

Crisis Eruptions:  
A Comparative Analysis of Right-wing Populism in El Salvador and  
Guatemala

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## **Abstract**

This thesis project is a comparative analysis of contemporary right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala, looking at the Nayib Bukele government in El Salvador and the Jimmy Morales and Alejandro Giammattei governments in Guatemala. Using a comparative historical approach and a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework, I situate the two case studies in the context of the global rise of right-wing or “authoritarian” populist movements and argue that they should be understood as arising out of an organic crisis in the neoliberal model of capitalism. In order to analyze the multi-faceted nature of the relationship between organic crisis and populism, I use a neo-Gramscian, institutionalist approach drawing on a multi-disciplinary historical review, news media, economic reports, and secondary fieldwork for evidence.

*Keywords: El Salvador, Guatemala, comparative analysis, populism, authoritarian populism, Gramsci, neo-Gramscian, historical sociology, social structure of accumulation*

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## Acronyms

ANEP	National Private Business Association ( <i>Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada</i> )
ANDA	Administration of Aqueducts and Sewers ( <i>Administración Nacional de Acueductos y Alcantarillados</i> )
ARENA	Political party, ES: Nationalist Republican Alliance ( <i>Alianza Republicana Nacionalista</i> )
AVEMILGUA	Association of Military Veterans of Guatemala ( <i>Asociación de Veteranos Militares de Guatemala</i> )
CACIF	Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations ( <i>Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras</i> )
CEPAL	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean ( <i>Comisión Económica para América Latina</i> )
CICIES	International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador ( <i>Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad de El Salvador</i> )
CICIG	International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala ( <i>Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala</i> )
CISPES	Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador
FMLN	Political Party, ES: Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front ( <i>Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional</i> )
FRG	Political Party, GT: National Republican Front ( <i>Frente Republicano Nacional</i> )
TSE	Supreme Electoral Tribunal ( <i>Tribuno Supremo Electoral</i> )

UDEFEGUA

*Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y  
Defensoras de Derechos Humanos  
Guatemala*

URNG

Political Party, GT: Guatemalan National  
Revolutionary Unity (*Unidad Revolucionaria  
Nacional Guatemalteca*)

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

– Karl Marx, *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

## Chapter One: Introduction

On April 16, 2015, an UN-sponsored anti-corruption and anti-impunity commission, the *Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala* (CICIG) or International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, publicized their investigation into a massive corruption ring that would come to be called *la línea*, where importers would pay kickbacks to customs officials for reduced duties, with the sanction of the government. In a country traumatized by decades of military repression and where killings of social movement leaders are still common, tens of thousands took to the street to demand the resignation of the sitting government. To the surprise of many, including themselves, the protesters were successful (Colburn & Arturo, 2016; Reynolds, 2015).

The candidate who captured the outpouring of popular anger was an unexpected one. Running on a very simple slogan, *ni corrupto, ni ladrón* (“neither corrupt nor a thief”), political novice and comedian Jimmy Morales was elected President of Guatemala, beating out centre-left candidate and former first lady Sandra Torres Colom who, despite overseeing an expansion of social supports for Guatemalans, was seen as tainted by corruption (Uribo Medina, 2015). Despite CICIG’s revelations being arguably the greatest contributor to Morales’ success, he would dissolve the body in 2018 when investigations turned towards his shadowy campaign financing. Flanked by a military honour guard several ranks deep, Morales gave CICIG investigators twenty-four hours to leave the country. Outside the presidential compound, military officers chant “Good riddance to the foreign communists!” beside American-donated armoured vehicles (Lakhani, 2018).

In neighbouring El Salvador, a similar process was unfolding in slow motion, absent the shocking revelations of CICIG. In 2011, thousands of Salvadorans took to the streets in protests

against inequality and corruption in the country. Despite courting from both the left-wing Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) government and the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) opposition, neither could capture the energy of these *indignados*, tainted as both parties were by corruption scandals. It would take until 2018, when upstart candidate Nayib Bukele would attack both parties as being part of “the system”, for simmering discontent to be mobilized (Torrez & Moodie, 2020). After winning the presidency, Bukele assailed the National Assembly when the opposition-dominated legislature refused to sign a secretive US\$109 million loan to upgrade the country’s police armaments (Wade, 2020). Bukele’s political party, *Nuevas Ideas* (“New Ideas”), would sweep the legislative elections a year later amidst low voter turnouts.

While their elections were fuelled by popular discontent, rather than addressing corruption and impunity, Bukele and Morales – and subsequently, Morales’ successor Alejandro Giammattei – have consolidated their own power, often with military force (see: CISPES, 2021; UDEFEGUA, 2017). They have also been instrumental in accelerating, rather than halting, other social crises which bear upon the Guatemalan and Salvadoran people: dispossession from land-grabbing, internal displacement, out-migration, aggravated poverty, precarious work, environmental degradation, and lack of access to clean drinking water.

In studying the right-wing populist governments of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Jimmy Morales in Guatemala, I ask the following research questions: what explains the rise of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala? What is the relationship between the crisis of neoliberalism and the rise of right-wing populism? What significance to particular national conditions have compared to transnational developments? How do populists in power in each case respond to identifiable ‘crisis points’ within the organic crisis? How are ‘the people’

constructed in each case, and what is its function? Are there regional or national peculiarities to right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala, and why do they exist? Are there divergences between these two case studies, and what explains them?

Historian James Dunkerley in *Power in the Isthmus* remarks that Central America is a region “closer to its history” (p.3), characterized by brief progressive openings followed by long cycles of repression. The strongman, personalist leadership styles of Morales and Bukele, coupled with domestic deployment and politicization of the military evokes comparisons to the military dictatorships which ruled El Salvador and Guatemala in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The cyclical nature of reaction in Central America makes Marx’s adage that “the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (1995) ring true in the cases of Morales and Bukele. The ghosts of nearly four decades of civil war, and the root causes of those conflicts, still haunt present Salvadoran and Guatemalan politics (Hatcher, 2018; Nelson & McAllister, 2013).

El Salvador and Guatemala are not isolated polities, however, and the rise of Morales and Bukele should not be considered as mere repetitions of a never-ending closed cycle. Transnational developments have converged with regional and national conditions. The neoliberal model of capital accumulation, characterized by wage repression, “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2005b), financialization, and the internationalization of production and supply chains (Robinson, 2018; 2003; Saad-Filho, 2008) has been in a deep and sustained economic “overaccumulation” crisis since the 2008 Great Financial Crash – marked by slumping investments, slow growth, and rising amounts of hoarded wealth (Robinson, 2019a; 2019b). Confidence in existing political systems has also been assailed across the world, evidenced by the increasing sentiment of “ontological insecurity” (Kinnvall, 2018) among citizens reacting to

distinct but interrelated social problems such as inequality, joblessness, landlessness, ecological devastation, corruption, and crime. Cumulatively, we can see a new cycle of mass mobilizations and protests on an increasing scale (Endnotes Collective, 2020; Taylor, 2019), only barely disrupted by the 2019-2020 global COVID-19 pandemic.

Following Robinson (2019b) and a number of other scholars and commentators (see: Babic, 2020; Levenson, 2020), I argue that the converging crises of a sustained overaccumulation crisis, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the ecological crisis – which is itself also an “underproduction” crisis of falling inputs (Moore, 2011) – increasing unrest, and growing immiseration for much of the world’s population, constitutes what Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (2018) called an organic crisis. Repression is one response to such a deep-reaching crisis: as legitimacy erodes, social movements are increasingly met with repression (Robinson, 2019a) – evidenced in Central America as death squads and secret police make a reappearance (CISPES, 2021; UDEFEGUA, 2017; Mowforth, 2014). Another response, however, is new kinds of governance and consent building represented by the rise of right-wing populism (Robinson, 2019b). El Salvador and Guatemala and illustrative of this, with both Morales and Bukele rising to power through elections. Drawing from comparative historical approaches found in historical sociology (Skocpol, 1984) and from neo-Gramscian theory, I argue that right-wing populism emerges as a response to the aforementioned organic crisis in the cases of El Salvador and Guatemala because of the unique combination of liberal democracy and “militarized accumulation” (Granovsky-Larsen, 2018; Robinson, 2019a) that has characterized neoliberalism in Central America.

### **Organic Crisis & Right-wing populism**

Gramsci used the term “organic crisis” to differentiate from ‘ordinary’ economic, ideological, or political crises. An organic crisis is a comprehensive, systemic crisis where the ruling order can no longer generate societal consensus in material or ideological terms. Such a crisis lays bare fundamental contradictions in the system that the ruling classes are unable to resolve (Levenson, 2020; Rey-Araújo, 2019; Gramsci, 2018). Neoliberalism as a political project and the dominant form of capitalist accumulation (Kotz, 2015; 2010; Harvey, 2005), both in Central America and the wider world-system, is facing an organic crisis: a novel global pandemic, stagnating investment, a crisis of institutional trust, two major recessions within a ten-year cycle, and massive social unrest have converged into an extremely volatile combination, the effects of which are still unfolding.

Organic crises are economic, political, social, and ideological all at once. “Organic” here means these crises are not merely a cyclical recession or momentary political upheaval – they threaten the very foundations of capitalist stability (Levenson, 2020). They usually lead to a rejection of established political parties, economic policies, and value systems and can result in “system transformation” (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Kotz, 2010) to a new form of capitalism, socialist revolution, or even system-wide collapse (Robinson, 2019a; 2019c). Organic crises do not emerge in a straightforward fashion but as a series of overlapping, disjointed conjunctures which culminate in crisis (Talbot, 2011; Arrighi, 1994). Responses to the collapse of, and the rejection of, the previous social order are likewise not straightforward, but are rather often entangled with and expressed in terms of culture, national identity, belonging, morality, and faith (Ausserladscheider, 2019; Hall, 1998). Organic crises make ideal “populist moments” (Laclau, 2005, p. 5) where insurgent campaigns from either the left or the right can capture discontent and disillusionment.

In addition to rising protests and civil unrest, political movements labelled authoritarian populist, national populist, or right-wing populist have also seen a meteoric rise over the last decade (Gusterson, 2017; Moffit, 2016). While wrapped in appeals to nation, people, and family, they rise in tandem with economic, social, and political crises arising from the neoliberal model of accumulation (Kiely, 2020). We can thus situate Morales and Bukele in a continuum that also includes Donald Trump in the United States, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. These examples of right-wing populism, while nationally specific are also part of a transnational right-wing populist movement (Öniş & Kutlay, 2020).

### **Situating the Project**

To say that populism emerges out of crisis is not an original statement. There is in fact widespread consensus that “liberal democracy’s sober regimes of rationality” (Gebhardt, 2019) are in crisis, heralding a new political and historical era, more confrontational and by extension more volatile and emotive than what preceded it (Cerveza-Marzal, 2020). Ernesto Laclau’s idea of a “populist moment” (Laclau, 2005, p. 5) is considered increasingly current across scholarly literature (Cerveza-Marzal, 2020).

Disagreement emerges, however, when comparing what different schools of ‘populism studies’ have to say about the details of populism-conjuring crises. Crisis of what? Crisis for whom? Popular across the literature on populism is an “ideational” model of populism which understands populism as an empty form which can be filled with content from across the political spectrum. Ideational models of populism usually argue that populist movements emerge out of crises of legitimacy or weak democratic institutions. A popular approach on the left is to use Laclau where populism is any delineation between “the people” and “the elite” (Jacobs,

2018; Laclau, 2005). However, Laclau's definition of populism has been criticized by others on the left as being too general and thus unable to study populism as a specific political phenomenon (Aytac, 2020; Rey-Araújo, 2020; Hart, 2012). On the other hand, liberal versions of the ideational model conceptualize populism as "a style of political mobilization based on strong rhetorical appeals to the people and crowd action" (de la Torre, 2010, p. 3).

While insights raised by these ideational models bear consideration in describing the rise of right-wing populism, I argue that an ideational model is insufficient. Ideational models can correctly diagnose a dimension of organic crises, namely the crisis of legitimacy of certain political institutions, they fall short in failing to connect crises of legitimacy with political economy or class dynamics and in failing to address the specifically capitalist nature of the institutions they describe (Rey-Araújo, 2020; Hart, 2012). On the other hand, many analyses of the political economy of populism can be overly rigid in their explanations for populism's rise, leading to a gap between reductive economic explanations and the actual discourse of right-wing populism (Kiely, 2020; Ausserladscheider, 2019).

By situating right-wing populism in the context of an organic crisis, I am attempting to describe both ideological and material factors and how they work in tandem to give rise to right-wing populism. Gramsci described an organic crisis as an interregnum, a limbo period between one form of rule and another. "A time of monsters" or more aptly translated, a period where "a variety of morbid symptoms" (Gramsci, 2018, p.276) appear. How organic crises resolve is dependent on the "balance of class forces" (Gramsci, 2018) and how these contending forces press their demands on institutions (Rey-Araújo, 2020; 2019). To describe and interpret the changing balance of class forces in Central America and its manifestation in the realms of politics, economy, and ideology, I draw from the work of Stuart Hall (1988) and from Social

Structure of Accumulation theory (Rey-Araújo; 2020;2019) for my analysis, and situate current developments using a comparative historical review.

This project is an original contribution to existing scholarship on populism and on capitalist crises as it follows Rey-Araújo's (2020; 2019) recent call to use Social Structure of Accumulation theory to interpret the relationship between populism and capitalist crises, and because it does so through two case studies largely excluded from studies of the contemporary wave of right-wing populism. I chose to study El Salvador and Guatemala based on my relative familiarity with these contexts and my connection with social movements in the region but believe that by adding these case studies to existing debates adds unique insights to the relationship between right-wing populism, capitalist crises, and emergent developments in the current historical juncture.

SSA theory attempts to qualitatively describe varieties of capitalism by looking at how specific "capital-labour relationships" (Hornstein, 2021) – the "balance of forces" in Gramsci (2018) – give rise to distinctive constellations of economic, state, cultural, and ideological institutions, and by extension understand the peculiarities of crises in different structures of accumulation (Labrousse et al., 2017; Kotz, 2015; 2010). SSA exists within the broader umbrella of what can be called neo-Gramscian scholarship which also includes Robert Cox's Global Political Economy framework, the Essex School of Discourse Analysis headed by Laclau and Mouffe (Jacobs, 2018), Stuart Hall's work in cultural studies, and Giovanni Arrighi's (1994) work in world-systems theory and world history. While each of these trends of scholarship is distinct, they share a project in grappling with Gramsci's central problematic of the "vagueness and imprecision characterizing the mechanism of subordination of politics and ideology to economics" (Mouffe, quoted in Kann, 2014) and offer different insights into capitalist crisis and

populism. I thus engage with them in detail in my theoretical chapter and draw from them where useful in my analysis.

While the relationship between ecology and the political economy of Central America is expansive and deserving of its own project, for the purposes of this analysis I situate ecological factors in a *capital-labour-nature* relation, drawing from conventional SSA theory's emphasis on "capital-labour relations" (Hornstein, 2021). In particular I describe the multiple "commodity frontiers" (Moore, 2011) which have contoured Central American capitalism's relationship to nature and, given the importance of agriculture in Central American political economy, draw from critical agrarian studies work that examines the connection between capitalist transformations of the global countryside, peasant struggles, environmental crisis, and right-wing populism (Borras, 2020; McKay et al., 2020) to better conceptualize the structure of accumulation in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Social Structure of Accumulation theory has many strengths, but it is worth acknowledging its limitations as well. Notably, as a "middle range theory" attempting to connect abstract Marxian concepts to peculiar and specific contexts, it often lacks a sufficient explanation for why particular institutions or social structures emerge at particular times or place (Hornstein, 2021). Further, application of the Gramscian and neo-Gramscian frameworks to Latin America has been heavily problematized, especially in conceptualizing the role of repression in capitalist social structures in Latin America (Hesketh, 2019; Burgos, 2015; Mignolo, 2012). Nonetheless, I believe there are important insights to be drawn out by applying this framework which can describe factors operating on multiple scales driving right-wing populism in Central America. I discuss what considerations are necessary to make my theoretical framework effectively

transpose or ‘travel’ (Salem, 2020; Morton, 2012) to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan contexts in my theoretical section.

### **A Note on Ecology and SSA**

It is difficult to undertake a project in political economy in 2021, as environmental crises become more and more difficult to ignore and a novel global pandemic likely spurred by deforestation (Tollefson, 2020) still ravages most of the globe, without also engaging with ecology. In fact, Yusoff (2018) argues that instead of thinking about ‘Global Political Economy’ we should in fact be thinking in terms of ‘Planetary Political Economy’ adding ecological and geologic processes to factors considered as part of political-economic analysis. Fraser (2021) and Moore (2011) argue that any crisis of capitalism is an ecological crisis, and vice-versa. As right-wing populist leaders the world over champion carbon energy development, clearcutting, and other environmentally destructive policies as paths to prosperity (McCarthy, 2019; Dalby, 2018) and as global warming exacerbates landlessness, displacement, and lack of clean water in Central America (Robinson, 2019c; Mowforth, 2014), these propositions have relevance to an analysis of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala.

While a full accounting of the relationship between ecology, organic crisis, and right-wing populism is beyond the scope of this project – SSA theory, notably, omits ecological processes in its discussion of the balance of forces – it bears remarking on. I reflect on its importance and potential future directions for looking at ecology and right-wing populism in Central America in the conclusion.

