the guerrillas are clearly politically motivated, there is no reason to suspect that they are lying when describing the state and conditions of the laboring class, and the action taken by the state to continuously suppress them. In what follows, based on my coding and analysis of a sample of their printed materials, I present the principal themes addressed by the guerrillas, focusing on their perspective on social issues, their analysis of their origins and benefactors, and their proposed strategies for combating systemic injustice and improving living conditions for all Guatemalans.

Sources of issues

The guerrillas locate the source of Guatemala's issues in a trifecta of socio-economic exploitation, corruption, and systemic violence. The guerillas analogize the political and economic situation to the human body, stating " *Guatemala vive una situación que es como una gran enfermedad que no se cura con mejorarles, sino que necesita ser operada*." (De Sol a Sol) or that Guatemala lives with a serious illness, one that cannot be cured with band-aid solutions, but rather requires major surgery for relief. Continuing with the analogy, explaining that just like a sickness can manifest itself through multiple symptoms and have a single origin, social issues in the country are just the same. They explain that the origins of these symptoms are the result of the historic collusion between the domestic land-owning bourgeoisie, whom they call "los ricachones," the military state that utilizes violence to protect bourgeois interests domestically, and the forces of international agro-imperialism. Beyond these forces, the guerrilla publications also broadly call out state and public institutions as mechanisms of exploitation and control. They cite specific institutions like BANDESA, INDECA, INAFOR, and BANVI not as forces of development and national improvement, but instead as the finger of the hand of Guatemala's wealthy that crush the workers who place themselves beneath them (De Sol a Sol). This rhetoric serves to preemptively limit any hope in state-led reform bringing any improved conditions, and primes the population for the actions later taken by the guerrillas. This section highlights the "issue trifecta" and describes the guerrilla perspective on the key issues of socio-economic exploitation, corruption, and systemic violence, as well as describe their responses to these issues, the solutions they propose, and the strategies that they utilize to achieve their goals.

Economic condition

The guerillas describe a slew of socio-economic problems facing Guatemalan workers. These issues are seen as the main contributing factors for the suffering of the laboring class. The most prominent socio-economic issues are the unequal distribution of land, poor labor conditions, and a debilitating cost of living crisis (CLC), which are working in conjunction against the laboring class. The guerrillas understand these issues not as new additions to their troubled society, but rather as inheritances from the colonial era that remain unresolved. This section will highlight the core economic issues described by the guerrillas in their published works, highlighting not only the frequency of these issues but also the severity of their impacts on the public

Land, or rather the division of land, is presented as a centuries-old, but ever-relevant socio-economic issue impacting the country. With the Spanish conquest of Guatemala, traditional Maya systems of communal land stewardship were replaced by formal divisions and private ownership. This system of private ownership historically benefited the European and Criollo elite of the country, aiding in the displacement of indigenous communities and allowing the very few that make up this land-owning class to decide how vast plots of land are utilized and developed (Batz 2024). They have used this monopoly over the land to commit the continued systematic economic abuse of the Guatemalan people, mainly exploiting their labor in the agriculture and mining industries. The land-owning elite were keen on maintaining their power over this crucial resource, and remained unchallenged in this pursuit for much time. It wasn't until the 1950s that President Jacobo Árbenz attempted to alleviate these issues through the implementation of agrarian reform and land redistribution in favor of the peasantry, but ultimately failed

against the desires of the elite. These attempted changes were not viewed favorably, fueling the 1954 coup and the eventual ousting of President Árbenz.

Since the ousting of President Árbenz land inequality has persisted as a socio-economic grievance for the working class. The guerrillas explain that "land in Guatemala is like a tortilla that's been very unevenly distributed" (De Sol a Sol), concluding that while a tiny few of the elite own the largest and best lands, most of the poor have very little land, or oftentimes none at all. They specifically highlighting the Indigenous Maya and campesino workers as victims who are disproportionately affected by this problem. The guerrillas argue that it is this system that serves as the foundation for broader economic exploitation. The guerillas express their frustration with this system, and lament "we are the ones who work from dawn to dusk, but the fruits of our labor do not go to us; instead, they go to the rich, who own the land, the factories, and the big businesses" (De Sol a Sol). Proving that this system of unequal ownership is perpetual, and has continuously harmed the working proletariat for the benefit of the bourgeois class. The systemic nature of this harm becomes even more evident when examining how land is utilized and developed.

Beyond the issue of land ownership, land usage also presents another layer to the complex issue. According to the guerillas, the landless poor are being denied access to the mutual public lands, as well as the resources from these lands that the peasants desperately need for survival. In "Campesinos of Huehuetenango" the C.U.C. describes the issue of trying to collect firewood. They say in a moment of solidarity "We know about your problems with firewood because, just like in many other places, we watch with anger as the rich and the authorities are allowed to destroy our forests, while we are

punished for taking the firewood we need." They acknowledge the hypocrisy that land owners and the state punish them for collecting firewood needed for daily cooking and cleaning, while they allow the mass destruction of forests in the name of progress and development. In the same vein, any agricultural or industrial infrastructure built on these land holdings remains entirely under the control of the landowners and their allies. Neighboring communities and the laborers themselves are systematically excluded from decision-making processes and have no say over land usage. Moreover, as these new projects emerge, they inevitably fall under the same exclusive ownership as the land itself, leaving workers and communities subject to continued compliance and subjugation or displacement. With this system in place, workers are left perpetually vulnerable to their exploiters, with no structural resources to break the cycle and support from a governing body to create structural change.

The guerillas further their discussion on land inequality by focusing on the issue of tenancy and share-cropping arrangements that almost exclusively benefit the rich landowners. In these types of agreements, landless peasant farmers work for rich landlords for minimal to no pay, often receiving food for days' work and a portion of the harvest at the end of the season. In some agreements, peasant farmers must pay to use the land and offer a percentage of their harvest to the land owner. They can work these lands for years, but will never own them. Due to the nature of this relationship, peasants often have no autonomy to use the land as they need it and must cultivate as they are directed. In many cases, they do not have the option to leave these arrangements due to a single owner or entity owning a majority of the local opportunities or due to the lack of economic mobility as a result of poor wages and a reliance on subsistence farming. These

kinds of situations are depicted visually in De Sol a Sol, where, in figure 1, we see hunched-backed, over-worked campesinos receiving a few cents for their work. He appears to be in agony as he reaches out to receive the pitiful payment for his work. While he suffers, his boss, the landowner, holds an arm full of cash, claiming he is taking out "his earnings". He is standing upright and grinning as he drops the coins into the man's hand. He tells the laborer, "Here are a few cents to help you get started", showing the disregard the bourgeoisie have for the working class, and highlighting their desire to exploit the working class, as well as their ability to do so openly.

Figure 1.Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"Yo saco mi ganancia. Aquí tienes unos centavos para que produzcas.", Periodico Popular #33,1985, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library, 1963-2000

Ultimately, the guerrilla print materials present land inequality not solely as an economic disparity, but as a foundational axis of Guatemala's systematic oppression. The historical exclusive elite ownership demonstrates that control over land is, and always has been, the primary mechanism for consolidating political power and extracting labor. As the guerillas' testimony and visual depictions make painfully clear, the elite's monopoly

extends beyond mere ownership to dictate land usage, tenancy terms, and access to basic resources like firewood and water, all with the complicity of a state that criminalizes the poor. The failure of Arbenz's reforms proves that the ruling class will not yield this control through peaceful or legal means, and that the struggle over land is ultimately a struggle for survival, autonomy, and human dignity. According to the guerillas, their demands not merely stop at reform, but a rather the employment of complete and radical restructuring of the socio-economic order itself.

Another crucial socio-economic issue described by the guerrillas is labor conditions. In the print media, labor conditions in rural Guatemala are depicted as brutal and ever-deteriorating. They describe frequent abuses against the working class, the most notable of these abuses being the implementation of forced labor. The guerillas describe the forced labor under the current military junta as at an all-time high, contending that it is worse now than in the days of Ubico, Guatemala's former and famously repressive dictator. They describe forced labor where conditions are unsafe, where they are given rations of tortillas in place of payment after demanding shifts, and where they must pledge to only labor for the military, with a prohibition on any other work, including planting what their families need for survival. They also describe the forced conscription into civil patrols (Figure 2) as an aspect of this forced labor, and state "they (the state) make us patrol by force."

Figure 2. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"They force us to patrol by force." Periodico Popular #33, 1985, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive Princeton University Digital Library, 1963-2000

These civil patrols force men to police their own communities and carry out punishments as the military sees fit. This job is especially heinous as it bars the men from agricultural production, impacting food stability for their families, and effectively turns peasants into state agents against their communities, often with deadly repercussions. The state uses this labor policy to aid in the creation of a surplus labor force required to serve the needs of the state and the bourgeoisie, while also discouraging collaboration or coalition with opposition forces and alienating these laborers from the potential of further organization with their peers. The guerrillas acknowledge these labor conditions as the axis of their revolution and cite them as a motivating factor in their efforts to create systemic change.

For those who do receive payment for their labor, wages are described as miserable and unsustainable in the face of rising prices. They are described as purposefully depressed by the bourgeois class to increase profits for the rich, at the

expense of laborers. Evidence of poor wages is best reflected in the agricultural sector. While the guerrilla materials mention a number of sub-sectors within the agricultural industry, they pay close attention to those who work in the growing, harvesting, and selling of coffee. The central focus on coffee is relevant, as it is the number one export for Guatemala, and a cornerstone of its economy. Although this work is essential to the health of the economy, coffee producers experience some of the lowest wages in the country and bear the brunt of corruption at every step of the production line.

In Figure 3, we are shown the severity of this multi-level exploitation of coffee producers. Coffee brokers are shown to cheat producers when purchasing coffee through the use of tipped scales, which lower the weight of the product as it's sold (Panel 1). This pattern of lower purchasing prices only leads to poor salaries for producers and surplus profits for coffee brokers. Then, the same coffee buyers will turn around and sell the coffee to consumers for a much higher price than what they purchased it for (Panel 2), further increasing their profits. This incongruency is called out by the peasant laborers, but much to the frustration of the producers, they also have little job security in this field, meaning that coffee brokers can continuously exploit their producers. The workers in the agricultural field also face consistent mass lay-offs and ever-increasing quotas that make it difficult to keep up with the production demands of buyers (Panel 3). Coffee producers, and by extension many other workers, are seemingly left with limited avenues within the system to create change for themselves, and are thus stuck in a cycle of exploitation that keeps them perpetually subservient. Urban workers do not fare any better. In fact, the conditions are often just as bad, with low salaries and virtually no job security in the city either. Urban workers describe having to take alternative jobs in the informal market,

turning to selling on the street to try to survive. The guerrillas describe little success in the informal markets, with workers willing to work for a couple of cents to survive. Many urban workers live in deplorable conditions. Living in what they describe as shacks, incapable of being called homes. They are impacted by the lack of water and disease.

