

## Roberto d'Aubuisson vs Schafik Handal: Militancy, Memory Work and Human Rights

Ralph Sprenkels

*'Si hemos de mirar al pasado,  
que sea sólo para extraer de él firmeza,  
reafirmación de nuestro carácter revolucionario'*  
Schafik Handal

*Abstract:* This article examines the memory work that former parties to the Salvadoran conflict engage in with regard to two key historical leaders: Roberto d'Aubuisson, on the right, and Schafik Handal, on the left. In spite of the peace process' relative success, El Salvador continues to be politically divided. Narratives concerning the historical role of these two leaders and their respective organizations are mobilized frequently and emphatically in political activities. The two main partisan groups strive to glorify their past and discredit that of their adversaries by use of 'militant memories'. Building on theory regarding memory politics, the article analyses how rhetorical requirements associated with militant politics propagandize history to nurture loyalty, polarization and even impunity. *Keywords:* El Salvador, ARENA, FMLN, memory politics, militancy.

After his death in 2006, former guerrilla 'Comandante' Schafik Handal quickly became the most prominent figure in the pantheon of the Salvadoran left. The leadership of the party he led for several years, the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN), designated Handal as representing 'the synthesis of the Salvadoran revolutionary process..., he who reads the past and points to where we should go'.<sup>1</sup> On the opposite side of the political spectrum, partisans of the right-wing *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA) often endow Roberto d'Aubuisson, the wartime leader of the militant right, with similar honours and functions.

This article identifies and analyses similarities in how Roberto d'Aubuisson and Schafik Handal, opposite poles in Salvadoran history, are represented by their partisans. It furthermore draws attention to the country's ubiquitous militant political culture in which the framing of history, especially that of their civil war, is an important propaganda tool. Taken together, the representation of D'Aubuisson and Handal in the form of what I call 'militant memories' provides a window into the civil war's political legacy. I have argued earlier that contemporary political interests weigh heavily in El Salvador's post-war memory work on human rights abuses (2002b, 2005). In this article I intend to extend the inquiry regarding political memory towards the leadership of the dominant political parties and their alleged role in the war.

### El Salvador's post-war political transition

The Salvadoran civil war was one of the bloodiest political contests in Latin America's recent history. In 1992, the Peace Accords put an end to twelve years of

armed confrontation that cost near 80,000 lives and ended with a virtual military tie between the US-backed Salvadoran Armed Forces and the Marxist insurgents of the FMLN. The agreements entailed important political and institutional reforms, including the conversion of the insurgent front into a legal political party, the purging and reduction of the military, an overhaul of the judicial system and the constitution of a new civilian police force (Montgomery 1995). A United Nations peace mission called ONUSAL supervised the implementation of the accords and shepherded El Salvador into the country's first free and democratic elections in 1994. The sitting right-wing ARENA party won the elections. The FMLN came in second, emerging as the country's main political opposition force (Montobbio 1999).

The most common assessment of El Salvador's transition is that remarkable progress was made in terms of political reform and institutional modernization of the country (Samayoa 2002). However, some scholars questioned the impunity granted through a blanket amnesty law to the military and death squads as well as the guerrillas for their respective war crimes (Popkin 2000). Furthermore, while the post-war economy produced relatively high overall growth figures, socio-economical inequality in the country grew more pronounced. The majority of the population (still) lives in poverty, forced to make due with meagre incomes and precarious social services (Spence 2004). In this context, the proliferation of organized crime, youth gangs, drug trade, protection rackets and police corruption turned El Salvador into one of the most violent countries in the world. Many everyday Salvadorans 'talk of 'peace' as 'worse than war'' (Moodie 2010, 2).

The war's former enemies now participate in periodic elections, generally accept the results of these elections and, in practice, distribute power between them. The country's democratic image has recently been strengthened by the 2009 electoral victory of FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes, bringing a left-wing president to power for the first time in Salvadoran history. In practice, the formal consolidation of electoral democracy has been accompanied by the recycling of non-democratic political tools, such as clientelism and manipulation by mass media, inspiring one scholar to write of 'electoral authoritarianism' (Wolf, 2009). Electoral campaigning has seen several cycles of high tension, including some fleeting political violence (Guzmán et al. 2006).

