

Grassroots Peacemaking: The Paradox of Reconciliation in El Salvador

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Reconciliation would be if these combatants were friends before the war, and then became enemies during the war, and in the postwar period they became friends once again.—Diego, San Salvador, July 2010¹

MY EXPLORATION OF POSTWAR “RECONCILIATION” IN EL SALVADOR STARTED thousands of miles away, in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, in 2004. I had traveled to Brazil to visit Diego, a former guerrilla combatant of El Salvador’s Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). To my surprise, Diego was in Brazil to attend a course on nonviolent communication along with Roberto, a former captain in the Salvadoran Army’s Atlacatl Battalion. My initial reaction to witnessing these former enemies attending the training together was one of unease.

The Salvadoran armed forces and FMLN fought a civil war from 1980 to 1992, leaving over 75,000 people dead, 500,000 internally displaced, and over one million in exile (Thompson 1997, 456; United Nations 1992, i). The army, and in particular the Atlacatl Battalion, was notorious for committing horrendous atrocities throughout the conflict, including the 1989 assassination of six Jesuit priests, as well as their housekeeper and her daughter, and for the 1981 El Mozote massacre, in which over 1,000 peasants were killed. The war divided El Salvador—a country about the size of Massachusetts, and with a population of five million people—into two camps: those who supported the state and its armed forces and those who supported the guerrilla movement. This history made the amicable engagement between these two ex-combatants difficult for me to digest.

In trying to come to terms with what I was witnessing, I asked Diego: “How did you become friends with a member of the army?” He responded,

There are no saints in war. Most guerrillas fought because the army was bloodthirsty from the beginning to the end. How will a son forget that his mother was killed after being raped by a soldier? [But also,] how would

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the wife of a soldier forgive a guerrilla for killing her husband in front of her? (Author's notes, Brazil, July 2004)

In 2010, still perplexed by my experience in Brazil six years earlier, I returned to my home country of El Salvador as a graduate student to research practices of reconciliation among ex-combatants. In the course of my investigation, I observed that certain sectors of society frequently condemn former enemy combatants' efforts to coexist and forge common ground. Many victim-survivors view ex-combatants from both sides—particularly former soldiers—as war criminals. Many at the extremes of the political establishment view the coming together of ex-combatants as weakening the ideological purity of their parties. In the postwar context, the war experiences of ex-combatants position them at the intersection of complex social relations. Practices of coexistence raise the following question: How can we, as Salvadorans, address our recent history in a way that enables us to create a peaceful, democratic present?

My exploration of this question is based upon six years of informal observations and on participant observation and 20 interviews that I conducted in the summer of 2010. The latter employed a structured format to gather information about the extent to which reconciliation has taken place in El Salvador, particularly among former enemy combatants. When individuals did not wish to be audiotaped, I followed an open-ended interview format (conversations).

My research proceeded from the assumption that my subjects would recognize their coexistence practices as reconciliation. This supposition was challenged during an interview with a former guerrilla combatant. After the civil war ended, he explained, "Guerrilla and army combatants did not talk to one another, assuming the interactions would result in a confrontation.... Then, lack of healthcare for veterans pushed us beyond fears, and to work together to call on the state for help" (Author's notes, July 2010). However, when I identified these practices as "reconciliation"—the term used by most transitional justice scholarship (Shaw et al. 2010; Sieder et al 1998; Theidon 2004; Teitel 2000; Wilson 2001)—this ex-combatant and subsequent interviewees rejected the term. This led me to question my own understanding of the concept and its meaning in postwar El Salvador. It also prompted me to reexamine state-led reconciliation efforts and to explore grassroots alternatives for peaceful coexistence.

The literature on transitional justice argues that for a society to reconcile and transition to peace, it is necessary to publicly address human rights violations committed during a conflict (Hayner 2002, 24; Teitel 2000). This process deters future violations and promotes respect for human rights, marking the beginning of a democratic regime and social relations based on the rule of law. Some of this literature argues in favor of war crimes tribunals as effective mechanisms for persuading individuals to comply with these norms (Futamura 2008; Moore and Pubantz 2008). Tribunals hold public officials and security personnel accountable

for their crimes through a victim-centered legal system that challenges wartime impunity. Other scholars have suggested that truth and reconciliation commissions are a better approach (Popkin and Roht-Arriaza 1995; Wilson 2001). Instead of strictly focusing on legal punishment, commissions seek to publicly unearth the truth about violations committed during the conflict, which in turn provides a space for individual and social healing, thereby opening a path for peaceful coexistence. Although this literature offers insights that are useful for achieving a societal transition to peace, the debate assumes that individuals will share the state's understanding of reconciliation and agree with a state-led process to attain it.