### **On Method: Comparative and Historical**

This project is not about the COVID-19 pandemic *per se*, though the impacts of the pandemic on Central America and on the fortunes of right-wing populism are discussed (see: Betz, 2020; Saad-Filho, 2020). However, like all “normal” practices and processes of scholarship, this project was affected by the pandemic. I had originally conceptualized this project as an ethnographic work, consistent with my background in anthropology. Travel restrictions and my own cautiousness about travelling as a researcher from the Global North to Global South countries and potentially becoming a vector for infection meant that I instead conducted this project remotely. I considered attempting a digital ethnography, but my lack of skills in internet-based research, as well as the vagueness of the term in anthropological scholarship, discouraged me. I attempted to incorporate online interviews from relevant experts and from social movement leaders in both countries, but the number of these interviews were limited due to factors like cautiousness from some about using video conferencing services to talk about violent political contexts and the difficulty of facilitating meaningful researcher-informant relationships in lockdown conditions, as well as more mundane problems like scheduling conflicts. The interviews I did conduct, while meaningful, served more as guides for direction in secondary research.

Thus, limited to secondary research, I had to develop a method and approach to analysis which could engage with the complex interplay of ideological and material pressures upon institutions at the micro, meso, and macro level of right-wing populism as I had hoped to do with ethnographic methods. In this endeavour, I turned to historical sociology which encompasses a variety of descriptive approaches ranging from substantivism (Polanyi, 2001) to world-systems theory (Kvangraven, 2020; Steinmo, 2008; Skocpol, 1984). Uniting historical sociological literature is an emphasis on looking at formal and informal institutions (Steinmo, 2008; Hall,

1989) comparatively where the focus is on attempting to describe institutional change in a dynamic, non-prescriptive way.

This makes an historical approach a strong complement to Social Structure of Accumulation theory which compares varieties of capitalism across both historical time (see: Kotz, 2015; Talbot, 2011) and present space (see: Bizberg, 2019; Menz, 2017a) where institutions' development and are contingent upon particular capital-labour relations (Hornstein, 2021; Rey-Araújo, 2019) e.g., the balance of class forces (Gramsci, 2018; Hall, 1989). This project's use of Social Structure of Accumulation theory takes the form of an "extended case study" (Geschiere, 2001) by looking over the long term how the changing balance of class forces comes to bear on the rise of right-wing populism. This comparison is qualitative and descriptive rather than quantitative and classificatory, attempting to develop a broader conceptual and institutional analysis (Steinmo, 2008; Mahoney, 2004; Thelen, 1999) of right-wing populism in each case rather than compare quantifiable outcomes.

Using Social Structure of Accumulation theory and a descriptive historical approach together puts this project methodologically in the broader tradition of comparative political economy (Clift, 2014; Mahoney, 2004) while avoiding the rigidity of political economy which sometimes results in a narrow conceptualization of social processes (Ausserladscheider, 2019; Seabrooke, 2007). This comparative-historical analysis also allows for the identification of important differences between these two very comparable cases, such as the persistence of a significant and distinct Indigenous majority in Guatemala while *mestizaje* dominates Salvadoran national identity, or the relatively stable post-war party system in El Salvador and the extremely volatile party makeup of post-war Guatemala.

Further, while this project itself is not ethnographic, I have found anthropological research and interventions on El Salvador and Guatemala extremely insightful in grounding my approach and framework in the specifics of these case studies. Wolf's (1969) historical anthropology in *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* helps situate the revolutionary wars of the twentieth century in broader agrarian transformations, while Granovsky-Larsen's (2017) account of social movement struggles and the contemporary neoliberal Guatemalan state, Torrez and Moodie's (2020) following of the *indignados* protests in El Salvador, Copeland's (2011; 2007) fieldwork on "radical pessimism" in the Guatemalan highlands and Silber's (2011) ethnography of disillusionment in post-war El Salvador all added significantly to this project's understanding of the context in which right-wing populism arises in El Salvador and Guatemala.

The methodologies, frameworks, and approaches discussed above have longstanding dialogues with each other. Historical sociology, neo-Gramscian scholarship, and anthropology all attempt to deal with similar problematics situating micro and meso practices and processes within the macro-institutional structure of society (Crehan, 2018; Gledhill, 2017; Jonsson, 1993) and have had significant influence on each other (see: Gonzales, 2018; Burawoy, 2003; Skocpol, 1984). While fieldwork can emphasize the uniqueness of each particular field site (Longcore, 2019; Marcus, 1995), there is also a renewed interest in comparative and historical methods in anthropology (Rosa & Dieste, 2020; Miller et al., 2019; Candea, 2018). 'New comparativists' emphasize that comparative anthropology should avoid replicating 'armchair anthropology' by keeping ethnographic research as its base, comparison adds a tool for scaling "vertically" from the 'sensual' nature of participant observation and process in particular field sites to the level of conceptual analysis (Miller et al., 2019; Wulf, 2016).

My endeavour is to integrate other secondary sources – including historiographies, other scholars’ fieldwork, economic reports, news articles, media from political campaigns, and official statements in a comparative analysis of right-wing populism in a Social Structure of Accumulation framework. This presents a wide number of scales at which the research operates. This is a challenging balancing act, but one that an institutionalist approach and Social Structure of Accumulation theory are engaged in managing. Using SSA and Gramscian tools like the concept of hegemony, contingent understandings of capitalist development and crises, and the capital-labour-nature framing alongside a descriptive account of processes and institutions, broader structural developments can be identified in each case without losing sight of how the particular history and social organization of El Salvador and Guatemala come to bear on the rise of right-wing populism.

### **Outline of subsequent chapters**

The second chapter of this thesis constitutes the theory section. I engage with other theories of populism and neoliberalism. In populism studies, I discuss the relevance and limitations of the ‘ideational’ models used by many prominent populism scholars like de la Torre (2010), Laclau (2005), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) and Moffit (2016). I argue, following Rey-Araújo (2020; 2019), that ideational models are insufficient and a fuller understanding of populism, left and right requires, political-economic analysis and that in engaging with Social Structure of Accumulation theory, ideological and material elements can be analyzed together. In elaborating a theory of neoliberalism, I discuss various understandings of neoliberalism and capitalist crises, and show how SSA theory can provide definition to neoliberalism and describe the current organic crisis. I also elaborate on the Social Structure of Accumulation framework by

discussing its constituent theoretical underpinnings in detail. Finally, I discuss means by which my framework can appropriately ‘travel’.

The third chapter is an historical overview, I attempt to provide a brief summary and analysis of Central American history. The historical framework uses the SSA concept of “system transformation” (Kotz, 2017) and Arrighi’s (1994) “systemic cycles of accumulation” (Talbot, 2011) to periodize distinct social structures of accumulation in Central American capitalism and the capital-labour-nature relations therein. The importance of Spanish colonialism and incorporation into the capitalist world-system, as well as the post-independence agrarian oligarchies are mentioned as relevant (Bucheli, 2008; Dunkerley, 1988), but the bulk of the chapter focusses on important events and developments in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Commonalities between El Salvador and Guatemala like the development of “coffee capitalism”, the failed experience with import-substitution industrialization, the political economy of cyclical violence (Hatcher, 2018), and the experience of wartime and post-war neoliberalism. are discussed, as well as important divergences such as *la matanza* in 1920s El Salvador, the Arbenz government in 1950s Guatemala (Bucheli, 2008; Grandin, 2000), the election of a left government in El Salvador (Almeida, 2015), and the importance of CICIG in Guatemala are discussed.

The fourth and final chapter constitutes the analysis, where I bring together the long historical review with economic, media, theoretical and other secondary sources to compare and contrast the cases of Jimmy Morales in Guatemala and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. I discuss their respective rises in relation to the organic crisis in the neoliberal structure of accumulation unfolding over the 2010s, considering factors like insecurity, economic growth, transnational investment, agrarian and environmental transformations, urbanization, crime, relationship to the

military. I also reflect on the recent divergences between the two cases in terms of relative stability, reflecting on the recent mass mobilizations in Guatemala and the consolidation of power by Bukele in El Salvador. I conclude by arguing that right-wing populism constitutes a response to the organic crisis of neoliberal capitalism in Central America, combining coercion and consent in its approach to class rule as a result of the unique combination of liberal democracy and militarized accumulation found in El Salvador and Guatemala.

## **Chapter Two: Theorizing Right-Wing Populism & Crisis of neoliberal accumulation**

This project takes the perspective that the current trend of right-wing populism, the two cases of El Salvador and Guatemala included, arise out of an organic crisis in the neoliberal structure of accumulation in those countries. Several theorists have argued that populism arises of crisis, and there is a wide recognition that the current wave of right-wing populism and other threats to the “liberal international system” (Babic, 2020) cannot be understood in isolation but rather as systemic (Cerveza-Marzal, 2020; Gebhart, 2019). For populism experts such as Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), populism is a crisis of weak or weakening liberal institutions and populist majoritarianism emerges as a kind of mutation of liberal democracy because of institutional weakness. Mainstream and heterodox economists alike have produced longitudinal and empirical studies correlating the rise of populism with negative impacts of free trade on workers and small businesses (Grossman, 2020; Iacolla et al., 2020; Rodrik, 2018). Some anthropologists and critical race scholars have focussed on populism as a crisis of identity and nationhood (Gusterson, 2017; Boyer, 2016), while Polanyian social scientists focus on crisis as a social “double movement” against market deregulation and disembedding (Kiely, 2020; Scheiring & Szombati, 2020).

Many of these prognoses remain narrow focus, addressing a handful of aspects of the current crisis, usually either in the ideological or material domains but not together. The concept of organic crisis illustrates however that the breakdown of ruling-class hegemony can “produce confrontations and conjectures in the political domain and the traditional areas of industrial and economic life” as well as “debates about fundamental sexual, moral and intellectual questions, in a crisis in the relations of political representation and the parties — on a whole range of issues which do not necessarily, in the first instance, appear to be articulated with politics, in the narrow

sense, at all” (Hall, 1988). Further, organic crises have to be understood as being specifically crises of the capitalist mode of production (Rey-Araújo, 2020).

In this chapter, I discuss the various iterations of the ‘ideational’ model used by many prominent populism scholars like de la Torre (2010), Laclau (2005), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) and Moffit (2016). I argue following Rey-Araújo (2020; 2019) that ideational models are insufficient and a fuller understanding of populism, left and right, requires political-economic analysis. I propose and elaborate on a Social Structure of Accumulation theory and a comparative historical approach as ways to address this deficiency. In elaborating this framework, I provide a brief summary of the corpus and history of neo-Gramscian scholarship growing out of the 1980s (Lacher, 2008) that makes up its theoretical underpinnings. I also describe the neoliberal structure of accumulation. Finally, I discuss means by which my theoretical concepts can appropriately ‘travel’ by engaging with challenges raised by the ontological turn to comparative method, as well as engaging with existing Latin American studies literature on populism, Gramscian theory, and coloniality and discussing the challenges and limitations of the Social Structure of Accumulation framework.

### **Ideational Framework of Populism**

Applications of the ideational framework vary in their theoretical foundations. De la Torre (2010) and Cas Mudde (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; 2013), draw from the liberal political science tradition, and situate their analyses in the context of liberal democracy (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; Canoyan, 1999). They conceptualize populations as divided into a series of equally valid and powerful constituency groups seeking representation and the advancement of their interests and understanding politics as principally a contest of ideas about how to best address these constituencies. Laclau and Mouffe prefer to see their understanding of

democracy as moving beyond the liberal tradition, focussed on “antagonistics” and “radical democracy” beyond liberalism. Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical foundations, while initially Gramscian, are eclectic, drawing as much from Jacques Lacan and Carl Schmitt (Aytac, 2020; Cerveza-Marzal, 2020; Jacobs, 2018).

In the former case, what might be called a ‘liberal’ ideational model, populism is a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde, 2004, p. 544) that can be combined or infused with socialism, conservatism, nationalism, or even liberalism. Key to populism in this framework is the opposition between a morally upright people and a morally inferior or degenerate elite (Mudde, 2004). Populism is thus “moralistic rather than programmatic” (Mudde, 2004) – it is, in effect, a form which can be filled with varieties of content, rather than a specific political project. The basic opposition between the “people” and “elite” is general to all manifestations of populism, but who is defined as the people and who is defined as the elite can vary based on the particular manifestation of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). In the case of Barr (2017) and Moffit (2016) populism is explicitly a strategy or style of appealing to potential constituents more than a coherent worldview. Acemoglu et al. (2013) also sees populism as principally a political strategy, in which politicians signal that they are not beholden to elite interests. For Acemoglu, this manifests principally as economic policies associated with the left, in particular deficit spending.

Another important element of populism for liberal ideationists is the figure of the leader. Populist movements and parties rely on the personal charisma of a leader to rally and organize supporters. The popular bona fides of the leader are extolled to demonstrate a direct connection between the leader and the people that they champion (Moffit, 2016; Levitsky and Loxton, 2012; Mudde, 2004). This political ‘personalism’ is coupled with a populist understanding of

representation i.e., majoritarianism (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; de la Torre, 2010; Conoyan, 1999), whereby the populist leader represents the general will of the united ‘people’. For some using the ideational framework, this makes populism dangerous for liberal-democratic institutions (Cervera-Marzal, 2020; Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019), while for others it is a symptom of the weakness or erosion of liberal democracy (de la Torre, 2010; Mudde, 2004).

Laclau and Mouffe’s work, while focussed on the realm of ideology (Jacobs, 2018) differs significantly from other ideational frameworks not only for its differing lexicon and theoretical foundations, but in its orientation to populism. Their work is “post-Marxist” because even though it owes credit to Marxian and especially Neo-Marxist theories of the state, it rejects what Laclau and Mouffe see as the economic and class determinism of Marxism (Cervera-Marzal, 2020; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Instead, political conflict – the “passions and rhetoric” of politics (Howarth & Laclau, 2015) – can be conceptualized as a constellation of various struggles, called *agonistics*. Where many writing in the ideational framework principally see populism as a ‘problem’ for liberal democracy, Laclau and Mouffe have a more positive interpretation of populism, arguing that the ‘friend/enemy’ distinction of populism can serve as a substitute for older understandings of class struggle in constructing a ‘people’ against a dominant ‘elite’ (Stewart, 2018).

The agonistic model of political analysis has wider scope and implications, but Laclau and Mouffe mainly use it to discuss how to create this people versus elite “populist moment” (Laclau, 2005, p. 5). Laclau and Mouffe attack neoliberalism for depoliticizing much of collective life by removing agonistic contestation in favour of technocratic governance (Mouffe, 2017; Laclau, 2005). They argue that contemporary populism is a reaction to this depoliticization, attempting to repoliticize work, the state, the economy, citizenship, national

identity, and other social relations (Cerveza-Marzal, 2020; Laclau, 2005). Populism is thus a positive development in the advance of “radical democracy” against neoliberalism (Cerveza-Marzal, 2020; Setwart, 2018).

This framing, however, neglects some important considerations. Laclau and Mouffe’s framework does not go far enough in their own goal of repoliticization, because it does not address the specifically capitalist character of the institutions which populists and ‘the people’ make demands upon (Rey-Araújo, 2020; 2019). While Laclau argues that the populist moment occurs when accumulations of unsatisfied demands move from being made *within* institutions to demands being made *against* institutions, the specific form of these institutions remains unspecified. A further problem with this framing of populism is that it does not provide criteria for examining why particular populisms triumph in particular moments or crises (Cerveza-Marzal, 2020; Ciccariello-Maher, 2020).

There is some merit to the ideational approach being applied to the cases of Nayib Bukele and Jimmy Morales. As candidates, both men made almost no clear policy commitments (Kitroeff, 2020; Reynolds, 2015), presenting their campaigns more in terms of a broad worldview of taking back power from ‘elites’ and returning it to the ‘people’, rhetoric consistent with a thin, instrumental understanding of populism that tracks with the ideational framework. Their campaigns were also driven heavily by personal charisma, with Bukele using his personal social media to campaign and later to govern (Goodfriend, 2019) and Morales based his campaign on his personal morality – “*ni corrupto, ni ladrón*” (Elías, 2015). But this only describes the style and rhetoric of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala and does not go very far in explaining root causes for their emergence. Neither does weak liberal institutions explain right-wing populism, El Salvador and Guatemala have had ‘weak’ liberal

institutions since the end of their respective civil wars. Rather, the current “populist moment” has to be situated historically in relation to the crisis in the neoliberal model of capitalist accumulation and associated changes in the balance of class forces.

### **Other theories of populism: Ontology, backlash, double movement**

Beyond the ideational framework, there is a variety of scholarship attempting to explain the rise of right-wing populism. In recognition that “liberal democracy’s sober regimes of rationality” (Gebhardt, 2019) are in crisis and politics are increasingly divisive and confrontational (Cerveza-Marzal, 2020), scholarship has turned to looking at the “ontological insecurity” (Kinnvall, 2018) of voters and citizens vulnerable to shocks and global security risks including health, terrorism, economic collapse, crime, climate change, and migration (Gerbaudo, 2021; Steele & Homolar, 2019; Kinnvall, 2018).

