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Local History, Politics, and the State in El Salvador

Most North Americans came to be aware of El Salvador in the 1980s during its revolutionary civil war and the subsequent involvement of the U.S. government. El Salvador, one of the smallest and most densely populated of the Latin American republics, was torn by intense social and military conflict during the 1980s, as were other countries in the region. The conflict resulted in a slow and contradictory movement away from authoritarian, military rule, partially as a result of Peace Accords between the government and the rebel Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN) in 1992.

In the aftermath of the political settlement, the military was restructured and at least formally removed from the political system; consequently, El Salvador entered the path of “transition” to electoral democracy. Ex-guerrillas transformed the FMLN into a political party (known by the same name) and became major players in the electoral politics of the country, winning most of the nation’s largest municipalities and thirty-one of the eighty-two positions in the National Assembly in national elections in 2000. However, elections and political liberalization have not resolved most of the nation’s chronic prewar social and economic problems. Income is highly concentrated, and, despite postwar redistribution of 12 percent of the agricultural land, landlessness and low wages remain facts of life for most Salvadorans. During the war the United States became a magnet for many people fleeing government repression, combat, and economic dislocation; after the peace settlement, Salvadorans continued to move north, as migration and a transnational diaspora became central features of Salvadoran life,

with even remote villages incorporated into migratory circuits (see David Pedersen's chapter). One of the goals of this book is to make some of the complex aspects of the Salvadoran experience before, during, and after the civil war visible to other Latin Americanists and also to encourage further studies about this country and its people.

Observers often find a paradox when trying to understand El Salvador's recent history. On the one hand El Salvador seems to be a nation without history—that is, its people, institutions, and government have only a weak and fragmented sense of their own past. Yet El Salvador often appears to be deeply, even overly, engaged with its “rootedness,” with a sense that where it is now and where it has been lately are all tightly determined by its past, a past in which things are known to have occurred but remain for the more demanding observer elusively ambiguous and vague. The chapters in this book set out to navigate the terrain created by this paradox, as they explore small pieces of El Salvador's history, both recent and centuries old. The authors shed light on local experiences that address familiar themes in the study of El Salvador, but they go beyond these themes to pose new questions and research agendas.

El Salvador is Latin America's least researched nation-state, perhaps because of the perceived absence of a large, visible, and “exotic” indigenous population to attract the attention of foreign anthropologists, as occurred in southern Mexico and Guatemala. El Salvador's indigenous people and cultures have been “hidden” behind the experience of actual *mestizaje* and the myth of their past or persistent de-indianization (see Henrik Ronsbo's chapter).¹ A contributing factor has been the limited sociological and anthropological training available in the country. As of the late 1990s there existed no university degree-granting program in anthropology,² and training in sociology remained highly abstract and theoretical, rarely leading to in-depth fieldwork or research.

Historical studies have not fared any better than sociological and anthropological studies. The country's authoritarian legacy contributed to a weak historiographical tradition and limited programs in higher education. The first bachelor's-level degree (*licenciatura*) in history was introduced at the National University of El Salvador only in 2002. More generally, the country's elites displayed little interest in investing in academic infrastructure—which might have helped develop a stronger national dialogue and research about the country's history—for they educated their own children outside of the country.³ Nor did the military, during its almost fifty years of rule (1932–1979), provide the basis for even a minimal research agenda into the country's history. A condition of “weak hegemony” made it clear to elites of both civilian and military stripe that achieving political hegemony through the study and postulation of a national culture and history would

fail. Elite disinterest in historical work offered free rein for the urban Left, mainly in the person of the multitalented Roque Dalton (poet, historian, sociologist), who published a series of books in which he offered general but informed and critical Marxian interpretations of El Salvador's history from the conquest to the writer's present.⁴

Interest in Central America expanded in the 1980s, and outside observers generated hundreds of new studies on Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica; but El Salvador only fell further behind as war and repression kept away most foreign researchers, disrupted local educational institutions, and forced the emigration of many college-age youth and established academics. Scholars addressing the conflict did produce an array of publications that posed crucial questions, mostly related to the sources of political and social conflict in the country; however, the limited previous work and the practical impossibility of carrying out empirical research in the midst of a civil war affected the answers, as did the exigencies of the political situation itself. At least in the United States, much wartime social, political, and economic analysis was written by journalists, political scientists, and human rights activists and was pitched at a high level of generalization and abstraction with little attention given to local and regional differences within El Salvador.⁵ Books bore such titles as *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution, Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*, and *El Salvador: Background to the Crisis*. These analysts strove to explain the conflict to a U.S. public whose government would eventually invest \$6 billion to prevent an FMLN vic-



