

# **From the Code of the Barrio to the Ideology of a Business: Gang Extortion and the Moral Economy of Violence in Guatemala City**

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## **Abstract**

Since their appearance in the 1990s, Central America's *maras* have undergone profound changes in their group cultures and criminal economies that have reshaped the experience of insecurity in marginal urban communities where they operate. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a Guatemala City gang territory, I trace how the moral economy of crime and violence has changed over time, focusing on the *mara*'s predatory turn to extortion. I propose that the evolution of gang violence and its impact here is best understood in terms of shifting relationships between gang and barrio and diverging social imaginaries. The expansion of extortion coincided with the city's *maras* becoming prison- rather than street-based groups, severing gang cliques from the social and ethical worlds of their barrios. This estrangement has transformed the moral landscape of violence and reciprocity in the city's 'red zones'.

## **Keywords**

Guatemala; gangs; *maras*; extortion; urban anthropology

## **I.**

« The code of the barrio has been traded for the ideology of a business. » This was how Cadejo, a one-time member of the Barrio-18, summarized the trajectory of Guatemala City's gangs since the 1990s. Like many other former participants I spoke with, Cadejo lamented what he saw as his gang's abandonment of norms that had placed certain limits on permissible uses and targets of gang violence, a move that he associated with the rise of extortion as its primary pursuit.

Across Central America's Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, street gangs called *maras* (the Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 and the Barrio-18) have changed dramatically since appearing in the region some 25 years ago. In the scale of their criminal economies, repertoires of violence, and impact on poor urban communities, it is apparent that

the « Central American gangs of today are not the mildly delinquent street gangs of a generation ago <sup>1</sup>. »

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Guatemala City neighbourhood of Colonia el Romero <sup>2</sup>, this paper looks at one aspect of this transformation: the shifting relationship between mara cliques and their *barrios*. In particular, I trace the predatory turn by local gangs to an extortion economy that has seen groups that once identified strongly with their *barrios* turn to the violent exploitation of these same neighbourhoods. This predatory turn has reshaped the experience of insecurity in the marginal communities where they operate, the « red zones » that make up the statistical and discursive epicentres of urban insecurity <sup>3</sup>.

El Romero's residents frequently reported that the mara had become much more dangerous to them in recent years. They spoke of disruption and distress that they, like Cadejo, linked to a destabilization of norms that once governed the relationship between particular gangs and their particular neighbourhoods. People often expressed this sense of a violation of normative bonds and ethical boundaries through talk of the decline of « *códigos de barrio* » (neighbourhood codes) that had organized expectations within the community, within gangs, and between the community and local cliques. The phrase invokes a complex of norms that distils a local « social imaginary »: a shared normative understanding of how people exist together and relate to each other <sup>4</sup>.

Discourses around the codes of the *barrio* relate a kind of moral history of El Romero and its relationship with local gangs, one which this paper examines from the perspective of neighbourhood residents and mara members. The opening sections sketch the development of El Romero's street gangs and the rise of extortion. I then explore how people describe the content and decline of *barrio* codes. Normative frames like the *códigos de barrio* provide groups with « ways in which insiders can be distinguished from outsiders <sup>5</sup>. » Using the concepts of social banditry and moral economy, I argue that an important part of what has been changing in El Romero as the mara evolved is the definition of insider and outsider for the gangs and residents who share the *barrio*. I propose the social and ethical estrangement I

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<sup>1</sup> Brenneman R., *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> El Romero and all names are pseudonyms. Where not otherwise cited, all quotations come from interviews and conversations with residents during a total of 19 months of fieldwork between 2011 and 2017.

<sup>3</sup> 'Zona roja' designates (typically poor urban) districts infamous for high rates of violence, gang activity, or other forms of criminality.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor C., « Modern social imaginaries », *Public Culture*, vol. 14, n°1, 2002, pp. 91-124, p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> Pirie F., *The Anthropology of Law*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 158.

identify is tied to both the transnationalization of gang cultures since the 1990s and to the Guatemalan state's recourse to massive incarceration as a gang-control strategy. The expanded and intensified repertoire of violence associated with gang extortion is both reflective and—I suggest in the final section of this discussion—productive of a transformed social imaginary and moral economy of crime in Guatemala City's red zones.

## II. Living in the red zone

### i. El Romero and its gangs

Colonia el Romero's residents wryly describe their notorious neighbourhood as « the reddest of the red zones. » Long infamous in the public imagination of Guatemala City as a place of poverty, criminality, and violence, the barrio lies within the most violent of the capital's 22 sub-divisions; its sector accounts for nearly a quarter of the city's murders<sup>6</sup>. Due to extensive informal occupation and significant residential mobility in El Romero, population figures are unreliable and rapidly outdated: estimates range from 14 000 to 34 000.

