

El Salvador in the Age of Globalization

Discerning Violence, Manifesting Peace

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Les maras du Salvador sont des bandes de jeunes très violents, des jeunes garçons surtout, qui sont souvent assassinés suite à des conflits internes ou entre bandes rivales. Plusieurs de ces bandes dans les grandes villes américaines furent déportées au El Salvador qui est leur pays d'origine alors même que ces jeunes sont des citoyens ou résidents légaux des USA. Il ne parlent pas l'espagnol et n'ont aucune formation ou éducation formelle. Cet article explore la violence à la racine des "maras" et ses effets sur la grande société salvadorienne.

Las Maras Salvadoreñas son pandillas de jóvenes violentos quienes son asesinados como resultado de conflictos entre ellos o con otros pandilleros. Muchos de ellos han sido deportados desde las ciudades de los Estados Unidos a El Salvador, porque éste es su país de origen, aun cuando muchos de ellos son residentes legales o ciudadanos de E.U. Usualmente ellos no hablan el español, no tienen educación formal ni saben hacer nada. Este artículo explora la raíz de la violencia de las Maras y sus efectos en la sociedad Salvadoreña.

My friend said that it would be a good contribution to write about the Salvadoran *maras*, for people at all levels in our country and internationally, even at the United Nations, are talking about them, but most people do not know much about them.

The Salvadoran *maras* are very violent youth gangs, mostly made up of young men, but young women also can be members (generally as girlfriends of the men). Their lives are very violent, and they are often murdered as a result of a conflict within the gang or with rival gangs. These gangs live in major cities of the U.S. Many of these gang members, however, have been deported to El Salvador because of their membership in these gangs, and the violence those gangs represents. Most of these young people are citizens or legal residents of the USA. Usually they do not speak Spanish, and do not have formal education or a trade. To understand the *maras*, the people in the *maras*, and the effect on the larger society,

one must dissect violence at its roots, take the thread of history from the past to the present, and even visualize the future. So this is what I will do!

Today, El Salvador is the leading country in the Americas, after Haiti, suffering desertification; there is a large percentage of the population, especially women single heads of households, children, and older adults, living in extreme poverty and hunger. El Salvador is the country in the Central American region that assigns the least percentage of the national budget for education in general, and university education in particular. The amount of money that the country receives in monthly remittances (money sent by Salvadorans living outside El Salvador to their families) is higher than the amounts brought in by the country's exports; thus there is heavy dependency on economic support from our citizens in the diaspora, especially from those living legally or undocumented in the USA. Hundreds of Salvadorans, both women and men—who have often left their children behind—and a large number of young people leave the country daily, at great risk, for the USA, and hundreds are deported back to our country monthly, too. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean—ECLAC, or CEPAL in Spanish—considers El Salvador today the most violent nation of the Americas, including the Caribbean. In El Salvador, as elsewhere in the world, women are very much affected by violence, not only because of the large numbers that are violently attacked and/or murdered, but also because of those who experience high levels of domestic and intra-family violence, and particularly women who are young and impoverished. In this country, as in most of Central America, women have the heaviest and largest burden resulting from gender, legal, social, and economic discrimination and inequality.

ECLAC considers any crime that makes an attempt on the lives of people, or any attempt against the physical and moral integrity of a person, a violent act. In opposition to this definition, I would use the general public understand-

ing in our country. We recognize as violence all aspects and situations that deny quality of life to anyone, and any situation that results in a life of insecurity for people and communities, and the destruction of the natural environment. In Spanish, rape is called *violación* (violation), and so, violence is rape, both of peoples and the nation, as well as the natural environment. It is important to understand violence in this way, to understand the *maras*, and the how and why of them, what is at the root of them.

My country, El Salvador, the smallest country in Central America, the size of Connecticut, was so little known in the 1960s and '70s that people in the U.S. and Canada had to check its location on the world map, where it appears as a small speck. Once in a while, El Salvador made the news because of gross human rights violations or another military coup d'état. People who studied the politics of the country knew that most of these conditions were determined by the foreign policies of the U.S.