### **Memory work as political instrument**

Academic production on what is often termed 'historical memory' in Latin America tends to concentrate on the dichotomy between the 'forgetfulness' proposed in official history and a 'fight for truth and for justice' realized by civil society groups and relatives of victims of human rights abuses, rallying against the hegemony of this official history.<sup>2</sup> The advantage of such an approach is that it highlights the power differentials which commonly exist between the victims and their families and their victimizers. Commonly, the latter still wield substantial influence over state and politics. A potential shortcoming of this approach in social scientific terms is that dichotomies such as 'truth-forgetfulness' and 'victims-victimizers' oversimplify both the rendering of what actually happened during the conflict as well as the posterior social processes shaping justice and impunity. The actual processes themselves are likely to be much more complex and variegated than the

proposed 'official' versions that political contenders from different camps circulate (Tilly 2002, 2008).

Starting with Halbwachs (1992 [1952]), academic debates have focused on social or collective memory as a political practice. Collective memory appears as a product of social processes of construction and interpretation of historical events, constituting an essential element for the capacity of groups and individuals to maintain identities through time (Misztal 2003). According to Susan Sontag, collective memory, strictly speaking, does not exist. 'What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings' (2003, 86).

The ideological proclamations of political contenders may thus offer some guidance in deciphering the memories that are being constructed and reconstructed. But to capture the dynamics of memory politics, Goffman's concept of 'frames' is much more incisive (1974). Frames provide the socially dynamic semantic structure that allows people to make sense of their reality (van Drunen 2010, 31-32). Interactionist by nature, frames are continually elaborated and re-elaborated by proponents and their audiences. In political terms, frames can be conceptualized as 'interpretive packages that activists develop to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, appeal to authorities, and demobilize antagonists.... [Frames] make clear the 'identities' of the contenders, distinguishing 'us' from 'them' and depicting antagonists as human decision makers rather than impersonal forces'. In this sense, frames are, for their adepts, 'at once empirically credible, experientially commensurable, and narratively faithful' (Polletta and Kai Ho 2006, 190). Impregnated with emotion and affection, frames induce people to filter their perceptions of the world and to allocate meaning by means of a selective use of information (Kuypers 2009).

Building on Goffman's work, Charles Tilly offers insight into how this process of filtering and selection of information may work in practice. He points to the crucial role (what he calls) 'standard stories' play in our social and political life (2002, 2006, 2008). These stories constitute 'explanatory narratives incorporating limited numbers of actors, just a few actions, and simplified cause-effects accounts in which the actors' actions produce all the significant outcomes' (Tilly 2008, 20). A crucial feature of stories is that they 'lend themselves beautifully to the judgment of the actors and to assignment of responsibility. They constitute marvellous vehicles for credit and blame' (Tilly 2008, 22). If frames provide the underlying semantic texture, the telling of stories constitute social and political actions that materialize into actual claims. Hence, 'social interaction generates these stories that justify and facilitate the continuity of the social interaction, but does so within the limits posed by stories people share as a result of previous interactions' (Tilly 2002, 39).

Providing past and contemporary events with the 'appropriate' historical interpretation then becomes an activity of great importance for politics (Ankersmit 2002, Trouillot 1997). During countless meetings, public interventions, press interviews and the like, politicians invest a great deal of time and resources in the trans-

lation of social and political processes into standard stories. In the process they attempt to forge, solidify, modify or innovate categories of political identity that are able to mobilize resources, votes and sometimes even armies (Reger et al. 2008). 'History' is a key tool for this task. Political memory work thus consists of the selective (and sometimes manipulative) use of history to build contemporary claims by activating political identities consonant with the historical frame referred to.

### **Beyond martyrdom**

The concept of martyrdom, a type of memory that identifies 'divine power and intentions as acting in human history' (Peterson and Peterson 2008, 513), served as a central feature of the discursive organization of El Salvador's civil war. Its appeal rested in part on the importance of liberation theology in the revolutionary movement. The massive political persecution that contributed to the escalation of the conflict also targeted important sectors of the Catholic Church. The archbishop of San Salvador, Monseñor Romero, stood out amongst the tens of thousands of victims of political persecution. Before his assassination by a right-wing death squad in 1980, he was El Salvador's most prominent human rights defender and an eloquent advocate for social, economic and political change in the country.

During the war, Peterson and Peterson argue, the image of martyrdom was 'politically and morally resonant' and worked to 'help make their struggles and sacrifices meaningful' while in contemporary post-war circumstances martyrdom typically appears as 'a discourse of commemoration' (pp. 514-15). It should be noted that, generally speaking, El Salvador's Catholic Church has become more conservative and distanced from political debates. The figure of Monseñor Romero nonetheless continues to be omnipresent. Thousands of Salvadorans wear T-shirts with his portrait, which is also painted on numerous walls across the country. Dozens of books circulate dedicated to his life and martyrdom. Every year thousands of followers participate in a vigil in commemoration of his life and death.

