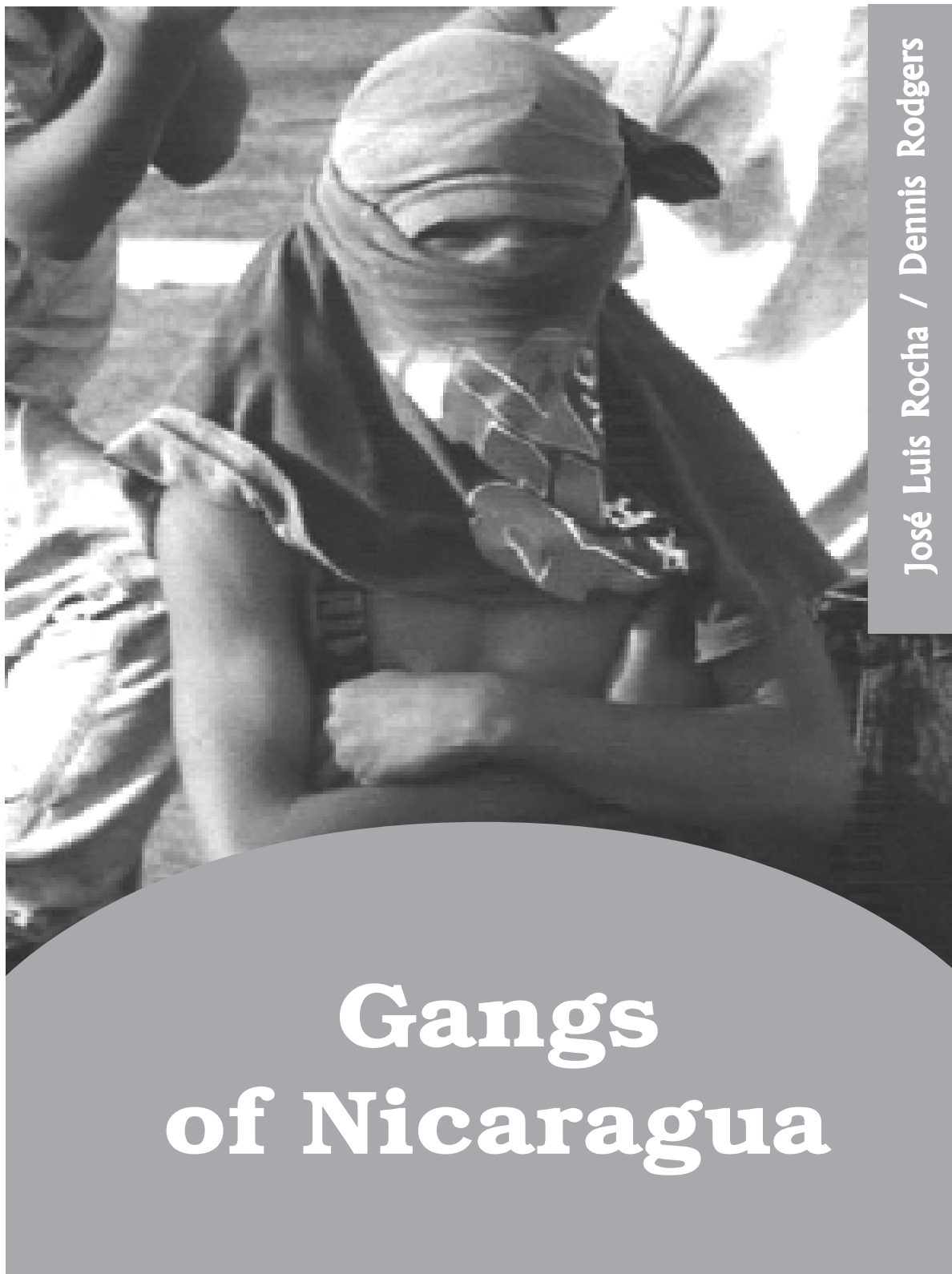


José Luis Rocha / Dennis Rodgers

# Gangs of Nicaragua



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José Luis Rocha, Dennis Rodgers

**“Gangs of Nicaragua”**

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*"When I was younger, my parents would beat me, to prevent me from becoming a gang member. But the issue is not whether or not they beat me, and it's not a question of education either. These can be important, but not always. The issue is how you connect to the 'feeling' of being a gang member. You get led to the gang because of friendship, and you become a gang member to be with your brothers".*

***César, 17 years old, 1999***

*"I feel good in the gang. I don't get backstabbed because I know who my brothers are."*

***Teresa, 20 years old, 1999***

*"I opened myself up to the gang little by little. Initially I'd get shoved around a lot, but then I affirmed myself and became one of them."*

***Elvis, 18 years old, 1999***

*"If I hadn't been a gang member, my life would have been very different. I'd have been less shrewd, less with it. I'd just have suffered life. Now nothing fazes me".*

***Carlos, 23 years old, 2003***

*"Long and hard is the gang member's life. And if he doesn't manage to improve his lot, he will stay delinquent forever."*

***Iván, 17 years old, 2006***

# Contents

<b>An anthropologist in a Managua gang</b> Dennis Rodgers (July 1997)	/10
<b>The hand that rocks the mortar launcher</b> José Luis Rocha (March 2000)	/27
<b>Youth gangs: A cultural prison</b> José Luis Rocha (June 2000)	/50
<b>An urban gang moves from social to economic violence</b> Dennis Rodgers (November 2004)	/75
<b>Nicaraguan youth gangs: From throwing stones to smoking rocks</b> José Luis Rocha (September 2006)	/90
<b>From telescopic to microscopic: Three youth gang members speak</b> José Luis Rocha (June 2007)	/115
<b>Why are there no maras in Nicaragua?</b> José Luis Rocha (August 2006)	/136
<b>The gangs of Central America: Major players and scapegoats</b> Dennis Rodgers (December 2007)	/166

# Prologue

*This collection of essays is a collaborative effort by two of the most distinguished experts on contemporary Nicaraguan “pandillas”, or youth gangs. The Nicaraguan philosopher José Luis Rocha Gómez has carried out a range of studies on different aspects of the phenomenon since 1999, most often from a political economy perspective. The British anthropologist Dennis Rodgers has studied the phenomenon from within. Between October 1996 and July 1997, he lived in a poor Managua neighbourhood, during which time he was initiated into the local gang, an experience that provided him with a unique perspective on the phenomenon, both then, and on his return visits in 2002, 2003, and 2007.*

*What is a gang? The term “gang” is generic and non-specific. A quick overview of the literature shows that it can refer to a range of phenomena, from spontaneous youth peer groups to organised criminal collectives. This collection of essays effectively presents an analysis of the evolution of Nicaraguan “pandillerismo” from the former to the latter, highlighting in particular the transformation of “pandillas” from vigilante peer groups concerned with defending their neighbourhood against external criminals to “local entrepreneurial elites” (Dennis Rodgers) dedicated to drug trafficking. In doing so, they highlight how Nicaraguan “pandillerismo” is characterized by a great variety of forms, albeit all generally dedicated to violent activities.*

*This intrinsic association with violence notwithstanding, “a pandilla always starts out first and foremost as a group of friends, not a delinquent collective” (José Luis Rocha). Both Rocha and Rodgers conceive “pandillerismo” as something of a counter-cultural youth movement that is an act of rebellion against the values of the adult world, drawing on a range of particular fashions, music, and aesthetics. They link “pandillerismo” to youth as a social category and a life-stage, stressing the role that gangs can take on in relation to identity construction as well as the attainment of social status and prestige. The gang, as José Luis Rocha emphasizes, “satisfies a range of not-so-uncommon needs: respect, being somebody, fame, attraction”.*

*According to Dennis Rodgers, gangs were in the mid-1990s the principal expression of local level community solidarity in marginalised neighbourhoods in Managua, effectively constituting a bulwark against the social erosion provoked by post-conflict economic and political crisis. This sense of social solidarity rapidly vanished, however, as Nicaragua’s ever-worsening socio-economic context made extreme poverty, unemployment, and the consumption and commerce of crack leitmotifs of 21<sup>st</sup> century life in marginal urban neighbourhoods. Individual survival became paramount, with the evolution of gangs “from social to economic violence” (Dennis Rodgers) clearly representing a form of survival. To this extent, gangs can be said to constitute an integral part of what the German sociologist Peter Lock has called the “shadow economy”.*

*At the same time, however, one of the principle insights of this volume is that gangs are epiphenomena of wider political, economic, and cultural factors, whether local, national, or transnational. In particular, Rocha and Rodgers emphasize the importance of the Nicaraguan state's evolution over the past two decades for understanding the transformation of gangs, with the increasingly violent activities of corrupt police officers highlighted as an especially clear expression of what Peter Waldmann has described as the "anomic state". Against this backdrop, gangs emerge less as a counter-cultural movement and more as an effort to establish an alternative social order. As César, a gang member interviewed by José Luis Rocha, bluntly put it: "we're the ones who give the orders here". Although the fear that this so-called "lost generation" generates among both adults and non-gang youth is evident in the essays presented in this volume, both Rocha and Rodgers show how the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods often perceive local gangs as positive factors, something that has been magnified by the fact that some drug-dealing gangs have become the principal drivers of processes of local capital accumulation.*

*One of the great strengths of these essays, in other words, is their ability to represent the ambiguity inherent to the gang phenomenon, and thus to generate new paradigms. The academic debate on Central American youth gangs oscillates between demonizing and mystifying them, and few investigators have proven capable of representing – and much less sustain an analysis of – their ambivalence. In particular, Dennis Rodgers and José Luis Rocha highlight how gangs constitute a mimetic mirror of wider forms of structural violence and hegemonic domination, and that it is these that must*



*ultimately be condemned rather than the gangs themselves. One is the obvious ever-increasing inequality of post-revolutionary Nicaraguan society, but another is patriarchy. As Dennis Rodgers points out, gangs are in many ways a “crystallization of the Nicaraguan machismo”.*

*The last two essays of the collection broaden the analysis to Central America more generally. Much of the media reporting on violence in the region has been concerned with the transnational gangs known as “maras”, an exportation from the mean streets of Los Angeles to the urban centres of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. One frequently asked question is why these “maras” have not invaded Nicaraguan cities. This is an issue which Dennis Rodgers and José Luis Rocha consider whilst simultaneously offering a demystifying explanation of the underlying character of contemporary Central American gang violence in both its “pandilla” and “mara” forms.*

*To conclude, the breadth, detail, originality, and longitudinal nature of this collection make it a fundamental reference for all those seeking a better understanding of the gang phenomenon in Nicaragua and Central America, and a valuable foundational contribution to the burgeoning literature on the topic.*

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January 2008*



**An Anthropologist  
in a Managua Gang**

# An Anthropologist in a Managua Gang

***T**he anthropologist became a gang member in order to know from the inside something of the logic of the hundred gangs that operate in the 400 neighborhoods of the Nicaraguan capital. These are the first notes on this interesting experience.*

DENNIS RODGERS

In Central America, violence and insecurity mount with each passing day, and Nicaragua is no exception. One feature of this is the bands of teenagers who roam the neighborhoods harassing, robbing, beating and even occasionally killing people. Are these gangs a random phenomenon or institutions with an internal logic? What motivates the violence that characterizes them?

As an anthropologist, I wanted some answers to these and other questions, so I set out in search of them. I would like to thank the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for its financing, without which this search, this research, would not have been possible. To obtain data, anthropological methodology today depends largely on “participatory observation.” The major strength of this research method is that it goes beyond just observing how people act; it also

observes how they understand and experience their actions. To do that, the anthropologist must assume the social role and participate in the social realities being investigated. So I did just that; I decided to become a gang member.

I had to live this double reality as an anthropologist-gang member, over an extended period in order for daily activities to become explicit. It was also necessary in order to test what the other members say they are doing against what they actually do in practice. This lengthy comparison process is important to understanding how the gang members' lives are organized.

All this requires immersing oneself in a different social role. Immersion, not conversion. In different moments of life, we all play various social roles, and anthropologists perhaps play even more in the course of their research. But one doesn't stop being an anthropologist while being a gang member, nor does one become just like the other members.

### ***The Only "Chele"***

It cannot be argued that the dual role distorts research; at worst, it does so no more than a survey. Introducing an external variable into a specific social situation can even precipitate useful conditions for understanding the phenomenon better. I verified that by taking on the role of a gang member in a poor neighborhood, or barrio, on the east side of Managua, where I lived with a family between October 1996 and July 1997.

Being a "chele" (light skinned and blond) was obviously atypical, especially in a social context in which I was the only foreigner living in the neighborhood. Also atypical were my social origins and my age-at 23, I was the oldest one in the group. All that distorted the situation, but not outrageously, and the advantages outweighed the distortions. As a member of the gang, I was treated as a "cool brother" and the other members talked to me about their criminal activities with no fear or reticence. Having an atypical status allowed me to understand some things about gangs that

a typical member would also have discovered, but perhaps through a slower learning process. Distance sometimes helps the analysis.

My differences weren't exactly disadvantages. While a gang's reputation depends partly on the characteristics of its particular neighborhood, it also depends on the characteristics of its own members. One reason the gang members in my neighborhood let me into their group was the "special touch" that my presence gave it. Members typically increase a gang's reputation or notoriety through their courage, their violence or their craziness; I gave mine additional cachet through my appearance. I'm sure that not many gangs in Managua boast a blond outsider as a member.

### ***The Logic of Gang Fights***

This atypical status helped me discover something of the logic underlying gang fights. I say logic because these frequent confrontations don't arise on the spur of the moment for no good reason. They are largely geared to doing harm to the notorious members of the adversary gang. And I, as the chele in my gang, was a target of this objective.

An anecdote that occurred after I had been admitted into the gang reveals my particular "importance." One day when there was no water in my neighborhood I decided to go shower at the house of one of the daughters of the family I lived with, in a nearby neighborhood. But "my" family wouldn't let me go alone. Even though it was only 6:30 in the morning, they felt it was too risky for me to venture into that other neighborhood. They feared that the gang there might attack me, not just for being a member of a rival gang, but for being one with such special characteristics. Finally, after weighing the risk, the boyfriend of the woman of my house, a taxi driver who was sleeping in the house that day, took me in his cab, waited for me to shower, then drove me back home. I'd never taken such a dangerous shower in my life.

## ***Sub-Gangs Within***

Gangs have a well defined structure, with subgroups by age. Members always enter at the lowest level, in the subgroup for those under 13 years old. Next they move up to the one for the 13-17 age group, and finally join those over 18. I'm not talking about "different" gangs, but "sub-gangs" within the larger one.

The gang in my neighborhood is subdivided two ways: by age and also by the neighborhood's geography. The Dragons are in the east section, the Shirkers in the west, and the "8th Streeters," who named themselves after a pool hall in their section, are in the center. These subgroups generally operate separately, but never fight among themselves. They also join forces when the neighborhood is in any danger — i.e. is attacked by a gang from another neighborhood-or to go mess with the crowds during big Saint's Day festivals such as Santo Domingo.

This staged incorporation into the gang is practiced with kids from established families in the neighborhood. In the early 1990s a massive wave of new families immigrated into my neighborhood, about half its current population. One can assume that various mechanisms were developed in those years to bring the newly arriving youth into the gang.

## ***My Initiation Rites: Knife Play and Theft***

My special status may mean that the rites of initiation I went through weren't typical, though some members have told me that they weren't so different from others. Since no new young people moved into the neighborhood after me, I had no chance to attend another initiation and dispel my doubts.

My rite was informal and had two moments. The first came one afternoon when the gang members tried to scare me by drawing a knife on me while we were talking in the street. It was a Swiss knife, bigger than the ones usually sold in stores, which the Swiss army uses for hand to hand combat. I was lucky: I grew up in

Switzerland and began playing with knives when I was 8. So now, after controlling my initial fear, which wasn't easy, I asked them for the knife and showed them how to do some tricks with it that they didn't know.

The second moment consisted of going to the nearby Roberto Huembes market complex with some of the other members to shoplift. Acting as a decoy I distracted the owner of a clothing stall while they stole some women's underwear, then later I had to sell them in the neighborhood. Going door to door and using my limited social networks-I had only been living there two weeks-I sold the eight trousers for 43 córdobas. They go for 20 córdobas apiece in the market, but it's normal to slash the price for hot goods.

Since the anthropologist proposes immersion and not conversion, I tried to explain this difference to the gang members. Once they initiated me into the gang I told them that I wouldn't participate in either assaults or robberies with them, or in fights with gangs that occurred outside the neighborhood. I told them I would essentially be an observer member. They accepted my conditions without problems, since they were aware that, ethical considerations aside, I couldn't get fully involved in activities like that not only as an anthropologist but also as a foreigner.

But when my neighborhood was attacked by an enemy gang in November 1996, my fellow gang members ended up observing my participation. On that occasion I helped defend the neighborhood, throwing rocks and stick-fighting the attackers. For me it was a question of self-defense, but when it was all over several gang members told me that I was now one of them, that they could see that I was "bad," that I loved the neighborhood and was willing to defend it. Even accepting that I have a special role within the gang, the members felt that I had to be "bad": always ready to defend the neighborhood from invasion, showing no fear of either getting hurt or participating in robberies, smoking marijuana...

## ***January 97 Police Busts***

Being a gang member as well as a member of a household in the neighborhood helped me a great deal to understand the attitudes of both the gang members and their families toward the new Liberal government's repressive campaign against them in late January 1997. Launched only weeks after President Alemán took office, the campaign consisted of police patrols in what were designated as "hot" Managua neighborhoods to stop the gangs. After several years of paying virtually no attention to these neighborhoods, the National Police would suddenly appear at any hour of the day or night, when the people called them or when they themselves decided. Each weekend, various patrols came into the neighborhood to carry off drunks and gang members.

A strong characteristic style of gang activity is to stand up to danger. This attitude fits well within the deeply rooted macho culture, which idealizes running risks and publicly demonstrating courage against all comers. When the Police arrived, all the gang members would come out yelling, throwing rocks and running all over the place. The mothers also ran out shouting, but not against the Police. They were trying to stop their boys and herd them back into the safety of their homes.

The mothers' attitude was not just a maternal instinct to protect their sons. Gang members picked up by the police don't get out of jail for two or three weeks. Since their mothers have to take food to them and the guards always end up with a portion of it, the price of their children's gratitude is too high: they lose time and have to spend hard-to-come-by money on extra food and transportation, the latter varying according to where the prisoner is held. The family also has the option of paying bail to get their son released in just three days, but in the eight months I was active it went up from 105 córdobas to 210 (roughly from \$13 to \$23). This is very expensive for a family whose average monthly income is between 600 and 800 córdobas.



Certainly the increased police presence and near doubling of the bail has led many parents of gang members to take severe measures, such as locking their children in the house for several days. The gang members also scaled down their activities due to the police campaign. Nonetheless, after several weeks of relative police inactivity again, the gangs went back to work. Holy Week was coming up and they needed money to pay for their traditional days at the beach.

It was quickly demonstrated that a police campaign such as the one in January can perhaps curtail gang activity, but not for long; it's no kind of a solution. Police repression reinforces the cycle of violence of which the gangs are only a part. The gangs and the violence they generate have a well defined origin and motivations, and as long as this isn't taken into account, any strategy against the phenomenon will be doomed to failure.

### ***A Nearly Military Organization***

Having such a close relationship with a gang allowed me to learn a lot about the tactics they use, which also illuminate important aspects of their roots and durability. When gangs fight, they essentially do so with an organization that is virtually military in all its details. They organize into "companies" that protect each other; they have a rearguard; they generally draw up a battle plan with a strategy; and they carry out their retreats in a very orderly fashion. The weapons that each individual takes into combat are his own, but the armed individuals are distributed among the different companies according to their weaponry to balance them. The exception to that is when the need arises to organize what they call an "assault commando," with a lot of fire power to achieve a specific objective such as wounding the rival gang's leader.

The weapons the gang members use range from their bare hands to AK-47 rifles and fragmentation grenades. Generally, however, they use rocks, sticks, pipes, knives and homemade mortars. Firearms-semi-automatic rifles and pistols-

are mainly used for assault and robbery, but they also come into play when a gang fight drags out over time and each confrontation requires an escalation of weapons until each gang reaches the point of using the strongest thing it's got.

### ***It's Not Just About Joblessness***

The gangs are a social phenomenon that reproduces itself over time. They began to appear in Nicaragua around 1990. Their members were youths who had served in the military during the war of the 1980s, which ended right after the 1990 elections, so they all knew how to use weapons. But the members of those first gangs are not the gang members of today.

In my neighborhood, members basically have two choices when they reach 22-24 years old. The first is the most common: they start a family "by accident," and leave the gang to show that they are responsible. From then on, the majority of them live most of the time without work. The second option is to move into the world of "hard" crime. A significant minority elects this route. In my neighborhood, about 15-20% become professional criminals.

It has been shown in just these seven years that information on how to handle weapons, devise combat strategies and military knowledge in general has been passed down through generations of gang members. It's important to understand this, because it shows that the gangs are much more than just a response to the structural stimulus represented by the extended unemployment that Nicaragua is suffering.

Naturally, unemployment and lack of alternatives are important factors in explaining the gang phenomenon, but they aren't enough. The gangs are institutions with a certain measure of socio-cultural autonomy and reproductive capacity that is not tied only to the socioeconomic context. Their motivations go beyond that of being spaces in which youths can overcome the boredom of having nothing much to do by provoking, harassing and attacking others.

The first gang members of the 1990s, adolescents who had lived through war, danger, death and many other forms of violence in the mountains, say that afterward they wanted to repeat these dramatic experiences. Above all they wanted to recapture the social status that military life conferred upon them by proudly serving their country.

Today's gang members didn't know the war or do military service. But in the framework of a national situation in which they feel like a lost generation, they coincide with those of yesterday in their desire to achieve a social status with prestige. They themselves state that they don't have any future and that Nicaragua doesn't either.

They are without work and without social respectability. They are also without any possibility of studying. Despite public government statements that the monthly student fees plus another charge for each final exam are supposedly voluntary, schools are still requiring them in the name of "scholastic autonomy." These fees are simply not within the reach of poor families, especially if they have more than one school-age child, which most do. Faced with this dead-end prospect, the only way these teenagers can see to create their own social role is by affirming their presence through a gang that assaults, robs, fights and exercises other forms of violence. It's not just their role but their mission: they see themselves as duty bound to defend their neighborhood and that gives them the right to attack any outsiders who dare to venture into their turf.

### ***Their Identity Is In the Barrio***

During this decade, the feeling of identity has become very localized. My gang identifies strongly with the neighborhood as it was during the Somocista years of their parents' time: a marginal and extremely dangerous barrio. One of my gang friends proudly told me once that "those who lived here before were really tough. They got respect. No one came in here, nobody. You came in one side on foot and

went out the other in a box. In those days even the Guardia [Somoza's National Guard] was afraid to come in here." The neighborhood was a theater of violent confrontations during the anti-Somocista insurrection in 1978-79; National Guard planes even dropped bombs on it several times.

In the first years of the Sandinista government, it benefited from an urban program that totally rebuilt the neighborhood. While no one lets me forget that fact, it was unfortunately a short-term one. By the mid-1980s, as the economic crisis mounted, the neighborhood ceased being maintained. Today it has only one functioning street light, the public spaces have all turned into garbage dumps and the houses are falling apart. Since family incomes have fallen drastically, most families can't even afford to keep up the maintenance on their own homes, much less the neighborhood. Its history since 1984-85 has thus been one of slow failure, of prolonged agony. There's no longer anything special about it; it's like hundreds of others all over Managua. Today's gang members dream of the past, when their neighborhood had respect. Everywhere, outside the neighborhood as well as within it, they paint graffiti with the name their barrio had before the revolution.

### ***What Would They Like to Do?***

This longing search for identity is intimately linked to the vacuum of other significant social roles and permits the assumption that if one could channel the gang members' energies and dreams toward other activities, they would perhaps find what they are looking for.

When I asked what kind of activities interest them and seem useful, they answered that they would like to do something concrete, beneficial to themselves and their neighborhood, something they can identify with and on which they can work collectively. For example, to build a basketball court that they could later be responsible for maintaining.

This response reflects something important to keep in mind when analyzing the social phenomenon of the gangs. They should be considered as collectives, as communities, not just as juxtaposed groups with no order or harmony. In my neighborhood it can be said that the gang is the only example of organization with cooperative solidarity, because even the families are fragmented. The family I live with, for example, is divided into three distinct groups, which survive on different incomes that are never shared among them.

The gang members underscore the importance of solidarity within their gang as strongly as they lament the atomization of their community. They point out that a gang member has responsibilities, one of which becomes obvious to any observer of a gang fight: no gang ever leaves one of its members on the “battleground.” Whatever the danger, a wounded member is rescued by the others before retreating. Naturally, this is partly due to the logic of the fights, whose objective is to capture or otherwise incapacitate members of the rival gang who have special qualities. Nonetheless, it is also a sign of the solidarity generated among gang members.

### ***Solidarity Inherited From Sandinismo?***

The gang members in my neighborhood say that this solidarity-with which they help each other and take care of the neighborhood-comes from Sandinismo. They see themselves as the heirs of the Sandinista values of solidarity and collective work. During the 1996 election campaign, the gang distributed FSLN propaganda and put red and black banners and posters along the streets after it was announced that FSLN presidential candidate Daniel Ortega was coming to the neighborhood.

All gang members in my neighborhood, 100% of them, are Sandinistas. While this certainly has an influence on their ideology of solidarity, the memories that the majority retain of the Sandinista period are imprecise because they were very young in those years. Their views were probably inherited from the first generation of gang members.

The current members tend to idealize and mythify the past. An example of this is their glorification of the history of the neighborhood before it was rebuilt by the Sandinista government, even though it was one of those with the most wretched poverty in Managua.

The gang members have a strong sense of territory. Each member identifies with his neighborhood and sees it as his turf. They also operate in other neighborhoods, but not with the same attitude of relationship that they have with their own. It can be said that the gang members have a strong feeling of social responsibility, at least toward their own neighborhood.

During a “war” with the gang from a neighboring barrio, my friends organized a truce “for the houses,” which were suffering from the mortar cross fire between the two bands. The gangs reached an agreement to move their war to neutral terrain between the two neighborhoods, far from the houses. Such a sense of cooperation between supposedly enemy gangs should not be too surprising. Many times the very gang members who fought yesterday join together today to attack another gang; even though these alliances are fleeting, they are not insignificant.

### ***Gang Members Who Are “Bad”***

While some gangs have female members, all are male in mine. The number of members grew steadily each year between 1990 and 1995, but since then has held fairly steady.

Not all teenagers in a neighborhood get involved in its gang. For example, my neighborhood has about 3,000 inhabitants, of whom some 750 are adolescent males, and only about 100 of them belong to the gang.

Why do some young people become gang members and others don’t? The explanation of the members themselves is that some are “bad” and others aren’t. Being “bad” is pure whim: an attraction to delinquency, a style of dressing-wearing

one's t-shirt inside out, for example-or a way of talking-reversing the syllables of words, so that one is "nitua" instead of tuani (cool).

It's also an attitude, a sense of humor, as was shown in the armed robbery of a diplomat by the members of my gang. They had noticed the diplomatic plates on a car parked on a street in the next neighborhood well known for drug sales. When the diplomat came out of the shop, they were waiting for him with an AK-47. They stole the \$200 he was carrying, his rings and watch, his shirt and his shoes. But they decided to show their "respect" for his office by leaving him the "best part": his fancy car and his drug purchase.

But "being bad" is more than robbing, taking drugs or hanging out and making trouble. It's also having a sense of value, of honor, albeit honor among thieves. It's feeling that you belong to the neighborhood and to the gang, with the responsibility that belonging implies. Gang members don't just help each other; they also trust each other a lot. And that trust is a value that is getting ever harder to find in the context of Nicaragua's current crisis.

This trust and this loyalty are partly reactions to the social stigmatization that the gang members suffer, although at least within my neighborhood and probably many others, this stigma is ambiguous. The inhabitants are constantly criticizing the gang, but they never forget that its members are the ones who protect and take care of the neighborhood.

## ***Who Joins a Gang?***

There's no clear correlation between membership in a gang and the socioeconomic situation of the member's family. Although there's a lot of social differentiation in my neighborhood, the youth in the gang are not mechanically from the poorest strata. At the same time, however, economics is always an important motive in the decision to join. Gang members can get their hands on a lot of money through assaults, thefts and other "business deals." They use it to buy glue to sniff, mari-

juana to smoke, liquor to get drunk on, charges for their mortars and bullets for their firearms, daggers, and clothes-especially Nike shoes and baseball caps. Food, too. The average monthly expenses for a gang member range between 200 and 400 córdobas (\$20-40). They never save money; they just go looking for it when they need it. They also don't share it with their family, though they sometimes do with fellow gang members.

Nor can it be said that gang members necessarily come from families with problematic histories-broken homes with scenes of domestic violence, etc. The only systematic indicator I've been able to observe is that the vast majority of teenagers from families belonging to evangelical sects don't join gangs.

This could be due to the strict evangelical ideology, which opposes some of the gang activities-including smoking and drinking. It could also be because the evangelical churches are so organized that they play a social role comparable to that of the gangs: both are institutional reference points that offer individuals solid group codes of conduct in a national setting in which many of the social guidelines have been transformed or have disappeared. Within a context of wrenching change and generalized insecurity, full of ephemeral touchstones, both the gangs and the evangelical sects represent an effort to construct a social space with defined rules, where the youths can feel part of a group with social identity.

The insecurity and precariousness that characterize Nicaragua today permeate the social space in which the gang members are situated. The gangs are socially structured and structuring. Even though new values, meaning, practices, relationships and kinds of relations emerge within the social space that these gangs constitute, they are still situated within-and subordinated by-a broader space which also shapes their members' identity. This broader space is the national space, which is in crisis. Since the gang members have to build their identity in both spaces, all their actions reflect both the established order and the one they manage to establish in their gang.



## ***The Expression of a Macho Culture***

In a country with a culture of violence, is it any surprise that gang members are characterized by accentuating that social feature? In a context in which strength is what gives status, the way to overcome the strongest is to get hold of a weapon.

Nicaragua's history is unquestionably impregnated with violence. It has been omnipresent ever since the Spanish conquest, and this has affected all organizational forms of life in Nicaragua. Violence is the preferred method for resolving any kind of conflict in a macho cultural framework; even the levels of violence within the household are quite high. The gangs can thus also be analyzed as a crystallization of Nicaraguan machismo, through the attitude of gang members toward danger, the premium they put on violence as a social expression, their almost exclusively male membership, the way they relate to women, and so on.

The gangs and their violence are not phenomena in the air. They have a logic within their own social space and within the social space that constitutes Nicaraguan society. They are the form that some youths adopt to impose themselves on a society that excludes them.

