Published in *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies: A Metahistory of Material Practices of Power*. Ed. Sangeeta Ray and Henry Schwarz. London: Wiley-Blackwell. 2016.

Guerrillas in Latin America

Christian Kroll-Bryce (Reed College)

Perhaps no other political subjectivity embodies to such a degree both the aspirations and fears of Latin Americans as the guerrilla. A "freedom fighter" for some, a criminal for others, the guerrilla is undeniably intertwined in highly complex ways with the socio-political development of Latin America during the twentieth century, specially so after the 1959 Cuban Revolution when guerrilla organizations multiplied throughout the region. Despite the military defeat of almost all guerrillas, they were undoubtedly instrumental in altering the relation of forces between the government and the governed by fostering diverse processes of democratization that led, in various degrees, to increased political participation and representation of hitherto excluded segments of the population. As such, guerrillas represent, regardless of their ideological differences, the entry of the equality principle on a regional level in national-spaces that had mostly imagined and structured themselves as two-tiered societies in which a large segment of the population—Indians, minorities and even women—had for all practical purposes been excluded. In this sense, guerrilla organizations and the revolutionary wars they waged against Latin America States were not the continuation but the very irruption of politics on a regional scale: what was at stake was not the redistribution of roles and parts but, ultimately, the very definition of the principles that were to organize life in common. Yet, even if their political horizon was other, guerrilla organizations ultimately reproduced many of the underlying logics, discourses and material practices of State reason, revealing thereby a seeming incommensurability between the State form and the aspirations of the subaltern.

Guerrilla warfare has without a doubt been a steady feature of political and military struggle since ancient times. Although ever changing, it has been mostly related to the aspirations of the weak and powerless against the strong and powerful, which not necessarily implies that guerrilla warfare has been the exclusive domain of emancipatory struggles, the protracted warfare of the CIA-supported Contra against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua being a case in point. It is generally assumed that modern guerrilla warfare and, especially, the figure of the guerrilla as a

distinct political subjectivity begins with the Spanish partisan insurrection against Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in the early nineteenth century. As a military strategy, modern guerrilla warfare unique characteristic lies in the fact that it acts mostly as an independent military force. Yet, despite Marx and Engels's chief influence in revolutionary thought and practice, the notion of guerrilla warfare as a 'revolutionary war' was first introduced in the nineteenth century by the Italian radical Carlo Bianco, who realized the political dimension of guerrilla warfare in and of itself in his quest to liberate Italy from foreign and domestic tyrants. Likewise, it was Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881) who initially articulated the need for a central command that could discipline, coordinate and direct cadres during revolutionary war, what Lenin years later would call the Vanguard Party. Lenin, however, regarded guerrilla struggle as a sometimes-necessary component of revolutionary war that had to be directly connected to the workers' struggle and subsumed under the authority of the Party. It was Mao Tse-Tung who fully linked Marxist-Leninist political theory with the conceptualization of guerrilla warfare as a people's "revolutionary war"; yet, for him, guerrilla warfare was still a component of revolutionary war, and the guerrilla organization itself, even if acting independently, had to remain connected to a regular army. It was only with Ernesto Guevara and Regis Debray's *foquista* approach that guerrilla warfare became fully independent from a regular army, a vanguard party or any other sort of controlling body.

Throughout this development, guerrillas have had four main roles or aims: (1) fighting wars of national liberation or decolonization against an imperial or colonial occupier; (2) attaining political or socioeconomic concessions from incumbent regimes; (3) helping separatists or minority movements create new political entities; and (4) overthrowing unpopular, commonly authoritarian and repressive local governments in order to take control of the State. By the late 1950s, when the first wave of guerrilla warfare in Latin America began, most national-states had been independent and, at least nominally, politically autonomous for more than a century. Thus guerrilla organizations in Latin America cannot be conceptualized, in the strict sense of the term, as national liberation movements against an occupying colonial or imperial power, as was the case in Africa and southern Asia, but rather as leading a revolutionary war against a local central government. Even if the patriotic-nationalist aspects of these revolutionary struggles were of paramount importance, the horizon of guerrilla warfare in Latin America was not defending or

outlining a national territory but rather defining, within an already-given geographical space, the set of political and economic principles that ought to organize life in common. Yet, the 1959 Cuban and 1979 Nicaraguan Revolutions, the only two successful revolutionary struggles led by guerrilla organizations in Latin America, might be thought of as national liberation movements against ruthless, locally-born dictators—Batista in Cuba and Somoza in Nicaragua—that had successfully coopted every aspect of daily life, restricted political participation across the board and curtailed the elite's economic aspirations.

