

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE REVOLUTION?Guatemala City's *Maras* from Life to Death

The vivacity of the popular and democratic movement for radical social change permeated Guatemala City in the late 1970s, even in the face of state violence. In 1977 over 100,000 city residents turned out to greet and support eighty Mam miners who had walked for days from the highlands to the capital to publicize their struggle for a union in a tungsten mine. One year later, in October 1978, students, private and public sector workers, young and old barrio residents, and almost everyone else in the city brought it to a complete stop to oppose an increase in the bus fares and to demand higher wages. On May 1, 1980, some fifty thousand marched in the last massive urban demonstration of the twentieth century, faces covered, under banners that read "For a Revolutionary Guatemala," and "Nicaragua Today, Guatemala Tomorrow." It was unimaginable that by 2010, juvenile gangs, and not revolutionaries, would so infuse the city's imagination and its dynamics.

The uproar about juvenile gangs came on the heels of the military's breakneck defeat of that possible future of popular revolution. The *maras* made their first public appearance in 1985 as part of a student demonstration against a bus fare increase. The massive publicity generated by the media, politicians, and the National Police about the presumed dangers of these new gangs contrasted sharply with the complete silence surrounding the peak of the military's ongoing genocidal war in the early 1980s, when hundreds of villages were destroyed and over 200,000 people slaughtered in the most sadistic acts of terrorism military leaders could devise.

In 1987, wishing to make sense of this abrupt emphasis on juvenile crime in a nation racked by extraordinary state violence, three researchers from

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the new Association for the Advancement of Social Sciences in Guatemala (AVANCSO), Nora Figueroa, Yolanda Castillo Maldonado, and I, studied these new maras. We interviewed dozens of *mareros* (gang members) about family, work, school, and their views on life and their gangs. Our findings, published in 1988 by AVANCSO in a monograph titled *Por Si Mismos: Un estudio preliminar de las Maras en la Ciudad de Guatemala* (On Their Own: A Preliminary Study of Gangs in Guatemala City), showed that the maras offered clues, but not danger, to the world around them. Gang members had grown up within a city permeated by the popular movement's visions and interpretations. Although anxious about life, they celebrated it, and they concerned themselves with the communities that surrounded them. Their "us" included the poor; the "asshole wealthy" or *burgueses* constituted their "them."

By the time of the 1996 peace accords, these maras had become violent worlds unto themselves; their "us" had become the gang, and their "them" was everyone else, including the poor. Although they are doubtless accused of far more crimes than they commit, into the twenty-first century many *mareros* have become the victimizers they were originally wrongly accused of being. In addition, and even more common and striking than their violence, is their obsession with death. According to their own version of themselves, they now kill to keep control, punish, defend, prove themselves, and earn a living; in turn they expect to be murdered before they reach their mid-twenties (Demoscopia 2007).

In what follows I describe the gangs of the mid-1980s and contrast them to those of later years. I suggest that the *mareros*' growing violence and their use of death as a fundamental resource are in part rooted in the military's successful use of "excessively cruel" violence to massively murder Guatemalans as the means to finish off fifty years of unfinished history in which radical political movements polarized Guatemala in a battle for its destiny.¹ The shift in the urban maras is also, again in part, the consequence of one of the military's major accomplishments: the destruction of an urban *barrio* culture of class solidarity, a culture that was reflected in the earlier maras' social imaginary.

The 1980s: Gangs to Live For

In September 1985 students from Rafael Aqueche High School in Guatemala City took to the streets to protest an increase in bus fares, and for days thousands of young people burned buses and engaged the police before the municipal government rescinded the price hike. The police termed bands of roaming youth *maras*, which, according to the head of public relations for the Guatemalan National Police, comes from *Marabunta*, a plague of red ants

that relentlessly devours humans.² A *marero* named Victor, who hung out with his friends at Plaza Vivar, a rundown mall on Sexta Avenida in the city's dingy downtown, remembered, "The guys from the press and the cops said 'Here comes the Marabunta!' And that's how it came to us and we started the Mara Plaza Vivar Capitol."³

By 1987 boys and girls ranging from fifteen to nineteen had created over sixty maras, with names that represented a place or suggested fun, mischief, or toughness. Altogether Mara Los Garañones (stallions), Tigresa (tiger), Las Brujas (witches), Los Angelitos (little angels), Nice, Relax, Miau Miau,⁴ 3 de Julio, Las Cobras, Mötley Crüe (from the heavy metal band), and Mara FIVE included as many as one thousand children and teenagers who joined together to financially support themselves and their families and to dance, socialize, have sex, steal, and live with a style, attitude, and personality of their own.

Figueroa, Maldonado Castillo, and I found that most of the young people with whom we spoke were surprisingly calm—given their bad reputation—articulate and thoughtful. Concerned about love and acceptance, they did not want to be misunderstood by us or the media, and they were eager to talk. The teenagers we surveyed came from families like most in the city: ladino and either poor or lower middle class. Their parents labored in the informal and formal economies as vendors, laborers, and domestic servants. These youth often described their home life as tense because of financial and emotional strains. Their discussion of emotional problems centered on male figures: the most dangerous person in these families was either the father or the stepfather. Young women and girls told of fathers and stepfathers who raped or deserted them. Young men and boys spoke of fathers and stepfathers who beat them or in other ways failed them. Strikingly, gang members who spoke well of their families were usually referring to those without men in them; the "disintegrated family" so feared by social workers and by the growing Evangelical movement. Maritza, a nineteen-year-old from Mara de la 4, related with pride, "My mother is a seamstress, she also makes ice cream to sell and with that and what I bring in we do OK. You know how hard it is to get steady work? My father, who knows? He left long ago. He was useless."

