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Slum wars of the 21st century: Gangs, *Mano Dura*, and the new urban geography of conflict in Central America

Dennis Rodgers¹

Abstract: *The political economy of violence in Central America is widely perceived as having undergone a critical shift during the past two decades, often pithily summarised as a movement from ‘political’ to ‘social’ violence. Although such an analysis is plausible, it also offers a depoliticised vision of the contemporary Central American panorama of violence. Basing itself principally on the example of Nicaragua, the country in the region that is historically perhaps most paradigmatically associated with violence, this paper offers an alternative interpretation of the changes that the regional landscape of violence has undergone. It suggests that these are better understood as a movement from ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’ (Wolf, 1969) to ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ (Beall, 2006), thereby highlighting how present-day urban violence can in fact in many ways be seen as representing a structural continuation of past political conflicts, albeit in new spatial contexts. At the same time, however, there are certain key differences between past and present violence, as a result of which contemporary conflict has intensified. This is most visible in relation to the changing forms of urban spatial organisation in Central American cities, the heavy-handed ‘Mano Dura’ response to gangs by governments, and the dystopian evolutionary trajectory of gangs. Taken together, these processes point to a critical shift in the balance of power between rich and poor in the region, as the new ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ are increasingly giving way to more circumscribed ‘slum wars’ that effectively signal the defeat of the poor, and concomitantly the end of the utopian dreams of revolution that the region is historically associated with.*

Any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another; and in either there are many smaller divisions, and you would be altogether beside the mark if you treated them all as a single State.

- Plato, *The Republic*, Book IV.

Introduction

It has become increasingly commonplace to observe that the political economy of violence in Central America has undergone a critical change during the past two decades, moving from ideologically-charged conflicts over the nature of the political system towards more prosaic ‘post-conflict’ forms of brutality such as delinquency and crime. This transformation is often pithily characterised as a shift from ‘political’ violence to ‘social’ violence (see for example

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Koonings and Kruijt, 1999, 2004; Moser and McIlwaine, 2004; Pearce, 1998), and is frequently linked to a broader Latin American ‘crisis of governance’, whereby the end of the Cold War, economic liberalisation, incomplete democratisation, and intensifying globalisation have undermined the political authority of states and their ability to command a monopoly over the use of violence, reducing their roles as primary institutional channels for conflict, and making them less attractive ‘spoils of war’ (see for example, de Rivero, 2001; Friedman, 2003; Galeano, 1998; Méndez *et al.*, 1999). ‘Non-political’ forms of brutality are perceived to have emerged from the shadows of weakened states, so to speak, something that is widely considered most evidently reflected in the ubiquitous proliferation of gangs throughout the Central American region over the past twenty years (see Hagedorn, 2008). While this kind of ‘governance’ analysis makes a certain amount of sense, it also implicitly assumes that violence in ‘post-conflict’ Central America is effectively ‘post-political’. This article seeks to problematise this assumption by suggesting an alternative lens through which to interpret the changes that the regional panorama of conflict has undergone during the past two decades. In particular, it suggests that focusing on the fact that present forms of brutality are now overwhelmingly urban, contrarily to the past, provides us with a critical insight into the continuing political dynamics of violence in the isthmus.

Basing itself principally on the example of Nicaragua, the Central American country that is historically perhaps most paradigmatically associated with violence, the article begins by tracing the geographical movement of conflict from country to city over the past three decades, before then drawing general parallels with the rest of Central America, describing in particular the origin and nature of the contemporary predominant form of urban violence, namely the youth gangs known as pandillas and maras. This particular rural to urban trajectory is then theoretically characterised as a movement from ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’ (Wolf, 1969) to ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ (Beall, 2006), thereby highlighting how although past and present forms of brutality might at first glance seem very different, contemporary urban violence can in fact in many ways be seen as a structural continuation – albeit in a new spatial context – of the political conflicts of the past. At the same time, however, there are certain key differences between past and present regimes of brutality, as a result of which conflict has intensified in the contemporary period. This is most visible in relation to three processes: the changing forms of urban spatial organisation in Central American cities, the heavy-handed ‘Mano Dura’ response to gangs by governments, and the dystopian evolutionary trajectory of gangs. These all point to a critical shift in the balance of power between rich and poor in Central America, as the new ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ increasingly give way to more circumscribed ‘slum wars’ that effectively signal the defeat of the poor, and concomitantly the end of the utopian dreams of revolution that the region is historically associated with.

Conflict, country, and city in Nicaragua and Central America

Nicaragua has long been associated with violence (Torres Peres, 1997), but is probably most famous for its Sandinista revolution, which overthrew the Somoza dynastic dictatorship in 1979, after almost two decades of guerrilla struggle. Although the vanguard Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front – FSLN) combined both rural and urban tactics during its insurgency, it was primarily founded on a rural guerrilla strategy, inspired by the Cuban revolution and the Nicaraguan military leader Augusto César Sandino’s historical struggle against the US occupation of Nicaragua during the 1920s and 1930s. Such a rural bent to the revolutionary struggle is by no means surprising. As Timothy Wickham-Crowley (1992) has suggested, revolutions occur as a result of propitious social conditions, and in Nicaragua these

were clearly chiefly precipitated by rural factors. Broadly speaking, the revolutionary insurrection mirrored the rise of agro-export capitalism in Nicaragua, which led to ‘the erosion of traditional agrarian society over a single generation [and] created the conditions for broad masses of the ...population to accept the revolutionary call and imbue it with the capacity to challenge the existing order’ (Vilas, 1995: 18). The Nicaraguan peasantry naturally became the backbone of the revolutionary movement, and following the February 1978 uprising and subsequent crushing of the indigenous village of Monimbó – ‘the spark that set Nicaragua alight’, as the folk singer Carlos Mejía Godoy put it – began to join the FSLN’s army *en masse*. Even if urban uprisings also became important as the insurrection progressed, its fundamentally rural character is clear from the fact that the insurgency is reckoned to have triumphed on 19 July 1979, the day that the FSLN’s troops marched into Managua from the countryside, rather than 17 July, when dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle was actually toppled.

Although the Sandinista regime unquestionably introduced less alienating forms of economic organisation and property tenure in rural areas, clearly addressing some of the concerns of the Nicaraguan peasantry that had led to revolution in the first place, these reforms were often clumsily executed, particularly in the early years of the revolution (see Walker, 1997). Timothy Brown (2001) and David Stoll (2005) have suggested as a result that the conflict that broke out in Nicaragua in the early 1980s – widely known as the Contra² war – therefore included a significant element of indigenous peasant resistance to revolutionary change (see also Kalyvas, 2004). Even if there are significant grounds on which to doubt the extent to which this characterization of the Contra war is accurate, it is certainly the case that it was principally a rural conflict. Indeed, although the Contra guerrillas had a devastating effect on the Nicaraguan economy, destroying and disrupting communication and economic infrastructure, terrorizing and demoralizing the population (see Harrison *et al.*, 1988; Torres Rivas, 1991), they were never in a position to directly affect major urban centres, and all their military actions were confined to the countryside, to the extent that Rose Spalding (1999) consequently labels the Contra war a ‘low-intensity war’ as a result.

