

SI NICARAGUA VENCIO,
EL SALVADOR VENCERA

Central American Agency in the Creation of the U.S.–Central
American Peace and Solidarity Movement*

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Abstract: Throughout the 1980s one of the Reagan administration's most contested foreign policy initiatives was that toward Central America, where it attempted to defeat the Salvadoran guerrillas and overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Reagan's policy was challenged by civil society organizations, whose efforts to undermine support for Reagan's policy came to be known as the Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement (CAPSM). What were the origins of this movement? I argue that previous explorations of the CAPSM's emergence are inadequate because they neglect the role played by Central Americans as purposive actors in the movement's rise and development. This article documents the ways in which Nicaraguans and Salvadorans, both in Central America and in the United States, played crucial roles in this transnational movement's creation and growth.

Throughout the 1980s, one of Ronald Reagan's most contested and controversial foreign policy initiatives was that toward Central America, where he attempted to defeat the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN) guerrillas of El Salvador and coerce the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN) government of Nicaragua out of power. Even though the Reagan administration spent millions of dollars and significant amounts of resources to promote the president's Central America policy, it was never very popular with Congress and even less so with the U.S. public.¹ In fact, during Reagan's two terms in office,

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1. Throughout the decade public disapproval almost always exceeded approval of Reagan's Central American policy. Public support for U.S. Central American policy averaged

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his policy was challenged by a wide array of civil society organizations, whose efforts to undermine support for Reagan's policy came to be known as the Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement (CAPSM).²

In this article, I explore the origins of this movement.³ Specifically, I document the ways in which Nicaraguan and Salvadoran revolutionaries, both in Central America and in the United States, played crucial roles in this movement's creation, growth, and success.⁴ I argue that previous interpretations of the CAPSM have misconstrued Central Americans' participation because they have used national frameworks of analysis to understand what was essentially a transnational phenomenon. On the one hand, this reification of the nation-state has led conservative politicians to accuse the CAPSM of being a foreign movement and its activists of being at best naive dupes of astute communists. On the other hand, it has led liberal scholars to conceptualize it as either a domestic (U.S.) movement or as what transnational social movement scholars call a distant issue movement (DIM).⁵

To date the most comprehensive books on the CAPSM are *Resisting Reagan* and *Convictions of the Soul* by sociologists Christian Smith (1996) and Sharon Erickson-Nepstad (2004), respectively. In his book, Smith (1996, xvi) views the CAPSM solely as a domestic U.S. movement and seeks to understand why "more than one hundred thousand U.S. citizens mobilized to contest the chief foreign policy initiative of the most popular U.S. president in decades." Alternatively, Erickson-Nepstad (1997; 2001; 2004, 6–8), conceptualizes the CAPSM as a DIM and tries to explain why U.S. citizens would become committed to a distant struggle that did not directly affect them. Despite their differences, both conceptualizations lead these scholars to focus exclusively on the movement's U.S. activists as its

between 19.7 percent and 30.5 percent (lower than all other military interventions in the 1980s) depending on the particular question wording used, see Jentleson 1992; see also LeoGrande, 1987.

2. Key government officials of the time have acknowledged that grassroots pressure on Congress and the constant bombarding of the public with information by this movement was the principal reason the administration's Central America policy was constrained. See Sobel 1993.

3. In this article, I do not focus on the Guatemalan side of the CAPSM. Rather, because previous scholarship has studied the CAPSM's Nicaraguan and Salvadoran parts, I limit my critique to what these scholars have addressed. Also, there were specific dynamics of the Guatemalan situation (revolutionary movement, U.S. aid, racial conflict) that make it sufficiently different to merit deeper analysis than possible in an article-length piece.

4. By Central American *revolutionaries*, I refer to the FSLN and FMLN cadre, to their sympathizers in allied civil society organizations in Central America, and to their Nicaraguan and Salvadoran cadre and supporters residing in the United States—that is, ordinary people who during this time did extraordinary things.

5. DIMs are national movements whose protagonists organize around issues in foreign countries "that are not related or are only very indirectly related, to the situation of the mobilizing groups in their home countries" (Rucht 2000, 79).

sole protagonists while neglecting crucial elements of the vital role played by Central American revolutionaries—both in their home countries and in the diaspora—as purposive actors in the movement’s rise and growth.

In contrast, I use a transnational framework of analysis that offers an alternative way to conceptualize the movement. This reconceptualization does three things to overcome the previously noted criticisms. First, it necessitates a specific exploration of Central American revolutionaries’ strategic contributions to the CAPSM’s origins and development while avoiding the false dichotomy that results from analyses that reify the nation-state. Thus, I argue that the CAPSM was a transnational social movement, which I define as one in which protagonists in two or more countries cooperate and/or coordinate efforts to achieve a common political goal or purpose. Second, a focus on how Central Americans acted purposively to cultivate the movement forces not only an explicit exploration of their strategies—which went unnoticed and/or underappreciated in Smith and Erickson-Nepstad’s work—but also a reassessment of much of the evidence they present. Finally, by highlighting the agency of these politically marginalized activists, we gain powerful theoretical insight into the study of transnational social movements. Specifically, by noting the Central American revolutionaries’ use of what I call a signal flare strategy of transnational activism, I identify a previously untheorized approach by which subaltern populations can use transnational substate actors to constrain the foreign policy of even the most powerful nation on earth.⁶

In the following section, I proceed by briefly summarizing and critiquing how scholars have understood the movement to date. In the third section, I put forward the theoretical concepts necessary to identify the signal flare strategy by which Central American revolutionaries’ transnational activism cultivated the CAPSM. The fourth section presents evidence that much of the growth and success of the CAPSM is attributable to the Central American revolutionaries’ efforts. To this end I trace the origins of the CAPSM back to the 1970s, showing that Central American immigrant activists were the founders of the movement’s earliest organizations. Additionally, I present evidence to document the important role played by Central American revolutionaries in creating the large national solidarity networks that were among the CAPSM’s most effective catalysts for public opposition to Reagan’s policy in the 1980s. I then revisit some of

6. Transnational substate actors include all those formal and informal civil society organizations, networks, institutions, and movements that act across national boundaries but that are politically under the juridical authority of the nation-state. I do not use the term *nongovernmental organizations*, because many of these entities often have complex ties to different governments. For signal flare strategy see Héctor Perla Jr., “Revolutionary Deterrence: The Sandinista Response to Reagan’s Coercive Policy against Nicaragua, Lessons toward a Theory of Asymmetric Conflict,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2005, 98–102.

the evidence presented by Smith and Erickson-Nepstad to show that Central American revolutionaries played a more active and strategic role than previously acknowledged, even in the creation of the national sanctuary and peace networks that those scholars studied. I conclude by identifying the elements facilitating the Central American revolutionaries' ability to challenge U.S. foreign policy and exploring these findings' implications for contemporary Latin American and transnational social movements.

PREVIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE CAPSM

In his study of the CAPSM, Christian Smith (1996) analyzes it solely as a domestic U.S. movement. This leads Smith (1996, 131) to categorically state, "The movement's protagonists were not society's disinherited and deprived, forced by a dearth of resources to take to the streets. Rather, they were the educated middle-class, committed to the political goal of transforming U.S. Central America policy." Alternatively, Erickson-Nepstad (1997; 2001; 2004) understands the CAPSM as a DIM, where U.S. citizens mobilized to stop a foreign policy that did not directly affect them. Therefore, Erickson-Nepstad (2001, 21) defines the CAPSM as "a movement of U.S. citizens who, during the 1980s, aimed to stand in solidarity with the poor in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and to constrain U.S. military influence and foreign policy toward the region." Moreover, in a coauthored piece Smith and Erickson-Nepstad (2001, 159) describe the movement as one in which "thousands of North Americans organized to curtail U.S. political and military involvement in these countries and to stand in solidarity with the poor of Central America in their struggle for a just social order." As a result of their conceptualizations, both authors focus exclusively on North Americans as the purposive agents behind the movement.

This underlying assumption is clearly evidenced by how these authors approach Central American testimonies. Although these authors document the powerful role of Central Americans' heartrending *testimonios*, both Smith and Erickson-Nepstad's work focus solely on how these stories motivated North Americans to take action rather than explore the conscious and strategic purpose of Central Americans' use of these narratives (2001, 173–174). Consequently, none of the CAPSM activists they interviewed are Central Americans. Indeed, in their conceptions there is no reason to ask why Central Americans told their stories, or to explore how, when, or why they told them in particular ways, because, to answer their research questions, what matters is simply their testimonies' effects on U.S. activists. As a result, both authors fail to explore whether—through the strategic use of voice and the framing of their narratives as a conscious organizing strategy—Salvadoran and Nicaraguan revolutionaries were protagonists in the CAPSM's growth. In summary, by focus-

ing exclusively on how contact “with the traumatized victims of the U.S.-sponsored war in Central America” affected North Americans, Smith and Erickson-Nepstad inadvertently characterize Central Americans simply as victims passively telling the stories of their suffering (Smith 1996, 151).

However, whereas much of the CAPSM’s most important activity logically took place within the United States—because of the government’s policy in Central America—its *raison d’être* was (located transnationally both in Central America and in the United States among the Central American diaspora) to redress the grievances of the populations directly suffering the consequences of Reagan’s so-called low-intensity war. If we take this as our point of departure, then the “victims” become the most important actors to understand. In particular it becomes vital to find out whether and how they acted as politically conscious protagonists strategically narrating their lived experiences. What was the motivation and strategic logic that led them to share with complete strangers some of the most intimate and painful details about their personal lives? Did they actively seek out or create public venues to disseminate their information with the conscious intention of mobilizing others to act on their behalf? Previous studies of the CAPSM have failed to even pose these questions, a priori precluding us from exploring whether the Central American revolutionaries had any purposive agency in the movement’s creation.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUALIZATION: CENTRAL AMERICAN AGENCY IN THE CAPSM

Ironically, the political process model used by Smith and Erickson-Nepstad’s cultural agency approach is intended specifically to focus scholars’ attention on the creative ways that marginalized people find to mobilize collective action and to move those with greater resources to support them. However, in this case to explore whether the aggrieved population acted with purposive agency we must start by investigating the role of Central Americans themselves. If we do not, we systematically overlook the agency of the oppressed and relegate their voices to historical silence. Yet neither of these approaches is equipped to study transnational social movements because they were designed to understand domestic movements and DIMs, respectively. Thus, without the appropriate theoretical tools transnational activists’ strategies can go unrecognized—flying beneath these scholars’ ontological radar—because the types of strategies and resources available to citizens trying to make political demands or rights claims on a government differ significantly from those available to noncitizens.

Therefore, we need to use the theoretical concepts that scholars have developed specifically to study the tactics of activists seeking to create transnational social movements. In this regard, the work of Keck and

Sikkink (1998), as well as the framework outlined by Guidry and Sawyer (2003)—who focus respectively on the tactics and modes of subversion used by oppressed groups involved in transnational conflicts to challenge more powerful adversaries—are particularly useful. In their book *Activists beyond Borders*, Keck and Sikkink (1998) delineate how transnational activists bring political pressure to bear on a government that is violating human rights and is unresponsive to domestic pressure. In these cases, Keck and Sikkink (1998, 16) find that activists whose own government is committing abuses and is unresponsive to domestic pressure use or create transnational advocacy networks to contact foreign allies to mobilize on their behalf through what they call information politics, symbolic politics, accountability politics, and leverage politics.⁷ These allies in turn use their citizenship rights to lobby their own government, so that it will put pressure on the government of the transgressing country. They call this the boomerang pattern of transnational activism.

