State Violence and Revolution: Lessons from El Salvador
UMass Amherst
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Featuring:

Carlos Henríquez Consalvi (“Santiago”), voice of the FMLN guerrilla radio, Radio Venceremos, during the Salvadoran Civil War (1981-1992), and current director of the Museum of the Word and the Image in San Salvador

Rosa Rivera Rivera, former organizer for the Union of Farm Workers (UTC) in the 1970s, and co-founder of the Living Memory Committee in Arcatao, El Salvador

Diana Sierra Becerra, organizer with the Pioneer Valley Workers Center and postdoctoral fellow with the National Domestic Workers Alliance

[Transcript]:

KEVIN YOUNG: Good evening. My name is Kevin Young and I’m an Assistant Professor of History at UMass Amherst. This is the second event of the History department’s 2018 Feinberg Family Distinguished Lecture Series, which is organized around the theme Another World Is Possible: Revolutionary Visions, Past and Present. The series is possible through the generosity of an alumnus of the History department, Kenneth R. Feinberg, and through the support of more than three dozen community and university partners.

Before introducing our first speaker, I’d like to give a few basic facts about the Salvadoran Civil War. The war began officially in 1981 and ended with the 1992 Peace Accords. Around 75,000 people died, the vast majority of whom were killed by the Salvadoran government and a network of right-wing death squads, funded and trained by the U.S. government. According to the 1993 UN Truth Commission report, the regime and the right-wing paramilitaries committed 85% of the violence, against 5% committed by the leftist guerrillas.

But the war began unofficially long before 1981. The 1970s witnessed the rise of large and powerful social movements – of peasants, workers, students, teachers, and more. The Salvadoran government and the big landowners responded with vicious repression, killing thousands of civilians by the end of the decade. In 1980 five guerrilla groups
formed the FMLN, the coalition that waged an armed insurgency against the state until 1992 before transitioning into an electoral party.

From 1992 to the present, El Salvador has technically been at peace. But it is still the site of enormous poverty and violence. Salvadoran emigrants, meanwhile, face other types of violence at the hands of gangs, human traffickers, and the anti-immigrant apparatus of the U.S. government. The war ended, officially, but in other ways it continues.

This is the context in which our three speakers live and work. Despite the violence they’ve witnessed and endured in their lives, they have also dedicated themselves to the belief that “another world is possible” – that human beings are capable of building a just, democratic, and peaceful world. This is why we have organized the event. We have asked them to share their experiences of hardship, but also the visions of a better future that have motivated them. We have also asked them to speak about the role of historical memory in the quest for a better world.

Carlos Henríquez Consalvi (known more commonly by his wartime pseudonym, “Santiago”) is the founder of Radio Venceremos, a clandestine radio of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, a Salvadoran peasant insurgency that fought the U.S.-backed military regimes from 1980-1992. The guerrilla radio documented human rights violations, led educational campaigns, and challenged the Salvadoran and U.S. governments. Henríquez Consalvi is the author of *La terquedad del izote*, a memoir narrating his wartime experiences. He has also authored short stories and novels. After the war, Henríquez Consalvi founded the Museum of the Word and the Image in San Salvador, El Salvador, and currently serves as its director. The museum promotes historical memory in order to denounce state violence and advance social justice. The museum makes history relevant to younger generations through the use of oral history, popular pedagogy, and innovative engagement strategies, from cartoon animations to exhibitions.

[Applause]

SANTIAGO: First of all, thank you for the invitation to participate in this event, one with the suggestive name “Another World Is Possible.” My intervention this evening will be accompanied by images that belong to the archive in the museum that I direct in San Salvador, the Museum of the Word and the Image [for the images, see the video recording of the event - editor]. I come here to share with you an experience of social struggle in a very small country of Central America that during 70 years of military governments suffered repression, deprivation of liberties, tortures, and intervention by foreign governments, especially the government of the United States.
In the 1970s I was a university student studying journalism, like some of you in the audience here today. And when we looked at any of our countries, we saw military dictatorships, with no freedom of expression, and we asked ourselves, What kind of journalism can we do in a country where there is no freedom of expression? Where Archbishop [Oscar] Romero was assassinated for denouncing human rights violations? So we as students decided that we must get involved in social struggles. We left the university to participate in social struggles, believing that a different country was possible, and that another world was possible.

