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Oral history and subaltern studies in the recovery of repressed narratives in western El Salvador

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Gould, Jeffrey L. and Aldo Lauria-Santiago. *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920–1932*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. 368 pp.

In *To Rise in Darkness*, Jeffrey Gould and Aldo Lauria-Santiago use oral histories and the methodologies of subaltern studies to re-examine the circumstances surrounding the peasant insurrection and the subsequent military-led massacre that took place in western El Salvador in 1932. Their history recovers a narrative that had been repressed in both the archive and in the memory of the community that suffered the horrors of the massacre. The book explores the long-term effects of collective trauma in El Salvador and

demonstrates the important role recovering repressed narratives plays in healing communities scarred by horrific violence.

On the evening of January 22, 1932, several thousand insurgents stormed military barracks, municipal buildings, stores, and hacendados' manors in western El Salvador. Organized by a cadre of ladino and indigenous communist leaders, the insurgents struck out against the agrarian elite, wealthy business owners, and municipal leaders who won their offices in corrupt elections. While the rebels killed a few of the richest individuals in these communities, the principal aims of the insurgents were the reclamation of civic power and the redistribution of food and material goods to the poor peasantry. Although the insurgency only lasted a couple days, it manifested a class tension that had been growing in El Salvador for some time. During the teens and 1920s, a small banking and agro-financial oligarchy introduced policies to subdue labor and subordinate the state to its interests. In response to increased oppression, *campesino* wage laborers fought back. According to Gould and Lauria-Santiago,

the revolt of 1932 derived from a transformation of a radicalized union movement that became revolutionary under the pressure of frustration among peasants and rural workers with the violent abrogation of democratic rights, combined with a rapid increase in the rates of exploitation and dispossession. (xxiii)

While the insurrection took place, waves of panic washed across the upper classes in El Salvador, and General *cum* President Maximiliano Hernández Martínez quickly dispatched the military to quell the rebellion. By January 25, 1932, the rebellion had ended, and the military and civil guards began a lethal campaign of retribution. *La Matanza* lasted two months. Gould and Lauria-Santiago safely estimate that 10,000 *campesinos*, largely of indigenous heritage, were killed, while some earlier reports suggested as many as 25,000 or 30,000 people died. Irrespective of the exact number, the massacre of thousands of

peasants had a tremendous impact on the indigenous community of western El Salvador, and its effects endure to this day.

In *To Rise in Darkness*, Gould and Lauria-Santiago attempt to harvest the lingering memories of the massacre sown in the minds of the children who witnessed the murders and the descendants of the victims. Their reconstruction of *La Matanza* resurrects a repressed narrative that had been hidden in the historical archive and in the memory of the community. The traditional history of the massacre derives largely from the accounts of military officers, professional anticommunists, and journalists writing to and for the Salvadoran elite. According to this story, the short-lived reformist national governments of Pío Romero Bosque and Arturo Araujo failed to respond properly to the post-1929 economic depression. Their governments allowed communists to infiltrate the countryside and win the support of the peasants. The ladino communist leaders then rebelled against the powerful General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez when he took power in late 1931, and the indigenous population suffered the consequences of that rebellion.

Gould and Lauria-Santiago's new narrative, coaxed from over two hundred interviews and COMINTERN documents released after the collapse of the Soviet Union, offers an alternative interpretation of the massacre and of the indigenous community's role in the insurrection. Their history reveals salient indigenous agency in both the insurrection and in the rural organization that led to the revolt. However, the official discourse of the massacre coupled with trauma and memory loss to transform indigenous agents of rebellion into unsuspecting, helpless bystanders. This discourse also allowed the military and elite to present "their version of the events as a reality so powerful that it reshaped the very fabric of memory of the survivors" (234). According to this narrative, the indigenous population was not involved in the initial rebellion,

and the sinners were the communist infiltrators who invited the massacre rather than the oppressive military regime that conducted it.

The authors uncover the power and longevity of the narrative created by the official discourse of *La Matanza* in the voices of the *ancianos* they interviewed. For example, “of the over two hundred interviews with people who in one form or another experienced the insurrection and its macabre aftermath, [the authors] encountered only two who admitted to directly participating in the insurrection and very few who admitted the participation of close relatives” (200). Gould and Lauria-Santiago suggest that the repression of memory of the rebellion instilled in the indigenous villagers of western El Salvador both political passivity and an aversion to organizing in opposition to the social and economic injustices that continued in the decades that followed. “The vast majority of indigenous people who had experienced 1932 were consciously apolitical” (271), and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, “there was less active support for the leftist alternative in the west than in other parts of the country” (263).

In order to counter the repressed memories of the community they interviewed, Gould and Lauria-Santiago employ the methodologies of subaltern scholars. They re-read traditional archival sources (identified as the prose of counterinsurgency) “against the grain” and combine their new interpretations with new sources from Moscow to identify significant indigenous participation in the insurgency. Their analysis of the archival sources contradicts the collective memory of the indigenous community and demonstrates the long-term cultural and political impact of the massacre. The authors suggest that the trauma of *La Matanza* repressed the memory of the massacre itself and the mobilization that preceded it and contributed to the widespread myth of passivity of the western Salvadoran peasant. In recovering a narrative in which the indigenous community played an important role in organizing a rebellion against a corrupt government, Gould and Lauria-Santiago’s research contributes to the creation of

alternative indigenous identities and has the potential to energize a new generation of political activism in western El Salvador. To increase this potential, the authors translated their findings into a Spanish language documentary *Cicatriz De La Memoria (The Scars of Memory)*, which they screened for the witnesses and descendents of the massacre (see Afterword).

To Rise in Darkness will serve as an excellent resource for scholars investigating the political economy and history of El Salvador in the early twentieth century. However, the book might be even more rewarding for students interested in the ways in which the trauma of violence shapes cultural values and collective memory and in the methodologies that might be employed to recover alternative narratives from the shadows of history.