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Gangs and the Origins of a Culture of Violence in El Salvador

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Abstract

Gang violence in El Salvador has resulted in conditions that have perpetuated an environment of terror and culture of violence. This paper aims to understand the emergence of transnational gangs in El Salvador and the US involvement in this process. The article is divided into the following subtitles; 1980s civil war and the repercussions of US involvement, Salvadorans migration to the US and reverse migration (with a focus on Los Angeles and San Salvador), and US exportation of heavy-handed policies to El Salvador's institutionalized use of political violence. The paper concludes that US involvement in El Salvador created a foundation for a culture of violence and through interlinked factors US influence and actions instigated circumstances for gang proliferation in El Salvador.

Keywords: El Salvador, Latin America, Gangs, Migration, Culture of Violence, Northern Triangle, US Politics

The Central American University's Institute of Public Opinion (IUODOP) conducted two studies in 1998 and 2003, in which Salvadoran participants were presented with scenarios and questioned on whether the scenarios justified or condoned a violent response. The survey results revealed extremely high levels of reception towards violence and aggressive attitudes among the Salvadoran people.¹ Today El Salvador, part of Central America's Triangle of Death, is engulfed in gang warfare and drug trafficking.² This has created massive political instability, prevented economic growth, and has resulted in high homicide rates — all of these have in turn perpetuated an environment of terror and embedded cultural violence.³ El Salvador is currently known as the murder capital of the world - primarily due to gang violence and the multifaceted factors contributing to the violence that continues to plague the country today, the effects of which have been tragic on the Salvadoran society.⁴

The United States (US) government has maintained interest in El Salvador and has been a large supporter of the regime since the country's civil war in the 1980s. Today, the US maintains political and security interests in El Salvador, and in an attempt to stabilize the region, it is one of the largest aid donors.⁵ Despite the efforts of the US government to bring prosperity to El Salvador, critics have

¹ Joaquin Chávez. "An anatomy of violence in El Salvador." *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. 37, no. 6 (2004), 31.

² Triangle of Death is a term used to describe the most violent region of the world, the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

³ AFP. "El Salvador becomes world's most deadly country outside a war zone." *The Telegraph*, January 5, 2016.

⁴ "The World's Most Dangerous Cities." *The Economist* (March 31, 2017).

⁵ Clare Ribando Seelke. "El Salvador: Background and US Relations." *Current Politics and Economics of South and Central America*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2014), 537.

theorized that US involvement in the country created the gang problem in the first place and contributed to the regime's aggressive policies. This paper will begin with an overview of gangs in El Salvador and an overview of the current historiography on El Salvador's history. In order to understand the situation and US involvement in this process, the analysis will be divided into the following subtitles: 1980s civil war and the repercussions of US involvement, El Salvadoran's migration to the US and reverse migration (with a focus on Los Angeles and San Salvador), and US exportation of heavy-handed policies to El Salvador's institutionalized use of political violence.

Overview

In Central America, gangs are referred to as "*mara*" and "*pandilla*," both slang words that are used interchangeably for "youth gang." While some studies use the words interchangeably, others differentiate between the two by defining *pandillas* as localized groups that have formally existed in the region and *maras* as a more contemporary occurrence that have transnational roots.⁶ However, the term is strongly associated with the Mara Salvatrucha and Dieciocho gangs, which are commonly referred to as adult "street gangs" that had evolved from these "youth gangs." Within El Salvador, the most prominent gangs are the Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13, and Mara 18/Barro18/M-18, also known as Eighteenth Street Gang. Today these are locally known as *maras*, developed from youth street gangs to transnational groups.⁷ According to collected sources, both gangs comprise more than 87% of the gang membership in El Salvador and have a large presence in many neighbourhoods.⁸

⁶ Seelke, "Gangs in Central America," 74.

⁷ José Miguel Cruz, "Central American Maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets," *Global Crime*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2010), 380

⁸ José Miguel Cruz, "Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence," In *Global Gangs Workshop, Centre on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding, Geneva*. (2009), 1.

