

Book Review

Journeys of Fear: Refugee Return and National Transformation in Guatemala



Edited by Liisa North and Alan Simmons
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999
337 pages, integrated bibliography
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This book is a very important contribution to knowledge about refugee repatriation because it challenges assumptions widely held in the international research and policy literature. The findings are particularly compelling because they arise from a team research project that, over several years, examined details of the return process and its national and international context. The study started in the early 1990s as Guatemalan refugees began their collective, largely self-organized return from Mexico, well before the 1996 Guatemalan Peace Accord. The research project followed events through to 1998, when the return flow had dwindled to a trickle, even though only half of those who were expected to return had done so. By the end of the study, much was known about how returning refugees had fared in the post-Peace Accord era. The findings—reported in fifteen carefully researched chapters, including substantive integrating chapters (introduction and conclusions) by research team leaders North and Simmons—brilliantly illuminate the Guatemalan case. Perhaps more important, in challenging common views about refugee repatriation, the volume suggests the need for new perspectives.

There has not been enough research on refugee repatriation, particularly in relationship to peace agreements. It has been a mantra that there cannot be peace unless the peace agreement settles the refugee issue. I have repeated that mantra often enough myself. The documented material in this volume tells a different story.

For example, in the Guatemalan civil war, one unique development was an agreement made directly between the refugees and the Guatemalan government. “The internationally mediated accord established between organized refugees and the Guatemalan government provided formal guarantees for the security of the returnees” (Castillo 133), but, as the author continues, “the implementation of

the accord was uneven and the return process was fraught with uncertainty.” More baldly put, there was a wide gap between what the peace agreement provided and what actually happened. Yet the peace agreement held, despite inadequate implementation of the refugee provisions.

Critical to the peace agreement were the witnesses, including the NGOs, who legitimated the process and act as moral sources of authority for dispensation of reconstruction funds. Further, to access the funds, conditions are placed on their use, which allow needed changes to take place. As Levitt (chapter 13) tells the story, the accompanying NGOs were mobilizing agents because they facilitated institutional and policy reform, providing legitimacy and access to resources, and witnessing implementation of the peace agreement.

If successful implementation of refugee repatriation is not essential to maintenance of a peace agreement, and the work of NGOs is, ironically, more critical, even though they are present to assist in that repatriation, do repatriated refugees help to keep the peace by acting as agents of change? Again, the research belies this notion. “Overall, it appears that the refugees, despite their transformative goals and new perspectives and skills, had a limited impact on home communities during the years immediately following their return. Their modest contribution to change may be largely explained by the fact that resistance to deeper transformation has been overwhelming in Guatemala” (North and Simmons concluding chapter, 288)

In other words, successful settlement of the refugee issue is not a necessary condition for ending a conflict. Further, repatriated refugees are not the catalyst for change that ensures that the peace is kept. Ironically, perhaps the refugees have an indirect responsibility for ensuring that resurgence of the conflict is avoided and for building the

new grounds for maintaining the peace, because of the NGOs who come to witness and assist in the return.

In fact, returnees often contribute, unintentionally, to continuation of the conflict or instigation of new conflicts. North and Simmons point to the impediments that came from the returnees themselves to the transformative project, including the conflict between the back-to-the-land movement and the propensity of those living in rural areas to migrate to cities (chapter by Gellert), landlords' increasing dependence on seasonal jobs for survival (chapter by Castillo), and the inherent conservatism of the attempt to reestablish communities (concluding chapter by the editors). The evidence arising from several chapters and documented in the conclusion to the volume goes further. Chapters by Poitevin, de Villa and Lovell, and Fonseca detail the problems inherent in land distribution, political power, and political structures that gave rise to military intimidation and government laxity in fulfilling the terms of land distribution as provided in the peace agreement. These were not the only impediments to transformation. Differences between the returnees and those who never left generated conflict and made the return difficult. These tensions were exacerbated by desires to control development funding and resources (chapter by Egan), conflicts over positions and administrative structures, as well as resistance to the new role of women that arose from their experiences in the camps. The volume provides excellent detail on the gender, ethnic, and identity dimensions of these processes (chapters by Torres, Crosby, Blacklock, and Nolin-Hanlon). It also examines the roles of non-government organizations, foreign governments, and the United Nations in the return and peace processes (chapters by Levitt, Baranyi, and Patroni and Gronau).

In other words, the facts belie our beliefs. Refugee repatriation may not be a necessary condition for avoiding conflict or keeping the peace and may even be a source for new conflicts.

Good research sometimes confounds our most cherished beliefs.

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