There is no doubt that the pivotal moment in Latin America's revolutionary process in the second part of the twentieth-century was the 1959 Cuban Revolution. As Greg Grandin argues, the Cuban Revolution was "the first in Latin America to fully understand itself as 'world historical'" (32), that is, to consciously be aware that it was participating in a global revolutionary process in which it was to play an instrumental role, specially so in its direct sphere of influence: Latin America. Even if informed by socialist and communist ideas and aspirations, Fidel Castro did not have a clear ideological position when he took over power and only became aligned with socialism after the 1961 sugar and missile crises. Moreover, the Castro-Guevarist *foquista* approach to guerrilla warfare was only given a theoretical dimension retrospectively by Ernesto Guevara and Regis Debray. The *foquista* approach essentially held that a small group of cadres could foster the subjective conditions necessary for revolution by becoming a hub or *foco* for popular discontent that would, with time, lead to a popular insurrection against the incumbent regime, which was precisely what happened in Cuba (see Guevera's *Guerrilla Warfare* for a detailed description of the *foquista* approach). Yet, the Cuban Revolution was successful not only because of the alleged moral superiority of the guerrillas and their willingness to sacrifice in the name of the people, as the official narrative tends to suggest, but also because of various specific conditions such as Castro's savvy manipulation of local and international media, the financial help and support he received from the Cuban bourgeoisie, the workers' struggles in town and cities throughout the country, and the U.S. government's withdrawal of support for Batista and the ensuing arms embargo it imposed on the regime.

Besides Nicaragua, where similar conditions greatly enabled the triumph of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in the late 1970s, the attempt to reproduce the success of the

Cuban Revolution in other Latin American countries failed not because guerrilla organizations were not revolutionary enough, couldn't correctly apply *foquista* theory or lacked the necessary ethos of sacrifice. Instead, they failed largely because the Kantian enthusiasm generated by the Cuban Revolution and its narrative led many prospective revolutionaries in the following decades to the uncritical adoption of *foquismo* to countries where the conditions that had largely enabled the Cuban Revolution to succeed were not present. Likewise, given the success of the Cuban Revolution within the framework of the Cold War, Latin American States and elites, with the active support of the United States government, became increasingly obsessed about containing "the spread of communism," which was seen as a threat to their way of life. Consequently, guerrilla organizations and social mass movements were met with absolute force, a force that did not usually distinguish between combatants, supporters, or civilians. In this sense, the Cuban Revolution became not only the main inspiration for later guerrilla organizations, but also, and with the exception of Nicaragua, the condition of impossibility for subsequent revolutionary struggles in Latin America.

Despite the heated polemics it generated among the Latin American left, Guevara's *foquista* prescription, backed up by the success of the Cuban Revolution, did resonate within Latin American prospective, mostly young, revolutionaries largely because it was a call for the immediate taking up of arms that highlighted the individual's determination to struggle and sacrifice. The revolution, the recipe posited, could be made regardless of ideology, political education, military training, the presence of a Party, or the time-consuming process of organizing the masses. What mattered, instead, was the guerrilla's commitment to social change, its revolutionary spirit and the belief that he—indeed, he—could become, by the pure power of his will and faith in the moral superiority of his cause and ultimate goals, the armed vanguard of the people. This was, for Guevara, the "New Man" that would bring about a new historical time, an era of justice, equality and human solidarity.

The religious undertone of Guevara's conceptualization of guerrilla subjectivity was particularly appealing to an audience of middle-class disenchanted and educated individuals who had been raised on Christian values and could imagine themselves as redeemers of the people. Guevara's pedagogy, unmistakably based on a system of rewards and punishments delineated in clearly

Christian terms, is clearly a normative narrative of liberation grounded on imperial/colonial reason in which the vanguard would guide the masses towards their own salvation, a process that would in turn allow them to transcend, it seems, a certain pre-modern or lesser state. Guevara's conceptualization of the New Man and the process of subjectivation activated by the revolution not only carries traces of Ginés de Sepúlveda's arguments in the Valladolid debates, Kant's culpable immaturity and Hegel's philosophy of universal history, but also alliterations of developmentalism, the idea of progress, and the supremacy of individual agency inherent to capitalism.

