

The Central American Fear of Youth

Anika Oettler, Institute of Sociology, University of Marburg, Germany

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The Central American Fear of Youth

Anika Oettler, Institute of Sociology, University of Marburg, Germany

It is often asserted that youth gangs and organized crime have seized Central America. For theories on contemporary Central American violence, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua present important test cases, which demonstrate the need to differentiate the diagnosis. This paper is concerned with the social construction of violence-related national and transnational myths as a precondition for policy formulation. The notion of exploding youth violence is part of hegemonic discourses and not necessarily linked to lifeworld experiences. While discourses on youth violence differ from country to country, with varying threat levels, patterns of attention, and discursive leitmotifs, they share the monstrous image of brutal gangs (Mara Salvatrucha, Dieciocho) as the most vivid object of fear.

1. Introduction: An Explosion of Youth Violence in Central America?

In recent years, many scholars have examined violence and globalization, dealing with the “new paradigm of violence” (Wieviorka 2003) that has accompanied global social changes since the end of the Cold War. With regard to Latin America, there is a wealth of literature on the wave of criminal violence that has swept the continent.

Central America remains on the margins of international political life, but developments relating to crime, violence, and insecurity are attracting growing interest. It is often asserted that levels of violence in the region are as high as, or even higher than, during the state terror, insurgency, and war of the 1970s and 1980s. According to policy papers and academic studies, there are “two key areas of crime in which Central America is remarkable by global standards: the volumes of drugs trafficked through the region and the rate of murder” (UNODC 2007, 45). Even though there is scant evidence regarding “real” crime rates and perpetrators (Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2008), the majority of crimes tend to be attributed to youth gangs (*pandillas*, *maras*). In recent years, the question of “How the Street Gangs took Central America” (Arana 2005) has evolved to become the center of public debates, thereby clouding the

multifaceted character of violence. The most prominent phenomenon are the notorious street gangs Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Dieciocho (Calle 18/18th Street) that were formed in the Hispanic barrios of Los Angeles. When the U.S. government began deporting convicted criminals “home,” the gang phenomenon spread to the war-torn Central American societies, increasing massively from the mid-1990s onwards. Since then, media reports as well as policy papers have not ceased to perpetuate the dominant image of the anomic adolescent other. Central American youth gangs are said to have metamorphosed into a hierarchical transnational criminal network, which is generally tied to the narcotics trade (Bruneau 2005; Johnson and Muhlhausen 2005; Manwaring 2007). These concerns tend to be mobilized and translated into policy agendas at global and domestic levels. Central American gangs are often seen as major challenges to state sovereignty (Bruneau 2011; Manwaring 2007). In the latest World Development Report, they emerged as “major bugbears” (Jones and Rodgers 2011, 987) that represent the power of anomic social forces. It is crucial to note, however, that actual empirical evidence on the criminal behavior of youth gangs has been provided for the local level (Rodgers 2006; DIRINPRO 2006) rather than the national or transnational

levels. In general, there is little consensus on the causes, logics, and structures of gang proliferation (Jones and Rodgers 2009). Academic debate is divided as to whether Central American youth gangs should be viewed as locally rooted groups or whether migration has accelerated the proliferation of transnational adolescent organized crime (Cruz 2010). Some authors argue that Central American gangs tend to replace the state in “providing micro-regimes of order” (Rodgers 2009, 964) in slums and poor neighborhoods, attracting members with their cohesiveness, “gangsta” culture, and resistance identities (Hagedorn 2008; Reguillo 2005; Liebel 2004). There is a lively debate about the scope and extent of illegal and violent collective behavior, while others have dealt with root causes of gang proliferation such as unemployment, migration, and social disintegration. However, the sub-field of gang studies faces serious problems of methodology. As Wolf notes (2010), much literature on Central American street gangs relies on anonymous sources, self-proclaimed experts, and media and police reports, and thus lacks a critical foundation. Findings vary greatly, ranging from dramatizing policy papers to naïve interpretations of gang culture.

What does “mara” mean? It is important to note that “mara,” “pandilla,” and “youth gang” have evolved into confusing and sometimes euphemistic buzzwords. In general, “pandilla” and “mara” are interchangeable Spanish terms for “youth gang.” However, politicians and mass media have been at the forefront of creating and disseminating the meaning of “mara.” The term is strongly associated with the Mara Salvatrucha and Dieciocho gangs, which should be labeled (adult) “street gangs” rather than “youth gangs.” Nevertheless, they are often fearfully associated with deviant adolescents. It is important to note that the ascription by others is not necessarily shared by gang members, who often describe themselves as “pandilleros.” When referring to domestic youth gangs, people in Nicaragua and Costa Rica mainly use the term “pandilla.” Finally, it should be mentioned that there is a persistent etymological legend. While the term “mara” is often said to refer to “a

type of ant known for its ferocity” (Manwaring 2007, 13; Bruneau 2011), myrmecologists’ use of the term does not relate to army ant species but rather to horror movies such as *The Naked Jungle* and *Legion of Fire: Killer Ants*.¹

In all Central American societies, *maras* and *pandillas* are seen as a greater threat than ever before. However, we presume that this ever-present danger is, as in other cases, mainly a result of discursive practices. The high level of Central American criminal violence may be understood as a social fact, which is such, because it is commonly believed. Thus, the notion of exploding crime is part of a dominant ideological/discursive formation (Fairclough 1995) and not necessarily linked to “real” threat levels or lifeworld experience. The Central American talk of juvenile delinquency shows how public discourses produce and reproduce collective patterns of interpretation as well as systems of social rules. It is crucial to note that this seed of fear is nourished by a diverse pattern of discourse events that differs from country to country.

