

A REVIEW OF Yvon Grenier, *The Emergence of Insurgency in El Salvador: Ideology and Political Will* (Pittsburgh : University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999)

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In this gem of a book (for which I wrote a blurb), Canadian Professor Yvon Grenier of St. Francis Xavier University deflates "the dominant paradigm" on the causes of the insurgency which wreaked havoc in El Salvador in the 1980s and, by extension, other revolutions *manqué* in Latin America.

Taking specific issue with the writings of John Booth and Tommy Sue Montgomery, Prof. Grenier persuasively argues that previous attempts to understand the outbreak of insurgency not only in El Salvador but elsewhere in Latin America have assumed too much about the general effect of socio-economic "causes" even as they failed to take into account the specific *causers*, the leaders who founded and commanded the several military organizations which became the formidable war machine of the *Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front*.

It is these *comandantes*, their social status, will to power and, more importantly, their ideological and institutional milieu, which Prof. Grenier brings to the forefront. They constitute a middle-to-upper class, urban-born, university-educated counter-elite who came of age during the 1960s, a time when El Salvador experienced rising expectations unleashed by unprecedented economic growth, rising literacy and life expectancy, and a modicum of political pluralism which opened the door of the national legislature and local governments to the reformist Christian Democratic Party. It was a time, also, when Fidel Castro exerted nearly hegemonic sway over Latin American

intellectuals, an influence that would in time extend to the field of Latin American Studies in the United States.

Prof. Grenier systematically dissects how these domestic and international currents converged on two Salvadoran institutions that, though neglected by the dominant paradigm, provide the key for understanding the origins of the insurgency: the public National University of El Salvador and the Jesuit University of Central America. It was here, among students and faculty, and not, as the dominant paradigm would have it, in the countryside or the urban shanty towns, where the Salvadoran insurgency germinated and put down roots.

At the university, successive cohorts of FMLN leaders and cadre became imbued with delusions of vanguardism, the arrogant belief that only they had a true understanding of Salvadoran "reality," and that only they had a "scientific" solution to the problems besetting their country, a solution they would impose by force. It was only later, and then for tactical reasons, namely the need for safe havens after the failure of the 1981 "final offensive," that the insurgency was transplanted to remote parts of the country.

Thus, Prof. Grenier shows that the chain of causality is the opposite of that alleged by the dominant paradigm: it was not an aroused peasantry rising in just indignation against oligarchical oppression and exploitation which produced the war; rather, it was the war and its associated incentives, taken to the countryside by a self-appointed vanguard, which radicalized the small portion of the peasantry that joined the FMLN.

Prof. Grenier's book makes many important points. Suffice it to highlight only two here. First, contrary to the conventional wisdom summarized in the title of an academic best-seller whose main thesis has been repudiated by history (Walter LaFeber,

*Inevitable Revolutions The United States in Central America*, W. W. Norton, 1993), the internal war which racked El Salvador was neither popular with the Salvadoran poor nor, strictly speaking, inevitable. Rather, it was waged because, to paraphrase the liberationist theologians, war was the preferential option of the *comandantes* of the FMLN.

Second, the elections which the United States imposed on El Salvador beginning in 1982, much criticized at the time by *bien pensant* intellectuals the world over, turned out to be only the first of a series which at first the moderate and eventually the radical left found irresistible. In the last two decades, there has been only modest change in that country's underlying socio-economic structures, yet bullets have been traded for ballots as the means for contesting shares of political power. This demonstrates that the political arena is fluid and manipulable and not, as Marxist academics would have it, hostage to underlying--and less malleable--social and economic structures.

Prof. Grenier's essay reminds us that ideas have consequences. The ideological fantasies that North American and European Latin Americanists incorporated into their books and lectures, Salvadoran and other Latin American revolutionaries tried to put into practice, with devastating consequences. Having been mauled by the reality they once thought only they understood, the Salvadoran insurgents have reflected on and admitted their errors. It remains to be seen, however, whether leftist Latin Americanists who once espoused the dominant paradigm--itself congruent with that of the Salvadoran insurgents in key respects--with nothing less than quasi-religious fervor will show the same intellectual humility in the face of Prof. Grenier's devastating critique.