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Overflowing the Channels of the Left

Global Accumulation and Communal Agro-Ecology as Competing Projects of Governance in Coastal El Salvador

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Abstract

In 2012, the "climate hotspot" region of the "Bajo Lempa" in El Salvador was the recipient of a Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) Fund granted by the United States and administered by the leftist FMLN political party to bring "sustainable development" to the region. Local organizations initially pursued funding opportunities through this mega-project though their efforts were unsuccessful, thereby undercutting subsequent campaigns to resist the project for its environmental risks. Remaining pockets of resistance were undermined by gang violence directed at key community leaders, seemingly at the behest of local oligarchs. Thus, an interlocking web of political-economic obstacles blocked communal agency to forge alternative climate futures. By analytically foregrounding the meso-level relationships between community-based environmental movements and leftist-controlled state institutions subordinated to global logics of accumulation, I distill the contradictions inherent to anthropocentric state forms, and the inability of the Latin American left to incorporate environmental concerns into their projects of governance. Ultimately, I argue that despite their inability to halt the MCA, the political and agro-ecological practices of communities in the Bajo Lempa "overflow" channels of the Latin American left and instantiate communal projects of resource governance as horizons of climate change adaptation, and radically democratic forms of governing social life.

Keywords: Environmental Movements; World-Systems Analysis; State-Movement Interactions; Latin America; Agro-Ecology and Food Sovereignty

How do anti-systemic movements respond when leftist governments assume state power? Do leftists in state power necessarily mean stronger struggles against neoliberalism and global capitalism? In particular, how do environmental movements and left parties negotiate the tensions around extractivist development paradigms when the left holds political power in Latin America? As the world economic system transitioned from state-led development paradigms toward more globally integrated, and transnationally-linked capitalist accumulation strategies in the latter decades of the twentieth century (Robinson 2014), many grassroots social movements reorganized popular struggles to resist the onslaught of the "neoliberal" economic policies that opened up their countries to transnational dispossession and jeopardized newly obtained social and political citizenship rights (Harvey 2005; Almeida 2007, 2014; Silva 2009; Sassen 2010; Robinson 2014). Opportunities for anti-systemic demands and campaigns were further augmented by the increasingly palpable limits to surplus accumulation under the new global capitalist regime, and the concomitant decrease in the legitimacy of national-level democratic institutions (Smith and Weist 2012). Literature informed by world-systems, social movements, and cultural geographic frameworks has thoroughly documented the waves of resistance to neoliberalism over recent decades, and also how these resistance movements led to the arrival to state power of various left-leaning and socialist governments (Mudge 2018; Almeida and Perez Martin 2022; Ellner, Munck, and Sanker 2022*)*.

Progressive governments born of popular struggle have been particularly common in Latin America, where a "pink tide" of radical and social-democratic governments made progress on deepening democracy (Cameron 2012; Goldfrank 2012; Baiocchi 2017) redistributing wealth through social programs and incorporating previously excluded constituencies across various political frameworks and geographies (Yashar 2005; Silva and Rossi 2018; Ellner et al. 2022). However, as the pink tide ebbed and seemed to largely subside by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century (though we are seeing a leftist revitalization in Bolivia, Honduras, Brazil, and Colombia), the limits and contradictions of the region's leftist projects of governance had become clear. Scholars have underscored corruption, clientelism, authoritarianism, distance from grassroots bases, and subjugation to global economic imperatives—including dependency on extractivist development paradigms—as contributing to leftist governments' loss of legitimacy and ultimately, of formal political power (Goldfrank 2017; Gonzalez 2019; Ellner 2020). Various studies have interrogated struggles against extractivism, related policy dynamics, and these struggles' implications for analyses of global political economy (Spalding 2018; Ellner 2021; Gudynas 2021), but few have done so by analytically focusing on the complex interactions between leftist governments and their allied social movements. Further, those studies that focus on these interactions typically highlight the dichotomous tendencies of cooptation or confrontation (Prevost, Vanden, Oliva Campos 2012), and have not paid attention to the gray zones (Auyero 2007) between these two heuristic poles in which most movement-state interactions play out under the Latin American left (see Ellner et al. 2022 for a crucial exception that is ameliorating this trend).

I show that by analyzing meso-level of interactions in specific countries and territories ruled by leftist governments we can assemble knowledge about how interactions between movement leaders and allied state functionaries constitute "transmission belts" by which constraints and opportunities are channeled in ways that shape prospects for social change at national, sub-national, and global levels. Such an analytic focus is consistent with a *global epistemology* framework that highlights how specific groups of actors interact at meso-levels in the context of globally shifting discourse and resource flows without assuming a priori that any particular global process *determines* the direction or content of those interactions (Bamyeh 2019). In particular, I shed a critical light on national-level leftist projects of governance in Latin America as they are subjected to global, anti-environmental constraints while simultaneously being challenged and overflowed by movement-based, agro-ecological action from below. In theoretical terms, the analysis that follows shows first, that the disciplining effects of global economic constraints are filtered through the "transmission belts" of meso-level interactions between low level state official and high-level social movement leaders, both entrenching and challenging various hierarchies and relations along the way; second, leftist parties' cooptation of "allied" movements' efforts to resist detrimental external impositions also impelled these movements to innovate in their political and agro-ecological action; and third, these innovative, localized agro-ecological practices combine alternative/subaltern local and trans-local knowledge to present a path away from the anthropogenic destruction of global capitalism and toward more sustainable climate futures and deeper democratic political structures.

Theorizing Movements, Governance, and Environment Amid Global Capitalism

Scholarly attention to the relationships between rulers and ruled across time and space is a significant source of knowledge on social and political change, state formation, and democracy (Tarrow 2011; Markoff 2015). While significant gray zones characterize the boundaries between the analytic constructs of "state" and "society" (and the movements therein) (Abrams 1988; Auyero 2007), this distinction helpfully frames a series of dialogic relationships and struggles among actors with differentiated access to the formal, centralized sources of political power (Mann 1984).

A focus on state-society interactions makes particular sense in Latin America, where the state has never achieved full control over its territories and populations (Centeno 2002). It is porous and uneven in institutional terms; an often-tenuous set of claims to political domination that exists in competition and dialogue with other collective claimants that contest its sovereignty, such as indigenous groups and organized criminals (Krupa and Nugent 2015). Given the state's frequent absence or dereliction, Latin American peoples have often self-organized to meet their own needs and create their own meanings from the broad arenas of non-state based civil society.

With the advent of democratization in Latin America in the 1980s and early 1990s, the generally successful enshrinement of civil and political rights such as free elections, freedom of expression, political organization, and assembly—including in the right to contentiously protest—provided an unprecedented opportunity for people to organize themselves into social movements

and advocate for further transformations of their societies (Almeida 2007; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Becker 2008; Levitsky and Roberts 2010; Markoff 2015) Soon, many movements exercised their newfound civil and political rights to mobilize for even broader and deeper demands including socio-economic, cultural-identitarian, and sexual and reproductive rights, as well as the right to "monitory power" over the decisions that elected officials were making even after and in between electoral contests (Keane 2009).

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, many citizens were engaging in contentious social movement activity that rejected neoliberalism and led to a wave of socialist-inspired governments that spurred a "second incorporation" of previously excluded or marginalized groups into social, political, and economic citizenship (Silva and Rossi 2018). Internally, movements increasingly used more horizontal organizational structures based in communities, workplaces, and affinity groups to *practice* the sorts of democratic outcomes they sought to foment in larger societies (Stahler-Sholk et al. 2014). In general terms, then, many movements were *deepening* democracy by dispersing power more equitably throughout society and across state-society constructs, or by empowering individual citizens vis a vis their local municipalities, and impelling democratization through the restructuring of public administrative apparatuses (Wright 2010; Goldfrank 2011).

As such, Latin American movements have not simply resisted the dispossessions (Harvey 2005) and expulsions (Sassen 2010) associated with the onslaught of global capitalism, but have actively created alternatives to these forces, including food sovereignty and agro-ecology (Patel 2014), as I discuss in this paper. To the extent that such alternatives are trans-locally linked, these groups have become globalizing actors themselves by refashioning specific aspects of globalization according to local needs and knowledge, and subsequently diffusing novel social movement practices and ideas into global arenas (Burridge and Markoff 2023).