This paper reports some results of an exploratory research project on “Public Spaces and Violence in Central America,” carried out together with Peter Peetz and Sebastian Huhn between 2006 and 2009, with new observational data and supplemental material added. The research project deals with public discourses on violence and focuses on a wide range of hegemonic spheres and “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser 1992) related to the media, politics, academic institutions, and the everyday social world (for more details on our approach, see Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2008). Our goal was to use multiple data sources to explore discursive fragments circulating within different public spheres (Oettler 2008), in particular in the media, the political arena, the academic and legal sphere, and daily life. The research data gathered included material from six Central American newspapers, speeches, publications of political parties and NGOs, ninety qualitative interviews, and 227 essays written by students from nine public, private, and rural schools and a theater project. These essays

¹ Thanks to Jan Oettler (University of Regensburg) and Chris R. Smith (Earlham College) for providing useful comments.

were published as an edition that can serve as a primary source for scholarly research (Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2007). In order to detect the macro-structure of the media discourse, we analyzed all issues of *Al Día* and *La Nación* (Costa Rica), *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* (El Salvador), and *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa* (Nicaragua) published in 2004, 2005, and 2006 (for an overview of the Central American print media and the marketing of crime, see Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2009).

This article is primarily concerned with the patterns of attention associated with contemporary youth violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua – three cases chosen for (1) a suspected similarity in the perception of insecurity and (2) a variety of forms and contexts.² In deconstructing the undifferentiated image of a vulnerable region that suffers from escalating violence and juvenile delinquency, my goal is to explore national differences as well as varying threat levels and patterns of attention paid to these issues. My argument is that current Central American debates on juvenile delinquency are closely intertwined with national myths, which provide citizens with a significant frame of meaning.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section briefly outlines the theoretical position and methodological approach of our research project. Rooted in the theoretical/methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, the project explores the “social construction of [violent] reality” (Berger and Luckmann 1966) at the local, national, and transnational levels. Powerful and less powerful speakers in different discursive spaces tend to (re-)produce national myths. As “discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped” (Fairclough and Wodack 1997, 258), the sections thereafter provide a brief historical overview of the evolution of political forces in Central America, revealing how national discourses on contemporary violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, deal with the basic question: What factors underlie the understanding of

youth gangs as one of the greatest problems for public security, or even national security? (for the concept of *seguridad ciudadana*, see Peetz 2011). The last section explores the landscape of discursive and non-discursive arenas from a comparative perspective, trying to trace back the national and sub-national origins of this mobilizing myth.

2. Violence Discourse and Mystification

As mentioned above, the research project aims to uncover the origins, development, and institutionalization of Central American discourses on violence, rather than to identify the “real” magnitude of youth violence in Central America. When we began our exploration of the issue in 2005, we compared current academic debates with our own field experiences in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. From our point of view, there were two basic presumptions to be made when addressing Central American crime. First, the waves of criminal violence that followed the state terror, insurgent action, and war of the 1970s and 1980s did not spread to all countries at the same speed. While public life in El Salvador has been shaped by fear and criminal violence for more than a decade (Cruz 1997, 2004), the level of attention to this issue in Costa Rica has only recently begun to rise (Huhn 2011).

Second, the “real” level of crime is mostly unknown. Throughout Central America, criminal statistics are incomplete, out of date, and, as a result, unreliable. As the state’s monopoly on the use of force is not fully functional in most Central American countries, the police and other state institutions are far from being omnipresent. According to Rodgers (2004, 117), many crimes are not registered in Nicaragua because the police are completely absent in over 20 percent of all municipalities.

With regard to the quantitative measurement of crime, Huhn (2011) recently summarized the pivotal points of criticism, ranging from the unreported crime figures to the institutional capacity for receiving complaints, and from

2 Central America encompasses a common history as well as a variety of national and local histories. Political turmoil and armed confrontation flourished in these countries throughout the second half

of the twentieth century, with Costa Rica being the sole exception. Democratization was achieved through civil war (Costa Rica, 1948), insurrection (Nicaragua I, 1979), election (Nicaragua II, 1990),

military directive (El Salvador I, 1982), and peace negotiations (El Salvador II, 1992).

crime investigations to translating these into accurate numbers. In general, criminal statistics reflect police activity more than levels of violent crime: due to under- and over-reporting they deliver disproportional pictures of crime. Moreover, the political-publicist circle of intensification (Scheerer 1978) “can be expanded by the crime rates themselves” (Huhn 2011, 137).

Young (2004) highlights the paradox that many researchers are aware of the thin ice of data, but still keep on skating. While this in itself is a fundamental reason to reject crime statistics, there are further epistemic arguments for abandoning a positivist attitude. From a social constructivist perspective, criminal statistics are a specific instrument people use to make sense of their world. They reflect and (re)construct patterns of violent action. “But if the information they give on crime is restricted, they may nevertheless reveal other facts about the society that produces them” (Caldeira 2000, 106). Thus, Central American criminal statistics relate to hegemonic discourses on violence, with the police being one of the most powerful speakers involved. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the homicide level in El Salvador is exceptionally high compared to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Throughout Central America, reported homicides are increasing.³ Are these data reflections of the “real” degree of fatal violence, or do they reflect crimes reported to the police and other government agencies?

Although (organized) youth violence is unquestionably a significant pattern of violence in Central American societies, our findings suggest that the very perception of youth violence is tied to a multifaceted imagery. As an extension of the North American Crime Myth, the discourse on North American Transnational Youth Gangs (Johnson and Muhlhausen 2005) has swept through Central America, producing the vivid myth of Central American youth gangs as a transnationally organized crime structure. From national and sub-national perspectives, then, this myth becomes off-centered, shifting from its transnational mean-

ing to diverse fields of national and local significance. Through my reading of Central American discourses on youth violence, I seek to explain what underlies the common understanding of *pandillas* or *maras*. The myth of youth gangs becomes a mobilizing myth if and only if it is tied to vital national myths. The myth of Costa Rica being the non-violent Latin American exception and the myth of Nicaragua being a safe country are key features of contemporary national debates. In El Salvador, on the other hand, the myth of a war-torn society being invaded by criminal adolescents permeates daily life. Although they may be obvious, it is important to highlight two key aspects of this particular case: First, El Salvador is a country highly affected by both criminal activity and street gangs. Second, the phenomenon of *maras* has undergone significant changes in recent years, with youth gangs metamorphosing into organized criminal structures. At the same time, public politics changed from *mano dura* (iron fist) to efforts to combat organized crime, narcotics trade, and corruption. However, what does not fade is the initial perception of male, marginalized adolescents being “at risk.” In June 2011, President Funes presented his plan to introduce forced military service for “high-risk” teenagers (*Prensa Libre*, June 1, 2011).

