

**Structural causes and diffusion processes of collective violence:
Understanding lynch mobs in post-conflict Guatemala ***

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According to the United Nations, previous human rights violations during the internal armed conflict and the existing levels of poverty are the main causes of lynching in Guatemala between 1996 and 2002. An alternative approach suggests that lynch mobs are the result of the lack of state capacity to provide justice and protection to its citizens, and the ability of the indigenous population to overcome collective action problems in order to attain those public goods that the state does not provide. In this article, both hypotheses about structural causes of collective violence in contemporary Guatemala are tested. The statistical analysis shows that the main structural factors affecting the lynching hazard are the solidarity among ethnic fellows within the indigenous communities, and the number of courts in each *municipio*: the larger the percentage of the indigenous population, and the smaller the ratio of courts per 100,000 inhabitants, the higher the lynching hazard. Past human rights violations during the armed conflict are also statistically significant, but have a smaller effect in a fatal outcome. The levels of poverty are insignificant.

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I. Introduction

The most striking problem that has been calling the attention of the world toward Guatemala after the end of its long and bloody internal armed conflict is the wave of collective violence in the form of lynch mobs.¹ Between 1996 and 2002, almost 500 cases have been reported. There is not an agreement about the causes of this peculiar form of violence that generally has been characterized by spontaneous reaction of the people in small towns or villages against alleged criminals that were captured *in flagrante delicto* or, sometimes, by openly defying the state authority for its inefficacy and corruption taking a suspect off the hands of the police.

The aim of this quantitative study is to achieve a better understanding about the causes of lynching in Guatemala by testing the explanatory power of different structural variables that have been proposed by some scholars and international agencies (Adams and Bastos 2003; Mendoza and Torres-Rivas 2003; MINUGUA 2000, 2002). The main questions to answer are the following: What are the determinants of lynch mobs? Are the never-ending poverty of the rural area and the past human rights violations committed during the armed conflict the crucial explanatory variables? How, and how much, do ethnic or territorial shared identities facilitate collective action? How, and how much, does the lack of justice affect people's propensity to violent solutions?

The first part of the paper presents a historical and political background where this quantitative analysis should be situated. The literature review connects important studies that have addressed collective behavior in general, and lynching in particular, to the cases in Guatemala, also aiming to show the theoretical lacunas that this empirical work has to confront. The section on data and methods includes a negative binomial regression (NBR) to adjudicate among competing explanations. The main findings are presented and discussed acknowledging the limitations of a model, such as NBR, that does not explain the diffusion process that occurs among the units of analysis over time. The conclusion includes some questions for further research, including the need of survival analysis to test for contagion effects.

II. Background

After 36 years of internal armed conflict, the tragic results of violence for Guatemalans can be summarized as follows: 200,000 civilian casualties, 50,000 forced disappearances, 40,000 refugees in neighbor countries, 1,000,000 internally displaced people, and around 500 indigenous villages erased from the map.² Terror was a strategic choice of the state during this period of political turmoil that was fueled by the Cold War. The worst years of counterinsurgency operations were 1980-1983. Once the guerrillas' threat was diminished, a military government decided to initiate transition toward democracy in 1984. A new constitution was enacted the next year to hold free and fair elections, and in 1986 after 15 years of continuous military-authoritarian ruling the first civilian president took power. Finally, after several years of negotiation, Guatemala achieved peace in December 1996.

¹ There are more than few academic studies about this problem. Besides the two official reports of the United Nations Mission for the Verification of Human Rights (MINUGUA 2000, 2002), the work of Adams and Bastos (2003), and Gutiérrez and Kobrak (2001) are good examples of the anthropological approach to the problem. Some scholarly efforts in the English language are Snodgrass (2002) and Handy (2004). Fernández (2004) has written a paper from a judge's perspective.

² On the statistics of the violence see Ball et al. (1999), Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (1999), and Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (1998).

As in any post-conflict society, Guatemala faces many challenges, such as consolidation of its democratic institutions, and reduction of poverty. However, one of the most salient concerns for its citizens is still their own security. Surveys have shown that common and organized crime are a nightmare (*Prensa Libre* 7/18/04). The life, freedom, and property of Guatemalans are always in danger. The police, the prosecutor, the courts, and the prisons are not functioning properly. Thus, it is almost impossible to establish the rule of law in the country. Corruption of public officials is an additional factor in favor of criminals and, as a consequence, the population feels helplessness. There is a shared disillusion with democracy because people's expectations were that a regime change would be translated into economic prosperity and security (Azpuru 2000). As a reaction, many people are willing to tolerate tough governments or, even worse, to apply justice by their own hands.

The main problem is a weak state that is incapable of exercising control over its entire territory by means of the legitimate use of physical violence. The lack of penetration of the state-as-law, and state-as-bureaucracy, has facilitated the long-lasting existence of "brown-areas" (O'Donnell 1994) where local *caciques* exercise discretionary power and basic individual rights are not guaranteed. This is not a legacy of the recent internal armed conflict, but it has earlier historical roots. Although the violent Spanish conquest (1524-1570), the Crown was ineffective trying to exercise its authority (e.g., collecting taxes), and it took almost 175 years to subjugate the entire indigenous population. During the independence period, after almost three centuries of colonial rule, the indigenous population of the rural areas did not recognize the new political arrangement for a while. Today, the state is still absent in many zones, especially those far away from the political center. Thus, the population in those regions has to provide by itself many public goods, such as infrastructure or education, by means of local organization. As a result of many centuries of resistance and survival, the indigenous population has developed and accumulated a "cultural repertoire" of strategies to overcome the collective action problem. It has also institutionalized colonial practices to preserve order in the villages, such as public punishment of those who violate the norms of the community. In all these practices the state is completely absent and the collectivity is indeed the enforcement agent.