Latin American (and other "weak") states play an ambiguous and contradictory role in the processes of trans-local (dis)assemblages of discourses and resources. States are frequently understood to have little autonomy to resist the impositions of global economic forces, and consequently, to no longer be the sole targets of social movement activity as they do not wield all legitimate decision-making power in a context of global capitalism (Smith and Weist 2012). On one hand, then, social movements have pushed the limits and "overflowed the channels" of state-based democratic practice through innovative actions, discourses, and interactions with other actors out of creative necessity in adverse scenarios (Alvarez et al 2017; Markoff 2019). On the other hand, state-society interactions that occur within the context of formal state-based processes are still frequently of utmost importance for social movements, particularly by serving as *transmission belts* for the conflicts and struggles over the sorts of decisions that can be subjected to democratic deliberation and the outcomes of these decisions themselves.

Questions around the scope of democracy in Latin America over past decades have been particularly contentious in the realm of environmental protection and resource management; or more broadly, in terms of delineating the relationship between society and environment. As opposed to overly deterministic environmental sociological frameworks such as treadmill of production or metabolic rift perspectives, and equally opposed to more optimistic but increasingly

unrealistic frameworks of ecological or reflexive modernization theories, an integrative theoretical approach of the *anthro-shift* seeks to empirically investigate the ways in which interactions across different constellations of state, society, and market forces remake the relationship between society and environment over time (Fisher and Jorgenson 2019).

Attempts to remake the relationship between society and environment, or more broadly, to *manage* the relations that make up the social world, needn't always come from the state or market. Across Latin America and the world, many collective, community-based actors are attempting to implement their own alternative *projects of governance* (Steinmetz 1988; Krupa and Nugent 2015) to these ends. Projects of governance enacted by community-based social movements propose more localized ways—and in the case described below, expressly ecological ways—to manage their territories and solve their self-identified problems to fundamentally recreate the relationship between society and environment. Importantly, these projects of eco-governance also attempt to draw strategically on support from state institutions while navigating the state's seeming irrationality and incoherence, especially across differentiated state institutions (Poulantzas 1978).

Thus, by merging a world-systemic, critical globalization approach (Robinson 2008) with a movement-state interactionist lens from political sociology (Goldstone 2003), and cultural perspectives on Latin American movements (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998) within a larger theoretical framework of the anthro-shift (Fisher and Jorgenson 2019), we gain much analytical leverage in understanding how territorially inflected meso-relations between movements and state institutions have a large, underappreciated effect on concrete expressions of global dynamics regarding struggles over the management of vital natural resources. In this paper, I apply this theoretical framework to empirical data collected ethnographically on the work of one grassroots, environmentally focused social movement organization in coastal El Salvador, the Asociación de las Comunidades Unidas para el Desarrollo Socio-Económico del Bajo Lempa (ACUDESBAL).

Positionality, Methods, and Analysis

From 2006 to 2012, I lived in El Salvador and worked on a variety of efforts with transnational solidarity and local social movement organizations. I witnessed the arrival of the leftist Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) to state power in 2009 in the context of working with leftist social movements that essentially demobilized at this moment. From 2014–2019 I returned to the Bajo Lempa and three other regions of El Salvador for at least a month each year to research the work of ACUDESBAL and other social movement organizations across the country in the novel political context of having political allies in state power. Many of ACUDESBAL's participants—especially its founding members—are longtime friends and colleagues of mine, and at this point, I consider them to be co-researchers of this study on their achievements, difficulties, and prospects. From 2014–2019, I collected 24 interviews with ACUDESBAL workers and ordinary people (non-activists) in four different communities of the Bajo Lempa region, and accumulated hundreds of hours of lived experience in the area, including participant observations of numerous ACUDESBAL meetings and workshops. My interviews and

field notes were coded using MAXQDA for relevant themes, and all interview participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

The Bajo Lempa Territory: Political-Ecological Contours

On the southeastern Pacific coast of El Salvador, the San Juan del Gozo peninsula sets off the Bay of Jiquilisco from the eastern banks of the widening mouth of the River Lempa just before it enters the Pacific Ocean. Here, the territory known as the Bajo Lempa, "the Lower Lempa," encompasses fertile flood plains and mangrove forests that are now the homes to numerous small, poor farming and shellfish harvesting communities. Historically the site of massive floods, droughts, and tropical storms, recent decades have seen it become a climate change hotspot as global sea rise has transformed portions of coastal mangrove forest buffer zones into desertified beaches, and rampant agrochemical use by large landowners has contaminated watersheds. It is ecologically fragile yet exceedingly attractive to transnational investors given the fertility of the soils, the abundance of its waterways, and the beauty of the landscapes (Voices on the Border 2014; Navarro 2017; Davila Medina and Acosta 2021).

Before the Salvadoran civil war of 1980–1992, the area was the exclusive terrain of wealthy landowners who planted sugarcane, cotton, and some coffee in the higher altitudes. After partial land reform processes associated with pacification efforts by Salvadoran military-civilian juntas in the 1980s, and the Peace Accords signed in 1992—which formalized a truce between the Salvadoran government and the rebel FMLN armies—large swathes of this area were appropriated from previous owners, nationalized, and then redistributed to demobilized ex-combatants of both the FMLN guerrilla army-turned political party, and of the Salvadoran military (Montgomery 1995; Nueva Esperanza Support Group 1999; Sprenkels 2018). Members of the Ejercito Revolucionario Popular (Revolutionary Popular Army, ERP) faction of the FMLN—who had been dominant in the northeastern Morazan department of El Salvador during the war—and their families became the primary beneficiaries of land offers on the Usulutan department side of the river in the newly opened Bajo Lempa region. People both traumatized and hardened by collective struggle and war brought their pre-existing structures of internal organization, their social consciousness, and their international contacts to bear on emergent settlements along the fertile but untamed flood plains of the lower Lempa river.[1]

The poverty and dense organization of the zone's internal migrants combined with the harshness of the ecological conditions and the general spirit of international assistance toward El

[1] It is important to note that explicitly ethnic issues of identity, such as the concept of indigeneity—whether imputed by outsiders or self-applied by inhabitants themselves—never came up in the course of my fieldwork, nor in the secondary sources I consulted on the Bajo Lempa region. Indigenous identities and politics—which have played such a prominent role in other countries of Latin America—are essentially a non-issue in most parts of El Salvador. Indeed, after the Massacre of 1932 in the western part of El Salvador, a horrific act of state violence against the largely indigenous populations of that region, most indigenous groups in the country ceased many of their cultural activities out of fear of repression; and over subsequent decades, fewer and fewer Salvadorans self-identify as indigenous but rather became incorporated into a homogenous, non-indigenous mestizo majority (Ching 2018; Tilley 2005).

Salvador to make the Bajo Lempa a recipient of many international aid projects beginning in the 1990s. Large scale sugarcane and cotton production still predominated in much of the region but these accumulation strategies increasingly had to contend with the communities and agricultural plots now managed by poor, leftist, internal refugees who instituted new ways of relating to land, politics, and the local wealthy class, with substantial support from international donors and solidarity groups (Nueva Esperanza Support Group 1999). Over time, additional micro-waves of internal migrants settled in the territory of the Bajo Lempa, and now at present, there are essentially two sorts of communities in political-ecological terms in the Bajo Lempa: the close-knit, refugee communities located in the floodplains of the Lempa whose inhabitants had been comrades in arms together and extended kin from their time during the war in Morazan; and the more internally heterogeneous mangrove communities, in which distinct groups of internal migrants have come from various parts of the country in different moments to comprise less socially cohesive communities. This paper is based on voices of people living in three floodplain communities—La Canoa, Amando Lopez, and Nueva Esperanza—and in two mangrove communities, El Chile and La Tirana.

Floodplain communities are situated on relatively fertile lands and their residents typically practice family-based agriculture of corn, beans, some rice, and many fruits and vegetables. A few of these communities have even formed cooperatives to facilitate collective cultivation of commercially profitable crops such as plantains, sorghum, sugarcane, or cacao. Mangrove communities, by contrast, exist essentially on sandbars that form the banks of the *canones* or sprawling fingers of the estuary, the Bay of Jiquilisco. Their residents have problems accessing fresh water and they rely on dugout canoes for both transportation across the *canones* and for their economic livelihood: a sustainable gathering of estuary creatures such as crabs, shrimp, clams, and other mollusks from the mangrove waterways. This harvesting provides for family consumption, sale outside the community, and promotes the health and balance of the local ecosystem.