A group of scholars critically examined this assumption in relation to truth and reconciliation commissions. They assert that state-led reconciliation and its human rights discourse are best understood as top-down efforts to incorporate individuals into national projects (Speed 2008; Wilson 2001). In practice, efforts of commissions to reunite society and forge peace through truth-telling and forgiveness have been based on unequal power dynamics between international actors, the state, and individuals (Shaw et al. 2010; Theidon 2004; Wilson 2001). The result has been that most of these processes take place within governmentality frameworks of newly formed state bureaucracies, and at the behest of individuals and sectors behind state power (Theidon 2004, 256; Wilson 2001, 19). In South Africa, the political and religious elite used the reconciliation process to create a common understanding of the nation-state as a postapartheid regime (Wilson 2001). In Peru, the political elite used the process to demonize Shining Path fighters in order to avoid engagement with local demands for reconciliation (Theidon 2004, 254–58). These state-led processes thus departed from localized practices, interests, and understandings of reconciliation.

In light of this critique, these scholars argue that reconciliation must be studied at the community level (Theidon 2004; Shaw et al. 2010). According to Theidon (2004),

If we are interested in recuperating people and communities, it is necessary to understand how these concepts [e.g., reconciliation] are defined and how the relationship between them and a particular culture is conceptualized.... [Because] what is at stake in postwar contexts is the reconstruction of social networks, of the cultural forms and economic networks, and the reinvention of life rituals that allow a community to make sense of the suffering experienced and produced. (Author's translation)²

For these scholars, such analysis brings to light the ways in which people practice reconciliation and come to terms with the physical and psychological wounds in their everyday lives. Much of this critique is salutary; yet in focusing our attention on the local, these authors assume that the concept of reconciliation is widely accepted. I advance this dialogue by exploring a case in which the term is rejected.

Expanding the analytic lens beyond official understandings of reconciliation in El Salvador reveals that the term has been equated with “forgive and forget.” Thus, a window for analyzing the reconstruction of social networks in post-conflict societies opens. Such an understanding offers insight into why perpetrators or victim-survivors of violence might view state-led “reconciliation” as irrelevant to their experiences. To ignore this dynamic risks reinscribing power disparities between marginalized groups and the state. My examination of coexistence practices among ex-combatants shows how social relations in a postwar society are formed and suggests that questioning the common-sense notion of “reconciliation,” along with the social stratification that underlies conflict, will sharpen our analysis.

My ethnographic research suggests that the negative attitudes of Salvadoran ex-combatants toward the word “reconciliation” are not directed at the concept *per se*. Rather, they convey a critique of the state’s understanding of the term and its actions toward that end. Ex-combatants with whom I worked were motivated to create their own practices of coexistence (e.g., friendships, political alliances), which I term “grassroots peacemaking.” Among the practices I observed were supporting neighbors in economic need and advocating for health-care benefits for civil war veterans. These ex-combatants work collectively, but in an ad hoc manner that is not aligned with a particular institution. Instead, they are dissidents who are often at odds with the organizations they once represented. My subject of analysis is this “paradox of reconciliation”: those who have been perpetrators and victims of violence are now leading grassroots peacemaking processes in El Salvador.³

The next section will contextualize the causes of El Salvador’s civil war and offer an account of the premises and applications of state-led reconciliation practices. Then I examine how discourses of political stability and wartime rhetoric propagated by El Salvador’s mainstream political parties create a space for grassroots alternatives to state-led reconciliation efforts. Ideologies are not the problem. Instead, the polarizing discourses of the two main political parties tend to obscure pressing social issues. Finally, I explore how ex-combatants understand reconciliation and how grassroots peacemaking efforts reveal their resistance to top-down projects through their own approach to reconstructing social networks. In contrast to the state’s understanding of reconciliation, these efforts advance alternative notions of coexistence, community, and justice.

