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The Postville Raids 10 Years Later: A Reflection

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The Postville Raid 10 Year Later: A Reflection

Part of the journal section “Forum: (Re)presenting (Im)migration”



Linda Green “The Postville Raid 10 Years Later: A Reflection”

1. May 12th 2008:

2. Agriprocessors, a preeminent kosher meatpacking plant, was the site of the largest workplace raid in US history. 390 workers arrested out of the approximately 900 employed over three shifts. As is now well-known, hundreds ICE agents in riot gear and fully armed, alongside dozens of Iowa state police, descended on this small rural town of 2,000+ residents in northeast Iowa with its moniker “Hometown to the World.” Two thirds of the workers apprehended by ICE that day were Guatemalan nationals, mostly from rural communities in the Department of Chimaltenango where I have conducted ethnographic research since the 1980s on the effects of war and violence on peoples’ everyday lives (Green 1999; 2011).

3. The opening scenes from Luis Argueta’s harrowing film, *AbUSed* (2011), capture much of the confusion and fear on the day of the raid. As ICE agents rounded up, arrested and loaded men and women onto buses with blackened windows, others ran hoping to escape; terrified of what might happen to their families, especially their children. The next few days were chaotic for those unlucky enough to be caught up in the sweep, arrested on the dual charges of aggravated identity theft and knowingly and with intent to use false social security numbers. They were warehoused, quite literally, at the Waterloo National Cattle Congress where animal auctions are the norm.

4. As family members and community volunteers searched frantically to locate those who were arrested, for some the haunting memories of those disappeared [1] in Guatemala surfaced once again. I had the opportunity over the next several years to interview some of those who were deported back to Guatemala as well as family members who remained in Postville. A number recounted having witnessed firsthand, while others testified to the secondary effects of *la violencia* [2] in Guatemala in the 1970s and 80s, as kin and neighbors were snatched from their communities, some while tending their corn fields. Most never seen nor heard from again.

5. When I first heard about the raid a few weeks after it occurred, I was struck by its eerie similarities to counterinsurgency tactics of the Guatemalan military some twenty-five years earlier during its dirty war. While I am not suggesting that the raid could be equated in degree, intensity or consequences, with the brutal counterinsurgency that left over 200,000 people, mostly unarmed civilians, either dead or disappeared, the raid nonetheless was reminiscent of the heavily armed Guatemalan army swooping into rural communities rounding up whomever they could as helicopters hovered overhead. Echoes of a past only half forgotten nor fully remembered infuse the lives of the children and grandchildren of counterinsurgency (Levenson 2013).

6. For migrants without documents, the social landscape in the US increasingly resembles life in Guatemala, where chronic fear and uncertainty permeate peoples' everyday lives as they struggle to survive under increasingly repressive conditions. Unforeseen by most at the time of the raid, Postville would become a harbinger for a dystopian future for migrants and their families living in the United States. Barack Obama was rightly labeled the "deporter in chief" for the dramatic rise in deportations (in 2012 alone over 400,000) during his administration. In the final years Obama's terms deportations fell to 250,000. While deportations have increased by only 2% during Trump's first year in office, however, the number of arrests of undocumented migrants has increased 43% over the previous year (2016). ICE agents now routinely scour for people to arrest outside churches, as they drop their children at school, waiting at dawn in parking lots adjacent to apartment buildings where they live and even entering courthouses. Yet the vast majority of the migrants now being rounded up have no criminal record (Human Rights Watch 2017). The Trump administration, too, has signaled its willingness to reinstate workplace raids, an ICE tactic that had lost favor during Obama's presidency. In January 2018, for example, ICE agents raided 98 7-Eleven convenience stores across 17 states, yielding 21 arrests in total. As in Guatemala so too in the US, fear has become the arbiter of everyday life for many.

Neo-liberalism: Postville

7. In many ways Postville, like many rural communities across the Great Plains states became a microcosm of the neo-liberal economy at the cusp of the 21st century. Meatpacking plants have been a central feature of the rural Iowan landscape for much of the past century, yet by the 1980s changes in production and technologies reworked labor relations in significant ways (Grey, Devlin and Goldsmith 2009). The preferred labor pool was no longer local, mostly Anglo unionized workers, whose wages could sustain a middle class American family, but rather international refugees and migrants. Turnover rates skyrocketed as low pay and dangerous workplace conditions were the norm. Simultaneously, the

“farm crisis” took its toll on the resident population; as overproduction of agricultural commodities, particularly for export, precipitated a fall in prices, alongside rising production costs. By the 1990s many farms had taken on unsustainable debt, leading both to loss of land and outmigration by local residents, particularly youth.

