Central American Street Gangs:
Their Role in Communities and Prisons

Review Essay by Sonja Wolf

– *Territories of Violence: State, Marginal Youth, and Public Security in Honduras*, by Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
– *Adiós Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death*, by Deborah T. Levenson. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013.
– *The Rule of Law in Central America: Citizens' Reactions to Crime and Punishment*, by Mary Fran T. Malone. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012.
– *Ver, oír, callar. En las profundidades de una pandilla salvadoreña*, by Juan José Martínez D'Aubuisson. San Salvador: AURA Ediciones, 2013.
– *Gangsters Without Borders: An Ethnography of a Salvadoran Street Gang*, by T. W. Ward. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Once civil wars and repression had ended in the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras), the levels of crime and violence spiked in an unprecedented manner. Of particular concern have been street gangs (locally known as '*maras*'), which were formed by Latino immigrant youth in Los Angeles and took root in the isthmus with the large-scale deportations of offending non-citizens to their countries of origin. The local development of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Dieciocho markedly eroded neighbourhood security, especially in marginal urban areas, and is fundamentally associated with homicides and extortions.

Over the years, administrations of different political persuasions have pursued primarily law enforcement approaches to deal with street gangs and crime, especially the area sweep- and arrest-focused *Mano Dura* plans. Occasionally, however, unconventional methods have been adopted, such as the government-sponsored gang truce that has been in place in El Salvador since March 2012 and that has been widely credited with a notable reduction of the homicide rate. The politicization of security, most acute during electoral cycles, has proved highly detrimental to the implementation of effective crime strategies. Inevitably, as the elusive search for comprehensive security policies continued, the gang phenomenon became intractable and the penitentiary systems increasingly unmanageable.

The situation calls not only for innovative policy interventions, but also for novel methodological approaches to the study of violent non-state actors in contemporary Central America. The five academic studies reviewed in this essay, reflecting different disciplinary traditions, examine chiefly the practices of the *maras* in communities and prisons throughout California and northern Central America. To some extent, they also shed light on the responses citizens and governments have embraced to deal with crime and violence and how the former feed into the latter.

The origins and evolution of Mara Salvatrucha

Gangsters Without Borders is an ambitious ethnographic study of hard-core MS-13 members in Los Angeles and their career trajectories. In what is the first long-term study of the *maras*, socio-cultural anthropologist Thomas Ward presents a wealth of evidence that elucidates the social processes gang-prone and gang-involved youth undergo and, contrary to prevailing stereotypes, shows street gangs to be 'complex social organizations that serve multiple functions' (p. 5). The research, conducted in the 1993-2011 period and at great personal risk, was facilitated by gatekeepers and the author's extracurricular support for gang members, such as hospital and prison visits, tutorials, and funeral attendances. In addition to interviewing over 150 affiliates of assorted gangs, Ward collected the life histories of twelve hard-core MS members that were subsequently converted into five composite characters for reasons of confidentiality.

The author vividly describes the circumstances driving immigrant youth into gangs, resulting in a perceptive portrayal of violence and discrimination that had previously been rendered with similar competence only by fellow anthropologist James Diego Vigil (2002). The main themes permeating *Gangsters Without Borders* address the motivations for gang joining and membership – survival, status, and the heart connection – and it is the

latter that, when ruptured by disillusionment, makes retirement possible. Ward focuses his analysis on hard-core gang members, who constitute a minority but are the most active and committed of their kind and serve as role models for their younger peers. Three issues stand out for the novel and/or nuanced treatment they receive: the origins of Mara Salvatrucha; gang leadership; and the role of female gang members.

Given the limitations of oral histories, little is known about the beginnings of MS-13 and its enduring enmity with the Dieciocho. Ward was able to trace its nearly forty-year history from its birth in Los Angeles in the mid- to late 1970s as a non-territorial stoner gang whose main activities included smoking marijuana and listening to heavy metal music. Its ensuing transformation into a traditional street gang – offering protection, identity and friendship – proceeded chiefly due to imprisonment and rival gang pressure, but, as Ward recognizes, was soon followed by its evolution into a predatory gang in pursuit of greater wealth and power. It was this search that would also herald important modifications in MS structure and leadership, although – as will be seen below – these changes have not succeeded in putting Mara Salvatrucha (or its rival, for that matter) on a par with organized crime groups. Conversely, its feud with the Dieciocho, itself created in California's largest city in the 1960s, appears to have been sparked by arguments over a woman or disagreements regarding recruitment and retirement. Whereas the reasons are all but forgotten nowadays, the long-running conflict is deeply engrained in gang members' minds and difficult to diffuse. As Ward's account suggests, efforts to remember that this inter-group antagonism was not inevitable might help reduce gang violence and provide space for the promotion of pro-social alternatives to gang life.

