

POLITICAL UNREST, POPULAR PROTEST



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Popular Movements and the Rise of the Left in Latin America

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Introduction

“Included in our struggle for agrarian reform—which is our most immediate objective—is also the need to develop the human being who has been excluded from everything. The people who struggle for agrarian reform are people who were excluded from all of the basic rights and all of the material needs, and also from self-esteem, from a feeling that they have potential in our society. We are always concerned about this, and we take care of this through participation.”

Ana Hanauer, member of Brazil's MST

Ana Hanauer’s quote embodies the theme of this collection of works. In the following chapters, I explore various popular movements, Western interpretations of Leftist leaders, and discuss Western influence on systemic inequalities within Latin America. What began as an interest in social movements turned into a fascination with the influence of global capitalism and neoliberal reforms on countries in Latin America, and with the Latin American people’s response to this influence.

In the first chapter, I use Brazil’s Landless Worker’s Movement and Argentina’s Movement of Recovered Companies as case studies for a comparative analysis of social movement’s relationship with capitalism. In the second chapter I critique some Western political scientists’ narrow definition of populism that is often applied to the “new Left” of Latin America. The third chapter offers a lively speech that I wrote in the voice of Elliott Abrams to offer my interpretation of how he would debate foreign policy with Hugo Chávez. Finally, the fourth chapter offers a critical examination of the role of the United States in attempting to promote democracy in El Salvador.

CHAPTER ONE

The Guilty Secret of Brazil's Landless Workers and Argentina's Recovered Companies: Social Movements and Their Reliance on Capitalism

“This is a class struggle.” “Our struggle for agrarian reform needs to project socialist values” (Fox, 2014; 253-254). “Hunger made us unite” (Trigona, 2014: 398). These are just a few quotes from leaders of two dominant social movements that have occurred in Brazil and Argentina in recent years. These social movements seek to right the wrongs wrought on their societies through various forms of protest. Their ultimate goal: to break the chains of capitalism. However, there are aspects of each movement that seem to contradict that very goal.

In this paper, I analyze two social movements: the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in Brazil and the Movement of Recovered Companies (MRC) in Argentina. First, I provide background information on the two movements, including the political and economic contexts. Then I look at the similarities and differences of the two movements’ characteristics and examine them in relation to the political, economic and social atmosphere of the countries in which they occurred. I draw from several texts assigned in the course, in addition to a few outside sources. Although the two movements have very different ideologies and organizational structures, they both used the strategy of breaking from dependency on the capitalist system in order to rise as movements. However, I argue that because of the core purpose of the movements, the right to property, they also relied on the capitalist system in order to sustain the longevity of their causes. It is with this argument in mind that I will proceed to the next part of my paper: setting the stage for the social movements.

Context of the movements: some hopeful days, and dark ones too

Land distribution has been an issue in Brazil since the 1500s, when Portuguese conquistadors arrived in Brazil (Vanden & Prevost, 2015 277). Once a military regime came into power in 1964, protests against unequal distribution of land were met with repression (Ondetti, 2006: 66). State policies became increasingly focused on industrialization, and over the years, millions of farmers had their land taken away by the government. Farmers began camping out and occupying land. These protests and occupations culminated in the creation of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores* (MST) in 1984 (Fox, 2014: 250-51). Just a year later, the country transitioned to a democracy in 1985. However, the organization’s first glimmer of hope was quickly dashed when President Jose Sarney’s major plan to distribute land to almost 1.5 million landless families was essentially shut down by landowner opposition. Landless families became disillusioned with the government as they felt the effects of skyrocketing unemployment and languished in poverty. (Ondetti, 66). Fernando Collor de Mello became president in 1989, only to be found guilty of corruption, the very thing he campaigned against, and impeached in 1992 (Vanden & Prevost, 387).

After the Collor debacle, newly appointed finance minister Fernando Henrique Cardoso expertly crafted the Real Plan and was able to greatly decrease inflation rates by the time he was elected president in 1994. Cardoso's campaign platform leading up to the elections was centered on his economic reform policy, but also included his promise to settle almost 300,000 landless families. Even during the first half of the 1990s, the MST continued to grow---they did not believe that his neoliberal allies and conservative coalition would actually follow through with the land reform promises. The MST was right in their suspicion of Cardoso: once elected, he failed to implement any social reform and was unable to continue his legacy of economic stability. By the 2002 election of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a member of the Worker's Party (PT), the new administration was faced with high federal debt, growing unemployment, and a stagnant economy (Vanden & Prevost, 387-388).

In Argentina, it seemed as if the "Lost Decade" was finally giving way to a new era with the election of President Carlos Menem. Once in office, Menem did an about-face and implemented sweeping neoliberal and free market reforms (Vanden & Prevost, 356). At first his economic policies appeared to be working on the surface, with reined-in inflation and a growing GDP. However, Menem's reform program bolstered long-term trends like increased disparity and concentration of wealth, growing unemployment, and increasing trade deficits (Vanden & Prevost, 357). The trade deficits resulted in thousands of businesses being closed (Hirtz & Giaccone, 2013: 90). In addition, his social policies severely curtailed the rights of unions and laborers. This included limiting the right to strike, taking away union management of their laborers' social services, and directly linking wage increases to production increases (Vanden & Prevost, 357). During his second presidential term, the economy tanked and Argentina entered a recession in 1998 (Hirtz & Giaccone, 90). The socioeconomic crises worsened and unemployment rose. At this time, instances of recovered companies began emerged sporadically (Hirtz & Giaccone, 91).

The Argentine people became increasingly distrusting and angry at the Menem administration, and accusations of police violence and corruption aggravated the situation. By the time the 1999 presidential elections arrived, Argentina was ready for a new leader. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for new President Fernando de la Rúa and his Vice President Carlos Alvarez to reveal that they wouldn't be able to work past their fundamental disagreements and set the country on the path to progress. Their incompatibility culminated in the resignation of Vice President Alvarez in October 2000. (Vanden & Prevost, 358). By mid-2001, the inevitable economic collapse sparked massive protests and the eventual resignation of President de la Rúa on December 20 of that year (Vanden & Prevost, 358-59). These massive protests coincided with a great increase in the number of recovered companies. This increase led to eventual organization of the unemployed workers into two initial organizations: the Coordinator of Occupied Factories and Workers in Struggle (*Coordinadora de Fabricas Ocupadas y Trabajadores en Lucha*---Coordinadora) and the National Movement of Recovered Companies (*Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas*---MNER) (Hirtz & Giaccone, 91).