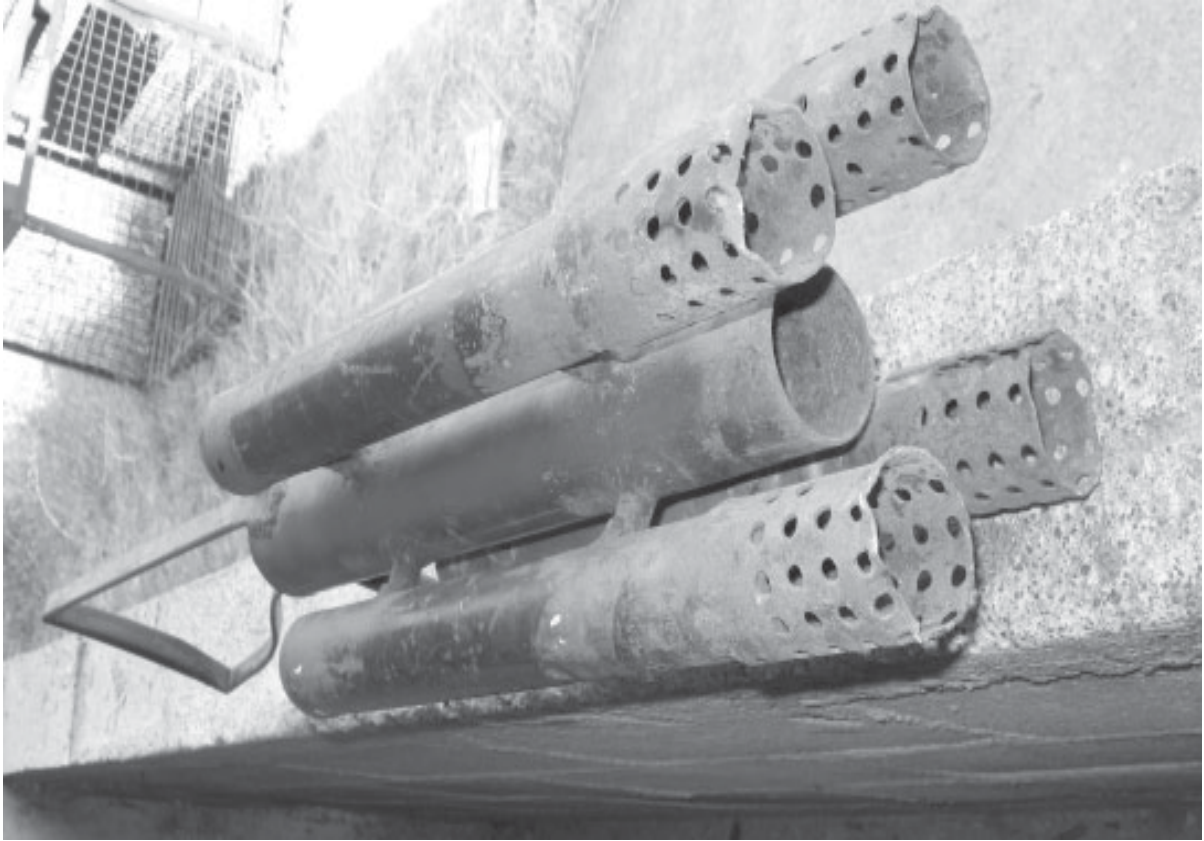
## ***An Uncertain and Changing Logic***

Notwithstanding all this, a perfect logic should not be sought in the gangs. The conventional explanation of individual behavior, whether it be in economics, sociology or other social science disciplines, is based on the concept that human actions are the product of a rationality based on considerations that individuals make about the various means and ends and causes and effects that are within their grasp. But it is often not easy to identify these supposedly interlinked pieces, because the options one has at hand are opaque and indeterminate.

The ambiguity inherent to the human condition-which is significantly increased in the chaotic and anarchic context of today's Nicaragua-means that people often

don't quite know what they are doing or the effect their actions could have. This doesn't mean that their actions aren't rational, but the logic they use doesn't ever get to the point of being systematic. People aren't as sure of either themselves or the world in which they are living as the social sciences often postulate.

The world is not immobile; it's always changing. For that reason, people's lives should be considered as an anarchic process of ongoing change. Human interaction is already ambiguous because all manifestations of communication between human beings-the crux of social interaction-are ambiguous; they constantly need interpretation. That's why many more experiences and a lot more time will be needed for the anthropologist ever to understand the gang member.



**The hand that rocks  
the mortar launcher**

# The hand that rocks the mortar launcher

*The number of youth gangs in Nicaragua seems to grow by the day. What are their adolescent members looking for? Why do they fight? What unites them?*

*Rather than breaking with the established order, these youth gang members actually form their own particular part of that order and share the cultural paradigm of our times. We need to observe and interpret them with greater understanding.*

Tom said, "Now we'll start this band of robbers and call it Tom Sawyer's Gang. Anybody that wants to join has to take an oath, and write his name in blood." Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

[JOSÉ LUIS ROCHA](#)

Over a century ago, US author Mark Twain wrote a series of stories about a gang of adolescents that hung out on the banks of the Mississippi. Twain's acute sense of observation enabled him to capture the gang's youthful spirit and to describe vividly the personality of each of his characters. Who has not heard of the adventures of youth gang member Tom Sawyer and his equally unredeemed friend and fellow gang member Huckleberry Finn?

The book was based on real life and celebrated a way of life that was no doubt censured by the "good consciences" of his time. Twain turned a social pariah into a hero, creating an inspired character who strongly criticized the educational

institutions of the time—Twain himself once urged his readers not to let school interfere with their education. He exalted the role of the rebel: attacking the established order, ridiculing the commonplace and undermining the apparently solid foundations of the existing institutions. Twain captured the rebellious spirit of those agitated times of gold fever, rapid change, social mobility, marginalization and delinquency.

### ***In praise of the tramp***

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Huck Finn is a teenage pariah, son of the town drunk. He is cordially hated by all of the local mothers for being crazy, lawless, vulgar and bad, and because all of their children are fascinated by his forbidden behavior. Huck is the prototype of the adolescent vagabond. Mark Twain said that he took his characters from real life, and Huck Finn was based on a dirty, ignorant, completely unrestrained, but good-hearted rascal. According to Twain, he was the only truly independent male in his community.

Today, we would be amazed by such praise of a tramp, but Twain makes it seem perfectly natural. The fact is that the rebellious sense of this literary creation is missing today. The writers of the 19th century idealized the poor (*Oliver Twist*), while those of the 17th and 18th centuries idealized the rogue (*Tristram Shandy*) and even the delinquent (*Moll Flanders*).

Nicaraguan intellectuals, who demonstrated an unprecedented fecundity in the epic genre and apologetics of the revolution, are now sunk in sterility or inclined toward historical themes. None of the works of fiction recently written in Nicaragua reflect the fragmentation of our society and the desperation of the excluded groups. There is no poem to the tramp, no place for such people as literary protagonists in these times; the literary absolution of our times does not cover them.

This vacuum reflects the growing distance that the middle classes have put between themselves and the dispersed expressions of grassroots agitation and

tension, which are on the rise but impossible to articulate into a collective project. If anything, these expressions reveal the poor as a threat to middle-class citizens, with whom they share only a few common spaces. No ideological construction dignifies them and encapsulates their sense of life. There is only rejection, based on the journalistic image of youth gang members branded as "anti-social ruffians" or "enemies of the citizenry," phrases that serve to justify hostility against them. It is through this tangle of epithets that we must try to make out the true face of the youth gang member, by blocking out the predominant perceptions.

## ***Oaths and symbols***

Mark Twain contrasted the dominant censure of the "ne'er-do-wells" of his time with a more favorable portrait. Some passages of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* still provide us with good anthropological tools. One example is the description of the oath Tom Sawyer designed to formalize acceptance into his gang. If anyone hurt any gang member, for example, any other members of the gang could be commissioned to kill that person and his or her family, and they should not eat or sleep until they had killed them and marked their chest with a cross as a sign of the gang's revenge.

Nobody outside of the gang could use this symbol, and would be punished if they did. If any member of the gang told about the cross, his throat would be cut, his body burnt and the ashes scattered and his name erased from the gang's list and never mentioned again. Tom based the oath on books about pirates, thieves and highwaymen, and when asked what the gang did, he replied: "Nothing only robbery and murder... We stop stages and carriages on the road, with masks on, and kill the people and take their watches and money."

Such descriptions reflect many of the characteristics of the gangs in Nicaragua and other Central American countries today: a code of honor that above all penalizes traitors, punishing snitches particularly cruelly; a set of symbols to identify

the group's acts; specific meeting places; the marking of their territory; and revenge as the main motive behind the greatest expressions of violence. And in these countries today the violence is not just the fantastical threats of a child's imagination, but is real. So how did a scheme that started as a game of scamps turn into such an apocalyptic reality?

### ***Latin America: a violent territory***

Let's now jump from literary fantasy to national reality. Sofía, a female member of the famous *Comemueertos* (literally "eaters of the dead") gang, perhaps the most violent gang in Nicaragua, proudly confesses: "We were the real thing, we were all big. We didn't go around doing just any old thing like the kids who like to fire off homemade mortars or steal wallets and necklaces and then run away. No, we went around with good weapons and attacked vehicles that came to sell goods in the *barrio*. We broke into houses, stole anything worth taking, and wouldn't think twice about mercilessly killing six people if need be. We also raped girls and old women right there in the street. And if someone informed on us, we made them pay for it. Everyone in my gang got together to burn down the house of an old man who tried to rape me when I was 14. He'd scratched my neck when I resisted."

The *Comemueertos* was the gang that in 1994 would dig up recently buried bodies from a cemetery located in what they considered their territory, steal any valuable objects and then burn the corpse using gasoline. Their symbol was the skull and crossbones from pirate stories, and like the much less brazen kids of Tom Sawyer's band, their conspiratorial escapades took place mainly at night.

Why all that violence? Why violence for violence's sake? In Latin America, violence has reached unprecedented levels. The innocuous robbery and fighting of Tom Sawyer's gang have multiplied to horrifying proportions not just in Nicaragua, but throughout Latin America. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, there are currently 140,000 homicides a year in Latin America. Latin

Americans annually lose the equivalent of nearly three days of healthy life per capita due to violence. In addition, 28 million families are the victims of robbery every year, and 54 families are robbed every minute.

According to any one of these indicators, the level of violence is five times higher in our region than in the rest of the world. The same study states that violence against goods and people represents a destruction and transfer of resources equivalent to approximately 14.2% of the Latin American GDP, or US\$168 million. In terms of human capital the region loses the equivalent of 1.9% of the GDP, or the region's entire spending on primary education. Meanwhile, the equivalent of 4.8% of the GDP or half the region's total private investment is lost in capital resources. The "resource transfer" between criminals and their victims equals 2.1% of the GDP, which is higher than the distributive effect of all public finances.

### ***First of all, a group of friends***

The youth gangs are not the only protagonists of all of this destruction, but in the case of Nicaragua, adolescents and young people have undoubtedly increased their participation in criminal activities. In 1997, according to National Police figures, 52% of those suspected of committing a crime were aged between 13 and 25, which is precisely the age range of the gang members.

At the beginning of 1999, the police counted 110 gangs, most of them in Managua. Taking the average size of a gang to be 75, this gives a total of around 8,250 members. Since there are varying degrees of involvement, however, the youth gang phenomenon involves many more people. The lack of a clear definition of what constitutes a gang makes it difficult to compare information about their differing expressions in different cities and at different periods of time. Nonetheless, it can be stated that gangs start first as a group of friends rather than as an association bent on criminal activity.



Like Huck Finn, excluded from participating in society's main institutional activities, gang members see the streets as an alternative way of socializing. These youngsters share many similar experiences, such as family tension, academic failure and lack of interest in legitimate activities, and the gangs offer them a collective solution to the problem of their own identity.

### ***Street socialization***

Going around in a gang gives you power, because it provides support for its members. It also confers prestige, because the gang's activities receive publicity that transcends the neighborhood borders. The family has little importance as a sphere of socialization for gang members, many of whom have had to wander the streets since they were children, selling bags of water, soft drinks and instant lottery tickets, or took to the streets because they were ill-treated by their families. Thus, this secondary-level integration into the gang was the result of the disintegration of the primary, or family, level. They were left with no other option but to socialize with their peers on the streets. "The gang is my family," as one member put it. Their greatest loyalty is therefore owed to their "brothers" in the gang and not to their families. Frequently, the family is unaware of—or pretends to be unaware of—what gang members from the family are up to.

The adolescents choose to belong to a group that their friends already belong to, regardless of the education to which they may have been subjected. According to César, "When I was smaller, my parents ruled with an iron hand. They hit me to stop me becoming a tramp. The problem isn't education or whether or not you rule with an iron hand. That might be important, but not always. The problem is that you like the way it feels to go around in a gang. You're led there by your friends; you join because that's where your 'brothers' are."

Friends are like a magnet, and friendships need space and time to be consolidated. Later, the friends form a hierarchy. The gang provides an opportunity

to define different degrees of friendship. As Neftalí pointed out, "You don't have many real friends. Although we all talk in the gang, we only really become 'buddies' with a few. Only buddies lend each other money. You can't be friends with everybody, because there are a lot of people in a gang that you hardly know."

Another gang member elaborated on the distinction between a 'brother' and a 'buddy:' "There are about 70 kids in the gang. They're all brothers, but only two are my buddies. When we got hold of weapons, AK-47s, I gave them to my buddies to look after. The other guys might rip you off. You can only trust your buddies. How do you make buddies? In my case, we were in a fight with another gang, there were a lot of us and I was wounded and lying on the floor, but only two of them, my buddies, came back and didn't just leave me there to die. They didn't abandon me and let me fall into the hands of the other gang.

The others just left me lying there when I got cut open around my eyebrow. So I owe my life to my buddies, and if anything ever happens to them, I have to go out of my way to help them. Buddies give you money even if you didn't take part in the robbery. If I go out to steal with my buddies, it won't end in a fight. If we get a hundred pesos, we split it three ways. That's why I don't steal with anyone else, because they want to stiff you, they stuff the money down their pants, and that's low." Life in a gang forges a common history, a constant exchange of knowledge, and strengthens the ties of friendship. Although it is the criminal aspect that most stands out for an outside observer, the main motivation for the kids is to find a place in the nearest space for socialization, which is also a source of identity.

### ***Gang member or hanger-on? Brother or traitor?***

Just as there are different degrees of friendship in a gang, there are also different degrees of membership. There are various ways of being linked to a gang and these different membership levels complicate the gang's organizational structure and the role it plays in the *barrio*. The gang provides a mechanism for measuring

social integration in the *barrio*. In many marginalized neighborhoods in Managua, the majority of young people are gang members, leaving those families that have no relations with gang members relatively isolated. There is also a kind of social pressure, a social tax imposed by the gang for the protection that they provide in the *barrio*. This social tax can be anything from providing the gang with human resources to giving them small sums of money. While such monetary contributions are offered voluntarily by neighbors or "suggested" to non-residents as a contribution, the intangible assets of those who do not pay deteriorate notably.

There are also various kinds of social tax, according to the person's status. A young evangelical or university student would not be required to maintain a strong link, for example, though they would be expected at least not to inform on the gang. These different levels of support provide diversity to the links: simple tolerance is the loosest level, and providing arms is the closest.

"The gang from La Aceitera comes to my *barrio* to start a war, so the people from my *barrio* give us money to buy homemade mortars," explained one member. The opposite of the collaborator is the informer, who becomes a potential victim. Just one notch up from the informers on the negative scale are the *peluches*, or cowards, who refuse to take part in the fights. This unwillingness is particularly punishable when they are considered to be shirkers and drop-outs, in other words when they share the same status as a gang member, but refuse to help defend the *barrio* in the socially accepted way.

Everything exists in the *barrio*, and the different statuses are clear: straight or bad, decent or tarnished, brother—the highest class being the buddy—or traitor. Churches and other institutions help define these statuses and each one carries certain obligations or roles. For example, different things are expected from a hanger-on than from a gang member. The role of the gang member and that of a "decent" person also generate different expectations. In general, however, gang members admit that belonging to a gang is just a stage in their lives and they hold on to the traditional ideals: marry a decent girl, start up a home, etc. Abandoning

the status of gang member implies changing friends. Hanging out with tramps is for gang members; decent girls are for something serious, like starting up a home.

### ***Defenders of their barrios***

The gangs are the spontaneous effort of young people to create their own society within a society that offers them nothing that matches their needs. Their gang-based activities provide them with what the adult world denies them: a leading role. The gangs even end up determining the neighborhood's ecology. Their activity is what sets the rhythm and the laws: when to stay in your house and when the coast is clear, where it's safe to walk and even what time strangers can visit. "We rule the *barrio*," as one young gang member put it.

The tattoos, the slang and a kind of moral code all imply the creation of a certain order, their own order. The most obvious demonstration of power this offers is the fact that gangs have succeeded in transmitting their traditions from generation to generation. The members change, but the name, the moral code, the tattoos, the territory and the meeting places live on. The existence of gangs in other *barrios* is an incentive to have one in your own. The gang takes on the role of defender of the *barrio*, and many *barrio* inhabitants only view those gang members from outside as a threat. This is where the gang can provoke ambivalent feelings, particularly but not only among those families who have no direct relations with the gang, because, in the end, the whole *barrio* ends up involved, affected or at least implicated. It ends up carrying a stigma in which outside observers view it not as a *barrio* where there are gangs, but as a gang *barrio*.

### ***Portrait of a gang barrio***

Let's now take a look at Reparto Schick, one of the *barrios* in Managua with the most gang-related activity. A long central artery cuts through the *barrio*, which is really a giant conglomerate of *barrios* built as a result of successive migrations, many of them from the banks of Lake Managua, that currently house some 40,000

inhabitants. Each migratory wave has had its own history of struggles to obtain lots, drinking water, electricity, paved roads, schools and churches. But the leaders who led those struggles have now died or retired from their organizational activities, and nobody has been willing to take their place. This is not an era of community struggles, but of everyone for themselves. The current dreams have a smaller, more individual dimension.

The *barrio's* recreation and commerce are concentrated around that central artery. Pool, places to get your hair cut, bars, the odd disco, improvised clothes stores, fried food stands and larger dining places stretch out in an almost uninterrupted line. This diminutive universe is the poor people's end of the market: a billiard parlor where you can play for just under 10 cents, in marked contrast to the \$2.50 charged in more central, "classy" areas; under a dollar for a haircut that would cost you six times more in a hairdressers' salon... Then there are the shops selling decent-quality second-hand charity clothing sent down in bales from the United States at very cheap prices, items which provide one of the few connections with the global village.

Moving away from this main drag and pushing into the new settlements with their unpaved roads, the architecture of the houses becomes increasingly heterogeneous. Sprawling concrete houses with garage included stand alongside small dwellings nailed together out of debris. The new settlements are the most vigorous tentacle tips of a *barrio* in permanent expansion. As in the rest of the country, construction is the most rapid growth activity in Reparto Schick. Today, it is both a bedroom *barrio* of the capital and the domain of the unemployed. The ruffians hover around the high schools, both inside and out.

Those outside lie in wait for the chance to steal a backpack or some brand-name sneakers from an unsuspecting pupil. Those inside try to make their teachers' lives hell, looking to challenge the authority of masters who receive the most meager monetary recognition from the state for their work in recently-declared semi-autonomous institutes, which conveniently free the state from its social

responsibilities. On Sundays, even the most inhospitable alleyways of the *barrio* come to life. On one corner, five adolescents meet up to smoke crack. One of their mothers sells marihuana and crack, and they benefit from "special" prices. Some of them sport recent bruises and old scars from local battles. The basketball courts are always full. Soccer is played on many street corners, and on many others groups of older men gather magnetized around a bottle of rum, their sweaty beer bellies glistening in the sun.

### ***Sects and gangs: Similar phenomena***

Same time, same day, same place, groups of young people, Bibles under arm, hurriedly cross the streets in the direction of the evangelical churches. Happy music drifts out of some of the churches; from others comes the sound of shouting and an overwhelming multitude of voices speaking in unison as if the gift of tongues had taken possession of the congregation, as they themselves believe. In a fragile world where nobody knows what the next day will bring, the church is a sanctuary for monolithic truths, where one can be soothed of worldly troubles to the tune of "Stop Suffering."

According to Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells, fundamentalism, be it Muslim or Christian, has spread and will continue to spread throughout the world at this moment of history in which global networks of wealth and power are linking nodal points and influential people throughout the world, while simultaneously disconnecting and excluding large sectors of different societies and regions and even whole countries. Reparto Schick is an island in Managua inhabited by people who know nothing about computers and by social groups that do not consume. Sects and gangs mark the *barrio* life. Both involve the logic of excluding the excluders, of redefining the criteria of value and meaning in a world that offers them no spaces. Like the sects, the gangs turn to primary identities in a world that excludes them. Like the believers in the sects, the gang members build their own meanings and moral codes.

## ***A "gentlemen's" code***

A set of explicit or tacit rules perpetuates the institution of gangs. Without this set of rules, the group of friends with its particular character would not be able to regenerate. There is a gang member ethics, in which certain actions are quite intolerable. The most punishable is being an informer, and this—as in Tom Sawyer's code—merits expulsion from the gang and even death. Sleeping with girls that hang out with the gang could be taken as rape in certain circumstances, although not always. Such an act is condemned according to the girl's status. Hanger-on status entitles one to the fewest rights, but also allows the gang member to avoid contracting any obligations. As long as the gang member is viewed as a shirker and a hanger-on, and acts like one, the normal rules are suspended.

It is normal—if insane—to rob or kill, following the "him or me" rule: either the other person has the money or the gang member enjoys it; either the other one dies in the fight or assault, or it's the gang member who dies. A wartime morality prevails during fights or attacks. In the gang's own territory, it is fair and even socially acceptable to kill, and at times cruelly, a rival gang member for penetrating it. The external legality is imposed by the coercive action of the police, but their legal system lacks legitimacy with the gang and it is the gang subculture, the gang government, that imposes the rules. After certain hours, any stranger in the *barrio* is a potential enemy. "Someone walking about at this time can't be up to any good," they say. Killing the person ceases to be inadmissible because you have to keep the upper hand and not wait for the other to take the initiative.

The local community also has to respect a certain code, minimum rules for co-existing with the gangs. Covering up for them is necessary in certain circumstances. Not giving them away is a permanent requirement. According to Augusto, one of Reparto Schick's most hardened gang members, "The neighbors know what you are. The other neighbors don't say anything to me out of fear. We could burn their house down. Though their faces say, "There goes the thief," they keep it to themselves. There are some fierce older people in the *barrio* who've got

weapons, but if an old guy knocks off five of us, then the other seventy will come down on him. Or else we'll get back at him by taking it out on the person he most cares about."

According to a US anthropologist, the streets of Los Angeles, California, have a similar code: "The people in the neighborhood know each other even if they've never spoken or said hello. Body language is enough. One facial gesture acts as a greeting and you don't have to know the name. There are rules about keeping quiet. Nobody can be a witness to anything. You can never know about any crime even it was committed right under your nose, unless you want to end up dead."

### ***Revenge, punishment and solidarity***

Taking revenge on traitors is common currency, and anything goes. Augusto recalled one of his acts of revenge: "Once we were at a party, and there was this girl 'Chola' there. Several people warned me, 'That girl wants to get information out of you, she's an informer, she passes information to the enemies.' She was going to tell them where I was going to go so my enemies would get me. She even called me some gushy name, making out like she was my 'brother.' I changed my plans and went off home, but I was angry, so I decide that all of my gang should take her by force. The girl's easy. So one day I invited her to the school when it was empty, and I told the boys to come along, and about 25 of us had her and I cut her hair off with scissors. I don't like rape, but that girl was an informer."

Since image plays a determining role in the gang members' world vision, trying to make out that you are superior in some way is also punishable. Showing off is always punished and fights break out at parties to get back at someone for standing out during the dancing, for showing off. In the words of *Pitayoya II*, "No one can show off because we're all equal. And if someone does try to make out that they're better than the rest, they pay for it."



The most emphasized norm is the principle of reciprocity, solidarity and group cohesion. There were many comments on this point. As Sofía of the *Comemueertos* explained, "If someone doesn't have anything, then we help them out. If it's you today, it might be me tomorrow." Another girl, Ruth, stated that "we share everything in the gangs. It's selfish just to reward yourself and not share. You have to think that you won't always have what you need, so if it's for you today, it could be for me tomorrow."

### ***Fights are a central activity***

The code serves the sense of belonging, and this is what makes the different activities possible. People normally identify gangs with robbery and taking drugs, and in fact most gang members are drug addicts and petty thieves. But this is not the trait that most identifies them, firstly because they are not activities exclusive to them, even when the collectivism generated by the gang turns the group into a fertile breeding ground for drug consumption and dealing. Many other young people who do not belong to gangs do drugs and steal. In Nicaragua, drug use among middle and upper class adolescents is more widespread than is generally supposed. Secondly, theft and drug consumption are not activities in which the whole gang takes part, or that are essential to do as a gang.

The only activity that really defines a gang is fighting. Fights pull together most of the gang members, and they never go into battle drugged up. Fights—rather than theft or drugs—occupy the central place in a gang's life and activities; they are what drive the gangs. The suspicion, whether founded or not, that there is an organized gang in a neighboring *barrio* that could attack at any moment generates the need to organize for mutual protection, and in the gang system of beliefs, that means organizing the young people in the *barrio*. Thus, the threat of attack from rival gangs encourages, or in some cases compels, young people to join a gang.

## ***The spiral of violence***

Violence and fighting have been integral elements of gangs right from the start. Violence is constantly present and creates a mythical system among the gangs. How does it break out? According to César, "The problems with others starts when they come to our *barrio* to bust up houses. Of course, we go to other places to destroy their houses, but only in revenge.

That's the way it is. They come one day and we go another day. Destroying houses in other *barrios* is what starts up the big fights. We've destroyed Fatty Cristóbal's house several times and we've destroyed Moya's place as well. We bend back the bars on the house with metal tubes and let off homemade mortars through the gaps."

Such situations can lead to serious escalations of violence. "Once when we were letting off mortars," recalls César, "one of them landed on a girl, right there in her private parts, and really messed her up. They put Black Wil away for three years for that, just to make someone pay for it. Another time an old guy got out an AK and started firing until he'd used up the magazine. Someone got hit in the forehead and it came out the other side, completely blowing open his head. He was left lying there in the street. So in revenge, they threw gas on the old man's house and were going to toss a grenade in it."

All gang members have seen comrades killed, many of them from back when they were children, and they talk about these experiences in a matter-of-fact way. Elvis, for example, calmly tells of "another time when the *Comemuertos* were wrecking the *Plo*'s houses, without mortars because they make too much noise. There were 40 of us and we hit them from behind. They grabbed Sitting Bull and started kicking him, and although the Chicken ran away, they caught him and said, "Aha, so you're with them! Take this!" and they stabbed him seven times in the stomach. He can show you; they really left their mark on him."

## ***Subjecting because they are subjected***

The fights provide a reputation, generate prestige and improve the gang's intangible assets. Revenge is a way of getting even, or guaranteeing a positive balance so that you don't end up in the red. Individual fights also generate fame, as Augusto explained: "When I got back to the *barrio* in December, after being on the run from the police, there were new kids who didn't know me and wanted to rumble.

They were just showing off. One of them really wanted to fight me, and I'm not a good fist fighter, but I do okay defending myself with a knife. He had one of those neat switchblades that pop out automatically when you press a button. So we started to fight, and he cut my arm several times, but in the end I stuck him with my knife. I left him on the floor and took off. Sometimes they want to take advantage of you, and it's best to act quickly, before they do you any harm. Now they respect me more. You have to keep the upper hand."

A common tribute among gang members is, "That one would stab anyone." Why has violence become a mechanism for gaining a reputation? Why has it been singled out in particular? In the words of former gang member Bayardo, "I now see gang members as people who carry a fury within them and are looking for a way to let it out." The gang offers an opportunity to channel it. Social scientist Khosrokhavar provides a possible clue to the origin of that rage: "When the project of constructing individuals who fully participate in modernity reveals its absurdity in the real experience of daily life, violence becomes the only way for the new subjects to affirm themselves. The neo-community thus becomes a necro-community. Thus, self-immolation becomes a way of fighting against exclusion."

In a world in which they are nobodies, the gang members react by attacking, dominating the *barrio*, subjecting because they are subjected, demarcating a territory because they are uprooted, and associating themselves with an institution that provides them with the identity that they lack. Gang members aspire to dominate in an environment that excludes them. As César remarked proudly, "We run the

*barrio* and nobody says anything. If anyone does say something, we wipe 'em out. They're scared 'cause there's so many of us. The youth rules."

A reduced territorial space such as a *barrio*—an island isolated from the globalized world—or even a street serves as the basis for new identities. And those identities become more local the more inaccessible the globalized world's culture gets and the more impossible it is for the poor to attain the middle class aspirations being imposed as ideals for young people. Domination over and defense of a territory generates identity. The more complex focal points of identity generation have collapsed, so people have reverted to more local mechanisms. In Nicaragua, recent historical events have particularly contributed to this climate. Today, the FSLN-PLC pact has sounded the death knell for the role of the great political identity alternatives through which aggression was channeled: reactionary or revolutionary, Sandinista or Contra, Liberal or Sandinista, Alemán or Daniel. For the gang member, you only need to be from outside the *barrio* to be a potential enemy, and territoriality provides a motive for expressing unrest, without ever solidifying into any kind of project.

### ***Suicide: Another form of violence***

Juvenile violence is not only expressed through gang fights; it also exists in the self-immolation represented by suicide, violence against oneself. According to the IDB, there were 15,664 suicides in Latin America in 1996, and the number of suicides in Nicaragua has shot up in the past few years. Just as young people commit most of the homicides against their peers, they also commit the majority of suicides. The National Police estimate that there was an average of 24.4 suicides a month in Nicaragua during 1999, or five suicides every six days. Of the total, 40% of those who took their own lives were under 20 and 73% were under 30.

Although it is generally supposed that self-inflicted violence is less important than homicide, a more in-depth approach would focus on the links between suicide and homicide. Some of the fiercest gang members express suicidal tendencies.

Twenty-three-year-old Black Eddy spent six years in the Model Prison, just outside Managua, and has now embarked on a rehabilitation process. A few days after he was born, his mother abandoned him in a refuse barrel. He confesses that he often thought about his mother, about what she had done to him, and wanted to kill himself, but he externalized his aggressiveness instead, taking the step from wanting to kill himself to wanting to kill.

In a certain sense, gang members are the ones who have overcome the tendency towards death, who have not let themselves be crushed by a reality that drives them to desperation. They turn their energy into aggression, rather than melancholy. The relation between suicide and gang violence is an almost untapped vein that could reveal the marginalized adolescent's urgent need for self-esteem. The gang provides one solution to a problem that the suicides were unable to overcome.

### ***Image, identity, self-esteem***

Self-esteem lies at the heart of the gang problem and appears to express best the area where the adolescent's need (identity) comes to a standoff with the cultural mechanism that exacerbates it (hunger for image).

Identity is a key concept because that is what the adolescent is constructing. It is also a need that is tough to satisfy in these times. Castells sustains that "the social and political tendency of the 1990s is to build social and political action around primary identities, be they assigned, historically or geographically rooted or of recent construction in the search for meaning and spirituality." He understands identity as "the process by which a social actor recognizes him or herself and constructs a meaning above all in virtue of a culturally determined attribute or set of attributes, to the exclusion of any wider reference to other social structures."

The same primary identity is also very attainable in the sects, which is why they attract so many people and why they have so much in common with gangs, including a community of beliefs, a moral code, the demonizing of outsiders, and

a very developed sense of belonging. But while sects are based on a system of dogmas, gangs are based on territoriality.

The gang members need to reinforce their identity because they feel it threatened, and threatened territory provides the material basis for expressing that identity. Once that underpinning has been obtained, the code, the symbols, the language and the tattoos follow to reinforce that identity. But identity is not built up exclusively by the gang members; several outside actors help in its design. The publicity surrounding gang violence, for example, satisfies the adolescent's hunger for recognition. Paradoxically, the media's description of gang members as antisocial beings and public enemies can encourage young people to join up, because widespread publicity ensures them notoriety, which is precisely what they are looking for. "We just fight for the fame, so they'll say how good we are," explained Elvis.

### ***An exaggerated hunger for image***

Cultivating an image, becoming famous and winning respect are the needs most emphasized by gang members. As César points out, "You win respect and then nobody goes around making fun of you. You win respect through fights. We call the others cowards, and they're always getting hit just for being there." In other words, you hurt others so as not to be the butt of ridicule. "When they saw that I'd stabbed two or three sons of bitches," recalls Black Eddy, "the others respected me and did what I told them," while Cristóbal states, "I earned respect through violence. Before, nobody respected me because I was poor. But I made people respect me, and it's very important to earn respect."

Gang members do not steal to satisfy their basic needs. Elvis earns just over \$2 a day and over \$5.5 on Saturdays, but it's not enough to satisfy his hunger for image, so he steals. "I rob," he says, "to be able to flash a lot of money when I take my girl out, so people don't look at me like I'm shit. I was born a couple of months premature and had a high voice when I was a child, so they teased me about it, but I started opening out in the gang atmosphere. At first all the gang members

would rap me over the head with their knuckles, but little by little I started building up a reputation."

Drugs play the same role. "I feel like the master when I'm on drugs," says Black Eddy. They even start fights just because someone's showing off, because someone's dancing better, trying to impress a girl or just because they want to order the others around. They compete for image.

What makes César most proud is the fact that he has built up a reputation as a gang member: "Personally, even if a girl is real good, I won't rape her. I use my lip, my chat, my tough look. A lot of girls like tough guys. I'm poor and the whole world knows it, but there are girls in richer neighborhoods that are interested in guys like us, and they're *decent* girls. But they like the fame, the color, the boys from gangs who live a wild life."