Complementing Keck and Sikkink's analysis, political scientists John Guidry and Mark Sawyer (2003) focus on the indispensable role played by "regular people" in challenging unjust policies. In their article "Contentious Pluralism," Guidry and Sawyer (2003, 273) argue that marginalized people use a variety of performative and subversive methods to make political claims in public spaces where their voices are not legally permitted or are excluded *de facto*. Specifically, Guidry and Sawyer (277) identify what they call rhetorical, demonstrative, and procedural modes of subversion used by ordinary people to challenge unjust power relations and policies.⁸

Both these sets of authors coincide in finding that marginalized groups who are figuratively or literally outside the polity—in that they lack routine access to influence the decisions that affect them—can nevertheless still act as challengers to their materially more powerful adversaries.⁹ They also agree on the types of strategies that these actors can effectively use to change policy. First, both identify the use of communications to

7. Keck and Sikkink (1998, 16) define information politics as "the ability to quickly and credibly generate politically usable information and move it to where it will have the most impact." Symbolic politics is "the ability to call upon symbols, actions, or stories that make sense of a situation for an audience that is frequently far away." Leverage politics is "the ability to call upon powerful actors to affect a situation where weaker members of a network are unlikely to have influence." Accountability politics refers to "the ability to hold powerful actors to their previously stated policies or principles."

8. A procedural mode of subversion involves the use of "accepted, legal procedures to hold the state and dominant actors accountable to their own principles. . . . A rhetorical mode of subversion is one in which actors use the logic of political ideas and discourse to change opinion in diverse publics, including the dominant ones. . . . In the demonstrative mode of subversion, actors strike at the structures of power by presenting and modeling alternatives to the existing order" (277).

9. I borrow from William Gamson's (1975, 140) definition of challengers.

appeal to norms, values, and ideals as primary weapons that marginalized actors deploy to mobilize against their adversaries. Second, these authors also find that supposedly powerless actors can use the very institutions, laws, and commitments of their adversary against them. Third, subaltern people can also mobilize allies through their own courageous examples of dignity, compassion, morality, defiance, passion, and perseverance in the face of their enemies' injustice and cruelty as symbols that demonstrate the just, legitimate, worthy, and ultimately "invincible" nature of their cause.

SIGNAL FLARE STRATEGY

Although it is clear that Central American revolutionaries lacked formal political mechanisms for redressing their grievances, this did not mean that they could not affect U.S. foreign policy or that they did not try to do so. Rather, it means that to recognize how they acted as transnational challengers, we must highlight the rhetorical, demonstrative, and procedural modes of subversion available to them, and investigate the information, accountability, leverage, and symbolic politics that they used to challenge the administration's Central American policy. Using these theoretical tools also helps identify the strategy that Central American activists used to cultivate a transnational social movement to oppose U.S.–Central America policy.

First, this theoretical framework makes clear that Central Americans' personal and collective appeals to North Americans were the primary way by which these transnational activists cultivated U.S. public opposition to Reagan's foreign policy. In other words, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan revolutionaries relied on transnational networks to "quickly and credibly generate politically usable information and move it to where it would have the most impact" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 16). Thus, Central American activists conveyed testimonies about human rights violations and passed along information about the adverse effects of Reagan's policy to build U.S. public opposition and to pressure the government to stop aid to the Salvadoran regime and the Nicaraguan *contras*. I call this rhetorical mode of subversion a signal flare strategy of transnational activism.

Although it is similar to the boomerang pattern, the signal flare strategy is fundamentally different from the phenomenon noted by Keck and Sikkink. In contrast to the boomerang pattern, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan activists sought support from U.S. transnational substate actors not to help against their own governments per se but to help against the Reagan administration's policies toward Central America. Thus, much like a traditional signal flare is used to draw attention to a castaway's plight in the hope of attracting aid, so too the political signal flare strategy tries

to draw the attention of potentially sympathetic actors to the plight of an aggrieved population. By shedding light on the negative consequences of the policy, the aggrieved population attempts to change the public discourse in the transgressing country around the policy in question and thereby undermine its legitimacy, stimulate opposition to it, and increase the domestic political costs of implementing or maintaining that policy.

Second, the Central Americans' signal flare strategy relied on symbolic politics that used personal testimonies, stories, revolutionary and religious narratives, movies, art, posters, poetry, and music to frame their plight and struggle in a viscerally tangible way for North American audiences. Similarly, another crucial aspect of the Salvadorans' and Nicaraguans' signal flare strategy was to actively encourage and welcome North Americans to physically share their lives in Central America. In this way their North American guests gained firsthand knowledge of the negative impact of their own government's policy. They also gained credibility by experiencing the country's situation directly, which then allowed them to return home and explain the Central American situation for distant U.S. audiences with little knowledge about the region.

Third, to successfully mobilize U.S. public opposition the Central Americans' signal flare strategy was premised on a politics of accountability. This meant that it appealed not only to North Americans' stated ideals, values, and principles but also to their very identity as a people who respect human rights, especially of vulnerable populations. Finally, for the signal flare to work it was necessarily reliant on leverage politics. Accordingly, Central American revolutionaries urged U.S. citizens to engage in a procedural mode of subversion on their behalf. As a result, their signal flare strategy was fundamentally a call on their North American allies "to affect a situation where the weaker members of the network were unlikely to have an influence" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 16).

THE MAKING OF A TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT

This section presents evidence that the Central American revolutionaries were protagonists in the CAPSM's creation and that much of its success was due to their signal flare strategy. First, it shows that Central American activists founded the CAPSM's earliest organizations. Second, it shows that they used their voice and credibility strategically to mobilize attentive North Americans, encouraging them to organize other U.S. citizens through the creation of national solidarity organizations. Third, it revisits evidence used by Smith and Erickson-Nepstad to document Central American activists' contributions in the creation of peace organizations.

Although there were significant similarities in how the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran parts of the CAPSM operated, there were also differences. The

major difference arose because the FSLN took power and the FMLN did not. Therefore in the Salvadoran case, the FMLN developed a more direct relationship with Salvadoran-focused solidarity organizations. This occurred because of the Salvadoran government's extensive political repression, which forced FMLN supporters to operate clandestinely. As a result, they were often embedded within legal civil and political organizations with which the solidarity movement could and did establish direct relationships. Thus U.S.-based Salvadoran organizations maintained strong ties to and close contact with popular organizations in El Salvador, which in turn often had informal and clandestine links to one of the five FMLN guerrilla organizations (Gosse 1988, 19–23). Conversely, in the Nicaraguan case, the FSLN's relationship to the CAPSM was less direct except early on. There was fluid communication and interaction between them, but it was often mediated by Sandinista mass organizations or civil society organizations that were supportive of the revolution.

