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REVOLUTIONARIES, BARBARIANS OR WAR MACHINES?
GANGS IN NICARAGUA AND SOUTH AFRICA

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Images of urban gangs as the embodiment of a modern–day barbarism are commonplace, particularly in policy–making circles,[1] among law enforcement officials,[2] as well as large swathes of the general population.[3] More often than not fuelled and underpinned by the sensationalist media depictions of the phenomenon,[4] such portraits tend to represent gangsters either as evil and deranged sociopaths,[5] or as the exemplification of the ever–growing spread of anomic and senseless violence in a world that is increasingly characterised by the loss of traditional socio–political reference points.[6] In his classic anti–colonial manifesto *The Wretched of the Earth* Franz Fanon famously proposed an alternative vision, however. Although he acknowledged that the gangster was often 'a thief, a scoundrel or a reprobate', he also contended that when the gangster's violence was directed against colonial authority, it became imbued with popular legitimacy through a process of 'automatic' identification, and the gangster as a result 'lights the way for the people'.[7]

The post–colonial transition notwithstanding, this view of gangs as proto–revolutionary vanguards has continued to inform the analyses of many gang researchers over the past few decades.[8] During the course of our own research on gangs in respectively a poor neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, and a coloured township in Cape Town, South Africa, we have found considerable empirical resonance between Fanon's vision and the real–life discourses of many of the gangsters that we have interviewed and spent time with. Although narratives of fighting with the authorities, only stealing from the rich (or the racially dominant), and protecting local communities and neighbourhoods have long been features uncovered by research on gangs,[9] we found these to often be actively framed in explicitly revolutionary terms. Nicaraguan gang members, for example, frequently compared their behaviour with the actions of the *Sandinista* revolutionary

regime, while gangs in post-Apartheid South Africa explicitly justified themselves as ANC-inspired forms of resistance against institutionalised racism.

Such clear-cut discourses by the principal actors involved seemingly make the idea that contemporary urban gangs are proto-revolutionary vanguard social forms highly appealing, but a more fine-grained analysis suggests that the reality is much more complex. Although drug gangs in Cape Town in the late 1990s, for example, often undoubtedly constituted important economic resources for township inhabitants – as one beneficiary put it, 'in the townships there are no banks, only the merchant [drug dealer]' – their territorial occupation of townships was premised on a violence which, despite their own representations, was often turned against local inhabitants. Similarly, while many living in Managua's myriad poor neighbourhoods during the 1990s considered that their local gang 'protects us and allows us to feel a little bit safer, to live our lives a little bit more easily', in the 2000s the same people simultaneously saw gangs as precipitating a 'state of siege' which made it 'impossible to live'. In the face of such ambiguity, the notion of gangs as revolutionaries – no less than barbaric sociopaths – misses the point.

Instead, we wish to propose that gangs are a phenomenon better viewed through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the 'war machine'.[10] This captures not only the ambiguities of gangs, but also the underlying similarities between gangs that have emerged in very different contexts, each with their own localised histories of accumulation and marginalisation. In doing so it allows us to better understand what it is that gangs and their violent practices really represent, and what relation they have, if any, to revolution.

GANGS AND REVOLUTION: MANAGUA

There exists a direct relationship between the contemporary rise of Nicaraguan youth gangs and revolution. Although the phenomenon has roots that can be traced back to the 1940s, it only emerged as a significant social factor in the early 1990s, following the demobilisation of thousands of young men from the ranks of the Sandinista Popular Army (the age of military conscription was sixteen).[11] Gang members from this period systematically mentioned three basic reasons for joining a gang. First, the change of regime in 1990 led to an abrupt devaluation of their social status, which as conscripts defending 'the Nation', had previously been very high; becoming gang members had seemed a means of reaffirming themselves vis-à-vis a wider society that seemed to rapidly forget them. Second, becoming gang members had been a way of recapturing some of the dramatic, yet formative and almost

addictive, adrenaline-charged experiences of war, danger and death, as well as of comradeship and solidarity which they had lived through as conscripts, and which were rapidly becoming scarce commodities in polarised post-war Nicaragua. But third, and perhaps most important from the point of view of the link with revolution, becoming gang members had seemed to many a natural continuation of their previous role as conscripts. The early 1990s were highly uncertain times, marked by political polarisation, violence, and spiralling insecurity, and these youths felt they could better 'serve' their families and friends by joining a gang than attempting to 'protect' them as individuals.

