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Review/Reseña

Bruneau, Thomas, Lucía Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner, eds. *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2011.

Demilitarization and the Empowerment of Civil Society to Resolve *Mara* Violence

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Maras explores the widely perceived problem of Central American street gangs in ten thoroughly annotated chapters. Although there are numerous regional and local gangs (*pandillas*), the collection concentrates on the transnational Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street Gang and the national and international responses to their illicit activities. The focus is on political and socioeconomic factors related to the gang phenomenon, including geography, demography, justice systems, and especially the social conditions among the Central American countries and the Central

American barrios of southern California, the birthplace of the *maras*. Together, the book's chapters debunk the notion that deportation from the United States has been the major factor fueling the expansion of the *maras*, and they criticize the militarized *mano dura* policies enforced by Central American governments to combat them.

"Case Studies", the first five-chapter portion of the book, opens with "The Origins of Southern California Latino Gangs", by Al Valdez, whose chapter looks at "the origins and evolution of the most notorious 'Sureño' [Southern California] street gangs" (24). The role of drugs in *mara* activities and their increasingly globalized involvement in drug trafficking are intertwined throughout a detailed overview of gang and *mara* history from the 1960s to the 1990s. The chapter casually concludes that "solutions have been hard to come by" (42), a disappointment that notably contrasts with the book's optimistic goal of setting "a standard for research and analysis...for innovative and enlightened policy making" (19).

Sonja Wolf's case study, in chapter two, explores the Mara motherland, arguing that "El Salvador's gang problem has worsened largely due to the tardy and ideological responses of a state run by the elite class" (48). Wolf challenges the uncompromising *Mano Dura* tactics as fundamentally ineffective, if not counter-productive, against gang violence, and she denounces its successor, *Súper Mano Dura*, as a "resounding failure" (62). She calls into question the reliability of state-produced statistics and raises the possibility of state-sponsored "social cleansing" (52). The transnational gang image does not escape criticism either. According to Wolf, the street gangs are largely a local security issue sensationalized by the mass media and aggravated by corruption, upper class resistance, and weak social institutions, all challenges that a comprehensive anti-crime policy must address. Misrepresentations of this image tend to shift responsibility onto the broader international community.

Elin Cecilie Ranum does not ignore the fact that gang members face a "dual identity as both perpetrators and victims" (72) as she assesses the current situation of Guatemala in chapter three, "Street Gangs of Guatemala." With 72% to 95% of gang members claiming affiliation with

either MS-13 or 18th Street, Ranum points to systemic inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion, in addition to the wavering integrity of the state and its security forces, as factors that nurture gang membership. *Plan Escoba*, Guatemala's version of *Mano Dura*, receives the same criticism that Wolf offered regarding El Salvador: massive, illegal detentions have proven overwhelmingly ineffective. Ranum's conclusions thus largely coincide with Wolf's, helping to shape the case studies into a cohesive argument.

Honduras' gang culture is the topic of chapter four, "Street Gangs of Honduras", by Joanna Mateo. U.S. military intervention and wider class divisions are highlighted as significant factors that perpetuate the pervasive *mara* presence in the homeland of *mano dura* policies. Mateo argues that a lack of prevention and rehabilitation funding, along with poor coordination among international human rights groups, local NGOs, churches, and the state, results in many young Hondurans coming to see gangs as a means of survival in a desperate economy. Given Honduras' extraordinarily high murder rate, the irony of gangs as a source of survival does not elude Mateo, who stresses that the only escape from gang violence may be "[b]road international support and expertise, coupled with strong domestic political will" (103). European assistance is applauded, whereas the U.S.'s role as "a limited one" (101) and Honduras's stance as "unwilling—or worse, unable" (103), not so much.

Chapter five agilely avoids repeating previous material while treating Nicaragua as an exception. José Luis Rocha focuses on key differences that positively set Nicaragua apart: the "inordinately smooth" (109) naturalization and residence procedures in the U.S. during the civil wars; Nicaraguans' tendency to settle in Miami and not Los Angeles; and the gangs' likelihood to focus on manufacturing or trafficking of drugs rather than on more violent crimes. The Nicaraguan police have also notably not employed a *mano dura* approach. Be that as it may, warns Rocha, the entire historical context leading to Nicaragua's relative success must be considered before attempting to cite any one factor as the definitive catalyst.