These young people wanted better families, not traditional ones. They slept at home most of the time, and they created new kinships inside their maras, which they referred to as "family." Yolanda, a fourteen-year-old member of Mara Belen, who lived with her mother and father, said, "Like the others say, for me the mara is my family, the best one in the world. There you have someone who loves you and tells you so." Alejandro reported, "It's like

family, but nicer, because no one bawls you out. Instead each person is like they are, and that's all there is to it." Herman also commented on family and mara in terms of freedom: "I think that family puts a lot of pressure on you, and because of that you seek your own group, a new family, so you can be as free to be what you want to be and not how others want you to be." Maritza, whose Mara de la 4 was at one point all-female, explained, "I joined because there was emptiness inside me, a little loneliness, a bit of sadness. Maybe we are all alike in this. I joined through a bunch of girlfriends with whom I was very heavy [*pesado*]. We've shared sorrows and joys. I think the mara is a group of people who need affection. Most of us want to escape the mess in our homes. Sometimes we think we can create a new world." To not have a dysfunctional—as distinct from a disintegrated—family, to have one of affection and empathic peers, was Maritza's wish.

This new mara family did not disapprove of sex for young people. Inside the maras sex flourished as exploration and conversational theme. A silent truth elsewhere—that some girls choose to have sex before marriage—was not hidden. Moreover one of the few spaces for youth that accepted open heterosexuality and homosexuality was within maras. Herman cheerfully described the mara in his working-class neighborhood as "twenty-eight guys and two dykes." His own lover was male. He said, "The heavy thing is that in the mara you learn to be freer in every sense. So, if a guy has sexual relations with a guy, no big deal. Same thing with the girls." Maritza, who had had an amorous relationship with another girl, described her greatest wish: "[To] find a girl or boy who in all honesty loves me and loves that I love her or him."

The gang members contributed financially to their two families, mara and blood kin. Many had worked in the informal and formal economies at one time or another. Maritza, for example, had picked coffee and taken in wash alongside her mother. Rafael said, "I worked in everything. Can you believe that when I was a little kid I collected plastic bags in the garbage dump? After that I gathered old newspapers and sold them in the market. After that I worked as a mechanic, which is very tiring work, and after that in a super-market."

But in the effort to generate cash for two families and for themselves as well, they quickly found out—often from adults who supplemented their wages in the same way—that more money could be made by stealing than in either the formal or the informal economy. When the Pepsi-Cola Company employed Alejandro, a seventeen-year-old Mara Las Cobras member, at Q15 a week, he discovered he could make Q15 a day stealing and selling crates. In 1987, as a full-time thief who "worked" tourists traveling to Antigua,

he earned as much as Q800 during the Semana Santa Easter holiday. These youth specialized, some in opening car locks, others in slitting pocketbooks or fencing goods. They were proud of their expertise. The milieu of the illegal economy, the new social relationships within it, its language and skills, all generated a new identity and power, and the illegal economy kept them in a comfortable traditional role within the family wage economy. They could provide new necessities for their new selves and old necessities for their families and maintain their accustomed selves. Herman explained, "I have money for my father's cigarettes, and I get what I want too," as he waved a handsome gold wristband around. Stealing provided a way to get something for oneself without hurting family members. Lupe provided cash for her mother and sunglasses for herself.

These young people wanted the new consumer articles of global youth—but not rapaciously, not at the expense of their accustomed obligations. They expressed solidarity with the poor, and they made intelligent critiques of society. Silvio, an eighteen-year-old in Mara FIVE, had been a part of an openly political association in public school at the close of the 1970s. To answer a question about his school, he explained that he was expelled because of his membership in the student association, but he was more interested in pointing out that school was a waste of his time: "I want a different education; something that was really helpful and not a lot of crap that, what the hell do you want to waste your time with it anyway? It would be great if the teachers taught in an interesting way and not just by dictation after dictation. You get tired and then you lose interest in your studies because you are treated as an object that should not talk, move, or think—that basically should not really exist."

Their explicit political and cultural opinions and choices were another example of their proximity to the popular movement. *La Historia Oficial*, an Argentine film about the dirty war, was a favorite movie. They unanimously described Ronald Reagan and President Vinicio Cerezo of Guatemala in negative terms—Cerezo as "a greedy asshole." They dismissed Madonna as empty-headed and Michael Jackson in negative terms because he rejected his roots. They selected Rigoberta Menchú and Che Guevara as "people [they] admire." One marero had an artistically arranged scrapbook, which he regularly updated, of clippings about the Sandinistas.

In 1987, when a few trade unionists attempted to hold a May 1 demonstration, the first since 1980, they approached Mara Plaza Vivar Capitol about it because this mara was close to the route and the final rallying point of the march in the city's Central Park. Plaza Vivar Capitol told the labor activists,

“The mareros are from the working class and we would never harm the working class.” When poor people occupied urban lands in 1986, gang members supported them (AVANCSO 1993: 86). And after a coup attempt against the civilian government in May 1988, Mara FIVE ran a classified ad in the newspaper *elPeriodico* that read, “This business of wanting to put an end to government is no good. Youth wants peace, not violence. When will we be heard? Mara FIVE.”

As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, these youth grew up in the late 1970s, within the social imaginary of the popular movement that predominated in Guatemala City’s barrios. In their minds their victims were *burgueses* (rich), and their “crimes” had a class justification; as *mareros* they had moral *élan*. Calixto, from Las Cobras, put it this way: “Look, the only people I steal from are people with money, because robbing from my equal would be evil.” Rafael, a seventeen-year-old from Mara 33, said, “I’ve taken what I need and I have robbed from the rich. Taking from the *burgueses* is like taking a strand of hair from a cat, and you have to survive one way or another.” Lupe, a fifteen-year-old Mara Piranas member, explained, “I knifed [the pockets of] two *burgueses*. . . . I took stuff from some others as well. . . . Last year I bought my mother a pair of shoes for Christmas so she doesn’t have to use sandals anymore. . . . We in the *mara*, we have to steal from the *burgueses* because they have things we don’t have, and it doesn’t affect them.”

