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# From Causes to Causers: The Etiology of Salvadoran Internal War Revisited<sup>1</sup>

by *Yvon Grenier*

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## INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGING THE DOMINANT PARADIGM

In contrast with leading approaches in studies of "great" revolutions (China, Russia, France), in which political phenomena are readily construed as dependent variables, dominant explanations of Central American revolutions tend to reduce revolt, to put things sharply, to the "inevitable" result of exploitation and injustice.<sup>2</sup> The roots of national revolt in Central America appear to be so self-evident that few analysts bother venturing into the vast scholarship available on violence and political change.<sup>3</sup>

John A. Booth is one of the very few scholars who looks at the Central American internal wars from a theoretical, as opposed to an historical or purely partisan, perspective.<sup>4</sup> In a successful attempt to summarize the "most promising theories" on the "roots of national revolts" in Central America, Booth highlights a "complicated combination of developmental changes and internal and external political processes" in the region. Political factors "also play key roles" in those revolts, since "aggrieved citizens will not generate overt political conflict."<sup>5</sup> Recent contributions quoted by the author support "the importance of the state in the political process of rebellion."<sup>6</sup> He rejects the "economically deterministic theories of revolution." Nonetheless, once the most vulgar economically determinist approach has been cast off, he invariably strives to construe political processes (typically confined to "popular mobilization . . . due to socioeconomic conditions" and "government response to popular mobilization") as dependent variables, ultimately determined by socioeconomic factors. In what could be considered as a dominant-paradigm-in-a-nutshell passage, Booth maintains that:

. . . according to what may be the most promising theories, recent economic development trends worsened the region's historically extreme maldistribution of wealth and income, intensifying grievances in the 1970s with the rapid expansion of Central America's rural and industrial proletariats, declining urban and rural real incomes, and increasing concentration of wealth (especially agricultural land). Such problems led the aggrieved to demand change and sparked growing opposition to incumbent regimes by political parties, labor unions, religious community organizers, and revolutionary groups. Violent repression of opposition demands for reform in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala not only failed to suppress mobilization for change but actually helped forge revolutionary coalitions that fought for control of the state.<sup>7</sup>

The chain of causality leading to "national revolt" can be broken down as first, persistent maldistribution of wealth and income, leading the aggrieved to demand change; second, pressure for change from the aggrieved, invariably meeting with repression, which far

from suppressing mobilization for change, actually radicalized the aggrieved, thus contributing to the formation of revolutionary coalitions. The casual link between these three moments, especially between the second and third, is predicated on two questionable, though usually unchallenged, premises that the radical politico-military organizations (without which there would have been no "national revolt") are expressions of, or to some extent descend from, the "aggrieved" (primarily the poor); and concomitantly, that the radical or "revolutionary" agenda put forward by these organizations, including the use of violence, is in fact a reaction, usually *in the last resort*, to the regime's initial rejection of reformist demands, repressive measures against the opposition, and to the outright failure of tirelessly tested alternative strategies.

Questions which, according to Booth, "warrant further study" such as the "critical process by which popular forces especially opposition organizations have formed . . ." and "the role played by external actors," are tossed in his concluding remarks, finding little room in an otherwise comprehensive theoretical framework.<sup>8</sup>

The full range of issues related to these two "residual" questions obviously reaches beyond the scope of this limited article. Moreover, a rigorous cross-national analysis would be necessary to test all of Booth's propositions. Nevertheless, it is unequivocal (even for Booth) that this approach downplays the decisive contribution and potential autonomy of leading insurgents (or "causers"<sup>9</sup>), as well as the considerable bearing that foreign actors have on the positions and dispositions of causers.<sup>10</sup>

### **On the Relative Autonomy of Causers**

Two interconnected questions could be formulated at this point. First, to what extent the probability of eruption of an internal war is contingent upon *choices* made by key actors (here, presumably, the causers). Second, to what extent the process by which those choices are made is "relatively" or "potentially" autonomous from, or conversely determined by, structural, overriding conditions of revolt.

The first question is much too broad to be dealt with in this article, although one should keep in mind that the internal war in El Salvador recently came to an end *without major alteration to its purported socio-economic causes*. Conversely, it came about in a context of rapidly changing ideological dispositions in the country, and important mutations on the international scene.

To address the second question one has to focus on the "causers": who they are; under what specific set of conditions they were typically mobilized; and finally, what were their ideological dispositions. In El Salvador, pressure for radical change came *initially* and *primarily* from a dissenting faction of the urban middle-to-upper strata, who *benefited* from the economic growth and social mobilization of the 1950s and 1960s. University actors (students, faculty) appear to be the core elements of this dissenting faction. Moreover, the case could be made that radical ideologies and romanticization of armed struggle featured by the vanguard of this armed opposition were not merely the last resort's response to exclusion and repression. They were the pivotal element of a new

post-developmentist and counter-cultural ideological disposition, very much influenced by the Cuban revolution and Castro's ensuing socialist crusade on the continent. From the 1960s until the recent emergence of powerful counter-trends, this mind-set was shared by political activists (primarily university-based) all over Latin America and beyond, in heterogeneous social, economic, and political environments.

## **BRINGING THE CAUSERS BACK IN**

Few scholars would now dispute the fact that Latin American modern guerrilla movements have been led to a large extent by middle class, university-educated young men.<sup>11</sup> In El Salvador, rebel organizations were created mostly by university actors, often in the National University precinct, in the first half of the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> The Central American University José Simeón Cañas and the college Externado San José have also been instrumental, but more indirectly, through their contribution in the politicization of unions and Christian base communities.<sup>13</sup>

This need not mean that the Farabundi Front for National Liberation (FMLN) was exclusively a "university guerrilla" (Gabriel Zaid). Regional and local leaders of the FMLN were also recruited from unions, popular or religious organizations, though union leaders or "delegates of the word" were often educated and "converted politically" either directly at the university, or indirectly, through contacts with university actors.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in addition to providing the initial impetus, the university-based sector of the opposition was everywhere the most radical and the most readily amenable to the use of violence.

