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DYING FOR IT: GANGS, VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN URBAN NICARAGUA

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Dying For It: Gangs, Violence and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua¹

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Introduction: The new political economy of violence in Latin America

Violence has long been recognised as a major social concern. War in particular, whether between states or within states, is widely considered “one of the main causes of human suffering and economic underdevelopment”.² But while war is perhaps the most paradigmatic manifestation of violence, it is by no means the only one, and certainly not the only one to have critical social implications. Criminal violence, for example, has been increasingly recognised as a major social problem.³ Worldwide, crime rates have risen by an average of 50

¹ I am grateful to Sue Redgrave for suggesting the first part of the title of this paper. I also want to thank Jo Beall, James Fairheard, Ralph Grillo, Ann Mason, Maxine Molyneux, Viviana Patroni, James Putzel, Rachel Sieder, and María Emma Wills for useful comments made in response to oral presentations of early versions of this paper at York University (Canada), the Universidad de los Andes (Colombia), the University of Sussex, and the Institute of Latin American Studies (United Kingdom). I would also like to acknowledge Arturo Matute’s able transcription of my February-March 2002 fieldwork interviews.

² F. Stewart & V. FitzGerald, ‘Introduction: Assessing the Economic Costs of War’, in F. Stewart, V. FitzGerald and associates, *War and Underdevelopment: Volume 1 – The Economic and Social Consequences of Conflict*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001a, p.1. See also F. Stewart, V. FitzGerald and associates, *War and Underdevelopment: Volume 2 – Country Experiences*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001b, although it should be noted that the relationship between violence and underdevelopment is extremely complex and many commentators have in fact reversed the link, arguing that it is processes of both underdevelopment and development which give rise to violence – See e.g. P. Collier, ‘Doing Well out of War’, in M. Berdal and D. Malone, (eds), *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000; M. Duffield, ‘The Political Economy of Internal War: Asset Transfer, Complex Emergencies and International Aid’, in J. Macrae and A. Zwi (eds), *War and Hunger: Rethinking International Responses to Complex Emergencies*, London: Zed Books, 1994; D. Keen, ‘The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars’, *Adelphi Papers*, no. 303, Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996; G. Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, 3 volumes, New York, NY: Twentieth Century Fund, 1968; and P. Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*, New York & Oxford: Kumarian Press, 1998.

³ See, for example: R. L. Ayres, *Crime and Violence as Development Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Latin American and Caribbean Studies Viewpoint Studies Series, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1998; T. P. R. Caldeira, ‘Crime and Individual Rights: Reframing the Question of Violence in Latin America’, in E. Jelin and E. Hershberg, (eds), *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Society in Latin America*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996; T. P. R. Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; P. Fajnzylber, D. Lederman & N. Loayza, *Determinants of Crime Rates in Latin America and the World: An Empirical Assessment*, Latin American and Caribbean Studies Viewpoint Studies Series, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1998; C. McIlwaine, ‘Geography and development: Crime and violence as development issues’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 23:3 (1999), pp 453-463; C. Moser & J. Holland, *Urban Poverty and Violence in Jamaica*, Latin American and Caribbean Studies Viewpoint Studies Series, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1997; C. Moser & E. Shrader, ‘A Conceptual Framework for Violence Reduction’, *Latin America and Caribbean Region Sustainable Development Working Paper* no. 3, Urban Peace Program Series, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1999; R. Patel, ‘Urban violence: An overview’, in J. Beall, (ed), *A City for All: Valuing Difference and Working with Diversity*, London: Zed, 1997; D. Rodgers, ‘Youth Gangs and Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Literature Survey’, *Latin America and Caribbean Region Sustainable Development Working Paper* no. 4, Urban Peace Program Series, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1999; D. Rodgers, , ‘Youth Gangs in Colombia and Nicaragua: New Forms of Violence, New Theoretical Directions?’, in A. Rudqvist (ed), *Breeding Inequality – Reaping Violence: Exploring Linkages and Causality in Colombia and Beyond* (Utsikt

percent over the past 25 years, with a notable surge during the past decade.⁴ The phenomenon has affected the entire developing world, but has been particularly marked in Latin America, where the most visible forms of violence now no longer stem from ideological conflicts over the nature of the political system, as in the past, but from delinquency and crime.⁵ At the same time, incidences of violence in Latin America have now reached unprecedented levels,⁶ despite much of the region undergoing processes of demilitarisation and democratisation during the past decade and a half.⁷

As Jenny Pearce has remarked, while “the idea that the region’s conflicts have been ‘resolved’ may be true at the formal level of peace accords between armies and insurgents, [it] is less so at the real level of people’s everyday lives, which remain overshadowed in the 1990s by ...violence, today of a more social and multifaceted kind than the polarized and political violence characteristic of the 1980s”.⁸ This is perhaps most apparent in contemporary Central America, where criminal violence is now so prevalent that levels of violence are comparable or even higher than during the decade of war which affected the region during the 1980s.⁹ In El Salvador, for example, the average number of violent deaths per year due to crime throughout the mid-1990s exceeded the average tally due to war during the 1980s by over 40 percent,¹⁰ while in Guatemala the economic costs of crime were calculated to be US\$565 million in 1999,¹¹ compared to an estimated US\$575 million loss to the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a result of war between 1981-85.¹²

Although it is important not to underestimate the continuities between the past and the present – crime is not a new phenomenon in Latin America, political violence is by no means extinct, and the boundaries between the two phenomena not always clear-cut – violence in contemporary Latin America can be said to have become more diffuse and disordered in nature. There has arguably occurred what Dirk Kruijt and Kees Koonings term a “democratisation” of violence in the region, whereby it has “ceased to be the resource of only

mot utveckling/Outlook on development series no. 18), Uppsala: Collegium for Development Studies, 2003; and UNRISD, *States of Disarray: The Social Effects of Globalization*, Geneva: UNRISD, 1995.

⁴ Fajnzylber *et al.* (1998), p.11.

⁵ See Caldeira (1996), p.199. See also C. T. Call, *Sustainable Development in Central America: The Challenges of Violence, Injustice and Insecurity*, CA 2020 working paper no. 8, Hamburg: Institut für Iberoamerika-Kunde, 2000; C. Moser & A. Winton, ‘Violence in the Central American Region: Towards an Integrated Framework for Violence Reduction’, *Overseas Development Institute Working Paper No. 171*, London: ODI, 2002; and J. Pearce, ‘From civil war to “civil society”: Has the end of the Cold War brought peace to Central America?’, *International Affairs*, 74:3 (1998), pp.587-615.

⁶ See OPS (Organización Panamericana de la Salud - Pan-American Health Organization), *La Violencia en las Américas: La Pandemia Social del Siglo XX*, Washington, DC: OPS, 1996; and J. L. Londoño, A. Gaviria & R. Guerrero (eds), *Asalto al Desarrollo: Violencia en América Latina*, Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2000.

⁷ See J. G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War*, New York: Vintage, 1993; O. Dabène, *La Région Amérique Latine: Interdépendance et Changement Politique*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1997; and S. Halebsky & R. L. Harris, ‘Introduction: Capital, Power, and Inequality in Latin America’, in S. Halebsky and R. L. Harris (eds), *Capital, Power, and Inequality in Latin America*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.

⁸ Pearce (1998), p.589.

⁹ See Call (2000), pp.7-14; Moser & Winton (2002), pp.5-8; and Pearce (1998), pp.589-590.

¹⁰ Calculated on the basis of Pearce (1998), p.590.

¹¹ Moser & Winton (2002), p.33.

¹² This last figure expressed in constant 1995 US\$, calculated on the basis of R. Ahrend, *The Economic Consequences of Fighting and Ending Latin America’s Civil Wars: What to Expect from Peace in Colombia?*, paper presented to the Latin American and Caribbean Economic Association conference (LACEA ‘99), Santiago de Chile, 21-23 October 1999; and the World Bank Development Indicators (<http://www.worldbank.org/data/online/onlinebases.htm>, accessed 2 September 2002).

the traditionally powerful or of the grim uniformed guardians of the nation... [but] increasingly appears as an option for a multitude of actors in pursuit of all kinds of goals".¹³ Understanding the dynamics and ramifications of this new regime of disorganized brutality, and in particular how such forms of violence can become defining features of social life, how they can both contribute to and undermine groups and communities, and how they can evolve and change, is obviously of crucial importance to understanding the reality of contemporary Latin America.

This is a task probably best approached by focusing on a particular actor within this new political economy of violence, perhaps the most prominent of which are youth gangs. These are a widespread throughout Latin America,¹⁴ and while it is difficult to quantify the proportion of regional violence directly attributable to them, there is no doubt that they account for a significant share. Certainly, most criminal acts in Latin America involve youth, and in particular young males, who make up the overwhelming majority of gang membership.¹⁵ In 1996, for example, 29 percent of all reported homicides in the region were committed by youths aged between 10 and 19 years old, and a further 34 percent by youths aged 20 to 29 years old.¹⁶ As such, youth gangs potentially constitute an ideal lens through which to explore the dynamics and ramifications of the new political economy of violence in Latin America, and this paper consequently presents an ethnographic case study of an urban Nicaraguan youth gang. My data derives from participant observation research conducted in 1996-97 and 2002 in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,¹⁷ a low-income neighbourhood in Managua, Nicaragua.¹⁸ The first part of this paper provides a brief overview of crime and violence in contemporary urban Nicaragua, exploring some of its socio-economic consequences and situating gang violence within it. The second part offers an account of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández youth gang as it existed in 1996-97, followed by a description of the gang in 2002, focusing on violent gang practices. The third section considers the nature of these two manifestations of the gang and the general evolution of the gang between 1997 and 2002 from an institutional point of view.

¹³ D. Kruijt & K. Koonings, 'Introduction: Violence and Fear in Latin America', in K. Koonings and D. Kruijt (eds), *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America*, London: Zed Books, 1999, p.11.

¹⁴ See Rodgers (1999).

¹⁵ See Ayres (1998), p.4; McIlwaine (1999); as well as C. Moser & B. van Bronkhorst, 'Youth Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: Costs, Causes, and Interventions', *Latin America and the Caribbean Region Sustainable Development working paper* no. 2, Urban Peace Program series, Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1999.

¹⁶ See R. Guerrero, 'Epidemia de la violencia juvenil en América', *Espacios: Revista Centroamericana de Cultura Política*, 10 (July-December 1997).

¹⁷ A pseudonym, as are all the names mentioned in this paper.

