Voices of Central America

Jeffrey Gould was awarded the John W. Ryan Award for International Programs in 2013 for his decades of work documenting the political developments and their impact on the peoples of El Salvador and Nicaragua.

For his work on behalf of Latin America and Latin American history, Jeffrey L. Gould was honored with the Indiana University John W. Ryan Award for International Programs in 2013. His 25 years in the IU history department have been punctuated by books in English and Spanish that are regularly cited as authoritative sources for modern Latin American history. For 13 of those years, he directed the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. In addition, he produced two full-length feature documentaries on Latin America and has now begun preliminary work on a third.

Gould began his career working with unions, first in Turin, Italy, and then in upstate New York. Although his sympathies supported those who got a raw deal from factions in power, he found himself at odds with union organizations that failed to serve their constituencies because of their own corruption.

One of the first reporters on the ground after the Sandinista revolution in 1979, Gould (second from the right) was assigned to interview survivors who lost family members in the fighting.
and misuse of union power. His first exposure to Latin America came when he and his new wife visited her family in Costa Rica. Like many trips that would follow, the short visit turned into an extended stay. During the next four years, he encountered firsthand peasant cultures that faced conditions that were familiar but even more intense than those of workers back home.

That initial stay included the moment of revolution in neighboring Nicaragua when Sandinista rebels overthrew the Somoza government. “It was a period of brutal repression. The national guard was gunning down any male between 15 and 25,” said Gould. “I signed on with a Dutch television crew. We were on the first plane that landed after the revolution. My job was a grizzly one; I was charged with interviewing people who had just lost loved ones. I went to the burial grounds and talked to widows and brothers. I will never forget. Despite the trauma of the moment, everyone had important things to say. I remember the brother of a woman I was interviewing. He told his sister, ‘You’ve got to pull yourself together for this international audience; people need to know what we went through here.’ She pulled herself together and told the story of her husband’s death at the hands of the National Guard.”

The experience became the basis of Gould’s dissertation and much of his later research. “I wanted to understand the stories I was hearing. I wanted to know what led to the revolution.” He first studied the peasant movement in Nicaragua in the 1950s and 1960s, and then turned his attention to the disappearance of the indigenous people of Nicaragua and to the massacre of 1932 in El Salvador. The central question that much of his research tried to answer was what happens when a people are told over and over that they don’t really exist?

This “myth of the mestizaje” began in the late nineteenth century. “In 1895,” Gould explained, “35 percent of the population of western Nicaragua declared themselves to
be Indian. A quarter century later, that number was down to 4 percent. What happened? There were no massacres, no wars.” Gould’s answer begins with land owners of mixed heritage who discovered the potential wealth of coffee plantations. They needed land and workers. Much of that land was held in common by indigenous groups. To appropriate their lands and indenture a labor force, they declared that because there were no more “pure” Indians, that all had become mestizos (of combined Spanish and Indian heritage), arguments of heritage and indigenous rights were no longer relevant.

For individuals who felt their Indian heritage, this “myth” created a cognitive dissonance and a sense of frustration. In nearby El Salvador, a similar denial of rights contributed to a revolt that brought a horrific government response in which 10,000 individuals, most particularly males 12 and older, were killed in cold blood by government forces. That government remained in power for 60 years after the massacre, and the implicit government policy was to make the events of 1932 as invisible as possible. The slaughter was not talked about. The disenfranchisement of the peasants continued, as


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For that reason, even at my age I don’t participate in politics because I’m scared.

Santo Romero de Guzman

In 1980, the National Guard came to our community and killed around 45 youths, including one of my own sons.

Margarito Vasquez

Now, we are dedicating ourselves to see if we can’t rescue and continue on with our language.

Pedro Antonio Perez

Let the indigenous people be the creators of our history.

Dominga Sanchez

Many people were killed right on the road and they had to be buried right there because it was too dangerous to go to the cemetery.

Pedro Sanchez

To tell the truth, in this municipality the corpses were everywhere in San Juan, Tajumulco, Puchtam, Cusamulco.

Jesús Velasquez

They took all the people and released them. You had all the troops with their machine guns lined up.
David from the village of Agua Zarca in Morazan, El Salvador: “I am proud that I can offer this testimony. Many compañeros died along the way. It’s true that we have opened up a political space, and we got rid of military rule. But the economic system was left intact, and it still dominates us.”

did the myth that there was nothing left of the indigenous cultures. “Of course, that contributed to the revolts of the 1970s and 1980s and the slaughter of tens of thousands of civilians,” Gould concluded.