What exactly does “myth” mean? A myth is a narrative synthesis of specific aspects of social life that is true for those who believe in it. The argument that crime myths create fear and justify repressive social control strategies is not new (Wright 1985; Ainsworth 2000; Garland 1996; Robinson 2000). Crime myths often evolve from certain crime stories and then become both exaggerated and over-generalized. In contrast to authors like Robinson (2000), who considers all crime myths to be untrue, I follow Katz’s argumentation (2003, 196):

Three features are salient in assessing whether a belief is a myth. First, myths are not necessarily false, they are ideas about matters that, under current states of evidence and by the use of the logic of empirical research, cannot be established as true or false. Second, myths are not just guesses about the unknown; they

3 Intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants: Costa Rica: 6.4 (2002), 6.6 (2004), 8.0 (2006), 11.3 (2010); El Salvador: 47.3 (2002), 64.6 (2004), 64.7

(2006), 66.0 (2010); Nicaragua: 10.6 (2002), 12.1 (2004), 13.1 (2006), 13.2 (2010); source: UNODC homicide data: [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html)

[analysis/homicide.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html).

are beliefs that resonate deeply because they address immediate existential concerns that they would resolve with presumptions. Third, myths are not simply emotionally evocative fantasies about central matters; they are profoundly consequential for the distribution of power in society.

In defining deviant social groups, crime myths produce and reproduce patterns of social exclusion. This is especially true for the vivid image of monstrous youth gangs, which tends to dramatize and overgeneralize the problem of youth violence. This image is profoundly consequential for the identification of both problems to be solved and social groups to be targeted. What if gang violence is not the key problem, but rather elitist attitudes, gender-based violence, and/or corruption on a grand scale? If the Central American crime myth has spread throughout the region, however, it is just as likely that a “real” problem of youth violence may exist at the local level. But if this is the case, the perception of insecurity tends to be shaped by a larger process of mystification. What is felt in Central American neighbourhoods, as we shall see in the following, is both a reflection and further complication of the vivid image of monstrous youth gangs.

3. El Salvador: The *Mara* Paradigm

Violence and repression shaped the history of twentieth-century El Salvador. Since 1931, there have been six successful military coups and numerous fraudulent elections, as well as short periods of democratic opening.⁴ From the late 1970s until January 1992, El Salvador experienced a guerrilla war between the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and the state. After the peace accords were signed, the FMLN became a political party and experienced factional splits as well as programmatic agreements. The record on implementation of the peace accords is mixed (Studemeister 2001; Zinecker 2004). Although there have been positive achievements such as the demobilization of military and guerrilla forces, the subordination of the military to civilian authorities, and, most notably, the end of the war, the peace settlement has been “undermined by halfhearted compliance” (Karl 1995, 75)

and “there also have been notorious deficiencies” (Cañas and Dada 1999, 73). The restoration of democratic rule in the 1980s was an “elite settlement” (Higley and Gunther 1992), expressing the political project of “self-modernized” sectors of the Salvadorian oligarchy (Zinecker 2004, 25). The political system has been highly polarized for decades. “Ideology has been a major determinant of the vote in El Salvador ever since the first postconflict elections in 1994” (Azpuru 2010, 129).

After two decades of one-party rule by the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), the 2009 presidential elections produced a victory for the FMLN. Mauricio Funes, a well-known journalist, was the first FMLN presidential candidate not to be a former guerrilla commander. During his campaign, Mauricio Funes used the Obama-style slogan “Nace la Esperanza, viene el cambio” (Hope is born, change is coming) to indicate his moderate approach to national politics. Since taking office, President Funes has made broad-based economic growth, job creation, and fighting crime his top priorities.

At the time of our research, the debate on violence was inextricably linked to the issues of homicide and youth gangs and was severely limited by a national and international obsession with the latter. The question of “how the street gangs took Central America” (Arana 2005) had evolved to become the center of public debate, drawing attention and discussion away from the multifaceted character of violence (Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2008).

It is important to note that the current meaning of *maras* arose out of a complex and contradictory public process. Within a few years after the end of the war, public concern about delinquency and “low intensity peace” (Ribera 1997, 128) had risen. In the mid-1990s, right-wing politicians exploited the issue, calling for tougher law enforcement and, particularly, the death penalty (Vickers 1999, 400). While the academic debate focused on the role of the media and psychosocial explanations for exploding homicide rates

⁴ Mass violence dates back to 1932, when military and paramilitary forces killed an estimated thirty thousand people in the wake of a peasant

uprising, organized by local activists and members of the communist party (Dalton 1997, 163–220). The *matanza* is remembered as one of the main

turning points of Salvadorian history (Martí i Puig 2004, 54).

(Armando González 1997; Cruz 1997), the *maras* were treated as a juvenile phenomenon rather than a threat to national security (Smutt and Miranda 1998, Cruz and Portillo 1998). Within this particular context of political polarization, statements on violence became increasingly focused on juvenile delinquency.