The military four-decades-long dictatorships were repressive, and oppressive, and attacked citizens mercilessly. Anyone who questioned the government, asked for justice, or demanded a stop to the repression of impoverished peasants, factory workers, and Indigenous peoples were disappeared, imprisoned, or murdered. Students, in general those of the National (state) University, and in particular, teachers and professors, artists (poets, writers, actors/actresses, singers), cooperative organizers, even those in political parties in the opposition, were hunted, exiled, disappeared, imprisoned, tortured, even murdered. For instance, in response to a peasant insurrection in 1932 due to extreme poverty, there was a terrible massacre, and thousands of rural people, and those urbanites who supported them, were executed in the space of two weeks. Repression and oppression continued, but the injustices, inequalities, hunger, and unemployment were such that the people continued to organize and press for needed change. The military increased the repression and organized death squads—armed men who came in the middle of the night, or even in plain daylight, kidnapped for a tortuous death men and women, old and young, student or peasant, teacher or priest—that roamed cities and countryside. Bodies, those of young and older women, tortured and raped, were found in roads, parks, streets, often completely naked, with evidence of torture, and messages carved in their bodies, denouncing them as communists, atheists, and traitors to the motherland.

Thus, this national history, and the history of the *maras*, are rooted in the time of conquest and colonialism, in the 1500s, which brought all the way to the present 500 years of violence, 500 years without peace. And this story is the same for all the nations who have suffered and lived through conquests, and colonial practices, which really have never been left behind. These situations are present, nowadays, often in different forms, for we continue to face hunger, malnutrition, lack of education, housing, unemployment, and the denial of our right to determine our lives. The

right to land and water continue even today to be people's major demand, and a reason for repression. In the 1980s, the people—both women and men, young and old, rural and urban—responded with mass organizations, trying to stop the exploitation in peaceful ways, demonstrations, civil actions, by presenting laws and electoral processes, or organizing protest strikes and, since the government responded with more repression, the people's army, a national liberation front, was formed to press and fight for change. Twelve bloody years went by. Communities were bombed, people were disappeared, kidnapped and murdered. In a population of five million at the time, there were 80,000 people killed. About the same number were imprisoned and disappeared. One million were displaced inside and outside of our country. The number of orphans and widows were in the tens of thousands.

Many of the displaced left the country and made it to the U.S. A large number were people from the countryside, some of them not able to read or write very well. They were brave; they helped to create the processes of political education of U.S. and Canadian people, and the world community, a citizenry who often had not been active in monitoring their representatives at the various political and social levels. The refugee and sanctuary movement brought a challenge to take care of and help those who had fled the country, for those very people pressed U.S., Canadian, Mexican, Latin American, European, and Australian citizens to understand what was at the root of such a bleeding of our nation, and to demand the needed change. This was the experience and practice of our peoples wherever they went, and the same was true of those from other Central American nations who had also fled repression. This is an example of sustainable practices. Sustainable practices are organic practices. They are rooted in solidarity, and in active, efficient and successful collaborative citizen participation.

Yet, it was many of those very people, refugees, who had to work two and three jobs to take care of their children, and continue to support the families at home, in El Salvador, even as they were actively developing the solidarity movement to stop the war in their country of refuge. So, their children found themselves alone, having no knowledge of the language and of the ways of the streets. They lived in major cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. In these cities, these youth met and had to face young people already in gangs, who had also experienced many of the same issues. These kids had to figure out how to survive and these bright, creative, Salvadoran children formed the *maras*, the gangs, as a survival mechanism. In El Salvador, the term *mara* means “the kids,” from the word *marea* in Spanish referring to an ocean wave, a bunch of kids who play and are together. These gangs called themselves *mara*, *mara Salvatrucha*, *mara 18*, *mara 13*, referring to the country and to their streets, their turf. And they had to survive so they became the meanest of them all. They tattooed

their bodies and their faces, developed their own spoken and sign language, and the U.S., not wanting to work on solutions, began deporting them. These youth did not have anyone in the cities in El Salvador, so they were sent to small rural communities, where their relatives were, and there they created *maras*. These *maras* have a different meaning. They attacked the people in these small, rural communities until they could move to a larger city, preferably the capital, where they brought in many more young members who did not have opportunities and were fighting to survive.

