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Conundrums or Non Sequiturs? The Case of Vicente Menchú

David Stoll

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Middlebury College

Jorge Rogachevsky acknowledges some of the nuances of my argument, which I appreciate, but he misses others, and I'm not convinced that he has found any conundrums. Why is it a conundrum to find truth in Rigoberta's account of repression but question it at the same time? Why is it a conundrum to have a critical attitude toward her story and accept her legitimacy as a Mayan leader? Why does critiquing the revolutionary interpretation of events mean portraying the Mayas "solely as victims" or denying their role as protagonists? These are not conundrums; they are non sequiturs, which result from interpreting Rigoberta's story and people in simplistic, polarized terms.

My two books about northern Quiché Department, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (1993) and *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1998), do not deny that some Mayas supported the guerrillas, for a variety of reasons including class consciousness. However, I do question portrayals of the Mayas as "a rebellious class with its own agenda and activism." So should anyone who realizes that the Mayas are not a single social class, that their response to the guerrillas was varied and complex, and that even those who joined the insurgency have very critical attitudes toward it, including the Nobel laureate and the Maya movement. I expect that if Rogachevsky talked with as many disillusioned guerrilla supporters in northern Quiché as I did, he would also feel obliged to question the revolutionary "ideological lens" of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Since Rogachevsky believes that my portrait of the Menchús is based on "fragmentary and contradictory data," (21) let's go over various points.

First, was Rigoberta really unschooled and illiterate? According to relatives, neighbors, six classmates, one of her Uspantán teachers, and at least three nuns of the Sacred Heart order, interviewed by myself and/or Larry Rohter of *The New York Times*, Rigoberta attended the public school in Uspantán and three Catholic boarding schools. According to Rigoberta, she merely received some informal instruction while working as a maid at one of these institutions, the Colegio Belga--a version which a Sacred Heart nun seconded when a Guatemalan newspaper asked her for comment. But what about the other three schools? Does Rogachevsky think Rigoberta's relatives, neighbors and fellow students made this up? Or that Larry Rohter and I made it up? What about the classmates who told me how they studied and scrubbed at the Belga, along with Rigoberta and other scholarship students, in an accelerated primary program so they could attend the Sacred Heart's boarding school in Chiantla, Huehuetenango, where they and others corroborate that Rigoberta was in eighth grade when her parents were killed? As a professor of literature, does Rogachevsky really think that she could talk about culture, consciousness-raising, class, ethnicity and gender the way she did with a few months of broom-closet education?

The Nobel laureate's denials about her education don't show us that the truth, in Rogachevsky's words, "may be as elusive as the rabbit that Alice chased down the hole." Instead, they show how the laureate will continue undermining her own credibility long after the damage caused by my book could have been repaired with a few strategic admissions. The Guatemalan left could score strong gains in coming elections and Rigoberta is an obvious presidential candidate. Unfortunately, her apologists have encouraged her to believe that she can deny basic facts about her life, of the kind that we expect from any public figure. Obtaining an eighth grade education is not a crime, nor was covering it up for tactical reasons twenty years ago, when a dictatorship could have retaliated against the Catholic nuns who smuggled her to safety. However, denying her education two decades later is hard to excuse, particularly if Rigoberta is supposed to represent her people's hopes for accountability.

Second, were Vicente Menchú's land conflicts mainly with avaricious ladino plantation owners, as described by Rigoberta, or mainly with his K'iche' Maya in-laws, the Tums of Laguna Danta, as described by relatives, neighbors and ex-town officials who remember dealing with the dispute? Here's a tally of the petitions that I found in the Chimel file at the National Institute for Agrarian Transformation (INTA). Fifteen from 1961 to 1978 were from Vicente Menchú, plus four others from his companions in Chimel. The majority of the nineteen appeals were for INTA to accelerate its deliberations, but five made complaints against other K'iche' smallholders, chiefly the Tums of Laguna Danta. Only one of the nineteen petitions was directed against a ladino. As for Vicente's in-laws the Tums, they filed seventeen counter-petitions from 1966 to 1979, mainly against him and his supporters. There were also twenty-five petitions

from four other groups of smallholders--including two dissident factions within Chimel, who petitioned against Vicente, plus two newly arrived groups of claimants, who petitioned against the Tums, Vicente and each other. Because most of the competing petitioners were K'iche' Mayas, nearly all the petitions were aimed against each other rather than ladinos.

Third, was Vicente a founder of the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC)? According to Rigoberta, ladino plantation owners were so intent on seizing Chimel's land that Vicente became an itinerant peasant organizer for CUC, an organization which vouched for the EGP's claims to represent an insurrectionary peasantry. Why do I doubt Rigoberta's stories that he helped start CUC?

1. When Vicente died at the Spanish embassy in January 1980, CUC published obituaries of five members who perished alongside him, but not of Vicente. Instead, CUC referred to him as part of "a group of Ixil and Quiché compañeros, accompanied by five compañeros of CUC."
2. I could not find any CUC publication that referred to Vicente as a member, even after he was dead and CUC could honor him as a martyr, as it did other fallen members.
3. I could not find any reference to Vicente as a CUC member until his daughter told her story in Paris, two years after his death.
4. I could not find any neighbors or relatives who recalled him being involved with CUC, although some told me how he had become involved with the EGP.
5. During the late 1970s when Rigoberta says that he left his village to organize other communities for CUC, several Peace Corps volunteers told me they were working with him in Chimel.
6. The records of his land disputes with his in-laws also indicate that he was living in Chimel in the late 1970s.