By the mid-1990s, however, what could perhaps be characterised as an incipient form of vigilantism had become institutionalised via a process of local territorialisation based on forms of gang warfare that through their semi-ritualised nature provided a sense of predictability for local inhabitants within a wider context of chronic insecurity. The first battle of a gang war typically involved fighting with fists and stones, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks, then to knives and broken bottles, and eventually to guns, mortars and AK-47s. Although the rate of escalation varied, its sequence never did – i.e. gangs never began their wars with firearms. The fixed nature of gang warfare constituted something of a mechanism for restraining violence, insofar as escalation is a process in which each stage calls for a greater but definite intensity of action, and is therefore always under the actors' control. It also provided local neighbourhood inhabitants with an 'early warning system', such that gang wars can be conceived as having been 'scripted performances' that offered local communities a means of circumscribing what Hannah Arendt famously termed the 'all-pervading unpredictability' of violence.[12] The motivation offered by gang members for this particular behaviour pattern was imbued with a definite political ideology: they repeatedly claimed to be 'the last inheritors of *Sandinismo*', contending that they had joined the gang and engaged in violence due to their 'love' ('*querer*') for their local neighbourhood. One gang member called Miguel claimed: '*Así somos, nosotros los bróderes pandilleros* [that's how we are, us gang member brothers], we show our love for the neighbourhood by fighting other gangs'; another called Julio said that 'you show the neighbourhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other gangs... You look after the neighbourhood in that way, you help them, keep them safe'.

A conceptual parallel can be made here with the 'love' that Ernesto (Che) Guevara saw as the mark of 'the true revolutionary'.[13] Guevara, however, was referring to an abstract 'love of the people', while gang members were

clearly motivated by a much more narrow, localised form of affection. This was expressed very clearly by the gang member called Julio, as he cleaned up a local graffiti extolling the virtues of the Sandinista youth organisation, which a person or persons unknown had crudely painted over in bright red – the colours of the anti-*Sandinista* PLC (*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista*) – the night before. Julio angrily berated the '*hijos de la setenta mil putas Somocistas*' ('sons of seventy thousands Somocista whores') who had done this:

> Those *jodidos* [assholes] don't respect anything in the neighbourhood, Dennis, nothing! OK, so they don't like *Sandinismo*, that's how it is, I don't like their politics either, but this is more than just a *Sandinista pinta* [graffiti], it's a part of the neighbourhood history. Our history, *bróder*! It's something that belongs to the community, to all of us; it shows us who we are, where we come from, how *Sandinismo* built our houses and made us into a community. It shows what the neighbourhood is, and people should therefore respect it, whatever their political opinions.

To this extent, Julio's revolutionary sympathies can be said to have reflected less a revolutionary ideology than his local neighbourhood's historical associations with *Sandinismo* (it had been a hotbed of anti-Somoza activity during the insurrection, as well as the pilot neighbourhood for the new revolutionary government's urban reconstruction programme in the early 1980s).[14] Certainly, there also existed a revealing discrepancy between gang members' political rhetoric and the concrete reality of their political practices. Although Julio and other gang members for example all actively volunteered to help with Daniel Ortega's campaign for the October 1996 elections, putting up banners and distributing flyers in their neighbourhood, for example, this support remained exclusively local in scope. None of the gang members volunteered to help outside the neighbourhood, even when Ortega's campaign tour stopped at the nearby market, where they often spent much of their time. Nor did any of the gang members make any efforts to go to the Sandinista party's campaign closing rally in downtown Managua, despite it being widely publicised, with free buses laid on to boost attendance. Ultimately, the parallels between gang activities and revolutionary action in Nicaragua in the 1990s proved largely circumstantial, as was highlighted dramatically when gang dynamics changed radically between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s. In particular, gangs evolved from being motivated by a sense of social solidarity with their local community to being predatory institutions focused on regulating an emergent cocaine-based drug economy,

to the exclusive benefit of their members who dominated the drug-dealing 'labour market', so to speak.

