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Analysing the geographies of the 'transnational' gangs of Central America: the changing spaces of violence

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to contribute to knowledge of 'transnational' youth gangs in the Central American region, through an analysis of the mutually constitutive processes of identity, space and place production. It is argued that insights into gangs gained through analyzing their spatial dynamics and practices, and discussing ways in which these dynamics and processes connect the local and global scales, offer useful knowledge concerning the functioning of these gangs in a field still lacking in-depth academic research. Drawing on over a decade of direct research with young people in the region, the paper finds that poor understanding of gangs inevitably leads to ineffective, counterproductive interventions, and demonstrates that the *geographies of maras* are a fundamental –and still neglected– aspect of their development and transformation.

Key words: Youth gangs, transnational, Central America, violence, space.

Analizando las geografías de las pandillas 'transnacionales' en Centroamérica: los espacios cambiantes de la violencia

Resumen. El objetivo de este trabajo es dar a conocer nuevo conocimiento sobre las pandillas 'transnacionales' en la región de Centroamérica, a través del análisis de los procesos (mutuamente constitutivos) de la producción de identidad, espacio y lugar. Se argumenta que el análisis de las dinámicas y prácticas espaciales, y la discusión de las diferentes maneras en que estas dinámicas y procesos se conectan a la escala local y global, nos proporcionan nuevo conocimiento 'útil' en este campo de investigación aún naciente. Basado sobre más de una década de investigación directa con jóvenes en la región, este trabajo argumenta que entendimientos pobres de las pandillas, resultan en intervenciones ineficaces y contraproducentes, y demuestra que las *geografías de las maras* representan un aspecto fundamental –y todavía bastante descuidado– de su desarrollo y transformación.

Palabras claves: Pandillas juveniles, transnacional, Centroamérica, violencia, espacio.

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'MS13 is a name you might have heard, and need to remember. This brutal street gang somehow grew from a local Los Angeles problem into an international threat, and it may already be in a neighborhood near you … It's going international, crossing borders at will, leaving its bloody mark from Central America to the American heartland.'

(Explorer, National Geographic Channel, 12/02/06).

INTRODUCTION

For decades now, youth gangs in the Americas have attracted significant –if uneven– academic, political and popular attention, yet significant empirical changes in gang structures, activities, and formation brought about by a range of global-local transformations have not, until very recently, led to any fundamental shift in how we think about gangs. This paper is an attempt to explore the various ways in which youth gangs have themselves become 'glocalized', both as subjects and actors within shifting political, economic, and social landscapes.[1] It of course goes without saying that globalization is not a uniform process of change, that global processes are always filtered through local conditions, and it is this channel from the global to the local (the so-called glocalization) which informs this work. Focusing on the emergence and spread of so-called 'transnational' gangs in the Americas, exploring the conditions, networks, and flows involved in creating and sustaining such a transnational organization (if indeed it can be represented as such), the paper aims to explore the shifting relationship between violence, space and territory with respect to the youth gangs known as '*maras*'. It is argued in this paper that it useful to try and gain further insights into gangs through the lens of their spatial dynamics and practices.

Understanding global-local spaces

The theoretical premise underpinning this paper, in which space and place are seen as (complex) processes, in which the global and the local are conceived as simultaneous, fluid and intricate, through which we are able to interrogate the connections between identity, space and place, is nothing new. Indeed, many influential thinkers have long been providing theoretical propositions along these lines, for example proposing a more 'progressive' or 'global' sense of place (Massey, 1993), suggesting the importance of the local in relation to the global information economy (Castells, 1997), employing the term 'glocalization' to refer to the simultaneity of universalizing (read global) and particularizing (read local) tendencies (Robertson, 1995), or alternatively urging us to reconsider localities in terms of the role of imagination in social life, in what is a globalized, deterritorialized world (Appardurai, 1996), among many others (see also for example Sassen, 2007). It is, in short, an area of inquiry and debate too vast to explore in depth in this paper, but I will draw on ideas emerging from this body of work to analyse a particular phenomenon, in this case 'transnational' youth gangs, through an understanding of the mutually constitutive production of identity and space.

