Introduction

An Arc of Triumph and Despair

> Let us hope that, in the next century, historians will be able to pick up the pieces in this field littered with fragments and create a richer and less chaotic vision that may help them (and others) to free themselves from the straitjacket of narcissism, to reinvent new forms of solidarity, and to find new roads to a more open and truly democratic world, where all people of different genders, classes, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities will come together to participate equally in the wealth of the world.
>
> Emilia Viotti da Costa, "New Publics, New Politics, New Histories"

We approached the corner store along a dusty side street of Puerto El Triunfo, El Salvador, 70 miles southeast of San Salvador. Guillermo leaned out the car window and asked a young man who was sweeping in front of the store for directions to 14th street. We were going to film an interview with a former packinghouse worker. The young man replied with equanimity, "here everything is 18th street," referring to the Calle 18 gang. As we turned around and headed out of the neighborhood, I pondered how the high level of loyalty, legitimacy, and solidarity that several decades ago had been associated with the Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera (SIP: the fishing industry union) now belonged to the Calle 18 gang, which, in addition, commanded widespread fear.

Today, on the way to the dock the few remaining fishermen walk past the corroded shells of the packinghouses, perched on the edge of the heavily polluted Bay of Jiquilisco. The oldest of them remember the din of machines, unforgiving odor of shrimp, and wild nights after their return to port. They recall how, during the 1970s, the shrimp industry was booming (third among El Salvador's exports) and its 2,000 organized

workers were among the more privileged in the country. After battling the companies, backed by the military dictatorship for nearly a decade, by 1980, their hopes for a dignified life for their children seemed on the verge of realization. But by the early 1990s, the collapse of the industry had extinguished those aspirations.

In an echo of US rustbelt anguish, many of the 16,000 inhabitants of this gang-ridden port blame the unions – in particular Sindicato Agua, the fishermen's union – for the destruction of their community and their livelihoods. That blame derives from two strikes that Sindicato Agua spearheaded; the latter one, from 1987 to 1991, the longest in Latin American history, coincided with the closing of Pezca S.A., the main shrimp processing plant. Yet, as we will learn in this book, the primary cause of the demise of the industry was a more than US$20 million fraud perpetrated by the rightist owners of the company and the director of a state-controlled bank. Like so many of the financial machinations during the onset of neoliberalism, the details of the fraud were largely illegible and invisible.[1] It was more plausible to blame those whose intransigent militancy was impossible to justify in a memory shaped by the triumph of neoliberalism that also swept away many private-sector unions in El Salvador and throughout the hemisphere.[2]

Solidarity Under Siege presents a case study of workers who struggled and prospered under extremely adverse conditions during the 1970s only to suffer discord, deprivation, and eventually the demise of their industry and their unions over the following decades. Their stories are instructive by revealing a road not taken. Initially crushed by state terror in 1980 and 1981, the workers were unable to maintain the dignified life and relative power for temporary and permanent laborers that they had achieved. Several years later, the workers reorganized. Gender differences, union politics, and political discord, however, obstructed their path forward

[1] Carlota McAllister and Diane M. Nelson, "Aftermath: Harvests of Violence and Histories of the Future," in *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Post-Genocide Guatemala*, eds. Carlota McAllister and Diane M. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 33–40.

[2] In addition to numerous interviews with residents who often used the refrain "mataron a la gallina que puso huevos de oro" (killed the hen who laid golden eggs), José Isidrio Arias Segundo (*Puerto El Triunfo: 487 años de Antología Histórica* [Puerto El Triunfo, El Salvador: Centro de Tecnología, 2009], a popular history of Puerto El Triunfo) encompasses such common sense when he writes: "We had to watch with sadness as one by one the companies closed due to lengthy labor-management conflicts." The book makes no mention of the fraud.

and ultimately blocked the possibility of a cooperatively run shrimp industry in Puerto El Triunfo.