The end of the Contra war and the subsequent change of regime in 1990 marked the beginning of a definite shift in the geography of conflict in Nicaragua, however, the logic of which was well summarized by Eduardo Galeano (1998: 314) when he remarked that ‘while the streets of Nicaragua’s cities were peaceful during the years of formal conflict, once peace was declared, the country’s streets became scenes of war’. Although the first years of the post-revolutionary era were marked by the presence in the countryside of several organized bands of demobilized Contra guerrillas (*recontras*) and ex-Sandinista military personnel (*recompas*)³ – as well as occasionally mixed groups of both (*revueltos*)⁴ – pressing putative land claims or engaging in banditry, their *modus operandi* was significantly different to that of the warfare of the 1980s. This was well illustrated in July 1993 when a 150-strong group of *recompas* occupied the northern city of Estelí – Nicaragua’s seventh largest – for several weeks, reportedly looting some US\$4 million from banks and shops before regular army troops drove them out at the cost of numerous casualties, including many civilians. In contrast to the war years, then, not only did urban areas become theatres of violence, but engagements also significantly involved non-combatants, which had not been the case in the past, as the fact that less than 15 percent of 31,000 casualties during the civil war of the 1980s were civilians shows well (Walker, 2003: 56).

² From the Spanish word *‘contrarevolución’* (‘counter-revolution’).

³ From the word *‘compa’*, an abbreviation of *‘compañero’* (‘comrade’).

⁴ From the expression *‘huevos revueltos’*, or ‘scrambled eggs’.

By the mid 1990s rearmed groups had declined to effective insignificance, and the most evident exemplification of this change in the geography of violence is clearly the dramatic explosion in urban crime and delinquency that occurred in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. According to official Nicaraguan Police statistics, crime levels rose steadily by an annual average of 10 percent during the 1990s, compared to just 2 percent during the 1980s, with the absolute number of crimes almost quadrupling between 1990 and 2004. Crimes against persons – including homicides, rapes and assaults – in particular rose by over 460 percent.⁵ While the overall trend of increasing urban crime is undoubtedly accurate, official statistics are highly problematic. As William Godnick *et al.* (2002: 26) note, ‘given the anecdotal information on violence as portrayed in the Nicaraguan press and the general perception of violence in Nicaraguan society, these figures are suspiciously low’. The national homicide rate – the accepted international benchmark for measuring violence – is particularly problematic, standing at an average of 15 deaths per 100,000 persons between 1990 and 2003 compared to almost three times that many in Honduras and over six times that in Guatemala and El Salvador (Moser and Winton, 2002: 47), suggesting that underreporting is a serious problem in Nicaragua.⁶

Certainly, crime victimisation surveys suggest that levels of violence are extremely high. For example, a 1997 survey reported that one in six Nicaraguans claimed to have been the victim of a criminal attack at least once in the previous four months, a proportion that rose to one in four in the capital city Managua,⁷ where 40 percent of all crime occurs (Granera Sacasa and Cuarezma Terán, 1997: 32). Similarly, a 1999 survey found that urban crime was considered the principal problem affecting the country by a margin of over 30 percent (PNUD, 2000: 130). The high levels of urban crime were also very visible more qualitatively during the ethnographic fieldwork I carried out in the poor Managua neighbourhood *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,⁸ and were starkly reflected in the social practices and discourses of local inhabitants. In 1996, for example, there was a manifest fear of leaving one’s home, with people going out as little as possible, and restricting themselves to a few fixed routes and destinations. By 2002, even the shelter of home seemed precarious as houses were barricaded in an almost fort-like manner with high walls, iron bars, and barbed wire. An informant called Adilia dramatically described the situation as ‘living in a state of siege’, a depiction that takes on added significance when one considers that she lived through several ‘real’ military sieges during the revolutionary insurrection in 1978-9.

⁵ Calculated on the basis of Serbin and Ferreyra (2000: 185-7), and data from <http://www.policia.gob.ni/>.

⁶ There are several potential reasons for this. The most important is clearly the inefficiency and weakness of Nicaraguan state institutions. Since the change of regime in 1990, a slow process of de-politicisation and reductions in both size and budget – partly related to IMF and World Bank-imposed budget-cutting – have severely affected the operational capacity of the Police, which has only limited patrolling capacities in urban areas, and is completely absent in 21 percent of the country’s 146 municipalities (Cajina, 2000: 174). Furthermore, the Pan-American Health Organisation (1998: 384) has estimated that over 50 percent of all mortalities in Nicaragua in 1995 were not registered due to deficient record-keeping by hospitals and morgues. It should also be noted that both Presidents Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2001) and Enrique Bolaños (2002-06) made fighting crime a key element of their programmes of government and ‘preferred’ positive – i.e. low – crime statistics. Having said this, Nicaragua is clearly not as violent as El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras. ‘Guesstimating’ on the basis of qualitative studies, on a rough scale of 1 to 100, if the most violent country, El Salvador, were ranked 100 in terms of gang violence, Honduras is likely to rank around 90, Guatemala around 70, Nicaragua around 50, and Costa Rica around 10. It should be noted that the distribution of violence within these countries varies greatly, however, even if the overwhelming majority of gang violence occurs in urban areas, including in particular the capital cities.

⁷ *La Tribuna*, 2 May 1997, page 4.

⁸ This name is a pseudonym, as are all the names of informants mentioned in this article.

According to the 1999 crime victimisation survey mentioned above, over 50 percent of respondents identified youth gangs, or pandillas, as the most likely perpetrators of crime in post-revolutionary Nicaragua (Cajina, 2000: 177). At one level, this is not surprising. Ever since the seminal gang studies carried out in the 1920s and 1930s by researchers associated with the Chicago School of Sociology (see for example, Thrasher, 1927; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Whyte, 1943), youth gangs have clearly emerged as paradigmatic forms of urban violence in societies all over the world. At the same time, their emergence as significantly violent social forms in contemporary Nicaragua is clearly a specific hallmark of the post-revolutionary period. Until the 1990s, Nicaraguan gangs – which can be traced back to the 1940s – were by all accounts small-scale and relatively innocuous youth aggregations. Their numbers however increased massively from 1990 onwards – partly due to the Contra and Sandinista Popular Army demobilisation of youthful combatants – and they rapidly became a ubiquitous feature of the streets of Nicaraguan cities, which they roamed robbing, beating, and frequently killing. At their most basic, these contemporary gangs consisted of variably sized groups of generally male youths between 7 and 22 years old, that emerged in poor neighbourhoods and slums, and engaged in illicit and violent behaviour – although not all their activities were illicit or violent – including petty crime and delinquency, as well as semi-ritualised forms of gang warfare that obeyed a particular territorial dynamic (see Rodgers, 1997, 2000, 2006a, 2007b, 2007c).⁹