El Salvador’s Transition to Democracy, Peace, and National Reconciliation

On January 16, 1992, Peace Accords between the government of El Salvador and the FMLN ended 12 years of civil war. The Accords committed the state to the rule of law, land redistribution, protection of human rights, privatization of public services, demilitarization of domestic law enforcement, and subjugation of the security apparatus to civil power. The FMLN turned its weapons in as part of a UN-backed process and became an official political party that was expected to vie

for state power in the electoral arena. The army's size was dramatically reduced, while the National Police and state-sanctioned "death squads" were dismantled. In their place, the Accords created the National Civilian Police (PNC) and required that 30 percent of the new officers be from the FMLN and the existing police ranks. Many rank-and-file fighters from both sides received compensation to aid with the transition to civilian life. These steps marked a radical departure from a history of economic exploitation supported by state repression.⁴

Given the country's sociopolitical polarization, the negotiators recognized that to attain peace and national reconciliation the country would have to deal with the human rights violations committed during the war and the underlying social disparities that led to the conflict (United Nations 1992, 13, 29).⁵ The Accords sanctioned the UN-backed 1992–1993 Salvadoran Truth Commission (STC), which sought to investigate "serious acts of violence ... whose impact on society urgently demands that the public should know the truth" (*ibid.*, 29). Over 22,000 human rights violations were reported to the STC, including extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, and torture, with 5 percent attributed to the FMLN and the remainder attributed to the armed forces, police, and other state-sanctioned groups (STC 1993, 57–58). The commission hoped that publicizing these findings would be a catalyst for bringing closure to the individual and social wounds produced by state repression and the violence of war.

The experience in El Salvador differed from that of South Africa, where a truth and reconciliation commission engaged in symbolic procedural justice for many years. Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress resistance movement shared power with their old adversary, the National Party, in leading the transition to peace. In El Salvador, the mandate of the truth commission investigation was limited to six months, after which it was to publicly reveal the names of accused human rights violators and suggest mechanisms for punishing those who were found guilty. The government remained in the hands of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*, ARENA), which had come to power in the closing years of the war. Despite the STC's limited powers, the process generated hope for justice among victims of human rights violations and their families.

This limited potential for "reconciliation" was short-lived, however, when the Legislative Assembly approved amnesty laws that undermined any semblance of substantive justice. On January 23, 1992, the Assembly—composed of deputies from political parties predating the Peace Accords—granted amnesty to various government forces and FMLN members. Since the law did not protect everyone, on March 22, 1993, the day after the STC published its findings, a newly elected assembly passed an even further-reaching amnesty law. This law effectively stripped the STC process of its power to recommend prosecutions for human rights violations committed during the war (*Ley de Amnistía* 1993). These laws constituted the state's primary acts of "reconciliation" until January 2010, when President Mauricio Funes formally asked the forgiveness of the Salvadoran people

for atrocities committed by the state during the war.⁶ Nonetheless, the amnesty laws remain in effect.⁷

ARENA used reconciliation efforts to promote its economic agenda. Inscribed within the Peace Accords, such efforts were intended to “consolidate peace and make progress towards the reunification of Salvadoran society.... The policy of privatization shall increase society’s share of ownership by affording workers access to ownership of privatized companies” (United Nations 1992, 77, 82). In line with this goal, ARENA’s policies privatized many public services.⁸ In 1998 alone, the government sold San Salvador’s power utility, the Salvadoran bank system, and the National Telecommunication Administration (ANTEL), resulting in massive layoffs of state employees. This contributed to a growing gap between rich and poor, an underlying cause of the armed conflict. Although the government viewed economic restructuring as a step toward reconciliation, the amnesty laws and neoliberal reforms thwarted the hopes for social transformation of many victim-survivors.

Despite the shortcomings of the accords and amnesty laws, the international political community regarded the Salvadoran peace process as one of the most successful in the world. Reflecting on the peace process before El Salvador’s Legislative Assembly in March 1999, then-US President Bill Clinton said: “A battlefield of ideology has been transformed into a marketplace of ideas. Decades of struggle have brought a victory to democracy.” He stated that “no nation has traveled a greater distance to overcome deeper wounds” in as short a time as El Salvador (Clinton 2000, 336). In June 2010, US Congressman James McGovern said that, “El Salvador is a country that has made great strides toward reconciliation, but to this day it still struggles” (Author’s notes).⁹

In the view of leaders representing right and left national parties, the Peace Accords were a “success” (*Prensa Grafica* 2007). For members of the right-wing ARENA party, the accords ended the civil war and prevented the guerrilla movement from attaining state power through armed struggle. For the FMLN, the accords were a mechanism to change the structure of power and domination that had long afflicted the country. Success was equated with establishing democratic peace as the norm, and politics, rather than warfare, as the means for contesting social, political, and economic conflicts.