These gangs are not a new phenomenon in El Salvador; the origins of Salvadoran youth gangs can be traced back to the 1950s, among privileged teenage schoolboys who would partake in rivalries and erratic street fights.⁹ Additionally, as a result of the urbanization and industrialization that El Salvador began experiencing in the 1950s, evidence suggests that gangs grew in urban centers in the 1960s, especially with the weakening of public institutions, increased political turbulence, and the growing elite of coffee plantation owners that neglected the agrarian poor.¹⁰ According to De Castro, gangs did not have political aims, and they exhibited little interest in altering the state structure, which is in contrast to the young guerrillas of the 1960s-1980s who aspired for political power. Instead, the gangs' objectives were short-term in the form of winning esteem and respect through committing violence against persons and private property, consuming soft drugs, and defending their 'turf' from other gangs. Despite the criminal nature of their actions, some of these groups had close relationships with their communities and acted as neighborhood overseers.¹¹ Today the gangs have developed from being turf-based small gangs who hung out in slums and city squares, to an association of cliques or networks who identify under the same franchise of either MS-13 or 18th Street, controlling many areas in El Salvador and organizing larger criminal activities. Nevertheless, whether young people in El Salvador are involved with gangs or not, they tend to face high levels of violence. According to the El Salvadoran Forensic Institute, 41% of murders in 2006 were perpetrated against young people aged 10 to 24 years old.¹² This has largely become a cultural issue and violence has permeated many aspects of life.

⁹ Manuel Vasquez, "Saving souls transnationally: Pentecostalism and gangs in El Salvador and the United States," *Christianity, Social Change, and Globalization in the America's* (2003), 7.

¹⁰ Cruz, "Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence," 2.

¹¹ Rafael Fernández De Castro, "Demystifying the maras." *Americas Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2007), 70-71.

¹² Cruz, "Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence," 7-13.

There is no unanimous consensus amongst experts on the exact causes and logic of gang proliferation. The academic debate is split regarding whether gangs in Central America are locally rooted or if they have proliferated due to migration and transnational crime. Some scholars, like Anika Oettler and Nazih Richani argue that gangs in Central America have taken over the role of the state and that they provide order to weak institutional societies.¹³ This is especially prevalent in poor neighbourhoods in which gangs can attract members easily due to their cohesiveness, strong collective identity, and offering the chance for economic improvement, albeit through illegal means. In this sense, there is a focus on the root causes of gang proliferation, such as unemployment, incarceration, relocation, and communal fragmentation.¹⁴ Scholars have also concentrated on the evolution of gangs over time. Some scholars stress the role of local conditions that lead to “gang institutionalization,” while other scholars focus on the contribution of communication technologies and the role of globalization.¹⁵ A prominent scholar on gangs in Central America, Miguel Cruz, focuses on “gang institutionalization” by highlighting the contact that occurs between local conditions and transnational progressions (migration, diffused cultural practices). Cruz asserts that marginalisation and law enforcement policies are important in understanding the emergence of street gangs in the United States and Central America, especially in explaining the transnational networks and influential local protection rackets. However, in his argument, the circular migration of Salvadorans to the US is not sufficient enough to explain the growing transnationalism of gangs, as other Latin American states had mass migration but have different results than El Salvador. This means that El Salvador is a unique case due to the divergent results and the current severity of its gang situation. Hence, Cruz focuses on a

¹³ Nazih Richani, “State capacity in postconflict settings: Explaining criminal violence in El Salvador and Guatemala.” *Civil Wars*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2010), 431-455.

¹⁴ Anika Oettler, “The Central American fear of youth.” *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, vol 5, no. 2 (2011), 263.

¹⁵ Cruz, “Central American maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets,” 380-388.

spectrum of factors: marginalization, migration, cross-culturalization, and the politics of violence.¹⁶

Although many studies mention the migration of Salvadorans as one of the interrelated and possible causes of gang proliferation, little thought is given to US policies that uprooted this gang proliferation. Additionally, little focus is paid to the history of US involvement in El Salvador dating back to the 1980-1992 civil war or current foreign policies that have played a role in the creation of a culture of violence. Hence, this paper will link much of the research that has been done on gangs by connecting the US role in the proliferation and perseverance of gangs in El Salvador. In order to gather a strong understanding of how the following research relates to each other, a definition of transnationalism, multiple marginality, and legal violence is needed. Ian Tyrell defines transnationalism as “the movement of peoples, ideas, technologies, and institutions across national boundaries’.¹⁷ It is important to differentiate between transnationalism from above and transnationalism from below, the relationship between nations and beyond nations. According to James Diego Vigil, multiple marginality “outlines several important components in the relationship between race/ethnicity and gang membership, including macrohistorical and macrostructural forces, ecological and economic stressors, elements of social control, and street socialization.”¹⁸ Furthermore, legal violence is a sort of structural violence that is embedded and sanctioned within laws, that intend to protect rights or regulate behavior for the general good, yet concurrently increases practices that hurt certain social groups.¹⁹

¹⁶ Cruz, “Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence,” 1-9.

¹⁷ Ian Tyrell, “Ian Tyrell Responds.” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 96, no. 4 (1991), 1068, 69, 70, 71, 72.

¹⁸ Adrienne Freng and Esbensen Finn Aage, “Race and gang affiliation: An examination of multiple marginality,” *Justice Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2007), 604, 605.