One common form of ontological insecurity pointed to as explaining the rise of right-wing populism is migration and cultural displacement (Steele & Homolar, 2019; Kinnvall, 2018). This forms the basis of the “cultural backlash” (2016) thesis and the eponymous book by Norris and Inglehart (2019). That book argues that the rise of populism worldwide is principally a culmination of conservative resistance to cultural shifts around sexuality, gender roles, national identity, etc. and perceived demographic displacement of older voters by a younger, more cosmopolitan, diverse, and progressive voting composition (Melito, 2020). This adds animus and appeal to right-wing populist parties, perceived by voters to be preserving and defending conservative cultural norms and loyalty to the nation from perceived encroachment (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

Norris and Inglehart's research explicitly juxtapose their thesis to economic explanations for the rise of populism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). They claim to disprove claims that the rise of populism can be connected to economic factors mathematically, analyzing a cross-section of populist movements and populist voters around the world and cross-referencing the rise of populist voters with a variety of sentiments and demographics. They claim this quantitative measure decisively disproves the economic explanations for the rise of right-wing populism. However, there are a number of empirical flaws with their quantitative argument (Johnson, 2019) and their qualitative dismissal of economic causes ignores the possibility that economic dissatisfaction can be expressed in cultural terms (Ausserladscheider, 2019).

However, Norris and Inglehart's claim that cultural and demographic changes are definitively driving the rise of right-wing populism based on their quantitative data is a reductive approach to assessing right-wing populism, ignoring the ways in which economic aspirations and demands can be refracted through cultural and nationalist language (Ausserladscheider, 2019; Linke, 2013). Further, quantitative evidence elsewhere shows the opposite, substantiating an economic explanation for right-wing populism (Grossman, 2020; Rodrik, 2018). In Guatemala for example, Morales like many right-wing populists appealed to Protestant conservatism and the idea of a united Guatemalan nation, (Copeland, 2019; 2007) but these appeals do not explain his emergence definitively. Protestant— Both ontological insecurity and cultural backlash arguments also focus on *sentiment*, neglecting institutional dimensions (Steinmo, 2008).

On the other hand, some recent literature also looks at economic “stresses” (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2020; Edelman, 2019) as explaining the ontological insecurity driving right-wing populism. These studies show evidence for a correlation between economic changes like austerity, deindustrialization, and trade liberalization as leading to a rise in both right and left-

wing populism (Grossman, 2020; Rodrik, 2020; Iacotella et al., 2020). Some longitudinal studies suggest a direct correlation between periods of recession in free trade or liberalized economics with the rise of populism and protectionism as a reaction to increasing impoverishment of certain sectors (Margalit, 2013).

Importantly, while analysts of the economic backlash thesis propose material causes for the rise of populism, they do not necessarily have a *class analysis*, with some exceptions (Edelman, 2019). Rather, analysts of the economic backlash thesis tend to focus broadly on “winners” and “losers” of trade liberalization (Grossman, 2020; Margalit, 2013). This analysis is mostly quantitative but does point towards some qualitative political economy – identifying uneven geographic development (Edelman, 2019; Rodrik, 2018) and declining real incomes (Rodrik, 2018) as indicators for the rise of both left-wing and right-wing populism. Whether left-wing or right-wing populism can succeed in capturing this constituency of “losers” from liberalized trade depends on circumstances (Edelman, 2019; Rodrik, 2018).

In an attempt to bridge economic and cultural “backlashes” as explanations for the rise of right-wing populism, a renewed interest in Karl Polanyi’s framework of the “double movement” has emerged (Kiely, 2020; Fraser, 2013). Polanyi’s approach is compelling because it cuts through the hard binaries of cultural versus economic backlash – understanding culture and the economy to be interrelated and interdependent, with some economic forces manifesting as culture and cultural values manifesting in the economy (Ausserladscheider, 2019; Polanyi, 2001). In Polanyi’s framework, alongside an historical movement towards marketization (and therefore privatization, commodification, and inequality) is a ‘countermovement’ that seeks to “re-embed” – halt, regulate, or otherwise control – marketization (Fraser, 2013; Polanyi, 2001).

Polanyi's double movement is a compelling model for right-wing populism because the specific political ideology of the countermovement against marketization is not prescribed by Polanyi. It can be reactionary, progressive, nationalist, or socialist or some combination thereof. Polanyi's substantivist approach thus fits within a descriptive, historical sociological tradition (Burawoy, 2003; Skocpol, 1984), with the "great transformation" describing the historical process of institutional changes brought on by the "double movement" of marketization and social regulation during the great depression.

There is, however, less evidence that a double movement describes the current response to crisis (Fraser, 2013). While some right-wing populists champion a degree of protectionism, criticize globalization, the global flexibilization of labour through immigration, and sometimes even promise to protect social programs for citizens (Kiely, 2020; Scheiring & Szombati, 2020; Ausserladscheider, 2019), outside of the "authoritarian reembedding" (Kiely, 2020) projects of the governments of Hungary and Poland in post-socialist Eastern Europe it is hard to describe right-wing populism as resisting marketization.

While both Bukele and Morales made appeals to nationalism and collective prosperity on the campaign trail, their commitments have not been reflected in the kind of fiscal expansion and revitalization of the public sector facilitated by their eastern European counterparts like Fidesz in Hungary or PiS in Poland (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020). While Bukele promised to "end the neoliberal system" (Martínez, 2018) and fund infrastructure projects to revitalize the Salvadoran economy, and right-wing politicians have been able to make inroads with small farmers and rural workers with populist appeals (Copeland, 2011; 2007), neither Bukele or Morales substantiated any sort of protectionist or regulatory efforts and thus these Polanyian terms do not serve this project well.

## **Neoliberalism and neo-Gramscian “escape movement”**

A proliferation of heterodox interpretations and applications of Antonio Gramsci emerged in the 1980s as part of the “poststructuralist escape movement” (Lacher, 2008) seeking to go beyond what was seen by some scholars as the overly rigid, determinist, and ahistorical structuralist Marxism of Althusser. From this intellectual movement out of and against structural Marxism, schools of thought varying from various institutionalist schools of political economy (Labrouse & Mitchell, 2017), Coxian “Global Political Economy” or GPE (Cox, 1983, 1981), the cultural studies work of Stuart Hall (1988), and the ‘post-Marxist’ political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Jacobs, 2018; Laclau, 2005), and Giovanni Arrighi’s (1994) work in world-systems theory and world history, emerged. Movements of ‘neo-Gramscian’ theory also emerged in the 80s and onward in sociology and anthropology (Crehan, 2018; Burawoy, 2003). Current political developments have prompted a renewed interest in Gramsci’s ideas, in particular the key concept of organic crisis (see: Levenson, 2020; Babic, 2020; Rogers, 2020; Bianchi, 2019).

Insofar as there is a unified mission between these various schools of thought, it is attempting to grapple with Gramsci’s central problematic of the “vagueness and imprecision characterizing the mechanism of subordination of politics and ideology to economics” (Mouffe, quoted in Kann, 2014) – in a word, the study of hegemony. In an organic crisis, the hegemonic configuration breaks down and, depending on the “balance of forces,” can reconfigure to the benefit of either the ruling class or the popular classes (Gramsci, 2018; Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 2018). Of crucial concern to many of these engagements with Gramsci’s work was attempting to explain the precipitating organic crisis and the “system transformation” (Kotz, 2017) from the

regulated, Keynesian structure of accumulation to the neoliberal structure of accumulation (McDonough, 2010; Saad-Filho & Ayers, 2008; Hall, 2002).

David Harvey describes neoliberalism succinctly as “a political project, carried out by the corporate capitalist class” involving the restructuring of the state, production, and general society to preserve and restore their economic, political, and ideological power (Harvey, 2016; 2005a) against the power of organized labour, social movements, and socialist governments (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2017; Harvey, 2005a). Put another way, neoliberalism is a hegemonic project (Plehwe, 2016). It is thus not enough to describe the economic differences between regulated, Keynesian capitalism and neoliberalism. Rather, neoliberalism had to be understood, according to neo-Gramscians, as an entire social structure with economic relations, or the relations between capital and labour, but also political, ideological, cultural, and social institutions and movements within and against these institutions (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Saad-Filho & Ayers; Hall, 2002).

Stuart Hall also comes the neo-Gramscian tradition, attempting to use Gramsci to explain the peculiar national constellations of power (Hall, 2002; Colpani, 2021; Rustin, 2019). Hall’s work on “authoritarian populism” (1988) represented an effort to understand the rise of Margaret Thatcher and ‘Thatcherism’ as the political movement stewarding the system transformation towards neoliberalism. In studying the “authoritarian populism” of Thatcherism, Hall raised that the “superstructural” language of “family values”, culture, freedom nation, sovereignty, and law and order, represent one possible response to a crisis of hegemony and that hegemonic institutions are not purely of an economic nature, nor are the demands made upon them (Rustin, 2019; Ausserladscheider, 2019; Rey-Araújo, 2019). This concept has also been applied in contemporary contexts such as Viktor Orban in Hungary (Rogers, 2020), Erdoğan in Turkey (Arat-Koç 2018) and Trump in the United States (Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017).

One of the strengths of authoritarian populism and Hall's overall approach is that it identifies the fact that responses to organic crises are not necessarily based on consent or coercion, but a combination thereof. Authoritarian populism addresses declining political legitimacy, an important component of organic crises (Levenson, 2020; Gramsci, 2018), by deploying increasingly repressive measures against designated internal enemies (Robinson, 2019b; Hall, 1988) while constructing consent based on representing the "general will" of an imagined citizenry (Scoones et al., 2018; Copeland, 2007). This combination of a "general will" with increasing repression not only provides a strong example of how right-wing populist ideology comes to bear upon policy, but strongly reflects the practice of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala. Hall's concept of authoritarian populism has been applied to the context of Guatemala by Copeland (2007), but like other perspectives discussed here would benefit from a greater engagement with political economy. Social Structure of Accumulation theory serves to help 'ground' the practice and ideology of authoritarian populism in political economy (Rey-Araújo, 2020; 2019).

### **Social Structure of Accumulation Theory and dimensions of crisis**

To situate organic crisis and right-wing populism in the particular conflicts and conditions of capitalist accumulation in Central America, I draw from Social Structure of Accumulation theory, one of the institutionalist political economy theories that came out of the neo-Gramscian break with structuralist Marxism. Social Structure of Accumulation theory seeks to explain the cycles of relative stability and crisis which historically characterize the capitalist system (Labrousse & Mitchell, 2017; Lacher, 2008) and compare varieties of capitalism across both historical time (see: Kotz, 2015b; Talbot, 2011; Arrighi, 1993) and present space (see: Bizberg, 2019; Menz, 2017a) as well as across scales (Jonsson, 1993). To do this, SSA theory

looks at the “balance of class forces” (Gramsci, 2018), e.g. the capital-labour relationship, and how it shapes other institutions in the broader social structure (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Bizberg, 2019; Labrousse & Mitchell, 2017). SSA also introduces the concept of “system transformation” which describes the changes arising from organic crises in the capitalist mode of production from social structure of accumulation to another (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Kotz, 2017; 2015a; Lacher, 2008).

Social Structure of Accumulation theory in political economy and historical sociology thus share some common features, recognizing causal complexity (Steinmo, 2008; Thelen, 1999) while connecting institutional changes back to dynamic struggles within and against institutions constituting the social structure. Institutional approaches tend to emphasize formal and informal rules, path dependencies, and movements within the social structure (Steinmo, 2008), Social Structure of Accumulation theory adds that institutional conditions are underpinned by the balance of class forces (Rey-Araújo, 2020; 2019; Bizberg, 2019). A Social Structure of Accumulation framework grounds a comparative, institutional analysis of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala in the political-economic ‘time and place’ of each case without falling into rigid economic determinism (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Kotz, 2017). We can look at the 2008-09 global financial crisis, slumping transnational investment in Central America, and other economic measures of crisis, whilst also understanding the rise of right-wing populism as one of many outcomes of the “accumulation of unsatisfied demands” (Rey-Araújo, 2019) from various social forces and dependent on the balance of power of those forces.

In the introduction, I noted Yussoff’s (2018) call to think about ecology and planetary processes in the context of political economy by situating ecological processes and social relations as co-constituted within a capitalist structure of accumulation (Fraser, 2021; Moore, 2015, 2011). While a full accounting of this is beyond the scope of this project, for our purposes

acknowledging the role of “commodity frontiers” (Moore, 2015; 2011) and agrarian capital-labour relations in the historical and contemporary social structure of Central America (Alonso-Frajedas, 2012; Dunkerley, 1988) as linked to general ecology is important. Ecological processes form part of the “general economic and social environment” (Gordon, 1980) in which organic crisis and right-wing populism in Central America emerge and the paths and processes of right-wing populism.

Adjacent to discussions of ecology, I borrow from critical agrarian studies (Borras, 2020; McKay et al., 2020) and from Moore’s (2011) concept of “commodity frontiers” and fit these concepts into Social Structure of Accumulation theory. From the rise of “coffee capitalism” (Tucker, 2010) in the independence era to contemporary extractivism (Arboleda, 2016; Mowforth, 2014), uneven and combined development (de Olivera, 2019) and the agrarian context is important to understanding Central American capitalism.

Critical agrarian studies have applied uneven and combined development to understand right-wing populism’s relationship with land and the rural world (Borras, 2020; 2018), showing how the landed classes and recently-dispossessed landholders have functioned as a strong base for right-wing and reactionary politics (see: Gonda, 2019; Edelman, 2019; Gürel et al., 2019; Bello, 2018; Scoones et al. 2018). Moore’s concept of commodity frontiers, where capital expansion requires the making of non-commodified nature available at the ‘frontier’ of capitalist social structure, adds an ecological dimension to organic crises, showing how “underproduction” (Moore, 2010) i.e. crisis of declining inputs or resource exhaustion as a result of super-exploitation and ecological degradation, can trigger crises in profitability.

While there is little evidence for Nayib Bukele having a particularly strong base among the landed or middle strata compared to other classes, with the majority of votes for Nayib Bukele coming from the highly urbanized *departamentos* of San Salvador and La Paz, it is true that Jimmy Morales benefited from Ladino and Maya small producers as a core component of the right-wing populist voting bloc (Copeland 2019; 2007). While the contention of critical agrarian studies that agrarian transformation should be understood as *the* driver of right-wing populism is not conclusive in the cases of El Salvador or Guatemala, its emphasis on uneven and combined development, and a working concept for how to consider agrarian dimensions to capitalist crisis mean that insights from this perspective can help describe crisis in the structure of accumulation in our case studies.

### **Neoliberalism in a Social Structure of Accumulation framework**

The contention of this project is that right-wing populism emerges in our two case studies in the wake of an organic crisis in the neoliberal form of capitalist accumulation (Robinson, 2019a; 2019b; Saad-Filho, 2021). It thus bears clearly defining how this project understands the neoliberal social structure of accumulation. Saad-Filho and Ayers (2008) note the profound changes in the capitalist world-system with the transition to neoliberalism, “the transnationalization of production, the rise of finance, the end of the cold war, the renewal of U.S. imperialism, and other political economy shifts.” These require accounting for by any aspiring school of thought, explaining the importance of neoliberalism to neo-Gramscian scholarship of all stripes.

The ideological dimensions of neoliberalism have existed since the emergence of Austrian and Monetarist economics since the 1920s (Mirowski et al., 2020; Slobodian, 2018), but these economic ideas and other ideological dimensions of neoliberalism did not become hegemonic until the restructuring of the world-system coming out of the organic crisis of Keynesianism (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016; Kotz, 2015). Whilst some individual policies associated with neoliberalism – tightened monetary policy, the leveraging of public debts, and hostility to labour and other social forces – also have precedents in other, historical ‘liberal’ structures of accumulation (McDonnough, 2010), the ‘neo’ of neoliberalism (so to speak) comes in the form of the specific capital-labour relation that grew out of the crisis of Keynesianism.

As noted by Saad-Filho and Ayers (2008), neoliberalism differs from other liberal structures of accumulation in its “rescaling” (Warnecke-Berger, 2020) of capitalist social relations through the transnationalization of production and removal of capital controls, a process underpinned by, although not reducible to, financialization (Labrousse & Michel, 2017; Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016). This is reflected in the changing organization of the capitalist class. Elite networks are less nationally bound, using multi-national corporate entities and interlocking directorships to oversee planet-spanning accumulation (Carrol & Sapinski, 2016; Kapferer, 2005; Robinson, 2003). In Central America, even as the oligarch families which control major industries remain largely the same elites in control prior to the neoliberal transformation, their means of profit-making have become embedded in these transnational elite networks (Warnecke-Berger, 2020; Bull, 2014a; Robinson, 2003; Arzú, 1993).

Neoliberal accumulation also means downward pressure on real wages and the cheapening of real prices for raw commodities relative to the Keynesian structure of accumulation (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2017; Moore, 2015). Harvey (2005b) calls this “accumulation

by dispossession” and identifies privatization, financialization, and direct wage cuts as means for accumulation by dispossession. Patnaik and Patnaik (2017), in a critical engagement with Harvey, add the cheapening of products which peasant and semi-proletarian producers depend on for income and land-grabbing facilitated by financialization (Borras et al., 2012).

In tandem with this capital-labour relation, state institutions have been transformed as well. On the one hand, those state institutions responsible to regulating or bridling capital have been significantly weakened or dismantled – exemplified by the ‘weak state’ design of postwar El Salvador and Guatemala in terms of taxation powers, environmental regulation, and fiscal policy (Ortiz Loaiza, 2020; Bull, 2014b) – leading some to go as far as describing elite institutions like corporations as having state-like sovereignty (Kapferer, 2005). On the other hand, other state institutions have become more powerful, being reengineered and redeployed as a force for setting and enforcing rules and producing subjectivities conducive to neoliberal accumulation (Brown, 2015; Wacquant, 2012). This too is evident in El Salvador and Guatemala, where in both cases state institutions are directly involved in enforcing capital accumulation through increasingly “militarized” means (Granovsky-Larsen, 2018; Robinson, 2019a) and in promoting neoliberal ideologies of *capacidad* and *consumismo* and policies like microfinance (Medina, 2015; Spalding, 2014; Copeland, 2007).