The MST and its fight for agrarian reform

The central objective of the MST is agrarian reform (Fox, 254). Tactics would include the search for large swathes of land that was considered by the Brazilian government to be “unproductive or otherwise eligible for agrarian reform.” The MST members, many of which were entire landless families, would convene on this land at night and set up encampments. Once these camps were set up, the MST members would utilize tactics like road blockades and occupations. The goal of these protests and occupations was to make the government expropriate what it had deemed as “useless” and hand over the land to the MST (Ondetti, 67). The MST’s ideology is influenced by socialism and leftist political thought. Evidence of this can be found in Fox’s 2008 interview of Ana Hanauer, veteran organizer in the MST: “Agrarian reform is the immediate objective of the movement, but our central theme is the Brazilian revolution---socialism. So our struggle for agrarian reform now needs to project socialist values, including the form of organizing, practicing how socialism is going to be” (Fox, 254). In this way, while fighting for equal land distribution The MST challenged the underlying logic of capitalism: they called for the building of “a society without exploiters and where labor enjoys supremacy over capital” (Meszaros, 2000: 8).

The MST is organized horizontally, with a consensus-based decision-making process. This organizational structure exists uniformly across Brazil in each of the movement’s regional groups (Fox, 252). Within an MST encampment, everyone has their own responsibility, called a “collective duty,” the completion of which is essential to the proper functioning of that community (Fox, 253). In addition, the community that began as a united front for agrarian reform became a community in which ideas were dispersed; in Fox’s interview, Ana calls for the unity of all workers in Brazil to “carry out the Brazilian revolution [. . .] Doing agrarian reform, just to do agrarian reform, isn’t possible in capitalism. For us, it is important to accumulate power for the class struggle.” The communities within the MST settlements have been documented as well-organized, with indications of “a high average income among settlers” and thriving education systems (Almeida & Sanchez, 2000: 11).

Although the Ana Hanauer of the MST went so far as to call for a Brazilian revolution of socialism and labor’s “supremacy over capitalism,” there is also evidence, which suggests the MST is more closely tied with the capitalist system than the group’s description above indicates. The MST is still very much linked to the capitalist system by relying on the government to hear their calls for the expropriation and divvying out of parcels of land. In addition, the MST actively participated in the 2002 elections and supported the PT (Ondetti, 77). These are just two examples of the way that the MST, no matter how much it demands the chains of capitalism to be broken, is still inherently destined to function within that system.

The MRC’s struggle to reclaim the factories

The central goal of Coordinadora and MNER was to protest layoffs, unfair or nonexistent wages, and curtailed social benefits by occupying a business with the goal of recovering the business and running it

by themselves (Hirtz & Giacone, 91). It was in the underlying ideology that the organizations diverged: MNER wanted Argentina to expropriate disused land and hand it over to the workers. Realizing that expropriation of land was essential for their legal control of the businesses, the MNER workers drew from the Peronist tradition by seeking to keep the profits of the recovered companies within the country and “defend national sovereignty” (Hirtz & Giacone, 92). Coordinadora, on the other hand, called for “nationalization under workers’ control,” drawing instead from class unionism and working to create “worker autonomy” (Hirtz & Giacone, 92).

MNER tried to be more cooperative with the government than Coordinadora (MNER developed political alliances with government workers and politicians, and some of the group’s leaders ran for public office), but this strategy eventually backfired when MNER workers disagreed on the ways in which government cooperation should be handled. The group dissolved soon afterwards, the majority of its former members joining the Federation of Cooperatives of Self-Managed Workers (*Federacion Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajadores Autogestionados*---FACTA). Coordinadora’s core ideology, which viewed the recovery of companies as a means to protest capitalist social relations, was inevitably what sustained its longevity. It is important to bring up MNER, because although the group existed at odds with the core ideology of Coordinadora and was able to cooperate to an extent with the government, it was Coordinadora’s call for the nationalization of worker’s control that “brought together a dozen companies that became emblematic of the recovered companies” (Hirtz & Giacone, 93). Thus, it was the ideology of Coordinadora that came to represent the MRC.

The organization of the MRC consisted of general assemblies in which decisions were made. This horizontal organizational structure also ensured that everyone received the same wage regardless of the position they worked in the company. In addition, because the meeting place was often the recovered company itself, the space offered the feeling of community. This solidarity allowed for the development of communal space in which training, celebrations, and political meetings could all take place (Hirtz & Giacone, 91).

The MRC was also adamant that “capitalism is exhausted” and that they “wanted all politicians and the political class out” (Trigona, 2014: 400-402). Yet, the group also seemed to have intrinsic ties to capitalism. A spokesman for Argentina’s MRC, Ernesto “Lalo” Paret, admits that all cooperatives made under the MRC were “the result of a legal need and not because we believed in a cooperative” (Trigona, 402). This legal need is essentially a need for the existence of a capitalist system to continue the functioning of the companies.

Conclusion

Both the MRC and the MST can be viewed as new social movement that seeks to challenge the existing system. Each movement sought to break from the chains of capitalism. However, it is also important to note how the MST and the MRC were still reliant on the very system that they boycott. In order for these two movements to be seen as promoting a legitimate alternative to the capitalist system, it seems

as though they must break from the system entirely. This brings up an interesting question worth further discussion: can a social movement break away entirely from the current system and command full agency, and still remain a social movement? Or is this the point in which contentious politics would categorize the social movement as a revolution? This could perhaps provide a foundation for further exploration of the question through the lens of comparative social movements in Latin America.

Latin America has a long, almost cyclical history of uprising and repression, uprising and repression. Yet the complexities of each individual situation are so important for a full understanding of the civilian-government relations in the region. In this paper, I have looked at the MST and the MRC, two social movements in Brazil and Argentina, respectively. Although each movement represented a different cause, some important similarities reveal that they both fought for the worker's right to property. The workers of the movements fought for the class struggle against the capitalist system. Yet it is for that very reason, the need for their right to property, that these workers were intrinsically tied to the capitalist system. Thus, the paradox of capitalism continues.