¹⁹ Cecilia Menjívar and Leisy Abrego, “Legal Violence: Immigration Law and the Lives of Central American Immigrants1,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 117, no. 5 (2012), 1387.

Civil War

It is important to understand the historical and cultural violence in El Salvador. The civil war acted as a watershed moment in El Salvador's history and helped establish a culture of violence as a viable solution for social and political conflicts. Economic disparities sparked a civil war that lasted from 1979 until 1992. The US played an active role in supporting the Salvadoran government during the civil war in its fight against pro-communist insurgents, which were viewed by the US government as part of a larger communist network. The US provided an enormous amount of financial support (sending \$1.5 million per day) and armed and trained government Armed Forces. For example, the US established the Army School of the Americas, where Salvadoran military officials were trained in anti-communist counter-insurgency efforts.²⁰ US support developed into an amplified repression against communist guerrillas, its sympathizers and thousands of innocent civilians. The US continued to fund the regime with military resources despite evidence that military aid was bypassing the government and ended up in the hands of corrupt members of the armed forces and paramilitary groups who had committed terror tactics, such as death squad operations, to pillage the countryside and massacre whole villages.²¹ This 12-year conflict resulted in 70,000 deaths, 500,000 refugees and tens of thousands of citizens disappeared and wounded.²² In the post-war era, the U.S. endorsed a neoliberal economic reconstruction plan in El Salvador, which resulted in increased foreign investment, privatization of public infrastructure and lack of investment in public programs.²³

²⁰ Mary Kathleen Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa? Deportation and the Making of Home in the US-El Salvador Transnatio” PhD. Dissertation. (2014): 103.

²¹ Stephen Macekura, “For Fear of Persecution: Displaced Salvadorans and US Refugee Policy in the 1980s.” *Journal of Policy History*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2011), 300-363.

²² Chávez, “An anatomy of violence in El Salvador,” 33.

²³ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?”, 49.

Issues that led to the war were largely ignored, while wounds and frustration would remain further exacerbated by the neoliberal policies that would push many into poverty. Neoliberal policies failed to work; they ignored the fundamental aspects of peace building by pushing aside national reconciliation and creating little opportunity for poverty alleviation. The war destroyed the social makeup, while also implementing characteristics of violence in everyday life, the use of terror and aggression to deal with social conflict and the lack of value for human wellbeing. In this context, youth gangs reproduced their social frustrations through violence that was internalized during the war.²⁴ According to Miguel Cruz, many Salvadorans faced socioeconomic discrimination that induced further forms of marginalization.²⁵

Another fundamental factor in the increased use of violence is the proliferation of firearms and explosives in civilian hands that were left behind by the war. According to Joaquin Chavez, this is an emergence of a “culture of arms” in which dominant cultural attitudes favour the ownership and the usage of firearms. Incidences of violent crimes involving firearms are very high due to the increased use of both registered and illegal weapons; the number of deaths related to gun use today is greater than in the post-war period.²⁶ This is part of the accessibility thesis that argues that the extensive accessibility of arms and light weapons point to an amplified use of violence.²⁷

For Chavez, then, the US is in large part to blame for this, as many American weapons entered the market during the civil war and today continue to be used in criminal activities.²⁸ According to a Periodic Brief prepared for the Small Arms Survey in El Salvador, the large

²⁴ Vasquez,” “Saving souls transnationally” 4.

²⁵ Cruz, “Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence,” 7-8.

²⁶ Chávez, “An anatomy of violence in El Salvador,” 37-38.

²⁷ Jayantha Dhanapala, “Multilateral cooperation on small arms and light weapons: From crisis to collective response,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 9 (2002), 164-165.

²⁸ Chávez, “An anatomy of violence in El Salvador,” 37.

transfers of small arms and light weapons that the US government made to the Salvadoran military during the civil war are now commonly used and reported in criminal activities.²⁹ According to the study, the older supply of weapons presents enough substantial harm even without taking into consideration the entry of post-civil war legal and illegal weaponry.³⁰ With increasing instances of armed violence and a post-war state marked by a corrupt police force and an unreliable judicial system, many people buy weapons for the purpose of protection. The war left a divided and traumatized society with many internally displaced, increasing disintegration of major cities, and an environment that allowed gangs to thrive in the face of economic marginalization, social exclusion, and violence.³¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that gangs increased after the civil war, the conditions and aftermath of which would set in stone a culture of violence; a traumatized society, an increased level of poverty and use of violence in all areas of life, as well as ready access to weapons.