Understanding youth gangs

The historical dominance of US gang research, and within this criminology, has profoundly shaped both understandings of, and responses to this type of youth organization in much of the region. While the pioneering work of Thrasher (1927) on immigrant groups in 1920s Chicago notably did not include criminality as a defining feature of youth gangs, since then, gangs became seen as unilaterally criminal, deviant, pathological, at the expense of more nuanced readings of their motivations, values, practices and organization. While the Chicago School was a significant contribution to social science, the entrenchment of human ecology, but particularly the ideologically-loaded notion of 'so-

[1] This article is the product of reflections based on a period of research on youth marginalization, gangs and violence in the region spanning over 10 years, particularly in Guatemala, and later Mexico, but also in Honduras and to a lesser extent El Salvador. This research has comprised qualitative research with young people in a range of marginal communities, and also in different institutional contexts (including NGOs, schools, and prisons), through interviews, group discussions, photography projects and observation in a range of contexts.

cial disorganization' in the study of gangs has been problematic, especially in the late-modern, post-industrial era when models of assimilation are no longer even theoretically viable (see Hagedorn, 2007c).

Yet, there are ideas here which can and have been rescued. In principle, its focus on the spaces of the city as key to differential urban processes was highly significant, even if the relevance of intentional, political structuring of these spaces was overlooked (Hagedorn, 2007a). Rather, then and this applies broadly to many contemporary approaches to gangs, be they cultural theories of gangs as a lower class subculture, political approaches to gangs as a form of resistance to blocked opportunities, economic approaches to gangs as entrepreneurs, or psychological interpretations of gangs as the result of individual pathology (Rodgers, 2006) –the challenge now is to adapt theory to the late-modern, globalized, post-industrial era.

It is curious to note that the rather more philosophically and theoretically holistic criminology of Latin America has not, to date, engaged to any significant level with the issue of gangs in Central America. After an initial stream of sociological epidemiological studies, some more detailed analyses have emerged recently (particularly, Cruz 2010; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2007; also Reguillo, 2005; Rodgers, 2006, 2007; Zilberg, 2004), although not yet on the scale of research in the US. This is noteworthy given the elevated public and political profile of the gang issue in Central America in recent years, although of course this itself might well have encouraged the production of more descriptive, perhaps even polemical work at first.

Thus, it is argued, the present approach may have something to offer this emerging field of research. Certainly, there are few studies of gangs related to different scales of geographical analysis, surprising in the case of the *maras* given their supposedly 'transnational' characteristics (excepting Zilberg, 2004) and few dedicated to the spatial aspects of gangs in relation to their evolution (Cruz, 2010, being a notable exception). Much early work on gangs in Central America was dedicated to understanding what caused young people to turn to gangs, and what structural conditions allowed these configurations to take hold in marginal Central American communities, together with suggestions as to how they may be prevented (see for example, Cruz and Portillo, 1998; ERIC *et al.*, 2004; Rocha, 2000, 2006; Santacruz-Giralt *et al.*, 2002; Smutt and Miranda, 1998; also Winton, 2004). Subsequently, attention became focused on the pernicious effects of the extreme anti-gang policies of the last decade (see for example Hume, 2007; Savenije, 2004a, 2004b; Thale, 2006), while more recently, and in part as a consequence of these developments, debate has hinged on the extent to which gangs may be considered transnational organizations, or whether they remain locally embedded.

This interest in the transnational aspects of these gangs is related at least in part to the perceived threat to Central and North American states that comes with the alleged scaling up of gang organization and activities, and also to the associated political responses to these threats. It is worth noting that despite documenting a series of important transformations in the way gangs operate in recent years (see below), most academic research does not find significant 'mafia-style' organization at a transnational level among gangs. In part to offset this apparent hysteria over the gang take-over of the Americas, others have focused on the transnational aspects of gangs more in terms of deepening understandings of the socio-cultural significance of transnational gang identities (for example Valenzuela *et al.*, 2007).