Nevertheless, it must be made clear that in both cases the CAPSM was not—as was claimed by the Reagan administration—simply a creation or tool of the Central American revolutionaries. Rather it was a transnational social movement in which U.S. and Salvadoran and Nicaraguan citizens acted together for a shared purpose: to stop U.S. intervention in Central America. Without the other neither would have been as effective as each was working in partnership to achieve a common goal.

FIRST ATTEMPTS AT TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZATION

The first organized opposition to U.S.–Central America policy did not begin with North Americans, but among Central American immigrants who mobilized within their own communities (Gosse 1988, 19–20). As Van Gosse (1988, 19)—a former activist and leading historian of the CAPSM—notes, “At first, most of the activity came from exiles working in their own communities, assisted by literally a handful of North Americans around the country.” Thus the first CAPSM organizations were formed by revolutionary activists from the Central American diaspora in the United States. During this first phase most of their efforts were focused on reaching out to the Central American immigrant community, which was concentrated in several large U.S. cities, among them San Francisco; Washington, DC; New York City; Chicago; Los Angeles; and Houston (Falcoff 1984, 370). This immigrant network helped the Central American revolutionaries disseminate information, recruit many of their earliest and best organizers in the United States, mobilize the community, and make connections with established U.S. organizations. The primary goal of these early immigrant-based organizations was to draw the diaspora's attention to the unjust economic conditions and violent repression that their compatriots were suffering at the hands of their home governments with U.S. complicity.

Nicaraguan Revolutionaries in the Diaspora

Starting in the early 1970s and continuing through the 1980s, Nicaraguan exiles and immigrants began mobilizing to protest against the abuses of the Anastasio Somoza regime and to oppose U.S. support for the dictatorship.¹⁰ The catalyst for much of their original organizing was the blatant corruption of the Somoza government, rampant in the days following the 1972 earthquake that destroyed Managua. When it became apparent that much of the international aid arriving in the country was being diverted to line the pockets of Somoza and his cronies, many in the community were outraged. At the time, the largest Nicaraguan community outside the country was located in San Francisco, California. FSLN activists capitalized on this sentiment by denouncing Somoza's abuses in "wanted" posters, which they plastered around La Misión, San Francisco's Latino barrio. This attracted the attention of a young U.S.-raised Nicaraguan poet named Roberto Vargas, a veteran of the Chicano movement. Vargas arranged a meeting with the FSLN representatives in San Francisco. From there Vargas and other young Nicaraguan and Latino activists would form a support committee for the FSLN that became known as El Comité Cívico pro Nicaragua en los Estados Unidos (Comité Cívico). By December 1974 the Comité Cívico was undertaking political work in support of Sandinista actions in Nicaragua. In that month a Sandinista commando group had captured a number of Somoza's top aides and was trying to exchange them for political prisoners. To publicize its demands the FSLN had issued a communiqué. The Comité Cívico's role was to disseminate the Sandinista position by publishing and translating the communiqué and by organizing a march to support their demands. The organization published the communiqué under the title *La Gaceta Sandinista*, distributing a thousand copies at the march. This small action drawing only several dozen activists was the first ever solidarity march held in the United States to support the Nicaraguan revolution. It was also the seed of what would flourish into the CAPSM and laid the foundation of the movement's basic strategy.

The *Gaceta Sandinista* became a regular newspaper publication reaching out primarily to Nicaraguan immigrants with stories, reports, photographs, and FSLN communiqués on a regular basis. From there the Comité Cívico branched out to incorporate literary publications, as well as cultural, religious, and political events. At the same time, the Comité Cívico's activism included more direct and militant tactics to challenge the dictatorship, such as occupying the Nicaraguan consulate—expelling the consul and his staff—while taking advantage of the action to attract me-

10. This account is based on the work of Alejandro Murguía (2004, 131–139), and on the author's conversations with Roberto Vargas.

dia attention to denounce the Somoza government's abuses. Finally, these early Nicaraguan organizers would also participate in mobilizing North Americans for their cause, including the creation of the Non-Intervention in Nicaragua committee, which would help secure a major political victory against Somoza by successfully pushing for congressional hearings that included the testimony of Nicaraguan opposition leaders in 1976.¹¹

Salvadoran Revolutionaries in the Diaspora

Likewise, by the mid-1970s Salvadoran immigrants were also forming their own solidarity groups. The first Salvadoran-focused CAPSM organization—El Comité de Salvadoreños Progresistas (Committee of Progressive Salvadorans)—was also formed in San Francisco. The organization was founded in direct response to the July 30, 1975, massacre of protesting students from the National University in San Salvador. Its founder, Felix Kury, a U.S.-born Salvadoran university student, was outraged with the brutality of the government's action against fellow students. A few days later the group organized the first-ever march in the United States to denounce the Salvadoran government's human rights violations. Within a year Salvadoreños Progresistas had established connections to university student organizations in El Salvador, which began sending them news, updates, and bulletins, such as *Voz Popular*, on a regular basis. They would use this information in publishing a newspaper called *El Pulgarcito* to reach out and educate the Salvadoran and North American communities.¹² By early 1978, Salvadoreños Progresistas had grown strong enough to occupy the Salvadoran consulate to protest and draw attention to the rising number of political disappearances in the country.¹³

11. Other early organizations formed by the Nicaraguan immigrant community were Casa Nicaragua (several cities), Washington Area Nicaragua Solidarity Organization, Committee in Solidarity with the People of Nicaragua, NICA, Nicaragua Taskforce, and Los Muchachos de DC. Like the Comité Cívico, most of these Nicaraguan organizations had connections with the FSLN and many would participate in the establishment of North American-based solidarity organizations. See Hoyt (2004) and Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla (2001, 129–130), who state that the Sandinistas' networks "provided a resource base on which newly arrived Central American immigrants were able to build."