A LOCAL TRANSITION TO NEOLIBERALISM

The massive fraud provides a Central American window on to what David Harvey, a pioneering scholar of neoliberalism, calls *accumulation by dispossession*. For Harvey, financialization forms a key component of the process: "Deregulation allowed the financial system to become one of the main centres of redistributive activity through speculation, predation, fraud, and thievery."[3] Harvey views neoliberalism as fundamentally a political project whereby the North Atlantic corporate elite dealt a crippling blow to its labor movements and managed to push national governments toward the promotion of deregulation of financial markets and the privatization of public assets – services and industries. For Harvey, the achievement of a radicalized form of capitalism hinged on the defeat and demoralization of the labor movement in the United States and in Western Europe and on the shift of industries to the developing world where they also had to confront an emboldened labor movement.

Solidarity Under Siege charts a unique, if particularly stormy, path toward neoliberalism that includes an epoch of violent repression marked by accumulation by dispossession, primarily benefiting some of the company owners. Fishermen and plant workers battled against flexible labor strategies associated with neoliberalism. Their two unions, however, waged their battles at different times. Moreover, during the strikes, there was precious little solidarity between land and sea workers.[4] Political differences, various forms of resistance to capital, and gender tensions impeded long-term solidarity between these unions.

Greg Grandin's analysis of the violent transition to neoliberalism in Latin America is apposite with respect to Puerto El Triunfo and El Salvador. State terror broke up alliances and pacified militants.[5] Repression was

[3] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161.

[4] As we will see, though informally referred to as "sector tierra" and "sector agua," or "Sindicato Tierra" and "Sindicato Agua," in fact Sindicato Tierra had many fishermen among its membership, primarily from Mariscos de El Salvador and Atarraya S.A. but also from Pezca S.A. Sindicato Agua, however, particularly in the 1980s, recruited workers from the processing plant.

[5] Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 196–97. For an excellent case study that substantiates the Grandin thesis, see Lesley Gill, *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle,*

not the only weapon against labor solidarity. During the 1980s, leftist SIP union leaders gradually became practitioners of policies congruent with neoliberalism that were inconsistent with their previous forms of solidarity: they opposed cooperative management of the enterprise, accepted a company subcontracting plan for fishermen, and opposed Sindicato Agua strikes. In short, SIP activists began to act within what some scholars call "neoliberal rationality."[6]

ON SOLIDARITY AND SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

The Salvadoran labor movement formed part of a Latin American upsurge during the 1970s. As in El Salvador, many strike movements had to contend with military regimes. In the Southern Cone, military coups crushed the massive, dynamic labor movements in Argentina and Chile. In Brazil, by contrast, despite military rule, automobile workers and metalworkers launched a massive and prolonged strike movement that had a decisive impact on the democratization process. Timing played a critical role in labor-regime relations. The Brazilian military government, in power since 1964, began a process of liberalization in 1978 and, more formally, in 1979 prompted in no small part by the strike wave, whereas during the same period, the Southern

Counterinsurgency, and Human Rights in Colombia (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). For an important reflection on related issues see Gilbert M. Joseph, "Latin America's Long Cold War: A Century of Revolutionary Process and U.S. Power," in *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War*, eds. Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 397–414.

[6] Harvey, and to some extent Grandin, represents one pole in a debate on neoliberalism. The other pole has its theoretical origins in Foucault, but other theorists have pushed forward his studies on "governmentality" and neoliberal rationality. Rather than a political project, these theorists view neoliberalism as the invasion of the political by economic liberalism: a "technique of government that has become the dominant rationality and has competition as its first principle . . . The drive towards individual responsibilisation and the self as enterprise is a major principle of the neoliberal art of governing. It leads subjects to perform actions that reinforce their own subjection," Mathieu Hilgers, "The Three Anthropological Approaches to Neoliberalism," *International Social Science Journal* 61, no. 202 (Oct. 2011): 358. Two important theoreticians of this this position are Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (New York: Verso, 2014). For a critique of their work, see Bruce Robbins, "The Monster of Governmentality," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 10, 2014.