When Berlin explained the origins of his small local *mara*, he made clear the connection between thievery and their senses of necessity, narrating the *mara*’s class nature:

It all started when we played soccer on the Barrio San Antonio team [in 1985]. We qualified for the juvenile championship, and we were supposed to play in the final, but we didn’t have decent sneakers or the money to buy them, so we decided to steal them from some *burgueses* who had a couple of pairs each. We watched them, and then we jumped them, and we took their shoes and some other stuff. . . . After that we met and played soccer but not with the same illusions. You begin to realize that even soccer is only for the *burgueses*. . . . We got to know other guys, and we started to get together to talk about the problems each one had. . . . The problems were the same—we were just a bunch of poor people! Then we felt this unity and a lot of desire to stick together. When one of the guys was really down, we helped out, but all of a sudden, we realized that we could have everything that was in style by ripping it off, or as they say, “borrowing.” (AVANCSO 1988)

Berlin draws together many elements of lower-class life in the city in the 1980s. It was virtually impossible for members of the working class to carry out their lives, even the simple leisure activity of soccer, without some sort of struggle. But bereft of movements to raise wages or to change anything at all, gangs became one of the few avenues through which working-class youth could obtain material improvement, albeit through stealing. Berlin’s *mara* was a local organization devoted to meeting needs defined in part by the dramatic rise of advertising for youth consumer goods in the 1980s.

As appealing as the young people were with whom we spoke, we concluded our 1987 study without too much optimism. Despite the powerful critiques and commentaries about life, love, family, and friendships that the gang members made, they were not trying to transform the already rapidly changing worlds in which they lived. The moral affirmation of stealing from the *burgueses* and of giving to themselves and others as poor people was important to the identity of the *maras* in the 1980s, but we knew that they knew that they were not always stealing from the rich to give to the poor, and that when they talked about stealing particular car or truck parts for the black market, they had no idea whom they defrauded. These were offspring of a revolutionary movement that still held the ethical high ground, but not much more. Moral flair and a Robin Hood discourse did not protect or orient these gangs of teenagers in a world in which hope for social justice was dying a painful death.

Moreover, in the mid-1980s powerful adults treated these youth terribly, both representationally and physically. The media stigmatized them as irrepressibly violent, the Evangelicals named them devil worshippers, and the police consigned minors to adult prisons, where they experienced violence and developed solidarities with adult criminal rings. In addition, neoliberal cutbacks shredded the few existing organizations for addressing youth issues. For example, the Juvenile Court judge lost her staff, forcing her to rely on the Direction for the Treatment and Orientation of Minors’ youth facilities, which could house no more than 250 children and adolescents and were overflowing in 1987.⁵ That year, the Juvenile Court joined with UNICEF to create the National Commission for Action for Children, an alliance of governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Evangelical NGOs—with funding from abroad, staff, long experience in gang ministry around the world, and ongoing cooperation with the Guatemala military’s social engineering projects in the highlands—became the Commission’s most active members. For example, under its auspices a well-known Evangelical psychologist set up a home called Casa Shalom for *mareros*. He had a cold manner, used corporal

punishment, and developed close authoritarian relationships with the girls. His associate, a Nicaraguan nicknamed Panamá, went into the streets “where Satan works” to save youth. He would tell me nothing of his life beyond his own narrative of sin and salvation: he had been a Contra in Nicaragua, and then a member of a Guatemalan death squad, but he had a revelation, met Christ, and left the death squad, although it remained unclear to me what he understood as “sin.” I toured a few Evangelical centers with Panamá over a period of months. All proposed an Evangelical regime of self-love and self-improvement proceeded by self-hatred and punishment. Physical penalties accompanied the psychological chastisement of acknowledging one’s sins. “Unruly” youth, Panamá explained, were locked up in small spaces. He was a shrewd, physically strong, well-fed, politically smart young adult and a self-confessed killer. At some point it occurred to me that he might have kept his ties with Army Intelligence, which maintained an excellent relationship with the Evangelicals, and I stopped seeing him.

Years later, as I continued my research, I learned that Army Intelligence (G2) used some *mareros* from the moment the gangs started in 1985. Army Intelligence made all the moves in the city in the 1980s. In response to anxieties about gangs, it could have destroyed the *maras*, but it did not. In 2002 Victor, a founder of Mara Plaza Vivar Capitol, told me that in 1985, G2 “kidnapped” some of their members, including him, from a street corner in Zone 1 and brought them to an army base “to train [them] to fight.” The military then took the boys to the Ixil Triangle and dressed them as members of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), in “long hair and cheap rubber boots.”⁶ According to Victor, they traveled under the guidance of a Cuban and a Nicaraguan to a small Mayan village, where they gathered the community together and began lecturing them on, as Victor described it, “social justice, Marx, Lenin, all that stuff”: “We had a *mitin* [political rally], like what the EGP always did.” Then the soldiers came down and “massacred the people.” After the army “discharged” him and other gang members back to the place from which they had been kidnapped, plainclothes men — “in other words G-2” — seized them again, put them in a van without license plates, murdered them and tossed their mangled bodies into a ravine the following day. Victor said he survived because he had crossed the street to buy a fresh fruit drink right before the vehicle showed up. He fled to Mexico where he got work with La eMe, a Mexican drug ring with connections throughout California’s prisons system.

This discovery that the military utilized *mareros* does not negate our 1987 findings that the *maras* were groups young people could *live* for, but it clarifies

the complexity of the panorama in 1985 and helps explain the turn towards extreme violence taken by the *maras* in the 1990s and beyond. What emerges from Victor’s story is that the military had connections to the gangs at the same time that it used them as a scapegoat. This deliberate manipulation, however, was only a part of the larger landscape in which the *maras* evolved,

The 1990s: Gangs to Die For

In the years following the 1996 Peace Accords violence increased dramatically in the forms of domestic violence, lynching, homicides, *feminicidio*, robberies, theft, “war” taxes on bus drivers and businesses, kidnappings, and all manner of extortion and blackmailing, and finally, narco-trafficking, Guatemala’s most thriving business.⁷ This violence has been labeled “depoliticized,” but its multiple causes *are* political (Savenije and van Der Borgh 2002). The accords did not address the social and economic roots of violence at a time of worsening economic crisis. On the contrary, the structural violence that led Guatemalans to rise up in the first place intensified with neoliberal policies, and more so because rural and urban organizations that might have countered the violence by winning better pay, benefits, and rights had been destroyed or had turned inactive (with notable exceptions) nationally.⁸ The postwar governments’ refusal to take up the burning problem of impunity has encouraged the current renaissance of local and international organized crime. Impunity has authorized violence. Veritable monsters such as Efraín Ríos Montt and the other generals who ordered genocide and war — deeds far beyond what any gang could do — have legitimized roles in society. Practitioners of extraordinary mass violence have hardly been the losers.