¹⁸ The first period of fieldwork, in July 1996-July 1997, was carried out in the context of a social anthropology PhD at the University of Cambridge (D. Rodgers, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Violence, Pandillas, and Social Disintegration in Contemporary Urban Nicaragua*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, 2000), partly funded by grants from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Trinity College William Wyse Foundation. The second, in February-March 2002, was conducted as part of the London School of Economics and Political Science Development Research Centre's Crisis States Programme (see <http://www.crisisstates.com/>), which also sponsored a further visit in December 2002-January 2003.

Violence, crime, and *pandillas* in contemporary urban Nicaragua

Violence is not a new feature in Nicaragua. The country has the dubious distinction of having been ruled by the longest-running dictatorship in Latin American history, that of the Somoza dynasty, which after 45 years was overthrown in 1979 by the left-wing *Sandinista* revolution. The triumph of the revolution led to an attritional civil war against the US-supported *Contras*, which was marked by numerous instances of brutality, albeit mainly confined to the country's rural areas.¹⁹ This war only truly came to an end in 1990 following the electoral defeat of the *Sandinista* regime, and since then, Nicaragua has generally been considered to be at peace. However, although the country's conflicts have formally come to an 'end', violence remains an overwhelming reality, to the extent that, as Eduardo Galeano has pithily remarked, while peace paradoxically reigned in the streets of the country's cities during the years of war, "since peace was declared the streets have become scenes of war, the battlegrounds of common criminals and youth gangs".²⁰

Crime levels have risen steadily in Nicaragua by an average of ten percent every year during the past decade, compared to an uneven average of just two percent during the years of war in the 1980s.²¹ In particular, the number of violent crimes leading to injury increased by 135 percent between 1992 and 1998,²² and crime rates in general further jumped up by 44 percent between 1997 and 2001.²³ Although the official homicide rate stood at an average of just 16 deaths per 100,000 persons during the 1990s,²⁴ statistical underreporting is a serious problem in Nicaragua, to a large extent due to the institutional weakness of health and government organisations. A recent report by the Pan-American Health Organisation estimated that over 50 percent of all mortalities in Nicaragua in 1995 were not registered, for example,²⁵ and the Nicaraguan National Police lacks the capacity to collect data systematically, partly due to the radical reforms that it has undergone since regime change in 1990, which have dramatically affected its operational capacities.²⁶ During a year's fieldwork conducted in the poor Managua *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996-97, I tallied nine crime-related deaths in the

¹⁹ See R. Spalding, 'From Low Intensity War to Low Intensity Peace: The Nicaraguan Peace Process', in C. Arson (ed.), *Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

²⁰ See E. Galeano, *Patas Arriba: La Escuela del Mundo al Revés*, 4th edition, Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1998, pp.322-324. For translation see, E. Galeano, *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World*, translated by M. Fried, New York: Picador, 2000 [1998], pp.314-316.

²¹ See A. Granera Sacasa & S. J. Cuarezma Terán, *Evolución del Delito en Nicaragua (1980-1995)*, Managua: Editorial UCA, 1997; A. Serbin & D. Ferreyra, *Gobernabilidad Democrática y Seguridad Ciudadana en Centroamérica: El caso de Nicaragua*, Managua: CRIES, 2000; *La Prensa*, 11 July & 5 September 2001; and <http://www.policia.gob.ni/anuario/addptos.htm> (accessed 5 March 2003).

²² See respectively *La Tribuna*, 2 May 1997; and E. Cuadra Lira, *Proliferación y control de armas en Nicaragua*, report prepared on behalf of the Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano for the 1st Central American Forum on the Proliferation of Light Weapons, Antigua, Guatemala, 27-29 July, 2000, p.8.

²³ See <http://www.policia.gob.ni/anuario/addptos.htm> (accessed 5 March 2003).

²⁴ Serbin & Ferreyra (2000), p.187; and PNUD (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo - United Nations Development Programme), *El Desarrollo Humano en Nicaragua*, Managua: PNUD, 2000.

²⁵ See PAHO (Pan-American Health Organization), *Health in the Americas* report on Nicaragua online, 1998, at <http://www.paho.org/english/HIA1998/Nicaragua.pdf>.

²⁶ The Police has been reduced both in size and budget, to the extent that it only has a limited presence in many urban areas, and is in fact completely absent in 21 percent of the country's 146 municipalities (R. J. Cajina, 'Nicaragua: De la seguridad del Estado a la inseguridad ciudadana', in Serbin & Ferreyra, 2000, p.174). There are 121 police personnel per 100,000 inhabitants in Nicaragua, compared to a regional average of 195 in Central America, and 285 in the USA or 266 in Spain, for example (Call, 2000, pp.24-25). Within the Central American region, the Nicaraguan National Police have the lowest number of police personnel per 100,000 inhabitants, the lowest number of police personnel per 100 crimes, the lowest budget per crime, the lowest budget per police personnel, and the lowest average salaries (See <http://www.policia.gob.ni/diap07pm.htm> accessed 3 April 2002).

neighbourhood, which works out proportionally to a staggering 360 deaths per 100,000 persons. While such a calculation is of course unsystematic and based on a small sample, it is certainly suggestive that official statistics are wrong.²⁷

Certainly, this was amply borne out in a qualitative way during the course of my fieldwork in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, both in 1996-97 and 2002. Beyond personally experiencing and witnessing criminal acts, this was reflected in the practices and the discourses of neighbourhood inhabitants. There was a prevalent fear of leaving the perceived safe haven of the home in the *barrio* in 1996, which had worsened by 2002 as even the shelter of the home now seemed precarious, with houses barricaded up in an almost fort-like manner and occupants emerging as little as possible, and when they did so, restricting themselves to a few fixed routes and destinations. “We are living in a state of siege”, was how an informant called Adilia described the situation in 1997, and in 2002 she told me that “things are worse, people are scared to leave their homes, it’s too dangerous”. Her mother, *Doña* Yolanda, further echoed this sense of insecurity:

There’s so much delinquency, it’s impossible to live... they’ll kill you for a watch... they’ll kill you for a pair of shoes... they’ll kill you for your shirt ... they’re everywhere, you’ve got to watch out... they could be your neighbour, even your friend, you can never be sure... you can’t go out any more, you can’t wear rings, bracelets, nice shoes, anything that makes us look a little better than we really are... how can we live? It’s not possible...

This chronic insecurity has had dramatic consequences for local community life, with the erosion of the social fabric reaching such dramatic proportions in Nicaragua that it is no exaggeration to talk of an atomisation of life.²⁸ “It’s each to his own” was an expression that was constantly repeated by my informants when describing Nicaraguan social life in both 1996-97 and 2002, and indeed, traditionally solidary social units such as the family, the household, or the neighbourhood have shattered, and networks of trust and mutual aid have worn away. There is little in the way of a local social collectivity, as one of my informants, called *Don* Sergio, described in 1997:

Nobody does anything for anybody anymore, nobody cares if their neighbour is robbed, nobody does anything for the common good. There’s a lack of trust, you don’t know whether somebody will return you your favours, or whether he won’t steal your belongings when your back is turned. It’s the law of the jungle here; we’re eating one another, as they say in the Bible...

In 2002, the situation was no better, as *Doña* Yolanda made clear:

²⁷ At the same time, it should be noted that while Nicaragua is undoubtedly very violent, the levels of violence afflicting the country are of a lower order of magnitude than those affecting a number of other countries in the region such as Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, or parts of urban Brazil. Furthermore, it is a violence that is very much concentrated in poor urban areas.

²⁸ See Nitlapán-Envío team, ‘The crisis is bordering on the intolerable’, *Envío* (in English), 14:167 (June 1995), pp 3-13; J. C. Núñez, *De la Ciudad al Barrio: Redes y Tejidos Urbanos en Guatemala, El Salvador y Nicaragua*, Ciudad de Guatemala: Universidad Rafael Landívar/PROFASR, 1996; and Rodgers (2000, 2003). A variety of other factors can also be invoked to explain Nicaragua’s desperate social predicament, including the legacy of war, revolution, and turmoil in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as high levels of debt, structural adjustment, chronic poverty, corruption, political stagnation, and natural catastrophes in the 1990s. At the same time, while my informants frequently mentioned these, it was the question of security that came out most forcefully in their discourses, both in 1996-97 and 2002.

You never feel safe in the *barrio*, because of the lack of trust. There always has to be somebody in the house, because you can't trust anybody to look out for you, for your things, to help you, nothing. People only look out for themselves – everyone, the rich, the poor, the middle class... Life is hard in Nicaragua, and you've just got to look out for yourself and try and survive by hook or by crook. It was the same five years ago; nothing has changed, except that we're now five years on, and the future didn't get any better...

Even if they are not solely responsible for the widespread criminal violence in contemporary Nicaragua, the most prominent criminal actors are undoubtedly the *pandillas*, or youth gangs, that roam the streets of Nicaraguan cities, robbing, beating, terrorising, and frequently killing. They are a ubiquitous feature of many urban *barrios* and major contributors to the high levels of crime. Certainly, although not all are gang members, over 52 percent of all those arrested in Nicaragua in 1997, were between 13 and 25 years old (i.e. falling within gang membership age);²⁹ while a recent survey which found that crime was considered, by a margin of over 30 percent, the principal problem affecting Nicaragua today, also found that *pandillas* were considered the most likely perpetrators of crime.³⁰ More generally, *pandillas* have to a large extent come to epitomize symbolically crime in the contemporary Nicaraguan collective consciousness, with the word '*pandilla*' used very much interchangeably with more general terms such as "criminality" or "delinquency".

Despite its wide-ranging import, however, the term '*pandilla*' denotes a definite local social phenomenon. At its most basic, a *pandilla* generally consists of a variably sized group of generally male youths,³¹ whose ages can range between 7 and 23 years old, and who engage in illicit and violent behaviour – although not all gang activities are either illicit or violent – and have a particular dynamic. Most notably, *pandillas* are territorial and tend to be associated with a particular urban neighbourhood,³² although larger neighbourhoods frequently have more than one gang and not all have one, for reasons which include the level of social fragmentation, demographic distribution, and economic factors, including the

²⁹ See J. L. Rocha, 'Pandillero: La mano que empuña el mortero', *Envío*, March 2000, at <http://www.uca.edu.ni/publicaciones/revistas/envio/2000/esp/MARZO/Pandilleros.htm>.

³⁰ See PNUD (2000), p.130.

