

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

The Popular Church and Revolutionary Insurgency in El Salvador

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This essay reviews the following works:

Vida, pasión y muerte del jesuita Rutilio Grande. By Rodolfo Cardenal. San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2016. Pp. 564. \$12.00 paperback. ISBN: 9789996110283.

Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador's Civil War. By Joaquín M. Chávez. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 336. \$74.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780199315512.

The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992. By Russell Crandall. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xv + 690. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781316500644.

Assassination of a Saint: The Plot to Murder Óscar Romero and the Quest to Bring His Killers to Justice. By Matt Eisenbrandt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 219. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520286801.

El Salvador: Historia contemporánea, 1808–2010. Edited by Carlos Gregorio López Bernal. San Salvador: Editorial Universitaria, 2015. Pp. 424. ISBN: 9789992327869.

A Radical Faith: The Assassination of Sister Maura. By Eileen Markey. New York: Nation Books, 2016. Pp. 1 + 307. \$26.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781568585734.

Priest under Fire: Padre David Rodríguez, the Catholic Church, and El Salvador's Revolutionary Movement. By Peter M. Sánchez. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. Pp. xvi + 308. \$44.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813061191.

Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino's Christological Spirituality. By O. Ernesto Valiente. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. Pp. 289. \$35.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780823268870.

Those of us who study El Salvador assumed that an outpouring of research on the civil war would occur eventually after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992. The existence of a sufficient number of books dedicated solely to El Salvador to justify a substantive review essay here in the LARR would seem to indicate that the awaited day has arrived. Furthermore, the books under review here are not an exhaustive representation of scholarship to date.

However, there is plenty of cause for pessimism. While all of the books here introduce new documentary evidence, the fact remains that most of them rely heavily on interviews for their source base, which highlights the deficiency in documentary materials available in El Salvador. We know of some documentary collections that exist but remain off limits, such as a military archive in downtown San Salvador that I personally saw in the mid-2000s, and another intelligence archive that a trustworthy source described to me. Beyond that, we have no governmental archives available, and it remains anybody's guess as to whether other collections that are supposed to exist but have never been revealed, such as buried caches of guerrilla documents, actually do exist or will emerge.

The common theme uniting these eight, somewhat diverse works is the origin and trajectory of El Salvador's civil war (1980–1992), and in particular the role of the popular/liberationist church in the insurgency. The works by Joaquín M. Chávez, Peter M. Sánchez, Russell Crandall, and Rodolfo Cardenal address these topics directly. The other four works, by Matt Eisenbrandt, Carlos Gregorio López Bernal, Eileen Markey, and O. Ernesto Valiente do so more tangentially. For example, Eisenbrandt narrates the quest to bring the murderers of Archbishop Romero to justice in US courts. Markey looks at the life of one of the four US churchwomen notoriously murdered by a death squad in December 1980, and so El Salvador enters the story at the end of the book. The volume by López Bernal brings together five prominent Salvadoran scholars to provide an updated survey-like narrative of El Salvador's modern history, and thus the civil war fills a modest portion of the book. Finally, the work by Valiente focuses on the theology of Jon Sobrino, which was deeply informed by the lived reality of El Salvador, but the book focuses on theological concepts and intellectual trends such that the civil war is an indirect topic.

Of the eight books, Chávez's makes the most the substantive contribution to scholarship, so I will begin with it. At the forefront of Chávez's study is the question of why El Salvador had a civil war and how the insurgency became, in Chávez's words, "a massive social phenomenon" (6). Chavez roots the insurrection in the peasantry—a shorthand way of referring to the rural poor as a whole. Chavez's main argument is twofold: first, peasants, and specifically "peasant intellectuals," played an autonomous role in giving rise to the insurgency; and second, the traditional urban guerrilla leaders emerged out of the budding New Left of the 1960s. A related but secondary argument regards the Catholic student organization, Salvadoran University Catholic Action (Acción Católica Universitaria Salvadoreña, ACUS). Chávez shows how it transitioned from a conservative stance in the 1950s to a progressive one dominated by adherents of liberation theology in the 1960s. Each of Chávez's arguments is based heavily on oral interviews, but he also includes new documentary materials, such as the periodicals and records of ACUS in the Archive of the Archdiocese of San Salvador.