At the end of the day, gangs satisfy a whole range of not unusual needs, such as respect, being someone, fame, attraction. As they cannot gain the respect of the adults, they break the established order and seek the respect of their equals, their peers. "The gang is my family," the members say. Their aspirations are surprisingly close to those of middle-class achievement, but since success is measured by middle-class standards, they are frustrated by the fact that they cannot attain the status. They want to attain the goals that society considers important, such as prestige and certain pastimes that determine status, and when they find that the legal means of achieving those objectives are very unequally distributed, they try to achieve them through illegal means.

This excessive hunger for image reflects low self-esteem. They feel mistreated at home and underrated by society, and their obsession with image leads them to want to be seen as and esteemed for being macho, cruel, feared, brutal and violent. The only way to maintain that roughneck image is by defending it, which is where the apparently excessive violence comes in.

## ***A cultural expression of our times***

Why has image come to have such excessive importance in our society? The gang members' actions should be observed, understood and interpreted not only in themselves, as a phenomenon characteristic of the marginalized *barrios*, but also as a cultural expression that shares certain traits with a wider constellation of attitudes and perceptions that are not exclusive to the gang members. It is a question of seeing the gangs as another element in the predominant culture, rather than as just a subculture.

To see the gangs in their real dimension, it is necessary to establish a parallel between the gang members' behavior and socially accepted behavior. If we look at it that way, today's gangs in Nicaragua represent part of rather than a breach in a cultural paradigm characterized by:

*Hedonism.* Gang members rob, not out of material necessity, but out of hunger for beauty as they perceive it. They rob to go to the cinema, to buy drugs or to buy nice clothes. Status and an opulent life style are also goals shared by the most prestigious and famous people in our society.

*Illegality.* Committing illegal acts is not at all out of tune with our society, where the law is openly broken, white-collar crime is boringly commonplace and the "sin" is not breaking the law but rather doing it unsuccessfully.

*Obsession with image.* The middle classes are hooked on beepers and cellular phones that are beyond their financial means; people go to great lengths to puff up their résumés; four-color brochures pile up in the institutions; NGOs invest disproportionate amounts of their money in lobbying; business administrators specialize more in selling a good image than a good product; and presidential candidates worry far more about their "look" than about the contents of their platform. Everyone is involved in merchandising. You have to look good to sell yourself, and it's better to "look like" than to actually be. Image is what gives us



value in the market. The gang members do the same thing. They sell themselves with all the means at their disposal: clothes, tattoos, spectacular actions. They don't do anything different, just the same thing through different means—illegal means—in a framework dominated by the *him or me* logic.

Criminologists and sociologists have unquestionably confirmed that the epidemic rise in gang violence is rooted in the behavior of the current exclusionary and dehumanizing economy. The invisible hand that "orders" the inequitable "free market" also holds an AK-47, a mortar and a switchblade. The vagabond Huck Finn, that literary hero of last century who was so content with just his freedom, has had new necessities forced on him in today's consumer society, has started to feel excluded and has become increasingly aggressive.



## **Youth Gangs: A Cultural Prison**

# Youth Gangs: A Cultural Prison

Getting out of a youth gang creates more problems than it solves. Does Nicaragua really want to “get out” of the problem of youth gangs? If so, the current efforts are leading nowhere, because they are only designed to punish.

JOSÉ LUIS ROCHA

## ***Individual solutions don't work***

In the famous salsa song *Pedro Navaja*, Panamanian songwriter Rubén Blades describes the typical neighborhood delinquent, a young man wearing sneakers in case he has to make a quick getaway, with a gold tooth, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his overcoat and the swagger of someone who knows he's good-looking. This ruffian stereotype has now been substituted by another expression of nonconformity. But there are elements that provide a certain continuity as old trends give way to new ones, such as *Pedro Navaja*'s violent end, shot down to the sound of *Life surprises you*. Society has also prepared other endings through its mechanisms aimed at correction, but they don't always arrive before death and don't always hit the nail on the head.

Solving the problem of youth gangs and the delinquency that goes along with them is linked to the conception of the problem. In other words, it is linked to the image of a gang member, which reinforces a standard procedure: you cure the sick, punish the criminal and provide therapy for the unbalanced, penitence and absolution for the sinner and correction for the ill-bred. Each poison has its antidote. What image of the gang member does this spread? Sick, criminal, disoriented, a pathological emanation of society, life in search of its true form, unexpressed protest, unarticulated nonconformity.

Churches, NGOs and the police propose their solutions, which often differ in all but one aspect: they are always aimed at the individual. But in the case of the gangs, the cure can't be individual because gangs have a reactivation mechanism. They are fed by successive generations and although they may appear to have died out, they soon display their recurrent nature. Furthermore, a series of cultural mechanisms makes it hard for members to abandon the gang. Individual solutions usually come too late.

### ***Caught in a cultural prison***

Youth gangs shape their neighborhood's profile. They are a component of its ecology, defining points of equilibrium, periods of calm, where and when people can be out on the street without it being considered suspicious. Nobody can ignore their presence, but while the gangs condition many aspects of neighborhood life, they have an even greater influence over their own active members. The gang demands dues paid out of one's hide more than one's pocket: time, risks, complicity, silence and forced collaboration. Individual members sacrifice a great deal of freedom and find themselves in what Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla terms a "cultural prison." This prison is reinforced by group coercion. The eagerness for image—macho, hardened, cruel—that unites the group and is sometimes graphically expressed in tattoos, acts as an internal guardian. The respect, built up so arduously, can be lost by leaving the gang, which is one reason it is so difficult to do so.

Looking back on his life from a rehabilitation center for drug addicts, Black Eddy put it this way: "It's hard to get out of a gang. Since I didn't want to accept drugs, one of the *Comemueertos* [one of Managua's gangs] wanted to mess me over when I came to the neighborhood one day. They know me, which is why Frugal warned me: 'You know what Black Will's like, you're going to be in trouble.' The rumor was even put about that I was hanging out with another gang. Leaving a gang has its problems. They rag on you; saying you're all got up in the latest fashion with a brand name cap, a 'plastic kid,' as they're called. They say 'Ah, you came out of the Modelo [a minimum security prison just outside Managua, in Tipitapa] a coward.' Others understand and tell you to keep on with your rehabilitation."

Black Eddy's mother abandoned him in a garbage dump as a newborn, an event that he sees as the root of all his consequent misfortunes and the origin of his aggressiveness. When we interviewed him, he was very optimistic about his process. Months later that cultural prison and those internal demons that keep telling him to maintain his reputation led him to pick a fight with his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend and with members of the rehabilitation center in which he had admitted to making such progress. He was finally expelled, only to return a few days later, masked, to rob the place.

There are many others like Black Eddy. During over a year of research, nearly all of the gang members we interviewed on the streets who said they had left their gang or were in the process of leaving were arrested for some crime, generally robbery or rape, within four months.

Sofía, a member of the *Comemueertos* gang, offers an illuminating and complementary version of the difficulties of leaving a gang. "It's hard to leave; they always trash you because they're afraid you're going to inform on them if you leave. The other problem leaving is that you're already marked; everybody's got you identified as a gang member. After I get out of jail I don't want to stay in this gang life, mainly because of my daughter. She's the most important thing for me.

But it's difficult, because it's dangerous for me in the *barrio*. The *Comemueertos* have it in for me because the woman I'm accused of killing was a relative of Chico-Masaya, the head of the *Comemueertos* himself. He swore that when I got out of jail in Tipitapa he was going to get his revenge. And me? Where am I supposed to go if my rock [mom] lives in the *barrio* and I don't have any money to go anywhere else?"

### ***The prison bars***

Many obstacles make it hard to leave a gang. The "bars" enclosing this prison include:

- Previous crimes that could be pinned on one. The gang provides cover while you still belong, but neighbors could set upon the now unprotected gang members once they leave.

- Loss of prestige. Still-active gang members tend to view a former comrade who quits as a coward—a *peluche* or *acalambrado* in the language of Nicaraguan gangs. The tough image so painstakingly built up through misdemeanors is not a possession easy to give up in a society that offers few other intangible assets to make up for the loss.

- The suspicion that a departing gang member may have become a snitch or joined a rival gang. Switching gangs is unusual, but it is severely punished. A gang member's inactivity arouses suspicions that he or she is selling the gang out to its enemies.

- Former members do not lose the stigma of belonging to a gang. Elvis described it this way: "One problem is if you fall for a decent girl. She'll tell you to 'straighten yourself out if you want to go out with me,' but you're already marked as a ruffian and people don't help you get out, they just make it even harder for you." Tattoos, while not exclusive to youth gangs, are a physical expression of this stigma. "I've got a tattoo of a demon," says Bayardo, "the famous *Chupacabras*

[a mysterious and unidentified being blamed for sucking goats' blood in various Latin American countries], which signifies our skill at attacking. Everyone in my gang gets the same tattoo on their right leg, and we're now identified by it." Their past is a major obstacle to former gang members' efforts to build a new reputation. The neighbors know them and don't trust them, while their tattoos immediately give them away even to strangers. The police pick them up on suspicion and if a crime is committed in the *barrio*, they are the first ones interrogated.

- Pending or feared revenge. The enemies made during so many confrontations hang like a long shadow over gang members, making it hard for them to lay down their arms. Black Eddy explained how this affected him: "I'm sick of jail and enemies. I have to watch my back on the streets and I still carry a blade. I don't go into the *barrio* unarmed. I can't. I've got a lot of enemies and I've always said it's better to mess someone up before they mess me up." Certain zones have become no-go areas, and leaving a gang implies losing protection in a hostile universe where you've already made enemies. Former gang members and even active ones have to change schools for fear of reprisals from their enemies. Gang members who have experienced a religious conversion are out of luck if there is no church in their turf. Although Fat David says he's found the Lord, he can't become an Evangelical because there's no church in his territory and to visit the nearest one he has to cross hostile territory inhabited by enemies who don't believe he's converted.

### ***More problems than solutions***

All of these bars to leaving are reinforced by economic difficulties. Robbery, which starts as a way to provide resources for good times, drugs and luxuries, becomes a permanent channel of potential income for gang members. Even the ex-member is always contemplating the occasional act of petty theft. Unemployment and the abundance of very low-paid jobs do not make the prospect of reinsertion into "socially acceptable" life at all attractive and most gang members are under-qualified for the job market. In the best of cases leaving the gang would involve moving

away to escape the bars of the social prison, but setting up somewhere else requires financial recourses and a social network of relatives and friends that gang members do not have. Leaving the gang often boils down to two rotten choices: move out of the *barrio* or end up dead.

Generally speaking, the pressure to stay in the gang comes more from the disadvantages of leaving than the advantages of staying. In this respect, with all the obstacles to leaving the gang that members mention, one is conspicuously by its curious absence. No one lamented or even mentioned the possible loss of their friends from the gang, whose company was one of the main motivations for joining in the first place.

### ***Lock them up or rehabilitate them?***

Nicaraguan Society proposes and implements different measures in an attempt to grapple with the youth gang phenomenon. These "remedies" can be grouped according to four models, which by no means exhaust all the possibilities: prison; rehabilitation centers; movements aimed at increasing gang members' self esteem—as a group and without having to leave the gang—and embryonic paramilitary vigilante organizations.

In the imprisonment model, the main aim—or at least the best fulfilled one—is to punish the gang members and keep them isolated for a determined period. The concept is that the gang member is a guilty party who must complete a certain sentence to atone for his/her failings against society. Once punished, they are supposed to go back into society determined not to re-offend. This model does not distinguish between gang activity and criminal activity.

The rehabilitation model is proposed in different forms by rehabilitation centers and foundations such as El Patriarca and Los Quinchos, and by Evangelical groups. Their objective is to cure. The gang member is seen as a sick person addicted to or possessed by drugs, sin, violence...or the Devil.



The rehabilitation centers base their healing process on isolating the gang members from the conditions that led them to offend and increasing their self-esteem. Such centers do not offer gang members any special treatment; rather their focus is on drug addicts, many of whom—though not all—are gang members. In Ricardo Falla's comments on Black Eddy's rehabilitation, he offers us a thought-provoking insight into one of the main problems of this model: "The psychologist is inculcating in him that he should believe in himself, that he is capable of making a new life, under the assumption that thinking of the future reduces the influence and relevance of the present.

One underlying point in this vision of self-esteem is too simplistic. According to this rehabilitation strategy, the gang member should not recognize his or her weakness, even though it is obviously always there and will resurface during future relapses. Strength should not be used to cover over weakness; it is not a dialectic vision of self-esteem." And this is exactly what happened in the end. Eddy's weakness, denied during the rehabilitation process, reemerged in successive waves and ended up defeating the cure.

Perhaps this failure can also be attributed to another limiting factor pointed out by Falla: "Due to their experience of frustration and disturbance, gang members seem to have touched a more profound bottom than healthy people, and if healthy people have never been there they will have a lot of trouble helping them with their rehabilitation." While it is utopian to expect the rehabilitation centers to include staff members who experienced such depths and are also capable of ordering their experiences, it is possible that hope will gradually spring from those without hope, as often happens.

Even so, we would still not have solved the problem of the reactivation of youth gangs, which renders any solutions centered on the individual alone insufficient. Successfully rehabilitating certain individuals does nothing to disable the social mechanism that perpetuates youth gangs as an institution. The self-esteem of the whole group needs to be worked on.

## ***Why do gang members become Evangelists?***

Evangelical denominations are grouped in the other great rehabilitation model. These churches have an ample following and a lot of impact in the marginalized *barrios* of Managua and other Nicaraguan cities. They work by isolating individuals and reinserting them in to another universe, thus transforming their values. This isolation is designed to be more global and permanent than prison: those who accept Jesus Christ no longer live in this world, but have rejected it like the ancient Anchorites.

Though they share the same physical space as those living in this world, their spiritual space is totally different, as are their obligations and attitudes. They undergo a complete change in their values and in their style, becoming quiet, moderate, calm, almost phlegmatic. Even their intonation changes. This new identity is as great a source of prestige and pride as their previous violent, reckless and passionate behavior. Within the new spiritual atmosphere being "*Gilberto*," or milk-toast—the biggest insult within a gang—confers greater status.

Why do so many gang members convert? The emotional nature of the sects' religious gatherings might play a role, enabling the gang member to express a heartrending cry of protest that was previously locked up deep inside. Also, both gangs and sects share a strong sense of community. The big difference, however, lies in the fundamentalism the sects offer: the gang member moves from a fragmented and fragile world into a universe of monolithic, immutable and solid truths. These similarities and this one big contrast facilitate the conversions.

Two other factors also influence the conversion: women and the end of the gang member's life cycle. Women are one of the spontaneous mechanisms behind the change, because they imply increased self-esteem and a supposed assumption of responsibilities that means moving beyond that prolonged state of adolescence that is the basis of belonging to a gang. The Evangelical churches offer the opportunity to find a woman. The symbolism linked to tattoos reveals the importance

of women in the ups and downs of self-esteem. A very common myth among gang members reinforces this thesis: that tattoos can only be erased by passing the needle over it again but this time using the milk of a first-time mother instead of ink. Only the recently virgin woman can erase the stigmas of the life renounced by the converted gang member.

Incorporation into a sect depends to a great extent on the culmination of the member's gang life cycle. The sects intervene when the time is right and act as a significant catalyzing element in a process that has already reached its end. The teenager cannot stay in a gang in perpetuity. There is a kind of reasonable time limit for such activities, and once it's over, the fundamentalism of the sects offers a new source of identity that often fills the void. The gang is even viewed as a very useful previous link according to the fundamentalist sect logic, representing the sinful stage preceding the conversion that will lead to eternal salvation, the maximum reward offered by the sects. Like the previous rehabilitation model, however, this one also offers nothing to the gang, just to some of its members.

### ***Increase their self-esteem or wipe them out?***

The third model increases the gang member's self-esteem as gang member. The objective here is to convert by rescuing the positive values represented by the gang. In this model the gang members are classified as protagonists in social life who have a lot to offer, provided that they redirect their activities. This model has only been worked on in Nicaragua at an almost intuitive level.

The concrete example most closely resembling this model is the space offered to gang members by moderator Evert Cárcamo in the popular *La Cámara Matizón* [candid camera] television program. In the midst of vulgarity and bad-taste humor, Cárcamo has offered gang members a legal way to act as protagonists and improve their image in front of a mass audience. Using an appropriate approach, this particular effort has an impact and coverage that outstrips all the rehabilitation foundations put together.

The two previous models assume that there is something "unhealthy" about gang members, something ethically bad, and the cure focuses on the individual who must be corrected. The idea is to perform a kind of moral orthopedic surgery. When the ruffian leaves the operating theater, he or she will be healthy or "straightened out." In this third model, the treatment focuses on the gang in order to help sublimate its energies and activities.

The final model, the paramilitary one, is not yet being put forward in Nicaragua; for the moment it is still just a latent risk. In this model, groups of middle- and upper-class adolescents who simulate bellicose confrontations in specially-designed fields and "children" who have access to guns could decide to take on the gangs from the poor *barrios* to wipe them out, whether for fun or revenge. These adolescents could form paramilitary groups that, imitating the Hollywood example of the Charles Bronson vigilante, could eventually propose confronting and eliminating the gangs through a learned white hat-black hat approach that could get them into the worst nightmare imaginable. Which model will catch on the quickest and with the greatest determination? It will depend on which image of the gangs wins out. So far, the most widespread model is that of imprisonment: locking up in order to punish.

### ***"This prison, these irons..."***

All genuinely active gang members—victims of that cultural prison that is their gang—have also been physically imprisoned at least once. They generally serve time for the lesser crimes they have committed, as was the case with Black Eddy, who tells of having committed far more serious ones: "I spent three years in the Modelo for stabbing two members of the *Cancheros* gang: Munra and Zanate. They were also there for killing an aunt of one of the *Comemuertos*. I left Zanate shitting in a [colostomy] bag for three months. I'm sorry I've messed up so many innocent people. I've been tried for homicide and murder and was let off. I've taken part in three killings: one homicide and two 'atrocious murders.' A murder is classified as 'atrocious' when you stab the victim more than three times. I'd rob

when I was drugged up, when I felt like the master, and if they resisted I'd stab them." A quick survey revealed that few of the other young prisoners in the Modelo are doing time for their worst crimes, but this is not the judicial system's only weakness.

Just in 1999, the country's different prison centers were flooded by an average of nearly 8 detentions every two hours, 107 a day, 750 a week and 3,000 a month. According to Nicaraguan Human Rights Center (CENIDH) figures, the eight crumbling and unhygienic prisons in Nicaragua's penitentiary system had over 5,450 inmates last year, although they have an official capacity of only 3,083. According to a UNDP report, each prisoner should have at least 4 square meters of space; Nicaraguan prisoners have an average of between 1.6 and 1.9. The National Penitentiary System currently has an expenditure of 64 million córdobas [just over \$5 million] a year, or an average of about \$2.50 per prisoner per day.

### ***The prison routine***

The prison facility in Tipitapa known as La Modelo, is the biggest in the country. The most infamous gang members from Managua end up in its wing for minors. During one visit in the second half of 1999 we found 215 inmates in that section. The average age was 18 and the youngest were 14. Only 138 were serving a sentence; of the other 77 that had been indicted, only 3 were in the middle of their trial and the rest were still waiting to be called up. A high percentage of these offenders spend several months following their arrest waiting to be tried. Meanwhile, 40 prisoners had not received any visits during their time inside. In jail slang, these prisoners are known as *donados* (given away). There were no professionals, technicians or university students among these minors; 38 were illiterate and only 64 had finished primary school. This limited educational level meant that only a few could take advantage of the computer and English courses that the penal system offers to minors.

The prison wings stretch out on both sides of a long corridor, broken only by security doors. At the end of the corridor is wing 7, the one for young offenders. Each cell holds an average of six prisoners, who remain locked up from 5 p.m. to

6 a.m. when they are all "unleashed" to go to the wing's communal area. Each cell is fitted out with one water tap, a hole in the floor for defecating, two bunk beds—there's no room for more in such a small space—and a window overlooking the yard, that provides ventilation and a place to dry clothes. Twice a week, from 8-11 a.m. or 1-3 p.m., the prisoners can go out into the large exercise yard where they play football and carry out commercial transactions behind the guards' backs using cigarettes as currency.

Conventional money is prohibited, and though it is not totally absent, cigarettes are used more. All goods and services, from food and clothes washing to pornographic playing cards, have a set price in this alternative currency. As one of the imprisoned gang members explained, "They search the place every couple of weeks and they look for everything. Money's illegal and if your family smuggles it in to you, they'll confiscate it because it's prohibited to do business in here. The prisoners hide it in their mouths or stuff it down their trousers. The screws look, but they almost never find anything. We know where to hide it, and a prison guard isn't going to outwit a thief, now is he?"

For those who want to go, there are English or computer classes at 8 a.m. Some more trusted and less serious offenders can clean floors or weed the yards inside the prison. This is a privilege generally reserved for inmates from wing 8 who get a day of their prison sentence knocked off for each day worked. Most prisoners while away the time relating their experiences, illegally trading goods or trying to prize off some metal object, a bit of grating or any other gadget that could be used as a weapon during the next fight.

The inmates' sex life has both institutional and spontaneous expressions. The institutional expressions are regulated by the visits of girlfriends and wives to specially designated cells, but very few have access to conjugal visits. According to Ricardo, one of the imprisoned gang members, "Many here don't receive visits. In this wing [with 215 inmates] only 50 receive conjugal visits. Most jerk off or fuck queers. A porno playing card sells for 20 pesos here and helps you jerk off well.

But there's also a queer. He wanted me to fuck him, but I don't go in for that. Queers make me sick; I don't like them. But several people here do fuck him, even though they're not queer. They just do it out of necessity. They just use him to relieve their sexual energy. That queer is really effeminate, but he'll defend himself if he doesn't like someone. Pitayoya II wanted to fuck him but the queer didn't let him and ended up stabbing him." Machismo, with all of its visceral rejection of homosexuality, persists in jail, but under these particular circumstances the normal rules are suspended and certain forms of behavior are admitted. The sexual life of a prisoner demands another code.

### ***The acid test***

There is a kind of social stratification in prison. Prisoners claim that those inmates with money or who were members of the army or police are allowed certain luxuries forbidden to most of the rest, like comfortable beds, cookers, refrigerators, food and sound systems. To this more institutionalized stratification is added a spontaneous one: the distinction between old prisoners and new ones.

"The old ones here take the new ones' things," explained Ricardo. "The older prisoners catch them by surprise when they've just arrived and take away the little things visitors bring them with so much sacrifice. I defend the new ones, not so they'll give me anything, though if I asked them they would. It's just that I don't like people taking advantage of them. It's different if you steal outside." Some of the old inmates, particularly the repeat offenders, become experts in jail. "In the penitentiary system," explains Fat David, "they treat me like a king. All the thieves, the re-educators, the Modelo heavies know me. So what happens? They treat me real good." The buddy system also works in prison. Old buddies meet up or inmates make new buddies and build up the same beneficial reciprocity as in the streets: "Buddies have to share food, marihuana and crack."

As far as gangs are concerned, jail represents a superior level of socialization that serves to professionalize a gang member's status. Prison is a source of prestige among equals. It's a feather in your cap because it's seen as the supreme test.

Pitayoya II confirms this: "In the streets they might act the Rambo, but when they get to jail they're shitting it. Surviving jail is the acid test of how good you are." Generally speaking, prison returns its wards to the community with a greater capacity to commit crimes. According to Black Eddy, "There are about 300 *Comemueertos* and about 50 old *Comemueertos* in the Modelo who are serving seriously long sentences. There are 17- to 25-year-old *Comemueertos* in the Modelo that are growing increasingly dangerous in there."

### ***Dreaming about getting out***

Gang members from very different barrios get to know each other in prison; they share impressions and reinforce their gang slang. But they also reproduce the model of turf confrontations, with those from the wing's upper floor fighting those on the ground floor. The definition of enemy according to their *barrios* changes to another equally territorial basis, with prisoners from different *barrios* in the same area banding together. In the Modelo, rival gang members from all the different sections of Reparto Schick, a vast tract of poor sub-neighborhoods with a notoriously high index of rival gangs, set aside their differences and act as a unified *barrio*.

For many, prison is a place to reflect on their lives and go over the different things that have happened to them. That's why it also tends to be a place where people reorient their lives. As César recalls, "I got here in '92 and jail's made me think things over. I don't think the same way as before. I'm thinking of getting work with a company when I get out." The idea of freedom is something positive to shoot for and changes certain expectations. "Nowadays there are a lot of kids like me," says César, "based in the gangs and with nothing to look forward to but jail or the cemetery. Gang members who haven't been to jail say that prison can't eat you and that some day you're going to get out. But they haven't experienced it. It's true that it doesn't physically eat you, but it ages you, particularly when you're a kid and you think a lot about the future. I probably never imagined that I was going to end up in a place like this, in jail. A lot of people sink into a world of perdition,



thinking that they're already lost and there's nothing to be done about it. But others think about getting out of this. Here we talk about what we're going to do when we get out. Most think positively. Those who say they're going back to the same thing say so because they still feel protected here and because their mothers are still supporting them in prison."

### ***The street is school, the prison, university***

But the cultural jail imposes itself and re-offending is a never-ending temptation. Susana, for example, intends to go straight, but includes the possibility of the occasional lapse: "When I get out I'm going to shape up. I've got to change because this is no kind of life. I don't want to mess up again. I'd like to work, selling underwear, washing dishes, whatever. My daughter's three now and it's time I cleaned up my act. Maybe every now and then I'll do a bit of petty theft, when there's no cops around. I could work from Monday to Friday and go out thieving on Sundays, to get some money together to set up a sales stand. Maybe there'll be a robbery on Saturday and I'll be able to grab a thousand pesos in one go."

According to one theory, individuals acquire certain behaviors and attitudes through a social learning process, and if that behavior is rewarded in some way it will be more frequently repeated. Robbery as source of income and the enemies made explain the commission of crimes. Black Eddy mentions three sentences: "I've been sentenced three times for causing serious injury and twice for robbery. This was my third time in the Modelo.

The first time I was in for a year and a half, the second for two years and the third for three—my sentence was five years but I swapped the last two years for rehabilitation in the El Patriarcha Foundation." In the end, he also escaped from El Patriarcha. Similarly, Fat David says that he found the Lord while in the Modelo and swore he would never rob or smoke crack again, but that did not stop him from re-offending, thanks to irregularities in the judicial proceedings. "Me and my two brothers are all criminals. I was thrown in jail in '89. I belonged to a gang that

robbed chains, watches and bracelets; we robbed the La Tabacalera tobacco factory and the Victoria brewery. In '97 I was sent down for 27 years for 'atrocious' murder and carrying illegal firearms (AKs, grenades, a shotgun). The jury hit us with 27 years, but within a year the sentence was revoked. My last sentence would have been for 19 years for robbing \$15,000, but I was only in for six months because they couldn't prove anything." In general, gang members agree that passing through prison hones their professionalism and throws them back onto the streets prepared for higher caliber crimes.

### ***Not correcting but punishing***

To penetrate the dehumanizing reality of prison, those detained there have to be something more than objects that are tabulated and counted but not understood. Cuban nationalist José Martí tried to convey to us the pain felt by the prisoner: "Infinite pain should be the only name of these pages. Infinite pain, because the pain of prison is the hardest, the most devastating of pains that kills intelligence and dries the soul leaving it permanently marked."

The science of punishment, the technology of expiation has evolved and turned in on itself, while prison has slowly turned into a permanent social fixture. French philosopher Michel Foucault described part of this route: "If we were to write a history of the social control of the body, we could show that even up to the 18th century the body of individuals was fundamentally a surface on which to inscribe torture and punishment; the body had been made to be tormented and punished. Through the means of control that emerged in the 19th century, the body acquired a totally different significance and stopped being something that should be tormented to become something that has to be educated, reformed, corrected, a body that should acquire aptitudes, receive certain qualities and qualify as a body capable of working."

In medieval Europe there was an isomorphism between the crime and the punishment, as demonstrated in Dante's *Inferno*. The nature of the punishment that befell the body was determined by the deviation it was trying to correct. In his

*Historia de los presidiarios en Puerto Rico (1793-1993)*, Fernando Picó observes that "The purgatory of the afterlife has its counterpart in the convict.... Later, in the 1830s, the terminology of commercial accountancy and civil debt starts to impose itself on penal language.

The secularization of purgation also supposed a greater accuracy in the calculation of the amount of time to be served." So the idea of punishment went from being an isomorphism to being a fixed concept with variable rates: confinement. Time acquired greater weight as the variety of punishments was suppressed. Thus the idea becomes that of doing time, with no intention of rehabilitation. The years are left to go by. The punishment is isolation from society, privation of freedom for a determined amount of time, sexual incapacitation, lack of access to lucrative work, inability to move around freely, dependence on the services provided by the institution and the stigma of having been imprisoned.

The idea of a punishment that aims to correct people by putting them in prison is a relatively new policing idea. It is not enough to merely compensate the direct victim. This idea comes from the supposition that the whole of society has been offended because its laws, its order, have been broken. It is based on the aim of punishing rather than of correcting, and of its four aims—to punish, isolate, persuade and correct—prison only fulfils the first. It does not isolate, because it involves a vigorous trade in goods, services and ideas.

The gang-based social capital, its most criminal talent, multiplies in prisons. Jail does not succeed in persuading people not to commit crimes—not even those who have served time there, as demonstrated by the figures illustrating how many former inmates end up recidivists. It does not correct; it professionalizes. The technologies of correction fail, and in-reality are not really aimed at correcting.

## ***Things were better 130 years ago***

Looking back in Nicaraguan history to a decree approved on September 17, 1866, by the prefect of the department of León "so that the establishments of this class [jails] correspond to the objectives of their institution," we find the establishment and/or confirmation of the following mechanisms. Their current absence represents a step backwards for the penal system in terms of corrective aims.

- The warden slept in the prison building, among other reasons to visit the prisoners at least once a night to ensure that order and decency were being upheld.

- The municipal government had the right to remove the warden in case of negligence or corruption.

- The warden could correct minor infringements by the prisoners through the application of hard labor in the jail. (Now they are punished with more days in jail or by being transferred to even more uncomfortable cells, or, more counterproductive still, to cells with more dangerous inmates.)

- The inmates worked from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. for a salary of ten centavos a day.

- Fruit and provisions were collected as charity for the particular benefit of prisoners who were physically impaired or did not receive food from relatives.

- The magistrates visited the jail to give the inmates the chance to air their complaints. (How many current Supreme Court magistrates have set foot in a Nicaraguan prison?)

- The municipal government had to ensure that workshops and teachers were installed in the jails so the prisoners could learn a trade or practice the one in which they were already skilled.

- Prisoners were given the chance to work, receiving half of the wages immediately with the other half set aside for when they were released.

But all of this has disappeared and we now have a system that involves imprisonment for its own sake. As US prisoner Nathan Leopold so pertinently put it in a symposium on prison systems: "One of the indispensable elements of a balanced and well-adjusted personality is self respect. Prison does everything possible to lower the prisoner's self-esteem. From the moment they are brought in, almost all official actions are calculated to wrest away their individuality, to humiliate them and to reduce them to a robotic state."

Puerto Rican historian Fernando Picó also emphasized this aspect: "The consequent deformation of the inmate's life is of no benefit to society, and deprives the inmate of all human warmth and vital purpose. The instruments of enclosure and vigilance, such as gates, fences, bars, windows, walls and towers are visually aggressive. Undoubtedly, as well as their normal functions, they have the additional capacity to symbolically impose the authority of those responsible for the confinement. But these things are not done to rehabilitate and when they represent the only visual stimulus, their message is a degrading one."

### ***Freedom in exchange for denunciation: The industry of betrayal***

Guarded and punished, inmates suffer from a mechanism in common usage in other areas of our culture. As Foucault observed: "The school system is also based on a kind of judicial power. There are constant punishments and rewards, evaluations, classifications, and it is announced who is the best and who is the worst. Why do they need to punish and reward in order to teach someone something? The system seems obvious, but its obviousness falls apart upon closer reflection." Punishment, the scourge of self-esteem, has been set up as the corrective instrument par excellence, completely replacing all other mechanisms.