Post-Conflict Democracy: Between Political Polarization and National Reconciliation

During an afternoon interview with Roberto, an ex-army captain, and Rubén, formerly a rank-and-file soldier, I mentioned that a former army general had avoided my questions about postwar reconciliation. According to Rubén, “This situation is not rare. The people at the top usually think that other people will do them harm. It’s all about their [political] interests...” (Author’s notes, July 2010). Roberto concurred, and equated the general’s evasiveness with the approaches of the political parties:

What happens is that political parties continue to practice a political culture that views tactics such as ideological polarization, defamation, and political violence as a way to do electoral politics. Many friends, who are army and ex-guerrilla combatants and civilians, don't believe in it [electoral politics] anymore. Their discourses have not resolved our basic needs. (Author's notes, July 2010)

Roberto then articulated some of those needs, which are shared by veterans from both sides of the war. "The combatants need health care, a way to make a living," he stated; "Especially those with disabilities, who deal not only with the ghosts of war, but with their physical impediments." After pausing, he added, "El Salvador *es un hospital en desorden*" (El Salvador is a hospital in disorder). Roberto's metaphor provides an apt image of the chaos and suffering that veterans and Salvadoran society still experience. For Roberto, this situation does not match the rhetoric of reconciliation coming from political parties; social healing and peace are yet to come.

After the Peace Accords were signed in 1992, many Salvadorans assumed that belligerent wartime discourses would lose their acrimony, allowing for the political establishment to focus on pressing social issues and for society to process the pain left by 12 years of war. Despite the positioning of ARENA and the FMLN at opposite ends of the political spectrum, each party had gained diplomatic experience in negotiating the accords. This new political maturity was viewed as a promising foundation for El Salvador's nascent democracy. The accords demonstrated that those representing opposing, entrenched ideologies could reach agreements beneficial to all Salvadorans. However, as time passed, both parties increasingly resorted to tried-and-true divisive discourses developed during the war, thus capitalizing on the social memory of the conflict for political gain (Artiga 2007; Dada 2005). Despite the polarization, both parties embraced state-led reconciliation practices as a standard trope for lasting peace. This ongoing contradiction necessitated the emergence of grassroots peacemaking in El Salvador.

In the 2009 presidential campaign, ARENA again resorted to belligerent wartime discourses. Presidential candidate Rodrigo Ávila closed the campaign with a speech that recounted "the Salvadoran struggles for freedom." These included "the defeat of the 1932 uprising, the beginning of the civil war in 1980, and the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992." Referring to the FMLN and its electoral platform, Ávila called upon "all Salvadorans to defend freedom and to not allow the communists to impose their Socialism XXI" (*Contra Punto* 2009). This strategy drew upon the party's traditional hard-line stance against "communism," which earned it the consistent support of the military, economic elites, and some middle- and lower-class sectors of society, as well as the US government.¹⁰ Yet, given ARENA's failure to reduce social disparities through the far-reaching neoliberal policies it

implemented during 20 years in control of the executive branch (1989–2009), this rhetoric rings hollow for most Salvadorans.

The FMLN also revived its earlier rhetoric, especially after gaining executive power in 2009 for the first time, with respected journalist Mauricio Funes as its presidential candidate.¹¹ When sympathizers from the Left critiqued the Funes administration, Jorge Schafik Handal, the 2012 FMLN mayoral candidate for San Salvador and the son of former FMLN leader Schafick Handal, encouraged the public “to not lose sight of the path forward.... The principal enemy is ... ARENA.” He recalled that “100,000 lives were lost before the Left could arrive at this point...” (*Co Latino*, February 6, 2011). FMLN rhetoric refers to the guerrilla struggle against state repression, the party’s opposition to ARENA’s neoliberal policies, and its vision for a socialist society. Dating back to the civil war, these discourses and actions against state repression have gained the FMLN broad support from the poor, as well as from some middle- to upper-class social sectors.¹² The Funes administration implemented progressive tax reform, education, and health-care programs. However, FMLN rhetoric has pointed to ARENA and the right-wing political establishment as the main obstacle to a fundamental overhaul of the structures underpinning poverty and inequality. In a society longing for rapid socioeconomic change, this discourse and incipient reduction of disparities produced disillusionment and hope for the past Funes administration and the FMLN. Many Salvadorans are now keeping a close watch on the discourse and actions of the Sánchez Cerén administration, newly elected in 2014.