My experience can be summarized in my participation as a journalism student in the construction of an insurgent radio in the mountains of Morazán [department], which for 11 years transmitted in a small territory, informing El Salvador and the world about what was happening from 1981 to 1992. This experience was alongside peasant communities like the ones that Rosa represents here today. In the 1970s these peasants organized Christian Base Communities, seeking to build heaven on earth on the basis of solidarity and their Christian thought. These communities immediately began suffering repression by the police and military forces of the government. For 11 years this population lived through the horrors of war, repression, and exodus to Honduras, where many took refuge in camps organized by the United Nations.

At that time, what was our vision of a just society? We learned it from these peasant communities. They were demanding land, land that in the 19th century started to be privatized by the powerful sectors in the country. These peasants’ vision of a just society involved access to education and health services. We [students] dreamed of a country without prisons for those in the opposition. We dreamed of free elections, [and] of universities that were autonomous.

At that point Archbishop Romero was the last voice who was denouncing the crimes against humanity. On March 24, 1980, he was killed by the ones in power, who thought that by killing him they could suppress popular demands for a just society. But on the contrary, as we see in these images, on January 22, 1980, 300,000 Salvadorans took to the streets of San Salvador demanding justice and raising the flags of freedom.

Why is it important to preserve the historical memory of these struggles, which we are doing now at the Museum of the Word and the Image? Because we believe that in order to chart a course for the 21st century, that in order to build that just society for which so many peasants and students have been fighting for so many years, in order to achieve these dreams, we have to get to know this past. And that’s why we’re working, especially with the younger generations, trying to consolidate what we call a culture of peace, which
starts with memory. The museum is in San Salvador, where it houses the most important archives and documents about the armed conflict. But it also keeps archives on the cultural history of the country, archives that have to do with writers, poets, and the women who were made invisible by the official history [of the country]. I’d like to invite you students and all the university community to make use of these archives, so that you come to El Salvador to research this history of dignity and sacrifice. Professor Kevin has threatened us [laughter], has offered to us, to come work with a very important archive that deals with this history. In a recent interview, I was asked, what can I tell students here in the United States? I answered that the responsibility [for the future] will soon lie with university students like you, because you’re going to be the ones ruling this country, and it is in your hands. Your responsibility is to make real that phrase: “Another world is possible.” And how to do it? Well, you’re going to be the ones deciding the destiny of the United States. I imagine here can be sitting among us the future woman president of the United States. And your responsibility is to change the shameful and unjust foreign policy of the United States, respecting the rights of migrants and the sovereignty and national interests of our countries in Latin America.

This that we’re seeing [images] is part of that everyday work that we do in El Salvador, archiving the records of Radio Venceremos. We preserve the oral testimonies of the victims of massacres like the one in El Mozote [in 1981], a massacre that killed 1,000 peasants, 400 of whom were children. The U.S. administration of that time was deeply implicated in that massacre.

Our main work is with the young people who come to the museum to try to understand the structural causes of violence. We think that if we understand the violence of the past, it can help us understand and solve the problem of violence in the present.

[...] 

I want to end by saying that it is true that we are living in difficult times, in El Salvador and in the world. What gives us the strength to keep on dreaming about that possible world is that we believe in the Salvadoran people, because we know the deep human fiber that makes up the people of El Salvador. It’s a people who in 1932 suffered one of the biggest massacres in Latin America, yet a people who survives today with its dreams intact. Peasants, above all, maintain their dreams of a more just and egalitarian society.

That’s why we’re working with these young people, because we know that the realization of those dreams is in their hands. We have the firm conviction that those young people are going to build that society that we, the adults, weren’t successful in building. And even if it’s true, that together with social movements, we achieved a series of big
transformations, there’s still a lot to do. There’s still a lot to dream and, especially, to build.

