

Book Reviews

Weld, Kirsten (2014) *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, Duke University Press (Durham, PA), xiii + 352 pp. \$99.95 hbk. \$26.95 pbk.

Book Reviews

I review Kristen Weld's brilliant and insightful *Paper Cadavers* in the context of some current human rights discussions. We cannot review a book on the contemporary history of Guatemala without considering the recent events and unprecedented social protest resulting in President Perez Molina's resignation. Weld's chronicle of the Archives of the National Police and their preservation should be understood as part of the struggle to consolidate democracy, deepen transitional justice, protect human rights, recreate historical memory, comprehend state terror, and secure the rights to truth and justice.

In 2005, investigators from the National Human Rights Ombudsman searching for explosives in a police installation, found, by chance, 75 million documents constituting the archives of the (already dissolved) National Police. In *Paper Cadavers*, Kirsten Weld tells the story of the ensuing Project for the Recovery of the National Police Historical Archives (AHPN). This project is a foreign-funded initiative, originally staffed by Guatemalan activists charged with saving the largest collection of state documents (many of them secret until their discovery) ever found in Latin America. Weld describes how, as soon as the archive was discovered, there was a strong and instant fight to preserve, organise, understand, and use the documents.

Many post-authoritarian and post-conflict societies are faced with massive challenges in the protection, conservation and access of records containing information on gross human rights violations. In fact, as Weld explains for Guatemala, in many cases, secrecy, national security concerns, and poor archival practice make it difficult if not impossible to know the truth. Weld contributes to our understanding of archives in the wake of repressive regimes' human rights violations and how those archives are essential to challenge the secrecy of such violations. *Paper Cadavers* shows, paradoxically, that the more a state police engages in invasive surveillance, the more documentation there will be, assuming the archives are recovered.

Paper Cadavers intersects with many issues central to transitional justice. A society's knowledge of the history of its oppression is part of its identity and archives are essential to construct this knowledge. Weld describes the AHPN as an effort to preserve collective memory and guard against revisionist and negationist arguments. The Archives provide irreplaceable material both to show people what happened to their loved ones and to bring down the mantle of impunity that was and still is predominant in Guatemala. Today all major human rights cases in Guatemala benefit from documents in the Archives.

Weld presents the fascinating story of how people came to terms with two different goals, that of archiving and that of human rights advocacy. This process was not easy and was full of tensions as the priorities of archiving and advocacy do not always coincide. *Paper Cadavers* argues that, as a response to these tensions, the concept of 'archival thinking' was essential. To the staff of the AHPN this meant a set of routines and a mentality distinct from the principles of human rights activism. To fully implement 'archival thinking', AHPN staff had to subordinate commitments that brought them to Archives in the first place. And, as Weld reminds us, the staff included ex-guerrillas acting as Director of the Archives as well as relatives of the disappeared. Most of them originally came to the Archives not to organise documents, but to search for answers on what had happened to their loved ones and friends.

Despite the contributions made by *Paper Cadavers*, Weld leaves some questions unanswered. First, the book does not explore how a state institution such as the AHPN can operate within a state that for the most part is interested in maintaining secrecy. What is or should be the proper relationship between the AHPN (which is fully funded by

Book Reviews

foreign sources) and the rest of the Guatemalan state? Weld's book also shifts attention towards the capital city and away from rural Guatemala, where most of the armed conflict and massive human rights abuses took place; towards targeted political violence and repression and away from the army's systematic mass killing. As such, the book does not provide a full account of both rural and urban violence, and does not delve into the relationship between the two. Also, Weld only touches on the fact that Guatemala's Maya majority are absent from her narrative. Even though most of the repression carried out by the police was in Guatemala City rather than in the rural areas, the Maya should not have been left almost invisible. The documents in the AHPN definitely show how a state institution replicated, reproduced and amplified deeply rooted Guatemalan social racist attitudes. In sum, *Paper Cadavers* is rich in original insight and a most welcome, accessible and readable narrative for general audiences and experts alike.

Ariel Dulitzky

University of Texas at Austin