

# **El Salvador: From Cold War Battleground to Neoliberal Development Project**

U.S. Influence on Salvadoran Political Identity

Maggie Dunlap

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Department of Politics, Sewanee: The University of the South

## **Abstract**

El Salvador, the smallest country in Central America, endured a brutal civil war that lasted from 1979 until the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992. Defined by some as the last real armed conflict of the Cold War, El Salvador's struggle attracted an unprecedented amount of U.S. aid, marking the beginning of a long and complex relationship between the two nations. This relationship was further developed by the large-scale immigration of displaced civil war refugees to the U.S., the subsequent dependence of the Salvadoran economy on remittances from these emigrated nationals. This study focuses on U.S. influence on current Salvadoran political identity and the current debate surrounding U.S. policies promoting a neoliberal development model in El Salvador. Ultimately, many factors contribute to a fragmented Salvadoran political identity, including: widespread distrust of a corrupt and ineffective political system, slow economic growth, lack of rule of law, and the continued project of social reconstruction post-civil war. All of these factors add up to an ambivalent attitude towards continued exertion of U.S. influence in the region. Through interviews (formal and informal) with Salvadorans from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, this study reveals the tenuous nature of political identity and the fragility of social unity.

## Introduction

A recent article in *Yahoo! Finance* reported the results of a global survey of 39 countries comparing public opinion of the United States and China. The survey was conducted by Pew Research Center and the final results were published with the title *America's Global Image Remains More Positive than China's*. Among the top ten nations with the most favorable views towards the United States, El Salvador ranks sixth, with an approval rating of 79% (behind Kenya (81%), Senegal (81%), Ghana (83%), Israel (83%), and the Philippines in first place with (85%)) (Newman 2013). The Pew report ventures general hypotheses to explain relatively high approval ratings of the U.S. in Latin America, emphasizing the success of soft power in the region (Kohut 2013). In the *Yahoo! Finance* article, despite a brief analysis of the economic, social, and political factors that might have contributed to high approval ratings in the other nine countries on the list, no attempt is made to discern the reasons behind El Salvador's favorable view.

El Salvador is a small, Central American nation, roughly the size of the state of Massachusetts, with a population of around 6 million. Its capital, San Salvador, is home to roughly 2 million people. El Salvador's relative anonymity in the American collective consciousness, as evidenced by the *Yahoo!* author's omission, obscures the political, economic, and social ties that bind these two nations. For example, El Salvador is home to the largest American embassy in the world, in terms of land (Dimon 2013). According to Adán Quan, scholar and professor of Anthropology at Michigan State University, the Salvadoran civil war was "one of the most costly and thorough interventions by the U.S. government in Latin America" (Quan 2005, 276). Due to large-scale immigration of civil war refugees and others in

search of better economic conditions, “nearly a quarter of El Salvador’s population now works in the U.S.” (Economic Weekly 2009). Furthermore, El Salvador’s official currency has been the U.S. dollar since 2001. Given these obvious ties between El Salvador and the U.S., my original research question was: How has El Salvador's civil war and the U.S. role in the conflict shaped Salvadoran political identity? Therefore, my research emphasized current Salvadoran attitudes towards the U.S. in light of the two nations’ shared history and continued relationship.

### **Left-Wing Anniversary**

June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, marked the fourth year of the term of the first left-wing president in El Salvador since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992. On this anniversary, President Mauricio Funes and his party, the Farbundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), organized a celebratory rally in the capital city, closing several major roads. 200,000 Salvadorans took to the streets.

With the signing of the Peace Accords in January of 1992, the warring factions of the civil war were redefined as legitimate political parties: the leftist guerilla movement coalesced into the FMLN, and the right-wing, military backed faction rallied behind Arena, Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (National Republican Alliance).<sup>1</sup> Funes’s four year anniversary marks the reality of a “new era” in Salvadoran politics: the FMLN victory in 2009 represents the nation’s first peaceful transfer of power since the end of the civil war. In other words, Funes is the first non-Arena president since 1992.

During the 2009 presidential campaign, it was obvious Funes was not the typical FMLN candidate: he never went to “‘el monte’ (to the bush, as they said of those who joined the guerilla

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<sup>1</sup> Though polarization between the FMLN and Arena defines most of Salvadoran politics, this characterization is somewhat simplified. There is a relatively strong third party presence, most recently in the form of GANA, Gran Alianza para la Unidad Nacionalista (Great Alliance for National Unity) headed by former Arena member and president from 2004 to 2009, Tony Saca. Saca will run for president in the 2014 elections on the GANA ticket.

forces)” (Moodie 2010, 213). Instead, hailing from a younger generation, Funes left behind a successful career in journalism to run for president. He is therefore relatively moderate, eschewing the left-wing hyper-nationalism of some of his fellow FMLN party members. He was not even an official party member before his selection by the party.

With this new era of Salvadoran politics as a backdrop, I sought to discern a cross-section of Salvadoran societal attitudes toward past and present U.S. involvement in the region in a series of both formal and informal interviews with Salvadorans from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, and representing various viewpoints on the political spectrum. Given the impossibly broad nature of this topic, my research inevitably was narrowed to a study of Salvadoran attitudes toward current U.S. policies in El Salvador, and, more specifically, U.S. policies promoting a neoliberal model of development.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. and El Salvador have a long and complicated shared history that starts most clearly with the onset of the Salvadoran civil war, though the U.S. exerted considerable influence in the region dating back to the Monroe Doctrine. The civil war itself was the culmination of a variety of social and economic factors, including gross economic inequality between a landed elite and a vast peasantry, the precariousness of prolonged, repressive military rule, and the influence of socialist rhetoric on this existing tension.