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Heads of State in El Salvador, 1894–Present

<i>Head of state</i>	<i>Year assumed power</i>	<i>Head of state</i>	<i>Year assumed power</i>
Rafael Antonio Gutiérrez	1894	Osmin Aguirre y Salinas	1944
Tomás Regalado	1898	Salvador Castañeda	1945
Pedro José Escalón	1903	Directorio Civil y Militar	1948
Fernando Figueroa	1907	Oscar Osorio	1950
Manuel Enrique Araujo	1911	José María Lémus	1956
Carlos Meléndez	1913	Junta	1960
Alfonso Quiñónez Molina	1914	Directorio	1961
Carlos Meléndez	1915	Julio A. Rivera	1962
Alfonso Quiñónez Molina	1918	Fidel Sanchez Hernández	1967
Jorge Menéndez	1919	Arturo Armando Molina	1972
Alfonso Quiñónez Molina	1923	Carlos Humberto Romero	1977
Pio Romero Bosque	1927	Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno	1979
Arturo Araujo	1931	José Napoleón Duarte	1980
Military Directorate	1931	Alvaro Magaña	1982
Maximiliano Hernández Martínez	1932	José Napoleón Duarte	1984
Andrés Ignacio Menéndez	1934	Alfredo Felix Cristiani	1989
Maximiliano Hernández Martínez	1935	Armando Calderón Sol	1994
Andrés Ignacio Menéndez	1944	Francisco Flores Perez	1999

tory while tolerating (if not facilitating) massive human rights violations by the state institutions it financed. Given the crisis on the ground—particularly in the early 1980s when the Salvadoran military and death squads linked to it were murdering tens of thousands of unarmed and often politically unaffiliated civilians—the differences between, on the one hand, peasants and rural workers in the rugged northern areas bordering Honduras and, on the other, those residing in the highly capitalized South Coast regions of Usulután and San Miguel Departments *seemed* of minor importance. But even had investigators wished to discuss social, economic, and cultural specificities—which would undoubtedly have enriched our understanding of the conflict—they would have encountered problems arising from the dearth of previous local historical, sociological, and ethnographic research.

The 1970s and early to mid-1980s did produce a limited number of competent studies that considerably influenced our intellectual understanding of Salvadoran history and society. For instance, William Durham's *Scarcity and Survival in Central America* drew on detailed cultural ecological studies of Tenancingo, El Salvador, and Langue, Honduras, as the basis for an alternative to mainstream explanations of the 1969 "Soccer War" between El Salvador and Honduras; and Je-

suit priest and sociologist Segundo Montes (murdered by the army along with five of his compatriots, their housekeeper, and her daughter on November 16, 1989) wrote a respectable book on *compadrazgo*, which analyzed the role of ritual coparenthood in the maintenance of local political power in four indigenous municipalities of the departments of Ahuachapan and Sonsonate.⁶ More important than either of these, however, was Rafael Cabarrús's *Genesis de una Revolución*, published in 1983 by La Casa Chata, a small Mexican press. *Genesis* contained a nuanced analysis of economic relations and peasant mobilization in the Aguilares region on the eve of the revolution.⁷ Earlier, historian Thomas P. Anderson published *Matanza*, still the most complete study of the 1932 popular rebellion and the brutal massacres that followed its suppression by government forces, and David Browning's pioneering work on land and geography contains important research leads into the post-World War II agrarian landscape that warrant close attention by researchers.⁸

To the studies just cited we would add Jenny Pearce's important study of peasant rebellion in Chalatenango, much of which was based on interviews carried out behind guerrilla lines.⁹ But, on the whole, detailed local and regional historical and social scientific work awaited the end of the conflict and the arrival to El Salvador of a new generation of students and researchers with the time, resources (financial and otherwise), and institutional contacts to plan and carry out research projects, often as part of postgraduate training in U.S. universities. In many instances foreign investigators' interest in El Salvador grew out of their participation in the U.S.-Central America solidarity movement, which worked to stop U.S. intervention in the region during the 1980s.¹⁰ These investigators eschewed the broad political science approach in order to study relations before, during, and after the conflict in particular areas of the country and by examining specific institutions; in other words, they spent considerable time "in the field" or, what might be considered the historian's equivalent, in the archives. Because their work set the stage for the research presented here, we briefly review some of the more trenchant contributions of the 1990s.¹¹