El Romero's boys and young men always formed *pandillas de cuadra* (street-corner gangs) of the type found around Guatemala City's popular districts since at least the 1950s<sup>7</sup>. Based on highly localised social groups and sometimes affiliation with urban youth sub-cultures or activities (such as heavy metal music or breakdancing), these *pandillas* « engaged in petty crime and brawled against one another without dominating [...] neighbourhood life or killing one another<sup>8</sup>. » El Romero's residents generally report that they refrained from victimizing locals. Arturo, an educator and community organizer, emphasized this in describing the gangs of his adolescence in the 1980s, claiming those who took part placed « a lot of emphasis on defending the barrio. Not just from other cliques, but seeing to it that there weren't thefts, assaults, or rapes. »

The MS-13 and Barrio-18 appeared in Central America in the early 1990s, spreading quickly by hybridizing Southern Californian gang culture with existing local forms and traditions. Guatemala City's mara cliques were essentially formed by Guatemalan teenagers

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<sup>6</sup> Mendoza C.A. and Méndez C., « 7 mitos sobre la violencia homicida en Guatemala », *El Periódico*, 23 January 2013; Dudley S., *Homicides in Guatemala: The challenges and lessons of disaggregating gang-related and drug trafficking-related murders*, InSight Crime, 2017, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Speaking of gangs in the present, people generally used *pandilla* and *maras* interchangeably, as they did *pandillero* and *marero* for gang members.

<sup>8</sup> Levenson D., *Adios Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013, p. 32.

who, without leaving the country, incorporated themselves into a transnational imagined community<sup>9</sup>. Cadejo remembers the return to El Romero in 1993 of a friend who had lived in Los Angeles and brought back word of the slang, tattoos, clothing, haircuts, and music associated with maras « *en los Estados Unidos*. » Those « were the magic words » for the barrio's kids and teenagers, and the trend took off throughout the neighbourhood. The cliques that multiplied around El Romero were still essentially *pandillas de cuadra*, but now branded as MS-13 or Barrio-18 and using imported stylistic signatures and cultural references. At first, Arturo said, people saw these maras « as something pretty funny and harmless. They had an attitude of protecting the barrio. » Another long-time resident recalled that during the 1990s, « there were maras, but maras that were not troublesome. »

By the early 2000s, though, the maras' violent capacity and criminal operations were intensifying. Beginning in 2002, El Romero's various gang cliques fought each other in what residents called the War of the Maras, which ended in 2008 when one Barrio-18 clique eliminated their last rivals in a murderous campaign. They have controlled the neighbourhood since, operating a criminal economy centred on the extortion of households, stores, markets, transportation, and services in their territory. As in other Guatemala City gang territories, the business of extortion here involves « significant subsets of the population<sup>10</sup>. » A network of collaborators gathers intelligence, delivers extortion demands, and collects payments. These helpers range from small children to elderly women, and are far more numerous than the mareros themselves<sup>11</sup>.

Assessing and managing risks presented by insecurity, extortion, and gang violence are constant subjects of everyday talk between El Romero's residents. When people spoke to me and to each other about change in their neighbourhood, gang extortion and violence were again the axes around which these conversations turned. The mara's impact on and relationship with this barrio was a persistent theme of both informal conversations and interviews.

Over time, I came to know men who belonged local gangs during the various stages the neighbourhood's cliques have passed through since the 1980s. My interviews with them, as

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<sup>9</sup> Cruz J.M., « *Maras and the politics of violence in El Salvador* », in Hazen J. and Rodgers D. (eds.), *Global Gangs*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 123-143, p. 126; Levenson D., *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Fontes A., « *Extorted life: Protection rackets in Guatemala City* », *Public Culture*, vol. 28, n°3, 2016, pp. 593-616, p. 601.

<sup>11</sup> Associates' estimates of clique membership varied between 80 and 300. Discrepancies are largely due to whether or not the figure included incarcerated pandilleros and how many 'ranks' were counted (not all degrees of gang association impart full membership).

well as their conversations and reminiscences among each other, provide the material in this paper that deals with the perspectives of gang members. Participants in mara cliques throughout the 1990s and early 2000s—many of whom I met through Cadejo and his close friend and fellow former Barrio-18 member Rafa—spoke readily about how they felt about El Romero’s current gangs and, as they came to know and trust me, about their own gang activity and the kinds of violence they perpetrated and suffered.

More recent participants were harder to reach. Mara attitudes towards members’ exit or retirement from active participation have hardened considerably in the last decade, and those who do try to leave often go into hiding or move far away from their barrios to attempt to avoid retribution. I established contacts with these groups either through family members or close friends of theirs who had come to know me in the course of my fieldwork, or through local evangelical pastors who arranged meetings with members of their congregation who had recently or were then attempting to leave the mara.<sup>12</sup> It is from this group that I derive most first-hand accounts of mara attitudes and operations over the past ten years.

Active members are typically hostile to outsiders and liable to face harsh punishment for divulging information about their mara, although observing the behaviour of adolescent *mareros* on the streets of El Romero gave me insights into their day-to-day relations with other neighbourhood residents. A number of collaborators in the gang’s extortion business spoke with me quite openly after trusted members of their kin or social networks vouched for me. Finally, I carried out visits in several prisons around the capital region which permitted me to acquaint myself with mara-dominated carceral spaces and to converse with active members held there. However, to minimise potential risks to both myself and people seen as close to me in the barrio, I did not seek contacts or interviews with current high-ranking mara members (virtually all of whom are incarcerated). This limits my knowledge of how active gang leaders feel and speak about the expansion of extortion, the violence underpinning it, and the barrios in which they exercise power. Nevertheless, the range of perspectives I was able to access from within the barrio and within the mara permits me to describe the changing relationship between the two and the place of violence and predation within it.