### **Coffee Dynasties, Military Rule, and Revolution**

The broad sweep of recent Salvadoran political history looks something like this: a thirty-one year reign of autocratic presidents with “relatively free” elections that lasted from 1900 to 1931, followed by a series of military presidents until 1979, when a decade of popular protests finally overthrew then-President General Carlos Humberto Romero, thus initiating the twelve year civil war (Guerra 2013, 68). El Salvador’s presidents from 1900 to 1931 were drawn from

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<sup>2</sup> Advocates of neoliberal economics support free trade, open markets, privatization, and deregulation, ultimately favoring the private sector over the public sector whenever possible.

the coffee elite whose wealth derived from their expansive coffee plantations, or “fincas.” This period of the “Coffee State” includes what is known as the “Meléndez-Quiñonez Dynasty,” an eighteen-year period in which the presidents all hailed from two related families. The coffee empires of these elites were based on the hacienda model of Spanish colonialism, in which single landowners employed laborers who lived on the land.

Salvadoran “campesinos” have a long history of protest in favor of land reform and wealth redistribution because of the economic inequalities perpetuated by the tenant farmer system. On the other hand, the Salvadoran government has a long history of brutally repressing such protests: in 1932, in the Western provinces of the country, a peasant-led rebellion was suppressed by military president Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, claiming the lives of anywhere between 10,000 and 40,000 civilians (Armstrong 1982, 9). The majority of victims were indigenous people, known as the Pipil, and the tragedy became known as La Matanza, or “The Killing.”

Despite La Matanza’s warning against popular protest, social unrest grew under the almost fifty years of consolidated military rule. Student-led organizations empowered by leftist rhetoric, trade unions, intellectuals in the universities, and peasants eventually coalesced into a sweeping multi-organization peoples’ movement that sought to overthrow the military rule. The right-wing elite favored the status quo to protect their economic interests. Others distrusted the popular movement for its socialist rhetoric. Finally, after nearly a decade of popular protest in favor of reform, conflict broke out between the two sides in 1980. Eventually, the protracted conflict was concentrated in the eastern hill country, favoring the guerilla tactics of the opposition. For as many people who willingly took up arms for the first time to fight in the

guerilla forces, there were an equal number of neutral bystanders caught in the crossfire of a conflict they didn't fully understand or support.

### **U.S. Involvement**

Because of the leftist rhetoric of the opposition, El Salvador's civil war was defined as "part of a broader struggle between communism and democracy" by the Reagan administration, and the U.S. provided "over \$1 million a day to assist Salvadoran forces in their fight against guerilla insurgents" (Coutin 2005, 510). In an attempt to avoid "another Nicaragua," i.e. losing the country to communists, U.S. officials funneled aid into an anti-guerilla military campaign long after records of its human rights abuses were corroborated (Armstrong 1982, 113).

One of the most often cited instances of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Salvadoran military is the massacre at El Mozote: in December of 1981, virtually an entire village, suspected of aiding guerilla insurgents, was wiped out by an American-trained Salvadoran battalion (Danner 1994, 9). According to Mark Danner in his account *The Massacre at El Mozote*, this gruesome tragedy summarized the fundamental conundrum for U.S. policy makers at the time.

El Mozote...heralded what became perhaps the classic debate of the late Cold War: between those who argued that, given the geopolitical stakes in Central America, the United States had no choice but to go on supporting a 'friendly' regime, however disreputable it might seem, because the alternative-the possibility of another Communist victory in the region-was clearly worse, and those who insisted that the country must be willing to wash its hands of what had become a morally corrupting struggle (12).

In the eyes of U.S. policies makers, El Salvador was too important to abandon. Nevertheless, El Mozote was not an isolated incident, and the United States' role in the 12 year conflict was often less than defensible.

The classification of El Salvador's internal struggle as a Cold War battle heightened the conflict's importance in U.S. foreign policy, allowing policy makers to draw ideological lines between the two sides. But El Salvador's war was not necessarily as clear-cut as communism versus democracy: "It was certainly possible to describe some members of the opposition, as Deane Hinton had, as 'out-and-out Marxists,' but it was equally possible to describe other members of the opposition...as 'a broad-based coalition of moderate and center-left groups'" (Didion 1983). Deane Hinton, U.S. ambassador to El Salvador from 1981 to 1983, could not accurately describe the entire armed opposition as 'out-and-out Marxists' because of the coalition nature of the group. Consequently, Joan Didion's account of El Salvador's political climate in 1982, *Salvador*, calls U.S. Cold War justifications into question:

It was possible to talk about Cuba and Nicaragua, and by extension the Soviet Union, and national security: no one could doubt that Cuba and Nicaragua had at previous points supported the armed opposition (in El Salvador)...but neither could anyone...be unequivocally convinced that American interests lay on one side or another of what Deane Hinton referred to as a civil war (Didion 1983).

El Salvador's internal conflict did not conform to Washington's black-and-white standard. Congressional battles raged in the 80's as to whether or not the U.S. would continue to support the Salvadoran government and military after news of right-wing death squads and gross human rights abuses reached Washington. After more than a decade of stalemated warfare in the countryside, the two sides signed the Chapultepec Peace Accords, moderated by the United Nations in Mexico in January of 1992.