Such gangs have come to be found in all of the larger Nicaraguan urban centres including Chinandega, Estelí, Granada, León, Masaya, and Matagalpa, for example, but are most prominent in Managua, the capital city. By 1999, the Nicaraguan Police estimated that there were 110 gangs in the latter, incorporating 8,500 youths, double the number in 1996, and five times that in 1990 (Policía Nacional de Nicaragua, 2001), although these statistics undoubtedly err on the low side. Even if not all acts of urban brutality in Nicaragua are perpetrated by these gangs, it is clear that they have largely come to symbolically epitomize urban violence in the Nicaraguan collective consciousness. For example, whenever my informants in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández talked to me of crime, of violence, or of fear, in both 1996-97 and 2002-03, the word 'pandilla' never failed to materialize in their discourses, often in the form of an expressive and despairing exclamation along the lines of: '¡Ay, estas pandillas, me matan, Dennis, me matan!' ('Oh, these gangs, they kill me, Dennis, they kill me!'). Similarly, the admonition 'cuidado las pandillas' ('watch out for the gangs') became a familiar refrain, punctuating all comings and goings from the household I lived in, to the extent that it almost had the equivalent verbal value of a more innocuous 'hasta luego' ('see you later'). During the year that I spent living in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996-7, I tallied nine gang violence-related deaths, equivalent to a homicide rate of 360 deaths per 100,000 persons, for example, which compares highly unfavourably with the average annual civilian death rate of 124 persons per 100,000 due to warfare during the 1980s (calculated on the basis of Walker, 2003: 56).¹⁰

Similar movements from rural to urban violence can also be observed in other Central American countries, which all display a general shift evolution in the geography of their violence from the country to the city over the past thirty years or so. The 1980-1992 civil war in El Salvador was widely characterised as a peasant rebellion (Wood, 2003), for example, while the rural character of the much longer war (1960-1996) in Guatemala is even more obvious due to its intimate association with issues of indigeneity (Löfving, 2002). But although indigenous

⁹ See also Rocha (2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2007b), and Rocha and Rodgers (2008).

¹⁰ Obviously, this comparison must be taken with a pinch of salt, considering that my sample size is a single urban neighbourhood, well-known moreover for its high levels of violence.

struggles – particularly over natural resources – do persist up to a point in rural Guatemala, the overwhelming majority of contemporary violence in both countries is now urban in nature (see UNODC, 2007). This is well epitomised – perhaps even more so than in Nicaragua – by the emergence of the notorious mara youth gang phenomenon.¹¹ Contrarily to the home-grown Nicaraguan pandillas, the maras are phenomena that have transnational roots linked to US immigration policy. Their origins can be traced to the 18th Street gang in Los Angeles, a gang founded by Mexican immigrants in the Rampart section of the city in the 1960s, but which rapidly began to accept Hispanics indiscriminately, and grew massively during the late 1970s and early 1980s particularly as a result of the influx of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees (UNODC, 2007: 59; Bruneau and Boraz, 2006).

By the mid 1980s, the 18th Street gang it was one of Los Angeles' most important gangs. In the late 1980s, however, it found itself confronted by a rival – possibly splinter – gang founded by a second wave of Salvadoran refugees, known as the 'Mara Salvatrucha'.¹² The two groups fought each other regularly, and were heavily involved in the violence and looting that accompanied the 1992 Rodney King riots, which led the State of California to implement strict anti-gang laws, and prosecutors began to charge young gang members as adults instead of minors, sending hundreds to jail for felonies and other serious crimes. This was followed in 1996 by the US Congress' Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which provided for non-US citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison to be repatriated to their countries of origin, and for foreign-born American felons to be stripped of their citizenship and expelled once they served their prison terms. As a result, in the eight years between 1998 and 2005 the US deported almost 46,000 convicts to Central America, in addition to 160,000 illegal immigrants caught without the requisite permit. Three countries – El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – received over 90 percent of the deportations from the US (USAID, 2006: 18-19). Many of these deportees were members of the 18th Street and Salvatrucha gangs who had arrived in the United States as toddlers but had never secured legal residency or citizenship, and had joined the gang as a way to feel included in a receiving country that frequently actively impeded their integration.

Following their exclusion from the US and arrival in countries of origin that they barely knew, they perhaps not surprisingly reproduced the structures and behaviour patterns that had provided them with support and security in the US. Deportees rapidly began to found local 'clikas', or chapters, of their gang in their communities of origin, which in turn rapidly began to attract local youth and supplanted the existing local pandillas. Contrarily to sensationalistic media projections, although each clika explicitly affiliates itself with either the Mara Dieciocho (as the 18th Street gang is known in Central America) or the Mara Salvatrucha, and while clikas from different neighbourhoods affiliated with the same mara will often join together to fight other groupings claiming allegiance to the opposing mara, the umbrella gangs are not real federal structures, and much less transnational ones. Neither the Dieciocho nor the Salvatrucha gangs in

¹¹ The origins of the word 'mara' are unclear. It has been widely suggested that it is derived from the word 'marabunta', a term used to describe a particularly vicious species of ants in certain South American countries. The fact that these do not include El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras makes it an unlikely proposition, although considering the US origins of the maras, it might be that the term derives from the classic US horror film 'The Naked Jungle' (1954), in which an army of marabunta ants devastate a plantation in Brazil despite the best efforts of Charlton Heston, which was remade for television and widely shown in the early 1980s. This is purely speculative, although it is interesting to note that this putative link with cinema was also mentioned in the first study of gangs ever carried out in Central America (Levenson *et al.*, 1988).

¹² A combination of 'Salvadoreño' and 'trucha', meaning 'quick-thinking' or 'shrewd' in Salvadoran slang.

Central America answer to a single chain of command, and their umbrella nature is more symbolic of a particular historical relationship than demonstrative of any real unity, be it of leadership or action. Indeed, in many ways, the federated nature of the maras is more of an imagined social morphology, based on the fact that the steady flows of deportees from the US share a common language and reference points. Certainly, there is little evidence of any cooperation between maras in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, and even less with the original putative ‘mother gangs’ in Los Angeles. Rather, the ties that exist are more akin to a sense of identity, founded organically on individuals’ common experience of gangsterism in the US, deportation, and stigmatisation in Central America.¹³

This imaginary aspect of their transnationalism notwithstanding, maras are a very real phenomenon, and have spread throughout urban El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Official Police statistics suggest that there are at least some 70,000 pandilla and mara members operating in Central America, although the estimates of NGOs and academics suggest that the number could be as high as 200,000 (UNODC, 2007: 60). Even the lower figure would however mean that there are a greater number of gang members than military personnel in Central America, however, as Nicaragua and Honduras have armies of about 12,000 soldiers each, El Salvador 13,000 soldiers, and Guatemala 27,000 (see Millett and Perez, 2005: 59). These gangs clearly contribute a significant share of the violence afflicting the cities of these countries. Reliable information is extremely scanty, however, with official statistics in particular especially problematic due to chronic underreporting, deficient data collection, and issues of political interference (see Huhn, Oettler and Peetz, 2006: 8-13). Nevertheless, Mo Hume (2007b) notes that maras in El Salvador are thought to commit between 30 and 50 percent of all murders that occur in the country – which is reputed to be among the most violent in the world – while Ailsa Winton (2004: 85) notes that in Guatemala the ubiquity of gangs is such that ‘there seems little need for the perceived severity of the problem to be verified by actual data’. Certainly, in many instances levels of violence are currently higher in Central America than during the previous decades of open warfare (see Call, 2000; Londoño *et al.*, 2000; UNODC, 2007). The annual number of violent homicides in contemporary Guatemala regularly exceeds the yearly tally of war-related deaths that the country suffered during the height of the civil war in the 1980s (Moser and Winton, 2002: 33), for example, while the economic cost of crime in El Salvador was estimated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to be US\$1.7 billion in 2003, or in other words equivalent to 11.5 percent of GDP, significantly higher than the country’s estimated average annual loss of 3.3 percent of GDP due to war during the period 1981-5 (Ahrend, 1999: 7).