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<sup>12</sup> On evangelical conversion and gang desistance, see O’Neill K.L., *Secure the Soul: Christian Piety and Gang Prevention in Guatemala*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2015; Brenneman R., *op. cit.*

## ii. Extortion and insecurity in mara territory

Over the past decade, extortion has become the « criminal lifeblood » and « economic engine » of mara cliques across the Northern Triangle, used to affirm their control over urban territories, support incarcerated pandilleros, and provide (generally poverty-level) wages for members<sup>13</sup>. During my fieldwork in El Romero, daily rates ranged from Q10-15 (around 1.50USD) for ambulant vendors to Q30 for market stalls, began at Q50 for stores and rose according to perceived earning potential. Transportation is a major source of extortion income. Buses on routes passing El Romero paid roughly 10 percent of what they took in, and each of the 30 moto-taxis operating in the barrio paid a weekly fee of Q500-800<sup>14</sup>. Extortion can be collected weekly from families known to have a steady income, but households (like schools and charities operating in the neighbourhood) are more often required to pay a large lump sum of Q5000-25 000 (roughly 600-3000USD) when they are deemed—albeit often on imperfect intelligence—to have access to assets, funds, or savings. As the following section discusses, the expanding scope of extortion and the violence with which it is enforced severely intensified the gang’s impact on El Romero’s social and economic life.

El Romero’s inhabitants report a sharp decline in local security and quality of life as extortion escalated under the dominance of a single clique. In stark contrast to the assessment that maras in the past were « not troublesome, » a local teacher judged that « now the delinquency is another matter. They will extort or kill anybody. » Colocho, a barrio resident in his thirties, similarly told me that whereas violence had once been limited and regulated, « now there is no control whatsoever. It is the law of the jungle. »

El Romero’s residents fled this uncertainty and insecurity in large numbers. A survey carried out by the neighbourhood’s Catholic parish estimated its population declined by 20% between 2008 and 2011; in some sectors, one third of homes were abandoned. Many who remained became averse to visibly improving their material circumstances, lest they trigger an extortion demand. As Arturo explained, « if you have *anything* of interest to them—a car, a motorcycle, you fix up your house—you’re fucked. Just fucked. » Shops shut under the pressure of extortion, with the few remaining reportedly managed by gang members’

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<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, Latin America Report n°62, Brussels, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Estimates of extortion income vary widely. Some sources report higher tariffs, such as one bus driver who said 37.5% of his take went to ‘circulation taxes’: Levenson D., *op. cit.*, p. 87. Police figures suggest lower extortion income from bus routes in El Romero’s municipal zone than were reported to me: Dudley S., *op. cit.*, p. 29.

families. Residents complained of a different feel to barrio life, contrasting abandoned houses and empty streets with memories of neighbourhood parties, bustling alleys, and open doors. « It was all really joyful, » one older woman recalled, specifying, « I say *was*, because it's gone now. »

People reported that the mara's use of violence against them became much more common and more brutal than in the past. « When they do something, » a young woman said, « they really do it ugly. » The gang uses violence in communicative and performative ways to enforce the extraction of extortion, maintain internal discipline, and demonstrate to inhabitants of their territory what non-compliance means. They target women and children for added emphasis. A local school's courtyard was strafed with gunfire while it was full of children preparing for Holy Week processions because its director could or would not pay an extortion demand. When one clique member *planchó* (fucked up) he was executed with a single gunshot to the head, but his girlfriend was killed more brutally; her entire face was « erased by bullets, » another *marero* said, to let others know what would happen to their loved ones in case of future slip-ups.

El Romero's residents understand murders perpetrated with special brutality to be intended to convey a particular message to the audience. The periodic appearance of mutilated bodies of young women, often showing signs of sexual assault and torture, has raised alarm in Guatemala since the early 2000s<sup>15</sup>. Various hypotheses and conspiracy theories attempt to explain these « femicides. » But residents of El Romero, where several such cases have taken place, are clear in their explanation: these murders are messages from the mara, and the bodies of young women are among the mara's favourite materials for making a message count. In the wake of one teenager's murder and the public disposal of her dismembered body parts around El Romero, residents told me they interpreted the intended lesson to be « that the mara will do anything, stop at nothing, to get what they want. » The following section explores explanations that inhabitants and mara participants offered of how and why the relationship between gang barrio—and the place of violence and predation within it—appeared to change so dramatically over the years.

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Sanford V., « From genocide to femicide : Impunity and human rights in twenty-first century Guatemala », *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 7, n°2, 2008, pp. 104-122; Constantino R., « Femicide, impunity, and citizenship : the old and new in the struggle for justice in Guatemala », *Chicana/Latina Studies*, vol. 6, n°2, 2006, pp. 108-121.