By the mid 2010s, evidence began emerging of the deleterious impacts of climate change on the fragile area of the Bajo Lempa, particularly on the mangrove ecosystem corridor. Various studies showed not only that biodiversity was being lost in the mangroves of the Bajo Lempa, but that dozens of meters of mangrove coastline itself were being eroded away as sea levels rose (Voices on the Border 2014; Navarro 2017). Between 2000 and 2015, around 150 feet of mangrove forest was lost, turning forests that once served as buffer zones for hurricanes and floods into desertified beaches methodically being overtaken by the rising sea. Local environmental abuse exacerbated the deterioration of ecological conditions—especially in the form of rampant use of toxic agrochemicals by large industrial sugarcane farmers—which contaminated watersheds and unleashed an epidemic of kidney failure across both mangrove and floodplain communities alike (Davila Medina 2019).

Environmental factors such as flooding and watershed contamination have played a prominent role in shaping local residents' activist priorities, but historical-political characteristics have also been crucial in this regard. Of particular importance for those residents of floodplain communities in the Bajo Lempa, the ERP, their popular-military organization of affiliation during

the Civil War, was only one of five competing factions within the FMLN, and this faction ended the war in political conflict with the two factions—Fuerzas Populares de Liberacion (Forces of Popular Liberation, FPL), and the Partido Comunista (Communist Party, PC)[2] —who coalesced to take control over the FMLN structure as peace was consolidated in the early 1990s (Sprenkels 2018). As a result of disputes with FPL and PC leadership over what the structure of the FMLN should be in the post-war period, the ERP leader, Joaquin Villalobos, departed from the FMLN soon after signing the Peace Accords (Sprenkels 2018). His bases and former ERP militants now located in the distant, marginal lands of the Bajo Lempa mirrored their leader's distance from FMLN leadership—if not from the party's underlying values—by creating organizations that have exercised a modicum of autonomy vis a vis the FMLN political party in the post-war period when compared to those social movement organizations that were derived from the FPL or PC factions of the FMLN. So while ERP militants are numerically the largest population bloc in the Bajo Lempa region, it is not the only faction with representation. Communities associated with the FPL were dominant on the other side of the Lempa River in the department of San Vicente, where a present-day, San Vicente chapter of CRIPDES, a national organization of peasant communities in regions with FPL bases, operates in virtual lockstep with FMLN partisan directives. Similarly, two communities aligned with the PC (Ciudad Romero and El Zamorano) sit in the middle of a sea of ERP communities in the main population corridor of the Usulutan side of the Bajo Lempa, and formed their own social movement organization, the Asociación Mangle (The Mangrove Association), which showed its direct linkages and subordination to the FMLN party when all of its leaders immediately went to work for the government once the FMLN assumed state power in 2009.

The Emergence and Work of ACUDESBAL from 1990s–2009: Resistance to Neoliberalism, Conquest of Basic Services, and NGOization

As more international aid began flowing into the Bajo Lempa region in the mid- to late 1990s it became clear to local residents that the formalization of their organizing and advocacy efforts into a legally established non-profit organization would be of their utmost strategic interest. In 2002, ACUDESBAL was founded to unify the communities of the Usulutan side of the Bajo Lempa around proposals, agendas, and interactions with outside actors. The communities' most immediate objective with their new organizational vehicle was to facilitate coordination of actions and advocacy work with state institutions and international aid agencies around the building of levies for the Lempa River, which flooded periodically due to strong seasonal rains and mismanagement of the hydroelectric dam further upriver. By way of ACUDESBAL, the communities of the Bajo Lempa made national headlines in the early 2000s by leading annual

[2] This was due to power struggles between Joaquin Villalobos, head of the ERP, and leaders of the other factions around Villalobos' contention that the FMLN should transition away from a vanguardist political structure toward a more open and internally democratic one in the post-war period (see Sprenkels 2018).

"Marches for Life" in which they would march for three days from the Bajo Lempa to San Salvador to protest outside the presidential palace and Legislative Assembly, calling for quick construction and fortification of the levies alongside the banks of the river Lempa. These marches earned the communities of the Bajo Lempa a well-deserved national reputation for being organized, militant, and willing to challenge both entrenched power structures and physical constraints in the pursuit of the changes they wanted to see for their communities.

ACUDESBAL's struggle for levies along the lower portion of the Lempa river connected the organization's two primary objectives: to provide their constituent communities with basic services, and to resist neoliberalism as a broad packet of social and economic policies. From 1989–2009, these neoliberal policies were systematically implemented in El Salvador by consecutive right-wing presidential administrations of the Alianza Republicana Nacional (National Republican Alliance, ARENA) political party. In the Bajo Lempa, ACUDESBAL militants viewed levy construction as a responsibility that only could have been provided by the state given the project's magnitude and associated cost, and which would have ensured community members' basic safety in the face of the relatively predictable natural phenomenon of flooding given the region's geography. But it was ACUDESBAL's own discursive framing of the issue and their contentious advocacy for change that imbued this campaign with national significance. ACUDESBAL and its regional, national, and international allies used ARENA governments' dereliction of state duties to fortify the levies as a rallying cry to resist neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology at both a national and global level (Almeida 2008, 2014).

ACUDESBAL's public agenda included participation in additional national-level campaigns against neoliberalism and its Salvadoran proponents—primarily expressed through the ARENA political party, its allied business associations, and international financial institutions.[3] Through extensive coalitional work, ACUDESBAL participated in protests, marches, and forums that resisted ARENA-led initiatives to privatize public pensions, the telecommunications system, health care, and water (Almeida 2014). ACUDESBAL was particularly active in national resistance campaigns to explicitly extractivist projects—deemed "projects of death" by popular movements across the country—such as metallic mineral mining (Spalding 2018), which though not directly proposed for the Bajo Lempa region, would have caused environmental contamination all the way down the Lempa and would have set a worrisome precedent for the country.

But ACUDESBAL was also concerned with other organizational and immediate needs in their territory beyond advocacy for levies and resistance to neoliberalism writ large. Many people talk about how they had nothing when they first came to the Bajo Lempa region as refugees from Morazan, and that the entire area was "simply wilderness," according to Alfonso, one of the founding members of ACUDESBAL. With the organizational support of ACUDSBAL, who itself was financially supported by international donors, community members worked urgently to secure their basic needs and services such as housing, water, electricity, roads, schools, and basic health care. A quintessential example of their "auto-constructed" (Holston 2007) efforts to meet basic

[3] See Robinson 2003 for a thorough discussion of this transnational political-economic apparatus and its U.S. funders.

needs was their financing and construction of an independent water system for the region. Supported by foreign activists and scientists that had been recruited by ACUDESBAL leaders, local Bajo Lempa residents successfully created a system that piped in fresh water from 12 miles north, a necessity given both the local water sources' contamination from past rounds of agricultural use and the public water agency's implicit—and assumedly ideological informed—refusal to extend the public water system to the ex-combatants of the ERP now living in the Bajo Lempa.

NGOization and other Critiques

Simultaneous to ACUDESBAL's anti-systemic social movement activity against neoliberalism and in favor of their own community's basic needs during the 1990s and 2000s, a parallel and somewhat contradictory process was playing out in the organization's strategic visioning, planning, and material choices. According to Bajo Lempa residents who worked with the organization during these decades, as the organization became increasingly reliant on funding from international aid groups (such as German, Dutch, and U.S. agencies), their agenda became relatively less radical, less concerned with community organizing, and more focused on securing measurable outcomes of increased economic stability for nuclear families.

Indeed, some community members, activists, and ex-ACUDESBAL workers I interviewed suggested that ACUDESBAL's growing financial dependence on external institutions directly inhibited the pursuit of a community-based, anti-systemic agenda for which it was founded. These folks alleged that by the mid-2000s, ACUDESBAL had contracted "*proyectitis*," as cleverly described by Cesar of the community of Nueva Esperzanza, in which the organization had developed the tendency to sacrifice its historic work in community organizing, and public advocacy in order to apply and execute fleeting, one-off, "development" projects at the behest of international funders.

On one hand, such a critical analysis from local activists suggests a process of "NGOization" in which the organization's status as an "anti-systemic" social movement organization (SMO) was contradicted by its apparent accountability to outside funders as opposed to local community members and a radical organizing project (Roy 2010; Choudry and Kapoor 2013). On the other hand, we can see ACUDESBAL's gradual evolution toward more of an NGO than a grassroots anti-systemic movement as a strategic, intentional process by which ACUDESBAL leaders and militants tailored their specific, local interests around community organizing and alternative development to global trends in NGO financing on topics such as feminism, youth organizing, micro-credit, and food sovereignty (Alvarez et al. 2017; Thayer 2017). This merging of local needs with transnational opportunity structures enabled ACUDESBAL to maintain financial solvency and a loyal base of international funders despite a series of tumultuous circumstances during the 2010s as described below.

