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Generational Shadows: Parties of Memory and Hope in El Salvador

Ellen Moodie
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

ABSTRACT

This essay contemplates generation and memory in the recent history of El Salvador. At its core are stories shared by a rising generation of young, middle-class activists with little or no direct memory of the 1980-1992 civil war — and their parents, who lived the war and celebrated the 1992 peace agreements. I contend that the way different generational memories took form, and the form their stories took, emerged from the liberal orientations that permeated the political trajectories of the activists and their parents. However, their stories diverged according to generation: the young activists felt the chill of the "generational shadows" of those who fought, or at least lived, the war.

Keywords: Generation, Memory, Civil War, Liberalism, Activism.

Este ensayo abarca los temas de generación y memoria en la historia reciente de El Salvador. En esencia, se trata de las historias compartidas de una generación emergente de activistas jóvenes de clase media que tienen muy poca o ninguna memoria de la guerra civil de 1980 a 1992 — y las de sus padres, quienes sí vivieron la guerra y celebraron los acuerdos de paz en 1992. Yo sostengo que la manera en la cual las diferentes memorias y narrativas de esas generaciones tomaron forma surge de la orientación liberal que permea las trayectorias políticas de la nueva generación de activistas y la de sus padres. Sin embargo, las narrativas divergen en cada generación: los jóvenes activistas sentían el escalofrío de las "sombras generacionales" de quienes lucharon, o al menos, vivieron la guerra.

Palabras clave: Generación, Memoria, Guerra Civil, Liberalismo, Activismo.

The Salvadoran Indignados burst onto the public stage in June 2011. They had one demand in their protests in front of the Presidential House. They called for the restoration of the integrity of a key state institution: the Supreme Court of Justice. They pressed El Salvador's Legislative Assembly to repeal a hastily passed decree that paralyzed the court, requiring all five judges in the judicial body's constitutional chamber to vote unanimously for any ruling to pass. Recent (4-1) decisions by this group of judges had aimed at containing the power of the executive and of political parties. This balance of powers, maintained through constitutionally established sets of rules and procedures, was precisely what the young activists supported. Their watchword was the endearingly geeky call for "Institutionality"!

At first, they succeeded. Legislators overturned the decree, just two months after the protests began. But ultimately, they failed. While the clamor for institutional integrity had convened them, they soon recognized a bigger goal. The Indignados, who took their names from the protest movement of the same moment in Spain, sought to overcome the left/right, Cold-War-remnant political impasse in the country. In the end, however, it was President Nayib Bukele, elected in 2019, who broke the deadlock. Bukele did not uphold the institutional stability the activists had demanded. He began to tear apart state institutions — including the Supreme Court. After his party *Nuevas Ideas* [New Ideas] took a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly in May 2021, he fired the attorney general and all the highest court's judges.

I had first watched the Indignados with a group of former guerrilla combatants and others in another part of El Salvador. When we saw the grainy televised images of young people marching on the streets of the capital in June 2011, just two years after first president from the leftist former insurgent party the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) took office, all of us were confused. Were these protestors enemies or friends? Dupes of the ruling class or a fresh cohort of rebels? I was intrigued. I wondered if these apparently middle-class, urban, mestizo millennials on the screen represented a new generation of activists.

When I finally met some of the Indignados, I realized that they were not the revolutionaries and radicals we might have expected in El Salvador, given its history. Nor were they right-wing reactionaries we might assume of protesters under the first FMLN administration. They were, rather, liberals, in the broad sense of an orientation toward rule of law, private property, a balance of institutional powers, and the moral equivalence of all humans. Their liberalism links to that emancipatory philosophy that arose in seventeenth-century Europe among the thinkers of rising middle classes, refusing the tyranny of kings and dictators and bishops. Liberalism is more than an ideology; it is both a habitus

shared by large swaths of the globe and a "form of engagement that regulates the entirety of legitimate political discourse across this spectrum" (Mahmud 2016).

This essay contemplates generation and memory in recent Salvadoran history. At its core are stories shared by Indignados and their ilk: a rising generation of young, middle-class activists who had little or no direct memory of the 1980-1992 civil war — and also by their parents, who lived the war and celebrated the 1992 United Nations-brokered agreements that aimed to democratize the country. I contend that the way different generational memories took form, and the form their stories took, emerged from the liberal orientations that permeated the political trajectories of the activists and their parents. However, their stories diverged according to generation: the activists felt the chill of the "generational shadows" of those who fought, or at least lived, the war.

In the larger project from which this research emerges, I consider how discourses of, and orientations to, liberalism mask many of our experiences in ways that trap us. "The most famous documents of liberal modernity are primarily about [propertied white males'] liberation, not anybody else's", as the Jamaican-born philosopher Charles W. Mills writes (Mills 2017, xiii). "If you add together the exclusion clauses or liberalism's most celebrated manifestos, treatises, and declarations of human rights, you get a litany of oppressions rather than a list of emancipations". I suggest studying liberalism's contradictions in this small country, founded by a few Europeans who conquered and colonized the Indigenous inhabitants, might help us understand the rise of more populist authoritarian politics in the past few years, around the globe as much as in Central America.