Contrary to common perceptions that the *maras* are hierarchically organized with a formal leadership structure, the anthropologist found that MS-13 possesses a diffuse form of leadership that may be more aptly labelled as 'democratic anarchy'. The term implies that decisions are taken by group vote, although the defiant personalities and rebellious nature of gang youth often produce disagreements and consequently frictions. In fact, Ward discovered that leadership shifted over time and place, depending on the qualities and influence of each clique's shot caller(s). Designated as leaders because they enjoy considerable respect for their active gang membership, courage, criminal participation, imprisonment, and social skills, these individuals in fact wields influence over only some activities, such as their clique's economic affairs or the perpetration of violence. The implication of such disperse leadership is that a gang's operations are more difficult to interrupt, since arrested, killed or retired leaders are quickly replaced. Simi-

larly, since gang structure is intertwined with criminal involvement, a verti-
cally-configured group is bound to be more organized and more delinquent.
With its democratically-oriented leadership, Mara Salvatrucha is unable to
display the capacities of the transnational organized crime network it is re-
puted to have become, but this has not deterred law enforcement agencies
from applying organized crime statutes against it. While such legislation
allows the authorities to put more gang members behind bars for longer
times, it does nothing to erode the staying power of MS-13 and other
groups like it.

With its foray into the role of women gang members in Mara Sal-
vatrucha, *Gangsters Without Borders* makes a much-needed contribution to
an understudied topic. For a long time, gang studies reproduced stereotyped
images of females as sex objects, mules, temptresses or spies, because these
enquiries generally had male researchers interview male gang youth who
tend to espouse sexist attitudes towards their female counterparts. Although
the last three decades have seen more studies of US-based women gang
members, in Central America these remain an exception (Interpeace 2013).
The jealousy of his male research participants limited Ward's access to fe-
male members of MS-13. However, his ethnography confirmed that Mara
Salvatrucha, like other street gangs, is patriarchal and sexist in nature, and
applies double standards. Females are more likely than their male peers not
only to be punished for violations of gang rules, but also to be exploited
and victimized. Moreover, women's roles appear to have changed little
over time. For example, whereas males can ignore their offspring and con-
tinue with gang life undisturbed, females are affected by pregnancy in three
ways – abandonment by their peers, renewed family influence, a changed
identity and responsibilities – all of which may terminate their gang affilia-
tion. Likewise, Ward points out that they fulfil expected caretaker roles,
including domestic chores, paralegal activities, hospital visits, and prison
courier services. He does not explain, however, why females often appear
prepared to willingly accept these functions. Does this occur, for example,
because they have internalized traditional gender roles or because they seek
acceptance in an androcentric world?

Rule of law weaknesses in Central America

Political scientist Mary Malone resorts to the Latin American Public Opin-
ion Project (LAPOP) surveys in order to examine citizen expectations of
democratic governance and especially citizen perspectives on rule of law
failings. Taking as its point of departure the impact of the crime crisis on
public agencies and their legitimacy, *The Rule of Law in Central America*

relates how the isthmus established democratic institutions and competitive elections but its democracies have yet to consolidate. Covering the entire sub-region except Belize, the volume muses on ways of escaping the 'security trap', pondering how individuals respond to poor institutional performance with survival strategies that do not defy the status quo of insecurity. Given their combination of elevated homicide rates and a fragile justice system, the countries of the Northern Triangle are deemed to be in a particularly precarious situation. Although Malone emphasizes that the national contexts differ and necessarily shape citizen views, the use of the LAPOP surveys enables cross-country comparisons, but it leaves out local and regional variations that are significant for understanding social and criminal issues as well as the responses to them.