Figure 3. Solidaridad con los trabajadores del campo

"Solidarity with the workers of the country-side", Comité de Unidad Campesina , Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

Taken together, the guerrilla accounts present rural and urban labor conditions not as separate issues, but rather as aspects of a unified system of exploitation in which the military acts as an enforcer for the wealthy agro-exporting land-owning class. This system uses forced labor and patrolling for forces to extract maximum wealth from the poor, while breaking communities' ties in an effort to limit resistance. Critically, the guerrillas insist that these abuses are intentional and are significant parts of Guatemala's economic system. Keeping wages low and denying legal protections is a deliberate strategy to maximize profits while eliminating any avenue for workers to seek justice within existing institutions. Ultimately, by linking economic exploitation to state-sponsored violence, the guerrilla media does more than document injustice. It helps build the revolutionaries' argument. They contend that the fight for fair wages is inseparable from the larger struggle for national liberation. Since the state exists to protect this

coercive labor order, its complete overthrow becomes the necessary first step toward genuine freedom.

Along with poor wages and uneven land distribution, another significant economic issue described by the guerillas is the cost-of-living crisis (CLC). The CLC is not presented as a natural result of economic downturn or changes in the market, but rather as a direct consequence of capitalist exploitation, calling it an orchestrated effort by the bourgeoisie to extract wealth from the proletariat class. The conditions of this wealth extraction are described as unlivable and ever-worsening, but also entirely artificial, controlled by the whims of the ruling class and protected by their political and military allies. The publications describe a double burden, where workers receive starvation wages, but also pay inflated prices for the goods they help produce. As such, basic goods such as beans and corn, cornerstones of the diet of the poor, are out of reach for the majority of the population. The increased cost of these goods has resulted in food scarcity and a nutrition crisis across the country, which is entirely intentional and depicted as a gastropolitical weapon of the bourgeoisie used to weaken the working class and aid in the extraction of wealth. The guerillas recognize food instability not just as a consequence of the cost-of-living crisis, but as an act of war waged intentionally against the proletariat class.

Figure 4 helps visualize this narrative of survival in the face of clear economic oppression, depicting a man in a business suit labelled “Rico$” (the rich) stacking sacks labeled “fare,” “gas,” “beans,” “taxes,” “corn,” “sugar,” “light,” and “salt” onto the back of a figure labeled “the people,” who is being asphyxiated under the weight of the sacks. Notice that it is the prices of necessities that are strangling the working class, and not

frivolous spending or poor financial management. The man grins as he stacks these burdens on the public, almost as if he is enjoying it. As he does this, he is propping himself up on a set of stairs labeled "High Cost of Living". With this set of stairs, he has the ability to go up and continue to stack unnecessary burdens on the public, and according to the guerrilla perspective, he will continue to do so.

Figure 4. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"The prices are ever increasing, put more weight on the load of the public", Periodico Popular #33, 1985, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

The guerillas make a point to focus on the uneven experiences of this cost-of-living crisis. While the poor suffer, the rich are either unaffected or directly involved in the wealth extraction process. They say that while the rich get richer, the poor are growing poorer by the day. This divide has created a society of feast and famine. One Panel from the "Chinto" comic found in De Sol a Sol highlights this excellently. We are shown a comic depicting the severity of these class disparities in Figure 5. Here, a man and woman, both in western dress, and maybe a bit portly, walk by two children who appear emaciated, with lanky thin appendages, and extended bellies with visible ribs, classic signs of poor or malnutrition (Dipasquale et al., 2020). Only one of the boys is

clothed, but he only has a pair of shorts that appear frayed. The couple appears to be walking out of the store, with a gift in hand. They walk past the starving boys, with smiles on their faces, and pay them no mind as one falls to the man's feet. The rich have no regard for the needs of the poor, and this is not a mistake, but rather a central aspect of the artificially created cost-of-living crisis. In response to this, the publications explicitly reject charity or price controls as solutions, arguing instead that revolutionary action is required. They argue that if things weren't bad enough in the past, the further deterioration of the situation should be enough motivation to fight. As the situation worsens, they conclude that something must be done to bring about systemic change; they state, "and to put an end to these evils, we must do as we do with weeds: pull them out by the roots." Further clarifying their stance on systemic revolutionary change over policy reform.

Figure 5. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"While the rich get richer, the poor get poorer" Periodico Popular #33, 1985, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

Beyond economic issues, political corruption presents itself as another major issue impacting Guatemala. The guerrillas discuss corruption in great detail, and

document the lasting impacts it has had on Guatemala's democratic and economic institutions. This corruption has become so ingrained in Guatemala, that total change is detailed as the only viable solution. In the section that follows, I will detail how the guerrillas discuss corruption and what they see as its sources.

Corruption

The guerrilla documents present a comprehensive analysis of corruption as a fundamental source of Guatemala's public suffering. Departing from conventional understandings that frame corruption as isolated instances of individual misconduct or personal enrichment, the guerrillas theorize that corruption functions as one of the systemic mechanisms through which the bourgeoisie elite extract wealth and retain control over the working class. They claim that corruption exists purposefully to perpetuate the material conditions of poverty, hunger, and ignorance for the proletariat. The guerrillas attribute the exponential growth of corruption to broader failures within the political and economic systems, which they argue operate in tandem to allow this corruption to occur, ultimately doing harm to the working class. This section examines how guerrilla materials depict corruption as the source of Guatemala's societal ills, identifying the mechanisms through which political corruption produces economic exploitation, social injustice, and physical suffering for the majority of the population. The guerrilla analysis closely links corruption with economic exploitation, asserting that the two are inseparable facets of the same oppressive system. Rather than treating corruption as distinct from labor exploitation, the revolutionary publications insist these phenomena are intrinsically connected, serving the interests of the wealthy ruling class.

The materials further describe how the state employs institutional corruption to criminalize poverty, thereby reinforcing social control.

Significant attention is devoted to exposing Guatemala's electoral system as a form of institutionalized corruption. The documents employ vivid language to characterize the electoral process, declaring that "elections are like a circus, and the politicians are the clowns" (De Sol a Sol). This metaphor conveys the guerrilla view that elections are performative spectacles designed to simulate democratic participation and the possibility of change. The guerrillas also present the reality these clown politicians do not even have any true decision-making power. In figure 6, the guerrillas depict the political class as being a marionette for the military junta. The puppet appears to be striking a pose and smiling while its under control, symbolizing a political class that willing takes part in the abuse of the proletarian class. Doing what it's told when it's told.

Figure 6. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"But we know how the power stays in the hands of the military" Periodico Popular #33, 1985, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

The guerrillas further acknowledge the state of political corruptions through their description of the motivations of the political class. They suggest that even when elections are held, the elections are meaningless and invective in creating change due the goals and desires of the political class. They suggest that the politicians compete not to serve the people, but to secure positions of maximum financial gain, and that the lust for wealth has crippled the operation of Guatemala. The guerrillas double down on this narrative visually in figure 7, depicting a figure labeled "government of the rich" riding the proletariat toward bags of money.

Figure 7. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"The situation keeps getting worse" Periodico Popular #33, 1985, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

Overall, the guerrilla analysis frames corruption as a systemic feature of a society structured to benefit the wealthy elite at the expense of the working class and peasantry. This framework leads directly to the conclusion that fundamental transformation is necessary for the country to recover from such entrenched corruption. The guerrillas argue that corruption cannot be resolved through electoral reforms alone; rather, it is a symptom of a system in desperate need of foundational change. As they state, "it is not a matter of applying quick fixes, but of getting to the root of the problem and changing it

from the ground up." They remain steadfast in their conviction that the wealthy elite will not voluntarily permit genuine reform. Beyond corruption, systemic violence is the next major issue described by the guerrillas. The next section will detail systemic violence as it is documented by the guerrilla forces.

Systemic violence

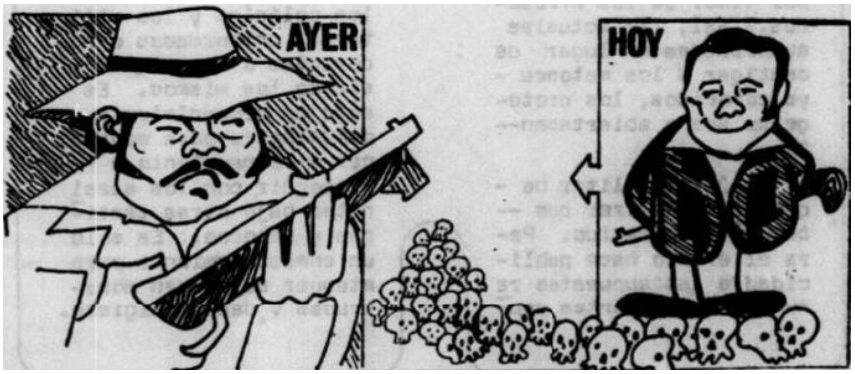
Systemic violence emerges as the third major source of issues in the country. According the guerrilla materials, state-sanction violence escalated significantly and was at an all-time high. They describe a drastic rise in the numbers of politically motivated murders and disappearances, connecting them to the newly increased targeting of non-combatants. The scope of this violence is described as sweeping and indiscriminate, with both those in urban and rural regions of the country constantly under the threat of the attack. The guerrillas describe this extreme brutality almost biblically, claiming their country as the place "where rivers of blood have flooded our land" (De Sol a Sol). The guerrilla materials spare no time in identifying the perpetrators of this violence in Guatemala, calling the state-military junta and the national police as the primary agents of oppression, acting on behalf of the bourgeoise class as an instrument of class-warfare. The guerillas claim that the military and the police are actively being deployed to brutalize the proletariat and the peasantry and to help the bourgeoise class maintain the status quo. The guerrillas link this rise in violence as a direct response to the growing success of the guerrilla movement and the popular struggle.

Ironically, while the state is committing these heinous acts of violence, the guerilla materials note that the military junta is also attempting to brighten its image and present itself a newer, less violent government in an effort to increase support amongst

the populace. The guerillas are weary of this new image, and remind the public that while the military claims to defend the people, in reality it does the exact opposite, still choosing instead to collude with the rich to repress the vulnerable violently.

Figure 8 captures this sentiment perfectly. The image, which accompanies an explanatory text, reiterates the guerrillas' perspective that these violent and oppressive institutions must be fully removed, regardless of how much they claim to have reformed. The guerrillas flatly reject any suggestion of genuine change and explicitly caution the public against trusting the newly smiling faces of the state's patrol forces. The illustration makes this visual transformation even more explicit. On the left-hand side, we see the patrolman of "yesterday." He is depicted with a harsh scowl or grimace, his weapon raised and ready, a pose that emphasizes his eagerness to inflict violence. Beneath his gun, a pile of human skulls stacks upward, a stark testament to the brutality of the military forces. Following the trail of skulls across to the image's right side, we encounter the patrolman of "today." This figure appears far less menacing at first glance. He wears a friendly smile, and his weapon is conspicuously hidden behind his back. Yet the visual parallel is damning. Despite his non-aggressive posture and concealed firearm, he remains firmly planted on the exact same pile of skulls. The message is unmistakable: a changed expression and a hidden weapon do not erase guilt. In the guerrillas' view, the state may have rebranded its face, but it stands on the same foundations of blood, or skulls, making it just as complicit as before.