Although drugs were by no means unknown to gang members such as Julio or Miguel in the mid-1990s, their main drug of choice at the time had been marijuana and they had not been involved in any regular form of trafficking. Cocaine dealing developed in the neighbourhood from mid-1999 onwards; initially on a small scale involving just one individual but rapidly expanding into a three-tiered pyramidal drug economy which by mid-2000 solely involved gang members and ex-gang members.[15] The potential rewards of the drugs trade were substantial at all levels of its pyramidal economy, ranging from around $450 per month at the lowest street-selling level to upwards of $1,100 per month for the middle level, and clearly much more for the top tier (about which precise information was less easy to obtain). In a neighbourhood where about half of the economically active population was unemployed, and a further 25 per cent underemployed, and where in 2002-03 those who did work earned a median monthly income of about $105, such sums were extremely significant. A gang member called Kalia made this clear during an interview in February 2002: 'What the fuck do you do when you don't have any food and there's no work to be had? You have to find some other way to look out for yourself, that's what! That's where selling drugs comes in, they're the only thing that's worthwhile doing here in the neighbourhood'.

Overall some 40 per cent of households in Kalia's neighbourhood seemed to be benefiting either directly or indirectly from drug trafficking. Most obviously, many of the previously ramshackle, mainly wooden, washed-out, monochrome houses had undergone a very visible process of infrastructural amelioration, with a significant proportion now bigger, (re)built in brick and concrete, often painted in bright pastel colours, and in some cases even two stories high (a rarity in earthquake-prone Managua). The changes inside many of these houses were just as impressive and extensive, as they now displayed tiled instead of dirt floors, fitted kitchens instead of gas burners, and (local) designer furniture instead of second-hand, as well as luxurious appliances such as wide-screen televisions with cable services, mega-wattage sound systems, Nintendo game consoles, and in one exceptional case a broadband-connected computer. The inhabitants of these new houses generally wore better-quality – often brand-name – clothes than had been the norm previously, displayed ostentatious jewellery and expensive watches, had the latest model mobile phones (in a neighbourhood where only a dozen households had had land lines) and ate imported food which they often bought in supermarkets rather than the local open-air market.

At the same time, however, the local neighbourhood drug economy was violently regulated by gang members who frequently brutalised local inhabitants in order to precipitate a generalised state of terror and ensure that their dealing could occur unimpeded. As one woman lamented during an interview in February 2002, specifically contrasting the situation with the mid–1990s, when the neighbourhood gang had an ethos of social solidarity:

> Before, you could trust the gang, but not anymore… They've become corrupted due to this drug crack… They threaten, attack people from the neighbourhood 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… People are scared, you've got to be careful what you say or what you do, because otherwise they'll attack you… We live in terror here, you have to be scared or else you're sure to be sorry…

Despite this clearly very different relationship with the local community, gang members nevertheless frequently continued to invoke the neighbourhood's historical association with *Sandinismo* in order to justify their actions. Indeed during an interview in February 2002, Bismarck, an ex-gang member turned middle-level dealer, directly compared the drug trafficking to the neighbourhood reconstruction programme promoted by the revolutionary government of the 1980s. Sitting in his plush new home built with drug money, he asked:

> 'So, Dennis, how do you see the barrio now? It's been what, almost 5 years since you were last here? Things have changed, haven't they? What do you think of my house, do you remember how it used to be a wood shack with cardboard instead of window panes?'
>
> 'Yes, I mean, wow, it's absolutely incredible how it's changed, Bismarck! All this concrete, these brick, these tiles, and this electronic equipment… It's all because of drugs?'
>
> 'That's right! You wouldn't believe how much money you can make selling that shit!'
>
> 'Well, it's certainly impressive, I have to admit. I never thought I'd see anything like this, last time the barrio seemed to be completely regressing…'

'So it was, but now it's been rebuilt like after the Revolution, except that instead of *Sandinismo*, it's the market that's been helping us!'

'I guess you could put it that way, Bismarck, but don't you think there's also a big difference between *Sandinismo* and the market? I mean, the drugs aren't helping everybody, are they? Sure, there are lots of nice, new houses in the barrio now, but some of these new houses are better than others. Yours is much nicer than Kalia's next door, for example, although he also sells drugs, and there are also many houses in the barrio that haven't changed at all since I was last here. There's lots of inequality now, which wasn't the case before, and that can't be a good thing'.