### **Salvadoran Identity**

This background of U.S. involvement in the Salvadoran civil war, combined with the victory of the nation's first left-wing president in 2009, forecasts a resurgence of Salvadoran political identity defined in opposition to the United States. Leftist and populist movements in

Latin America hinge on a kind of crisis of identity: national sovereignty becomes a kind of hysterical whine, and any intervention on the part of “extranjeros,” or foreigners, is a threat. For example, on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Nicolás Maduro, the president of Venezuela, denounced deprecating comments made by Samantha Power, Obama’s new nominee for U.S. United Nations ambassador, regarding civil rights in Venezuela: “As president, my policy is zero tolerance for any attacks the Gringos make on Venezuela. I’m not going to tolerate any sort of aggression against Venezuela—verbal, political, or diplomatic. That’s enough! You there with your empire. No more meddling with Venezuela” (Munoz 2013). Power’s comments implied potential U.S. action to protect the civil rights of Venezuelan citizens. Maduro’s response asserted a national identity in intense opposition to U.S. involvement. In El Salvador, because of the FMLN’s leftist identification, broad-base support that brought Funes to power might suggest the presence of similar anti-imperialist distrust of U.S. influence.

In order to discern the validity of this hypothesis I asked interviewees: What does it mean to be a Salvadoran? Javier<sup>3</sup>, a community leader from the Bajo Lempa region and wounded veteran of the guerilla, expressed a kind of disillusionment with his own Salvadoran identity:

I feel that, perhaps ideally, one identifies with the country, right, because one is a Salvadoran, because one has one’s identity, birth, origin there...But when one sees that foreign interests dominate more than one’s own, then one feels disconnected from the country’s heritage. As if one was no longer a part. When one sees, well, for example, when they talk about “fathers of the homeland,” who are the current deputies<sup>4</sup>, many say it is better to have no parents, because they do nothing. Because it is not true that they are our parents. They are parents of the economy, of their own interests. You know why? Because they have more time to go abroad than to visit here. We do not know of a deputy who has come here. You don’t see them. So, that’s why I’m telling you, what does it mean to be Salvadoran? Well, we are patriots of the country and everything. But do we feel the pride, the honor, of when they lay down a law there, it reaches the corner here, and that they are protecting us? No. We are not in that situation at all...Some people feel protected, it’s true, living in their country, but it’s because they have everything. But most do not. But, well, we are proud because it is our country.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>3</sup> All interviewees’ names have been changed unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> Elected members of the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly are called “diputados,” or deputies.

One reason Javier feels disconnected from his own government and national identity is because he has been stripped of agency in the political process. He feels that foreign interests influence the government's decisions more than the needs of the Salvadoran people. Deputies who supposedly represent him in the Legislative Assembly have never even been to his region. Decisions are made that affect him without his input. Nevertheless, Javier still feels abiding loyalty towards a generalized Salvadoran identity: he is proud to be a Salvadoran, despite everything he experiences that discourages this pride.

Javier's dwindling faith in the institutions of government is not a unique sentiment. With the next presidential elections coming up in February of 2014, the country is facing widespread disinterest in the political process. Young Salvadorans are not getting their state issued ID card, the Documento Único de Identidad or DUI (Unique Identity Document) that would allow them to vote. Marvin López, joint director of the organization Líderes Solidarios y Voluntarios de El Salvador (Solidary and Volunteer Leaders of El Salvador), a group composed of university students committed to exercising their democratic rights, notes, "There is apathy on the part of young people" (Romero 2013).<sup>5</sup> This apathy reflects a lack of trust in political institutions that have long ago seemed to stop serving the Salvadoran people.

Roddy Hughes<sup>6</sup>, the director of Voices on the Border, a U.S.-based non-profit that has worked with refugees of the civil war since the 1980s, echoes Javier's concern for the lack of representation within government: "We have to have election reform were people in the legislative assembly are accountable to the people they are representing. That has never been the case in El Salvador. Still not completely the case" (Hughes 2013). Salvadorans generally distrust politicians not only for their inability to achieve tangible results or take into account the

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<sup>5</sup> "Hay una apatía de parte de los jóvenes."

<sup>6</sup> Real name

peoples' concerns, but also for their corruption. Javier, as a prominent and articulate community leader, has been asked to run for local political office, but he has refused, citing a wariness of the corrupting nature of politics: "In issues of electoral politics, we haven't...I know them, they have sought me out (to run for office) ... but I do not like that, to go getting into that kind of thing, because I feel better supporting the pueblo, with my head held high, even though it's only a little bit, but it's something, and I'm there present with them" (Javier 2013).<sup>ii</sup> Javier feels his time is better spent working directly with the community than ineffectively advocating for their interests in the political sphere. Similarly, Manuel, a local high school teacher and community leader in the Bajo Lempa, views Salvadoran politics as irreparably corrupting: "And when you become political (get involved in politics) you lose your ideals" (Manuel 2013).<sup>iii</sup>

The Bajo Lempa region where Javier and Manuel live is home to many of the displaced refugees of the civil war. Pushed out of their homes in the Morazán department during the conflict, many fled to Honduras where refugee camps were eventually established. Others remained to fight in the guerilla army. After the war, the Peace Accords awarded land grants to these displaced persons. Thus, entire communities were transported from the mountainous region in the northeast to the shores of the Jiquilisco Bay and watershed of the Lempa River in the department of Usulután. Therefore, the watershed of the Lempa River, or Bajo Lempa, represents an area of the country populated by the most fervent leftist Salvadorans with the most ardent support for the FMLN.

In addition to being a leftist stronghold, the Bajo Lempa has a long tradition of accepting foreign assistance and hosting foreigners: In these communities, there is a lot of solidarity with people outside the community" (Manuel 2013).<sup>iv</sup> Amando Lopez and the surrounding communities are used to "gringas" and "gringos." Some foreign NGO's and non-profits have

been with the communities since their time in the refugee camps, like Voices on the Border, helping the local farmers advocate for their rights, take advantage of education, and access medical resources. In this way, the Bajo Lempa may not represent the most stereotypically anti-imperialism faction of the FMLN because its residents have directly benefitted from a long term relationship with Americans and other foreigners.

