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Leigh Binford, *From Popular to Insurgent Intellectuals: Peasant Catechists in the Salvadoran Revolution*. Rutgers University Press, 2022. 224 pp. ISBN: 9781978833685.

Through the life of Fabio Argueta and forty other peasant leaders, Leigh Binford demonstrates the central role of Catholic catechists as theorists and organizers in the revolutionary war in El Salvador. For twelve years between 1980 and 1992, the peasant insurgency fought to overthrow a US-backed dictatorship. The decision to take up arms had been several decades in the making. In the 1960s and 1970s, teachers, students, workers, and peasants organized to confront massive class inequality. State violence, in addition to electoral fraud, radicalized thousands, leading many to join Marxist-Leninist guerrilla organizations. In line with recent scholarship, Binford challenges views that characterize the urban, formally educated leadership as the most significant revolutionary actors. While the role of religion within these struggles has been documented, his book goes beyond studies about parish priests and other clergy. Binford focuses on ordinary people who made the teachings of the bible politically relevant to the poor, and who were transformed in the process. In the words of Abraham Argueta, life “makes no sense if one is not concerned for others and their living conditions” (p. 101).

Binford takes our geographical focus to Morazán department, located in eastern El Salvador. He demonstrates how catechists powerfully organized in the 1970s before the arrival of mainly urban guerrillas—the Revolutionary People’s Army (ERP), the country’s second largest guerrilla organization. Peasant organizing laid the foundation for an alliance with the ERP. During the war itself, catechists also played a strategic part in organizing peasant civilians in the guerrilla territories.

Binford largely draws insights from Joaquin Chávez’s *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador’s Civil War*. The author specifically discusses the influence of this book on his own scholarship. Chávez documents the revolutionary protagonism of peasants, poets, writers, students, teachers, and Catholic diocesans as popular intellectuals. In Chalatenango, a northwestern department, peasants organized a mass network of cooperatives, radio schools, and Christian base communities. This organizing laid the foundation for building peasant unions. Peasant leaders then joined the FPL, deepening its praxis and turning it into the country’s largest guerrilla group. Like Chávez, Binford demonstrates how peasant organizing

predated the arrival of guerrilla groups. Read together, the work of Chávez and Binford provide us with a richer picture about peasant organizing across El Salvador.

Peasant catechists acted as popular intellectuals who made revolution, as Binford demonstrates. Before the arrival of urban guerrillas in the mid-1970s, peasants collectively studied the bible, organized catechism centers, and challenged conservative clergyman who claimed that poverty was a mandate of the God-given order. The centers raised the self-esteem of participants, taught them public speaking, and deepened their political analysis about Marxist political economy (37-39). Approximately 15,000 lay workers received training in these centers. In Morazán, catechists also led mutual aid projects and collectivized the production of henequin and other crops. Their work built a powerful network of Christian base communities. Catechists like Fabio allied themselves with progressive priests like Father Miguel Ventura who helped people “to discover themselves as human beings in a dehumanized society,” as the priest himself explained. But as Binford makes clear, “No priest could substitute for the local knowledge, skill, and perspicacity of trained catechists” who travelled on foot from village to village, recruiting people who had not been formally trained. Participants wielded liberation theology as a powerful social weapon. It “preserved the Christian mystique surrounding the ideas of God and the sacrifices of Jesus but materialized history and placed it firmly in the hands of humans whose responsibility was to play an active role in its making” (p. 149).

In contrast to guerrilla organizations that advocated armed struggle from their inception, these catechist projects did not initially seek to take state power via armed revolution. But the organizing process, alongside growing state repression, transformed their outlook. To increase their chances of survival, catechists allied themselves with ERP guerrillas, forming military committees to resist state slaughter. In fact, Fabio recalled that catechists took the initiative: “we were feeling the repression and we had to organize to protect ourselves, to defend ourselves. We saw that there was no other solution” (74). Fabio himself survived 19 days of torture. Father Miguel was also captured, and soon after, the ERP, with its growing membership of catechists, founded a mass peasant organization—the 28 February Popular Leagues (LP-28). The group occupied churches and government buildings to demand the release of their comrades and protest government actions (p. 89).

During the war itself, catechists played an important role in the guerrilla territories. Catechists helped to reorganize production, which meant organizing people to sustain life in the zones under ERP control. To survive war and build the institutions of a new society, catechists created food, clothing, and sugar mill cooperatives, and popular health clinics. They also developed relationships with civilians, ensuring the success of the ERP. Catechists worked tirelessly to build the political consciousness of guerrillas and to ensure proper respect toward civilians. Their skills proved invaluable:

So, when the war came, the catechists were better equipped to organize, to relate to the population...I didn't just go and give military orders but made the compañeros aware of how they had to do things, how to act around the population, how to treat

their comrades. That called for discussion, and that's where catechists had practice (p. 93).

People like Fabio “made important contributions to political education and the minimization of violence against civilians in Northern Morazán and perhaps elsewhere,” argues Binford.

Binford's study is a welcome addition, allowing us to appreciate the popular lay workers who made insurgency possible. The book will be of interest to those interested in exploring the role of peasants and religion within armed movements.

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