According to the latest census, the indigenous people are around 42% of the total Guatemalan population (INE 2003). The percentage of households below the line of poverty is larger for the indigenous people (72%) than for the non-indigenous people (44%). This socioeconomic inequality has deep roots in a long history of institutionalized means of oppression and exclusion. For instance, during the colonial rule, the *encomienda* and the *repartimiento* systematized and legalized the control of the Spanish over indigenous people's lands, work, and lives.³ More sophisticated mechanisms of labor exploitation and lands expropriation were designed after independence. Recently, during the armed conflict, the indigenous population was the most affected by the state's counterinsurgency strategies, and today most of the basic public services do not reach many of the indigenous villages. Thus, the indigenous people have enough reasons to distrust the state and feel resentment toward the *mestizo* population that has controlled the state apparatus and, by doing so, has practiced cultural discrimination against the indigenous population.

³ Through the *encomienda* the Crown gave indigenous families to the Spaniards in order to facilitate work force for their new lands; in exchange, the landlord was expected to teach the Gospel to the natives. The *repartimiento* was also a system for cheap labor, which consisted in the obligation of the indigenous communities to provide periodically to the colonizers a number of workers.

III. Literature review

Lynch mobs are a type of collective violence. Then, should be analyzed applying theories that explain collective behavior. In fact, the literature on social movements is a valuable intellectual resource that helps to describe and explain some specific characteristics of the lynch mobs.

The indigenous villages in Guatemala are characterized by strong organizational skills, despite many years of war and economic hardship, or precisely for those reasons. Several models of organization that were already culturally legitimated have been recognized politically. Two examples may be enough to illustrate indigenous organization. First, the presence of the Catholic Church since colonial times, and the presence of the Evangelical Church since the 1870s have been crucial in terms of the organizational repertoire of the indigenous people at the local level. The religious institution of the *cofradía*, for instance, has not only survived several centuries as a mechanism adopted by the indigenous population for status recognition and distribution of power, but has also been adapted to respond to new challenges such as the incursion of the political parties. Second, since the return to democracy, the indigenous people as a group marginalized by the existing political institutions have developed alternative models of organization for politics (Clemens 1993). The *comités cívicos* are a real competitor for the conventional political parties during local elections. These legally-recognized political organizations have many features that reflect traditional patterns of indigenous organization and public service.

The continuous struggle for survival has shaped the indigenous people's skills for collective action. Preexisting local networks in the indigenous villages (e.g., between religious and military organizations) are activated almost instantly in case of emergency by using traditional methods for community awareness (e.g., the bell of the church). Through history, the indigenous communities have learned that they cannot wait for an answer from the state because it could take for ever. Thus, the mobilization of indigenous resources for acting together has been a major strategy. Sometimes the trigger for such a collective effort has been a natural catastrophe or a political opportunity (or threat), the nature of the action might be different (e.g., just contributing with cash for the local fiesta or risking their own lives trying to stop a fire), but the truth is that the indigenous population has achieved high levels of effectiveness in many domains where collective action is needed to provide public goods. Therefore, in the daily life of the rural villagers of the western highlands and the northern and northwestern mountains of Guatemala several theories of collective behavior can be used to account for different expressions of social mobilization, especially those related with "contentious politics" (McAdam et al. 2001).⁴

Although a lynching could be a component of a broader protest, the particular characteristics of these episodes of collective violence in Guatemala do not fit neatly into theoretical frames designed to explain social movements. However, the common explanations are based on the classical sociological theories of collective behavior that emphasize that structural strains generate a disruptive psychological state that finally accounts for the extreme, irrational, and savage collective behavior that should be examined by psychopathology, condemned by the public opinion, and repressed by the state. Torres-Rivas (2003), for example, argues that Guatemala is a sick and anxious society because it has been affected deeply by the traumas of the armed conflict, and as a result it is prone to collective hysteria and contagion of aggressive behavior. He favors the classical explanations of social anomie and fragmentation, but

⁴ Contentious politics means "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interest of at least one of the claimants," (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 5).

one of the main problems with this set of theories is that not only overemphasizes psychological states of the mind, but also fails to explain how collective behavior actually emerges. Another limitation of this approach is that in the case of the indigenous communities it is solidarity, and not fragmentation, it is social control to guarantee compliance with social norms, and not anomie, which are explaining collective violence.

Several mechanisms used for all sorts of collective action are also present in the case of a lynch mob. For example, in the famous case of the lynching of a judge, in March 2001, when more than 1,000 people in a northern Guatemalan town attacked him after he issued an unpopular ruling in a rape case, hacking him to death with machetes (New York Times 3/13/01), the report of the prosecutor suggests that the instigators of the mob were former members of the civil patrols for self-defense or the guerrillas. Neighbors said that three days before the crime the local radio station disseminated two messages in Q'eqchi' language calling for collective action. It supports the idea, tested in a very different context, that people who are already involved in an organization are more likely to participate in collective efforts, especially in small communities where individuals belong to a dense network of shared organizations (Fernández and McAdam 1988), and it also shows the central role of media technology facilitating coordination and mobilization (Roscigno and Danaher 2001).