Chavez advances his first argument, about peasant intellectuals and autonomous peasant mobilization, in opposition to what he identifies as the prevailing "dominant narrative ... established during the past two decades" (257, note 36), which he says privileges the guerrilla organizations and their leadership as the determinant variable in giving rise to the insurgency. He contends, in contrast, that "this [the insurgency] was not the typical case of 'unblocking' the peasants' consciousness by urban intellectuals." Instead, by the time guerrilla leaders and even liberationist-oriented diocesan priests got to them, the peasants were already politicized," and their "decision to fight the repressive forces emerged from the peasant communities and their leaders" (6, 97).

My reaction to Chávez's research and his claims on this particular topic is resoundingly positive. I agree that scholarly analyses of the war have been too focused on the political-military organizations, that is, the guerrillas and various popular front organizations. Indeed, notwithstanding some exceptions, we have lacked either the evidence or the conceptual frames to realize the potentially autonomous role of the peasantry in the making of its own history. Chávez's research and arguments are original and they make important contributions that will set an argumentative standard for years to come.

One caveat is that I find the wording of Chávez's argument about peasant intellectuals to sometimes outrun his evidence. Chapter 3 is a main locale for his argument on peasant intellectuals, and therein a reader will find a modest number of specific examples of these individuals. But alongside those examples are myriad references to the important role of outsiders, particularly the priests and lay workers in the Catholic Church's liberationist wing. They created a vast network of peasant training centers, or "peasant universities," across the nation in the mid to late 1960s. As Chávez points out, these centers trained "thousands of peasant leaders," many of whom remember their training as having "changed their 'mentality,' that is, it helped them to develop analytical skills to fully engage in social and political activism" (78). In the face of repeated statements like that, I find Chávez to be revealing a highly sophisticated, dialectical relationship between peasants and so-called urban intellectuals, who in many instances were humble priests and lay workers, as well as so-called urban intellectuals, some of whom were guerrilla activists. I see Chávez showing a dynamic interplay between the various groups, such that his claim about the primacy of peasant intellectuals is unnecessary. I would like Chávez to have been slightly more nuanced with his claims at the beginning and end of the book to better reflect the evidence he provides in between. If scholars of El Salvador keep that dialectical interplay in mind as we move forward, we will be well served.

In regard to Chávez's claims about ACUS and the New Left origins of the guerrilla leaders, I have no concerns. His research on ACUS is original, sound, and compelling. He essentially reveals that an organization that was founded on one set of principles can be transformed toward another set rather quickly when its

members dictate as much. In the specific case of ACUS, what Chávez shows is that once a critical mass of members chose to identify with an alternative perspective, in this case liberation theology's preferential option for the poor, then the organization and its mission changed. Chávez's claims about El Salvador's New Left are less pathbreaking and instead offer more a recasting of familiar people and organizations in the light of the concept of the New Left. Chávez takes time to show his readers the countercultural milieu of books, ideas, and music that existed in 1960s El Salvador and how they contributed to a small but influential number of affluent, educated, mostly university-age people who gave up everything and formed clandestine militant organizations bent on overthrowing the Salvadoran state. I have refined my understanding of the guerrilla leaders as a consequence of reading Chávez's book.

Another modest concern I have about Chávez's book is that he portrays the oppositional protagonists in an almost uniformly positive light, be they peasants or urban guerrilla leaders. Chávez is hardly alone in doing so. The corpus of scholars working on El Salvador is sympathetic toward the opposition, if not because of its members' personal virtues, then because of the other side's widely heinous and disproportionate acts of barbarity. Nevertheless, I think we are at the point where our research can begin to reveal the more rounded qualities of our subjects. They are, after all, people, and like any human being or human-based organization, they are complex. The political scientist Bill Stanley provided some words of wisdom back in 2000 in his review of another book about the origins of Salvadoran insurgency: "Extremism on both sides helped start the war, and moderation on both sides helped end it."¹ In other words, no one has a monopoly on righteousness, although one side possesses a disproportionately justifiable claim to it.

Peter Sánchez's study of the "revolutionary" priest Father David Rodríguez (Padre David), complements Chávez's book nicely. With its focus on one man's story, Sánchez's study is less ambitious in scope and his source base is smaller than Chávez's, but his claims and analysis reveal an important argumentative dynamic about the origins of the insurgency. Sánchez relies heavily on interviews with Rodríguez and many of his friends, family members, and former parishioners. His main contribution of new documentary evidence is a small, but revealing collection of materials from the Parish of Tecoluca, which Rodríguez once served as the local priest.