Fourth, was Vicente used by the Robin García Revolutionary Student Front, the EGP affiliate that led the occupation of the Spanish embassy where he and thirty-five others died? Rogachevsky is offended by a student's recollections of the planning between the Quiché peasants and the ladino students who led them to the embassy ("They would tell Don Vicente, 'Say, the people united will never be defeated,' and Don Vicente would say, 'The people united will never be defeated'"). All I can say is 1) I'm quoting a Mayan student whose ambivalence about peasant-cadre relationships was widely shared with other Mayas 2) no one denies Vicente's leadership qualities, least of all my book 3) no one except his daughter describes him engaging in public protests until the September 26, 1979 occupation of the national congress that he helped lead. As my book notes, this first of Vicente's two protests in Guatemala City was relatively successful, because it obliged a controlled press to report the peasants' appeals for their kidnapped relatives. If Vicente and his delegation required instruction in how to show the media that they were protestors, this hardly detracts from the initiative and courage that they displayed. A number of them barely spoke Spanish. As for my source's statement that "I suppose that the campesinos didn't understand where it would all go. Vicente Menchú wasn't the leader, he was led," this is a reference to the flash fire that took their lives. How many of the protestors expected that riot police would attack them inside a diplomatic sanctuary? How many understood that their student leaders would respond to the police attack by hurling Molotov cocktails inside a crowded room? ¹

If Rogachevsky doubts my conclusions, about Vicente Menchú or any other subject, he could look up my published and archival sources to see if I have misquoted them. He could conduct his own search for documentary evidence, which might turn up something that I failed to find. He could go to Uspantán and talk to people there himself. Instead, he falls back on vituperation and claims that I portray Vicente as "a poor dumb peasant with no political understanding whatsoever." In other words, if Vicente Menchú was not the revolutionary hero depicted by his daughter, if the man described by his neighbors was rather different, are we to understand that, in Rogachevsky's words, he was a "hollow drug store dummy"? This is certainly not how I describe him, or any of the hundreds of people in northern Quiché who have shared their experiences with me. But if Rogachevsky thinks this is the only alternative to "a rebellious class with its own agenda and activism," is this what he thinks about peasants who fail to live up to his expectations?

Portraying the Menchús in terms other than the agitprop of the 1980s hardly turns them into "mannequins." If anything turns them into crash-dummies, it is the heavy-handed structuralism that presumes, in Rogachevsky's words, that Vicente Menchú ran into "the brick wall of the socio-historical limitations created by his context." That is to read his possibilities from the top-down perspective of Guevarismo, with its presumption that armed struggle was inevitable. No, I don't believe that the K'iche's of Uspantán looked at their world through the revolutionary lens of inevitable armed confrontation with the state, and no, I don't think they were anyone's puppets either. Consider the success of some of Vicente's friends in a title dispute with the largest and most intimidating coffee plantation in the area, the Finca San Francisco. As my book mentions, in 1976 K'iche' homesteaders from Uspantán braved arrests and, with the help of Guatemalan courts and the Guatemalan press, wrested twelve hundred acres from the finca. This occurred about five miles from Chimel. In Vicente's own dispute with a smaller finca adjoining his property, over the location of a boundary

marker, the national land titling agency INTA sided with him rather than his ladino adversary (Stoll 1999:52-3, 56).

No one died to achieve these victories. There were no political murders in Uspantán until 1979, when the EGP and the army arrived and began assassinating unarmed civilians who allegedly supported the other side. If anything deprived the Mayas of agency, it was not the kind of legalistic, ameliorative and sometimes successful petitioning pursued by Vicente Menchú for most of his life. What deprived the Mayas of agency, or better said, reduced their possibilities to the life-and-death choice of fight-or-flee, was the militarization of peasant life by guerrilla organizers and army counterinsurgents. What could deprive Mayas of agency in the future is not careful reporting of how political violence started. What could turn them into refugees again is the kind of reductive attitude displayed by Rogachevsky.

Rogachevsky asks why I would challenge the veracity of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. No, I don't object to Rigoberta's story because it had a specific political intent. All to the contrary, my book argues that her narrative strategy is easy to justify precisely because of her purpose, to denounce mass killing (Stoll 1999: viii-ix, xi, 273, 282-83). Nor do I claim that my interpretations are definitive; my book is full of caveats, including a defense of Rigoberta's narrative strategy in the context of 1982 (Stoll 1999: ix, 9, 11, 63, 65, 102 112-123, 189-91, 277). By misconstruing me as a facts-for-their-own-sake objectivist, Rogachevsky overlooks why I felt obliged to go into Rigoberta's story in such detail, even though it is clearly stated in the preface. The reason is that scholars like himself were so hostile to other perspectives on the violence. By being selective about which Mayas they were listening to, they protected an ideal indigenous voice in dialogue with their own concerns, which they could use to ignore Mayas who felt victimized by the left as well as the right. Hence Rogachevsky's astonishing claim that, in my work, "victims cannot be allowed to present their own historical experience and make their own claims regarding who they are," when I quote Mayas extensively and want more students to read *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