Lauria-Santiago's research on the peasantry and agrarian social relations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrates the need to properly contextualize the political behavior of local actors with a deep examination of the history of local landowning, production, class relations, and the often-unpredictable linkages between local politics and national politics. More recently, his joint work with Jeffrey Gould has melded oral histories with archival sources and produced a more complex and nuanced interpretation of the social movements that led to the 1932 revolt.¹² Patricia Alvarenga has opened up the relationship between local peasants and communities and the policing and judicial net-

works of state power to careful study. She examines the role of peasants in networks of power and authority that tied them to a national state too decentralized to organize its own direct policing apparatus but sufficiently connected to local administrators, conflicts, and disputes to recognize the need for close relationships with local people. While her conclusions about the class basis of the state and the goals of local policing might be questioned, her work provides an important guide to researchers of local communities especially regarding the conflicted loyalties of peasants when confronted with the judicial system.¹³

Erik Ching's studies of local networks of power and patronage trace the continuities of political authority and factional networks in various western municipalities during the civilian and military governments of the 1920s and 1930s. Ching notes how politics at the municipal and regional levels have always been complex and open to corruption and bossism but there are also local examples of political insurgency. Ching also documents how the leaders of indigenous political factions resisted and adapted to the demands and impositions of local ladino power holders and national state policies, even after the 1932 revolt and massacre.¹⁴

The military and its local roots emerges as a theme in the work of Philip Williams and Knut Walter. They treat the military as a multifaceted, internally heterogeneous institution with its own interests and motivations. They view militarization and demilitarization of different aspects of state and society as relative continuums rather than absolute outcomes. They use this approach to explain El Salvador's long-standing tradition of authoritarian politics—the military's "tutelary" power over the political system and their paramilitary networks of social control. In this light, civilian-military collaboration only further institutionalized the military's power. The authors suggest that the military's penetration of rural power networks was a major contributor to social control prior to 1979, a point that should stimulate additional investigation into regions and communities elsewhere in the country.¹⁵

More recently, and perhaps in somber contrast with Cabarrús's work of the late 1970s, Leigh Binford wrote an ethnography of El Mozote, Morazán. This work is an ethnography of a massacre. In a careful study that brings the people and community of El Mozote to life and questions the role of anthropologists as observers of state violence, Binford discusses features of kinship relations and agricultural organization of El Mozote as well as the connections through which some residents became linked to activist catechists, revolutionary organizations, and the government's counterinsurgency plans. In the process he avoids the sweeping, unsubstantiated generalizations that marred much earlier interpretations, a point we discuss briefly here.¹⁶

Rodolfo Cardenal shows how studying local communities can elucidate na-

tional politics. Like Cabarrús, Cardenal focused on the important (and perhaps unique in its polarized politics) municipality of Aguilares, in which peasant frustration and stratification intersected with church activism, revolutionary organizing, and state-led repression. But while Cabarrús employs an ethnographic process tantamount to “fieldwork under fire,”¹⁷ Cardenal uses parish archives and news records to reconstruct the relationship between church, state repression, and peasant mobilization.¹⁸

Elisabeth J. Wood provides evidence not only of the persistent and dynamic relationship between revolutionary forces and sectors of the peasantry but also of the peasantry’s ability to understand its own reality without outside or “push” factors. By carefully integrating a micro-level analysis of places and actors with a larger comparative framework for interpreting transitions to democracy, Wood’s work bridges the difficult and often vulgarized links between macro-level arguments and local-level research.¹⁹

Other important investigations that articulate local situations and often analyze them in national (and even international) contexts include Mark Pedalty’s study of international press coverage of the war, Serena Fogaroli and Sara Stowell’s little known sociological study of postwar reconstruction in Tecoluca municipality (San Vicente Department), John Hammond’s sociological survey of popular education, and the work of Mandy MacDonald and Mike Gatehouse and Steve Cagan and Beth Cagan on the Colomocagua refugee camp and the Salvadoran community of Ciudad Segundo Montes, which was created following the refugees’ repatriation.²⁰