12. This section based on author's interview with Felix Kury, San Francisco, February 2007.

13. Another Salvadoran-led organization, the Broad Movement in Solidarity with the Salvadoran People (Movimiento Amplio en Solidaridad con el Pueblo Salvadoreño) was active in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Founded in early 1980, its first public activity was to hold a press conference in front of the Salvadoran consulate to protest and denounce the assassination of Archbishop Romero the previous day. Other early solidarity organizations included the Salvadoran People's Solidarity Front (Frente de Solidaridad Popular Salvadoreño) in Los Angeles, and the Farabundo Martí Salvadoran People's Struggle Support Committee (Comité de Apoyo a la Lucha Popular Salvadoreña-Farabundo Martí) in New York, both in existence by 1979. There were also a number of Casa El Salvador organizations

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These early diasporic organizations soon began attracting sympathetic North Americans' support. As the political climate in Central America deteriorated and human rights violations escalated, the revolutionaries launched their signal flare strategy to denounce the growing repression in their home countries and the U.S. government's refusal to stop aiding the dictatorial regimes. They also encouraged their North American allies to create their own organizations to oppose U.S. policy (Gosse 1988, 19–20). Thus, these immigrant-based organizations played a major role in the growth of the CAPSM, serving a function analogous to wireless Internet hot spots, intensifying and extending the signal flare's range.

Nicaraguan Solidarity

In the late 1970s, Nicaraguans both in the United States and in Central America played an active role in founding the earliest Nicaraguan solidarity organization, the National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People (NicaNet; Gosse 1996, 318). "In February of 1979, the Network was founded to support the popular struggle to overthrow the 45 year U.S.-supported Somoza family dictatorship, and after the July 19 victory, to support the efforts of the Sandinista Revolution to provide a better life for the nation's people."¹⁴ As Yvonne Dilling—NicaNet's first national coordinator—explained, these Nicaraguan activists were essential to the national solidarity organizations' early growth: "The Nicaraguan exile community was always there also, ever providing a human face to the news stories, going out into the streets of Washington DC and other large cities to raise a grassroots voice for change" (Kaufman 2004). According to Katherine Hoyt (2004), NicaNet's national co-coordinator, not only was the network's founding conference held in response to an appeal from the Nicaraguan social movement but also a number of its founding committees were made up of Nicaraguans living in the United States. Hoyt (2004) notes that the invitation to the founding conference "cited the uprisings in Nicaraguan cities during the previous September as the reason for urgency in holding the conference. . . . Conference organizers said that the conference answered the appeals of many in Nicaragua for international efforts to stop aid to the dictatorship." Moreover, Hoyt (2004) observes that, "numerous Nicaraguans living in the United States participated [in organizing the conference], including Saul Arana of the Washington Area Nicaragua Solidarity Organization . . . and Roberto Vargas of the Commit-

located in cities across the country. See Hamilton and Stoltz-Chinchilla 2001, 131–132 and Van Gosse 1988, 19–20.

14. NicaNet (accessed September 11, 2006, at <http://www.nicanet.org/#about>).

tee in Solidarity with the People of Nicaragua in San Francisco." Finally, from its inception NicaNet relied on direct human connections with Nicaraguan activists, who infused the organization with their ethos, gave it an inspiring distinctly Nicaraguan identity, and relayed compelling information. As Hoyt describes, "On Saturday night Nicaraguan singer/song writer Luis Enrique Mejia Godoy entertained and inspired attendees at a 'political-cultural' event. . . . On Sunday morning, the representative from the Nicaraguan United People's Movement and National Patriotic Front addressed the gathering" (Hoyt 2004).

From its founding conference of about three hundred people, the network would grow immensely. By the end of 1980, NicaNet had approximately fifty committees, eventually growing to over 350 committees across the United States.¹⁵ NicaNet's major projects included supporting Nicaragua's literacy campaign, organizing national speaking tours for FSLN representatives, taking U.S. activists on delegations to Nicaragua, and raising material and financial aid for communities devastated by the U.S.-funded contras (Gosse 1988, 20–22).

Salvadoran Solidarity

At the same time, Salvadoran revolutionaries—both in the diaspora and in-country—were seeking to encourage the creation of solidarity committees. The two largest and most successful of these were the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) and the SHARE Foundation. CISPES was founded in October of 1980 as a secular organization, and SHARE was founded as a faith-based organization in early 1981. These organizations were instrumental in conveying information respectively from the FMLN or its allied legal civil society organizations to regional and local committees throughout the United States, and in launching and coordinating nationwide campaigns against U.S. Central America policy.

By some accounts CISPES would become the largest, most effective nationwide CAPSM organization throughout the 1980s (Gosse 1988, 22–45). Like the Nicaragua Network, CISPES had from its inception both active encouragement from the Salvadoran exile community and strong links with the popular movement in El Salvador. Van Gosse (1988, 24–26), an early CISPES leader, acknowledged that in the months before CISPES's founding "a few key activists met with the newly-formed Democratic Revolutionary Front [an umbrella coalition of Salvadoran civil society organizations and opposition political parties] . . . and agreed to help initiate a national

15. Author's communication with Chuck Kaufman, national co-coordinator of the Nicaragua Network, October 10, 2006.

solidarity effort." Also he acknowledges that CISPES's leadership maintained close connections to the Popular Revolutionary Block—a coalition of unions and grassroots organizations—with links to the FMLN's Popular Forces of Liberation faction (Gosse 1988, 24–26). The Salvadoran revolutionaries' efforts to encourage the creation of North American solidarity committees was confirmed by documents captured from the FMLN and released by the U.S. State Department on February 23, 1981, commonly referred to as the "White Paper." The White Paper contained documents belonging to Shafik Handal, a leading FMLN commander, which included a report from Handal's brother, Farid, on his visit to the United States in early 1980. As former *Boston Globe* reporter Ross Gelbspan (1991, 41–43) observed, "The purpose of Farid Handal's trip according to the diaries, was to promote the establishment of a network of 'solidarity' groups in the U.S. to support the Salvadoran rebels and oppose U.S. military aid and intervention," on behalf of the Salvadoran regime. The report documents that Handal, with the help of a U.S. activist, arranged a conference to establish a national network of solidarity committees with the Salvadoran guerrillas. It summarizes, "Out of the two 1980 conferences—one in Los Angeles and one in Washington—there emerged the initial structure for the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)." ¹⁶