Of course, one could simply state that the causers' radical agenda was "in the last instance" a reflection of a situation of social injustice existing in their country. But one could have empathy for the aggrieved without electing oneself as their natural armed and conscious vanguard, and without adopting a radical ideology that, historically, never enjoyed mass support.

The political significance of this dominant feature, i.e., the middle to upper class intellectuals spearheading post-1960s insurgencies everywhere in Latin America, is downplayed by most observers. In the literature on El Salvador, the causers are presented as either the interchangeable members of a revolutionary coalition (along with peasants, workers, the "social subject of the revolution," and so on), or as trend-surfers who, emulating Hannah Arendt's "men of the revolutions," strive to glide on top of the latest revolutionary wave. The foco theory's (or Bolshevik's or Blanquist's) basic premise is seldom taken seriously, i.e., that a small group of professional revolutionaries can trigger and sustain a military opposition to a given regime, without waiting to meet supposedly objective conditions of revolt, including mass support. In the context of middle-income, unstable, and authoritarian "city-states," such as the Central American countries, a relatively small but highly organized and motivated group of armed individuals, from coup plotters to guerrillas, can certainly sustain an internal war for a long period of time, even without widespread popular support.<sup>15</sup> In fact, as Arendt pointed out in her famous *On Revolution*, the insurrectionist pattern of revolutionary mobilization, featuring a small

army of professional revolutionaries, has been dominant during this century. Of course, this does not mean that Central American insurgencies, and the Salvadorean insurgency in particular, did not enjoy some popular support at one point or another. It only means that popular support is not a requisite for internal war, especially not in these countries.

The all-encompassing and spellbinding notion of Revolution, which, incidently, was the Virgen of Guadalupe of most Central Americanists during the 1980s, blurs two observable phenomena.<sup>16</sup> First, an unsuccessful insurgency is not necessarily identical to a successful one in nature and origin. It is a common mistake to assume that all Latin American revolutions are structurally similar, with the proviso that some are (unfortunately) defective and do not develop to their fullest extent. The fact that one group of actors takes up arms in a country where indicators of relative deprivation abound is not tantamount to the emergence of a social revolution.

Second, once the necessary distinction is made between the emergence of an insurgency and a national revolt, not to mention a successful national revolt ending with the collapse of the old regime, it is tempting to suggest that if structural conditions especially political, state-centered ones<sup>17</sup> are crucial for the understanding of the victory of an insurgency, they are usually not a strong explaining factor of the emergence of an insurgent group.<sup>18</sup> Arguably, the analyst must pay more attention to the "agent" during the initial mobilizational period, and focus more on "structures" as the "foco" successfully coalesce with other groups and contribute to the emergence of a genuine national revolt.

### **Vanguardism From *Soberbia* to *Soberbia Armada*** <sup>19</sup>

The sources of the causers' radical vanguardism could be traced at least back to the 1950s, at the onset of what could be labelled a "permanent revolution of modernizing intellectuals."<sup>20</sup> Positivism, developmentalism and finally marxism successively celebrated the intellectuals' direct, objective, i.e., scientific, and somewhat exclusive access to "reality" (*la realidad*).<sup>21</sup> Sooner or later, this qualification had to be rewarded with corresponding social deference and quotas of power.

The idea that universities of the region were trusted by history to accomplish a mission is already professed in the Declaration of Principles of the Central American Universities' First Congress, held in San Salvador in September 1948:

. . . the Central American universities, because of particular circumstances of the environment, cannot exactly follow in the footsteps of the European and United States . . . [That] they have a singular and profound mission: on top of the three missions universally recognized, that is [scientific] research, teaching of professions and transmission of culture, they should *guide spiritually their people, build the Central American nationality in order to reconstruct the Great Mother Country [patria]* . . .<sup>22</sup>

Prior to the Castroist vogue, university actors had been promoted by enlightened generals as the harbingers of progress (following the famous "Atcon Report" recommendations)

and consequently, as honorary leaders, i.e., with no real power, of their developing nations. Meanwhile, social mobilization engendered a swelling educated stratum in the cities (in Central America, mostly in the capitals). This provided university intellectuals with a market for their ideological production. Through their intellectual influence, social prestige and sheer number, university actors have occupied a preeminent position in urban middle strata, something unlikely in more developed (or very underdeveloped) countries.<sup>23</sup>

The rupture with the patronizing and repressive generals arguably occurred in 1968. An illegal strike launched by the National Association of Educators of El Salvador (ANDES) turned into a general strike, becoming a vehicle for all forms of discontent.<sup>24</sup> ANDES, a teachers' union, was led by Melida Anaya Montes, a PCN<sup>25</sup> fellow traveller who converted politically and ended up as a top leader of the FMLN's most radical faction, the Popular Forces of Liberation (FPL). This general strike, replicated in 1971, had two important impacts on the dissenting sectors of the "state ideological apparatus" (professors, teachers, and students). First, it confirmed them in the idea that they, as an educated elite located at the periphery of the political and economic establishment, had to fulfill an historical mission: spearheading a movement of national redemption. Second, the tremendous success of the strike, in terms of both organizational capacity and popular support, demonstrated their power capability. In sum, the successful strike heralded what Gabriel Zaid called their transition "from books to power."<sup>26</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, the National University (University of El Salvador UES) celebrated its self-proclaimed triumph as the "critical conscience" of the Salvadoran people. On the 1984 elections for example, "the UES consider[ed] indispensable to indicate to the Salvadoran people that the current electoral process *could only be correctly interpreted* within the minimal framework of the following political events. . ."<sup>27</sup> The same year, commenting on the first round of negotiations between the Duarte government and the FMLN: "Before the announcement of a dialogue between the Government of the Republic and the FDR-FMLN . . . the UES, *assuming once again its function as the critical conscience of the Salvadoran people*, presents the following reflections. . ."<sup>28</sup> In 1988, announcing its stance on elections: "The UES, *in keeping with its function as the society's critical conscience*, considers *incontestable its obligation to pronounce itself* upon the current electoral process; it does it *with the objective that citizens can orient themselves* and analyze critically the country's reality."<sup>29</sup> And in January 1989, commenting on the political situation in the aftermath of a FMLN's peace proposal: "The UES, *aware of its utmost responsibility as the nation's moral and cultural guide*, as an integral part of the Salvadoran people, and with the *full moral capacity and intellectual soundness* to discuss and pass judgment upon the great and serious problems that burdened the Salvadoran society. . ."<sup>30</sup>