Figure 8. Image Created by Guerrillas, Insurrección popular, No. 1, 1982



"Yesterday" "Today", Insurrección popular, No. 1, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

Displacement is presented by the guerrillas as another deliberately violent counterinsurgency strategy weaponized against the public to weaken support for the revolutionary movement. The publications detail state-enforced displacement of entire communities, almost entirely Indigenous, into "model villages" (*aldeas modelo*) and "development hubs" (*polos de desarrollo*). These "model villages" and "development hubs" are described by the guerrillas as concentration camps rather than humanitarian interventions, as characterized by state. In "*De Sol a Sol"* guerrillas describe these "model villages" further as "nothing more than prisons where we live under threat and repression and are forced to work for the benefit of the army" (De Sol a Sol). The guerrillas argue that these villages serve multiple repressive functions, that they concentrate displaced populations for surveillance, help break traditional community structures, create a labor force for military-controlled projects, and create a veneer of humanitarian concern masking ethnic cleansing. Guerrilla forces further explain "They talk about model villages and development hubs, trying to make us believe they are meeting our needs, but they are nothing more than prisons where we live under threat and repression" (De Sol a Sol). The psychological impact is described through the language

of imprisonment and control. Those who survive displacement and end up in model villages “live very controlled, like prisoners” (De Sol a Sol). Communities are “concentrated” and have no freedom of movement and are left to the whims of the violent state bent on control.

Throughout their publications the guerrillas suggest that usage of such level of violence benefits the ruling bourgeoise class by eliminating communities that might be sympathetic to revolutionary ideas. This was the mentality of the state as it rolled out violence targeting Indigenous communities, whom they deemed subversive and sympathetic to the guerrilla cause. Although the guerrillas do not use the word genocide in their publications, the targeted violence at the hands of the state they do describe is genocidal in nature, per the definition of genocide of Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide sub-section (a) and (b), which define genocidal actions as the or intent to “killing members of the group” and Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” (United Nations 1948), both of which are described by the guerrillas.

Figure 9 captures the violence inflicted upon Indigenous communities by state forces during the war period that would serve as foundation for the Guatemalan genocide. The Guatemalan genocide would have been ongoing during the original publication of some these materials, reaching its material peak in 1982, where it accounted for nearly half of all civilian deaths (CEH 1999) . This specific image references the 1978 *Panzos Massacre*, which happens outside of the scope of the what is defined as the “genocide period”, but is used by the guerrillas as a tool to describe the current violence they are facing, almost as a memory the public can draw on to better understand current events.

The guerrillas describe the massacre as a state-sanctioned exterminated campesinos "who tried to stand up in defense of their land". This image exposes the brutality of militarized patrol forces and their pattern of committing atrocities against communities perceived as allied with guerrilla forces or acting against state interests. The soldiers in this drawing are depicted as ruthless, opening fire indiscriminately on the community they are attacking, showing no regard for women, children, and male non-combatants.

Figure 9. Image Created by Guerrillas, " Periodico Popular #33, 1982

Guerrilla Created Image," Periodico Popular #33, *Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)*

In the center of the image, a woman flees while holding one child's hand and carrying another on her back while attempting to dodge gunfire. One child has been hit, crashing towards the ground. On the left side lie the bodies of a woman and a child, both victims of gunfire they tried to escape. Beyond the killings, the military, armed with what appear to be flame throwers, goes further by burning homes and crops. This not only functions as an act of murder but also eliminates the possibility of survival for anyone who might return. Without shelter or harvest, the village is effectively erased. Notably, every villager portrayed is turned away from the soldiers, running from the gunfire. None faces their attackers. This detail communicates the guerrillas' perspective that the military is intentionally targeting civilians and non-combatants in an extremely violent manner.

According to guerrilla sources, such tactics were common, as state forces routinely "removed" entire communities from the map through violent repression and murder. Although the text accompaniment for this image focuses specifically on the departments of Quiche and Alta Verapaz, genocidal violence was committed across the country against the Ixil, Q'anjob'al and Chuj, K'iche', and Achi Maya communities.

Based on the analysis of the print materials, it is clear that the guerrillas locate the sources of these many issues in the historic collusion between the domestic land-owning bourgeoise and the military state. These issues are seen as the systemic mechanism of class warfare, constantly perpetuating poverty and hunger to enrich the wealthy. For the guerrillas, these problems are seen as the many symptoms of a much larger issue, and to combat the many facets of this issue, the guerrillas employ a number of strategies to create change. In the section that follows, I will detail the strategies presented by the guerrillas to combat the issues of their era.

Response, Strategies, and Solution Building

The guerrillas not only clearly described what they believed plagued Guatemala, but they also proposed solutions and strategies to create change. The guerrillas had moved beyond a state of frustration and into one demanding a revolution. This unique aspect of the guerrilla content and resulted in an equally unique set of responses, strategies, and solutions that break the mold of normative political thought. This section focuses on the responses, strategies, and solutions put forth by the guerrillas through their publications and highlights their focus on educating the public, on organization and solidarity building on national and international levels, and their rejection of democracy.

Educating the public

The education materials produced by the guerrilla movement served first and foremost to reveal the hidden structures of power that maintained exploitation and poverty in the country. The revolutionary forces understood that consciousness raising was a necessary prerequisite for collective action. They suggested that workers and peasants need comprehend not just their individual suffering, but also the systemic nature of their oppression before they could effectively organize against it. The guerrillas' educational strategy was not merely about transmitting information; it was also about transforming passive subjects into active agents of revolutionary change. Their pedagogical approach was characterized by accessibility, participatory engagement, practical applicability, and an emphasis on collective action and group security.

The revolutionaries understood that traditional educational materials would reach only a limited audience. Instead, they employed the popular format of the comic strips, flyers, and magazines with plenty of images to make complex political and economic analysis accessible to semiliterate and illiterate workers. The visual nature of these

comics transcended literacy barriers, allowing the long complex political message to spread through oral transmission and communal viewing. The images were deliberately designed to resonate with the lived experience of rural workers. By grounding their political education in familiar imagery and situations, the guerrillas made abstract concepts concrete and relevant. Peasant readers could see themselves in the characters, recognizing their own struggles in the guerrillas' depictions of unfair weighing practices, miserable wages, and forced military service.

Furthermore, the pedagogical approach emphasized collective learning and discussion rather than passive consumption. Readers were explicitly instructed to read the materials slowly, reflect on their lessons, and gather with trusted friends to study and discuss them (figure 10 and figure 11). This collaborative approach allowed participants to clarify and deepen their understanding through dialogue, built bonds of solidarity and trust among community members, and created the organizational epicenter from which broader resistance could develop. The discussion groups increased exposure to revolutionary theory and practice, and created a space where workers could share their experiences, analyze their common situation, and plan collective action. This political education also addressed the particular oppression of Indigenous peoples in Guatemala. The revolutionaries recognized that class exploitation and racial discrimination were intertwined, and they devoted significant attention to explaining the historical roots of Indigenous subjugation within this context. The materials traced the oppression of Maya peoples to the Spanish conquest, explained how racist ideologies justified the continued exploitation of Indigenous labor, and emphasized that the struggle for Indigenous rights was inseparable from the broader class struggle. This was a crucial pedagogical

intervention, as it worked to overcome the divisions that the ruling class had historically cultivated between Indigenous and Ladino workers, laying the groundwork for a more unified revolutionary movement.

Figure 10. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"We have to talk with compatriots about these points" "We'll go in early to look for them" Periodico Popular #33, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

Figure 11. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"Group meeting" Periodico Popular #33, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

The Guatemalan guerrilla movement's educational strategy represents an understanding of the relationship between consciousness and revolutionary action. By providing workers and peasants with a comprehensive analysis of their exploitation, the revolutionaries sought to transform the lived experience of oppression into a conscious commitment to resistance. Their educational materials were especially impactful due to their accessible, engaging, and deeply practical messaging. Ultimately education of the public served both to reveal the hidden structures of power and to build the organizational capacity necessary to challenge those structures.

Organization and Solidarity

The guerrillas constructed a sophisticated revolutionary strategy, where organization and solidarity across identity lines functioned as a countermeasure to the state's divisive repression and as an engine for building proletarian unity. The deliberate cultivation of cross-ethnic, cross-sectoral, and gendered solidarity was a calculated essential to the guerrillas to fight against the identity-based discrimination that has fractured and weakened the Guatemalan proletariat since the colonial era. The URNG, in their 1982 letter *Declaration of Revolutionary Unity in Guatemala* clarify the importance of the multi-identity collation and cite it as an essential part of their organizational strategy, stating "Workers, peasants, Indians and ladinos, Catholics and Protestants, men and women old enough to think and fight, and all patriotic and democratic sectors are involved (URNG 1982). The URNG takes pride in this cross-identity solidarity, and sees it as a tool for furthering the revolution. The guerrillas take great care to explain that social identity has functioned as a mechanism of working-class domination, and that to combat them the proletariat must come together regardless of identity to form a

successful unified front . Creating ethnic and racial divisions, occupational hierarchies, and geographic isolation to prevent the development of a unified front against their exploitation.

In response to this historic division, the guerrillas explain that overcoming these systemic issues requires rejecting identity-based divisions and building a unified front of workers regardless of social identity, and go as far to say that the revolutionary project hinged on the conscious reconstruction of social bonds among Indigenous and Ladino peasants, rural and urban laborers, teachers, domestic workers, and even progressive clergy under that title "laborer." The guerrillas make a particular effort to bake these ideas into the visual iconography of the periodicals to consistently reinforce this idea, depicting crowds that explicitly included both Indigenous campesinos in traditional "traje" and Ladino laborers (figure 12 and 13), thereby normalizing a multi-ethnic revolutionary subject that directly subverted the state's divide-and-rule logic. Figure 12, the cover of the *De Sol a Sol* magazine, embodies the transformation of these fractured social constituencies into a single cohesive political force perfectly. Here we see a unified front of workers from various ethnic groups and professions. Although they come from different backgrounds, they have rallied together in their fight for their collective rights. The workers stand united and hold banners that read "the strength of workers lies in their organization." The guerrillas reject the notion that race, gender, or occupation should stand in the way of a unified front, and that the workers themselves are strong enough to fight back when they come together.

Figure 12. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33 Cover, 1985

"The strength of the workers in their organization" Periodico Popular #33 Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

Figure 13. Image Created by Guerrillas, C.U.C Fyler, 1980

"Peasants of Huehuetenango we invite you to join the C.U.C" Campesino de Huehuetenango 1980, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

Aligned with the efforts of domestic organization and solidarity building, the guerrillas also focus on the importance of international solidarity. The guerrillas argue that much like the domestic proletariat must unite to fight bourgeois suppression in Guatemala, the proletariat across the world must also rise to fight economic exploitation

on an international scale. The guerrillas lean into this sentiment by boldly stating, “for us the working class there are no such thing as borders” which is an assertion that politically constructed national borders mean nothing to the combined struggles of the unified proletariat against the global bourgeoisie.