This describes the advanced, consolidated neoliberalism that entered a deep crisis following the 2008-09 recession. We can divide the development of neoliberal accumulation into two distinct “waves” (Birch and Mykhenko, 2010). The first wave corresponds with “reactionary neoliberalism” (Fraser, 2017) which was focussed on the counterattack against the strictures of the regulated, Keynesian social structure. In this period ‘authoritarian populists’ (Hall, 1988) Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher dismantled capital controls, the welfare state, and other

regulatory bounds on capital (Harvey, 2017; 2005a), while in Central America and elsewhere across the periphery, military juntas and dictatorships facilitated the dismantling of developmental regimes and quashed popular and armed struggle (Justino & Martorano, 2018; Almeida, 2008; Brown, 1995).

Following this initial reactionary stage, the 1990s leading up to the Great Financial Crash of 2008 were a period of relative hegemony for neoliberalism (Plehew, 2016), manifesting in “progressive neoliberalism” (Fraser, 2017) which managed to absorb human rights, demands for inclusion and development from certain marginalized, and aspects of feminism into dominant ideology. In Central America, a degree of democratization through peace processes produced “hybrid regimes” (Karl, 1995) which attempted to construct a degree of hegemonic rule (Granovsky-Larsen, 2017; Mahoney, 2001). Understanding this history and the unique aspects of neoliberal accumulation help us better understand how right-wing populism emerges from the organic crisis of neoliberalism.

### **Ontology, Comparative Method, and “travelling” theory**

So far in this theory section, I have outlined a comparative historical approach drawing from historical sociology and a Social Structure of Accumulation framework and discussed the project’s understanding of populism and of neoliberalism in the context of the two case studies of El Salvador and Guatemala. This has been under the assumption that comparative method is beneficial in bettering scholarly understanding of social structures, an assumption that has been problematized by the “ontological turn” in the social sciences.

Particularly in anthropology, the ontological turn emphasizes difference and the “otherwise” (Povinelli, 2012), using methods and theory which emphasize the uniqueness of

each particular field site (Longcore, 2019). Mignolo (2012) and others argue that without attention to difference, scholarship contributes to the epistemological domination of the non-European world. Even scholars firmly within the Euro-American tradition, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1999) have cautioned against the privileging of certain modes and categories of analysis as being connected to cultural and academic imperialism. In its most dramatic form, investigation into the otherwise describes different “worlds” as the subject of analysis, seeking to overcome the limits of representation in scholarship and represent research subjects within their own ontology (Pickering, 2017; Povinelli, 2012).

This seems to situate individual cases above the possibility of comparison, indeed Caneda (2018) refers to comparative anthropology, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion as an “impossible method”. While many comparative approaches are laden with all of the problems the ontological turn writes against – generalizations, epistemologically imposed abstractions, and symbolic representation of subjects, to name a few –I respond to the challenge of the ontological turn by acknowledging that “one cannot strictly apply methods and epistemologies drawn from the study of invariant variables that have fixed relationships across space and time” (Steinmo, 2008) and using my theoretical framework to understand the institutional context in which social processes take place in a manner which suits the subject of study.

Further, a comparative historical approach helps situate this project in the particular social organizations of El Salvador and Guatemala whilst taking the realities of capitalist, colonial, and other power structures overdetermining social relations seriously (Bessire and Bond, 2014), a problematic that much scholarship in the ontological turn ignores. Drawing on historical context and a variety of source materials and pieces of evidence, rather than limiting the scope of analysis to conventional economic indicators, helps my Social Structure of

Accumulation theory fit in the particular ‘time and place’ of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Doing this effectively is described as making theory “travel” (Hesketh, 2019; Morton, 2012) a motif borrowed from Edward Said (Salem, 2021S; Morton, 2012). Morton (2012) describes making theory travel as embedding key concepts in the social, geographic, and cultural context of the conditions under study. Morton (2012) further argues, following Hall (1998) that this concretizing of institutions and processes in space and place is also constitutive of a Gramscian theoretical project, bringing my approach and framework together.

In practical terms, this includes especially acknowledging and providing an account of the accentuated role of repression in the maintenance of capitalist social relations in Central America, an emphasis absent a large portion of Gramscian scholarship (Hesketh, 2019; Burgos, 2015; Mignolo, 2012). Social Structure of Accumulation theory’s commitment to identifying variety and variation in capitalist social formations (Bizberg, 2019) helps situate the role of repression in the study of right-wing populism’s rise in Central America.

Given the restrictions of this project in regard to fieldwork and seeking to situate my two cases in “refractions” of capitalist world-system (Bessire and Bond, 2014), I draw on comparative and historical approaches, and scale my cases “vertically” (Miller et al., 2019; Rosa & Dieste, 2020) in a manner which engages with anthropology but emphasizes the institutional level of analysis. I also refer to historical and recent ethnographic work on El Salvador and Guatemala as a tool to help theory “travel” (Salem, 2020; Morton, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed various ways to approach the study of populism – including ideational, Polanyian, and neo-Gramscian – and outlined the need to ground analysis upon political economy when studying populism. I outlined a comparative historical approach and the Social Structure of Accumulation framework and how they work in tandem in the context of this project. I argued that right-wing populism should be understood as one possible response to organic crisis. Thus, by extension, I am arguing for an understanding similar to Hall’s ‘authoritarian populism’ wherein right-wing populism combines consent and coercion in the management of crisis. I also discussed the challenges of comparative research in light of the ontological turn and discuss ways in which to make neo-Gramscian theory “travel” through so as to make this study better reflect and represent Central American realities.

### **Chapter Three: Shadow of the Volcano – An Outline of Central American History**

In this chapter I conduct an “extended case study” (Geschiere, 2001) analysis of Salvadoran and Guatemalan history, focussing on the twentieth century and recent history, in order to trace the shifting balance of class forces, path dependencies, and other factors which relate to the contemporary rise of right-wing populism. I use Arrighi’s (1994) concept of “systemic cycles of accumulation” to connect historical transformations in Salvadoran and Guatemalan institutions with crises of capitalist accumulation (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Talbot, 2011). This helps place contemporary right-wing populism in the context of previous “system transformations” (Kotz, 2017) and capitalist crises. While this project addresses specific, recent, political developments (the rise of right-wing populism in Central America), conducting an historical review situates these recent developments in the institutions, path dependencies, and ideological strictures in which right-wing populism emerges (Steinmo, 2008; Skocpol, 1984). We learn that waves of reaction can be correlated to capitalist crises and trace the antecedents of personalist leadership, militarization, and insecurity.

The history of Central America has often been described as ‘explosive’. Eric Wolf named his deep history of the region and the pre-Columbian Indigenous peoples *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (1962) in relation to the numerous volcanoes which dot Central America. Vilas (1995) uses a similar metaphor, describing the region as trapped between “earthquakes and volcanoes.” The region’s widespread volcanic activity serves as a persistent motif for its historical, cyclical instability – with bouts of revolutionary fervour and violent repression “exploding” on to the scene of history. By situating our historical review with reference to Social Structure of Accumulation theory, we can connect these explosive events in relation to changes in the balance of class forces and crises in particular structures of accumulation.

## Colonial History & Capitalist Incorporation

While the region of Central America has a rich pre-colonial history, for our purposes we begin this review with a discussion of the period of Spanish colonialism, which marked the region's incorporation into the emerging capitalist world-system centred in Europe (Palme & Sacarano, 2011; Arrighi, 1994; Dunkerley, 1988). Spanish colonialism introduced the historically significant institution of the *hacienda* (Torres-Rivas, 1981; Wolf, 1969) and militarist *caudillo* governors which held amalgamated political, legal, and military power in the Spanish colonies (Holden, 2004; Hamil, 1992). Both would remain entrenched features of post-independence Central America. *Hacienda*-grown coffee functioned as a “commodity frontier” (Moore, 2015; 2010) devaluing labour and nature and played a defining role in the emergence of a national agrarian oligarchy (Balkiliç, 2018; Tucker, 2010; Samper, 2006; Rus, 2003) while the militarized elite produced a post-independence state resembling more Charles Tilly's (1985) “state as organized crime” more than a Weberian liberal state (Thies, 2006).

The Spanish imperial system created the preconditions for the emergence of a bourgeoisie class both in Europe, where early creditors in Genoa and Holland created early capital circulation using Spanish debt repayments made through tributary extraction in Latin America (Álvarez-Nogal, & Chamley, 2014; Álvarez-Nogal & De La Escosura, 2007; Arrighi, 1994), and in its colonies where well-connected *criollos* (local Spanish gentry) combined ground rents with export agriculture to produce a hybrid capitalist and landed oligarch class (Carey, 2007; Wolf, 1982). It collapsed, however, as a result of heavy public debts, extensive graft, lack of productive investment, and the defeat in Europe by Napoleon (Álvarez-Nogal, & de la Escosura, 2007; Dunkerley, 1988; Rouquié, 1987). In its place the *criollo* agrarian oligarch class in Central America established nominally independent states able to engage in trade with these

new centres of capital, including the now-ascendant Britain and rising United States (Talbot, 2011; Arrighi, 1994).

### **Independent States & the Agrarian Oligarchy**

The collapse of the Spanish imperial system was part of a wider system transformation which also involved the unshackling of capitalists from tributary, mercantile strictures (Arrighi, 1994; Wolf, 1982) and generating a new cycle of accumulation. In spite of this and the gaining of national independence, many of the internal qualitative social relations of the colonial period persisted in Central America. The majority of the population lacked political franchise, racially divided into *castas* or castes (Carey, 2007; Grandin, 2000). The economy remained mainly agrarian and land ownership was concentrated in the hands of a few aristocratic families (Centeno, 2002).

One factor in the stark preservation of pre-colonial inequalities even relative to other former Spanish colonies is the relative ease with which Central America achieved independence, not requiring the broad popular alliance the Andean states needed to achieve independence. By the time Central America declared independence, the Spanish empire was already effectively dissolved (Dunkerley, 1988). Another is the infighting between liberals and conservatives, which caused the initially unified isthmus to disintegrate into separate republics dominated by the conservatives, who favoured an agrarian economy and the continued power of the church (Gill, 1998; Dunkerley, 1988).

Coffee increased in significance post-independence, though sugar and bananas as enclave agriculture also played a role (Russ, 2003; Dunkerley, 1988; Lauria-Santiago, 1988). The development of a “coffee capitalism” (Tucker, 2010) realigned and reorganized aspects of the

still Indigenous-majority subaltern population as well, enlisting local elites in converting traditional reciprocal structures into class relations and facilitating proletarianization (Grandin, 2000; Lauria-Santiago, 1998; Wolf, 1982). Trade was mostly inter-industry, with coffee exported and manufactured goods almost entirely imported. So dependent was Central America on foreign trade for any technical capacity that European and American industrialists were often given significant land concessions in exchange for construction of railways, ports, and other important pieces of national infrastructure, which was privately held (Gibbings, 2020; 2016; Grandin, 2011).

The *hacienda* system was able to function with relative stability and without the need for much technological innovation in the labour process both because of how it placed the national elites of Central America in relation to the global organization of production and the particularities of the labour regime in the *hacienda* system. While the labour-intensive *hacienda* crops had comparatively narrow rates of profit, *criollo* elites could ensure steady profits by producing for export, in partnership with external capital like the United Fruit Company (Colby, 2011; Bucheli, 2008). The majority of labour was, while waged, compelled by both private enforcers employed by plantation owners and by agents of the state (Gibbings, 2016; Lauria-Santiago, 1998; Dunkerley, 1988).

### **Great Depression Crisis, agrarian unrest, and *la matanza***

The agrarian oligarchic structure and the liberalized, export-oriented regime of accumulation (Bizberg, 2019) remained relatively stable for nearly three hundred years after independence. Class struggle was limited to limited negotiations between the oligarchy and the popular classes around new land developments or for limited autonomy from the *hacienda* system (Lauria-Santiago, 1998; Dunkerley, 1988). Accumulation was kept constant through

unfree labour and export crops but was inherently vulnerable to external shocks throughout the capitalist world-system due to singular reliance on steady foreign sales of goods largely considered luxuries.

With the onset of the world-historical Great Depression, demand for coffee and other luxury imports crumbled rapidly, and with it, prices on the world market. The great depression virtually collapsed the global coffee trade, precipitating a profit squeeze for the agrarian oligarchs in Central America. In contrast to the response of larger Latin American states which shifted from oligarchical to populist systems based on import-substituting industrialization, in Central America, oligarchic and corporate landowners offloaded these profit losses on to workers in the form of wage cuts and expropriated small peasant holdings to expand export production (Booth et al., 2010; Almeida, 2008; Dunkerley, 1988).

The Great Depression and the ensuing social tumult provided the original basis for Gramsci's (2018) concept of an organic crisis, as well as Polanyi's (2001) concept of the double movement (Fraser, 2013; Silver & Arrighi, 2003). The collapse of profitability and naked marketization generated societal upheaval in the form of communist and labour movements inspired by the young USSR on the one hand and populist and nationalist movements on the other. The liberalized, imperial structure of accumulation with Britain as its main centre was in deep crisis (Arrighi, 1994). The labour movement in Central America, largely nascent due to the repressive *hacienda* system and lack of a unified program, ballooned in size and influence among plantation workers. While official communist parties remained marginal in El Salvador and Guatemala, radical politics were nonetheless influential in the labour movement (Grandin, 2011; Almeida, 2008;).

In response to rising labour unrest and demands for reversal of wage cuts, regular breaks, and the relaxing of coercive labour practices, the military apparatus in El Salvador and Guatemala developed a more assertive role. While always having an important function in compelling work in the *hacienda* system and both advancing the prestige and enforcing the authority of leading sections of the oligarchy, the military became more autonomous from nominal civilian leadership as salaries and payments were deferred due to the economic crisis and the United States and the United Fruit Company started to more directly sponsor particular military officers in exchange for securing holdings in Central America (Colby, 2011; Bucheli, 2008; Grieb, 1971).

Where elsewhere counter-movements like the left-populist and nationalist governments in larger Latin American states implemented social protections against the impacts of the Great Depression, both El Salvador and Guatemala moved from an agrarian oligarchy with nominal democracy to open military dictatorships by 1931, with Jorge Ubico in Guatemala and Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador taking power that year (Dunkerley, 1988). Both moved to repress labour and democratic movements and secure the profits of the local oligarchies and American investors. While both military dictators were influential officers inspired by European fascism, the mass politics of European fascism were largely absent in their rule. They principally borrowed from fascism an identification with the landed classes (Bello, 2018) and a hostility not only to democracy and socialism, but also a racist response to the Indigenous populations of their respective countries (Cuéllar, 2018; Suter, 2001).

While Ubico and Hernández are comparable in terms of their ideological orientation and the historical circumstances and function they played in containing social unrest, the repression in El Salvador in this period deserves a special note, diverging in scale and intensity from the

repression in Guatemala. In 1932, separate uprisings led by the Salvadoran Communist Party against rigged elections in the cities and protests organized by Indigenous community leaders in El Salvador's western interior to protest their working conditions on coffee plantations culminated in a nationwide rebellion. The Hernández government moved swiftly to repress the uprising, arresting and executing Communist Party leaders, including Farabundo Martí. The main brunt of repression was borne by Indigenous communities, which over seventy-two hours the Hernández government massacred systematically (Almeida, 2008; Dunkerley, 1988; Anderson, 1971).

The exact numbers of victims of these mass killings are unknown, but upward estimates range around 40,000. While political repression and "restoring order" were the stated goals of the Hernández government, the violence was explicitly racialized. Long seen as uncooperative and uncivilized 'others' for their resistance to wage-labour, Indigenous communities were targeted for extermination. Individuals were targeted as suspected communists based whether or not they wore traditional Indigenous garments, spoke Indigenous languages, or had stereotypically "indio" features in addition to registered Communist Party members. Many indigenous communities were wiped out entirely in the *matanza*, while others while not physically exterminated, assimilated into mainstream Salvadoran culture. The explicitly racialized targeting of Indigenous language speakers and those wearing traditional garments not only crushed early labour and democratic movements in El Salvador, but also consolidated national identity around *mestizaje* as most Indigenous communities abandoned traditional dress entirely and avoided use of Indigenous languages, hoping to avoid future violence (Cuéllar, 2018; Dunkerley, 1988; Anderson, 1971).

While distinct Indigenous communities largely disappeared in El Salvador because of the repression and trauma of *la matanza* (Cuéllar, 2018), they persisted in Guatemala, subject to special oppression by the Ubico government and to similar stereotypes of laziness and propensity towards communism. Persistence of Maya peoples did not mean that they were unscathed by colonial oppression, however, but rather that they had to deal with conditions of conquest, responding creatively through efforts and resistance and resilience (Martínez, 2012; Lovell, 1988). This factors into later divergence between the Guatemalan and Salvadoran cases, notably the Árbenz government in Guatemala and some peculiarities of the Guatemalan armed conflict, as well as social dynamics today. Likewise, the dominance of *mestizaje* ideology (Carey, 2007) and the erasure of surviving Indigenous communities in El Salvador, numerically small and largely invisible during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also factors into the modern politics of that country (Peterson, 2006).

### **Post-war Developmentalism, military states, and the Árbenz government**

Post-war capitalism marked a significant system transformation, introducing unprecedented changes in the capitalist world-system. Central America was not an exception to this pattern and was influenced by global changes. Notably, the emergence of the United States as world and regional hegemon (Arrighi, 1994), the politics of the Cold War and decolonization, and the emergence of competing development agendas for the economies of former colonies would have a significant impact on post-war politics in Central America (Dunkerley, 1988).