we have a government with no commitment to peace. Our country officially sends military contingents—the tenth one now to Iraq, this in spite of the people's demand to stop doing so. Our country is part of the "Coalition of the Willing," and even the Catholic Archbishop, a man of great influence and power, supports sending the troops to Iraq, considering it a moral obligation to fight terrorism and to contribute to democracy in the world, and reconstruct Iraq. Thus, in the U.S. and Canada, and in any country of the world, we, the people, must be about governance; that is, the commitment to work intentionally to govern

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In El Salvador, the people are afraid of the *maras*, and the numbers continue to grow, especially because the government hunts them and puts them in prison by the hundreds. Since they must be kept together and separate from other groups to avoid a problem even worse—fights in prison with a rival gang, or with common delinquents—they develop even tighter relationships and networks. The government has used this situation to demand more money for security, more militarization, and to pressure the judicial system to cooperate and support the laws for surveillance, suspension of constitutional rights, and the presidential campaign for security, which under the current administration is the Super Iron Fist Law. It is within this framework that the government has regionalized the support for the program to control the *maras*, and reached agreements with the police of neighbouring countries and the U.S., but the *maras* have gone regional too. Now the government officially requests international economic aid to fight organized crime and terrorism, claiming that the *maras* are behind both. Recently, at the continental level, the International Academy to fight *maras* and terrorism was created with U.S. support, based in El Salvador.

As a result of the work of local people and international efforts, on January 16, 1992, under the auspices of the United Nations, we reached a negotiated settlement, the Peace Accord, to stop the twelve-year civil war in El Salvador. This Accord is an example conflict resolution to the world. There was an overarching process to work for peace through justice in our country that must be recognized and celebrated, but today our politicians and systems do not work within that framework; violence, exploitation, and oppression continue to be our reality in El Salvador.

What can be done? How can we be about peace? Let us remember the life principle that we reap what we sow. Today

our government, and govern our lives. It is the citizenry who must be about the intentional and effective practice of the culture of peace. This culture of peace must be about all aspects of our lives: as persons, families, communities, and nations, and our nation in the community of nations. It encompasses every aspect of our lives, the quality of our personal relations, relations with our family and other human beings, and with the natural environment. Thus, we must become versed in how to manifest this culture of peace, and how to make it part of the social environment. Above all else, each citizen must be about this. This is the real vocation, the reason for being on this earth. This is living an organic life as persons and nations.

Building a New Society

What do I mean when I affirm that we must live an organic life? I have a story to reflect on these concerns. It is a real story. It happened at the beach in El Salvador where, due to health reasons, we used to take our father and mother. We were at the beach, and very early in the morning I heard a pick, pick, pick. It was a bird knocking at the glass window; it would leave, and then return, and do it again. When we went outside, we found a good number of special seeds on the floor below the window. They were very special seeds. Who knows where the bird had gone to get them? And we could not figure out what it was all about, why the bird was doing that. The next morning at dawn it was the same thing, and we carefully got up to check it out. The bird was courting! The bird was bringing these gifts to the one it wanted to please, but, this is the thing, the bird was watching its own reflection in the window, so the lover never responded. The next morning the bird did not come. Thank goodness, I thought, but my sister said that the bird probably decided that since

the other bird was not smart and didn't care or respond, it would go on its way.