Although his followers were (and are) largely restricted to left-wing circles, it is safe to say that, in the 1980s and early '90s, Monseñor Romero was the most actively promoted historical figure in the country. Today, the figure of Romero continues to inspire thousands of Salvadorans. However, as Peterson and Peterson indicate, while before the memory of martyrdom practically constituted a call to the war, its concrete meaning has now become more diffuse, and 'its power to motivate activism and to inspire hope has diminished' (2008, 536). What is clear is that the emphasis of the left has shifted from liberation theology-inspired community organizing towards electoral and institutional strategies (Silber 2011). It is in this context that FMLN followers have started to promote Schafik Handal as the left's transcendental leader after his death in 2006. However, the right has also increasingly been active in the field of memory politics.

For years activists linked to ARENA have tried to position Roberto d'Aubuisson as the country's most transcendental political leader. By his worldwide reputation, he seems a highly controversial candidate for eternal glory. For one, D'Aubuisson has been formally accused, though never condemned, as the intellectual author of Romero's assassination. A military academy graduate (class of 1963), he held several positions in the National Guard, where he rose to the rank

of 'major'. He received extensive counterinsurgency training, including the infamous School of the Americas (Gill 2004). In the 1970s he played a prominent role in ANSESAL, the intelligence unit involved in the persecution of political opponents. Numerous sources name him as the leader of the 'death squads', paramilitary groups financed mainly by wealthy Salvadorans worried about the 'communist threat'.<sup>3</sup> These paramilitary groups were often semi-embedded in or protected by the Salvadoran Armed Forces and acted with impunity. The death squads engaged in a large-scale persecution of alleged 'subversives' and became a determining factor in the war's escalation (Cabarrús 1983). A virulent anti-communist, D'Aubuisson alleged that the Catholic Church was infiltrated with communist priests. He saw the *Partido Democrático Cristiano* (PDC), a centrist party, as a secret ally of the communists. According to D'Aubuisson, even the Democratic Party of Jimmy Carter had fallen prey to the international communist conspiracy. Robert White, US ambassador to El Salvador from 1977 to 1980, called him 'a pathological killer' (Dunkerley 1982).

While coordinating death squad violence, he also engaged in the political project of building an anti-communist right-wing political front (Baylora 1982). After several failed coup attempts, which brought him a brief spell in prison and political exile in Guatemala in 1980, he founded ARENA and returned to El Salvador in 1981. The aim was to strengthen the political position of the militant right through participation in the 1982 elections, held in the midst of the war. ARENA came in second, after the PDC. With help from smaller right-wing parties, D'Aubuisson became the legislative assembly's president. In 1984, he competed in the presidential elections against PDC candidate José Napoleón Duarte and lost. D'Aubuisson remained active as legislator and opposition leader. Five years later, ARENA defeated the PDC in the presidential race. Wealthy entrepreneur Alfredo Cristiani became the president. D'Aubuisson died of cancer in February of 1992, one month after Cristiani signed the peace accords with the FMLN. ARENA remained El Salvador's strongest political party for the next two decades, until losing the presidency to the FMLN by a narrow margin in the 2009 elections.

Schafik Handal is very different figure, although also not free from polemics. Born into a middle class family of Palestinian immigrants, he studied law at the University of El Salvador (UES) and in Chile, and became a member of the *Partido Comunista Salvadoreño* (PCS) in 1957. In the 1970s, the different emerging insurgent groups strongly criticized Handal, the then leader of the PCS, for following Moscow's official line that insisted on electoral participation and condemned proponents of armed struggle as adventurers and ultra-leftists. In the midst of growing political violence and turmoil, the PCS was the last group to embrace armed struggle in 1979. In 1980, the PCS joined the other insurgent groups to form the FMLN, and Handal became one of its five top leaders. The PCS-FAL led by Handal, then known as 'Comandante Simón', represented a modest force in military terms. But politically speaking, Handal was one of the more experienced FMLN leaders. Towards the end of the war, Handal began to play an important role in the peace negotiations (1990-1992).

In its 1993 report, the UN Truth Commission determined that the FMLN top leadership, including Handal, was responsible for several acts of violence in violation of international human rights law, including the execution of political oppo-

nents. The Commission recommended that all those responsible be 'disabled from the exercise of any public function for a minimum of ten years' (United Nations 1993, 166). The FMLN did not accept that particular recommendation and, in 1994, Handal was the FMLN candidate for mayor of San Salvador, an election that he lost. In 1997, the PCS fraction of the FMLN was implied in a scandal around the abduction of several wealthy Salvadorans. These kidnappings for ransom began taking place at the end of the war, and continued after the Peace Accords. A clandestine cell kidnapped Andrés Suster, son of an affluent family, in September of 1995. During the adolescent's 354 days of captivity, the case aroused massive media attention and nurtured all kinds of speculations. In 1997, when the role of old structures in the PCS that had not been demobilized came to light, the right-wing press focused its attacks on Handal. The case dragged on for several years, and Handal managed to stay clear of penal prosecution. However, a criminal court condemned 'Comandante Marcelo', one of Handal's close collaborators and the former second in command of PCS-FAL. 'Marcelo' disappeared and remains fugitive today.