Landscapes of Struggle combines locally oriented investigations by some of the scholars we have mentioned (Binford, Ching, Lauria-Santiago, Wood) with offerings from a new generation of researchers (Kowalchuk, Moodie, Pedersen, Ronsbo, Silber). Along with forming part of a continuing effort to broaden our knowledge of the country and its history—especially the areas outside the capital city—we seek through this volume to stimulate dialogue and intellectual exchange among historians and other social scientists, as occurred in Mexican studies following the publication of *Everyday Forms of State Formation*.²¹ No well-trained contemporary anthropologist should undertake a study of El Salvador without delving heavily into the historical literature; no contemporary historian, working primarily from archives, should hazard interpretations without at least a basic acquaintance with the results of sociological and anthropological research. The current volume pursues these historical contextualizations, bringing to bear on them critical perspectives and debates that have been part of social and historical analysis of Latin American countries during the last decades but that have often been marginalized or absent from Salvadoran historiography and sociology/

anthropology. Although the authors in this volume treat very different themes from the perspectives of different disciplines and approaches, we consider the work as a whole an interdisciplinary dialogue that will inform future studies of El Salvador as well as Central America. It is the product of an unusual international collaboration among contributors based in Latin America (El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Mexico), the United States, and Europe (Denmark). We hope it will contribute to improving El Salvador's future insofar as a deep accounting of the past and a knowledge of the present are keys to doing so, particularly for El Salvador's people.

The Autonomy of Local Politics and Actors

Because of their generalized nature, studies of El Salvador have in the past generally failed to unravel how the familiar large-scale, state-centered, national-level processes have been assembled from local, small-scale interactions and actors. This oversight applies to all aspects of the country's history, including the origins and process of the civil war, the formation of the authoritarian military state, urban and rural class relations, and many other critical themes. As a result, we not only lack insight into "local" Salvadoran places, institutions, and experiences that might have arisen from this kind of research but we also have missed opportunities to reposit and reframe the larger, national perspectives.

Until recently scholars tended to view structure and agency as mutually exclusive rather than dialectically related points of departure. They treated classes and class fractions abstractly and used structuralist approaches to frame many debates over the causes of the Salvadoran revolution, giving little or no attention to specific local/regional social relations and their contradictory historical development. Analysts *presumed* that the spread of coffee cultivation led to the eradication of communal and peasant landholdings and their replacement with large-scale private coffee estates. They *assumed* that the government's massacre of 10,000 people in the wake of the 1932 rebellion crushed the ethnic identity of the remaining indigenous population. And a common logic, which contemporary research is only now beginning to address, held that the civil war of the 1980s was *exclusively* a product of growing landlessness and land poverty resulting from a combination of rapid postwar population growth, land concentration (particularly in the formerly sparsely inhabited South Coast), and the post-1969 disappearance of the Honduran safety valve; liberation theology was generally treated as an ideological matchstick that, combined with the positive example of the Cuban Revolution (and later the Sandinista defeat of Somoza's National Guard in Nicaragua), touched off the social time bomb.

The point is not that these explanations were entirely incorrect; each certainly contains elements of truth. But taken as unassailable generalizations rather than tentative hypotheses subject to further examination through archival investigation and fieldwork in specific regions and locales, they have impeded the advance of understanding by foreclosing the investigation of many key issues, some of which are taken up in this book. To take but one example, it made little sense to take local actors seriously as long as they were represented uniformly as “peasants” or “workers” and treated categorically as the unconscious bearers of structurally based processes, as opposed to social agents consciously maneuvering to realize ends that accorded with their particular experiences and interests. By contrast, different chapters here contest the simplicity of the above-mentioned “truisms” and provide nuanced analyses of previously oversimplified local and regional social relations and historical processes (see the chapters by Aldo Lauria-Santiago, Leigh Binford, and Henrik Ronsbo).

The chapters in this book take seriously the agency of peasants, workers, and other local actors, freeing them from the common teleological arguments about the character of Salvadoran politics and society. No matter how oppressive or repressive Salvadoran society might have been, the blanketlike power of elites and state-based institutions and discourses has been overstated; understanding the agency of popular sectors requires the kind of analysis and research presented in these chapters. Furthermore, the premise of much that has previously been written about the Salvadoran poor rests on alternating but equally flat images of peasants and rural workers: heroic fighter or stoic passive victims. But it would be better to approach El Salvador’s “exceptional” countryside in the light of the many years of research into local agrarian patterns in other Latin American countries.²² Framed in this way, El Salvador’s agrarian exceptionalism might become merely a position among other similar experiences, but this also enhances the importance of studying local history in order to find the true sources of the country’s uniqueness.