The crisis of the pre-war, liberal structure of accumulation in the core countries was resolved through the outcome of the Second World War, resulting in a regulated, state-organized structure of accumulation – or Keynesianism (Labrousse & Michel, 2017; Saad-Filho & Ayers, 2008). The Second World War resulted in a massive destruction of capital while at the same time

massively expanding state management capacities as a result of the necessity of the war effort (Kotz, 2017; Arrighi, 1994). The post-war structure of accumulation also saw the first truly ‘international’ trade system, made possible under the auspices of US hegemony through new communications technologies and management techniques (Robinson, 2004; 2003), and the transition from the primacy of coal (deeply connected to the British imperial system) to oil (Moore, 2015).

The weakening of European empires, the political recognition of the right of self-determination, and the demand both for labour and new investment avenues created a new paradigm for the peripheral countries under the auspices of state-organized accumulation which was called “development” (McMichael, 2016; Escobar, 1995). Broadly speaking, development was offered to Latin America, and the growing number of independent states in Africa and Asia, in capitalist or socialist models sponsored by the US and Soviet Union, respectively. While there were stark differences between these two models, both promised to accomplish the goal of allowing the peripheral Third World countries to “catch up” with the more developed Second and First worlds (Mowforth, 2014; Escobar, 1995).

The rise of the development paradigm, as well as a domestic desire to avoid the total implosion caused by the great depression’s impact on the agrarian-based, export-oriented structure, led to the adoption of state-induced industrialization policies throughout Latin America, including (but in much weaker form) in the isthmus. This effort not only sought to diversify Central America economies but also enlist elements of the urban middle classes and some previously excluded bourgeois sections into the ruling elite alongside the agrarian oligarchs (Torres-Rivas, 1984). El Salvador and Guatemala both pursued Import-Substitution Industrialization, using industrial policy to promote national industries, though to a more limited

extent than in larger states like Mexico, Argentina, or Brazil and only after the Second World War, whereas the larger countries had begun some ISI policies in the 1930s. An important part of this state-led development period was diversification and public works construction. The countries in the isthmus moved away from the mono-crop of coffee towards cotton, sugar, cattle, and small-scale manufacturing. Roads, schools, telecommunications, and other important pieces of national infrastructure were built, but mainly linked sites of primary production with the port cities, retrenching export dependency and limiting the growth of an internal market (Mowforth, 2014; Booth et al., 2010; Almeida, 2008; Torres-Rivas, 1984).

An important part of this period is the “Democratic Revolution” in Guatemala, a period of democratic rule under first Juan José Arévalo and then Jacobo Árbenz from 1944–1954. Sometimes called the “ten years of spring”, these governments undertook significant efforts to enfranchise campesinos and Indigenous communities, empower workers, and pursue equitable development in Guatemala – much to the chagrin of local oligarchs, the United Fruit Company, and the United States (Gleijeses, 1991). The Democratic Revolution, similar to many post-war progressive projects, framed its policies in the context of the development paradigm. Several scholars of the region consider this period the most significant democratic opening in the isthmus prior to the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. In contrast to El Salvador, where democratic enfranchisement was effectively nonexistent, the Democratic Revolution was the first genuinely popular government in the isthmus. While led primarily by urban middle-class intellectuals and professionals, it was remarkably responsive to demands from below, incorporating labour and communist parties as well as campesino and Indigenous organizations into the development and execution of expansive social policies and political reforms (Martínez, 2012; Booth et al., 2010; Grandin, 2011).

Perhaps most notably and significantly, the Democratic Revolution sought to implement agrarian reform, undermining the material base of agrarian oligarch' power and the United Fruit Company, the main branch of US capital in the region. United Fruit controlled Guatemala's railway system and significant enclaves of land. The Arevalo and Árbenz governments targeted landed estates and *haciendas* over a certain size in consultation with local campesino and Indigenous organizations for redistribution and revoked land concessions granted by the military government to United Fruit (Colby, 2011; Booth et al., 2010; Grandin, 2011).

The Árbenz government angered both local agrarian elites and US capitalists with its land redistribution program. While the United States maintained a rhetorical commitment to national self-determination and decolonization after the Second World War, in practice the maintenance of a capitalist world-system against the twin contending forces of the socialist bloc and the popular movements in the Third World meant numerous efforts to subvert national sovereignty in the periphery (Bevans, 2020; Brown, 1995). Guatemala was one of the earliest cases of US subversion efforts. It provided a blueprint for interventions and subversion efforts elsewhere and in Central America solidified existing relations between US imperialism and local oligarchs, especially the military, into an anti-communist and anti-popular alliance (Bevans, 2020).

The unravelling of the reforms of the Democratic Revolution also resulted in the racially targeted, anti-democratic militarization of Guatemalan society. The revolt of Guatemala's elites against democratic opening and especially the expropriation of land embedded and reinforced colonial anxiety about Maya and other Indigenous 'native' reprisals against the ladino elite. While racist anxieties had permeated anti-democratic ideology among the Guatemalan elite since at the era of the *conquistadores*, it found new animus in the example of the Árbenz government and a consensus around the necessity of violent repression became entrenched not only among

the local agrarian oligarchs, but their partners in the commodity chains they supplied, especially United Fruit and the United States government (Bevans, 2020; Martínez, 2012; Grandin, 2011; Dunkerley, 1988).

### **The “false boom”, 70s crisis, and escalation of armed conflict**

While armed guerrilla groups existed in El Salvador and Guatemala as early as the late 60s – growing out of armed resistance to the coup against Árbenz in the case of Guatemala (Grandin, 2011) – these groups were disparate and armed conflict was contained mostly to remote hinterlands, allowing the coastal and urban regions of Central America to experience a boom as the liberalized Central American Common Market (CACM) and the US-backed Alliance for Progress initiative poured foreign investment into the region (Bulmer, 1987). The influx of foreign investment provided positive outcomes in terms of GDP growth for the 1960s and 1970s, and apparently aided the agenda of development. The influx of wealth was, however, largely captured by local elites who integrated themselves with new transnational corporate networks formed out of the Common Market and the Alliance (Robinson, 2004; Portes & Hoffman, 2003; Vilas, 1995) and was distributed unevenly geographically besides. Alliance for Progress investment and other means of external financing was also issued principally as credit, giving Central American states accumulated debts comparable to other states pursuing ISI but with less gains in terms of creating substitute industries (Mowforth, 2014; Ayres & Clark, 1998).

Growth was still dependent on external markets, creating large trade deficits and undermining import-substitution policies in the long run, precipitating a regional fiscal crisis that would coincide with the global crisis of the Keynesian SSA in the late 70s. (Booth et al., 2010; Bulmer, 1987; Torres-Rivas, 1984). Creating actual substitute products for imported secondary and tertiary goods proved difficult given the extremely small domestic markets, lack of regional

coordination, and the high up-front costs of essential capital equipment. (Mowforth, 2014; Bulmer-Thomas, 1987). This period can be described as a “false boom” as these structural issues meant most economic growth was lost with the fiscal crisis (Bulmer-Thomas, 1987).

Even as the 60s-70s boom was in full swing, economic growth exacerbated rather than resolved the social tensions and inequalities present in Guatemala and El Salvador (Brockett, 1998). Economic diversification came at the expense of small peasant holdings rather than the large coffee plantations, and imports did not make up for the loss in basic foodstuffs production (Vilas, 1995). This uneven and combined geographic development (de Oliveira, 2019) displaced campesino communities through relative stagnation of rural agriculture and pulls towards the cities, generating an increase in internal and regional economic migration (Bulmer, 1987; Torres-Rivas, 1984). Environmental degradation also increased in this period, with acid runoff from new industrial coffee-roasting techniques, mining, cattle-driven deforestation, and soil depletion from cash-crop growing on major *haciendas* marking new frontiers of cheapened nature (Moore, 2015; Faber, 1992; Winson, 1978).

The 60s-70s boom changed the organization of the elite, integrating them further with transnational corporate networks and diversifying industry (Carroll, 2016; Portes & Hoffman, 2003; Winson, 1978). The subaltern classes were also transformed through a greater level of proletarianization and urbanization of Central America. Industrialization and public infrastructure creating an increased level of communications and connectivity both within individual states and across the region (Almeida, 2008). The unique combination of higher education levels but lower caloric intake of many workers and campesinos due to liberalization (Vilas, 1995) created a more cohesive strata of militant workers, women, and youth movements than the disconnected fragments of the immediate postwar decade which were literally and

figuratively hungry for democratization, redistribution, and among the more radical ranks inspired by the Cuban Revolution, for socialism (Booth et al., 2010; Almeida, 2008).

This regional crisis of spurious uneven development and inequality compounded with the crisis of the regulated, Keynesian structure of accumulation on the global stage. While the Great Depression was a “classic” Marxian crisis of accumulation characterized by a declining rate of profit, the crisis of the Keynesian structure of accumulation was different (Kotz, 2017; 2015). Rather than a complete collapse of profitability, various compounding strictures and slowly declining profits prompted a crisis in the Keynesian model in the core countries and the development paradigm in the periphery. Combined pressures on profits of historically high (and rising) wages and a strong labour movement as well as the “new social movements” (Harvey, 2017; 2005a), important sectors remaining inaccessible to capital due to state-directed management and public ownership, “stagflation” (Kotz, 2017), the OPEC oil crisis and petro-nationalism which threatened the cheap oil which late 20<sup>th</sup>-century capitalist production depended on (Moore, 2015), controls of capital liquidity and movement, and the rising amounts of third world debts (Mowforth, 2014; Robinson, 2004) – not simultaneously but compounding over the 1970s – produced an organic crisis in the international Keynesian post-war order (Arrighi, 1994).

The implosion of Keynesianism in the 70s combined with the regional fiscal crisis escalated unrest and repression across the region (Justino & Martorano, 2018). Robinson (2018) describes this period as an “implosion” of Central America, with social stability and economic activity collapsing. While militancy in the cities increased, the real insurgency was in the countryside as progressive intellectuals joined with peasant struggles. Whilst armed struggle groups in El Salvador and Guatemala struggled to build a social base in previous decades, the

agrarian transformation and immiseration of the countryside created a strong rural base for armed struggle (Paige, 1997; Vilas, 1995). The state-sponsored assassination of Archbishop (now Saint) Oscar Romero in El Salvador is often considered the instigating incident in prompting disparate revolutionary groups to merge to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), just as important were the cumulative peasant resistances which served as a countermovement to the effects of liberalization which joined the FMLN as the armed struggle expanded. Similarly, while the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG), or Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, had been active since soon after the overthrow of Árbenz, they found more purchase in a more organically militant peasantry (Grandin, 2011; Pérez-Brignoli, 1989). The Central American civil wars can thus accurately be understood as twentieth-century “peasant wars” (Wolf, 1982).

The economic collapse of the fiscal and balance-of-payments crisis and the outbreak of armed struggle created a unique experience of neoliberalism in the region. Central American states were subject to a ‘long structural adjustment’ rather than shock therapy, at least initially, due to wartime necessity. United States aid offset some of the initial shocks of privatization, and social movement energy was more focussed on supporting *guerrilla* efforts in the countryside. Even as the Common Market and the integration of national elites into transnational corporate precipitated the shift to a neoliberal model of accumulation, serious reforms were done gradually in tandem with the war effort. The ‘first wave’ of neoliberalism (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010) was then from its outset was a militarized endeavor in Central America, reproducing the central role of the armed forces as a distinct power bloc in new circumstances (Cruz, 2011; Stanley, 1996). The association between neoliberalization and democratization and shock therapy would come later (Bull, 2016).

## Civil Wars

Critical scholarship on histories of the Cold War in Latin America pushes against a one-dimensional view of the cold war as being a geopolitical conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, the more the actual stakes and dimensions of the conflict in Latin America are examined, the less prominent the “cold war” between the US and USSR becomes and the more prominent the struggle between popular-democratic movements and reactionary oligarchs backed by the United States becomes (Booth, 2020; Bevans, 2020; Grandin, 2011). Anti-communism was an important part of US foreign policy and elite ideology in Latin America since the 1930s, leading some historians to describe these conflicts as a “long Cold War” (Booth, 2020) but it is more accurate to describe the US-assisted elite repression as a “long counterrevolution” (Schrader, 2018) – also consistent with Wolf’s (1982) peasant wars model, focussing more on domestic counter-movements than geopolitics. This becomes especially evident when looking at the armed struggles in Guatemala and El Salvador, where repression of popular movements justified by anti-communism came to a head in the 1980s.

The first and only armed struggle in the region to triumph was the Nicaraguan Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), or simply Sandinistas after labour organizer Augusto César Sandino, in 1979. The Salvadoran FMLN and the Guatemalan URNG based their strategy and tactics on those of the Sandinistas, which were themselves based on the Cuban revolution. Neither struggle came close to the success of their inspirations, however. In part because the United States and local oligarchs also learned from the Sandinista revolution and committed to preventing “another Nicaragua” in the region (Bevans, 2020). Containment was not absolute, but

rather drew out conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala over several decades (LeoGrande, 1998; Dunkerley, 1988).

Military officer and de facto president of Guatemala during the height of the armed conflict, José Efraín Ríos Montt, described the attitude of the government as such: “The guerrilla is the fish. The people are the sea. If you cannot catch the fish, you have to drain the sea” (quoted in Bevens, 2020) a possible allusion to Mao Zedong’s advice to communist guerrillas to “move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea” (2000). The policy of anti-communist containment treated the entire campesino population as potential guerrillas and enemies of the state, as well as workers, Indigenous peoples, and religious workers besides using repression and intimidation tactics ranging from midnight raids and forced displacement to mass killings and rapes, with the intention of breaking the *guerrillas* and the general population’s fighting spirit (Bevens, 2020; Grandin, 2011; Copeland, 2007; LeoGrande, 1998). Environmental devastation also played a role in counterinsurgency, with the military burning crops and forests utilized by campesino and Indigenous communities, occasionally using napalm (Faber, 1992). Montt, like most of the military officers responsible for the counterinsurgency strategies used by Guatemala and El Salvador was trained at the US School of the Americas, which included among its staff former axis officers (Bevens, 2020; Grandin, 2011).

Throughout the civil war, Guatemala and El Salvador were governed effectively as military dictatorships with massive US support, at times providing almost as much funding as the entire national budget of El Salvador and Guatemala (Lilley & Grandin, 2021; LeoGrande, 1998; Dunkerley, 1988). However, the United States was nominally committed to at least superficial democratization and came to bear pressure on Central American states to adjust their tactics (Robinson, 2006; 1996). However, the armed forces, intelligence agencies, and death squads

formed the real centres of power in the Salvadoran and Guatemalan states. In El Salvador, a ramshackle civilian government was pulled together in the late 80s under the leadership of the Christian Democrats, serving the double role of giving the Salvadoran state the appearance of civilian rule and appeasing church leadership made anxious by the persecution of progressive bishops and nuns (Dunkerley, 1988). This government cannot really be described as a democracy even in strict liberal terms, but rather a “polyarchy” wherein the veneer of democracy is permitted but managed by a consortium of local and transnational elites and military brass with ultimate veto over civilian democracy (Robinson, 2006; 1996). Constructing a stable polyarchy was not so successful in Guatemala, with constant tensions between the military and civilian right (Dunkerley, 1988; Karl, 1995).

While both civil wars were remarkably brutal, with numerous massacres and crimes against humanity committed by the military, the Guatemalan armed conflict is notable for its extended length relative to the Salvadoran civil war as well as the distinct racialized dimensions of the conflict. While the founding leadership of the URNG predominately came from the same progressive middle-class ladino strata as the Árbenz coalition, the necessity of building a guerrilla base in the rural hinterlands and its orientation towards the peasantry (though not necessarily Maya specifically) meant it attracted a significant number of Indigenous peoples as organizers and fighters even as their discourse was based in class and avoided the question of race (Warren, 1998). The majority of the troops of the Guatemalan army would also be considered *indios*. Despite both forces being multiethnic and including a large number of Maya fighters, the threat of “red Indians” in the hinterlands (Dunkerley, 1988) and the preservation of the ladino elite’s caste as well as class privileges formed an important part of the war and

justified a more openly genocidal dimension to the counterinsurgency (Martínez Salazar, 2012; Grandin, 2011).

Counterinsurgency in Guatemala thus included not only a general campaign of state terror but a directed effort at genocide of the country's Indigenous population. The armed conflict was extenuated entirely by military and paramilitary efforts at genocide, as the *guerrillas* of the URNG posed no real threat by the late 80s but armed conflict continued well into the mid-90s because the government continued to use the pretext of countering an insurgency to justify massacres and attempts to disperse and disarticulate distinct Indigenous communities across the country but especially in the hinterlands (Bevans, 2020; Martínez Salazar, 2012; Booth et al., 2010). Efforts at complete physical extermination – killing and disappearing over 200,000 people – worked alongside efforts at assimilating more and more Maya simultaneously into ladino *mesitizaje* and into wage-labour (Martínez Salazar, 2012; Dunkerley, 1988; Lovell, 1988).