Neo-liberalism: Guatemala

8. Guatemala is characterized by the World Bank as a middle developing country; its economy generates 35% of all the wealth in Central America. Yet a staggering 75% of the labor force work in the informal sector. And 80% of the Maya, who make up the majority of the population, live in poverty, 50% are illiterate and 80% suffer from chronic malnutrition including stunting. Moreover, it holds the distinction of having the sixth highest malnutrition rate in the world. And since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 Guatemala, alongside El Salvador and Honduras, consistently ranks among the top five of countries in the world not at war for homicide and femicide. [3]

9. The signing of the Peace Accords in Guatemala (1996) brought an end to the war that lasted nearly 4 decades, a war fought between the military and the armed insurgency, that claimed almost a quarter of a million lives, another one million internally displaced for some period of time and over 600 villages completely destroyed and countless others partially razed. The Accords by design did little to redress the marked social inequalities that permeated Guatemala society nor the virulent racism directed against the Mayan population. These central underpinnings lay at the heart of the insurgency and the popular movements’ demand for social justice. The negotiated settlement put into effect two conditions favorable to the continuation of war against the poor, mostly indigenous population: a neo-liberal economic model of austerity and impunity for the crimes committed in the name of counterinsurgency.

10. Beginning in the 1980s, even with the war ongoing, major changes were underway in agricultural production and technologies that had a substantive impact of rural people’s lives and livelihoods. [4] For centuries the Maya have grown their traditional rain-fed crops of corn, beans and squash on their milpa lands so protracted that the Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano, characterized them some 30 years ago as “plots of land the size of graves.” In lieu of agrarian reform, one of the key demands for which the war was fought, (Guatemala’s land distribution is one of the most unequal in all of Latin America according to its Gini co-efficient ranking), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) promoted through its loan program the growing of non-traditional crops, mostly winter vegetables, for export to the United States, by small peasant producers instead of their subsistence crops. This strategy of “comparative advantage” heavily promoted as part of neo-liberal economic policies, was first introduced with the signing of the Caribbean Basin Initiative under then President Ronald Reagan and advanced further under the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA 2005). Under these initiatives heavily subsidized American corn and soybeans were imported (from the Great Plains states) flooding the Guatemala domestic market and undercutting the local prices of small producers. These new global agricultural practices shifted the brunt of risk and failure to peasants. Moreover, the impact of austerity measures with its drastic reduction in social service expenditures and the lifting of price controls on basic goods left most rural families in more precarious conditions than before the war. Taken together, the risks imposed by crops for export, including loans financed by USAID, and the undermining of subsistence production placed peasant farmers at a

significant “comparative dis-advantage.” Unable to compete, many have lost their land due to some combination of crop failures, overproduction and by intractable debt. These rural families now face intensifying food insecurity. With climate change, the rain-dependent crops of corn and beans now suffer the vagaries of droughts. By some estimates rural peoples’ subsistence production has declined by 75% over the past two decades.

11. Simultaneously, USAID was also providing the financing for infrastructure of rural industrialization in the Guatemalan highlands. Large scale maquila factories employ several thousand workers, mostly young women, who assemble apparel for export. They are notorious for their labor right violations and human rights abuses. In one factory in the Department of Chimaltenango, all the assembly workers were Mayan adolescents, mostly young women. The work is repetitive, dangerous and abusive. Wage theft, hazardous working conditions and occupational safety issues are commonplace as is sexual harassment and abuse by non-indigenous supervisors and managers (2002). Dismissal was a constant threat, as long lines of potential workers waited outside the gates each day in hopes of procuring work. The pay, as little as \$4 per day for 10 -12 hour shifts, was dismal but the cash was critical as families struggled to survive under increasing levels of poverty and immiseration. Today the situation for many rural families is more precarious than it was a quarter century ago.