Nevertheless, their relationship with these foreign non-profits might best be described as ambivalent. Manuel, expresses conflicted feelings about outside help:

...they (foreign organizations) will control your project. They ask for things for you. But you do not know if that's good or bad. You do not know how much they gave you; you don't know where to invest it. So then we said: we want to be independent. We have the ability to manage our own projects, and we will administer our own funds. So if you want, join us, but don't just give to us anymore. Join us, teach us, tell us how (Manuel 2013).<sup>v</sup>

Over time, the Amando Lopez community has reasserted its right to self-determination in the face of outside involvement. While appreciative of foreign assistance, pride has stepped in and made the local residents more interested in doing things for themselves.

Carlos, a graduate of a bilingual school in San Salvador who moved to the U.S. to attend the University of Virginia, also answered the question of what it means to be Salvadoran. Carlos's experience of U.S. culture and influence is very different from Javier's or Manuel's: educated in both Spanish and English, the goal of Carlos's schooling was to attend university in the United States. Having graduated from UVA, he now plans to attend Princeton in pursuit of his PhD. Thus, he is in a unique position to offer a Salvadoran's opinion of his own national identity with some outside perspective. "To be Salvadoran is to embrace the bad times, to live through them because they are simply the way of the world, and to know that because that is the way of the world, making it through will take a lot of extra effort" (Carlos 2013). Most proud of

the Salvadoran ability to laugh, even in the face of adversity, Carlos also expressed chagrin for the thinly veiled corruption of the Salvadoran political system:

I would say that I am embarrassed to call myself Salvadoran when I hear about the political maneuvering, and the blatant disregard for the separation of powers...In many ways, the political sphere (and I would argue the country's socioeconomic elite) have (sic) not moved past the civil war. We don't talk about it openly; that is, politicians don't cite the conflict as their birthright and philosophical standing ground, as Americans do the founding fathers. The conflict presents itself as a false party-binary nonetheless, there to hide the pettiness, selfishness, and ineptitude of politicians.

Lack of trust in Salvadoran politics is not only a result of corruption and inefficiency, the ubiquitous plagues of Latin American politics, but also, as Carlos indicates, a result of the stalled project of social reconstruction post-civil war. Carlos is embarrassed by the thinly veiled political maneuvering of selfish politicians, but he also understands the structural consequences of lasting civil war identities. Shortly after the signing of the Peace Accords, on March 20, 1993, El Salvador forgave its war criminals in La Ley de Amnistía General Para La Consolidación de La Paz (The General Amnesty Law for the Consolidation of Peace):

Legislated shortly after the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador published its Report yet prior its widespread diffusion, the main thinking behind the Amnesty Law, as evidenced by the title, is that peace was best served by forgiving and forgetting past human rights abuses. A prosecutorial model of transitional justice that could have brought reputed human rights abusers before the courts to face justice, therefore, was eschewed (Aguilera 2012, 3).

Though the Amnesty Law allowed Salvadoran society to transition from stalemated civil war to legitimate democratic process, it failed to purge the country of its most insidious elements or initiate a process of social healing. War criminals on both sides were never held accountable for their actions. Civil war loyalties morphed seamlessly into political party identifications. Thus, the process of social reconstruction post-conflict was stalled, and the civil war status quo essentially preserved along new party lines. This lack of closure and preservation of old identities is in many ways the biggest source of fragmentation for Salvadoran political identity.

In addition to interviewee's responses, general reactions to the project were also extremely telling. Raised eyebrows were the most common response to the topic of my research, from both Americans and Salvadorans from across the political spectrum, expressing both surprise and alarm. Many did not view Salvadoran politics as a topic worthy of study, or, because the memory of the civil war is so fresh, they wondered why anyone would investigate something so unpleasant. When I explained I was researching Salvadoran politics, one outspoken member in a group of Salvadoran women responded, "Well, when you figure it out, let us know, because we have no idea what's going on." These responses echo the kind of disillusionment with the political process expressed by some of the interviewees. This quip also reveals a kind of resignation, echoing the ongoing problem of youths who have not solicited their national identity card: political involvement yields no results, so there is little incentive to become, or remain, informed.

Interviewee's definitions of what it means to be a Salvadoran also reveal a concern for the lack of rule of law in El Salvador: "Do we feel the pride, the honor, of when they lay down a law there, it reaches the corner here? No" (Javier 2013). For Javier, respect for the final word of the law is a source of pride in one's country. Despite his misgivings about foreign influences in El Salvador, he suggests that rule of law is something to emulate: "...the laws here are not like the laws there. If they were like those over there, there would be a little bit more, I don't know, a little more precaution, a little more respect. Because over there the laws are quite serious...when the law is applied, it is applied. And not here. Here there's a bureaucracy for enforcing laws" (Javier 2013).<sup>vi</sup> According to the World Justice Project, El Salvador ranks somewhere in the middle in terms of measures of different factors of rule of law, except in terms of criminal justice where it ranks second to last in the world, just 0.01 points ahead of Venezuela (The World

Justice Project 2013). El Salvador's biggest challenge in pursuing rule of law is overcoming corruption, a plague not limited to judges, in order to enforce existing laws.