In summary terms then, the structural historical moment of neoliberal democratic globalization provided organizations such as ACUDESBAL with opportunities for anti-systemic organizing to resist neoliberalism and to provide the communities of the Bajo Lempa with certain

basic services. These achievements were accompanied by contradictions however, including a tendency toward a more NGO like structure that seemed to distance the organization from its initial focus on grassroots organizing and an anti-systemic agenda. It was amid this complex local context in the Bajo Lempa that El Salvador's historic elections of 2009 loomed on the horizon. During this electoral cycle, every elected seat in the country was up for grabs and given the apparent exhaustion of the neoliberal economic model and the concomitant political project led by ARENA, the FMLN seemed to have a legitimate shot at gaining power across local and national branches of government, including in the Presidential Palace.

Hopeful, Strategic, and Stagnant: Demobilization Under the FMLN, 2009–2014

Along with other repopulated communities and leftist bastions across El Salvador, residents of the communities of the Bajo Lempa rejoiced when the FMLN won presidential elections in 2009 through an alliance with outsider candidate and journalist Mauricio Funes. Grassroots groups such as ACUDESBAL and other NGOs across the Bajo Lempa that had historically seen their struggles as wrapped up in the political success of the FMLN—first during its revolutionary days of armed struggle, and then during the post-war period of neoliberal democracy—hoped that the party's arrival to executive state power would translate into a rollback of neoliberal economics on one hand and policy-based solutions to chronic problems of unemployment, poverty, and social violence on the other. While there were some policy wins for leftists under the FMLN—including more investment in health care, education, and violence prevention; co-governance with feminist organizations in certain areas of gender politics (Burridge 2020), an eventual ban on metallic mining (Spalding 2018), and the long-awaited construction of fortified levies along the Lempa River—what an FMLN government meant for the party's aligned social movements' activities in practice, was demobilization.

Demobilization is the process by which SMOs and activists lower the intensity of their political claims-making activities and discourses, or when, in practical terms, an SMO becomes "a shadow of itself" (Davenport 2015). When an SMO demobilizes in a democratic context—that is, not as the result of government repression—the organization typically deprioritizes grassroots organizing and ceases to be involved in contentious actions such as protests (Davenport 2015). Indeed, indices of protests often serve as a helpful and easily measurable proxy for social movement contention, and in this conceptual and empirical terrain, the *absence* of protests provided a clear indication of demobilization. For example, if we were to apply Almeida's (2014) research design—which explained varying indices and locations of anti-neoliberal protests across Central America during the 1990s and early 2000s—to the years of the Funes administration in El Salvador, we would simply have no data to work with, as there were no significant anti-neoliberal protests to analyze.

That ACUDESBAL demobilized when the FMLN assumed executive power in 2009 was a unanimous sentiment across the leftist activists of the Bajo Lempa that I interviewed. The only difference among interviewees was whether they viewed demobilization as normatively positive

or negative. Typically, those activists with more ideological or material proximity to ACUDESBAL thought it was positive while those more "independent activists" were critical of the demobilization tendency. For instance, when I questioned Carlos, a teacher and independent activist from the community of Amando Lopez about the impacts that the FMLN's arrival to power had on leftist social movement activity in the country, he said:

> I have the impression that since the government of Funes, the social movements have fallen asleep a bit. We still don't have a water law (that would guarantee universal access to the vital liquid) and the law to prohibit mining cost us so much (time, effort, and lives).

Similarly, Cesar, the now-independent activist from the community of Nueva Esperanza, who had previously worked with ACUDESBAL, responded to a similar question from me in 2018 with a more territorialized account that organically incorporated the term of demobilization itself. He said,

> …all the demobilization that has happened here (in the Bajo Lempa), it is because the FMLN has come to power. You understand me? I mean if the Frente (the "Front," a colloquial term for the FMLN) is there, ah it's ok, it's good…(in reference to neoliberal economic policies…) Because I remember, we (ACUDESBAL) were more active when the ARENA governments were in power.

The demobilization of social movements upon the arrival of a leftist government to state power is of course not surprising, as activists frequently understand a tendency to scale back contentious activities under a sympathetic government as strategic. This point was furthered by ACUDESBAL militants, such as David, during our interview in 2014. When we addressed the topic of demobilization, he rhetorically wondered why groups such as ACUDESBAL would ever engage in protests under an FMLN government as these would contribute to "destabilizing *our* government," especially in the first years of a new administration. In a similar vein, a high level leader of ACUDESBAL and resident of La Canoa, Eduardo, agreed that ACUDESBAL and other organizations no longer organized protests and other contentious activities under the FMLN, but forcefully declared that as ACUDESBAL, "We have always maintained our agenda. We never forgot the changes we wanted to see…but at the beginning (of the administrations of the FMLN) we wanted to give them an opportunity to make good on their promises."

But for those activists who were militants of ACUDESBAL during ARENA administrations but who left the ranks of the organization during the FMLN's years in power—such as Cesar and Carlos—their departure was the result of ACUDESBAL allowing this window of opportunity for the FMLN to come through on its promises to remain forever open. The fact that ACUDESBAL never sought to hold the FMLN accountable for its transformational changes was a breaking point for many of these more critical and now-independent activists. Estela, an ex-militant with ACDUSBAL who began dedicating her time to family self-sufficiency through agro-ecological practices around 2017 when I interviewed her, recounted a conversation she had with Eduardo, a top leader of ACUDESBAL, and her longtime friend and comrade in arms during the war:

> I said to Eduardo just the other day…don't you think that we should be promoting these issues the way we did in the past? To keep pushing on the ban on mining, on regulating the sugarcane fields, on the water law? Don't you think we have stagnated? And he said "yes, maybe you're right Estela."

The reality of demobilization by social movement organizations such as ACUDESBAL under a leftist FMLN government alerts us to larger dynamics at the level of social movement-state relations amid global capitalism. From a world-systemic standpoint, the drastic change in social movement activity in El Salvador away from contentious resistance to structural neoliberal economic processes and toward demobilization suggests that intermediary or meso-level national political forces play a determinant role in orienting social movement activity. It is not just the global forces of dispossession and accumulation—or "neoliberalism" writ large—that impels movements to act in certain ways, but rather national-level political contexts, opportunities, and constraints that motivate movements to either engage in contention or to demobilize.

From Demobilization to Transnational Conflicts by Meso-Level Interactions: The Millennium Challenge Account in Coastal El Salvador

In empirical terms, the complexities of the demobilization of ACUDESBAL in the communities of the Bajo Lempa are best exemplified through the dynamics associated with the implementation of a Millenium Challenge Corporation grant in the coastal zone of El Salvador beginning in 2014. The Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC) was a flagship program of the United States Aid for International Development (USAID) under the administration of George W. Bush and was initially unveiled in 2005.[4] The MCC was considered (by its architects) to be a cutting-edge novelty in the realm of international aid due to its requirement for *shared accountability* between the donor country and the recipient country. Despite its ostensibly "shared" nature, the weight of accountability fell heavier on the recipient country of MCC grants, as they were required to demonstrate substantial progress across a variety of specific indicators in the broad domains of "economic freedom" and "ruling justly" as defined and measured by USAID to ensure continued financial flows from the MCC.[5]

The MCC grant that was allocated for the coastal zone of El Salvador in 2014 (after the successful implementation of a first MCA grant in northern El Salvador from 2006–2011) was meant to spur a process of sustainable development and eradication of poverty by investing a total of 77 million in three strategic areas over five years: logistical infrastructure, human capital, and enhanced investment climate. Known colloquially as "Fomilenio 2," available information on the project's investment priorities[6] suggested that it's true intent was to promote infrastructure projects

[4] See https://www.mcc.gov/about for an overview of the aid model itself.

[5] See https://www.mcc.gov/who-we-select/scorecard/fy-2019/SV for an example of a "scorecard" used to rank countries such as El Salvador in their progress in the various MCC priority areas.

[6] See El Salvador Investment Compact | Millennium Challenge Corporation mcc.gov

that would facilitate the region's continuing insertion into transnational accumulation circuits of tourism and non-traditional agricultural exports (Robinson 2008).

In this sense then, the tourism-focused development project of Fomilenio 2 is best understood through the lens of extractivism, a process by which raw natural resources are extracted from developing countries to be processed elsewhere to be sold on the global market (Gudynas 2021). While tourism projects may not typically be conceived within the extractivist paradigm, I argue that they should be, given that tourism-based development typically displaces *local control* over natural resources in favor of their appropriation by wealthy capitalists, whether nationally or globally positioned.