Although the guerrillas align themselves with the workers of the world, they make a specific point of standing proudly in solidarity with other Central American nations. They mention El Salvador and Nicaragua, as during this period both countries are undergoing similar proletariat revolution, albeit at different stages. They explain that the struggle of the Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Nicaraguan people against bourgeois suppression and exploitation are inherently linked. They go as far as to say “*pues somos hermanos en una misma lucha*” or “we are siblings in the same fight”. Note that they do not say allies or even friends in combat; instead, they insist they are “siblings” in this fight against the bourgeoisie and imperialism.

Figure 14. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

“All of Central America against the Yankee intervention” Periodico Popular #33, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

In De Sol a Sol, we are shown celebratory images of transnational solidarity. Figure 14 depicts a crowd of campesinos and laborers organized and walking with banners of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Above them, Augusto César Sandino, Nicaraguan revolutionary and namesake of the FSLN, who famously declared war on the United States, looks down on the crowd. They exclaim "All of Central America against the Yankee intervention" positioning the independent struggle of each nation as a part of the broader regional anti-imperialist movement. The publications know the struggle is long and difficult, but they also know that recognizing genuine solidarity comes from revolutionary movements and the people who struggle for them, not from governments or arbitrary borders drawn during the colonial era meant to define a people. Pan-central American identity and internationalism are key parts of creating revolutionary change for the guerrillas, not just in each country but in Central America as a whole.

Outside of examining international solidarity as a revolutionary tool, the guerrillas also analyze the way the state uses international solidarity in its attempt to retain control over the country. The main international force that the guerrillas portray as aligning itself with the Guatemalan government and the bourgeoise class is none other than "Uncle Sam," or the United States. They describe the interventionist actions of the United States as imperialism and neo-colonialism. They feel strongly that the support from the United States emboldens the current government and allows it to act with unprecedented violence domestically without consequence. The guerrillas suggest that the United States' relationship with Guatemala is twofold: the United States does the dirty work of

improving the regimes' reputation abroad, while helping fund Guatemalan state terrorism domestically.

In figure 15 the guerrillas recognized this relationship and illustrated it beautifully. We see Ríos Montt, the military dictator of this period, standing in front of a podium labelled the demagogy of the military junta. On his back, we see a set of angel wings. They go along with the halo above his head that is being held up by Uncle Sam. In his hands, Uncle Sam holds a stack of bills appearing to be the financier behind the military junta. Below Ríos Montt, a depiction of a laborer and a farmer are crushed under his feet. He also appears to have a gun pointed directly at them. They are shocked and look at the gun head-on. The guerrillas describe the pressure Guatemala is facing on the world stage: as a newly described pariah state, it would make sense that their main supporter, the United States, would advocate and even make the Ríos Montt government attractive. All of this, the guerrillas explain, is done to hide the horrors his government is committing in Guatemala. It takes a lot of work to make a regular politician look like an angel.

Next to Ríos Montt, we see Francisco Luis Gordillo Martínez, who is armed and has a backpack with a human skull peeking out of the back pocket. On the left side of Ríos Montt, we see General Horacio Maldonado Schaad, who is depicted in a simian-esque manner. He showed with oversized hands and dragging knuckles. These men make up the three-person military junta that governs Guatemala through coercion and violence. Overall, this paints a bleak picture of the current state of the country in 1982. The guerrillas depict how the state continues to suppress the laboring class, making life unbearable, all while receiving support from abroad. But the guerrillas do not simply give

up. Instead, they boldly acknowledge that fighting their government means taking on the mammoth that is the United States and its military interventionism in the region, which the guerrillas argue is for the betterment of their nation and its people.

Figure 15. Image Created by Guerrillas, Insurrección popular, No. 1, 1982

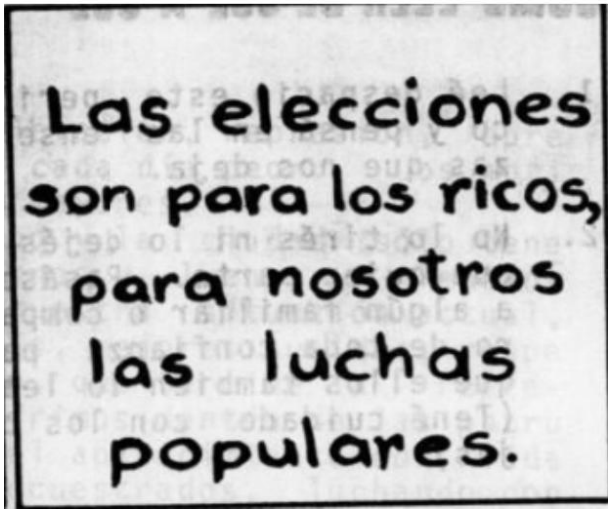
"The demagogy of the military junta" Insurrección popular, No. 1, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

Rejection of democracy

In response to the corrupt and ineffective nature of Guatemala's political and electoral processes, the guerrillas use their publications as a tool for developing skepticism among the public about the possibility of democracy. According to the guerrilla media, the current institutions of democracy in Guatemala are nothing more than a mask used by the bourgeoisie to disguise the system of oppressive governance that has kept the proletariat class in bondage. The guerrillas explain that democracy as a political system has functioned to hide the abuses of the ruling elite, having been used as a tool of disenfranchisement and exploitation, while being promoted as a systems of majority rules and equality.

The guerrillas' perspective is that the only individuals who see real change from any election are the rich, and consequently the poor are losing faith in the election system. The guerillas eventually conclude that the electoral system designed for bourgeois success and functions as an apparatus of the continuous wealth transfer from the people to the bourgeois class. In the De Sol A Sol comic featuring "Chinto", a childlike character utilized by the guerrillas in the De Sol a Sol comics. the guerillas conclude that "elections are for the rich; for us, it's popular struggles." (Figure 16) With this conclusion, the guerrillas reject Guatemala's democracy as an avenue for change and instead advocate in favor of revolutionary violence.

Figure 16. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985



"Elections are for the rich, for is its popular revolution" Periodico Popular #33, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

For the guerrillas, rejecting electoral democracy and usage of revolutionary political violence go hand-in-hand. Rather than shying away from political violence as both a topic and an action, the guerrillas embrace it, seeing that the ineffective nature of the country's democracy has left the public with limited avenues for the proletariat to express their grievances. They treat this violence as two things: one, as a necessary,

justified, and ultimately defensive step of the revolutionary process, and two, as a natural consequence of the political system in place in Guatemala. The theme of violence as a revolution action appears in nearly all of the printed media in the data set, with Figure 17 showing how central this idea is to the guerrilla movement. Here we revisit the character Chinto, in the "De Sol a Sol" comic section. Chinto explains the necessary role of political violence as a tool for creating a better future. In Insurrección Popular, the guerrillas synthesize these sentiments and state without equivocation: "The experience of popular struggles is becoming increasingly rich and confirms that the path to victory lies in mass revolutionary violence, in insurrections and people's wars" (Insurrección Popular: 2), making clear that violence is a key strategy in the liberation of the proletariat class.

Figure 17. Image Created by Guerrillas, Periodico Popular #33, 1985

"What can we the workers do?" Periodico Popular #33, Guatemala News and Information Bureau Archive, Princeton University Digital Library (1963-2000)

The rejection of democracy and the usage of revolutionary violence serves multiple strategic functions and is not something done without a greater purpose. The first is to offer defense of the public against state terror, the second is disruption of exploitative economic relations, demonstration that the state's monopoly on force has

been broken, and creation of martyrs whose sacrifice motivates continued struggle. Crucially, it must also be noted that this is not a celebration of violence for the sake of committing violence out of simple frustration, but a necessary reaction based on decades of state violence against peaceful organizers, student protestors, and laborers.

The guerillas present economic inequality, corruption, and structural violence as major issues impacting the country, and in response to these issues the guerrillas prioritize educating the public, creating a unified front, and rejecting democracy to bring on institutional change. Although we now have a clearer understanding of the guerrilla movement and its goals this is only part of the broader picture meant to be relieved during this investigation. In the section that follows I will detail the findings of the digital media data analysis highlighting both the sources of issues describes by commenters as well as their resistance strategies.

DIGITAL MEDIA

Sources of Issues

While the guerrilla media of the 1960s-1990s was unipolar in its articulation of social issues and dissent strategies, in 2026 social media is much more diverse and multi-polar, with ideas surrounding social issues and dissent strategies encompassing a broader set of views and perspectives. This can be explained through by looking at the drivers of this commentary. The following analysis examines user-generated comments collected from the TikTok accounts of *Plaza Publica* and *Quorum*, two prominent Guatemalan digital news media outlets, to better understand how the public articulates grievances, identifies sources of systemic problems, and proposes solutions to the country's challenges in the contemporary era. The patterns among these comments reveals a contemporary populace engaged in diagnosing national crises while simultaneously grappling with profound institutional distrust. The comment threads demonstrate that Guatemalan citizens are debating policy solutions, political accountability, and the nature of the systemic problems facing their country. Users consistently identify structural and institutional failures as the roots of Guatemala's greater social problems, demonstrating an understanding of how power operates within the country's political economy and the direct relationship between this power, the state, and corruption. Within this discourse, commenters do not reduce complex national challenges to individual misconduct or temporarily limited contingent circumstances, but instead locate the sources of crisis in political and economic institutions themselves. This digital public sphere, while constrained by the technological affordances and limitations of social media platforms, nonetheless functions as a space where citizens perform the intellectual labor of identifying problems, debating solutions, and attempting to hold power accountable

within a political context characterized by widespread corruption and institutional fragility. In what follows I focus on the themes of socio-economic issues, corruption, and insecurity, and how they manifest in these TikTok comments.

Economic issues

The most prominent socio-economic issues identified by commenters are the high cost of living and the seemingly monopolistic control of essential services and markets that drive up the cost of goods and services. In "¿Por qué está cara la luz?", a video concerning electricity infrastructure and pricing, users repeatedly assert that Guatemalan energy distribution companies operate as a "total monopoly," where prices are controlled, high, and constantly rising. Users struggle with keeping up with these rising costs, but are told just to pay the bill when they raise questions about the cost, no matter how high it may be. These complaints of high cost are often paired with comments related to poor service. Where commenters report dealing with periods of blackouts, shaky connectivity to the grid, and a lack of maintenance on this essential service. Commenters demonstrate historical awareness that enriches their analysis, tracing current problems to specific policy decisions with the privatization being specifically identified as a pivotal moment of policy failure. This historical consciousness reflects a populace that does not accept present conditions as natural or inevitable, but instead understands them as the products of political choices and state policy. They extend this sentiment beyond electricity and assert, "everything in Guatemala is a monopoly." They describe all services provided by the state and multiple economic sectors as operating within and benefiting from this monopoly structure.