The chief examples of the rule of law deficiencies that the author considers include extra-legal justice; military participation in public security tasks; and private security. Malone draws a distinction between extra-legal justice meted out by police, notably in Honduras and El Salvador where the *Mano Dura* policies had declared gang youth public enemy number one, and popular vigilante justice (lynchings) that have arisen especially in Guatemala. Whereas the former entails a strengthening of discretionary police powers, but does not necessarily shut out other parts of the justice system from the penal process, the latter sees citizens take justice into their own hands, because they regard formal institutions as ineffectual. Since in this scenario state agencies are bypassed completely, for Malone this form of extra-legal justice poses the greater threat to the rule of law. As her analysis reveals, the surprising element in Guatemala is that the lynchings, which have taken place particularly in indigenous communities, constitute a form of conflict resolution. Rather than mirroring cultural support for this practice among the Mayan population, the lynchings reflect an institutional void that emerged when the traditional justice system was permanently destroyed during the war and that the official one has since been unable to fill. Overall, however, the disturbing finding is that perceptions of poor institutional performance increase support for extra-legal justice, particularly where crime is politicized, as happens across Central America.

The withdrawal of the military from politics and government had opened up possibilities for a rights-respecting approach to public security. However, the post-conflict crime crisis and ineffective policing rekindled the appeal of army participation in internal security tasks. This trend has arguably been more acute in those countries of northern Central America whose political class prioritizes short-term political interests over long-term policy needs. High levels of popular support for this show of force suggest

that, unsurprisingly perhaps, the required break with the authoritarian past has not yet been achieved. Despite the abuses committed by state security agents, many citizens now remember the law and order era with nostalgia and are indulgent of today's human rights violations, which are mostly committed against suspected criminals and not political opponents. Military involvement in policing duties is closely tied to the politicization of public security, particularly the police reforms that were left incomplete, because they met with entrenched interests. The author's extensive discussion of the political nature of rule of law reforms in Central America is engrossing and corroborates that the socialization into democratic norms remains a pending task. Public security and the military is a subject, however, that Malone gives only limited consideration, because the growth of the private security industry is a development that she finds even more disturbing.

Throughout the isthmus private security takes a variety of forms, ranging from walls and alarm systems to gated communities and private security guards. In fact, the latter have come to outnumber the police in each country. Even so, protection of this kind is and can only be sought by individuals with the financial means to do so. In addition to the deficient regulation of the industry and the lack of accountability mechanisms, this opt-out of public security provision is problematic, because it relaxes the state's monopoly on the use of force. Moreover, it can intensify existing patterns of social exclusion, since affluent citizens have little incentive to champion the strengthening of the police so that security may be available in equal measure to all members of society. Although military participation in public security has sparked controversy, the proliferation of private security services might pose a comparatively greater threat to the rule of law. In any case, while Malone's work offers insight into citizens' motivations to acquire private security, this is an area that requires further empirical research, including on the actors involved in the business as well as the quality and ramifications of their activities.

The street gang as a survival strategy

Oral historian Deborah Levenson, one of the first scholars to conduct gang research in Guatemala, has examined the *maras* and their precursors since the mid-1980s. Based on a decade-long investigation in the capital city, *Adiós Niño* traces the origins of the local street gangs from relatively innocuous turf-based crews into groups that today are entwined with murder, extortion, and forced displacement. Following anthropologist Tobias Hecht (2002), Levenson argues that studying youth is a requisite for understanding society at large, especially its marginal sectors. Acknowledging that the

maras actually convey a tale about the transformation of the Latin American working class, the author proposes situating the gang's evolution in Guatemala's historical context, particularly the genocidal violence, the defeat of the popular movements, and the neoliberal policies that fuelled job insecurity and reduced social spending. The *maras* are placed specifically in the history of urban youth that joined the social protest movements challenging the post-1954 military regimes. For Levenson, their story began in the mid-1980s when the official discourse began painting the *maras* as a danger in order to deflect attention from state-sponsored violence. The overriding themes that shine through this slender volume concern the prison system (also scrutinized by Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera) and the dividing line between the street gang as a survival strategy and an instrument for social justice.

The analysis shows two actors to exercise authority over the penitentiary institutions: Pentecostals, who were influential in the political circles of the 1980s and moved from working in youth detention centres to – harshly – ruling private juvenile reformatories; and the military, whose control over prisons has ostensibly permitted its re-establishment as a positive force in post-war Guatemala. In a similar vein, it is demonstrated that the country's penitentiary system has traditionally been poorly managed and seen a variety of income-generating activities flourish among the inmates. Unlike other studies, however, *Adiós Niño* exposes that while the penal complexes may have become operations and socialization centres for gang members, their clout is trumped by that of incarcerated drug traffickers and state agents. Unnoticed by much of the outside world, the jails have developed into sites for power struggles between criminal networks. One of their features is the prisoners committees, formed to maintain order, discipline, and security. El Pavón, perhaps the most notorious of these facilities and located just outside Guatemala City, was raided in 2006 in what later transpired to be the settling of a dispute about the control of the drug and contraband market.