¹³ These are crucial factors that explain why Nicaragua does not have maras. Not only does Nicaragua have a very low deportation rate from the US – less than 3 percent of all Central American deportees are Nicaraguan – but furthermore, Nicaraguans who have emigrated to the United States have mainly settled in Miami – according to US Census data, only 12 percent have settled in Los Angeles, where they account for just 4 percent of Central Americans in the city, while in Miami they represent 47 percent – where contrarily to the more syncretic gangs of LA, the gang scene is dominated by highly exclusive African-American and Cuban-American gangs which do not let Nicaraguans join them (Rocha, 2006). This also explains why Nicaraguan pandillas are not as violent as maras, and by extension why El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are more violent than Nicaragua. The transnational transposition of US gang culture in the Northern three Central American countries is has had much more brutal results, most likely because it is less embedded within a local institutional context than traditional Central American pandilla culture, and therefore less rule-bound and constrained. At the same time, however, it is important to note that the mara phenomenon is not simply a foreign problem imported by deportees, but has also evolved and grown in response to domestic factors and conditions following its transposition.

To this extent, as Jenny Pearce (1998: 589) presciently pointed out, 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, this is less so at the real level of people’s everyday lives’. Even if in contrast to the numerous sensationalist accounts linking Central American gangs to high-profile criminality such as migrant trafficking, kidnapping, and international arms smuggling, it is clear from the various qualitative studies that exist that both pandillas and maras are mainly involved in small-scale, localised crime and delinquency such as petty theft and muggings,¹⁴ the extent to which such ‘prosaic’ brutality is prevalent in Central America has clearly given rise to what Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (1999) very aptly describe as ‘societies of fear’, imbued with a terror that is comparable to that of the war years of the past. Indeed, this is a point that was made very forcefully to me by Pablo Alvarez, an inhabitant of the poor Managua neighbourhood barrio Luis Fanor Hernández whom I interviewed in March 1997:

‘I’ve fought in all the wars of the last twenty years here in Nicaragua, against Somoza’s dictatorship, against the Contras, and I tell you, war is a terrible thing. You see so much horror, so much death, you become like numb, almost as if you were dead yourself... War changes you, it changes everybody – your family, your friends, your neighbours, everybody... Even the whole country change... “Never again”, that’s what everybody says, “never again, the war is over in Nicaragua, we’re at peace now”... That’s what they say, but have you seen how we live? Look at what’s happening in this country, all this delinquency, all this crime... People are scared, everybody lives barricaded in their homes because it’s so dangerous... You can get killed for almost anything – money, jewellery, your watch, but also your clothes, your shoes, or even for just looking at somebody the wrong way... It’s like this everywhere, in all the poor neighbourhoods... I tell you, this isn’t peace, it’s war; we’re living in the middle of a war again... The only difference with the past is that this war is no longer happening in the mountains [the countryside], but right here, in the city.’

From ‘peasant wars’ to ‘urban wars’

The rural nature of the Central American civil wars and revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s was by no means exceptional. The starting point of Eric Wolf’s (1969) classic exploration of the great popular revolutions of the 20th century is what he termed the ‘peasant question’, by which he meant ‘the enduring presence of large, agriculturally based populations within societies

¹⁴ Maras in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are however increasingly reported to be involved in the extortion of protection money from local businesses and the racketeering of buses and taxis as they go through the territories they control (UNODC, 20007: 64), and there have admittedly been some high profile kidnapping cases associated with maras, not least one involving the son of Salvadoran President Ricardo Maduro which ended with his murder. Generally, though, ‘gangs are ... considered to be distinct from organized criminal organizations because they typically lack the hierarchical leadership structure, capital, and manpower required to run a sophisticated criminal enterprise. Gangs are generally more horizontally organized, with lots of small subgroups and no central leadership setting strategy and enforcing discipline. Although some gangs are involved in the street-level distribution of drugs, few gangs or gang members are involved in higher-level criminal drug distribution enterprises run by drug cartels, syndicates, or other sophisticated criminal organizations’ (Ribando, 2007: 1-2).

that were confronting the challenge of change and modernization posed by the new century' (Wolf, 1999 [1969]: ix). Although the details differ in each of the six cases he outlined, Wolf (1999 [1969]: 276-9) argued that the world-wide diffusion of 'North Atlantic capitalism' was leading to processes of peasant alienation due to the general commoditisation of land, which meant that 'where previously market behaviour had been subsidiary to the existential problems of subsistence, now existence and its problems became subsidiary to marketing behaviour'. This was accompanied by an increasing monopolization of agricultural resources by the owners of large estates, and a concomitant decrease of land holdings held by the peasantry. From this perspective, 'the peasant rebellions of the twentieth century [were not] ...simple responses to local problems ...but ...parochial reactions to major social dislocations, set in motion by overwhelming societal change. The spread of the market [tore] men up by their roots, and [shook] them loose from the social relationship into which they were born' (Wolf, 1999 [1969]: 295).

Such an interpretation fits the historical experience of revolutionary violence in Central America very well, but is clearly less applicable to describing post-revolutionary brutality if seen as a form of warfare. Even if certain continuities can be traced between past peasant rebellions and present urban gang violence – Nicaraguan pandillas for example have a definite elements of militarisation to them linked to the civil war (see Rodgers, 2006a), while mareros in El Salvador have been reported as justifying their violence in terms clearly derived from the revolutionary discourse of the 1980s (Hume, 2007a) – Wolf's analysis doesn't really provide us with elements to understand the movement from the country to the city that the regional economy of violence has experienced. One obvious alternative explanation for this shift, though, is simply the very nature of the changes that have occurred in regional demography and spatial morphology. Urbanization in Nicaragua has proceeded apace during the past two decades, for example, with the country now the most urbanized in Central America as the urban population has grown by over 54 percent since 1990 compared to just 29 percent in rural areas,¹⁵ and urban settings have of course long been associated with violence. As Ferdinand Tönnies (2001 [1887]), Georg Simmel (1950 [1905]), and Louis Wirth (1938), for example, have all classically suggested, social relations in cities are weaker than in the countryside, with socially atomized urban dwellers therefore being both more prone to violence and to being violent. Such a line of thought can be said to go a long way towards explaining the changed geography of Nicaraguan violence, and accords well with the discourse describing the transformation of the Central American political economy of violence as a movement from political to social violence, insofar as the latter is often typically depicted as a form of impersonal, anomic violence, which are also terms frequently applied to both urban and gang violence.