CHAPTER TWO

POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY OF THE 'NEW LEFT': A DEBATE ON DEFINITION

How is it that the same word used to describe a racist, conservative politician from Alabama is also used when referring to the 19th century Russian peasant socialist movement? Populism, as Ernest Laclau once put it, is “the locus of a theoretical stumbling block” in political theory (Laclau, 2005: 4). However, instead of beginning the struggle to find commonalities between George Wallace and the *narodniks*, it may be more beneficial to get to the root of the populism’s ambiguity. Although its definition seems ever elusive, the concept does carry a negative connotation when applied by some Western political scientists to a handful of today’s leaders in Latin America. This tendency for some to conflate ‘populist’ with ‘undemocratic’ stems from the vagueness of populism as a social science concept.

Using former President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez and consecutive Presidents of Argentina, Néstor Kirchner & Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as case studies, I argue that the failure of some Western scholars to recognize these governments as democratic is a result of their particular definition of populism and its “simplification of the political space” (Laclau, 2005: 18). Ironically, this political space is the very thing that has the potential to change the scholars’ narrow definitions of democracy. Furthermore, I argue that the liberal democratic definition of populism fails to correctly define political space because it identifies this space as being part of the classical formulation of the public sphere. I follow this line of thought by providing an alternative to the dominant definition of public sphere. The Chávez and Kirchner governments differ from each other in several ways; for example, Chávez is seen as socialist, while the Kirchner governments are not. Yet somehow they are both grouped into the same obscure category of “populist.” In the following paragraphs, I explore this conundrum.

“Chavismo relies on a charismatic . . . relationship largely unmediated by any institutionalised party [that is based] on a powerful Manichaeian discourse of “the people versus the elite”. . . . These populist qualities undermine the movement’s democratic potential” (Hawkins, 2003: 1137). This portrayal of Chávez as populist is the perfect example of the Western “liberal democratic” definition of populism, which functions under the assumption that a state can only be deemed democratic if it promotes liberal institutions and a liberal party system. The assumption “institutionalizes an elitist system of representation based upon the fetishization of the bureaucracy as an insulated specialist elite acting on society’s behalf.” (Motta, 2010: 34-5). This liberal democratic conceptualization of populism does not allow for the possibility of other members of society besides elected political leaders and economic elites to play a role in political organization. Liberal democracy can be defined in this context as having “a central concern for the rights [. . .] of minorities (which is often synonymous with “elites”), places a premium on the system of checks and balances and the diffusion of authority” (Ellner, 2012: 99). This biased definition of populism is also found in the following description of Cristina Kirchner: “Kirchner’s

governing style is rooted in an authoritarian form of democracy that disdains checks and balances. . . . Those voters are expected to abide by the administration’s decision-making without any meaningful participation or detailed explanation from their leader” (Finchelstein, 2014). Both quotes are examples of the liberal democratic definition of populism, which upon closer examination can be picked apart in order to prove that the Kirchner and Chávez governments are democratic.

First, because the liberal democratic notion of populism functions under the assumption that those who can possess the power to make political decisions are the “intellectual and political vanguard”—in other words, the elites of the country (Motta, 2010: 34). They also assume that this “vanguard” of elites must be located within the economic and political structures of organization that exist within a liberal democracy. By allowing this assumption to underlie their concept of populism, these scholars neglect to acknowledge the potential for the existence of political and economic participation outside of the liberal institutions and capitalist market (Motta, 2010: 35). In doing so, this is the first way Western scholars “simplify” the political space in which alternate forms of participation do exist. Second, due to the assumption that the liberal democracy is the best formation of the structures of a state, many of these scholars also claim that the governments of Chávez and the Kirchners fail to create representation for marginalized sectors of society. This assumption also stems from a lack of understanding of the nuances in the political space in Argentina and Venezuela. By looking closely at some forms of popular politics that are excluded from the political space by a liberal democratic definition of populism, we can discover areas of vigorous political participation that represents marginalized people and provides innovative alternatives to the liberal democratic idea of political and economic structures of a state.

Some of Argentina’s popular political participation comes in the form of neighborhood assemblies (*asambleas populares*), barter clubs (*clubes de trueque*), organizations of unemployed workers (*piqueteros*) and workers occupying and taking over companies (*empresas recuperadas*) (Rodgers, 2005: 2). For example, the barter clubs, or networks, began in the mid-1990s and became an essential source for the exchange of goods and services for which many people normally would not have the money. As one participant puts it, “in every neighborhood people were able to eat because of this barter relationship -- we were all involved – and it changed us all” (Sitrin, 2015). These alternative monetary markets often provide the means necessary for the marginalized sectors of the population, particularly when the global economic recession significantly enlarged this sector with the dawn of the “new poor” in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America (Pearson, 2003: 214). In this way, the barter clubs are able to create “exchange outside the formal capitalist economy (Sitrin, 2015). The evolution of neighborhood assemblies is another important example to discuss. In the years before Néstor Kirchner came into power, the neighborhood assemblies came into existence as the result of people’s desires to effect positive change in their community. As these assemblies evolved, they became increasingly involved with other assemblies, political parties, and social movement organization. Eventually the influence of the neighborhood assembly in Pompeya, paired with Kirchner’s call for greater popular participation, led to the implementation of participatory budgeting (PB) (Schaumberg, 2008: 376-8). PB gave neighborhood assemblies like the one in Pompeya a chance to have autonomy over a budget for their community.

Venezuela also possesses a plethora of alternative forms of political organization. Among these are community media organizations (CAM), neighborhood assemblies (*asambleas populares*) and urban land committees (*comités de tierra urbana*). The community media organizations, for example, stand for “increased public media participation.” Their work, paired with Chávez’s commitment to establishing a system of popular governance, eventually resulted in the creation of the National System of Popular, Alternative, and Community Communication (NSPACC). Chávez’s constitutional reform in 1999 brought about a new focus on popular governance and allocated government funding to CAM in order to further its cause (Fuentes-Bautista, 2011: 255-6). Another important form of popular politics, communal councils (*consejos comunales*), was established in 2005 after demands for the government to give popular sectors more agency in decision-making processes. These councils “enable the organized “people” to directly exercise the management of public policy and projects” in a way that circumvents formal political structures and distributes “power in a democratic and participatory manner” (Motta, 2010: 36-7).