Much of the study revolves around one of the key tensions characterizing gang members: their identity as both victims and victimizers. The earlier *mara* generations, Levenson finds, considered gang membership an option to earn both income and respect. Although gang youth often ended up hurting poor, hard-working people, they justified their actions with a sense of entitlement to some of the wealth that society had denied them. At the time, their awareness of their own disenfranchisement led Levenson to wonder why the youth, rather than joining a gang, did not try to alter the social reality surrounding them. Yet, while back in the 1980s the gangs at least displayed a hint of class consciousness, by the 2000s even that dis-

course had vanished. Instead, the *maras* had become secretive and criminally-involved, their violence more brutal. Feeling excluded by society, gang members responded in kind and remained aloof to all but their peers. The historian, seeing them as 'neither rebels nor conformists' (p. 98), argues that contemporary Guatemalan gangs are the product of their environment, one that can produce an anti-capitalist critique, but that has seen the dismantling of popular movements capable of bringing it to fruition. In contrast to Gutiérrez Rivera, who believes the *maras* may well engage in collective social action, Levenson finds this doubtful. On a concluding note, she warns that unless Guatemala deals with its history, ends impunity, and transforms the oppressive socio-economic and political system into a more caring one, more bloodshed lies ahead.

The street gang as an actor in the community

For his undergraduate dissertation on violence and identity in the street gangs, young Salvadoran anthropologist Juan José Martínez conducted one year of fieldwork in a MS-controlled neighbourhood of San Salvador. The 22 diaries he derived from this experience form the backbone of his first book-length publication. *Ver, oír, callar* is a slim volume with no bibliography and little analytical value, but whose merit lies in the rich description of the social reality he encountered. Non-judgmental in its approach, it does not aim to explain the workings of Mara Salvatrucha, but to understand life in parts of the subaltern classes, including such dynamics as violence and solidarity. At the most basic level, the work identifies the characteristics of a marginal community; relates how the gang war plays out at the micro-level; and offers glimpses into the gang world, including its jargon and the preparation of hits. Fundamentally, however, *Ver, oír, callar* examines community relationships and changes; the clique's control over the local economy; and the grooming of younger gang generations.

La Última Comunidad de la Colina (a pseudonym) is a place with a long gang history, suggesting that little to no gang control was ever exercised there. Upon his arrival El Destino, the clique's current leader, violently displaced existing street and drug gangs. His group embarked on a steady growth and reigns over this territory, its population, and its illicit markets. The impact of the Bravos Locos Salvatruchos (another pseudonym) makes itself felt in varying degrees of rejection and complicities on the part of the area's inhabitants. Changes include modifications of the urban environment (speed bumpers to make police patrols more difficult), nightly curfews, forced displacements, prohibitions to attend school in enemy territory, and, importantly, the code of silence that inspired the title of Martínez's book.

Tellingly, in the school tutoring that the anthropologist assisted with, and that folded under the impact of the gang violence, most of the children participating in a game of 'police and thief' opt to play the latter. Similarly, the gang members, though known to mistreat their girlfriends, have female admirers and maintain cordial relations with some community residents who use the gang youth for personal vendettas.

Territorial control, expressed through the omnipresent graffiti, is pervasive and leaves no neutral space. The youth centre, the clique's headquarters and Martínez's fieldwork base, is covered in it and governed by gang rules outsiders must respect if they value their life. This same control grants the clique domination of the local economy, specifically the bus route that has its terminal in the community. The company running the route pays the MS-13 protection fees to avoid assaults, and in return the youth receive free transportation. Not recognizing extortion for what it is, the author is somewhat unskeptical of this arrangement, but is able to show how the clique's income also serves to maintain the spouses of imprisoned gang members.

A subject that is crucial to understanding the endurance of the *maras*, but that scholarly works have yet to examine in great depth, is the development of younger generations. Martínez adroitly observes how two adolescents look up to the older gang members and are brought into the fold. While 12-year-old Hugo remains close to El Destino, himself in the process of retiring but respected as the clique's teller of legends and tattoo artist, Bernardo quickly loses his shyness and – emboldened by his first homicide – begins to radiate the powerfulness that recent recruits tend to feel. A notable finding refers to the *grupos piloto*, pilot groups created by children who play at being gang members. Apparently in existence for some years, these bands provide training in extortion and homicide and offer a pathway into the gang. The obvious concern, but one that Martínez does not address, is that these children grow up in a milieu of violence, drugs, and promiscuity and will be harder to resocialize into a conventional lifestyle.