Though extractivism is commonly understood as an integral part of the packet of neoliberal economic policies in Latin America, it had already been a dominant accumulation paradigm in Latin America for centuries and did not cease to be so simply because leftist governments assumed state power in the 2000s (Gudynas 2021). The extraction and exploitation of natural resources for global accumulation was a reliable way for leftist governments of the early twenty-first century to generate dividends despite the need for changes in their rhetoric and political values in relation to such practices (Ellner 2021). Indeed, as Mudge (2018) demonstrates in the case of center-left governments in Europe, and as Gonzalez (2019) and Gudynas (2021) have argued in studies of the Latin American pink tide governments in specific reference to extractivism, globalizing forces, and national-level political and financial imperatives often impel leftist or left-leaning governments to moderate their otherwise potentially radical, socialist, or revolutionary policy proposals to ultimately push and implement economic policies that are part and parcel of the neoliberal canon (Zibechi 2010; Rivera Cucicanqui 2012).

So it was that consecutive FMLN governments—first led by outside journalist Mauricio Funes from 2009–2014, and then by the historic guerrilla commander Salvador Sanchez Ceren from 2014–2019—enthusiastically accepted and implemented the two MCC projects in El Salvador. FMLN state officials heralded both projects as opportunities to pursue their priorities of ameliorating poverty and unemployment through sustainable development and large-scale infrastructure projects that would be largely financed by outside investment.[7] And while such statements seemed to conflict with past statements by FMLN officials about how projects that allowed foreign access to vital resources (such as water, metallic minerals, or health care) were "neoliberal" and solely enabled outside investors to enrich themselves at the expense of local Salvadorans, such discourses largely disappeared once the FMLN held state power. That such "neoliberal" policies and projects suddenly become "opportunities" when leftist parties assume state power shows both the disciplining effects of state power itself (Krupa and Nugent 2015) and how leftist parties' moderation in the interest of maintaining state power can separate them from their revolutionary ideals and grassroots supporters (Michels 1911; Sprenkels 2018). Political moderation and acceptance of extractivism by the FMLN put already demobilized activists of

[7] See https://elfaro.net/es/201409/noticias/15979/s%C3%A1nchez-cer%C3%A9n-recibe-el-alivio-de-fomilenio-ii.htm

SMOs such as ACDUDESBAL in an even more complicated position as the discursive and material effects of Fomilenio 2 manifested in their communities.

A New Possibility for International Funding for ACUDESBAL

While the framework and implications of Fomilenio 2 seemed to clearly position the development project within the "neoliberal" category of economic policies, the leadership of ACUDESBAL, as well as other similarly leftist organizations, were initially willing to allow the architects of the project an opportunity to implement it in a way that would benefit their communities' interests. Specifically, ACUDESBAL did not propose to resist Fomilenio 2, but rather, at the behest of FMLN allies already working within the state apparatus, and in alliance with other SMO's and some lower-tier state agencies, ACUDESBAL endeavored to design and submit a proposal to the MCA to secure funding to enhance its already-existing community-led development priorities for the Bajo Lempa region.

Speaking in 2018, but remembering back to 2014, Eduardo, a leader of ACUDESBAL, stated:

> When Fomilenio 2 started, we drew on the trust we had with the new government, which was of the Frente, and we wanted to believe their word. We said, ok, if you're going to develop the coastal marine zone of El Salvador, hopefully you will help us resolve a few of the problems that we have identified. Let's try this…

Eduardo went on to describe the broad coalitional space in which relevant actors drafted a sweeping series of community-led development projects to be presented to Fomilenio 2 for funding. Those at the table for the drafting of the funding proposals included a long list of leftist social movement organizations[8] and municipal governments on both sides of the Lempa River,[9] internationally recognized environmental NGOs, relevant governments agencies such as the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Public Works, Ministry of Civil Protection, the CEL, and even a representative from the Technical Secretary of the Presidency.[10] After months of meetings, the project proposal laid out a comprehensive agenda: to construct irrigation matrices and local marketplaces; to provide technical assistance and credit to local farmers, entrepreneurs, and cooperatives; and to pool public resources from various government agencies to protect coastal and mangrove ecosystems for conservation and low-impact tourism.

Eduardo talks of being a part of all the planning meetings, and even a member of the representative commission that formally presented the group's proposal at the Presidential Palace. He was hopeful that their proposal would be approved, citing the high-level decision makers who had already been part of the drafting of the proposal, and the fact that one of the President Funes'

[8] The Mangrove Association, ACUDESBAL, CRIPDES, CORDES, CONFRAS, an unnamed guild of artisan fisherman, and various local agricultural cooperatives.

[9] These included Jiquilisco, Tecoluca, Zacatecoluca, and San Luis la Herradura.

[10] This agency had been created by Mauricio Funes to provide his most preferred advisor, influential Keynesian economist Alexander Segovia, with an opportunity to be ever at his side. During the Funes government of 2009–2014, this was likely the most influential institution within the state apparatus.

mandates was "to come and do this type of work, to come and listen to the people, and come up with proposals for real change." Eduardo continues the story saying,

> Two months later we met again (with representatives of the Salvadoran president) to discuss their response to our proposals. The surprise for us was that the government of the United States had not approved—had not accepted *a single one* of our proposed projects. But still we thought there was hope, and we said to the President's representatives: "the government here (of El Salvador) is with us right? If the government from up there (the US) doesn't accept this, you all can put forth the money and support the proposals?" But ultimately the response was no. And so, we asked them: if we are here in representation of four coastal-marine municipalities, if we are the organizations that are with the communities, and they don't accept a single one of our proposals, how is it that Fomilenio 2 is going to come and eradicate poverty here in the coastal-marine zone? If that was the objective of Fomilenio 2….

Eduardo then describes a series of "strong" discussions between the coalitional space he was a part of and the President's representatives, discussions which led to a total rupture between the two groups. High-level officials in the FMLN government—much higher level than mid-level managers who had been involved in the drafting of the proposal itself—claimed that the dialogue with representatives from the Bajo Lempa had turned into an "ideological space;" that the Bajo Lempa contingent was defending "interests that were not those of the country as a whole," and that there was no way to negotiate with them. In response to that posture by the government, according to Eduardo,

> We "*marcamos cancha*" (drew a line in the sand) and said that if the communities are not going to have direct participation, if they're not going to be benefitted by the project, then we are in opposition to Fomilenio 2.

From what I can surmise based on subsequent similar accounts from leaders of other social movement organization such as CRIPDES and Voices on the Border, this falling out between the coalition of Bajo Lempa organizations and municipal governments on one side, and national-level state officials tasked with the implementation of Fomilenio 2 on the other, occurred in mid-2014. Soon after this, ACUDESBAL began to facilitate "informational forums" in the communities of the Bajo Lempa territory in which they warned of Fomilenio 2's total disconnection from the interests of normal people in the zone, and its possible detrimental environmental impacts on the region. These forums led to a rapid rise in critical consciousness around the impacts of Fomilenio 2 and myriad calls from individuals in the Bajo Lempa region to resist the mega-project, as I detail in the next section.

Eduardo's account demonstrates that ACUDESBAL's trust with allies in FMLN-held state institutions led them to believe that their priorities and values of ecologically sustainable, community-led development could be furthered by the otherwise neoliberal-seeming project of Fomilenio 2. These hopes were unceremoniously dashed through a series of interactions with their alleged allies now ensconced in the state apparatus, leaving ACUDESBAL and other leftist organizations, militants, and local governments, with little other option than to attempt some sort

of opposition to the project. But the potential efficacy of such opposition had already been undermined by ACUDESBAL's and other leftist organizations' exhaustion of political capital in their initial effort to secure funding through Fomilenio 2. In this sense, the tenuous possibility of state-based funding for otherwise anti-systemic organizing initiatives served as an insidious form of social movement cooptation that crystallized at the meso-level of interactions between social movements and state institutions when the left controls the state (Prevost, Vanden, and Oliva Campos 2012). The transmission belts of knowledge and resources that flowed between leftist social movement leaders and low-level state bureaucrats affiliated with the FMLN in the Salvadoran state initially facilitated a flow of knowledge that seemed to provide an economic opportunity for allied movements, though this opportunity was eviscerated by the structural veto power of global capital as manifested through the U.S. government-funded MCC, and transmitted through state-movement interactions among disempowered allies on the Salvadoran left.