In July 2003, President Flores announced his anti-gang campaign, Plan Mano Dura (the “iron-fist” plan), centered around raids and detentions (Peez 2011). One month later, according to *El Nuevo Diario* (August 23, 2003), the police had arrested 2,438 youths for having tattoos and for their style of dress, with 1,505 of them already having been released again. In October 2003, parliament passed the anti-gang law, which defined gang membership as a crime punishable by imprisonment. As the media began extensive coverage of the “total war” against youth gangs, repeatedly reporting on anti-gang efforts and crimes supposedly committed by gang members, the official electoral campaign started. During the first *foro presidencial*, a presidential campaign debate held in November 2003, Saca was asked: “Tony, why should the Salvadorans vote for Tony Saca?” Interestingly, while the ARENA candidate referred to honesty (“manos limpias”), freedoms (of expression, economic, religious), dialogue, and foreign investment, he did not mention public security or anti-gang policies. However, later on in the campaign, ARENA disseminated a manifesto entitled *País Seguro: Plan de Gobierno 2004–2009*, in which the “iron fist” against youth gangs is portrayed as the most important emergency measure to be taken.⁵ As discourses on violence are, in Foucault’s words, “interlocking, hierarchized, and all highly articulated around a cluster of power relations” (2006, 540), ARENA was able to restrict other representations of public insecurity. On the other hand, transnational networks of donor agencies and NGOs tend to play a critical role in defining political priorities and, thus, violent realities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Society Without Violence

Program, established in 1998, provided an important public space in which the discourse on violence could flourish.⁶ A number of conferences were held to cover topics such as prevention strategies, media representations of violence, and gender-based violence (PNUD 2004, 2006). However, some of these issues were overlooked in subsequent debates. While they were not completely negated, they were relegated to discursive niches. One study, for instance, points out that Salvadorian newspapers “prioritize and accentuate violent acts committed by *maras* and marginalize information related to violence against women” (translated from *Las Dignas* 2006, 25).

As our qualitative data indicate, the awareness of daily insecurity tends to be multifaceted, with the hegemonic discourse on youth violence being questioned and other forms of violence being perceived as an imminent threat, albeit with varying degrees of sincerity. A paramedic told us:

And nowadays, well, in quotation marks, we live a peace process after an armed conflict, but with regard to violence, it has not been contained, and I’m not only talking about the situation of armed violence, in the typical case of, let’s call them, social groups, mistakenly called *maras* and all that, but rather there is domestic violence, there is violence in the streets, there is traffic violence, there is violence of all kinds, so we are not just transporting people assaulted by non-legal armed people [gente armada no legal] but we are bringing in children who have been mistreated by their parents, women who have been mistreated by their husbands, and we are even getting to a point where men are also mistreated by their wives [laughter]. (Interview, El Salvador, December 7, 2006)

As described above, the 2004 electoral campaign was the central point from which the discourse on organized and monstrous youth violence emanated. However, the *mano dura* policy was not the only feature of the electoral process. The media and ARENA also stoked fears of communism, trying to establish a relationship between the FMLN and international terrorism. Moreover, the media highlighted the US administration’s preoccupation with leftist

5 Only one type of perpetrator is specified in the text: “The minor law-breaker and young adult in conflict with the law,” “the youths” and “the *maras*.” When referring to delinquency and crime less concretely, perpetrators are not specifically mentioned.

6 In 2005 and 2006, the programme implemented an Arms-Free Municipalities Project in two pilot municipalities, San Martín and Ilopango.

governments, suggesting the possibility of deportations and the drying up of remittances, the financial lifeline that still keeps the Salvadorian economy running. The *mano dura* thus began to form an integral part of ARENA's rhetorical repertoire, but was not the only strategy used.⁷

In the Salvadorian case, the entrepreneurial sector is key for both political agenda setting and policy formulation. While the Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEP) was participating in bodies such as the National Commission on Citizen Security and Social Peace, the right-wing think tank FUSADES has propagated a specific understanding of what is threatening to investors. FUSADES, far from restricting its debate to “iron fist” policies, proposes a catalogue of measures that includes small arms control, law enforcement, prevention, rehabilitation, and institution building (Pleitez Chávez 2006). Thus, the more sophisticated concept of the enemy, as applied by Mauricio Funes, is also backed by the most powerful sector of Salvadorian society. In recent years, we have witnessed an elite discourse shifting from obsession with *maras* to a more multifaceted threat analysis. On a national level, the fear of marginalized youth has given way to the fear of organized crime. In his second anniversary address, Funes identified insecurity and low productivity as the main obstacles to development (*La Prensa Gráfica*, June 2, 2011). However, as many commentators noted, the president failed to touch on the social roots of insecurity: the neoliberal model.

Altogether, the image of monstrous youth gangs had a profound effect on the political trajectory in post-conflict El Salvador. In this process, policy makers did not simply react to a given problem. Instead, they proactively identified and prioritized the problem of juvenile delinquency. With the transformation of policy goals into repressive anti-gang policy, Salvadorian policy makers introduced a “punitive populism” (Wolf 2009, 88) that ultimately proved counterproductive. Although the change of government had a visible impact on agenda-setting, the overall fear of youth is unlikely to disappear.

4. Nicaragua: Contested Evidence on Insecurity

In contrast to El Salvador, popular uprising and guerrilla warfare were successful in Nicaragua. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of building a trans-isthmian canal had increased U.S. attention to the region. The following decades were marked by long periods of U.S. military occupation of Nicaragua (1909–1919, 1912–1925, 1926–1933) and a guerrilla uprising headed by Augusto César Sandino. In the early 1930s, U.S. troops withdrew and gave way to the Somoza dynasty that was to rule the country for almost fifty years.

As mentioned above, democracy came through insurrection. After their revolutionary triumph in July 1979, the Sandinistas encouraged a mixed economy and carried out national crusades against illiteracy and disease. It is important to recognize that the “first half decade of Sandinista rule ... featured experimentation, innovation, and some significant success in the area of politics” (Walker 2000, 74). Espousing an ideological *mélange* or “*sincretismo político*” (Cardenal 2004, 540), the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) fostered a system of mass organizations, with the Comités de Defensa Sandinista (CDR) being among the most grassroots organizations. They functioned both as local administrative units for food distribution and as neighborhood *vigilancias* (vigilance committees).