Ana Cristina Sol<sup>7</sup> expresses a similar concern for lack of rule of law in El Salvador. Now a successful businesswoman, Sol served as El Salvador's ambassador to France, Belgium, Portugal, the EU, and UNESCO from 1989 to 1993, and later as ambassador to the United States from 1993 to 1997. In 2004, she was the Vice-Presidential candidate alongside presidential hopeful Héctor Silva, representing the centrist coalition party of CDU-PDC, Centro Democrático Unido and Partido Demócrata Cristiano (United Democratic Center and Christian Democratic Party). Claiming today that she does not belong to any political party, Sol is a rarity in Salvadoran politics. She admits in retrospect that, "We (Sol and Silva) knew we were not going to win the election, but the idea was to provide a more legal option, more transparent than what exists now" (Sol 2013).<sup>vii</sup> This question of legality features prominently in Sol's analysis of Salvadoran politics. She also points to deficient rule of law as the main cause behind El Salvador's economic stagnation:

"Sol: I feel that the lack of an environment that attracts investment, for me, is legal. It's not, 'Oh! It is violence.' Sorry, but there are rather violent countries where investment is higher... Legal security in this country does not exist. A company that is going to invest in any part of the world needs to know...

MD: That they are not going to steal their money?

Sol: For sure, just like that, ahead of time!" (Sol 2013).<sup>viii</sup>

Though Sol recognizes that instability is a concern for El Salvador, she argues that a climate conducive to investment ultimately hinges on the ability to foster reliable rule of law principles. Her sentiments are echoed in El Salvador's hot-button domestic issues: how to create an environment that will engender economic growth.

### **The Development Challenge**

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<sup>7</sup> Real name.

With the backdrop of a fragmented political identity and the legacy of the civil war, the most salient political issues today in El Salvador, as Sol's analysis indicates, are economic growth and security. Gang violence threatens the stability of civil society, though a recently negotiated gang truce has cut the murder rate in half (Dimon 2013). Successful economic growth, from the point of view of the American embassy and Salvadoran government, will provide the conditions necessary for making the gangs obsolete. Thus, the question then becomes: how to promote this growth?

In *Cuentos Chinos: El engaño de Washington, la mentira populista, y la esperanza de America Latina* (translation: *Tall Tales: Washington's delusion, the populist lie, and Latin America's hope*)<sup>8</sup> journalist Andrés Oppenheimer compares China and Southeast Asia's unprecedented economic success to Latin America's sluggish development.<sup>9</sup> His first argument in the text posits that China, despite being a one-party state governed by communists, has managed to reconcile its leftist politics with a decidedly neoliberal model of development, creating an environment favorable to foreign investment by "making its labor and tax laws more flexible, and improving the education system in order to create a more qualified workforce" (Oppenheimer 2005, 429).<sup>10</sup> And the tactic has worked: China boasts of "an annual growth rate of more than 9 percent in various decades, 60 billion dollars in annual investment, 250 million people lifted out of poverty" (Oppenheimer 2005, 71).<sup>11</sup> Oppenheimer refers to this practice as

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<sup>8</sup> "Cuentos Chinos" is the Spanish idiom for tall tales, or stories with elaborate lies. It literally means "Chinese stories." Therefore the title is a play on words, simultaneously referring to the delusion of populist rhetoric and the alternative truth told through Chinese examples.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the English title of Oppenheimer's *Cuentos Chinos* is actually *Saving the Americas: The Dangerous Decline of Latin America and What The U.S. Must Do*. Despite an additional prologue and afterword in the English edition, the text is unchanged and has very little to do with the U.S.'s potential role in "saving the Americas."

<sup>10</sup> "flexibilizar sus leyes laborales e impositivas, y mejorar el sistema educativa para crear una mano de obra calificada"

<sup>11</sup> "Un crecimiento anual de más del 9 por ciento en varias décadas, 60 mil millones de dólares en inversiones anuales, 250 millones de personas rescatadas de la pobreza"

“pragmatism” and lauds China for its unprecedented growth despite the apparent disconnect between political rhetoric and actual government policies.

Leftist and populist governments in Latin America, on the other hand, fear for the sovereignty of their nations in the face of foreign direct investment and unregulated involvement in the global economy. They argue that national industry must be protected against foreign business interests in order to succeed and ultimately lift people out of poverty. Oppenheimer argues that this “populist lie” is at the base of all the reasons why Latin America’s economy is not growing. The best summary of Oppenheimer’s critique of Latin American populism can be found in a pointed comment he made to former Argentinian President Néstor Kirchner:

It is undeniable that the United States has a dubious history in the region...though it needs to be recognized that in the last three decades Washington has learned some lessons, and increased its support for democracy and human rights in the region. But if I may put forth a constructive criticism, the government sometimes gives the impression of wanting to do the opposite of what was done in the nineties, whether good or bad. Major political or economic lurches are bad for countries. They generate internal and external distrust, which translates into lower investment, increased capital flight, less growth and more unemployment. The countries that are doing the best...are those where the left wins, the right wins, or the center wins and nothing dramatic happens (230).<sup>12</sup>

Oppenheimer eschews hyper-nationalism in favor of a more globalized, standardized method of governance because, he argues, that is the only way to ensure economic growth. Fortunately, El Salvador has not suffered from coups, “golpes de estado,” or radical shifts in economic policy, at least not since the end of the war. In fact, the Funes administration has been even more surprising for its willingness to continue the close relationship with the U.S. and move forward with a neoliberal model of development. On May 23, 2013, the Legislative Assembly passed a

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<sup>12</sup> “Es innegable que los Estados Unidos tienen una historia dudosa en la región...aunque hay que reconocer que en las últimas tres décadas Washington ha aprendido algunas lecciones, y ha aumentado su respaldo a la democracia y los derechos humanos en la región. Pero si se permite una crítica constructiva, su gobierno a veces da la impresión de querer hacer todo lo contrario de lo que se hizo en la década de los noventa, y sea bueno o malo. Los grandes bandazos políticos o económicos les hacen mal a los países. Generan desconfianza interna y externa, que se traduce en menores inversiones, mayor fuga de capitales, menos crecimiento y más desempleo. Los países que mejor andan... son aquellos donde gana la izquierda, gana la derecha o gana el centro y no pasa nada dramático.”