The transition from "cockiness" to "armed cockiness" came about thanks to a key *external* demonstrative factor: the Cuban revolution.<sup>31</sup> Thereafter, urban students could revive with a new breath of life the Córdoba movement's dream of a student-led national renewal.<sup>32</sup> The simultaneity with which guerrillas rose in South America in the 1960s and Central America in the 1970s<sup>33</sup> in convergence with powerful counter-cultural trends in



North America and Europe is striking. In Latin America, the diversity of socio-economic and political conditions (from democratic Uruguay and Venezuela to praetorian Guatemala) lends itself to Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley's thesis that "the cause of this sudden outpouring of revolutionary fervor was symbolic or ideological in nature, rather than material."<sup>34</sup> The Cuban revolution announced the death of the developmentist ideology for a sizable part of the Latin American intelligentsia, and the birth or revival of a Leninist, anti-imperialist and nationalist set of political beliefs. "Revolution" replaced the call for reforms; romanticization of armed struggle supplanted sober plans to uplift the ancien régime and to fortify the productive forces. Disenfranchised technocrats, now covetting the commanding heights, turned into scientific revolutionaries, leaving the empty shell of developmentalism behind.

A thorough critical analysis of all manifestos made public in the 1970s by the Salvadoran politico-military organizations would deserve a separate study. Suffice it to say that they were typically calling for a "popular revolutionary government of workers and peasants," with the Sandinista and the Castro regimes as the main models.<sup>35</sup> Few would challenge the view that the Salvadoran politico-military vanguards were more radical, at face value, than their Cuban (pre-1959) and Nicaraguan (pre-1979) counterparts. In the 1980s, Wickham-Crowley contended that "by both act and ideology . . . the Salvadoran guerrillas have set themselves apart from almost all other regional revolutionaries," and that "the closest parallel to their acts seems to be *Sendero Luminoso* . . ."<sup>36</sup> As late as January 1990, the not quite reconstructed FMLN still maintained that "the socialist system has clearly proved that it is a more human system and that it is capable of facing the greatest challenges that mankind will encounter in the next millennium."<sup>37</sup>

Numerous sympathetic observers of the Salvadoran left, both in El Salvador and abroad, depict the intellectual debate in the 1970s that is, when insurgency emerged not as a logical and timely response to unfolding events, but as a largely irrational and solipsistic dispute, opposing extremist and power-hungry factions. By dismissing this early stage of ideological development as an infantile but normal step in the apprenticeship of revolutionary struggle, most observers missed a pivotal element in the emergence of insurgency in El Salvador. For Rodolfo Cardenal, a Jesuit scholar from the Central American University (UCA), the political language at the time,

was functioning like a syntactic ideology, that is, it was operating as a series of clichés and not as though it was resulting from analytical processes. Words had become almost magical, having themselves power, and therefore it was possible to disregard any collating with reality. For example, the word socialism was understood in a utopic way. [. . .] in many important junctures one could notice the predominance of ideology over reality, which had negative consequences for the revolutionary process in general.<sup>38</sup>

James Dunkerley alludes to the left's central tenet (the nature of the authoritarian regime) as a "wishful abstraction."<sup>39</sup> Likewise, analyzing the radical left in the whole Central American region, Edelberto Torres-Rivas claims that "in the 1970s, there [was] a radicalization of the means employed and, sometimes, this occurred in a way that appeared independent from the ends. The point was to valorize the rifle for its capacity of

expression, this being reinforced by the conviction that the problem was not one of 'forms of struggle' but one of 'revolutionary path'.<sup>40</sup> Though "reality" was constantly invoked (each faction claiming an exclusive access to it), the capacity to juggle with outlandish doctrines in close, clandestine surroundings was paramount.

This radicalism of the Salvadoran insurgency is often interpreted as an indicator of the nature of the internal war itself; that is, one of "class struggle," instead of a mere "war of liberation" as in Nicaragua.<sup>41</sup> The argument goes: the more radical the opposition is, the deeper the class conflict must be. One author suggests that "the hardening of class warfare radicalized both sides in the Salvadoran struggle and left precious little space in the middle of the political spectrum."<sup>42</sup>

Once more, El Salvador is supposed to provide data for a pre-conceived scenario that makes more theoretical than empirical sense. First, the FMLN's factions were more radical and extremist *before* sporadic violence turned into a full-blown internal war. Second, though the Salvadoran extreme left *and* the extreme right are more vigorous than their Central American counterparts, one could say the same about the center (essentially the PDC): until recently, it had been more robust in El Salvador than in Nicaragua, Guatemala or Honduras. What is more, politicized social forces, such as the church, unions, or students, are also more vibrant and effective in El Salvador. The constant reference to the "polarization" of Salvadoran politics in the 1980s blurs a much more interesting phenomenon: the *whole* Salvadoran political class is inflated. Over the past two decades, El Salvador has had more vanguards, spokespersons, and "representative forces" than any other country in the region. Third, it is not so evident that the "popular movement" was stronger and enjoyed more widespread support in El Salvador than, for example, in Nicaragua before the downfall of Somoza. In the period of emergence of the Salvadoran insurgency (1970s), the country went through a major crisis in 1972, when the military blocked the likely electoral victory of a reformist coalition, but no national revolt occurred then. In the late 1970s, there was some consensus in the political class to dump the military dictator Carlos Humberto Romero, but no strong evidence of massive popular support in favor of (or against) the military coup. During the several months following the coup, numerous demonstrations were successfully organized in San Salvador, but in a context of institutional confusion when ministers sometimes demonstrated before their own offices. Then, massive repression stifled further mobilization in the cities. In the 1980s, the FMLN did not put together, or enjoy the tacit support of, a coalition comprising a broad spectrum of forces opposed to the juntas (1980-82) or the governments of Alvaro Magaña (1982-84), José Napoléon Duarte (1984-88), or Alfredo Cristiani (1988-94).