Politics also underlines the “depoliticization” of youth, including those in *maras*. By the end of the 1990s the Guatemala City I knew in the late 1970s and into the 1980s had gone up in smoke. What revolution? What radical movement? The language of popular culture that used concepts and terms such as *exploitation*, *class*, *bourgeoisie*, and *capitalism* had vanished, and as the twenty-first-century advances, discourses of the Left have not returned. It is not that the generations that experienced the radical urban movement do not remember those terms and times. Rather they have been afraid — notwithstanding important exceptions — to communicate them, to elaborate on lessons that would allow them to move forward, or to publicly invoke the era of popular protest. Over time these fears deform those very memories, and the richness of this past is lost to the subsequent generation. The dominant discourse, the new “official story,” has converted state violence and revolutionary armed struggle into *la violencia* as if it were simply an inexplicable

natural force, and analytical thinking loses ground.⁹ This does not mean that all young Guatemalans know nothing about this period. However, they seem to have heard more about the bizarre and ultraviolent feats of the *kaibiles* (army special forces) than about the goals of ordinary people who joined the revolutionary fronts. In other words, youth who joined the gangs in the 1990s and later grew up within a new subjectivity engendered by the defeat of critical consciousness and of human solidarity as widespread practices. The transformation of schools from cauldrons of activism to establishments that promote individualism, self-promotion, and competition between students is the most obvious example of a radical change in the lives of young people. No one attending public school in the early 1990s had anything resembling the experiences of students from the 1940s to the early 1980s. The transformation was that fast and that profound.

The neighborhoods where these youth grew up also changed precipitously in the 1990s. Although Guatemala City was no longer the zone of economic attraction it had been between the 1950s and 1980, old barrios grew and new settlements such as Mezquital appeared, in part due to the arrival of war migrants. This meant that people who at one time would have articulated themselves in the city by virtue of their rural hometowns were secretive instead and marked as “refugees,” “victims,” “ex-soldiers,” “survivors,” “widows,” or “orphans.” Even if and perhaps especially when they did not talk about the massacres for fear of reprisals, or spoke of them in ways that disguised blame and personal connection, these new residents carried within them the deep trauma, despair, and anger of their war experiences (Bastos and Camus 1994; Gellert 1999).

The presence of this dispersed and disorganized war-related migration has been one shift in urban life. Another has been that neighborhood involvement has become almost exclusively tied to the infrastructure of global NGOs since the 1990s.¹⁰ In many areas vertically structured civic life has replaced the horizontal political life of the earlier period. The number of global NGOs, from the Lions Club to World Vision, has increased dramatically. Structural adjustment programs have meant the decline of state services such as medical clinics. In contrast to the 1970s, grassroots organizations have become few in number and only local in perspective. That means everything that went with grassroots agency—from starting from scratch in someone’s front room and getting up the nerve to go door to door, to developing analysis, strategy, and tactics in relation to the Guatemalan state and its agencies—has all but died off. Community-improvement committees generally seek financing and advice from vertical, not horizontal, agencies with international ties; they are

often entangled in trying to win changes “from above” rather than in mobilizing “from below.” With many NGOs working in barrios, competition for funding from these agencies often divides community leaders. Communities have tended to become further depoliticized because the international NGOs encourage them to resolve their problems through the medium of the NGOs, instead of bringing them to the attention of the broader public and the state, as did *poblador* (squatter) groups in the 1970s, when neighborhood residents boldly inserted themselves into national politics (Gellert et al. 1999).

To further confound this new absence of horizontal solidarities, violence has shattered the Catholic Church’s previous role in urban barrios. In the 1970s Catholic lay workers and clergy spread the tools and language of liberation theology to develop strategies to end what was understood as human-made oppression and exploitation and to create “God’s Kingdom on Earth.” After the devastating earthquake in 1976, for example, a liberation theology priest led the land invasion that settled a large urban area with displaced people. He and other community members called the new neighborhood of hastily built homes Tierra Nueva I (New Land) because they planned for it to be a religious socialist community. That vision was destroyed by the military as well as by nongovernmental financing of alternative projects, including Evangelical ones.

By the 1990s dozens of Evangelical churches dominated neighborhoods such as Tierra Nueva I. Trucks mounted with sound systems blasted taped messages of sin and salvation incessantly to summon residents to services that went on for hours during the day and evening. Unlike liberation theology adherents, many Evangelical pastors opined, in the words of one, “The poor will always be with us. The poor choose to be poor.”¹¹ For the most part Evangelical pastors emphasized that nothing could be done about the fact that life is hell, and this portrayal of earthly impotence and hopelessness resonated in the wake of the defeat of the human project for social change (Nuñez 1996: 167). The Evangelical message underscores the constancy of crisis. Nothing could have seemed truer in the 1990s. These churches grew like wildfire.

The history of Tierra Nueva II illustrates these changes. In 1985 the teenage son of a religious left-wing organizer of the original Tierra Nueva launched Tierra Nueva II with his friends. Two of the newly emerged socially aware maras of the mid-1980s, Nene and Las Cobras, were born with the invasion; they were part of its “heat,” as one participant described their support for the new community (AVANCSO 1993: 86). But within a few years the combination of well-funded NGOs and selective state violence undermined the power of the original organizers and their visions for a community-run Tierra Nueva

II. Death threats forced one organizer into exile and others out of activism. A rivalry between Maras Nene and Las Cobras, once confined to break-dance contests, became violent over “territory” that included neighborhood streets and young women’s bodies. Las Cobras destroyed Mara Nene at the end of the decade.