### **“Peace” and hegemonic neoliberalism**

“As long as we're still poor, peace hasn't arrived for us,” a rural organizer said to anthropologist Burrell (2013) at a ceremony marking the signing of the Peace Accords in Guatemala in 1996. The reality of the peace processes at the close of the twentieth century in El Salvador and Guatemala was not a complete social peace as the accords might imply, but rather a “conflict transformed” (Tubb & Rojas, 2020) and a continuation of violence (Cruz, 2011; Smith, 1990). While The FMLN and the URNG entered into United Nations-mediated peace negotiations in 1992 and 1996, respectively (Booth et al., 2010), more than any other factor this represented the hegemonic victory of neoliberalism. With the Soviet Union dissolved, the Sandinistas cowed, Cuba embroiled in the troubles of the “special period”, and the military

situation on the ground at best in a stalemate position, the settlement on peace was a path-dependent result of narrowed options for the guerrillas (Mahoney, 2001).

The Peace Accords which grew out of these negotiations were emblematic of the “end of history” neoliberal consensus. They formalized democracy, but within a liberal framework where political democracy was linked to the preservation of the market economy (McReynolds, 2002; Karl, 1995). While the peace process temporarily abated the relentless violence of the counterinsurgency, the campaigns of terror waged by military-state aided by the United States were largely successful insofar as it cut down a revolutionary alternative to the market economy and provided an out for many of the main perpetrators of the massacres in blanket amnesty laws (Bevans, 2020; Robinson, 2006). Nominally applying to both the army and the guerrillas equally, blanket amnesty favoured the armed forces because the vast majority of crimes committed during the war were committed by the army (Bowen, 2019; Cruz, 2011; Short, 2007).

Thus, while the transition to formal democracy instituted nominal civilian rule, included commitments to a degree of land reform (Bremond, 2007; McReynolds, 2002), and halted temporarily the most overt forms of social violence, it did not dismantle the military apparatus nor even prosecute the majority of direct perpetrators of many massacres and abuses over the course of the civil war. Crucial aspects of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century repressive state were preserved, as was US sponsorship of state repression through various security initiatives and assistance programs (Edwards, 2020; Burt, 2007; Jonas, 2007). The adoption of a formal peace allowed Salvadoran and Guatemalan elites to further integrate into the transnational organization of neoliberal accumulation (Warnecke-Berger, 2020; Robinson, 2003) and a secure, hegemonic neoliberalism allowed for limited civil participation (Fraser, 2017; Medina, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this review, crucial historical developments in the shared and divergent histories of El Salvador and Guatemala have been connected to the changing balance of class forces, crises in capitalist accumulation, and the path-dependent outcomes resulting therein. I have shown how Salvadoran and Guatemalan institutions have transformed based on changes in the capital-labour-nature relations predominant in the isthmus in different historical periods, showing how Social Structure of Accumulation theory can help explain institutional changes in the Salvadoran and Guatemalan context. I argued in my theoretical section that right-wing populism should be understood as arising out of an organic crisis, and in particular an organic crisis in the neoliberal structure of accumulation. Over the course of this historical review, we can see how crises at different points in the development of Salvadoran and Guatemalan capitalism have produced dramatic political changes. The crisis of the 1970s generated the revolutionary movements which fought over the subsequent twenty years but were crushed through repression. In the absence of a revolutionary alternative, the negotiated post-war impositions were polyarchic liberal democracies. This temporarily stabilized Salvadoran and Guatemalan capitalism but did not solve contradictions therein, leading to new forms of perverse politics in the form of right-wing populism. This substantiates the argument that institutional transformations should be understood in relation to capitalist crisis, as well as establishes some of the path-dependent context which gives rise to contemporary right-wing populism. In the final chapter, I analyze the crisis of neoliberalism and the rise of right-wing populism in Guatemala and El Salvador in light of this context.

## Chapter Four: Boiling Over – Right-Wing Populism and the Crisis of Neoliberalism

In situating this analysis in the context of Salvadoran and Guatemalan history, the importance of the balance of class forces and the role of capitalist crisis in contouring institutional developments in these case studies should be evident. Thus, in this fourth and final chapter I discuss the crisis of neoliberal accumulation in Central America and how the changing balance of class forces and associated crisis of legitimacy (Hall, 1979) fuelled the rise of Jimmy Morales and Nayib Bukele, comparing and contrasting these two cases rise and subsequent durability as right-wing populism regimes. In doing this, I bring together the long historical review with economic, media, theoretical and other secondary sources. In describing the balance of class forces, I consider factors like insecurity, economic growth, illicit activities, transnational investment, political evangelicalism, agrarian transformations, urbanization, and the military.

### Sound and Fury

The boisterous, “thin” (Mudde, 2004) campaign style of both Bukele and Morales would initially appear to support an ideational approach to right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala, focussing on appeals to the people and the central role of the charismatic leader, a la Moffit (2016), de la Torre (2010), or Mudde (2004). Both candidates aggressively embodied their ‘outsider’ personas: Morales’ “googly-eyes” mockery of journalists at his first press conference (see: Watson, 2015) and racist character *pitaya* on his comedy TV program (Uribo, 2015), Bukele’s wry smile and dramatic hand gestures, invoking supplication, the Italian *che vuoi*, and the Roman salute – often in a single speech. Personal charisma, mockery and denunciation of their opponents, and moral dualisms were the watchwords of their elections. Morales’ denunciatory slogan was sufficient to win the presidency, as was Bukele’s social-media, meme-fuelled campaign where many election posters featured nothing but a bold white

capital “N” against a sky-blue background (see: Peña, 2021), standing for both “Nayib” and his political party *Nuevas Ideas*.

As Hall (1979) points out, these ‘ideational’ dimensions matter, but so too does political economy. To leave explanations of right-wing populism to the ideational framework leaves us with an assessment resembling the stereotypical account of the Latin *caudillo* and weak institutions in Central America without explaining how the conditions for populism emerge, nor why right-wing populism triumphs over left-wing populism, (Ciccariello-Maher, 2020). A Social Structure of Accumulation analysis is uniquely equipped to connect the “passions and rhetoric” (Howarth & Laclau, 2015) of Morales and Bukele’s populist style to the ongoing crisis of neoliberal capitalism in Central America by grounding our understanding of right-wing populism upon political economy while also describing the role of ideas, movements, and practice in institutional changes (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Skocpol, 1984).

Central to my deployment of this approach and framework is Gramsci’s (2018) concept of an “organic crisis”. I argue that the rise of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala should be understood as arising out of an organic crisis wherein the ruling order can no longer generate societal consensus in material or ideological terms (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Gramsci, 2018) in the face of overlapping political, social, economic, and ecological crises threatening the stability of the structure of accumulation (Rey-Araújo, 2019; Talbot, 2011). The crisis in the basic capital-labour relations comes out of the unresolved recession of 2008, with capital now suffering an “overaccumulation” crisis, manifesting as slumping investments, slow growth, and rising amounts of hoarded wealth (Robinson, 2019a; 2019b). From this, other institutional crises have also emanated, including an ecological “underproduction” crisis of falling inputs (Moore,

2011), increasing social unrest, growing immiseration, and declining legitimacy of establishment politics.

### **Heating Up: Changing class formations and the crisis of progressive neoliberalism**

Where this analysis frames the rise of right-wing populism as emanating from the crisis of 2008 (Kiely, 2020; Robinson, 2018), it is worth reviewing developments in the neoliberal structure of accumulation both international and in Central America leading up to the crisis. I concluded my historical overview at the end of the first ‘wave’ of neoliberalism (Birch and Mykhenko, 2010), corresponding with what Fraser (2017) calls “reactionary neoliberalism.” In the first wave, neoliberalism was hotly contested, with mass struggles in the Global North and violent conflict in Latin America peaking in the late 1980s with struggles against dictatorships and the rollback of developmental and welfare policies coming to a head (Justino & Martorano, 2018). The “progressive neoliberalism” of the 1990s leading up to the Great Financial Crash of 2008, signaled a degree of relative hegemony for neoliberalism, incorporating a degree of social inclusion and civil participation (Fraser, 2017). In Central America, this manifested as *consumismo* (Medina, 2015; Spalding, 2014), or the promotion of consumer goods associated with prosperity in the Global North as positive indicators of social and economic development, and *capacidad* (Copeland, 2007) promoting development schemes geared towards “capacity building” among women and rural and youth populations through individual entrepreneurship and micro-enterprises.

This “progressive” period of neoliberal hegemony also coincided with the limited democratization growing out of the peace accords (Karl, 1995). This allowed an opening to civil society groups, a degree of popular involvement in policymaking and oversight, and the formalization of human rights and human rights monitoring (Edwards, 2020; Almeida, 2008;

Dodson and Jackson, 2004). Violence and economic exploitation, however, did not disappear. While *consumismo* and *capacidad* attempted to build consensus for state-backed dispossession and marketized accumulation, violent force remained a prominent means of maintaining stability and steady capital accumulation (Mowforth, 2014; Robinson, 2003). While the Peace Accords promised to usher in stable civilian rule, the contradictions between democratization and the neoliberal structure of accumulation meant that formal peace did not result in genuine civilianization or addressing violence but in a transformation of conflict (Tubb & Rojas, 2019; Cruz, 2011).

In spite of democratization and efforts at hegemony, the 1990s also saw the dismantling of remaining state regulations and moved El Salvador and Guatemala from the traditional agrarian export model to a more extractivist agrarian system (Granovsky-Larsen, 2018; Alonso-Fradejas, 2012; Almeida, 2015; 2008). The removing of tariffs and capital controls under the Central American & Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) (Spalding, 2014) and the onset of structural adjustment coincided with the virtual deindustrialization of the coastal regions where secondary manufacturing had been concentrated (Cáceres, 2018; Robinson, 2004; Van der Borgh, 2000) and the transition to a combination service and extraction economy, subsidized by the valorization of migrant workers (Aguilar-Støen, 2020; Almeida, 2015; Garni & Wehyer, 2013).

These changes amounted to a “rescaling” (Warnecke-Berger, 2020) of social relations and conflicts in favour of the elite, by this point now firmly embedded in transnational corporate networks (Spalding, 2014; Robinson, 2003). Even as the capitalist class remained composed of the same oligarchic family elites which controlled the pre-neoliberal social structure, family ties were sidelined by inter-elite relations facilitated by multinational corporate boards, directorships,

and foundations (Warnecke-Berger, 2020; Bull, 2014a; Robinson, 2003; Arzú, 1993). The capitalist class captured the majority of wealth created by free trade and structural adjustment (Mowforth, 2014; Spalding, 2014), resulting in massive inequality (Cáceres, 2018; Díaz, 2012) and weakened state and regulatory institutions as the removal of capital controls allowed tax based to be eroded and transnational investment pressured for removing regulations (Ortiz Loaiza, 2020; Bull, 2016; Robinson, 2003). The intentional “weak state” design of El Salvador and Guatemala, impunity, and the liberalization of international trade also permitted the growth of elite-driven illicit trades and activity, intertwining gang activity, the military, and formal businesses (Delpech, 2013; Moodie, 2010; Peacock & Beltrán, 2003).

Agriculture shifted from the conventional mono-crop, labour-intensive export system to an extractive, mechanically intensive model, mirroring developments in the mining sector. This reduced the power of campesinos and their organizations by removing them from the land, effectively declassing them (Borras et al., 2012). This was facilitated by violent, state-backed displacement which cleared land for mining and cash crop developments, as well as the hydro projects which would provide power and aquaponics to these more mechanically intensive forms of production (Cuéllar, 2020; Granovsky-Larsen, 2018; Alonso-Fradejas, 2012). The rise of the extractive model also coincided with the dismantling of many peasant co-operatives and alternative communities organized over the course of the civil wars (Granovsky-Larsen, 2017; Binfeld, 1997).

Displacement, not only from agrarian transformation but also from gang violence and natural disasters, created large numbers of unemployed and informally employed workers clustered in urban and peri-urban settings, a pattern repeated across Latin America (Arboleda, 2016) and the global south. Out-migration created a massive number of remittance workers in

the United States, Canada, and Europe. Remittances served to bolster capital, creating a kind of subsidy to offset the immiserating effects of neoliberalization (Warnecke-Berger, 2020; Rocha, 2015) and functioned as a social release valve for unrest, sending dispossessed and declassed peasants that the labour market was unable to absorb abroad (Cáceres, 2018; Orozco, 2018). Dispossessed Salvadorans and Guatemalans pushed north towards the United States and buoyed their respective economies with billions in remittances (Orozco, 2018a; 2018b).

From 1990 until the Great Financial Crash of 2008, Central America followed the global economy as a whole in experiencing a finance-driven expansion (Robinson, 2019c). The isthmus averaged 4% annual GDP growth between 1990 and 2008 (Beteta & Moreno-Brid, 2014). Like previous booms, however, most of this growth was captured by elites – evidenced by the lack of wage and employment growth (Warnecke-Berger, 2020). Heavy dependence on extractive cash crops, mineral mining, and remittances made Central America particularly vulnerable to the 2008 Great Financial Crash.

The 2008 crash resulted from the surplus of wealth unable to be recycled as investment into the capital circuit as a result of slumping consumption and declining relative profitability in conventional investment, prompting pressures to offload these surpluses lest the circuit of capital and profit-making grind to a halt (Robinson, 2018; Kotz, 2015, 2010). In Central America, this resulted in the beginning of a steady decline in conventional transnational investment (Bárcena et al., 2018; Beteta & Moreno-Brid, 2014), even as various “spatial and other fixes” (Arrighi, 2004) driven by the financialization of agriculture and mining became more prominent vehicles for investment (Robinson, 2018; Taques et al., 2017; Kotz, 2010) resulting in proletarianization or declassing of peasant and semi-proletarian populations, and land-grabbing (Robinson, 2018; Borras et al., 2012). Central America’s financial situation was also worsened by a coinciding

coffee blight, affecting one of the region's still major exports (Avelino et al., 2015). El Salvador was more directly affected by the combination of the financial crisis and the coffee blight than Guatemala. Capitalists in Guatemala, while relatively unaffected by the blight in Guatemala, downloaded the impacts of the crisis onto small producers through land-grabbing to shore up stable portfolios (Alonso-Frajedas, 2012) and onto workers through creating artificial food shortages and price spikes through expropriation of small farms and by pivoting large-scale production towards the more profitable biofuels market (Headey et al., 2010).

While Guatemala's economic and political crises are less directly caused by the 2008 financial crisis in material terms, the crisis of hegemony the crash produced nonetheless influenced Guatemala's political contours. In spite of the return of temporary stability after the crash, the global moment of further concentration of wealth and power eroded trust in states and economic elites in the wake of 2008 (Stahl, 2019), setting off a veritable 'wave' of populist responses (Kiely, 2020; Davis, 2020). The 2008 crisis this had ideational as well as economic ripples in generating right-wing populism as one possible, transnationally realized response (Öniş, & Kutlay, 2020).

Further south in Latin America, countries experienced the rise of the left-populist 'Pink Tide' with the nationalization of raw exports like oil and hydrocarbons fuelling social spending through high commodity prices from 2000-2007. In contrast, Central America's left only experienced electoral success later. While a left government in El Salvador in the wake of the Great Financial Crash of 2008 (Sprenkels, 2019a) and a centre-left government in Guatemala came to power in 2007 (Almeida, 2015), both promising greater social protection and structural reform, the policies of left governments in both countries remained firmly embedded within the bounds of neoliberal accumulation regime.

## Limits of the left in El Salvador and Guatemala

Left governments came to power in El Salvador and Guatemala in 2008 and 2007 respectively. While the revolutionary left in Guatemala, the URNG, was left politically marginalized in post-war Guatemala, crippled by a four-decade conflict and unable to compete in a volatile party system, the Salvadoran FMLN emerged comparably intact and was able to stake out space as an opposition party in a more stable party system where FMLN and the right-wing ARENA served as the main political parties (Sprenkels, 2018; Alison, 2006). In contrast, the *Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza* (UNE) in Guatemala possessed fewer formal ties to social movements and no ideological commitments to socialist revolution, growing out of the Christian-democratic tradition which mixed paternal Catholic social teaching with liberalism (Pico, 2008).

Social movement struggles, and parties' relation to them, were increasingly important in the wake of 2008, as neoliberalization and formal democratization not only changed the forms of capitalist production, but also the forms of resistance (Almeida, 2015). Traditional mobilizers of social action and resistance like labour unions and rural co-operatives were weakened by neoliberal reforms (Granovsky-Larsen, 2017). However, newer forms of protest such as youth, environmental, and urban social movements emerged to challenge privatization, extraction, and impunity in El Salvador and Guatemala. The political expression of this resistance was "social movement partyism" (Almeida, 2015) where political parties attempt to embed themselves and solicit support from social movements

However, neither government made a substantial break with neoliberalism, remaining in CAFTA, either failing to reverse privatization or continuing to advance it, and making little to no effort to restructure their nation's economies away from dependency. Both FMLN and UNE

governments also relied on forms of clientelism. UNE's direct-cash social welfare transfers were widely regarded as corrupt and a form of vote-buying (Sandberg & Tally, 2015). The UNE president, Perez Molina, also perpetuated impunity (Copeland, 2019; Granovsky-Larsen, 2017). The FMLN, despite making real advancements in social welfare, also participated extensively in the practice of *compadrazgo*, or nepotism in the allocation of state and public sector jobs (Torrez & Moodie, 2020; Sprenkels, 2019b; Silber, 2011).