These examples show that the liberal democratic definition of populism, when used to describe the governments of Chávez and the Kirchners, effectively marginalizes “the popular democratic subjects who are at the heart of contemporary Venezuelan [and Argentine] politics” (Motta, 2010: 39). The argument that the leaders do not have the interests of the people at heart effectively erases the opportunity for the development of an understanding of those “people.” The space in which those people exist is instead sequestered to the singular realm of “people” and placed within the Manichaeic dichotomy of “the people versus the elite.” Through this dissection of the liberal democratic definition of populism, there is potential for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Furthermore, because the liberal democratic understanding of the political space succeeds in removing the possibility for popular agency outside of institutions and political systems, it therefore does not fully understand the definition of the public sphere. Thus, it is necessary to redefine the public spheres of these two Latin American governments in order to remind these Western political scientists of the nuances that exist within a public space. If there is a citizen who is dissatisfied with the current power structures of their state, this dissatisfaction is not shown when they are placed within the broad realm of the public sphere, a space in which satisfied citizens exist as well. Therefore, using the term “counter-public sphere” allows for more nuance within that space, a space in which “different publics of diverse ideological valences come together, engage in radical debates, negotiate internal divisions, and create movement identity” (Calhoun, 2011: 14). Describing the members of the barter clubs, the neighborhood assemblies, the communal councils and other forms of popular politics as part of a “counter-public sphere” ensures that the political space they occupy is not simplified, and the nuances in the relationship between the “state” and the “people” are not ignored. With this clarification, we can continue to unpack why it is problematic for Western political scientists to label Chávez or the Kirchners with their definition of populism.

CHAPTER THREE

ELLIOTT ABRAMS DEBATES FOREIGN POLICY WITH HUGO CHÁVEZ

Hello everyone, I'm very happy to be here in Argentina at such a beautiful time of the year. However, it deeply saddens me to hear President Chavez say that he wants to sever ties with the United States. I just wanna say, after all these absurd accusations you've just heard, I gotta say that the US truly stands for something in the world. It is not commerce, and it's not a strong military---no, what we stand for, above all, is **democracy**. Therefore, we are truly on the side of those people who are fighting for democracy in their own country. We are on the side **of the people** when I say that promoting democracy in other countries, like Venezuela, isn't replacing the wishes of the people of those countries---*it's getting behind them*.

Chavez claims that the United States is acting out of selfish intentions, but this is simply not the case. The US and Venezuela are mutually dependent on each other. The United States receives about 60 percent of Venezuelan oil exports, while Venezuela's economy relies on U.S. oil demand. But unfortunately, the reason for US concern with Venezuelan interests also stems from a concern about undemocratic policymaking decisions of Chavez. Venezuela was one of the founding countries of OPEC in 1960, yet Chavez's decision to increase oil production rather than raise prices effectively distanced the country from the very organization it helped to found.

This was just one of many ways Chavez began to undo Venezuela's democracy. It is important to remember that Chavez has also concentrated political power in the hands of the executive and curtailed the independence of the judiciary, among other things. So by the time April 11, 2002 arrived, the public was angry. Now why is this date important? It is the day that the people of Venezuela rose up against the government in an attempted coup, angered by Chavez's failure to uphold their rights. Now, by human rights I am referring to the political rights of citizens in a democracy, of course. The protest march on April 11 was the largest in Venezuela's history. This is a significant fact. These protestors demanded Chávez's resignation. And what did they get in return? Violent government oppression that was authorized by none other than President Hugo Chávez. I believe hundreds were wounded and dozens were killed that day. Innocent civilians.

This is a perfect example of why the issue of democracy in Venezuela is so important. When I say democracy, you must know, I am referring to the permanent establishment of a political system that protects human rights. So it is fair to say that modern-day Venezuela cannot be seen as a democracy, because the April 11 episode provides saddening evidence of Chavez's failure to uphold the basic principles of a democracy. And in the words of Andrei Sakharov: a country that does not respect the rights of its own people, will not respect the rights of its neighbors. That, ladies and gentlemen, is exactly why the United States must continue to play a role in promoting democracy in the world.

Perhaps Chavez's speech may have given you the impression that the US and Venezuela have irreconcilable differences, but I beg to differ. I only wish that Chavez would not believe that the US underestimates Venezuela's capabilities. In fact, I believe quite the opposite. We care about Venezuela's internal affairs because we see so much potential in a country that is simply being held back by a leader who does not have his people's best interests in mind. What is a democracy? liberty under law. Liberty, but also within a constitutional system, and most importantly, one that protects not just majority rule, but also minority rights. This is the true democracy that we would like to see in Venezuela. Thank you.

CHAPTER FOUR

POVERTY, VIOLENCE AND US DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN EL SALVADOR: A CASE STUDY

Abstract

Today, high levels of violence and poverty exist within El Salvador. Although these levels decreased slightly at the end of the country's bloody twelve-year civil war, in recent years they have begun to climb back up. In this paper, I examine the causes of this violence and poverty, demonstrating that these issues stretch far back in El Salvador's history. The United States' position as a great power in the hegemonic world order has allowed the US to intervene in many countries affairs, including El Salvador. Thus, in examining the closely intertwined concepts of US interventionism, poverty and violence, I argue that the US has played a key role in exacerbating existing inequalities and injustices in Salvadoran society by promoting low-intensity democracy within the ultimate goal of sustaining the hierarchical world order from which it benefits.

Introduction

“Flowers, by themselves, have no power whatsoever, other than the power of men and women who protect them and take care of them against aggression and destruction” (Marcuse, 1989–1999; 265). These flowers that Marcuse refers to can also be thought of as the impoverished people of Latin America. Like flowers, they strive to hold their ground and grow roots, even throughout terrible storms and droughts (and civil wars and famines). However, flowers are fragile organisms --- if they are not tended and cared for, they can wilt, or even be destroyed. The destruction of the Latin American people is evident in recent data, which shows that there are roughly 33.7 million Latin Americans living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2012). More specifically, in El Salvador, a country of 6.21 million, over 2.5 million people are classified as poor, and over 12% of these poor Salvadorans are living in extreme poverty (World Food Programme, 2011). Like flowers, the poor people of El Salvador are more susceptible due to their increased vulnerability and lack of resources.