It is worth noting that a serious limitation to researching gangs in this or any context is lack of access to verifiable data on their internal structure and leadership. This is extremely closely guarded information, and the spread of false information is rife, just as gangs are diverse, such that any bold statements about gang organization in Central America ought to be viewed with some scepticism. There are simply too many contradictory accounts to be able to paint a complete empirical picture of gang structure in the region. What we can hope to do is enrich our understandings through careful reflection on research and knowledge. This paper hopes to contribute to this endeavor in contemplating the spatial and scalar aspects of transforming gang practices in the Central American context, specifically in terms of 'trans-local' dynamics.

GANGS *IN* GLOBAL-LOCAL SPACES

To frame this discussion of the spatial and scalar dynamics of gangs, this first section attempts to outline their context in Central America, couching this in terms of the city as a space of alienation. If, as Joan Moore (1998:75) suggests, 'conditions in many nations […] are ripe for the formation of American-style youth street gangs', what might such conditions look like? Why was it possible for the *maras* to gain such a strong foothold in urban Central America?

The city as a site of economic alienation

Urban settings, and more precisely urbanization, have long been associated with violence, and it has traditionally been posited that social relations are weaker in cities than in the countryside, with socially atomized urban dwellers being both more vulnerable to violence and to being violent (Rodgers, 2007).[2] But, as Hobsbawm (2005, cited in Rodgers, 2007:7) has pointed out, violence does not emerge in cities because they are inherently alienating spaces, but rather because they are spaces inhabited both by the poor and by the political powers and elites that affect their lives, and thus 'violence is inevitably a function of the economic and political relations that exist within a city'. The city concentrates diversity. Similarly, for Mike Davis, (2004, 2006 cited in Rodgers, 2007) urban slums in the South are not evidence of cities as 'engines of growth' experiencing rapid economic expansion, as conventional wisdom would have it, so much as a dumping ground for those excluded from increasingly technological and informational production processes.

In such a situation, many people, particularly young people, face 'multiple marginalities' (Vigil, 2006), or 'fragmentation' (Davids, forthcoming). If the post-industrial city has become a site of alienation, it could be argued that the barrio (and perhaps by extension, the gang, Rodgers, 2006) has become the new sociological basis of collective social life, or 'the proximal place where a person can learn and exercise their capacity for control, and produce security' (Merlo and Milanese, 2000:16). Conflicts at this level, then, become a necessary way of managing marginalization by means of governing belonging (*Ibid.:*17), and rather than being indicative of social disorganization, constructions and representations of 'deviance' have the role of maintaining a specific kind of social organization. As Nateras Domínguez (2007:131) argues in the case of Latin America, 'structural, symbolic, political, and daily violence become language in the geography of the metropolis', thus violence is not aberrant (as the state is wont to present it) but in fact it makes sense *within* daily practices (Castillo Berthier and Jones, 2009).

Yet, as the marginality of the barrio mixes with the global-local flows associated with globalization, new spatial configurations and inequalities emerge. An important way in which borders (be they invisible/inferred/imagined/imposed) may be transgressed is through the cultural penetration of globalization: global communication networks facilitate, if always unevenly, relatively 'borderless' flows of information. Yet this information can itself heighten marginality, as the gap between young people's aspirations and their capacity to reach them grows ever wider.

The city as a site of political alienation

Elsewhere, it has been argued that the transformation and continuation of violence in contemporary Central America is strongly related to the particularities of the local *institutional* landscape, whereby a wide range of violent institutions and groups (state, private, civil, formal, informal, criminal), enter into relationships of conflict, collusion, or collaboration, resulting in a complex web of violent perpetrators (Winton, 2011). In addition to these aspects of the Central American context, it is useful to consider the institutional landscape at a national level, and state capacity more specifically.