³¹ Although female gang members are not unknown, they are not the norm, although according to newspaper reports and urban legend there were two all-female *pandillas* in Managua in 1997, one in *barrio* 19 de Julio, and the other in the *Ciudad Sandino* suburb. The few young women gravitating around *pandillas* on a regular basis tend to be treated as communal sex objects by male *pandilleros* and are not really considered "proper" members of the gang as such. Having said this, there was a female member in the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang in the early 1990s. Her femininity was very obviously downplayed whenever contemporary *pandilleros* would talk about her, however. She was invariably described as having been extremely violent and fearless, both of which reflected the *machismo*-inspired ideal of what a gang member should be, and it can be argued that there had been a certain "masculinization" of her status, implicitly pointing to the absence of female roles within the *pandilla*. Generally, there did not seem to be alternative collective organisational forms for female youth in the neighbourhood, although there were of course female friendship networks, but these tended to remain rather small in size, and were certainly not organised in any way. To a certain extent this absence of alternative female collective organisational forms was linked to the fact that due to the ambient *machismo*, young women were rarely seen in the streets past a certain age (around 14 years old), due to the existence of a gendered division of space along the lines of "street = public = male/home = private = female" (See S. Ekern, *Street Power: Culture and Politics in a Nicaraguan Neighbourhood*, Bergen Studies in Social Anthropology No. 40, Bergen: University of Bergen, 1987, p.55).

³² *Pandillas* are an urban phenomenon; indeed, in 1996-97 there were no more than half a dozen gangs outside Managua, which is more than ten times the size of Nicaragua's second biggest urban centre. In 2002, however, Nicaraguan newspapers were regularly reporting on gang activity in a variety of urban centres other than Managua, including Chinandega, Estelí, Granada, León, and Matagalpa, although there were no reports of rural *pandillas*.

opportunities young neighbourhood inhabitants might have (such as migratory possibilities, for example). By 1999, the Nicaraguan National Police was estimating that there were some 110 *pandillas* in Managua alone – which is made up of some 600 *barrios* and spontaneous settlements – incorporating about 8,500 youths,³³ double the number three years previously. These figures probably err on the low side, although there is some evidence to suggest that youth gang membership peaked around 1995-96, and that the total number of youths involved has declined in absolute terms since then but that gang groups have simultaneously become smaller, such that while there are less *pandilleros*, there are an increasing number of *pandillas*.³⁴

Pandillas are not a new social phenomenon in Nicaragua, having antecedents going back to the 1940s, but they were much less prevalent and violent than today, in fact disappearing completely from view during the first half of the 1980s, partly as a result of military conscription, but also because of the extensive organised community vigilance in urban neighbourhoods promoted by the *Sandinista* regime. *Pandillas* began to reappear slowly towards the end of the decade, but the end of the civil war in 1990 precipitated a veritable explosion in gang formation. Many of the members of this new wave of *pandillerismo* were youths aged 16 to 18 years old who had been demobilized or discharged from both the *Sandinista* Popular Army and the *Contra* forces. Individuals who became *pandilleros* during the early 1990s whom I interviewed all mentioned the same general reasons for becoming *pandilleros*: the change of regime in 1990 led to a devaluation of their social status, which as conscripts defending the Nation or as “freedom fighters”, had been high within their respective social contexts, and forming a *pandilla* had been a means of reaffirming themselves *vis-à-vis* a wider society that seemed to very rapidly “forget” them, as well as a way of recapturing some of the dramatic, yet marking and almost addictive, adrenaline-charged experiences of war, danger, and death, but also of comradeship and solidarity which they had lived through as conscripts or guerrillas.

One immutable aspect of being a gang member is that it is a finite social role, however, and by the mid-1990s the vast majority of the demobilised youth conscripts of 1990 were no longer gang members. Generally, at some point between 19 and 23 years of age, *pandilleros* either “become responsible” (“*ser responsable*”) and integrate into mainstream life and society, or else become “*tamales*”, or professional criminals. In the mid-1990s, some 85-90 percent of the *pandilleros* tended to “mature out” of the gang rather than turn to full-time crime. This suggests that the *pandilla* phenomenon in Nicaragua is not just a subculture resulting from the strain of not being able to successfully attain mainstream values,³⁵ as might be thought from the conscript *pandilleros*’ experience. Rather, the fact that the overwhelming majority of *pandilleros* do eventually integrate mainstream life and society implies that they actually share mainstream values.³⁶ This was well reflected by an ex-*pandillero* called Elvis

³³ See Policía Nacional de Nicaragua, *Boletín de la Actividad Delictiva*, 32 (2001), at <http://www.policia.gob.ni/boletin32.htm>

³⁴ See J. J. Sosa Melendez & J. L. Rocha, ‘Las pandillas en Nicaragua’, in ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica*, volume 1, Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2001.

³⁵ The notion of ‘strain’ was originally developed by Robert K. Merton to explain the social consequences of there existing a gap between certain groups and individuals’ culturally induced aspirations for economic success and structurally distributed possibilities of achievement. He used it to explain why criminal behaviour patterns emerged in society (R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1949). See A. K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955, for an exemplification of this line of argument specifically in relation to US gangs.

³⁶ This is not to say that a *pandilla* does not constitute a locus of particular values and cosmological reference points. However, as Hannerz has argued, an individual’s “cultural repertoire” is largely situational (*Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). Inevitably,

when I asked him in 2002 why most of the 1996-97 gang members were no longer gang members:

The majority of those who were *pandilleros* then now have children, Dennis, and when you have children, you of course want to distance yourself from the whole *pandilla* thing, you know that you have to work in order to support your family, you've got to become like everybody else and you can't hang out in the streets anymore.

At the same time, the continued existence – and indeed growth – of the gang phenomenon in Nicaragua since 1990 indicates that it possesses a certain structural autonomy. Although the systematic process of “maturing out” of the gang could plausibly suggest that *pandillerismo* constitutes something of a rite of passage for Nicaraguan youth, this idea is undermined by the fact that not all Nicaraguan youth join gangs.³⁷ For example, in 1996-97, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* integrated only about 15 percent of neighbourhood youth aged between 7 and 22 years old. These youths originated indiscriminately from richer and poorer neighbourhood households, and other stereotypical ‘determinants’ or ‘risk factors’, such as family fragmentation, domestic violence, migration, or alcoholism, were not significant in explaining gang membership. The only element that systematically affected membership was religious, as there were no evangelical Protestant youths in the *pandilla*. In many ways, this is hardly surprising since many of the activities associated with being a *pandillero* – being violent, stealing, drinking, smoking, or taking drugs – were in direct contradiction with the teachings of evangelical Protestantism. Moreover, Evangelical Protestant churches provided a clear alternative organisational framework for their members, thereby constituting an alternative collective form to the gang for any youth members.

At the same time, however, other than the gang and Evangelical Protestant churches, and small networks of friends and intermittent groups coming together in order to play basketball or baseball, there were no alternative collective organisational forms for non-*pandillero* youth in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,³⁸ which ultimately seems only explainable as a reflection of the widespread lack of trust, and processes of social breakdown and atomisation. From this perspective, *pandillas* can plausibly be seen either as constituting the last rampart of social collectivity in a wider context of generalised distrust and social atomisation, or alternatively as a desperate adaptation to the general Nicaraguan context of chronic violence and social breakdown. Rather than attempting to establish a series of determinations in order to answer this question, however, what is perhaps more important is to provide a sense of the varied intertwined factors underlying *pandillerismo*. This is particularly important because while

because *pandilleros* do not solely socialize within the gang, but also with family and other non-*pandillero* individuals in the *barrio*, they will be exposed to mainstream culture, and it will enter their individual repertoires, and will even most probably be “used” in relation to practices that do not touch directly on the gang sphere of activities. But while they are in the gang, it is the social role of *pandillero* that is the primary one, and so mainstream cultural repertoires will constitute a secondary cultural resource for gang members compared to their *pandillero* cultural repertoire. “Maturing out”, from such a perspective, signals a reversal of a *pandillero*'s hierarchy of referential repertoires.

³⁷ Moreover, the process of “maturing out” is something that has been observed almost universally in studies of youth gangs around the world, and seems part of a more general youth group dynamic (See H. C. Covey, S. Menard & R. J. Franzese, *Juvenile Gangs*, Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1992, for a comprehensive survey).

³⁸ There were arguably two more general partial exceptions to this, namely the labour market and school. Until the age of 16-17 years old, youths' experiences of the labour market tended to be sporadic, however, and the school dropout rate was extremely high, particularly once primary school had been completed. It should also be noted that education participation rates of young females was significantly higher than those of young males, especially at the secondary school level.

Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* is a persistent phenomenon, it is also one that has changed radically over the past half decade, as I hope will become clear from the case study of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* and its violent practices that I present in the next two sections of this paper, first as it was in 1996-97, and then as it had become in 2002.

The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* in 1996-97

In 1996-97, the neighbourhood Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* was made up of about 100 youths, all males aged between 7 and 22 years old. The gang was subdivided into distinct age and geographical subgroups. There were three age cohorts – the 7 to 12 years olds, the 13 to 17 years olds, and those 18 years old and over – and three geographical subgroups, respectively associated with the central area of the neighbourhood, the “*abajo*” (or West) side of the neighbourhood, and the “*arriba*” (or East) side of the neighbourhood. Groups were approximately of equal size: geographically, they ranged between 25-35 individuals, and within this each of the subgroups divided into three age cohorts of 7 to 12 individuals each. The different geographical subgroups had distinct names, respectively “*los de la Calle Ocho*” (named after the alleyway where this group tended to congregate), “*los Cancheros*” (because of a “*cancha*”, or playing field – if only in name, because all it was in fact was a stretch of relatively un-potholed road – on that side of the *barrio*) and “*los Dragones*” (because all its members had a dragon tattoo).

These different subgroups generally operated separately, except in the context of gang warfare, when they would come together in order to defend the neighbourhood or attack another. At the same time, even if the different groups were very autonomous, the individual gang members always qualified themselves members of a generic neighbourhood *pandilla*, which was called “*Los Sobrevivientes*”, in reference to “*La Sobrevivencia*”, the neighbourhood’s pre-revolutionary name. There also existed a notion of generic neighbourhood *pandilla* territory, spanning the whole of the neighbourhood and some of the neighbouring wastelands, despite its variable occupation by different geographical subgroups and age-cohorts. Moreover, none of the subgroups, whether age- or geography-determined, ever fought each other, although fights did occasionally break out between individuals.