For centuries, the citizens of El Salvador have experienced atrocious levels of violence and have been subjected to gross inequalities of land distribution, income and resources (Ripton, 2006; 109). Throughout the years of unrest and inequality, the United States has played a significant role in Salvadoran politics and society. The purpose of this paper is to show the myriad ways in which the United States has had an influence on El Salvador, and the ways in which this influence has exacerbated existing inequalities and injustices. I demonstrate how so-called US democracy promotion in El Salvador has failed to uphold human rights and protect the delicate “flowers” of Salvadoran society. The flower analogy could insinuate that the Salvadorans are one-dimensional victims, for the purposes of this paper it is meant to create a metaphor about the importance of being aware of one's actions and their

influence on our environment. Instead of protecting the marginalized against destruction, US democracy promotion has reinforced and even created, in some cases, the current inequalities and high levels of violence in El Salvador.

Analytical Framework

I will begin by examining the role of the United States in Salvadoran politics and society. I will analyze US influence on El Salvador by drawing from William Robinson's conception of US democracy promotion. Robinson (1996) draws partially from Gramsci's notion of hegemony in order to demonstrate how the United States has promoted a severely amended version of democracy that is tailored to its own interests. He highlights Gramsci's two forms of domination, *coercive* and *consensual domination*, which are both essential to the success of the United States' hegemonic control of political and social order (Robinson, 1996; 21-22) and argues that the United States has exercised both forms with its intervention in other states' affairs: coercive domination through the support of authoritarian regimes and consensual domination through the promotion of "low-intensity democracy" (6). The concept of low-intensity democracy promotion is important for my analysis; it is defined by Robinson as democracy promotion through neoliberal policies as a model meant to produce a more sustainable form of hegemonic social control by gaining control of the Gramsci *extended state*: the domination of both the political system and civil society by creating political and economic arrangements which favor the transnational elites and are aimed at "suppressing popular and mass aspirations for more thoroughgoing democratization of social life" (Robinson, 1996; 6). This form of democracy promotion, as I will show you in the following paragraphs, is evident within US interventionist policies in El Salvador.

I will connect the concept of low-intensity democracy promotion with US influence on El Salvador by discussing the ways in which the majority of Salvadorans have been marginalized throughout the years and show how US promotion of low-intensity democracy has worsened existing inequalities within El Salvador's social structure. Douglas Porpora provides a good starting point for my analysis of US intervention in El Salvador because he shows the nuances in ways that low-intensity democracy promotion has further marginalized Salvadorans (Porpora, 1990; 72-75). He argues that the US is complicit in both the funding of state terror and the monopoly of land by the elite in El Salvador ((Porpora, 1990; 82). In addition, his argument ties together with Robinson's theory of low-intensity democracy promotion: Porpora demonstrates that the United States' marginalization of the Salvadoran poor effectively exacerbates the inequalities of the current hegemonic international order so that the US can ensure its continued position as a great power and prevent challenges to that prevailing system (Porpora, 1990; 82).

In order to support my claim that the US is complicit, at least to some extent, in the current level of violence in El Salvador, I will focus my analysis in on the El Salvador civil war (1980-1992) and the violence surrounding this conflict. Stephen Rabe provides an excellent, clear overview of the increasingly heightened tensions and inequalities leading up to the civil war, demonstrates how those tensions and inequalities worsened during the war and shows how the US was implicated in these

events. His analysis supports my argument about US influence on the marginalization of and violence against Salvadorans, particularly the poor; in addition, Rabe shows how the US knowingly funded state terror in El Salvador and did so in the name of democracy promotion (Rabe, 2016). In addition to Rabe, I will draw from Nazih Richani, who shows through his analysis of post-conflict El Salvador that democracy promotion is not enough to overcome the “system of violence” and that this system is a result of “the interplay among weak state capacities, low opportunity costs of crime, and agency” (Richani, 2010; 450). I will use his evidence to argue that through the promotion of low-intensity democracy, the US has fostered these factors that form and consolidate El Salvador’s system of violence.

Furthermore, Philippe Bourgois provides invaluable ethnographic research that allows me to draw from direct accounts of violence and its effects on El Salvador’s peasants during and after the civil war (Bourgois, 2001). Bourgois attempts to categorize this violence and produces a helpful starting point for my articulation of the nuances of violence in El Salvador and its lasting impact on Salvadoran society. He defines *direct political violence* as “targeted physical violence and terror administered by official authorities and those opposing it,” *structural violence* as “chronic, historically-entrenched political-economic oppression and social inequality,” *symbolic violence* as “the internalized humiliations and legitimations of inequality and hierarchy,” and *everyday violence* as “daily practices and expressions of violence on a micro-interactional level: interpersonal, domestic and delinquent” (Bourgois, 2001; 8). In this way, I can more legitimately attempt to dissect the violence that still pervades Salvadoran society. With this theoretical framework in mind, I will delve into a brief history of US intervention in El Salvador.

US involvement in El Salvador and its implications

The first example of US involvement in El Salvador is the United State’s close economic ties with *Los Catorce* (the Fourteen Families), a small group of Salvadoran elites who essentially ran the country for centuries up until the civil war. The relationship began when the Salvadoran oligarchy was in desperate need to pay back British loans and, hoping to finish building their railway system, the oligarchy turned to the United States in 1921 for more money, and they struck a deal; the US gave the Salvadoran elite a \$20 million loan in exchange for US control of the railway and US collection of import and export duties (LaFeber, 1984; 70-71). This example already shows that the US had its own interests in mind, and by making the Salvadoran oligarchy even richer the US did not take into account the needs of the Salvadoran poor.