Project Methods

The starting point for this project is the Salvadoran pro-democracy protests that began June 2011. In this moment the children, the grandchildren, and nieces and nephews of war survivors were coming of age and confronting troubling realities in their country, despite the peace accords with its promises of democratization: high crime rates, economic stagnation, and political disappointment. I carried out interviews with more than 100 people over about 10 years, about half of them among young people between the ages of 18 and 35. I met with people of several generations, often parents and their grown children, both together and separately. I got to know them through introductions by a few key trusted friends and acquaintances, what we call in English the "snowball method". In a country rife with distrust, this is the only way to ensure access to key activists. The four activists here each represent slightly different positions in their trajectories to protest.

I also participated in many public meetings and gatherings over the years, whether political events, planning sessions, presentations of reports on by non-government organizations, or celebrations. (Though almost everyone I interviewed felt comfortable with publication of their full names, I am holding back in this essay, given recent political changes in the country. A number of the current administration's political "enemies" have been arrested or gone into exile.) I draw on theories of narrative, memory, and postmemory to analyze participants' words within the frame of liberalism as an ideology and ethical system shaping ways of being in and making the world.

Generational Shadows

Liberal "common-sense" understanding of memory is individualized. This is especially true when considered in conjunction with accounts of coming to political consciousness, often framed through independent experience and/or rational, researched, decision making. Such was the perspective of most of the young activists I interviewed — and of their parents. But while we as humans do perceive through the organs of our separate, physical bodies, the conversion of sensation and experience to narration reflects cultural ontologies, ways of being, as well as shared experiences. Our stories produce, and are produced by, social relations. And then those stories become a resource for interpreting social relations.

Elizabeth Jelin's theorization of memory as a space of political struggle is key to my thinking here (Jelin 2003). Members of the post-postwar generation do not, often cannot, speak of war memories. Yet they have been shaped by the war, by its effects on their parents, on their extended families, and on Salvadoran societies. Their subjectivities have been formed in part by what scholars call postmemory; they understand the past not through direct experience but through their family members' shared stories, images, and behaviors (including silences) growing up (Hirsch 2012).

Memory is not (just) something that older folks have accumulated more of than youth. In the context of war or in histories of exclusion (whether racist, patriarchal, homophobic, or other) in historically liberal societies, the weight of memory can instigate a specific, limited form of liberalism, in philosopher Judith Shklar's framing: the liberalism of fear (Shklar 1989). To Shklar, a Latvian-born Jew who fled Europe during World War II, liberalism should represent the "party of memory" rather than the more rights-focused "party of hope". Remembering, she theorized, can help to avoid what went wrong in the past — to avert the *summum malum*, the ultimate evil. To her, true liberalism should focus on restraining state violence, with stable but limited institutions that uphold the rule of law and

protect the vulnerable. The party of hope, on the other hand, imagines the future and focuses on rights (Ashenden and Hess 2020).

Memories of the Salvadoran civil war have cast long generational shadows. By generational shadow, I mean the way past trauma, past activism, and past experience can seem so much more consequential than present struggles — can overshadow them. As Holocaust scholar Marianne Hirsch argues, "To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors" (Hirsch 2012, 5). This experience clearly reaches beyond El Salvador: Hirsch writes of the children of Holocaust survivors; Jelin considers Argentine struggles over the past and present. The concept of "generational shadows" emerges from conversations with researchers among activists of 1968 Mexico City and their successors (Cohen and Frazier, n.d.). In Central America, anthropologist Michelle Bellino argues that postwar generations in Guatemala differ from their parents, as they are "entrapped by the violent present, 'no longer' at war and 'not yet' at peace", she writes. Youth "are instructed to wait — for peace, stability, opportunity, voice, inclusion: to wait for the changed nation they were promised […] to 'wait for the returns on their investments of hope'" (Bellino 2017, loc 242). The Salvadorans presented here are a minority, in that they are not waiting, but rather struggling to get out of the shadows.

Remembering *la Ofensiva* of 1989

When I began conversations with these young, middle-class activists, I was interested in the way they thought about the war and their resistance to what they saw as ongoing war-era polarization. Many Salvadorans do see the war's Cold War-form opposition as the key marker of their historically located ways of remembering and experiencing the world. The difference is their relationship to that marker. The parents and elders lived the war. The new generation had not.

As the father of activist Karen told me, "She makes these decisions and protests and everything, but she doesn't have the point of view of those of us who lived before and during the war. We have lived through all the political, social and economic problems that this country has had. She didn't live the war". These differences in experience — generational shadows — may well have produced the fissure in liberal imaginaries. The war generation, that of Karen's father, may well belong to the party of memory that girds Shklar's liberalism of fear. The post-postwar generation would then constitute the party of hope.

If any of the young activists I met had memories of war, it was of the guerrilla incursion into the capital near the end of the conflict. The world

remembers November 1989 for the fall of the Berlin Wall. It represented both the symbolic end Cold War and the imagined global triumph of liberalism. In El Salvador, that moment has its own significance. It is remembered for *la ofensiva* [the offensive], called by its architects "*Hasta el tope*" [to the limit].