Much of *pandilla* activity involved acts of violence. Not all of the gang’s behaviour patterns involved violence, of course, but in many ways, it was the group’s distinguishing feature, setting them apart from other youth in the neighbourhood.³⁹ There were two major forms of gang violence: delinquency and warfare. Different age groups were involved in different delinquent activities, from low-level pickpocketing and stealing by the youngest, mugging and shoplifting by the middle group, to armed robbery and assault by the oldest. A golden rule of gang delinquency common to all groups, however, was not to prey on local neighbourhood inhabitants, and in fact to actively protect them from outside thieves, robbers, and *pandilleros*. This happened frequently, although it has to be said that the *barrio* gang

³⁹ There existed a distinct *pandillero* sartorial ‘fashion’, which included wearing one’s t-shirt inside out, sporting an earring and tattoo, or having a partially shaved head, for example, but all of these practices were shared with various segments of the non-*pandillero* youth population. Similarly, other popular non-violent gang activities such as smoking marijuana, sniffing glue, drinking heavily, or hanging out on street corners were also shared with other segments of both youth and non-youth population, and consequently cannot be said to constitute distinguishing features. In many ways, this is not surprising, as *pandilleros* are inevitably situated within a wider youth culture, with which they both conform and contrast. While they naturally engaged in the usual activities of youth – they talked, joked, exchanged stories, listened to music, danced, drank, and smoked – they also regularly engaged in other violent and socially disruptive activities, and it is this that distinguished them from other youth.

members were not always effective in providing adequate protection. During the course of my fieldwork in the *barrio* in 1996-97, three inhabitants of the neighbourhood died as a result of delinquency by *pandilleros* from other *barrios*. In addition, one *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandillero* died whilst attempting an assault in another neighbourhood.

The dynamics of delinquency were clearly social rather than economic. Even if the revenue from delinquent activities was not inconsiderable, amounting on average to some 450 *córdobas* (US\$50) per month – approximately equivalent to about two thirds of the average household's monthly income in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996-97 – it was not as important as having a tale to tell the rest of the gang afterwards, with the money or whatever had been stolen becoming a symbol of the deed for all to see. Moreover, *pandilleros* never contributed the illicit revenue to their family economy, but always spent it quickly, on cigarettes, alcohol, glue (to sniff), or marijuana, to be consumed communally by the gang group. As the French anthropologist Michel Maffesoli has pointed out, such collective activity contributes to the construction of a sense of identity, based on “a social cement constituted of common emotions and shared pleasures”.⁴⁰

Although gang delinquency was more prevalent than gang warfare, the latter was undoubtedly the more spectacular form of violence, as conflicts between rival gangs transformed parts of Managua into quasi-war zones, with gangs fighting each other with weaponry ranging from sticks, stones, and knives to AK-47s, fragmentation grenades, and mortars, often with dramatic consequences both for gang members and local populations. During the year of my stay in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996-97, fourteen distinct gang wars affected the neighbourhood, leaving three gang members and at least two neighbourhood inhabitants dead (as well as several hundred injured). Although these gang wars initially seemed highly chaotic, they in fact displayed very regular patterns, sometimes almost to the point of being ritualised. The *pandillas* organized themselves into “companies”, which 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 amongst the different “companies” in order to balance out fire-power, except when a high powered “attack commando” was needed for a specific tactical purpose. Conflicts revolved around either attacking or protecting a neighbourhood, with fighting generally specifically focused either on harming or limiting damage to both neighbourhood infrastructure and inhabitants.

The first battle of a *pandilla* war 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 rate of escalation could vary, its sequence never did – i.e. *pandillas* did not begin their wars immediately with mortars, guns, or AK-47. Moreover, battles involved specific patterns of behaviour on the part of active participants, intimately linked to what the gang members called “living in the shadow of death” – “*somos muerte arriba*” in the original Spanish.⁴¹ On the one hand, this expression reflected the very real fact that gang members often found themselves in dangerous situations, but was also more than just a corporeal state of being, as gang members used it to describe their attitudes and practices. For them, “living in the shadow of death” entailed displaying specific behaviour patterns in battle, which included flying in the face of danger and exposing oneself purposefully in order

⁴⁰ See M. Maffesoli, *Du Nomadisme: Vagabondages Initiatiques*, Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1997, p.116.

⁴¹ My translation is not literal, as I feel that the range of connotations that the expression entails are not adequately conveyed by a more verbatim rendition of “*somos muerte arriba*” as “we have death above us”.

to taunt the enemy, taking risks and displaying bravado, whatever the odds and whatever the consequences, almost daring death to do its best. It meant not asking oneself questions or calculating one's chances, but simply going ahead and acting in a cheerfully exuberant manner, with style and panache.

In many ways, this idea of "living in the shadow of death" can arguably be seen as a primary constitutive practice for the *pandilleros*, playing a fundamental role in the construction of the individual gang member self. At the same time, gang wars also contributed to the constitution of the gang as a group, reaffirming the collective unit by emphasizing the primordial human distinction between "us" and "them". But *pandilla* warfare was arguably also about a broader form of social construction that went beyond the gang group or individual and related to the wider neighbourhood community. The *pandilleros* qualified their violence as being primarily motivated by their "love" for the neighbourhood, justifying their fighting other gangs as representing an "act of love" for their neighbourhood. As one of them called Julio put it:

You show the neighbourhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other *pandillas*... You look after the neighbourhood; you help them, keep them safe...

This is not as implausible as may initially seem. In many ways, the ritualised nature of *pandilla* warfare can be conceived as a kind of restraining mechanism; escalation is a positive constitutive process, in which each stage calls for a greater but definite intensity of action, and is always therefore under the actors' control. At the same time, the escalation process also provided local neighbourhood inhabitants with a framework through which to organize their lives, acting as an "early warning system". As such, *pandilla* wars can be conceived as having constituted "scripted performances" which offered a means of circumscribing what Hannah Arendt has aptly termed the "all-pervading unpredictability" of violence.⁴² Although *pandilla* wars clearly had deleterious effects for the local population, these were indirect, as gangs never directly victimised the local population of their own neighbourhood, in fact protecting them instead during gang wars. The threat to local neighbourhood populations stemmed from *other* gangs, whom the local gang would engage with in a prescribed manner in order to limit the scope of violence in its own neighbourhood, thereby creating a kind of predictable "safe haven" for local inhabitants.

In a wider context of chronic violence and insecurity, this function was a positive one, and even if it was not always one hundred percent effective – as mentioned above, bystanders were frequently injured and even killed in the crossfire of gang wars – local neighbourhood inhabitants very much recognized it as such. As *Don Sergio* put it:

The *pandilla* looks after the neighbourhood and screws others; it protects us and allows us to feel a little bit safer, to live our lives a little bit more easily... Gangs are not a good thing, and it's their fault that we have to live with all this insecurity, but that's a problem of *pandillerismo* in general, not of our gang here in the *barrio*. They protect us, help us – without them, things would be much worse for us.

⁴² H. Arendt, *On Violence*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969, p.5.

As a result, members of the local community did not call the Police during gang wars, and nor did they ever denounce gang members.⁴³ Indeed, although there existed a certain ambivalence towards the gang phenomenon among local neighbourhood inhabitants,⁴⁴ there also existed a definite sense of identification with the local gang and its violent exploits, which in practice provided the principal anchor point for a sense of a collective *barrio* identity in an otherwise fractured community. From this perspective, the *pandilla* offered the neighbourhood much more than just a certain sense of security, but in fact constituted itself as a primary symbolic index of community, its “care” for the neighbourhood standing in sharp contrast with the wider atomisation and social breakdown.

The barrio Luis Fanor Hernández pandilla in 2002

When I returned to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 2002, the *pandilla* had changed radically. The gang was now constituted by a single unitary group of just 18 youths aged 17 to 23 years old known as ‘*Los Dragones*’. The groups’ violent and illicit activities had evolved; in particular, the gang was now intimately connected with a thriving local neighbourhood drug economy involving cocaine, especially in the form of crack, known in Nicaragua as ‘*la piedra*’ (“the stone”).⁴⁵ According to my informants, cocaine began to be traded in the *barrio* around mid-1999, initially on a small-scale by just one individual but rapidly expanding into a three-tiered pyramidal drug economy by the first half of 2000.⁴⁶ At the top of the pyramid

⁴³ At the same time, the Police rarely came if called, often only doing so if the caller indicated that he or she was willing to “pay for the gasoline”. Generally, as noted previously, the Nicaraguan Police is under-funded and badly equipped. Partly as a result of this, they were not a very visible presence in the neighbourhood in 1996-97, patrolling very infrequently, with the sole exception of a three week period in January 1997 immediately following President Arnaldo Alemán’s accession, when in typical populist fashion he unblocked special funds for the Police to buy supplies of gasoline and ammunition in order to conduct an anti-*pandilla* campaign. This operation came to an abrupt end when supplies ran out and no more funding was forthcoming. In 2002, the Police was a somewhat more visible presence, patrolling the neighbourhood by car more or less regularly, but hardly in a very effective manner, as patrols seldom stopped, except, as occurred in two cases that I was able to observe, to buy drugs from neighbourhood drug dealers. There is some evidence to suggest that between 1997 and 2002, the Nicaraguan Police, and indeed the Nicaraguan state in general, sporadically achieved higher levels of institutional presence, but generally, it is probably fair to say that it has constituted a rather absent or ineffective manifestation at the *barrio* level during the past decade and a half. To a certain extent, following Callaghy (‘The State as Lame Leviathan’, in Z. Ergas (ed.), *The African State in Transition*, New York: Macmillan, 1987) and Zartmann (*Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), the Nicaraguan state can plausibly be characterised as a “lame leviathan”, or in other words, a weak institution with only a limited or occasional reach into wider society (See Rodgers, 2000, for a more detailed description of the Nicaraguan state’s debility).

⁴⁴ As *Don Sergio* above makes clear, neighbourhood inhabitants made a clear distinction between the gang phenomenon in general and the local manifestation of the gang. While unequivocally critical of the former, they were generally positive about the latter. This is not to say that they never had anything negative to say about the gang – certainly the parents of gang members frequently worried about their offspring, for example – but there was no fear of the local gang in the neighbourhood. To a certain extent, one could draw a parallel with Hobsbawm’s notion of “social banditry”, with the local gang constituting an “honourable” form of banditry within a wider context of “unsocial banditry” (*Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York: Norton, 1959).