Given this acrimonious history and fundamental ideological divide, one might expect the two parties to hold diametrically opposed stances toward postwar reconciliation. ARENA’s conception of democracy is predicated on capitalist values of individual freedoms and private ownership,¹³ whereas the FMLN’s democratic vision emphasizes participatory democracy and a defense of the common interest.¹⁴ Yet, in 2011, when the Salvadoran Supreme Court received a request from Interpol to extradite former military officials accused of the 1989 assassination of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her 16-year-old daughter, the political parties found common ground.¹⁵

On August 9, 2011, *Diario de Hoy* reported that ARENA, PCN, and GANA (the three largest right-wing parties) shared the position that “it is too late to revive cases that were already resolved in the past.” In addition, Oscar Santamaria, a signatory to the Peace Accords and an ARENA member, explained: “To break with these agreements [amnesty laws] is to set the precedent for further cases that would result in a witch hunt” that would target leaders and ex-combatants from both sides of the armed conflict. For the FMLN, “this case must be resolved by the judicial authorities, who will discuss it with strict adherence to the law.... We energetically reject the efforts of individuals and fringe groups to use this case to threaten the political stability of the country” (Author’s translation; *Co Latino*, August 9, 2011). By implicitly supporting the 1992 and 1993 amnesty laws, the

FMLN thus joined the right-wing parties in opposing the extradition of the accused officers, foreclosing the possibility of alternative state-supported reconciliation efforts. Although former vice president and 2014 FMLN presidential candidate Salvador Sánchez Cerén promised to work toward derogating the amnesty laws if elected, to date all major parties have dismissed the war victims and their relatives' desires for justice and social healing, thereby increasing popular disillusionment with the political establishment (*Contra Punto*, January 16, 2013).

Frustrations on the part of ex-combatants reflect a deep, ingrained pessimism in many sectors of society regarding the approaches of political parties to electoral politics and their understandings of national reconciliation. In contrast to ARENA, the FMLN does attempt to foster civic participation through events such as “open tribunals” in public plazas. These efforts are insufficient, however, when divisive discourses preempt the possibility for in-depth debate on pressing socioeconomic issues. This situation, along with the state's limited engagement with demands for reconciliation from outside the political establishment, has fostered grassroots peacemaking processes, which are based on people's own understandings of what it means to forge relationships among “intimate enemies” in a neoliberal society (Theidon 2004).

Grassroots Peacemaking: The Paradox of Reconciliation

In contrast to the self-congratulatory view of the Salvadoran political elites and many in the international community regarding state-led reconciliation, many ex-combatants are disillusioned with these efforts. Ex-combatants I worked with associate the state's efforts with top-down power and political elitism. ARENA's privatization policies merged past and present economic inequalities. The political discourse on the amnesty laws is an ongoing deterrent to entertaining alternative approaches to justice in relation to wartime human rights violations. This disillusionment, combined with the lack of employment and social healing, is a dynamic force driving ex-combatants' grassroots peacemaking.

To understand how ex-combatants negotiate their experiences with war violence and advance grassroots peacemaking, I asked José, a former FMLN combatant, to reflect upon the peace process. His view of the past is nostalgic and his critique is poignant. José believes that when the Peace Accords were signed, “All combatants ... had to conduct a new grand operation—reinsertion [into civilian life].”¹⁶ He continued:

Many *compas* [comrades] created cooperatives.... Others received the order to enrol in the PNC [National Civilian Police],¹⁷ were given a scholarship to study, and others were simply pushed aside. And then *cada quien vea como le hace* [everyone for him- or herself] became a slogan.... It would be interesting to do a study to locate the ... *compas* and find out what has

become of them today. I am almost sure that it would result in something like neoliberalism applied on a small scale. A few are doing well. Others, the majority, are as they were before the war, and even worse because we now carry the phantoms of the war with us uphill. (Author's translation; online communication, 2008)¹⁸

This statement raises the following question: What material gains did ex-combatants derive from the Peace Accords? José responded on his blog:

The only tangible gain from the accords for the combatants and the [masses] is that the guns were silenced. . . . The army stayed in the barracks and we could say with pride that we were from the *frente* [FMLN]. That was it. The gain for us is that we were not killed and that we now can write without problems. From this perspective the Peace Accords were a success. (Author's translation; online communication, 2008)¹⁹

José added that gains were also made in terms of governability and democracy. However, for him, this is "a theory, a question for the state, something that the majority of us *compas* (guerrillas) understand very little, and the little we understand we see as involution" (Author's translation, online communication, 2008).²⁰ His words reflect a deeply ingrained critique among ex-combatants, many of whom are highly disillusioned by the lack of support from previous ARENA governments as well as the FMLN leadership.

"Reconciliation" peripherally emerged in my initial conversations with ex-combatants, but the term did not come out afterward. When asked about his view, José responded:

Regarding reconciliation: there was *gato por liebre* [trickery]. The truth commission only showed us a showcase truth . . . amnesty laws were in the middle. . . . [During the war] there was indiscriminate violence, the social wounds have not healed yet; they are there. [They] might be at rest, but latent. There is no such thing as *borrón y cuenta nueva* [to erase the past and create a new future on a blank slate]. Nobody believes in that. There has not been reconciliation, because we have been extremely busy with reintegration [into society]. Or, better said, we have been extremely occupied with surviving, like everyone else. This has not allowed us to participate in a [process of] reconciliation under academicians' standards. (Online communication, 2008)²¹

These statements raise the question of whether an academic understanding of the reconciliation concept shares assumptions with that of the state. If that is the case, how can scholars move beyond the state's understandings and avoid reinscribing unequal power dynamics that exist between the state and communities?