Migration:

Reception

On the onset of the civil war, following massive migration and displacement, many El Salvadorans would attempt to seek refuge in the United States. At this time, the 1980 Refugee Act removed nationality as a criterion for refugee status and replaced it with a case-by-case basis in which refugees would be judged individually instead of as a group.³² Refugee policy was extremely politicized because it became easier to ignore large groups fleeing war or persecution, and because the US supported the right-wing government of El Salvador, it systematically rejected refugee standing, refugee exemption, and political asylum to Salvadorans escaping the war. This dictated the refugee policy towards Salvadorans at the time, and refugee status

²⁹ William Godnick, Erick Haven, and Ivonne Martinez-Henriquez. "SAND (Program on Security and Development) Brief: El Salvador." *Periodic Brief prepared for the Small Arms Survey* (March 2000), 1-3.

³⁰ Godnick, Haven, and Martinez-Henriquez. "SAND," 3.

³¹ Cruz, "Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence," 6.

³² Macekura, "For Fear of Persecution," 359.

was rejected with the vague and biased interpretation of “fear of persecution” clause. Thousands of displaced Salvadorans were increasingly detained and deported at the border and despite their well-founded fears, labeled as economic refugees.³³ Between 1983 and 1990, the US approved asylum for only 2.6% of the applications submitted by Salvadorans.³⁴ The legal consequences of the Refugee Act put forward an exclusionary refugee policy; the Cold War mentality was clearly evident in granting and favoring refugee status to citizens fleeing communist regimes. More than 90% of the 3 million refugees granted admittance into the US between the years 1946 and 1994 had fled communist regimes (for example, from Poland, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Romania and etc).³⁵ Within this environment, it is evident at that time that the US functioned in a political climate that was unfriendly and unreceptive to Salvadorans, as there existed strong anti-immigration and anti-refugee rhetoric as a whole.³⁶ Within the media and politics there existed a strong perception of Salvadoran refugees as self-interested economic migrants, and prevalent xenophobia rhetoric questioned their cultural integration.³⁷ As Salvadorans were in search of a haven, many were rendered to a precarious legal position throughout the entire decade and would face many issues forging their new lives in the United States.

Life and uncertainty

For Salvadorans, life in the US was marked by symbolic and structural violence that produced social suffering and long-term repercussions for incorporation into society. These struggles resulted from the fear of deportation; the exploitation of their work and rights; as well as their exclusion from socioeconomic resources that were vital for their mobility and incorporation into society. Immigrants are accountable to the law but are also excluded from

³³ Macekura, “For Fear of Persecution,” 357- 76.

³⁴ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 107-08.

³⁵ John Povwell, *Encyclopedia of North American Immigration*, New York, NY: Facts on File, Inc., (2005), 64.

³⁶ Povwell, *Encyclopedia of North American Immigration*, 109.

³⁷ Macekura, “For Fear of Persecution,” 364-67.

legal protection that virtually forces them to reside in a nation, but not be seen as part of it. From the initial migration of Salvadorans into the US in the early 1980s, they have been in a limbo of legal uncertainty with temporary applications, reapplications, long processes, and a threat of looming deportation.³⁸ Unfortunately, they also lacked a direct path to citizenship due to strict requirements and complex procedures that both excluded and discouraged many from becoming citizens. The repercussions of this in the long-term are shown on statistics on Salvadorans living in the US in 2011, in which only 29% were citizens, 46% were undocumented, another 25% held temporary status or green cards, and a significant 71% were eligible for removal if detained by immigration officials for either a lack of documentation or committed offense.³⁹

The Salvadoran migrant community was left in a legally vulnerable and highly deportable state. Part of this is since many were ineligible for legal protection and social services because of their status, and undocumented Salvadorans were forced into vulnerable and limited spaces with little upward mobility that made them easily exploitable sources of labor. The majority that resided in the US after the civil war were rural and uneducated, which has further put them in low-income jobs with a narrow prospect for upward mobility.⁴⁰ The Salvadoran populations in general are more likely to live in poverty than both native-born population and foreign-born populations.⁴¹ A study conducted in 1995 showed that many worked in low-paying jobs, little security and mobility as well as a feeling of alienated from mainstream society.⁴² Many Salvadoran immigrants lived in fear of being deported, while media and public discourse portrayed them as undeserving lawbreakers, which further alienated their contributions in society and created a situation ripe for their mistreatment.⁴³ In

³⁸ Menjívar and Abrego, "Legal Violence," 1384-1392.

³⁹ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 111.

⁴⁰ Sarah Gammage, "El Salvador: Despite End to Civil War, Emigration Continues," Migration Policy Institute (July 26, 2007), 1-3.

⁴¹ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 111-12.

⁴² Vasquez, "Saving souls transnationally," 5-6.

⁴³ Menjívar and Abrego, "Legal Violence," 1411.