'Well, you can't help everybody, you know. Life is hard here in Nicaragua, Dennis, and you've got be clever and try to survive by hook or by crook. Kalia's just plain dumb, he uses his profits from selling drugs to smoke up, and then loses his head and can't sell properly. And those who don't have the drugs to sell, well, that's just the luck of the draw. It's like the lottery that attributed the houses in the rebuilt barrio to everybody, some people got bigger and better located houses than others, but nobody complained because it was all random, and everybody had the same chances to start off with'.

Of course, not everybody had the same opportunities, insofar as drug dealers were all gang members or ex-gang members, whose monopoly over the use of violence in the neighbourhood was what enabled them to sustain and regulate drug dealing. Instead of promoting a sense of inclusion and universal protection, gangs in urban Nicaragua in 2002-03 could now more plausibly be seen as engaged in localised 'primitive accumulation'. Gang members violently constituted themselves as a nascent local 'narco-bourgeoisie' in a context of otherwise extreme poverty and acutely limited alternative economic opportunities. By 2007, the situation was even starker, as the gang had become professionalised and drew members from a variety of neighbourhoods. To this extent, even if members of contemporary Nicaraguan gangs still compare their behaviour to the actions of the *Sandinista* revolutionary regime, they now effectively embody an ideology that clearly mirrors Nicaragua's broader post-revolutionary political economy of ever-increasing levels of inequality and iniquitous governance.[16]

GANGS AND REVOLUTION: CAPE TOWN

As in Nicaragua, there are obvious links between gang culture and revolution in South Africa, i.e. the ANC-led struggle against the notorious apartheid regime, known simply as 'the struggle'. This is especially the case among African[17] gangs in and around Johannesburg, where African urban male subcultures developed along ethnic lines as a general consequence of the expansion of the mining sector in the 1930s and 1940s.[18] While initially similar to other urban gangs that have developed in contexts of rapid urbanisation and social change around the world,[19] these groups became increasingly directed against dominant white society following the social devastation produced by the forced resettlement of Johannesburg's African population to townships in the 1950s. Resettlement set the scene for the gangs' militarisation and their embracing the struggle following the Soweto uprising of 1976, which constituted a turning point in the fight against apartheid.[20] From this moment on gang subculture became subsumed within the larger framework of the struggle.[21] A clear indication of their new revolutionary ethos was the fact that the gangs which had developed in Soweto township after the forced removals in the 1950s changed their name from '*tsotsi*' (hooligan or thug) to '*comtsotsi*' (a combination of 'comrade' and '*tsotsi*').

A similar link between gangs and revolution also existed in Cape Town, where gangs in coloured townships were instrumental in the widespread consumer boycotts called by the ANC against the apartheid regime. For example, a local township activist called Gadidja described how she had enticed the gangs to participate in the boycotts: 'I'd tell Dessie, the leader of the gang, do you know that the white man's trucks are coming in through Modderdam Road? And Dessie would go to the road and order the trucks looted'. Another activist, however, suggested that 'the gangs actually exploited the struggle. It gave them freedom to commit crimes; they would exploit it and hijack the meat truck, the furniture truck, anything. At the time, it was acceptable because it was a part of causing havoc amongst the whites. [...] We saw this as being part of the campaign, but not realizing that these guys were actually exploiting the whole situation'.

Certain ex-gangsters interviewed some 13 years after the end of the struggle would often comment on the involvement of gangs with some amusement: 'Yeah, those were glorious days. But you know, we were actually protecting the community'. This claim is by no means implausible. As a former township activist said regarding the looting of trucks, 'then there was chicken for everyone'. There existed a definite sense in which gangsters adopted something of a 'social bandit' role,[22] re-distributing some of the

gains from their criminal proceedings, which helped make them a symbol of the struggle for many in the townships. Gangsters furthermore patrolled and policed the boundary between the townships and dominant society, contributing to the former's reputation for being 'ungovernable', which arguably minimised the apartheid state's everyday intervention.