Nevertheless, the extreme violence used during a lynching is something that reminds unexplained. Public punishment, as a mechanism of social control, has existed in the indigenous communities even before the armed conflict. For example, flagellation in the central plaza for those who violate the norms of the *pueblo de indios* was a common practice during colonial times. Probably, this and other forms of cruel punishment, also learned during the war, have been included into the cultural “tool kit” of the indigenous people. Thus, the notion of cultural strategies of action (Pattillo-McCoy 1998) should be explored to explain how, and how much, cultural differences between indigenous and non-indigenous communities affect the type of collective answers for dealing with criminals. For example, the term “culture of honor” suggests that violent male behavior is more likely to emerge wherever the man perceives a threat to one of his most valued possessions, namely his reputation for strength and toughness, because gaining resources, or keeping them, depends on the community’s believing that the individual is capable of defending himself against predation (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, xv).

The lynching era in the South of the United States (1882-1937), when around 5,112 lynching executions were registered, is a well-known case (Soule 1992, Beck and Tolnay 1990). Sociologists have looked at the relationship between economic conditions (e.g., price of cotton and inflation) and lynchings by exploring the “competition and power-threat” hypothesis, which suggests that political challenges and economic competition have shaped regional and temporal variation in lynchings against blacks (Corzine, Creech, and Corzine 1983; Olzak 1990), and have dismissed the hypothesis of popular justice (Tolnay and Beck 1995). Social control theories have been challenged by those who empirically have shown that there is not a clear relationship between the lynching rates, an “informal mechanism” of social control, and two alternative forms of “formal social control” namely legal executions and incarceration (Massey and Myers 1989). Among the models of collective violence, one proposes that the activation of latent political identities that separate people into “us” and “them” often triggers violence. This violence does not emerge from preexisting hatred, but from sudden uncertainties and shifting social conditions, particularly the declining capacity of authorities to enforce agreements or police existing boundaries (Tilly 2003).

IV. Puzzle

The United Nations Mission for the Verification of Human Rights in Guatemala (MINUGUA) has documented 480 cases of mob violence, from 1996 to 2002, which affected 155 out of 331 *municipios* of the country (Table 1 and Figure 1). A total of 133 of those cases were “fatal” resulting in 235 deaths (1.4% of the total number of homicides during those years).⁵ Although the usual definition of lynching is as follows: “murder for supposed crime, to seize somebody believed to have committed a crime and put him or her to death immediately and without trial,” a broader definition has been used by MINUGUA: to punish, *not necessary to death*, one or more persons (e.g., presumed criminal offenders) by collective violence without due process of law. The field research done by MINUGUA’s officers in the countryside confirms that the members of the lynch mobs were not habitual criminals but ordinary citizens. The main actors were a relative small number of instigators and perpetrators, generally males older than 35 years. Most of the crowds were passive spectators, probably captured by the volunteer’s dilemma.⁶ MINUGUA has also pointed out that during the first years of mob violence, it was a spontaneous reaction without any possible control, but in the recent years it seems to be a more or less planned action. There is also some evidence of local authorities supporting lynch mobs by doing nothing to stop them.

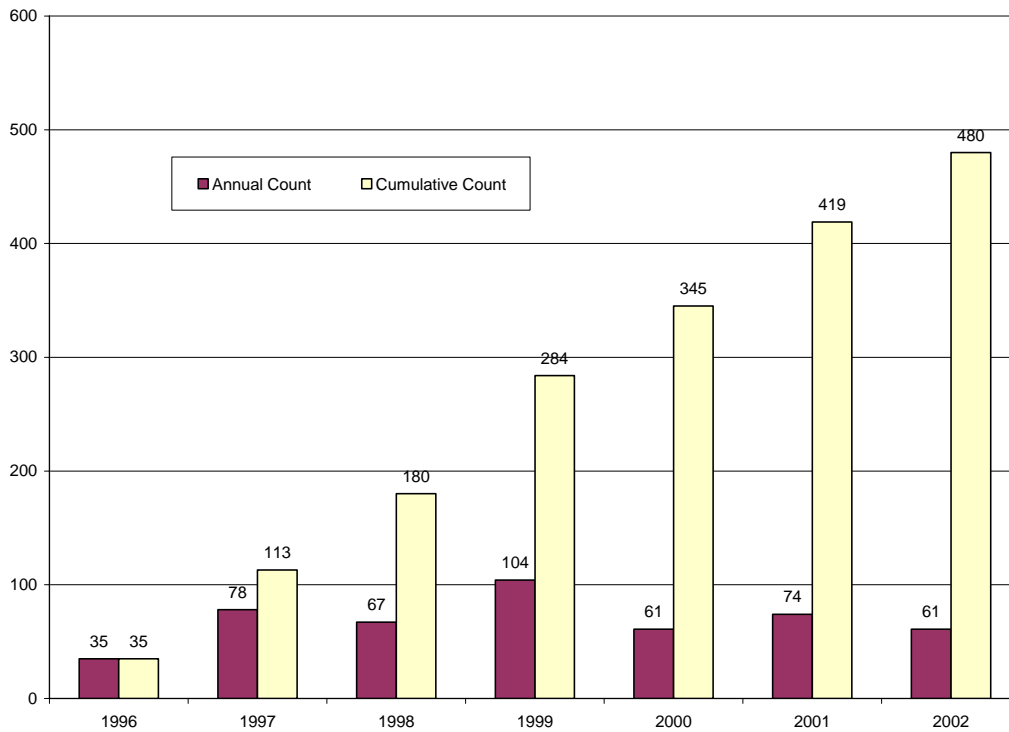
Table 1: Distribution of Lynch Mobs in Guatemala, 1996-2002