Viewed with extreme suspicion, searched and interrogated, those detained—including gang members—do not enjoy conditions conducive to redirecting their lives. This approach does not correct but instead leads to the deformation of the

most basic values. The most obvious example of this distortion comes when inmates are "invited" to become snitches. Fat David, a gang member from Reparto Schick, describes the procedure: "So the guy said to me 'I'm going to send you to the psychologist, you're going to talk to the psychologist on one condition. The man's going to help you, he's going to sort you out, on one condition: I need you to investigate so and so.' Right there in the same wing where you're living. You might be caught for a serious assault; you might be the head of a gang or a member of a notorious band of robbers. Then along comes a police officer, a member of the Criminal Investigations Department, and says, 'Investigate that man for me.' And if I give the right information I'm a free man. But saying that they'll let you out is usually just a trick they use; it's not true. So you snitch on the guy, you keep snitching on him and finally you end up losing out, and so does the other guy, and you end up being seen as a toad, because they themselves make sure you're seen that way when you're no use to them any more."

The system tries to get truth and justice by encouraging denunciation, rewarding betrayal—selling out one's brothers—with the reduction, or offer of reduction, of one's own sentence. This is a distortion of values that also prevails in society, where a worker who betrays a colleague is considered a faithful defender of institutional interests. Punishing and locking up criminals and gang members and turning them into snitches is all passed off as natural.

### ***Good guys, bad guys***

Isolation requires a whole ideological setup that acts to legitimize the proceedings, censuring the offenders to justify the act of locking them up. The gang members assume the labels applied to them: "We're tramps," they say, "and they're healthy kids." Forty years ago US psychotherapist R.D. Laing analyzed the social definition of what is "good" based on his skepticism of the distinction between sanity and madness. What is good and what is bad, who defines it and how it is transmitted are all social products. Laing investigated the meanings of the word "good" and found connotations that tended to approve a certain kind of behavior. According to

Laing, "good" is used in the particular sense in which, for example, a good dog is not a healthy or vital dog, but a beaten down creature that will not leave its kennel except to go for its daily walk at the heels of its master. This use of the word "good" is very common in our culture and is particularly applied to children. This is language at the service of repression. A "good" person is one who adapts to the role the family assigns in accord with the expectations of its older members. Any attempts to act independently are considered "bad" or perverse. This situation is unsustainable, however, as it supposes the stagnation of development. Puberty is the moment in which we question the model proposed by our elders.

We can extrapolate from the situation of individuals within the family circle in order to understand the role played by certain groups in the social sphere. Laws, as an expression of the spirit of a certain people, prescribe what is right and what is wrong. The police and prison play a repressive role. Who is healthy: those who view the current situation as normal? Effectively, "healthiness" belongs to a determined context and only makes sense within that context. The authorities and laws praise a given conduct at certain moments, while penalizing it at others. Laws change, thus changing what is considered crime, those to blame and sentences.

### ***A Sandinista precursor: The "divine mob"***

The gang members that are currently condemned had a precursor—or perhaps it is better to talk of an embryonic form—in the role played by certain groups in the 1980s. These groups were an expression of popular agitation aimed against the wealthy classes that opposed the Sandinista government and provided a legitimate release for popular discontent, legitimized and ably manipulated by the FSLN. They were dubbed "divine mobs" by Tomás Borge, the Sandinista leader most inclined to theologize reality, and consisted mainly of young people from marginalized *barrios*. They had an almost military structure and a well-coordinated call-up capacity and were thus far from the spontaneous eruptions that the official Sandinista media tried to sell to the public.

For the government the mobs were shock troops that could be used to snuff out any critical demonstration, thus playing the role currently institutionally assigned to the riot police. For the young people, enrolling in the mobs provided the chance to vent an aggression that was socially approved and blessed by the national authorities. Aggression that could have been aimed against the government was therefore astutely recycled and transformed into the tacitly institutional repression of opposition forces. The ideology of the times sold the idea that all of the country's problems were rooted in the activities of imperialism and of its cronies within the country and the war cry was that "against the enemy, anything goes!"

### ***What constitutes peace?***

The tactic has changed now: if the system previously channeled discontent, it now represses it. This may be because the current ideology does not condemn certain situations, preferring to minimize them and declare them irrelevant. It is socially acceptable to spend \$70 on a perfume, for example, when that represents the monthly salary of a primary school teacher. The system guarantees that we are free to spend our own money on what we want to, but should young children beg for money at the traffic lights? Is that normal? Is it "good"?

The overriding logic is that of utilitarianism: it doesn't matter how much or for how long some members of the group suffer, the important thing is to increase the well-being of the group as a whole. And the group's happiness is mathematically expressed in the growth of the Gross Domestic Product. Nobody dares rock this boat; it is prohibited to "disturb the peace." But what constitutes that "peace"? Four-year-olds begging for money at traffic lights until 2 in the morning? The rolling back of the agrarian reform? Earning 20 córdobas [\$1.50] a day while trying to support a family of eight? The fact that the Comptroller General of the Republic winds up in jail for doing his job?

The same question comes up again and again: what is "healthy"? The fact that this scenario seems normal? It seems appropriate here to quote Kierkegaard's main epistemology: the world does not look the same viewed from a hut as viewed



from a palace. Would Noel Ramírez, the arrogant president of Nicaragua's Central Bank, have such a positive opinion of economic growth and job generation if he had to spend the whole day selling icewater for five cents a bag under a scorching sun at a Managua traffic light? And would he have the courage to continue such "work" if he were offered the chance at a better income selling drugs or stealing?

### ***The head of a rotten fish begins to stink first***

The corruption displayed by the country's political parties and state officials and the impunity of the criminal big fish is also related to the increase of delinquency and discontent expressed by the youth gangs. How to trace the thread linking illegal macro acts with illegal micro acts? Where do they overlap? What new social class is growing richer and emerging as a result of the terrible shortcomings in the rule of law? What is the line connecting juvenile delinquency to the absolute illegitimacy of the Nicaraguan legal apparatus? A hint is offered to us in the cynical words of the English bishop Watson, preaching to the Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1804: "The laws are good, but unfortunately they are being flouted by the lower classes. Certainly the higher classes do not take them much into consideration either, but this would not be of much import if it were not for the fact that the higher classes provide an example for the lower ones."

Although the impunity of the powerful is obscene, they themselves make a great to-do about the misdemeanors committed by others. Why does being poor not constitute an extenuating circumstance? Why does being rich, having received an education and coming from a stable family not constitute an aggravating circumstance?

Jail is not the answer to juvenile delinquency, whether or not linked to youth gangs. Jail forms part of a whole system dedicated to disqualifying the discontent expressed through the youth gangs. That the gangs attract so many young people reflects the lack of governance palpable at so many levels, expressed in this case

in society's inability to satisfy the demands of youth from poor social sectors, who are in fact the majority of young people in the country. Generally speaking, the government's solutions are little more than a self-caricature: if the children beg for money at the traffic lights... the government replaces the traffic lights with traffic circles; if students and transport workers protest and erect barricades using street paving blocks ... the government paves the streets with asphalt.

As long as this situation is allowed to continue and the solutions focus on guarding and punishing, youth gangs will be around for a long time yet.



**An Urban Gang Moves  
from Social  
to Economic Violence**

# An Urban Gang Moves from Social to Economic Violence

*F*ive years ago they warred with each other and defended their barrio. Today, they're selling crack and accumulating capital, their unique "love" of their neighborhood forgotten. This recent evolution of Nicaragua's youth gangs largely reflects their country's evolution—from collective projects to individual interests.

DENNIS RODGERS

In 1996-97, I lived in a poor neighborhood, or barrio, in eastern Managua to study the life and activities of its youth gang, which I even became part of for a while. Some of my preliminary findings were recounted in an article published in *envío* in August 1997. In February 2002, I returned to this same barrio for a month and a half, to see how the gang had evolved. I shared some of my findings in *envío*'s March 2004 issue, and now offer some of the conclusions I've drawn.

## ***A consequence of peace, an addiction to war***

Prosaic forms of violence, such as crime and delinquency, have become ubiquitous in Nicaragua since the end of the *contra* war in 1990, with the number of crimes committed rising from 28,005 in 1990 to 97,500 in 2003, according to official Police

statistics. Not surprisingly, then, a 1999 survey by the Nicaraguan NGO Ethics and Transparency cited in a United Nations Development Program report showed crime to be one of the principal problems concerning Nicaraguans today. It also found that youth gangs were seen as the most likely perpetrators of crime. Even if they are by no means solely responsible for the widespread crime in contemporary Nicaragua, they are certainly the most visible, roaming city streets, robbing, beating, terrorizing and often killing.

Nicaragua's youth gang history can be traced back to the 1940s, but gangs were a relatively small-scale phenomenon up until the 1990s; in fact, the gang phenomenon almost completely disappeared from view during the 1980s, partly because of military conscription and the extensive organized community vigilance in urban neighborhoods promoted by the Sandinista government. There was an explosion in gang formation following the end of the war and change of government in 1990. In many ways, this was less a consequence of the war than of the advent of peace, as most of these new gang numbers were youths aged 16 to 20 who had been discharged from either the army or the *contra* forces.

The individuals I interviewed in 1996-97 who had become gang members during this period always gave two general reasons for joining a gang. One was that the change of regime in 1990 led to a devaluation of their social status, which as soldiers defending the nation or as "freedom fighters" had been high within their respective social contexts.

Forming a gang had been a means of reaffirming themselves vis-à-vis a wider society that seemed to "forget" them very rapidly. The other was that forming a gang seemed a way to recapture some of the dramatic, yet marking and almost addictive, adrenaline-charged experiences of war, danger and death, as well as the comradeship and solidarity they had lived through as conscripts or guerrillas, which were rapidly becoming scarce commodities in an increasingly politically polarized and ever-impoverishing postwar Nicaragua.

Gangs proliferated and grew rapidly in Nicaragua's early postwar years. Gang membership is a finite social role in most youth formations around the world, with individuals "maturing out" of the gang at some point over the age of 18, so by the mid-1990s most gang members were no longer the war-affected youths who had initially formed the gangs. Nonetheless, the gangs were a ubiquitous feature of Managua, manifesting their strong degree of institutional autonomy. At its most basic, a gang refers to a very definite kind of local social institution, which generally consists of a variably sized group of overwhelmingly male youths aged between 7 and 23 who engage in illicit and violent behavior—although not all gang activities are either illicit or violent—and have a particular territorial dynamic.

Most gangs tend to be associated with a particular urban neighborhood, although larger neighborhoods frequently have more than one gang and not all neighborhoods have even one. The reasons for their greater or lesser presence include the level of social fragmentation, number of youths, the sort of other opportunities neighborhood youth might have and economic factors—the richer the neighborhood, the less likely it is to have a gang.

The Nicaraguan National Police estimated that in 1999 there were some 110 gangs in Managua alone—which is made up of some 600 neighborhoods and spontaneous settlements—involving about 8,500 youths. Apart from likely being on the low side, these figures also do not reflect the fact that youth gangs are a changing phenomenon, as the following description of the evolution of the gang in my *barrio* between 1996-97 and 2002, makes clear.

### ***The gang violence in 1996-97***

In 1996-97, the gang was made up of about 100 youths, all males aged between 7 and 22. It was subdivided into distinct age and geographical subgroups. There were three age cohorts—7-12 years olds, 13-17 years olds and those 18 and over—and three geographical subgroups, respectively associated with the central area of the neighborhood, its west side neighborhood and its east side. All

these different subgroups considered themselves part of a single gang but they generally operated separately, except during gang warfare, when different subgroups would come together to defend the neighborhood or attack another.

Much of the gang activity involved acts of violence. While not the gang's exclusive behavior pattern, violence was in many ways its distinguishing feature, setting its members apart from other youth. In 1996-97, most gang crime was at a petty level, such as mugging, pick pocketing or shoplifting, although a significant proportion did also involve much more serious and violent acts, including armed robbery, assault, rape and murder, particularly by older group members.

Perhaps the most frequent form of gang violence at the time were the regular conflicts between gangs, which turned parts of Managua into quasi-war zones, as gang members fought each other with weaponry ranging from sticks, stones, and knives to AK-47s, fragmentation grenades and mortars, with often dramatic consequences for both gang members and the local population. While at first glance these gang wars seemed highly chaotic and anarchic, they were in fact very organized and displayed regular patterns. Moreover, even if unquestionably frequently deleterious for local residents, they also had positive implications.

### ***Gang wars: Tactics, strategy and ritual***

While the triggers for gang wars ranged from assaults on individuals to territorial encroachment by other gangs, they always revolved around either attacking or protecting a neighborhood, with much of the fighting specifically focused either on inflicting or limiting damage to both infrastructure and inhabitants. The gang organized itself into "companies" that operated strategically, expertly covering each other whenever advancing or retreating.

There was generally a "reserve force," and although weapons were an individual's own property, each gang member was distributed among the different

“companies” to balance out firepower, except when a high-powered “attack commando” was needed for a specific tactical purpose.

The conflicts themselves were highly regulated, even ritualized. For example, the first battle typically involved fighting with stones and bare hands, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks and staffs, then to knives and broken bottles, then mortars, and eventually to guns, AK-47s and fragmentation grenades. Although the escalation rate could vary, its sequence never did; gangs did not launch their wars with mortars, guns or AK-47s. Moreover, battles involved specific behavior patterns by active participants, intimately linked to what members called “living in the shadow of death” (*somos muerte arriba*).

This expression reflected the very real fact that gang members often found themselves in dangerous situations, which in itself constituted a dimension of the lives of gang members critical to understanding the significance of the ways they related to each other and to wider society. At the same time, living in the shadow of death was more than just a corporeal state of being for them; they used the expression to describe their attitudes and practices. Living in the shadow of death entailed displaying specific behavior patterns, such as exposing oneself purposefully to danger to taunt the enemy during battles. These battles became almost a kind of ritualized ballet, with gang members running around, exposing themselves to risk, shooting away, whatever the odds and whatever the consequences.

Living in the shadow of death meant taking risks and displaying bravado, not asking questions or calculating one’s chances, but simply going ahead and acting, almost daring death to do its best. It meant being violent and being exposed to violence, but with style, in a cheerfully exuberant way that made it almost an esthetic expression.

As such, gang violence was more than simply a practice. It was a veritable way of life, an enduring everyday process that became a primary constitutive force in the construction of the individual gang member self, as well as contributing



to the constitution of the group. Gang wars helped reaffirm the group by emphasizing the primordial distinction between “us” and “them.”

### ***Violence with a social dimension***

At the same time, gang violence was about more than just the construction of the gang or individual; it was arguably about a broader social structuration process, for the gang members justified their fighting other gangs as primarily representing an “act of love” for their neighborhood. In short, an all-important golden rule of gang behavior was not to prey on local neighborhood residents, and in fact to actively protect them from outside thieves. As one named Julio put it, “You show the neighborhood you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, protecting them from other gangs... You look after the neighborhood; you help them, keep them safe....”

Despite the often negative consequences of gang wars for local neighborhood residents, this is not as implausible as it may initially seem. In many ways, the ritualized nature of the warfare can be conceived as a kind of restraining mechanism; escalation is a positive constitutive process, in which each stage calls for more intense action, and is thus always seen as under the actors’ control. At the same time, the escalation process provided the locals with a framework through which to organize their lives, a sort of “early warning system.” As such gang wars can be seen as having “scripted performances,” a means of circumscribing what Hannah Arendt has called the “all-pervading unpredictability” of violence.

Although gang wars had clearly deleterious effects for the local urban population, they were indirect, as gangs never directly victimized their own neighborhood population. The threat stemmed from *other* gangs, with which the local gang would engage in a prescribed manner to limit the scope of violence in its own neighborhood, thereby creating a kind of predictable “safe haven” for local

inhabitants. In a wider context of chronic violence and insecurity, this function was positive, even if not always 100% effective.

Despite bystanders frequently being injured and even sometimes killed in the crossfire of gang warfare, the local inhabitants recognized it as such. As a resident named Sergio put it, “the gang looks after the neighborhood and screws others, it protects us and lets us feel a little safer, lets us live our lives a little bit more easily.”

In many ways, though, the local gang did more than simply provide the neighborhood a certain sense of security: it also constituted itself as a symbolic index of community, as its “care” for the neighborhood stood in sharp contrast to the wider context of fragmentation and breakdown characterizing contemporary Nicaragua. This was also reflected in the existence of a certain identification with the gang and its exploits among local residents, and ultimately the gang constituted the principal anchor point for a collective *barrio* identity in an otherwise fractured community.

Seen this way, the gang and its behavior patterns provided important reference points for the general collective organization of social life in the *barrio*, but it did so in a reduced way, restricted to the local neighborhood, and in what in the final analysis has to be considered more of a palliative than an enabling way. Ultimately, such a form of local social order would never be viable, and indeed, when I returned to the *barrio* in 2002, both the neighborhood and the local gang dynamics had changed radically.

### ***2002: Everything has changed with the omnipresence of crack***

In 2002, the gang had shrunk from being a group of about 100 members aged 7 to 22, with age and geographical subgroups, to a single group of just 18 youths aged

17 to 23. New violent and illicit activities had replaced those of five years earlier. In particular, gang wars were a thing of the past, individual crime was up as were levels of brutality.

Most dramatically, the communitarian ethos of “loving the neighborhood” had disappeared. Gang members no longer cared about the community and in fact now actively preyed on their own local population. As a gang member named Roger put it: “If people in the *barrio* get attacked, if they’re robbed, if they have a problem, who cares? We don’t lift a finger to help them nowadays... We just laugh ... Who cares what happens to them?”

A variety of factors contributed to the change in dynamics, but the most important seemed to be the emergence of hard drugs, more specifically crack cocaine. Although modest quantities of crack could be obtained in Nicaragua in 1996-97, it was not a prevalent drug; marijuana was the most widespread drug at the time, along with glue, both of which were domestically produced and sold on a relatively small scale. Crack began to supplant marijuana and glue around mid-1999, rapidly spreading to the extent that it was omnipresent by the time I came back.

The *barrio* gang had a dual relationship to crack, first as a privileged site of consumption, and second as a drug dealing institution. With regard to the first, drug use among gang members had increased tremendously compared to 1996-97. Although it was an important element of gang identity in 1996-97, less was consumed than today; moreover, the main drug then was marijuana, which has very different effects to crack. Consuming crack enhances aggressiveness, as a gang member called Chucki emphasized: “This crack makes you really violent, I tell you... When I smoke up and somebody insults me, I immediately want to kill him, to get a machete and do him in, defend myself... I don’t stop and think, talk to him, ask him why or whatever... I don’t even recognize him, all I want to do is kill him... it’s the drug, I tell you, that’s where the violence comes from...”

Not surprisingly, then, there were more acts of spontaneous, unpredictable public violence in the *barrio* in 2002 than in 1996-97, many of which could clearly be linked to crack consumption. In many ways, though, what people complained about most was not the rise in individual acts of violence as such, but the broader, generalized sense of increased insecurity and uncertainty that now marked neighborhood life.

The pattern of spontaneous, unpredictable violence contrasted starkly with the ritualized gang wars of the past that had allowed local residents to predict potential outbreaks and organize their lives around them. Not only had gang wars disappeared, but the gang no longer acted as a bulwark against wider criminality. In fact, it now regularly preyed on local residents and threatened with retribution anybody who would dare denounce them.

### ***The gang was a natural for metamorphosing into a drug institution***

But while this new behavior pattern was clearly linked to drug consumption, it was also the result of the gang having become a drug dealing institution. Drugs in Nicaragua move from the Caribbean coast, where they arrive from Colombia by sea, to Managua and from there up the Pan-American highway to Honduras, the next stop on the route to the US and Canada. Those facilitating transport in Managua take a cut of the shipments to make money distributing it locally; a veritable drug economy has thus sprung up in the city during the past few years, with gang members buying wholesale from big drug traffickers then selling small quantities on street corners as “*muleros*”

The average income generated for gang members dealing crack is substantial in local terms, the equivalent of US\$350-600 a month, which is upwards of three times the average wage in Nicaragua. These rewards from crime are in striking contrast with the past; in 1996-97, a gang member’s average revenue from

delinquency was about US\$50, and most of that was spent on items of immediate gratification such as alcohol, glue, or marijuana, or of conspicuous consumption such as a Nike cap or shoes. While a significant proportion of a gang members' drug income is still spent on items associated with conspicuous consumption—now more on the order of gold chains and watches, however—most is used to improve the material living conditions of gang members and their families, as well as to reinvest in increasing their drug business.

### ***From a social to a business orientation***

The gang's rise to prominence within the emergent drugs trade is not surprising. As the dominant violent institution within the neighborhood, it was ideally positioned. Due to the illicit nature of drugs, a drug economy cannot rely on classic regulatory and contract-enforcement mechanisms such as the law, and violence constitutes the next best means to impose regularity onto transactions (which is of course implicitly what the power of the law rests on).

Although gang members make their drug transactions on an individual basis, the gang as a whole acts as a cooperative interest group to ensure the proper functioning and protection of the local drug economy in general. Not surprisingly, it generally employs extremely brutal means. For example, in 2001, *muleros* from an adjacent neighborhood set up shop on one of the entrances to the *barrio* to intercept its crack clients. Contrary to the gang wars of the past, the *barrio* gang simply fell on their rivals, shooting two dead and leaving three critically injured.

In many ways, the change in violent behavior patterns and decline in gang warfare were almost inevitable. The gangs have changed from socially oriented institutions into economically oriented ones, which means that gang members now have little interest in engaging in activities such as gang wars that might discourage potential clients from coming into their neighborhood. Instead, their violence serves to uphold their drug transactions and ensure the smooth accumulation of capital.

## ***As evolved Nicaragua, so evolved the gang***

Although the gang in 2002 seems at first glance to be a very different institutional form than the one in 1996-97, with the earlier one more socially oriented and the later one more economically oriented, they are clearly linked. In fact, to a certain extent it is the same gang with the same individuals. The 18 members in 2002 had all been part of one subgroup of the 1996-97 gang (the 13-17 age group from the east side of the *barrio*). At certain levels, they even have the same violent behavior patterns, albeit not necessarily in the same way, with the 1996-97 behavior a form of social violence, while in 2002 it was a form of economic violence. Seen this way, what we have is not so much two different institutions as one that has evolved significantly between 1997 and 2002.

The possible paths of social transformation are neither obvious nor certain; rather, they are a function of a whole myriad of factors, particularly wider political economy issues. For example, the emergence of the drug trade in Nicaragua and the concomitant effects on the gang and its violence is arguably a result of the particular nature of the global economy and Nicaragua's place within it. Thus to understand the underlying nature of this youth gang transformation, it has to be analyzed within the context of Nicaragua's development, understanding the gang as an institution embedded in this specific content.

In many ways, contemporary Nicaragua is caught in a predicament of vicious, spiraling crisis and social breakdown. Violence, chronic poverty and what the US political scientist William I. Robinson has called "maldevelopment" hold the country tightly in their grips. There is little ground for optimism, either internally—considering the venality and self-interested corruption that characterizes the country's political class—or externally—international aid being conditional on following the IMF's bankrupt neoliberal prescriptions. Moreover, the Nicaraguan economy suffers from severe and increasing imbalances and is generally increasingly uncompetitive in the context of the global economy.

What the gang in 1996-97 arguably represented, then, was a radical and desperate form of social structuration, an attempt to constitute a local collective social order through violent means in the face of a wider process of social breakdown with chronic violence and insecurity. It was an emergent social morphology that attempted to step into the void precipitated by the ambient crisis and social breakdown at multiple levels—individual, group and community—by deploying a socially oriented violence.

Admittedly, though, this was a desperate form of social ordering, and a highly unstable one at that. Not surprisingly, the gang had become a key institution organizing the emergent drugs trade in Nicaragua by 2002, directing its violence towards ensuring the proper operation of drug markets for its own benefit, no longer protecting or caring about the local neighborhood. Its ordering function was no longer geared to maintaining a neighborhood community but simply to maintaining a local market and bettering their own lives and those of their families.

From this perspective, their violence can be qualified as having been economic in nature. What this evolution can be said to constitute, then, is a story of two halves that reflects the evolution of wider Nicaragua society over the past decade or so. The first half, which culminated around 1998, involved a desperate attempt to mitigate the fragmenting of Nicaraguan social life through the creation of a restricted and ultimately unviable form of local collective social order, a form of localized social sovereignty.

This form of social ordering was limited in scope, taking the neighborhood as its anchor point from which to (re)build a social imaginary in socially fractured Nicaragua rather than any national or even city-wide anchor point, for example. But it was social in scope, building on the last vestiges of an ethos born in the heady days of the revolutionary social transformation.

The second half of the story, on the other hand, is about a turning away from the social, about grasping a new opportunity for the construction of a new, indivi-

dual-based, improved way of life that emerged in the form of the drug trade and drug-dealing entrepreneurship.

These are not contradictory stories, however. One is a natural continuation of the other, as a second building on the ruins of the first. The big picture, then, is one of a continuing attempt to establish some kind of sustainable way of life in the poor *barrios* of contemporary urban Nicaragua on a basis that has been constantly shrinking in scope in the face of violence, poverty and the erosion of hope.

It has been shrinking from the level of neighborhood to gang-group to individual gang member-entrepreneur, in other words an inexorable slide from the collective to the individual... And this slide mirrors the evolution of Nicaragua's recent history, with the triumph of neoliberal ideas and associated notions of individualism and the freedom of markets. At the same time, however, rather than seeing this process of dissociation from the collective to the individual as a regression, the evolution of Nicaraguan gangs can be interpreted in another way.

Borrowing from Karl Marx, the progression of Nicaraguan gangs from being socially focused organizations to economically focused ones can be seen as a move from a certain form of impoverished "primitive socialism" to vehicles for localized "primitive accumulation" processes. In many ways, the bigger picture epitomized by the evolution of Nicaraguan youth gangs is one in which the relative socioeconomic egalitarianism of the 1980s and its echo into the 1990s is being torn apart by a socioeconomic differentiation process. The drug trade in Nicaragua has significantly changed everyday life at the *barrio* level, initiating conditions in which gang members have become something of a local entrepreneurial elite. For Marx, such a process of socioeconomic differentiation was the necessary first step for more extensive economic development in the form of capitalism.

Whether the evolution of Nicaraguan gangs reflects an instance of this developmental transformation at the local level in a more general context of stagnation remains to be seen, but in a broader context where there seems to be



little spurring of any form of socioeconomic progress, it bears thinking about. At the same time, irrespective of whether it reflects a positive process or not, the evolutionary path of Nicaraguan gangs between 1997 and 2002 probably does not bode well for the country's future. At worst, they can potentially be seen as the harbingers of a Hobbesian hair-trigger society, where the law of the most violent rules and life is short, nasty and brutish, while at best, according to the further development of Marx's "primitive accumulation" argument, they would be sowing the seeds of much larger future (class) conflicts.



**Nicaraguan Youth Gangs:  
From Throwing Stones  
to Smoking Rocks**

# Nicaraguan Youth Gangs: From Throwing Stones to Smoking Rocks

**N**icaraguan youth gang members have evolved from throwing stones to smoking “rocks” of cocaine; from planting their feet firmly on the ground of the territory they fearlessly defended to floating in the clouds of a drug high. Drug use and dealing have taken center stage in their activities.

JOSÉ LUIS ROCHA

The most distinguished mention of a 1970s youth gang member in Nicaragua is found in Ernesto Cardenal’s memoirs of the Sandinista revolution. *Charrasca* was the notorious leader of a gang dedicated to petty theft and smoking marijuana in the city of León. He and his group provided invaluable support to the Sandinista National Liberation Front in its operations against the National Guard in the 1979 insurrection that brought down the Somoza dictatorship.

## ***Heroes, champions, avengers...***

*Charrasca* and his group went from being common criminals to social bandits, an evolution similar to the rural bandits studied by British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm. According to Hobsbawm, the essential thing about social bandits is that they are

peasants living outside of the law, whom the lord and the state consider criminals, but who remain within peasant society and are considered by their people to be heroes, champions, avengers, fighters for justice, sometimes even liberation leaders, but in any case people to be admired, helped and supported. He describes them as men who find themselves excluded from the normal path of their people and therefore forced outside the law where they fall into delinquency. Taken as a whole, they are merely the symptoms of crisis and tension in their society, including hunger, plague, war and whatever else distorts it.

But Hobsbawm adds that such groups of bandits, with their forces reduced by times of either tribulation or hope, can unconsciously turn into something else at great apocalyptic moments. As in the case of Java, they can merge into the broad mobilizations of peasants that abandon fields and houses to wander through the countryside full of exalted hope. Alternatively they can turn into peasant armies, as in Italy in 1861, or become soldiers of the revolution, as did Italy's legendary bandit Carmine Crocco Donetelli in 1860. Hobsbawm concludes that bandits are valiant both in their actions and as victims. They die defiantly and well and countless youths from poor neighborhoods and suburbs, who possess nothing more than the common—but highly appreciable—gift of force and valor, can identify with them. In a society in which men live subordinated, assistants to metal machines or like movable parts of a human machine, bandits live and die with their boots on.

Like most of the bandits Hobsbawm studied, *Charrasca* met a tragic end. But his legend lived on to remind us that many Nicaraguan youth gang members of the seventies, navigating the historical currents of the time, managed to give their deviations and violence a social content.

### ***Charrasca: Prince of the lumpen***

Ernesto Cardenal described this gang leader in his book *La revolución perdida* [The Revolution Lost]: "I met *Charrasca* in Cuba following the triumph [of the Sandinista revolution]. He was like the prince of the lumpen and had become famous throughout Nicaragua as the terror of the National Guard. The guards ran

when they heard his challenging voice announcing in the darkness of the night: "Here's *Charrasca*!" That time in Cuba, in the protocol house provided to me by Haydée Santamaría, he lifted up his shirt and showed us all the bullet holes in his thorax. There were seventeen in all. He hated the National Guard so much he committed acts of extreme cruelty, such as tying up a guard with barbed wire, placing him in some car tires and then setting fire to them. And it was that hatred that led him to ally with the Sandinistas. The alliance with the FSLN included not only *Charrasca*, but the whole of his gang, consisting of marihuana smokers, drunks, anarchists and semi-criminals who were nonetheless very brave and controlled by no one except *Charrasca*, whom they obeyed blindly...

"Just after the triumph of the revolution, *Charrasca* was imprisoned in *El Fortín*, along with the prisoners from the Somoza regime, for some kind of anti-social behavior. I'm not sure if he was imprisoned more than once. What I do remember is two or three self-accusations that appeared in the newspaper for errors or acts of indiscipline he had committed, written with the humility of an Ignatius of Loyola. In fact, that was why he had been sent to Cuba, where I met him: to rehabilitate him more. After he returned to Nicaragua, *Charrasca* lost his head, killed several members of his family (I can't remember if his wife was among them) and fled on a motorbike pursued by the police. When the police caught up with him, he took out his pistol and killed himself. He died in the same place in front of the San Felipe church where he had been shot so many times and lived to tell the tale."

### ***With the end of the contra war being a gang member bestowed status***

The application of the structural adjustment program and slashing of the state apparatus initiated by the Sandinista government at the end of the eighties coincided with the reappearance of youth gangs in Managua. *Las Pitufas*, *Los Pitufos*, *Los Mao Mao* and *Los Bariloche* were the most famous then. Some of their members, who are now over 35, recall those first clashes between youth gangs as break

dance competitions and fights with *chacos* [two sticks joined by a short chain] and the like, but never with firearms. Similar gangs with similar characteristics also emerged in other Latin American countries; they came to be known as *maras* in neighboring countries like El Salvador and Honduras and *pandillas* in Nicaragua. The Mexican "communicologist" Rossana Reguillo recalls how "the *mara*, the band, the clique, the crew became alternative forms of socialization and belonging, arenas where they could compensate for the disenchantment and vacuousness of political meaning. In these arenas, strongly coded and codified in the sense of honor, many Latin American youths found answers to the growing uncertainty of the neoliberal order that showed its ferocious face in the eighties."

According to British anthropologist Dennis Rodgers, many members of this new wave of gang activity were 16- to 18-year-olds who were veterans of the Sandinista Popular Army or the Nicaraguan Resistance. The gangs boasted well-planned military strategies and ritualized battles, with a gradual increase in the use of dangerous weapons. They had a well-defined structure and a certain command of military tactics. Everything was placed at the service of the budding territorially-based semantics and normative sectarianism that informed the youth gang craze.