A helpful way of thinking about state capacity, particularly in relation to gangs, is through the notion of 'vulnerability'. As Kirby (2004) argues, the strength of the notion of vulnerability is that

[2] This notion borrows to some degree from social disorganization theory, which as mentioned above has itself played a significant (if contentious) role historically in gang studies, particularly in the US.

it considers not only the threats to a system, but also focuses attention on the ability of a system to cope with these threats. There are thus two sides to vulnerability, which are mutually reinforcing: an increase in risk on the one hand (increased and diversified criminal activity), and the erosion of mechanisms to cope with those risks (state inefficiency, transnational nature of crime) on the other. By extension, therefore, a vulnerable state allows gangs to prosper in the first place, and then later becomes itself vulnerable to the pressures placed on the system by organized para-legal non-state actors, including gangs. Gangs also fit into an absence of legitimacy, creating a kind of para-legal order. Indeed, for Reguillo, (2005) the power of para-legality is far greater than illegality, since the former implies a disregard for the system and the beginning of an alternative pact.

For the individual, the state is no longer able to make citizenship meaningful, which has long been considered the most basic form of societal membership, hence: 'the project of a national society of citizens … appears increasingly exhausted and discredited' (Rodgers, 2003). Social fragmentation and polarization can be countered by the development of an alternative societal membership, whereby gangs become 'a resource with which to obtain an acknowledged identity' (Briceño and Zubillaga, 2002:27). So it is, that in the context of a situation of such manifold alienation and deprivation, some young people may find in a gang (among other factors) 'social recognition and prestige, economic reward, wellbeing and power' (Nateras, 2007:139). As one Honduran gang member in Tapachula, Mexico, expressed: 'I wanted to be someone in the gang. I wanted to be respected… and I wanted to have some kind of say in things, because when you're nobody, they treat you like….well…'.[3]

Thus, in the absence of an effective democracy, *space* becomes the battleground for (re)claiming any kind of position and belonging in life (Davids, forthcoming). This speaks not only to the legitimization or institutionalization of gangs, but most importantly in the present case, to the importance of locally based *territorial* structures such as gangs, whereby space becomes an overt source of power (see below). In this sense, the spaces of the barrio become the site not only of the accumulation of structural forces creating conditions necessary to sustain an alternative social structure such as a gang, but they also become the site for these very structures to be challenged.

These factors, of course, can be only part of the explanation of the spread of youth gangs in Central America. We must not forget that most young people living in the conditions described do *not* find it necessary to join a gang (see also Rodgers *et al.*, 2008). If young people who get involved in gangs find something there that they were missing, most young people have the resources (social, cultural, and economic) necessary to prevent them joining. What is particularly important about these structural issues, however, is that they create the conditions that allow the emergence of gang structures in certain contexts. Of concern here is the interaction of gangs with their environment. Having briefly discussed some important global-local aspects of the context in which gangs are enmeshed, I now turn to the spaces which they themselves actively produce.

GANGS *AS* GLOBAL-LOCAL SPACES

It is argued here that it useful to try and gain further insights into gangs through their spatial dynamics and practices, and to consider the extent to which they represent the local enactment of 'global' processes.[4] It is to these themes that the remainder of the paper is directed, through considering the possibility of the gang itself being a '*glocalized' space.*

[3] Interview in detention centre in Tapachula, Chiapas, CERESO 4, December 2006.

[4] I recognise that the implied uniformity of the term 'gang' and 'gang member' is highly problematic, due to the fluidity of young people's identities in relation to gang affiliation. In reality, gangs are hugely diverse structures, and young people's relations with them are complex and time-space dependent.

Tracing a transnational gang: the rise of the maras[5]

The expansion of the youth gangs known as *maras* in the US, Mexico and Central America in recent years provides an interesting example not only of the increasing relevance of 'translocality' in gang formation, but also how counter-productive the misguided (transnational) institutional interventions can be. What makes the case particularly interesting is the extent to which transnational networks and flows have so profoundly transformed and scaled-up what started as a local, Los Angeles phenomenon. Across the region, *maras* have become a spectacular symbol of deviance, defiance and delinquency, yet as the gangs encounter local conditions in Central America, they transform according to local environments. Despite their transnational origins, therefore, I would argue that the gangs remain fundamentally *local* institutions, although strongly influenced by external/global processes (see also Cruz, 2010; Santamaría, 2007).