I asked Roberto to comment on what reconciliation means for him. As if he had long been pondering the topic, Roberto energetically replied, “Reconciliation is, first of all, to recognize and accept within oneself the atrocities committed. . . . I am a different person after the war.” Then, family reunification must happen and there should be a “resolution with your former enemy, accepting that you were both the perpetrator and the victim of the violence committed.” In addition, ex-combatants must find “ways to coexist with victims of war violence. But,” he concluded, “this is not happening in El Salvador.”

I asked Roberto about his friendship with Diego and whether that is reconciliation. His enthusiasm unabated, he said: “My friendship with *el chero* [a nickname for Diego] is an individual expression of reconciliation.” But with diminished cheerfulness he stated, “Reconciliation does not exist as long as socioeconomic polarization continues to exist in the country.”

As I further explored this concept at a local *comedor* (cafeteria-style restaurant) over dinner with Diego, Lourdes (a former urban guerrilla combatant), and Rodrigo (a civilian who lost his mother to state repression), I asked them about Roberto’s comments on reconciliation. Diego sturdily replied,

Reconciliation doesn’t exist. Having former army and guerrilla combatants sitting together is not reconciliation. Reconciliation would be if these combatants were friends before the war, then during war became enemies, and in the postwar era became friends once again. There needs to be a rupture and repair [in order for a relationship to be understood as reconciliation]. What I have with Roberto is another thing—a newly formed, caring friendship. (Author’s notes, August 2010)

Lourdes added that “some of us work with former enemy combatants, and we have learned to have cordial relationships, but I would not call it reconciliation, either.”

As I discovered, ex-combatants and members of their communities do not use the term “reconciliation” to describe their efforts to reconstruct social networks; rather, the term *convivencia* (coexistence) emerged to describe such efforts. During an unplanned conversation at a Salvadoran university I asked Diana, a former guerrilla, what reconciliation meant to her. After an uncomfortable silence, she lowered her reading glasses, gazed at me intensely, and then burst into laughter. Smiling, she told me a story:

The other day, I was at a presentation in the law school building when a group of students and faculty started to talk about the war. I got drawn into the conversation and started narrating my experiences as a former FMLN member. A friend pinched my arm and took me aside to tell me, “Do not talk so explicitly about your involvement. You never know who might be listening. . . .” We don’t have reconciliation. What we have is *convivencia*. (Author’s notes, August 2010)

For Diana, *convivencia* with people holding different political views is experienced not as reconciliation, but as coexistence based on concrete needs such as being able to work and live in the same neighborhoods. A husband and wife, both *ex-guerrilleros*, talked with me about their grassroots peacemaking practices. According to the husband,

When we moved to this town we never mentioned that we were *frente* people. This town, Cinquera, was known for being an army stronghold during the war. But after the war, we came to live here. With a couple of zinc rooftops and other materials, we built a place for our children and us to sleep. That winter we got wet. The roof did not protect us from the heavy rains. One day the neighbor came with a couple pieces of zinc roofing for us. Then, another day, he came with wood. Little by little, we started to talk. Not surprisingly, he was a former army combatant. Yet the surprise has come many years later: despite having fought against one another during the war, and us being *frente* people, we continue to be friends, helping each other in what we can. (Author's translation, Author's interview, June 2010)

I uncovered numerous such stories, in which material needs outweighed ideological divisions among former combatants. As a former guerrilla combatant, Valeria, observed,

Both soldiers and guerrillas once were poor peasants, workers, and students. Coming from ... the same village, *barrio*, sometimes and quite, quite often, the same family. These are evident commonalities among us all. (Electronic communication, April 2011)

This grassroots peacemaking is especially powerful given the political polarization that permeates Salvadoran society. It demonstrates that the term "reconciliation" obscures the power dynamics between the state and sectors of civil society, between various local communities, and among individuals within those communities. State-led reconciliation efforts assume that reconciliation must take place between victim-survivors and perpetrators, and between ex-combatants who fought on opposite sides. Yet the social disparities that led to civil war persist. The ex-combatants I worked with have developed a clear knowledge that their present and past struggles are against social disparities and other forms of domination, rather than against each other. The result is the development of a political consciousness based not on right/left ideologies as practiced by the two main political parties, but on common experiences as individuals who struggle to survive and make a decent living.