At the same time, however, as Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) famously contended in his classic book The Urban Revolution, the urban context not just as a geographical space, but also a specific political realm. Indeed, Eric Hobsbawm (2005: 1) points out that 'whatever else a city might be, it is at the same time a place inhabited by a concentration of poor people and, in most cases, the locus of political power which affects their lives', and it is when the existence of disjuncture between the two that generally leads to the emergence of urban violence, and not the fact that cities are putatively inherently alienating spaces. In other words, urban violence and conflict are a function of the economic and political relations that exist within a city rather than anything to do with the intrinsic nature of cities. This is something that Jo Beall (2006) also implicitly highlights in a recent article on cities, terrorism, and development, where she suggests

¹⁵ Calculated on the basis of data from PNUD (2000) and the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (Nicaraguan National Statistics and Census Institute – INEC) website: <http://www.inec.gob.ni/>.

that ‘Eric Wolf’s (1969) Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century are increasingly giving way to what we might call urban wars of the twenty-first century’ (2006: 110). By establishing such a genealogy, Beall draws attention to the critical fact that just as Wolf’s analysis of the ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’ was underpinned by a ‘peasant question’, there is likely to be an analogous ‘urban question’ underlying the new ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ such as the ones that have emerged in post-conflict Central America.

In this respect, even if this ‘urban question’ has come to the fore partly because of natural demographic processes, it can also be linked to a very definite socio-economic process that Mike Davis (2004, 2006) describes very well in his recent work on the global proliferation of urban slums. Contrary to conventional explanations of the world-wide growth of slums in terms of increasing rural-urban migration connected to rapid economic expansion in cities due to intensifying globalisation, Davis contends that these new slums in fact house – so to speak – those who increasingly find themselves expelled from the formal economy. Rather than being the ‘engines of growth’ that they are widely considered to be, cities in the South are rapidly becoming ‘dumping grounds’ for those who are excluded from globalising and increasingly technological and informational production processes, with slums emerging as ‘a fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing the twenty-first century’s surplus humanity’ (Davis, 2004: 28). Davis maintains that these slums are consequently ‘volcanoes waiting to erupt’, and speculates that their explosion might lead to the emergence of ‘some new, unexpected historical subject’ bearing a ‘global emancipatory project’. The similarities with Wolf’s conception of peasant rebels as revolutionaries are evident, and Davis’ analysis can therefore be said to provide a plausible ‘urban question’ to underpin Beall’s ‘urban wars of the twenty-first’.

It is also an analysis that fits the evolution of Central American societies very well, insofar as their economies have undergone profound changes during the past two decades as a result of both regional and global transformations. Agricultural and manufacturing sectors, particularly those geared towards domestic markets, have declined dramatically in importance, and economic activity has become based on more regionally- or internationally-oriented processes of production and accumulation, such as (liberalised) export-oriented manufacturing or financial services, neither of which are very labour intensive (see Robinson, 1998, 2003; Sánchez Ancochea, 2007). Certainly, this new economic model is particularly obvious in the case of Nicaragua, which saw the contribution of traditional agricultural and mineral productive activities to its export base decline from 76% to 35% between 1990 and 2005, while non-traditional activities including in particular financial services, export-processing, and tourism all significantly increased their share during the same period (Sánchez Ancochea, 2007: 226). The country is furthermore clearly controlled by a small, elite oligarchy that looks to Miami and the US in terms of economic, cultural, and residential interests – on this question see Mayorga (2007), Rocha (2002), and Rodgers (2006b, 2008) – and which tends to have little to do with the extremely impoverished mass of the population, a situation that bears obvious similarities to the ones described by Wolf in his Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century.

At the same time, however, Wolf’s thinking was predicated on a class-based analysis, with peasant rebellions being ultimately seen as struggles over the means and relations of agrarian production. Although Davis (2004: 27) labels 21st century slum dwellers a ‘vast informal proletariat’, his overall characterization of the contemporary slum phenomenon rather undermines this categorization insofar as it postulates the unprecedented growth of slums as being the result of the disconnection of a large swathe of the economically active population from the means of urban production, which is obviously the basis upon which class is constituted. In other words, if the ‘urban wars of the 21st century’ are to be seen as corresponding to a new form

of class-based conflict, they must be about class, ‘but not as we know it’.¹⁶ Davis (2004: 28-30) recognises this to a certain extent, questioning whether ‘an informal proletariat possess[es] that most potent of Marxist talismans: “historical agency”?’ He ultimately argues that slum dwellers lack the potential to constitute a meaningful ‘class in itself’, and much less a potentially activist ‘class for itself’, but that they nevertheless bear ‘radical chains’ in ‘the Marxist sense of having little or no vested interest in the preservation of the existing mode of production’ since they ‘have been largely dispossessed of fungible labour-power’. He suggests that forms of ‘populist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity’ constitute potential expressions of this political radicalism, even going so far as to suggest that they occupy ‘a social space analogous to that of early twentieth-century socialism and anarchism’.

Although Pentecostal Christianity has made significant in-roads in Nicaragua – and Central America more generally – during the past few decades (Hallum, 1996), it has had little in the way of any visible impact in terms of large-scale collective mobilization among urban slum dwellers, as is well exemplified by the fact that its proliferation has not translated into electoral votes for Pentecostal political parties (see Coleman and Stuart, 1997: 183).¹⁷ An obvious alternative vehicle for political radicalism is the supposedly ‘prosaic’ criminal violence chronically affecting contemporary Central American cities. As Franz Fanon (1990: 54) famously observed in relation to the colonial struggle,

‘the gangster who holds up the police set on to track him down for days on end, or who dies in single combat after having killed four or five policemen, or who commits suicide in order not to give away his accomplices – these types light the way for the people, form the blueprints for action and become heroes’.

Such a vision would make the current urban brutality in Central America a continuation rather than a break with the revolutionary rural violence of the past, and constitute gangs as a vanguard form of violence. At first glance this might seem implausible; gangs can clearly be construed as corresponding to the ‘ruthless Darwinian competition’ that Davis (2004: 28) identifies as a possible dystopian option for excluded slum dwellers, whereby ‘poor people compete for the same informal scraps, ensur[ing] self-consuming communal violence as the highest form of urban involution’, rather than any form of revolutionary class action. At the same time, however, Davis’ ‘informal proletariat’ would not actually mobilise against oppression and exploitation as such, but against exclusion, insofar as they constitute a superfluous – rather than a reserve – army of labour in the new ‘de-labourised’ economy (see Rifkin, 1996). Contrarily to the rebellious peasantry that Wolf described, who were struggling over their position within a production process that they were a necessary part of, the struggle of today’s slum dwellers is not so much over their role within the system as their non-position within it.¹⁸

¹⁶ With apologies to Mr. Spock (of Star Trek).

¹⁷ Populist Islam is obviously not a factor in Central America.