### III. Barrio codes and the ethics of crime

#### i. Gang codes and the predatory turn

The predatory turn towards the systematic extraction of extortion from their territories shifted the prevailing moral logic of gang violence in Guatemala City's red zones. Current and former mara members in El Romero often invoked what they called the « codes of the barrio » to explain gang change <sup>16</sup>. « The codes are different, » I was often told; « the codes changed, » « they were different codes. » Murci, a Barrio-18 member in the 1990s, claimed their codes then mandated « protection of the barrio, protecting the space from external things. » Asked whether he had ever collected *renta* (extortion), a contemporary of Murci's in another local clique responded « Nah, man. We had to take care of the barrio. » Though probably always imperfectly observed, there was a shared ethos that it was, in the words of another ex-member, « just bad form to rob your own people, you know? »

However, more recent mara members revealed profound changes in attitude and behaviour coinciding with the entrenchment of the extortion economy in the last decade. Their testimonies fit a pattern observed by gang scholars in which « moral imperatives » that may have shaped gang cultures tend to give way in the face of newfound « economic imperatives » as these groups become more oriented towards criminal economies <sup>17</sup>. Kevin, who joined El Romero's Barrio-18 clique in the late 2000s, lamented how the codes had changed from the norms of gang life his older brothers had known before him. He explained that « before, the code was to take care of the barrio, and not to mess with its people. » But instead of enforcing respect for the neighbourhood as a gang member, he found that « more than anything else, you destroy it. » Whereas older generations of mara participants habitually insist they only ever used violence against rival gangs, Kevin admitted he « hurt a lot of people who had nothing to do with our problems. » The use of violence now responds to the logic of extortion. As Junior, a teenage gang member, explained, « if you kill someone, it's nothing personal. It's business, it's an order, they didn't pay. It works more like a corporation. »

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<sup>16</sup> The codes that organize gang behaviour have been a persistent theme since the foundation of gang studies; see Thrasher F., *The Gang*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1927. Urban ethnographers have also examined the question of how such codes relate to the broader social order and community mores of gangs' neighbourhoods; see especially Anderson E., *Code of the Street*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Salagaev A.L. and Safin R.R., « Capitalizing on change : Gangs, ideology, and the transition to a liberal economy in the Russian Federation », in Hazen J.M. and Rodgers D. (eds.), *Global Gangs: Street Violence across the World*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 65-83, p. 78.



There appears to have once been a common sense among Guatemala City's gangs that one's barrio was not an acceptable target for violence or crime, and a general disruption of this ethos concurrent with the rise of gang-run extortion economies. In a MS-13-dominated neighbourhood, residents reported norms similar to those attributed to El Romero's earlier cliques. Rules against internal predation were said to have been observed and strictly enforced by gang members who served as the local « authority—and not only the authority by force, but the moral authority as well. » The clique was seen, however, to have abandoned this role upon introducing systematic local extortion.

Rodgers' long-running research on a Managua barrio's gangs also traces this same pattern. Nicaraguan pandillas once complied with a « golden “rule” [...] not to prey on local neighbourhood inhabitants <sup>18</sup>. » Here, too, the prioritization of profit-making activities drastically changed the prevailing relationship between gang and barrio. Members' involvement in the drug economy from the late 1990s converted the gang from « an organization that displayed a sense of social solidarity with the local community to a more exclusive and predatory group <sup>19</sup>. »

El Romero's residents' reports of increasing victimization and brutality are thus consistent with what would be expected from a gang that has transformed itself into a « violent entrepreneur », defined by the « conversion of organized force into permanent revenue <sup>20</sup>. » The mara's prevailing relationship with its barrio has shifted from a defensive, identity-based one to a violently-enforced tributary model. This change in what territory means to local gangs has had far-reaching consequences for residents of those sectors of the city to which they lay claim.

## **ii. Barrio codes and the social imaginary**

El Romero's residents also used talk of discarded barrio codes to explain change over time in their neighbourhood. Their real trouble was said to have begun when gangs « started to break all those codes that existed, » governing both their internal affairs and their relationship with the broader neighbourhood.

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<sup>18</sup> Rodgers D., « Living in the shadow of death : Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002 », *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 38, n°2, 2006, pp. 267-292, p. 275.

<sup>19</sup> Rodgers D., « The moral economy of murder : Violence, death, and social order in Nicaragua », in Auyero J., Bourgois P., and Scheper-Hughes N. (eds.), *Violence at the Urban Margins*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 21-40, p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> Volkov V., *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 28.

According to residents, however, the mara's abandonment of its code of the barrio not only changed the relationship between gangs and the neighbourhood, but also among neighbours more broadly. As well as internal gang norms, *código de barrio* also refers to a broader normative vision of the neighbourhood. People used the phrase to refer to basic standards of decency and an ethic of social trust, mutual aid, and local reciprocity. According to Cadejo, during his youth in the 1980s and 1990s, those codes meant « solidarity between everyone in the barrio. » Mono, a teenage local activist, likewise defined *códigos de barrio* as « all those social relations within the community, that feeling of solidarity. »

However, people located this generalized solidarity firmly in the past. « Now, man, » Mono told me, « it's like "save yourselves, if you can." » El Romero's residents blamed the mara's extortion, violent discipline, and ubiquitous web of collaborators for splintering that community ethos. They believed fear and suspicion had led people to retreat from shared spaces and from each other, undermining vital social networks that had enabled small favours and daily help between neighbours. These claims are consonant with findings from elsewhere in Central America that increased gang involvement in criminal economies changed not only those groups, but also « transformed the moral landscape » of their communities as a whole <sup>21</sup>.