12. By the first decade of the 21st century Guatemalans from the Department of Chimaltenango were flocking to Postville with its promise of steady factory work. After years of war, followed by neo-liberal Peace Accords the possibilities for most semi-subsistence peasant production was moribund. Perhaps ironic, then these migrants, the descendants of the indigenous Mayan people, these “the People of Corn” moved to one of the highest yield corn- producing regions of Iowa. Neoliberal migration was one of the last options for procuring a future, what Chacon and Davis (2006) have poignantly described as “informal survival.”

13. Impunity too has permeated the social fabric in the rural countryside. At the community level some men who actively participated in the reign of state terror now hold positions of power in local institutions. Fear continues to be an effective mechanism of social control in everyday life, and where the calculations of whom to trust can lead to lethal consequences as guns, gangs and criminal enterprises rule. It is within this milieu many have decided to migrate in hope of creating a future for themselves and their families. As James Dunkerely (1994:46) argues the term ‘economic refugees’ may hide a much more complicated reality where the “... ‘push factor’ is far more complex and nasty than simple privation.” [\[5\]](#)

Rule of Law

14. The Postville Raid was also emblematic because it represented a more visible symbiosis between the US Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security with regard to the juridical processing of undocumented migrants charged with federal crimes. In his thoughtful and provocative essay Erik Camayd-Freixas (2008), a professor at Florida International University and a federally licensed court interpreter, describes the Waterloo court proceedings to which he was privy over a two-week period. In trailers as the makeshift courtrooms the arraignment of over 300 migrants was “fast tracked”. Led before the judge ten at a time hands and feet shackled, the migrants waved all their rights

of due process and agreed to a uniform Plea Deal drawn up by the Department of Justice in which the charges of aggravated identity theft were dropped in exchange for a guilty plea to “knowingly” and “intentionally” using false social security numbers.

15. According to Camayd what became increasingly clear over the ensuing days at the Cattle Congress was that most of the migrants did not understand the court proceedings nor the full extent of the charges against them. Many simply did not know what a social security number was, certainly a mitigating factor in jurisprudence. When they applied for work at Agriprocessors they simply filled out papers and paid a fee. In later interviews some migrants told me that over the course of their employment they had to renew their “papers” paying increasingly higher fees, some multiple times at the discretion of their supervisor. Most did not speak Spanish well. For a number of the migrants from Guatemala Spanish is their second language. Their lingua franca is one of the 22 indigenous languages, native to Guatemala. Most have had little or no schooling.

16. Moreover, for the migrants and their families the most difficult and seemingly inexplicable aspect of this spectacle was the mandatory five-month sentence in federal prison prior to deportation. The emotional strain and the monetary stress placed on families as they struggled to survive without any source of income in both Guatemala and the US was enormous. Even a few years later when I interviewed migrants and their families they continued to puzzle over “why were they put in jail and why they were not just send them home” (Green, nd). One of the federal judges involved in the case seemed to agree. He noted that this situation was extraordinary because the overwhelming majority of those sentenced had no prior convictions at all. Ordinarily, a judge in a federal court would have discretion in reducing a sentence under such circumstance. In this case the sentence was dictated in the Plea Agreement drawn up by DOJ and irreversible (Argueta 2010).

17. The parallels with Operation Streamline are noteworthy. Operation Streamline, an initiative between the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security in 2005 was designed as a “zero-tolerance” enforcement strategy along the US-Mexico border. In Tucson, AZ criminal proceedings began in January 2008 in US Federal District Court with the processing of forty migrants, captured in the Tucson sector, the 200 miles boundary between Arizona and the state of Sonora, Mexico, what was called at the time ground zero in the immigration war. Under Operation Streamline migrants are processed in court hearing en masse. Until quite recently like the migrants at the Cattle Congress, those accused were shackled hands and feet as they shuffled into the court proceedings. The migrants are represented by public defenders who may be responsible for dozens of clients at a time and may speak to them only hours before court. The entire criminal proceedings including initial appearance, plea and sentencing take place in a single day. The migrants are charged with “illegal entry”, that as part of their plea deal is reduced to a misdemeanor with prison sentences between 30-120 days prior to deportation. Although there are Spanish-speaking court interpreters, it is clear that many of the migrants do not understand what is going on. Perhaps because it is going too fast—many migrants have had only limited educational opportunities. For others it is obvious that Spanish is not their native language. In Arizona, in 2015 Operation Streamline cost \$120 million annually for the courtroom proceedings and \$50 million more for detention and incarceration.

