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## Review/Reseña

Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

### **The Dialectics of Injustice, Insurgency, Massacre and Memory in El Salvador**

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In January and February 1932, the densely populated and largely indigenous western region of the small coffee-growing republic of El Salvador witnessed one of the most horrific episodes of state terror in the history of Latin America, when in response to a communist-inspired insurgency the Salvadoran military massacred between 10,000 and 30,000 unarmed Indians and ladinos, many of them women and children, in what has come to be known simply as *La Matanza* (The Massacre). This collaborative study by two prominent historians of Central America sheds important new light on this watershed moment in Salvadoran history, offering a host of fresh insights into the origins, characteristics, and

legacies of the January 1932 insurgency and the orgy of state-led bloodletting that crushed it. In addition, the more than 200 oral interviews with survivors and others conducted by Gould in the late 1990s and early 2000s add substantially to the existing stock of documentary evidence on the topic.

The book's publication was preceded by the production and distribution of a film, *Cicatriz de la memoria* (*Scars of Memory*, 2003; excerpts of *Cicatriz* can be viewed on YouTube). While the book makes no claims to be definitive—indeed, as the authors acknowledge, “We inevitably fall short of creating a definitive narrative of events” (xiv)—and while one can sense the historiographic storm clouds gathering in response to the book's treatment of its sources and several of its main arguments—witness Erik Ching's forthcoming review in *Hispanic American Historical Review*<sup>1</sup>—this carefully crafted study will inevitably loom large in any future efforts to understand the events it describes and analyzes with such sensitivity and subtlety. As all participants in this impending historiographic clash would doubtless agree (and paraphrasing Ching's broad-minded observation that concludes his review), the real winners of such debates will be the people of El Salvador in their struggle to come to terms with the profound traumas of their past.

Recent years have seen an upsurge in scholarly interest in the events of 1932. Since the early 1970s, the standard English-language monograph was Thomas P. Anderson's *Matanza* (1971, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1992). After the end of the Salvadoran civil war and the opening of the Comintern archives in the early 1990s, North and Central American scholars have explored various aspects of “el 32”. Along with co-author Lauria-Santiago, historians Patricia Alvarenga, Erik Ching, Rafael Lara Martínez, Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, Héctor Pérez-Brignoli, and Virginia Tilley in particular have challenged the conventional wisdom that the social trauma of the 1932 *Matanza* effectively eradicated Indians and Indian ethnic identity from El Salvador. As Ching and Tilley made clear in their award-winning 1998 study, and as Gould and Aldo-Lauria concur, the long-term effects of La

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<sup>1</sup> The review will likely be published in Fall 2009, though the exact issue is not yet determined; Erik Ching, personal communication.

Matanza on indigenous identity in El Salvador were far more ambiguous and partial than the “Indian disappearance” interpretation allows.<sup>2</sup>

The book follows a clear chronological sequence: the first two chapters, drafted by Lauria-Santiago, take the narrative to late 1930, examining the political and economic origins of rural discontent, especially in the west, and paying special attention to the explosive growth of coffee production, the processes of capitalist transformation, and the rapidity of the country and region’s descent into extreme social and class inequality in the 1920s. Chapters 3 through 8, drafted by Gould, examine rural and urban political mobilization from the late 1920s, particularly the pivotal period from 1929 to 1931, that ultimately led to the uprising of 22 January 1932; the social geography, patterns, and characteristics of the uprising itself and its suppression; and individual and social memories of the massacres and repression from 1932 to the present. The book concludes with a brief comparative analysis of the paroxysms of state violence in 1932 and 1980, and an Afterword by Gould describing the film’s production, reception, and multiple reworkings from its rough cut to final version.

Chief among the book’s many strengths is how the authors frame their study in constructive dialogue with existing literatures on the topic. They begin by identifying four principal themes that they say “have dominated interpretations of the revolt of 1932 and the massacre” that followed: “political crisis, economic collapse, communist agency, and indigenous participation” (xviii-xix)—to which might be added a fifth: the imperial role of the United States in helping to shape Central America’s political landscape of constraints and possibilities. As the authors observe (but do not examine in much detail), “Radical nationalism and anti-imperialism became important components of the Salvadoran labor movement” (51). Aptly asserting that the central challenge for scholars has been to understand and represent the intricate intertwining of these four themes at local, regional, and national levels, they do a remarkable job in achieving their stated objectives.