Yet, how often it is that we, like the bird, put our energy into an illusion, thinking that it is real, that it is important to carry on? Well, this is exactly what we do when we put our creative energy into consumerism, or in support of war, or to defend ourselves from terrorists. We do not realize that we create the conditions for people to be in terror, and fear. The drug war, the war against poverty, for example, do not have to exist, if we do not create the conditions for them to exist.

I know this because I live it. I know that another world is possible, urgent and necessary, and we can be about it. But it is a choice, a decision, and an intentionality that is needed as a first step. I hope that we move to make this choice. Today, with the terrible and devastating world financial and economic crisis, the increasing destruction of the natural environment, and all related concerns, we must recognize that the only way out is understanding, that we have come to a new era, and it is not an era of change, but in reality it is about the change of an era. And this is not only about the U.S. losing its world economic and military power, not at all. For a while many people will choose to mend the system, to take measures to survive as societies have done up to now. But the world will never be the same, ever again; it is just a matter of time, and it is not too long, to come to that point. However, we can consciously and intentionally choose to create now the practices of the new societies of care of peoples and the planet. Many people have been about this for a while now, but we must find each other and work in collaborative ways—people and processes of the North and the South—and find the ways to bring our relatives and friends and our organizations and movements on board.

We must be about social transformation through culture, and since culture is all that we do, or do not do, we must intentionally create conditions, time and space for the expansion of our consciousness and the citizenry, by working with the collective imagination, with ethics and aesthetics, to promote the conscious choice to be planetary and global citizens, within the framework of human rights, focusing on those citizens who through time are and have been the most vulnerable and discriminated against.

To this effect we in El Salvador have created the XXIII Century Movement which works to promote all those aspects mentioned above. Movements are urgent and important for this work to be accomplished, for NGOs often get trapped in fundraising schemes. We have the Museum of Folk Cultures and Arts, where using all forms of folk art and recycling we educate the general public for planetary and global citizenship. In our centre "Culture is Peace," we conduct seminars and training workshops to teach people about aspects of racism, sexism, environmental responsibility, human rights, the economic, social and cultural rights of peoples, folk arts, Millennium Development Goals, conflict transformation, etc. We have an

Ecological House in an Indigenous town, where we work on soil and water conservation and management, and on the rights of Indigenous peoples, especially those of the Indigenous grandmothers, who we celebrate with a Sunday lunch every week. The XXIII Century Free University for Peace trains community leaders from various walks of life and communities in areas of human rights, economics, international conventions, such as those on the rights of children and youth, and the Convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

We recognize the importance of being part of a larger movement, both at the national and the international levels, and so we continue to create situations for that kind of international participation and networking. In this context, we created a network to celebrate in El Salvador the Global Day of Action for the World Social Forum taking place January 19-26, 2009, where we shared experiences and dreams as organizations and individually, and prepared a process to have a youth-led civil society forum on Youth and Development for the Presidential Ibero-American Summit held in our country in the fall of 2008. We must choose to be an effective presence in our town, country, and the world.

We, the citizenry, must decide to govern our governments, our nations, our lives, and create the processes to do so. This is organic, this is sustainable. We, the citizens, are solutions, and this is where the *maras* and other types of violence and social ills will find their end.

Update: This article was written a year ago, before we had the recent presidential elections, and therefore describes many of the policies of the ARENA party government, which by many fraudulent ways and fear governed El Salvador for 20 years. In March 2009, they lost the elections, the result of the concerted efforts of all sectors of the society, including women and youth, and June 1, just a few days ago, a new, more open and progressive government took office. We have inherited many, many problems, including the world financial and economic crisis, and ongoing climate change, which have a terrible impact on the present and the future, and will make things difficult for the new government. Yet, we are hopeful, very hopeful, and we are working collectively to bring all peoples together to create the new society we need and want. The new government has promised to work with youth and the *maras*, the problems with violence, as also with the many other concerns afflicting our peoples.

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