The phrase *códigos de barrio* has different possible referents. When current or ex-gang members defined the term, they were most likely to speak of rules organizing and limiting the use of violence by and between gangs and a protective attitude towards their home territory. When others explained the concept, they typically emphasized broader individual and collective values of community, autonomy, self-reliance, and mutual aid. Yet there is an implicit consensus about the core, if not the scope, of these sets of norms, expectations, and understandings. Where they coincide is in the moral boundaries they draw around the neighbourhood, establishing it as a normative realm of a certain kind: a unit within which some reciprocity was owed and predation was reprehensible or impermissible.

While the general trajectory traced by accounts of El Romero's *códigos de barrio* and their decline is highly plausible, it is now virtually impossible to confirm to what extent the barrio's « codes » as currently represented correspond to norms that did, in fact, regulate

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<sup>21</sup> Rodgers D., « The moral economy of murder », *op. cit.*, p. 36; Hume M., *The Politics of Violence*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 107.

behaviour and order social life there in the past <sup>22</sup>. People did contradict each other on the matter of gang predation within the barrio. Cadejo said that in any period you might be robbed in El Romero. But his friend Wuicho, raised there at the same time, claimed that « before, they didn't rob you in the *colonia*. » Others questioned how much the mara's evolution really had impacted residents. « It's changed, » according to a woman of 33 years' residence, « but not much. There have always been deaths. »

To parse these conflicting statements, we can distinguish two kinds of claims about this neighbourhood's past: one about certain facts of what occurred here, another about the kind of moral world its residents and gang members have inhabited. Incidents of internal predation of the kind mentioned by Cadejo need not disprove the overall account of barrio codes to which Wuicho may have been referring. Social norms always co-exist with a certain number who break them and reject them as standards. Similarly, to state that there has always been violence does not imply that violence has always taken the same form, nor had the same meaning. Even if the number of violent deaths remained perfectly constant, what these deaths say about local norms around violence and reciprocity may well have changed dramatically <sup>23</sup>. When people said the codes had been broken, they were not necessarily claiming to witness completely novel behaviour. They were saying that a certain consensus around a model of their community and relationships within it no longer holds as it once did.

### **iii. Social bandits and the moral economy of violence**

The concept of social banditry helps to elucidate the nature of that fractured social imaginary and the changing moralities of violence El Romero's residents described. I use social banditry here not to argue that maras past or present should be classified as such. Rather, it provides valuable distinctions for thinking about the relationship between gangs and the communities from which they arise and among whom they operate.

As defined by Hobsbawm, social bandits are « peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people...as men to be admired, helped, and supported <sup>24</sup>. » The notion has been criticized as a « figment of the human imagination » that does not describe any real outlaws, only an

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<sup>22</sup> On this issue and the place of nostalgia in accounts of barrio codes, see Saunders-Hastings K., « Red zone blues: Violence and nostalgia in Guatemala », *Ethnography*, OnlineFirst, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138118795975>.

<sup>23</sup> Rodgers D., « The moral economy of murder », *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Hobsbawm E., *Bandits*, London, Abacus, 2001, p. 20.

implausibly « noble robber, embodying the virtues of Robin Hood <sup>25</sup>. » But critics of social banditry have long emphasized only one component of Hobsbawm's definition—the approval and aid such brigands supposedly received from the common people. I wish to focus instead on the idea of the bandit who *remains within* local society. To ask only whether an outlaw is « idolized » or « criminalized <sup>26</sup>» in popular opinion leaves too little room for actions that are morally neutral or that might be seen as venal rather than mortal sins. Yet that grey zone may well be the space that many street gangs worldwide occupy for those among whom they live.

For social bandits, the crucial question should be not whether they are admired or well-liked, but whether they continue to be seen by the poor as part of their community. El Romero's gangs never had the kind of popular support Hobsbawm suggests. However, until the mara's predatory turn to extortion, they did meet the broader criteria of social banditry: remaining within the neighbourhood's social and ethical world. Like social bandits who « share the value-system of ordinary peasants, » mara values across the Northern Triangle once presented « little contrast with those of the barrio itself <sup>27</sup>. » In the late 1980s, Guatemala City's gang members positioned themselves and their organizations within « the class world of the deserving poor <sup>28</sup>. » They saw themselves and were seen by others as belonging to the same sphere of reciprocity as everyone else in their barrios.

I do not suggest that this relationship was free of any antagonism. Gang members always behaved in ways that displeased other residents, violated some of their values, and attracted their disapproval. They disrupted expectations of how boys and young men should manage the transition to adulthood, work, and family life. But they still shared certain notions of neighbourhood solidarity and generally continued to meet the « minimum moral requirements of reciprocity » within this community <sup>29</sup>.