¹⁸ Wolf’s ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’ were thus generally articulated around attempts to achieve more equitable distributions of the means of production that did not necessarily challenge the system as a whole. Certainly, the difficulties the Nicaraguan revolutionary regime encountered attempting to collectivize the countryside’s newly tenured peasantry following its land redistribution programme of the early 1980s is a testament to the fact that peasants rebels rarely seek to challenge the underlying basis of an existing social order, but rather seek to achieve a certain uniform self-sufficiency. Hence Karl Marx’s famous comment in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis

Seen from this perspective, gangs much more plausibly constitute a potential vanguard form of social mobilisation of the new ‘informal proletariat’, certainly in Nicaragua where they were localised forms of resistance against social exclusion during the 1990s. Although pandillas in Nicaragua unquestionably had extremely deleterious effects, anarchically transforming large swathes of cities into quasi-war zones, there was a clear difference in the social experience of gang violence depending on one’s sociological standpoint. From a more localised perspective, pandillas emerged as socially constitutive institutions in slums and poor neighbourhoods. Gang warfare, for example, was clearly a constitutive process for pandilleros, playing a key role in the construction of the individual gang member’s self-identity and contributing to the constitution of the gang-group. But it was also about a broader form of social structuration that related to the local neighbourhood community. Gang wars followed set patterns: the first battle typically involved fighting with fists and stones, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks and stones, then to knives and broken bottles, and eventually to mortars, guns, and AK-47s. Although the rate of escalation varied, its sequence never did – i.e. gangs did not begin their wars immediately with firearms. The fixed nature of gang warfare constituted a mechanism for restraining both the intensity and scope of violence – escalation is a process in which each stage calls for the application of greater but definite force of action, meaning that it is always under actors’ control – and also provided local neighbourhood inhabitants with an ‘early warning system’ that offered a means of circumscribing the ‘all-pervading unpredictability’ of violence (Arendt, 1969: 5).

The negative consequences that gang wars could have for local populations were mainly indirect. The threat stemmed from other pandillas, whom the local gang engaged with in a prescribed manner. In a wider context of chronic violence and insecurity, this was very much recognized as something positive by local neighbourhood populations, even if it was not always effective. As an informant in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández called 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... Without them, things would be much worse for us.’

In many ways, however, gangs were not just the functional purveyors of a certain sense of security, but also provided their local neighbourhood communities with a medium for enacting an otherwise absent form of collective identity. There existed a strong sense of local association and empathy with pandillas in Nicaragua during the 1990s, thus constituting them as the principal anchor point for a notion of community in a wider context of extreme social exclusion. Admittedly, this was limited, but as Charles Taylor (2002: 106) has underlined, the primary measure of any collective order is not its magnitude, but rather the degree to which it affects ‘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’ (for further details, see Rodgers, 2006a, 2007b).

In other words, then, gangs, at least in their initially moment of emergence, institutionally organized and regulated local collective life in the slums and poor neighbourhoods of Nicaraguan cities, providing micro-regimes of order as well as communal forms of belonging to definite,

Napoleon (2004 [1852]: 239) that the peasantry ‘is formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes’.

albeit bounded, collective entities, in a wider context of chronic insecurity and exclusion. The evidence regarding maras in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras is sketchier, but research has underlined these as being similarly associated with processes of local solidarity and vigilante protection, at least initially (see ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2001, 2004; Santacruz Giralt and Concha Eastman, 2001).¹⁹ To this extent, gangs in Central America can plausibly be said to have corresponded during the 1990s to vanguard forms of ‘insurgent citizenship’ (Holston, 1999: 158), attempting to violently construct new spaces for ‘possible alternative futures’ within a context of wider urban exclusion. This makes them conceptually comparable to the peasant movements studied by Wolf, insofar as the reasons for the emergence of such a form of ‘insurgent citizenship’ are to be found in the broader structural processes, just as those of the revolutionary peasant movements were grounded in wider processes of traumatic social change due to processes of economic modernization. A critical difference between the peasantry described by Wolf and Davis’ new urban ‘informal proletariat’, however, is that the former mattered to the agrarian elite that exploited them, insofar as they were the source of their economic power through labour exploitation. The new ‘informal proletariat’ has no such value to the contemporary transnational ruling elites in Central America, and this has led to an intensification of conflict in the region, and a concomitant transformation in the nature of the gangs.

The intensification of conflict in contemporary Central America

Although the maras and pandillas that have come to prominence in the post-conflict Central American settings are undoubtedly an important source of contemporary regional brutality, there has also been a significant escalation in violence during the past decade as a result of other processes. One of these is directly associable with the new urban nature of the regional panorama of violence, namely the widespread purposeful processes of spatial segregation that have occurred in Central American cities – and Latin America more generally (see Caldeira, 2000; Jones and Ward, 2004) – as a result of the proliferation of gated communities, closed condominiums, and the neglect of public spaces. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Managua, where spatial segregation has amounted to a veritable ‘disembedding’ of the city (see Rodgers, 2004). Instead of the classic gated community model of ‘splintering urbanism’ (Graham and Marvin, 2001) that has emerged in Guatemala or El Salvador, for example, Managua was transformed between 1997 and 2002 through the constitution of a ‘fortified network’ by means of the selective and purposeful construction of high speed roads connecting the spaces of the elite within the city: their homes, offices, clubs, bars, restaurants, shopping malls, and, of course, the international airport with its direct flights to Miami. The poor are excluded from these locations by private security, but also from the connecting roads, which are cruised at breakneck speeds by expensive 4x4 cars, and have no traffic lights but only roundabouts, meaning that those in cars avoid having to stop – and risk being carjacked – but those on foot risk their lives whenever they try to cross a road. In other words, a whole ‘layer’ of the city’s urban fabric was ‘ripped out’ of the metropolis for the exclusive use of the elite, thereby profoundly altering the cityscape and the relations between social groups within it.

I have characterised this process as a ‘revolt of the elites’ – to use Christopher Lasch’s (1995) famous expression – insofar as most of the urban transformation undergone by Managua

¹⁹ Although it should be noted that most of this research has also highlighted that maras are generally much more ambiguous social phenomena than pandillas, and are more frequently violent and predatory against their local communities.

was sponsored either by unregulated private initiative or else directly by the elite-captured Nicaraguan state, partly in response to the utopian attempts of the Sandinista revolution to foster more egalitarian forms of social organisation (see Rodgers, 2004, 2008). This ‘revolt’ has been furthermore supported by new forms of urban governance that involve regular Police patrolling in rich areas of the city and on the new roads, on the one hand, and unpredictably and violently patrolling slums and poor neighbourhoods on the other, in order to precipitate localised conditions of terror and symbolically demonstrate the arbitrary power of the elite-captured state (see Rodgers, 2006b). The socio-spatial separation of Nicaraguan society into a small, transnational elite living in the disembedded Managua, and those living in the slums and poor neighbourhoods that overwhelmingly make up the rest of the country, is thus enforced by means of both changing the built environment and the differentiated territorial regulation of the city. The net result has been that urban violence is now mainly restricted to the city’s slums and poor neighbourhoods,²⁰ to the extent that the government actually promotes Nicaragua as ‘the safest country in Latin America’,²¹ as the richer urban areas – those that belong to the ‘disembedded’ Managua – as well as tourist destinations such as Granada or San Juan del Sur are now safe and visibly free of violence.