In the countryside, evidence of a pivotal contribution of the rural poor to the *emergence* of the insurgency is sparse at best. The presence of peasant unions and some ecclesial based communities (CEBs), along with a certain tradition of resistance, does not *ipso facto* prove that the countryside was ripe for revolt, let alone for a full-fledged political revolution.<sup>43</sup> This is nevertheless one of the most common assumptions in the literature on El Salvador. Once the insurgency had moved into the countryside, after the failure of the January 1981 "final offensive," peasant support became pivotal indeed. But then, one



might add, peasants were submitted to a new series of incentives to revolt, some of them perhaps as decisive, or even more decisive, than historical factors of grievance: self-defense, obedience to *de facto* authority, some forced recruitment, etc.<sup>44</sup> Those new incentives appeared as a consequence of the internal war: they may have contributed to its consolidation; they could not possibly have "caused" it in the first place.

The difference between the cases of El Salvador (insurgency/counterinsurgency confrontation) and Nicaragua before 1979 (national revolt) lies in variables such as the capacity to build a broad opposition movement against the ancien régime, and the nature of the regime itself. In El Salvador, the absence of a single undisputed nemesis (El Salvador had no Somoza) rendered the task more difficult than in Nicaragua. The FMLN's extremism, preventing the formation of a large and coherent opposition to the military regime, rendered broad mobilization virtually impossible. All in all, the importance of understanding the "causers'" profile and ideologies is perhaps even greater in the El Salvador case than in cases where internal war is characterized by an heterogeneous, widespread and inarticulated social protest.

In sum, two phenomena can hardly be overlooked. First, radical ideologies spread like wild fire in all Latin American universities during the 1960s and 1970s, and started fading at the end of the 1980s. There is no shortage of objective reasons for revolt in Central America, but the ideological shifts of the past four decades do not correspond directly to any obvious mutation in the socio-economic environment. Second, there is a correlation between this ideological fluctuation and the periodization of internal wars in the region. This does not imply that ideologies constitute the only independent variable explaining national revolt in Central America, but it strongly suggests that they deserve to be considered as an essential part of what Booth called the "critical process" by which insurgency forces emerge, develop and fade away in Central America.

## **EXTERNAL ACTORS AND THE SIREN SONG OF ELECTIONS**

In addition to considering the demonstrative impact of momentous external events (the Cuban revolution, the collapse of the socialist bloc, etc.), an original and potentially fruitful way of looking at "the role played by external actors" in El Salvador would be to reassess the legacy of the electoral process since the early 1980s. It is our contention that elections altered ideological dispositions in El Salvador in a way that proved conducive to democratization.

As it has been correctly pointed out by most observers, elections were initially imposed by the US. The former insurgents and most scholars consider the US-sponsored demonstrative elections as an unqualified failure. An element of sophistication was added to this judgement by Terry Karl, who maintains that the US-imposed elections did worse than fail: they had a counter-productive impact on the search for peace and democratization.<sup>45</sup> Being somewhat artificial, those demonstrative elections prevented or postponed the achievement of a real, firmly-grounded pact, achieved through negotiation a breakthrough that, presumably, could have occurred at any time in the 1980s if only Salvadoran belligerents had been allowed to work out a deal among themselves. In short,

US-imposed elections wound up being one more cause of the continuation of the internal war.

For this hypothesis to be validated, two counter-hypotheses strongly related to the relative autonomy of causers would have to be falsified.

### **From Extremism to the "Fascination for the Centre"**

First, no definitive evidence warrants the assumption that a peaceful agreement is always possible between armed, and therefore extremist, factions, as though there was never such things as incompatible ideologies or agendas.<sup>46</sup> Belligerents have the *choice* of settling for *el pacto de no pactar* (agreeing to disagree), at least in the short run.<sup>47</sup> In the early 1980s, the Salvadoran extreme right set out to exterminate "communists" and behead the opposition movement. This was implemented in a spirit of crusade, to save the country from the "evil" of communism. It was not simply a police operation. The ARENA party prospered incredibly from this anti-communist fixation, to become in only a few years the most popular party in the country.<sup>48</sup> On the other side, the different factions of the FMLN could weather centrifugal tendencies because of an overriding commitment to military struggle and revolution. Military struggle and revolution were in fact so intertwined "means" becoming "ends" that without resorting to armed struggle, the rest of the agenda would have rested on shaky ground (as its current crisis illustrates).<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, observers who dismiss the electoral process with the "exclusion of the FMLN" argument are missing a fundamental point: to be excluded from a polity, you either have to have been previously included in it, or be outside and aspire to be included in it.<sup>50</sup> As Juan Linz said: "The exclusion from political competition of parties not committed to the legal pursuit of power which in reality is limited to enforceable exclusions [. . .] is not incompatible with the guarantee of free competition in our definition of democracy."<sup>51</sup> The elections of the past twelve years were certainly not sufficient to bring about democracy in El Salvador, but for other reasons: not because the system could not accommodate the guerrilla's desire to destroy the system.<sup>52</sup> The exclusion argument also blurs the fact that full-fledged internal war comes only with a certain magnitude of insurgent activity. Between this level and the original (and elusive) moment when the spiral of violence starts (in El Salvador, the late 1960s), measures of exception and violent rebellions and upheavals are mutually reinforcing. This makes the initial causal explanation (repression begets radicalization) a useful, but uncorroborated, assumption. As Juan Linz pointed out: "political violence is both an important indicator and a contributing cause of breakdown, but the line between cause and effect is blurred."<sup>53</sup> The violence-as-a-last-resort argument makes a lot of sense in general, but it does not mean it is automatically valid in El Salvador.