To this extent, coloured gangs in Cape Town can be said to have been active in the struggle, but their commitment as well as their genesis varied markedly from that of Johannesburg gangs. This is partly because Cape Town gangs did not emerge as a response to migration to the mines, but were rather a product of the waves of coloureds and poor whites who migrated to the city as a result of the South African rural crisis of the 1930s and 1940s. These migrants – often referred to as '*plaas-jappies*' or 'country bumpkins' – moved to Cape Town's traditional working class districts, where they encountered an old and established multicultural urban society.[23] As these districts changed – becoming poorer, increasingly coloured, and more conflict-ridden – gang cultures developed. Ironically, the first gangs emerged as a vigilante response to rising crime levels, as an attempt to control the menace of the '*skollie*', or thug.[24] Economic need and increasing repression by the police, however, rapidly led to gang members developing more classic criminal entrepreneurial activities.[25] But from the 1960s onwards the apartheid regime began to forcibly remove people from the old working class neighbourhoods in the centre of Cape Town to council housing on the Cape Flats, some fifteen kilometres from the city centre. This caused significant disruptions to all local social activity, including that of the gangs, which were scattered across the vast expanse of the new townships, and it took a full decade for gangs to re-emerge as a significant Capetonian social feature, albeit now in a distinct Cape Flats version.[26]

Having lived through forced removals and being brought up on tales of injustices, these new gangs were particularly hostile towards dominant white society. Although the coloured townships can in general be said to have had a precarious and strained relationship with the struggle, and especially with African 'comrades' who often themselves did not trust coloured activists either, gangsters rapidly became involved in the struggle along very similar lines to gangs in Johannesburg. Indeed, many of the gangsters talked continuously of their activism against the whites and the Apartheid regime, often explicitly identifying themselves as having been part of a 'vanguard'. This zeal and antagonism towards the dominant white society was not confined to the struggle years, however. In 1999, one drug-dealing gangster called Mattie claimed: 'Actually this [the drug-dealing] is all because of the whites, *die vokkers*. We still fight them. We fight *die boere* [the police] and we

only go steal in white areas. And you know, we really suffered. They beat us and put us in jail'.

Such a view of gangsterism was echoed more generally among the wider township population. When the largest drug dealer in Mattie's township, Kelly, was killed by unknown assassins in March 1998, the community was abuzz with stories of his bravery vis-à-vis the white police.[27] Furthermore, Kelly was explicitly portrayed as having tried to live up to the model of the 'social bandit'. He was rumoured to have donated money to old age homes, lent to the cash-strapped, and regularly disciplined those who transgressed the norms of acceptable behaviour in the township. Kelly was by no means the only gangster to engage in such forms of social solidarity; Daniel Reed has described how Cape Town township gangs were often founded with the explicit intention of defending their local communities.[28] Furthermore, in the post-apartheid era, there exists a widespread notion among African and coloured gang members that they must protect their territory, referred to as '*die agterbuurde*', or the back streets, in opposition to white society.[29] Indeed, there can often be an almost symbiotic relationship between gangs and the local community. In her study of gender in a coloured Cape Town township, Elaine Salo shows how young men in gangs formed a strategic alliance with women in the community.[30] The women, often the mothers of the young men, would exonerate their gang-related practices in return for their respect for the women and defence of territory. An important element allowing for the legitimisation of such alliances was the past association of gang violence with the struggle.

But nowhere within the Cape Flats world of gangsters are revolutionary associations more prominent than in prison. South African prisons are very violent and are dominated by organised gang structures, referred to as the number gangs – 26, 27 and 28.[31] Although these gangs originated in and around Cape Town, they are now national in scope. Despite the fact that coloureds only account for 9 per cent of the total South African population, these dominate both the prison and the gangs, partly because for almost a century they have been vastly over-represented in jail – relative to population size, in 1993 there were four times as many coloureds in jail as Africans – and they stay longer, often because they commit gang-related crimes in prison that lead to an extension of their imprisonment. The gangs relate quite clearly to notions of masculinity, insofar as to be a member of one of these gangs is to be an '*ndota*' ['man' in iziZulu]. Inmates become *ndotas* through an initiatory ritual process of stabbing a warder and subsequently submitting to the consequent violent punishment and solitary confinement. In the process the incumbent has to exhibit solidarity (he must do it for the advancement of

the gang), stoicism (he must not show pain) and measured restraint (he must not mortally wound the warder). In this way, the prison gangs 'transform… the [institutional prison] violence from a tool of mortification into a form of nourishment' of masculine assertion.[32]