Sparks of Resistance from Below

Though I wasn't aware of ACUDESBAL's pursuit of that financial opportunity through Fomilenio 2 until 2018[11], I knew since the beginning of my formal research in 2014 that leftist activists' perspectives on Fomilenio 2 were exceedingly complicated. On one hand, people felt that demobilization was the order of the day. In a particularly revelatory quote, an older, seasoned activist from Nueva Esperanza, Rosa, who professed to have always focused her activist time on community structures, said:

> There used to be resistance, but once the Frente came into power… "Fomilenio is coming… Ah Fomilenio, yes that's ok ('si esta bien'). There was a big influence, like it or not, by the FMLN in the second-level organizations like ACUDESBAL, and that influence has also come down into the communities.

While Rosa's analysis reveals the sense that people in the Bajo Lempa were complacent regarding the warnings that Fomilenio may jeopardize aspects of their communal livelihoods—and that organizations such as ACUDESBAL were inadvertently contributing to such complacency—there were other perspectives that were fully oppositional to the prospects of Fomilenio's implementation. In contradiction to Rosa's sentiment that people were accepting of Fomilenio because the FMLN was administering the project, Alfonso, one of the founding members of ACUDESBAL, and resident of La Canoa declared, "I expect the people of the Bajo Lempa to rise up and defend the lands they shed blood for against the foreigners and the right-wingers who are behind Fomilenio 2."

[11]Eduardo told me about it late one evening while seated at his kitchen table in his house in La Canoa, only after many extended conversations and interviews with him in the preceding years; years after he had begun calling me "*compa*" (short for *compañero*, or comrade in leftist circles of El Salvador), suggesting that I had won his political trust; and only after much diplomatic prying on my part about what seemed to me like a surprising lack of resistance to Fomilenio 2 from ACUDESBAL. It is my speculation that few non-leader activists in the Bajo Lempa region were aware of the funding proposal that was submitted by ACUDESBAL in conjunction with its state-based and societal allies to Fomilenio 2 at the beginning of 2014.

Consistent with the implications of Alfonso's expectation of resistance were accounts from both ordinary community members as well as activists throughout the Bajo Lempa region that Fomilenio 2 would lead to the appropriation of their land by outside investors, as well as to water scarcity and deforestation as new hotels and golf courses would come to occupy strategic territories and consume vital resources.[12] These worries were certainly fostered by the forums that ACUDESBAL, Voices on the Border, and CESTA were organizing across the territory, in which these organizations presented their research on the possible environmental effects of the projects on the region.

During my interviews in mid-late 2014, I found fears of Fomilenio's impacts to be particularly pronounced in mangrove communities. In an interview that year with Arturo, then president of the community board of the mangrove community of La Tirana, he expressed his understanding that Fomilenio 2 would threaten the "privatization of our livelihoods" for residents of the mangroves. Arturo did not believe that Fomilenio 2 would bring employment and development to their communities. Rather, like many others in his community, he worried that their precious natural resources—the flora and fauna, as well as the mangrove ecosystems themselves—would be destroyed or appropriated by foreign investors who would be the real beneficiaries of the aid program.

Jonatan, the president of the community of El Chile, another mangrove community even further east of the mouth of the Bay of Jiquilisco, and closer to pristine beaches known for their beauty and abundance of wildlife such as tortoises, asserted that communities like his are not taken into account by state institutions when "mega-projects" are negotiated and approved. For Jonatan, the absence of representatives from the Bajo Lempa in negotiations around Fomilenio 2 was even more egregious given the project's direct and detrimental impacts on "ignored communities" such as his. He professed his desire to speak directly with the members of the Legislative Assembly—"the ones who supposedly represent us and make laws in our name."

Fearing government inaction regarding an imminent appropriation of their land from outside investors aligned with the architects of Fomilenio 2, Jonatan worked with other community members under the guidance of ACUDESBAL to try to convince all El Chile residents to refuse to sell their lands to outsiders. But despite his small group's best efforts, and the efforts of other leaders and NGO workers, "the population was divided" in mangrove communities such as El Chile and La Tirana according to Jonatan. Here, some residents were hoping that the development project would bring viable employment and investment opportunities, and still others had already sold their land to outside investors, portending a vested interest in the realization of the project.

[12] According to a report published by Voices on the Border in 2014 called "Tourist Development in the Bay of Jiquilisco," communities such as La Tirana and El Chile are among the 20 percent of Salvadoran communities that are still not connected to public systems of water and get their water from wells or other informal sources. The report provides an extensive discussion and voluminous quantitative data to show how an influx of tourist projects, and especially of golf courses, would occupy the vast majority of already-scarce hydric resources in the Bajo Lempa territory, leaving area inhabitants in even more precarious situations of "hydric stress."

But the desire to resist Fomilenio was still strong among many residents of mangrove communities, and as a result, by the end of 2014, a group of community boards of directors threatened by the implementation of Fomilenio 2, and supported by ACUDESBAL, CESTA, and Voices on the Border, had coalesced into a new group, the Association of Mangrove Communities in Defense of Territory (ACOMADET), which purported to both raise awareness in the communities around the threats to their way of life posed by mega-projects such as Fomilenio 2, and to present a proposal to national-level government agencies for community-based "co-management" of the mangrove forests around the Bajo Lempa and Bay of Jiquilisco.[13] Though ACOMADET never formally presented such a proposal to any government institution, nor was it able to actually establish its own judicial personhood, its existence combined with the sorts of perspectives already cited here demonstrated that leaders in both mangrove and floodplain communities at least *attempted* to resist Fomilenio 2 by both critiquing its seeming promotion of a neoliberal, extractivism development model and by forwarding their own ideas around community control over local resources. Additionally, many also expressed their desires to formally resist Fomilenio 2 through "claims-making actions" (*actos reinvindicativos*) such as marches and protests against Fomilenio 2, a prospect that caused great worry in the ranks of mid-level FMLN officials in the Secretary of Citizen Participation when I directly shared such sentiments with them during interviews.

While contentious resistance to Fomilenio 2 may have seemed likely, particularly from local anti-systemic such as ACUDESBAL, there were never any public protests or outward resistance to Fomilenio 2. This was the case because community members of the Bajo Lempa and militants of ACUDESBAL ultimately refused to "destabilize their government," and because another more sinister factor had arrived to not just demobilize them, but to destabilize their very lives.

Gray Zones of Violence: From Gang Incursion to Community Dissolution

As if the arrival of the FMLN to state power combined with the unsuccessful attempt by ACUDESBAL and other organizations to secure funding for their own projects through Fomilenio 2 were not enough to demobilize community resistance to this neoliberal development project, an additional demobilizing factor emerged: the arrival of outside gang members to the communities of the Bajo Lempa. Seemingly in chronological lockstep with the crystallization of the *possibility* of organized resistance to Fomilenio 2 on behalf of communities in the Bajo Lempa (during mid to late 2014), gang members from beyond the region began arriving to the area to establish territories (*canchas* or "fields" in local parlance) and recruit local members into their ranks. While gang activity had been a source of epidemic levels of violence, fear, and social conflict in many areas of El Salvador since at least the early 2000s (Wolf 2017), the communities of the Bajo Lempa

[13] The concept and practice of "co-management" by local communities and government agencies of valuable, delicate natural ecosystems is both well-documented and on the rise around the world, including in Latin America, in countries such as Colombia, Chile, and Costa Rica (Amigos de la Tierra 2007).

had remained free of this destructive social dynamic, in large part due to their remote geographic location and the strong, already-existing social networks that structured the communities.

But the sudden incursion of gang members and activity in the communities of the Bajo Lempa—with their practices of rent extortion under pain of death and open warfare with police and rival gangs—sabotaged community-organizing processes throughout the territory for at least two years. Indeed, after an intensive round of ethnographic fieldwork in 2014, I was advised by trusted local informants to not even visit Bajo Lempa area in 2015 and 2016 given the violence being unleashed by gang members, and eventually also by police, soldiers, and para-state officials against suspected gang members in the area. In my subsequent visits in 2017 and 2018, ACUDESBAL workers and other activists spoke of a total stoppage in their organizing processes during the previous two as their physical travel from one community to the next had been impeded and threatened by warring participants in rival gangs—the 18th Street gang and the MS-13.