The origins of the two gangs making up what are commonly referred to as *maras* can be traced to gang formation in Los Angeles. First to emerge was the 18th Street Gang, or *Barrio 18*, which was originally formed mainly of Mexican immigrants, but then became relatively heterogeneous, and later the *Mara Salvatrucha* (or MS13), which was formed mainly of Salvadoran migrants in order to provide some resistance to the *Barrio 18* and other local gangs. Although these national affiliations are strong, both gangs in Los Angeles later contained a significant number of Latino youth from other countries, with their affiliation based on territory, a notional Latino identity, but above all attachment to the gang itself. In the words of a gang member from Honduras:

> It doesn't matter where we're from. You could be from here [Honduras], from any Department, or from El Salvador, Guatemala, or from the US. As long as you're a Salvatrucha, you're one more member of the family (Savenije, 2004a:2).

While the basic structure and norms of these gangs were born according to local conditions in Los Angeles, international migration flows have caused them to expand into (arguably) transnational organizations, yet operating in a translocal way. In other words, international migration flows have meant that cultural practices and values originally attached to socio-spatial conflicts in the United States have been transmitted to, and *transformed* within local contexts in many cities in Central America.[6]

Although *maras* were reported in Central America during the 1980s (see AVANCSO, 1996), and there have always been bi-directional flows of migrants, legal and illegal, between the US and Central America, it was the vast upsurge in deportations and repatriations during the 1990s which is largely thought to have allowed the phenomenon of the *maras* to spread to such an extent in Central America (see Cruz, 2010 for a detailed account, also Liebel, 2004; Rodgers *et al.*, 2008; Santamaría, 2007).[7] First, the end of decades of civil war in much of Central America in the 1990s meant that there were mass-repatriations of Central American

[5] It should be clarified that the term *mara* was used by gangs in Central America prior to the development of the 'transnational' gangs which it later came to represent. It is now a term used popularly throughout Central America to refer to youth gangs, but interestingly it is rarely used by gangs themselves, who more commonly refer to themselves as '*pandillas*', the generic name for gangs. Confusingly, *banda*, *pandilla* and *mara*, far from being interchangeable labels, have very specific connotations in different countries.

[6] It has been argued that there is some similarity between this pattern and the Mexican Cholos, first established in Los Angeles during the 1940s among children of Mexican immigrants, also in the face of discrimination and vicitimization. Both are directly related to (disadvantageous) migration, and the gangs themselves share similar broad traits in terms of the norms that shape their identity, and the codes of conduct that rule the way they behave (see Nateras Dominguez, 2007). Yet it must be noted that there are very significant differences between them, due largely to vastly different local conditions in Central America.

[7] Interestingly, the *maras* have not spread to Nicaragua, for which a partial explanation is that young Nicaraguans historically have not migrated to the US to the same extent as their Central American neighbours, largely since it is more convenient to travel to neighbouring Costa Rica, where in 2001, 53 percent of emigrants from Nicaragua arrived (Rocha, 2003). Where they have migrated to the US, this has historically tended to be to Miami, which has a very different gang landscape to that in Los Angeles.

citizens who had fled the conflict during previous decades. Second, concerns among US authorities that Latino gangs were rapidly growing in size and influence led to mass deportations of gang members from 1992 (Savenije, 2004a), further to which changes in immigration laws in 1996 meant that non-citizens, and in some cases foreign-born citizens, who were sentenced to one of more years in prison (among them many gang members) could be repatriated to their country of origin. As a result of these stricter laws relating to the repatriation of felons and illegal immigrants, between 1998 and 2005 the US deported nearly 46 000 convicts to Central America, in addition to 160 000 illegal immigrants. Three countries, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, received more than 90 percent of the deportations from the US, many of whom were gang members (Rodgers *et al.*, 2008). So these young people, many leaving behind entire families in the US, and with no memory of their 'home country', were left to effectively fend for themselves (Zilberg, 2004). Perhaps unsurprisingly, with few or no apparent alternatives, for many continuing gang life was a quite logical decision.