Commenters push the discussion of socio-economic issues beyond the high cost of energy and detail their struggle to afford basic goods such as food, and describe the pricing of necessities as extortion. In *"¿Cómo es el problema de desnutrición de Guatemala?*" a video dealing with the nutrition crisis in Guatemala, focuses on an interaction between member of press and then presidential candidate and businessman Carlos Pineda. The reporter alleges "50% of children face chronic nutritional insecurity" and questions the politicians plan to alleviate this issue. Pineda, who refutes the data, questions "who says so?", brushing the problem off as a skewed statistic. This interaction does not go well with commenters who feel the candidate is out of touch with the struggles of lay people. The commenters argue: "What do you mean, "who says so"? "GUATEMALA SAYS SO!!!", suggesting Pineda doesn't the daily struggle to afford necessities. The user further expresses this sentiment by stating: "That's how people who have it all are, they don't think about others", suggesting that food insecurity is class-based, and those struggling to afford the basic necessities are not being met with understanding. As suggested by the sentiments of commenters, affording the basics is an ever-growing challenge, one that the elites are clearly not experiencing.

Commenters feel left behind by the rising prices and feel they are being cheated as a society. They describe the high cost of living crisis as masking a much larger issue, monopolistic-corporate greed. In *"¿Por qué en Guatemala todo está caro*?", users suggest that monopolies and their desire for increased profit are at the center of economic issues. One user commented: "Although competition is necessary and the right thing, competition and the free market alone aren't enough; there's always a tendency toward monopoly." This suggests that even laws or other efforts geared towards market reform

are not enough to combat the systemic nature of monopolies in the country. One user echoes this sentiment in a much briefer manner stating “One word: “monopoly”” as an exacerbator of economic suffering.

While economic hardship presents itself as a major issue, users present it as a part of a broader picture. Some users suggest that conditions such as these would not be possible without a government that is corrupt and in-bed with big business. Commenters in *“¿Por qué está cara la luz?*” call-out these corrupt “*politicos”* or politicians. One user comments “but those crooks from Vamos and Valor don’t want to pass it to protect the Guatemalan business elite,” suggesting a close relationship between the corrupt nature of the economy and the corrupt nature of the state.

Corruption

Corruption is consistently framed by TikTok users as a major issue and as a central structural principle of Guatemalan politics. In users’ analysis of these issues, the comment section discourse moves between blaming the individual acts of politicians to the characterization of corruption as structurally embedded in the country’s political and economic institutions, entrenched within all branches of the Guatemalan government and its many major corporations. Commenters depict a vision of corruption as so deeply institutionalized that conventional legal and political mechanisms prove inadequate. As such, this corruption occurs openly and at the expense of the public, but as users describe, there are limited legal tools to dismantle these systems of corruption.

A particularly troubling aspect that emerges in the discourse is the normalization of corruption. Although commenters do not normalize this corruption in an effort to gain acceptance for it, they themselves are accepting it through this normalization. One user

states, “Unfortunately, corruption has almost become the norm in some regions of the country, making it difficult for honest leaders to participate and compete with the politicians we see every four years.” (*La ciudadanía batalla contra un enemigo poderoso: la corrupción estructural*) This normalization is described as a self-perpetuating cycle where corrupt actors accumulate economic power derived from “illicit capital flows in all their forms,” suggesting that corruption serves as both a mechanism for personal enrichment and a barrier to political competition. Commenters also articulate how corruption captures regulatory bodies, with one user explaining that “it’s the CNEE (National Electric Power Commission) that needs to be held accountable; they’re both judge and executioner when it comes to setting prices.” This captures the sense that institutions designed to regulate are instead complicit in exploitation. In this regard, municipal authorities and local-level corruption also emerge as significant sources of these problems.

Across multiple videos, local governments receive a significant amount of blame for corruption from commenters. When discussing the failures of their local governments, commenters identify irresponsibility in urban planning, permit issuance without adequate oversight, and failing infrastructure as major factors negatively impacting the public, that are being all fueled by corruption. A number videos reveal how environmental degradation and inadequate services disproportionately affect working-class communities and are a result of systemic corruption. Water contamination complaints and service instability as described in “*Empagua o Nimajuyu: ¿Quién se cansa primero”* and illustrate how basic services, clean water, and reliable electricity remain precarious for many Guatemalans, especially those in the working class.

On a national level, the judiciary - public prosecutors' office and individual judges - are seen as corrupt. Commenters accuse judges of the miscarriages of justice through a process of impunity that favors the rich and political elite classes. These judges receive material and financial benefits for aligning themselves with the rich, even if it goes against their duty as an enforcer of justice (Satterthwaite 2025). Some users do not stop at the actions of individual justices, and question the legitimacy of the judiciary system as whole. In "*¿Qué pasará con los criminalizados por Consuelo Porras?"* One user goes as far to say: "The Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ), the Constitutional Court (CC), the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP), and the USAC rector needed to be replaced, because they were all riddled with corruption." This reflects a lack of fate institutional legitimacy, and demonstrates that citizens are uniformly condemning these institutions as a part of the greater system of corruption it is meant to prevent and punish.

The pervasive nature of corruption leads some to a disparaging conclusion, with one user expressing that: "I feel like corruption is as Guatemalan as tortillas." This comparison suggests that corruption has become so normalized it seems to appear as an intrinsic part of national identity, one akin to the culturally significant tortilla, a cornerstone of the Guatemalan diet that fuels the nation. This quote also holds a bit of cultural nuance. In Guatemala, tortillas are eaten with such frequency that many *tortilleras*, or tortilla makers who hand-press and cook tortillas offer service three times a day or "*a los tres tiempos"* around the day's three major meals. With this context, the comment reveals an additional layer of this issue. It shows that corruption is not only normalized, but is happening with such frequency that it can be equated to a thrice daily service offered nationally. Some as mundane and common as buying tortillas. This tragic

acceptance of widespread corruption simultaneously reflects and reinforces political cynicism. It shows that corruption is entrenched within the essence of the nation, and, sadly, that it cannot be removed easily. This commenter suggests that a Guatemala free corruption is as plausible as a Guatemala free of tortillas.

This institutional corruption has also created a lack of accountability within the country's justice system. This lack of accountability has allowed for insecurity to grow uncontrolled as a result. This insecurity has manifested as both individual episodes violence occurring at the micro-level, but also systemic ignorance of the vulnerable at the macro-level. It seems that without a centralized body to enforce social order through a legal system, or one that does so without corruption, Guatemalan society has become burdened by insecurity. This burden grows as corruption remains unchecked, and represents a major theme in the consciousness of commenters.

Insecurity

While somewhat overshadowed in public discourse by more popular issues such as political corruption and economic hardship, insecurity in Guatemala consistently surfaces in the user narratives as a critical point where the fragmented issues of society converge into tangible daily suffering. For ordinary Guatemalans, the reality of murders, armed robberies, assaults, predatory extortion, unfair labor practices, housing insecurity, and the lack of justice are not interpreted as random surges in criminality or as poor decision on the individual level, but instead as the materialization of systemic rot that then manifests into a general sense of insecurity. This systemic rot is characterized by the state's inability or lack of desire to intervene on behalf of the public and its general unaccountability for the resolution of safety and wellbeing issues. While the phrase

"failed state" comes to mind, it does not fully capture this specific phenomenon, as in this case the state chooses who it shows up for, and provides resources to, accordingly (Satterthwaite 2025).

Users describe this systemic rot in the context of insecurity when discussing crime and policing. They feel unprotected and abandoned by the state, believing one's security depends on class status. One user states in support of this: "If the police are supposed to protect us, they're actually just trying to take our money" (*Funcionaría el modelo de Bukele en Guate?*). The commenter reveals that seeking justice has an economic cost, and that security is only guaranteed if you can afford it. This lack of accountability in combination with this systemic rot, has created a system of daily violence is structurally nourished by the profound economic inequality in Guatemala. This, combined with staggering judicial impunity, where an overwhelming number of crimes go uninvestigated and unsolved, has created a system where crime can operate openly (Martínez 2008).

The discourse suggests that violence is not simply a matter of criminal activity; it is enabled by state failure to provide security and justice, creating conditions where citizens are simultaneously abused by criminals and abandoned by the state. The presence of "narco-military officers in government" as described by commenters, is cited as contributing to the broader security crisis, suggesting that the state itself is complicit in the violence that afflicts citizens, blurring the distinction between state and criminal actors. This infiltration also fundamentally destroys distinction between law enforcement and organized crime, entrapping citizens in a hostile limbo where they are simultaneously preyed upon by individual assailants and armed groups, while also being abandoned by

the very authorities sworn to protect them. This seems to align with the historical sentiments of the guerrilla movement, who also felt the state was failing to do its job of prioritizing and protecting their citizens as a result of criminal corruption. This interconnection of this issue across time periods, shows that security cannot be addressed in isolation from economic, political, and environmental problems, suggesting that commenters possess a more advanced analytical framework that resists simple explanations and instead recognizes the complex interplay of forces that produce insecurity. Consequently, these citizens insist that any durable remedy must necessarily be multidimensional. With commenters demanding not just policy reform, but foundational interventions in economic security, judicial independence, and transparent governance to dismantle the interlocking systems that manufacture and perpetuate insecurity across the country.

Overall, Commenters do not simply name the issues of corruption, economic, inequality, and insecurity. They actively plan on how to combat these structural issues. In the next section I will document the Response, Strategies, and Solution Building used by TikTok Commenters.

Response, strategies, and solution building

Utilizing the TikTok comments collected from *Plaza Publica* and *Quorum pages,* this section of analysis focuses on the responses, strategies, and solutions articulated by TikTok users in regards to the social issues they have identified. The comments help reveal a citizenry that is deeply engaged in diagnosing national problems, but often becomes paralyzed by a sense of inaction when attempting to manifest change.

Examining these comments helps in drawing out the complex tapestry of political thought in contemporary Guatemala, and present these thoughts both complex and pessimistic.

Vocalization and debate

TikTok users demonstrated a remarkable capacity for the identification and vocalization of social issues through the usage of debate in comment sections. Rather than relying on the ideas of a unified political party, users are actively forming ideas of who bears the reasonability for political failings and sharing them with others. As a result, the commentators are creating a system of idea exchange and infusion that fuels individual engagement and in-app interactions. These two traits of the comment sections appear to function as a collaborative form of political historiography, where users can come together to better trace the origins of contemporary problems back to their historical and structural roots. While many of the vocalizations were individual expressions of frustration or discontent with the state, these types of comment were functional examples of the relationship between macro-level issues micro-level issues and their impact on the public This dialectical relationship between personal grievance and systemic critique forms a core aspect of TikTok political literacy, as users relay personal experiences to contextualize the broader symptomatic of the country and its monopolized and centralized economy.