Nearly two dozen priests alone were killed by the security forces or death squads during the war (Sánchez lists them on p. 251), and researchers haven't come near to telling all of their stories. So despite Padre David's prominent role in history, his story had gone more or less untold until now. It goes without saying that biographical studies like this one are far too rare in El Salvador, and we can only hope that more will come.²

After being raised in what he describes as a "very conservative" environment, Padre David went through a transformation process between entering the seminary in 1956 and being ordained as a priest in 1963. In that span he was exposed to progressive versions of Catholicism and steadily found himself tracking towards the preferential option for the poor, just as Vatican II (1962–1965) opened the floodgates for such views (159). It's worth noting that Rodríguez's awakening was a very intellectual process, something that occurred in classrooms and in consultation with liberationist-leaning mentors, often outside El Salvador, but not necessarily because of on-the-ground encounters with poverty and repression. But that was about to change as Rodríguez began to apply his emergent theology to the real world of El Salvador.

What emerges thereafter, and what forms the bulk of Sánchez's study, is the constant feedback loop between Rodríguez's emergent ideology, his experience with people in poverty, and the impatience that authority figures demonstrated for even the most moderate challenges to the status quo. Rodríguez was posted to a series of small parishes in regions not far from where he grew up in south-central El Salvador, and in each of them he translated his growing commitment to liberation theology into action by encouraging peasants to see the world in a new, autonomous light. Sánchez's rendering of Rodríguez's life reinforces a growing paradigm in El Salvador, one that is reflected by the life stories of Father Rutilio Grande (see below), Father Miguel Ventura from Morazán, Archbishop Romero, Father Rogelio Poncele, and Enrique Alvarez, among others. At every step of the way he is faced with having to decide to either give up or press on in the face of growing opposition from a host of traditional authority figures, including conservative leaders in the Catholic Church. Eventually, the repression against priests and their parishioners grew to be intolerable; priests were being tortured and killed and peasants were being massacred. In fact, the first so-called mass

¹ William Stanley, Review of *Emergence of Insurgency in El Salvador: Ideology and Political Will*, by Yvon Grenier, *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 1 (March 2000): 215.

² Reading Sánchez reminded me of a similarly rare biographical study: John Lamperti, *Enrique Alvarez Córdova: Life of a Salvadoran Revolutionary and Gentleman* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

killing of peasants, the notorious La Cayetana massacre of 1974, occurred in Rodríguez's parish. After Archbishop Romero was killed in March 1980, approximately thirty progressive priests gathered in a secret meeting and laid out the three options before them: flee the country, suppress their views and quietly return to apolitical ministerial work, or incorporate into the guerrillas. Rodríguez chose the latter, partly out of conviction, but partly as a survival mechanism, because the guerrillas could offer physical protection. In fact, he had already joined one of the guerrilla factions, the Popular Liberation Forces (Fuerzas Populares de Liberación, FPL), so his decision in 1980 meant that he would be abandoning his public personae and entering a fully clandestine life as a guerrilla. Rodríguez estimates that one-third of the priests at that meeting in 1980 chose the same path.

Sánchez's framing device for Rodríguez's story revolves around the concept of leadership, and therein exists the argumentative tension with Chávez. Sánchez claims that Rodríguez's story proves that social mobilization is unlikely until a coterie of leaders stands up and makes it happen, regardless of a society's objective conditions. In Sánchez's words, "ideas and leaders are of paramount importance in explaining the timing of political contention in an unjust social context. In essence, contention is unlikely unless ideas and leaders give rise to a tipping point toward rebellion" (9). Sánchez makes this argument less out of direct engagement with scholarship on El Salvador than by applying broader studies on leadership to the Salvadoran case. Nevertheless, in attributing a causal role to Rodríguez and other liberationist priests, Sánchez shares an argumentative point with Chávez about the autonomous role of the popular church when he says that "religious leaders, therefore, were way out in front of the FPL and the ERP [i.e., the guerrilla organizations] in mobilizing the poor in the early 1970s" (104).