In the late 1990s, Gould’s work took a new direction. With the support of Fulbright and NEH grants, Gould talked with survivors of the revolts. He continued writing, but began to use the materials of his research to make documentaries in a joint effort with Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, founder of a museum dedicated to preserving El Salvadoran history.

The first film appeared in 2002. 1932: Scars of Memory (Cicatriz de la Memoria) collected personal interviews and archival footage to tell the story of how the growing divide between rich and poor led to the massacre and to an aftermath that tried to erase the event from El Salvadoran history. Gould explained, “Everyone knew it was a big deal, a traumatic and taboo subject. There had never been a film about 1932. I was able to give a more accurate portrayal of who got massacred and why. This led to much discussion.”

The documentary was shown in schools, community centers, and other venues—to tens of thousands, most of whom would not have had the opportunity to read the history. “The most interesting part of the reaction had to do with ethnic relations. What does it mean to be an Indian? A ladino?”

Gould and Consalvi followed the first documentary with La Palabra en el Bosque (The Word in the Woods), released in 2011. It traced the history of the revolt that seemed an inevitable consequence of the suppression and invisibility of the first. In the early 1970s, peasants in a remote region of El Salvador tried to reestablish a culture of early Christian communities based on communal land and communal labor. Perceiving encroachment on its authority, the government responded with torture and executions and then in the 1980s with a scorched earth policy. In the film, the survivors of the interviews speak with authority and energy; they seem to be eager to have the chance to tell their stories. The documentary concludes with a spirited discussion among several survivors of whether the world that came after the peace treaty of 1992 justified the deaths of a hundred thousand soldiers and civilians.

Gould is now at work on his third documentary about a different kind of enemy. It will trace the consequences of the failure of the El Salvadoran shrimp industry in the 1980s. He sees his work in film as a complement and enhancement to his printed scholarly work. “Both efforts require the collection and sorting of massive amounts of data, and doing that for film leads to insights that are useful in print. Also, things get recorded in a film interview that aren’t accessible through written or recorded spoken word—gestures, facial expressions, intonations.”

Also, Gould said, “I had imposed on people, taken their time, accessed intimate details of their lives, appropriated their culture and memories for my research. Yet, my scholarship was inaccessible to most of them. I felt I should somehow return the results of my research. The documentary films were a way I could give something back.”
"My current project is grueling, a bit dangerous, and somewhat unnerving. It’s not something I planned on doing," said Gould.

In the 1980s, a combination of labor strife, owner corruption, and overharvesting brought a thriving shrimp industry to an end. The latest project of Gould and Consalvi looks at what has happened to the 15,000 Salvadoran families who depended on that industry. “There was no safety net for them, no schools, no employment alternatives.” The project has attracted cinematographer Guillermo Escalon, whose credits include numerous documentaries and full features with a special interest in the struggles of individuals in Latin America, and filmmaker Thomas Lennon, who won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject for one of his films about modern China.

The children have no schools to go to, the parents no jobs, so the family nearly every day of the year travels across Jiquilisco Bay to the mangrove swamps to harvest curiles, a type of mollusk popular to eat with beer and rum in Central American bars. “The family spends all day collecting these mollusks, which don’t fetch a high price. The resulting family income is about $70 a month.”
Left: Jeff Gould, left, and Guillermo Escalon (behind the camera) talk to a resident of a community hit by the collapsed shrimp industry.

1932: Scars of Memory is available from Icarus Films: icarusfilms.com/new2003/scar.html

The Word in the Woods is available from films Media Group: ffh.films.com/id/24426/La_Palabra_en_el_Bosque_The_Word_in_the_Woods_in

The Museo de La Palabra y la Imagen, founded by Carlos Henriquez Consalvi to preserve the records of El Salvadoran history, can be found here: museo.com.sv/en/

Sandinista Revolution 1979

Civil war began in 1980 with death squads and a scorched earth policy against peasant supporters of government-resistance forces.

The shrimp industry of Jiquilisco Bay failed in the 1980s.

The worst of the 1932 massacre affected the western regions of the country.

The state of Indiana as a direct size comparison