The second five-chapter portion of the volume is titled “Responses to Gang Violence”. In chapter six, “State Power and Central American *Maras*: A Cross-national Comparison”, Enrique Desmond Arias reiterates that each country must be understood on an individual basis where particular policies create distinct cause-and-effect outcomes. The discussion centers on state activity and organized crime in Brazil, Colombia, Jamaica, and Mexico; at times it loses focus on Central America and the *maras*, the principal thrust of the book. Nicaragua and Guatemala reappear, but the frequent suggestions asking that the reader reference preceding chapters makes for a somewhat labored reading. Nonetheless, Arias draws connections between official corruption, political exclusion of the lower classes, national histories, and state structures to account for the various *mara* and organized crime configurations throughout Latin America. He especially condemns showy police action against small-fry street gangs when drug kingpins and other elites remain largely untouched thanks to collusion and bribery (136).

José Miguel Cruz’s chapter seven, “Government Responses and the Dark Side of Gang Suppression in Central America”, refutes the notion that gang prevalence is exclusively related to the ineffectiveness of government policies. The value of the present chapter lies in the discussion on extralegal measures, “state actors operating on their own” (138), argued to be serious factors that impact legitimate state responses. The author calls upon Central American nations to accept responsibility in a lawful manner and to balance repressive tactics with preventive methods. The cleanly laid-out argument, however, remains a bit mired in *mano dura* summaries, some repeated for the second or third time by this point in the book.

Mauricio Rubio, in “Elite Membership and Sexualized Violence among Central American Gangs”, looks into the reason wealthier gang members have a tendency to rape lower class victims: they manipulate “the system” (178) to their advantage since their victims are traditionally powerless. Rubio also questions the reliability of survey research on this topic, arguing that the representation of lower classes tends to be skewed and misleading, and this can produce negative consequences: “Flawed research and mistaken assumptions about the causes and composition of

gangs mean that policies intended to solve problems like recruitment and endemic sexual violence will be less likely to reach their intended goals” (179). Consequently, victims of gang violence, both society and individuals, find themselves with little solace.

Clifford Gyves’s chapter nine, “The Use of Intelligence to Combat *Maras*”, focuses on the problems of sharing information among authorities—getting the right data to the right people. To better quantify the *maras*, Gyves likens them to systems with “identifiable inputs, processes, and outputs” (183) that can be used to evaluate gang presence and government responses. Information “fusion centers” that pool data and coordinate intelligence gathering are hailed as powerful weapons that continually combat gangs as they “learn new ways to survive” (196).

In the final chapter, “The Impact of U.S. Anti-gang Policies in Central America: Quo Vadis?”, Florina Cristiana Matei accuses U.S. deportation and imprisonment tactics in the mid-1990s of being borderline unconstitutional. Matei looks to the Mérida Initiative, “a multiyear security assistance program to help Central America combat transnational organized crime” (198), as a means of holding Washington responsible for repatriation, law enforcement, capacity enhancement, and prevention. Nonetheless, Matei argues that the various U.S. agencies collaborating with Central America are willing to help; what is of concern is the lack of quantifiable, positive results (204-05). Matei points out that inter-agency “turf battles” (208) in the U.S., in conjunction with a lack of engagement of the isthmian states, must be settled before the necessary coordination is reached for Mérida or other initiatives to be truly successful.

Thomas Bruneau and Lucía Dammert conclude the study by summing up the gang issue: “The *maras* are still an elusive phenomenon in the Americas” (211). Sensationalist journalism and policies based on political gains are criticized once again, while gang and crime “fusion centers” are recommended and various sectors of civil society are urged to collaborate. One noticeable omission from the book is the presence, or lack thereof, of Costa Rica and Panama, even as outliers or bases for comparison. Still, *Maras* stands out as one of the few studies to exclusively treat these issues in regards to Central America, for its clear drive towards

objectivity, and for the avoidance of emotionally driven ideological conclusions, leaving us with sober, intelligent analyses. As my previous comments indicate, the overall push for a more progressive policy direction developed around societal changes is one that simply cannot be ignored.