By 1990 Las Cobras was one of many local maras that had become violently abusive within and without—within the gang, in the neighborhood, and in the city.¹² In 1991 crack consumption skyrocketed, the drug apparently initially supplied by dealers in the old barrio El Gallito in Zone 3.¹³ In the following years the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) started to deport undocumented and imprisoned gang members back to their home countries. Over the years the INS sent hundreds of members of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (M-18), two gangs formed in Los Angeles, into the urban sinkhole of Guatemala City’s depoliticized and demoralized neighborhoods.

What were these Los Angeles gangs? They came out of poor LA neighborhoods teeming with the tens of thousands of Central Americans who had fled their countries as a consequence of the wars in the 1980s and 1990s. Salvadorans started MS-13 in response to racism and exclusion from Latino gangs; among its founders were ex-soldiers and, besides Salvadorans, many Guatemalans and Hondurans joined it. M-18 was an older Latino gang that Central Americans came to dominate. At some point a fierce rivalry started between MS-13 and M-18; their fights and their violence seemed, by most accounts, to be distinctly more brutal than those of the many gangs in the area (Hayden 2004). In one way or another, these youth “knew” Central American war and state terror, either through their parents’ experiences or their own. They were not only “LA gangs,” a term used by journalists, security agencies, and a handful of scholars to identify the maras.¹⁴ In an interview, Ernesto Miranda, a Salvadoran ex-soldier and founding member of MS-13 in Los Angeles, explained, “[In Salvador] we were taught to kill our own people, no matter if they were from your own blood. If your father was the enemy, you had to kill him. So the training we got during the war in our country served to make us one of the most violent gangs in the United States.”¹⁵

By contrasting them to the Mexican gangs in Los Angeles, an astute LA gang member explored what he saw as the uniquely Guatemalan and Salvadoran quality of MS-13 and M-18:

The difference between the Mexicans and Salvadorans or Central Americans in general is this: Mexicans usually come from states like Michoa-

can. They live in a small town and are mainly agricultural. They do have violence from feuds, drug war, or now LA barrio violence. They, generally speaking, are not initially violent when they come to the U.S. El Salvador and Guatemala is another story. [There] it was common to see a street splattered with brain particles and blood. People in Guatemala were getting kidnapped and tortured to the point of insanity. In the main university in Guatemala City, students were forced to give classes due to the fact that all the professors had gotten smoked, one by one. . . . In El Salvador if you reach the age of fifteen without having to identify [the body of] a relative you were blessed. . . . These people [Guatemalans and Salvadorans] saw carnage that even the *Faces of Death* [snuff videos] chose not to use.¹⁶

However much influenced by LA subcultures, as well as by unemployment and racism within LA, these youth came from milieus in which “carnage” beyond the sick imagination of a snuff filmmaker predominated, and at least some of them had the skills and experiences of ordinary soldiers involved in extraordinary wars against their own kind of people: poor people.

MS-13 and Mara 18 consolidated in Los Angeles, but the gangs’ “foundational map” starts in Central America’s wars, zigzags through crime-ridden Mexico, and crosses the border into Los Angeles and into California’s multinational prisoner population, where gang members made important contacts. Once deported to Guatemala or El Salvador, these mareros took over local maras, which then became MS-13 or M-18 subgroups, or *clikas*. Without necessarily maintaining ties to LA, MS-13 and Mara 18 in Guatemala City carried on the LA legacy of deadly rivalry and, without doubt, some of their ties to the changing scene of Mexican drug lords.

Victor’s saga is illuminating. By the time he crossed into Mexico to “run away from G2” in 1985 at age fifteen, after participating in a massacre and having his friends’ bodies turn up mutilated, he was a changed teenager. He rode on the tops of trains until he reached Mexico’s northern border. Some of the Guatemalan teenagers he met along the way went on to Los Angeles, where they were drawn into either MS-13 or M-18, ending up in jail, and from there, according to Victor, they were deported back to their countries. Victor stayed on the Mexican side, where he “met the eMe, lived in DF” (Mexican gangsters and lived in Mexico City), and learned to “live in the street, to steal, to rob, to kill.” When he came back to Guatemala after the 1996 peace accords, he knew “all the knowledge, the structures—the *veteranos*, the *pala-bras*, the laws and the reasons for them, the colors, who were the enemies.”¹⁷ By then MS-13 and M-18 had a presence in Guatemala. He found the maras

in Guatemala City “more sophisticated, Mara FIVE had joined MS-13 and [his own] Plaza Vivar Capitol was with M-18.” He explained, “Everyone saw themselves as soldiers serving *el barrio* [the gang] in a war against the world and without any Geneva Code.” By then a man in his late twenties, he joined M-18, lived in cheap hotels in Guatemala City, “distributed *bolsas* [drugs] at the corners,” and got paid in either cash or goods. A small cog in a flourishing enterprise, he saw himself as “bad,” and his “place in the world” consisted only of areas of the city held by M-18.

Even through MS-13 and M-18 are transborder gangs, their stake and sway lay in local neighborhoods. In the 1990s residents described the maras as opening a new chapter in barrio life. The newness was not so much violence itself but the explosion of violent crimes by the poor against the poor. Death squads, not youth, murdered neighbors in the “old days.” In one neighborhood a woman said, “Ten years ago you could come in [to the area] at 9 at night,” but by 1995 that was impossible, and in addition between 8 p.m. and 4 a.m. there was constant gunfire and screaming. In this barrio, every social space had become dangerous. Rival maras came to “own” the basketball courts, street corners, fields, and plazas. Residents described acute changes in daily life that made mistrust and fear realistic reactions and the acquisition of weapons a necessity. Gang members broke up community events such as dances and meetings, their presence divided people along the lines of their offspring’s affiliation in rival maras, and their constant warring with one another made walking around nerve-racking and sleeping difficult (AVANCSO 2000). By 2001 gun fights between rival maras led to fires in neighborhoods where firemen refused to enter because police had been unable to maintain substations there. By 2002 maras had enough power in some areas to regularly tax merchants and bus and delivery truck drivers. Afraid that their children would be beaten on their way to school, families sometimes kept them home and, for fear of the gangs and fear that their children might be forced to join them or be killed for refusing to join, even sent their children abroad to live with relatives. They have reconfigured neighborhoods and the routines of everyday life.