Of course, this is not to say that ideologies and dispositions never change. To the contrary, recent breakthroughs in the Middle East, South Africa, and in El Salvador itself teach us that the political arena is more fluid than the socio-economic "structure." This fluidity can breed anything from war to peace, even in a context of relative social and

economic stability. In El Salvador, the recent rapprochement between arch-enemies is inextricably tied to significant ideological shifts on both sides what a Salvadoran analyst recently called the new "fascination for the centre"<sup>54</sup> away from extremist positions. The actors themselves would probably recognize that the electoral system *was* a major factor conducive to this shift. Hence the second counter-hypothesis to the dominant "demonstrative elections" thesis: elections have created a new political dynamic where extremists, to win votes, had to moderate their ideological stance.

### **The Siren Song of Elections**

After the electoral defeat of 1984 and 1985, the party of Roberto D'Aubuisson strove to cloak itself in the mantle of political respectability. A businessman, Alberto Cristiani, was designated by D'Aubuisson to be the new upfront leader.<sup>55</sup> ARENA won by a plurality of votes the 1988 and 1992 legislative elections, and won the presidential elections in 1989. Adam Przeworski's comment on the radical left and elections in Europe could be applied to the extreme right. He claims that in periods of democratization, once a competitive democratic "mechanism" is basically in place, radicals can hardly resist the "siren song of elections":

They tend to be wary of democratic institutions, distrustful of their chances, and skeptical that their victories will ever be tolerated. Yet the attraction of an open-ended democratic interplay is irresistible, and Radicals find that to abstain is to forsake popular support.<sup>56</sup>

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, the two top leaders of the insurgency's political wing (Ruben Zamora and Guillermo Ungo) returned from exile in November 1987 (*before* the end of the Cold War) in the wake of the Esquipulas II accord. Then, they founded a new party and participated in elections. After some contradictory signals, the FMLN decided for the first time not to obstruct the electoral process through intimidation and sabotage. In the March 1994 elections, the former insurgents toyed with the idea of asking a mainstream Christian Democrat (Abraham Rodriguez) and even a businessman close to both the Christian Democrats and the ARENA party (Roberto Murray Meza) to become their presidential candidate. As Goodwin and Skocpol correctly pointed out: "The ballot box may not always be 'the coffin of class consciousness' . . . but it has proven to be the coffin of revolutionary movements."<sup>57</sup>

There has been no "stunning" or "founding" election since 1982 only *repeated* elections. Gradually, the US-imposed device affected the political actors' tactics and strategy, in addition to gaining credibility in the public. Then, some of the actors who previously condemned elections as a counter-insurgent mockery started having second thoughts. As early as 1985, for example, the generally pro-insurgent Central American University qualified its stance on elections.<sup>58</sup> The 1988 legislative elections were seen as a "breach," likely to "introduce new dynamics" and "broaden, or perhaps break, dominant structures."<sup>59</sup> At the same time, the FMLN's usual sabotage of the electoral process became the object of adroit criticism by the influential Jesuit intellectuals:

The resort to violent actions to prevent or disorient elections bestows to these elections, in the first place, a great importance, which contradicts the position that they are not important; second, this indicates the FMLN's low expectation to attract with its propaganda, through an effort of persuasion, a great number of Salvadorans; and third, it demonstrates the relative weakness of the FMLN when it comes to imposing a line of conduct to the population.<sup>60</sup>

The heretofore counter-hypotheses are predicated on the same idea: the actors' dispositions, beliefs, and ideologies do matter in politics. In periods of transition, they are key factors in the pact-making equation. Hence, elections, though imposed from above and from abroad (and therefore quite distant from Booth's socio-economic domino theory of revolt) can be instrumental in ending internal war, because elections do affect at least some of the actors' ideological dispositions.

## **Conclusion**

The modest contribution of this article is to bring the conscious political actor and its agenda "back in." Central American political actors are power-seekers; not merely social class spokespersons. Their political agenda is shaped by a variety of conditioning factors; not just those deriving from some compelling socio-economic "reality." This "reality" itself, constantly invoked by politicians and scholars alike, is an intellectual construct, predicated on multiple beliefs and dispositions whose origins are not exclusively, and perhaps not primarily, domestic.

The structural and historical conditions of grievances identified by Booth and other analysts are supported by a significant, though probably not sufficient, body of evidence. The dominant paradigm does provide a thorough collection of sound reasons for revolt. One wonders why most Latin American countries are not permanently disrupted by the aggrieved masses. Indeed, this paradigm is not very potent even to predict the past. The focus on the "causers" is not sufficient either, especially if one wishes to explain broad-based national revolts and the conditions of seizure of power by revolutionary contenders. Nevertheless, the Salvadoran case suggests that political variation in the short-term (emergence of an urban, middle stratum-lead insurgency; its risk-seeking extremism; eventually, the withering away of this extremism) calls for an agency-centered analysis.

Bringing the actor "back in" is also a way of highlighting the political actors' liberty and responsibility. For all the awesome constraints Latin American countries have to face, including those deriving from dependency and underdevelopment, no political outcome can be regarded as "inevitable." Over the past two decades, virtually no political option was out of reach for El Salvador: direct and exclusionary military rule, mobilizational dictatorship with civilian participation, fascist junta, democratic facade, flawed but improving democratic system, Marxist-Leninist regime, and so on. As a matter of fact, only the latter was not tested. In politically unstable developing countries, a wider variety

of outcomes is available than in democratic and developed countries, where institutional rigidity, diffusion of power, and "rent-seeking" activities typically breed gridlock.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the autonomy of the political dynamic as a whole seems to be enhanced during what Simon Schama, in a remarkable analysis of the French revolution, called an "explosion of politics;" that is, when passions supplant interests, when "means become ends." In these charismatic periods of history, active minorities, leaders and ideas do shape politics in a dramatic way.