Number of lynch mobs (k)	Number of municipios experiencing k lynch mobs	Total number of lynch mobs
0	176	0
1	68	68
2	35	70
3	20	60
4	5	20
5	9	45
6	4	24
7	3	21
8	1	8
10	3	30
11	1	11
13	1	13
15	1	15
17	1	17
22	2	44
34	1	34
Total	331	480

⁵ Datasets are available through the Internet <http://www.nd.edu/~cmendoza1/datos/>

⁶ Experiments have shown that the more people there are present, the less likely any individual will take action: It appears that when there is some kind of undesirable activity going on in which the intervention of others could stop it, people are reluctant to act if there is more than one observer present. Each waits for the other to do something. (Felkins, 1995).

Figure 1: Lynching by Year, 1996-2002



MINUGUA has claimed that the causes of lynching in Guatemala are related to the consequences of the armed conflict (e.g., the so-called “culture of violence” as a legacy of the war), and to the socioeconomic hardship of the people (i.e., poverty and lack of education) that generates frustration and high levels of criminality. Those conclusions are based on the fact that the main characteristics of those regions affected by lynch mobs are the following: *i)* High intensity of the internal armed conflict (e.g., massacres and military intervention in the daily life of the people); and *ii)* Socioeconomic exclusion (e.g., low levels of human development). Concerning the first characteristic, MINUGUA argues that traditional patterns of communitarian life and distribution of power among the indigenous people were destroyed by the armed conflict. The military structures acted to the detriment of the traditional authorities, and against the use of indigenous people’s norms, damaging their social fabric, eroding their cultural capital, and violating their notion of rule of law. The cruelty and brutality of the lynching are also related to the counterinsurgency strategy during the 1980s, which implies a process of collective learning on how to deal with conflicts in the villages.⁷ About the socioeconomic causes of lynching, MINUGUA suggests that frustration could be the fuel for angry mobs, and also an explanation of high levels of criminality.

It might be true that lynching deaths have occurred typically in communities where the state repression was more intense during the civil war, and where the socioeconomic conditions

⁷ According to MINUGUA, several mob instigators were related to the Army as *Comisionados Militares* or *Patrulleros de Autodefensa Civil*. However, the data provided by MINUGUA (2004) shows that such claim is only true for less than 5% of the cases. The tabulation of each case verified by MINUGUA’s officers confirms that lynch mobs are the result of spontaneous reactions of the communities (in 78% of the cases “the villagers” were the instigators).

are below the national average. However, such a model can not elucidate why in El Salvador, for example, with a very similar brutal civil war and also high levels of poverty the problem of lynching has not been present. That explanation has also neglected the fact that lynch mobs have occurred in regions mostly inhabited by indigenous people. Regarding the social and cultural capital, contrary to MINUGUA's assumption about a lack of both, some cultural and social assets of the indigenous population might explain why the indigenous regions have the lowest homicide rates in the country, another problem of violence that mainly affects the non-indigenous areas.⁸ MINUGUA's hypotheses are not enough to explain *collective* violence. Therefore, complementary hypotheses should be developed. For instance, not poverty but high levels of insecurity in the communities due to frequent criminal actions might be the source of people's frustration.⁹ The network of former paramilitary agents is not the main resource to be activated for action against criminals, but the strong sense of ethnic identity and solidarity.

If one of the most fundamental purposes of the state's existence is the provision of order, security, and justice, what happens when the state does not provide those public goods? Some people involved in lynch mobs have said that lynching is an answer to the inefficacy of the judiciary, and several surveys have confirmed that the public opinion explains lynching as a result of impunity and lack of confidence in the justice system. Violence is neither wanton nor senseless; it can be instrumental in order to reduce the probability of defection. In this sense, extreme brutality aims to alter the criminals' expected utility, by increasing the intensity of the sanction and the probability that any crime will be sanctioned (Kalyvas 1999, 251). Violence could be also explained as the result of a "culture of honor" which implies that people need to appear strong and unwilling to tolerate any transgression to their norms. This culture, a set of informal institutions, is more likely to grow in locations where the law and state enforcement mechanisms, the formal institutions, are absent or very weak.¹⁰

Lynching is not part of indigenous customary law, but instead a form of collective violence that emerges from some particular characteristics of the indigenous culture, such as its enormous capacity of organization, coordination, and contribution to provide public goods. Generally, any problem of collective action is solved thanks to a strong shared local and ethnic identity that in the cases of criminal offenses "makes it more likely that ill-treatment or an injustice to fellow ethnics [neighbors], though not personal experiences will become a grievance and act as a grievance multiplier in the group as a whole" (Oberschall and Kim 1996, 63). Thus, any criminal activity within an indigenous community is not only the victim's problem, but also a concern for the whole village and something that will trigger collective action, especially when there is a perception of high levels of criminality.