In return, being a gang member did not necessarily radically alter one's position in local social worlds. It was « a finite social role »—neither a permanent nor exclusive identity <sup>30</sup>. In the 1990s, gang members were also members of church groups, sports teams, and arts projects. By their early twenties, virtually all « aged out » of active gang membership (back) into broader kin and community networks. Gang involvement may have reflected poorly on a

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<sup>25</sup> Blok A., « The peasant and the brigand: Social banditry reconsidered », *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 14, n°4, 1972, pp. 494-503, p. 500; Wagner K., « Thuggee and social banditry reconsidered », *The Historical Journal*, vol. 50, n°2, 2007, pp-353-376, p. 353.

<sup>26</sup> Wagner K., *op cit.*, p. 370.

<sup>27</sup> Hobsbawm E., *op. cit.*, p. 43; Breneman R., *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Levenson D., *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Scott J.C., *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> Rodgers D., « Living in the shadow of death », *op. cit.*, p. 284.

young person in the eyes of their neighbours, but it did not exhaust who they were or define who they might become.

Initially, then, maras shared the broader group membership and taboos against victimizing others within that in-group that define « the peculiar relationship which makes banditry “social”<sup>31</sup>. » Yet this relationship apparently no longer holds in El Romero. Its gang now more closely resembles the « underworld robbers and raiders » Hobsbawm uses as foils for social bandits. Underworld criminals were definite outsiders, forming their own « anti-societies. » They saw themselves as distinct from the populations they operated among and preyed on, and were regarded by them « as criminals in their sense of the term and not merely by official law<sup>32</sup>. » Social banditry recognizes that a « differentiated morality of violence » may exist between elites and lower classes<sup>33</sup>. But at least as important for understanding insecurity at the urban margins are the different ethics of violence and predation separating social bandits from underworld criminals. The former share a common morality of violence with the poor; the latter do not.

Cadejo’s claim that maras have traded the « code of the barrio » for the « ideology of a business » can be understood in terms of a fracturing moral economy in Guatemala City’s gang territories. As elaborated in the work of first E.P. Thompson and then James Scott, the moral economy describes standards for inter-class relationships around food production, distribution, and marketing used by the poor and the peasantry to draw lines between « what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices, » which claims on them and their labour « were tolerable and which intolerable<sup>34</sup>. » These economies were moral because these norms were, much like El Romero’s *códigos de barrio*, articulated around a central discursive axis of social reciprocity, in terms of mutual expectations, obligations, and rights. Economic relations were thus « locally embedded in moral expectations about appropriate behaviour that make power holders socially accountable to the poor<sup>35</sup>. » It is that social accountability to its neighbourhood from which El Romero’s mara loosed itself in « breaking all those codes that existed. »

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<sup>31</sup> Hobsbawm E., *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Hobsbawm E., *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Rodgers D., « The moral economy of murder », *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson E.P., « The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century », *Past and Present*, vol. 50, 1971, pp. 76-136, p. 79; Scott J.C., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Karandinos G., Hart L., Montero F., and Bourgois P., « The moral economy of violence in the US inner city », in Auyero J., Bourgois P., and Scheper-Hughes N. (eds.), *Violence at the Urban Margins*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 41-72, p. 43.

Both Thompson's historical analysis of English crowds and Scott's ethnographic study of Vietnamese peasants were concerned with cross-class relations, the encroachment of capitalist economics on traditional relations of production and resource distribution, and the bases of collective action or resistance in the face of such dislocations. However, anthropologists have more recently expanded moral economy's theoretical foundations and analytical remit beyond inter-class conflict to encompass the « moral regulation of everyday intra-class reciprocities »<sup>36</sup>. » It is in this sense that I employ it, following Fassin's definition of moral economy as « la production, la répartition, la circulation et l'utilisation des sentiments moraux, des émotions et des valeurs, des normes et des obligations dans l'espace sociale »<sup>37</sup>. »

At the core of the concept of a moral economy is the contention that a sphere of activity—whether occurring between or within class groups—is « embedded », that it is « permeated by the norms of the enveloping society »<sup>38</sup>. » In this, it contrasts with the supposedly unfettered or « disembedded » market economy. In the moral economy, exchange relationships are part of broader « patterns of social control and reciprocity » and can be articulated in terms of « moral rights or expectations »<sup>39</sup>. » Nothing prevents criminal economies from being moral economies in these terms. The social bandit who remains within the bounds of community morality despite transgressing legal norms and the underworld robber who violates both can correspond to embedded and disembedded criminality respectively. This vocabulary provides one way to describe the change conveyed through accounts of abandoned barrio codes. Street gangs that once saw themselves and were seen as part of broader local normative communities have disembedded from these, becoming parasitic on and predatory within their neighbourhoods as extortion transformed the mara's moral economy of violence.

This simplified transition from embedded to disembedded gangs, from moral community to ethical estrangement between maras and their barrios, presents rather too neat a picture at both ends of the trajectory. For residents of the communities they come from and operate in, gang members often appear as « dangerous intimates »: figures characterized by both

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<sup>36</sup> Karandinos G. et al., *op cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Fassin D., « Les économies morales revisitées », *Annales Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 64, n°6, pp. 1237-1266, p. 1257.

<sup>38</sup> Booth W.J., « On the idea of the moral economy », *American Political Science Review*, vol. 88, n°3, pp. 653-667, p. 664.