## Endnotes

1. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided financial support for this research. I would like to acknowledge with thanks the comments of the anonymous referees, as well as the constructive destruction offered by colleagues and friends Lisa Kowalchuk and Jean Daudelin. The title "from causes to causers" is taken from Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave* (Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 106.

2. James Dunkerley summarizes this view by stating that "nobody *in their right mind* could plausibly refute the view that the Central American conflict is rooted in the economic structure of the region." In his *Power in the Isthmus* (New York: Verso, 1988), p. 171 (emphasis added). See also Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions, The United States in Central America*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993). (A third edition is apparently underway, with the same title).

3. For an overview of the literature on this subject, see Ekkart Zimmermann, *Protest, Revolt and Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990).

4. John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning, The Nicaraguan Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1982); and Booth, "Socioeconomic and Political Roots of National Revolts in Central America," *Latin American Research Review*, 26, no. 1 (1991), pp. 33-74.

5. Booth, "Socioeconomic and Political Roots," p. 35.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., pp. 34-35. For a similar perspective, see Jan L. Flora and Edelberto Torres-Rivas, "Sociology of Developing Societies: Historical Bases of Insurgency in Central America," in J. L. Flora and E. Torres-Rivas, eds., *Central America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), pp. 32-55.

8. Equally puzzling for him is the case of Honduras. In spite of being the poorest nation in the region, Honduras has not undergone national revolt and therefore remains impermeable to Booth's mainstream (by Central American studies standards) explanation.

9. "Causers" refer to the vanguard of the insurgency movement; not all the followers, let alone the fellow travellers.

10. The agency-centered approach to revolution is slowly appearing in the literature on political change in Latin America. Forrest D. Colburn and Eric Selbin, while embracing different approaches, highlight the importance of agency, culture, and ideology in explaining policies produced by revolutionary governments; none of them really deal with the issue of *emergence* of insurgencies, however. See Forrest D. Colburn, *The Vogue of Revolution in Poor Countries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Eric Selbin, *Modern Latin American Revolutions* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993).

11. And yet, Jeff Goodwin and Theda Skocpol aptly deplore that "with some notable exceptions, the literature that emphasizes the role of peasants in revolutions tends to ignore the role of professional revolutionary organizations, groups that tend to be disproportionately middle class in social composition." See their "Explaining Revolutions in the Contemporary Third World," *Politics and Society*, 17, no. 4 (1989), p. 492. See also Timothy Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 335-40 (appendix B: "Social Origins of Guerrilla Leadership: Post-1970 Period"); Marta Harnecker, *Con la mirada en alto, historia de las FPL Farabundo Martí a través de sus dirigentes* (San Salvador: UCA editores, 1993), pp. 38-45.

12. The five top FMLN *comandantes* Joaquín Villalobos, Eduardo Sancho Castañeda, Francisco Jovel, Jorge Shafik Handal, and Salvador Sánchez Cerén were activists in the National University (University of El Salvador UES) student association. Among the first seven members of the FDR-FMLN's Political-Diplomatic Commission (CPD), at least three (Ungo, Castillo and Rodríguez Ruiz) held positions as professors at the UES; two (Castillo and Rodríguez Ruiz) served as rector as well. Sánchez Cerén has lectured at the UES. Ungo lectured at the Central American University (UCA), where he also ran the Institute of Research in the early 1970s. Samayoa taught at both the UCA and the Externado San José. About a decade earlier, Dr Rubén Zamora, a leader of the strictly political wing of the FMLN, had led the Social-Christian University Revolutionary Federation (FRUSC). Among the other prominent leaders of the non-armed radical opposition who could be strongly identified with the UES, one could mention Dr Hector Dada Hirezi, member of the second junta (1980) who became involved with the FDR: he is a former director of the Department of Economics at the UCA, and a former candidate for the rectorship of the UES; then Dr Rafael Menjivar, leading theorist of a mass organization and leader of the FDR, served as rector at the UES (1972); Dr Melida Anaya Montes, founder of the teachers union, ANDES, and number two of the FPL until her assassination in 1983 (by number one, Salvador Cayetano Carpio), taught at the UES; Dr Eduardo Calles, leader of MIPTES and FDR's vice-president served as dean of the UES's Faculty of Agronomy. The kidnapping of six of FDR's leaders during a meeting at the



Externado San José in November 1980 (followed by their assassination), was for instance presented in a UES's publication as another episode of an "anti-university campaign," the FDR being "constituted by university members and professionals." Considering this intimate relationship between the Frente and the UES, it comes as no surprise that in his inaugural speech during the ceremony for the foundation of the FMLN as a political party on 1 September 1992, Schafik Handal, secretary of the Communist Party and top comandante of the FMLN, commended the UES as "our Alma Mater" and insisted that "we [the FMLN members attending the constituent convention] are part of the UES." See Norma G. De Herrera, "Crónica de una Universidad intervenida, 1980-1982," *El Universitario*, (May-June 1982), p. 2; FMLN, *Documentos Políticos* (San Salvador: Ediciones Alternativa, January 1993), p. 12.

13. See Yvon Grenier, "Vers la "libération universitaire du peuple salvadorien": l'Université Centroaméricaine dans la transition politique au El Salvador," *Revue Canadienne d'Études du Développement*, 13, no. 1 (March-April 1992), pp. 7-38; Externado San José, "El Externado piensa así," *Estudios Centroamericanos [ECA]*, (June 1973), pp. 399-422.

14. From the mid-1970s to 1981, the politico-military organizations most were created in the 1970s after successive schisms were supported by a number of "mass organizations," representing high school and university students, as well as urban workers and peasants. Their loosely controlled and elusive membership estimates range from 50,000 to 100,000 could hardly be equated with a precise degree of support for the insurgents' political agenda, as two of their supporters acknowledge. See Salvador Samayoa and Guillermo Galvan, "El movimiento obrero en El Salvador ¿Resurgimiento o Agitación?," *ECA*, 369/370 (July-August 1979), pp. 591-600.