To reiterate, privileging deteriorating material conditions in the analysis of the civil war is not necessarily wrong, but such an approach cannot account for specific cases of collaboration with the state or opposition to it without the provision of a series of mediating concepts and the historical study of actors’ maneuverings on local and regional fields of power. The analyses presented in this collection uncover the complex and contradictory operations of hegemony and counter-hegemony at particular times and places in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, embracing, therefore, prewar, wartime, and postwar El Salvador. They deal with the formal exercise of political power, but they also explain how such exercise is simultaneously founded on and resisted through more subtle social and cul-

tural processes that have received scant attention in writings on El Salvador, which have been overly concerned with issues of structural and political violence. Victor Hugo Acuña Ortega and Erik Ching explain how patronage and clientelism allowed the government and military to forge links with the nascent middle classes and residents of rural communities, respectively, during the first half of the twentieth century; Kati Griffith and Leslie Gates analyze post–World War II military governments’ manipulation of reigning gender ideologies in order to strengthen their hegemony over the organized working classes of San Salvador; and Leigh Binford discusses the roles played by rural catechist training centers in disseminating liberation theology into remote rural areas, where it challenged conservative religious discourses in areas with limited government presence.

The Postwar Reconfiguration of El Salvador

Almost half the contributions transcend the period of conflict in order to address the postwar (post-1992) situation. As we alluded to earlier, the country underwent a monumental, unplanned transformation as a consequence of the twelve-year civil war.²³ Large areas of conflictive zones were depopulated for more than a decade as hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans fled to urban centers and displaced persons and refugee camps or left the country entirely. Those who opted to return to their places of origin (see Elisabeth J. Wood’s and Vincent J. McElhinny’s chapters) tended to concentrate in settlements, which they perceived as “safer” than dispersing among households in the countryside, the prewar rural standard.²⁴ Others settled in San Salvador (whose population more than doubled), eking out a living in the burgeoning urban “informal” economy. Approximately 20 percent of the Salvadoran population still resides outside the country—mainly in the United States—remitting over a billion dollars annually, more than three times the foreign exchange generated by the crisis-ridden coffee industry. Contrary to predictions, privatization of state enterprises and economic liberalization, which have been accompanied by growing integration of Salvadoran and U.S. economies, have not improved the material situation of the majority of people but have had disastrous impacts both on small rural farmers, who cannot compete with heavily subsidized and industrialized U.S. agriculturalists, and on urban workers, who find it hard to survive on the low wages available in assembly plants or through petty commerce and service work. Poverty and desperation, youth alienation, the ready availability of weapons, and other factors contributed to an epidemic of criminal violence that touches all regions and social classes and has resulted in an annual homicide rate higher than during all but the worst years of the civil war.²⁵

Much has been published assessing post-conflict reconstruction and the “transition to democracy” in general terms, but we still do not know very much about how particular groups of people in particular places negotiated the postwar years.²⁶ Several of the contributors to this collection carried out field research in the mid- to late 1990s directed specifically toward discerning this. We expect that most of them will eventually publish book-length accounts of the results of their work. Until that time, this collection provides a sampling of individual and group responses to complex postwar social situations that vary greatly from one place to another. In separate contributions several authors discuss the dialectic of political mobilization and demobilization in a resettled community in northern Morazán (Vince McElhinny); among NGOs, grassroots organizations, and communities in Chalatenango (Irina Silber); and in cooperatives in western El Salvador characterized by different levels of organization (Lisa Kowalchuk). Three other contributors (Henrik Ronsbo, David Pedersen, and Ellen Moodie) apply sophisticated forms of discourse analysis (that have made important in-roads in cultural anthropology but have seldom been used by investigators in El Salvador) to cases that turn around three issues that have become increasingly important in the last fifteen years: international migration, violence, and ethnicity. Collectively, these six contributions provide a good barometer of the impact of and response to the enormous changes that have occurred during the last ten years.

Following a loose historical format, this book is divided into three thematic/chronological sections, each of which is introduced by a brief discussion that summarizes the chapters therein. The first section contains new and often revisionist historical research into some of the most important themes of the 1890–1980 period. The second section revisits the civil war and key problems of the post-civil war period, including the social bases of support for the FMLN in different regions and the formation of postwar communities and identities. The final section provides innovative ethnographic discussions of three crucial themes of contemporary El Salvador that have important historical roots: violence, migration, and identity.