Why does it matter whether Rigoberta was at boarding school, and whether she saw her brother burn to death in Chajul? In terms of the criminal responsibility of the Guatemalan army, it doesn't matter at all. What does matter is whether Rigoberta's story is an eyewitness account, because of the way that testimonio scholars used to define the genre. Perhaps Rogachevsky has forgotten that, when scholars like himself began to object to my questions about *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in small academic gatherings in the early 1990s, they were still defining testimonio as a first-person narrative by "a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts." To continue quoting John Beverley, "testimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, novela-testimonio, nonfiction novel, or 'factographic literature.'" According to the Casa de las Américas, which first recognized *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as a leading example of the genre, testimonio presupposed "knowledge of the facts by the author or his or her compilation of narratives or evidence....Reliable documentation, written or graphic, is indispensable" (Gugelberger 1996:9,24,39).

If this was the definition and if I was right about Rigoberta not being an eyewitness of key episodes, then the most widely-read testimonio was not a testimonio--a problem which Rogachevsky et al (see Gugelberger 1996) have solved by redefining the genre away from the eyewitness standard. Fair enough. That should give Rogachevsky all the more reason to welcome the kind of comparison I make between Rigoberta's version of events and what other Mayas have to say. But he doesn't, and in this he is not alone. Why not? Since Rogachevsky seems to have overlooked my actual argument, I would like to draw his attention to a passage in one of my book's closing chapters, titled "Rigoberta and Redemption" in reference to the behavior of scholars like himself:

"Certainly Rigoberta was a representative of her people, but hiding behind that was a more partisan role, as a representative of the revolutionary movement, and hiding behind that was an even more unsettling possibility: that she represented the audiences whose assumptions about indígenas she mirrored so effectively. I believe this is why it was so indecent for me to question her claims. Exposing problems in Rigoberta's story was to expose how supporters have subliminally used it to clothe their own contradictions, in a Durkheimian case of society worshipping itself. Here was an indígena who represented the unknowable other, yet she talked a language of protest with which the Western left could identify. She protected revolutionary sympathizers from the knowledge that the revolutionary movement was a bloody failure. Her iconic status concealed a costly political agenda which, by the time her story was becoming known, had more appeal in universities than among the people she was supposed to represent."

"I suspect that Rigoberta has carried iconic authority for the same reason that many of my fellow graduate students said they were studying "resistance." As I heard this term again and again, I came to think of Prometheus chained to a rock--eternally bound, eternally defiant. The preoccupation with resistance assumed the same kind of Prometheus figure, the undying Western individual fighting for his rights against oppression. Rigoberta was a Prometheus figure who justified the projection of Western identity drives into the situations we study."

"At this point, the identity needs of Rigoberta's academic constituency play into the weakness of rules of evidence in postmodern scholarship. Following the thinking of literary theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak,

anthropologists have become very interested in problems of narrative, voice and representation, especially the problem of how we misrepresent voices other than our own. In reaction, some anthropologists argue that the resulting fascination with texts threatens the claim of anthropology to be a science, by replacing hypothesis, evidence and generalization with stylish forms of introspection. If we focus on text, narrative or voice, it is not hard to find someone to say what we want to hear--just what we need to firm up our sense of moral worth, or our identity as intellectual rebels.

"This is how critiques of Western forms of knowledge can degenerate into a worshipful attitude toward symbols of rebellion like *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. By dismissing empirical research as a form of Western domination, critical theorists can end up interpreting texts in terms of simplistic stereotypes of collectivity, authenticity and resistance which, because they are authorized by identity with victimhood, are not to be questioned. Even though Uspantán and Chimal are places which you can visit, where some of the inhabitants may be willing to tell you about their experiences, according to this conception of scholarship they are to be reserved as a land of myth, wrapped in clouds of mystique as well as mist" (Stoll 1999:246-7).

Endnotes

1. I should also clarify two other issues that Rogachevsky raises:

- a) Do I "cast doubt on the possibility that one of Rigoberta's brothers died of malnutrition while the family was working on a coastal plantation"? My only reference to this issue is a footnote (Stoll 1999:287) that, according to Rigoberta's siblings, the two brothers who she claimed to have seen die on a plantation expired before she was born. I never obtained any information on how they joined the high infant mortality rate; however, Rigoberta's siblings did say that she never worked on a plantation herself.
- b) Could Rigoberta have heard from her mother that her brother Petrocinio had been burned to death? When Rigoberta's parents protested the death of their son in January 1980, their delegation told the press what a number of people in Chajul told me: that the seven captives from Uspantán had been shot. The first person who referred to Petrocinio being burned was Rigoberta, some two years after the event (Stoll 1999:183). [Return](#)

References

Gugelberger, Georg M., ed. 1996 *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Stoll, David. 1993 *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*.

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