On November 11, 1989, the FMLN invaded the San Salvador metropolitan area. The event shocked the more comfortable *capitalinos* [those in the capital city] because the brunt of the war had taken place in rural areas. The government declared a state of siege and curfew. Five days later, members of an elite military unit would break into the Central American University (the UCA) and murder six Jesuit priests known for their links to liberation theology, along with their housekeeper and her daughter. Fighting intensified in the capital. The FMLN insurgents eventually held hostages in the Hotel Sheraton in a wealthy neighborhood. Peace negotiations between the guerrilla forces and the government accelerated after the fighting ended in early December.

Most of the activists I knew would eventually mention *la ofensiva* in our conversations. Some of them remembered it. Or they remembered stories their families and friends shared, memories of memories. Sometimes they weren't sure which. Parents or older siblings were more likely to point to the shared terror or broader meanings of the collective experience of *la ofensiva* within the context of the war after nine years of conflict. In contrast, many young Salvadorans narrate *la ofensiva* as intimate, personal, contained within the private property that was supposed to keep them safe. Their perspective suggested a return, in the imagined "safety" of postwar, to a more liberal individualist way of being, or, more specifically, as I have theorized previously, a neoliberal mode of individual risk management (Moodie 2010).

In what follows, I share parts of extended conversations with activists and their parents — sometimes together, sometimes separately. The different political orientations, marked by war experience, soon become clear.

Karen

Karen called her age cohort "*la generación de quiebre*" [the rupture generation]. She shared her concept with me in our first conversation, in a Pizza Hut during her lunch hour. At the time, February 2013, she was working for an environmental non-governmental organization (NGO); later she would become a journalist in a political interview program on television. She characterized her peer group, which she estimated to be born between about 1985 (her birth year) and 1992, as barely having experienced the war. For that reason, she speculated, they didn't feel the political allegiances of their parents. They were not as stymied by the fierce polarization that had gripped their elders. They wanted change. She said,

> I don't remember the war. I mean, in *la ofensiva* of 1989, I was four years old. And for me *la ofensiva* was a *un momento chivo* [a cool moment]. […] All my uncles came, and my grandmother, and we were all together in one house, and we got mattresses out, and the lights went out. I mean for me it was a time to jump on the mattresses.
>
> I do remember when they killed the Jesuits, because my mother studied in the UCA. I do have that memory of seeing the impact on her because they had killed her professors. [And] I really remember the soldiers, when they began to enter Santa Tecla, and I remember the war tanks. But it's not a painful memory. Eh! It's different, what we feel about the war.

She was not proposing that the blurred and even benign experience of the war *determined* her (middle-class) generation's identity. Rather, I think, she was suggesting that these softer memories, or inherited memories, might open her (middle-class) cohort to other perspectives. The war did not define them the way it does their predecessors. They sought individual understandings in their particular contexts. "Now, my family is super particular", Karen continued, "because my mama is from Arcatao, […] one of the guerrilla areas, and the family of my mother was in the guerrilla forces. I grew up in a leftist family, *el voto duro de izquierda* [the left's base], convinced it was worth it to go to war because of social injustice".

I would later talk to Karen's parents in a cappuccino-fueled conversation. As her father indicated (above), their formative memories contrast dramatically with those of their daughter, setting up some of their generational differences. While Karen recalled her paternal uncles gathered for protection in the family home during *la ofensiva*, her mother remembered her own uncles' imprisonment and her cousins' death earlier in the war. "When I was a little girl", her mother said, "I remember the political campaigns that my uncles participated in, and that they were always in prison". The National Guard would arrest them for spreading propaganda (putting up posters), "just to shut them up". Later, cousins would join the guerrilla forces. One aunt lost four of her six sons in the war. Karen's mother eventually left her family's rural home to study in San Salvador. Karen's father's first political memory was that of the murder of a friend's father, a politician for the National Opposition Union. "They killed him for not agreeing, they killed him and disappeared him […]. The police came to my street to look for [my neighbors] […] so I lived not with fear, but I realized what was happening".

Later, he would attend night school. "So many people who were my *compañeros* [colleagues] in the night school got involved in the guerrilla and I didn't see them again. After a while I realized they had been killed". He did not

join the guerrilla forces, he said, because he had to support his family. "When they killed people, when they killed the Jesuits, when they killed [Archbishop] Óscar Arnulfo Romero, all these things infuriated me, but no, I was never disposed to go join the guerrilla. Friends in my barrio disappeared, for getting involved with the guerrilla".

"Or for sympathizing with them", Karen's mother added. He agreed. "If they found you with a book of Marx or Lenin, that was enough for them to kill you. Or if you listened to the music of a Venezuelan group called los Guaraguao, […] that was enough that the police would grab you and disappear you".

While they took her to demonstrations and spoke of the past, her parents did not smoothly transmit to her the memories that converted into their political convictions, Karen said. "I think it's impossible to dialogue, for example with my mother, to talk about the *Frente* as an obsolete party now". I'm struck by Karen's prescience. After the 2024 elections, the FMLN would have no representation in the Legislative Assembly.

I asked, "You mean, your mother doesn't want to hear that?"

"Yes, I mean my mother saw me protesting last year and she suffered, she said, 'What's going on? I mean, when our daughter went out into the street to protest the FMLN […]. I mean when did we teach her that?'" Karen laughed. "It's the joke my parents repeat: 'When you went to the right'".