But while this twin process of ‘disembedding’ and changed urban governance may have made 21st century Managua a safe – indeed, almost idyllic – place of residence for the rich (see Babb, 2004), from the broader perspective of the city as a whole, it can be construed as a violent act of ‘urbicide’, to use the term that Stephen Graham (2003: 63) – following Marshall Berman (1996) – applies to ‘the deliberate wrecking or killing of the city’. Although in the wake of the global terrorist acts of 9/11, 11/3, and 7/7, the concept of urbicide has been mainly used in relation to acts of terrorist violence, it was originally coined to describe ‘a deliberate attempt to deprive people of the benefits of urban life’ through processes of ‘pernicious urban planning, evictions, involuntary relocation and the deliberate destruction of urban infrastructures for political purposes’ (Beall, 2006: 111), all of which have been features of the urban reorganisation of Managua during the past decade. Such an analytical framework bears thinking about because, as Martin Shaw (2004) has pointed out, urbicide is a process that can be associated with genocide. Although genocide is defined in a restricted manner in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as relating to any act ‘committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group’,²² it can nevertheless plausibly be used to refer to the destruction of any bounded social group, and is thus conceivably applicable to the elite-led process of urban disembedding in Managua that is not only reinforcing the economic exclusion of the city’s poor, but in fact actively contributing to their extinction from a Davisian perspective, insofar as those living in the city’s slums and poor neighbourhoods are excluded from the means of production and reproduction, and left to survive as best they can by viciously fighting each other over ‘informal scraps’ (Davis, 2004: 28).

Obviously, any case for genocide would have to be made on the basis of negligence by the elites of their responsibilities that come by virtue of being embedded in a collective urban space constituted through a plurality of people (see Harvey, 2003), rather than any explicit campaign of intentional mass extermination against the poor, but the principle remains. At the

²⁰ Indeed, a recent United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report has noted that the overwhelming majority of the violence in contemporary Central America more generally is clearly poor on poor brutality (see UNODC, 2007).

²¹ See for example President Bolaños’ speech to the 29th Caribbean Basin Initiative Conference, 5 December 2005, http://www.presidencia.gob.ni/presidencia/files_index/presidente/Discursos/2005/Diciembre/29%20NA%20CONFERENCE%20MIAMI,%20DE%20LA%20CUENCA%20DEL%20CARIBE%20CCAA-06dic.htm.

²² See <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/genocide.htm>.

same time, however, when viewed from the standpoint that gangs potentially constitute a vanguard of the poor in the new ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’, it is by no means evident that such a campaign is not happening, as a veritable regional ‘war on gangs’ has been waged by Central American governments during the past 5 years. The opening salvo of this campaign was El Salvador’s adoption of a ‘Mano Dura’ (‘Iron Fist’) policy promulgated by the Salvadoran President Ricardo Maduro in July 2003, which advocated the immediate imprisonment of gang member simply for having gang-related tattoos or flashing gang signs in public, something that became punishable with 2 to 5 years in jail, and applicable to gang members from the age of 12 onwards. Between July 2003 and August 2004, 20,000 pandilleros were arrested, although 95 percent were eventually released without charge when the Mano Dura law was declared unconstitutional by the Salvadoran Supreme Court for violating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). A new ‘Mano Super Dura’ package of anti-gang reforms was rapidly pushed through, which respected the provisions of the UNCRC but stiffened the penalties for gang membership to up to 5 years in prison for ordinary gang members, and 9 years for gang leaders (Aguilar, 2006). Although under the new law the Police needs to have some proof of active delinquent behaviour in order to arrest an individual, El Salvador’s carceral population has doubled over the past five years, from 6,000 to 12,000 prisoners, 40 percent of which are gang members (Hume, 2007b).

Honduras implemented a comparable policy called ‘Cero Tolerancia’ (‘Zero Tolerance’) almost simultaneously in August 2003, which was also partly inspired by Rudy Giuliani’s (in)famous eponymous policy in New York. Among the measures that this package promoted was the reform of the penal code and the adoption of legislation that established a maximum 12-year prison sentence for gang membership, a penalty which was later stiffened to 30 years, as well as provisions for better collaboration between the Police and the Honduran army in urban patrolling. Guatemala likewise adopted its ‘Plan Escoba’ (‘Operation Broom sweep’) in January 2004, which although not as draconian as the Salvadoran Mano Dura and the Honduran Cero Tolerancia still contained new provisions allowing minors to be treated as adults, and the deployment of four thousand reserve army troops in troubled neighbourhoods in Guatemala City. Nicaragua similarly regularly implemented a range of anti-gang initiatives from 1999 onwards, although these were of a significantly ‘softer’ nature, partly because of the less violent nature of the pandillas compared to the maras.²³ Although these crackdowns have been very popular with the general public in all the Central American countries, they have also been vigorously opposed by human rights groups who are concerned with the potential abuse of gang suspects. More ominously, organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have presented evidence – corroborated by the US State Department in 2005 – of the existence of paramilitary death squads in Honduras and El Salvador that are deliberately targeting gang members, and often youth more generally, moreover in collusion with state authorities (see Faux, 2006).

At a more regional level, Central American states have also begun to engage in unprecedented forms of cooperation in order to deal with gangs, which a September 2003 regional summit of heads of state declared to be ‘a destabilising menace, more immediate than any conventional war or guerrilla’. In January 2004, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and

²³ At the same time, it is important to note that although the Nicaraguan Police has gained a reputation for focusing on ‘preventative’ rather than ‘repressive’ anti-gang policies, the evidence of its practices on the ground tends to belie this (see Rocha, 2007c), even if overall the response to gangs has not been as violent as in other Central American countries, partly because of the less violent nature of the pandillas compared to the maras.

Nicaragua agreed to lift legal barriers to the cross-country prosecution of gang members, whatever their nationality, while in March 2005, Presidents Tony Saca of El Salvador and Oscar Berger of Guatemala agreed to set up a joint security force to patrol gang activity along their common border. The Central American states have also sought to involve the US, which was initially resistant to participate in anti-gang initiatives until June 2004, when the Honduran minister of Security, Oscar Alvarez, rather ludicrously claimed that a suspected Saudi member of Al Qaeda, Yafar Al-Taya, had arrived in Salvador in order to meet with gang leaders. Although clearly a completely unfounded assertion, by December 2004, the FBI had created a special task force focusing on Central American gangs, and in February 2005 announced the creation of a liaison office in San Salvador to coordinate regional information-sharing and anti-gang efforts. Following a new (and no less ludicrous) claim by Oscar Alvarez to have thwarted a Colombian FARC-mara plot to kill President Ricardo Maduro in April 2005, the region's military leaders formally called on the US Southern Command for assistance in the creation of a multinational force to tackle organized crime and youth gangs, although this has yet to be implemented.

While it has been widely reported that the different anti-gang initiatives seemed to initially reduce crime quite significantly, there evidence suggests that this was a temporary state of affairs, if ever true. There are increasing numbers of report that the widespread repression of gangs is leading to their becoming more organized and more violent (Aguilar and Miranda, 2006: 42). This is something that was well illustrated by the tit-for-tat violence that certain maras engaged in with the Honduran government following the implementation of Mano Dura. On 30 August 2003, one month after the promulgation of the new anti-gang legislation, gang members attacked a bus in the Northern city of San Pedro Sula in broad daylight, killing 14, and leaving 18 wounded, as well as a note to President Ricardo Maduro ordering him to withdraw the law. The following month, in the town of Puerto Cortes, a young woman's head was found in a plastic bad with a note addressed to President Maduro saying that this was a response to the extrajudicial assassination of a gang member by the Police. Over the course of the following year, more than 10 decapitated corpses were left in various cities with messages from gang members to the Honduras president, each time in response to a putative extrajudicial killing, and on 23 December 2004, in Chamalecon, gang members again attacked a bus and killed 28, once again leaving a message claiming revenge for the May 2004 death of 105 gang members in a prison following a suspect fire. Similarly gruesome events have been reported in El Salvador and Guatemala.