15. See the thoughtful comments by Ignacio Ellacuría, "Universidad y política," *ECA*, 383 (September 1980), pp. 807-24.

16. In a previous article, this author made the case that we must abandon the notion of revolution altogether, to replace it by notions such as internal war, coup and radical change. The notion of revolution is nevertheless used in this article in deference to common usage and given the practical difficulty of making two connected but still different cases in the same short article. See Yvon Grenier, "De l'inflation révolutionnaire: guerre interne, coup d'État et changements radicaux en Amérique latine," *Études Internationales*, XXII, no. 1 (March 1991), pp. 47-61.

17. Jeff Goodwin breaks down the political etiology of a successful national revolt into five cumulative factors: first, state sponsorship or protection of unpopular economic and social arrangements; second, exclusion of mobilized groups from state power or resources; third, indiscriminate, but not overwhelming, state violence against mobilized groups and oppositional political figures; fourth, weak policing capacities and infrastructural power; and finally, corrupt and arbitrary personalistic rule that alienates, weakens, or divides civilian and military elites. See his "State-Centered Approaches to Social Revolutions: Strengths and Limitations of a Theoretical tradition," *New School for*

Social Research, Center for Studies of Social Change, *The Working Paper Series*, no. 216 (August 1995).

18. Eric Selbin makes the opposite case: that the origins of revolutions are shaped primarily by structure, whereas revolutionary policies are closely linked to the agents. Again, Selbin is referring to the origins of a successful national revolt, which is not equivalent to the emergence of any insurgency, successful or not. See "Socio-Cultural Origins of Revolution: Popular Political Culture and Resistance, Rebellion, and Revolution in Latin America and the Caribbean," paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association, Washington, DC, 28-30 September 1995.

19. That is, approximately, "from cockiness to armed cockiness."

20. See H.D. Lasswell and D. Lerner, *World Revolutionary Elites, Studies in Coercive Ideological Movements* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), chap. 2 "The Unnamed Revolution: The Permanent Revolution of Modernizing Intellectuals", pp. 80-93.

21. The intellectuals' use and abuse of the notion of *realidad* in Latin America conveys their desire to conceal their existence as a key social stratum (they do not speak: they are merely the reality's spokespersons), and their subjectivity (science or even culture give them exclusive access to the objective reality). See Yvon Grenier, "La "realidad" de los intelectuales: ciencias sociales, poder y transición política en Centroamérica," *América Latina Hoy* (Madrid), forthcoming.

22. In *Resoluciones y Recomendaciones votadas por el Primer Congreso Centroamericano de Universidades* (Guatemala, C.A., November 1948), p. 50 (emphasis added).

23. According to Sheldon B. Liss, ". . . in Central America intellectuals and radicals receive more respect and have more political clout" than in North America. See his hagiographic but informative *Radical Thought in Central America* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), p. 209. See also S.M. Lipset, "University Students and Politics in Underdeveloped Countries," *Comparative Education Review*, 10, no. 1 (February 1966), p. 134; and Ellacuría, "Universidad y política."

24. Melida Anaya Montes, *La Segunda Gran Batalla de ANDES* (San Salvador: Editorial Universitaria de El Salvador, 1972); see also interview with Gen. Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez (member of the civil-military Junta from 1979 to 1982) in *Análisis* (San Salvador), 9/10 (September-October 1988), pp. 47-59.

25. *Partido de Conciliación Nacional* National Conciliation Party, the political vehicle of the military.

26. See also Gabriel Zaid, *De los libros al poder* (México: Gribaljo, 1988).

27. UES, "La situación política y el proceso electoral," *ECA*, 426/427 (April-May 1984), p. 367 (emphasis added).

28. UES, "La UES ante el anuncio del diálogo, 13 de octubre de 1984," *ECA*, 432/433 (October-November 1984), p. 855 (emphasis added).

29. UES, "Análisis sobre la democracia salvadoreña y el actual proceso electoral de diputados y alcaldes," *ECA*, 473/474 (March-April 1988), p. 273 (our emphasis).

30. UES, "La paz es constitucional," *ECA*, 483/484 (Jan.-Feb. 1989), p. 151 (emphasis added).

31. In the case of the Cuban revolution as in other cases of key external influences, this article focuses mostly on the ideological and demonstrative impact, not the material one. The material contribution of Cuba or the US has already been widely documented. See, for example, Jorge Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed, The Latin American Left After the Cold War* (New York: Vintage, 1994), chap. 3.

32. As Carlos Fonseca (one of the three founding fathers of the FSLN) pointed out, violence awakens the "consciousness of the popular masses to the profound nature of the struggle we are carrying out." By "we," Fonseca meant a specific kind of vanguard: "The sector of the people formed by students is the one that with great enthusiasm accepts this goal." Carlos Fonseca, *Bajo la bandera del sandinismo*, Managua, p. 137, quoted in Antonio Ybarra-Rojas, "The Changing Role of Revolutionary Violence in Nicaragua, 1959-1979," in Michael Radu, ed., *Violence and the Latin American Revolutionaries* (New Brunswick, NJ and Oxford: Transaction, 1988), p. 63. See also Marta Harnecker, *Estudiantes, cristianos e ind'genas en la revolucion* (México: Siglo XXI, 1987), chap. 9.