In 1997 Handal became the leading legislator for the FMLN and started to play a determining role in the internal struggles between different tendencies and groups in the FMLN. In the period between 1997 and 2003 amidst long and tense disputes, the group led by Handal, labelled by the press as '*ortodoxos*', imposed its dominance over other factions in the party, the largest being the '*renovadores*'. Handal then became the FMLN's presidential candidate for the 2004 elections who, after a tense campaign filled with 'dirty' propaganda from the right and left, lost by considerable margin to ARENA's Antonio Saca. He died of a heart attack at El Salvador's international airport when returning from Evo Morales' presidential inauguration in Bolivia in 2006.

### **The rehabilitation of Roberto d'Aubuisson**

On 7 November 2004, *La Prensa Gráfica*, one of El Salvador's leading newspapers, perked its weekend edition with a free 80-page supplement dedicated to the life of Roberto d'Aubuisson. Its author, Geovanni Galeas, challenged the claims of D'Aubuisson's involvement in the murder of Monseñor Romero. In its 1993 report, the UN Truth Commission found 'full evidence' that 'D'Aubuisson had given the order to assassinate the archbishop and precise instructions to members of his security service, acting as a 'death squad', to organize and supervise the assassination' (United Nations 1993, 123). Galeas claimed to have 'solid reasons to doubt the objectivity and impartiality' of the Truth Commission. His main argument was that the Truth Commission had been manipulated to zoom in exclusively on violations committed by the organization *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP). Since, according to Galeas, the other guerrilla groups belonging to the FMLN had committed similar or even worse abuses, the report showed 'omission', 'lack of objectivity' and even 'unacceptable political slander' (2004, 47). After the 1994 rupture of the ERP from the FMLN, Galeas, himself a former ERP militant, became one of the FMLN's most outspoken critics.

Galeas has not been the only Salvadoran to criticize the Truth Commission's report. A few days after its publication, the Minister of Defence appeared in a press

conference together with his entire cabinet and disqualified the report as 'unjust, incomplete, illegal, unethical, partial and insolent' (Rico 1997). Also Villalobos, co-signer of the Peace Accords and the maximum leader of the ERP, recriminated the Truth Commission for having allegedly been influenced by other leftist groups to discredit the ERP (1999, 31).

The blanket amnesty law that followed the report of the Truth Commission frustrated later truth finding and legal persecution. In this sense, the Commission failed in its mandate to obtain 'public knowledge of the truth' on 'the serious acts of violence' of the armed conflict (United Nations 1993, 162). The amnesty law, together with a weak and faltering judiciary, left post-war El Salvador without any formal mechanisms to establish the historical truth about the serious human rights violations that had taken place during the war (Collins 2010). While wartime controversies remained unresolved and perpetrators enjoyed impunity, different versions of what actually happened continued to be disputed and politically exploited, as Galeas does in his text.

The effort of re-propelling D'Aubuisson into history, this time on favourable terms, lies at the heart of a booklet titled *The Face behind the Myth*. Because 'the time has come to open the doors for memory' (2004, 2), the text aims 'to draw the face of one of the most polemical personages...of El Salvador's recent history' in order to 'get rid of the shadows' (2004, 2), shadows generated partly by 'left-wing...groups [that] deliberately mounted a dirty campaign of lies and exaggerations against him', a campaign in which Galeas himself admittedly participated back in 1982 (2004, 44). While brushing away stains on D'Aubuisson's reputation, the publication forwards his candidacy as a builder of the modern Salvadoran nation, the leader that 'created the most successful political project of Salvadoran history', a project 'defined, from the beginning, by the ballot and not by the bullet' (2004, 76).

Other publications have engaged in similar rehabilitative tasks. David Escobar Galindo, the country's most prominent right-wing intellectual, described D'Aubuisson as a 'controversial magnet'.

At the precise historical moment, his brave, fervent and virulent message galvanized the right... [D'Aubuisson], who inevitably appears against a *chiaroscuro* background, now finds himself – also inevitably – on the frieze of history (2002, 87).