The argumentative discord with Chávez comes in Sánchez's repeated references to the liberationist priests as being responsible for raising the consciousness of the peasantry. When Sánchez describes Rodríguez as "one of the many priests and nuns who were awakening the poor," and when he says that [Rodríguez] "formed peasants," he would seem to be dismissing Chávez's autonomous peasant intellectuals (72). But just as with Chávez above, I think Sánchez overstates his case at times. An astute reader can see the dialectal process at play in Rodríguez's life, even if Sánchez provides nowhere near the examples that Chávez does. It requires someone to read against the grain and focus on evidence like the following statement from Rodríguez in regard to his encounter with peasant parishioners early in his pastoral work: "I am learning more about the Bible here than I learned in the seminary" (84). Thus, my main criticism of Sánchez's work is that he falls into the apparent trap exemplified by Abraham Maslow's popularized quote, "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail," meaning that if you tell the story from the perspective of a leader, you may be inclined to conclude that the leaders' actions were determinant. If readers overfocus on the surface-level claims made by both Chávez and Sánchez, then they would find quite a debate. I encourage them to see consensus instead, even if it's unintended, and therein a pathway for future scholarship on these topics.

Of the remaining books to be reviewed, the one that follows Sánchez most naturally is Rodolfo Cardenal's study of Father Rutilio Grande, *Vida, pasión y muerte del jesuita Rutilio Grande*. Father Grande was murdered by a death squad/security forces in 1977 for his pastoral work in the region of Aguilares, to the north of San Salvador. He was the first priest to be assassinated in the run-up to the civil war, with many others to tragically follow, and his death is perhaps most recognized for encouraging his friend, Archbishop Óscar Romero, to continue a process of internal reflection that would eventually lead him to become a champion of liberation theology.

Cardenal's book is not new. For all intents and purposes it is a modestly revised version of his prior study of Grande, *Historia de una esperanza: Vida de Rutilio Grande*, first published by UCA Editores in 1985. It would seem that Cardenal and/or UCA Editores wanted to reissue the book under a new title, rather than have it appear as the fourth edition of *Historia de una esperanza*, so that readers could have a renewed encounter with Rutilio Grande in light of his possible beatification.

There is little need for me to offer a substantive review of research that is now more than thirty years old. I will simply say that *Historia de una esperanza* is a significant piece of work that is replicated in some ways by Sánchez's study of Rodríguez, namely that the biographies of these individual priests are told within the context of the communities they served; indeed the stories of Rutilio Grande and David Rodríguez share many similarities. From the perspective of evidence, Cardenal relied upon Grande's personal papers (apparently he was a rather meticulous record keeper) and other related materials located in the Jesuit's Central American Archive, making it a deeply researched and original study. One of the things I've always admired about Cardenal's study of Grande is the implicit manner in which it engages this chicken-and-egg question: Which came first, the priests' influence on the peasants or the peasants' autonomous radicalization vis-à-vis state repression? I find his work to be imbued with the dialectic approach I describe above. As he

narrates Grande's life, he shows the constant interaction between priest, parishioner, urban radicals, and material economic conditions such that not any one of them seems causal or determinant. Some onlookers might find Cardenal's lack of argumentative explicitness to be a limitation of the book, and indeed, if he doesn't make the argument explicit, then maybe he didn't intend to make it all. But I've always considered that ambiguity, intentional or not, to be a strength.

Eileen Markey's biography of Sister Maura Clarke has the least to do with El Salvador specifically, but its lessons reinforce many of the themes contained in the other seven books under review. The driving question of the book is how did a nearly fifty-year-old nun from Queens, New York, end up in a shallow grave in El Salvador in December 1980, along with three other US churchwomen, as the intended target of Salvadoran death squads/security forces? The short answer is that she answered the call. Earlier that year, Archbishop Óscar Romero issued two pleas. The first was to President Jimmy Carter to request that his administration send no more aid to the government of El Salvador. The second was to the president of the Maryknoll Sisters asking her to send more Maryknolls to El Salvador, because their dedication to serving others embodied the kind of work that Romero believed needed to be done in El Salvador at that time. Sister Maura accepted Romero's invitation knowing that "going to El Salvador would involve the very real possibility of death" (212).