These subjectivities have brought together many former enemies in the postwar era, enabling them to stake out an independent position in current sociopolitical

struggles and in their notions of justice. The practices of these ex-combatants problematize efforts of political parties to exacerbate right/left polarities through war rhetoric that obscures the contemporary social reality, especially during electoral campaigns. They also challenge the state-led practices and discourses of reconciliation championed by political parties.

Conclusion

This article calls for a critical review of our assumptions about “reconciliation” as part of transitional justice processes. Truth and reconciliation commissions and amnesty laws have been important elements of state-led transitions from conflict to democracy and peace in over 20 countries during the last three decades. Support for these limited reconciliation processes is widespread among economic elites and political actors involved in the negotiation of the transition. Such actors generally celebrate state-led reconciliation efforts as political achievements.

Indeed, long-enduring reconciliation processes (e.g., South Africa) that have ample participation from the state, perpetrators, and victims of violence have produced greater respect for human rights and serve as a symbolic closure of social conflict. By their very nature, however, these processes fail to incorporate understandings of reconciliation that are generated outside the state. Moreover, they do not focus on rectifying past injustices such as economic and racial disparities that lie at the root of such conflicts. Recognition of the need for peacemaking in societies divided by social conflict engenders a grassroots debate about the meaning of reconciliation for those most directly affected. A corollary discussion is whether top-down processes can achieve the promised reunification of society.

Widespread acceptance of limited reconciliation processes therefore demands careful analysis of the potential achievements of these processes. According to many scholars, truth and reconciliation commissions are preferable to war tribunals when it comes to dealing with past violence and moving forward to an era of peaceful democracy (Popkin and Roht-Arriaza 1995; Wilson 2001). However, because reconciliation is lived and practiced at the community level, Shaw et al. (2010) and Theidon (2004) emphasize the need to understand how the concept is defined locally. Proponents of this position generally assume that the concept of reconciliation is accepted at the community level and enacted through local rituals that deal with memories and experiences of past violence. I argue that outright rejection of top-down “reconciliation” by Salvadoran ex-combatants directly refutes the state’s understandings and practices, since they lack measures to reduce socioeconomic disparities and injustices.

In advancing this critique, I do not imply that grassroots peacemaking processes are flawless. Grassroots peacemakers struggle with gendered hierarchies, among other issues. My principal emphasis is that grassroots peacemaking accounts for the root causes of the conflict, complicating the common sense of reconciliation

and providing a better understanding of social relations in postwar societies. Such an analysis examines why and how seemingly contradictory practices, such as ex-combatants' critiques of state-led reconciliation, become key elements for re-creating social networks in postwar El Salvador. "Remembering" and "not forgiving" have become part of a contestation of the underlying principles of reconciliation adopted by the state and political establishment, which call on Salvadorans to embrace amnesty laws as the chief form of reconciliation. For some sectors of society, reconciliation is not possible when individuals exercising economic and political power maintain and deepen social disparities through neoliberal economic policies. The refusal of ex-combatants to engage in a reconciliation project led by those interests opens the door for grassroots peacemaking.

This article has analyzed why ex-combatants reject state-led reconciliation, and how their critique of the political establishment has motivated them to create their own grassroots peacemaking processes. They view official "reconciliation" as a top-down process that negates individual and community desires for social and economic justice. Their critique is that the political establishment continues to use tried-and-true discourses that foreclose substantive debate on pressing social issues. Instead, the state and the political establishment should directly address social inequalities and support the reconstruction of the country from below, as understood by those who were perpetrators and victims of war violence.

Grassroots peacemaking led by ex-combatants attempts to forge friendships and political alliances. At times a contradictory process, it nonetheless has the potential to expand the analytical lens for understanding social formations in divided societies. To prevent social scientists from replicating power dynamics similar to those that exist between the state, the political establishment, and marginalized sectors of society, we need scholarship on transitional justice and an anthropology of politics that includes an understanding of grassroots peacemaking and a critical analysis of the causes of conflict. The grassroots peacemaking processes underway in El Salvador have the potential to plant the seeds for a much-needed social healing that could support a lasting democratic peace.

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NOTES

1. I use pseudonyms throughout this paper to protect research participants' identities.
2. "Si nos interesa recuperar personas y comunidades, es necesario entender como estos conceptos (reconciliación) son definidos y como la relación entre ellos se conceptualiza en una cultura dada...."

Lo que esta en juego en los contextos de posguerra es la reconstrucción de las relaciones sociales, de las formas culturales y de las redes económicas, y la reinención de la vida ritual que le permite a una comunidad dar sentido al sufrimiento experimentado y causado.”