Malena Recinos, a retired journalist, channelled her admiration for D'Aubuisson in an attempted biography. The 76-page pamphlet is a D'Aubuisson hagiography (10,000 copies were printed). Recinos portrays D'Aubuisson as an 'exceptional Christian' (p. 75) and 'an extraordinary citizen' (p. 44). The strength of his ideals led to persecution and exile, and made him cry the 'tears of a real man, because in spite of not being able to feed his children,... he carried on' with his mission (p. 23).

According to Recinos, D'Aubuisson surrounded himself with 'pure nationalists willing to risk their lives to confront the irrational fanaticism of our adversaries' (p. 30). D'Aubuisson 'transmitted so many ideas to the people' and his 'charisma...infected men and women, and everywhere he went, crowds poured out and cheered him on like a movie star' (p. 44). According to Recinos, the accusation of

his involvement in Romero's assassination had been fabricated as a propaganda trick by the PDC (p. 33).

Ricardo Valdivieso, one of D'Aubuisson's close collaborators, published a book that frames the story of ARENA as a heroic saga in which a small group of nationalistic young people headed by D'Aubuisson save El Salvador from the communist threat at great personal peril and sacrifice (2008). Regarding D'Aubuisson, Valdivieso adopts a mystical tone:

[He] personified the greatest adventure yet of our Republic.... D'Aubuisson's dream constitutes the feeling the first human being had when looking up at the sky one dark night and, seeing the stars in all their light and glory, becomes filled with hope to undertake the flight towards infinity...which meant great sacrifice, great risks and great sufferings (2008, 196).

David Panamá also wrote a book about his participation with the young nationalists. 'While the terrorists destroyed everything in their way', D'Aubuisson and his followers engaged in an 'arduous fight', with the additional disadvantage that 'the global press was under total control of terrorists' (2005, 57). However, as his 'denunciation against the terrorists [of the FMLN] continued, the personality of Roberto d'Aubuisson gained the affection and esteem of the people' (53). Panamá emphasizes D'Aubuisson's 'jovial character' and his ability to work 'without bounds or fatigue.... He was a man that loved freedom and the western values, and was always willing to sacrifice his life...for his people' (pp. 195-6).

Books are not the only medium his followers use to consolidate D'Aubuisson's myth. ARENA dedicates substantial resources to the promotion of 'the most nationalist of all Salvadorans'.<sup>4</sup> Antigua Cuscatlán, the country's most prosperous municipality (governed by ARENA since the '80s) built a square in his honour. The central monument consists of a large pole flying the national flag, surrounded by marble plaques with D'Aubuisson's best-known slogans. His mausoleum in San Salvador's 'Cemetery for the Illustrious' is decorated in the colours of ARENA and features a bronze effigy. Images of D'Aubuisson are omnipresent in ARENA party offices, to be found in almost all the municipalities of the country. During electoral campaigning, references to D'Aubuisson and his 'invaluable services' to the fatherland permeate party propaganda.

### **The edification of Schafik Handal**

In 2009 Tatiana Bichkova de Handal, a Spanish interpreter from Moscow and Schafik Handal's second wife, published a book on her life with Schafik. The book launch took place before an audience of approximately 300 people and was broadcasted live on radio. Dr. Victoria de Avilés, at the time a Supreme Court magistrate, someone with close historical ties to the PCS and the FMLN, was the main speaker.

Schafik...won a position in the summit of our national history by his bravery and his selfless devotion.... He had a deep love...for his people, to whom he dedicated the sacrifice of being expelled, captured, tortured in this country on countless occasions.... In him [personal] ambition was never born....

Schafik...never gave an empty speech. It was always an analysis of the situation that enlightened people to the need for change....

We all remember that the last meeting Schafik attended was on January 6, 2006 [at the *Plaza Cívica*]. With remarkable plainness, he explained the triumph of the 'Bolivarian' people [sic] and afterwards...requested the people's permission to travel to Bolivia [Applause]. The people, filled with emotion, granted him this permission, and amongst the shouting someone could be heard with the words: 'May God bless you, Schafik. May God look after you!' [Applause] ...This was his last intervention [at the *Plaza Cívica*],... now like a mute witness of the love, the perseverance, the honesty of a man that for more than half a century, and without even the slightest doubt with regard to his behaviour, sacrificed his life and his struggle for this people [Applause].