To many, the maras seem unassailable. The late Jesuit Padre Manolo Maquiera spent years building sports and art workshops in which supposedly reforming gang members had the responsibility of teaching young children in a neighborhood of Zone 6, only to discover that all the while they had been recruiting the kids into Mara 18. After ten years he judged the mara members beyond rescue and redemption.¹⁸ He, like others, turned away from the maras

and instead concentrated on “children at risk,” a term for children who had not yet joined a mara or been killed by them.

The first time I met members of MS-13 was in the late 1990s, when I was sitting with a Casa Alianza street educator doing medical checkups in a makeshift sleeping quarters for homeless children.¹⁹ Two mareros came in to shake the children down. Straight out of a photograph, with tattooed arms and dressed in black, the two looked muscular and healthy, even jaunty, and they contrasted with their prey, the malnourished, drugged, and sick street children who huddled on filthy mattresses. After one marero directed the street worker to look over a wound, the two retreated, to return only after we had departed.

Later that day street children who lived in the Casa Alianza crisis shelter told me that mareros forced them to take drugs and demanded money from them. But the same children prized the MS-13 and M-18 signs on their bodies, and one small boy drew MS-13 in block letters on a piece of paper as he sat with me waiting for lunchtime. Ten-year-old Minor from Zone 6 reported proudly, “MS-13 paid me to run errands” and “knew how to get things done.” What things? I asked. “Defend themselves,” he replied. In an essay on the topic “what I wish my family were like,” a twelve-year-old named Rubén wrote that he wanted his older brother to be head of Mara 18 so that everyone in his family would be “safe, and the men feel strong,” and his mother would be “happier and less sad.” Carlos, a seven-year-old whom street educators had found in the bus terminal, looked forward to being in a *mara clika* (subgroup) when he was “stronger.” These children knew the maras for better and worse, and the gangs seemed to represent an inevitable pathway and source of violent defense against an evil world of violent parents, police, and other adults. At least they could join the maras. Everyone else disapproved of them. In the same shelter I spoke with ex-mara members who stayed there to escape either the gang or the police. Sixteen-year-old Eduardo had been leaving his home on and off since he was four years old. From a family in one of the most impoverished *colonias* in Zone 18, he remembered that when he was hungry, his brother gave him drugs to stop his stomach pains. He said, “[I] went with 18 from the start, I was convinced that they would help me.” He stayed for a few years, until he witnessed the death of two youths in a fight with a clika from MS-13 and left, horrified. Because the penalty for leaving would be death without trial, he said, he had entered the shelter. Seventeen-year-old Luis Arturo described himself as a “professional” drug salesman because he did not take drugs and insisted on cash payment. A muscular body builder who

regularly worked out in a gym in Zone 1, Luis Arturo spoke about his barrio as a sales region, one he had killed several sellers from other clikas to protect. He normally lived alone in a “so-so” hotel, but he now stayed in the shelter because the “involvement of the National Police in the trade” had become a “permanent threat” to his life.

One striking difference between youth in the 1980s and those of the post-war period is that the former were eager to talk about almost anything, often took the conversational initiative, and hoped to present themselves as “good” within the framework of a class struggle between rich and poor. The latter teenagers did not. They framed most of their thoughts in relation to their own and “society’s” inherent evil and, as if to resolve this evil, around killing and death.

Repeatedly, without pride, young men in the maras described themselves as *malos*, “evil, bad.” They had little to say about being malos, except to indicate that it was the way of all flesh. Seventeen-year-old Edgar put it poignantly: “We are bad, like life, and that’s why we have to be bad.” José Josué saw being malo as part of his occupation; he told me that “life demands malo.” He left home when he was thirteen with his fifteen-year-old brother, and together they started to steal radios out of cars and sell them to pay for a Q30-a-week room in a hotel. The police captured him after a Mazda he and others had stolen crashed into a pole, and they sent him to jail. There he made friends with malos. His initiation into MS-13 happened in jail, where thirteen other members beat him thirteen times. After he left prison, he bought baggy pants, which he said symbolized freedom from prison, as well as the rank of having been a prisoner, a proven malo. He found MS-13 on the outside, resumed a life of “robbery,” and continued to live in a small hotel. He did not comment on his gang activities beyond saying “Somos malos.” It had no ring of the “Bad is cool” of U.S. gangs.

Somos malos—“We are bad,” the phrase I heard again and again—started to sound like an indispensable, pragmatic manner of being. Given that life is evil, their evil needs no explanation. What was there to discuss? Life is bad, period. Fourteen-year-old Venado told me, “[Because] they [are] malo, we have to be.” Who are “they,” I asked. “*La gente, la sociedad* [people, society].” What does society do? “Mistreat us.” Like other researchers and outreach workers, I found the gang members had little to say about “society,” except that it did not accept them because of their tattoos and general manner. Gang members neither talked about burgueses nor the social justice of stealing, nor could most place the name Rigoberta Menchú. A young man explained to the sociologist Anneliza Tobar Estrada, “Society isn’t ours, it belongs to

others. . . . When we join the gang, we look with indifference at the rest of the world” (2007: 46).