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<sup>2</sup> Erik Ching and Virginia Tilley, “Indians, the Military and the Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 30, no. 1, Feb. 1998, awarded the 1999 Conference on Latin American History Prize.

A related strength of the book centers on its efforts to illuminate local patterns, variations, and actors through a careful and perceptive analysis of extant published and archival sources, including the interviews conducted by Gould, excerpts from which are woven throughout the narrative. Similarities and differences in social and ethnic geography, political economy, leftist organizing, popular mobilization, insurrection, and state repression in the municipalities of Izalco, Nahuizalco, Juayúa, Sónzacate, and Sonsonate in Sonsonate Department, and Ahuachapán and Tacuba in Ahuachapán Department, receive special attention. So too do key individuals—from prominent national figures like Miguel Mármol, Ismael Hernández, and Modesto Ramirez to lesser-known militants like the Cuenca brothers in Tacuba, Luis Alfonso Castillo in Ahuachapán, and Francisco Sánchez in Juayúa, among many others. The authors also do a commendable job of highlighting the role of a host of landowners, military officers, and politicians in this unfolding drama of mobilization, insurrection, massacre, and remembrance. Empirically rich and theoretically informed, the book seems sure to spark lively and fruitful debates about the role of specific individuals and organizations and the larger patterns and processes in which they were enmeshed.

Because all viable historical research and narrative representations are ultimately guided by questions about the past, it will be useful to summarize the principal questions that the authors contend with and their responses to them. Chief among these is, “Was it [the insurrection] communist?” (xxii). More broadly, what was the role of foreign communists and the Comintern in initiating and shaping the popular mobilizations and insurrection? How best to understand the relationship between local actors—Indians and ladino, rural and urban—and the Comintern and the Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS) in the months and years prior to the January 1932 uprising? As the authors rightly observe, a powerful current both in the scholarly literature and in popular discourse in effect portrays Indians in the western coffee departments as the unwitting dupes of foreign communists, assigning blame for the *Matanza* to the Comintern’s manipulation of indigenous grievances and ignorance in combination with

the fear-induced backlash of the coffee-growing elite as manifested in the military's ferocious response.

According to Gould and Lauria-Santiago, the key leftist popular organizations in western El Salvador were the Federación Regional de Trabajadores de El Salvador (FRTS), the PCS, and especially, from its foundation in 1930, the Salvadoran branch of Socorro Rojo Internacional (SRI), a PCS "front group" (xxiii) that thanks to the agency of local actors acquired a critical degree of autonomy from both the PCS and the Moscow-based Comintern. To simplify a complex and multilayered argument, the authors contend that it was through the organizational framework of Socorro Rojo that local actors—Indian and ladino, rural and urban—appropriated and modified the rigid class categories and anti-imperialist discourse of foreign communists to suit Salvadoran realities.

What role did indigenous peoples play in the mobilizations and uprising? What was the relationship between *ladinos* and Indians? And what was the relationship between urban-based militants and the rural workers and campesinos who formed the backbone of the insurrection? Here the authors' analysis is especially rich and compelling. Fleshing out the fluidity of ethnic identities and allegiances within the broader process of *mestizaje* (an elite nation-building discourse, in large part a legacy of the Mexican Revolution, that posited that national populations that were no longer Indian but ethnically homogenous<sup>3</sup>), the authors argue that the line between Indians and ladinos was porous, variegated, and shifting; that town and countryside did not constitute separate spheres but in fact interpenetrated at multiple levels in everyday life; and that both Indians and ladinos played key roles in the mobilization and insurrection that followed. In brief, the authors argue powerfully against the notion that Indians were manipulated by foreign Marxist-Leninists. Instead, drawing from a wide variety of sources, they argue that indigenous individuals and communities were active agents in the making of their own history, finding deep resonances in communist discourses of class struggle and equal

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<sup>3</sup> The process of *mestizaje* in Nicaragua is examined by Gould in much greater detail in his *To Die In This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

rights, and shaping that discourse to accord with their own experiences and cultural prisms.