> In the elections […] five or six years ago, they didn't take me with them to vote because I wasn't going to vote for the FMLN. Seriously, I was going to vote for *Cambio Democrático* [Democratic Change], which in theory is the moderate left, […]. And they didn't take me to vote.

Karen did vote, but alone. The formative event in Karen's own life, she said, "the before and after", was her volunteer work with TECHO, a nonprofit founded in Chile in 1997 to bring (often middle-class, university) youth to build emergency housing in poor communities. By then the NGO was operating throughout Latin America. "Even though I feel like my parents, with all their formation on the left and everything — they had really sensitized me to poverty, but I never had gone for a week in a poor community, never". She was shocked seeing how people actually lived, she admitted. "If something changed my life, maybe that was it, because it was like I don't know, it's that it was like garbage made into houses". Later she called these homes "*Casas de cartón*" [cardboard houses] echoing a renowned revolutionary anthem of the Guaraguao, the group her father loved.

Karen's parents linked their convictions to their communal (family and community) experiences of war, terror, and repression. They also spoke of their economic limitations. They worked hard to rise above poverty. Her father went to

night school; he did not join the guerrilla forces. Karen's generational difference, then, would not only be her cohort's distinct experiences of war and postwar, but changed class identity and youthful sense of security — and the right to freely make demands of the state (as a member of the party of hope). She was insulated from the suffering her parents had lived. At the same time, Karen's independence — her making her own political decisions, her sneaking out of work to protest the FMLN government — might well have reminded her parents of how fragile life still felt, despite their material comforts. They may well have thought: If Karen doesn't follow the right path, she could fall.

Laura

Laura was born, like Karen, in 1985. Also like Karen, she described a radical change in her perspective after a confrontation with poverty. Her values, she said, had first developed in a comfortably middle-class context. Unlike Karen, she identified her family as right-wing. Her story represents the liberal belief in ascendant rationality and the strains under its limits as she embraced collective action. Her awareness of political generational differences was sparked, she told me, by the disparaging attitude so many politicians — left and right — took toward her and her fellow activists advocating for the rights of youth. "So the *diputados* [congress members] treat us like we're children playing, like we don't know what we're doing. […] When they realize that as young people, we *do* know what we want and we're struggling *not* for our own individual interests, nor even or the interests of our organization, but for the collective interest for all the youth in the country, then they get nervous. […] The problem that they all have here is a question of power".

Laura and I had first encountered each other at a conference on youth and politics in an air-conditioned ballroom at the Hotel Intercontinental in San Salvador. The event was sponsored by the *Coordinadora Intersectorial Pro-Juventudes de El Salvador* [the Intersectoral Pro-Youth Coordinating Committee of El Salvador known by its acronym CIPJES], an organization formed in 2008 in the wake of the Ibero-American Convention of Young People's Rights. The international convention promoted "youth as a strategic agent of development", and CIPJES members worked to develop a national policy on youth. Laura was one of a series of poised young speakers at the event.

Laura and I met again a week later in a chain café, the "Coffee Cup" (in English). At the time she was volunteering full-time with *Lideres Solidarios* [Solidarity Leaders] a youth-led NGO that worked in violence prevention and political formation. Unprompted, Laura narrated her story as her bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story. She was raised to be "very superficial", she told me. "I

didn't just have dolls, I had Barbies. Collections of Barbies. My Barbie house, my Barbie car. […] I had a life of certain comforts, that I know many, many children and young people don't have now, the majority don't have".

She had never boarded a public bus until she entered the University of El Salvador to major in psychology. As part of her studies, she worked on projects among the urban poor in the *zonas marginales* [marginal zones]. It changed her life. "The first time I went to the community was in my second year. We went to the Community El Cañito. […] It's the kind of community you see everywhere, with little shacks. Humble people. Some families with drug addiction, with alcohol, with abuse". She began to grasp that any sense of agency may be structured by larger social and economic forces. This realization clashed with her own liberal thinking, shaped by the presumption of individual volition and desire. She explained: Most of the people her organization worked with, those in "the communities", could not conceive of how to improve their lives. "For example, […] we were offering six scholarships for them to continue studying. But only one person wanted to take the scholarship. Just one".

Later I asked her if she remembered anything of the war.

> I have slight, slight memories, but they really had an impact on me. For example, here there was a curfew. Which meant that at six in the evening everyone had to be shut in their house. You couldn't go out […].
> My father would take me to the park that's close to the house, every day, at four in the afternoon. And I remember so many times my papa saying, 'We have to go'! and I wanted to keep playing, I wanted to stay in the park and everything, and I remember my father, 'The soldiers are going to come'! That they were going to punish me [if we stayed out]. So, at six in the evening, back home.

The soldiers were stern patriarchal figures, disciplinarians in a dangerous society. Her other memory is more intimate, pointing to familial fear and vulnerability within the privacy of the home.

> And I remember also, and this is something that really had a big impact on me, my mother was pregnant, eight or nine months pregnant, eh! We went to sleep in what is now my bedroom. […] There was a moment that got really rough. I remember helicopters flying above the house. And I remember my mother was afraid, and my father helped her get under the bed. In that room the three of us slept. Faint memories, but they had an impact on me.