Violent death seemed to weigh heavily on their narratives of their own activities and trajectories. Everyone I met said that friendship was what initially attracted them to the clikas of MS-13 and Mara 18. But the internal life of the maras had shifted away from good times, to use that expression in a general sense, to the intense matter of fighting the rival gang. Several explained to me that MS-13 and Mara 18 had become bitter enemies because of a “very serious and unknown incident” in Los Angeles, which no one could describe. This repeatedly mentioned legend gave MS-13 and Mara 18 their identities and defined their mission as being enemies of one another. Gang members constantly referred to themselves as “soldiers” in a war to the death against rival gang members. Hundreds of young men and boys and a smaller number of girls from similar backgrounds and with similar troubles composed each other’s enemy. One young man explained, “We dedicate ourselves to killing gang members who aren’t from our barrio, and that’s it, day after day, someone dies every day, every day our life is the same except it’s different, the person who dies, one day one of theirs, one day one of ours.” Another described himself as a “calm, cool fighter.” He had killed to defend “mi barrio,” a term referring simultaneously to his gang and its *territorio*, or space, without which the gang is not a gang. Because he had killed, he had been promoted to the status of *veterano*. Thirteen-year-old CC, a member of Mara 18, described how one day he would die in a gang fight, “*matando a ellos, matado por ellos* [killing them, killed by them],” to live and kill for the gang, to be killed soon. Gato told me that he had “nothing to do with anything except kill ‘rivals’”: “We die one day to the next.”

Amiable, fifteen-year-old Abel, a member of a clika of MS-13, explained that he had been forced out of his home “because of poverty” and went directly to the National Airport because he thought he could sneak onto an airplane. Instead he met a kindly cleaning woman who paid him to help her, and eventually she took him home. She tried but could not maintain him, so she brought him to the Casa Alianza crisis shelter, which, because he was stable and did not take drugs, placed him in a group home for boys ages thirteen to fifteen where, he says, he discovered drugs and MS-13:

They [MS-13] offered me a barrio. I wanted one, and they had asked me so I joined. To join I had a baptism. They took turns hitting me, hard, thirteen times, thirteen seconds each blow. . . . You need the mara to defend you, you need friends for fights; they say “If someone touches you they are

touching everyone.” There isn’t a night without a fight. The ambulances don’t come; nobody comes. I fight. I am prepared. I don’t have obligations. If I die, so what?

Later killed in a gang fight, a former street child recounted his experiences in MS-13 this way: “A bunch of us little [street] kids entered the MS-13 together. One of us was five years old. The majority of us are dead now. They [MS-13 leaders] killed them. . . . Five people died at my hands. The last time I killed was in 2003. I gave a coup de grace in the forehead, right here” (“Revista Domingo” 2005).

These youth had a “text.” They knew they were the bad kids with tattoos all over themselves who coolly killed—even if they did not. They knew that they would burn in hell, and they all loved their mothers, but they loved above all their gang, and they killed and were killed for it because that is the way it is. They presented this seemingly airtight argument over and over, without spontaneity. Often tattooed, but sometimes covering their tattoos with neat, almost preppy clothes, speaking about the “rules,” accepting being beaten and beating others, killing and being killed, they spoke as if they had complete control over their destiny: death.

As poor as they were, they generally did not live in the mode of poverty-bound Guatemalan neighborhood youth. Whether they stayed in cheap hotels or remained inside their neighborhoods, they severed themselves from *esa vida*, “that life” of the poor, as if their mara identity, with its special style of handshakes, graffiti, tattoos, palabras, and codes, liberated them from the classic class identity of worker and the “ethnic” identity of ladino, both of which increasingly signal powerlessness.²⁰ Questions about their personal social milieu of family went unanswered; what they wanted to highlight was that *they* had broken with their families, even if, in fact, they still slept at home. Victor articulated this in stark terms. When I asked him where he was born, he replied, “I was born with the mara, without it I am nothing.”²¹ When I asked Fredy, a sixteen-year-old member of MS-13, about his kin, he replied that his mother thought that he was malo, and he thought that she was not part of his *vida*. These youth might well have supported families, but that was not part of their story. What they communicated was that even though they were bounded by poverty on all sides, the life that they lived in the mara severed their identifications to poor people’s lives—and perhaps, tragically, with life itself. Initiations sometimes involved being raped or raping or killing a known person such as a neighbor or a rival gang member’s relative, or, in the most stunning break with tradition and morality, an elderly person.

After she left the gang and went into hiding, twelve-year-old Rosa gave a social worker at Casa Alianza the following account of the internal life of a mara:

At first I was happy in the mara, but when I saw them rape a girl . . . I felt like crying. It felt like they were doing it to me. The girl is dead now; they killed her in front of me, because they were afraid she would turn them in. They shot her, and she just kept quiet, she didn’t say anything. Her name was Elisa. She had already left the mara. I was ready to—ready to kill myself. My heart ached and I felt like I really needed to get out of the maras, but I just couldn’t.

After joining the mara, I killed an old woman because they told me I had to kill somebody and to sacrifice their blood. . . . I pushed her, and when I touched her afterwards, she wasn’t breathing any more. She was a sixty-year-old woman who lived with her grandchildren. They were from the Brekera Mara [a rival clika]. I felt so bad, like I had killed my own grandma. . . . I don’t remember exactly what happened. The mara has also tried to kill me—once with a gun, once with a knife, and another time with a car.

According to the social worker Rosa felt sick and lost.

For these “soldiers,” there appears to be no “cause” except a rivalry none can explain. Whether or not they recognized themselves in each other, M-18 and MS-13 have become involved in suicidal homicide, just as in the war, wherein the common soldiers, usually forced Mayan and ladino “recruits,” were taught to hate an enemy similar to them in social and cultural background without any clear reason, except that they were “other”—when they were not. This killer/killed persona is the warrior, the winner of the contest to decide Guatemalan history, who was also a loser, a dead warrior.

As the gangs have become more violent, the proportion of males to females has shifted. There were far fewer young women in the early twenty-first century than when the maras started in the mid-1980s. A certain maleness now prevails. Masculinity’s many meanings—ranging from courtesy, breadwinning, and bravery to mindless brute physical violence—have shriveled to the latter. This is the violence of the solider, who, unlike the violent general, has no idea why he is fighting and only the knowledge that he will kill and die. The male fighter was valorized in Guatemala and in “world” youth culture long before the military’s triumph over the revolutionary movement, but I am arguing that the loss of a class, community, and humane language and practice and the normalization of the ability to maim, wound, and kill as

INTRODUCTION The Internet abounds with dread-inducing “gangster” images of menacing tattooed young men in maras. The Guatemalan photographer José Manuel Mayorga reaches beyond the politics of provoking fear of mareros by instead evoking the fears *in* which they and others live: the common reality of weapons used by adults, here by a parking lot attendant; a child who works assisting a bus driver in a space that belongs to criminals; and a small calling card suggesting that Guatemala City is “finished”—in such disarray as to be defunct—and inviting us to visit and see for ourselves.