Before commenting on any of the book's revelations, let me first say that it is beautifully written. Markey's capacity for prose drew me into the story and carried me along with its combination of captivating detail amid an ever-present attention to the larger forces at work. Whether the setting was New York, Ireland, Nicaragua, or El Salvador, I felt like I was in the hands of a most capable tour guide. As just one example, consider the following quote: "Sometimes it seems we demand that our victims be powerless, that innocence—pristine separation from the world—is a prerequisite for being wronged. But Maura had agency. She wasn't a hapless innocent. She was an actor in a fraught and shocking place, struggling to hear God's direction in the cacophony of fear and violence, grief and terror" (10). Not only does that quote reveal Markey's strength as a writer, but also it speaks to one of her main claims, namely that Maura Clarke should not be defined by her death, but rather as a rounded person with hopes and fears, doubts and convictions, who had lived for nearly fifty years before that fateful day in December 1980.

This book came to Markey unexpectedly, and in a way we can think of it as a bit of an authorized biography, to the extent that she had the support of Maura's family, and they made available to her documentation that has never before been utilized. That material, combined with a host of personal interviews and a solid review of the relevant secondary literature and contemporary journalistic accounts, to say nothing of the personal trips by Markey to Ireland, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and New York, makes for a solid foundation of evidence.

One tie-in to the other works under review here is that Maura's life shows us the transnational nature of the civil conflicts in Central America in the 1960s and 1970s. Another connection is that Maura's life is the story of a conversion to liberation theology. Just as we watch the protagonists in Chavez's, Sanchez's, and Cardenal's studies grapple with the socioeconomic conditions of El Salvador as part of their own intellectual and spiritual journeys, here we have a nineteen-year-old daughter of an Irish immigrant family from New York enter the convent in 1950 and come face to face with similar realities, just in different geographic locales, namely the Bronx and Nicaragua. One of the compelling themes that emerges from this book is how becoming a nun, especially with the Maryknoll order, represented the potential for individual empowerment and autonomous opportunity, especially for a working-class girl raised in 1930s/1940s America. With its global, missionary focus and, as Markey describes it, its "relatively modern orientation," the Maryknoll order appealed to young women who "wanted to see the world, to find adventure, to know people not like themselves" (49).

The other theme that emerges from this study is perhaps best captured by the renowned quote from the Brazilian Archbishop Hélder Câmara: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist." The life of Sister Maura demonstrates how making that transition from serving the poor to interrogating the structural origins of poverty can be an insurmountable challenge for some, but for others it can be so natural that it happens almost without notice. Sister Maura exemplifies the latter, and Markey's telling of her life shows how, even in advance of Vatican II, a young woman in service to the poor can find herself being led into a new consciousness by a combination of the people she was serving and the collaborative reflection of fellow nuns and priests. In time she would come to see the connection between "the wealth of the mining company and the poverty of her students" (79). When she encountered members of the Sandinista Liberation Front in Nicaragua in the early 1970s, they "were not strangers"; instead "they were the kids she'd trained to think freely, using Paulo Freire's methods," and they were "the teenagers she'd sung and prayed with and nurtured for years in the youth group" (173).

In searching for criticisms of this book, I'd say Markey portrays Sister Maura in an almost uniformly positive light, risking a hagiographic hue. And as a practicing academic historian, I balked at some of the details in Markey's narration, wondering how any evidence could allow for such omniscient knowledge. Indeed, Markey does not critically examine her evidence, but this is a narrative biography written by a journalist for a particular audience, so judging it by an academic standard is perhaps unjustified.

Russell Crandall's *The Salvador Option* is more of a mixed bag, and it has been met with criticism from some fellow academics. But let's start with the positive. At the time of its publication, there was no other book on the market that provided a comprehensive survey of US policy in El Salvador in the 1980s, and Crandall did us a service by assembling this one.³ Crandall's narration is sound in style, and the structure of the book—forty-nine brief chapters, each broken down into numerous subsections—makes it manageable to tackle.