⁴⁵ Cocaine is usually distributed in two forms: either as a white crystalline powder or as an off-white chunky material. The powder form is cocaine hydrochloride, which is generally snorted, while the chunky form, crack, is a ready-to-use freebase, usually a combination of cocaine and sodium bicarbonate boiled in water that is normally heated and the vapours inhaled or else smoked. Crack is much less expensive than cocaine powder, and is frequently referred to as “the poor man’s cocaine”.

⁴⁶ Although cocaine and crack were available in Managua in the mid-1990s, they were not widespread. The subsequent expansion of the cocaine trade in Nicaragua has both international and national explanations. Internationally, the mid to late 1990s saw a diversification of drug trafficking routes from Colombia to North America as a result of improved law enforcement efforts in the Caribbean. Flows along the Mexican-Central

was the “*narco*”, or the “big man”, who brought cocaine into the neighbourhood. The *narco* only wholesaled his goods, in particular to the half a dozen “*púsheres*” in the neighbourhood.⁴⁷ *Púsheres* then either re-sold the cocaine they bought from the *narco* in smaller quantities or else “cooked” it into crack which they sold from their houses, mainly to a regular clientele which included “*muleros*”, the bottom rung of the drug dealing pyramid. *Muleros* sold crack to all-comers on the *barrio* street corners, generally in the form of small “*paquetes*” which cost 10 *córdobas* (US\$0.70) each and contained two “fixes”, known as “*tuquitos*”. There were 19 *muleros* in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, 16 of whom were *Dragones pandilleros* – the two non-*mulero pandilleros* were brothers of one who was, and shared in his profits – and the other three ex-gang members.⁴⁸

The *Dragones muleros* hung about on neighbourhood street corners as a group, waiting for potential clients to come by, and taking turns selling their drugs to them. The rewards of such small-scale dealing were substantial: depending on turnover and auxiliary activities, an individual *mulero* could make between 5,000-8,500 *córdobas* (US\$350-600) profit per month, equivalent to between three and five times the average Nicaraguan wage. This was considerably higher than in 1996-97, and partly as a result *pandillero* spending habits had changed compared to the past. Although a significant proportion of gang members’ delinquent income was still spent on items associated with conspicuous consumption such as alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes – as well as new commodities such as gold chains, rings, expensive watches, powerful hi-fi systems, and wide screen televisions, amongst others – a sizeable proportion was also being used to improve the material conditions of gang members’ lives and those of their families. This was starkly reflected in the infrastructural disparities that existed between drug dealer and non-drug dealer homes in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, with the former displaying major improvements, including being generally made out of concrete blocks rather than wood. Overall, some 40 percent of the neighbourhood seemed to be benefiting from the drug economy in one way or another, either through direct involvement, or else indirectly, by being related to or employed by somebody who was involved.

At the same time, although many in the neighbourhood benefited from the drugs trade, there also existed a generalised ambivalence towards it among *barrio* inhabitants. On the one hand, this was due to the physical effects of regular crack consumption on users. Crack is a powerfully addictive drug, and has very serious consequences on the health of regular users.

American corridor increased, and due to its proximity to the Colombian Caribbean island of San Andrés, Nicaragua is geographically a natural first trans-shipment point within this transit zone. Nationally, in late 1998 Nicaragua was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, suffering major infrastructural damage and resource drainage, which have had highly negative consequences on the already limited capabilities of local law enforcement organisations. At the same time, post-Mitch reconstruction efforts focused mainly on improving transport links within Nicaragua, and most notably the Pan-American highway, and the concomitant increase in the volume of traffic along this route has made it easier to move drug shipments across the Nicaragua-Honduras border undetected. Within Nicaragua, drugs are transported from the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua to Managua, and those facilitating conveyance along the way take a cut of the shipments in order to make money distributing locally. There are consequently thriving local drug economies, especially in Bluefields and the Lagunas de Perlas area, as well as in Managua. See D. Rodgers, ‘Cracking Development: The Political Economy of the Drugs Trade in Contemporary Nicaragua’, *Crisis States Programme Working Paper*, London: Development Research Centre, LSE, forthcoming, for more detail.

⁴⁷ The *narco* also supplied *púsheres* from other neighbourhoods, *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández being one of the principal provider neighbourhoods of Managua’s burgeoning cocaine trade, into which it arrived into the city and from where it was distributed. Others included *barrios* Santa Ana, San Judas, and El Recreo.

⁴⁸ Indeed, all the various actors of the drugs trade were linked to the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* in one way or another. The *narco* was an ex-gang member from the early 1990s and all the *púsheres* were either ex-*pandilleros* from the mid-1990s or else closely related to ex-*pandilleros*.

In particular, smoking crack can cause pulmonary abnormalities including lung trauma and bleeding, respiratory arrest, as well as potentially lead to cardiac arrest and seizures. Some half dozen individuals in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández had died since 1999 from causes that were widely attributed to excessive crack consumption, and addicts certainly often displayed grotesque wasting effects, to the extent that they were popularly referred to as “*gárgolas*” (“gargoyles”). Intriguingly, crack users were also frequently described as “*son muerte abajo*”, which would literally translate as “they have death below them”. The expression was explained to me by informants as denoting that crack users are inevitably condemned, that they cannot escape death, which is an interesting reversal of the expression “*somos muerte arriba*” which the *barrio pandilleros* used to describe their predicament in 1996-97.

On the other hand, and more importantly, this generalised ambivalence was also related to the fact that crack consumption had clearly heightened the local population’s sense of insecurity in the neighbourhood. Although drug consumption had been widespread in the *barrio* in 1996-97, particularly within the gang, the main drug consumed at the time had been marijuana, which has very different neurological and psychiatric effects to crack, as a drug user called Hugo explained:

Crack makes you crazy, like you’re flying, and then when you come down, it’s brutal, you’ll do anything to get another fix, even rob your neighbours, your friends, your own family even... it’s not like marijuana, which just makes you feel at ease with everybody, happy, you know... crack takes you over completely and makes you do what *it* wants...

In particular, crack makes users extremely violent, a *pandillero* called Chucki emphasised:

This drug, crack, it makes you really violent, I tell you... when I smoke up and somebody insults me, I immediately want to kill them, to get a machete and do them in, to defend myself... I don’t stop and think, talk to them, ask them why or whatever... I don’t even recognise them, all I want to do is kill them... it’s the drug, I tell you, that’s where the violence comes from...

Not surprisingly, perhaps, there were clearly many more acts of spontaneous, unpredictable public violence occurring in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 2002 compared to 1996-97, and the majority were linked to crack consumption, as Adilia explained:

The problem is that now, anybody could be a potential danger, if they’ve smoked some crack, any time... you can’t know what they’re going to do, with this drug people become more violent, more aggressive, they don’t care about anything, they don’t recognise you... you don’t know what they’re thinking or even if they’re thinking at all, they could just kill you like that, without a thought ...

Although they were by no means the only crack users in the neighbourhood, the gang definitely constituted a privileged site of crack consumption, and all the gang members were crack users. They were clearly involved in a large proportion of the drug-related violence affecting the *barrio*, and it was extremely frequent to see drugged *pandilleros* stopping neighbourhood inhabitants in the *barrio* streets and asking for a few *córdobas* in order to buy another fix. If their request was refused or ignored, they often became violent and attempted to rip off watches and necklaces. At the same time, however, this heightened sense of insecurity and the concomitant ambivalence towards the gang were the result of more than

just their crack consumption and its attendant consequences. The *pandilleros* in 2002 were an intimidating and threatening presence in the neighbourhood, no longer imbued with an ethos of “loving” the *barrio*, as a gang member called Roger made clear:

We couldn't give a fuck about the *barrio* inhabitants anymore... If they get attacked, if they're robbed, if they have problems, who cares? We don't lift a finger to help them anymore, we just laugh instead, hell, we even applaud those who are robbing them... Why should we do anything for them? Now we just hang out in the streets, smoke crack, and rob, and nothing else!

Although crack consumption was clearly important in explaining this changed behaviour pattern, to a larger extent it was arguably a consequence of the gang's intimate association with the local drugs trade. Even if as *muleros*, gang members constituted the lower rung of the local drug economy, and moreover conducted their drug dealing transactions on an individual basis, the gang as a group acted to ensure the proper functioning and protection of the *barrio* drug economy in general. They would ensure that transactions proceeded smoothly and generally provided security services to the *narco* and to *púsheres*. At a general level, the gang had instituted a veritable regime of terror in the neighbourhood. *Pandilleros* were a very visible presence in the neighbourhood, strutting about the streets, menacingly displaying guns and machetes, and often verbally warning *barrio* inhabitants of the potential consequences were they to denounce them or others involved in the local drugs trade, and sometimes backing up these threats with violence, as *Doña Yolanda* described:

Five years ago, you could trust the *pandilleros*, but not anymore... They've become corrupted due to this drug, crack... They threaten, attack people from the *barrio* now, rob them of whatever they have, whoever they are... They never did that before... They used to protect us, look out for us, but now they don't care, they only look out for themselves, for their illegal business (*bisnes*)... People are scared, you've got to be careful what you say or what you do, because otherwise they'll attack you... Even if you say nothing, they might still come and rob you, come into your home, steal a chair, food, some clothes, whatever they can find... They often do, you know it's them, but you can't blame them, otherwise they'll burn your house down... It's their way of telling you to be careful... If you say anything to them, if you do anything, if you denounce them, then they'll come at night and wreak their vengeance... We live in terror here in the *barrio*, you have to be scared or else you're sure to be sorry...

Gang members would enforce contracts, roughing up recalcitrant clients if the *narco* or *púsheres* asked them to, as well as guard drug shipments as they were moved both within and outside the *barrio*, and generally actively made sure that clients could enter the neighbourhood unmolested by either the local population or outsiders. For example, there was an incident during my stay in February-March 2002 when the gang collectively beat up the adult son of an elderly neighbourhood inhabitant who lived next to a *púsher's* house, as a warning after she had harangued and thrown a bucket of water on crack buyers who had knocked on her door instead of her neighbour's. Similarly, in early 2001 a group of *muleros* from the nearby *barrio* Nosara spatially occupied one of the entrances to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in order to intercept crack clients; when they realised what had happened, the *Dragones pandilla* swiftly attacked them armed with guns and shot two dead and left three critically injured. At the same time, however, the ritualised gang wars of the past had completely disappeared, because they might have discouraged or made it difficult for

potential clients to come into the *barrio*, and were therefore detrimental to the gang's changed preoccupations as a key feature of the local drug economy.