The territorial strategies of street gangs

In *Territories of Violence*, Honduran-born political scientist Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera grapples with the puzzle of why Honduras experiences persistently high levels of social violence and the latter is concentrated in certain areas. In her first book, an adaptation of her doctoral thesis, Gutiérrez Rivera adopts a political geography approach to studying the relationship between state and non-state actors, mostly in marginal neighbourhoods and prisons. Analysing the actors' territorial strategies, Gutiérrez Rivera seeks to understand the challenges the Honduran state faces in controlling territory, for

example through public security policies. The study's objective is thus not so much to offer a greater understanding of the street gangs, but to explain how political and social processes have shaped the Honduran state's relationships with various social groups and, especially, why it has so spectacularly failed to reduce and control violence. The author argues that this inability is a result of the way in which the authorities organize and regulate territory, particularly the neglect to fragment space – such as neighbourhoods and prisons – into smaller units for more control.

Traditionally, and perhaps more so since the 2009 coup, analysts have tried to comprehend the nature of the Honduran state by focusing on aspects such as the weakness of its institutions, the levels of corruption, and the country's fledgling democratization. Gutiérrez Rivera does not deny the relative weight of these factors, but takes issue with the widespread assumption that a state necessarily exercises control over its political territory along with the people and resources within it. The perspective of political geography allows her to cast a critical glance at the relationship between state and territory as well as its embeddedness in historical processes. Beginning by clarifying concepts central to the production of space and territory, Gutiérrez Rivera draws specifically on Robert David Sack's (1986) notion of territoriality, defined as '[the] attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area' (p. 27). In this sense, Gutiérrez Rivera maintains, the *Mano Dura* policies were the Honduran state's effort to assert authority over areas where it had customarily lacked presence.

As the author demonstrates, past difficulties in territorializing and centralizing state power are related to the process of state formation, specifically the long-standing absence of national cartography, law enforcement and military institutions; the scarcity of resources; political instability and the influence of foreign governments and businesses; and the existence of a deeply entrenched municipal system that impeded the creation of a unified national territory. Although the state apparatus has been modernized since the 1950s, no major territorial changes have occurred. In recent decades, Gutiérrez Rivera indicates, the authorities' territorial strategy has been plagued by contradictions that contributed to its ineffectiveness. At the same time as the government pursued non-repressive anti-crime measures such as community policing and an – albeit faltering – decentralization, *Mano Dura* further alienated gang members and prompted them to retaliate.

The author recognizes that, in addition to frail central institutions incapable of delivering public security, factors such as social exclusion, easy

access to firearms, and drug trafficking-related territorial disputes foment violence. However, Gutiérrez Rivera downplays the ways in which the politicization of security policies contributes to their failure. Furthermore, she suggests that the pursuit of similar territorial logics in Guatemala and El Salvador might explain those countries' high levels of violence. The latter, though, divides its municipalities into smaller administrative units, but for a long time registered a higher homicide rate than Honduras. Nicaragua and Costa Rica, on the other hand, are experiencing less, yet nonetheless rising, violence. Although Gutiérrez Rivera provides fresh insights into the reasons why crime and gang policies may or may not succeed, more research is needed to more fully understand these trends.

A second theme the research touches on is the struggles for prison control. Some of the work charts the history of street gangs in Honduras and implies that the penitentiaries were among the places where local gang youth and deportees mingled and recruitment into the *maras* occurred. Indeed, the circumstances in which the two gang phenomena merged remain little understood, and Gutiérrez Rivera's findings could be a starting-point for similar enquiries elsewhere. The real treasure of her study, however, lies in the fieldwork-derived descriptions of gang life in the detention centres. The problems afflicting contemporary Honduran prisons – including precarious infrastructure and services, overcrowding, violence, corruption, weak controls, and deficient rehabilitation programmes – are well-known.

Gutiérrez Rivera offers not only a fascinating glimpse into the host of economic activities taking place behind bars, such as the food and cigarette stalls run by the inmates, but also sheds light on the *rondines* system. The insufficient number of guards requires the prisoners' assistance in supervising and controlling the detainee population. The *rondines*, chosen for their good behaviour, keep an eye on their fellow inmates, but also negotiate the establishment of the commercial stands. The mass incarceration of street gang members, however, upset the existing order, since the gang members refused to accept the *rondines*' authority. The pursuit of for-profit activities in prisons, though known, has not been widely documented and Gutiérrez Rivera's discoveries will hopefully prompt further research on the subject across Central America.