Public Private Partnership Law after much debate. The law opens up certain sectors of the economy to contracts with private businesses which have the ability to provide services at a lower cost than the government. FMLN deputies, not surprisingly, were strongly opposed to this law initially, and the final version was modified to exclude projects affecting water, public education, national security, and health. The law was seen as a threat to sovereignty because privatization of such sectors would exclude the government.

The U.S. Embassy placed a strong emphasis on the P3 Law as a pre-condition for the renewal of the Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact (MCC) this September (CISPES 2013). The MCC is an independent U.S. foreign aid agency founded by Congress in 2004 that negotiates aid compacts with developing nations worldwide (Millennium Challenge Corporation 2013). In addition to this established relationship, El Salvador is one of four countries worldwide to join the Partnership for Growth program with the U.S., the goal of which is “to accelerate and sustain broad-based economic growth by putting into practice the principles of President Obama’s September 2010 Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development” (US Department of State 2013). Thus, current issues in Salvadoran politics reveal a continued legacy of U.S. involvement.

### **American Bias and Attitudes towards the U.S.**

The active pursuit of economic partnerships like the MCC Compact and Partnership for Growth indicates that, despite its leftist identification, the FMLN has not adopted anti-American imperialism as a part of its rhetoric. More generally, it seems that Salvadorans as a whole do not harbor any great feelings of resentment towards the U.S. In an interview with Francisco Quiñonez<sup>13</sup>, presidential candidate in 1984 for the now-defunct Popular Salvadoran Party, my hypotheses about Salvadoran attitudes towards the U.S. were once again thwarted. Quiñonez

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<sup>13</sup> Real name

now operates a successful packaging company out of El Salvador, called Bemisal. Decidedly right-wing, Quiñonez worked with the El Salvador's interim president from 1982 to 1984, Alvaro Magaña, in efforts to collaborate with the U.S. and comply with the parameters set by Congress for receiving aid, namely proof of concerted efforts to reduce the human rights abuses committed by the military in the name of the government (Observer-Reporter 1983, 6). In an informal interview, he argued that the phrasing of my title, "U.S. Influence on Salvadoran Political Identity," suggested I had already made up my mind. I assumed there had to be some kind of backlash against the U.S. because of its checkered past in El Salvador, and that resentment towards the U.S. had to be at the forefront of concerns for Salvadorans.

Similarly, Phil Dimon, a Political Officer at the U.S. embassy in El Salvador, anticipated backlash against U.S. involvement in the region in light of the civil war legacy. However, in his experience, this has turned out not to be the case.

MD: With what you know about the history of this country, to what degree do you think U.S. involvement in this civil war affects relationships now? Or does it?

Phil: Surprisingly, very little. If at all. I mean I've been here a year, it's just a topic of conversation that doesn't come up. Which is pretty amazing considering that we played a major role in the war and the war ended only 20 years ago. It's just uh, I don't know, Salvadorans in general and Salvadorans in government have just moved beyond it and it's not really, it's kind of like "the past is the past" thing and it's not really a topic of conversation in terms of their relationship to the U.S. It's different from what I expected when I came down here, from what I knew about the history of the war and our involvement. I was like wow; I wonder if there will be Salvadorans who hate us for our influence in the war. But it's just not, it just hasn't in terms of my work, in terms of the national conversation, it's not a huge thing (Dimon 2013).

Salvadoran political identity is not plagued by hatred for foreigners or resentment of U.S.

involvement in Salvadoran history. It was almost arrogance on my part to assume that the left-wing rhetoric of the now triumphant FMLN would focus exclusively on anti-Americanism. I take issue with Dimon's assertion that Salvadorans have "moved beyond" the civil war, but I did not encounter any large scale resentment of Americans either.

Quiñonez called me out on my assumptions about Salvadoran priorities, and would have done the same to Dimon. The project elicited a similar response from Roddy Hughes, the director of Voices on the Border, an American based non-profit that works in the Lower Lempa region. In an informal interview, Hughes accused me of American bias when I asked the question: If the neoliberal model of development is not the right way to promote growth in El Salvador because communities don't have a voice in the construction of policies that affect them, then what is? He argued that my answer assumed American involvement was necessary to promote growth. Though his answer also seemed at first to suggest that Salvadorans were happy to be poor, his intention was to warn me against imposing U.S. solutions on Salvadoran problems, instead encouraging respect for El Salvador's right to self-determination.

Respect for El Salvador's right to self-determination would, for Hughes, likely involve complete withdrawal of U.S. influence in the region. This desire to purge El Salvador of U.S. imperialism is more commonly expressed by Americans and other foreigners, not necessarily Salvadorans. In an excerpt from the CIS El Salvador (Centro para Intercambio y Solidaridad El Salvador, or Center for Exchange and Solidarity El Salvador) blog, Marilyn Langlois articulates regret for U.S. intervention in the Salvadoran civil war.

Locking eyes with one of the people before me and reaching deep into my heart, I took my turn and aid (sic), "Marilyn Langlois, California, mediadora, Perdón." All 25 of us from throughout the United States on our recent School of the Americas Watch delegation to El Salvador made a similar statement on three occasions to our hosts, giving our name, state of residence, profession, and apologizing for not doing more to stop our government from the key role it played in the atrocities committed against Salvadoran peasants and advocates for the poor during the 1980-1992 war (Langlois 2013).

This kind of response to El Salvador's unfortunate history seems to be operating under the assumption that an apology is somehow what this country needs to solve its identity crisis. As Dimon's experience and my research indicate, though the U.S. is clearly implicated in El

Salvador's sad history, Salvadoran political identity is fragmented, not due to American intervention, but due to a long history of internal conflict and lack of closure post-conflict.