These vocalizations and debates serve as active sites of contestation, where users argue over the effectiveness of various policies and political parties. The most prominent topic is a proposed competition law aimed at lowering the cost of goods and services by increasing domestic economic competition through the usage of a “competition law”. Opinions on this are deeply divided. One user argues: “Competition law would lower the

cost of basic necessities, electricity, highway construction, building construction, medications, and internet and phone services" (Plaza Publica, 2023). Another counters: "That's not the solution at all" (Plaza Publica, 2023 Although the law might seem like an easy win given that the cost of living is a major public grievance, many opponents dismiss it as a "scam" or have little confidence that the law will pass, with one user stating unconfidently "Unfortunately, that law won't pass, and even if it does, it will end up in the pile of pending bills awaiting review". At the same time, its defenders passionately champion it as a way to end corporate privileges and improve economic stability for the working class. Ultimately, TikTok's comment sections prove to not function as monolithic echo chambers where the same ideas are recycled and reiterated; instead, they operate as a digital public square, where citizens debate governance through anecdotes, historical references, and speculative logic. Overall, this system of debate and vocalization allows for the discussion of political issues and their origins to be conducted with a multi- polar view, creating space for a number of different ideas and perspectives. For instance in *Plaza Publica*'s "¿Por qué está cara la luz?" users ponder together who is or what is to blame for these specific issues. One user directly blames former president Álvaro Arzú for privatizing the energy sector, while another traces corruption all the way back to 1821, when the Aycinena family planned independence from Spain to appropriate lands for themselves. The usage of debate and vocalization reveals the new reality of political diversity being an essential aspect of the Guatemalan democratic institution.

In combination with vocalization and discussions of social issues, commenters also harbor on the importance of electoral change and political accountability as necessary steps for addressing the challenges in Guatemala. Below, I will explore how

users discuss democracy as tool for creating change, as we as the strategies to conceptualize to realize that change.

Electoral change

Despite some pessimism, the electoral system emerges as the central, if deeply flawed, tool for change in the users' discourse, and the comments are infused with desperate hope rather than confidence. The political conversation is heavily focused on the viability of candidates as a mechanism for salvation, with users in several threads engaging in direct debates about whom to vote for, mentioning candidates like Carlos Pineda, Bernardo Arévalo, and Geovani Reyes. One user suggests, "If you really want to break the cycle, don't vote for @cpineda_72 (TikTok of Carlos Pineda)," suggesting a tactical approach to voting where the goal is to prevent the worst outcome rather than to elect an idealized leader. However, the comments are not naive about the system's capacity for reform. For instance,one user articulates a fundamental critique that "the way we vote is the problem, the political parties, the system is made for corruption." A recurring theme is that honest leaders are hard to find because the system is structurally designed to benefit those with economic power. Users describe a political class that is out of touch with everyday citizens, one that governs leisurely when it comes to building solutions for the working class. One user from the "*Empagua o Nimajuyu: ¿Quién se cansa primero?*" video suggests: "The city government is run by thieves who plant trees, paint, and go for a run on Sundays, they love that." The comment suggests a lack of urgency towards solution building and a reliance on a system that allows politicians to be inactive politically but retain the benefits of political power.

This paradoxical relationship with electoral politics seems to reveal a deeper tension within the Guatemalan political psyche, one where citizens simultaneously invest immense energy in electoral debates while fundamentally doubting the system's capacity to deliver meaningful change. The frantic discussion over which candidate represents the "most viable option" may not reflect democratic enthusiasm but rather a desperate last-resort calculation, where voting becomes an exercise in harm reduction rather than hope. Users seem to understand that the electoral arena is structurally rigged and "made for corruption", yet they return to it repeatedly because it remains the only legitimate avenue for political participation available to them. Commenters suggest that even "Semilla" the party of the newly elected president, a party that promised something different, "didn't help", further capturing this cycle of hope and disappointment that defines contemporary electoral politics. Ultimately, the users' discourse reveals that while elections serve as the primary site of political engagement, they function less as mechanisms for transformation and more as ritualized expressions of collective frustration, offering catharsis without revolution and participation without power.

Synthesizing these themes, the political ideals of Guatemalan TikTok users in this sample can be described as frustrated structural pragmatism. The commenters are, regardless of their political orientation, reformers who are attempting to operate from a premise of systemic pessimism. Their ideology is an eclectic mix of political thinking, where they advocate for free-market solutions like the competition law to lower prices, while simultaneously calling for nationalization of services and stronger protections for domestic workers that illustrates a desire for a system that is both economically functional and socially just. However, their pragmatism is shackled by the perception that

the entire political and economic system is a made up of a monopoly of corrupt elites that are uninterested in the governing, and further focus on economic extraction, forcing them to see protests and election recalls as necessary steps for change, but sadly as their only option, forcing users ultimately pin their hopes on the deeply flawed electoral system to save them.

Ultimately, this analysis revealed a sort of desperate democracy, where these users believe in the power of the people to make a difference but see that power as constantly thwarted by a structurally corrupt state serving a narrow elite. They seem trapped in a cycle of diagnosis and debate, armed with a clear understanding of the disease but lacking a clear prescription for a cure, forced to navigate a political landscape they believe is rigged against them without the skill required to create real change. While engagement on TikTok serves as a digital megaphone for collective grievance, as a space where they can name their enemies and outline their frustrations, they do so with heavy dose of pessimism, debating the fate of their nation as it sits in limbo.

Discussion

A comparative analysis of guerrilla print media and contemporary TikTok comments reveals a profound paradox at the heart of Guatemalan political life. While the foundational grievances that fueled the Civil War have remained remarkably intact into the contemporary era, the infrastructure for articulating dissent and pursuing structural change has undergone a fundamental fragmentation. This discussion section synthesizes the findings across both eras to examine the persistence of social issues, the transformation of political expression, and the implications of these patterns for understanding contemporary Guatemalan society. The analysis is organized around two central axes: the endurance of grievances that have defined Guatemalan political conflict for generations, and the fragmentation of political form that has reshaped how citizens understand and respond to these enduring problems.

ENDURING GRIEVANCES: THE PERSISTENCE OF STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

The most striking finding of this comparative analysis is the remarkable continuity of social grievances across nearly four decades of Guatemalan history. The issues articulated by guerrilla resistance in the 1980s have remained as central concerns for Guatemalans engaging in digital discourse today. This persistence is not merely superficial but reflects deep structural continuities that have survived the formal end of the civil war, the transition to democracy, and the proliferation of digital communication technologies.

The guerrilla publications present a comprehensive indictment of Guatemala's economic system, describing a society structured to extract wealth from the laboring class through unequal land distribution, depressed wages, and an artificially inflated cost of living. These analyses, produced in the context of state censorship and violent repression,

document conditions that were, by any measure, devastating. Campesinos worked from "dawn to dusk" only to receive a "few cents" for their labor, while landowners and coffee brokers grew wealthy from their exploitation. The cost of basic necessities was described as intentionally manipulated to extract maximum wealth from the proletariat while creating conditions of food scarcity that functioned as a gastro-political weapon against the poor. Indigenous communities were disproportionately affected by these policies, forced to work on land they would never own, punished for collecting firewood while watching forests destroyed for elite profit, and ultimately displaced or murdered for perceived sympathies with revolutionary movements.

Contemporary TikTok comments reveal that these same structures of exploitation persist in the present era. Users describe a society of "total monopolies" where essential services like electricity, internet, and food are controlled by a few companies that charge exorbitant prices while providing inadequate service. The cost-of-living crisis remains acute, with users describing the inability to afford basic goods and services despite working full-time. While the language of exploitation has shifted to monopoly, high prices, and unfair wages rather than bourgeois extraction and proletarian suffering, they still describe the same underlying structure of created inequality as an ever-present issue.

Marx provides an indispensable framework for understanding capitalism and its durability. While the "Communist Manifesto" does describe the state as a "Committee for managing affairs of the bourgeoisie," reducing it to a front for business interests obscures more than it helps reveal. The state, as later clarified, is not a neutral instrument but a historically specific apparatus forged to enforce the conditions of capital accumulation. Its actions, from blocking competition laws to selective prosecutions, are

systematic expressions of a power structure designed to subordinate labor to capital. Marx states in relation to this: “It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment”.” (p. 15). Which seemingly represent the economic-structural reality the Guatemalan revolutionary movement confronted. Their struggle aimed not to achieve policy reform but to create a rupture within the class antagonism underpinning the state. The simple fact that these structures of suppression persist across regimes and eras confirmed Marx ideas of a persistent bourgeois class, one will do all they can to protect the system that enriches them. Unfortunately, it seems that these beasts have grown out of control and aligning with the warning given by Marx: “modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.” (p. 17), this could help explain that even in the face of democracy and people leading reforms the material realities of Guatemala have little to no improvement between eras.

Corruption as systemic feature

The theme of corruption appears with remarkable consistency across both eras, but the analysis reveals important nuances in how it is understood and articulated. The guerrilla publications present corruption as a systemic feature of Guatemala's political order, not an individual failing or isolated incident. They describe elections as a "circus" designed to simulate democratic participation while maintaining elite control, politicians as "clowns" and "marionettes" controlled by military and economic interests, and government institutions as mechanisms for wealth extraction rather than public service. This understanding of corruption as systemic, built into the very structure of the political and economic system, represents a sophisticated analysis that contemporary users largely replicate and extend. TikTok users also describe corruption as a systemic issue entrenching all three branches of government, with no legal tool to dismantle it. Commenters express that The Supreme Court of Justice, Constitutional Court, and Public Prosecutor's Office are themselves described as "riddled with corruption" suggesting an institutional capture so complete that reform from within is nearly impossible. Commenters note that corruption has become the norm in the country, making it "difficult for honest leaders to participate and compete" with those who have accumulated power through illicit capital flows. The saturation of corruption, which users lament as feeling "as Guatemalan as tortillas," represents a tragic acceptance that simultaneously reflects and reinforces political cynicism.

The theoretical framework helps explain why corruption persists despite widespread recognition of its destructiveness. Avery Gordon's concept of sociological haunting suggests that corruption is not simply a contemporary problem but a spectral

presence that carries the weight of unresolved historical injustices. The "ghost" of the 1954 coup, which ended democratic reform and installed a military regime committed to protecting elite interests, haunts present-day politics by establishing a precedent that democratically elected governments cannot be trusted to implement meaningful reform. The "ghost" of the civil war, with its state-sponsored violence and systematic destruction of popular movements, continues to shape the possibilities for collective action by creating a context of fear and impunity that inhibits organized resistance. These ghosts are not merely metaphorical; they manifest in the institutional arrangements that persist across regimes, the economic structures that continue to produce inequality, and the cultural memory that shapes political expectations.

The legacy of violence

The guerrilla publications document state violence in harrowing detail, mentioning disappearances, massacres, forced displacement, and systematic targeting of Indigenous communities with physical and sexual. They describe a country where violence is the norm and where state forces commit atrocities with impunity, burning homes and crops, murdering women and children, and concentrating survivors in "model villages" that function as prisons or concentration camps. This violence, the guerrillas argue, serves the interests of the ruling class by eliminating communities that might support revolutionary change and creating a climate of fear that inhibits organized resistance. Contemporary discourse reveals that this legacy of violence, which is far less aggressive and structural in the contemporary period than during the civil war, has continues to shape Guatemalan political life, though its manifestations have transformed. When discussing this structural violence users express persistent fear of state institutions,

especially the police, one user stating, “I’m more afraid of the police than of criminals,” and another noting that police corruption is so extensive that “they’re going around demanding bribes” rather than enforcing the law. The public prosecutor’s office, which should serve as a check on state violence, is described as “lukewarm” and unwilling to challenge the “attempted coup d'état” orchestrated from within. The criminalization of human rights defenders and environmental activists, described as “persecution” by some and legitimate prosecution by others, demonstrates that the state’s capacity to target political opponents remains intact, though the methods have shifted from military violence to legal harassment (Human Rights Watch 2025). While the violence of the contemporary does not equate raping, maiming and killing of the civil-war period, it does highlight a continuation of the normalization of violence in society at large. It highlights the evolving nature of violence, and shows that even outside periods of war, the country has a violence issue.