The Salvador Option is caught in a bit of an identity crisis, between a textbook-like survey and an academic monograph. It initially comes across as the latter, but if judged from that perspective, it disappoints. Its evidence base is largely secondary sources, contemporary journalist accounts, and some well-known declassified US State Department and CIA materials located mostly in the Digital National Security Archive at George Washington University. One of Crandall's central claims is certainly compelling, namely that "U.S. policy in El Salvador was in fact carried out in a largely ad hoc fashion in country without strategic guidance from Washington" (7). But then the substance of the book is not organized around that argumentative premise, so the claim falls flat. Furthermore, Crandall does not provide a substantive engagement with scholarship to demonstrate the need for or originality of his claims. His argumentative foils seem to be hyperbolic and/or propagandistic claims made by pundits, policy-makers, and politicians rather than academic scholars, and their identities are clouded by unclear citations and/or by the use of passive verbs and vague subjects in key sentences, such as "observers who have fallen into the trap," or "deep U.S. involvement is given credit for ..." (10–11).

When it comes to explaining the origins of the war and the subsequent nature and impact of US policy on it, Crandall's claims are, once again, general and not based on particularly new evidence, but his overarching explanations are reasonable and reflective of some existing academic trends. He situates the insurgency in a combination of structural conditions of "desperate poverty" and the repressive reactions of conservative elites and officers. He acknowledges a local peasant base to the insurgency, rooted largely in liberation theology, but also says that "former guerrilla commanders readily acknowledge the role of external military and political support—above all—from allied governments in Managua and Havana" (501). Thus, while Crandall criticizes the unyielding and simplistic cold war mentality of most US policy-makers for overemphasizing the external origins of the insurgency, and being unwilling to countenance an FMLN-victory regardless of the cost, he says that it was reasonable for the United States to pursue a baseline policy of "engagement in the effort to hold the line in El Salvador" (501). That claim is going to be met with varying degrees of hostility by Crandall's fellow academics.

Matt Eisenbrandt's *Assassination of a Saint* charts the efforts of a core group of human-rights lawyers and activists to pursue the people responsible for killing Archbishop Óscar Romero in March 1980. In this regard, Eisenbrandt reinforces the fact that El Salvador's civil war was a transnational conflict, and so too are its legacies. Eisenbrandt was one of the lawyers on the trial team in a 2004 case brought against Alvaro Saravia, a member of a paramilitary death squad in El Salvador and the driver of one of the vehicles used during Romero's assassination. People like Saravia could not be tried in El Salvador between 1993 and 2016 because of the blanket amnesty law that was in effect. So activists and lawyers like Eisenbrandt could only pursue them in US courts, either on technicalities surrounding the manner in which they acquired their residency permit or if victims brought a civil suit directly against them under the Alien Tort Statute, the relevance of which rose to the fore in precedent-setting trials in the 1970s and 1980s.

Eisenbrandt's account is part memoir, part trial record, and part detective story, as he and others around him went into the field, pursuing witnesses, gathering evidence, and trying to find Saravia, which they failed to do and thus he was tried in absentia in the 2004 case. It seems evident that Eisenbrandt is aware of the detective-like nature of his story, because he employs a nonlinear narrative. He opens each chapter with an anecdote from the 2004 trial and then moves back and forth in time and space thereafter. It makes for a more novel-like read, but I have to confess I sometimes lost the sequence of what was happening, and also it caused me difficulty in distinguishing the myriad characters.

³ Since the initial draft of this review, the historian Brian D'Haeseleer published *The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979–1992* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017). Based on similar evidence, it advances an argument contrasting to Crandall's, thereby creating an interesting historiographical debate.

In 2010, the Salvadoran investigative journalist Carlos Dada published a startling interview with Alvaro Saravia in *El Faro*, an independent online newspaper in El Salvador that Dada had cofounded. It appeared under the provocative title (translated) of “How We Killed Archbishop Romero.” In the interview, Saravia provided his version of the events, which included him confessing to being part of the assassination team, but as a driver not as the shooter. As were many other readers, I was captivated by the interview. But Eisenbrandt’s book demonstrates how much was known about Saravia and his story many years prior to Dada’s interview, simply in less publicly accessible formats and by a smaller coterie of people pursuing him. Thus, one of the great services that Eisenbrandt does in this book is document that history, and therein show us the tremendous challenges in bringing someone like Saravia to justice, as well as the inspiring determination of those people who try. There have been successes in US courts against some of the Salvadoran perpetrators of human rights violations, including Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova and José Guillermo García in 2002, and Inocente Orlando Montano in 2013. And it appears that a Spanish court may initiate proceedings against some of those accused of architecting the murder of the six Jesuits in November 1989. And with the Amnesty Law having been abrogated by the Salvadoran Supreme Court in 2016, a case is now emerging in regard to the El Mozote massacre in December 1981. Eisenbrandt reveals how long and slow these processes can be, but also why there is reason to hope that some form of justice can be done. *Assassination of a Saint* does not contain an academic argument that needs to be analyzed or an evidence base that requires assessment. It’s a sophisticated read for educated laypeople that performs a valuable service.