1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) came into effect. Both of these acts permitted and made easier the deportation of documented immigrants by expanding the term-aggravated felony to incorporate offenses that were previously seen as relatively minor crimes, as well as mandating the ground for removal if convicted of a prison sentence of one year or more.⁴⁴ For example, in 1998 Salvadorans accounted for approximately 21% of immigrants who were deported, and today they compromise the fourth largest group of deportees.⁴⁵ Laws such as these normalized the perception of Salvadorans as criminals, which impeded integration and hindered mobility in several ways.

The Creation of Gangs in Los Angeles

The largest population of Salvadorans in the US reside in California, particularly in Los Angeles (LA). Within LA, ethnic and racial tensions, as well as a negative reception, along with the psychological impact of war, fostered the reaction and formation of a Salvadoran street gang. South Central Los Angeles was an area previously dominated by African Americans, and with the mass migration of Latinos (especially Mexicans), identity politics would emerge between both groups as they viewed each other as threats and competed for status and space in society. It is within this context that Salvadorans arrived in Los Angeles, and due to their already existing state of vulnerability, many youths would be enticed into street gangs to give themselves purpose and identity.⁴⁶ In LA, Maras originated from the 18th Street (M-18) or Dieciocho gang in Los Angeles (Chicano), which was founded by Mexican immigrants early in the 1960s and grew with the membership of many Salvadoran and Central American refugees.⁴⁷ Salvadorans felt the need to carve out their own space and self-defense groups in the streets in relation to Chicano gangs. Later in the 1980s, Salvadoran refugees would form their rival group, which would be identified as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13).

⁴⁴ Menjívar and Abrego, "Legal Violence," 1391.

⁴⁵ Menjívar and Abrego, "Legal Violence," 1391.

⁴⁶ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 114.

⁴⁷ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 110-114.

The Dieciocho and the Salvatrucha developed into hostile rivals and often clashed with each other and with law enforcement in the city blocks of Los Angeles.⁴⁸ It is within these gangs that Salvadorans would incorporate new norms, values, and attitudes in exchange for defense, relationships, and support. Salvadoran youth would borrow from the dominant Chicano culture and create their own faction; they adopted the lifestyle, language, and the dress of cholos (gang members). A hybrid culture emerged, and it is evident through the Mara language, which is a combination of Salvadoran Spanish, Chicano Spanish, and African-American English.⁴⁹

When MS-13 and M-18 were first formed, they participated primarily in drug deals, trafficking, and turf-based fighting. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) met these problems with a repressive force by prohibiting suspected gangs from meeting in certain areas, and raiding suspected gang hangouts and homes. During this period, the LAPD-Rampart Division's anti-gang unit Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) operated in mostly Salvadoran areas of Los Angeles.⁵⁰ Despite their primary focus on gangs in general, they were especially fixated on targeting, criminalizing, and deporting Latino immigrants and young adults that they linked with urban decay.⁵¹ This trend of targeting and criminalization would continue with the creation in 2005 of ICE's Operation Community Shield, which is a partnership between the government and law enforcement that identify and target street gangs for deportation.⁵² Since then, more than 31,200 gang members and associates have been arrested and deported through the program.⁵³ A major concern is the fact that there is no legal definition of what constitutes a gang membership; therefore, law enforcement officials have complete

⁴⁸ Dennis Rodgers and Adam Baird, "Understanding gangs in contemporary Latin America," Forthcoming in Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz (eds.), *Handbook of Gangs and Gang Responses*, New York: Wiley (2015), 14.

⁴⁹ Vasquez, "Saving souls transnationally," 8.

⁵⁰ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 114-115.

⁵¹ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 115.

⁵² Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 100-116.

⁵³ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 100-116.

discretion and judgment which leads to many innocent individuals caught up in gang raids also being convicted and deported.⁵⁴ The media has played a strong role in the sensationalization of the gang phenomenon, and it has also contributed to stereotypes and the perception that Salvadoran migrants are criminals who will inflict disorder in the U.S.⁵⁵ The consequence of all of this is increased deportation and marginalization of the larger Salvadoran community.

Reverse Migration:

Context of Return

Once the civil war ended in El Salvador 1991, thousands of Salvadorans made their way back home, both voluntarily and forcefully through deportation. The bulk of deportations would take place after the passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act. In the first year alone, 1,200 Salvadorans with criminal backgrounds would be deported, more than half of which had ties to gangs.⁵⁶ Removals have increased since the mid-2000s, with a significant percentage holding a criminal record, but not necessarily gang related. For example, out of the 18,677 Salvadorans deported in 2012, 46.2% had a criminal record.⁵⁷ During this period, the US government did not provide a complete criminal history on deportees to the Salvadoran government; hence in many cases, Salvadorans with criminal records were invisible to local authorities.⁵⁸ However, the Sombra Negra (Black Shadow), a guarded group made up of officers and military personnel who during the war were known for their death squad tactics, would hunt down and murder suspected gang members at times directly on airport arrival.⁵⁹

Most of the returnees were young males who grew up in a different culture, had left El Salvador as children during the war and hence had

⁵⁴ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 100-116.