Gangs, violence, and social change in urban Nicaragua

There are clear links between the two manifestations of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* described above. Most obviously, the gang members in 2002 had all been members of the 13 to 17 years old cohort of the *Dragones* subgroup of the *Sobrevivientes* gang in 1996-97. There was also continuity in the two groups' behaviour patterns. The gang in 2002 continued to occupy the same geographical space as the gang in 1996-97, and gang members were heavily involved in drug use both in 1996-97 and 2002, albeit of different drugs. Finally, both groups were violent social forms. At the same time, however, there are also very clear differences between the two expressions of the gang, particularly in relation to their violence. In 1996-97, the *pandilla*'s violent practices were arguably social in nature. The gang as an organisation and its violence can be conceived as having constituted elements of an institutional arrangement that constructed a local form of collective social order within a wider Nicaraguan context of violence, insecurity, and social breakdown. It did so at multiple levels – the individual *pandillero*, the gang group, the local community – using violence as the cement for this process of social and symbolic structuring, but at the same time also doing so in a reduced, exclusive manner, taking the *barrio* as its ontological point of reference for the constitution of this collective social order rather than a broader form of “social imaginary”, such as the city or the nation-state, for example.⁴⁹

Following James Holston and Arjun Appadurai – who draw on the work of T. H. Marshall – it could be argued that Nicaraguan *pandillas* in 1996-97 represented a form of “insurgent citizenship”, that they were emergent “social morphologies” attempting to force “a reconsideration of the basic principles of membership” in society in a wider context where the traditional mediator of collective association – the Nicaraguan nation-state – maintained only “an envelope of citizenship”.⁵⁰ Gangs and their violent practices arguably provided local neighbourhood populations with a concrete sense of belonging to a definite, albeit reduced, collective entity which they did not have at the city and national level due to the chronic and widespread insecurity pervading Nicaragua. At the same time, however, such a radical form of community as was provided by the *pandilla* and its violent practices in 1996-97 was clearly more palliative than enabling, allowing local neighbourhood inhabitants to live more securely within the context of a limited, very much bounded social unit, but little else. Borrowing from T. H. Marshall's original discussion of citizenship, one might say that as such, *pandillerismo* constituted a “formal” rather than a “substantive” form of social

⁴⁹ The notion of “social imaginary” derives from the work of Charles Taylor (‘Modern social imaginaries’, *Public Culture*, 14:1 (2002), pp.91-124). It refers to the self-understandings that are constitutive of society. The concept refers not so much to ideas as to institutional structure: “the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society” (Taylor, 2002, p.91). In this sense it is about the broader issue of how people conceive and think about social reality, “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations... the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor, 2002, p.106). The nation-state – understood here as an “imagined community” (See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983) – is probably the most paradigmatic of “social imaginaries”.

⁵⁰ J. Holsten & A. Appadurai, ‘Introduction: Cities and Citizenship’, in J. Holston (ed), *Cities and Citizenship*, Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1999, p.2.

structuring, which did not empower the local neighbourhood population to do anything other than survive.⁵¹

By 2002 the *pandilla* had changed radically. Although the gang and its violence clearly continued to organise the local neighbourhood community in 2002, they did so in a very different way. In particular, the gang's violent practices were now arguably economically rather than socially driven. The gang had become a key element of the local drug economy, with individual gang members having become drug dealing entrepreneurs and the gang group's violence now focused on ensuring the unimpeded circulation and exchange of both drugs and customers within the neighbourhood, rather than the protection of the neighbourhood community. As such, the gang and its violence can be conceived as having constituted elements of a new institutional arrangement that promoted a localised process of capital accumulation. In a wider Nicaraguan context, where economic opportunities are lacking, unemployment levels are extremely high, job creation is scarce, and the labour market is highly segmented, the emergence of localised forms of informal economic provisioning is not surprising. That promoted by the *pandilla* and its violence is a limited form, however, based on monopoly control of a resource by a small group operating for its own exclusive advantage rather than constituting a generalised opportunity for economic enrichment, thereby promoting a process of socio-economic differentiation.

To a certain extent, this process of capital accumulation bears comparison to Karl Marx's famous notion of "primitive accumulation", which he developed to explain how capitalist accumulation begins, namely through the violent creation of two distinct classes, one of capitalist producers and sellers, and the other of dispossessed labourers and consumers. Capitalism for Marx was not just about money, but was a particular exploitative relationship between producers and labourers based on unequal control of the means of production and consequently in order to take off, an initial process of socio-economic differentiation was necessary.⁵² Although the analogy with the concept of "primitive accumulation" is not perfect – in particular, the drug dealing elite is not exploiting the non-drug dealing population in the way Marx envisioned capitalists exploiting the proletariat – the drugs trade in Nicaragua is certainly fuelling the creation of localised entrepreneurial elites in urban neighbourhoods, some of whom are in fact beginning to invest their profits in both legal and illegal local

⁵¹ T. H. Marshall defines citizenship as "a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed" (*Class, Citizenship, and Social Development*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977 [1950], p.92). He makes a distinction between formal and substantive aspects of citizenship, however, the former referring to membership within a political community such as a nation-state, for example, while substantive aspects of citizenship refer to the array of civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights that individuals possess and can exercise, or in other words, the means through which formal citizenship is actualised. As James Holston & Teresa Caldeira have highlighted in relation to what they call the "disjunctured democracies" of Latin America ('Democracy, Law, and Violence: Disjunctions of Brazilian Citizenship', in F. Aguero and J. Stark (eds), *Fault Lines of Democratic Governance in the Americas*, Miami: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), societies in which there exists a gap between the formal and substantive rights tend to be highly elitist and democratic only in name, excluding large swathes of the population – generally the poor, but also particular racial or ethnic groups, as well as age- and gender-based groups – from both political and economic processes (See also Caldeira, 2001; Jelin & Hershberg, 1996; Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, 'Democracies without Citizenship', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 30 (September/October 1996), pp.17-23; and N. Scheper-Hughes & D. Hoffman, 'Brazilian Apartheid: Street Kids and the Struggle for Urban Space', in N. Scheper-Hughes and C. Sargent (eds), *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁵² See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy – volume 1*, translated by B. Fowkes and introduced by E. Mandel, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1867], especially chapter 26.

economic ventures.⁵³ Whether this will lead to more extensive economic development in the same way that “primitive accumulation” leads to the development of capitalism according to Marx remains to be seen, but what is eminently clear from the above description of the two manifestations of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang is that it is an organisational form whose nature changed radically between 1997 and 2002, and interpreting this transformation from one condition to another is critical to understanding what sort of institutional arrangement the *pandilla* and its associated violence are part of.

Institutions, institutional arrangements, and institutional change

Institutions, according to Geoffrey Hodgson, are “the stuff of socio-economic reality”.⁵⁴ They are humanly devised sets of rules that affect and govern behavior, coming together into arrangements that constrain or enable the constitution of both individual and collective action in everyday life. Institutions and institutional arrangements can be both formal and informal, and can exist at a macro as well as a micro level, but as Jack Knight emphasizes, they affect all aspects of social existence: “from political decision making to economic production and exchange to the rules governing personal relationships, institutional arrangements establish the framework in which these social interactions take place”.⁵⁵ Institutional arrangements are typically considered to serve particular functions. In particular, they are seen to facilitate social interaction by regularizing it – thereby reducing uncertainty – and can be the result of both conscious design as well as gradual and unintentional evolution.

Institutional arrangements are generally considered durable structures, imbued with a certain “path dependency” whereby, once established, they will often persist because of inertia and the high transaction costs of change.⁵⁶ The natural state of affairs is therefore for an institutional equilibrium to exist, but this can be disturbed either by exogenous factors leading to a change in the institutional environment such as the introduction of new opportunities or new players, for example, or by endogenous contradictions within a particular institutional arrangement which might be generated by individuals attempting to improve their own situation by changing the payoffs associated with certain actions. Both these stimuli can lead to changes in the norms and rules associated with a particular institutional arrangement, which in turn can lead to institutional change since this will affect the given institutional arrangement’s efficient fulfilment of its specific function (function following necessity, institutional arrangements will inevitably change when social and physical conditions or internal institutional dynamics disrupt existing outcomes). Ultimately, institutional change is seen to tend towards the re-establishment of a new equilibrium which accomplishes either a changed institutional arrangement’s previous function more efficiently or else achieves a new function altogether.⁵⁷

As Pranab Bardhan has remarked, however, “an institution’s mere function of serving the interests of potential beneficiaries is clearly inadequate in *explaining* it, just as it is an

⁵³ See Rodgers (forthcoming) for a more detailed discussion of the political economy of the drugs trade in Nicaragua.

⁵⁴ G. Hodgson, *How Economics Forgot History: The Problem of Historical Specificity in Social Science*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.302, cited in J. Harriss, ‘Institutions, Politics and Culture: A Case for “Old” Institutionalism in the Study of Historical Change’, *DESTIN working paper* no. 02-34, London: DESTIN, 2002, p.1.

⁵⁵ J. Knight, *Institutions and Social Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p.1.

⁵⁶ See D. C. North, *Structure and Change in Economic History*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1981; and *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

⁵⁷ See North (1990) in particular on this point.

incompetent detective who tries to explain a murder mystery only by looking for the beneficiary and, on that basis alone, proceeds to arrest the heir of the murdered rich man”.⁵⁸ Although a particular institutional arrangement can certainly change as a result of the emergence of new opportunities or internal contradictions, these do not predetermine the end result of this change. At any given time, there always exists a “repertory” of possible collective actions at the disposal of social actors, and the ones they choose – social actors are not necessarily passive carriers of structural roles – and how these evolve are the result of a conjunction of factors that cannot be predicted in a functionally deterministic way. In particular, it is important not to focus only on how particular institutional arrangements underlie particular social practices at any given time, but also on what it is that makes these underlying institutional arrangements realizable at this given time. The building of institutional arrangements is not necessarily spontaneous, and when these change, they frequently do so incrementally, with new arrangements building on existing ones, even if these are not necessarily directly related. Furthermore, institutions are also embedded in particular contexts, which will inevitably influence outcomes in varying ways.

Ultimately, then, the possible paths that processes of social change can take are neither obvious nor certain. The challenge of conceptualising institutional change is therefore to develop a thoroughly dynamic approach to social transformation that goes beyond simply determining whether there has been change in a given institutional arrangement or whether there is continuity. As Abner Cohen has rightly pointed out, a continuity in the form of a given institutional arrangement does not necessarily automatically entail a continuity of its function for the same form can fulfil new functions, while conversely, a change in the form of a given institutional arrangement does not necessarily automatically entail a change of its function because the same function can be achieved by new forms.⁵⁹ When comparing different types of institutional arrangements what is therefore required is not only that we understand what is common and what is different between them, but also what is the basis for the development and maintenance of their respective forms and functions. In other words, it is not the relationship between a given form and a given function *per se* that is important, but understanding what it is that enables a given institutional arrangement to articulate a given function, what are the limitations on this particular arrangement performing this particular function, and what are the different factors that can lead to a change either in form or function or both.