All the individuals Rodgers interviewed who became members in the early 1990s mentioned the same reason for belonging to a youth gang: the change of government in 1990 following the FSLN's electoral defeat led to a devaluation of their social status. They had previously enjoyed a great deal of recognition in their respective social contexts as defenders of the revolution or "freedom fighters." Forming a gang became a way to reaffirm themselves in a society that rapidly appeared to be forgetting them. It was also a way to recapture something of the still attractive and almost addictive drama of the adrenalin-, danger- and death-filled experiences of war they had lived through as soldiers or guerrilla fighters.

Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla also detected this relationship between the end of the war and outbreaks of gang activity: "Not unlike the increasing

nationalism of recent years, peace means that the structure of bipolar confrontation gives way and the countries' own internal tensions rise to the surface. After the wars, violence remained in the air, as did the 'know-how' to handle arms and manufacture homemade weapons, while organized crime groups remained, which while different from the youth *maras*, appear to strengthen them either directly—by using them—or indirectly."

For Rodgers, the youth gangs and their violent practices provided the populations of poor neighborhoods a concrete sense of belonging that they lacked on the city or national level due to the chronic and widely disseminated insecurity predominating at the time in Nicaragua. Rodgers found that, apart from the evangelical churches or small networks of friends or groups that intermittently met, there were no alternative forms of collective youth organization to the youth gang in the Managua neighborhood in which he did his field work. He thus viewed the gangs as a last redoubt of social collectivity in a context of generalized distrust and social atomization.

### ***Neighborhood defenders with a code of honor***

From then on, robbery became a favorite gang activity, but the members never put their illicit earnings into the family economy. They were always quick to spend them on cigarettes, alcohol, shoe glue for sniffing—one of the cheapest and most common drugs available—or marihuana, all of which tended to form part of gang consumption. In 1999, researchers from Managua's Central American University (UCA) conducted a second research study on youth gangs in the country. One of their findings was the sense of a neighborhood "body" built up by the different forms of gang militancy. This body included adults as providers of arms, munitions, money, information and protection from the police and victims' protests. That explains why gangs were mentioned as having up to 80 members.

The gang members usually enjoyed broad acceptance within the confines of their own neighborhood. They were seen as its defenders, while other gangs from

other neighborhoods were seen as the threat. Fights between members of rival gangs—their main activity—had a group objective and a series of individual benefits, including the building up of reputation, respect and power. The youths who controlled the neighborhood enforced their law. This role as neighborhood defenders and legislators was a mechanism that increased their status and respect. The fights satisfied their hunger for image as their fame transcended their neighborhood's limits.

For the gang to function as an institution, it had a code of honor, a tacit set of rules to which everyone submitted. One of the main rules was the prohibition of robbery within the neighborhood. The gang members were protectors of their neighborhood and couldn't endanger its inhabitants or undermine the respect they had built up. Not swindling their brothers-in-theft was another of the code's basic articles. US criminologist Edwin Sutherland found an identical set of rules among US thieves: cheating on colleagues by declaring a lesser amount than was actually stolen and pocketing the difference was the most horrible crime imaginable. Among the gang members from Managua's Reparto Schick neighborhood, being a snitch was the worst possible offence and was severely punished.

One of Sutherland's informants described the code's role and the censure of informants, explaining that while few moral rules were established among the thieves, there were a number of tacit rules. It was accepted by all that there could be no informants. Cases of informing are so rare that they barely merited mention. If a thief did inform, the others wouldn't stoop to the same level to get even; they had more effective methods. All they needed to do was spread the news that he was a snitch and his thieving days were over.

Snitching endangers the group's very survival. In the youth gangs, the sense of loyalty to the collective is at the core of their *raison d'être*. So snitching is the most cruelly punished crime—or deviant behavior, if you like. Punishments include gang rape and shaved heads for women and beatings or murder for men.



## ***From throwing stones to smoking "rocks"***

The profile and functioning of Nicaraguan youth gangs evolved notably between 1999 and 2005, with a change in motivations, procedures and emphasis on activities. The biggest change, from which others also sprang, could be summed up as the gang members passing from throwing stones to smoking crack. They went from having their feet planted on the ground through the defense of their territory to floating in the clouds on a crack-induced high. This doesn't imply that gang members didn't do crack, marihuana, glue or cocaine before, but it does express a change in the emphasis of their activities. Drug use and dealing have taken a central place, entirely displacing the defense of the neighborhood or fights on enemy turf.

The most active youth gang members are now more unwilling to give information about their activities. Some work as drug "mules," and they all know even the most innocuous drug outlet within a radius of one kilometer and frequently have information on dealing in neighborhoods a long way from their own. They have to protect not only themselves but also the whole complex network in which they're inserted: the dealers who supply them and shower them with gifts, the clients who demand secrecy, the neighbors who cover for them and the police who sell their silence and collaboration at a high price.

They're no longer obsessed with death. The rock, the joint and the line are the escape routes, the links that unite—there's a lot of collective use—and the activities that engage and provide status. The new occupations of drug users or pushers could be at least in part the effect of the gang members' "university." As Falla puts it, "If the street is the youth gang's school, then jail is their university." Some gang members I interviewed during a research project in 1999 were linked throughout their stay in Managua's Modelo prison to small groups of drug dealers. But such links are only one aspect of the change, one of the accidental conditions that made it possible. The structural condition was the multiplication of the drug trade in Nicaragua once the big cartels were forced to find alternative routes that ended up passing through Central America.

More drug use requires more income. Youth gang members have to opt for legal and cheaper drugs—such as alcoholic beverages—to avoid the stigma of being criminals... and just be considered dipsomaniacs. Otherwise, to always have enough money for drugs, they have to engage in muggings or armed robbery and thus have to bear the stigma. One thing leads to the other: drug use encourages robbery. The less daring turn into "wet clothes thieves," entering neighbor's yards to steal recently washed clothes hanging on the lines. The gang members have stopped defending their neighborhoods and now appear more than anything like juvenile delinquents who steal in backyards and on the street, and hang out to the point that they feel more identified with the label "bum" than "youth gang member."

### ***A new identity and younger***

Many young people talk about being part of a group, but they don't always identify it as a gang, frequently reserving that label for neighboring groups, which they still call by names that have since been abandoned. As a result of this dissolution of identity, the collectives are christened with less honorable titles that make a vague reference to some feature in the area where they live or allude to their main activity. "The ones from the paved part," "the duck stealers"... This decline in identity is linked to the degradation of the code of honor.

The abandonment of a considerable part of the code and its agglutinating ethic was one of the most glaring symptoms of the change taking place in Nicaraguan gangs even before 2002 and which is now quite evident. On the one hand the relaxing of their ethic is associated with the loss of internal gang cohesion, a phenomenon directly related to drug dealing. On the other, that same laxity meant that the gang members started stealing in their own barrio and stopped being perceived as its defenders in a rapid erosion of their social capital. The drugs' very effects have relaxed once sacred clauses in the code, such as not robbing from neighbors. The neighbors' vulnerability is an expression of the deterioration of the social capital of both the gang members and the neighborhood.

In 2002, Rodgers found that the gang members were no longer imbued with the ethos of love for the neighborhood; rather they were perceived as an intimidating and threatening presence.

Another change is the age range of gang members. In 1999, they tended to be between 18 and 25 years old, but by now most are somewhere between 15 and 18. Many of the leaders and other older members are in prison. Approaching adulthood and therefore no longer being protected by the Code for Children and Adolescents is a disincentive for gang activities. It's as if they feel that "things get serious" when they cross the line into legal adulthood. Some of them thus lean toward other activities. Being a drug mule or setting up a drugs outlet is an often less dangerous and almost invariably less visible way to commit a crime, and also offers pecuniary advantages. It even allows them to cut deals with the police more easily. However, in 2006 we still found that many gang members interviewed in 1999—who at the time were among the more veteran members and are currently well into their thirties—kept up an intermittent gang career interrupted only by a few stints in prison and occasional involvement in small gangs of adult assailants.

### ***Transformed, dynamic, uncompromising...***

The main transformations experienced by Nicaraguan youth gangs, then, are a reduction in their average age, a drop in the number of clashes, a loss of interest in defending the neighborhood, a relaxing of the code of honor, stealing from people in their own neighborhood, an erosion of the trust people in the neighborhood felt toward the gang members, the dissolution of the gang member identity, the gang's atomization and a primary interest in drug use and dealing. Even though many of their leaders and other members have been confined to the country's main prisons, the gangs are proving unyielding, with an apparently limitless capacity to recruit new members. The endurance of most gang names, the dissemination of the legend of many of their members and the persistent—if reduced—recruitment all reflect their structural autonomy.

The institutionalization of their dynamism is perceptible in several identity-bestowing mechanisms. Some of these mechanisms persist with the same vigor, such as personal nicknames that evoke terror or segregation transmuted into a symbol: *Zapatito Junior*, *Zayayín*, *La Pantera*, *Gargolita*, *Culo de Tabla*, *El Gato*, *El Chicho Renco*, *La Carla Tuerta*, *Gallito*, *el Gordo Manuel*, *Anticristo*, *Tres Ojos*, *Tabo Chintano*... Others have weakened, like the construction of strictly delimited and ferociously defended identities: the positive identity of the warrior, the one who "works over" or "harms," as opposed to the negative identity of *peluches* and *gilbertos* [roughly translated as "milk sops" and "jerks," respectively]. This opposition and the supremacy of the "harmful" over the "jerk" made sense when, as anthropologist Gonzalo Saraví observed among young Argentineans, "the demarcation between one and the other is the participation and involvement in street culture. Thus the isolated ones are those who don't share the rules, values and practices characteristic of the neighborhood's dominant youth culture. Also called *giles* by the belongers, they live in the same neighborhood, go to school or work, don't do drugs and don't get involved in violent and/or criminal activities."

### ***Drugs: Fertilizing the gang's growth***

Since the late nineties there has been a recorded expansion of drug use and dealing in Nicaragua. In fact, the spread of drug trafficking is a problem whose seriousness and potential to generate chaos was identified at least as long ago as 1994. The United Nations Development Program (UNPD) has identified drug use and trafficking as two of the main problems facing indigenous communities in Nicaragua's Caribbean coast. People in many areas of that vast and sparsely populated region grow marihuana and produce crack with cocaine introduced from Colombia.

The Ministry of Government estimates that an average of 6,000 people consumed drugs on a daily basis in Nicaragua in 2002. A survey done a year earlier by the National Council for the Fight against Drugs found that 5.1% of male

high school students took crack, 10.5% smoked marihuana and 5.7% sniffed glue. The cost of small doses of all these drugs is moderate for those who buy at the cheapest rates: 8 córdobas (\$0.45) for glue, and 10 córdobas (\$0.57) for crack or marihuana, compared to 50 córdobas (\$2.85) for cocaine. According to a Ministry of Government's public safety assessment, "drug-related crimes and problems are increasing on the national level, rising from 21.74 to 23.47 crimes per 100,000 inhabitants between 1997 and 2001." The number of drug outlets rose from 857 in 1999 to 1,289 in 2002. In some cities, such as Bluefields on the Caribbean coast, drug outlets prosper right under the nose of the National Police.

In 2001, the National Police registered the existence of 409 drug outlets in Managua's eight districts, of which 28% (115) are in district V, which is where the Reparto Schick neighborhood is located. The outlets in that district almost have a monopoly over cocaine and marihuana, concentrating 66% of all cocaine sales outlets in the capital and 59% of its marihuana outlets. The public safety assessment charged that "district V easily exceeds all other districts in the number of outlets" and associated the drugs boom with growing availability caused by Nicaragua being used as a transit country. The "spillover effect" leaves part of the drug in the country to be sold for local consumption because organized crime pays local dealers in drugs. According to Falla, "with globalization, drug trafficking is increasing throughout the world and the gangs in the United States are multiplying because they are the drug 'retailers.' Something similar is happening with those in Central America: drugs are a powerful fertilizer for the growth of the *maras*."

### ***Marys full of grace travel up and down the region***

The preferred way to transport drugs is to use women mules. The traffickers contract them because they're less likely to arouse the suspicion of the police, the patrols or road blocks don't always have female police officers to do a body search and their skirts camouflage the hidden merchandise better. They never travel

alone; they're always accompanied by men ready to offer out bribes when it looks like they might be discovered. Those escorts also watch their every move, ensuring they don't make off with the goods.

"Once, when I was just starting out, I tried to put one over on them," I was told by Angela, an experienced mule, "so I got off in Honduras to sell the packets of cocaine there. They grabbed me and showed me photos of beaten women and children cut up into little pieces. 'You think you're going alone? Well you're not,' they told me. One warning was enough for me."

The mules pick up the packets in Costa Rica, Managua or Bluefields and take them on to Guatemala wrapped in a very flexible aluminum foil that molds itself to the shape of the body. The packets are generally attached to the legs using adhesive tape. Lycra shorts and three skirts are the preferred choice to ensure discreet passage. Several kilograms can be transported this way. Some manage to take six or more, earning US\$600 for each packet. Another way is to swallow the cocaine packaged in small "ovules" tied with a cord to form ampoules the size of an adult finger. The traffickers pay \$20 for each "finger" transported from Nicaragua to Guatemala. The carriers can't eat or drink at all en route. Some mules manage to swallow over 120 "fingers." This form of trafficking was graphically portrayed in the recently distributed Colombian film "Mary, Full of Grace," which received an Academy Award nomination for best actress.

On their journeys to Bluefields, many mules end up buying a kilo from local drug bosses willing to sell it to them at a low price, perhaps around \$400, for their own benefit. They take it back to Managua and place it in small outlets or sell it on to local drug bosses there. It's always more profitable for the traffickers to sell their drugs in the United States; in fact, the further north they can place them, the higher the price. Most of what's sold in Nicaragua amounts to shavings from the large-scale trade, the minuscule filings resulting from the friction of the great flow north.

## ***Connected with the barrio drug economy***

The most important catalyst of gang activities in the last two years has been the use and dealing of drugs. While drugs aren't just used by gang members, the gang can sometimes be the place where other young people's drug use and links with drug dealing begin.

The introduction of drugs triggered an evolution in the violent and illicit activities of certain young people. Rodgers found in 2002 that the gang was closely connected with his neighborhood's drug economy; they participated in dealing and using cocaine, particularly crack, a cocaine derivative sold in "rocks." Rodgers stated that the gang, as the dominant organization in managing instruments of violence in the neighborhood, was ideally positioned to provide the kind of regulation required for local drug dealing, while the neighborhood dealer, typically a former gang member, was linked to the gang in a way that allowed him to involve it in his business. In its biannual report for 2004 and 2005, the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center (CENIDH) mentioned that "some of these young people in the youth gangs are also dedicated to protecting and providing information to the neighborhood drug dealers, representing an enormous potential for organized crime."

## ***Why the symbiosis between drugs and gangs?***

Drugs have shaped both the purpose and frequency of theft. Theft used to be motivated by wanting to have a story to tell or the need for money for arms, drugs or identity-bestowing mechanisms like tattoos and brand-name clothes. Now drugs absorb almost all licit and illicit income. The number of outlets is directly proportional to the vitality of the youth gang and the caliber and number of arms at its disposal. The gang's public presence has changed and has stopped being group-oriented. If ongoing drug use was incompatible with the gang's previous main activity—fighting—its group presence in public arenas is now incompatible with its new main objective—drug dealing.

One young man told me in 2003 me that the gangs from at least three neighborhoods were stronger as a result of the drug flow. In the Augusto César Sandino neighborhood, where the gang was a little lethargic, there was only one traveling dealer, four glue outlets and three crack and marihuana outlets. In contrast, the area controlled by the much-feared gang called *La Mora* had five glue outlets and 18 crack and marihuana outlets. The greater links between that gang and the drug outlets meant that their arsenal of pistols and AK-47 automatic rifles were the envy of other gangs. It was common knowledge that *Los Salseros*, *Boleros* and *Cevicheros* had AK-47s, while other gangs less linked to drugs had only pistols, stones and machetes.

The drug/gang symbiosis functions to such a point that sometimes the busting of drug outlets coincides with the waning of a gang and its activities. The decline of the gang from the Augusto César Sandino neighborhood in 2000 coincided with the police dismantling of one of the strongest drug outlets in the area, presided over by Pelo de Lluvia [literally "Rain Hair"]. One of the gang members told me that Pelo de Lluvia's business was frequented by "rich kids and police officers." "The police busted it in 2000," he explained. "But they were from the Plaza del Sol police headquarters, because those from the District V station were working with him."

There are a number of different reasons for the correlation between gangs and drugs. The gangs have incorporated drugs into their range of essential activities and incentives—there's a greater stimulus to rob where the possibilities of buying drugs are greater. The police involved in the drug circuits might be providing arms to the gang members most inserted into those circuits, who can thus afford them. The gangs can guarantee that competition doesn't penetrate a determined market niche, while gang fights occasionally serve as a diversionary tactic to draw attention away from the big fish in the drug trade and their premises or even to justify habitual incursions into the neighborhood of police officers mixed up in drug trafficking. The drugs trade has definitely benefited from the presence of gangs while at the same time stimulating their survival through various channels.



## ***The barrio geography and the prestige of the drug bosses***

A neighborhood's geography can be a factor in defining whether a drug boss uses it as an operations base or not. The existence of blind alleys in certain points, of quick evacuation routes to other zones or of paths littered with obstacles for people who don't habitually use them are all ways of shaking off the police. The gang members demonstrate how lots fenced with wire or small drainage ditches are very useful for giving the police the slip and therefore good places for setting up drug outlets. Two geographical factors that favor the drug flow in certain points of Reparto Schick and the sprawl of four or five other poor neighborhoods surrounding it in Police District V are their relative proximity to centers of Managua nightlife and an enormous main street that cuts through all of them, allowing people to pass from one end to the other and conduct business without having to use their meandering side streets, which are "hotter." These neighborhoods are not far from Camino de Oriente, one of Managua's liveliest entertainment malls, and are bordered on the south by Las Colinas, by far Managua's wealthiest residential area and home to many rich kids who frequent the drug outlets just "on the other side of the tracks."

Young people in general—whether gang members or not—find it hard to ensure their drug intake. This is partly because the step from marihuana to crack implies increased costs and partly because consumption rates have shot up, given that there are only minor non-economic obstacles to obtaining drugs and that crack is more addictive. Drug bosses and teenagers benefit from the Code for Children and Adolescents, using minors as mules and even pushers because the law protects them from harsh treatment by the law. There are even ten-year-old drug mules.

Drug dealing and consumption don't mix well. Pushers are never irredeemably hooked addicts, because the drug boss would never trust that they wouldn't consume the merchandise, attract attention and be more vulnerable during police

raids. But addicted gang members can provide many other services in exchange for drugs: bartering stolen goods, protection, distracting the police...

The big drug lord in Reparto Schick enjoys enormous prestige. He has a fleet of 15 taxis and likes to give away booze and throw wild parties for the gang members. The taxis are a way of laundering his ill-gotten gains and introducing it into the legal commercial circuits. In addition to the taxis, he also has a truck and several houses. His chances of operating depend on the relations he builds, investments he makes and his respect for a certain code. "That guy's really cool with us," says *Caifanes*. "That's why no one snitches on him. He paid out 1,300 córdobas in *ranchera* music at the last party. He's good people. He gives out booze and women. He's a top guy. He supplies the whole of District V. They busted Tomasa's outlet last year because she sold pure [sodium] bicarbonate. She was screwing us over like we were dumb kids, so we ratted her out. But this guy, he's the law."

This boss, *Grueso* [roughly, "the big guy"], buys loyalty by investing in local youths; some of them may have benefited from working in his taxi fleet. This is where the redistributive ethos comes into play: whereas the gang members snitched on Tomasa because she was gypping them, they defend *Grueso* and justify his activities because he shares: "He got involved in the taxi business to do some honest work. He wants to leave drugs some day and do something legal with the money he's earning."

### ***Cops have an image as cogs in the wheel***

The police have a terrible image when it comes to drugs. *Caifanes* stated that "most cops are involved in drugs. *La Cochona* and *La Araña*, who have outlets, work with the police. They've got their close friends inside who warn them when a search warrant is issued, so they've already disappeared or hidden the merchandise by the time the cops arrive."

This micro-level impunity reflects what is happening on the macro level, which also involves the judicial branch. The number of cases ruled in favor of big drug traffickers increases each year. Some feel that good police work—when not previously aborted by officers who collaborate with the traffickers—crumbles in the courts where a network of corrupt criminal and appeals court judges annul trials or hand out acquittals, pardons, case dismissals or releases on low bail. Just in March 2003, 92 corruption cases linked to drug trafficking that involved judicial officials were investigated. How many more have there been since then?

The National Police sector chiefs know the precise location of all drug outlets and bosses. They know their houses, names, properties, routines and relations. But the network of officers linked to the drug business makes successful searches impossible unless the dealers contravene some clause of the unwritten local code. So in the end it all depends on the social networks woven by the drug boss.

If the weave is tight, a sector chief will be strongly discouraged from mounting any operation to dismantle the outlet because it jeopardizes his future in the neighborhood. The Government Ministry's hypocritical focus runs against the most elementary logic, but in line with the logic of power. Its strategy is based on the idea that "the outlets are the main factor to be neutralized, given that the corrosion of society begins there." Translated, that means that they don't want to touch the real bigwigs. But this strategy cooked up by the elites in the ministry runs up against local survival strategies and the networks of gang members, police officers, small-time drug bosses and other inhabitants in the neighborhood.

On occasion drugs have turned addicted "bums" into the hardest workers. For example, they'll lug water when it's cut off in the neighborhood to make a bit of money, and this helps bolster their image, even though the community knows perfectly well that by paying them for this service it is financing their crack and marihuana habit. In Bluefields it's said that many families depend on the drug boom for their survival, and in Reparto Schick many families have prospered from drugs.

The campus of the drug "university" has been expanding. Drugs are the great catalyst for many processes in the neighborhood: the social mobility of certain members, the generation of profits for other investments, relations with the police, youth-gang belligerence. In the absence of any activities emanating from the Youth Secretariat or other state institutions and in light of the limited solutions—either work or recreation—offered by the public security proposals, the networks linked to drugs and theft will continue to prosper. And in Reparto Schick and many other places this will continue to revolve around the drug outlets. The police, whether out of fear or complicity, will be just another cog in the drug trafficking machine.

### ***Consumption reinforces the group and metamorphoses the consumer***

Although the gangs are more atomized, they still require a minimum amount of collective life to exist as such. Drug taking is one of the activities that most brings the group together. Its members meet in abandoned houses, empty lots, street corners or the house of a member whose parents are away. Like all forms of consumption, drug taking is a social classifier.

The kinds of drugs and the places involved distinguish the "pedigree" addict from the common garden variety. The street use of glue and crack is for unredeemable "bums." People with more means will smoke marihuana at home or in a bar or snort coke at night clubs. "Coke stimulated me," explains one such club frequenter, "but it also made me feel really superior to crack heads. I was happy to be on that level." Some revel in their "drug-tasting" skills: "We'd taste the product before buying it. I got into being a 'drug-taster.' If it numbed the tongue right away, it was good. It also has to have a penetrating floral smell. If it tasted bitter, it was no good."

Collective consumption, sharing—for example by passing a joint around—reinforces the sense of group. The members experiment together with risky

combinations, such as inserting a few rocks of crack into marihuana joints. It costs more, but its effects are highly valued. Drugs are valued for the metamorphosis they produce in the consumer's psyche. As Iván put it, "Marihuana 'breaks' your eyes; it makes them go Chinese, closes them up. It gives you the giggles or leaves you pensive, quiet and depressed.

It can even give you a 'white out,' when everything goes black, your vision fogs over, your blood pressure drops, you break out in a cold sweat and your eyes roll up so only the whites are visible. That's why it's called a 'white out.' You can even foam at the mouth and look like you're dead. With crack, your saliva dries up, your throat closes and you feel like you can't swallow. You feel a pulsing in your throat when you try to wet it with your saliva. Everything spins round and you get really irritated, pissed off; which is when you want another rock and you'll rob to get the money." Drugs are feared above all for their physical effects. For example, crack makes you skinny and all crack heads end up corpselike.

Hermógenes prefers marihuana: "I bought grass almost exclusively. From then on I started to learn from experience. If your hand starts trembling and the bag's small, you'll drop it. You have to learn to roll it up. I smoke alone, because people here talk too much. My mum and dad don't know it, but I spend the 20 córdobas they give me every day on marihuana. Your nervousness disappears when you drink liquor and it makes you feel gutsier so you say things you wouldn't dare say when you're straight.

You can shout when you're drinking. Marihuana relaxes you, and it doesn't give you a hangover the next day. It makes you think, you get hungry, it makes you randy, you get exited quick. It's good when you're out looking for girls. It makes you giggle; you can't stifle your laughter and you reach right out and grab her ass. You take her right there. You're happy, you feel real good. Marihuana has helped me stop being shy. That's why I had this tribal tattoo done, which means that you feel possessed by the drug, that you're inside it."

## ***Neighborhood producers: Cooking up rocks***

Many young people recognize sooner or later—sometimes following a really bad trip—that on this voyage to Venus in a ship of drugs "you want to float, but all you do is sink," to quote a song by the Spanish group *Mecano*. But drugs aren't just a form of evasion, an alienating opiate. They're also a powerful business. Their trade is one of the most lucrative activities that can be practiced with no professional qualifications. According to his neighbors, Ñato Zepeda, the famous Nicaraguan heroine czar captured in Costa Rica, is illiterate. Many youth gang members, unemployed and outside of the school system, dedicate their days and nights to small-scale crack production and dealing.

Iván explained how to prepare crack: "I cooked crack once. I bought an ounce of cocaine and put it in a glass. Then I poured in half a cup of water and heated it over a low flame. Then I put in half a box of bicarbonate of soda and left it to bubble up. When it rises you have to remove it from the flame immediately. You do that three times. The third time you take it off and cover it. It comes out like oil and you have to skim off the foam. You leave it to cool, which takes about half an hour, by which time you've got this white cake."

According to experts in the field, one cake produces a minimum of 80 rocks, each of which can be sold for 10 córdobas. Given that the cake costs 500 córdobas to produce, the profit margin for that quick operation is 300 córdobas. As drug producers, the gang members know that there's available and expanding demand in their immediate circle, with no foreseeable change.

As long as there are drugs in Nicaragua, teenagers will continue to be involved in using, dealing and producing them. These activities could have very diverse effects on the design and activities of the youth gangs. There's little or no chance that we'll find opportunities for helping young people in this terrain, but other tendencies in gang predilections could open up more constructive and benign alternatives.

## ***Hunger for transnationalism: The Gothic look***

Another aspect that marks the current identity of youth gangs is their hunger for transnationalism, which has various expressions. The Gothic fad—so evident in many European, US and South American cities—has found its way onto the palette used by Reparto Schick gangs to retouch, redraw and redefine themselves. Through that process of self-creation and being who they want to be, youth gang members transcend their local, everyday conditioning by painting their nails, piercing their ears and wearing earrings, glitzy bracelets and black clothes.

Fashion signals have transnational meaning, in which painted nails and rings and bracelets on male fingers, ears and arms would have been interpreted as symptoms of homosexuality just a few months back. Now they, together with the earlier tattooing and body piercing, are an indication of their wearers' international connection, part of the fashion statement required by the transnational ritualizing of rebelliousness. According to Erik H. Erikson, a great part of young people's "demonstration" in public or in private is the dramatization of a spontaneous search for new forms of stylistic or ideological ritualization invented by and for youth itself. Challenging and mocking, but rarely unbridled and often profoundly sincere, those new rituals try to counteract—occasionally through the romantic restoration of old songs and clothes—the lack of meaning of the existing conventions of our times, the impersonality of mass production, the vagueness of the declared values and the intangibility of prospects for either an individualized or an authentically communal existence.

Such rituals are also political manifestations, given that "the actions of young people are always, in part and out of necessity, reactions to the stereotypes held up to them by their elders," in the words of Reguillo. She goes on to describe such rebellious acts crystallized in appearance as "post-apocalyptic prophecies, produced in those bodies plagued with message, that advance ominously over real and symbolic territories like living testimonies of the fragility of the social

order we have given ourselves." They are the most visible, if not the only, expression of that rebellious and transnational micro-politics. Other expressions, including songs, rarely emerge into public view.

### ***Singing "The long, hard life of the drifter"***

We are too used to thinking of the gang members as a kind of urban terrorist. We conceive the street "bum" as a young person languishing on the corner, subdued by a hangover resulting from a night of marihuana and rum. We never think of such young people as the producers of art. They are never presented as creators who simultaneously seek to describe and judge the experiences of their neighborhood. But gang members have authored a vast musical production. Their most frequent inspiration is the world of drugs, idleness, the risks they take and the like, all of which demonstrate what one gang singer-songwriter described to me as "the long and difficult life of the drifter." The following song was composed by 15-year-old Iván:

Now you think, mate, what you've got on your mind:

*Evil or envy or being rebellious  
I've grown up in the atmosphere of my barrio  
Where I learned my brothers' bad habits at an early age.  
Fury and evil is what has always grown.  
A demon's motto is to just wander around lost.  
A whore's motto is that everyone falls on you.  
A fag's motto is that they give it to you up the arse.  
The dogs' motto is to bite people.  
The crack head's motto is to be a delinquent.  
The mafia's motto is to kill who you're looking for.  
The MS motto is Mara Salvatrucha.  
The prisoners' motto is to be locked up.  
And marihuana's motto is to get you high.*



The songs also relate to the transnational sphere: the chords come from a Panamanian genre known as *plena* and the lyrics allude to the murderous mafias and the Mara Salvatrucha, a youth gang in Central America that's a living legend and an international reference point. Iván repeats what a friend of his told him after living in Mexico for a few months: "The MS is a *mara* [youth gang] from El Salvador. It has members in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama, but they're more properly from El Salvador.

They board trains and rob people. There are two types of *maras*. There's also the MS, which is another name for Mara 13, and Mara 18, also known as the *Batos Locos* [literally mad simpletons]. MS doesn't just stand for Mara Salvatrucha; it also means Satanic Mission [*Misión Satánica* in Spanish]. They don't just do crack and marihuana. They also shoot up."

Iván picked up this information from people who start out for the United States but get picked up and deported back from Mexico after staying a while there in shelters or jails, absorbing the features of other cultures with which they later season their traveler's tales. The singer-songwriters introduce such recently-acquired and exotic knowledge into their songs because the reference to things transnational adds prestige.

The songs build a bridge towards that mystified transnational sphere, which expresses in superlative what the gang members experience here. The transnational sphere is a grotesque mirror that reflects their own neighborhood in gigantic dimensions. The songs also serve to moralize. By writing and singing, the gang member looks at himself from the outside and judges. Looking down on himself, he adopts a socially applauded role, but his songs are amphibian: they travel over socially permissible ground—taking up the rhythm of the *plena*, for example, which is frequently used in Evangelical music—while at the same time swimming in the waters of the prohibited—because most of their compositions employ crude language some would call obscene that closes the churches' doors to them.

### ***Why not promote gang member artists?***

Gang members and many other youths from poor Nicaraguan neighborhoods have two compulsive obsessions: drugs and the transnational craze with its artistic expressions. While these are very different obsessions, they are sometimes demonized in the same way. The transnational craze, with its artistic expressions, is something rarely picked up on by lazy policy scribblers, who tend to avoid mental hernias by proposing the everlasting panaceas of sports and jobs.


Offering these young people chances to express their artistic creations—songs, graffiti, drawings—with a certain level of public recognition and fame could prove a powerful contribution in transmuting the violent orientation of their energies. It would allow their just nonconformity to be heard and open up arenas for their participation in a policy based not on sticks, stabbings and homemade mortar rounds, but rather on arguments, illustrated with images and adorned with creativeness.

Why don't civic participation programs contemplate the artistic participation of youth gang members as a way to satisfy their hunger for image and a protagonist role? This would be a great contribution, although little more than a patch on such a rotten society as ours, which tolerates millionaire tax evaders indifferently driving past five-year-old children at the traffic lights who defy the hostility of passing cars full of bitter faces to earn a few cents selling chewing gum or washing windshields.



**From Telescopic to Microscopic:  
Three Youth Gang  
Members Speak**

# From Telescopic to Microscopic: Three Youth Gang Members Speak

nly proximity can help us understand the motivations, strategies and dead ends in the lives of youth gang members. Let's trade the sociological telescope and macro-explanations for a strong microscope to zoom in on three personal stories and improve our understanding of the best paths to rehabilitation.