⁵⁵ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 115-116.

⁵⁶ Cruz, “Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence,” 2.

⁵⁷ Seelke, “El Salvador: Background and US Relations,” 563.

⁵⁸ Seelke, “Gangs in Central America,” 89.

⁵⁹ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 121.

no connection to their birth land. In some cases, they did not even speak Spanish and their families remained in the US; therefore, they had weak social ties.⁶⁰ The type of services available to deportees from either the US or Salvadoran government were few; hence they encountered a weak institutional framework for reinsertion into society. There was once a program called *Bienvenidos a Casa*, or Welcome Home, which provided limited help, but its main function was to record incoming deportees for potential surveillance.⁶¹ Reintegration proved difficult, returnees often become financial burdens on their families and were seen as alien in their homeland. Additionally, within Salvadoran society, there is a prevalent conflation of deportee and gangster identities, which has led to the classification of entire groups of deportees as possible threats to national security.⁶² Salvadorans returned to a country that is still dealing with the structural problems that lead to the civil war (inequality, poverty, marginalization, etc.). Consequently, many struggled with a weak support system, a lack of economic opportunities, and increased levels of violence and criminalization, all of which would further marginalize them in society.⁶³

Within the group of deportees that had spent the majority of their lives in the US, some see deportation as “betrayal, exile, and banishment from the homes they constructed in the U.S.”⁶⁴ This group is further marginalized because they are also automatically treated as if they are gang members even when they do not have a history of gang membership.⁶⁵ Whether they had a gang history or not, many of the returning Salvadorans faced stigmatization, violence, and a hostile context of return.⁶⁶ Therefore, having arrived in a country they barely knew, deportees started to create the networks and behavioural patterns that offered them security and support in

⁶⁰ Vasquez, “Saving souls transnationally,” 11.

⁶¹ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 123.

⁶² Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 50.

⁶³ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 118.

⁶⁴ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 198.

⁶⁵ Dingeman-Cerda, “¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?,” 198.

⁶⁶ Rodgers and Baird, “Understanding gangs in contemporary Latin America,” 4.

the US (focus on LA), and this is where the formation of chapters of the Dieciocho and Salvatrucha gangs takes place.

Cultural diffusion and Gangs

When deportees with gang histories and criminal records from California took to the streets, they encountered gangsters who venerated their style and mannerisms, as well as respected their experience with real gang culture in the United States. This would present many with an opportunity to influence and direct gangs in El Salvador.⁶⁷ Existing gangs in El Salvador started to adopt the ways of returning gang members, and a process known as social remittance, which is the movement of symbolism, identities, and norms that accompanied the migration of deportees.⁶⁸ This started the process and expansion of maras that would occur through social imitation based on migration and networking. In this way, deportees' influence would change and assimilate the gang culture dramatically. They diffused cultural styles in the form of "the use of tattoos, the utilization of gang signs to communicate and, more importantly for the increase of violence and criminal behavior, they included the norms, values, and knowledge about how to behave, about who is the enemy, and about who is friend."⁶⁹ Prior to this, youth gangs compromised numerous small territorial groups; however, with increased migration of California deportees, small groups would become two large groups of cliques, the MS-13 and the M-18. A study piloted in San Salvador in 1996 revealed that 84% of gangs were linked to either MS-13 or M-18. Although American deportees made up 10% of gang membership, the cross-culturalization would occur largely through contact, imitation, and adaption of identities, which is what would transform these gangs into transnational forces between the US and Central America.⁷⁰ This was not an organized effort, the old turf gangs transformed into cliques that would compromise an association of gangs recognized as either MS-13 or

⁶⁷ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 121.

⁶⁸ Cruz, "Central American maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets," 388.

⁶⁹ Dingeman-Cerda, "¿ Bienvenidos a Casa?," 122.

⁷⁰ Cruz, "Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence," 5.