<sup>39</sup> Scott J.C., *op. cit.*, p. 40.

familiarity and otherness, by confusion and contradiction<sup>40</sup>. This is and always has been the case in El Romero. Even so, narratives surrounding lost codes and rising violence strongly suggest that—for reasons explored in the following section—something important has changed in the balance of this relationship, in the constellation of intimacy and danger.

#### **IV. ‘Disembedding’ gang violence**

##### **i. Explaining normative drift**

The various dynamics, opportunities, and constraints that contributed to the mara’s changing group culture and criminal ethic lie beyond the scope of this paper<sup>41</sup>. The ready availability of arms after the end of Guatemala’s internal conflict in 1996 and the vastly increased flow of cocaine heading northwards through Guatemala from the early 2000s were among the factors that enabled maras to expand their violent capacity and resource base as a prerequisite for the level of power and control they presently exercise in their territories. However, the Guatemalan state’s short-sighted preference for incarceration over any other gang-control strategy played the most decisive role in the social and normative fractures between mara cliques and their neighbourhoods that I have been describing.

Since the early 2000s, when *mano dura* policies bloated inmate populations, the Northern Triangle’s prisons have provided the crucible in which the latest incarnation of the region’s maras took form. Although virtually the entire leadership of both maras is in maximum-security prisons, Guatemalan authorities have been far less successful at interrupting the operational capacity of these gangs. If anything, incarceration seems to have enhanced it. Especially after the move to segregated prisons for members of each mara in 2005, the penal system brought cliques from around the region into closer, sustained contact, expanding their territorial reach, resource bases, and operational integration. Implemented to interrupt a series of deadly attacks between imprisoned gang members, the separation of rival maras into their own wings and institutions reduced prison violence in the short term. But it also had the perverse outcome of « increasing gang strength both within and beyond prison walls<sup>42</sup>. »

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<sup>40</sup> Penglase R.B., *Living with Insecurity in a Brazilian Favela*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> See Levenson D.T., *op. cit.*; Fontes A., *Mortal Doubt : Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Lessing B., « The danger of dungeons: Prison gangs and incarcerated militant groups », in Krause K. (ed.), *Small Arms Survey 2010: Gangs, Groups, and Guns*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 156-183, p. 158.

The permeability of Guatemala's prisons poses little obstacle to effective communication and control from within. Incarcerated leaders manage operations on the street closely, keeping in constant contact with the cliques. Junior, an eighteen year-old Barrio-18 member, explains that every order « comes from the prison. No one shoots anybody without that order. No one charges a rent without that permission. » With this strictly enforced chain of command, several gang members and associates told me that mara footsoldiers have lost their capacity to veto or protest the application, extension, or targets of extortion. One lower-ranking gang member describes himself and his peers as « like soldiers: you do not question orders, you execute them. »

Observers of gangs around the world argue that the imprisonment of leaders and members strengthens those groups instead of weakening them<sup>43</sup>. Existing studies largely focus on the practical ways in which incarceration augments gang capacity by providing « tactical headquarters » and other « organizational assets »<sup>44</sup>. However, perhaps the most significant outcome of shifting the mara's centre of gravity into the prison system has been on the level of group culture. The gang has come unmoored from the physical and social space of its barrio.

The first seeds of that drift lie in the transnational gang culture formed as maras spread in the early 1990s. Despite retaining continuities with earlier street gangs, the appearance of the Barrio-18 and MS-13 began to redraw the lines used to define identity, loyalty, and hostility for gang members. A person's neighbourhood and gang affiliation were once synonymous, both expressed by the phrase « *mi barrio* ». The barrio is the neighbourhood is the gang; the gang is the neighbourhood is the barrio. The importation of Californian gang culture brought with it new « norms, values, and knowledge about how to behave, about who is the enemy, and about who is a friend »<sup>45</sup>. » Mara affiliation increasingly supplanted neighbourhood as the focal point of group identity and loyalty.

Inter-gang violence, in turn, became less about defending particular neighbourhoods than asserting and strengthening broader franchise identities. The barrio of gang identity began to diverge from the barrio of neighbourhood belonging. This shift in the dominant meaning of « *mi barrio* » suggests the cliques' progressive unrooting from the physical and social

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<sup>43</sup> For instance, Lessing B., *op. cit.*; Hagedorn J.M., *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 13; Sánchez-Jankowski M., « Gangs and social change », *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 7, n°2, pp. 191-216, pp. 206-208; Salagaev A.L. and Safin R.R., *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>44</sup> Lessing B., *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>45</sup> Cruz J.M., *op. cit.*, p. 126.



geography of their neighbourhoods, which, accelerated by the rise of massive incarceration and new rent-seeking strategies, would facilitate predatory violence against these territories in the next decade.

The concentration of *maras*' organizational structures and cultural core in prisons means that many gang members, and virtually all of those with real decision-making power, « no longer relate directly to the people who live in the space they control <sup>46</sup>. » In the late 1980s and early 1990s, gang members identified with their neighbourhoods; their « "us" included the poor <sup>47</sup>. » But incarceration in segregated gang prisons shrinks the social world of members down to the *mara*, reinforcing their ties to each other and weakening other claims on them. Gang and *barrio* have undergone a sort of « normative mitosis <sup>48</sup>. » The idea that the neighbourhood is a unit productive of moral duties and relationships is no longer shared by local gangs; their worlds of reciprocity and responsibility no longer include their *barrios*.