The list of guerrilla organizations that adopted a *foquista* approach on the wake of the Cuban Revolution and were eventually defeated by national armies is extensive, but relevant examples include the Guatemalan Revolutionary Movement 13th November (MR-13) and the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), both founded by disaffected officers of the Guatemalan Army; the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) in Peru; and the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN), headed by Liberation Theology exponents. Even if Guevara and Debray explicitly conceptualized the *foquista* approach as rural in nature, it was nonetheless also adopted for urban guerrilla warfare by, for instance, the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) and the Montoneros in Argentine; the Uruguayan Tupamaros National Liberation Movement; and the Chilean Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). An exception to the norm, Mexico's guerrilla organizations, heirs to the Mexican Revolution, were largely grounded on peasants' movements concerned more with specific local needs such as land tenancy than with the attainment of a socialist or communist society. As such, guerrilla organizations on Mexico were usually the armed expression of an already organized and politically aware peasantry in no need of a *foco.* The Peasants' Brigade Against Injustice—the armed wing of the Party of the Poor—is the paramount example of Mexico's peasant guerrillas.

By the early 1970s, however, a new crop of Latin American revolutionaries began to recognize the limitations of the Castroist-Guevarist line, opting to combine the *foco* approach with the active political mobilization of both the rural indigenous population and the urban middle class. Even Regis Debray came to the realization, as expressed in his 1974 *Critique of Arms,* that the *foco* theory he helped developed had been disproven by experience, mostly because it

emphasized military struggle and downplayed the importance of local politics and mass-organization. Although controlling the State was still the ultimate goal, so-called second wave guerrilla organization in Latin American changed the political emphasis of their struggle from the attainment of a socialist society to a more reformist approach that included recognition of indigenous rights, increased political participation and representation, and a more egalitarian partition of the socio-economic. Guerrilla organizations of this second wave of revolutionary struggles include the already-mentioned Sandinistas in Nicaragua; the Organization of the People in Arms (OPRA), the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and a regrouped version of the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) in Guatemala, which then formed in the early 1980s the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG) as an umbrella organization; the Salvadorian Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in 1980; and the Colombian 19th of April Movement (M-19).

The viciously successful Dirty Wars waged by the military in countries such as Argentine, Chile, Uruguay, El Salvador and Guatemala against guerrilla organizations, militants and supporters, coupled with the winding down of the Cold War and mounting international pressure, led to a gradual transition from military regimes to civilian-elected governments, a process that began in Ecuador (1979) and Peru (1980), and was soon followed by Argentine (1983), Guatemala (1986) and Chile (1990). By the late 1980s and early 1990s—the Sandinistas' defeat in the 1990 national elections being a watershed event for lingering revolutionary aspirations—guerrillas throughout Latin America had been militarily defeated or given up on the one objective they all had hitherto shared: reaching the capital city to take over power and re-found the State according to some version of socialism or communism. They opted instead to lay down their arms and, in cases such as Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala, become part of the political party system.

Throughout this process, that is, from the Cuban Revolution up to the late 1980s, guerrilla organizations and their leaders were caught in their own contradictions stemming from what can retrospectively be regarded as a seemingly insurmountable gap between, on the one hand, their well-intended yet ultimately problematic self-proclamation as liberators and redeemers of the people, and, on the other hand, their inability or reluctance to question, challenge or reconceptualize the underlying logics, discourses, and imperial practices of State sovereignty,

which they ended up reproducing in various degrees. Their conceptualization of the political struggle was thus largely influenced, and perhaps even determined, by structuring dichotomies such as friend-enemy, criollo-indigenous, and men-women. Moreover, indigenous peasants almost never occupied leadership positions or had any significant influence in the political decisions of the guerrilla, not even by the end of the 1970s when they comprised the majority of combatants. Likewise, even if women's active participation in guerrilla organizations markedly grew during the late 1970s and early 1980s, they never comprised more than 20 to 25 percent of combatants, were mostly relegated to communication, logistics and organizational tasks, and only rarely assumed leadership positions, thereby showing the degree to which guerrilla organizations were permeated by hegemonic discourses on masculinity and patriarchal conceptualizations of gender.