M-18. These so-called cliques each controlled a specific neighbourhood with relative independence from each other; however, that would change with gang warfare.⁷¹

Violence and battles among gangs, specifically MS-13 and M-18, would re-construct the struggle for urban spaces and territory. Gangs would use tattoos to mark their bodies and identity, showing allegiance to their gang. With the dominant two gangs, there was also an increase in the likelihood of interaction among the warring gangs proliferated beyond territorial areas. This created a changing dynamic of violence because it could now take place anywhere, no longer defined by specific boundaries, as they went even beyond a gang's turf. In this sense, a gang's turf became diffused, and it would cover the entire space in which gangs moved, which would cause the conflict and insecurity to citizens to become more pervasive. Identities associated with either gang would be more important than controlling a specific neighbourhood or turf, and this would reshape gang warfare. According to Cruz, gangs would no longer build their identity based on ethnic origin like they did in California, or build their identity in relation to a specific turf like they did in the earlier days in El Salvador (Central America); instead they would construct their identity based on the opposition and contention with the rival gang.⁷² In this sense, identity became more important than space, and violence would function to reinforce these identities. This would have brutal effects because it is no longer entrenched in a native context of pandilla culture; therefore, it is less rule-bound and constrained.

US Zero tolerance policing:

Mano Dura (the "iron-fist" plan)

As a result of the growing presence of MS-13 and M-18, the El Salvadoran government implemented anti-gang policing strategies

⁷¹ Cruz, "Central American maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets." 386.

⁷² Cruz, "Central American maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets," 394.

known as *Mano Dura* (2003) and *Super Mano Dura* (2004). Both of these plans centered on raids and targeting and imprisoning of gang members for showing gang-related tattoos or gang signs.⁷³ Any signs of gang allegiance and criminal activities would be punished with prison sentences up to five to twelve years. In this effort, increased spending on policing and a creation of a joint anti-gang military police patrols were endorsed.⁷⁴ These efforts would largely criminalize youth street groups as well as limit the civil rights of gang members; the intended goals were a large-scale persecution and suppression of gangs. According to the Salvadoran police from July 2003 to 2005, the police arrested 30,934 youths alleged to be gang members.⁷⁵ According to Cruz, it is essential to pay attention to the “politics of violence” which has institutionalized gangs through a combination of efforts of institutions, players, and plans that advanced the severe use of violence as a standard feature of Salvadoran youth gangs.⁷⁶ The consequences of such strict policies would be the primary tool to dealing with marginalized youth and would further institutionalize gangs.

The mass incarceration of gang members overpopulated the already weak prison system, but it also provided the opportunity for gang organization and cohesion. This was made possible by the decision of the state, built on the American model, to separate gangs in prison centers based on their gang affiliation.⁷⁷ This would allow gangs to network inside jails with cliques from all over the country leading to an ultimately better organized and well-connected network of gangs. The Jails themselves would become an assembly in which gangs would debate, make deals, and resolve strategies and plans. *Mano dura* law only worsened gang violence. It entrenched the state’s use of violence against the youth and offered the *maras* with the opening

⁷³ Oettler, “The Central American fear of youth,” 264-267.

⁷⁴ Oettler, “The Central American fear of youth,” 264-267.

⁷⁵ Cruz, “Central American *maras*: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets,” 390.

⁷⁶ Cruz, “Global Gangs in El Salvador: *Maras* and the Politics of Violence,” 7.

⁷⁷ Cruz, “Global Gangs in El Salvador: *Maras* and the Politics of Violence,” 7-15.

to consolidate, unite, and acquire regional and national leaderships.⁷⁸ Also, the all-war against gangs brought in new violent actors (drugs and traffickers), more resources (guns and weapons for defense), and an entrenched pattern of Salvadoran violence. These hardline policies would mark a turning point for the institutionalization of gangs, and the use of violent policies to suppress them would lead to further violence and transcend boundaries of both the state and the community.

When looking at what drives violence and crime, inequality and social exclusion play a major role in creating a breeding ground for gang membership. Consequently, the hardline policies that are being used to combat gangs are further adding on to the diminishing social relations. On the contrary, Nicaragua, a country in Central America that is the poorest (GDP) yet the safest is using a different approach to deal with gangs. It has been fortunate and spared much of the gang violence that nearby countries face and its approach to violence is key to this. Instead of pooling money and resources into a police budget, Nicaragua uses their resources for community development and has enforced a softer approach on gangs to prevent further marginalization and crime. A community-based approach is used in regards to gangs; in which police sponsor meetings with social workers, community members and family meetings with competing gangs and groups. This approach is used as a tactic of inclusion instead of isolating and repressing local gangs, both current and potential gangs are given the opportunity to resolve differences and are provided the resources and assistance to change their course of life away from that of criminal activities and gangs. For example, when Daniel Ortega resumed presidency in 2007, he put forward and adopted community-based policing programs - which are a stark difference to the *mano dura* policies used in El Salvador.⁷⁹ It is important to note the significant influence the US plays in this creation of a penal state - an extension of US efforts at dealing with

⁷⁸ Cruz, "Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence," 15.

⁷⁹ Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh and Ronald Kassimir, *Youth, globalization, and the law*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 64-100.

crime both abroad and at home (further elaborated on in the next section).