Langlois's response also assumes that Americans have corrupted the "true" Salvadoran identity through continued involvement in the country's internal affairs. In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah takes issue with the idea that culture is a resource that can be diminished, lost, or replenished. In one part of his argument, he criticizes multiculturalist

William Kymlicka:

"Kymlicka tries to make headway here (in the attempt to define cultures as resources) by invoking a term that has been used by Margalit and Raz: 'decayed culture.' Some unfortunates are possessors of decayed cultures, he says, and we ought to try to rejuvenate them. I confess I am not sure how to make sense of this notion. If what we have in mind is a troubled period of cultural transition, though, it isn't obvious that such conditions diminish our liberty or autonomy... That culture changes is a commonplace. What's not easy to imagine is a person, or people, bereft of culture" (Appiah 2005, 124).

El Salvador is clearly in a period of "cultural transition:" large-scale migration, an unclear economic future, and an ongoing process of social reconstruction post-civil war leave many confused about what it means to be a Salvadoran. But that fact alone does not mean the Salvadoran people are inherently disadvantaged. Further on, Appiah explains, "People are wronged when they are decisively excluded from the exercise of power, when they are dispossessed and deprived of equal standing under the law... But what is at issue is, in the first instance, political, not cultural exclusion" (127). Langlois and groups like CIS El Salvador want to resurrect a lost Salvadoran national identity from the grave of American imperialism and globalization, but this effort is misguided. Appiah explains it well: "Because identities are constituted in part by social conceptions and treatment-as, in the realm of identity there is no bright line between recognition and imposition" (110). The rebirth of Salvadoran national

identity and sovereignty that these groups champion is just as much of a social construction as whatever political, cultural, or national identity Salvadorans currently operate under.

Most criticisms of the U.S. in El Salvador hinge on the word “imposition.” Salvadorans, if they disagree with U.S. policies, feel imposed upon. It is difficult to discern definitively if the Public Private Partnership Law and the development model it represents are imperialist impositions, or if the U.S. is somehow a neoliberal bully. But, it is clear that Latin America, and consequently El Salvador, faces a choice:

Latin America has two paths: the path of attracting more investment and exporting more value-added products, like they are doing in...all the other countries that are growing and reducing poverty, or the path of falling into the populist deception of captains of microphone who-like Chávez and Castro-blame others for poverty in their countries to justify their own mistakes and remain in power (Oppenheimer 2005, 429).<sup>14</sup>

El Salvador in its last election seemed to choose neither path. That is what was so historic about Funes: finally, the chance for the “base,” as Javier calls it, to have its day in government. Yet, while Funes has done many good things for the country, he has not been the Hugo Chávez of El Salvador. He was not the voice for the people many thought he would be. The choice of the upcoming FMLN presidential candidate as Salvador Sanchez Cerén, current Vice-President, reflects this criticism of Funes’ presidency: Cerén is a former guerilla commander, a “brother in arms,” and not nearly as moderate as Funes.

Yet, Sanchez Cerén is not supported wholeheartedly by FMLN loyalists (Manuel 2013).

They have reservations about his ability to lead the country:

Sanchez Cerén for me, he is not a good candidate. So that’s why, there’s that doubt about whether to vote for the FMLN or not. Anyways, Sanchez Cerén was Minister of

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<sup>14</sup> “América latina tiene dos caminos: el de atraer más inversiones y exportar productos de mayor valor agregado, como lo están haciendo China, India, Chile, Irlanda, Polonia, la Republica Checa, Letonia y todos los demás países que están creciendo y reduciendo la pobreza, o el de caer en el engaño populista de los capitanes de micrófono que como Chávez y Castro- culpan a otros por la pobreza en sus países para justificar sus propios desaciertos y perpetuarse en el poder.”

Education, and he said he would work hard, because the area under the Ministry of Education is in a bad way. And he committed himself to the teachers that he would work for them, and he did not. And now he's going for president and he failed to keep his promise? He, from my point of view, as a candidate, is screwed. He does not work. (Manuel 2013).<sup>ix</sup>

There is no concrete success he can point to as Vice-President, or Minister of Education that would prove his competence as a leader. In addition, as a political legacy of the Amnesty Law, Sanchez Cerén is openly accused of war crimes by the opposition. As a general in the guerilla army, it is quite possible that these accusations are true. Because of his unpopularity within his group of supporters and without, the FMLN tacked on mitigating choice of Oscar Ortiz, extremely popular and capable mayor of Santa Tecla, as his running mate. The legacy of the war complicates what it means to be a Salvadoran and muddles current politics. As El Salvador gets ready for the upcoming presidential elections, it will be interesting to see how old civil war identities inform voters' decisions, for better or for worse.

### **Conclusion**

The Museo de Arte El Salvador's (Art Museum of El Salvador, or MARTE) newest exhibition is entitled "Al Compás del Tiempo: Procesos e influencias en el arte Salvadoreño" (To the Beat of Time: Processes and Influences in Salvadoran Art"). Organized chronologically, the exhibit follows the development of Salvadoran art throughout the nation's history. One piece in particular, in a video installation by artist Verónica Vides, aims to be a visual representation of the very concepts this project explored: "a traditional candy made of sugar, stamped with the national seal of El Salvador, is deteriorating before our eyes. The artist reflects on the concepts of nation, patriotism, and identity and on how fragile and ephemeral all these concepts can be"

(Molina 2012, 163).<sup>15</sup> The video only lasts for a minute, but if you catch it from the beginning, the white sugar melting in the grass is somehow deeply sad. At one point a fly lands on the confection.