JOSÉ LUIS ROCHA

Thirty years ago, comedian and movie director Woody Allen predicted that in the near future rape and kid-napping would be predominant forms of human relations. We didn't have to wait long before seeing the lead role played by violence in establishing, modulating and cultivating human relations. The history of humanity has been marked by the use of violence as a means of sending messages, exercising domination and regulating the population. Perhaps Allen was just suggesting that rape and kidnapping were replacing wars, which had in turn supplanted or complemented ritual human sacrifice.

Before the French Annals of History school, the science of history was above all a sequence of episodes—most of the time violent ones—perpetrated by great men and imperial powers. New visions of history do nothing to undermine the

conclusion reached by British anthropologist Keith Hart that the greatest concentrations of money in the history of humanity have gone to subsidize the food and arms of the planet's bully boys, who generate power and wealth through the exercise of violence.

Today the ideology of "citizens' security," which aims for a society unpolluted by violence, tends to make us lose sight of the predominant tendency of human history by presenting certain acts of violence as exceptional events that have no place within the rule of law. Anathema as the only presumably civilized reaction to such criminal acts renounces the idea of unraveling the polysemy of criminal violence, which among other things expresses social unrest and, according to Mexican researcher Roxana Reguillo, "the most extreme face of the exhaustion of the legal model."

### ***The violence of pups and paladins***

Youth violence in Nicaragua must also be interpreted using a long-term perspective, removed from the exegetic canons of "citizens' security." From this viewpoint we need to remember that it's not something new, nor is it at its peak. Hundreds of thousands of young people participated in the war of the 1970s to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship, and then in the 1980s the Sandinista army ended up with some 134,000 soldiers, most of them between the ages of 16 and 25, the same age range with the highest proportional participation in criminal violence. The opposing faction contained more than 16,000 fighters. Both sides received the blessing of different states. The revolutionary rhetoric coined the phrase "Sandino's pups" to bestow on the youngsters who did their military service, a social distinction in line with the mythology of the times. Ronald Reagan compared those on the opposite side to the US founding fathers in a no less forceful political marketing effort for these supposed paladins of liberty. All those 150,000-plus armed men, most of them young, represented 18 times the total members of youth gangs when this phenomenon was at its height in Nicaragua at the end of the 1990s.

## ***From guerilla fighters to youth gang members***

What are the differences that make today's youth violence more visible, increasingly threatening and less likely to be extolled by the hegemonic voices? There are three fundamental differences: today's is de-ideologized; it has traded its rural stages for urban ones where it is more visible and likely to alarm the middle and upper classes; and it isn't organized by powerful institutions. The social unrest previously manifested in the form of guerrilla fighters now appears in the form of youth gangs, which lacks the blessing of states and powerful organizations. These gangs also lack any ideology, or else participate in the dominant hedonistic one. Previously, evil was incarnated in a dictator or very clearly-labeled "others" (Somocistas, Contrás, Sandinistas), while good was represented by an ideology of "freedom," "revolution" or "socialism." The real evil now is the invisible hand of the market, which is more systemic but harder to rally forces to fight, so other demons are substituted.

Thus, where there were once guerrilla fighters, there are now youth gang members and fundamentalist sects fighting an omnipresent evil, which are de-ideologized ways of manifesting uncertainty and social unrest. That unrest is expressed in different ruptures of the social contract. Youth gang members do not subscribe to the great national or international social contract, preferring to invent their own. They're not the only ones who break the social contract, but they do so most belligerently and explicitly, with the exception of the big political gangs belonging to Arnaldo Alemán and Daniel Ortega, who redesign the social contract according to their whims and in full view of a seemingly eternally patient public.

## ***Three stories "under the microscope"***

There are many macro-explanations of the youth gang phenomenon, which has reached epidemic proportions in Los Angeles, Paris, Barcelona, Medellín, Bogotá, Lima, Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, San Salvador, Guatemala, Estelí and Ma-

nagua, to name but a few cities. But those great explanatory aggregates consist of many micro-experiences that often escape the supposedly omnipresent sociological eye.

To better see, feel and understand the experiences of youth gang members, one has to take a close look at personal stories, at “the long, hard life of the bum,” as one of those interviewed put it. To facilitate that closer view, I’ve summarized below three interviews that had a real impact on me. They’re not average, representative cases, if such a thing can be said to exist. But their stories do condense a number of experiences that recur among youth gang members. They are the stories of Walter, Ernesto and Camilo. Walter and Ernesto express two very different moments in the history of Nicaraguan youth gangs—1999 and 2006—while Camilo demonstrates the success of one model for dealing with youth violence.

### ***Black Walter’s story***

Walter was 23 when I interviewed him in 1999. Four years earlier he had been a prominent member of the youth gang called *Los Comemueitos*, located in the vast Reparto Schick neighborhood in Managua. Its name (literally, “eaters of the dead”) referred to the fact that its members used to dig up fresh corpses to steal their jewelry before dousing them with gas and setting them alight. Very dark-skinned, muscular, of medium build and with a scar-scored face, Walter is one of the most pleasant human beings I’ve ever met. We talked at length in the headquarters of El Patriarca Foundation, across the street from the Roberto Huembes market.

“They call me Black Walter. I’ve got a deadly vendetta with *El Cejas*. The feud started when some others came into the barrio to attack it so we defended the territory and some people ended up dead. That’s how they killed Yonki, from *Los Canchero*. He came alone into *Los Comemueitos* territory, intimidating everyone

with his pistol, making out he was real cool. They did him in there and then. You only do something like that if your life really sucks.

“I was in the Modelo Prison [in Tijuana] for three years. They put me there for stabbing Munra and Zanate, two members of *Los Cancheros*. I left Zanate shitting in a [colostomy] bag for six months. I took part in three other killings: one homicide and two first degree murders.

“I used to steal when I was drugged up; when I was high I felt like the master. If they put up a struggle, I stabbed them with absolutely no remorse. But now that I’m clean I regret having done it. “I’ve been doing marihuana, glue and *floripón* [a large flower brewed in a tea for its hallucinogenic effects] since I was eight. I liked fucking around, hurting people since I was just a kid. I loved making people afraid of me. If they saw me stabbing three or four sons of bitches in the street, they respected me and did what I told them to. “I haven’t got a family; they left me in a garbage dump when I was three. I call the woman who brought me up my aunt. She lives alone without a husband. She had four children: three boys and a girl. She took in laundry.

“I left there when I was eight, and survived by stealing in the Huembes market. I slept there in the bus terminal. The best time to steal was 5 in the morning, when it was dark and the first passengers were turning up. I did a good stint every day.

“I went back to my aunt’s house when I was 12, but I’d set off every morning in the early hours to go stealing. In a day I’d grab five or six necklaces and four watches. It was getting harder; there were fewer cops before and they didn’t kill you just for stealing some shit.

“I think I joined a gang and started doing drugs because I didn’t know my real parents. My stepbrothers told me they picked me up from a garbage dump, where my mother had abandoned me. That’s always made me really sad; it’s even made me want to kill myself. Before, I’d go off on my own to cry. The gang was my family.



“I had a girlfriend for five years. I lived in her house and kept her with the money I made stealing. She told me to leave that life of robbery, drugs and youth gangs. When her mom realized I gave them everything I stole, she started showing me affection. But sometimes they got mad, because the inter-gang feuds meant their house even got strafed. That girlfriend ended up a junkie.

“It’s a problem leaving the gangs. They badmouth you, saying you’re aspiring to be a *ponqui* kid—that’s a plastic kid who dresses like a *cholo* with a brand-name cap. ‘Aha,’ they say, ‘you turned yellow in the Modelo.’”

### ***The long shadows of a youth gang past***

Walter was allowed to commute his last two years of prison for rehabilitation in the Patriarca Foundation, where he tried to stab another parolee. The anger was still eating away at him. He ended up running away from the farm where they had sent him for the final stage of his rehabilitation.

He had no use for any government, because as far as he was concerned, the Sandinista, Chamorro and Alemán governments respectively brought the plagues of war, drugs and hunger.

His gang, *Los Comemueertos*, took its name from an activity related to the most notable place in their barrio: the cemetery. The same was true of *Los Billareros* (the Pool Parlor Boys), *Los Cancheros* (the Basketball Court Boys), *Los Colchoneros* (the Mattress Boys), *Los Bloqueros* (the Cement Block Boys), *Los Aceiteros* (the Oil Boys), *Los Rampleros* (the Ramp Boys) and *Los Puenteros* (the Bridge Boys). A pool bar, a basketball court, a place selling mattresses or cement building blocks or oil, a ramp and a bridge were the distinctive neighborhood sites that generated territorially-based identity. That’s why the greatest offense was for an enemy gang to penetrate one’s own territory and the home gang’s greatest duty was to defend it. Brandishing knives and throwing stones earned them a respect they were otherwise denied. They felt like the “masters.”

The members' nicknames function as noms de guerre: Black Walter, Fat Manuel, Chayane and Cat Lung earned them fame for their warrior-like feats. Some first-generation gang members had done military service in the eighties and found space in the gang to relive the adrenaline-fueled drama and the camaraderie they had enjoyed when recognized as "Sandino's pups."

But Walter is from the next generation after them. For him and his contemporaries, the gang was a substitute family and a way of earning respect and power. They controlled the streets and ordered the social chaos through a code of conduct. It was hard to leave because the people they'd shared so many adventures with would accuse them of chickening out and because they still had pending scores to the death with enemies.

Their past followed them around like a long shadow. Their record was etched on the memory of their community and of their rivals. Once outside the group, they no longer had protection and were suspected of being not only cowards but also traitors. Their own personal demons added to this social conditioning to keep them locked within a cultural jail whose bars had been forged by those demons and reinforced by certain social institutions. Jail functioned as a training ground for their professionalization, because if the street was their school, jail was the institute of higher criminal learning. The publicizing of their feats in the mass media acted as an incentive for fame that helped them acquire the label that rounded off their criminal career.

### ***Ernesto: "Really mixed up in drugs"***

Ernesto's experience at the start of the new millennium has its similarities, but is marked by the anarchy that characterized many of Nicaragua's gangs in 2006. Ernesto is 19, with tattoos from *Guns and Roses*, a skull and the devil, which he had done in Costa Rica when he went there to play soccer and stayed on to work as a laundryman. He washed pants until he was ratted out and expelled as an

undocumented immigrant. He's a man of few words, an unredeemed crack head and really feared when he loses his cool. Before we were introduced, he stalked me in the streets waiting for a chance to rob me.

"I was six when they killed my dad," he told me once we were deep in conversation. "He went over to Colombia and they killed him there. I've got problems with my family; with my mom. That's why I sleep on the street, on a mattress by the side of my gran's house. I didn't go to school. I've been a bum since I was small. I started hanging around with *Los Billareros* when I was 14 and now I'm with *Los Puenteros*. There's no fighting now, but four years ago there was. We fought with stones, homemade pistols and mortars against *Los Praderos*, *Los Búfalos* and *Los Comemuertos*. Those were the times when *Chuky* just went around splitting heads open. I stabbed one then *Los Cancheros* nailed him with a rocket and disabled him. That's when they split my brow open. I've been inside three times. My gran denounced me for stealing clothes from the house. All she ever says is, "Christ's blood!" And in the police station they always hit me with their bully sticks, because I don't let them get me without a fight. I hit 'em and throw stones. I always say I'm 17 or 16 so they'll release me fast, but sometimes not even that works. They had me locked up once for four months without a trial.

"I'm really into crack, and I also do marihuana and a mix of marihuana and crack. I did glue when I was a kid. That was before I got a job collecting bus fares on routes 19, 9 and 8. I go to the Venegas outlets to get rocks of crack because the mules don't come here. A joint or a rock both cost 10 pesos apiece (about 55 cents). Half an ounce of cocaine is worth 50 pesos (\$2.75) if the coke's crappy. There's a band of Colombians selling the coke. Some crack heads help them. They're the ones calling the shots. And if anyone rats them out, they kill them.

"I've been in several rehab centers, but I don't like them. One of them put me selling vegetables down at the lake, along the boardwalk, as if I was their slave. I escaped and made off with their telephone."

### ***Younger and with No “code of honor”***

Ernesto doesn't respect the tacit clauses of the ethical code. He steals from his family, steals in his own barrio and even robs those who try to help him. Drugs have turned into an essential spice of life, as they are for many youngsters of his generation. Producing, selling and using drugs are very common activities in his barrio. And they energize its economy the same way family remittances do. British anthropologist Dennis Rodgers found that remittances, taxis and drugs were the main forms of accumulation in the Managua barrio where he did his study on youth gangs.

Drugs are the great catalyst of gang-related activity. Tattoos have also become more relevant. Like the group names and nicknames, they generate identity and allude to a personal and community history. Tattoos turn stigma into an emblem, triggering segregation and pushing existing segregation to the extreme. And like the taste for all things gothic, they reflect an appetite for the transnational. Tattoos and gothic styles are a “glocal” trend, cultural artifacts of globality recreated and doted with new local meanings.

### ***The gangs have undergone many metamorphoses***

Black Walter and Ernesto are continuing a tradition whose starting point goes way back. Walter insists “it isn't true that youth gangs started in 1990. There was already a multitude of gangs in Reparto Schick in 1986: *Los Barilochi*, *Los Pitufos*, *Los Dragones*, *Los Brujos*. I was there, in *Los Brujos*.” But there's a big difference between *Los Brujos*, whose members fought fist-to-fist, and *Los Comemueertos*, whose members used home-made mortars, machetes and even AK-47 assault rifles.

There were also a lot of changes between 1997 and 2006. The main ones were a drop in the average age of gang members, a reduction in the number of clashes, a loss of interest in defending the barrio, a relaxing of the code of honor,

which includes stealing from people in the same barrio, a consequent erosion in neighbors' trust of the gang members, a dissolving of gang identity, atomization of the gang and increasingly predominant interest in drug use and retail. Before crack came along, the rock fights were to gain respect and reorganize the social chaos. Now the interest is in other "rocks"—a combination of cocaine and bicarbonate of soda—which allow them to make a living and avoid the chaos. What persists is the anger, the vendettas and the difficulty abandoning violence as a way of sending messages.

### ***Violence as message***

In his latest book, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*, iconoclastic US historian Howard Zinn includes a chapter with the suggestive theme "Killing people to 'send a message.'" It starts by stating that Timothy McVeigh—the young man who blew up the federal building in Oklahoma—and the government of the United States of America—which executed him for that act—have something in common. Both believe that killing people is a valid way to send a message. Timothy McVeigh committed his act outside of the law, which is why he was labeled a terrorist. The US government executed him by applying a law that authorizes the death penalty as punishment.

Violence is imbedded in culture. Max Weber subscribed to Trotsky's declaration that all states are founded with violence. According to Trotsky, the concept of "state" would disappear if there was nothing more than social formations that ignored the recourse to violence. Not only state institutions but also private citizens continually use violence; the defense of private property provides a license to maintain private security guards.

The sale of citizens' security by private companies is entirely legitimate and has become one of the fastest growing industries in Nicaragua. If we add freelance guards—security sold in the informal sector—to the over 10,000 private employees of the most buoyant security companies, we would undoubtedly find that security

sector employment at the very least matches that of the *maquila* assembly plants for re-export, and with much less government propaganda. Such propaganda is certainly not required when the sensationalist news served up by the television channels continually fuels the terror on which Servipro, Ultranic and so many other security companies base their prosperity.

Complementing this cultural tendency are companies that sell military training and simulated warfare competitions, recycling an activity that already functions in Nicaragua and presenting as a game what has amounted to a terrible tragedy for so many countries, families and individuals. The *Aquí entre nos* (Here among us) supplement in the April 20, 2007, edition of *La Prensa*, a newspaper that constantly laments today's "loss of values," dedicated text and photos to a mock warfare competition involving a number of well-to-do high schools: Notre Dame, Mont Berkeley, Saint Dominic, Anglo-Americano and Pierre y Marie Curie. The competition took place in the Paintball Xtreme Jungle training camp, with the participants spurred on by phrases like "What a killer instinct, kiddo!" The report concluded that "The adrenalin was pumped right up to the limit. All participants wanted to win first place at whatever price."

### ***CEPREV's peace-building experience***

Based on the theory that violence sinks its roots in culture, the Violence Prevention Center (CEPREV) has been doing laudable work to pacify young gang members. CEPREV is the only body apart from the Nicaraguan National Police that converts groups, not individuals, without neglecting personal attention. Working exclusively with individuals allows gangs to perpetuate themselves by recruiting new members, making it essential to work with the group.

That is largely the approach employed by CEPREV, an NGO with eight years' experience rehabilitating youth gang members, during which time its promoters have worked in over 20 barrios. Its method consists of giving talks in high schools to teachers, parents and students; psychological attention; neighborhood visits

and workshops; home visits to gang members' families; and training sessions on self-esteem and self-knowledge that explore the origin of young people's anger and why they use drugs and arms, as well as raising their awareness of the consequences of violence.

Following a research study on civil society organizations that work with young people involved in youth violence, anthropologist Wendy Bellanger concluded that "the key to reducing the violence exercised by young people in gangs could lie in programs like CEPREV's, which attack the culture of violence without becoming totally absorbed in the specific issue of abandoning the gang." Without taking the youth gang members out of their environment or attempting to break up the gang, CEPREV builds up youth gang members' self esteem by sending psychologists to visit them, their families and neighbors. One the main mechanisms is training gang members to be "peace leaders," which in addition to changing the sign of the slogan that brings them together maintains their self-esteem and makes them agents of their own rehabilitation.

This lead role is rightly presented as one of the essential factors of their success. The camaraderie among the psychologists and other six team members makes the young people feel they've entered the world of the socially acceptable in an atmosphere of respect and ongoing learning on how to handle themselves in the organizational and social sphere surrounding them. In other words, while learning about machismo, violence and prejudices, they also learn the ways, the jargon and the values that will allow them to perform smoothly in the organizational atmosphere.

### ***Machismo and authoritarianism are the cradle of violence***

The CEPREV workshops usually transcend the merely informative and aim to treat psychological issues such as human relations, maternity, paternity, gender and machismo, contributing to people's emotional growth. Complemented by a

frequent presence in the neighborhoods, the workshops try to help the young people discover their own forms of non-violent expression. They involve mixed groups of young gang members and other inhabitants from the same neighborhood, which helps foster a very tangible form of social acceptance of the gang members. CEPREV also holds workshops with journalists, teachers and police officers aimed at changing the way gang members are treated. The awareness-raising work with journalists is a key element in influencing the public perception of gang members and youth violence. Over its lifetime, CEPREV has worked with 15,000 young people and indirectly with 30,000 people in 21 neighborhoods in Managua's District V, Tipitapa and Ciudad Sandino. Unfortunately, the organization's financial limitations have made it impossible to extend its work further.

CEPREV's promoters sustain that the causes of youth violence are cultural, citing machismo and authoritarianism. Based on a psychogenic approach, they identify "family disintegration first of all, because it's part of a cultural problem. We're raised in that atmosphere of an authoritarian family, although in gang members' families the father generally isn't present. If he is, he's the one who exercises most power." As a result, the young people "aren't accepted at home and hit the streets, going to a group where they're accepted and not discriminated against. And there they feel fulfilled in a negative sense, because that's where they drown everything very negatively with drugs and violence. That's where they vent all their anger." As a result, the CEPREV promoters conclude that violence "is a cultural problem, a problem of the roles imposed on us by our culture."

### ***Certain missing links that illuminate***

Although the promoters associate the micro-psychological problem with the macro-social one ("Politicians provide a bad example, telling us, 'They're stealing up there at the top, so we're going to steal, too'; or 'If the President and the legislators steal, why can't I?'"). They don't make the leap into abstraction implied by talking about the system and its de-legitimization. They explain everything psychogenically, as the result of learning roles such as thief or perpetrator of violence. This presents



gang members as a phenomenon taken out of its socioeconomic context, which appears at a certain moment and keeps growing. “It started with break-dancing,” explained one promoter, “with Sandino’s pups, tattoos, music. From then on they started organizing on the street corners.”

The psychogenic approach offers very useful tools for providing effective individual and group attention, but there’s also a need to make the historical and socioeconomic link to avoid omitting certain elements that could illuminate and enrich their treatment, anchoring it in time and space. For example, they could extend their interesting theoretical framework to the social plane and to historical evolution by asking why the role of youth gang member as a form of youth violence appears at a given moment; how it interacts with other roles in Nicaraguan society; what differences and similarities there are between the gang members of the end of the nineties and those of the seventies and the eighties; what effect religious organizations have in modulating their roles and what impact their offer of spaces of collective life that complement or replace the family has on youth gangs; what indirect impact on youth violence is exerted by nongovernmental organizations that don’t work directly on this issue but whose local promoter networks foster citizens’ participation in local micro-politics.

Greater reflection on these issues would make CEPREV promoters more aware of which flanks are being affected by their intervention, even when not explicitly planned, and make them conscious of their work’s real potential, even through avenues not contemplated in their strategy. None of this detracts from the invaluable merit of working on the ground level and entering into the “long, hard” lives of so many young people who have benefited from and converted to a non-violent culture.

### ***Camilo Arce, “El Piruca”***

One notable example of the kind of success achieved by CEPREV is the story of Camilo Arce, alias “El Piruca” [slang for a maintenance-drinker], who was 20 when interviewed and is one of those I am most indebted to in my exploration of the

youth gangs. He shared his life, friends and time with me, making numerous visits and offering me protection.

Camilo's mother and stepfather both had problems with alcoholism. After bouncing from house to house belonging to his father and aunts, Camilo ended up in a tiny house in Reparto Schick with his mother, stepfather and younger sister. His anger found different expression from an early age. "Before I got involved with the gang," he recalls, "I was already rebellious because of the way my family treated me. So I came looking for a way to vent everything they did to me. I wanted to take it out on other people. I didn't last long at school because sometimes the teachers wanted to attack me like they did at home. They'd say, 'Shut up, Camilo!' or threaten us with a ruler. I didn't like that so I lashed out. I haven't studied for seven years now."

### ***"I changed for my sister"***

"I started getting mixed up in stuff when I was 13. But I didn't get involved with the gangs until I was 14. I joined because I liked it when the kids said, 'Hey! *El Piruca's* really tough, he doesn't ever lose his nerve.' Because they called me *El Piruca* in an affectionate kind of way. All of us adopted bad nicknames. What I liked most was when the guys said, 'That kid's no nonsense, don't let him die; he toughs it out, really gets into it.' The guys would praise me like a symbol, like the gang's trophy. 'This guy's got real guts; he never backs down.' It really pleased me when the guys said that about me. The more they said it, the deeper I got involved. I felt like a symbol, a shield for them.

"Later I set up a gang with some other bros called *Los Soyerros*, and it was big. Then the gang called *La Pradera* started up and became famous because someone got killed. Then came *Los Gasparines*, made up of the younger kids. In my gang we were all "undefeated," which means there were no deaths, just injuries. The gang fights were terrible because we didn't even respect the police. We went at them with anything we had: bottles, whatever was at hand. If they shot at us, we'd

run off down a path there. One day they got hold of me and kicked me in the chest and I fell off the top of a wall. Then they picked me up by my long hair, grabbed me by the pants and threw me into the patrol car, beating me up as they went. I coughed up blood for a week. I was dying and the judge told me to file charges, to go to the forensic scientist, but I told her I didn't want any part of that, that I just wanted to die."

After the gang split up and he got beaten up and then left his stepfather "shitting in a bag," Camilo started fearing for his own safety and the future of his little sister: "Only when I got beaten up by so many people did I start to feel fear. I mulled things over and felt like what was happening inside me was a death zone, a risk... I got really scared; like deep-down fear of getting mixed up with the gangs again. I'd never known fear before; nothing frightened me. I was like a kind of super hero, like Superman, who nothing happens to. But after getting the shit beat out of me, I felt afraid and started thinking things over.

"I stabbed my stepfather, clubbed him and once bashed him on the head with a baseball bat, making a big wound. My sister saw it all, and it really traumatized her. So I started thinking over how something might happen to her later on down the line. I changed mainly to save myself and to keep my sister from turning bad later on. I love that girl so much, I'd lay down my life for her. That's what made me change. My mom's already into what she's into, and so's my stepfather, but my sister's little, right? I wouldn't like her to get messed up in what they're into later on. My sister's like an angel for me. She needs me and I need her. She helps me recognize I'm worth something."

### ***"Now I feel like a peace leader"***

That awareness of his value as a person and his use of words such as "think things over" and "traumatized" reveal that Camilo has internalized the CEPREV discourse. He was induced to assume another social role, and that's how he perceives it: "Now I feel like a leader in how to live, like a peace leader. Because

I explain to them how they can change, too. They've told me that and I feel the same way. "The kids support me and the most wonderful thing I've seen is that they come to my house when they've got problems. They say, '*Piruca*—because that old nickname stuck—look, I've got this problem...' 'Don't worry,' I tell them, 'Come back tomorrow.' Even those who messed with me come around. They say, 'Look, *Piruca*, I'm only drinking booze now, no rocks, trust me, I give you my word.' 'Yeah, man,' I tell them, 'Don't give me that. You know that later you'll go out stealing and only bad will come of it.' If I see them with drugs I start talking to them, because I've got leaflets, which I explain to them, and I tell them what happened to me. I say, 'Remember when I took booze with Valium and all that? I nearly died, I got tachycardia. I know you've got the same symptoms. Want me to tell you why? When you run, you're drowning. Your lungs could fill up on you.' So the kids are getting scared. I know the score with drugs; I tell them how I felt."

Getting to that point, where you become the subject of your own reinsertion, is a slow process that requires constant and tenacious work by the CEPREV psychologists. Camilo transmuted his social role from violent leader to peace leader. His cultural metamorphosis has been possible because of the leading role he's played in many other metamorphoses. His story is similar to those of many kids in his barrio, but his particular transformation isn't common, because the problem of youth violence is greater than the capacity of the existing institutions and because those fighting violence are swimming against the current: against Paintball games promoted by the well off and against the security companies that buy into the prevailing inequity in choosing their victims.

### ***We need "sociological imagination"***

Some recommendations can be drawn from the exploration of these three cases, including one rehabilitation initiative. The first and most obvious is the need for more research: comparative studies in different barrios, follow-ups of gangs and gang members over time, comparisons of Central America's different democratization

processes, more in-depth study of the strategies some have termed “the rebellion of the elite” and their desire to segregate, and analyses of the evolution of the definitions of crime and of the dynamism and composition of the social networks, among other factors whose influence on youth violence can be reasonably presumed.

Such attempts to get a closer look at the reality of youth gangs require combining different disciplines: criminology, sociology, anthropology, psychology, social psychology, political sciences, etc. They also require risk-taking, because greater human proximity can help us understand the motivations, strategies and dead ends in the lives of youth gang members, and that closeness entails risks. But only getting close to those who’ve hit bottom in the great social mismatch can stimulate intellectual creativity. It’s what C. Wright Mills would call “sociological imagination.”

Exercising sociological imagination with ethical responsibility involves not letting oneself be duped by the smoke screen of “citizens’ security,” which masks the problem, focuses on stigma and reinforces the criminal career. Understanding why gang members don’t respect a social contract that has confined them to the garbage heap is only possible by redefining citizens’ security as job security, secure quality of life, old age security, disability and death security, among other spheres of security that build citizenship, i.e. a sense of belonging to a legal community.

Sociological imagination shows that the problem of youth gangs—which is at bottom a symptom of far greater social problems—must not be reduced to its manifestations of street violence. The growing suicide rates, which affect young people more than any other age group, must also be included in the analysis. And no less attention should be paid to the slow but very effective self-destruction through drug abuse, because there’s a danger that the analyses will dismiss young people who destroy themselves taking crack on a street corner as non-problematic, concentrating only on drug abusers who stand out because they exercise violence. There’s also a danger of neglecting the effects of middle- and upper-class

ostentation, of those who shamelessly display their opulence with no awareness of its direct and collateral damage and stimulate the compulsive obsession with brand names that idolatrizes certain merchandise.

### ***Why not recognize that value?***

There is an urgent need for both more analysis and more action. The National Police must restrict its actions to the dictates of the Code for Children and Adolescents, control and restrict arms possession more and multiply its invitations to turn in weapons. Police commissioners should not be permitted to invest in weapons shops and private security companies. As the most visible face of the state, the police force has a presence even in places with no schools, electricity or health centers. And in its role as the coercive apparatus, it has had and will continue to have a determining role in the relationship between the state and youth gangs. The ways in which it confronts them define a cultural pattern, making it an indispensable element in bringing about change. Its collaboration with organizations such as CEPREV, or even reproducing its peace-based model on the national level, would make a hefty contribution to changing the role of youth gangs.

Door-to-door work is still the domain of civil society, but it also has macro-tasks. It must continue pressuring for an administration of justice in Nicaragua that builds credibility in the judicial system and in the legislative framework. The first step toward such credibility is the fight against the big tax evaders who are emptying the state coffers and against the existing tax structure, which perpetuates inequity.

As part of civil society, the media have an enormous responsibility in the way they mold perceptions of violence. Their ethical responsibility not to continue feeding stigma by presenting youth gangs in a skewed way—covering the crimes but hardly touching on successful rehabilitation experiences—must be highlighted and demanded. They must present the multiple meanings of the youth gang

phenomenon. Why not recognize them as questioning the social order? Rather than demonizing them as sick or deviant, they could show them as sensitive, even allergic to the chaos surrounding them. Rather than glibly labeling them countercultural, they could show them as a crude manifestation of the cultural refrains of our times: the obsession with brand names, hedonism, every man for himself, unsatisfied expectations, risk...

### ***Redemption through art?***

Nobody has yet explored in Nicaragua the rehabilitating potential of certain youth activities, for example redemption through art. Youth gang members share two compulsive obsessions with many other youths from marginalized neighborhoods: drugs and the transnational trend in artistic expressions. Although the two are very different, they are sometimes lumped together and demonized.

The transnational artistic expressions are rarely taken up by lazy policy scribblers who prefer to avoid any danger of a mental hernia by proposing the perennial panaceas of sports and employment. Offering these young people chances to express their artistic creations (songs, graffiti, drawings) with some level of public recognition and notoriety would make a forceful contribution to transmuting the violent orientation of their energies. It would allow their righteous inconformity to be listened to and open up arenas for their participation based not on sticks, stabbings and mortar blasts, but rather on arguments, illustrated with images and endowed with inventiveness.

Among the Walters, Camilos and Ernestos are many artists and citizen apprentices looking for ways to express themselves. There's a lot to do, but few are heading in the right direction. While CEPREV is making unflagging efforts to transform the culture of violence, the businesspeople behind Paintball Xtremo Jungle continue to legitimize it and sell it as fun.



**Why are there  
no maras in Nicaragua?**



# Why are there no maras in Nicaragua?

**W**hy haven't the fierce Mara 13 and Mara 18 youth gangs moved into Nicaragua? And why are Nicaragua's own gangs less violent than their counterparts in the rest of Central America? The discourse on youth violence is full of fear-mongering, stereotypes and myths. We have to reach beyond all that and start thinking more.

JOSÉ LUIS ROCHA

The United States Army, that self-styled police force of humanity, has already started to turn its ominous periscope toward youth gangs. In March 2005, the US Army War College published another article in its special series on "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century." Titled "Street gangs: the new urban insurgency," it is a manual aimed at training members of the US Army on the issue. It was written by retired colonel Max G. Manwaring, who is Professor of Military Strategy at the US Army War College and has also held positions in the US Southern Command and the Defense Intelligence Agency. As the title suggests, this document presents youth gangs as a mutation of urban insurgency because, like the old forms of insurgency, these gangs have the objective of "controlling the governments of targeted countries."

***Political and criminal in nature,  
they threaten the collapse of states?***

According to Manwaring's article, the youth gangs are half-political and half-criminal in nature and this is manifested in the fact that they generate serious domestic and regional instability and insecurity; exacerbate the problems of civil-military and police-military relations and reduce effective civil-military ability to control the national territory; and help transitional criminal organizations, warlords and drug barons erode the legitimacy and effective sovereignty of the nation states. Crime and instability are only symptoms of the threat, the ultimate threat being either state failure or the violent imposition of a radical socioeconomic political restructuring of the state and its governance.