US export of zero-tolerance policies

“We’re mounting a coordinated, aggressive suppression strategy that targets the worst offenders and the most violent gangs. We’re converging local, state, federal and even international efforts ... coming at them with everything we have.” – Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa,⁸⁰

According to Markus-Michael Müller, the import of anti-gang zero tolerance-oriented penal policing is to a large degree prompted by police building efforts sponsored by US organizations as well as through interrelated activities of American embassies.⁸¹ Other methods included police training by the FBI and Drug Enforcement Agency, as well as connections of Central American law enforcement agents to US law enforcement divisions that actively pursued zero-tolerance methods of policing (Los Angeles). US police building assistance has converged with local political interests of holding crime accountable. This would connect international punitive anti-gang efforts across the Americas, which would result in crackdowns in marginalized neighbourhoods and lead to the unprecedented imprisonment of marginalized youth in El Salvador.⁸² Since the early 2000s, there is a growing perception of MS-13 and M-18 as transnational gangs, which has brought Central American and American officials under the guise of viewing these gangs as both national and regional security threats connected to cross-border criminal activities and drug trafficking. The United States would have an interest in maintaining its national security against gangs, drugs, and even terrorist links.⁸³ In the last decade, the US has increased collaborative efforts with El Salvador, communicative links on report

⁸⁰ “LAPD targets city's worst gangs.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2007. (Press conference: www.latimes.com)

⁸¹ Markus-Michael Müller, “Punitive Entanglements: The “War on Gangs” and the Making of a Transnational Penal Apparatus in the Americas,” *Geopolitics*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2015), 709.

⁸² Müller, “Punitive Entanglements,” 709- 710.

⁸³ Müller, “Punitive Entanglements,” 709-11.

and intelligence records, funding the International Law Enforcement Academy in El Salvador, blocking assets of gang members, and attempting to create a transnational security apparatus.⁸⁴

In addition, these efforts abroad are entwined with efforts at home as they fortify punitive gang suppression exertions within the US. American efforts in gaining as much information and data on gang members abroad have produced a systematic criminalization of marginalized Latino and Salvadoran groups in the US.⁸⁵ Not only is the US pursuing a war on transnational gangs abroad; it has translated into a war on gangs at home. As mentioned in the section on the context of migration, migrant Latin American communities in Los Angeles are faced with increased racialized and politicized policing and surveillance in their neighbourhoods. Policy concerns about transnational gangs have translated into increased pressures to persecute gang members at home.⁸⁶ Not only has the US exported its version of heavy-handed policies in dealing with gangs and other criminals in an effort to coordinate a security apparatus, but such efforts also have an effect on communities abroad and at home, which creates a cycle of violence and marginalization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined the multilayered and interlinked factors of the US influence and actions that instigated the circumstances in which gangs proliferated in El Salvador. Furthermore, it is evident that through these actions, the US has also created a foundation for a culture of violence. Starting at the watershed moment of the Salvadoran civil war, US efforts would prove to be vital to the government crackdown on guerillas. Although the US backed government won the war against communism, it started a new war against poverty, marginalization, the use of violence and the culture of arms. The civil war would set in

⁸⁴ Müller, "Punitive Entanglements," 716.

⁸⁵ Müller, "Punitive Entanglements," 711-716.

⁸⁶ Müller, "Punitive Entanglements," 716-718.

stone the culture of violence - use of violence to solve political and social issues. In addition, the mass migration and reception of Salvadorans in the US can be described as a negative social reception that forced structural violence (legal violence) that would place migrants at the marginal of society leading many to seek other outlets to fulfill the void created by a lack of belonging. The growth of MS-13 and M-18 in Los Angeles is largely due to marginalization, ethnic conflict and marking space in society. Law enforcement's harsh response and use of legal violence in the form of criminalization and deportation would set the stage for transnationalism. The massive influx of deportees with criminal records back to El Salvador, to a society still dealing with the effects of the civil war and a government lacking the institution to govern properly would lead to the reconfiguration of the existing gang culture. The diffusion of the Los Angeles gang cultural style into Salvadoran gangs and the ultimate dominance of both MS-13 and M-18 would be transformative for gangs in El Salvador. The rise and dominance of both gangs would transform space, guerilla warfare, and criminal activities. The staunch government response of Mano Dura and Super Mano Dura would benefit the institutionalization of gangs while marginalizing youth and further creating instability and conflict within society. It is evident that such anti-gang zero tolerance punitive policies are imported through contact, support, cooperative efforts and links with US agencies, governments, and law enforcement. The transnational context of gangs and their ability to transcend borders, as is evident in this case, and US efforts to combat gangs both abroad and at home, have resulted in repercussions on Salvadoran communities and set a cycle of political violence and marginalization.

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