The event continued with a show that combined theatre and dance to represent Schafik's life. It culminated with the crowd frantically shouting a slogan dedicated to him: '*Mi Comandante Se Queda*', subsequently overtaken by '*El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido*'.<sup>5</sup>

Bichkova's book itself overflows with praise for Handal. According to Bichkova, Handal was a man 'admired by the people' that 'never neglected anybody' (2009, 73) and 'never left...the road of peace' (p. 48). 'His leadership was natural, he never looked for it, he earned it from within the FMLN and everybody recognized it' (p. 28). A substantial part of the book revisits the 2004 electoral campaign, with Handal as presidential candidate and Bichkova as aspiring first lady. Regarding the outcome, Bichkova asserts that 'Schafik did not win the presidency, but he did gain a titanic political victory that brought all his adversaries down to the ground.... The fraud was so scandalous, so shameless and macabre, that for a moment it left us all in shock.... *'The system defends itself with its teeth'*, Schafik said' (p. 140).

The book culminates with the description of Handal's burial. When Bichkova arrived 'at the Plaza Cívica...there were thousands and thousands of Salvadorans, silently weeping and accompanying me in the pain they were suffering with me' (p. 211). On the sixth day 'the country continued to be hypnotized and destroyed by pain' (p. 219). According to Bichkova, 'two million people participated in the burial of Schafik'. For her, the event 'was not a burial, it was a popular insurrection' (p. 220). 'It was after his death that Schafik won the political battle. This time, forever' (p. 222).

Tirso Canales' biography *Schafik Handal. On the Revolutionary Path* aspires to a more scientific analysis of his leadership. According to Canales, Handal came from a 'talented generation' that 'with patriotism and political sensitivity' managed to find, 'a method [Marxism] that was like the magnet that united him to the history of our people's struggle' as well as 'the compass that...oriented him as the popular leader of our people' (2009, 34). In the process, Handal displayed 'his enormous capacities as organizer and political-revolutionary strategist' (pp. 23-4). He became the catalyst 'to release the joint progressive forces that had not yet fulfilled the social-historical functions that corresponded to them' (p. 15).

The superior legacy of Schafik Handal – in addition to being an incorruptible revolutionary –, consists of his brilliant political ideas proved in practice through diverse forms and means of struggle (p. 30).

More acclaim for Handal can be found in Lorena Peña's autobiography. Peña, one of the FMLN's historical leaders, refers to him as 'history's giant' and declares that she has 'never met a man more energetic in his convictions, more passionate about the cause of the people, and more profound in his interpretation of social, human and political phenomena' (2009, 237-8). Similar praise appears in publications by both José Luis Merino (2010) and Medardo González (2010), both FMLN heavy weights, and in current vice-president Sánchez Cerén's public certification of Schafik as the man 'that laid the foundations for the emergence of the FMLN,... the artifice of the peace accords that opened up the roads for democracy in El Salvador' as well as the author of 'the ideas that triumphed' during the 2009 presidential elections (2010, 6-7).

Handal has become the central figure in FMLN partisan memory work. The FMLN municipal council named a street after him in the capital. His followers paint FMLN offices and other buildings or walls with Handal's effigy. In traditional FMLN strongholds like the UES, depictions of Handal have in part replaced those of revolutionaries killed during the war. Annually, on 24 January, hundreds of militants participate in the guard of honour at Handal's sumptuous mausoleum. In 2010, the FMLN leadership inaugurated the Schafik Handal Museum, a house in San Salvador that exhibits photographs and personal effects. In 2011, the FMLN inaugurated a 'Schafik Handal' monument on one of the main highways out of the capital, which carries the phrase printed at the beginning of this article.

### **Militant memories**

The similarities in the political memory work around Roberto d'Aubuisson and Schafik Handal are obvious: partisans project them as extraordinary citizens, of impeccable moral standards, visionaries and lovers of freedom, victims of persecution and slander, gifted speakers, close to the people and loved by the people, willing to endure every imaginary sacrifice for their ideals. Both are framed as 'founding fathers' of the modern Salvadoran nation. Meanwhile, the political adversary stands out as a perverse force to be overcome.

This binary reading of Salvadoran history is not new. Since the 1932 popular uprising and its subsequent massacre, the right has emphasized political narratives regarding the containment of communism and 'red terror'. The left has concentrated on stories regarding the popular struggle against exploitation by the oligarchy and military repression (López Bernal 2007). The narratives constructed around D'Aubuisson and Handal are inserted in, and are a continuity of, these traditions. Militants rarely question their 'own' group's official account. On the contrary, they actively and continually rally for its certification. What's more, the organization of party life induces those party members to publically and categorically endorse these respective 'official' histories, since they are explicitly immersed in the choreography of party events. For example, a FMLN member is expected to partake of party events and to sing texts like *Hermanos unidos para combatir* and

*Revolución o Muerte: Venceremos*. In turn, ARENA members shout *Patria Sí, Comunismo No* and *El Salvador será la tumba donde los rojos terminarán*.<sup>6</sup>