At the same time, however, the 'war on gang' has also reportedly led to maras becoming less conspicuous. Gang members in El Salvador have begun to use less obvious signs and symbols, for example, including in particular getting rid of tattoos and no longer keep their hair in the short-trimmed rapado style, in order to avoid being picked up by the Police, and they have also become more mobile, and the emigration of maras into Southern Mexico is also widely attributed to the repression (Aguilar and Miranda, 2006: 49). This retreat can be interpreted as reflecting the fact that the maras are losing ground vis-à-vis the dominant authority of Central American states, but at the same time, it is also increasingly reported that maras are professionalizing and becoming more involved with organised crime (see Aguilar, 2006). Despite the well-known association between increased violence and organised crime (see van Schendel and Abraham, 2005), this evolution suggests that gangs are losing the fight against exclusion as vanguard representatives of the urban poor, however, as by the evolutionary trajectory of Nicaraguan pandillas between the mid 1990s and the early 2000s dramatically highlights. From socially embedded institutions that displayed solidarity with their local communities, these became intensely predatory and parochial. Rather than protecting and federating local neighbourhood inhabitants, gangs now acted exclusively to ensure the proper functioning of local

drug economies in the interests of their members and associated local dealers – who were more often than not ex-gang members – through the imposition of localised regimes of terror based on fear, threats, and widespread acts of arbitrary violence (Rodgers, 2006a, 2007a, 2007b).

This particular evolution was clearly linked to the increasing difficulties of life in poor urban Nicaraguan slums, where the extreme poverty and lack of economic opportunities resulting from the ever-increasing socio-spatial exclusion and the country's new economic order made the gang's previous ethos of social solidarity with the local neighbourhood community unsustainable. As a gang member in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández called Kalia put it:

‘What the fuck do you do when you don't have any food and there's no work? You have to find some other way to look out for yourself, that's what! That's where the drugs come in, it's the only thing that's worthwhile doing here in the barrio. It's good money, but there isn't enough for everybody, so it doesn't make sense to try to help everybody, because that way nobody gets enough. You can't eat people's love and gratitude, you know, so you have to first make sure that you have something, and then perhaps give a bit to your family and friends, if there's anything left, but nobody else. That's why the pandilla doesn't try to do things for the barrio anymore, because it doesn't work. People are treacherous, so you have to be careful and look out for yourself.’

From the perspective of most local neighbourhood inhabitants, this changed ethos meant that their situation worsened dramatically, as many individuals living in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández told me during visits in 2002 and 2003. The gang effectively became the vehicle for the emergence of a localised and limited ‘narco-bourgeoisie’ that sought to protect its ‘primitive accumulation’ through the imposition of a generalised regime of terror over those who did not benefit (Rodgers, 2007a).

At the same time, however during a field trip in 2007, it became evident that the gang had again changed substantially, and was no longer embedded within the neighbourhood context in the same way the pandilla had been in both 1996-97 and even 2002-03. The new locally dominant group was now made up of young men from several different neighbourhoods whose common point was their involvement in drug trafficking. The group displayed a clear leadership structure, as well as a high degree of professionalism that had not been the case of the previous barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang avatars. To this extent, it was actually closer to being an organised crime group than a gang, something that was well reflected in the widespread use in the neighbourhood of the term ‘cartelito’ (‘little cartel’) to describe it.²⁴ Seen in the light of this particular evolutionary trajectory, Central American gangs can be said to be increasingly fulfilling Davis' (2004: 28) dystopian prediction that ‘ruthless Darwinian competition’ and ‘self-consuming communal violence’ will emerge in excluded slums and poor neighbourhoods if their impoverished inhabitants were unable to challenge their marginalisation. When considered in relation to the idea that contemporary Central American violence can be characterised as ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ that are the successor conflicts of Wolf's ‘peasant wars of the

²⁴ The rise of a more professional criminal organisation can be said to have left no sociological ‘space’ for a violent youth gang that might have hindered or challenged their activities. Although there were delinquent youth in the barrio who might have formed a more ‘classic’ pandilla, these tended to only congregate in groups of one or two, and engaged in petty criminality mainly on a sporadic basis in order to sustain their regularly drinking and drug habits.

twentieth century’, this implies that the Central American poor have in fact lost the war, and are now embroiled in forms of internecine civil conflict that can perhaps most accurately be termed ‘slum wars of the twenty-first century’, insofar as they remain contained within the slums and don’t spill much into other areas of cities.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the implications of an alternative interpretation of the changed landscape of violence in contemporary Central America. This has been widely portrayed in terms of an evolution in the regional political economy of brutality, namely from political to social violence. I have proposed instead that these changes might be better visualized from the perspective of the geographical transition from the country to the city. I characterized this as a movement from ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’ (Wolf, 1969) to ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ (Beall, 2006), and explored the way in which various social, economic, political, and spatial processes shaping contemporary Central America in turn shape the nature of conflict in the form of a contemporary ‘urban question’, analogous to Wolf’s original ‘peasant question’. Even if new forms of urban brutality in contemporary Central America seem markedly different to the revolutionary rural violence of the past that aimed at changing unequal economic systems, their underlying structural dynamics as resistance to exclusion suggest that they can in fact be seen as a continuation of previous forms of (class) conflict in a new setting. I then examined how the new ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ have involved an intensification of violence, illustrating this in relation to processes of socio-spatial segregation affecting contemporary Central American cities, the ‘war on gangs’ being waged by Central American states, as well as a partly concomitant ‘involutionary’ evolutionary trajectory of the gangs that can be conceived as constituting the vanguard of the impoverished masses in their struggle against a dominating and excluding transnational elite class (see Robinson, 2003).

These factors have combined to promote an increasingly poor-on-poor manifestation of violence in Central America, which when considered in relation to the notion that contemporary Central American brutality can be characterised as ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’, would seem to imply that the Central American slum-dwellers have in fact lost the war, with most of the region’s current violence best characterised as a form of internecine civil conflict for survival between the poor inhabitants of what Davis calls the ‘planet of slums’. These can therefore most accurately be termed ‘slum wars of the twenty-first century’, insofar as they tend to be geographically restricted to such areas. The obvious question such an analysis raises is where do we go from here, and in this respect, I have little in the way of an answer to offer, and even less of an optimistic one. If anything, the dystopian evolution of gangs in Central America towards more predatory and individualistic social forms has to be literally seen as a terrible harbinger of things to come for the region, insofar as youth ‘have a stronger instinct for survival than adults[,] ...no doubt ...because [they] adapt better and faster to exceptional circumstances’, as the Lebanese film-maker Ziad Doueiri (1998) – maker of the extremely powerful film West Beyrouth (1998) – has pointed out. Seen in this light, what the defeat of gangs as the vanguard of the urban poor in the post-conflict Central American ‘urban wars of the twenty-first century’ ultimately arguably signifies is not only the end of the revolutionary dreams historically associated with the region, but also the practical consolidation of the so-called ‘era of neo-liberalism’.

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