Although the second half of the Sandinistas' rule (1985–1990) saw important political achievements (constitutional process, elections), this period was shaped by the Contra War and the steady decline of both the economy and social programs, as well as a reversal of the gains in participatory democracy (Figueroa Ibarra 1993, 68–78, Walker 2000, 76–77, Prevost 1997, 154–55). Soon after its electoral defeat in 1990, the FSLN experienced internal struggles and organized Sandinista civil society imploded (Polakoff and La Ramée 1997).⁸ Since the late 1990s, Nicaraguan politics has been severely constricted by the *pacto*, a power-sharing pact between Daniel Ortega (FSLN) and

7 For more information about the 2006 electoral process, see Guzmán, Peraza, and Rivera (2006).

8 The Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista (MRS) broke away from the FSLN in 1995, on the grounds that the political stance of the post-insur-

rectionist FSLN was dominated by the authoritarian pragmatism of Daniel Ortega, oscillating between cooperation and confrontation (Close 2005, 123).

then head of state Arnoldo Alemán (Partido Liberal Constitucionalista, PLC). Even after Alemán was convicted of corruption in 2003, the *pacto* permitted president Bolaños little room for leadership. Together with Cardinal Obando y Bravo, head of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, Ortega and Alemán formed a powerful triumvirate, corrupting democratic governance.

In the 2006 presidential elections, former president Daniel Ortega (1985–1990) was reelected with 37.99 percent of the vote. Since then, he has managed to bridge the gap between the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), proposed by the Venezuelan government. Ortega introduced new anti-poverty programs and centralized power. His government's active efforts to "monarchize and privatize the state" (Rocha 2010) have caused severe friction within Nicaraguan society. At the time of writing, voters had just elected Ortega for a fourth term, ignoring the constitution's term limits.

In Nicaragua, the importance of insecurity in public discourse is much more difficult to ascertain. Until 2006, public life in Nicaragua was overshadowed by an elite discourse that described Nicaragua as a safe country (Rocha 2005). On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the National Police, President Bolaños reported on the state of (in)security: "The citizen security we have achieved is enviable, it is beginning to constitute a legend in Latin America" (translated from *La Prensa*, August 6, 2004). On the same occasion, the head of the National Police, Edwin Cordero, referred to a decline in youth gangs (*pandillas*) and traffic accidents, saying that the police had achieved success both in combating the sale of illegal drugs and in establishing a network of women's police stations. A consultant working for a powerful semi-state consulting agency in Nicaragua told us:

Nicaragua is one of the most secure countries in Central America. ... yes, you notice security more in the urban part, in the rural part it is a bit more complicated, or in the poorest sectors of Nicaragua, or in the poor neighborhoods in Managua, you sense a bit more insecurity, because, OK, maybe it's a bit, well, maybe a bit strange, but, yes there are some hold-ups among the poorest people. (Interview, Nicaragua, December 14, 2006)

This image was reinforced by high-ranking police officials, who repeatedly claimed that "criminal violence is minimal" (Rocha 2005, 5). Given this image of Nicaragua as a safe country, most of the presidential candidates avoided the issue of violence during the 2006 electoral campaign. However, the FSLN presidential candidate Daniel Ortega, who refused to participate in pre-electoral "bourgeois" media events, addressed his electorate by touring the country and via party structures. His entourage touched upon the major preoccupations of poor people, including insecurity and the supply of electricity. Douglas Pérez, National Coordinator of the Communal Movement, stated:

Adolescents are generally criminalized, and the problem comes from the system ... we want a government that ... like we have been in the 1980s. (translated from FSLN 2006)

In general, our findings suggest that Nicaragua was a discursively divided country in 2006, with total insecurity and unrestricted freedom forming antithetical public perceptions. It is crucial to point out that the image of Nicaragua as a safe country was produced not only by members of the elite, but also by people belonging to the lower strata of society. A well-educated employee of the security company ULTRANIC stated that Nicaragua

is sane, relatively sane; of course, there are incidents ... Here it [the problem] is small, because it is a small country, everybody knows each other, the capital does not provide the conditions for gangs to organize. (Interview, Nicaragua, November 24, 2006)

Many Nicaraguans perceive crime as something imported or happening elsewhere. "Aquí es sano, pero ..." (here it is sane, but ...) is a phrase often heard in Nicaragua, and also in other Central American countries. On the other hand, large sectors of society perceive violent crime as an important problem affecting the country. The "talk of crime" often focuses on the poor, and some of our interviewees stated that criminal behavior is a rational choice made by people facing famine wages and "condiciones muy jodidas de trabajo" (very fucked up working conditions) (theater educator, Nicaragua, October 25, 2006). The latest IEEPP opinion poll (2010, 13–15) shows that 77.7 percent of respondents perceived ordinary crime as the main problem of insecurity. 38.4 percent referred to youth violence, and

31.1 percent to gender-based violence. Interestingly, 65.6 percent of the respondents identified insecurity as a consequence of unemployment. In general, the Nicaraguan public debate on insecurity tends to address socio-economic causes, with the lack of prospects at the center of many statements on the crime situation. However, there are conflicting views on the magnitude of youth violence.

First, the National Police celebrates a successful deactivation of *pandillas*. In a recent report, the police identify twenty youth gangs (*pandillas juveniles*) with 369 members and 163 at-risk juvenile peer-groups (*grupos juveniles en alto riesgo social*). Moreover, the police claim to have “re-integrated” 3,979 adolescents between 2002 and 2007 (see also *La Prensa*, February 26, 2010, and October 23, 2010).

Second, some analysts state that Nicaraguan *pandillas* were “metamorphosing into a drug institution” (Rodgers 2008, 84). According to Oscar Bonilla, director of the Salvadorian National Council for Public Security, Nicaragua has already imported the brutal Mara Dieciocho and Salvatrucha from Central America’s northern triangle – El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (CENIDH 2010, 71, see also *La Prensa*, April 21, 2010).

