

Grenier, Yvon. *Guerre et pouvoir au Salvador. Idéologies du changement et changement idéologique.* Sainte-Foy, PQ: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1994.

The conflicts of the 1980s in Central America generated an enormous amount of instant histories and political analyses. Most were hastily erected on shaky scholarly foundations, and displayed quasi-journalistic myopia rather than knowledge of the region. The same conflicts also drew the interest of more serious scholars whose revealing studies, by definition, have taken longer to appear (ironically, they are now appearing with some regularity, but in a context of diminished interest in the region). Yvon Grenier's *Guerre et pouvoir au Salvador (War and Power in El Salvador)* is part of this second, more substantial wave.

Grenier takes full advantage of a longer term acquaintance with Central American scholarship, and of the brief but significant distance that separates the contemporary observer from the violent political and military conflicts of the 1980s. He focuses on the crucial conjuncture of the 1979-82 period: from the creation and rapid breakdown of a reformist military junta, to the election of a constituent assembly amid pronounced armed conflict between a revolutionary left and a desperate, US-backed military. For the most part, these years have been seen hitherto as a period of political failure, and of social revolution aborted by the "artificial" (that is, illegitimate and inhuman) interventions of US foreign policy and death squad violence. Grenier offers a more historically and theoretically informed understanding of the conjuncture.

For Grenier, beneath the chaotic and harrowing surface, these three years were the culmination of a stage in the formation of a political class, a troubled and divisive process with roots stretching back into the nineteenth century. More original is Grenier's identification of this conjuncture as one in which the foundations of an integrated political class and a state with significant autonomy were laid. More original still is the author's proposition that the first articulation of the conditions for the political compromise that led to the peace agreement of 1992 is actually to be found in the much-maligned project of Jose Napoleon Duarte, leader of the Christian Democrats and provisional leader of the country from 1982-84. Duarte has been dismissed generally as a deluded US flunky, smokescreen of legitimacy for a vicious counter-revolutionary struggle, and respectable front for the party's massive corruption.

I will not enter into a rebuttal here, though Grenier's latter argument in particular is sure to provoke displeasure among many scholars and activists with interests in the region. What is most important about this study is its depth of field and its transcendence of the shallow Central American political science of the 1980s. Grenier's insistence on the weight of history in the unfolding of contemporary political configurations is commendable, although the paucity of solid historiography to which he can appeal underlines the fact that we know very little indeed about the history of El Salvador, from independence to the 1960s.

Grenier must be complimented for writing a fine, serious and consistent study that will be of interest to Central American activists and scholars, as well as to students of conflict and democratic transitions.

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