

Joan Didion's Salvador: The mechanism of terror

ROB KELLY

It is easy--all too easy--when writing of politics to become the exponent of diatribe, the parlour-game for sponge-bathing ideologies. This is particularly true when the political atmosphere under discussion is not your own and you may take license with observation and interpretation. In short, political journalists tend to spew. Where El Salvador is concerned, the spew has become torrential. Joan Didion's *Salvador* is a triumphant departure from such opinion-stroking; this is primarily due to the fact that she deals with the personal politics of this particular disaster rather than the collapsible rhetoric of regime and rebellion.

Personal politics in this sense means what can be apprehended by the individual through source and experience, with an indelicate scrutiny applied to both. In the almost obscene liberty (in the context of an El Salvador) of western democracy it is too simple to scream moral outrage and speak of the need for human rights; the situation is all too obviously obscene and human rights, non-existent. Didion puts this dilemma in perspective by a mixture of personal encounters and historical background, recent and remote. Unfortunately, the mass media has characteristically seized upon a catch-phrase to sum up Didion's intense account: "Terror is the given". It's glib and insinuating; it is also nebulous, conveying none of the substance of such terror or the

machinations which make it a "given".

Didion's prose does carry, if not the skin-shrinking actuality of the brutality and body count mentality, at least a representative bone fragment or two.

Hard data is presented in the form

Area Handbook for El Salvador", and of course, being there. The almost stereotypical situation of a right-wing oppressor opposed by mountain rebels is an easy target for lots of sympatico sarcasm and contrapuntal irony; Didion rejects such cleverness in favour of clarity

benefit of press pass (which means nothing anyway), and although she didn't crawl through the underbrush with rebels nor experience the city-under-siege, all of her encounters with natives, military, church officials, and the remaining entrenched bourgeoisie are vividly,

statistic used to satisfy the need for an explanation of chaos. The familiar euphemisms employed by the machine of bureaucracy of any government seem particularly ugly here. This is a book which hits at the solar plexis of liberalism--which is the same place anatomically for you comfortable anarchists--with an impact that injures anything worth calling human. There is a barrage of paradox and anachronistic flotsam so ugly that they are the only points at which Didion allows her opinions to flail a bit. This is excusable or at least understandable given that reading them is at turns painful and frustrating; being there must have been doubly so.

The explanation and conclusions offered are obvious yet well-rendered reflections of the perceptions of Salvador by the various factions involved. What becomes clear is that the U.S. really doesn't care if El Salvador gets "better" as long as the government maintains the appearance of progress, i.e., the election and land reform bill. The place comes across not as just the setting for another experiment in American adventurism or as a banana estate dragged kicking and screaming into the present, but as a country ripped apart by a series of increasingly shrewd governments and a military which, quite simply, enjoys killing people. Joan Didion's *Salvador* is not an endorsement of anything; it is an account of crouching down waiting for the bullet to follow the blast.

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of U.S. Embassy records and releases, *la Prensa's* propagandic releases, the testimonies of bureaucrats--American and Salvadoran--and the twice removed optimism of American statesmen, including Ronald Reagan. Other more impressionistic sources drawn upon are official and unofficial historical accounts of the country, excerpts from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Autumn of the Patriarch*, a U.S. government pamphlet entitled "An

and a determination to provide an informative essay on a very difficult subject. She succeeds admirably.

It is a short book (108 pages) and the length ensures that there is no space for maudlin rambling. It is a bare-faced by and large non-judgmental statement about a situation which draws the righteous nattering of politicians and intellectuals (ahem) who comment from the safety of distance--both physical and experiential. Didion went without

purposefully expressed. This seems like the only believable writing that has been done on the El Salvadoran situation.

Didion's incisive thinking and the lucidity of her prose allow her to dissemble paradox, lie, and subterfuge and the terror inherent in these to the same extent that she conveys the horror of body count and battle. The convenient manipulation of numbers in elections and government accounts is a sort of intuitive

Aspects of proletarianization in the global city

STEPHANIE-LYN GROSS

Kent Trachte, a professor of Government and International Relations is concerned about "unemployment, poverty and despair" in Detroit-Windsor and New York. On Monday, he spoke at Atkinson College on "Aspects of Proletarianization in the Global City."

Invited by the Political Science Graduate Students Association and Atkinson Dean Wallace Northover, Trachte outlined the problems he believes result from "the emergence of global capitalism". According to John Foster, a York political science graduate, Trachte takes a leftist stance offering "a Marxist interpretation from a global point of view."

Trachte said he studies "the erosion of job security, real wages and unemployment in the manufacture sectors" of the Detroit-Windsor and New York areas which he said were "once attractive" regions with great "expansion and growth".

"Since the 1950's, more than half the manufacturing jobs have disappeared in New York." He adds that "in Detroit, lay-offs will mean another 350 thousand auto-related jobs phased out in the next five years."

The reason for growing unemployment in these areas, Trachte explains, is the internationalization of production, which allows "firms and investors to possess a new ability to relocate production."

And "Workers will have extreme difficulty" in improving their situations "with political weakness for the remainder of this century."

Trachte said that this gives an "unprecedented mobility for investors to shift production", making it "easy for capital to compromise with labour." Auto industry lay-offs, according to Trachte and his colleagues, "are related to increased competition on an international level." Trachte

explained that "new constraints are placed upon capital" which results in a "new lever to exploit labour." Trachte argued that "global competition and labour mobility allow labour to be used for profits."

Since production and labour are being shifted to regions other than Detroit-Windsor and New York (Trachte cites Mexico and other third world countries), "this work force has less bargaining power" and "unemployment, lower real wages

and a decrease of unionization" will result in the auto and manufacture sectors. Trachte claimed that "clerical, financial, service, sales and high technology jobs" are more available than "construction and skilled machinery work." Trachte is concerned with this labour shift because "these jobs do not absorb the unemployment" and "they pay less and are not unionized."

In the Detroit-Windsor areas, "one third of the working popula-

tion receives welfare benefits." Trachte adds that "real wages and the level of well-being in working conditions in the Detroit and Windsor areas "resemble those of the Third World."

He cited the "resurgence of sweat shops in New York" as an example of this labour disintegration. "In New York there are 3,000 illegal sweat shops, employing mostly women and immigrants whose real wages are approximately \$1.75 an hour."

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