What were the origins of the popular mobilizations that led to the January 1932 insurrection? The story told here is immensely complex, combining long, medium, and short-term political, economic, demographic, social, and cultural factors. One of the authors' most interesting arguments concerns the stunning rapidity of the processes of primitive accumulation and the impoverishment of rural workers in the western coffee districts. Building on Lauria-Santiago's previous work on Salvadoran agrarian history, the authors show that from 1881 the liberal reform laws that abolished indigenous forms of collective landownership in fact promoted the formation of a class of relatively prosperous smallholding peasants with substantial access to land. At the dawn of the twentieth century, in short, El Salvador's rural producers were pretty well off. Over the next three decades this relative prosperity eroded dramatically, particularly in the mid and late 1920s, as the boom and bust cycles of capitalist development and a Salvadoran version of the "dance of the millions" led to the concentration of landholdings into the hands of a small number of elite coffee growers and the "agonizing decomposition" of the peasantry (3). Rapid population growth only intensified these trends, as the country's population more than doubled from 1880 to 1920 (17). In the process two new rural classes emerged: semi-proletarian peasant laborers and resident laborers on coffee estates (*colonos*), neither with adequate access to land or productive resources. In short, not unlike the situation in Porfirian Mexico, in the space of a generation the process of agrarian capitalist development impoverished the country's rural majority, leading to land hunger, a social memory and discourse of injustice, and mounting social discontent. Then in 1930 came the global economic depression, the plummeting of coffee prices, and the accompanying unemployment, wage cuts for coffee workers, and deepening immiseration for both urban and rural working people.

Entwined with these structural economic and demographic changes was the unfolding drama of Salvadoran politics at national, departmental and local levels. Our authors do a masterful job of situating these structural

transformations within the context of the convoluted succession of regimes from the authoritarian Meléndez-Quiñónez family-dominated Partido Nacional Democrático (PND, 1913-27) to Pío Romero Bosque and his Partido Civilista (1927-31) to the ineptly reformist regime of Arturo Arujo (1931), which ended in the military's coup of 2 December 1931—which in turn set the stage for the military's crackdown and the ensuing insurrection.

Especially illuminating are the authors' efforts to reconstruct the social geography and cultural dynamics of municipal political struggles and labor organizing and mobilization in the western coffee zones—most notably Juayúa, Izalco, and Nahuizalco, as well as San Isidro, Jayaque, and neighboring locales. “Every night they had their comités” and “They were real fiestas but they were also meetings,” read the oral interview-derived epigraphs introducing Chapter Three (aptly titled “Fiestas of the Oppressed”), all emblematic of the book's ground-up approach to understanding how ordinary people in town and countryside, Indian and ladino, responded to the economic and political crises confronting them. And, like the “dance of the millions” that sparked it, the process of political mobilization among rural and urban workers took place in a remarkably brief window of time, essentially from 1929 to 1931. Socorro Rojo, for instance, was not founded until 1930. As the authors evocatively write in their introduction to Chapter Five, “Every protest, every meeting, every strike portended the ‘final battle’ with the enemy. Time was telescoped for individuals and groups... [by] December 1931, ... the winds of social change had reached gale force” (132).

Painstakingly reconstructing and elegantly narrating and analyzing the complex sequence of events in the crucial months from September 1931 to January 1932, Chapter Five offers a fine-grained examination of the revolutionary moment immediately before and after the PCS Central Committee's fateful decision (of January 10) to launch an armed insurrection later in the month. Chapter Six carefully reconstructs the events of the insurrection itself, while Chapter Seven offers a chilling portrayal of the massacres that followed. The title of Chapter Seven, “They Killed the Just for the Sinners” (*mataron justos por pecadores*) captures

one of the book's central themes, highlighted throughout but fleshed out in detail in Chapter Eight. That is, in individual and social memories of "the orgy of bloodletting" that was La Matanza, the overwhelming tendency among Salvadorans has been to echo the military's version of events – which is, in the authors' words, that "those who were 'guilty' escaped and those who were 'innocent' died... [a] view of communist perfidy and indigenous innocence" accompanied by the systematic and long-term "suppression of indigenous agency" (215, 246). In other words, aggrieved Indians were cynically manipulated by foreigners and Marxist-Leninists; the former suffered and died and the latter survived. This transmutation of individual and social memories into a toxic narrative of indigenous victimization and communist betrayal comprises one of the book's core arguments and one of the principal axes around which the authors construct their narrative. As a long-term effect of a profound social trauma, the authors maintain, it is also a transmutation that needs to be acknowledged and dealt with in a sustained and collective way if Salvadorans are to transcend the traumas of their past and begin the process of collective healing.