A final issue that merits discussion is the idea of street gangs as social movements. The author starts by reminding readers that although youth gangs have existed in Honduras since the 1960s, two decades later the state outlawed formal social organizations as part of its counterinsurgency strategy. The ban was not lifted until the mid-1990s, forcing marginalized teenagers to seek alternative forms of participation, for example membership in

street gangs. MS-13 and the Dieciocho exhibit an important organizational and mobilizing capacity, yet why, Gutiérrez Rivera wonders, have they not transformed into 'street organizations'? The term was coined by gang researchers Luis Barrios and David C. Brotherton (2003) to denote gangs that empower their members to fight for opportunities in society. Gutiérrez Rivera suggests that the *maras* have not made this transition, because *Mano Dura* turned them into more vertical, secretive, and violence-ready groups in search of survival. Yet, how realistic is the expectation that an entire street gang can be converted into a non-violent social movement?

Individual youth may well want to, and succeed in, abandoning their gangs in order to start a new life. However, the differences in age and motivations as well as the leaders' difficulties in controlling members makes this an unlikely scenario, especially in the case of larger and more criminally-involved gangs. The complexity of the matter is apparent in El Salvador, where the gang truce apparently triggered an immediate drop in homicides, yet gang members have refused to cease extortions in the absence of viable economic alternatives. In the Central American context, these demands are unlikely to be achieved in the foreseeable future.

Territories of Violence, though slim in volume, is broad in scope and perhaps tries to accomplish too much. Some issues would have deserved a more extensive treatment than they received, such as the gangs' fruitless attempts to contest *Mano Dura* through truce offerings and a dialogue with the government. Others escape reflection entirely, for example the dilemma of how to study groups that in response to the crackdowns have become increasingly hermetic and may refuse cooperation unless it is tendered by relatives or close confidants. Gutiérrez Rivera does not offer substantially new material on the *maras*, but she is to be commended for tackling a tough subject. The strength of her study lies, above all, in demonstrating that states differ in the degree to which they control their territories and – in some cases – never lived up to the Westphalian ideal of the nation-state to begin with.

The politicization of security

Taken together, the books reviewed here contribute to our understanding of the role street gangs play in marginal communities and prisons across North and Central America as well as their reticence to engage in protest action designed to transform the social reality surrounding them. Similarly, the studies explain how states may – even if inadvertently – exacerbate existing crime phenomena and reveal under what conditions citizens turn to or away from justice institutions in the face of delinquency and violence (gang-related or not). The authors, trained in different disciplinary traditions,

demonstrate that ethnographic research can offer otherwise unobtainable insights about the lived experiences of gang members and citizens affected by gang violence.

At the same time, security research in the Americas remains fraught with methodological challenges, since the inherent dangers of ethnographically-minded work on actors at the margins of the law often preclude it. Creative ways are thus needed to uncover issues that remain hidden beneath the surface. Some of the concerns begging future research relate to the street gangs in Central America. More work, for example, is required on their social base; the relationship of females (gang-involved or not) to male gang members; the economic function of the gangs; their attitudes towards sexual diversity and the persecutory actions they may trigger; and gang life in prisons, which has so far been scarcely explored by academics.

Moreover, although it is recognized that gang violence is a factor of forced displacement in the Northern Triangle, little is known about what happens to the displaced populations and what, if any, are the lasting effects of police initiatives undertaken to recover abandoned houses usurped by cliques. In fact, state responses to gangs and crime may warrant more extensive scrutiny than the phenomena they purport to address. On the one hand, gang truces need to be examined in order to ascertain their viability and their bearing on communities beyond their seemingly positive impact on homicide rates. On the other hand, the politicization of security and its pernicious effects remains relatively understudied. The *Mano Dura* anti-gang policies are a recent and prominent example of this practice, but its pursuit spans practically the entire post-war era and has yet to be fully understood in all its manifestations and ramifications. In this context it is also pertinent to enquire how ideological divisions over military participation in law enforcement tasks might be overcome, not only in order to create space for more reasoned debates on public security, but also to facilitate the incomplete reconciliation of former foes and help reduce societal polarization.

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