I met Laura's mother a few months later. Remembering the war, she sketched broad outlines of non-specific danger that could emerge in random moments. She

demonstrated very little sense of agency, of being able to do anything more than pray and endure.

> Really the war, for us here in the city, it was nothing like it was for people in the countryside, it was a hard time, but difficult in the sense that we had to be careful, because there were times when, there were attacks on certain places, and you could just be passing by, and something could happen.
> We didn't stop working, we didn't stop doing what we had to do. […] We still did what we always did, just praying to God that that the wrong moment wouldn't come. After the war I got to know a lot of people who had come from rural areas, eh! People displaced by war, truly, and who suffered greatly […]. I saw that that was hard for them.
> A lot of people left El Salvador because they were afraid, mostly people who lived close to strategic places, like military barracks. High-ranking functionaries at that time might have been attacked, these people began to separate themselves, they started leaving, and a lot of people also because they were afraid their sons would be recruited.

She was afraid for her daughter — joining Karen's parents in the party of memory.

> I tell Laura, when she goes around doing certain kinds of activities, […] it scares me. For example, in the anti-mining things. She was supporting these groups, and I told her no, that scares me. I didn't tell her, don't go, but […] a lot of them have been killed. So it scares me, scares me a lot.

Laura had described her family as "ultra-right". Her mother, however, did not discuss politics with me. Perhaps she was intimidated. She called herself uneducated (she worked as a secretary). Her ideology was more implicit. To her, people in the countryside were innocent victims (on the political right, *campesinos* [peasants] were thought to be duped by Communists). In her view, high-ranking military — the patriarchal, authoritarian state itself — were the ones at risk.

Laura pointed to explicit family politics. "My family has always voted for the right, and when I was little, they always took me to ARENA events". ARENA, the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* [Nationalist Republican Alliance] party, is a right-wing party founded in 1981. Laura did not really think much about the generational shadows in her life, though, until she began to take university classes. "I began to understand that the extreme right had done so much harm to the country. I have been in the salon of Major Roberto D'Aubuisson (in the Legislative Assembly)". ARENA founder D'Aubuisson was also a death-squad leader. He gave the order to assassinate Archbishop (now Saint) Óscar Arnulfo Romero.

"Definitely a disagreeable historical figure! They have his pictures, his books, his diary, his clothes, it's like a room of monuments to him, like a cult of him, almost a semi-god, and it's really creepy to go to that place".

This dissonance between her upbringing and her experiences after entering university pushed Laura to study her country's past. "I am fascinated by history. To realize the truth, why there was an armed conflict, what happened during those 12 years. I understood that [the extreme right] did so much damage. It killed people. Figures like Monsignor Romero".

Both Laura and Karen cited their shock encounters with El Salvador's deep inequality, outside of the intimacy of home, as stimulating their political consciousness. That awakening was initially full of affect. Laura had a visceral reaction to the image of family hero D'Aubuisson. Karen pointed to her symbolic expulsion from the family, at least on election day.

Culture, including political culture, is shared. It is social. It is public. But many of these young, middle-class Salvadorans conceive of, and narrate, their politics — their way of engaging with the world, with power, with social relations — as emergent in individual reasoning, in rational thinking, in private, privatized, processes.

Alejandro

Alejandro was born in 1983. Though he is a bit older than Karen and Laura, he only has vague memories of war. "It wasn't marcante [defining]" for him, said. "I am a child of the Peace Accords more than of the war". He recalled moments. People running in the street when there were battles. Blackouts.

> I remember the death once, of someone or several people. And suddenly seeing the sadness of my parents, you know. But I don't remember anything specific. […] The clearest memories I have are two. One is *la ofensiva*. I remember the sounds, the bullets, the darkness. We hid under the stairs. And the other one is when a stray bullet broke a window in the house. And that's it. Those are the most powerful things I remember. And then I remember the images of when they signed the peace accords. On television, my parents crying.

Alejandro may have been a child of that peace, but what he often felt, he told me, was the chill of generational shadows. In his experience, war-era activists, and combatants, would not, could not, make room for new people or new ideas. He pointed to the way the "adult-centric" Salvadoran environmental movement overshadowed youth initiative.

> The Environmental Alliance doesn't have anyone young. The Mesa or the Water Forum, no youth protagonism. It's an adult-centric space. What that means is that the only kind of experience that matters to them is combat [in the war]. The NGOs, they are people who were organized and think they're still the insurgents. The problem is, I felt like that there was just un tope [a ceiling], for someone like me. A clear limit.

I would think of his comments, from 2012, when we met up a few years later. We began talking about how in the 2014 elections then-San Salvador mayor Norman Quijano, about to leave office, had spoken contemptuously of mayoral candidate Nayib Bukele. Quijano said Bukele was *muy jovencito* [too much of a youngster] to lead the capital city (Diario1 2014). Bukele and his fans followed up with delighted memes about youth and youngsters. They refused the generational shadows the war-era generation was trying to cast upon them. Alejandro, through critical of Bukele, recognized the feeling.

It didn't matter to Alejandro whether Quijano was "old" or Bukele was "young". What he saw a distinction based on generations.

> For me the difference between adults and youth in the country, is not much the age, but the process, the political process that these adults lived and the political process that that today's young people, and not-so-young people, have had. What political education have we had? In comparison with the adults of before, who made war, who formed the NGOs, wow! It's a big difference.