At the same time, however, such practices clearly also lend themselves to an understanding of gangs as being in a constant state of struggle against whites and dominant society, and fuel a narrative of antagonism and resistance to the state in which *ndotas* pay the highest price as a revolutionary vanguard. In contradiction to this narrative, however, stand gang-related practices both in prison and in the townships. While gangs, in and out of prison, represent themselves in a revolutionary manner, they are in fact arguably reproducing the very oppression, physical as well as discursive, against which they purport to act.

First of all, when we move from the level of narrative to practice, we realise that many of the elements of gang narratives break down: they do steal from their own; they maim and kill (sometimes incidentally) fellow township residents; they sell drugs and engage in numerous illicit economic activities that have toxic social consequences; and they fight each other, often with dramatic consequences for local communities. Gang members – and other youth as well – often engage in these practices for reasons of individual or group survival: there are few employment opportunities in the context of a wider South African economy that is characterised by highly segmented and constrained labour markets.

Secondly, while group membership may be seen as imperative for personal survival, as the police increasingly target young coloured men in arbitrary ways, the existence of gangs has facilitated – or necessitated, depending on one's point of view – a constant security presence of the state in the townships. To this extent, while the gangs claim to protect their local communities, their presence and practices are what allows for further oppression. Gang membership has also become the reason for the continued stereotyping of the coloured townships on the Cape Flats.

Finally, gangs as social structures are also inherently conservative. Rather than challenging the over-arching (capitalist and racial) structures of prison and society, they reproduce the system, which does allow for their continued existence and (male) dominance. Both township and prison have been turned into domains that are run by *ndotas* and where, as the saying goes in Cape Town, 'the rest are made women out of'. To paraphrase Philippe Bourgois, the gangs reproduce patriarchy on the streets.[33] If this is revolution, then the gangs themselves appear to be its sole beneficiaries.

GANGS AS WAR MACHINES

Although gang members in Nicaragua and South Africa often explicitly seek to justify their social practices by associating them discursively with revolution, such invocations in many ways constitute little more than attempts to mitigate the stigma of barbarism that is so often levelled at gangs and their violence. While gangs often do draw some level of support from the local neighbourhood communities within which they emerge (not least as sons, neighbours or friends), arguably all this does is 'blur' violent gang practices. In the final analysis, gangs in both Managua and Cape Town are really not fighting 'for' anything but themselves. Although they can plausibly be said to be fighting 'against' wider structural circumstances of economic exclusion and racism, most of the time the behaviour patterns of gang members are clearly motivated principally by their own interests rather than the active promotion of any form of collective good. To this extent, their association with revolution must be seen principally as part of a sub-cultural repertoire – which also includes particular narratives and practices of gang warfare, initiations, and bodily performances[34] – that allows gangs to articulate themselves as concrete institutional forms within particular historical contexts of economic and political hardship and flux.

For this reason, we suggest that gangs are better conceived through the notion of the 'war machine' rather than as vanguard revolutionary violence or modern-day forms of barbarism. Deleuze and Guattari elaborate this notion to discuss social phenomena that direct their actions against domination, but without necessarily having well-defined battle lines or standard forms of confrontation.[35] A 'war machine' does not display political consciousness; it is not directed towards establishing an alternative form of authority; it simply destabilises (in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, it 'deterritorialises') authority. Such a characterisation of the 'war machine' is in many ways reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's famous 'destructive character', who is 'always blithely at work', just 'clearing away' and 'reduc[ing] to rubble'. This is particularly apt in relation to gangs considering that Benjamin contended that 'the destructive character is young and cheerful'.[36] Yet viewing gangs as 'war machines' does potentially open up somewhat more 'utopian' associations than the impoverished options of Benjamin's 'destructive character'. The 'war machine', as Malene Busk has pointed out, 'inhabits territory as pure deterritorialization', and in doing so constitutes itself in fundamental contradiction to the realm of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'the majority', that is to say dominant society.[37] A 'war machine' is thus a 'minority' that is differentiated from 'the majority' not in terms of its size, but in relation to the fact that it occupies space in a radically different manner. A