On arrival, many such deportees established *clikas* which either supplanted existing gangs (*pandillas*) or absorbed them (Rodgers *et al.*, 2008). As Cruz (2010: 388) finds, 'the *maras* did not expand because of a premeditated and centralized process, but through a social imitation process based on migration and networking'. Migration is, after all, as much a flow of ideas as it is a flow of people. It is now overwhelmingly the case in cities in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, that the *clikas* of the *Mara Salvatrucha* and the *Barrio 18* are the dominant local gangs, even in some cases where more established gangs still remain. It is important to note, therefore, that deportations had a massive effect not so much on the *numbers* of young people involved in street gangs per se, but rather on the *practices* and *organization* of gangs. Conditions in urban Central America were such that the physical dissemination of 'American' gang structures precipitated important changes in the local (Central American) youth gang landscape. It has been argued in terms of the impact of migration on local gang structures in the US, that gang members can contribute to proliferation 'if they introduce new and exciting cultural distinctions from those existing gangs', whereby they act as 'cultural carriers of the folkways, mythologies and other trappings of more sophisticated urban gangs' (Maxson, 1998:3).

Certainly, the 'imaginary' of the *mara* is as (if not more) powerful as their physical presence, both as an appealing identity for members, imitators, and sympathizers, as well as a generator of fear and suspicion among the general population. Thus, the shared cultural symbolism of the *maras*, their practices and rituals (although varied) unite them under a shared identity that may be based more on sense of 'imagined' community, than on real physical connections through space. Indeed, Santamaría (2007) finds that the transnational character of *maras* in the region is limited to the cultural and symbolic influences shaping their identity and behavior, rather than any more formally organized transnational structures. However, it is certainly the case that these cultural norms and practices morph according to the context in which they are appropriated, thus forming the basis for 'glocal' gang structures. Thus, as micro- and macro-level conditions change over time, so do the structures and functions of gangs. Gangs are constantly in process, evolving, transforming, displacing, being displaced. So how do these new structures affect local geographies? How is the 'gang' spatially constituted?

Rewriting the streets: space, identity and violence

An obvious but nonetheless important point to note is that while deportees did provide the impetus and leadership that brought about the spread of the *mara* gang structure, the majority of gang members –then as now– were local youths. Of particular note is that the levels of violence used by *maras* in Central America far exceed the violence of their founding gangs in the US: in a culture of normalized violence such in Central America (see Winton, 2011), violence which is 'exceptional' far surpasses that which would be normatively understood as such in less violent contexts: the bar is set much higher in already-violent contexts. Conversely, it is also true that the *mara* presence

in Southern Mexico, while problematic, has not been associated with the levels of brutality seen in Central America. Thus, local conditions are an important filter for gang structures and practices.

Once established, the dominating presence of the *maras* created an intriguing 'translocal' geography in many cities in Central America, such that later, deportees or returnees would be immersed in a new geography of conflict based on their identity as a gang member in the US, 'rewriting the geography' of the Central American streets (Zilberg, 2004). The gang identity relocates, moving with them through space, across borders and over territories, as they become enmeshed in the implications of their identity in these new unfamiliar spaces.

There are pertinent issues, therefore, regarding attachment to place and the meaning of territory for *maras*. For Reguillo (2005:79), 'translocal migrants, *mara* members do not confine themselves to any particular territory because they were discarded long ago. It is this uprooting which is their main strength'. Certainly, the implication that gang members have a mobile identity is an interesting one, and one which will be explored at greater depth below: the very fact that *maras* have been formed according to transnational flows means that their identity is a unique combination of places and translocal influences. Yet, I do not think it wise to take this too far and detach *maras* from their locality, not least because *maras* now are heterogeneous amalgams of a whole range of different groupings, many (if not most) of whom have never even been to Los Angeles.