The guerrillas’ identification of the military as the primary agent of state violence has been partially superseded in contemporary discourse by a focus on the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the judiciary, reflecting the transition from military to civilian governance. However, the underlying dynamic of the use of state power to protect elite interests and suppress dissent remains consistent. The “model villages” that concentrated and controlled displaced populations during the war have their contemporary analogues in the “urban extractivism” and “touristification” that displace communities to this day in Guatemala (Morales Blanco, 2021; Trivi et al., 2023). The legal and economic mechanisms of control may have replaced military violence, but the outcomes,

displacement, economic precarity, and the erosion of community, remain remarkably similar across eras.

The theoretical framework illuminates the persistence of violence as a structural feature of Guatemalan society. Gordon's concept of haunting suggests that the violence of the civil war is not over but continues to shape the present through the unresolved trauma of survivors, the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators, and the institutional arrangements that emerged from the conflict. The 1996 peace accords, while formally ending the war, did not resolve the underlying conflicts or provide justice for victims. This unresolved violence returns as a "ghost" in contemporary discourse, manifesting as the persistence of economic exploitation, political corruption, and the criminalization of dissent. Marxist theory explains this persistence by identifying the material interests served by violence: the extraction of surplus value from workers, the protection of elite property rights, and the suppression of movements that threaten the existing order. Violence is not an aberration from Guatemala's political development but its consistent feature, a tool for maintaining a system that benefits the few at the expense of the many.

Hopelessness as a recurring theme

One of the most striking parallels between the two eras is the prevalence of hopelessness in the political discourse of each period. The guerrilla publications, despite their revolutionary optimism, explicitly acknowledge the difficulty of their struggle and the extent of the suffering they document. They describe a country where the ruling class is protected by a state that has no interest in reform. The guerrillas' call to action is, in part, a response to this hopelessness, an attempt to transform despair into collective resistance. Yet even in their calls for revolution, they acknowledge that their project is a

long and difficult one, requiring the transformation of consciousness and the building of organizational capacity over years or decades. Contemporary discourse is saturated with an even more profound hopelessness, one that lacks the counterweight of revolutionary optimism. Users describe a system so thoroughly corrupt that "there isn't a single candidate or leader who isn't seeking power through corruption," where even promising political projects like Semilla fail to deliver meaningful change, and where "the way we vote is the problem, the political parties, the system is made for corruption." This hopelessness is not passive resignation but active despair: the product of repeated cycles of hope and disappointment, of believing that "this time will be different" only to see the same patterns of corruption and exploitation persist. One user's comment that corruption "is as Guatemalan as tortillas" captures the tragic dimension of this hopelessness, not an acceptance of corruption but a recognition of its systemic nature so pervasive that it seems an intrinsic part of national identity.

The persistence of hopelessness across eras reveals something crucial about the nature of Guatemalan politics. When the same grievances, economic exploitation, political corruption, state violence, elite impunity, persist across regimes and eras, it creates a cycle of political engagement that alternates between hopeful mobilization and demoralized withdrawal. The historical record demonstrates that this pattern has deep roots: the 1944 revolution, the 1954 coup, the civil war, the 1996 peace accords, and the 2023 election of Bernardo Arévalo all represent moments of hope followed by disappointment and renewed struggle. Each cycle reinforces the sense that meaningful change is impossible, while simultaneously demonstrating that the conditions requiring change persist and intensify. This is the tragedy of Guatemalan political life: the

structural conditions that produce suffering also produce the hopelessness that makes organized resistance difficult to sustain.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF FORM

While the grievances that animate Guatemalan political discourse have remained remarkably consistent, the forms through which dissent is organized has evolved significantly with the transition into the digital era. This fragmentation of political form represents a shift from centralized, ideologically coherent revolutionary movements to fragmented, individualized digital expression, representing the most significant change in Guatemalan political life since the civil war. Understanding this fragmentation is essential for grasping the possibilities and limitations of contemporary political action in Guatemala.

From revolution to reform: the transformation of political imagination

Perhaps the most dramatic difference between the two eras is the scale and scope of political imagination. The guerrillas envision a total transformation of Guatemalan society: the overthrow of the state, the expropriation of elite property, the establishment of a new social order based on class solidarity and economic justice. Their political imagination is revolutionary in scope, rejecting reform as insufficient for addressing the depth of Guatemala's problems. As they state, "it is not a matter of applying quick fixes, but of getting to the root of the problem and changing it from the ground up." This revolutionary imagination is not merely rhetorical; it is grounded in a comprehensive analysis of Guatemala's political economy and a clear strategy for achieving revolutionary change.

Contemporary discourse, by contrast, operates almost entirely within the framework of reform. Users call for a "competition law" to lower prices, the nationalization of services, stronger protections for domestic workers, and more

accountable governance. These are important policy changes that would improve the lives of many Guatemalans, but they do not challenge the fundamental structures of power and inequality that produce suffering. The language of revolution has largely disappeared from Guatemalan political discourse, replaced by the language of policy reform and electoral politics. Even users who express profound frustration with the system, who describe corruption as a "cancer" that has "infiltrated all three branches of government", do not articulate an alternative to the existing political order. They demand better governance, more responsive politicians, and more equitable policies, but they do not imagine a fundamentally different society.

This transformation in political imagination reflects the material and ideological shifts of the post-war era. The guerrilla movements, which once offered an alternative vision of social organization, were defeated militarily and transformed into the URNG political party, effectively incorporating them into the political system they had once sought to overthrow. The reforms of the 1990s and 2000s further narrowed the range of political possibilities, making it difficult to imagine alternatives to market-based development and liberal democracy. The dominant ideology of the era, which the guerillas might have described as bourgeois hegemony, naturalized the existing order and made revolutionary change seem both impossible and undesirable. The result is a politics that, while critical of specific policies and actors, accepts the fundamental structures of power and inequality as given.

From collective to individual: the transformation of political action

The shift from revolutionary to reformist politics is accompanied by a transformation in political subjectivity the way citizens understand themselves as political

actors. The guerrilla publications construct a collective political subject: the proletariat, the laboring class, the people united in struggle against a common enemy. This collective subject is not a natural category but a political construction, created through the work of education, organization, and solidarity building. The guerrillas explicitly work to create this collective subject, urging workers to recognize their common interests across ethnic and occupational divisions and to organize collectively for change.

Contemporary discourse, by contrast, is characterized by individualization and the tendency to express political grievances in personal terms and to see political problems as matters of individual choice rather than collective action. Users describe their personal struggles with high electricity bills, inadequate water service, and unaffordable necessities. They express frustration with their individual inability to effect change, lamenting that "we can't live like this" without proposing a collective solution. The "we" that appears in these comments is often a generalized "we" of fellow sufferers rather than an organized "we" of political actors committed to collective action. This individualization is reflected in the strategies for change that users propose. While the guerrillas called for collective organization, mass mobilization, and armed struggle, contemporary users discuss voting, social media sharing, and individual consumer choices as their primary political instruments. The comment that "if you really want to break the cycle, don't vote for @cpineda_72" captures the individualized nature of this politics: change is achieved through the accumulation of individual electoral choices rather than collective action. Even the calls for a "National Constituent Assembly" or "all of Guatemala to join the fight against corruption" are expressed as aspirations rather than

organizational commitments, lacking the concrete strategies for mobilization that the guerrillas developed.

The fragmentation of political subjectivity reflects broader social changes in the post-war era. The defeat of the guerrilla movements, the neoliberal restructuring of the economy, and the cultural dynamics of digital communication have all contributed to the decline of collective political identity. Social media platforms, which structure the production and dissemination of political content, reward individual expression and viral engagement rather than sustained organization and strategic thinking. The algorithmic organization of digital space fragments audiences into affinity groups rather than building the broad coalitions that the guerrillas sought to create. The result is a politics that is expressive but not organizational, critical but not constructive, individualist but not collective.

From action to voice: the transformation of political practice

The shift from collective to individual political subjectivity is accompanied by a transformation in political practice the way citizens engage with political issues and attempt to create change. The guerrillas' political practice was organized around action: the production and distribution of printed materials, the organization of communities, the mobilization of mass resistance, and ultimately armed struggle. This action was oriented toward the transformation of the state and the achievement of revolutionary goals. While the guerrillas recognized the importance of education and consciousness-raising, these activities were always understood as preparation for collective action rather than ends in themselves.

Contemporary political practice, by contrast, is organized around voice: the expression of grievances in digital spaces, the articulation of political opinions in comment sections, the sharing of information with networks of followers. This voice is often expressive and cathartic, a way of naming problems and assigning blame, but it rarely translates into organized action. Users' express frustration with the inaction of politicians and the dysfunction of institutions, but they do not organize collectively to address these problems. The comment "they've been talking about the competition law for quite a while now, but they still haven't passed it. What are they doing in Congress?" captures this dynamic: citizens are watching and commenting, but they are not acting.

The shift from action to voice reflects both technological and political developments. Digital platforms make voice easier than ever anyone with a smartphone can express their political views to a global audience. But this ease of expression can substitute for more demanding forms of political engagement, creating the illusion of participation while leaving power structures undisturbed. The algorithmic organization of digital space also shapes political practice, rewarding outrage and polarization while discouraging the sustained engagement required for collective action. The result is a politics that is constantly in motion but rarely effective at creating change. The fragmentation of political form has profound implications for understanding contemporary Guatemalan politics. While the grievances that animated revolutionary struggle persist, the infrastructure for collective action has been eroded. Citizens who share a diagnosis of Guatemala's problems economic exploitation, political corruption, state violence find it difficult to organize collectively to address them. The result is a politics of frustration, where hopelessness and inaction coexist with sophisticated

analysis and passionate critique. The digital public sphere, for all its democratic potential, has not been able to substitute for the organizational infrastructure that the guerrilla movements once provided.

Implications for Understanding Guatemalan Politics

The analysis presented in this thesis has implications for understanding contemporary Guatemalan politics and the possibilities for change. The endurance of grievances across eras suggests that the fundamental problems facing Guatemala, economic inequality, political corruption, state violence, elite impunity, have not been resolved by the transition to democracy or the reforms of the post-war era. These structural problems persist, producing the same kind of suffering that animated revolutionary struggle in the 1980s. Citizens who engage in digital discourse are not simply complaining about minor inconveniences; they are naming the real and persistent conditions of exploitation and injustice that define their daily lives.