Alejandro grew up in a family that talked about the war. I had met his mother years earlier. She was a well-known actor and a friend of many in my circle. Her own trajectory echoed that of Karen's mother, determined to leave her rural home despite family resistance. (The promises of liberalism, in other words, were not freely extended to women.) Her parents, she said, had only finished primary school. Her mother worked in the home but could have become a great singer, she declared. She inherited her mother's love for the arts. When she was 16, in 1970, she secretly took an entrance examination for the High School of the Arts of San Salvador.

Though she went to San Salvador for art, she became politicized too. It was inevitable, she suggested, given the time and place. "It was a key place in the revolutionary movement", she said of her high school in the early 1970s. "In fact, a lot of other students didn't finish, because they went to join the guerrilla [forces]. People would come to speak with group of young people. For example, Miguel Mármol". Mármol was the Salvadoran Communist Party founder and survivor of

the 1932 anti-Communist massacre in which the military murdered at least 10,000, mostly Indigenous people.

> He would come to the cafeteria, and he would sit there, with all of us around him to listen to the stories he would tell us. People from other countries would come too, and *compañeros* [comrades] already in the movement. Somehow or other our consciousness was raised.

The birth of Alejandro's older brother in 1977 forced her and her husband to turn to their home life. Still, they supported their insurgent friends. "We had a lot of friends and compañeros who were part of the movement. They always asked for help, 'Look, could you open a bank account in your name'. This was money for the movement, you know".

She described a moment when she sensed an ominous shift in political currents. She and friends had formed the Independent Theater Group. Until around 1974, she said, they would perform without fear. Then, during a performance of the anti-war political play "*El Soldado Raso*" [the lowest-ranked soldier — "Private" in English], something changed. Originally written by Chicano activist Luis Valdez to be performed by California farmworkers, it tells the story of Johnny, a young man who goes to the Vietnam war and dies.

> At that moment we were waking up, consciousness-raising, the dawn of the politics of war. Everything was changing. We went with that production everywhere in the country. To the farthest corners [...]. I remember once we were doing it up in Chalatenango. We were in a park, in public, it was in the street. And there were a lot of soldiers. They were watching the show. At the beginning they were laughing but then they got really serious. They didn't know what to do. They were kind of, like saying —.

Alejandro interrupted, laughing as he took on an imagined 1974 soldier's voice. "'Do we have to beat them up?'". His mother laughed too. "Yes, 'Should we do something against these people?' So they [the soldiers] didn't know what to do then. It still wasn't clear what was happening at a political level". After that performance, the actors — along with everyone else — became much more cautious.

> Because someone could easily point to another person as subversive, even though they weren't. Because the fact of going around putting on a play and saying 'strange' things meant a person was dangerous. That's why a lot of people died

> who weren't directly involved in the movement. A lot of people died. A lot of people left the country because of threats. This happened.

Alejandro's own activism did not follow the "somehow or other" path of his mother. His participation in social movements was a deliberate, and deliberated, choice. He had studied two years in France on a teaching exchange. He could have stayed in Europe. He liked it there. ("I'm bourgeois, yes"! he said in our first interview, just after he explained to our waiter how to make a proper café latté.)

But, he said, "I had a strong desire to return to my country. To contribute […] even though it might seem romantic, utopian and everything". He pointed to his Jesuit education as foundational. "I studied with Jesuits all my life, in high school, in the university. Critical thinking hasn't been far from my formation, of course, you know.

> You see how the history of colonialism has been, in terms of the construction of the country, a paradigm of development, and then industrialization. You see what it has meant for the country. What it meant to be a military country, a dictatorship. […] So I saw, no, I can't be anywhere else in the world other than my country.

Around the time of his return to El Salvador in the late 2000s, anti-mining activists in the northern rural department of Cabañas, by the Honduran border, were being threatened. They had organized against metal mining, which threatened the country's water supply. Three activists died in 2009, including leader Marcelo Rivera, whose corpse was found with signs of torture, and activists Ramon Rivera Gómez and Dora Alicia Sorto Rodriguez, who was eight months pregnant (Hernández 2010). Alejandro helped make a documentary on the movement (Colectivo 2018).

Like so many of the people I interviewed, Alejandro had been invited to participate in countless leadership forums and workshops, where NGOs teach them to develop critical capacities, to make their own proposals. He attended some; he even led some. But he became doubtful. His propensity for critical thinking pushed him beyond fortifying the institutions rooted in the racial liberalism of the 19th century. He had eventually dropped out of the Indignados movement. "When we participate, we find ourselves obligated to reproduce the same model. Why?! They're just plugging more of us into the hole then, in the hole of liberal democracy".

He recalled the experience of a friend who had recently participated in the United Nations Global Forum on Youth, representing Latin America. "What is the objective of having youth even participate? To legitimate their model? […] I expected that [the friend] was going to […] well, attack the system! But he took a

position like, 'Youth are the present, and we're going to make the change because of hope,' etc. What the fuck"?

Alejandro recognized the political opening at that moment (of the interview, in 2012) which allowed him and his activist friends to speak, to act. But he did not trust it. "I can't say that, that there's a military dictatorship, that doesn't let us, doesn't let us organize. That's bullshit. Here we can participate in everything. We can organize and everything, and no one's going to say anything".