I’ll finish my presentation by giving my heart out to the people of Massachusetts, who during the whole armed conflict played an extremely important role in solidarity with El Salvador. In the universities of this region there was a network of solidarity that, when we were in the mountains, gave us strength and gave us the courage that we needed to continue in our struggle. And so thank you. And I see that here there’s a presence of unions, of social movements, of workers’ movements. So thank you very much for that solidarity, which is nothing else but love between peoples. Thank you.

[ Applause ]

KEVIN: Thank you, Santiago, for your words. It’s a privilege to listen to you and to learn about your experiences. For those of us here today, it’s important to remember that Santiago, at that time, was seen as an extreme threat by our government here in the United States. He was one of the government’s most wanted targets. If they had gotten the chance they would surely have tortured him, killed him, or worse. So it’s miraculous that he’s alive.

Our second presenter is Rosa Rivera. Rosa is a former organizer of the Farm Workers Union (UTC), a militant Salvadoran peasant union that organized during the 1970s and 1980s. The union confronted the power of landowners, death squads, and government officials. Rivera also organized with the Association of Salvadoran Women (AMES), a revolutionary feminist organization that organized peasant women within the guerrilla territories. She is a founder and current member of the Living Memory Committee, in Arcatao, Chalatenango department, a group dedicated to the preservation of historical memory. The committee has led exhumations, constructed a sanctuary to house the remains of victims of state violence, organized commemorative events, and is in the process of creating a museum.

[ Applause ]

ROSA: First, I want to say thank you for the opportunity to be here in this place, and for this slogan, “Another world is possible.” I’m going to talk a little bit about what Santiago has already talked about, but it’s the reality [that we lived]. In the 1960s and 70s, the only income we peasants had was from the coffee harvest. I remember that when I was little, my parents would take me to the coffee plantations. On the plantations they would give us 2 tortillas and some beans, but only to the adults who were working in the fields. And the rest of us, those who weren’t harvesting the coffee or were working other little tasks,
we wouldn’t be fed. The wages of the coffee cutters had to cover their families’ food, too, but it was never enough. There was no place to sleep. We would sleep under the coffee plants, and we would get wet when it rained. The only thing we had to drink was the rain – the water from the rain, which was captured in tanks, but left uncovered. It didn’t matter if there were animals swimming in the tanks, [or] if animals died inside. And I remember from this reality that I lived, that [we received] almost nothing for a kilo of coffee. It was as if we were just donating our labor power for free. We didn’t have any right to demand more in the face of this injustice. If parts of the plants were broken, if branches were broken, the cost of the branch would be subtracted from our wages. If we were sick, we had to go to work anyway, or else we’d be fired.

This situation of extreme poverty that we lived, this exploitation that we suffered, led us to develop our consciousness. I was just a youngster, 17 years old, when we started fighting to defend our rights. We defended the rights of both women and men, because when it comes to work, we’re both discriminated against and exploited. And that’s one of the reasons that, from the time I was a child, I didn’t have the opportunity to study, because of a lack of resources. I grew up knowing that reality of injustice. The landowners would stomp on you with their boots, so you couldn’t speak out. They crushed you with the boots of exploitation and oppression and violence.

When I was 15, I had never had shoes because the only thing that my parents could earn as wages was from the coffee harvests. And it was only enough to buy a little food and some basic clothing. So we lived shoeless. Older people didn’t have shoes either. So in that moment, I was thinking, and I asked my father, something that maybe at my age wasn’t proper, but it was on my mind. I asked him, “Who do you love more – your boys or your girls?” And he answered, “For me, you’re all equal, and I love you all equally.” And then I asked him, “Then why does God love some of his children more than others? Why are there some children of God who have a lot of things while the majority don’t even have shoes?” And he answered with a very wise reflection – my father was illiterate, but very wise. He said, “My child, we are poor because we give our labor power away for the coffee harvests. That is why we are poor while the owners of the coffee plantations get rich.”