Third, there is a growing concern about the manipulation of *pandillas* for political purposes. As mentioned above, Ortega’s return to power has been accompanied by growing repression, including police raids, criminal charges, and harassment of prominent opposition figures and Sandinista dissidents like Ernesto Cardenal, Mónica Baltodrano, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, and Dora Maria Tellez. After the 2008 municipal elections, political demonstrations were met with violence. “Meanwhile, bands of young Sandinista-linked thugs, claiming to be the ‘owners of the streets,’ attacked demonstrators while the police stood idly by” (Burbach 2009, 37; see also CENIDH 2010, 65–66). Vilma Núñez, director of the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), declared that the adolescents

were manipulated by the government (*La Prensa*, November 9, 2009). The adolescents were supplied with weapons, food, and bus fares. As Rocha notes, “the aggression was produced by and in the context of an absence of political and social morality” (2008). Most strikingly, it remains unclear whether these adolescents were actually gang members or not.

5. Costa Rica: Crime and Moral Decline

Following the annulment of presidential election results in March 1948, Costa Rica experienced a short civil war, which brought José Figueres into power. Since then, the political system has displayed great stability, based on a party system effectively dominated by two parties, the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) and the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC). A commitment to democracy, the abolition of the army, and the “Bismarckian character of the Costa Rican state” (Davis, Aguilar, and Speer 1999, 43) have become core features of national identity. In contrast to other Central American countries, non-communist political society has been embedded into an institutional setting characterized by a high level of political freedom. If the second half of the twentieth century was characterized by the consolidation of democracy and organized civil society (Davis, Aguilar, and Speer 1999, 44), the turn of the millennium witnessed a significant change. The “transition to neoliberalism” (Booth 2000, 101) of the late 1980s implied the replacement of the social democratic model with structural adjustment and cutbacks in social security, education, and health. While political decision-making was dominated by decrees, voters were faced with the increasing “sameness of the PLN and PUSC” (Booth 2000, 96). The 2006 election returned Óscar Arias (PLN), the president and famous Nobel Laureate, to office but brought the bipartisan model to an end.⁹ In 2010, Minister of Justice Laura Chinchilla (PLN) won the presidential elections.

In contrast to El Salvador and Nicaragua, political parties and decision-making bodies in Costa Rica tend to highlight

⁹ Surprisingly, the Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), founded in 2000 by Ottón Solís, received 38.9 percent of the vote, and the PUSC suffered a devastating defeat, winning only 3.5 percent. The “new-

comerís” appeal to the electorate was successful because he presented the PAC as a force opposing free trade and corruption.

the very perception of insecurity as a major problem. The “real” level of crime and the perception of insecurity are often discussed as two sides of the same coin. For instance, the final document of the PLN party congress in May 2005 and the forty-nine-page PLN *Programa de Gobierno 2006–2010* both refer to a dramatic increase in violence and insecurity, linked to a persistent fear of crime. The PLN proposed to “stop the increase in delinquency and reduce the acute perception of insecurity that is currently a burden on the Costa Rican population” (translated from PLN 2006, 24). In recent years, the twofold problem of increasing crime and increasing fear has been perceived as one of the main obstacles to human development in Costa Rica. Notably, awareness of rising insecurity has circulated within the realm of academic debates linked to international organizations (Proyecto Estado de La Nación 2000, PNUD 2005, Rico 2006).

However, it appears that the twofold problem of increasing crime and fear was not at the center of the electoral process in 2006. While the electoral platforms of both the PAC and the PLN included the issue of insecurity, promising an “integral-preventive vision” (PAC 2006), the strengthening of the police, and the recovery of values and norms, media debates focused on free trade, privatization, the social system, and, most notably, the personalities of the presidential candidates. The issue of violent crime entered the stage in 2010. During the presidential campaign, Minister of Justice Laura Chinchilla emphasized conservative sexual policies as well as the promotion of free trade and foreign investment. However, her top priority was the improvement of public security and, especially, the introduction of new anti-crime policies.

In Costa Rica, the increase in crime is not perceived as being explosive in nature, but rather as being linked to a steady socio-economic decline since the mid-1980s. It is important to note that a perceived or real dramatic increase in robberies has emerged as a thematic node associated with other leitmotifs such as drug consumption and moral decline (Rico 2006, 17, 25–26). The issue of “ordinary violence” is not treated prominently in *La Nación*, but where it is addressed, it is treated intensively (Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2009). Media reports reflect an ongoing concern that

the country is facing a permanent decline linked to a deterioration of the foundations of the social security system and the social fabric of society. By attributing crime to moral decline, *La Nación*, as well as other important voices, establishes an argument that leads to the stigmatization of youth. Consider, for example, Ottón Solís’s *Convocatoria a la Ciudadanía*. In this document, the PAC associates crime and insecurity with social exclusion, loss of solidarity, impunity and corruption, the transnationalization of organized crime, and “domestic violence, especially violence against women” (PAC 2006, 43–44). The chapter on insecurity culminates in a statement on rehabilitation measures with *infractores* (lawbreakers), “children and adolescents with criminal behavior,” “youth gangs” (*pandillas juveniles*), and “marginalized youth from rural and urban areas” as the focus groups. How does the diagnosis of crime symptoms translate into the definition of perpetrators to be reintegrated into society? It is crucial to note that the Costa Rican “talk of crime” is not a discussion about youth gangs, but rather a conversation about moral decline, with the (imagined) criminal behavior of adolescents serving as a vivid leitmotif.

6. Organized Youth Violence as a Discursive Node

Members of the political establishment and international think tank researchers play a key role in the process through which the meaning of youth gangs (*pandillas, maras*) is progressively created. The life-threatening scenario of brutal and hierarchical gang culture, however, evolves into something more fluid as we take other public realms into account.