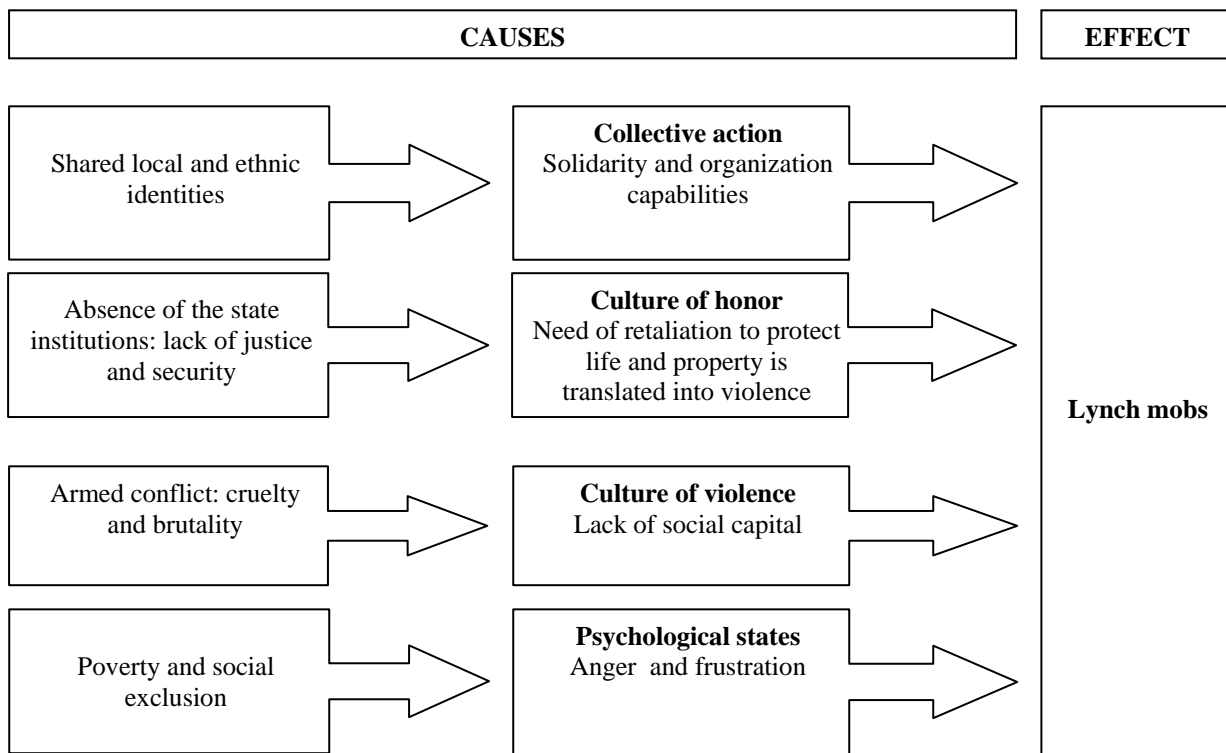
⁸ In seven *departamentos* with high percentage of indigenous population (more than 60%), the annual average of homicide rates (from 1986 to 1997) is 5.9 per 100,000 inhabitants. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the U.S. during the same period had a rate 9.2 per 100,000 inhabitants (Homicide rates from the Vital Statistics, Source: National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics). Internet source: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/hmrt.txt> Comparisons between lynchings and homicides are made in Adams and Bastos (2003, 173-179), and Mendoza (2003, 105-109).

⁹ Of course, such absence of the state might be explained as a consequence of the internal armed conflict. For example, as a result of the tolerance and promotion of violence by the state itself during the conflict, the civilian population understood that the state would not guarantee their lives, freedom and property, and that, even worse, the state's agents could be a menace for those fundamental rights. So, without any legal or institutional protection the people started to provide by themselves the public goods that the state neglected: justice, order and security.

¹⁰ The manhunt tradition in the U.S. was a "practice of Southern white men in arming themselves unofficially and hunting down an accused person. This method of mutual aid in policing area, evolved on the frontier, persisted in localities where police power was least adequate" (Raper 1969, 9).

Consequently, in a society where the formal institutions for preserving order and protecting the life and property of the people do not exist, or are not enforceable, a set of informal institutions that applies instrumental violence are more likely to emerge. When high levels of criminality and impunity exist, and such problems disturb a community with strong ethnic identity, it is more likely that this group will achieve collective action in order to provide a valuable public good: security. If both conditions exist at the same time, in the same area, there is a higher probability of collective violence in the form of lynch mobs. The quantitative analysis that follows reveals that, in explaining lynching hazard, ethnic solidarity among villagers and the absence of the state, specifically the judiciary, should be taken seriously. Figure 2 presents the four possible causes of lynching that are going to be tested.

Figure 2: Possible causes of lynch mobs



The complementary explanation emphasizes an explosive combination: shared ethnic or territorial identities that facilitate coordination and mobilization, and a culture of honor that generates violence. The causes for this culture of honor are the absence of the state and high levels of crime (i.e., threat to people’s resources). If such instrumental violence applied through collective action is a successful strategy (e.g., crime decreases), then other communities will behave in the same way following a model of diffusion. Another implication is that if the state achieves better levels of performance, not just being physically present, but also by fulfilling its role as enforcement agent of the law, and delivering the public goods, then the people will avoid the risk of dealing directly with criminals, because it also has a cost for individuals.