But, he concluded, "Nothing's going to change if we don't change ourselves. If the people don't organize, it doesn't matter if […] we can't keep believing in messiahs, in a hero, in a cacique, in some kind of leader that's going to save us". In retrospect, Alejandro's words (like Karen's, and like Ricardo's, below) were prescient. After 2019, Nayib Bukele, the messianic self-appointed "philosopher king", the self-anointed "world's coolest dictator", began closing the aperture, spying on journalists, threatening human-rights activists, persecuting his political enemies, dismantling the justice system.

Ricardo

Ricardo was just a year old in *la ofensiva*. The day marked his family. I think of theories of postmemory: "the structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience" (Hirsch 2012, 6). Ricardo must have picked up the anxiety of the moment, his parents told me. "It's something even a child doesn't forget", his father said. Their home sat at a strategic point for the advancing guerrillas. "We were in the house and they [the guerrillas] attacked, because in back of the house of ours there was an electric substation […]. Everyone was so nervous, and I mean even though he was so little" he must have felt their fear.

Ricardo and I have had several conversations over the years. When we first met, in 2012, he was the director of CREO. CREO was the youth offshoot of the Salvadoran Foundation for Social and Economic Development (FUSADES). FUSADES, founded during the war with US-AID funding, is considered a right-wing think tank, an incubator for the neoliberalism that began to be implemented in 1989 with the election of the first ARENA president. Ricardo later became an editor for the more conservative of the traditional newspapers. Eventually he moved to a more critical outlet, an independent digital magazine.

Years later, just after Bukele became president and soon after Ricardo had earned a master's degree in Latin American Studies in the U.K., the ex-Indignado would tell me he was "no longer a liberal". He knew what he was talking about. Ricardo had studied political science at the Francisco Marroquín University in

Guatemala, known as a free-market stronghold, with monuments to Ayn Rand and Adam Smith.

Ricardo did not believe his generation was ready for prime time, so to speak. "What a lot of people say is, 'Yeah, we need like, really we need a generational leap'. But I don't see my generation as prepared to take the lead. I see some people who are prepared, but [most of us] are not". His words reflected long liberal discourses on Latin American lack. "Yeah, this is a very young democracy, and I wouldn't even say democracy. It's a very young attempt at democracy and I don't know, I feel like the civil society has yet to, to learn how to walk". He believed in the possibility of progress, though, indeed saw it in the present: "I think these are great years for being an activist in El Salvador".

"There is a lot of space for you", I agreed.

"Yeah, and these are great years not because being an activist is easy but because being an activist is very difficult but possible. In the past it was very difficult but impossible. I said we're clumsy but being clumsy and surviving is a sign of a little more freedom". Cautiously, then, Ricardo had signed up for the party of hope.

He saw hope in the way youth of his generation were overcoming — at least a little — their parents' polarization. "I think the big lesson from [the Indignados and other protests of 2011-2012] was that a lot of people from different ways of thinking can get together around a topic and try to put aside the differences. To try to put aside the fact that we won't agree on 80 percent of the topics". At the time, the organizers of the 2011 protests were still in frequent contact through WhatsApp.

> We never fight, we only have like good discussions about, for example this guy who wanted to talk about the rain forests. I'm like, 'Really? You want to pressure the state for rain forests when you have thirteen people being murdered a day. I know it's an important cause but let's do it in private'.

His parents, like so many Salvadorans of the war generation, were part of the party of memory, the liberalism of fear. They worried about Ricardo's frank public conversations. In our interview, they remembered some fallout from a youth political radio show. His father told me, "I said to [Ricardo], 'Look, make it clear that the things that people talk about are people's *opinions*, because it's difficult, these [speaking out, opposing the government] are reasons that they kill people here, and such strong comments, so out of nowhere'".

He wanted to remind Ricardo that during *la ofensiva* (and throughout the war) people were killed for their ideas. Ricardo's mother had taken a class in social psychology with one of the six Jesuit priests murdered, Ignacio Martín-Baró. "To

kill a professor to silence him is terrible", she said. "It was an excellent class, what it did was break our childish and superficial ways of seeing things, I think. The university sent us to do social investigations at the city's periphery. […] It was profound".

Five days before those murders, on November 11, 1989, Ricardo's parents had gone with friends the annual consumer exhibition held on the grounds of a national convention center. "Right after we left" the fair, his mother said, "They began to bomb". They rushed back home, in a comfortable neighborhood called La Cima, high above San Salvador. They had always felt safe there. But not this time, Ricardo's father said.

"They said that behind our house the guerrillas passed by, and the soldiers passed by, and it was dangerous. I think we had found this out on the radio that we had from the military". They eventually were able to get to a relative's house in the countryside. The event triggered memories of past traumas. Ricardo's mother and her family had fled violence in the small western town of Ciudad Arce. But 1980s San Salvador did not feel safe to her. She watched leftist movements recruit her fellow students, who then disappeared. Her husband had studied at the prestigious Jesuit Externado de San José in the late 1970s: He recalled the time as a "war of words", of kidnappings, of the murder of Romero. Once he arrived at the school to find it occupied by guerrillas.