The fragmentation of political form, however, suggests that the infrastructure for collective action has been significantly eroded. The guerrilla movements, despite their limitations and ultimate defeat, provided an organizational framework for translating grievances into action. They created institutions that could mobilize communities, produce and distribute political materials, and coordinate resistance across regions. These institutions created the conditions for collective action, even in the face of state violence and repression. Contemporary citizens, by contrast, lack this organizational infrastructure. They can voice their grievances on TikTok, but they cannot easily translate this voice into the kind of collective action that might actually create change.

This fragmentation is not simply a matter of individual choice; it reflects the structural conditions of the post-war era. The peace accords, while ending the war, did not address the underlying conflicts that produced it. The reforms of the 1990s and 2000s further weakened the capacity for collective organization, breaking down the social solidarity that had sustained resistance. The cultural dynamics of digital communication, while democratizing access to expression, have fragmented audiences and rewarded individual performance over sustained organization. The result is a politics that is critical and expressive but not effective, a public sphere that documents suffering but cannot organize to end it.

The analysis also suggests the importance of historical memory for understanding contemporary politics. The ghosts of the civil war the unresolved trauma of violence, the impunity of perpetrators, the persistence of structures that produced suffering, haunt the present, shaping political expectations and limiting the possibilities for collective action. Citizens who remember or have inherited the memory of state violence may be reluctant to organize openly, fearing repression or cooptation. The institutional arrangements that emerged from the war, including the peace accords' amnesty provisions and the subsequent reforms, have narrowed the range of possibilities for change. Understanding these ghosts is essential for comprehending the dynamics of contemporary politics and the challenges facing movements for change. The endurance of grievances and the fragmentation of political form together create the conditions for a politics of frustration, where citizens are acutely aware of the problems facing their society but unable to organize effectively to address them. This frustration is not apathy or ignorance but the product of a structural gap between consciousness and action. Citizens have the analytical

tools to diagnose Guatemala's problems; they lack the organizational infrastructure to address them. The result is a political landscape that is constantly in motion but rarely effective, a public sphere that documents suffering but cannot transform it.

While it may be easy to end this aspect of the story here, and decide that all hope is lost and no real change can be produced, I am reminded how important it is to acknowledge the efforts currently made by those in the contemporary era. Although the comments on TikTok may appear unorganized and ineffective in comparison to the active revolutionary forces of the civil war, these comments represent more than just social commentary, they represent a populace that is active politically, one that desires change and is doing all that it can to achieve it.

Conclusion: The Paradox of Political Expression

This thesis has examined the transformation of political expression in Guatemala from the revolutionary print media of the civil war era to the digital discourse of the contemporary period. The findings reveal a paradox at the heart of Guatemalan political life. While the grievances that animated revolutionary struggle such as land rights, economic inequality, corruption, and violence remain remarkably intact in the comments of TikTok users, the forms through which dissent is articulated and organized have undergone a fundamental fragmentation. While the guerrillas utilized a unified front that promoted education and organization, the rejection of democracy, and the usage of revolutionary violence to bring on fundamental change, TikTok commenters have lost that revolutionary essence, and instead focus on the usage of democratic systems to drive change and the implementation of protest to articulate grievances. Highlighting that the infrastructure for collective action has been eroded, leaving citizens with voice but no action, analysis but no organization, critique but no unified strategy for change. The theoretical framework developed in this thesis, combining Avery Gordon's sociology of haunting with Marxist conflict theory, illuminates this paradox. Gordon's concept of sociological haunting explains why the grievances of the past persist in the present: they are spectral presences, unresolved injustices that refuse to be forgotten, manifestations of historical wounds that continue to shape social life. The "ghosts" of the civil war as the victims of state violence, the destroyed movements, the unfulfilled promises of reform, haunt the present, demanding accountability and justice. Marxist conflict theory explains the material foundations of these grievances: the persistence of class exploitation, the control of the state by elite interests, the use of violence to maintain the existing order.

Together, these frameworks explain both the endurance of grievances and the fragmentation of political form.

The fragmentation of political form represents a significant challenge for those seeking to create change in Guatemala. The shift from centralized, ideologically coherent revolutionary movements to fragmented, individualized digital expression has made it more difficult to organize collective action. Citizens who share a diagnosis of Guatemala's problems, who are united in their frustration with corruption, inequality, and state violence, find it difficult to translate their shared grievances into collective action. The digital public sphere, for all its democratic potential, has not been able to substitute for the organizational infrastructure that the guerrilla movements once provided. Yet the fragmentation of political form also represents opportunities for new forms of political engagement. The proliferation of digital platforms has democratized access to political expression, allowing voices that were previously excluded to participate in public discourse. The comment sections of TikTok videos, while imperfect and often frustrating, represent a space where citizens can name their grievances, debate solutions, and hold power accountable.

This digital public sphere, while limited in its capacity to organize action, is not irrelevant; it contributes to the construction of political consciousness, the formation of public opinion, and the documentation of injustice. The challenge for contemporary movements for change is to build on this digital foundation, creating the organizational infrastructure that can translate voice into action. The enduring grievances and fragmented politics that characterize contemporary Guatemala are not simply a matter of individual failure or collective will; they reflect the structural conditions of the post-war

era. The peace accords, while formally ending the war, did not address the underlying conflicts that produced it. The reforms of the 1990s and 2000s weakened the capacity for collective organization. The cultural dynamics of digital communication shape political practice in ways that are often counterproductive for change. Understanding these structural conditions is essential for developing strategies that can actually create change.

The analysis presented in this thesis challenges the notion that the wartime era and its impacts are in the past. The grievances that animated revolutionary struggle persist, the structures of exploitation that produced suffering remain intact, and the ghosts of violence continue to haunt the present. At the same time, the analysis suggests that the forms through which dissent is expressed and organized have undergone fundamental change. The challenge for contemporary Guatemala is to bridge this gap and to develop forms of political practice that can translate the sophisticated analysis and passionate critique evident in print media digital discourse into the collective action necessary for structural change.

Work Cited

Allison, M. E. (2016). The Guatemalan National Revolutionary unit: the long collapse. Democratization, 23(6), 1042–1058. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1159557

Alvarado, D., Juárez, C., & Gettleson, B. (2021). Historical Memory in the Digital Age: In Guatemala, truthtellers and preservers of the past face renewed hostility. Digitization projects help safeguard the archives of state violence. NACLA Report on the Americas, 53(2), 133–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2021.1923206

Astoundz. (2024, January 22). Genocide in Guatemala - Holocaust Museum Houston. Holocaust Museum Houston. https://hmh.org/library/research/genocide-in-guatemala-guide/

Avalos, Elisabeth. "La política en las redes sociales." Análisis de la Realidad Nacional 12.246 (2023).

Avila, Renata, and A. Gutiérrez Valdizán. "Mapping digital media: Guatemala." Country Report. London: Open Society Foundations (2013).

Batz, G. (2024). The Four Dispossessions: Invasion, Historical Maya Displacements, and Extractivist Violence in Guatemala. LASA Forum.

Charmaz, K. (2014). Constructing grounded theory (Second edition.). SAGE Publications.

Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K. (2019). Grounded theory research: A design framework for novice researchers. SAGE open medicine, 7, 2050312118822927. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050312118822927

Covarrubias, Katia Alejandra, and Ana Paula De la O Campos. A profile of rural poverty, food security and livelihoods in Guatemala. Vol. 34. Food & Agriculture Org., 2024.

"Declaration of Revolutionary Unity in Guatemala." Latin American Perspectives, vol. 9, no. 3, 1982, pp. 115–22. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633429. Accessed 28 July 2026.

Dipasquale V, Cucinotta U, Romano C. Acute Malnutrition in Children: Pathophysiology, Clinical Effects and Treatment. Nutrients. 2020 Aug 12;12(8):2413. doi: 10.3390/nu12082413. PMID: 32806622; PMCID: PMC7469063.

Garcia-Ruano, Karina & Pacheco, Alejandro & Suazo, Dessiree. (2013). The Use of Digital Media for Social Mobilization in Marginalized Communities: The Case of a Mayan Socioenvironmental Movement in Guatemala. International Journal of Communication. 7. 1878-1891.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. NED-New edition, Second, University of Minnesota Press, 1997. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt4hp.

Guatemala: Guerrillas, Genocide, and Peace | Beyond intractability. (n.d.). https://www.beyondintractability.org/library/guatemala-guerrillas-genocide-and-peace

Guatemala. (2025, January 16). Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/guatemala

"Guatemala: Significant Political Actors and Their Interaction." Central Intelligence Agency, 1985

Iqbal, Mansoor. "TikTok revenue and usage statistics." Business of apps 1.1 (2021).

Keen, D. (2003). Demobilising Guatemala. (Crisis States Research Centre working papers series 1 37). Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Kruijt, D. (2024). Interviews with guerrilla leaders and military commanders in Latin America, 1959 to the 2000s. Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 60(4), 465–478. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2389261

Kruijt, D. (2024). The Central American guerrilla movements. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.1195

Lane, D. S., Lee, S. S., Liang, F., Kim, D. H., Shen, L., Weeks, B. E., & Kwak, N. (2019). Social media expression and the political self. Journal of Communication, 69(1), 49–72. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy064

Liebenguth, J., & Gricius, G. (2024). The nutritional turn towards crisis: a critical perspective. Critical Studies on Security, 12(3), 269–281. https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2024.2354577

Martínez, Susana S. (2008) "Guatemala as a National Crime Scene: Femicide and Impunity in Contemporary U.S. Detective Novels," Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Millett, Richard. “Guatemala: Progress and Paralysis.” Current History, vol. 84, no. 500, 1985, pp. 109–36. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/45315477. Accessed 28 July 2026.

Morales Blanco, Ninfa Mariela, Fabricio Gliemmo Mansanta, and Florencia Viviana Moscoso. “El proceso de gentrificación en Antigua Guatemala.” Libros de Cátedra (2022).

Morales Blanco, Ninfa Mariela. La historia gentrificada: Efectos de los procesos de patrimonialización y turistificación en el centro histórico de Antigua Guatemala. Diss. Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2021.

Omar, B., & Dequan, W. (2020). Watch, share or create: The influence of personality traits and user motivation on TikTok Mobile video usage. International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM), 14(04), 121. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v14i04.12429

Salzman, Ryan. “Exploring social media use and protest participation in Latin America.” Journal of Latin American communication research 5.2 (2015): 72-85.

Sippert, E. (2022). La red que crece: Platform Politics and Social Struggle in Neoliberal Guatemala. Latin American Perspectives, 49(6), 107-123. https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X221128536

Trivi, N. A., Moscoso, F. V., & Morales Blanco, N. M. (2023). Touristification and urban extractivism in Latin American destinations: Heritage and conflicts in Antigua Guatemala (Guatemala) and Cartagena de Indias

(Colombia). Journal of Urban Affairs, 46(6), 1205–1225. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2023.2242535

Wilson, Richard Ashby. “Digital Authoritarianism and The Global Assault on Human Rights.” Human Rights Quarterly, vol. 44 no. 4, 2022, p. 704-739. Project MUSE, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2022.0043.