33. Wickham-Crowley differentiates the 1960s guerrillas (mainly in South America, plus Guatemala) from the 1970s guerrillas (El Salvador, Nicaragua), the latter being due to the "persistence" of the old regime. No convincing evidence is provided to show that this time lag is not simply due to a belated social mobilization and greater imperviousness to foreign trends by those impoverished city-states. In Nicaragua, where Castro-like guerrilla groups appeared in the 1960s but did not gain any meaningful presence until the 1970s, Tomas Borge, former minister of interior, claims that "the apparent impermeability of Nicaragua [to radical ideologies] was broken by the Cuban revolution. The struggle in the Sierra Maestra had an influence on the Nicaraguan political life. From then on, the Nicaraguan rebellion fed itself with Lenin, Che, Ho Chi Minh and other revolutionaries." Tomas Borge, *La paciente impaciencia* (Managua: Editorial Vanguardia, 1989), pp. 90-91. Also in Nicaragua, a leading Sandinista admitted that he "[knew] and came to Sandino through Che." See Omar Cabezas, *Fire from the Mountain* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1985), p. 12.

34. Timothy Wickham-Crowley, "Winners, Losers, and Also-Rans: Toward a Comparative Sociology of Latin American Guerrilla Movements," in Susan Eckstein, ed.,

*Power and Popular Protest, Latin American Social Movements* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 138-39.

35. Castroism or other forms of rural Bolshevism were obviously not the only building blocks of Salvadoran radical ideology. With the growing number of radical Christian newcomers, the insurgent movement *as a whole*, i.e., not just the *comandantes*, has come to convey a syncretic ideology. On the ideological syncretism of "peasant revolution," see, for example, Raj Desai and Harry Eckstein, "Insurgency, the Transformation of Peasant Revolution," *World Politics*, no. 4 (July 1990), pp. 457, 463.

36. Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, "Understanding Failed Revolution in El Salvador: A Comparative Analysis of Regime Types and Social Structures," *Politics and Society*, 17, no. 4 (1989), p. 519.

37. The communiqué clearly suggests that the FMLN did not have social-democracy in mind, but rather the Soviet-like "socialist system." In "FMLN General Command Issues Year-End Message," broadcasted on *Radio Venceremos* (2 January 1990), translated and reproduced in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service-Latin America*, 90, 005 (8 January 1990), p. 24. The FMLN militaristic orientation is criticized in a special issue on "The masses," in *ECA*, 465 (July 1987).

38. R. Cardenal, *Historia de una esperanza, vida de Rutilio Grande* (San Salvador: UCA editores, 1987), pp. 452-56.

39. J. Dunkerley, *Power*, p. 342.

40. E. Torres-Rivas, *Centroamérica*, p. 142.

41. See, for example, Wickham-Crowley, "Understanding Failed Revolution in El Salvador," pp. 511-37; Manus I. Midlarsky and Kenneth Roberts, "Class, State, and Revolution in Central America: Nicaragua and El Salvador Compared," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 29, no. 2 (June 1985), pp. 163-94; Matthew Soberg Shugart, "States, Revolutionary Conflict and Democracy: El Salvador and Nicaragua in Comparative Perspective," *Government and Opposition*, 22, no. 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 13-32.

42. Wickham-Crowley, "Understanding," p. 521.

43. Some refreshing observations on this subject can be found in Douglas Kincaid, "Peasants into Rebels: Community and Class in Rural El Salvador," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29 (1987), pp. 466-95.

44. One of the top FMLN leaders, Salvador Samayoa, conceded:

I believe that the people have different motivations for fighting than those acquired by a more sophisticated leadership. Politically, people have more rudimentary motivations: often they simply have no choice, like in the case of the peasantry, such an important

component of the struggle in El Salvador, which joined the guerrillas because it couldn't be on the other side, because their families were simply murdered. They know since they were born that the Army is evil and that the guerrillas are against the Army. That's about it; the rank and file have a great deal of political vision, but as far as elaborating much more with regard to socialism or marxism, this has never been its strong suit. That is more a problem for the elite.

Quoted in Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, pp. 241-42.

45. Terry L. Karl, "Imposing Consent? Electoralism vs. Democratization in El Salvador," in Paul Drake and Eduardo Sila, eds., *Elections and Democratization in Latin America, 1980-85* (San Diego, CA: CILAS/Center for US-Mexican Studies/IOA, 1986). See also E.S. Herman and F. Broadhead, *Demonstration Elections: U.S.-Staged Elections in the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984).

46. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 18-19.

47. See Guillermo O'Donnell and Ph. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 71.

48. See ARENA, *Manual del dirigente, 1990*, San Salvador (n/d). For an original interpretation of the extreme right's crusades in Latin America, see Frank Graziano, *Divine Violence* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992).

49. As the former *guerrillero* Marco Antonio Grande pointed out, "the Salvadoran problem was seen by the Left as a problem of class struggle and seizure of power, not as a problem defined in terms of democratizing the system." M. A. Grande, "Dialéctica del desarrollo del FMLN," *Análisis* (San Salvador), no. 5 (May 1988), p. 23.

50. Przeworski falls in this trap when he contends that "one should not forget that the success of the Pacto de Punto Fijo cost Venezuela the largest guerrilla movement in Latin America. Exclusion requires coercion and destabilizes democratic institutions." Przeworski, *Democracy*, pp. 90-91.

51. Juan L. Linz, "Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration," in J.J. Linz and A. Stepan, eds., *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 6.

52. Among them are the absence of an independent and effective judicial system, the high level of political violence, the constant fear in the population, the impunity of military and security forces, the death squads' activities, etc.

53. J. Linz, "Crisis," pp. 14-15.

54. Rafael Guido Béjar, "El centro político y la reproducción del consenso," *Tendencias* (San Salvador), no. 23 (September 1993), p. 21.

55. See Daniel Wolf, "ARENA in the Arena: Factors in the Accommodation of the Salvadoran Right to Pluralism and the Broadening of the Political System," *LASA Forum*, 23, no. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 10-18.

56. Przeworski, *Democracy*, p. 74.

57. Goodwin and Skocpol, "Explaining Revolutions," p. 495.

58. See, for example, "Las elecciones de 1985 ¿ Un paso adelante en el proceso de democratización ?," *ECA*, 438 (April 1985), pp. 205-14.

59. "Elecciones aleccionadoras," *ECA*, 473/474 (March-April 1988), p. 156.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 165.