Cone regimes had recently begun their brutal crackdowns on labor.[7] In El Salvador, the labor movement had developed over two decades under military regimes. Labor's militant rise in the late 1970s pushed the regime in a highly repressive direction that, in turn, propelled an expansion of the movement. If we use the number of strikes and strikers as a measure, by 1979, the Salvadoran workers' movement followed Brazil as the proportionately the most combative in the Americas. Moreover, the Salvadoran labor movement followed Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay in the early 1970s as the most militant in Latin American history, if one takes the *toma* (plant occupation) as a sign of militancy.

In many respects, the Salvadoran movement resembled the Guatemalan, so brilliantly depicted and analyzed by Deborah Levinson-Estrada in *Trade Unionists against Terror*.[8] The organized Guatemalan workers also faced an increasingly homicidal regime: presumably, the two governments exchanged notes on their respective situations. The main difference between the two movements was that the Salvadoran radical Left (the Organizaciones Populares, OP) led the majority of strikes in 1979 and 1980, as opposed to Guatemala, where trade unionists not identified with the Far Left headed most of the labor actions; the Salvadorans also employed the tactic of the *toma* more frequently. Regardless of the differences, the union activists of both countries rank among the most heroic and brutalized in twentieth-century labor history.

Solidarity Under Siege explains the success of the Puerto El Triunfo labor movement in achieving major quotas of autonomy and substantial improvements in the workers' wages and working conditions; it had begun the 1970s under the leadership of a regime-controlled labor federation tied very closely to the military regime. That achievement hinged significantly on a major change in the consciousness of a primarily female workforce.

[7] For an excellent analysis of the Brazilian labor movement during the late 1970s, see John D. French, *Lula's Politics of Cunning: From Trade Unionism to the Presidency*, *Part 2* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming).

[8] Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists against Terror* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). The Honduran labor movement had a larger percentage of the economically active population organized in unions and achieved significant gains during the 1970s facing far less repressive regimes. The Nicaraguan labor movement was weaker than its neighbors, though it took off in at least a numerical sense following the 1979 triumph of the revolution.

Like their counterparts in Guatemala, Salvadoran workers struggled for a life in which their children could be adequately cared for, schooled, clothed, and fed in a healthy community free from arbitrary repression. To achieve that basic goal, they entered into alliances that ultimately made them objects of state and paramilitary violence. Faced with a common, homicidal antagonist, the alliances nevertheless endured well into the 1980s.

This book explores the multifaceted transformation of workers' consciousness. In my first book, *To Lead as Equals*, I analyzed the ways in which peasants and peasant laborers (campesinos) in northwestern Nicaragua experienced an endogenous transformation of consciousness.[9] Campesinos used and expanded the meanings of elite concepts – such as private property – to understand and transform their social world. Moreover, they deployed those concepts in ways that first engaged and ultimately disengaged with their elite allies. Rather than a realm of complete autonomy, a dialectic of autonomy and dependency was consistently in play in their contradictory forms of consciousness. *Solidarity Under Siege* follows *To Lead as Equals* in that it emphasizes the endogenous transformation of consciousness yet embarks in a new direction in that it explores the uneven qualities of the changes related to the workers' multiple, coexisting affiliations and identities. Those, in turn, conditioned misunderstandings and discord within the labor movement, rooted to some degree in gendered structural divisions and labor segmentation. To cite a key example, the approximately 500 fishermen based in Puerto El Triunfo engaged in a unique form of resistance, known as "la movida" (the move) involving illegal sales of shrimp that became a realm of dispute among all port workers. Due to its illegality, no one could publicly speak about *la movida*.

The silence conditioned what I call a *desencuentro*, a Spanish word with greater reach and resonance than the individual English synonyms: a misunderstanding, disagreement, disjuncture, run-in, or failed encounter. People in two different groups can have different understandings of the

[9] Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912–1979* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). My analysis resembled the early work of the Subaltern School, on the one hand, and James Scott's corpus, on the other. Unaware of that important work at the time of my research and writing, it differs in my emphasis on the subaltern use of elite concepts.