The Central American youth gangs are the first to be addressed by Manwaring. He states that the Californian youth gangs began moving into all five Central American republics in the early 1990s, the main impetus coming from convicted felons being sent from prisons in the United States back to the countries of their parents' origins. They included members of the famed Mara Salvatrucha (also known both as MS-13 and Mara 13) and Mara 18 (*"mara"* is the Spanish term for youth gang, particularly the more violent ones, in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), as well as several others in El Salvador such as Mao Mao, Crazy Harrisons Salvatracho and Crazy Normans Salvatracho.

Manwaring calculates that there are some 39,000 active gang members in El Salvador, adding that several thousand individuals with direct links back to El Salvador are located in the United States, Central and South America, Mexico, Canada and Europe. He adds that "in the early stages of their development and through the present, virtually all the Central American gangs have flourished under the protection and mercenary income provided by larger criminal networks. The basis of this alliance is the illegal drug trade "that is credited with the transshipment of up to 75 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States."

Manwaring has many colleagues in the Central American coercive apparatuses who agree with his particular interests. The producers of order establish alliances, organize seminars and design strategies to suffocate the youth gang threat. Is this document just another sinister face of US anti-immigrant policy?

Exaggerating the linkage between youth gangs and organized crime networks and associating their beginnings exclusively with deportation effectively adds up to criminalizing migration, without making even the slightest allusion to adaptation problems experienced by migrants as the result of xenophobic policies and reactions, the unbridled desire for profit of many businesspeople or residential segregation. Manwaring's document contains many questionable arguments, omissions and other unfounded statements. While it thus might be useful to refute, correct or complete his thesis, it seems of even greater interest to reflect on criminal violence and delinquency based on certain statistical information and theories.

### ***A pioneering study and today's debate: Are they criminals or merely a symptom?***

Dr. Deborah Levenson was a very early and visionary pioneer in this field given that her research was carried out in 1987. When she studied youth gang members in Central America the gangs were still in their infancy and it was impossible to predict the overwhelming force they would achieve just five years later. Levenson describes them as voluntary organizations made up of young people born and raised primarily in the city, who had a positive feeling about their participation in a group they perceived as democratic.

She argued that their members weren't the poorest of the poor and that their group activities were more important to them than any other kind. Even then she observed that the youth gangs had grown considerably over the previous year without involving more than a handful of adults. Drugs were important for their

members, but not central, and in a very broad sense they saw themselves as rebels. She also highlighted that these groups provided their members with help, camaraderie, a few pleasant moments, an identity and a little money.

Two large gang consortiums subsequently absorbed the many gangs that existed in the eighties: Mara 13 and Mara 18, which currently have branches in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico and the United States. The level of violence increased and the repressive responses more than compensated. In the current context, the coordinates of discussions about youth gangs and violence are set on the one extreme by the champions of citizens' security and on the other by those—such as Mexican “communicologist” Rossana Reguillo—who prefer to think of the gang members “as a symptom, a radicalized expression of contemporary unease, who find ‘criminality’ to be an ideal vehicle given the lack or inadequacy of languages to be expressed.”

What follows is a presentation of several theses on youth gangs based on Italian criminal law expert Alessandro Baratta, who considers that rather than a preexisting fact objectively proved by official bodies, criminality is a “social reality” of which the actions of those bodies are a constituent element.

### ***Urgent need for an informed and critical debate***

For reasons of space, we will not detail either the discourse or the actions of the control and rehabilitation agencies, although they should be understood not as independent variables, but as constituent elements of a shared social reality, as other ways of expressing the same problem, as diverse symptoms that are neither removed nor clearly dissociable. NGOs dedicated to rehabilitation; the judicial system that pardons or punishes; the police, whether they are participating in the drugs trade, inflicting beatings or applying non-repressive programs; proponents of a Code for Children and Adolescents who achieve more international legitimacy

than national social consensus; these are all expressions of different strategies that are mutually conditioned. They are just some of many factors that should be borne in mind when analyzing youth violence and delinquency.

Informed debate is an essential condition for the design and implementation of effective public policies, placing us, in Reguillo's words "in a better place from which to understand *maras*, whose complexity has not been successfully gauged in public debate, because it is their most spectacular traits that remain fixed in a discourse that spreads—more than the *maras* themselves—and whose effect is to block critical reflection."

Nobody has yet bought the Nicaraguan franchise for those two giant youth gang consortiums known as Mara 13 and Mara 18. There is a persistence of fragmentary groups, small gangs not associated with bigger conglomerations and less permeable to US influence. The Nicaraguan gangs have not yet bought into the *mara* fad and are less violent than those in the rest of Central America. Why? Let's compare Nicaragua to Guatemala,

El Salvador and Honduras in this respect as a methodological way of questioning certain theses and buttressing others, without pretending for even a minute that the situation of young people is better in Nicaragua than in the other three countries. The comparison of certain indicators could offer clues to which elements are associated with youth violence and those with which no univocal correlation can be established.

### ***More youth violence than ever before?***

From the early eighties, violence and youth violence in particular became the focus of attention for Central American social analysts and public policy designers. It was noted that the rate of youth participation in homicides was notably high and in an alarming ascent. In 1996, 29% of all homicides reported in Latin America were committed by 10- to 19-year-olds and over 34% by 20- to 29-year-olds.

According to police statistics for January to November 2005, over 43% of male detainees accused of the various forms of homicide were young men between 18 and 25. If we extend the age range to young men between 15 and 25, their participation increases to 50.6%. The same age range accounts for 73.32% of people detained for robbery with violence and 51.48% of all detainees. This level of criminal activity is greater than the demographic weight of young men of this age.

Fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds account for 20.5% of the total population and 37% of the population over the age of 15 and therefore liable for detention. The criminal participation of 15- to 25-year-olds—measured according to the number of people detained—is 14.48% above the same age group's demographic weight in the population over the age of 15. And their participation in robbery with violence is double their demographic weight. This confirms the disproportionate criminal participation of young people, particularly in violence labeled as a crime.

Violence is a very visible component of the functioning of Nicaraguan society, of Central American societies and of other societies in the world. "Criminal" violence has been recognized as one of the greatest social problems of our time. According to British anthropologist Dennis Rodgers, crime rates have increased by 50% globally in the last 25 years, with a notable surge in the nineties.

This phenomenon has affected all underdeveloped countries, but has been particularly marked in Latin America, where the most visible forms of violence are no longer activated by ideological conflicts related to the nature of our political system, as was the case in the past, but rather appear as common crime or what can be termed organized crime to a lesser or greater extent.

Another feature that differentiates the current violence from its previous forms is that it has stopped being the patrimony of the coercive apparatus of the state and organized opposition groups, giving way to what Dirk Kruijt and Kees Koonings term the democratization of violence, an option now available to multiple actors pursuing all kinds of goals.

In Nicaragua and other Central American countries, the cessation of the armed conflicts of the eighties caused a displacement: while the war concentrated the violence in rural zones and generally speaking stayed away from the cities, the war was transferred to the urban centers under the guise of crime following the peace accords.

***Today's violence: Devoid of ideology,  
more democratic and more urban***

Three changes characterize the region's current violence: its de-ideologization, the democratization of its use and the urbanization of its scenarios. A look at Nicaraguan crime statistics reinforces the idea of "democratization," which should perhaps be termed the "de-ideologized spontaneity of its practice." According to police statistics, the figures for injuries display a constant increase: from 1,875 in 1984 and 4,568 in 1990, to over 10,000 in 1995. Murder, homicide, rape and assault all display similarly upward curves. In 1981 there were 1,862 aggravated robberies, which dropped to 64 in 1985. Even in 1989, a year before the change of government following the FSLN's electoral defeat, there were just 830 aggravated robberies.

But subsequently, according to the newly appointed National Police Commissioner, Aminta Granera, in a study published in 1997, "the drastic rise in the occurrence of robbery with intimidation can be observed in a more pronounced way starting from 1990, during which year this crime rose by 87%. In 1994, 3,018 cases were reported, representing a 28% increase over 1992." The growth was not only visible in absolute terms. In the first four years of the nineties the population grew an average 3.3% a year, while the increase in criminality in general and violent crime specifically averaged 18%; in other words, it grew 5.5 times faster than the population. This abrupt increase can partly, although not exclusively, be seen as a typical phenomenon of a postwar period and of the transition from regimes with powerful coercive apparatuses to ones with a more limited control apparatus and laxer policies.

Youth participation in criminal violence has become the center of attention of multilateral organizations, governments and academics. As the UN's Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has observed, the most symptomatic and worrying aspect is that the faces of violence are almost always young, whether we're talking about victims or victimizers. ECLAC's alarm bells are laudable, but require greater justification. A closer look at the behavior of young people in the past three decades reveals that youth violence is neither new nor has it reached its peak.

### ***Violence then and now: From institutional to outside legal channels***

The percentage of young people involved in criminal acts—a category that includes violent crimes—has increased, but there are indications that the rate of their participation in violent acts per se has dropped.

In Nicaragua in the seventies, tens of thousands of young people took up arms during the insurrection that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship. Not only did they make up the bulk of the guerrilla army, they also played a key part in running the fight, with teenage boys and girls holding the rank of *comandante*. In the following decade of the *contra* war, the age range for compulsory military service established by the Sandinsta government was between 16 and 25, precisely the age group that currently claims the greatest number of youth gang members and most of those detained for committing crimes.

But while the military service recruited hundreds of thousands of young people—to which should be added those who fought for the counterrevolution—it is probable that the number of young people in Nicaraguan gangs over the last ten years has not exceeded 25,000. So the real boom in youth violence in Nicaragua actually took place in the seventies and eighties, although it was admittedly institutionalized violence, with an ideological basis and a predilection for rural settings.



What has happened since then is that young people—particularly those involved in youth gangs—now practice a kind of violence that is labeled as criminal due to its relative de-ideologized spontaneity and the fact it takes place outside the legally established channels. The novelty, however, is not so much its scenarios, lack of ideology, classification as an offense for taking place outside of institutionalized channels or association with so-called common crimes such as street fights, robbery, hold-ups, etc.

The reasoning that regards today's youth violence as either greater or at least more threatening now springs from a discourse and a strategy. It is a discourse that sees the epoch of peace as a return to normality, the rule of law, where there are precise and unquestionable norms about which behaviors can be qualified as acceptable and which as deviant. It is a discourse that proclaims the existence of what it intends to generate: attaining the desired ends involves going through certain channels, the stage of all against all is at an end, and the legality of a certain behavior is what will guarantee its continuity.

For this discourse, if violence is domesticated by an ideology and operates under certain circumstances, then it has a certain legitimate character that it lacks during peace time. That discourse, with its laws and myths, obeys a middle-class strategy.

The war took place in settings that didn't directly affect them, which is why they underestimate its dimensions and refuse to look at the historical continuity. As a result, their discourse presents the eighties as some kind of rupture. That decade was "the dark night" (as Pope John Paul II famously called it), "the lost decade," a parenthesis in a normality that requires a certain re-established legal framework in order to continue functioning.

It's worth highlighting the criminalized nature of the youth gangs and the fact that they are labeled as a transgression of the standards that constitute the re-established normality. On the youth gangs' side, this emphasis is obligatory as

their violence is the object of attention precisely because it constitutes a transgression. Taking up this confrontation between the youth gangs' activities and their labeling by the order-producing organizations, Rossana Reguillo proposes that the gangs should also be seen as the "most extreme face of the exhaustion of a legal model." In the range of gang reactions to this exhaustion, fights are just one more transgression and no longer even the most vigorous. There are other faces of this exhaustion of the legal model. Could drugs be the most sinister?

### ***Are Nicaraguan gang members the authors of such countless damage?***

A superficial and largely unfounded analysis associates the greater manifestations of violence and criminality with the youth gangs. The Nicaraguan National Police sustained in 1999 that a large part of youth delinquency was associated with the existence of the youth gangs and they were therefore trying to keep thorough records of their number, location and activities. In 2002, the National Police in Managua "captured"—or so state the police documents—736 youths identified as gang members.

That figure would appear to indicate that the police apprehended 33% of Managua gang members that year, as the police estimated the total membership of the capital's 118 gangs at 2,229. That would have had a very high impact and would indicate that the youth gangs were the focus of privileged police attention. But those 736 gang members represented just 7% of the total number of 15- to 25-year-olds detained in Managua, a weight that does not in any way correspond to the extreme danger attributed to them.

The following year, the police recognized that youth gangs committed just 0.51% of crimes. Does this mean that their members were not a very active criminal sector, that the statistics are badly put together or that gang activities go relatively unpunished compared to other offenses because charges are hardly ever pressed, for example due to fear in the neighborhood where they operate?

Or could it be that the gang members are extremely skillful at evading the police, the police frequently apply extrajudicial penalties, or gang activities have been displaced toward behaviors that are less penalized or identified as gang-related? Might it even be that a disproportionate fuss is made about gang activities? It must surely be a combination of several of the above possibilities.

Given that the police had a “Youth Gang Plan” in place since 1999 and given the stubborn predilection for gangs in police videos on youth violence, there appears to have been no lack of police zeal in referring to and penalizing gang activities. The elevated weight of young people among the total detainees shows that they are a very appetizing segment for secondary criminalization, which operates when penal system agencies such as the police, judges or the magistracy attribute the category of criminal to specific individuals.

Why isn’t there a large number of youth gang members among those detainees? First because approval of the Nicaraguan Code for Children and Adolescents has increased a tendency among police to mete out their own spontaneous punishments on the scene for the main crime committed by the youth gangs: fights between different groups in which there is often no one to file legal charges. Second, because gang members’ activities now concentrate more on drug use and dealing, petty theft and muggings carried out individually and not in groups. Third, because the communications media have fueled the public’s perception of the gangs, making more of a fuss about their deeds and the “countless deaths and damage” than about the gangs themselves and attributing crimes to the youth gangs that were not actually perpetrated by their members.

### ***“Youth groups at risk” or “youth gangs”?***

Do Nicaraguan police statistics underestimate the number of youth gangs and does this in turn affect the statistics on youth gang activities and the number of detained gang members? The Nicaraguan National Police have applied a new youth gang classification since 2003.

The first category consists of what are called “Youth Groups at High Social Risk,” consisting of young people who “spontaneously relate,” sometimes for illicit ends; occasionally consume liquor or take narcotics and psychotropic drugs; among whom certain signs of violence and rebelliousness emerge; and who occasionally commit minor offences classified as misdemeanors.

The second category, identified as dangerous, although not on the same level as their Central American counterparts, is that of the “Youth Gang,” consisting of young people who “identify as a group”; use identity-conferring symbols, languages and behaviors; sometimes have no family links; “organize” locally—in the block, basketball court, on the street corner and in the neighborhood, which they consider “their territory”; commit crimes and penal misdemeanors and inflict injuries and damage to property that “provoke a great feeling of insecurity”; “habitually” consume alcohol and drugs; practice “continuous violence” that is firmly asserted in the group; generate “clashes with other groups or youth gangs” in defense of “their territory,” using firearms, blades, home-made weapons, etc; and constitute a penal category classified as “association to commit a crime.”

The use of quotes in the above descriptions highlights the contrast made by the National Police between these two groups. The youth groups consisting of individuals who relate spontaneously and only occasionally consume drugs are clearly discernable from youth gangs, which generate insecurity, are a source of ongoing violence, are organized according to territories and are devoted to drug taking and using weapons. The category “youth gang” is bestowed only on groups that possess these features, based on criteria defined by the different police apparatuses in Central America. According to this classification, the number of youth groups and their members “at social risk” in Nicaragua has declined from a peak of 285 and 4,428, respectively, in 2002 to 77 and 988, respectively, in November 2005, while youth gangs have climbed from 62 in 2003 to 89 in November 2005, and their members have climbed from 1,058 to 2,227 in the same period, according to Nicaraguan National Police figures.

***The case of Managua's District V:  
Disinformation,  
prudence or something else?***

Managua has always had the greatest presence of youth gangs. In 1999 the figure mentioned was 110 youth gangs in Managua and in 2001 the National Police registered 96 gangs and 1,725 members in the capital city. The next year the numbers had jumped to 118 gangs with 2,229 members. In January 2003, there were 117 gangs and 2,139 members and just a month later the same number of gangs was registered but with slightly more members: 2,171.

These figures give an average number of 18 members per gang, which is similar to the average for the Colombian gangs known as *parches* in 1997. In November 2005, the 34 gangs and their 706 members in Managua represented 38% and 32% of the national total of gangs and youth gang members, respectively, which is much greater than the capital's roughly 25% of the country's total population. The department with the greatest youth gang presence after Managua is Estelí, with 24% of the country's gangs and 19% of its gang members. Estelí is the only Nicaraguan city apart from Managua in which the gangs have been studied and both places are notable for their dramatic urban growth.

In Managua's District V, the focus of the field work for this research, the police registered the existence of just five youth groups and gangs with a total of 61 members: *Los Rampleros*, *Los Caucheros*, *Los 165*, *Los Power Rangers* and *Los Plot*.

But a survey of inhabitants from the different neighborhoods, particularly the gang members themselves, reflected the general impression that many highly active groups and gangs were missing from the official police figures, including: *Los Mata Perros*, *Los Churros*, *Los de la Adoquinada*, *Los Billareros*, *Los Placeños*, *Los Aceiteros*, *Los Puenteros*, *Los Raperos*, *Los del Pablo Úbeda*, *Los Come Muertos*, *Los Bloqueros*, *Los Nanciteros*, *Los Cholos*, *Los Diablitos* and *Los Roba*

*Patos*—previously *Los Búfalos* and includes *Los Concheños*. Also absent were *Los Tamales del Urbina*, undoubtedly the most famous and belligerent gang in District V. It is impossible to ignore some of these groups, such as *Los Puenteros*, whose activities are continuously mentioned in the papers and has been identified with several murders.

### ***PIPs: The complete opposite of VIPs***

The police statistics verge on the chaotic. The *Los Cholos* gang appears in the police records of gangs currently in circulation and its members are among the gang members detained, but the gang doesn't appear at all in the general youth gang register. Only youth gangs from District V's Reparto Schick neighborhood appear in that general register and no mention is made of other neighborhoods where youth gang activities are notorious.

There's also an underestimation of the number of gangs per neighborhood. The inhabitants of the Grenada neighborhood, for example, talk of *Los Diablitos*, *Los Crazy* and *Los Colchonerros*. Gangs from other districts are also notable by their absence: *Los Parrilleros* and *Los Tomateros* are just some of the youth gangs most often mentioned in conversations with gang members in Reparto Schick that do not appear in the police registers.

Is this deliberate disinformation or an attempt to sugar the pill? The National Police could be interested in using their reports to reduce the gangs to their minimum expression as a way of calming society. The police in the zone, who pass their reports to the District V police station, know the details of all the gangs and each of their members because they make routine visits to them all. In the police records they are classified as PIPs—*Personas de Interés Policial* (People of Police Interest)—and their files must be continually updated by the sector heads. It could be said that PIPs are the extreme opposite of VIPs...

The police could be interested in presenting a more peaceful situation than actually exists, perhaps because it would suggest good police performance and dovetails nicely with the government decision to present Nicaragua as the safest country in Central America, free even from “land grabbers” and therefore attractive to foreign investment. But this underestimating could also be part of a de-stigmatizing strategy.

### ***Why do the Maras 13 and 18 have no presence in Nicaragua?***

In 2006, Salvadoran writer Juan José Dalton told the Spanish newspaper *El País* that 100,000 youths belonged to Maras 13 and 18, which is comparable to Central America’s total military and police forces. But why aren’t the Maras 13 and 18 in Nicaragua? And why do the youth gangs in Nicaragua not display the same ferocity as the *maras* in the rest of Central America? Even if the youth gangs in Nicaragua have a greater presence and more widespread activities than reflected in the police statistics, Nicaragua’s gang members are fewer and less violent than in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, countries in which those two great transnational conglomerates—Maras 13 and 18—predominate.

**SOCIAL INDICATORS IN CENTRAL AMERICA**

Countries	Per-capita income	Urban unemployment rate	% illiteracy among over 15 yrs. olds	Male unemployment (15-24 age group) in urban areas	Social public spending	Public spending on housing	Public spending on education	Average years of study (15-24 age group)	
	<u>2004</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2000-2005</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>Per capita in US\$ (2000)</u>			<u>Both sexes</u>	<u>Men</u>
<b>El Salvador</b>	2,377	65	18.9	14.9	149	19	67	9.2	9.1
<b>Guatemala</b>	1,895	31	28.2	8.3	109	29	44	8.2	8.5
<b>Honduras</b>	1,061	8	22.0	10.9	126	17	70	7.9	7.6
<b>Nicaragua</b>	854	93	31.9	21.8	68	13	32	7.9	7.4

Source: ECLAC, *Social panorama of Latin America*, 2005

Those *maras*, which also operate in the United States and Mexico, have not extended their sphere of action to Nicaraguan cities, which is intriguing given their expansionist tendency and the fact that they are a virtually regional phenomenon. How can those who insist on a univocal correlation between youth violence and poverty levels explain the absence of *maras* in Nicaragua and the lower levels of violence among the country's youth gangs? According to ECLAC's Social Panorama of Latin America, 2005, Nicaragua has higher levels of poverty and exclusion than those countries where the *maras* are present, as shown in the table on the next page.

In its study on "Youth, Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean," ECLAC states that "it is convenient to avoid certain simplifications that are still present in the interpretation of the phenomenon of youth violence and delinquency. Among them is the one that mechanically associates youth poverty and youth delinquency. Under this approach, violence is a logical derivative of poverty. But the evidence available shows that, contrary to what this theory indicates, the greatest expressions of violence are not concentrated in the poorest areas of the continent, but rather in those contexts in which various economic, political and social conditions perversely combine." So poverty and exclusion alone cannot exclusively determine youth violence and delinquency.

### ***Other factors, other explanations***

In the search for explanations, some have also explored the path of relations with the government, democratic values and trust among the citizenry. The study on political culture and democracy coordinated by Mitchell A. Seligson of the University of Vanderbilt, whose Nicaraguan case study was conducted by Luis Serra and Pedro López Ruiz of Managua's Central American University (UCA), contains a number of revealing figures. For example, just 28% of those surveyed have values that support a stable democracy; only Guatemala has a lower percentage (21%), while Honduras and El Salvador do slightly better with 30% and 32%, respectively.



Government efficiency was classified as 17.5 in Nicaragua, 27.3 in Honduras, 32 in Guatemala and 35.6 in El Salvador, and Nicaragua also has the lowest level of satisfaction with municipal services. In terms of the assessment of the rule of law, El Salvador obtained a score of 39.7, compared to Nicaragua's 32. Confidence in the armed forces reached the 60s in Honduras and 68.6 in El Salvador, but just 54.2 in Nicaragua, and a similar pattern was repeated for confidence in congress, the Supreme Court, the church and political parties. The greatest victimization by acts of corruption was registered in Nicaragua. Finally, the study took a look at social capital. Asking about interpersonal trust, it found a rate of 56 in Nicaragua, followed by 57 in Guatemala and 63 in Honduras and El Salvador. Conclusion: none of these are determining factors for the reduced youth violence in Nicaragua.

Other factors associated or associable with youth violence and the presence of *Maras* 13 and 18 that merit examination and analysis include migration, organized crime, the availability of arms and police operations, all of which are variables with a considerable impact on the expansion—if not necessarily the appearance—of the *maras* and on the rates of youth violence. They demand analysis.

### ***Transculturation: The Negros Curros of Havana and the Cholos of the eighties***

The *maras* are a transnational phenomenon. This feature, with its corollary of “transculturation,” recalls references to the “*negros curros*” (literally “flashy blacks” or “cocky blacks”) that strutted their freedom through the streets of Havana in the first third of the 19th century—at the height of slavery—dressed up in outlandish clothes, talking their own slang and spreading panic with a show of bad living, delinquency, marginalization and violence. Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz coined the concept of transculturation to refer to the different phases involved in the passage from one culture to another, which implies a partial deculturation—uprooting from a preceding culture—and a neo-culturation—the subsequent creation of new cultural phenomena.

According to Ortiz, “what happens in any embrace of cultures is the same as in the genetic copulation of individuals: the offspring always has something from both parents, but is at the same time distinct from each of them. As a whole, the process is a ‘transculturation,’ and that term implies all the phases of its parabola.”

Transculturation has left its mark on many features of Cuban culture, such as the *santería* (a system of cults whose essential element is the worship of deities created through syncretism between the African and Catholic beliefs), which is as far-removed from—or as close to—its African roots as it is from Spanish Catholicism. Nineteenth-century transculturation produced the “*negros curros*,” which although they have now disappeared emerged from the vigorous migratory flow between Spain and Cuba.

The “*negros curros*” had many Andalusian traits: the slang, the courage, the argumentative attitude. They were also distinguished by their way of walking and dressing and by their life “of crime and blustering, always with a knife in hand: defiant and quick to brawl.” The continuous slave traffic produced a cultural mixing. Lifestyles and cultural institutions were stirred together, producing identity, and very often mixed and conflictive identities, such as the “*negros curros*.”

#### CENTRAL AMERICAN RESIDENTS IN THE US (2004)

Place of Residency	Place of origin			
	Nicaragua	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras
United States	248,725	1,201,002	698,745	407,994
Florida	93,646	38,423	45,597	71,481
Miami	79,896	16,642	15,234	44,065
California	93,600	516,859	290,827	78,955
Los Angeles	29,910	368,416	199,543	56,555
Texas	7,591	161,148	39,655	40,136
New York	5,760	99,724	46,872	59,896

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004: American Community Survey.

Many vehicles are currently facilitating the cultural mixing between the United States and Central America, including music styles such as rap, *reggaeton* and *perreo*, which reflect a mixture of common motives among young people living in different climes; television programs; clothes—where the bales of used clothing imported from the States play a key role, providing a cheap way of dressing gringo- or *cholo*-style; friends and relatives who come and go or who settle over there, but regularly communicate and are a kind of role model of success, whether a cousin, an aunt or a rich brother who went of to seek their fortune.

### ***Cultural remittances and young nomads***

These cultural remittances maintain the connection between over there and over here: the United States and Central America respectively. And this leads to a very complex tangle of all kinds of cultural survivals and mixtures, marked by the problems of adaptation there and here, of the present and the past, as demonstrated by the *pachucos*, the *cholos* and the gang members of the eighties. The *maras* have existed since the eighties, before the migratory waves took on their current dimensions, alarming for some, natural for others and celebrated by very few.

In 1987, Deborah Levenson found a multitude of youth gangs in Guatemala City with colorful names: *Tigresa* (Tigress), *Angeles Infernales* (Infernal Angels), *Escorpion* (Scorpion), *Güevudos* (Assholes), *Zope* (Vulture), Relax, Nice, Motley Crew, Apaches, Las Pirañas (The Piranhas). A team from the Rafael Landívar University discovered that 12 years later all of these gangs had been absorbed by two big rival gang corporations: Maras 13 and 18, corresponding to two streets and gangs from Los Angeles, California.

Although the US influence was perceptible from 1988 in the use of English names, the gangs' globalization was only institutionally consecrated years later by their transnational nature and the strong links between those from the North and the South, to the point that gang emissaries from the North visit their Central American affiliates to pass on gifts and money.

These nomadic youths are at the crossroads of transcul-turation, where among other ingredients, cultural remittances, assimilations, setbacks and drugs all converge. As Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla observed, “With the open migration to the United States as the result of wars, ideas and organizational agents—the deportees—flow back from the *maras*.” And Rossana Reguillo drives home the *maras*’ nomadism: “In their current phase, the novelty introduced by the *maras* is that of carrying their territory around with them and their capacity to establish relatively stable links in the locations where they install themselves.”

### ***Central American emigrants: Nomads, residents, deportees...***

The deportations from the United States appear strongly associated with the *maras*. Years ago a report in *The Los Angeles Times* was already describing the gangs of Teguci-galpa as nourished by deportees: “Nearby is a neighborhood called El Infiernito, or Little Hell, controlled by a street gang, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS). Some MS have been US residents, living in Los Angeles until 1996, when a fede-

#### **CENTRAL AMERICANS DEPORTED AND NATURALIZED IN THE USA**

Country	<u>Deported from</u> 1992 to 1996	<u>Naturalized from</u> 1992 to 1996	<u>Deported from</u> 1998 to 2002	<u>Naturalized from</u> 1998 to 2002
Nicaragua	1.585	19.586	5.026	22.794
Honduras	9.497	15.606	63.639	19.996
Guatemala	7.276	24.311	39.669	39.789
El Salvador	9.767	57.695	56.076	83.710

Source: *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*

ral law began requiring judges to deport them if they committed serious crimes. Now they are active throughout much of Central America and Mexico. Here in El Infiernito, they carry *chimbas*, guns fashioned from plumbing pipes, and they drink *charamila*, diluted rubbing alcohol. They ride the buses, robbing passengers.” If this link between the *maras*, migration to the United States and deportations is true, this may be one of the reasons for the absence of *maras* in Nicaragua.

The destiny of Nicaraguan migrations is markedly different to those from the other Central American countries in two senses. First, most Nicaraguan migrants go to Costa Rica, not the United States. It is estimated that around half a million Nicaraguans are temporarily or permanently residing in Costa Rica, while according to a US Census Bureau survey indicates that there were 248,725 Nicaraguans in the United States in 2004, representing just 8.57% of all Central Americans in that country.

Second, the Nicaraguans who have migrated to the United States have mainly settled in Miami and other parts of Florida; only 12% of them have settled in Los Angeles, the city from whose streets Maras 13 and 18 took their names. Nicaraguans account for just 4% of the Central Americans living in Los Angeles, while in Miami they represent 47%. Almost 31% of the Salvadorans who migrated to the United States live in Los Angeles and another 12% live elsewhere in California. And while only 14% of Hondurans in the USA live in Los Angeles, there are still 56,555 of them there compared to just 29,910 Nicaraguans.

To this spatial distribution should be added the different volumes of deportees. Population flows and back-flows are powerful conditioners and Nicaraguans have been less affected by deportations from the United States than their Central American neighbors. According to official statistics from the US Immigration and Naturalization Service, only 1,585 Nicaraguans were deported from the USA between 1992 and 1996—an average of 317 per year. Nicaraguans detained for deportation between 1998 and 2002 totaled 5,026, an average of 1,005 a year,

which is insignificant compared to the deportees from other Central American countries. From 1998 to 2002, the United States of America deported 63,639 Hondurans, 56,076 Salvadorans and 39,669 Guatemalans. And this isn't just because there's less Nicaraguan migration to the United States. The same situation is reflected in the relative volumes. The percentage of naturalized Nicaraguans divided by the number of their deported co-nationals is also much higher than the corresponding percentages for Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

Nicaraguans have been relatively more benefited by naturalization than affected by deportation. Between 1998 and 2002, the United States naturalized 4.5 Nicaraguans and conferred residency on 14 for every Nicaraguan they detained for deportation. In contrast, just 1.5 Salvadorans and 1 Guatemalan benefited from residency for each of their co-nationals deported. At the opposite extreme to Nicaragua is Honduras, with 3 Hondurans exported for every 1 naturalized.

The Cubans living in Miami felt a political affinity with the Nicaraguans who arrived in their city during the eighties, putting their contacts with Republican Party politicians at the service of the newcomers. Many of these new arrivals were welcomed as political refugees fleeing the Sandinista government, which was considered a communist regime, and the naturalization and residency procedures were unusually streamlined for them. Many new migrants still benefit from the effects of that privileged policy without being the object of persecution.

After such favorable beginnings, the influence of Nicaraguan migrations and gangs will depend to a great extent on future US migratory policies, changes in the spatial distribution of migrants within the United States and an increase in the young Nicaraguans currently emigrating to San Miguel and other departments of El Salvador, where they could come under the influence of Maras 13 and 18. More importantly, it will also depend on meetings among the many "deportables" of all Central American nationalities in Mexico, that enormous vertical boundary, that anti-migratory filter at the service of the United States and location of so many cultural exchanges.

## ***Central America: A great number of weapons in civilian hands***

Given the early stage at which Deborah Levenson did her first study of youth gangs in Guatemala—prior even to the emergence of Maras 13 and 18—her conclusions seem premonitory. She argued that their lack of orientation undoubtedly left them exposed to manipulation by political groups and that they would not escape from being incorporated into or used by adult criminal networks and absorbed by crime. If that turned out to be the case, she continued, they would cross the point of no return and become centralized, anti-democratic, authoritarian and more violent. Several studies agree that the *maras* have evolved towards violence on a major scale.