That gave me a major foundation for understanding God, a God who was close to those who suffer. And that’s when we started to work with the Christian Base Communities. We started to form the Christian Base Communities around the end of 1973. We started to organize and to struggle for reforms, seeking immediate improvements as well as longer-term changes. We were looking for better life conditions. Why? Because we the people were asking for places to live as we were working in the plantations, so that we had the basic things we needed. And so in these communities we started to educate
people and raise consciousness with the idea of a Jesus who was suffering together with the people, and also through the image of Mary, who saw her son die on the cross.

And that’s when we saw the repression start. It was a selective kind of repression. For me, in my community, the war started in 1974. July 30, 1975, was the massacre of university students [during a march in San Salvador]. And there we could see that [the state] was not only repressing peasants, but also students, teachers, and workers. And it was around that time that the Christian Base Communities got together and founded the UTC, the Union of Farm Workers. We got together and started protesting for respect, for a more just life, for the right to access health care and education, for the right to dignified employment, for the right to have water, to have electricity. Because those rights were all denied to peasants.

And it was then when they started with selective repression, when they started killing peasants, teachers, students, priests. The series of massacres started.

The people never chose war. We were forced into it, in order to live and survive. The people were seeking food. The response was repression. And that repression, those massacres, as [Santiago] said already, [became especially visible] when they killed a priest, Rutilio Grande, in 1977. That same year, ours was the first Christian Base Community in Chalatenango department that was forcibly displaced. Since then I have not lived in the village where I grew up. We fled to other communities.

I remember when Archbishop Romero visited Arcatao. He was stopped and detained three times as he was trying to get there. The army already had the paramilitaries, ORDEN, working with them, and before he could reach Arcatao, they took him out of his car and detained him with his hands above his head. It was a group of us women who went and got him and led him to the church. We went to the door of the church where the military was, and people were telling Archbishop Romero that he needed security, and he said that he did not, that the people were his security. Eventually the soldiers let us enter.

And then he offered us a reflection. He said, “I see how they treat the green tree, how would they treat a dry tree?” He was talking about us, the peasants. He was saying that his work was alongside the people, with the people, and for the people.

So this is the way that we became more and more aware of reality. The killings and the disappearances didn’t demoralize us. The death of Archbishop Romero was like fertilizer for the spirit of the people: we realized that we couldn’t stay silent.
And it’s not true that those massacres were directed against the guerrillas. They targeted the defenseless civilian population.

That’s why for me, solidarity is the most important thing. Why? We were so happy when we had a chance to listen to the international news. When churches and organizations were protesting against the School of the Americas here in the United States, when they protested U.S. military aid to El Salvador. We know that governments at the time were funding the Salvadoran military, and especially the U.S. government. But inside the U.S. there was a large population of people in solidarity with us, to whom we owe so much, as [Santiago] said. Although there were certainly pro-war people, there were also people with human hearts who fought to defend the people who were dying, and are still dying. For me it is very important to maintain these networks of solidarity.

It’s [also] important to preserve this memory and make our young people aware of the past. Why is it important for them to know what happened in the past? It is only by knowing the past that we can work for the present and the future. It is true that we cannot recover [i.e., change – ed.] the past, but we can work together for the future, preparing that other world that is possible. And it is only possible if we all come together to fight for the rights of everybody. The recovery of historical memory is most important for the younger generations.

In our [Living Memory] Committee [in Arcatao], we are working toward 4 goals. When we started the Committee, we dreamed about building a museum, about publishing a book, about exhuming the bodies of the martyrs, and about building a sanctuary for them. Why? Because even if books speak of the bombings and the massacres, it is [also] indispensable to visit the museum where you can see the remnants of the bombs, some exploded and some unexploded. You can visit our martyrs’ sanctuary and see the bones that we have exhumed and are currently keeping there.

Why did we decide to make a separate sanctuary instead of burying the victims in the cemetery? Because we all go to the cemetery. The idea of the sanctuary is to preserve the historical memory, so that new generations learn the history of what happened.

We have only been able to build this space because we have solidarity that helps us to do it. We made the plans, but it’s only through solidarity that we’ve been able to realize them. And now, we are also hoping to build a museum house because we have a museum, but we don’t yet have a museum house. We dream that in the future we could have this other building to accompany the museum.

