What kind of history do we have today of the Salvadorean revolution? Or some would call it the Salvadorean (civil) war. This year (2017) marks the 25th anniversary of the Peace Accords which brought the civil war to an end. However, not even this basic characterization (revolution/civil war) is shared of this sorrowful, yet some would argue nonetheless, inspiring experience of mass based insurgency during the Cold War. I am using the terminology of ‘revolutionary war’ as an interim nomenclature, awaiting the verdict of history. El Salvador is, it is argued in this presentation, trapped between (traumatic) memories and history, a past that overshadows the present without becoming history. Becoming history, is both a scholarly and a social process, with profound political implications. El Salvador remains a country of multiple polarizations mediated by violence rather than politics.

This presentation recounts a collective effort to transform memories into history with Salvadorean peasant participants, of what they used at least to call, the ‘revolution’. As a young scholar activist, in 1984 I conducted an oral history of the peasant movement in Chalalatenango, El Salvador. This was never translated into the Spanish of the peasants who gave me this history. The main aim of the oral history was to explore the relationship of the peasants to the revolutionary movement, the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) and the extent to which the guerilla war was a popular insurgency, with the people capable of processes of self growth despite the militarization of their socio-political struggle. It was also to communicate to a wide and global audience, what was happening in guerilla zones of control in order to promote solidarity. The conclusion of my study, conducted under difficult war conditions, was that El Salvador was in a transition between the logic of revolution and the logic of war. However, this proposition was not full explored in the book, and yet has haunted me as I have watched the limitations of the Salvadorean peace process and the eruption of post war violences. The peasants are no long considered actors in the construction of their country, and Chalatenango and Morazan (another area of guerilla/peasant control during the war) remain areas of abandonment, with varied social and political legacies of the war but with very limited opportunities for locally led development. The proposition of my book, that the Local Popular Power (PPL), in which peasants developed their own local government in Chalatenango between 1983 and 1985, was a serious political act, faded quickly. Some have implied that this was only ever a ‘show’ for the outside world that would encourage it to give more international support for the insurgency.

Three decades later, I returned to Chalatenango to work with the Museum of Historical Memory of Arcatao to confront how significant this experiment was for the peasants from the lens of hindsight. The Museum has been built by the
peasants in an old school, housing an eclectic collection of artefacts from the war in danger of rotting in the damp conditions. The methodology was a series of conversations in three of the locations – at the time of the oral history, ruined villages following army invasions – in north east Chalatenango where the PPLs had emerged. Mike Goldwater, the photographer who originally accompanied me to Chalatenango, brought his photographs, which became the catalyst for the conversations.

A documentary was made of this process and this will be shown in the presentation. I will then reflect on the meanings of this process, using Walter Benjamin’s essay on the Concept of History. I will argue that the role of the peasants of Chalatenango during the Salvadorean civil war, could become what Benjamin refers, to as one of many ‘flashes of history’, that are lost if the historian does not act. By acting, the historian is unearthing the many resistances that poor and marginalized actors have enacted, suffering enormously in the process. This is particularly, but not only, true of Latin America. By unearthing their memories with the subjects of the resistance, the historian can contribute to returning their historical capital to them.