[10] For other uses of *desencuentros* see Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America, Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso Press, 2012); Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth Century Latin*

same word or concept that, in turn, may condition different practices in a given historical moment.[10] In the words of the Russian linguist, V. N. Volosinov: "Each word, as we know, is a little arena for the clash and crisscrossing of differently oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product of the living interaction of social forces."[11]

I propose to use *desencuentro* as a methodological tool to aid in our understanding of the divisions among oppositional and subaltern forces. In previous work, I noted that, in the 1980s, the Sandinistas and grassroots peasant activists understood "people's property" differently, with significant political consequences. The peasant notion, rooted in an earlier conceptualization of "private property," emphasized individual access with local, collective control of land whereas the emerging revolutionary notion limited the meaning to state ownership and control. At times, I will use the term in a stronger sense, emphasizing the linguistic impact on political disagreement (*desencuentro* I). At other times, the term will refer to the failure of two groups with shared goals to ally, without specifying a linguistic dimension (*desencuentro* II).

The book also explores a vein of analysis opened up originally by Daniel James that emphasizes the dialectical relationship between formal ideological discourse and practical consciousness.[12] *Solidarity Under Siege* underscores how the labor and peasant movements grew quantitatively and qualitatively when that relationship was able to flourish, and what happened when this dynamic was restrained.

In El Salvador and elsewhere, the disjunction between formal ideology and practical consciousness was related to the contradiction between the revolutionary major utopias and subaltern minor utopias. Those spaces of unfettered horizontal communication at times were not visible to the different actors.[13] In Latin America, these minor utopias, "visions of

America (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). For another interesting use of the term related to the notion of a failed encounter, see Álvaro Garcia Linera, "Indianismo y marxismo: El desencuentro de dos razones revolucionarias," *Revista Donataria* no. 2 (Mar.–Apr. 2005).

[11] V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 41.

[12] Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[13] Jay Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 5. Winter calls "minor utopias": "imaginings of liberation usually on a smaller scale, without the grandiose pretensions or the almost unimaginable hubris and cruelties of the 'major' utopian projects."

partial transformation, of pathways out of the ravages of war, or away from the indignities of the abuse of human rights" were often embedded within a "major" revolutionary utopian discourse.[14] As a result, the organized Left often ignored or misunderstood these utopian, egalitarian experiences, due to their challenge to all forms of hierarchy. There was also a murky space often filled with rhetorical flourishes between the revolutionary nationalist imaginary and the objective possibilities for social and political change most vividly illustrated by the chasm between the leftist Sandinista government's goals and its achievements, however noteworthy.

Regardless of the *desencuentros*, discord, and disillusionment associated with the Central American Left, the enshrinement of fundamental notions of solidarity was a significant collective achievement. Today, the term *solidarity* encompasses elastic meanings ranging from the purchase of fair-trade coffee to support for flood victims. However, during the 1970s the term had powerful salience throughout the world, despite its multivocality. One of the key contributions of Liberation Theology that spread across Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s was to take a strand of Christianity, the early ideas about brotherhood, and create new meanings of solidarity embodied in the thought and practice of tens of thousands of Christian Base Communities (CBC). Solidarity meant a full commitment to aid and support fellow members of the CBCs specifically and the oppressed in general, both locally and nationally, in their struggles for material and spiritual liberation. The Iglesia Popular (Popular Church) also pushed the institutional churches to offer support (solidarity) to the CBCs and to join their attack on the profoundly inegalitarian societal structures that imprisoned the majority of Salvadorans in poverty. These notions of Christian solidarity resembled those of anarcho-syndicalists during the earlier decades of the twentieth century, especially in Spain and in the Southern Cone, and illustrate the philosopher Kurt Bayertz's contention that

> The solidarity practiced within social movements thus acquires a dimension which is both archaeological and anticipative. It is archaeological insofar as it uncovers a disposition, buried under established social conditions, towards cooperation, mutual aid, common feeling – in short: solidarity. It is *anticipative* insofar as it also draws a picture of the future human being, who will ultimately be free to develop its cooperative and common strengths unhindered . . . It refers directly to a *means* of the battle: solidarity as a weapon. Yet, at the same time, it refers to the