## ii. Violence and reciprocity

The foregoing discussion has characterized violence largely as a product or consequence of the social and ethical separation of gang and *barrio* associated with the *mara*'s predatory turn. In closing, I want briefly to consider how violence may in fact also be producing that very separation.

Simon Harrison's work on warfare in Melanesia may illuminate this dimension of the violence the *mara* now practises within its territory. He criticizes an assumption that acts « negative reciprocity », including the physical predation of violence and the economic predation of exploitation, arise as a function of social distance, the lack of ties that bind one individual or group to another. In Harrison's analysis, by contrast, violence is not necessarily evidence of social separation, but productive of it. The Melanesian social worlds he describes are permeated by « inescapable relations of obligation » that leave groups « working constantly to extract themselves from the other <sup>49</sup>. » Their problem is not the establishment of ties, but the maintenance of boundaries. Violence is one means by which they delimit and, where needed, cut bonds of obligation: insiders and outsiders to the sphere of (positive) reciprocity are defined through the application of violence.

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<sup>46</sup> Cruz J.M., « Central American *maras*: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets », *Global Crime*, vol. 11, n°4, pp. 378-398, p. 396.

<sup>47</sup> Levenson D., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Cover R., « Nomos and narrative », *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 97, n°4, 1983, pp. 4-68, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Harrison S., *The Mask of War: Violence, Ritual, and the Self in Melanesia*, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1993, pp. 23, 9.

The mara could also be seen as the kind of « intrinsically permeable <sup>50</sup> » group liable to struggle with « cross-cutting ties » between groups in conflict that produce « incompatible loyalties » if they are not somehow suspended or severed <sup>51</sup>. Despite the physical separation produced by the imprisonment of a significant proportion of the clique's membership, social distance remains awkward, fragile, and fabricated. Gang members have parents, siblings, children, lovers, friends, acquaintances, and helpers throughout the population they exploit, all of whom have their own cascading networks of loyalty and reciprocity. In this socially-dense landscape, acts of negative reciprocity « may be not so much a *consequence* of social distance as a means of *creating or asserting* it <sup>52</sup>. » By preying on and profiting from its own community, the clique claims and performs a separation, a lack of obligation.

For gang members to be capable of the physical and economic depredations demanded of them, they must come to view residents of their own barrio as (at least ethical) strangers to them, persons to whom they owe nothing and from whom they make take anything. To this end, transgressive violence can be mobilized towards (re)creating spheres of reciprocity and enmity. The gang's more aberrant violence in particular, such as the murder and mutilation of young women in the barrio, may be both constructing and communicating their rejection of any sense of obligation or duty of care towards the neighbourhood and its residents. Arturo described the rites and requirements of gang initiation—which according to members can include participating in the gang rape of young girls or the murder of a taboo victim such as a child or pregnant woman—as « a process of 'un-souling' (*desalmar*), of getting rid of the soul. » Former gang members told me they believed the initiation process was designed to have recruits violate the most fundamental social norms and bonds, with the result that their loyalty and accountability—as well as their support network—was restricted to their gang. The violence done by the mara to El Romero's inhabitants has thus been redefining the shape and content of local social imaginaries in ways that are as productive for the gang as they are destructive for the neighbourhood.

## V.

At the outset, Guatemala City's mara members seem to have seen their gangs as « simply an extension of the neighbourhood <sup>53</sup> »: both were their « barrios ». However, the social

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<sup>50</sup> Harrison S., *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Roberts S., *Order and Dispute: An Introduction to Legal Anthropology*, New York, St Martin's, 1979, p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Harrison S., *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> Brenneman R., *op. cit.*, p. 39.

imaginary gang members once shared with other residents of their neighbourhoods—that coincidence of basic understanding of the bounds of legitimacy and tolerability that typifies social bandits and moral economies—ended with the mara's predatory turn towards systematic extortion. The barrio of the gang has fissioned off from the barrio of the broader community as the mara has increasingly opted out of the neighbourhood's social and ethical world. This process of normative drift began as transnational gang franchises replaced local neighbourhoods as the central provider of gang identity. Yet the Guatemalan state's preference for incarceration over any other gang control strategy played a critical role in unmooring cliques and members from their neighbourhoods and transforming Guatemala City's maras into the ruthless engines of violence entrepreneurship.

The rise of extortion and the concomitant expansion of the mara's repertoire of violence have re-shaped the experience of insecurity in the communities these gangs control, with far-reaching effects on social and economic life there. In El Romero, shifting relationships between gangs and barrio, fractured and abandoned codes featured prominently in the narratives people used to explain what had happened to them, to local gangs, and to their neighbourhood. The story of the decline of the *códigos de barrio* communicates a moral history of El Romero. It relates the mara's changing ethic of violence, its evolution from social bandit to underworld criminal; it tells of the distress occasioned by instability in the shape and scope of people's normative worlds. In trading the « code of the barrio » for the « ideology of a business », preying on and profiting from populations with which they once identified, maras have transformed the moral landscape of violence in the capital's red zones.

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## **Biography**

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