FIG 7.1 *The Pistol and the Defeat*, 2011. The pistol, carried “just in case,” is a quotidian feature of many Guatemalan lives. The “Red Defeat” of the headline here refers to the frustration of the national soccer team’s hopes of qualifying for the World Cup. PHOTO BY JOSÉ MANUEL MAYORGA. USED WITH KIND PERMISSION



FIG 7.2 *Streets of Fear*, 2011. Ciudad de Guatemala. Boarding a bus, no one can be sure they will leave it alive, if the driver will be shot dead, if passengers will be held up. PHOTO BY JOSÉ MANUEL MAYORGA. USED WITH KIND PERMISSION



MAYORGA

GUATEMALA

FIG 7.3 *Carte de visite: Bitter Boulevard*, 2006. With a public transportation system in collapse, people seek the security of solitary travel to their destinations, even though private vehicles can also be held up or stolen; pickups are particularly coveted. PHOTO BY JOSÉ MANUEL MAYORGA. USED WITH KIND PERMISSION

a form of power within urban life did not happen until the postwar period because before then, a praxis of solidarity flourished.

By the mid-1990s humble, often domestically abused, and increasingly disconnected urban boys and girls for whom *ladinismo* and Mayan ethnicity continually depreciated into a cultural nothing, without jobs or aims and within communities without internal cohesion, were drawn or forced into the imaginary of the power of violent death over life. Within the gangs' understanding of the world the line between victim and victimizer, once as clear as crystal, became blurred in a messy intertwining of ruled and ruler. There existed only one side: the absolute of violence, the killer's side. The effective identity of mara came to flow as lifeblood from the power to hurt and kill. Their everyday lives became everyday life or death, nothing in between, and death, their own deaths, would win because death is supreme. In the late 1990s one significant tattoo signaling mara membership in Guatemala City was three small dots between the thumb and the index finger that, a young man explained to me, stood for hospital, prison, and morgue. The feisty 1980s maras belonged to the period of political fight; those of the 1990s and later belong to the post-slaughter, the all-is-over time. Neither rebels nor conformists, orphans of the world, and not only of Guatemala, criminalized by adults and even by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for all manner of evil, the mareros have become a variation of those whom Hannah Arendt (1951: 276–302) once called “the most symptomatic group,” the leftovers, “forced to live outside the common world,” who, in this case, futilely reproduce the traumas that cast them out, to end those in death.

Notes

1. The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) repeatedly uses this term and others like it to refer to sadistic acts, including those inflicted by the military as well as forcing others to commit and witness.
2. The term *mara* was already used to refer to groups of friends in at least Guatemala and El Salvador.
3. Author interview with Victor, Guatemala City, 2002.
4. Named after a famous Puerto Rican gang in New York.
5. Author interview with Direction official, 1987.
6. The Ixil Triangle is made up of the three Maya-Ixil townships of Nebaj, Cotzal, and Chajul, designated a site of genocide by the CEH.
7. In 2009 the United Nations Development Program (UNDP 2010: 10) declared Central America “the most violent region in the world,” and “Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador . . . between three and six times” more violent than other nations in the region. Currently 88 percent of the cocaine consumed in the United States passes through Guatemala.

8. There has been a resurgence of activism among banana workers, schoolteachers, and villagers affected by land loss, mineral exploration, and megaprojects.
9. The origins and use of the term *la violencia* in the Guatemalan context are complex. During and after the war, many Guatemalans employed it (or *la situacion*) to refer to state violence without getting into trouble. But for many in subsequent generations *la violencia* refers to a past that is not explained. The military, politicians, and unfortunately much media and many NGOs and even social scientists use the term without explaining who does “it” or why “it” occurs.
10. NGOs were in the neighborhoods in the 1970s but did not replace more organic groups.
11. Author interview with Juan Miguel Fuentes, Guatemala City, 1997.
12. One of assassins of the AVANCSO founder Myrna Mack was recruited from Las Cobras.
13. Author interviews, El Gallito, 1992 and 1996.
14. Violent gangs grew significantly in Honduras between 1985 and 1989, which was before the INS began to deport gang members (Salomon 1993).
15. Miranda 2005. In 2006 he left MS-13 in Los Angeles and returned to El Salvador, where he was murdered for having quit the gang in LA.
16. Angelface website, accessed May 2004. *Faces of Death* is a series of snuff videos that show moments of real violence and pandemonium, such as actual scenes of death squad killings in El Salvador, the slaughter of dolphins, the napalming of Vietnamese, a massacre at a Colombian wedding, electrocution, rape, and a train wreck in India. The videos are snapshots of violence without context or narrative.
17. Author interview with Victor, 2002. According to Victor, the status of *veterano* is earned by killing someone. *Palabras* connect different *clikas* within the broader gang structure.
18. Author interviews with an unnamed Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) representative and Padre Manolo Maquiera S.J., 2005.
19. Connected to New York City's Covenant House, Casa Alianza opened in 1981 in Guatemala City. For years its extraordinary staff aided street children and exposed police brutality against them. The Guatemalan National Police, as well as the so-called parallel powers of state repression, made life extremely difficult for Casa. Several of its staff were killed in the years before it closed.
20. The population of Guatemala City—poor and largely ladino—should put to rest the pernicious stereotype of ladino as homogeneously or even primarily middle class. If this were the case, almost half of the Guatemalan people would be middle class, and this is not the case (see González Ponciano this volume).
21. Personal communications with Padre Manolo Maquiera and members of the Equipo de Estudios Urbanos and AVANCSO; interview with Victor, Guatemala City, 2004.