

DAY FIVE

*One expert witness testified before Judge Pedraz on Friday, May 30, completing the second round of hearings in the international Guatemala genocide case. **Marta Elena Casaús Arzú** holds a doctorate in Political Science and Sociology and is professor of the History of the Americas at the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM). She has been the principal researcher on numerous studies concerning racism and intellectual development in Central America. Among her most recent publications are Guatemala: linaje y racismo (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2007); Las redes intelectuales centroamericanas: un siglo de imaginarios nacionales (1820-1920) (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2005); and La metamorfosis del racismo en Guatemala (Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 2002).*

My studies have been focused on racism; I study the racist nature of the Guatemalan state. Racism is a historical and structural element of Guatemala. The racist state was constructed based on the exclusion of the indigenous. Within this construct, the indigenous was not considered a citizen.

How has racism evolved? Racism began in service of a caste society, which held an image of the Indian as a savage. Since the 19th century, the Guatemalan state has used violence to control indigenous communities. Instead of doing what other American states, like Mexico, did in celebrating *mestizaje* (citizens of mixed race) and incorporating this wider group into nationhood, the Guatemalan state defined itself as a white state. The idea was never to mix with Indians, but rather to keep them in their place. The whites were considered superior. In this sense, Guatemalans looked to Argentina as a model during the 1920s. In the press, editorials would call for migration from Argentina and other countries in order to improve the Guatemalan race.

There was never an agrarian reform, as there was in many other countries in Latin America, at least not after 1954. But during the brief, democratic period from 1944-1954, the indigenous consolidated their position as *campesinos*. They became the authors of their own story and began to incorporate themselves into political life, which was troubling to the elite. In the collective Ladino imagination there was a permanent fear that if the “Indians” gained power, they would rise up and take revenge on the whites. This fear persists today.

In the 1970s, the indigenous began to incorporate into the armed conflict. The response of the state was the massacre of Panzós in 1978, one of the first powerful signs of the attack to come and the dehumanization of the *indio* by the military.

Two years later, in 1980, when the Indians took over the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City, it was an invasion of urban space by *campesinos* who didn’t “belong” there. The Spanish embassy massacre was a turning point. The elites blamed [Ambassador Maximo] Cajal for siding with the wrong people – he was considered a traitor to his race. It was the only way they could explain what happened, consistent with their world view. And when the government lost international face over the massacre, it had nothing left to lose by moving to indiscriminate killing.

The state and the power elites perceived a threat from the indigenous, and society accepted that it was the right moment to act against them. The fear of rebellion and the overlapping desire to exterminate the “Indians” united in a historical-political moment that would lead to ethnocide. The elites believed that there was no other form to address the conflict than with systematic violence and genocide, and the racist attitudes of the army high command contributed to the execution of the genocidal acts.

I wanted to look more closely at this question of racism within the dominant culture. I interviewed 110 elite Guatemalans, many of whom graduated from top schools in the United States, in order to understand their attitudes about race. One of the questions I asked was, “What is the solution that you would propose to better integrate the indigenous communities into national life?” The answer of one businessman, aged 49, was typical of others interviewed. He said, “The only solution for those people would be a strong dictatorship, a Mussolini or a Hitler that would force them to work or to educate themselves. Either that or wipe them out altogether.”

That is the kind of thinking that leads to genocide.

When the Ríos Montt government took over in 1982, many of the people in the elite who shared these views became part of the government and its major backers. Combined with this attitude was a variant of Pentecostalism that held that the Indians who did not accept the Pentecostal view were damned and did not really have souls. So it was easy to dehumanize them.

And even after there was no longer any threat from the guerrilla, why did the state continue massacring the indigenous population? Because the political and military elite wanted to teach them a lesson, to make sure they never even *thought* about rising up again.

If we look at Guatemala today we find that not much has changed, to the extent that the underlying economic conditions and the underlying racism are very similar to what they were during the conflict. The structure of the racist state remains intact and there has not been real legislative change, nor change in the justice system nor in the economic structure. The racist state continues functioning with the same logics of exclusion, discrimination and extermination, and generalized violence continues being one of the principle evils of the country.

And if all that is true, then why should we not seriously consider the possibility of a revival of genocide in Guatemala?

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