'majority' sediments a particular type of order, entrenches itself and occupies space in a universalising way, while a minority is a 'line of flight', unstable, ambiguous, and 'ever-moving'.[38]

This is a vision that arguably resonates rather well with the ambiguities of gangs as we have described them in Managua and Cape Town. Their violence is not directed against authority in any proactive sense of promising a (revolutionary) alternative, but nevertheless engages with authority, imposing often ephemeral and highly contradictory but fundamentally different forms of order to those projected by dominant society. As such, gangs could arguably be seen as providing glimpses of the fact that alternatives to the present are possible: they are constituted as 'a point that would stand outside the temporality of the dominant order' in a contemporary epoch that seems otherwise barren of plausible emancipatory revolutionary projects.[39]

At the same time, however, as Deleuze and Guattari themselves are at great pains to point out, 'the majority' and 'the minority' should not be seen as distinct domains, as they are inseparable partners. The value of the concept of the 'war machine' is that it allows us to transcend easy and ultimately unproductive binary notions of 'power' and 'resistance', 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', or 'moral society' versus 'barbarians', and focuses instead on the systemic articulations between different poles in society. The need for such a nuanced view is particularly clear when considering the way that gangs are increasingly policed around the world. Since the 1980s, states have arguably been waging something of a global 'war on crime', which has fundamentally shaped gangs and their actions worldwide. Originating in the US, but rapidly spreading to Europe and the global South, including in particular Central America and South Africa, this 'war' has notably involved the proliferation of new forms of policing, including in particular the seemingly contradictory approaches of 'community policing' and 'zero tolerance',[40] which in actual fact can be seen as very similar forms of authority,[41] insofar as elements of both approaches are drawn from – or resemble – counter-insurgency strategies.[42]

Although it might initially seem strange to compare extremely violent counter-insurgency practices with contemporary law-enforcement efforts against crime, the grammar of the two is remarkably similar. Community policing as well as counter-insurgency operations are often described as 'psycho-politico-security projects' (to use the military lingo) that combine both development and security elements.[43] Specific areas – 'gang-affected areas', for example – are to be 'pacified', through a combination of partnerships, development initiatives and 'targeted' security interventions. Similarly, both counter-insurgency and 'zero tolerance' policing operate on

the basis that authorities must strike hard against the first signs of 'social decay'.[44] Finally, both strategies are based on a binary opposition between 'law abiding citizens' and 'criminals', and impose a stark either/or logic that allows for little of the ambiguity that is the hallmark of gangs – and indeed life more generally – in both Cape Town's townships and Managua's slums. In Central America, for example, the 'Mano Dura' – 'hard hand' – anti-gang strategy was introduced in 2003, allowing for the arrest of individuals from the age of 12 onwards, simply for having tattoos or dressing in particular ways;[45] while in South Africa, multiple legal reforms and social development initiatives have systematically sought to categorise and identify 'deserving' and 'undeserving' populations, in order to attend to their 'needs' differently, so to speak.[46]

The deployment of such counter-insurgency strategies logically suggests the existence of insurgents, and begs the question of whether revolutionary potential is not being attributed to gangs. By fostering the production of predictable, visible frontlines and enemies, dominant society could be said to be extending an imagined subversive agency to gangs, which might perhaps be able to inspire revolution, very much along the lines that Fanon described in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Certainly, this is an idea that can be said to be implicit in James Holston's recent analysis of the violent *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) gang in São Paulo, Brazil, as a form of 'insurgent citizenship'.[47] Highlighting the paradoxical fact that the PCC formulates its demands on the Brazilian state on the basis of invocations of human rights and the rule of law, in a context where both of these are lacking, he contends that this makes these demands into an almost revolutionary statement. At the same time, he concludes that such a form of 'insurgent citizenship' ultimately delegitimises the already fragile Brazilian democracy, without offering much that is positive in its place.