The next important instance of US involvement occurred in the context after a successful *golpe* in 1931, which unseated democratically elected President Arturo Araujo. General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, who led the *golpe*, subsequently took over as the new President. At first, the US refused to acknowledge Martínez’s government. But when Martínez met mass peasant uprisings in 1931-1932 with intense government oppression, the United States did an about-face and acknowledged the regime as legitimate. Just two weeks after the 1932 *mantanza* (massacre), during which up to 30,000 peasants were

killed in a matter of days by the state, the US turned around and gave Martínez informal recognition (LaFeber, 1984; 73-74). Eventually, US President Theodore Roosevelt gave President Martínez full and official recognition (LaFeber, 1984; 74). Soon after, the US was sending Martínez large supplies of arms; in 1940 Martínez requested 35,000 rifles and the US obliged him (Montgomery, 1982; 60). In 1944, Martínez convened a Constitutional Assembly as a facade to attempt to amend the constitution so that he would be elected for a fourth term. That same year in response to this assembly, a *golpe* was attempted but was quickly crushed by government forces (Ibid, 60). Furthermore, over the next couple decades the Salvadoran government implemented import substitution policies that created even greater dependence on foreign capital from the US (Ibid, 67). The US support of the Salvadoran regime even during its violent repression of civilians, combined with El Salvador's increasing reliance on US imports and arms, shows that the US utilized both coercive and consensual domination in order to prolong the existing structures of hegemony.

In January 1961, the US backed a *golpe* that overthrew the government, and the US immediately recognized this new government officially (Montgomery, 1982; 74). The US became increasingly involved in Salvadoran affairs as El Salvador's regimes became increasingly oppressive, yet the US continued to support El Salvador's military regimes. By the 1960s the United States was equipping and training El Salvador's National Guard and National Police forces (Chomsky, 1985; 36). In fact, between 1946 and 1972 the US had already given \$16.7 million in military aid to El Salvador, and it had trained thousands of the country's soldiers (Porpora, 1990; 88). Throughout the 1970s, tensions rose between the increasingly oppressive military and the popular sectors of Salvadoran society. The mobilization of the poor increased and eventually tensions culminated when the military heightened its level of repression and began massacring civilians in the late 1970s (Porpora, 1990; 90). Thus, there is early evidence that the US knowingly funded a regime that had already massacred tens of thousands of its civilians in order to quell an uprising of the masses.

On October 15, 1979, a *golpe* was attempted in order to overthrow a corrupt and repressive regime. A U.S.-backed coup allowed José Napoleón Duarte Fuentes to take over power from a civilian-led government that had also resulted from a *golpe*. Duarte, a U.S.-educated center-right politician and leader of the Christian Democratic party, was a puppet for the United States from the beginning of his rule: just days after coming into power, he implemented a hasty agrarian reform plan that claimed that land would be redistributed to the poor (Barry, 1987; 112-113). In fact, the agrarian reform was "designed by U.S. experts, financed by U.S. economic aid, and carried out by U.S. organizers and technicians" (Barry; 114). Furthermore, the US motivation for this quasi-land reform was to undermine the growing popularity of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN). However, in reality the reform plan was a US political project meant to increase the number of farms producing crops for export and was therefore a pacification program that harkened back to the United States' efforts in rural Vietnam (Ibid; 114). Importantly, the same month that the first parts of the plan were implemented, the first shipment of a vast amount of military aid was sent from the US to the Salvadoran military (Ibid; 114). There were three phases of the plan, and the second phase was quickly dropped when it was met with great opposition by the oligarchy. The other two phases were framed as being pieces of an agrarian

reform that would benefit 300,000 of El Salvador's rural poor. This so-called reform in El Salvador was accompanied by high levels of military repression of civilians, especially of rural peasants. During what became a bloody twelve-year civil war, the Salvadoran military, funded the entire time by the United States, murdered between 10,000 and 30,000 civilians. Throughout the massacre, the US justified the bloodshed in various ways, attempting the whole time to avoid being blamed for the affair (Ibid; 116-117). However, it cannot be ignored that El Salvador was the recipient of the largest amount of US aid in Latin America during that time (Seelke, 2012).

The effect of US interventionism on El Salvador's poor

The involvement of the US and its strategic funding of the oligarchy and military in El Salvador have been severely detrimental to the Salvadoran poor. The rural poor of El Salvador have struggled for survival since the era of Spanish colonization, during which the international demand for indigo prompted the commercialization of agriculture in the country (Ripton, 2006; 102). The international market's demand for exported goods, combined with the existing power structure in which a small group of elites virtually controlled the nation, meant that land was an important commodity that the oligarchy could commandeer as it saw fit. With the rise of demand for coffee, the oligarchy expanded their plantations even further, wreaking havoc on indigenous Salvadorans' land and forcing them to leave their homes. By 1920, coffee was 95 percent of all exports in El Salvador (Barry, 1987; 26). Because El Salvador devoted so much of its land to exports, it became heavily reliant on US imports. Thus, the United States essentially controlled the markets of El Salvador. And unfortunately, the only Salvadorans who could afford to import an adequate amount of food were the elite (LaFeber, 1984; 71). Thus, the majority of Salvadorans were left in hunger and deep poverty. By the late 1920s, there was virtually no middle class (LaFeber, 71). By supporting the oligarchy both financially and through continued trade, the United States was complicit in perpetuating the marginalization of many Salvadorans. The 1931 peasant uprising was the culmination of the high levels of poverty wrought by the domination of the coffee mono-crop and the concentration of power in the hands of the oligarchy. When the peasant uprising was crushed, only ten percent of those murdered by the state were actually part of the initial uprising (LaFeber, 1984; 73). Because the United States chose to support Martínez's regime even after he authorized the murder of peasants, it is also complicit in legitimizing gross human rights violations against the poor of El Salvador.

Between the 1931 uprising and the Salvadoran civil war, conditions for the impoverished only worsened. Salvadoran plantation worker explains what it is like to work on a coffee plantation:

For our family of six, the plantation bosses gave us each week two to three pounds of corn, one pound of beans, and a pound of limes, They didn't even give us a little coffee. And when the coffee harvest was over, you went back to your village all pale and weak because you hadn't eaten (Smith, 1996).

As is evident in paragraphs above, “hunger and malnourishment are directly linked to skewed land distribution” (Barry, 1987; 17). Between 1950 and 1979, the amount of arable land increased considerably in El Salvador, but the amount of basic food cropland (per capita) actually shrunk from 0.220 hectares to 0.080 hectares, with a -64 percent change (see Table 1).