In a society where crime is one of the most salient problems because it directly affects people's sense of security, order, and peace; and where the state is incapable of preventing such crime and punishing criminals; a culture of honor to protect their lives and properties with violence is more likely to emerge. And if the people in such societies have learned to overcome problems of collective action by organizing themselves, thanks to their strong shared collective identities; then it is more likely that lynchings will occur in such a society. This suggests that individuals are willing to take high risks in order to avoid potential losses due to the fact that no formal institution or enforcement agent will protect them. Such self-defense action against criminals is more likely to emerge in communities that have good channels of communication among its members, which facilitate coordination and a quick mobilization.

V. Data and method

This quantitative study of the period recognized as the lynching era in Guatemala presents two important gains in comparison with the previous reports of MINUGUA (2000, 2002), which based their conclusions in very superficial analysis that only took into account the *departamentos*, the larger political and administrative sub-national unit, or simply some *municipios* where lynching cases occurred. First, while MINUGUA faces limitations for quantitative inquiries because it uses a small sample, this study has a larger sample including all the 331 *municipios* of Guatemala, a sub-national unit that has political autonomy and where the population has a shared territorial identity since colonial times. Second, comparisons across the entire municipal set prevent the problem of selection bias on the dependent variable.

There are two dependent variables in this analysis: (a) the number of fatal cases in each *municipio* between 1996 and 2002, which is a count variable that varies from 0 to 7; and (b) the occurrence of lynch mobs without taking into account the final outcome, which varies from 0 to 34. Due to the use of a count variable, the presence of many observations with zeros (249 *municipios* with 0 fatal cases, and 176 with 0 mob episodes), and overdispersion due to positive contagion (one event increases the likelihood of another) it is worthwhile to estimate the models using negative binomial regression.

The first independent variable (conflict) is an average of the annual ratio of human rights violations during the internal armed conflict (people disappeared, injured in army attack, killed, kidnapped or tortured) per 100,000 inhabitants in each *municipio* from 1960 to 1995 (Ball 1999).¹¹ The second independent variable (poverty) is the extreme poverty rate for each *municipio* taking into account the 2000 Living Standards Measurement Survey and the population in 2002 (SEGEPLAN 2004).¹² The third explanatory variable (ethnic) is the percentage of indigenous population in each *municipio* according to the latest population census of 2002 (INE 2003).¹³ The fourth explanatory variable is the current presence of the state

¹¹ Ball, Kobrak and Spierer (1999) have processed and analyzed over 19,000 case reports of human rights violations from various sources. The dataset is available through the Internet <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ciidh/data.html>

¹² This is the most recent estimation of extreme poverty rates for each *municipio* according to the latest household survey and population census. It has not been published yet by SEGEPLAN.

¹³ The ethnic or geographical identity has been captured by the population census. The census data sheds light on the degree of people's self-identification with a specific ethno-linguistic group. Thus, the percentage of speakers of a particular indigenous language will indicate not just the concentration of indigenous population, but also the sense of belonging to that population, at least indirectly. A survey could help us to understand which is the predominant identity shared by the people of a defined area. It could be the case that territorial ties are stronger than ethno-linguistic links. The survey should also explore the propensity of such a strong shared identity to facilitate collective action.

(courts) that is measured using a ratio: courts per 100,000 inhabitants by municipio in 2003 (Organismo Judicial 2004).¹⁴ Two control variables are introduced into the model: population density (density) and percentage of urban population (urban) in each municipio according to the 2002 census (SEGEPLAN 2004).

Table 2: Pearson correlation coefficients and univariate statistics for independent variables

	conflict	poverty	ethnic	courts	density	urban
Annual ratio of human rights violations, 1960-95	1.000					
Extreme poverty rate, 2000	-0.015	1.000				
Percentage of indigenous population, 2002	0.056	-0.138 **	1.000			
Courts per 100,000 inhabitants, 2003	-0.105 *	-0.004	0.072	1.000		
Population density per sq km, 2002	-0.068	-0.103 *	-0.035	-0.081	1.000	
Percentage of urban population, 2002	-0.057	-0.010	-0.033	0.283 ***	0.424 ***	1.000
Mean	6.298	19.776	47.495	7.358	290.126	38.722
Standard deviation	13.759	14.242	40.463	6.549	518.526	25.200
Minimum	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	1.580	3.000
Maximum	150.360	65.000	100.000	52.190	4398.570	100.000

* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

VI. Discussion

The violence during the internal armed conflict does not explain the formation of a mob against a suspected criminal, but it is statistically significant for fatal outcomes. It has a positive sign, indicating that in places with more human rights violations, the more likely the occurrence of a lynching. Regarding the argument about socioeconomic hardship and lynchings, the negative binomial regression has shown that the percentage of extreme poverty in each municipio is not statistically significant in explaining either the lynching or the formation of mobs. In contrast, the percentage of indigenous population in each municipio is highly significant in explaining both mob formation and lynchings. It has the expected sign, that is, the larger the indigenous population the more likely it is the occurrence of a mob and the violent death of the suspects. The presence of the state by means of the courts is also highly significant and with the sign suggested by the theory: the more the presence of the judiciary the less likely it is the occurrence of deaths by lynching and the formation of violent mobs. Population density is statistically significant in explaining mob formation. Thus, it is plausible to argue that in places where the neighbors are isolated from each other it is more difficult to overcome the collective action problem due to the lack of communication among them. The percentage of urban population is significant only for fatal cases, indicating that the higher the urban population the less likely the murder. It might be explained by the fact that in urban areas it is easier for policemen to take care of a situation in which a suspected criminal has been caught by the population.