A few years after the war, Ricardo saw a report about a guerrilla group taking hostages at the Japanese ambassador's home in Peru. "And Ricardo was so small, but he read this, or saw in in the news, and it scared him so much", his mother recalled.

> He said, 'Well if this can happen in the house of an ambassador, which is so protected, it could happen to a family like ours, that doesn't have any security'! He was seven or eight at the time […]. He was so serious! We couldn't figure out what to do. He couldn't sleep, and we had to stay with him, because he was afraid that men could get into our house.

Ricardo's fears perhaps led him to anticipate dangers. As prescient as Karen, as Alejandro, he predicted the populism that would soon dominate Salvadoran politics — though not the authoritarianism.

> When Norman Quijano announced that he was going to run [for president], the first interview he had, it was Monday night. He said that he was against [the government paying for school] uniforms and he said that we're wasting money. He was widely criticized. On Thursday he said that he was not only in favor of [giving students a free] glass of milk but he wanted to expand that to a full

> breakfast. He had this, like an epiphany and changed from Monday to Thursday. So I can only think he is a populist.

Quijano ultimately lost. Years later, Nayib Bukele, who Quijano had dismissed as "too much of a youngster" would charge him with conspiracy and electoral fraud. Quijano fled the country.

Return

I returned to El Salvador once again in February 2024, just as Bukele won a second (unconstitutional) term for presidency. By then he had begun calling the internationally lauded 1992 peace accords that ended the Salvadoran war a "pact of elites" or a "pact between the corrupt" who only negotiated for their own benefit (Maldonado 2024). The move, Ricardo would likely say, was a purely populist one, in which society is divided into 'the people,' the majorities, and the corrupt elites against which they can mobilize.

But it could be that Bukele, targeting his political enemies, stumbled upon something the majority of Salvadorans recognized, if only below the threshold of awareness: that the peace accords, too, as a contemporary "document of liberal modernity" in Mills' words, did not represent liberation for most of the country. Inequality continued. Violence continued. The fragile democracy that issued from that date was a neoliberal democracy, focused on individual risk management in a market society rather than collective emancipation.

I had arrived in El Salvador to share a draft of my manuscript with my interlocutors. It had taken me a long time to find a way to interpret what had happened between the Indignado spark of 2011 and the Bukele win of 2019. These were no longer "great years for being an activist in El Salvador", as Ricardo had said of 2012. The two-year-old State of Exception had sent thousands of police and military into the streets, seeking anyone who might be connected to gangs (or anyone named in anonymous phone calls, or certain enemies of the government). The crime rate had plummeted, though no one really knew by how much since the government only released information in tweets with unconfirmed statistics. Many people did feel safer, at least those not imprisoned or those without imprisoned family members. By then El Salvador had the highest incarceration rate in the world.

Generational shadows were no longer unsettling the activists who had emerged in 2011. The president, the onetime *muy jovencito* candidate, was born on the cusp of the Indignados' generation (in 1981). But few of my activist friends supported Bukele (unlike the majority of Salvadorans who voted). He did not seem to share the liberal, constitutional hopes of those who had marched in 2011.

When Bukele effectively fired the all the magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court in 2021, no one seemed to remember how, a decade earlier, a group of determined young people had demanded the Supreme Court's constitutional integrity be saved. Though the immediate danger passed in 2011 — the threatening decree was overturned — it was not enough. Perhaps it never would have been. Maybe the activists had just been plugging Alejandro's "hole of liberal democracy". The Indignados believed in institutions, in the balance of powers, in all the concepts so many of them had learned in youth leadership seminars and NGO talks. They wanted justice. Many even wanted social justice. But they did not seem to recognize liberalism's exclusion clauses.

Many of their parents knew about those limits, if only intuitively, as manifested in their anxiety about activism, about speaking out. The shadows they cast on their offspring may well have reflected knowledge of the fragility of their positions. Historically, in a country of European conquest and colonization, most of them had been excluded from the promises made in each of the country's 13 constitutions since 1841.

I met Laura to share my manuscript about halfway through my trip. She took a long pause after listening to her own words as cited in this essay. "It sounds like a different person. I'm not the same person now". She continued to yearn for emancipatory politics, she told me. She still struggled against injustice. And now she even had a good job supporting causes she believed in. But she asked me not to name it. She did not feel safe.

"There's fear now", she said. Soldiers had recently confronted in his home a close friend of hers, a well-known activist who had criticized Bukele on social media. She pointed to neighboring Nicaragua, where former guerrilla leader Daniel Ortega had become a dictator who imprisoned his political opponents. As in that country, she said, "The social movements here are disarticulated. People are going clandestine". She wanted to "pass the torch" on to a new generation, she said, "but there's no one to pass it on to". The aperture that the Indignados and other activists had found and widened back in the early 2010s had contracted, if not closed. At least for now.

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Ellen Moodie
is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Director of Global Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She first became involved in Central American solidarity work in 1982. In 2010 she published *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace: Crime, Uncertainty, and the Transition to Democracy*

(University of Pennsylvania Press). Her forthcoming book is *Indignant Liberalism: Protest, Political Change, and El Salvador's Post-postwar Generation*.
Email: emoodie@illinois.edu

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