In 1971, 50 percent of arable land on farms of over 220 acres was left fallow, while 95 percent of small farms were too small to support a single family (Barry, 9). Rural unemployment had skyrocketed to 47 percent by the early 1980s (Smith, 1996; 9). Malnutrition was rampant; 35 percent of the poorest half of the population was lacking its minimum caloric need, and 75 percent of children were malnourished. As shown in Table 2, this malnutrition increased 46 percent between 1965 and 1975 (Smith, 1996; 10). By continuing to dominate trade relations and support oppressive government regimes, the US helped to exacerbate existing levels of marginalization and poverty felt by the rural poor by the 1970s.

Table 1: Per Capita Basic Food Cropland in El Salvador (Hectares)

1950	1979	Change (%)
0.220	0.080	-64

Source: Porpora, 1987.

Table 2: Malnutrition in El Salvador

Calorie deficit, poorest half of population*	Child Malnutrition (%)	Change in Child Malnutrition 1965-75 (%)
35	75	+46

Source: Porpora, 1987.

Note: * = Percent of minimum caloric need lacking.

At the same time, however, there was a significant increase in political opportunities with the rise of organizations that would facilitate protest. In the 1972, the fraudulent presidential elections were what many scholars consider to be a turning point in the political atmosphere of Salvadoran history; some see it as the signal to the nation that the change that its citizens wanted was no longer possible through political and legal channels (Porpora, 1990; 89). The popular and poor sectors of society began grouping into protest organizations, the largest ones being the Front of United Popular Action (FAPU) and the Popular League of February 28 (LP-28) (Porpora, 1990; 90). The Salvadoran military responded to this increase in popular protest by beginning to facilitate death squad killings. The organizations responded to the oppression by forming their own armed coalitions, the most significant of which is the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN). Because the US was striving to continue its policy of low-intensity democracy promotion, it saw these popular organizations as direct threats to the hegemonic world order.

The US government under the Reagan administration sought to eradicate the FMLN, and they did so in a number of ways: military and economic aid, political isolation, psychological warfare, selective repression and scorched-earth land sweeps. For example, in 1985 the Salvadoran military received \$744 million in military aid, and from 1981-1989 the US provided El Salvador with more military aid than it provided to any other country in the region (Smith, 1996; 35). Money that was specifically designated as food aid was also used by the US to fund the Salvadoran military; according to a congressional report from the US during the conflict, the food programs were “used to prosecute the war and repair its damages, rather than to change the conditions that sparked and continue[d] to fuel rebellion” (Smith, 1996; 37). In this way, the US explicitly allocated resources away from helping civilians and towards the military that was killing those same civilians.

The US used political isolation through the implementation of the so-called agrarian reform in the first part of the 1980s. This “tactical” land reform targeted the FMLN specifically and was meant to undermine support for the revolutionary group (Smith, 1996; 43). In addition, the US also engaged in psychological warfare by introducing the strategy of persuading FMLN fighters to join the Salvadoran military in order to undermine confidence in the movement (Smith, 1996; 46). Selective repression was also a tactic used by the US during the Salvadoran civil war; thousands of targeted executions were carried out by the Salvadoran military, and people who were targeted for this “selective repression” would be submitted to horrifying torture before being murdered. The following account provides a brutal example of the ways that US introduction of selective repression led to heightened levels of torture (Smith, 1996; 48):

Putting people’s heads in buckets of excrement, electrical torture? Oh, this is nothing. But if you cut somebody, their skin, or you take somebody’s eyes, this is actually what they did at the torture. With a pencil, you take one eye out and you say, “If you don’t talk I will take the other one.” And this person bleeds to death, and then you laugh around him, drink, smoking marijuana. This is how they fight terrorists, Communists---to eliminate a person---this is it. They are trained to eliminate.

Lastly, the US military advised the Salvadoran military to carry out what are called “scorched-earth land sweeps.” These strategic massacres were perpetrated by sectors of the military that were permanently in the field, with no barracks to go home and sleep in and the constant task of bombing and burning areas in which the FMLN fighters were likely to be residing. In this way, the US enabled the El Salvador army to kill entire villages. By the time the war ended in 1992, around 75,000 Salvadorans died, and over 1 million Salvadorans (25 percent of the population) fled the country as refugees (Smith, 1996; 51). Because the US played an active role in the El Salvador civil war, it is complicit in the death of these 75,000 people, and in the displacement of millions of others.

Discussion

The motivation for US involvement in El Salvador over the years, particularly in the recent civil war, is a contested topic. Using Robinson “low-intensity democracy promotion” as the framework for my analysis, I argued that the US became involved in the affairs of El Salvador when it felt that its position of power in the hegemonic world order was being challenged. Furthermore, I argued that the US has justified its interventionist policies in El Salvador through its so-called democracy promotion, and that in reality, US policies have combined coercive and consensual domination in order to maintain its position at the top of the hierarchical social, political and economic superstructures of the international order. Using the excuse of the necessity of promoting democracy and upholding human rights, the US funded state terrorism in El Salvador. With its trade relations with the oligarchy of El Salvador the US has supported its goal of maintaining the current social order---the oligarchs, with whom the US has an established relationship, stay at the top, while the peasants, who are perpetually discontent with the current arrangement, must stay at the bottom (Robinson, 1996). When Reagan addressed the US in 1984 regarding the situation in Latin America, he used rhetoric about promotion of democracy and human rights:

The issue is our effort to promote democracy and economic well-being in the face of [guerrilla] aggression, aided and abetted by the Soviet Union. We Americans should be . . . proud of what, together with our friends, we can do in Central America, to support democracy, human rights, and economic growth, while preserving peace so close to home (Reagan, 1984).

By using the justification of the importance of promoting democracy in the world, the Reagan administration was able to promote a form of low-intensity democracy that benefited the elite and continued the marginalization of the poor in El Salvador. However, there are implications of US involvement in El Salvador that must be discussed further.