Ernesto Valiente’s book *Liberation through Reconciliation* has the least to do with explaining the civil war per se, but clearly the war and its causes provide the context for Jon Sobrino’s theology. Sobrino is a Jesuit at El Salvador’s Central American University (UCA), where the Salvadoran army murdered six of his Jesuit brothers in November 1989. He survived that massacre by virtue of having been out of the country, and even though he was a widely regarded theologian at that time, his productive influence since then highlights how tragic it is that his six brothers’ lives and intellectual contributions were cut short.

Valiente’s main research method was to read the corpus of Sobrino’s writings and discover therein an emergent theology of reconciliation that prior scholars failed to appreciate. What makes that discovery particularly compelling is that the concept of reconciliation has been used by opponents of liberation theology to blunt its impact. Valiente demonstrates that reconciliation is not inherently opposed to liberation, regardless of the fact that those who appeal to reconciliation’s notions of shared togetherness, its idea that we are all part of one big family, have undermined liberation theology’s structural explanations for the origins of poverty and injustice. Thus, it is quite a distinct contribution to demonstrate the existence of a concept of reconciliation within the writings of one of the leading figures of liberation theology.

Valiente says that “Sobrino has never explicitly developed a theology of reconciliation” (6), and in particular that Sobrino’s writings avoid the potential conflict between reconciliation and liberation because “he [Sobrino] attends to the demands of truth, justice and forgiveness” (5). In other words, Valiente believes that Sobrino privileges liberation such that reconciliation can occur only within its structural context. I’m not sufficiently versed in Sobrino’s writings to assess the accuracy of Valiente’s claims, but I’ve appealed to colleagues who are, and their assessment is that Valiente’s claims are sound, based on a sufficiently expansive reading of Sobrino’s works, and that *Liberation through Reconciliation* makes an original and valuable contribution. I’ll defer to them. I found Valiente’s explanatory context for Sobrino to be well done and his analysis of Sobrino compelling. When he shifted away from an objective interpretation of Sobrino’s theology toward a sort of Christian advocacy, as if Biblical phrases possessed objective meaning, I found myself discombobulated. But I’ll confess that may be a disciplinary bias against the manner in which some theological scholars write.

Last but not least we have *El Salvador: Historia contemporánea*, which Salvadorans refer to simply as “el libro MAPFRE” (the MAPFRE book). It is the book I have the least to say about, which is ironic, because I enjoyed reading it the most. *Historia contemporánea* is edited by the Salvadoran historian Carlos Gregorio López Bernal as part of the Latin American Contemporary History series of the MAPFRE Foundation, the philanthropic and education arm of the Spanish insurance conglomerate. The goal of the series is to provide survey histories of every Latin American country that are informed by the most recent historiography in commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversaries of the independence of the Latin American republics. To that end, López Bernal assembled a star cast of Salvadoran academics, including Roberto Turcios, Knut Walter, Héctor Lindo Fuentes, and Ricardo Roque, in addition to a photographic display assembled by the up-and-coming scholar René Aguiluz. The contributors are all men, unfortunately, and the focus is decidedly on political economy, with the exception of the final chapter on culture by Ricardo Roque.

For me, every sentence of the book was like a conversation with a fellow scholar in the field. I know the authors' works, the scholarship relevant to their narrations, and the comparative case studies from other Latin American countries, so behind the words on the page I could see the authors' decision-making process, their assessment of scholarship and El Salvador's distinctiveness, or lack thereof. And so whether the topic was independence, the liberal reforms of the late nineteenth century, the 1932 uprising, the military regimes of the twentieth century, the civil war, or postwar politics, it was a pleasure for me to watch these scholars manage the secondary scholarship and deftly craft it into a coherent and accessible narrative. Moreover, the authors did not rely solely on secondary evidence. For example, in his two chapters Knut Walter introduced some new statistical data in easily readable tables. I know that this book was not intended for me, and other readers will experience it differently depending on the incentives that bring them to it.