By the end of 2016, as a result of what amounted to a low-scale social cleansing campaign by state and para-state security personnel, there was little gang presence in the floodplain communities (gang members had either been killed or had fled on their own), though gang members did hold on to power in a few mangrove communities, such as La Tirana, where there was less unity and organization compared to their floodplain counterparts. Again, using local folks' warnings to protect my own safety as an indicator, I was able to do extensive research in the floodplain communities during 2018 but was still advised against entering La Tirana given the ongoing violence in that community. At that point, violence in La Tirana was occurring primarily between gang members and police, though such violence increasingly claimed "civilian" victims, or those who were not formal gang members nor police or their informants. This violence ultimately led to the veritable dissolution of La Tirana.

When I joined the Board of Directors of Voices on the Border in June of 2019, one of the first reports that I received was that the community of La Tirana—where Voices had been investing time and resources to strengthen internal community organizing processes—had "fallen apart." The Executive Director of VOCES, and long-time community organizer and educator in the Bajo Lempa region explained how the police had come in the middle of the night and set fire to the houses of people suspected of collaborating with the gang members who had come to take control of a large chunk of the community's land and population. It had been the house of Maria who had always helped the community board of directors (still headed by Arturo) and made food for visiting delegations with unshakeable charisma and enthusiasm. She and her family subsequently fled the community to parts unknown of El Salvador or to other countries. By mid-2020, roughly half of La Tirana's population had fled, including all of those community residents and leaders, such as Arturo, who had promoted resistance to Fomilenio 2 and had been threatened by gang violence, police violence, or both. Simultaneously, according to ongoing virtual communication with Voices on the Border staff, large tracts of the community's land that had been vacated by emigrants was being bought up by a local oligarch and sugar baron, who was assumed to be planning to implement tourism projects with funding from Fomilenio 2.

Meanwhile in El Chile, which I was able to visit in 2018, the transfer of land from locals to outsiders had seemingly happened with much less coercion and gang-state violence. According to my main contact in the community, Jonatan, who was no longer the president of the community due to a shift in local political power away from those aligned with NGOs such as ACUDESBAL and Voices on the Border, the community's transformation into an investment-ready series of properties was nearly complete. He said:

> If we see now who are the owners of the beach terrains, we don't see a single peasant there, not a single fisherman, not a single egg-collector. We see wealthy men who have come from others places to appropriate this land. And when they buy the land, they promised to bring employment, but when the time comes, they bring workers from other places…

Though it would be impossible to prove causation between the arrival of gang members to the Bajo Lempa and the abandonment of resistance to Fomilenio 2 in mangrove communities, there is a direct correlation between the destruction wrought by gang and state violence across the Bajo Lempa region from 2014–2018, and the passage of coastal and mangrove lands into outside investors' portfolios. In hushed whispers and only among others of trust, some Bajo Lempa residents will speculate that the arrival of the gang members to the area was part of a larger strategy by the wealthy local oligarchs to disarticulate community organizations, such as ACOMADET, and the local community board in La Tirana, whose resistance to Fomilenio 2 posed a threat to transnational circuits of accumulation facilitated at a policy level by Fomilenio 2, even after many other community leaders—especially in the floodplains—had already been pacified through the organizational demobilization of ACUDESBAL. What is undeniable regarding Fomilenio 2 is that a complex, interlocking web of social, political, and economic factors coalesced to block the possibility of community-led resistance to the mega project, thereby weakening communal agency to forge alternative climate futures in opposition to the accumulation logic of global capitalism.

Toward Food Sovereignty, Agro-Ecology, and Engaged Autonomy

ACUDEBAL's demobilization under FMLN governments along with its internal and external tensions—especially its reliance on international funding and discourses—coalesced to obligate the leaders, communities, and organizational structures associated with ACUDESBAL to reinvent themselves (Motta 2013) during FMLN administrations from 2009–2019. This reinvention saw ACUDESBAL transform from a militant SMO focused on resistance protests and policy advocacy to one more concerned with cultural and ecological change within the communities where it operates. In the theoretical terms of Erik Olin Wright (2003), it shifted its focus from symbiotic transformation—change that would be engineered through interactions with the state—to interstitial transformation—change that addresses the fabric of social (and ecological) relationships themselves. From around 2018 onward, ACUDESBAL and many activists and community boards associated with it began to forge a series of more localized, autonomous, and trans-locally linked practices around social organization and agro-ecology processes, outside the

logic of partisan, state-based politics. ACUDESBAL's and other group's recent reinvention signals dynamics in which the organization and its activists are "overflowing the channels" (Markoff 2019) of the established (formal) Salvadoran (and Latin American) leftist political projects.

Since around 2017—after the vanquishing of the threats posed by gangs—ACUDESBAL has come to focus its work on more explicitly interstitial strategies of social change: organization of youth and women's groups who have goals of local transformation, scholarship programs for students, and a large array of agro-ecological projects for communities, cooperatives, and individual farmers, which are characterized by empirical environmentalism and engaged autonomy vis a vis outside forces.

ACUDESBAL has always represented communities and people who construct alternative social development models that are deeply rooted in local claims to land use and management of local natural resources. Both present day and ex-militants of ACUDESBAL are deeply committed to ecological sustainability given the extent to which they recognize themselves as co-dependent with the natural world as a result of their carving out their lives in the territorial milieu of the Bajo Lempa and of the large impacts that the natural world has on their prospects for a dignified life. But as it became clear to residents of the Bajo Lempa and to ACUDESBAL as an organization that their ecological causes were not being prioritized by the FMLN—with the most dramatic example being that of Fomilenio 2—their environmental work increasingly began to take place outside and independent of the political orbit of the FMLN.

As an example of ACUDESBAL's commitment to ecologically sustainable models of localized development, the organization's president, Eduardo, had this to say in 2018 about the organization's work with agriculturalists in the territory:

> The people's awareness-raising process is advancing slowly. The people have been led to believe that without agro-chemicals, their crops won't produce anything. Well, we (ACUDESBAL) have gone about demonstrating that this is not the case… We work on productive diversification. We're interested in farmers' parcels having fruits, vegetables, basic grains, greens, herbs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, pigs—so that you will see everything in a parcel—enough to maintain a family—enough. And what does that bring? The ability to not depend on supermarkets, to not depend on agro-chemicals, but rather to depend on your land. And that is what we call food sovereignty—it's like the alternative to the conventional model, which—even though the government is FMLN right now—we say with clarity, that the government is complicit in facilitating a capitalist model of agriculture.

Eduardo's words exhibit one element of *empirical environmentalism*: a concern for protecting and managing natural resources sustainably due to empirical experiences that have convinced people that their basic human dignity and survival depends on such protection. By invoking a family-based, community-supported model of food sovereignty, Mario contextualizes how ACUDESBAL promotes localized practices that result from empirical environmentalism while simultaneously converging with globally circulating ecological perspectives and discourses around environmental protection (Cartagena Cruz 2015). That is, ACUDESBAL is one of many grassroots efforts around the world that is forging alternative social development models in their

territory by drawing on both global discourses and local experiences and knowledge to contest dominant, capitalist models of land and resource use by enacting and practicing their own more sustainable claims to land and resources.

Importantly, according to Eduardo, these visions and practices of agro-ecological sustainability in the Bajo Lempa are implemented in tension with the "conventional" capitalist model of agriculture and resource use being promoted by the FMLN. For Eduardo, this conventional model was expressed through various agricultural aid programs which doled out one-season-use "terminator" seeds and agro-toxic fertilizers to small farmers, through large-scale, seemingly-neoliberal development projects such as Fomilenio 2, and also through FMLN governments' apparent lack of will or ability to regulate large-scale sugarcane production in the Bajo Lempa region.

While leftist militants and leaders such as Eduardo still largely identified with the FMLN political project, they increasingly realized that their territorialized context and needs would not be supported by their alleged allies in power. This realization combined with the more generalized disappointments and contradictions of FMLN governments led most activists in the Bajo Lempa region to begin prioritizing their local needs over allegiance to the FMLN, and to construct a critical distance from party imperatives on various issues. This distance became clear through the consolidation of community- and family-based agricultural model that constructed food sovereignty and local control over resources, especially as the ever-increasing intensity and harms of sugar cane production in the region directly jeopardize the pursuit of food sovereignty of ACUDESBAL's community bases.

