

PUBLIC MEMORY AND POLITICAL POWER IN GUATEMALA'S POSTCONFLICT LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT. Landscape interpretation, or “reading” the landscape, is one of cultural geography’s standard practices. Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to reading landscapes transformed by insurgency movements or civil wars. Those landscapes can tell us a great deal about past and present political and social relationships as well as continuing power struggles. Guatemala presents a complicated postwar landscape “text” in which the struggle for power continues by many means and media, including how the war is portrayed on memorials, and in which the Catholic Church and the military/state are the two main competing powers. This essay explores some of the images and the text presented in Guatemala’s postconflict landscape through contrasting landmarks and memorials associated with the country’s thirty-six-year-long civil war that formally ended in 1996. *Keywords:* Catholic Church, Guatemala, memorials, military, postconflict landscape.

Landmarks and memorials in a landscape, overt or discreet, play a powerful role in telling us about people’s values, history, struggles, and successes. Cultural geographers have a long and rich history of recording and “reading” the landscape for both its obvious stories and its subtler ones (Lewis 1983). The types of landscapes and landmarks studied by geographers have varied widely. Traditionally, landscape studies have focused on material features related to indigenous and ethnic cultures, such as vernacular architecture, religious icons, settlements forms, sacred spaces, and agricultural landforms (see, for example, Sauer 1925; Jordan 1982, 1985; Domosh 1989; Kniffen 1990; Hobbs 1995). More recently, socially and politically oriented landscape studies have examined messages communicated by buildings, landmarks, and memorials (Craig 1978; Cosgrove 1984; Harvey 1985; Lowenthal 1985; Hershkovitz 1993; Gillis 1994; Fallah 1996; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Till 1999, 2003). Most of these studies focus on landscapes in developed nations and within the context of contestation, but not on open insurgency or warfare. Postrevolutionary or postconflict landscapes in countries like Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, or Guatemala have received less attention from geographers. A partial exception is the article by Kenneth Foote, Attila Tóth, and Anett Árvay (2000), which analyzed the change in political monuments and historical shrines in Hungary after the fall of the communist government in 1989. Even Hungary, however, contrasts with these other countries in that the recent transition from communism was largely peaceful.

Perhaps the absence of postconflict landscape analyses is not surprising, given that, in areas where military conflicts subsided only recently, landmarks are less common and much more subtle. Power relationships in such landscapes may still be “settling,” so that no one side can claim public space in which to construct obvi-

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