From this perspective, explaining the course of institutional change is inevitably closely related to what might be termed the “compatibility” between the key elements of an institutional arrangement and their context. Of course, this compatibility can be conceived as having analytically distinct institutional, organisational, and environmental aspects to it, but it is in the conjunction of these different aspects that the most interesting insights into social change actually lie. While the emergence of exogenous factors or the endogenous contradictions of institutional arrangements are of course important to explaining social change, they cannot constitute the basis upon which to explain the *specific* transformation of a given institutional arrangement by themselves. Rather, it is the complex interplay between exogenous stimuli, endogenous contradictions, and the specific nature of a given institutional arrangement, the nature of its key elements, its particular context, and the agency of the social actors it involves that provides us with a real understanding of processes of social change.

⁵⁸ P. Bardhan, ‘The new institutional economics and development theory: a brief critical assessment’, *World Development*, 17:9 (1989), p.1392, italics in original.

⁵⁹ See A. Cohen, ‘Political anthropology: The analysis of the symbolism of power relations’, *Man* (N.S.), 4:2 (1969), p.219.

This is what the next section of this paper proposes to trace out in relation to the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla*.

Tracing the course of institutional change: The evolution of the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández pandilla, 1997-2002

The most immediately obvious reason for the changed nature of the *pandilla* in 2002 as compared to 1996-97 is clearly the emergence of the drugs trade in Nicaragua in the late 1990s. However, the development of the drug economy does not constitute an explanation as such of why the *pandilla* – as opposed to another organisational form – was able to grasp the opportunities provided by the appearance of cocaine at that particular point in time, and why this changed *pandillerismo* as a particular type of institutional arrangement. As the story of the evolution of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* between 1997 and 2002 in fact suggests, the institutional arrangement governing the gang was already changing when cocaine became a significant presence in the neighbourhood, and although the latter certainly had consequences for the former, the reverse is also true. In particular, the changing nature of *pandillerismo* as an institutional arrangement was having profound effects on the kind of organisation the *pandilla* was, and there was therefore arguably a certain situationally specific ‘compatibility’ between the gang as an organisation and the emergent drugs trade.

According to my informants, the *pandilla*’s mutation began towards the end of 1997, when the *Calle Ocho pandilla* subgroup fell apart because its entire elder age cohort “matured out” of the gang simultaneously. This seems to have occurred following the departure from the neighbourhood of a key member of that age cohort a few months previously and the sudden death of another. The younger members of the subgroup were absorbed into the two other *barrio pandilla* subgroups and the *Calle Ocho* subgroup effectively ceased to exist. This polarisation of the gang into two subgroups led to a qualitative change in the gang’s dynamics. The tripartite structure of the gang had constituted a stable system, holding each subgroup in a balance of power. Binary structures, on the other hand, are inherently oppositional, and there rapidly developed a strong sense of rivalry between the two remaining subgroups, reflected mainly in a heightened sense of subgroup territoriality. This culminated in areas of the *barrio* dominated by one group becoming no-go areas for the other and vice-versa, and the tension was further heightened towards the end of 1998 when the *Cancheros* subgroup changed its name to “*Los Killers*” (because several members of the subgroup were involved in a series of murders). Around Easter 1999, this tension erupted into a full-fledged conflict between the *Killers* and the *Dragones*. As one *Dragones* gang member called Ronnie explained to me:

the conflict was inevitable. They [the *Killers*] believed they were the masters, you understand. They believed they were better than us. But here, in the *pandilla*, everybody’s equal, you can’t have a situation where some are better than others, we’re all equal, you understand, nobody is better than anybody else. In the *pandillero* language, we say that they were shitting bigger than their arses (*se la tiraban aquí del culo*), that they were getting too big for their boots. They were trying to put one up on us, which wasn’t right, you understand, and so we had to make them respect us, to make them understand ... We had to make them respect what we call the law of ice (*la ley del hielo*). What this means is that when somebody tries to put one up on you, if they try to dominate you, then you have to give it to them, you’ve got to hit them, slash them, beat them up real good, you know, smash their head against the wall until they’re covered in blood, defeated,

dead, perhaps, at any rate so that they'll never defy you again. That's what you have to do to make them respect the law of ice, as we say here in Nicaragua, so that's why the conflict between us was inevitable.

What actually sparked off the conflict was that a family with four youths belonging to the *Killers* moved from the West side of the *barrio*, which was the *Killers*' side, to the East side, which was the *Dragones*' side. The *Dragones* subgroup wanted nothing to do with the four *Killers pandilleros*, but at the same time gave them an ultimatum to either leave the *Killers* or leave their side of the *barrio*. Refusing the *Dragones*' demands on their members, the *Killers* decided to take pre-emptive action and attacked the *Dragones* by surprise one evening. The *Dragones* had fortuitously been planning a surprise attack themselves later that night and so had their weapons at hand, and the fight quickly escalated into a raging gun battle. The *Dragones* acquired the upper hand and went on a rampage in the *barrio*. Somewhat miraculously, there were no deaths, but almost one hundred *pandilleros* and *barrio* inhabitants were injured, including one *Killers* gang member who had an ear cut off, whilst his father lost an eye trying to intervene. Many of the houses on the West side of the *barrio* (the *Killers*' side) were also damaged, including several that were burnt down with Molotov cocktails.

According to both gang and non-gang informants, this conflagration was considered "too much" for the *barrio* population. Several families called the Police and denounced the dozen or so more notorious *Dragones pandilleros*. Six were arrested with the active cooperation of neighbourhood inhabitants and put in prison to be tried, while another half dozen fled the *barrio*. When the case against the six who had been caught was due to come to court, however, those *Dragones* gang members that remained in the neighbourhood threatened the *barrio* inhabitants who were pressing charges with reprisals, and the case was quickly dropped. This unprecedented episode profoundly marked the *barrio pandilleros* and fundamentally changed their attitude towards the *barrio* population. As a *Dragones pandillero* called Roger put it:

the people in the *barrio* showed themselves to be hypocrites then, all of a sudden they hated us, and they turned against us, but before that we had been respected, liked, because we helped and protected them... without us they couldn't survive! Now they don't want to know about anything, they'll fucking denounce us if they get half a chance! Why should we do anything for such treacherous people?

The *Dragones* began to wander about the *barrio* visibly armed partly in order to intimidate the *barrio* population, but also the *Killers*, who spontaneously disaggregated over the course of the next month in the face of this terrorization.

At the same time, it is important to note that a generalised acceleration in leaving the *pandilla* had been occurring. This affected both the *Killers* and the *Dragones*, and continued to affect the latter after the former had disbanded. The *Dragones* rapidly reduced in size from some forty integrants just after the conflict with the *Killers* to just twenty members by the beginning of 2000.⁶⁰ To a certain extent, demographic factors came into play, as the peak of *pandillero* recruitment in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández seems to have been reached in 1995, and many of those who joined the *pandilla* then were 14-15 years old, and consequently

⁶⁰ 2 of the 20 subsequently died due to drug-related health complications.

reaching an age at which “maturing out” naturally came into play. At the same time, the conflict with the *Killers* and its aftermath also profoundly affected some *Dragones* gang member, as one called Elvis, who had had to flee the *barrio* in order to avoid being caught by the Police after the *Dragones-Killers* conflict, makes clear:

It was horrible, I was running from here to there, millions of places, from one to the other to avoid being caught, and it's horrible, I tell you... You feel like you're being tracked, hunted, like an animal, always looking over your shoulder... I never want to be on the run again, so ever since all that, I've looked to distance myself, to avoid problems, especially as those guys in the *pandilla* have got crazier and crazier, you know, more violent and all... I began spending less time with the *pandilla*, doing my own thing, not looking for trouble. I still talk with everybody and all, but when there's going to be trouble, I do my own thing, you know, to avoid problems...⁶¹

Another ex-*Dragones pandillero* called Ronnie told me that he had become “independent” because he did not like the new look gang's antagonism with the wider neighbourhood community.

Taken together, these events arguably prepared the ground for the gang to become closely related to the drugs trade. A drug economy cannot rely on classic mechanisms of regulation and contract-enforcement – such as the law – in a context where drugs are considered illicit goods. It needs alternative mechanisms to impose regularity onto transactions. As numerous social theorists have pointed out, perhaps the most basic form of social regulation is achieved through the use and threat of violence (indeed, this is what ultimately lies behind the power of the law, albeit in a somewhat veiled manner).⁶² The gang, as the dominant organisation commanding the instruments of violence in the neighbourhood, was ideally positioned to provide such regulation, and as an ex-gang member himself, the *barrio narco* was ideally connected to the gang to involve them in the drugs trade.

At the same time, however, the exclusive nature of the drugs trade and the relatively low profit levels of the drugs trade in Nicaragua – certainly compared to the USA, Mexico, or Colombia, for example – meant that in order to be able to provide the necessary violence in an effective way, the gang had to be a small, compact, self-interested unit rather than a large group of a hundred individuals imbued with what Mancur Olson has called an “encompassing interest” for the wider neighbourhood.⁶³ Had cocaine appeared in the *barrio* in 1996-97, for

⁶¹ A further factor to take into account is that in late 1999 and early 2000, the municipal authorities built two basketball courts in *barrio Luis Fanor Hernández*, incidentally providing an alternative focal point to the *pandilla* for neighbourhood youth, and in particular for those wavering over membership. It should be noted, however, that this did not signal an increased presence of the municipal authorities in the *barrio*, as the basketball courts constitute the only public works to have been carried out in the neighbourhood since the *Sandinista* government's urban reconstruction efforts in the early 1980s.

⁶² See for example M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, translated by A. Sheridan, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977; T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by R. Tuck, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1651]; K. Marx, *Selected Writings*, edited by D. McLellan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp.159-192 & 221-247; G. Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations*, translated by K. H. Wolff and R. Bendix, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955; and M. Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London: Routledge, 1948, and *Economy and Society*, edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich, 2 volumes, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978, especially volume 2.