But politics is not just about making claims to power based on stories and ideas; it is also about controlling and mobilizing different types of assets (Bourdieu 1994). For decades, ARENA was able to mobilize a well-organized constituency as well as abundant resources related to the control of the central government (until recently) and to private sector backing. But it should not be overlooked that the FMLN also assembled a significant national constituency and considerable international support during and after the war. Through NGOs, international sponsors, public office and, most recently, party-run companies, the FMLN has been able to tap into substantial private and public resources. Since 1997, the FMLN governs more people at the municipal level than ARENA does. Both ARENA and the FMLN have managed to mobilize enough sympathies, affinities and resources to be able to enlist the services of thousands of active militants, whose own life trajectories are often intimately related to their party militancy. The services of these individuals are key to sustaining the political dominance of the two power blocks.

The pervasiveness of a 'militant' conception of politics in both the FMLN and ARENA has its roots in how different Salvadoran political forces prepared for or responded to armed struggle and civil war. Faced with military dictatorship, the insurgents had to show extraordinary levels of discipline and dedication in order to overcome political persecution, while building resilient clandestine political-military organizations (Kruijt 2008). Only highly committed revolutionaries were allowed to become 'militants' of the 'political vanguard' of the insurgent groups (Grenier 1999). Insurgents gathered momentum towards the late '70s, while conservative forces became increasingly weak and divided. In 1979 and 1980, D'Aubuisson and his followers responded by going partially underground to step up violet persecution and intimidation, using clandestine means as well as supporting factions within the military, and aggressive political propaganda, all to vigorously combat the insurgency and its perceived allies (Baloyra 1982). The result was a 'militant right' (Escobar Galindo 2002, 87). D'Aubuisson himself termed ARENA strategy 'political warfare' (1991). During the years of war, both the insurgents and the extreme right sustained and consolidated a political apparatus as well as a conception of politics based on militancy.

In general terms, militancy can be characterized as a type of political engagement based on an 'ideology of conflicting interests' that combines an inclination towards concrete and confrontational actions, high levels of personal commitment as well as strong reliance on collective membership mobilization (Kelly 1996). Militancy stands in contrast to moderation, a political attitude that favours dialogue and negotiation as tools for a gradual improvement of the status quo and does not view a political adversary as by definition having conflicting or irreconcilable interests with their own group (Darlington 2001). In praising their heroes, militants sharpen the boundary between worthy insiders as less worthy outsiders (Tilly 2008, 90). At the same time, they routinely apply what Tilly calls 'a presumption of blameworthiness' to their political adversaries (2008, 54). In other words, militants are specialists in generating, maintaining and sharpening us-them boundaries between political contenders. Combining the idea of militancy with that of political memory work, I propose the concept of 'militant memories' as a kind of memory

work that specifically aims to generate trust, cohesion and discipline in their political in-group, while nurturing distrust towards outsiders, and especially political adversaries.

Militants do not only promote their group's 'official' history, they also censor potentially divergent points of view within their own partisan environment. In this sense, the memory work around D'Aubuisson and Handal is destined for at least two different recipients: 'the people' that need to be convinced of the leader's, and thus the party's, superior qualities, and the fellow party activist that needs to be reminded of the 'correct' party line that should be followed. For example, Panamá argues that he wrote his book to again 'pursue the original line of ARENA 'from and for the people'', which in the author's version was lost in 1999 (2005, 205). In the case of Handal, this dimension is even more salient, because of his prominent role in the party's internal disputes in the late '90s and early 2000s. Handal's followers now dominate the FMLN. To the insider, Handal's glorification implies censorship of potential dissidents within the FMLN.

When the Salvadoran militants push forward their particular version of history, what almost invariably seems to be at stake is the practical accumulation of forces in the present. Within their respective frame, Salvadoran militants have no qualms in (re-)writing history to appropriately fit their (present) political position and interests. 'Militant memories' are especially pervasive in El Salvador's partisan politics, but they have a broader societal impact. The weight of El Salvador's militant memories ties in with three different circumstances. First, the country is short of independent historiography as well as autonomous institutions able to systematically and authoritatively interrogate the proposed partisan interpretations of history. Second, El Salvador's judicial system has been unable to impart justice for wartime atrocities based on scientific documentation of the facts. With the end of the war, there have been no trials and no convictions; so who in the end has the last word with respect to what really happened? Third, the two dominant political forces are omnipresent in public life. The strength of both ARENA and FMLN contrasts remarkably with the relative weakness of the state (Artiga-González 2004). For many everyday Salvadorans, party connections are an important aspect of different kinds of economical, social and political troubleshooting.