In general, “fear of youth” is not necessarily linked to lifeworld experiences. This is best explained with an example. Our data set, gathered in 2006, includes 226 essays written by students from rural and urban, marginal and upper middle-class schools (Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2007). The survey was carried out in two steps. The first question was not directly linked to problems of crime, violence, and insecurity but allowed for a variety of answers: “Imagine you were the president of the country. What are the country’s most important problems and how would you solve them?” The second question referred directly to lifeworld experience: “Do you feel secure in your family/neighborhood/vil-

lage/town/country? Why? Why not?” The students’ essays show that there are national differences in the perception of threats (Peez 2011). 80 percent of the Salvadorian students identified problems related to violence, crime, and (physical) insecurity as major problems of their country, compared to 67 percent of the Costa Rican students and 25.6 percent of the Nicaraguan students. There is a correlation between print media discourses and students’ perception, with the latter differing from “real” crime rates. Furthermore, our data indicate that the image of youth gangs is connected to class and patterns of social exclusion. In their answers to the open question that was not directly related to violence, sixteen (out of nineteen) Salvadorian upper-middle-class students mentioned youth violence as a major problem of the country, while only thirty-four (out of fifty-two) students from Salvadorian urban public schools identified issues related to crime and violence as important problems. Are students from an upper middle-class social background – which, in San Salvador includes certain standards of private security – more sensitive to crime problems than their marginalized peers? Our data indicate that the latter tend to stress other issues such as poverty, inequality, and joblessness. Most interestingly, however, only four (out of nineteen) Salvadorian students from private schools mentioned youth violence as a problem related to their own personal security. In contrast, thirty-four (out of fifty-two) students from marginalized urban schools considered youth violence to have an effect on their own lives. This indicates that even in marginalized neighborhoods, fear of youth gangs seems not to be omnipresent.

The image of *maras*, however, evokes feelings of fear that have gradually become internalized. This image of organized youth violence has emerged as a symbol for social deterioration and exploding crime rates. Our interviewees often drew on this symbol of the *mara* when they were asked to compare the current situation with the past or to comment on the statement that Central America is one of the most violent regions of the world. A Costa Rican priest stated:

Yes, I think so [that Central America is one of the most violent regions of the world], yes I think so. In other Central American countries, it is worse and, for example, in El Salvador the *maras*, it’s terrible, it’s terrible. (Interview, Costa Rica, November 4, 2006)

A taxi driver from El Salvador said:

And what we have here is violence, nothing but violence, and I think that you will eliminate this violence only if you eliminate these *maras*. (Interview, El Salvador, November 28, 2006)

A female cook:

Yes, I think so, El Salvador is the country that has more violence, more assassinations, rapes for nothing, they kill people without any reason, they assault people without any reason because there are many *mareros* and many delinquents. I think, yes, El Salvador has more delinquency. (Interview, El Salvador, 9 December 2006)

It is important to note that the cook identifies two groups of perpetrators, *mareros* and delinquents, and presumes them to be guilty of a variety of crimes. Although most interviewees also refer to other groups of perpetrators and other violent settings including, for instance, school massacres in the United States, the war in Iraq, suicide bombers, Colombian mass violence, and insecurity in Somalia, it appears that the very notion of *maras* provides a strong argument.

In recent years, the concept of *pandillas/maras* has entered the political vocabulary. As political decision-makers, among them presidents, members of parliament, and international consultants, have begun to turn their attention towards public security, youth gangs have increasingly been labeled as the perpetrator par excellence. It is crucial to underline, however, that the political intentions and socio-economic settings have differed from country to country.

According to Rocha, various factors have contributed to the identification of Nicaraguan youth gangs as a major target group to be reached by policy interventions. What has mattered most is the transformation of the Sandinista police into the National Police. The existence of parallel Sandinista and traditional elite networks within the National Police “has generated different discourses and actions towards youth violence” (Rocha 2005, 12), with powerful international donor agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank contributing to making the rehabilitation/prevention of youth violence a major prior-

ity.¹⁰ In general, it appears that Nicaraguan decision-makers use efforts to reintegrate so-called “young people at risk” as a marker of difference, and something that indicates the democratic nature of Nicaraguan politics. They also take up arguments that are circulating in other spheres of public life in Nicaragua. After the Sandinistas’ electoral defeat in 1990, NGOs dealing with child protection appeared throughout the country. The Instituto de Promoción Humana-Estelí (INPRHU-Estelí), the Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (CEPREV), and the Fundación de Protección de los Derechos de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Infractores de la Ley (FUNPRODE) are some of the most important Nicaraguan NGOs working with “adolescents at risk.” All share the characteristic of being dependent on foreign financial resources. A second, and more important, shared feature is participation in transnational advocacy networks. Since the ideas of international consultants, Nicaraguan decision-makers, and NGO activists complement one another, the notion of youth violence has emerged as a substantial issue in public spheres.

In contrast to Nicaragua, the networked, organized civil society in El Salvador has been an ineffective counterweight to official agenda-setting and thus not a policy multiplier. While ARENA has used the *maras* label as a meta-symbol for evil, trying to establish the idea of close ties between *maras*, Jihadist terrorism, and the FMLN, the latter has circumnavigated the issue of youth violence, focusing instead on power relations and the socio-economic dimensions of development. Given the high degree of political polarization, the discursive power of organized civil society has been severely limited for a long time. Since anti-gang policies have been adopted, human rights organizations, churches, universities, and non-organized professionals have criticized the state for violating human rights and exaggerating the problem of youth violence. Backed by international NGOs and intergovernmental organizations, organized civil society has sought to establish a counter-

weight to official statements. In general, critical views on repressive anti-gang rhetoric can be articulated, but they tend to be ignored by the mass media. Recently, however, U.S. and Colombian “success” stories appear to have created renewed interest in the promotion of alternative anti-crime strategies by the business sector, regardless of whether or not these strategies are repressive. Certain interventions by FUSADES (see above) signaled a strategic shift from “iron fist” policies to more comprehensive anti-crime policies.