Although the White Paper's conclusion—that CISPES was controlled by the FMLN—was later proved false, the late Shafik Handal himself acknowledged that throughout the war the FMLN actively cultivated and established good relationships with U.S. civil society organizations and congresspeople with the express purpose of building opposition to Reagan's Central American policy.¹⁷ In addition, Angela Sambrano—CISPES's first national coordinator—illustrates the effectiveness of the Salvadoran revolutionaries' signal flare strategy, explaining that the origins of CISPES can be traced back to a Salvadoran immigrant-based organization.

I know there were some North Americans that were involved [in the Comité Farabundo Martí]. In fact what happened is that some of those North Americans that were involved . . . they then . . . with the Salvadoreños of the Comité Farabundo Martí founded CISPES. So the Salvadoreños were very instrumental in building CISPES, in founding CISPES. But it was clear that CISPES from the very beginning, the strategy or the vision was that CISPES was a solidarity committee.¹⁸

16. Gelbspan (1991, 41–43). This recounting of CISPES's founding is not meant to assert or imply that it was controlled by the FMLN, but rather to illustrate the FMLN's signal flare strategy's success. As the Senate Intelligence Committee stated about the documents, the Farid Handal trip report "did not, on its face, show foreign direction or control of CISPES."

17. Author's personal notes, Shafik Handal Speech, University of California, Los Angeles, October 2003.

18. Author's interview with Angela Sambrano, Los Angeles, February 17, 2007.

Moreover, according to longtime CISPES leader Don White, the FMLN through its U.S. representatives gave CISPES updates on a regular basis throughout the war. "We always had a U.S. representative of the FMLN give us an update . . . to project the political analysis of the FMLN . . . but the quid pro quo was that . . . they could not try to dictate our policies . . . we had to be an independent solidarity organization."¹⁹ Furthermore, CISPES also relied on an active relationship with grassroots Salvadoran organizations to mobilize U.S. opposition. They took delegations of U.S. activists to El Salvador to meet with popular organizations such as Andes 21 de Junio and Comadres.²⁰ In addition CISPES brought activists on tours of the United States, "We would bring student leaders . . . who would tell North American audiences about the repression, about the death squad activity. We would bring mothers of the disappeared, Comadres [and] . . . We would bring labor leaders."²¹ This direct contact and information provided by Salvadoran activists became "absolutely, fundamentally important" to the organization's success.²²

The second important nationwide North American organization formed to challenge U.S.–El Salvador policy was the Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Relief, and Education Foundation (SHARE).²³ Similarly, the Salvadorans' signal flare strategy played a vital role in SHARE's creation as well: "SHARE was born in 1981 in response to a cry for solidarity that came from thousands that fled from the death squads to the refugee camps in El Salvador and Honduras, as well as from the refugees that sought sanctuary here in the U.S."²⁴ Since its inception, the SHARE Foundation worked directly with the mainstream U.S. religious community. The organization served as an ecumenical hub of information and coordination, linking U.S. parishes with Salvadoran parishes and communities, especially those devastated or displaced by the war. In particular SHARE worked with what it called "accompaniment." This process consisted of organizing delegations of North American religious activists to literally walk with organized Salvadoran refugee communities in their efforts to repopulate the war zones. These politically mobilized communities were determined to return to the conflictive zones and called on North American religious people to accompany them and impede the Salvadoran mili-

19. Author's interview with Don White, Los Angeles, February 19, 2007.

20. Andes 21 de Junio is the Salvadoran national teachers union and Comadres was the mothers' committee of the disappeared, author's interview with Don White, Los Angeles, February 19, 2007.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. Later SHARE merged with New El Salvador Today and was renamed "The SHARE Foundation: Building a New El Salvador Today."

24. SHARE Foundation, About Us (accessed March 3, 2007, at <http://www.share-elsalvador.org/about/about.htm>).

tary from attacking them.²⁵ As the organization explains on its Web site, "During the war, SHARE literally walked with our Salvadoran partners. U.S. citizens traveled to El Salvador to serve as human shields both in the refugee camps and as organized communities left the camps and walked home and began to rebuild in a war zone."²⁶

CENTRAL AMERICAN ROLE IN CREATION OF PEACE ORGANIZATIONS

In this section, I document how Central Americans acted purposively to cultivate the growth of North American peace organizations. I revisit some of Smith and Erickson-Nepstad's evidence, highlighting Central Americans' use of a signal flare strategy that went unexplored in their scholarship. In particular, I focus respectively on one organization and two networks that form the bases of their studies: Witness for Peace, the Pledge of Resistance, and Sanctuary.

Witness for Peace

Witness for Peace emerged from the 1983 experience of church people who traveled to Nicaragua to witness firsthand the effects of the Contra War. The delegation was coordinated through the Evangelical Committee for Aid to Development (CEPAD), and led by Gail Phares, an ex-Maryknoll nun who had done missionary work in Nicaragua. From the beginning Nicaraguan activists' signal flare strategy played an important role for the organization. As Smith (1996, 71) notes, Phares had returned to the United States to change the government's Central American policy "at the urging of the Central Americans she worked with." Despite this acknowledgement Smith goes on to focus solely on the North Americans' role in Witness for Peace's creation. However, in this regard his account is contradicted by Ed Griffin-Nolan's (1991, 28) account of the organization's origins, which documents that the organization was always a collaborative effort between Nicaraguan and North American activists.²⁷

Griffin-Nolan explains that U.S. delegates were struck by the plight of the contra victims they met and motivated by the fact that the contras refused to attack while North Americans were present. Upon returning to Managua they elaborated their plans with Sixto Ulloa, CEPAD's international relations representative. Ulloa "lit up when he heard the idea [of