The FMLN also continued the policies of *manodurismo*, relying on US assistance to perpetuate crackdown policies against gangs and organized crime. The perpetuation of *manodurismo* and attempting to channel "punitive populism" (Bonner, 2019) from the left ended up alienating the FMLN from youth movements, which understood *manodurismo* as criminalizing youth as a whole and not just gang members (Umaña & Rossini, 2012). The failure to make a significant break with neoliberalism and the continued practice of nepotism and state corruption disillusioned and demoralized many FMLN voters over the course of the party's seven year hold on the presidency (Torrez & Moodie, 2020; Silber, 2011). The FMLN nonetheless made significant reforms in healthcare, rights for women and combatting gender-based violence, and some movements in international relations towards regional counter-hegemonic projects like ALBA and cooperation with China (Sprenkels, 2019a; Goodfriend, 2019), though the degree these realignments were driven by ideology or commercial necessity is debateable.

Important extra-parliamentary social movement victories were also won by post-war mobilizations. In Guatemala, social movements supported the formation of the UN-led *Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala* (CICIG), or International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala. Where impunity and lack of accountability through blanket amnesty had

enabled the re-insertion of military dictatorship participants and their patronage networks into Guatemalan politics, CICIG provided an important counterweight in identifying and in some cases prosecuting widespread impunity for graft, intimidation, repression, and crimes against humanity (Zamudio-González, 2020; Hudson & Taylor, 2010). It was nonetheless limited by elite opposition and the reliance on state institutions like the Office of the Prosecutor and Chief of Police which were subject to elite capture (Zimmermann, 2018).

El Salvador did not experience a CICIG-like process. Though a similar body called CICES was established it remained ineffectual. Social movements gained victories on a different front, however, with first-of-its-kind legislation banning mineral mining across the entire country being passed in 2017. The metal mining ban was an important nexus for anti-extractive, anti-neoliberal politics in the country (Spalding, 2018; Edenhofer, 2019), but with FMLN loss of the presidency, the ban seems unlikely to continue.

In spite of this initial momentum, the left ultimately did not establish a firm foothold in Central America outside Nicaragua where the *Sandinistas* were elected in 2006 and have rapidly consolidated power. The left-leaning Honduran government was overthrown in a US-backed coup, and the left in Guatemala and El Salvador, despite nearly ten years of FMLN governance in El Salvador and the extensive revelations of CICIG implicating nearly the entire Guatemalan political establishment in corruption, was alternately repressed, obstructed, destabilized, and neutered for much of the 2010s. Chiasson-Le Bel and Larrabure (2019) reflecting on the Pink Tide on the continent, note how left governments did not successfully undermine the influence and power of economic elites, nor did they effectively strengthen popular sector capacities to the point of a contending force (Cannon & Hume, 2012). This is doubly true of left governments in

El Salvador and Guatemala which became deeply compromised by corruption and alienated popular sectors (Sprenkels, 2019a; Granovsky, 2017).

### **Radical Pessimism & the weight of history**

Stuart Hall (1988) points out that an organic crisis and the associated collapse of legitimacy of the existing political, social, and economic order generates a variety of responses, not all of them confined to the strict arenas of political or economic struggle. The history of democracy in El Salvador and Guatemala is a patchwork of limited reforms and openings. Rarely have nominally democratic systems, from the US-organized “polyarchies” (Robinson, 2006; 1996) to the “hybrid regimes” of the post-war states (Karl, 1995) delivered materially for the popular sectors. In the post-war era, liberal democratic institutions have been subject to pronounced elite capture (Granovsky-Larsen, 2017; Peacock & Beltrán, 2003; Stanley, 1996). Rather than preventing elite capture, liberalism facilitated it, evidenced in the consolidation of the transnational elite, weakening regulations, and growing inequality in post-war El Salvador and Guatemala.

While initial momentum in the backlash to the impacts of the recession of 2008-09 was captured by the left in El Salvador and Guatemala, their failure to chart a post-neoliberal path and compromise by endemic corruption retrenched a sentiment observed by Copeland (2007) during fieldwork among Maya campesinos and rural workers, “radical pessimism”. Radical pessimism, first conceptualized by Copeland to explain why Maya voters would vote for ex-dictator Ríos Montt in the 2003 Presidential elections, is a particular kind of ideological hegemony emphasizing the unchanging character of the Guatemalan power structure, precluding any form of radical social or economic transformation and emphasizing personal gains in political participation (Copeland, 2019; Copeland, 2011).

Silber (2011; 2004) also notes an embedded pessimism in postwar Salvadoran politics, even as the FMLN was ascendant, with grassroots organizations progressively alienated from the policy decisions made by the FMLN in power and the decision-making mechanisms of the party (Torrez & Moodie, 2020; Sprenkels, 2019a). An instructive moment from El Salvador is the *indignados* protests in 2011 described by Torrez and Moodie (2020). Taking their namesake from similar protests in Spain and protesting against corruption, impunity, and inequality, the *indignados* initially buoyed the FMLN with new energy from youth, urban, and middle-class sectors previously ungalvanized by the party. In the long run, however, *indignados* participants became disillusioned with the FMLN and the left more generally as the FMLN's attempts to address impunity were stonewalled or ineffectual and the party's own participation in the system of *compadrazgo*, allocating civil service and public sector jobs based on political and personal connections, became increasingly obvious (Sprenkels, 2019b).

One response to a hollow democracy and a compromised left is to simply not vote, as many Salvadorans did in the election which gained Nayib Bukele the presidency in 2018. While Bukele won a first-round victory in El Salvador's two-round voting system, the majority of voting-age Salvadorans abstained from the presidential election (Cavito, 2019; Chavez García, 2019). Similarly, while a plurality of Guatemalans turned out to vote in 2015 in the first round, in many cases galvanized by massive anti-corruption mobilizations triggered by damning reports from the CICIG, only a little more than half participated in the second round which delivered Jimmy Morales the presidency (TSE, 2015).

Another response, however, can be embracing right-wing populism's authoritarian bent. "They talk about democracy... I don't know what else," (quoted in Sherman, 2021) remarked one Bukele voter when commenting on the other parties, expressing a general apathy for liberal

democracy. Mair (2014) describes the gutting of mass politics and the cartelization of political parties, highly pronounced in El Salvador and Guatemala, as creating a political “void” which makes personalist, populist campaigns appealing and leads constituencies, especially in agrarian and manufacturing regions, to abandon the left and centre-left when they fail to reverse significant deindustrialization, displacement, or wage loss (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020; Rogers, 2020; Borras, 2018).

Radical pessimism can be understood as a legitimacy crisis, an important component of an organic crisis (Gramsci, 2018) wherein popular faith in the ruling order and ideological “common sense” erode (Levenson, 2020). Radical pessimism reflects the de-legitimization and popular rejection of the outward features of neoliberal accumulation in Central America – ranging from *capacidad*-oriented development programs to impunity – absent an organized counter-movement. Radical pessimism represents a conjunctural (Colpani, 2021) form of ideological domination (Hall, 1988), produced by the defeat of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan left in both the past and present-tense. In the past tense, the defeat of the revolutionary armed struggles in El Salvador and Guatemala and the overwhelming, genocidal violence used by the military-state to accomplish these defeats engendered both reflexive fearfulness of supporting (or even being perceived as supporting) radical left movements or parties and a pessimism at the possibility of radical change being successful, especially in older populations and among those communities most directly affected by wartime violence and repression (Copeland, 2017; 2011). In the present tense, the failure of the electoral left and centre-left to differentiate itself from the right in its use of *compadrazgo*, pork-belly tactics, and other forms of systemic corruption as well as the failure to make substantial breaks with neoliberalism embedded pessimism in

younger, more active generations about the possibility of positive change coming from the left (Torrez & Moodie, 2020; Sprenkels, 2019a; Copeland 2017; 2011).

### **Ontological insecurity, evangelicalism, and right-wing populism**

Crises of moral orientation and value systems should also be analyzed as contested spaces in an organic crisis (Ausserladscheider, 2019; Hall, 1988). In the theoretical chapter, I discussed the phenomenon of “ontological insecurity” (Kinnvall, 2018) as a sentiment associated with and sometimes explanation for right-wing populism. Radical evangelicalism in Central America serves as a unique expression of the unevenness and contradictory nature of responses to organic crises, as well as an expression of many Salvadoran and Guatemalans’ ontological insecurity.

Politicized, radical evangelicalism has built a significant base for right-wing populism in Latin America, especially in Brazil and other countries where the number of self-identifying evangelicals is growing, potentially tipping many national elections in favour of the right (Althof, 2019; Malamud, 2018). Evangelicals now constitute anywhere between thirty and fifty percent of the population in many Latin American states (Malamud, 2018; Cooperman et al., 2014). In Guatemala, 42% of the population is Protestant with the majority being evangelicals, while in El Salvador it is a more modest 37% but, in both cases, steadily rising (Cooperman et al., 2014).

The emergence of political evangelicalism in El Salvador and Guatemala has roots in Central American history. Connections between evangelical and charismatic Protestant churches in Latin America and the political right and military were cultivated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by US intelligence and local leaderships to counter the hegemony of the catholic church, which while

not progressive in many respects had increasingly critical and even revolutionary elements in the region (Keeley, 2015). Guatemalan dictator Ríos Montt was a devout evangelical (Copeland, 2007).

Evangelicalism and right-wing populism have both surged in tandem with structural economic crises of slumping investment, high unemployment, rising dispossession, and general overaccumulation in the capitalist system. The emergence of an evangelical base which lends support to right populism, often involving charismatic pastors using apocalyptic and “deliverance” narratives to encourage voters (O’Donnell, 2020). This relationship is not predetermined, however. The relationship between evangelicalism and right-wing populism is rather a result of the aforementioned historical background and converging path dependencies (Steinmo, 2008), namely the existence of already well-funded and established evangelical churches and networks across the region combined with the rising sentiment of insecurity among many Salvadorans and Guatemalans as a result of social ills like crime, impunity, and internal displacement (Galdamez, 2021).

Morales relied heavily on the evangelical vote for electoral victory, and evangelical educational institutions are likely where he first connected with the military-state and AVEMILGUA, the Association of Military Veterans of Guatemala (Althof, 2019). Evangelicalism and right populism share some rhetorical and symbolic similarities, relying on charismatic leadership and emphasizing the integrity of the patriarchal family and conservative social norms. Both evangelical pastors and right populists depict feminist, LGBTQ+, and other progressive social movements as being foreign threats to a traditional way of life and to national sovereignty. Morales has tapped these equivalences, campaigning and speaking alongside evangelical pastors who promote the criminalization of homosexuality and view feminist

movements as a threat to the social fabric (Cariboni, 2018). Evangelicalism, combined with his middle-class background, has also enabled Morales to signal proximity to the Guatemalan public (Althof, 2019).

Bukele, by contrast, is not an evangelical and has no pre-existing network connections to evangelical churches. Bukele has expressed a personal belief in God but is not a Christian, and even had to fend off accusations of being a secret Muslim during elections due to his Palestinian heritage. He has, however, appeased evangelical constituencies with his opposition to the decriminalization of abortion, gay marriage, and transgender rights (Nóchez, 2019). He is also not above appeals to divine authority, assuaging insecurity and fomenting mistrust of legislators by directly appealing to God when trying to force through legislation (New York Times, 2020). However, Bukele's relative distance from organized evangelicalism, as well as the fact that many Catholic voters in Central America also share many social views with evangelicals (Althof, 2019) shows that the convergence of evangelicalism and right-wing populism in the region is more instrumental than causal.

### **Militarized Accumulation, Displacement, and Right-wing populism**

Granovsky-Larsen (2018) describes the post-war economic paradigm as “militarized accumulation.” Accumulation is militarized in the post-war neoliberal social structure of El Salvador and Guatemala in the sense that the various kinds of “accumulation-by-dispossession” are enacted by overt force and the armed forces and other armed elements form an important part of the capital-labour relation and associated institutions. While the Peace Accords included the important provision of relegating the role of the armed forces solely to territorial defense and external conflicts, this provision has been gradually undermined in both El Salvador and Guatemala.

In El Salvador, the US-led Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) integrated military units and logistics with increasingly militarized anti-gang police (Cruz, 2011; Burt, 2007). In Guatemala, the Association of Military Veterans in Guatemala, AVEMILGUA, formed by former military junta leaders to advance expanded amnesty and other benefits to the post-war military, has played an active role in both organizing right-wing political vehicles like Jimmy Morales' own National Convergence Front (FCN) and the re-establishment of death squads (Burt & Estrada, 2019; CMI, 2019; Peacock & Beltrán, 2003).

At the same time, militarized accumulation-by-dispossession has facilitated increased integration between the state and criminal elements (Granovsky-Larsen, 2018; Dudley et al., 2017; Mowforth, 2014). Financialization of land and minerals through the new 'global land grab' has driven ecological degradation alongside militarized accumulation as land is leased or developed into high-profit sugar, palm oil, or mining sites (Granovsky-Larsen, 2018; Alonso-Fradejas, 2012; Borrás et al., 2012). Declarations of *estado del sitio* or "states of emergency" are frequently used to expropriate land for mineral or other extractive projects in Guatemala (Copeland, 2020; Masek, 2019). Militarized accumulation like Salvadoran and Guatemalan capitalism more generally is transnational and linked to value extraction by the global core, evidenced by the deep US involvement in all aspects of state force through initiatives like CARSI, yet is justified in nationalistic terms by right populism to construct a degree of consent for what is ultimately facilitating the accumulation and transfer of wealth by transnational capital (de Oliveira, 2019; Robinson, 2019a; 2019b).

The mass deportation of Central Americans, especially Salvadorans, from the United States in the 1990s in the aftermath of the peace accords created a mass of urban un(der)employed that now form the base of organized crime in the region (Kalsi, 2018; Moodie,

2010). Despite outward hostility between these criminal groups and the state, organized crime is an important part of militarized accumulation, cooperating with the armed forces in practices of extortion, smuggling, expropriating lands for drug operations or extractive production and policing the local labour force (Mackey, 2020; Granovsky-Larsen, 2018; Mowforth, 2014; CGWR & WRC, 2015). While violence between state actors on the one hand and between organized crime on the other do occur, these mostly serve as internal competition between rival factions of the same elite in the context of militarized accumulation (Granovsky-Larsen, 2018; Piché, 2017; Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016; Thies, 2006).

At the same time that militarized accumulation facilitates capitalist profits and integrates organized crime, the armed forces, local oligarchs, and transnational corporations into a relatively unified elite, it produces a series of immiserating effects on the popular classes. Dispossession – through land-grabbing, but also climate change (Burgeon et al., 2015), deindustrialization (Cáceres, 2018), and mechanization (Robinson, 2019c) – has created huge swaths of “surplus humanity” or lumpenized populations in order to pursue rapid accumulation (Robinson, 2019a). One vector by which many Salvadorans and Guatemalans experience this immiseration is through the impacts of water. Many Central American communities are experiencing a “hydrosocial” (Cuéllar, 2020) crisis as water contamination and shortages, created by industrial pollution and the hydroelectric installations used to power extractive projects, affect poor and underserved neighbourhoods and rural regions (Lustgarten, 2020; Wolf, 2020) demonstrating the co-constitutive dimensions of militarized accumulation, immiseration, and ecological crisis.

Another direct way in which many Salvadorans and Guatemalans experience this dispossession is in the “slum wars” (Rogers, 2009), which have replaced the “peasant wars”

(Wolf, 1969) of the previous chapter, between state actors and organized crime. Central American governments have pursued a policy of *manodurismo* or “heavy-handedness” towards street gangs like MS-13, aided by the United States but with little success at eradicating gang violence because of the elite-driven nature of this violence (Pearce, 2018; Cruz, 2011; Howard et al., 2007).

Both Bukele and Morales appeal to popular frustration with this direct symptom of immiseration by promising a decisive end to gang violence and criminality. Speaking shortly after assuming the presidency to CBS, Bukele remarked “our whole economy is in shatters” (Alfonsi, 2019) arguing that any social policy had to be precluded by a crackdown on street gangs. Morales similarly emphasized a punitive approach, classifying gangs as terrorist organizations (Clouser, 2019; Puerta, 2018). Terror designations and the rooting out of internal ‘threats’ has a long and bloody history in Central America. Cuéllar (2018), for example, points out that the eliminationist slaughter of the *matanza* in El Salvador was justified as a similar counter-insurgent “cleansing”. Anti-terrorism is a justification used by AVEMILGUA and other remnants of the Guatemalan dictatorship for acts of genocide (Martínez, 2012).

For Mouffe (2017) and Laclau (2005), the decisive moment of populism is the delineation of “the people” as a protagonistic force against an antagonistic elite. One of the critiques of Laclau and Mouffe’s definition of populism is that it lacks a strong distinction between left and right populism. Mouffe says that left populism tends to expand democracy while right populism tends to restrict it (Cervez-Merzal, 2020). While this is true in a nominal sense, if right-wing populism works to restrict democracy while nominally operating in the name of “the people”, as has been the case in El Salvador and Guatemala, there needs to be greater analytic clarity into how and why.

Stuart Hall's work on "authoritarian populism" – applied to cases as varied as Viktor Orban in Hungary (Rogers, 2020), Erdoğan in Turkey (Arat-Koç 2018) and Trump in the United States (Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017) provides this clarity. Gangs, delinquent youth, and popular movements are grouped together as foreign subversives and repression is justified in the name of securing the national body politic (Kiely, 2020; Rus, 2018; Hall, 1988). This is evident in Central America where in both our case studies national security figures prominently in the appeal, discourse, and practice of right-wing populism.

### **Race, Violence, and Legitimacy**

In the previous chapter, we discussed the important role in racial hierarchies in the emergence of Salvadoran and Guatemalan capitalism and traced their enduring historical significance across several periods and structures of accumulation. Race also comes to bear on the contemporary discourse and popular appeal of Nayib Bukele and Jimmy Morales, though in very distinct ways.