18. Moreover, with this assembly line justice, it is nearly impossible for lawyers to provide their clients with adequate representation, particularly legitimate claims to immigration relief—such as asylum claims or U-visa eligibility. A decade later Operation Streamline continues apace in Tucson enacting a simulacrum of a justice system array, one that continues to make a mockery of the rule of law.

Hope, Dignity and Justice

19. Community members in Postville rallied around those left behind in the early hours and days after the raid but importantly in the months and years afterward. People came forward with material aid, with legal counsel, political support and solidarity from local people to dignitaries, like Rigoberta Menchú, representatives from the US Congress, such as Representative Luis Gutiérrez and faith communities across the country. Breaking the silence about what happened to whom was and is perhaps one of the most important strategies to undertake. As Guatemalans were unable to speak for themselves people in Postville and beyond, like Erik Camayd, Luis Argueta, Sonia Parras, David Vasquez, Sister Mary McCauley and countless others took up their cause and negotiated spaces where migrant voices could be heard.

20. The ongoing work of Jennifer Cooley at the University of Northern Iowa is particularly noteworthy. Using dramatization Cooley (2011) and her students make visible the multi-layered violence sitting just below the surface that migrants and their families experience on a regular basis. Many of her students like the Guatemalans of Postville are from mixed status families. Yet the violence imposed upon them remains mostly hidden, shored up silence and fear on the part of its recipients and by an indifference and historical amnesia on the part of the dominant society (Green 2008). This work follows in the very best tradition of resistance in Latin America, South Africa and the Philippines, among other places, as a weapon against exploitation and repression by making visible and vocal injustices perpetrated, using the arts, especially public theatre as a pedagogical tool of liberation.

21. Likewise across the US the sanctuary spaces—churches, whole cities and small towns are taking a public stance for the migrant people who are their neighbors, classmates and co-workers. The humanitarian groups, like No More Deaths and the Samaritans in Tucson where I live, follow the long tradition of solidarity dating back to the first wave of Central Americans seeking refugee during the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s. Today, Dreamers, alongside the countless other people across the US, with and without documents, are struggling for dignity, justice and a hope for a future for everyone, no matter what side of the border you are on.

[1] Disappeared – the act of someone being secretly abducted or imprisoned, but whose whereabouts is never acknowledged. Most are tortured and killed, never to be heard from or seen again. Guatemala was one of the first countries (in 1966) to use this method as a general practice of terror.

[2] The campaign of state terror that took place in the rural highlands of Guatemala during the 1970 s and 1980s was aimed directly at unarmed, mostly Mayan civilians as well as the armed guerrilla groups known collectively as the URNG. The repression including massacres, kidnappings and disappearances was talked about in public discourse during that period as simply la violencia or la situación.

[3] Femicide is the killing of women and girls. It is a gender-based hate crime perpetrated by men.

[4] During the worst year of the counterinsurgency war over 1 million people were internally displaced for some period of time. Many hid in the mountains, others fled to Mexico and some to the United States. In the Department of Chimaltenango where the vast majority of those living in Postville were from, between the years 1981 and 1983 when la violencia was at its peak in the central highlands many communities had no corn harvests at all.

[5] The first extensive displacement of Mayan people during the 20th century took place during the genocidal war. One million displaced internally; tens of thousands, seeking asylum in the US, mostly refused. “Economic refugees,” President Reagan called them. The second exodus has been described in the following terms: “Month by month millions leave their homelands. They leave because there is nothing there, except their everything, which does not offer enough to feed their children. Once it did. This is the power of the new capitalism.” John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear* (2007:24). After negotiated Peace Accords (1996) the twin processes of dispossession and dislocation accelerated, wrecking havoc. The “free market” came to the altiplano; now most everything is commoditized; the country returned to “democracy” with redressed generals in civilian guise in charge. Austerity, impunity and extractive industries were called the backbone of “development”. Young able-bodied men fled first; those with access to cash or collateral for their lands. Then middle age men, youth, women alone all heading to El Norte. El sueño americano is not so much to live lavishly, in the American consumerist sense, but to survive with dignity, without fear. Many have made it; others have not; disappeared while crossing Mexico or died, mostly of thirst, in the Sonoran Desert. For indigenous peoples this is an ethnocide as they are torn from their history and their kin.

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