3. These veterans view themselves as perpetrators and victims of violence.
4. See Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador (1993) and Gould and Lauria-Santiago (2008) for a historical discussion of the social and political polarization affecting the country and the hideous index of human rights violations that contributed to it.
5. The Salvadoran newspaper *Diario Co Latino* (August 15, 2011) reported that “the results of the March 1989 [presidential] elections revealed the intense polarization of El Salvador. On the one hand, the conservative ARENA candidate (Alfredo Cristiani) won 53% of the votes.... On the other hand, an unheard-of 50 percent of the electorate did not go to vote, despite the legal obligation to do so. It is assumed that these supported the FMLN’s call to abstain from voting or to turn in a blank ballot” (Author’s translation).
6. This public apology was a welcome change from previous administrations. On that day, Salvadoran Vice President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, an FMLN leader, asked “for pardon from all Salvadorans affected by [FMLN] actions during the war” (*El Faro.net*, January 16, 2011).
7. The removal of the amnesty laws is the subject of contentious debate across social strata.
8. Other ARENA economic programs that claimed to reduce social disparities were the dollarization of the Salvadoran economy in 2001 and the 2006 implementation of a multilateral free-trade agreement with the United States, the Dominican Republic, and four other Central American countries (DR-CAFTA).
9. As part of this research, I conducted an internship with Congressman McGovern. I was particularly interested in understanding US foreign policy toward El Salvador from someone with close ties to the country. McGovern played a leading role in the US congressional investigation that created the Joe Moakley Commission report in 1991. That report tied military personnel to the assassination of seven Jesuit priests and recommended that Congress cut military aid to the Salvadoran army, which in turn contributed to the peace process.
10. Roberto D’Aubuisson, a Salvadoran military officer and death squad leader, founded the ARENA party in 1981 with the promise of defeating communism.
11. There is much contention over who is ruling the country. FMLN members do not view this administration as theirs. However, a leader of the FMLN guerrilla organization and political party, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, is El Salvador’s current vice president.
12. The FMLN was first founded as a military-political umbrella organization for five armed groups, the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), National Resistance (RN), Communist Party Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL), and the Central American Worker’s Revolutionary Party (PRTC).
13. For more information, see www.arena.com.sv/noticias/39-gral/116-30-anos-de-alianza-republicana-nacionalista.html, and www.arena.com.sv/principios.html.
14. For more information, see www.fmln.org.sv/oficial/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=133&Itemid=59.
15. For more information, see www.cja.org/article.php?lis.
16. “Todos los combatientes ... nos topamos con una nueva gran operación que realizar: reinsertarnos.”
17. Although my subject argues that they were given an order, ex-combatants from both sides could choose whether or not to take a job at the National Civilian Police.
18. “Muchos compas se organizaron en cooperativas ... otros recibimos la orden de ir a la PNC, otros recibimos alguna beca para estudiar, otros recibimos cursillos de alguna profesión y otros ... fueron simplemente apartados. Y el cada quien vea como le hace, se convirtió en consigna.... Sería curioso hacer un estudio para ubicar donde están los compas ... y que es de ellos ahora. Casi estoy seguro que resultaría algo así como el neoliberalismo aplicado en chiquito. A unos cuantos les ha ido bien, otros, los muchos están como antes de la guerra, y si cabe mas jodidos porque cargamos con los fantasmas de la guerra a cuestas.”

19. “La única ganancia tangible para los combatientes y las ‘masitas’ es que con los acuerdos ya los fusiles se silenciaron.... El ejército ya se quedó en los cuarteles y nosotros podíamos decir con orgullo que éramos del frente. Hasta ahí. La ganancia para nosotros es que no nos mataron y que podemos escribir sin problema alguno. Desde esa perspectiva los acuerdos de paz fueron un éxito.”

20. “Una cuestión de teoría de estado, algo que la mayoría de compas poco entendemos y los que poco entendemos vemos como involución.”

21. “Sobre la Reconciliación: Es que ahí hubo gato por liebre. La comisión de la verdad, solo nos mostró una verdad en vitrina ... leyes de amnistía estaban de por medio ... hubo represión indiscriminada todo eso está ahí. Quizás quieto, pero latente. No hay tales de borrón y cuenta nueva. Nadie cree en eso. Reconciliación no ha habido, porque hemos estado demasiado ocupados en la reinserción. O más bien hemos estado ocupados en sobrevivir, como todos los demás. Eso no nos ha permitido entrarle a la reconciliación bajo los estándares de los académicos.”

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