Table 3 summarizes the results of the negative binomial regressions. In model 1 the dependent variable is the occurrence of lynching, properly speaking, or “fatal” cases. Model 2

¹⁴ However, the most important question is whether the state agents are or not responsive and effective. Thus, a better measurement needs indicators of responsiveness and effectiveness (e.g., rate of supposed criminal offenders who were captured in a specific year and area). There is a lack of information on this issue.

has the occurrence of a “mob case” as the dependent variable; it does not take into account whether a person was killed.

Table 3: Determinants of lynchings and mobs

	Lynching Model 1		Mob Model 2	
Annual ratio of human rights violations, 1960-95	0.009 ** (0.004)		0.019 (0.013)	
Extreme poverty rate, 2000	-0.005 (0.007)		-0.006 (0.007)	
Percentage of indigenous population, 2002	0.016 *** (0.002)		0.017 *** (0.002)	
Courts per 100,000 inhabitants, 2003	-0.153 *** (0.042)		-0.087 *** (0.020)	
Population density per sq km, 2002	0.000 (0.000)		0.001 *** (0.000)	
Percentage of urban population, 2002	-0.011 ** (0.005)		-0.005 (0.004)	
Constant	-0.770 * (0.407)		-0.240 (0.286)	
Number of observations	331		331	
Wald chi2 (6)	77.82		86.07	
Log likelihood	-234.452		-470.020	
Alpha	0.791		1.354	

All the estimations were made using the option of robust standard errors for the command *nbreg* of STATA 8.2. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* p < 0.10 ** p < 0.05 *** p < 0.01

Taking into consideration that Guatemala City is an outlier due to many factors such as its larger population (21% of the country) and its high number of lynch mobs (34, but only 1 death), the two models were also run without the *municipio* of Guatemala. The only important difference is that population density is not statistically significant in model 2.

Table 4 shows the impact on the dependent variable of each coefficient estimated for the six independent variables. The figures indicate the expected change in the number of fatal cases and lynch mobs due to one standard deviation increase in the independent variable, holding the other variables constant in their mean.

Table 4: Expected change in the dependent variable due to + One Standard Deviation

	Lynching	%	Mob	%
Reference (all variables in their mean)	0.22	Change	1.03	Change
Annual ratio of human rights violations, 1960-95	0.25	14	1.33	30
Extreme poverty rate, 2000	0.20	- 7	0.94	- 8
Percentage of indigenous population, 2002	0.42	92	2.04	99
Courts per 100,000 inhabitants, 2003	0.08	- 63	0.58	- 43
Population density per sq km, 2002	0.25	15	1.72	68
Percentage of urban population, 2002	0.16	- 25	0.90	- 12

As it was mentioned above, extreme poverty does not have a statistical relevance explaining lynching or mobs. However, the negative sign might be indicating that collective action of any sort rarely emerges among people who are very poor. The percentage of indigenous population has the most important effect: an increase of one standard deviation implies a 92% increase in the number of fatal cases and 99% increase in the number of mob cases. Nevertheless, the effect of the number of courts per 100,000 inhabitants is the crucial one in terms of public policy intervention because if this variable is set to its maximum value, it would reduce the number of lynchings to zero. Additionally, it is the only variable that can be manipulated by the state intervention. The human rights violations during the armed conflict also have an effect in lynchings, but it is less than 1/6 of the effect of the indigenous population, and more than 1/5 of the effect of the courts presence.

The main conclusion of this statistical analysis is that a *municipio* with a higher percentage of indigenous population is more likely to punish a suspected criminal by means of collective violence. However, the decisive element to preserve a peaceful social order is the presence of the state delivering the public goods such as justice and security. The main limitation of this type of cross-sectional analysis is that does not address the change of the variables across time. Moreover, the percentage of the indigenous population per *municipio* changes very little over time, and the violations of human rights during the conflict are fixed. Consequently, a complementary time-series analysis is required.

How, and how much, do the severity and geographic distance of previous episodes of collective violence affect the lynching hazard in the villages over time? Diffusion models explaining racial rioting in the United States during the 1960s can be applied to argue that lynch mobs are not independent events, and that villages not only have differential intrinsic propensities to lynching, but also different levels of responsiveness and resistance to diffusion from previous lynchings (Myers 2000, forthcoming). According to preliminary survival analysis done with data corresponding to one year (1996), diffusion is also important in explaining the pattern of lynching: contagious effects from previous lynch mobs are mitigated by geographic distance, and depend on lynching severity.¹⁵ The model supports the main hypothesis about ethnicity and absence of the state. However, only some of the variables related with the event history data are statistically significant.¹⁶

VII. Conclusions

Lynch mobs are a specific case of collective violence. On the one hand, the *collective* dimension is related to the ethnic and local identities, that is, the solidarity that strong ties generate and that increase the capability of the people to get organized in order to provide public goods by themselves. On the other hand, the *violence* is related to a culture of honor that arises due to the need of self-defense against criminals, due to the absence of the state. For those reasons, it is

¹⁵ This is a work-in-progress that aims to incorporate survival analysis, using event history data. The complete dataset to test the hypotheses related to diffusion processes was not ready at the moment of elaboration of this paper. For survival analysis additional variables should be included in a dataset that requires a specific arrangement. First, the number of observations combining each day with each municipio will be 846,036 (2556 days * 331 municipios). Second, the dependent variable will be the failure (i.e., the occurrence of a lynch mob), and the covariates should include geographical distance between municipios (i.e., between the observed place and the one that reported a previous event), severity of each event (e.g., number of deaths), and cumulative count of previous events (for each municipio and for the entire country). Third, it is recommended to use a Cox model.