There have been different types of struggles in different periods of our lives, because
our country, it is true that the bombs have stopped, but the war continues. And there may even be people here who had to flee El Salvador because of violence, who emigrated out of terrible fear for their lives and who, once here, endure another terrible fear, of deportation. In our country, there are no job opportunities. If all the Salvadorans here were deported, we don’t know what would happen, because El Salvador lives off the remittances that migrants who are working here send back to our country. It’s vital to be aware of this reality. There are no opportunities in our country. There are many people there who have studied very hard for years and gotten their degrees, but they have no jobs. And that’s one of the causes that compel people to emigrate.

As young people, as students, as professors, and people who are already in government positions, what I ask of you is that you, whatever job you are doing, that you always fight for human rights. When you who are now young get into positions in the government, be aware of how the taxes that you pay are being spent. Don’t allow this money to be used to massacre the people, make sure that this money is invested in human development. If those billions of dollars that U.S. administrations sent as military aid to El Salvador were invested in the development of people, emigration would not be at such a high level today. The development of a people is not so much about infrastructure, as about how each human being develops intellectually.

So I want to say that I feel very proud for having this invitation, and I also invite you to visit the country. There are also many communities that you could visit at any time. The violence that the media broadcasts is not everywhere in El Salvador, it’s only in some regions. There are regions and communities that you can visit and enjoy our clean air and see how beautiful our country is. I want to invite you all and say that El Salvador is your home. And our communities are your home.

Finally I say thank you to you all, to God, to Archbishop Romero, and to those of you who invited me. Thank you very much.

[ Applause ]

KEVIN: Thank you for sharing your story with us. Reading a history book is one thing, listening to those who’ve lived that history is another. Both Rosa and Santiago lost close friends and family during the war. For me it’s very moving to hear them speak. In Rosa’s case, I think it’s worth emphasizing just how young she was in the 1970s when she started to organize. As a teenager – younger than most of the students in this room – she was already an important local peasant leader. Santiago on the other hand was already old...

[ Laughter ]
For those of us who live in the United States, we sometimes think that we live in desperate times. But for most of us, there’s no comparison with what Rosa, Santiago, and so many others lived through. However, in this context, they dared to keep fighting. They kept believing that another world really was possible.

Our third presenter is Diana Sierra Becerra. Diana is an organizer at the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, an organization that builds the collective power of immigrants and workers. She is also a historian and popular educator. Her book manuscript, tentatively titled Insurgent Butterflies: Gender and Revolution in El Salvador, documents the feminist praxis that working-class and peasant women developed within labor and armed movements during the late 20th century. As a postdoctoral fellow, she is developing the project, Putting History in Domestic Workers’ Hands, a popular education initiative to empower and mobilize domestic workers on a massive scale. The project is a collaboration between Smith College academics and organizers from the National Domestic Workers Alliance.

[ Applause ]

DIANA: I would like to thank our speakers and the organizers of this event. I am just one person representing a much larger organization.

At the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, workers and immigrants organize to build their collective power. We organize to win improvements in our daily lives and also dismantle the root causes of exploitation. If you are part of the Workers Center, please stand up. I would also like to acknowledge our comrade Lucio who is living in a church a few minutes from here. He has been in sanctuary since October 2017.

Many of leaders at the Worker Center are from El Salvador. 1 in 5 Salvadorans live in the United States. In January 2018, the Trump administration cancelled Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans. This means that close to 200,000 Salvadorans will be at risk for deportation.

What will it take to stop deportations? What will it take to abolish ICE? What will it take to win legalization for all undocumented immigrants? How will we support refugees who are fleeing from climate change?

The revolutionary history of El Salvador offers important lessons for the immigrant rights movement. Salvadoran organizers practiced anti-imperialist politics and built alternatives to capitalism. Their vision of liberation is more relevant than ever and can
guide the immigrant rights movement forward.

In the United States, we hardly discuss why immigrants are forced to migrate. U.S. intervention, militarily and economically, forces people to migrate. Understanding the connections between imperialism and migration has important implications for our demands. It means that we have to protect people in the here and now, but also work to address the root causes of migration.