The gallery's introductory summary explains how contemporary Salvadoran art echoes the fragmented nature of Salvadoran political identity revealed in the interviews. "The last three decades of the history of El Salvador have been marked by the abandonment of the countryside for the city, large scale migration abroad, and the advent of new foreign influences, all of which give us a new multicultural identity, extremely confused and full of ambivalence" (141).<sup>16</sup> Salvadoran political identity is extremely fragmented and ambivalent to its transnational component. Nevertheless, El Salvador does not seem doomed to melt away into the past. A fragmented notion of what it means to be a Salvadoran is not a death sentence, or a sign that Salvadorans are inherently at a disadvantage. But, to move forward, El Salvador must address its past in such a way that there is accountability and closure. And, if we accept the neo-liberal model of development, El Salvador must also continue on the path of pragmatism Oppenheimer outlines, investing in education and taking further steps to attract foreign investment. If El Salvador is to overcome the ambiguity of its identity, radical social change from within to address the legacy of the civil war is what's necessary, not resentment towards Americans and our lamentable past foreign policy.

### **Acknowledgments**

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<sup>15</sup> "En este obra, un dulce tradicional de azúcar, con la impresión del escudo de El Salvador se deteriora ante nuestros ojos. La artista reflexiona sobre el concepto de nación, de patriotismo e identidad sobre lo frágil o efímero que todos estos conceptos pueden ser."

<sup>16</sup> "Las últimas tres décadas de la historia de El Salvador han estado marcadas por el abandono del campo por la ciudad, la migración al exterior en gran escala y el advenimiento de nuevas influencias foráneas, lo que nos plantea una nueva identidad multicultural extremadamente confusa y llena de ambivalencia."

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<sup>i</sup> “Yo siento que quizás viendo la perfección, uno se identifica con el país, va, porque es salvadoreño, porque tiene su identidad, su nacimiento, su origen que... Pero cuando ya ve uno que reina más el extranjero que uno, ya uno se siente uno como que está desligado con el patrimonio del país. Como si no fuera parte se siente uno, cuando ve uno, vaya por ejemplo, cuando hablan de los padres de la patria, que son los diputados, muchos decimos que es mejor no tener padres, porque no hacen nada. Porque no es cierto que son los padres de nosotros, son los padres del económico, de lo de ellos. ¿Sabe porque? Porque ellos tienen más tiempo para andar en el exterior que para visitar aquí. Nosotros no sabemos de un diputado que ha venido aquí. No se ven. Por eso le digo, ¿qué significa ser salvadoreño? Pues, porque somos patriotas del país y todo. Pero que sentimos el honor, el orgullo de que de veras la ley que ponen allá llegue al rincón aquí, y que lo están protegiendo, no es así. No estamos así en la tal de todo. Ahora bien, con los megaproyectos, con los sistemas, con (sic) allí si lo tiene bien atajados. Allí si lo tienen bien amarrados, en la televisión, con todo, todo. Allí lo tienen bien amarrado, eso ya no es parte de uno, yo no me siento parte del sistema pero estoy amarrado con ella. Porque estoy obligado a vivir con él... Hay gente que se siente protegida, verdad, vivir en su país, pero es porque tienen todo, pero la gran mayoría no. Pero así, nos sentimos orgullosos porque es nuestro país.”

<sup>ii</sup> “En cuestiones así, políticas electoreras casi no nos, las conozco, me han buscado... pero no me gusta andar metiendo en eso porque me siento más bien apoyando al pueblo con, con la cara en alto, aunque sea poquito pero que sea algo, y estoy allí presente con ellos.”

<sup>iii</sup> “Y cuando tú te conviertes en la política pierdes tus ideales.”

<sup>iv</sup> “En estas comunidades existe mucho la solidaridad de personas afuera.”

<sup>v</sup> “Porque aquí hay muchas organizaciones... y ellos te controlan tu proyecto. Ellos piden por ti. Pero tú no sabes si eso es bueno o malo. No sabes cuánto dieron, no sabes en que lo invertir. Entonces nosotros dijimos, nosotros queremos ser independientes, tenemos la capacidad y vamos a gestionar, y nosotros vamos a ministrar nuestros propios fondos. Entonces si ustedes quieren, acompañanos, para ya no nos den. Acompañanos, enséñanos, dígnanos como.”

<sup>vi</sup> “Porque las leyes aquí no son como las de allá. Si fueran así como las de allá, viene un poquito más de, no sé, un poquito más de precaución, de respeto. Porque allá son bastante serias las leyes... cuando la ley se aplica, se aplica. Y aquí no. Aquí hay una burocracia para aplicar las leyes.”

<sup>vii</sup> “Nosotros sabíamos que no íbamos a ganar la elecciones, pero la idea fue ofrecer una opción más legal, más transparente que el que ahora existe.”

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<sup>viii</sup> “Yo siento que la falta del ambiente que atrae la inversión, para mí, es legal. No es que, ‘¡Ay! Es que es la violencia.’ Perdón, hay países bien violentas donde la inversión es más alta...La seguridad jurídica en este país no existe. Una empresa que va invertir en cualquier lado del mundo, necesita saber...MD: ‘¿Que no le van a robar el dinero?’ Por seguro, así, ¡ahead of time!”

<sup>ix</sup> “Sánchez Cerén para mí, él no es un buen candidato. Por eso que, esa duda que votar por el FMLN o no. Igual, Sánchez Cerén fue ministro de educación, y él dijo que iba a trabajar mucho, porque el ámbito del ministerio de educación está mal. Y el cometió a los maestros que iba a trabajar por los docentes y no lo hizo. Y ahora va por presidente ¿y no cumplió? El, desde mi punto de vista, como candidato esta quemado. No funciona.”