Cohen suggests that when the past cannot be converted in politically useful discourse in the present, this may easily lead to obliteration and denial (2001). Thus, even though amply documented by the UN, the Salvadoran right continues to deny state and paramilitary terror which caused thousands of victims. ARENA has long ignored, eluded or sabotaged the claims of human rights organizations that imply recognition of atrocities committed (Sprenkels 2001, 2002a). The FMLN's most common omission relates to the internal purges that occurred in the interior of the FMLN during the war (Sprenkels and van der Borgh 2011). The Truth Commission's report shows that the responsibility of the guerrilla in the human rights violations is far less, proportionally, to that of the army and the death squads. Nevertheless, the FMLN might be legally held accountable in hundreds of individual cases. In consequence, the FMLN has done little to promote the derogation of the Amnesty Law or to allow thorough investigations on the violent facts of the war (Sprenkels 2002b, 2005).

## Conclusions

The memories of D'Aubuisson and Handal are not self-propelled narratives. They are the result of dedicated labour on the part of those who look to position their leader. The stories partisans tell about these leaders constitute myths-in-construction that forge political identities in order to favour the accumulation of political strength in the present. The proficiency of this type of militant memory work concurs with the continued political dominance of the war's main political contenders. It also attests to the relative weight of the militant identity within these political parties today. As Susan Sontag affirms, 'to the militant, identity is everything' (2003, 10). Militants harness identity by resorting to history, recent and past, in binary opposition to the perceived enemy. The result consists of a play on Ankersmit's assertion that '*the best political ideals and values are those that inspire and permeate the most convincing historical writing*' (2002, 3). Militants attempt to prove their political superiority by representing history accordingly.

The presidency of Mauricio Funes will generate fresh scenarios for memory politics in El Salvador. Some new developments are already visible. While ARENA and the FMLN continue to fortify the status of their respective historical leaders, Mauricio Funes, a relative outsider to partisan politics, seems to look for ways to keep some distance from the party that brought him to power. Funes mostly ignores Handal in his speeches, and instead focuses on Monseñor Romero as the key national historical referent. With this, three objectives come within reach. First, Romero's strong moral condemnation of poverty helps to advocate the idea of 'social inclusion', the most important discursive element of the Funes government. Second, Romero's prestige helps to weaken the position of the right, especially ARENA, because of its complicity in his assassination. And thirdly, Romero's prevalence, in a subtle manner, also attenuates possible credit for the FMLN as the (sole) champion of progressive political transformation. After losing the presidency and a substantial group of militants to a new right-wing party called GANA, ARENA might think they need D'Aubuisson's 'appeal' more than ever before. Meanwhile, others look to increase the political liability associated with D'Aubuisson's involvement in Romero's assassination to further debilitate ARENA.

Although new historical narratives and perspectives may well gain currency in the near future, El Salvador's political memory work is likely to remain polarized and subordinated to contemporary political interests. Submitted to the rhetorical requirements of militancy, history becomes virtually inseparable from propaganda.

\* \* \*

**Ralph Sprenkels** (1969) lived in El Salvador from 1992 until 2002, and from 2007 to 2010, working in the field of human rights, politics and international cooperation. He participated in the documentation of human rights violations for the Truth Commission. His publications include books and articles about El Salvador's civil war and about the human rights movement in El Salvador. He is currently a PhD candidate at Utrecht University. <r\_sprenkels@yahoo.es>

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## Notes

1. Inauguration of Schafik Handal Museum, San Salvador, 13 MAR 2010. 'Radio Mayavisión' live broadcast.
2. Examples include Garretón (1994), Hayner (2000), Jelin (1994, 2001).
3. See Baylora (1982) Montgomery (1995), Dunkerley (1982) and Menjívar Ochoa (2006).
4. [http://www.arena.org.sv/noticias.php?page=noticias\\_wajax&#noticias](http://www.arena.org.sv/noticias.php?page=noticias_wajax&#noticias), accessed 2 FEB 2010, 11:40.
5. The first slogan means 'My "Comandante" Stays Put'. It was popularized in Venezuela, in support of Hugo Chávez after the coup against him in 2003. In Handal's case, it refers to his presence after his death. The second slogan means 'United the People Will Never Be Defeated'.
6. Lyrics of the official hymns of the FMLN and ARENA respectively. Translation for FMLN: 'Brothers (and Sisters) United for Combat' and 'Revolution or Death: We Will Win'. For ARENA: 'Fatherland Yes, Communism No', and 'El Salvador Will Be the Tomb Where the Reds Will Meet Their End'.

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