Moreover, the guerrillas' conceptualization of their own political subjectivity also carried the mark of imperial, sovereign reason, and therefore found themselves in a conundrum they were not able to solve, and which greatly precluded the possibility of substantial change. On the one hand, the bourgeoisie leaders of guerrilla organizations impose their own demands and vision of the future throughout the course of the struggle; yet, they were not the collective agent in Lenin's sense of the term. On the other hand, conversely, despite speaking and fighting in the name of the subaltern, guerrilla organizations were not peasant, indigenous or popular movements since these groups did not place on the entire course of the revolution their own demands or vision for the future, and therefore were not the collective agent struggling for self-determination. Caught up between a State they did not recognize and subaltern groups whose aspirations they did not really understand or could fully represent, the Latin America guerrillas thus reveal the persisting inability or impossibility of forging horizontal inter-class and inter-ethnic alliances able to contest the State and the interests its represents, exposing thereby the seeming incommensurability between the imperial/colonial practices and aspirations of Latin American States and national elites, and peasant and indigenous conceptualization and practices of communal organization whose point of reference has never been State sovereignty. In this sense, Latin American guerrillas reveal the degree to which Latin America States have successfully been able to articulate the nation within the frame of a duplicitous logic of fraternization by means of which the subaltern, despite the State's discourses of all-encompassing brotherhood, is

included in the community of brothers only through its exclusion: her absolute obedience expected, her protection never guaranteed.

Against this background, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), which has been intentionally been left out of the previous discussion, does not only represent the beginning of a new path for emancipatory impulses, but also the end of what can be called the guerrilla approach to oppositional (revolutionary) struggles in Latin America. Up until the EZLN's uprising on January 1, 1994, guerrillas and other insurgent organizations posited as the horizon of their struggle a prescribed, redeeming future, dividing thereby the political in clear Schmittian terms between friends and enemies of the revolution. The EZLN, for its part, has refused from the very beginning to close the field of possibilities, opting instead for a dialogic path in which the struggle's end-result and the future itself are unknown and therefore open to ongoing construction. The EZLN thus marks the appearance of a new relation between insurgency, emancipatory impulses and the State, whose most defining characteristic might well be the dismissal of the State as the compulsory reference for emancipatory struggles.

In any case, the legacy and memory of guerrilla warfare, the guerrilla's own subjectivity and the overall socio-political interpretation of Latin America's revolutionary decades remain a deeply contested affair. Nowadays that the armed option seems unviable unless, as was the case with the EZLN, it serves a purely symbolic purpose, the currency and valence of past guerrilla movements and revolutionary processes does not lie in their strategic or tactical dimensions, or in the exhaustive analysis of the socio-political conditions that enabled or hindered their success. What seems to matter the most for future emancipatory or oppositional political practices is rather the guerrillas' relation with subaltern and popular sectors, the multiplicity of local and regional networks they were able to forge, and the complex ways in which they and the State produced and reproduced each other. Even if relevant studies on how or why subaltern elements such as women, peasants and/or indigenous decided to join guerrilla organizations, remain neutral or side with the State have appeared in recent years, a comparative, interpretative and demystifying historicity of Latin America's guerrilla organizations remains to be written. If it is true that the State no longer is the compulsory point of reference for emancipatory impulses, a fuller understanding of the guerrilla's political subjectivity might also prove essential to rethink

and reimagine material practices that do not end up ultimately reproducing imperial/colonial ones.

References and Further Reading

Debray, Régis. 1967. *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Gott, Richard. 1970. *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. London: Nelson.

Grandin, Greg. 2010. "Living in Revolutionary Time. Coming to Terms with the Violence of Latin America's Long Cold War." In *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence During Latin America's Long Cold War,* edited by Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph, 1-42. Durham: Duke University Press.

Guevara, Ernesto. 1987. "Socialism and Man in Cuba." In *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution: Writing and Speeches of Ernesto Che Guevara,* edited by David Deutschmann, 246-61. Sydney: Pathfinder.

Guevara, Ernesto. 2006. *La guerra de guerrillas* [*Guerrilla Warfare*]. Australia: Ocean Press.

Kampwirth, Karen. 2004. *Feminism and the legacy of revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas.* Athens: Ohio University Press.

Kohl, James and John Litt. 1974. *Urban Guerrilla Warfare in Latin America.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Taber, Robert. 2002 [1965]. *War of the Flea. The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare.* Washington, D.C.: Brassey's INC.

Wickham-Crowley, Timothy P. 1993. *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.