We must defend the protections that immigrants have won. This means fighting to protect DACA and TPS. We must also win new protections. We must fight for the legalization of all 11 million undocumented immigrants.

But we must also fight to dismantle the institutions that inflict state violence against immigrants. We must abolish ICE, an agency that terrorizes the victims of U.S. imperialism. We must abolish Border Patrol, which murders refugees with impunity as they try to reach safety. Claudia Patricia Gómez Gonzáles, a young Guatemalan woman who was shot in May 2018, is one its many victims.

The immigrant rights movement must stop the policies that force people to migrate in the first place. To do that, we have to be committed anti-imperialists. We must denounce how the U.S. war machine murders people abroad, traumatizes veterans, and funnels domestic resources away from education and healthcare.

We must also understand the economics of imperialism. Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has transferred wealth from the rich to the poor. How has it done this? Capitalists and politicians have privatized social services, cut social spending, and have deregulated financial institutions. Corporations are free to travel across borders to exploit resources and labor in the Global South. Meanwhile, workers are forced to flee violence and poverty and are criminalized as they go north.

This is where ICE enters the picture. ICE is a racist institution that protects the interests of capitalists. Capitalists use the threat of retaliation and deportation to prevent immigrant workers from organizing. This fear creates a cheap and easily exploitable labor force.

Climate change will only increase forced migration. A 2009 study (from the Global Humanitarian Forum) estimated that climate change is already killing 300,000 people a year. The deaths may increase to 500,000 a year by 2050. The UN-affiliated International Organization for Migration predicts 200 million climate refugees by 2050. And these are conservative estimates.
At the last event [on September 6], Kali Akuno, a black radical organizer, asked an important question. Why is it easier to imagine the end of the planet, than to imagine the end of capitalism? To save life on earth, we must destroy capitalism. And we must build an economy that puts people over profits.

For Salvadoran revolutionaries, overthrowing capitalism was absolutely necessary. But equally necessary was the work of building an alternative to capitalism.

In the guerrilla territories, peasants created councils to democratically manage their lives. The councils addressed important needs such as security, food, education, and healthcare. The councils kept people alive but also represented the seeds of the new society. In short, peasants built alternative institutions as they waged a struggle against capitalism. Some people call this “pre-figurative politics.”

At the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, we have drawn inspiration from the organizing of Salvadoran peasants. They taught us that ordinary people can lead their own movements. With that principle in mind, we have built our Worker Committees. In the committees, workers and immigrants identify solutions to collective problems. All our major campaigns have emerged from the committees.

Salvadoran peasants taught us that movements can confront state violence in the here and now, and build an alternative. With that principle in mind, we created Sanctuary in the Streets (SiS).

Sanctuary in the Streets is a rapid response network. It has 2,500 people and 20 congregations. The network organizes against three major problems: 1) workplace abuse; 2) detentions, raids, and deportations; and 3) hate crimes. SiS provides workers and immigrants with the resources and support they need to organize. Our goal is to disrupt the institutions that profit from the exploitation and oppression of workers and immigrants.

The councils in the guerrilla territories divided their work into committees. Sanctuary in the Streets also has a committee structure. Its capacity is developed through a Steering Committee with seven volunteer-led subcommittees. Some of the subcommittees include media, rideshares, and childcare.

Solidarity is one of the most important principles I have learned from Salvadoran peasants. Solidarity allowed peasants, urban workers, and students to build a united front. Teachers mobilized to support peasant-led land occupations, while peasants bused
to the cities to support worker strikes, marches, and factory occupations. International solidarity helped peasants stay alive as they fought the most powerful empire on earth.

At the Workers Center, solidarity allows us to recognize how oppressive systems impact people in different ways, and how those systems represent our common enemies. Solidarity allows us to recognize that the liberation of one group is entwined with the liberation of another.

[ Applause ]

Transcription by Jill Remillard; translations and editing by Jeff Diteman, Elena Igartuburu, and Kevin Young.