ACUDESBAL's work to "defend life and territory," as has been their slogan since 2017, has crystallized around adaptation to the effects of climate change writ large with a special focus on resistance to unchecked sugarcane cultivation (Davila Medina 2019; Davila Medina and Acosta 2020). This advocacy work has become increasingly based on coalitions with other organizations and efforts within El Salvador and also on transnational connections across the Central American region. For instance, ACUDESBAL was instrumental in the founding of the Movement of Victims and Affected of Climate Change and Corporations (MOVIAC), a Central American wide network that resists development projects that have precipitated adverse climactic changes in the region such as metallic mineral mining and cross-national contamination of watersheds by textile factories (Navarro 2017). Most recently, ACUDESBAL has partnered with other peasant organization across eastern El Salvador and with environmental groups such as CESTA and Voices on the Border to begin the national coalition "Azucar Amarga" ("Bitter Sugar"), which has undertaken research and advocacy efforts to compel the new Salvadoran government—led by the young, social-media savvy, neo-populist dictator Nayib Bukele—to effectively regulate the country's sugarcane industry and thereby mitigate the overwhelming health and environmental risks that the industry precipitates (Davila Medina 2019; Davila Medina and Acosta 2020).

Such coalitions have enabled ACUDESBAL to scale up their demands and claims both toward the Salvadoran state on certain strategic issues and toward more lucrative transnational funding agents in the United States and Europe, though with decidedly uneven indices of success.

While MOVIAC and Azucar Amarga have had little to no policy successes on the issues they have addressed, they have contributed to a growing national and global consciousness on the importance of government oversight of key industries, and on the ability of organized local communities and peasant agriculture to "cool the planet" (in the famous formulation of La Via Campesina) through agro-ecology and food sovereignty.

On one specific issue however, ACUDESBAL's support for a constituent community's attempts to protect and manage their local resources has been resoundingly successful. The community of Amando Lopez, a floodplain community with a strong community board of directors who had served in the ERP in Morazan during the war, utilized ACUDESBAL's institutional support to construct relationships of collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARN) in order to enshrine a system of "co-management" (Amigos de la Tierra 2007) of its Bosque de Galera. This is one of the undeniable achievements of ACUDESBAL and its constituent communities in its recent years of focus on empirical environmentalism and engaged autonomy.

In summary terms then, ACUDESBAL's relative demobilization after the arrival of FMLN governments, the complexities of the implementation of Fomilenio 2 and the existential threats posed by gang-member incursions into their territory did not end the organization's work to bring alternative development to the communities of the Bajo Lempa. Rather, their work, as well as the work of other independent activists and local communities in the region was *reinvented* to pursue more interstitial forms of social change that would not be conditioned by formal political parties or institutions. Importantly, this did not mean that ACUDESBAL fell out of the orbit of outside imperatives altogether. Their longstanding international connections and overwhelming reliance on foreign funding still shaped their work, but this should not be seen simply as a case of global cooptation of local autonomy or normatively negative "NGOization" (Thayer 2017). Rather these transnational linkages constituted a bi-directional, North-South transmission belt of ideas, discourses, and resources that enabled ACUDESBAL to pursue its objectives for community organization and food sovereignty in novel, and relatively sustainable ways over the course of three decades, even when its plans to access political and financial opportunities through partisan allies in state power went awry. That certain academic and activist discourses glorifying the work of "social movement organizations" such as ACUDESBAL coexist simultaneously with critical discourses—from other camps of more radical local activists or academics further to the left—that see such organizations as merely "NGOs" that stymy truly anti-capitalist organizing is not an analytic or theoretical problem to be overcome so much as an indicator of the complexity of the work of NGOized social movement organizations in the twenty-first century global South.

Conclusions: Competing Projects of Governance, Overflowing Channels of the Left, and the State's Anthropocentric Constraints

In the face of potentially destructive development projects such as Fomilenio 2 that sought natural resource-dependent, transnationally-linked accumulation and threatened to displace communities

and exacerbate environmental and socio-economic risks, ACUDESBAL seemed to provide the organized communities of the Bajo Lempa with a collective social vehicle to confront and combat these threats. It had ultimately been successful in collaborating with a sympathetic, leftist-led state to ensure the building of levies along the Lempa river and was part of the anti-mining movement that also had success under FMLN governments, but Fomilenio 2 in the Bajo Lempa region ended up quite differently: ACUDESBAL did not end up trying to lead resistance efforts to an initiative that would possibly unleash such detrimental impacts on its communities. Rather, ACUDESBAL and other organizations including low-level state institutions worked to design and submit a proposal to the MCA, at the behest and in coordination with their FMLN counterparts and allies in government. This resulted in an even deeper demobilization of ACUDESBAL's affiliated communities than had already occurred simply due to the FMLN attaining state power. The few communities—located in the coastal mangrove zones of the region and who were already only loosely connected to ACUDESBAL and the FMLN political project—were effectively gutted and demobilized by gang violence in their communities, potentially in the service of investor networks seeking to appropriate land that could be developed under the auspices of Fomilenio 2. This sequence of events led to a learning process among residents of the Bajo Lempa and leaders and militants of ACUDESBAL in which the movement has reinvented itself to more explicitly pursue cultural, interstitial change—through specific objectives such as agro-ecology and food sovereignty—within its own communities and through trans-local connections, as opposed to contentious or symbiotic relationships with state institutions, politically aligned or not.

While the prospects for this local project of eco-communal governance looks gray in the wake of the implementation of Fomilenio 2, the subsequent departure of the FMLN from political power, and the recent rise of a new, populist fascism under young social-media influencer-president Nayib Bukele, there are clear analytical and theoretical insights to be gained from this empirical foray into the Bajo Lempa movement territory of El Salvador under FMLN governments.

First, meso-level interactions are extremely important in seemingly "transnational" conflicts over natural resources and extractivism. When analyzing the activity of social movements, we should pay close attention to the relationships of movement leaders with low-level state officials, especially when they are operatives of an ostensibly aligned party. Such relationships serve as transmission belts for ideas, resources, discourses, opportunities, and constraints that mediate global processes and local interests. By more specifically and critically tying movement-state relations under the left in Latin America to world-systemic dynamics, we can better understand both the prospects for social change across diverse contexts and how movements themselves are dynamic nodes situated at various points along political-economic channels and networks.

Second, a state-based project of governance that is subordinated to transnational capital—even if administered by a "leftist" party—is incompatible with an eco-project of governance from below as instantiated by the community bases of ACUDESBAL in which agro-ecology, food sovereignty, and community organization guides social relations and contributes to ecological sustainability (Fenelon and Alford 2021). A capital-conditioned state by contrast, must see natural resources as production inputs or as assets to attract foreign investment to spur economic growth

and contribute to overarching concerns with the maintenance of political power at various scales. Such a state project—even if "leftist"—is just as anthropocentric and anti-environmental as right-wing political projects (Bruno 2015; Smith 2017). Thus, in El Salvador as in Ecuador, Venezuela, or Bolivia, the institutional Latin American left seems unable to incorporate environmental concerns into its projects of governance (Gonzalez 2019). They have been unable to escape the extractivist logic of the state as most clearly demonstrated in El Salvador by the implementation of Fomilenio 2.

Third, the tensions between projects of governance on the left can be considered a "productive" one (to borrow the problematic use of Garcia Linera in Bolivia) only if and when the local, eco-communal project gains true ascendance and parity in the state-society relation. Community activists, agro-ecologists, and ordinary people of the Bajo Lempa began overflowing the established channels of the institutional Salvadoran left (Markoff 2019) just as it was on the brink of losing state power (which it did in 2019). Nevertheless, community-based agro-ecological action in the Bajo Lempa continues to reinvent the relationships between communities, the natural world, and political power—with or without support from formal political institutions. Communities are demanding that national-level governments respect local practices to lead processes of climate change adaptation, local resource control, and democratic politics. In this way, eco-projects of governance from below contribute to a reinvention of leftist politics writ large both in El Salvador, in Latin America, and throughout the world. It remains to be seen if the institutional left—in El Salvador or elsewhere in the region—will be able to re-gain control over the grassroots flood toward more intersectional, non-hierarchical, and ecologically conscious expressions (Markoff, Lazar, Case, and Burridge 2024), or if these new currents will seek new political expressions (through institutional politics or not).

Fourth and finally, the reinvention of leftist politics represented by projects of eco-governance from below—such as those that are incipient in the Bajo Lempa—are contributing to a new phase of anthro-shift in which societal actors' attempts to construct harmonious relations with the environment reject state and market imperatives to put the environment in the service of economic accumulation. Communal agro-ecology from below thus illuminates a horizon by which a more horizontal and peaceful relationship between humans and the natural world can be constructed. We might conclude that agro-ecological action along these lines is ultimately incompatible with western civilization's basis in human domination of nature and may be leading us away from the Anthropocene. Following the insights of indigenous cultures across the world as theorized by Fenelon and Alford (2021), such cultural, social, and political practices are illuminating a path toward a new, post-anthropocentric civilizational paradigm.

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