25. Author's conversation with Jose Artiga, executive director of the SHARE Foundation, February 17, 2007.

26. SHARE Foundation, About Us (accessed March 3, 2007, at <http://www.share-elsalvador.org/about/about.htm>).

27. Ironically Smith's own account is drawn in part from Griffin-Nolan. See Smith 1996, 70n6.

a peace vigil on the border where the Contras were active, and] . . . immediately set to work arranging meetings with government and church leaders" (Griffin-Nolan 1991, 28). Moreover, because cultivating solidarity links with U.S. citizens was a high priority for the FSLN, Ulloa was even able to arrange a meeting with the president of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega. Ortega enthusiastically supported the idea of bringing ever-larger delegations of North Americans to Nicaragua's war zones. The FSLN leadership hoped that by allowing U.S. citizens to witness for themselves the effects of U.S. policy, they would be moved to return home to tell others about the devastating impact of the administration's policy on average Nicaraguans. "The Sandinistas had always felt that the more international visitors who came, the better" (Griffin-Nolan 1991, 27–28).²⁸ What then would Witness for Peace have looked like without the Nicaraguan revolutionaries' signal flare or their active encouragement? Without CEPAD and the FSLN's support, its most effective programs would have been severely diminished or would not have existed. In other words, had Nicaraguan activists not supported its vision, the organization could not have existed as it came to be.

Pledge of Resistance

However, there is perhaps no better example of the signal flare strategy's effectiveness than the Pledge of Resistance. The pledge was born a week after the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983, at a meeting of fifty-three Christian peace and justice activists "who were in close communication with alarmed Nicaraguan church leaders" (Smith 1996, 78–80). The fears of the Nicaraguan religious leaders—that the Grenada invasion was merely the prelude to Reagan's true goal, the invasion of Nicaragua—were transmitted directly to those North Americans present at the meeting. After seeing what the United States had done in Grenada and talking with Nicaraguan church leaders who asked them to help prevent an invasion, the North American activists launched the Pledge of Resistance. Thus, the Pledge of Resistance was born as a direct result of Nicaraguans' plea for help (Smith 1996, 78–80).²⁹ As of 1986 the Nicaraguans' signal flare had been amplified into a pledge by eighty thousand U.S. citizens to protest legally or through civil disobedience in case of a major U.S. escalation in Central America (Peace 1991, 88).

28. In this regard Sandinista efforts were extremely successful, with more than one hundred thousand U.S. citizens traveling to Nicaragua by 1986 (see Smith 1996, 158).

29. See also Ken Butigan's slightly different account of its founding, which also supports this claim (accessed September 19, 2006, at <http://paceebene.org/pace/nvns/essays-on-nonviolence/a-journey-for-peace-and-justice>).

Sanctuary

Central American revolutionaries also played a leading role in mobilizing the Sanctuary movement. Starting with the earliest refugees, Salvadoran immigrant kinship and friendship networks were the first to help newcomers integrate into life in the United States (Menjívar 2000). However, because of the precarious conditions of many of the receivers themselves and the overwhelming volume of refugees arriving daily, Central American activists quickly realized that they had to organize to provide assistance to their compatriots. The result was that various immigrant-based organizations working to stop the war in El Salvador and U.S. aid to the Salvadoran government spun off specialized organizations to deal with the refugee crisis. Among the first were Amigos de El Salvador, a spin-off of Salvadoreños Progresistas, and Casa El Salvador Farabundo Martí, which began taking in refugees in the late 1970s where their offices were housed, Most Holy Redeemer's Catholic Church in San Francisco.³⁰ From there Casa Farabundo Martí would spin off two new organizations that would play a large role in the development of the national sanctuary movement, the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and the Centro de Refugiados Centroamericanos.³¹ Similarly, in Los Angeles members of the Santana Chirino Amaya Refugee Committee and the Southern California Ecumenical Council founded El Rescate. Created in 1981, El Rescate "was the first agency in the U.S. to respond with free legal and social services to the mass influx of refugees fleeing the war in El Salvador."³²

These organizations would play a leading role in creating the Sanctuary movement. According to anthropologist Hilary Cunningham (1995, 62–64), "Salvadorans formed their own Sanctuary communities . . . many of which were coordinated through CARECEN." Furthermore, as Stoltz-Chinchilla and Hamilton (2004, 207) explain, "The [Central American] organizations, committees, and social-service agencies formed during this period . . . cooperated with the Sanctuary movement. . . . Individual refugees also 'testified' at local churches, synagogues, and schools about their experiences. The presence and creative grassroots organizing of these Guatemalans and Salvadorans helped catalyze a dynamic national movement."

Despite these efforts, by the Sanctuary movement's 1985 national conference, Central Americans' agency was being marginalized by paternalistic elements in the movement. Yet it is precisely here where we can most

30. Author's interviews with Felix Kury, San Francisco, February 2007.

31. Author's interview with Jose Artiga, former director of Casa El Salvador–Farabundo Martí, San Francisco, February 2007.

32. El Rescate, "El Rescate's 20 Years of Aid and Advocacy" (accessed February 6, 2007, at <http://www.elrescate.org/main.asp?sec=about>).

clearly see the Central American activists as protagonists in the creation of a truly transnational movement. Instead of accepting a role as simple beneficiaries of the Sanctuary movement, they demanded participation as activists with full rights in the movement's leadership structures.