[14] Ibid., 5.

end of the battle: solidarity as an anticipation of future society, as part of Utopia already lived.[15]

These notions of Christian solidarity had a major impact on the development of the campesino movement in El Salvador: the vast majority of the rural wing of the radical Bloque Popular Revolucionario (BPR) had an intimate connection with the CBCs. Campesinos translated the practice of social solidarity within the CBCs, including highly evolved notions of sharing and collective labor, into the radical struggles for land, decent wages, and working conditions. In the BPR and other OPs, the Iglesia Popular's notions of solidarity merged with those connected historically to the labor movement and then to those related to the nascent revolutionary movement that exploded onto the world stage in 1981. As the Jesuit intellectual, Ignacio Ellacuría warned, however, the integration of these distinct strands of solidarity was not seamless. Criticizing the OPs for minimizing the influence of the CBCs, he wrote that former needed the latter "to transform our being itself and the consciousness of the laboring class; this is the deepest and most valuable principle of liberation."[16]

In the port, the transition from the most elementary forms of unionism, a sense of solidarity with fellow workers on the shop floor to a willingness to sacrifice for all union members, was fraught and far from unidirectional. The move from labor solidarity to support for political-military organizations committed to social-political revolution was similarly partial and contradictory.

By 1979 and 1980, as state repression intensified, popular resistance grew. Death squads tied to security forces executed between 8,000 and 11,000 civilians in 1980. Amidst that orgy of violence, opposition to the regime often was equated with support for the revolutionary Left. By the end of the year, when death squads eliminated the entire civilian opposition leadership, that identification between dissent and revolution became a truism.

On January 22, 1980, in the largest demonstration in the country's history, some 150,000–200,000 workers, peasants, and students marched in San Salvador, in what many leftists understood as the high point of revolutionary Left mobilization. The view from the port on January 22, however, allows for a more nuanced interpretation. For labor militants in

[15] Kurt Bayertz, "Four Uses of Solidarity," in *Solidarity*, ed. Kurt Bayertz (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 20.
[16] Tomás Campos, "La iglesia y las organizaciones populares en El Salvador," *Estudios Centroamericanos* 33, no. 359 (Sept. 1978): 699.

the port, and perhaps for a substantial minority of union members nationally, the march represented the power of the labor movement. At the same time, the SIP and its parent labor federation employed minor forms of coercion to encourage its membership to join the march. This study suggests that the revolutionary Left enjoyed less support than it purported to have, and that support was at times ambivalent. At the same time, its middle-level leadership was far more *popular*, based in the rural and urban working classes, than some analysts and scholars have posited.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Recently, there have been several fine studies of the origins and development of the Salvadoran civil war. Joaquín Chávez's *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador's Civil War* examines the evolving alliance between urban intellectuals and peasants during that critical and understudied period.[17] It describes how peasants became educated and then became educators through nontraditional means fostered in general by the Catholic Church. Chávez also provides a first-rate analysis of the mobilization and radicalization process by focusing on the emergence of different types of intellectuals, including peasants.

In *Modernizing Minds*, Erick Ching and Héctor Lindo-Fuentes offer a convincing account of the primordial role of ANDES 21 de Junio, the teachers' union within the anti-regime opposition.[18] Moreover, they unpack with great precision a major division in the governing Partido de Conciliación Nacional, that is the military, highlighting a rift between those committed to social-economic reform and those who fought to maintain the status quo. Ching has also recently published *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle over Memory*. This finely crafted, sophisticated study examines the process of memory formation in the aftermath of the civil war. He analyzes four discrete narratives: civilian elites, military officers, Frente Farabundo Martí Para La Liberación Nacoinal (FMLN) combatants, and FMLN commanders. Through a literary analysis of written testimony Ching argues that each narrative, drawing on

[17] Joaquín Chávez, *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador's Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[18] Héctor Lindo-Fuentes and Erik Ching, *Modernizing Minds: Education Reform and the Cold War, 1960–1980* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).