The concepts of US democracy promotion, poverty and violence in El Salvador are intimately linked, as I will demonstrate. Porpora (1990) calls hunger the second form of mass genocide that occurred in El Salvador during its civil war. Chomsky (1987) quotes a Salvadoran man: “to watch your children die of sickness and hunger while you can do nothing is a violence to the spirit” (6). In 1983, less than 10 percent of Salvadorans had the resources for the required daily caloric intake, and in the late 1970s it was common for every two children in rural areas to die before they are five years old (Barry, 1987; 17). Hunger and poverty go hand-in-hand, and because the US promoted policies which further marginalized the impoverished, in this way it also supported the “violence of hunger;” that is, the normalization of malnourishment and starvation that is often accompanied by illness and death.

Chavez (2004) argues that the cycles of mass political violence in Salvadoran society were incited by state hegemony. He cites the coffee mono-crop, the removal of indigenous people from their land for that mono-crop, and a repressive state military as evidence of the first cycle of mass political violence in El Salvador (Chavez, 2004). After the second cycle, the civil war, Chavez notes the important shift that

El Salvador's civil war introduced in the country's culture of violence: a general lack of respect for human life, the normalization of violence as a means to deal with social conflict, and the increased and normalized use of weapons (Chavez, 2004). He argues that this "culture of violence" is the result of a "systematic and protracted use of state terror" against the Salvadoran civilians, especially against the marginalized sectors of the population, which has led to a "consciousness of exclusion" (Chavez; 2004). Exclusion from society, as he argues, can lead to an increased likelihood of using violence as a means to solve social conflict. Chavez indicates that many Salvadorans are experiencing this consciousness of exclusion, which means that they have become aware of their marginalized position in society (Chavez, 2004).

Binford (2002) provides a good base for the context of different forms of violence and their relationships to post-conflict society:

In the case of former FMLN combatants and their civilian supporters, contemporary displays of everyday violence are at least as much, if not more, a function of poverty and exploitation in the present (structural violence)—resulting from Peace Accords that hardly touched the pre-conflict economic class structure---as of the post-war fallout of wartime political violence.

Indeed, there is evidence that suggests that the everyday violence is the result of a systemic violence that existed long before the civil war; evidence that the peasants' "consciousness of exclusion" from the system can stoke this fire. This consciousness "nourishes among the excluded an angry sense of inferiority that results in acts of self-destructive or communal violence which in turn further fuel a cycle of humiliation and demobilizing self-blame" (Bourgois, 2001; 29). Most importantly, Bourgois argues that this communal violence manifests itself in the form of everyday violence, thus obscuring the larger structural violence with instances of criminal violence or domestic aggression (Ibid; 29).

With the last few paragraphs in mind, I will introduce three points to summarize my argument. First, the marginalization of the poor in El Salvador, both during and after the civil war, has further excluded them from society and thus increased the likelihood for violence to occur as a means to solve an issue. Second, the normalization of violence has also contributed to an increased likelihood of violence. Third, that although the first two points seem to hold true, the reasons that violence occurs within Salvadoran society are complex and nuanced. Binford and Bourgois note that modern-day violence in El Salvador, especially among the victims and participants of the civil war, cannot be described with simply one category. Chavez contributes to this point by demonstrating that state hegemony initially contributed to the two major rises in mass political violence in El Salvador.

Conclusion

With these points in mind, I argue that the violence existing in El Salvador today can be at least partially attributed to the US involvement in the country. The US has intervened in El Salvador in various ways and to various degrees through its low-intensity democracy promotion. It has supported regimes that further marginalize the poor sectors of Salvadoran society. This marginalization comes in the form of

the exacerbation and continued existence of unequal land distribution and income. Unequal land distribution is intimately linked with hunger and poverty, and this hunger and poverty is, in turn, intimately linked with violence (Barry, 1987; 7), both the everyday and the structural. The near-monopoly of land has forced the indigenous off of their communal land and allowed the Salvadoran elite to devote most of the land to luxury export crops, leaving very little for staple crops. Because a large majority of Salvadorans own so little land, and because so little land has been devoted to staple crops that stay within El Salvador, large sectors of the population go hungry. This hunger and poverty have largely contributed to the discontent and unrest, which led to two major cycles of mass uprisings among the poor: in 1932 and in the 1980-1992 civil war. This leads me to my second point about US intervention: the US has also intervened in El Salvador by supplying vast amounts of money to the Salvadoran military, and by training, equipping and advising its soldiers. This military participated in the massacres of 50,000 civilians, and the US supported that regime for the entirety of the war. Salvadorans have been exposed to atrocious levels of violence that have caused deep psychological trauma for many within the country. In addition, the oppression of civilians has normalized violence within Salvadoran society, has increased access to/normalization of weapons, and has further socially excluded the poor by failing to provide adequate compensation and support in post-war El Salvador.

Today, violence in El Salvador is a major issue, with high levels of gang violence and crime. Many studies that seek to find solutions to the violence in El Salvador recommend increased vigilance of police and improved court systems, and in doing so they fail to understand the true causes of violence in Salvadoran society (Moser and van Bronkhorst, 1999; Cunningham, 2008; Buvinic and Morrison, 2011). In order to truly begin to decrease levels of violence in El Salvador, the poor and hungry must gain autonomy and agency so that they lend a voice to the injustices and inequalities that still exist within their society. There are studies that prove the importance of increased agency of the poor. Although his argument is relegated to the realm of criminal violence, Richani (2010) provides a compelling argument: he asserts that the most effective means by which a post-conflict state can be successful has two parts: (1) the rule of law must be fully inclusive and (2) the government must be able to “mitigate social antagonisms generated by exclusiveness of the socioeconomic and political structures” (433). He notes that El Salvador has socioeconomic and political structures that have historically marginalized the poor, and therefore he argues that it is necessary for policymakers to “mitigate the destabilizing effects of a sharp increase in unemployment,” a factor which “reduces the opportunity costs of crime and, hence, facilitates the creation of a system of violence” (451). In summary, I do not try to argue that the violence in El Salvador is a direct result of the United States and no one else---instead, I use US intervention in El Salvador as a lesson, one which shows how the current hegemonic world order will continue to marginalize the poor if it is not upended. With today’s urgent refugee crisis, rising levels of violence, and increasing numbers of right-wing radical nationalist parties, the world may seem unbearably fraught with anger and destruction. However, there is a very clear step we can take towards a more peaceful society: we must shelter the millions of delicate flowers in our world from the destruction by greed, wealth and power.

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