The hypothesis that youth gang violence is proportional to the availability of arms seems reasonable enough. A large proportion of homicides and other crimes are the result of the ability to get hold of firearms. According to a publication by the Small Arms Survey and the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfer, there were 52,390 legal weapons in Nicaragua in 2000. Only Costa Rica had fewer (43,241), while the figures were much higher in El Salvador (170,000), Guatemala (147,581) and even Panama (96,614), a country characterized by the relative absence of armed conflict.

Nicaragua also has low homicide rates compared to the rest of Central America. In 1997, police statistics and other governmental sources revealed the following homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants: 9.2 in Nicaragua, 109.1 in El Salvador, 52.5 in Honduras and 30 in Guatemala.

In the October 2002 study by William Godnick, Robert Muggah and Camila Waszink, “Stray Bullets: The Impact of Small Arms Misuse in Central America,” Nicaragua stands out for its low level of violence: the country’s 12.26 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, although much higher than Costa Rica’s 5.94, seem

meager compared to El Salvador's 43.4, Honduras' 36.11 and Guatemala's 30.2. Some areas of El Salvador and Guatemala have homicide rates of nearly 100 per 100,000 inhabitants.

### ***Nicaragua: A great number of weapons and people who know how to use them***

Obviously these very low averages in Nicaragua mask a distribution of violence that particularly affects poor neighborhoods. Living for a year (1996-97) in the poor Managua neighborhood he dubbed "Luis Fanor Hernández," British anthropologist Dennis Rodgers counted 9 violent deaths. This amount is proportionally equivalent to 360 deaths per 100,000 people.

It we count "homemade" weapons—hammers added to metal tubes with the capacity to fire AK-47 rounds—the availability of arms in Nicaragua increases. According to my own calculations during the field work for this study, there are at least three "homemade" pistols for every twenty houses in some Managua neighborhoods. Nicaragua could also have both a low legal registry and a high distribution of weapons as the Sandinista government created a number of armed defense mechanisms that achieved mass recruitment during the eighties in its desire to knock out the counterrevolution. These included the Patriotic Military Service, Reserve Battalions, Popular Sandinista Militias, Sandinista Defense Committees and Student Production Battalions. Many of the weapons belonging to these institutions ended up in the hands of their members.

Some idea of the under-registration of arms in Nicaragua is provided by a survey carried out by the firm *Borge y Asociados* in 2001. Only 6.2% of the owners of arms interviewed said they had legally registered them. In some areas of the country at least half of those surveyed said they had been trained in the use of firearms. In 2002, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Government estimated that 140,000 firearms were in civilian hands, of which only 69,157 had been legalized. And hidden arms caches were still being found in Managua at least up until July 2001.



Even contemplating these not inconsiderable factors, the gap between Nicaragua and the rest of Central America is so wide, the migration of arms from Nicaragua to the rest of Central America at the beginning of the nineties so considerable and the problem of under-registration so generalized in the region that it appears certain there are fewer arms and homicides in Nicaragua than in the countries with *maras*. These features should be taken into consideration when explaining why Nicaraguan gangs are notably less bellicose. Another important element here is the *maras'* linkage or similarity to organized crime, which has been detected in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Crime in Nicaragua isn't as well organized, nor has it developed so many links with youth gangs, except in the small, very localized in neighborhood drug markets. Despite the presence of certain bosses in neighborhoods with a high youth gang presence, their trafficking of large amounts of drugs doesn't involve the gang members.

### ***The maras' most terrifying face***

If it's true that violence begets violence, then the actions of the police as the entity authorized to exercise institutional and legitimate violence undoubtedly condition other manifestations of violence. Shouldn't the number of civilians killed by the different Central American police apparatuses be a key indicator of the state's promotion of violent methods to resolve conflicts? That unknown and hard-to-discover figure is fundamental to explaining the rising levels of violence and the perceptions of a rule of law or lack of it.

In April 2006, the Second Anti-Youth Gang Convention took place in El Salvador's capital with the participation of 170 experts from eight countries, including Mexico and the United States. During the convention, 40-year-old Commissioner Omar García Funes, a former lieutenant in the Salvadoran army who graduated as a police officer in Chile and is currently in charge of the Salvadoran National Civil Police's special divisions, told the press, "Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 have something in common. They were founded by Salvadorans and their members are mainly Salvadorans who cross borders.

They continue to control the neighborhood because they are territorial. They have a lot of resources because they used to charge motorists 25 cents [US] and currently charge restaurants, stores and transport businesses thousands of dollars in extortion to allow them to operate. They currently mobilize in vehicles and have cell phones and radios, most of which they have stolen. Certain cliques specialize in hired killings. We know of people who have hired them to rub out enemies they were feuding with. They also use intelligence. They penetrate or infiltrate a place before they make their move. In other words, they carry out reconnaissance operations. Our own general director of the National Civil Police, Rodrigo Ávila, has even discovered the infiltration of police units.”

There is a quite evident desire to present the *maras*’ most terrifying face. As Commissioner Funes concluded, “The *maras* have mutated and are an organized crime phenomenon.” If the “labeling approach” theory is right, the Nicaraguan police’s officially non-criminalizing attitude could have the effect of not stimulating further violence and criminality.

### ***If violence begets violence, the police also do their share***

The Nicaraguan National Police apply an approach towards youth violence in general, and the youth gangs in particular, that is in marked contrast to the policies applied by their Central American counterparts. They’ve dubbed their operations against the youth gangs with names linked to public holidays—the Bethlehem Plan at Christmas or the Beach Plan in Easter week—in contrast with police operations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, whose names demonstrate the desire to severely repress youth gang members: Anti-*mara* laws, the Broom Plan, the Zero Tolerance Plan, the Hard Hand Plan and the Super Hard Hand Plan.

Nicaragua’s National Police statistics and the institution’s distinction between youth gangs and youth groups also have a decriminalizing effect. Could the under-

registration and classification of youth gangs also be governed by such a strategy? To a certain extent we can interpret them as the application of W. I. Thomas' theorem that if certain situations are defined as real, then their consequences are real. This theorem would be applied here in the following form: if the police determine that there are very few youth gangs and that most of them are inoffensive, even if it isn't true, then that under-registration, classification and determination will have the effect of not reinforcing criminality, and will help the police statements end up as true.

### ***A breeding ground for youth gangs, both legal and illegal***

We intuitively know that if the youth gangs are to be understood completely, their existence and manifestation must be linked to labor insecurity, the collapse and transformation of the old social security model, the weakening of many institutions, the de-legitimization of the justice apparatus, which has been put at the service of private interests, and the transnationalization of the elites, all of which gels into a crisis of hegemony for the organizations responsible for administering social order.

All of these transformations have generated and disseminated mechanisms of public insecurity that are more severe and imbedded in everyday life than those anathematized by the penal system and the communications media. The existence of political parties dominated by a patronage network that controls the government and maintains indissoluble links with the private sector, their manipulation of the democratic institutions and the ongoing presence of gangs of nepotistic and corrupt politicians as a legitimate form of social capital in the political economy of Nicaragua and the rest of Central America have turned corruption into a lasting system with multiple ties to politics and culture.

The system of institutionalized corruption is deeply rooted in conceptions that de-legitimize the judicial apparatus and the state's normative power, disseminating a broad acceptance of impunity and permissible illegality. The erosion of state

legitimacy—expressed by Reguillo as the exhaustion of a legal model—provides an ideal breeding ground for all kinds of transgressive behaviors, some highly penalized and others immune to criminalization due to the status of those who adopt them. In the words of the Chilean Mauricio Duce and the Venezuelan Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, both experts in judicial systems, it is assumed that “those processed by the penal system are dangerous to society, unless their social connections prove otherwise.”

### ***What can be done?***

#### ***Policies for the police and society***

Beyond intuition, the comparative analysis of the figures presented highlights the influence of certain factors, including migrations, the availability of arms, organized crime and police operations. It's not the case that young people in Nicaragua do not participate in Maras 13 and 18 because they are apparently in a better situation with respect to the other Central American countries. We haven't examined many of the indicators related to the situation of young people, such as suicide rates (i.e. the violence they commit against themselves), drug and alcohol consumption and sexual violence, but based on the contrast discovered in certain factors conditioning the youth gangs in Nicaragua and the *maras* of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, it is possible to suggest certain policies, bearing in mind of course that poverty and many other factors—above all inequality—do play some role in youth violence.

First, the control of arms and reduction of their possession and use must be a priority for the police apparatuses. This good intention clashes with the fact that in Nicaragua—as perhaps in other countries of the region—there are close links between the National Police and arms and munitions dealers. As a result, the sale of arms will continue being a very lucrative business. What can be changed is the legislation on their possession and use, and the prohibition of links by current and former army and police members with the arms market.

Second, Central America's police forces should adopt practices and discourses that do not criminalize young people and adolescents and instead stick more closely to what is established in the Codes for Children and Adolescents and the UN legislation that inspired them.

Third, the link between *maras* and youth gangs should not lead to criminalizing migration or deportees. If anything, deportations should be criminalized. Adaptation problems lie at the root of the problem and require treatment in the migrants' countries of destination. The fight against deportations must continue, but if they persist, the reinsertion of the deportees into their countries of origin should be more benign and subject to an active policy.

### ***Save yourself if you can... afford it***

There is a need for more research and more political willingness to reduce social inequalities and work on all of the areas mentioned. Above all, there is a need to save society as a whole, but not with the kind of operations aimed at personal salvation currently manifested in the privatization of public security in Nicaragua.

In 2000, there were 47 private security companies operating in the country, employing 6,536 agents. By 2005 that number had risen to 67, covering 4,153 objectives with 9,329 guards and 6,805 arms. In Managua alone the 8,217 guards are close to the total number of police officers in the country (8,360). And in addition to these company-linked security guards there are around 5,000 street watchmen operating independently.

There's a real need to come up with another radical way, a more comprehensive strategy for dealing with crime and violence that doesn't get bogged down in details. There is a need for. If we keep along the same path we'll be heading for atomization, the dissolution of social links, and an attitude of "save yourself if you can... afford your own security."



**The Gangs  
of Central America:  
Major Players and Scapegoats**

# **The Gangs of Central America: Major Players and Scapegoats**

**T**hey're called *pandillas* in Nicaragua, and *maras* in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Where did these violent, organized young people spring from? The one thing that's absolutely clear is that they are major players, born as the smoke of Central America's military conflicts was lifting. What must be made equally clear is that they are also scapegoats for those who concentrate power in our highly unjust and profoundly unequal societies, which offer no opportunities for these youths.

DENNIS RODGERS

Although the last of the revolutionary conflicts that plagued Central America during the 1970s and 80s was formally brought to an end in 1996, violence has continued to affect the region unabated, to the extent that it currently suffers some of the highest homicide rates in the world. Indeed, the levels of brutality are generally higher than during the decades of military conflict, although one significant difference between past and present forms of violence is that contemporary brutality is principally criminal rather than political in nature.

For example, the annual number of homicides in Guatemala today regularly exceeds the yearly tally of war-related deaths suffered by the country during the height of the war in the 1980s, while the United Nations Development Programme estimated the economic cost of crime in El Salvador to be US\$1.7 billion in 2003;

at 11.5% of the gross domestic product, that is significantly higher than the country's estimated average annual loss of 3.3% of the GDP due to war during the 1981-85 period. Perhaps not surprisingly, a 2007 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) identified criminal violence as *the* major obstacle to the realization of sustainable development objectives in Central America.

### ***Are the gangs the major problem?***

The new criminal violence in Central America is particularly associated with youth, and more specifically with young men. To a certain extent, this isn't surprising; statistically, most criminal acts around the world are committed by young men between the ages of 15 and 24. Furthermore, over half of Central America's population is under 24, so it logically follows that the greater the share of a population that falls within this demographic group, the greater society's vulnerability to violence. At the same time, however, the young gang members have specifically emerged as a major concern in contemporary Central America.

Although gangs have long been a feature of the region's societies, they came to the fore as a social concern in an unprecedented manner during the past two decades, and are accused of a whole slew of crimes, ranging from mugging, theft and intimidation, to rape, assault and drug dealing. There have even been attempts to link them to revolution and global terrorism.

A 2005 US Army War College publication contended that Central American gangs constituted a "new urban insurgency" whose ultimate objective is "to depose or control the governments of targeted countries," while Anne Aguilera, head of the Central America office of the US State Department's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs branch, asserted in an interview published in the Salvadoran newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* on April 8, 2005, that gangs are "the greatest problem for national security at this time in Central America."



## ***What defines a genuine gang?***

Youth gangs, of course, are by no means uncommon social phenomena. They can be found in societies all over the world, although the vast majority of what are identified as gangs are often little more than ephemeral groups of youth who gather on street corners and engage in behavior frequently labeled “anti-social” but is really little other than a fundamental part of growing up.

Gangs in the proper sense of the term are much more definite social organizations that display an institutional continuity independent of their membership. They have fixed conventions and rules, which can include initiation rituals, a ranking system, rites of passage and rules of conduct that make the gang a primary source of identity for members.

Gang codes often demand particular behavior patterns from members, such as adopting characteristic dress, tattoos, graffiti, hand signs and slang, as well as regular involvement in illicit and violent activities. Such gangs are also often—but not always—associated with a particular territory and their relationship with local communities can be either oppressive or protective (indeed, this can shift from one to the other over time).

Central American gangs clearly correspond to this second type of institution, at the same time that they remain profoundly misunderstood. Sensationalist myths and stereotypes about them abound, as the claims linking them to insurgency and terrorism starkly illustrate.

Reliable information about gangs is extremely scanty, with official statistics particularly problematic due to chronic underreporting, deficient data collection and issues of political interference. While official figures suggest that some 70,000 gang members are operating in Central America, estimates by NGOs and academics suggest that the number could be as high as 200,000.

## ***They are definitely major players in Central American violence***

Although little trustworthy quantitative data is available, an increasing number of qualitative studies collectively suggest that gangs constitute primary actors within the contemporary regional panorama of violence. Estimates of the proportion of total Central American criminal violence attributable to gangs range widely: from 10% to 60%.

These studies also highlight the widely varying distribution of violence among the different countries in the region. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are clearly experiencing much greater levels of gang violence than Nicaragua and particularly Costa Rica. Guesstimating on a rough scale of 1 to 100 based on these qualitative studies, if El Salvador, the most violent country, were ranked 100 in terms of gang violence, Honduras is likely to rank around 90, Guatemala 70, Nicaragua 50 and Costa Rica 10.

## ***An urban phenomenon***

One thing all countries have in common is that the overwhelming majority of gang violence occurs in urban areas, particularly the capital cities. Gangs are very much urban manifestations, partly because a critical demographic mass of youth is necessary for a gang to be able to emerge.

Studies have reported that up to 15% of youths in gang-affected communities can end up joining a gang—although most studies suggest that the figure is somewhere around 3 to 5% on average—with gangs having anything between 15 and 100 members and the average size tending towards 20-25 members. Most gangs emerge in poorer urban neighborhoods, although not necessarily always in the poorest ones; indeed, a study in Guatemala City found that neighborhoods falling within the metropolis' bottom quartile of impoverishment suffered less gang-related crime than neighborhoods falling within the next quartile up.

## ***The demographics of gang members***

The vast majority of gang members are male, even if female members do exist. Nonetheless, there is some evidence of all-female gangs operating in Nicaragua and Guatemala.

The age range of gang members is highly variable, although a 2001 study based on nearly 1,000 interviews with gang members by researchers at the University Public Opinion Institute (IUDOP) in El Salvador found that the average Salvadoran gang member was 20 years old, with a mean age of entry into the gang of 15 years of age. Nicaraguan gang members have been found to fall between 7 and 23 years old, while the age range in Guatemala and Honduras is between 12 and 30 years old.

## ***Why join a gang?***

The IUDOP study also asked gang members why they joined a gang, to which 40% answered that they had done because it was “the thing to do,” 21% because they had friends in the gang, and 21% to get away from family problems. The study also found a partial correlation between youth unemployment and gang membership, as only 17% of gang members were employed, and 66% actively characterized themselves as “unemployed.”

Generally, though, most studies of Central American gangs have highlighted the difficulties of systematically pinpointing factors explaining gang membership. Stereotypical “determinants” such as family fragmentation, domestic abuse or a particular psychological make-up are not consistently significant. The only factor that has been reported as systematically affecting gang membership is religious, insofar as evangelical Protestant youths in Nicaragua tend not to join gangs (it can be speculated that this is because the totalizing nature of evangelical Protestantism is such that churches constitute a complete organizational framework for their members that is institutionally equivalent to that provided by the gang).

Links can be found to a range of more structural factors, including the pervasive *machismo* (many gang codes are clearly heightened expressions of a certain way of understanding masculinity), high levels of social exclusion and inequality, the long history of war, the unregulated availability of weapons (it is estimated that there are over two million unregistered small arms in Central America), as well as the widespread absence of the state and concomitant “local governance voids” that gangs seek to fill.

These factors have to be seen more as contextual variables than determinants, however, considering that they affect Central American youth universally, but not all become gang members. A more significant structural variable is migration, which has affected gangs in the region differentially, insofar as there are two types of gangs in Central America.

### ***Maras and pandillas aren't the same thing***

Even if there is frequently a tendency to talk about Central American gangs generically, a distinction must be made between *maras* and *pandillas*. *Maras* are a phenomenon with transnational roots, while *pandillas* are more localized, home-grown gangs that are direct descendents of the youth gangs that have long been a feature of Central American societies. *Pandillas* were initially present throughout the region, but are now only really visible in Nicaragua, and to a lesser extent Costa Rica, having been almost completely supplanted by *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

*Pandillas*: This gang form initially came to the fore in the aftermath of peace in the early 1990s, when demobilized young combatants returned to their communities and found themselves facing situations of heightened uncertainty, insecurity and socioeconomic flux. Drawing institutionally on a traditional organizational vehicle for collective action by youth, some of these young veterans formed *pandillas* as

localized vigilante-style self-defense groups. It was an instinctual attempt to provide a measure of order and predictability for both themselves and their local communities, often by engaging in patterns of semi-ritual gang warfare regulated by strict codes and behavioral expectations, including in particular protecting local community inhabitants.

As such there were parallels with past gangs insofar as these often emerged as informal defense organizations in illegal squatter settlements. The *pandillas* of the 1990s, however, were much more numerous and violent than their predecessors, partly due to the legacy of war and insurrection, which bequeathed youth unprecedented martial skills.

They were also much more institutionalized than the gangs of the past, giving themselves names—examples from Nicaragua include the Dragons, the Ramparts or the Death Eaters—and developing hierarchies and rules that persisted over time despite membership turnover. To this extent, *pandillas* can be seen as organic, indigenous and localized institutional responses to the Central American post-conflict circumstances of insecurity and uncertainty, although it is important to note that there were significant variations both between and within different societies in the region.

*Maras*. This form involves much more uniform organizations with a very definite origin that can be directly linked to particular migratory patterns. There are just two *maras*, *Dieciocho* (18) and *Salvatrucha*, sometimes shortened to MS, which currently operate only in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras within the region, although they have recently begun to extend into Southern Mexico as well. Their origins lie in the 18th Street gang in Los Angeles, founded in the Rampart section of the city in the 1960s by Mexican immigrants, although it rapidly began to accept Hispanics indiscriminately. The 18th Street gang grew significantly during the late 1970s and early 80s as a result of the influx of mainly Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees, who sought to join the gang to feel included as outsiders in the US.

In the latter half of the 80s, a rival—possibly splinter—group founded by a second wave of Salvadoran refugees emerged, known as the “*Mara Salvatrucha*” (a combination of *marabunta*, a “Salvadoran” insect, and *trucha*, which means quick-thinking or shrewd in Salvadoran slang). The *Dieciocho* and the *Salvatrucha* rapidly become bitter rivals and frequently fought each other on the streets of Los Angeles.

In the aftermath of the 1992 Rodney King riots, California implemented strict new anti-gang laws and prosecutors began to charge young gang members as adults rather than minors, sending hundreds to jail for felonies and other serious crimes. This was followed in 1996 by the US Congress’ Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Non-US citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison were now to be repatriated to their countries of origin, and even foreign-born American felons could be stripped of their citizenship and expelled once they served their prison terms. As a result, the US deported nearly 46,000 convicts to Central America between 1998 and 2005, in addition to 160,000 immigrants caught without the requisite permit.

### ***Mara cliques reproduced “back home”***

El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras received over 90% of these deportees. Many of them were members of the 18th Street and *Salvatrucha* gangs who had arrived in the United States as toddlers but had never secured legal residency or citizenship, and had joined the gang as a way to feel included in a receiving country that frequently actively impeded their integration.

Following their expulsion from the US and arrival in countries of origin they barely knew, it is not surprising that they reproduced the structures and behavior patterns that had provided them support and security in the US. Deportees rapidly began to found local “*clicas*,” or chapters, of their gang in their communities of origin, which in turn rapidly began to attract local youth and supplanted local *pan-*

*dillas*. Each clique explicitly affiliates with either the *Mara Dieciocho* (as the original 18th Street gang is known in Central America) or the *Mara Salvatrucha* and cliques from different neighborhoods affiliated with the same *mara* will often join together to fight other groupings claiming allegiance to the opposing *mara*. Nonetheless, contrary to media projections, neither umbrella gang is a real federal structure, much less a transnational one. Neither the *Dieciocho* nor the *Salvatrucha* gangs in Central America answers to a single chain of command. Their umbrella nature is more symbolic of a particular historical relationship than demonstrative of any real unity, be it of leadership or action.

Indeed, in many ways, the federated nature of the *maras* is more an imagined emergent social morphology that relies on a steady flow of deportees from the US sharing a common language and reference points. The *maras* are perhaps best conceived as loose networks of localized gangs that do not necessarily communicate or coordinate either within or between countries.

### ***What makes Nicaragua different?***

There's no evidence of any cooperation between *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala or Honduras, and even less with the original *maras* in Los Angeles. Rather, any ties that exist are founded on a common experience of gangsterism in Los Angeles and deportation from the US, which are probably crucial factors explaining why Nicaragua does not have *maras*. Not only does Nicaragua have a very low deportation rate from the US—less than 3% of all Central American deportees are Nicaraguan—but Nicaraguans who have emigrated to the United States have mainly settled in Miami and other parts of Florida. According to US Census data, only 12% of them have settled in Los Angeles, where they account for just 4% of the Central American population, while they represent 47% in Miami. Miami has a different gang culture than Los Angeles; while there are Cuban gangs, they don't let Nicaraguans in.

This reality also helps explain why Nicaraguan *pandillas* aren't as violent as *maras*. There's no evident exportation to Nicaragua of US gang culture, something that has clearly proven to be more brutal than traditional Central American *pandilla* culture, perhaps because it's less rule-bound.

### ***Sensationalist crimes not so much...***

Contradicting numerous sensationalist accounts linking Central American gangs to migrant trafficking, kidnapping and international organized crime, the various qualitative studies of Central American gangs indicate that both *pandillas* and *maras* are mainly involved in small-scale crime such as petty theft and muggings. These are most often perpetrated on an individual basis, although the *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras also collectively racketeer buses and taxis going through the territory they control and extort protection money from businesses.

Admittedly, both *pandillas* and *maras* use weaponry that includes firearms such as AK-47s and explosives such as fragmentation grenades, with often dramatic consequences for both themselves and the wider population. The 2001 IUDOP survey of Salvadoran gang members mentioned above found that 25% of those questioned admitted to having committed a murder in the past year, and another 25% refused to answer the question.

Much of this violence tends to be circumscribed to the poorer, local communities from which the gangs emerge rather than richer neighborhoods. Indeed, most gang violence is in fact against rival gangs, as is starkly illustrated by the tit-for-tat prison wars that occur between incarcerated gang members in Guatemala, where gang members sometimes actively get themselves arrested so they can try to kill imprisoned detainees from opposing gang.

On August 15, 2005, newly imprisoned members of the *Dieciocho* attacked members of the *Salvatrucha* in El Hoyo prison near Guatemala City, killing 30 and leaving more than twice that number seriously wounded. A retaliatory attack



by members of the *Salvatrucha* in the San José Pinula juvenile detention center a month later killed at least 12 and wounded another 10.

### ***...but drug trafficking yes***

Over the past decade, however, both *pandillas* and *maras* have become increasingly involved in drugs trafficking and dealing. This is not surprising considering that drug use has long been associated with the gang lifestyle and that Central America has become a transit point for over 80% of the total cocaine traffic between the Andean countries and North America.

Drug trafficking within Central America is decentralized, however, with shipments passing from one small, local cartel to another, each of which takes a cut of the product as profit. The role that both *maras* and *pandillas* have begun to play in this process is mainly as the local security apparatus of these small cartels, or as small-time street peddlers connected to them informally. The gangs themselves are apparently not involved in the large-scale movement of drugs, or in wholesaling, although certain studies in El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua have highlighted that the local cartel leaders are often ex-gang members who have “graduated.” In general, *maras* seem to be more involved in the drug trade than *pandillas*, perhaps because they have a tighter grip on the monopoly of local violence, but strong evidence suggests that involvement in drug trafficking and dealing is leading to both types of gangs evolving towards more violent behavior patterns.

### ***Central American states declare “war on gangs”***

A factor that has clearly intensified *mara* violence is the implementation of a declared “war” against them by Central American states over the past several years.

“Get tough” policy in El Salvador: The opening salvo of this veritable regional conflict was El Salvador’s adoption of a get-tough policy known as *Mano Dura* in July 2003, which advocated immediate imprisonment for two to five years of youths age 12 and up simply for having gang-related tattoos or flashing gang signs in public. Between July 2003 and August 2004, 20,000 gang members were arrested, although 95% were eventually released without charge after the Salvadoran Supreme Court declared the *Mano Dura* law unconstitutional for violating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A new “*Mano Super Dura*” package of anti-gang reforms was rapidly pushed through, which respected the provisions of the Convention but stiffened the penalties for gang membership to up to five years in prison for ordinary gang members and nine years for leaders. Although the Police needs to have some proof of active delinquent behavior in order to arrest an individual under the new law, El Salvador’s incarcerated population has doubled over the past five years, from 6,000 to 12,000, 40% of which are gang members.

“Zero tolerance” in Honduras: Almost simultaneously, Honduras implemented a comparable policy called “Zero Tolerance” in August 2003, partly inspired by former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s (in)famous policy. Among the measures this package promoted was a reform of the penal code and adoption of legislation that established a maximum 12-year prison sentence for gang membership—later stiffened to 30 years—as well as provisions for better collaboration between the Honduran police and army to root out the *mara* members. This collaboration extended to joint urban patrolling, sometimes even using tanks.

“Operation Broomsweep” in Guatemala: Guatemala likewise adopted its “*Plan Escoba*” (“Operation Broom-sweep”) in January 2004, which while not as draconian as the Salvadoran or Honduran versions, still contained new provisions allowing minors to be treated as adults and deployment of 4,000 reserve army troops in troubled neighborhoods in Guatemala City.

“Softer” measures in Nicaragua: Nicaragua regularly implemented a range of anti-gang initiatives from 1999 onwards, although these were of a significantly softer nature, partly because of the less violent nature of the *pandillas* compared to the *maras* and partly because the National Police have a very limited presence in many barrios and urban squatter settlements due to a lack of patrolling capacity.

Although these crackdowns have been very popular with the general public, they have been vigorously opposed by human rights groups concerned with the potential abuse of gang suspects. Even more ominously, Amnesty International has presented evidence—corroborated by the US State Department—that paramilitary death squads exist in Honduras and Guatemala that are deliberately targeting gang members and often youth more generally.

### ***Multi-country anti-gang alliances and coordination***

Less extrajudicially, Central American states have also begun to engage in unprecedented forms of cooperation to deal with gangs, which a September 2003 regional summit of heads of state declared to be “a destabilizing menace, more immediate than any conventional or guerrilla war.” On January 15, 2004, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua agreed to lift legal barriers to the cross-country prosecution of gang members, whatever their nationality, while on March 18, 2005, Presidents Tony Saca of El Salvador and Oscar Berger of Guatemala agreed to set up a joint security force to patrol gang activity along their common border.

The Central American states have also sought to involve the US in their anti-gang initiatives, which was reticent to participate until the Honduran minister of Security, Oscar Alvarez, rather ludicrously claimed in June 2004 that a suspected Saudi member of Al Qaeda, Yafar Al-Taya, had arrived in El Salvador to meet with gang leaders. Although an unfounded assertion, by December 2004 the FBI had

created a special task force focusing on Central American gangs and in February 2005 announced the creation of a liaison office in San Salvador to coordinate regional information-sharing and anti-gang efforts. Following a new and no less ludicrous claim by Alvarez to have thwarted a Colombian FARC-*mara* plot to kill President Ricardo Maduro in April 2005, the region's military leaders formally called on the US Southern Command for assistance in creating a multinational force to tackle organized crime and youth gangs, although this has yet to be implemented.

### ***It only made things worse***

While the different anti-gang initiatives initially seemed to reduce crime quite significantly, there is increasing evidence that this was a temporary state of affairs as gangs have become both less conspicuous and more radical. Several studies have reported that gang members have begun to use less obvious signs and symbols, in particular getting rid of tattoos, to avoid being picked up by the Police. Gangs have also begun to reorganize themselves along more vertical lines, coordinate more with other gangs and generally resort to more intense forms of violence.

This was well illustrated by the exchange of violence that certain *mara* groups engaged in with the Honduran government following the implementation of *Mano Dura*. On August 30, 2003, a month after the promulgation of the new anti-gang legislation, gang members attacked a bus in the Northern city of San Pedro Sula in broad daylight, killing 14 and wounding 18. They left a note for President Ricardo Maduro ordering him to repeal the law.

The following month, in the town of Puerto Cortez, a young woman's head was found in a plastic bag, again with a note addressed to President Maduro, this time saying that it was a response to the extrajudicial police killing of a gang member. Over the course of the following year, more than 10 decapitated corpses were left in various cities with similar messages from gang members to the

President, each time in response to a putative extrajudicial killing. And on December 23, 2004, in Chamalecon, gang members again attacked a bus and killed 28, this time leaving a message claiming revenge for the May 2004 death of 105 gang members in a prison following a suspect fire.

### ***Opening opportunities seems a better solution***

It seems clear in light of such events that the attempts of the region's governments to arrest themselves out of their gang trouble are not working. Indeed, the repressive approach they've adopted has only enhanced the problem, radicalizing the gangs and precipitating a spiral of violence. The new criminal justice initiatives are obviously failing as deterrents, partly because defiance of the state has become a key feature of the gang member ethos following the "war on gangs" waged by the governments, but also because repression simply doesn't remedy the underlying problems generating the gangs.

At their most basic, the gangs can be said to be about creating a sense of belonging and inclusion for their members and sometimes their wider community, as well as constituting vehicles for resource accumulation. Seen in this light, it's not surprising that experience in the world has consistently shown opportunity-providing initiatives taking this into account to be more effective in reducing the phenomenon.

### ***Scapegoats for unjust societies***

Although there has been some limited implementation of such schemes in Central America, the real problem is that social policy inevitably reflects the political sentiment of a given social context. Arguably the biggest obstacle to dealing coherently with Central America's gang problem is the deeply entrenched oligarchic nature of its societies and the concentration of power in the hands of a small elite

that actively excludes the majority. This results in more than simple policy paralysis, as the oligarchic Central American governments are actively using their highly publicized crackdowns on gangs to avoid taking action on other issues of broader significance such as social exclusion or inequality.

Gangs have thus become convenient scapegoats on which to blame the isthmus' problems and through which those in power attempt to maintain a particular status quo, but it can be argued that they also simultaneously embody the risks of violent social reaction that is likely to erupt in the face of such attempts to preserve an unjust society.

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***What is a gang? A quick overview of the literature shows that this generic and non-specific term can refer to a range of phenomena, from spontaneous youth peer groups to organised criminal collectives. This variety notwithstanding, gangs generally have extremely negative connotations, particularly in contemporary Central America, where they are highly demonized and subject to extensive mystification.***

***This collection of essays on Nicaraguan gangs goes beyond the stereotypes and presents a nuanced analysis of the phenomenon. It brings together a series of articles published on the topic by José Luis Rocha and Dennis Rodgers in the Nicaraguan journal Envío between 1997 and 2007. The breadth, detail, originality, and longitudinal nature of this collection make it a fundamental reference for anybody seeking a better understanding of the gang phenomenon in Nicaragua and Central America.***



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