⁶³ See M. Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982. At the same time, it is clear that they also reinforced each other. For

example, the social nature of *pandillerismo* as a given type of institutional arrangement might have precluded the *pandilla* as an organisational form from becoming a key element of the drugs trade. When it appeared in 1999-2000, however, *pandillerismo* as an institutional arrangement was undergoing a mutation that was leading to an organisational shakedown of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang, to ultimately just twenty members imbued with a very different sense of their relationship with the wider neighbourhood community. One could therefore say that there existed a “coincidental compatibility” between the two social phenomena, which was the result of the particular moment in time the drugs trade emerged in Nicaragua, the changing nature of *pandillerismo* as an institutional arrangement, the particular organisational nature of the gang, as well as specific individual agencies. At the same time, however, underlying this whole process was a critical question of power.

Institutional arrangements, power, and social change

Whatever their form or function, and however they emerge, institutional arrangements are multidimensional fields of power. They are both a means and a source of power, constituted through the control of economic resources, authoritative positions, means of violence, and the opportunities they create. In many ways, the institutional arrangements of a society can be said to be the outcome of strategic distributive conflicts between different social groups, in which groups with disproportionate resources and power try to constrain the actions of others. This is a point that is well made by Charles Tilly in his famous essay on “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime”, in which he traces the rise of modern European states to an initial process of anarchic conflict between barbarian warlords:

In an idealized sequence, a great lord made war so effectively as to become dominant in a substantial territory, but that war making led to increased extraction of the means of war – men, arms, food, lodging, transportation, supplies, and/or the money to buy them – from the population within that territory. The building up of war-making capacity likewise increased the capacity to extract. The very activity of extraction, if successful, entailed the elimination, neutralization, or cooptation of the great lord’s local rivals; thus, it led to state making. As a by-product, it created organization in the form of tax-collection agencies, police forces, courts, exchequers, account keepers; thus it again led to state making. ...As a result of these multiple strategic choices, a distinctive state apparatus grew up within each major section of Europe.⁶⁴

This shift in the focus of attention from the efficiency aspects of the different elements making up a particular institutional arrangement or the specific conjunction of events that leads to its emergence at a particular point in time to the question of power inevitably confronts us with the question of somehow grappling with political processes (and here, I

example, the increased consumption of crack cocaine by gang members and their involvement in drug dealing certainly contributed to accelerating the dropping out of younger members from the gang. By their very nature, both are activities that are less suited for the young, as smoking crack has excessively strong and highly dangerous effects on the young, and dealing would be problematic for reasons linked to client confidence.

⁶⁴ C. Tilly, ‘War Making and State Making as Organized Crime’, in C. Besteman (ed.), *Violence: A Reader*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002 [1985], pp.51-52. Mancur Olson (1993) makes a similar point, based on the case of early 20th century warlords in China, emphasising the logic for “roving bandits” to become “stationary bandits” and how the latter eventually develop an “encompassing interest” for their domains, which leads to stable formal political systems (‘Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development’, *American Political Science Review*, 87:3 (1993), pp.567-576).

deliberately use the term “political” with a small rather than a big “p”, taking it at its most basic, as it relates to the actual constitution of ontological order). This is something that Tilly’s analysis perhaps overlooks, assuming that a warlord seizes power without considering how the power necessary for this is first appropriated and then maintained, and in what form, something that is perhaps particularly crucial to consider when thinking about social forms intimately associated with violence (as a source and instrument of power). In other words, it is critical to consider what the sociological basis of power might be, as well as the specific processes through which it is legitimised, for herein lies the key to understanding what might be different and what might be similar between the two manifestations of Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* presented above.

At its most basic, power can be said to relate to social organisation. As Anthony Giddens has underlined, human beings are organisational creatures, craving “ontological security”.⁶⁵ As fields of power, institutional arrangements objectify roles and relations, achieving a degree of stability and continuity without which social life cannot exist, and it is this, more than anything else, that is the sociological measure of power. From this perspective, *pandillerismo* arguably constitutes a particular form of power, for both in 1996-97 and in 2002, the gang and its violence organised neighbourhood society in fundamental ways. They did so very differently, however, the first in a horizontally collective manner, while the second was arguably more vertical and exclusive in nature. But both nevertheless constituted at their respective points in time the key element of a particular institutional arrangement that fostered an enduring structure of governance and rule in the neighbourhood. As such, in both 1996-97 and 2002, *pandillerismo* can plausibly be seen to constitute a form of what Robert Latham calls “social sovereignty”.⁶⁶ Sovereignty can be defined as a condition whereby a specific kind of institutional arrangement possesses final and absolute political authority – in other words, power – in a given community. Taking as his starting point the idea that “sovereignty can be and historically has been understood as an attribute not just of states but of other forms of social organization as well, operating within and across national boundaries”, Latham elaborates the concept of “social sovereignty” to describe non-state “bodies of relations that effectively structure practices and agency in a given area of life”,⁶⁷ of which *pandillerismo* in Nicaragua arguably constitutes a clear example.

Recognizing non-state forms of sovereignty does not necessarily mean pushing the state to the margins of political imagination, however. Rather, Latham’s aim is to “force upon us the question of who or what constructs and maintains the structures of codes and practices that set the terms for collective life” in order to challenge what he perceives to be the excessive and rather exclusive focus on the state in relation to the organisation of collective social purpose.⁶⁸ Within a wider context where the Nicaraguan state is arguably a “lame leviathan” no longer capable of effectively imposing universal order within its boundaries, and *pandillerismo* constitutes an autonomous form of organising localised collective social life, conceptualising them as forms of “social sovereignty” makes sense.⁶⁹ The question, however, is how viable this form of sovereignty can be. Power alone cannot guarantee stability and continuity because it is an erratic process, and generally relies on auxiliary processes of legitimisation. This is especially the case in relation to violence as an instrument of power. As Max Weber famously pointed out, the state’s monopoly over violence is in fact a

⁶⁵ See A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*, Oxford: Polity, 1991.

⁶⁶ See R. Latham, ‘Social Sovereignty’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17:4 (2000), pp.1-18.

⁶⁷ Latham (2000), pp.2-3.

⁶⁸ Latham (2000), p.15.

⁶⁹ See Callaghy (1987) and Zartmann (1995) on the notion of the “lame leviathan”.

monopoly over *legitimate* violence rather than violence *per se*,⁷⁰ and although the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang held a (near) monopoly over violence in the neighbourhood in both 1996-97 and 2002, the violence embedded at the heart of the two manifestations of *pandillerismo* in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in both the earlier and later periods was perceived very differently and had different sources of legitimacy.

If we adopt as measure of legitimacy the probability that those affected by the exercise of power will conform to the authority exercising that power, in 1996-97, the gang derived its legitimacy from the perception that its interests coincided with those of the neighbourhood population. In 2002, however, the gang's legitimacy was derived from the regime of terror it had imposed on the neighbourhood, and as Barrington Moore has suggested,⁷¹ terror is a poor source of legitimacy. While it can work, the regime it produces is inevitably fragile. This is arguably particularly the case when terror is used to legitimise a collective order aimed at the accumulation of assets by a small group in society. This can lead to increasing temptation for others to engage in predatory activities, which in turn lead to an increased importance of deterrence, and for deterrence to work, the threat of retaliation must be credible. As Robert Bates has described very well, in the final analysis this:

increases the likelihood of violence. In such societies, private warriors populate public places; people bearing arms and intimating their willingness to employ them strut in the boulevards and cluster in the marketplace. Public places are populated with *provocateurs*; where families are honor-bound to protect their own, hot-tempered youths find protection against the consequences of brazen behavior. Interactions thus take place in a volatile ambience of honor and impudence; young hotheads move to the fore; and a culture of machismo permeates the society. The private provision of security thus creates a hair-trigger society. Provocative acts become commonplace – but also uncommonly dangerous because they can unleash violent reprisals.⁷²

From this perspective, then, the question to ask, is after having swung from gang-based collective social violence to drug-based individual economic entrepreneurship, where this process of social change will lead Nicaragua next.

Post Scriptum

I returned to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández again in December 2002-January 2003, and found the situation to have changed significantly once again. In particular, the gang as an organised collective form had effectively disappeared. This seemed to be due to at least three factors. Firstly, gang members had continued increasing their levels of crack consumption, which had two effects. On the one hand, it made effective drug dealing more difficult, as conducting transactions when high is not practical. On the other hand, it also meant that *pandilleros* needed to increase their revenues in order to buy greater quantities of drugs. This led them to adopt more efficient selling practices, and they would no longer hang around on street corners as a group, selling in turns, but now did so individually, aggressively trying to get as many clients as possible. One might say here that the gang fell prey to mercantile logic.

⁷⁰ See Weber (1948), p.78.

⁷¹ B. Moore, Jr., 'The Impact and Function of Terror', in C. Besteman (ed.), *Violence: A Reader*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002 [1954].

⁷² R. H. Bates, *Prosperity and Violence: The Political Economy of Development*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2001, p.46.

Secondly, there was a notable increased and more effective police presence in the neighbourhood compared to February-March 2002, or indeed 1996-97. The Bolaños government that came to power in January 2002 has recruited a large number of new policemen and provided the National Police with the financial means to be a much more intimidating presence. Not only were Police patrols now stopping on their rounds of the *barrio* – some patrols even occurring on foot – but between March and December 2002 there were also several raids on drug dealers in the *barrio*. This last factor significantly changed the dynamics of the local drug economy, which became more clandestine. *Muleros* disappeared as a group, as selling openly in the streets made them vulnerable to arrest. *Púsheres* now frequently changed the houses out of which they operated, and the *narco* had in fact moved to another neighbourhood altogether, although he still maintained several houses in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández and it continued to be his principal site of operation. Drugged up individuals – many of them *ex-pandilleros* – now hung about in the streets in order to direct clients to a *púsher*'s house in exchange for a *paquete*, but this seemed to happen in an uncoordinated way. To a certain extent, this new evolution can be interpreted as reflecting a change in the relative power of the gangs versus the Nicaraguan state, with state-based forms of sovereignty perhaps regaining some ground over more social forms of sovereignty. Whether this is a temporary condition or something more permanent remains to be seen, however, particularly considering that somewhat ominously the *narco* was said to be in contact with Colombian drug cartels, trying to establish an exclusive partnership which would see them deliver drugs directly to him in Managua. Were this to come about, it would undoubtedly introduce another violent actor in the Nicaraguan context, and one that has already proven in Colombia that it has no hesitations in taking on other social actors in order to try and establish itself as the principal locus of power and domination in society.

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Research Objectives

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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