¹⁶ This is the case of the variable of spatial heterogeneity, and the variables of severity with distance decay. The variables of temporal heterogeneity are not significant at all.

important to make the important distinction between (a) the institutions and organizations of the daily life of the indigenous communities, and (b) the extraordinary events that trigger an unusual violent behavior by the members of those communities that otherwise enjoy a peaceful environment.

One of the important implications of this alternative approach is that lynchings might be adopted by other villagers because it is an effective measure for stopping crime. How much and how do temporal and spatial proximity of previous lynching events determine the likelihood of a mob formation in a particular village? For example: does the fact that a lynching occurred recently in a neighboring village affect the preferences of the people about options for public punishment, and their perception about the most efficient and effective strategy to prevent and stop crime? It is crucial to collect evidence about the actual consequences of lynching in some villages. A preliminary analysis of the data reveals that diffusion is also important in explaining the pattern of lynching: contagious effects from previous lynch mobs are mitigated by geographic distance, and depend on lynching severity (also diminished by distance decay). The hypothesized lynching effect decaying over time could not be supported by the data. In addition to this quantitative approach, a special effort of field work doing interviews with key people in the communities is needed.¹⁷ The levels of criminality could be also measured by surveys that can reveal both the perception and the actual level of burglary and other criminal offenses. However, the main problem is that perceptions and reality are intermixed in the issues of violence and crime, and even a well designed survey could not be able to separate what people believe were the levels of crime before and after a lynching, and the actual prevalence of crime in both moments. People will tend to justify the community behavior by exaggerating the dissatisfaction with the previous situation and the benefits of the radical measure.

A major challenge is to find evidence that will support or contradict the relevance of the two most statistically significant explanatory variables (i.e., ethnicity and courts) and that will shed light on the causal mechanisms that finally generate the phenomenon. How, and how much, does the lack of state penetration and capacity determine: (a) the probability of criminal actions; (b) the development of a “culture of honor” among the villagers; and (c) the probability of a collective, public, and violent punishment against alleged criminals? To what extent, and how, does the absence of the state in rural Guatemala promote the creation of new forms of popular justice? How much, and how, does the citizens’ perception of state’s agents corruption and inefficacy shape the way in which different mechanisms of law enforcement operate? Does the perception that human rights doctrine favors the criminals affect negatively the moral rules and social norms that are in place for the respect of basic rights such as due legal process and presumption of innocence?

It is also important to note that although lynch mobs have only been documented since 1996 some evidence about previous events might be found. However, it is still important to answer why lynchings began to be an issue until 1996. One of the missing variables of the model is the level of crime, but there is not data available at this moment to analyze its effect. It could be the case that after the end of the armed conflict crime erupted to levels never reached before and when people started to feel the real threat of such a chaos then decided to take risks. In terms of theory, it is important to improve our knowledge about human behavior, specifically about collective and violent behavior. It is also crucial to address the relationship between the state responsiveness and the provision of public goods by the citizens; and the interaction between

¹⁷ Gutiérrez and Kobrak (2001, 15) have pointed out that many people in Huehuetenango said that crime was stopped after a lynching.

formal and informal institutions. A more ambitious study should aim to shed light on the human behavior at both the individual and collective levels, explaining the macro-behavior by looking at its micro-foundations: the incentives or motivations of individuals, that is, how humans make decisions. How much and how does individual's perception about losses due to criminal activities determine his, or her, willingness to take the risk of dealt directly with alleged criminals and later face possible state persecution? Does the individual's risky behavior (i.e., participating in a mob), trying to avoid perceived losses (i.e., the effects of criminality), alter the individual propensity to use violence?

From a comparative perspective, Guatemala is just a case of post-conflict societies, young democratic regimes, and developing economies. Additionally, the existence of lynch mobs is not an exclusive problem of Guatemalans. Lynchings have occurred in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, Haiti, Britain, and Spain in recent years. Thus a broader comparative study should be done. In the case of Latin America, it is clear that there is a relationship between indigenous population and lynch mobs.¹⁸ How, and how much, do ethnic and territorial identities affect: (a) the way grievances against a member of the community are perceived by the rest of its members; (b) the way in which such grievances are framed in order to promote collective action; (c) the cultural repertoires for collective reaction to crime and for public punishment of criminals? Under what conditions does a particular collective identity generate a violent collective and public reaction against those who are identified as the source of grievance? How, and how much, does ethnic identity determine: (a) participation in and commitment to an ethnic group or community; and (b) the likelihood of participation in ethnic collective action? Under which circumstances does a specific ethnic identity become the most salient one amongst the multiple identities that people possess, and how the intensity of such identification promote violence against those outsiders who are threatening the group?

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VIII. References

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¹⁸ The most recent cases have been against authorities of the state such as policemen, mayors, and judges. This could be a sign of a conflict between the formal institutions of the nation-state and the informal institutions of the indigenous peoples.

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