Deleuze and Guattari, however, warn us against associating either the 'minority' or the 'majority' with good or evil.[48] This suggests that what is really at stake with 'war machines' such as the PCC or the gangs of Managua and Cape Town is less the actual meanings of their behaviours and practices, and more the potential that their existence represents. In this respect, though, the articulation of gangs and policing practices resembles what Foucault discerned regarding the social production of 'delinquency' – a means of stifling youthful forms of resistance to oppression and injustice by constructing these as a concern of court rooms and prisons rather than of the streets.[49] In other words, even if gangs can be seen as potentially offering a glimpse of the possibility of emancipatory social change, the tragic truth is that in the final analysis their existence in fact actively suppresses the

perception of such potential transformation, suggesting that the chance for utopia has come and gone in Nicaragua and South Africa – for now.

NOTES

1   USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gangs Assessment*, Washington: United States Agency for International Development, 2006.

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9   Gerald D. Suttles, *The Social Order of the Slum: Ethnicity and Territory in the Inner City*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.

10   Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Continuum, 1988, pp. 351-423.

11   Demobilised *Contra* youth were also involved, albeit to a much lesser extent, and were generally concentrated in a few specific neighbourhoods of the country's cities.

12   Hannah Arendt, *On Violence,* New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969, p. 5. For further details, see Dennis Rodgers, 'Living in the Shadow of Death: Gangs, Violence, and Social Order in Urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38(2), 2006, pp. 267-92; Dennis Rodgers, 'When Vigilantes Turn Bad: Gangs, Violence, and

Social Change in Urban Nicaragua', in David Pratten and Atreyee Sen, eds., *Global Vigilantes*, London: Hurst, 2007.

13 Ernest (Che) Guevara, *Venceremos: The Speeches and Writings of Che Guevara*, Edited by John Gerassi, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969, p. 398. This analogy is all the more relevant considering the associations between *Sandinismo* and the 'Cult of Che' (see Roger Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution: Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 132 and 185).

14 Not all Managua gang members were pro-*Sandinista*. The increased political polarisation that followed the 1990 elections led to a spatial re-organisation of the city's population. New neighbourhoods emerged and coalesced, some pro-*Sandinista* and others pro-*Contra*. The post-electoral return of refugees also greatly contributed to the formation of the latter; the gang members in *barrio* Enrique Bermúdez (named after the commander of the *Contra* Northern Military Front during the war in the 1980s) were in no way sympathetic to *Sandinismo*, for example. Instead, this particular gang's solidarity was grounded in identification with the historical experiences of the *barrio* Enrique Bermúdez population's opposition to the *Sandinista* regime, just as gang members in Julio's gang were discursively pro-*Sandinista* as a result of their neighbourhood's local historical association with *Sandinismo*.

15 See Dennis Rodgers, 'Managua', in Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, eds., *Fractured Cities: Social Exclusion, Urban Violence and Contested Spaces in Latin America*, London: Zed, 2007 for details.

16 Dennis Rodgers, 'A Symptom called Managua', *New Left Review*, 49, 2008, pp. 103-20.

17 'African' was one of four racial categories employed by the Apartheid regime to divide the heterogeneous South African population. Each of these categories – white, Indian, African or coloured – gave access to different resources and privileges. They continue to be used today in post-Apartheid South Africa, both pro-actively and pejoratively. For further details, see William Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Steffen Jensen, *Gangs, Politics and Dignity in Cape Town*, London: James Currey, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; Alistair Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, London: Heineman, 1990.

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25 Don Pinnock, *The Brotherhoods: Street Gangs and State Control in Cape Town*, Cape Town: David Philips, 1984, pp. 23-30.

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28 Daniel Reed, *Beloved Country: South Africa's Silent Wars*, Oxford: BBC, 1994.

29 Steffen Jensen, 'Capetonian Back Streets: Territorializing Young Men', *Ethnography*, 7(3), 2006, pp. 275–302.

30 Salo, 'Respectable Mothers'.

31 These have something of a mythical origin, with the standard narrative being that they were founded at the beginning of the 20th century when a man-turned-prophet, Po, recruited two men, Nongoloza and Kilikijan to revolt against colonial and capitalist exploitation. These two men became the forefathers of the 27 and the 28, while the 26 gang emerged inside prison as a compromise between the two older gangs. Jonny Steinberg, *Nongoloza's Children: Western Cape Prison Gangs during and after Apartheid*, Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2004.

32 Ibid., p. 25.

33 Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

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35 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 351–423.

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