In Costa Rica, the stigmatization of youth has not yet been translated into policy. Rather, the classification of youth as the social group most susceptible to crime and anti-social behavior corresponds to the widespread perception that Costa Rica is facing a moral decline. The 2005 PLN electoral platform includes a similar argument, stating that Costa Rica is suffering from a norms and identity crisis. Therefore, state policies should “promote generation rescue, inspired by new principles and norms, creating the conditions for a renewed culture of social cohabitation that allows for the reversal of the observed tendencies” (translated from PLN 2005, item 151). Why is a generation to be rescued? Or, in other words, why do strategies designed to prevent crime overlook adult criminals and violators and refer solely to the imagined perpetrators of tomorrow? As described above, adolescents at risk tend to be the only group of perpetrators that is *named*.

In conclusion, as explained above, public discourses on youth violence differ from country to country, with important thematic nodes linked to their respective political history. The seed of fear is not automatically nourished by “real” violent incidents but rather by discursive events. Moreover, we have shown that the public discourse on violence is not a monolithic phenomenon, but rather a series of overlapping or contradictory discourses emanating from a variety of hegemonic publics and “counter-publics” (Fraser 1992).

¹⁰ A variety of institutions dealing with youth violence and/or “young people at risk” have been established since the late 1990s, with the National Secretary of Youth Affairs (Secretaría de la Juventud) and

the Special Ombudsman’s Office for Children and Adolescents (Procuraduría Especial de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) being the most important.

7. Conclusion

The argument that there are discrepancies between the portrayal of monstrous Central American youth gangs and social reality is not new. Previous writings have highlighted the complex and often dispersed nature of the Central American gang phenomenon:

While there is no doubt that a significant proportion of regional violence is attributable to the phenomenon, gangs are relatively local-level security issues rather than the transnational threat that the media and some policy outlets make them out to be. (Rodgers, Muggah, and Stevenson 2009, 23).

The combination of scant empirical evidence and dramatizing reports has fostered the spread of myths about organized youth violence: (1) youth violence is exploding; (2) North American transnational youth gangs have “growing tentacles” (Muhlhausen 2005); and (3) Central American neighborhoods are struck with fear.

There are, however, significant discrepancies here. Our qualitative data indicate that national discourses on violence are intrinsically tied to national myths. The myth of Costa Rica being a “peace-loving nation” (Huhn 2009), the myth of pre-Ortega Nicaragua being a secure country (Oettler 2009), and the myth of El Salvador being invaded by criminal adolescents (and, more recently, by mafia organizations) are key features of contemporary national debates. In Central America the diverging paths of development seem to converge in terms of crime policy. The three cases discussed in this paper encompass countries with high and medium human development (Costa Rica vs. El Salvador and Nicaragua), countries with and without a recent history of internal war (El Salvador and Nicaragua vs. Costa Rica) and countries with crime rates usually perceived as exploding (El Salvador), increasing (Costa Rica) or low (Nicaragua). These contextual features may best be understood as a complex matrix that affects discourse content indirectly, allowing for overlapping or even contradictory messages. Irrespective of national differences, however, Central American crime myths are created and perpetuated mainly by mass media, politicians, and social scientists and serve to justify elitist status quo politics.

On the other hand, it is crucial to note that Central America is a “bounded system” (Stake 2000), an interdependent con-

figuration of societies characterized by porous borders. There is a cross-national discursive leitmotif focusing on the ever-present danger of youth violence, moral decline, and social disintegration. The notion of organized youth violence has become a central feature of both national and international debates on violent Central American “realities.”

The vivid image of monstrous youth gangs is widespread but by no means automatically associated with lifeworld experience or sufficient empirical evidence. The talk of intentional crime, whether regarding homicide or organized youth violence, is by no means the only talk of violence found in public spheres in Central America (Moodie 2010; Hume 2008). What matters to many of our interviewees are issues related to large-scale corruption, structural violence, and/or gender-based violence (Huhn 2009; Peetz 2011; Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2007). The talk of crime is performed within ever-shifting intersections of ethnicity, class, and gender (see Anderson, Hill, and Collins 2001; Johnson 2001). Moreover, public spheres are often divided along residential lines. Various domains of oppression and privilege come together in the rhetoric of (in)security. As our data indicate, the “talk of crime” (Caldeira 2000) serves to create and perpetuate a patchwork of inequalities. There are, for instance, white female NGO activists who reproduce prejudices against the poor. There are people from poor neighborhoods who identify other poor neighborhoods as the danger spots, and there are machos from all strata of society laden with prejudices against women. On the other hand, there are men who communicate feminist messages and people from poor neighborhoods who demystify the image of the dangerous poor. And, of course, there are white feminists engaged in the struggle against prejudice. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that discourses on violence are plurivocal and often ambiguous, with a wide range of speakers bound to different public realms. Perceptions of insecurity are closely tied to a matrix of privilege and discrimination, with income, gender, sexual orientation, and residential background being important, albeit not determinative, factors affecting fear.

The perception of youth violence is multifaceted, with cross-sectoral and cross-border discursive strings as well as national and subnational peculiarities. As Downs pointed

out thirty years ago, every problem of crucial importance to society “leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then – though still largely unresolved – gradually fades from the center of public attention” (1998, 100). In public discourse, though, issues come and go in public attention. According to Downs, the “issue attention cycle” usually begins with a series of dramatic events resulting in “alarmed discovery” and “euphoric enthusiasm” that the problem can be quickly solved (*ibid.*). Applying this concept to the intertwined Central American cases, we can identify different stages of national agenda-setting and po-

licy formulation. While the problem of youth violence is still leaping into prominence in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, it is already fading from the center of public attention in El Salvador. Nevertheless, the iconographic image of monstrous youth gangs that originate in marginalized neighborhoods will have an enduring effect on collective memory. In Enteman’s words: “even a million words may not be able to undo the negative impacts of a single bad picture” (2003, 27). The picture of gang members with their tattooed faces and torsos will endure as long as “adolescents at risk” are seen as a menace to the social order.

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Anika Oettler

oettler@staff.uni-marburg.de