

## Review - Keepers of the Future: La Coordinadora of El Salvador

Written by Vanessa Braga Matijascic

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/10/30/review-keepers-of-the-future-la-coordinadora-of-el-salvador/>

VANESSA BRAGA MATIJASCIC, OCT 30 2019

***Keepers of the Future: La Coordinadora of El Salvador***  
**Directed by Avi Lewis and Produced by Klein Lewis**  
**BullFrog Films, 2018**

*Keepers of the Future: La Coordinadora of El Salvador* is a captivating documentary filmed from the point of view of the people of Bajo Lempa, portraying their efforts to protect the Bay of Jiquilisto from environmental hazards by using participatory democracy at the local level. The documentary demonstrates how Salvadorans are overcoming a context of violent conflict after twelve years of civil war (1980-1992). In 1992, peace talks were conducted in El Salvador by a small group from the United Nations (UN) and the parties involved in the conflict: the guerrillas (the so-called *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, FMLN) and Alfred Cristiani, President of El Salvador, represented the state. When differences between the negotiating groups intensified, more representatives were sent, such as members of the high command of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, two Salvadoran government ministers and more FMLN leaders. Dialogue was facilitated by the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS), the UN Special Envoy, Álvaro de Soto, and the UN peace operations official at the time, Marrack Goulding. Civil society, however, did not participate directly in the negotiations during the peace process. The influence of their representatives, including political parties in the form of the Interparty Commission and the Catholic Church, could be exerted only as consultants when they were called for debates at the Salvadoran National Assembly (Matijascic 2019).

Explaining the end of the civil war and talking about the peace process of El Salvador has mainly been an exercise in looking at the political actors of that time and assessing each step that they pursued towards peace. Many manuscripts have been written about that political process (see Montgomery and Wade 2006; Torres-Rivas 1997), but in contrast to this type of research, what is the exciting about this documentary is the emphasis on Salvadoran people. *Keepers of the Future* presents a short story about a community in the region of Bajo Lempa composed of refugees of the civil war, centred around a farmers' cooperative (*La Coordinadora*), who are trying to overcome the difficult post-conflict situation and find another path to life through reconciliation. The community decided to organize to try and recover land, make it productive, and thereby ensure a better future for themselves. Peasants are shown not only debating daily challenges but also planning their future towards economic development in partnership with the private sector. In this way, ordinary peasant meetings, free time enjoyed by small groups at school, scenes of daily life and work in rural areas, and simple gestures by individuals focus the viewers' attention on what is genuine in life. The activities captured by the film show participatory democracy in action and a critique of human interference in nature, both central values for the community and providing a source of cohesion.

As the documentary shows, the cultivation of land and sustainable fish farming are the main economic activities of these Salvadoran peasants, which brings them closer to contemporary concerns about climate change and environmental sustainability. Likewise, the power of the local community and their democratic dialogue is important and present in the film. One female leader is shown talking about democracy and its importance while behind her there is a small group carrying FMLN flags. At this time, the FMLN is seen as a political party and there is no direct ideological reference to the revolution or the insurgency of the 1980s – something which might be surprising to those

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who are aware of the guerrilla groups actions during the civil war.

What is particularly interesting is that environmental devastation is not even mentioned by the screenwriter in relation to El Salvador's past experiences in the civil war, but only as a circumstance from which to start again and make progress. Of course, the documentary could have shown the environmental impact of the armed conflict on the community, but it does not seem to be its focus. *Keepers of the Future* sheds light on the real lives of people who want to develop in whichever way they can and regardless of their past experiences. Here, despite recent history, even the United States is viewed with empathy by local leaders. In a meeting they express satisfaction with the support of US companies for the development of the region and express concern only about the risk of damaging the Bay of Jiquilisto. This reveals the role that people can have in balancing economic activities with nature but seems naive to the challenges imposed by the asymmetric relations between the private sector and local communities, such as *La Coordinadora*.

The intention of this documentary, apart from showing deep bottom-up democratic processes, is to pass on a message of reconciliation. The last scene expresses this tone by simultaneously showing both Salvadoran peasant leaders and Americans who survived hurricane Katrina more than ten years ago. It seems that grievances regarding US political decisions in the 1980s do not remain all that prominent in the minds of these Salvadoran leaders. Moreover, between the lines is an implicit message that human suffering can strike everyone in the world, indifferent of race, gender or country. It is a matter of timing and circumstances. This point is demonstrated powerfully by the last scene, which shows a Salvadoran who visited New Orleans taking note of how US authorities were leaving people without assistance after what had happened there. To sum up, do not watch *Keepers of the Future: La Coordinadora of El Salvador* if you are seeking a glimpse of the revolutionary behaviour of the Salvadoran; there is no left-wing orientation. Notwithstanding, if you want to understand how people in that community want to live and pursue their lives after the civil war, surely this open-minded perspective will appeal.

### References

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### About the author:

**Vanessa Matijascic** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science from the University of Sao Paulo/USP and has a PhD in History from Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho/UNESP. She is author of *El Salvador: da Guerra à Paz*.