Above all else, *Historia contemporánea* performs a valuable service, because it is the only text like it to have appeared in El Salvador since the end of the war, and for that matter, for many years prior. The closest analog is the two-volume high school history text produced by the Ministry of Education in 1994, to which some of the authors of *Historia contemporánea* contributed. Indeed, for so many reasons, postwar El Salvador needed this MAPFRE book. As evidence of this, the original edition was only for one thousand copies, but a second edition of twenty-five thousand copies has been sponsored by El Salvador's Office of the Presidency and has been included in the "Biblioteca Escolar Presidencial" in support of the public school system, even though I'm not sure the book's structure is appropriate for use in high schools, or maybe even universities without a more traditional text as accompaniment.

The MAPFRE book functions as a survey even though it wasn't designed specifically as such. It's more of a collection of thematically driven essays covering the same two-hundred-year period. So to judge the book as a purposeful survey would be unjust, but nevertheless it functions akin to one. The challenge for any book like this is to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. In this regard, *Historia contemporánea* falls a bit short. Ricardo Roque's very fine chapter on culture feels tacked on at the end of the preceding political economy. A more comprehensive issue is the lack of a unifying theme or question that might have given each section a shared purpose, like: Why did El Salvador have a civil war in the 1980s? Or why did El Salvador have such a long run of military governments in the twentieth century? Or, perhaps on a more positive note, How has El Salvador managed to sustain a relatively functioning democracy in the postwar era, despite economic malaise and persistent gang violence? In other words, this book asks more "what" questions than "why" questions, which is not uncommon in survey-type works. Perhaps that is a good thing, because it is easy to fall into an overly functionalist trap, making every topic serve the needs of a later question rather than being addressed on their own terms and in their own right.

Because the authors of *Historia contemporánea* asked more "what" questions, and because they answered those questions with survey-like generalized answers, it is difficult for me to create a historiographic dialogue with the other works under review here. Nevertheless, this is an excellent survey written by top-notch scholars, and while I devoured the text, I wonder if readers looking for some comprehensive take away might be frustrated.

One of the overarching revelations I find in these eight books is the scale and importance of the liberationist/popular church to the emergence of insurgency in El Salvador. A consensus argument among them is that the church was well out in front of the political-military organizations—that is, the guerrillas and popular front organizations—in terms of questioning the status quo and mobilizing people to defend themselves against injustice. As members of the popular church questioned the status quo, the conservative defenders of that system pushed back, with increasing ferocity, such that nonviolent parishioners were left with only two options: fight or flight. One of the remarkable facts we must remember is that of the eight dioceses in El Salvador, only one, the archdiocese in San Salvador, embraced the liberationist cause. All of the other bishops remained loyal to traditional theology, and yet, directly beneath them, often in close geographic proximity, liberationist priests, nuns, and lay workers engaged in vigorous campaigns of consciousness-raising and popular mobilization. Prior works have provided us with some insight into how this dynamic played out in real time, such as the memoir by Father José Inocencio Alas, and scholarly articles by the anthropologist Leigh Binford about Father Miguel Ventura in Morazán and the El Castaño peasant-training center outside of San Miguel.⁴ The works under review here add significantly to our

⁴ José Inocencio Alas, *Iglesia, tierra y lucha campesina: Suchitoto, El Salvador, 1968–1977* (El Salvador: Asociación de Frailes Franciscanos, 2003); Leigh Binford, "Peasants, Catechists and Revolutionaries: Organic Intellectuals in the Salvadoran Revolution, 1980–1992," in *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El Salvador*, edited by Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 105–125.

understanding of these people and processes. What they don't do is address the larger question as to why Salvadorans embraced liberation theology so earnestly, notwithstanding divisions within the Church, whereas other countries in Latin America, such as Colombia, remained more uniformly opposed to it, despite having economic conditions not so dissimilar from El Salvador. It seems to me that as we deepen our understanding of the specifics of El Salvador, we will want to broaden our engagement with these comparative questions, which will then in turn provide greater clarity and context for our studies of the Salvadoran case. Fortunately, we are not without precedent in this arena.⁵

Author Information

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⁵ Daniel Levine and Scott Mainwaring, "Religion and Popular Protest in Latin America: Contrasting Experiences," in *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, 2nd ed., edited by Susan Eckstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 203–240.

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