

Catalyst -- Fear and Conflict

The first section will consider the relationship between fear and conflict. More specifically, I will consider the use of human rights violations as a means to institutionalize fear within society and to maintain an oppressive status quo, using references to experiences in Latin America.

Why are human rights violations used as an instrument in maintaining political power? In El Salvador, two hundred identified peasants in the town of El Mozote were brutally murdered by the death squad, due to suspicions that they supported the resistance movement. Any organization that was in a position to promote opposing ideas that questioned the official policy of the government was automatically labelled as working for the guerrillas and ran the risk of 'elimination.' (Planchart, 1993: 44) Yet surprisingly enough, of the 117 remains examined in El Mozote, 85 percent belonged to children under the age of twelve. (Torres-Rivas, 1994:25) This evidence demonstrates how the soldiers indiscriminately murdered, regardless of age or sex.

In Chile during the military takeover, security forces took over 7,000 people from their homes and streets and brutally murdered and tortured them. (Cleary, 1997:2) In San Paulo Brazil, 1,171 people died during 'confrontations with the police.' (Caldeira, 1996:198) Between 1978-1985 in Guatemala, government forces and death squads arbitrarily executed approximately 50,000 to 70,000 people. (North, 1990: 42) How can thousands of unexplainable 'disappearances' and mass murders be justified or explained? Why do those holding political, military, and economic power choose violence to maintain 'political stability'? Is this a means of maintaining status quo, or a strategy to prevent the evolution of 'democracy'? What relevance does this have to the relationship between fear and conflict?

Underlying these questions of human rights violations is one common variable: a national governmental structure and political system that creates or permits this type of abuse to occur. Generally speaking, these political systems use violence to maintain order, and suppress opposition. It is a type of violence that preys upon the insecurities and fear of its victims, and in essence institutionalizes fear.

Fear, anxiety, anguish, terror, panic, fright and horror are some responses to the perception of clear or undefined danger. Salimovich asserts that a situation is perceived as dangerous when the individual becomes aware of the magnitude of a threat and of his or her own powerlessness to confront it. (Salimovich, 1992:73) Political repression uses fear to provoke specific behaviours, including helplessness and submission. It is a fear that can become permanent, particularly when it is perceived as life threatening, as with human rights violations. It can affect emotional stability and psychic functioning, and thus generates specific psychopathological processes. (Salimovich, 1992:74)

In turn, fear becomes institutionalized in both the societal and governmental structures through the abuse of political and military power. It also generates psychological responses within each individual, which can be classified into three groups. First, a sense of personal weakness and vulnerability emerges in the face of a life-threatening situation. Individuals perceive themselves