Jimmy Morales' discursive and political application of race and racism follows a pattern with other right-wing populists in invoking racial divisions to shore up appeal in the context of crisis (Robinson, 2018). Morales' evident disdain for Indigenous and Black people in his mockery of them in his TV sketches prior to assuming the presidency (Campbell, 2015; Uribo, 2015) reflects his allegiance to a highly racialized social structure which privileges Ladinos over the Indigenous majority. Morales' Ladino heritage and strong identification with Ladinos over and against Indigenous peoples problematizes his populist bona fides and helps explain the lack of a lasting popular appeal for right-wing populism in the Guatemalan context. Morales nonetheless appealed rhetorically to a united Guatemalan people, taking advantage of popular anti-corruption sentiment and the hegemony of radical pessimism among the same Indigenous

voters who were mocked by his comedy (Abbott, 2015; Colburn & Arturo, 2016). Morales does not overtly support racist policies, but maintained the colonial domination of Guatemala's Indigenous majority through the impact of militarized accumulation, including anti-terror measures directed at social movements and communities opposite to extractive development (Oglesby & Nelson, 2016; Clouser, 2019)

In the context of El Salvador, the ideology of *mestizaje*, or of a unified people with “mixed” Spanish and Indigenous origins, predominates (Suter, 2001; DeLugan, 2016) and distinct Indigenous communities are much less numerically significant than in Guatemala. This enables Bukele to appeal to a supposedly homogenous, united Salvadoran people without worrying about racial inequalities being overly visible. Bukele, however, is an immigrant of Palestinian origin and thus not considered *mestizo*. The significant Palestinian minority, similar to El Salvador's once numerous Chinese minority, operates as a middle strata between ‘native-born’ workers and oligarchs, working as contractors, street vendors, and small businessmen (DeLugan, 2016; Foroohar, 2011). Bukele is not the first Palestinian Salvadoran to run for office, but nonetheless has been able to mobilize an apparent ‘outsider’ status and association with Palestinian immigrants with entrepreneurialism to his benefit. In this way, Bukele's instrumentalization of *mestizaje* and his immigrant background resembles Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori's mobilization of his Japanese heritage to establish himself as an ‘outsider’ to establishment parties (Carreras, 2013). Bukele's “total war” approach to gang violence, however, reflects the persistence of colonial racialization in conditioning state policy in El Salvador, bearing resemblance to *la matanza* and counterinsurgency in its rhetoric of purification through violence (Cuéllar. 2020b, 2018).

### **Agrarian transformation, militarization, and populist clientelism**

The displacing impacts of agrarian transformation and social and ecological immiseration have been noted elsewhere as being a driving force in the rise and popularity of right-wing populism. Right-wing populism works not only to legitimize dispossession in the name of an abstract ‘national interest’ (Robinson, 2018) and can sometimes re-embed segments of workers and middle strata in the structure of accumulation (Borras, 2020; Edelman, 2020; 2019). Dispossessed peasants can be recycled into the workforce working in credit-driven construction and infrastructure projects, which often in turn fuel further dispossession. Small landowners and the petit-bourgeoisie can be shielded by selective supports and programs from sliding into the conditions of the *microfundios* (Gonda, 2019; Bello, 2018; Scoones et al., 2018).

It is evident that agrarian transformation and environmental degradation need to be considered in the political economy of right-wing populism in Central America, but there is no conclusive evidence if small landowners or rural middle strata make up core constituencies in the cases of El Salvador and Guatemala. The evidence is stronger in the latter instance - both Ladino and Maya small producers and landowners have been a core component in right-wing political campaigns since the early 2000s (Copeland 2019; 2011; 2007) and AVEMILGUA, in addition to demanding amnesty for war criminals, also pushes for land concessions to be given to veterans. In El Salvador, there is not a clear constituency of small producers or rural middle strata aligned with Bukele, although Sprenkels (2019; 2018) notes that many former FMLN voters dropped support for the party based on the slow pace of land reform and land concessions for guerrilla veterans. Based on media interviews, at least some of these voters have become staunch *Nuevas Ideas* supporters (Gamalez, 2021; Sherman, 2021). Urbanization as a result of displacement is also much higher in El Salvador, meaning that a rural base may not be necessary to explain Bukele.

## Impunity, crisis, and right-wing populism

Historically, repression and escalated violence in Central America was spurred on by a crisis in ruling-class control (Robinson, 2019c; Dunkerley, 1988). While gang and anti-gang violence has been endemic in El Salvador and Guatemala, the escalation of anti-terrorism, *estados del sitios*, and other means of repression of popular sectors has progressively escalated as transnational investment has slumped and capital searches for more and more invasive “spatial and other fixes” (Arrighi, 2004) in the form of land-grabbing and extractive projects (Robinson, 2019a; 2019c).

Right-wing populists have redoubled *manodurismo* policies, positioning themselves as defenders of public safety and sovereignty against the threat of organized crime (Kurylo, 2020). Public displays of “crackdowns” on *mara* groups, such as Nayib Bukele’s display of captured gang members, stripped and chained together in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic, serve to reinforce that policies designating gangs as terrorist organizations and other repressive security policies are working for “the people” in promoting their safety and security. While media and politicians will present criminal violence as driven by delinquency (Bonner, 2019), the structure of organized crime reveals that violence in Central America is in fact elite-driven (Daudelin, 2017).

Right-wing populists are part of this elite-driven violence, advancing impunity for wartime death squads and shadow networks. Both Jimmy Morales and his successor Alejandro Giammattei have direct ties both to AVEMILGUA and organized crime (Chaves García, 2020; Abbott, 2015; Villatoro García, 2015). Nayib Bukele, without demonstrating direct ties to the armed forces or organized crime, has consistently governed in a manner favourable to both interests overall, negotiating secret truces which he condemned previous governments for and

passing more blanket amnesty legislation to protect elements of the armed forces from prosecution (CISPES, 2021).

Right-wing populism is thus not only a product of the militarized conditions of neoliberal accumulation in El Salvador and Guatemala in terms of responding to symptomatic issues of the crisis, but also in relying on the militarized class structure in order to gain power. Both in El Salvador and Guatemala, right-wing populists have worked to increase impunity and remove accountability and culpability of the armed forces, especially for crimes committed during and after the civil war, empowering these actors to continue to operate and avoid prosecution (Masek, 2019; Weld, 2018). Bukele has blocked investigations in the El Mozote massacre, the largest massacre in the Salvadoran civil war committed by the army with US support (Roht-Arriaza, 2020) and taken other measures to prevent judicial oversight of military operations and acquisitions (Transparency International, 2021; Arevalo & Wenham, 2021).

### **Changing balance of class forces & divergent outcomes**

While both governments can be said to be systematically “pro-impunity” (Weld, 2018), there are important distinctions between them. One divergence is the role of CICIG in making impunity more legible to the Guatemalan public. CICIG made the scale of corruption and impunity publicly available and legible (Zimmermann, 2020; Granovsky-Larsen, 2018), providing an outline of the political system that social movements now denounce as a “corporate-military democracy” (Copeland, 2020). These revelations were also used to mobilize anti-corruption protests in 2015 which, while partially coopted by the Morales campaign, did not have a significant right-wing bent and remained militant in pressing for prosecutions of corruption and impunity.

El Salvador, while nominally having an equivalent to CICIG in the CICES, the body has long been comparatively ineffectual due to underfunding, the lack of a supportive government executive and prosecutor's office, and manipulation by the traditional right-wing parties (Goodfriend, 2015) and but has become largely perfunctory under Bukele (WOLA, 2021). While individual cases are known, they mostly deal with FMLN or ARENA politicians and do not extend to investigations within the military or wider state apparatus (Goodfriend, 2015). This has allowed Bukele to cast himself more effectively as an outsider while still potentially receiving patronage and support from military, corporate, and crime networks. Bukele has also, perhaps looking to Guatemala, moved quickly to prevent such investigations against himself or his allies in government and the military, kneecapping CICES. Bukele's ability to appeal to younger Salvadorans and association with the *indignados* (Torrez & Moodie, 2020) generation may also insulate him from scrutiny.

Another divergence is the degree of integration with economic elites versus the autonomy of state and militarized forces within the composition of the right-wing populist coalition. While Morales served a full term (Guatemalan presidents can only serve one term), besides the initial populist moment of the 2015 protests Morales' government relied principally on clientelism to appease any sort of base and stayed close not only with military and criminal elites but also business elites, represented by CACIF (Ortiz Loaiza, 2020; Eventon, 2019). CACIF supported the ousting of the CICIG, and Morales may even have made the decision based on CACIF pressure (Eventon, 2019; Contreras & Oliva, 2019). On the other hand, Bukele has isolated CACIF's equivalent in El Salvador, the ANEP, stripping it of key roles in government commissions (Rio Times, 2021) and creating panic in the business group over aggressive deficit spending (Goodfriend, 2021).

Thus, while Morales can be considered more in continuity with the repressive capital-labour relation and institutional framework growing out of post-war Guatemala (Granovsky-Larsen, 2018), Nayib Bukele has made a more noticeable break with the post-war neoliberal structure of accumulation. Bukele's strong personalist leadership and willingness to defy leading sections of capital in pursuit of state objectives while also attacking and criminalizing the left (CISPES, 2021) reflects a more "bonapartist" (Antonini, 2020) restructuring of state institutions under Bukele. Bukele's willingness to use deficit spending to bolster his political project reflects Acemoglu et al.'s (2013) description of populist political strategy.

For example, while both the Guatemalan and Salvadoran state have prioritized repression over healthcare in their COVID-19 responses, bolstering existing militarization and over-policing (Copeland, 2020; Arevalo & Wenham, 2020) the Bukele government has combined these repressive measures with emergency welfare provisions (Arevalo & Wenham, 2020; Lagarde et al., 2020). These measures often take the form of direct cash transfers and deliveries of food to needy families – a move popular with the Salvadoran public. Nonetheless, protests over lack of food and water have broken out, especially in crime-ridden areas are often excluded from aid (Cuéllar, 2020a; 2020c).

There are a number of reasons for why Bukele has been able to consolidate a more autonomous populist politics compared to Morales. Leaving aside subjective factors like each president's personal ambitions or goals, Bukele benefits from the demoralization of the political left after the FMLN's strained decade in power and the weakening of social movements (Torrez & Moodie, 2020; Sprenkels, 2019). By contrast, in Guatemala many movements have been in a gradual process of rebuilding (Copeland, 2020; Granovsky-Larsen, 2017) presenting a more solid alternative and in response generating a more unified elite backlash which limits the

potential for populist appeals. Maya identity, decolonization, and new social movements have also been integrated into the Guatemalan left whereas the FMLN has remained closed to many newer social movement demands (Torrez & Moodie, 2020).

The persistence of a distinct indigenous identity is also significant in undermining the populist credentials of the Ladino-dominated Morales and Giammattei governments. Whereas *mestizaje* is more hegemonic in El Salvador and distinct indigenous communities are a small minority, a significant plurality of Guatemalans continuing to define themselves as Maya, Ixil, and other Indigenous peoples while political leadership, especially on the right, remains dominated by a European Ladino minority. As a result, the elite allegiances of Guatemalan right-wing populists are more evident (Copeland, 2020; Martínez, 2012) whereas shared mestizo identity makes it easier for Bukele to appeal to an apparently homogenous Salvadoran people.

Overall, right-wing populism may be a brief interregnum in the case of Guatemala. While writing this chapter, social movements called a national strike across the country, and demands for a constituent assembly and an alternative, “plurinational” (Wolff, 2013) socialist democracy are growing (Copeland, 2020). Guatemala now faces a sharp divide between a radical transformation or backslide into more conventional forms of despotism, while in El Salvador, Bukele’s rapid consolidation of power, still steady popularity, and the weakness of the opposition suggests Salvadoran right-wing populism may have the makings of a more permanent authoritarian “post-neoliberal” (Ruckert et al., 2017) accumulation regime (Arsel & Saad-Filho, 2021; Edelman, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I situated and compared two cases of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala within Social Structure of Accumulation framework. Drawing from a comparative historical approach, I connected their rise and trajectory to the overall organic crisis of neoliberalism, and described various institutions, practices, and path-dependencies which overdetermine right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala. In line with Social Structure of Accumulation theory, I connected these elements to the crisis in neoliberalism and the changing “balance of forces” (Gramsci, 2018). This brought together ideational and material factors to better explain and locate the rise of right-wing populism in a social structure-wide crisis.

In this chapter I further explored the contention that right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala arises as a response to an organic crisis in neoliberalism and the unique combination of liberal democracy and militarized accumulation. Given the combination of ideological drivers – radical pessimism, ontological insecurity, and declining legitimacy – and material drivers – the role of armed groups, elite configurations, and economic transformations – substantiates Hall’s (1988) contention that right-wing populism is a response to capitalist crisis that involves a combination of coercion and consent. I also found differences in each case, with right-wing populism apparently consolidating in El Salvador and collapsing in Guatemala. These differences are also contingent on a combination of ideological and material factors, further substantiating that they should be studied together.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion & Things to Come

In the 18<sup>th</sup> *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx (1937) remarks “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” I chose this quote as the epigraph for this project both because of the context of the *Brumaire*, which also analyzed a reactionary response to capitalist crises, but also because it exemplifies the historically contingent nature of responses to (and outcomes of) crises of capitalist accumulation. It aligns with how I have come to understand the rise of right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala: as emerging from an organic crisis of neoliberal accumulation, encompassing economic, social, and political crises.

I argued that right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala should be understood, consistent with Stuart Hall’s (1988) concept of authoritarian populism, as one response to capitalist crises which combines both cooptation and coercion. This meant that perspectives from both ideational and political economy approaches to the study of populism, and their respective emphasis on the ideological versus material, had to be considered. I drew from Social Structure of Accumulation Theory to develop a framework which could speak to the multiple dimensions of organic crisis in El Salvador and Guatemala, and used a comparative historical approach. Overall, this analysis served to add unique case studies and comparative analysis of two instances of right-wing populism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the strengths of taking a comparative historical approach is that it expands the realm of possibility within political economy (Seabrooke, 2007; Skocpol, 1984) showing the many contingent factors and developments at play. While Social Structure of Accumulation theory places greater emphasis on how the capital-labour relation overdetermines other institutional structures it also recognizes the

contingent and non-deterministic trajectories of political and economic developments (Rey-Araújo, 2020; 2019). I substantiated my argument that right-wing populism emerges as a response to organic crisis in the Salvadoran and Guatemalan contexts as a result of the unique combination of liberal democracy and militarized accumulation by engaging with these theories, and by situating contemporary political developments through a social structure of accumulation and institutionalist interpretation of Salvadoran and Guatemalan history.

Using these approaches and theories together not only better describes the rise of right-wing populism and related developments in El Salvador and Guatemala, but also points to emerging contingencies which will affect the fortunes of right-wing populism. This shows that Social Structure of Accumulation theory can add to scholarly interpretations of right-wing populism.

Some threads that this project did not address that merit analysis are the gendered dimensions of right-wing populism and a deeper examination of ecology. Social movements and especially women's organizations in El Salvador (Zanzinger et al., 2021) and Guatemala (Santamaría, 2021) have drawn attention to the patriarchal and *machista* ideology present in right-wing populist discourse and its effect in emboldening and enabling violence against women. Another is the ecological dimensions of right-wing populism and the wider crisis, referenced at different points throughout this manuscript in reference to agrarian and extractive sectors roles in Salvadoran and Guatemalan political economy. A more thorough examination of ecology – considering ecosystem collapse, desertification, relations between humans and the rest of nature, etc. – could not be conducted here but has bearing on Salvadoran and Guatemalan political economy (Mowforth, 2014; Faber, 1992) and how we understand the ongoing crisis (Huff & van Sant, 2018; Moore, 2015). While race was referenced and discussed in the context

of this project, scholarship would also benefit from a more comprehensive account of the relationship between race and populism in Central America.

While this project concludes its analysis roughly in summer 2021, the crises and political developments discussed herein are still ongoing. Many of the crises which gave rise to right-wing populism in the two cases studies are ongoing and still unresolved. Mass social movements in Guatemala, El Salvador's precarious fiscal situation, imminent transformations of the labour process by digitalization, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the looming crisis of climate change will all have bearing on both our two case studies and the future of right-wing populism more generally (Betz, 2020). Right-wing populism thus cannot be said to have *resolved* the organic crisis in Salvadoran and Guatemalan neoliberalism.

On the one hand, Bukele's right-wing populist project seems to be embracing shifts towards techno-capitalism" (Kalb, 2020), or "authoritarian developmentalism" (Arsel et al., 2021; Edelman, 2020), summoning cryptocurrency investors to El Salvador by promising to make bitcoin the national currency. The collapse of legitimacy of the Giammetti government in Guatemala and demands for a "plurinational state" (Copeland, 2020) seem to sit with more optimistic calls for left-populism or "left-protectionism" (Gerbaudo, 2021), a Green New Deal, or something yet more radical to carry the day (Ajl & Heron, 2021).

While this project substantiated that right-wing populism in El Salvador and Guatemala arises out of the organic crisis of neoliberalism, whether right-wing populism will be a staying factor in either case is inconclusive. Evidence is stronger in the Salvadoran case for something resembling a populist hegemony and political project, but it remains to be seen if this can survive pressure from above and below as well as if it has any stay beyond Bukele's single legal presidential term. A more definitive assessment would have to be done retroactively with more

historical distance. This project nonetheless describes two important, ongoing case studies in the brave new world of crisis-ridden politics in which right-wing populism has been able to grow into an unignorable phenomenon.

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