How many people did the Salvadoran military kill? The authors' answer: we will never know, but probably closer to 10,000 than the commonly cited figure of 30,000 (234). Did the military's repression of the movement constitute a form of "genocide"? The authors' response: a carefully qualified and convincing "Yes" (217-27). Do the individual and collective memories of "el 32" unearthed by Gould and others accurately represent historical realities? The authors' response: a sensitively rendered, carefully crafted, and insistent "No." Significantly, only two of Gould's more than 200 informants were actual participants in the insurrection, while "very few" acknowledged that close relatives participated (200). The remainder recounted more generic, shared memories of the mobilization, insurrection, massacre, and its aftermath.

Given this tenuous and at best partly reliable evidentiary base, the authors' narrative understandably brims with highly qualified assertions, conjectures, and hypotheses; terms and phrases like "probably," "undoubtedly," "doubtless," "very possibly," "it is likely," "it is doubtful,"

“there is little possibility,” “it seems highly plausible” and so on abound. At times these speculative forays seem too qualified. (For example, concluding their discussion of the spread of Protestantism in the 1920s, the authors maintain that “There is thus *little doubt* that the growth of Protestantism, if not necessarily another form of religious protest by Indians, *probably* did contribute to the generalized sense that all things ideological were up for grabs” [113; emphases added]. This double qualification [there is “little doubt” that it was “probably” the case] seems unnecessarily redundant; a single qualifier would suffice.) Overall, however, such cautious qualifications appear necessary and contribute to the book’s overall sense of judicious, prudent, and rigorously reasoned evenhandedness.

The book’s theoretical touchstone is the Gramscian notion of hegemony, especially as elaborated by Ranajit Guha and the late William Roseberry. The book’s core argument revolves around this concept—not merely the dialectic between the moments of consent and coercion as most commonly understood, but (following Roseberry, to whose memory the book is dedicated), “not to understand consent but to understand struggle” (4). Deploying this robust and elastic notion to a wide variety of texts and contexts, the authors repeatedly buttress their arguments by referencing a myriad of prominent theoreticians and social critics, from Ernesto Laclau and Raymond Williams to James Scott to Karl Marx. Indeed, scarcely a page goes by without some reference to a significant contributor to social history and theory (the Preface alone invokes the work of Daniel James, Greg Grandin, Gabriel García Márquez, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Jeffrey Paige, and Timothy Wickham-Crowley). This approach deepens and broadens the book’s comparative relevance while providing an explicit set of theoretical and interpretive guideposts that critics and subsequent investigators can either accept or reject as they choose. The great bulk of these comparative references are to European and North American scholars (around three-quarters); around one-quarter are to Latin Americans; the sole Asian scholar to appear is Guha; and none are Africans. Evidently published too late to be incorporated into the study are the recent works by Virginia Tilley and Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, Erik Ching, and Rafael Lara Martínez that explore many of the same topics and themes examined here,

particularly the politics of social remembering and forgetting and the role of ethnicity and Indians in the events of “el 32” and its aftermath.<sup>4</sup>

One body of comparative literature that is surprisingly absent from the book’s theoretical repertoire is that treating cultural constructions of *honor*. Indeed, while the authors focus repeatedly on cultural constructions of dignity, respect, rights, masculinity, and social equality, the concept of “honor” appears only sporadically; the word itself does not appear until more than halfway through the book (146, here in reference to “local leftist discourse”; the only other brief references to honor appear on pages 163 and 168, despite the repeated invocation of closely related concepts like humiliation, shame, dignity, respect, masculinity, patriarchy, and sexuality). Given the authors’ evident linguistic and semantic sensitivity; their frequent theoretical and comparative forays into other key terms and concepts; the centrality of the honor-shame complex in Latin American history and culture; and the dense nexus between honor, dignity, masculinity, and hegemony, this absence seems striking.

A handsome volume featuring five maps and 36 photographs (15 contemporary, most of interviewees, and 21 historic), the book, along with its accompanying film, are sure to spark animated and productive debates about the events and processes it analyzes with such care and eloquence. As a final note, and building on their creative multimedia approach to the topic, the authors might consider creating a website into which Gould’s oral interviews and other documents—including the film—could be housed and made accessible to scholars and researchers worldwide. It is too early to say whether the book’s major and minor conclusions will stand the test of time—indeed, the current state of ferment and flux on this topic strongly suggests that some, at least, will not—but few will disagree that this finely wrought study makes a major contribution to understanding one of the most horrific and consequential episodes in the modern history of Latin America.

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Tilley, *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation and Power in El Salvador* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, Erik Ching, and Rafael Lara Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador: The Insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the Politics of Historical Memory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007).