Also present at the conference were the critical voices of Central Americans who had become active in Sanctuary. Often relegated to the role of 'telling' their horrible and tragic experiences to congregations, many Central Americans asked for a "true partnership" and more participation in the decision-making structures of the movement. Some asked for a clarification of the Sanctuary ministry, and, warning against paternalism, "declared their opposition to any attempts to make them mere objects of interest." (Cunningham 1995, 62–64)

Assessing Central Americans' Contributions

This study finds that, through their signal flare strategy, Central American revolutionaries (both in the diaspora and in their home countries) provided several fundamental resources that facilitated the CAPSM's growth. The first element that made their participation so important was that Central American activists transmitted a *mística* (revolutionary mystique) to North Americans (Judson 1987; Mojica 2007). As political scientist Marco Mojica (2007, 8–9) explains, "*mística* reflected a 'saintly' ethical and moral idea and practice that rejected all of the vices produced by the dictatorship and capitalism: corruption, false morality, exploitation, opportunism, individualism. . . . The '*militante*' must, above all, have a selfless commitment to others, surrendering his life if necessary." Central American activists conveyed this revolutionary ethic to North American activists in clear examples of Guidry and Sawyer's (2003) demonstrative mode of subversion. As CISPES's Don White explains:

We wanted the Salvadorans to speak for themselves and to testify as to what was happening. . . . People who came to hear these (talks) were ready to be recruited into CISPES. . . . The solidarity between the Salvadorans that came here and their brothers and sisters back in El Salvador was very strong. They didn't come here to get jobs and try to save money. They came here to fight for their brothers and sisters in El Salvador.³³

Second, direct human contact with these politically engaged Central Americans in turn provided the CAPSM with what political scientist Lisa Garcia Bedolla (2005, 7–9) calls a "mobilizing identity." This consisted of a positive affective group attachment, a positive view of their movement, and a belief that they had the ability and responsibility to act on behalf of the Central American people, which they transmitted to North Americans. As Garcia Bedolla explains (2005, 7–9), "Put simply, for individuals to choose to act, they must feel that they are a part of something and that

33. Author's interview with Don White, Los Angeles, February 19, 2007.

that 'something' is worthy of political effort. That feeling of attachment and group worthiness is what motivates them to act on behalf of the collective." In their study of the Central American immigrant community, Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz-Chinchilla (2001) illustrate how Central American revolutionaries helped create this mobilizing identity with a quote from Hugh Byrne, a national CISPES leader between 1987 and 1991. Byrne explains:

I got involved in El Salvador solidarity work after meeting Salvadoran activists who had just arrived in Los Angeles, "fresh from the front," so to speak in the early 1980s. They were experienced organizers, "on fire" with passion for their cause, and filled with optimism. The continuous contact with them inspired me, as I am sure it did many other non-Central Americans who joined the solidarity movement. (Hamilton and Stoltz-Chinchilla 2001, 129–130)

Hamilton and Stoltz-Chinchilla (2001, 129–130) eloquently sum up the Central American diaspora's role in diffusing this mobilizing identity, "The goals of anti-intervention and solidarity work, with its explicit challenge to U.S. government policies, made it logically the focus of U.S. citizens rather than recently arrived immigrants. But behind all of these campaigns . . . were the immigrants, with their access to information, their passion for the cause, and their optimism about the capacity of ordinary people to bring about change."

The final element that Central American revolutionaries provided was timely information that kept their North American allies updated, enabled them to recruit others, and pressured Congress to oppose Reagan's policy. Their information was credible because it came from internationally respected religious and secular civil society organizations in Central America. These organizations served as the primary sources of human rights information that U.S. activists used to denounce the administration's allies' atrocities. Thus, organizations like NicaNet, Witness for Peace, CISPES, and SHARE served as amplifiers of the Central Americans' signal flare, transmitting updated information and a clear message about the consequences of U.S. policy for the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran people. As NicaNet national co-coordinator Chuck Kaufman summarizes, "the solidarity movement's role [was] to increase the volume of the Central Americans' message."³⁴

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To date the CAPSM has been studied either solely as a domestic U.S. movement or as a DIM. In this article I critique these perspectives and offer an alternative vision of the CAPSM in which Salvadorans and Ni-

34. Author's interview with Chuck Kaufman, Managua, Nicaragua, June 23, 2006.

caraguans are the central protagonists in the movement's creation, on equal par with North Americans. Although this work puts forward a new framework of analysis for studying the CAPSM—reconceptualizing it as a transnational movement—and thus the empirical understanding of Central Americans' roles in its growth, it is not meant to supplant or replace Smith or Erickson-Nepstad's empirical work on North Americans. On the contrary, it is complementary to previous analyses in an important respect; it begins documenting and theorizing the participation of CAPSM organizers that they have not studied—Central American activists.

By using this transnational framework, I am able to document Central Americans' agency in the movement's origins and development, which is otherwise missed by forcing it to fit discreetly into a nationally based framework of analysis. At the same time, it avoids reification of the nation-state which has led to a mistaken interpretation of the CAPSM as a cynical manipulation of well-intentioned U.S. citizens by savvy political operatives. This insight is important for its historical value, because it corrects erroneous and incomplete pictures of the movement, which have focused exclusively on North Americans either as dupes of Central American communists or as the movement's only purposive agents.

This conceptualization also allows the article to identify a potentially generalizable transnational mode of subversion by which marginalized people can challenge more powerful actors in asymmetrical international conflicts. Thus, I highlight the signal flare strategy that Salvadoran and Nicaraguan revolutionaries used to mobilize sympathetic North American activists and spark a transnational social movement. Specifically, the article identifies several vital resources that Central American activists afforded the movement: direct human contact with the victims of U.S. policy, revolutionary *mística*, a mobilizing identity, and access to compelling information. These findings provide possible insights for contemporary solidarity movements, such as those with Cuba and Venezuela.

Finally, this article raises important issues and questions that cannot be addressed in an article-length piece, such as a more thorough exploration of the role of Central Americans in their home countries and the Guatemalan side of the CAPSM. Nevertheless, it is intended to open the door for Latin Americanists—who have to date been uncharacteristically silent about this important phenomenon—to take up this agenda and study the movement. Thus, although this article leaves many questions and issues about the CAPSM unanswered, I believe it gets Latin Americanists to start asking the right questions. But even more important, the article is a cautionary tale that reminds us that how we frame our research questions affects the answers we come out with and their implications. Concretely, it exemplifies how a particular analytical (ontological) lens, focused on the actions of mainstream actors can lead scholars to miss important activity by subaltern people. This is a problem not only for Latin Americanists,

but also relates to where scholars see power operating in any particular subject area.

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