What is particularly interesting though in terms of the connection between identity, space and territory, in the case of the *maras* is that although *clikas* function according to territoriality, the final attachment is to the gang, and defense of territory is merely the vehicle through which to display and perform this identity, such that the barrio has taken on a *symbolic* rather than physical significance. This notion is borne out by the way territory is sometimes divided at a sub-barrio level. Certainly in the case of Guatemala, one neighbourhood may be host to various *clikas* of the MS13 and the Barrio 18, with each territory sometimes not stretching to more than a few blocks. The 'barrio' therefore is imagined, a social space synonymous with 'gang' in its meaning, which in this sense does *dislocate* the gang from the neighbourhood.

This ambiguous relationship with territory in turn impacts upon the relationship between the gang and the wider community, since the symbiotic relationship of mutual protection so often reported as a key characteristic of gangs (see for example Rodgers, 2006) becomes impossible. Rather than protecting the barrio, gangs create a violent disorder for community members. As one young woman aged 17 noted in an interview:

> Just outside [my house] is the boundary of two gangs –the 18s and the 13s. When they come out to fight they start doing it in the street with machetes, and stones –they throw stones which hit the houses, and so people have to stay where they are. I can hear it all from my house, when they start to fight, to kill.[8]

It is notable first of all, that since that interview the weaponry of gangs has changed significantly to now consist largely of knives and firearms, and second that the imposition of gangs' geographies directly impinges upon the mobility of others. It is worth remembering that in any locality, there are as many geographies as there are inhabitants.

So while space remains a crucial source of power and control for the gangs, the spaces inhabited and created by gangs are malleable and fluid. As Cruz (2010) finds, the fact that gang identity in this case is not strictly restricted by territory, means that gang practices (including violence) are similarly borderless. This is not to say that identities are detached from space, but rather the gang identity remains attached to the individual as they move through the city. It could be argued, then, that their gang identity is not so much *dislocated* as it is *relocated*: it has meaning beyond the territory of their *clika*, in the different spaces of the city, and more widely in the region.[9]

[8] Interview in Guatemala City, January 2001.

[9] Another important space which is strongly imbued with these relocated gang identities is the prison (see Cruz, 2010; and discussion below).

'Transnational' syndicates or barrio gangs?

It has been established that the general functioning and identity of maras are rooted in transnational migration flows, but beyond their transnational roots, an important question is of course to what extent they are organized at this level. First, in an imagined sense, they have certainly formed a 'global' community. The Barrio 18 has had its own website, and a cursory search of YouTube indicates that members, affiliates and sympathizers of both gangs have created a virtual community which transcends national borders. So it is that through the creation of imagined communities, identity and belonging are constructed in a way that disrupts the connection between space and identity (Helvacioglu, 2000).

The extent to which the gangs are physically networked is more contested. Authors reporting a rise of complex and expansive criminal networks, for example journalists Lara Klahr, (2006) and Fernández and Ronquillo (2006), provide accounts which seem based on dubious and perhaps sensational empirical evidence (see Wolf, 2010).[10] Indeed, as Rodgers *et al.* (2008:23) argue, 'in many ways, the federated nature of the *maras* is more of an imagined social morphology than a real phenomenon, based on the fact that the steady flows of deportees from the United States share a common language and reference points'. In other words, the fact that gang identity can be *relocated*, as noted above, has meant that '*mareros*' are perceived as monolithic and omnipresent, such that it is assumed that they are the result of conscious and formal networking and organization, whereas it seems more likely that in reality, these connections where they do exist are loose and informal. As Santamaría (2007) finds, national and transnational links between gangs and gang members are neither formalized nor institutionalized, such that the *maras* operate rather as a *disorganized* criminal network.

Indeed, I have found that direct communications between the different neighbourhood *clikas* of gangs is rare, but it occasionally served two broad purposes: to facilitate migration, and to standardize or control gang practices and operations (particularly of new groups). This communication was said to take the form of coded letters sent with members travelling through Central America and Mexico, and perhaps maps of where other clikas are based who would then be obliged to receive and protect them. It seems likely that the majority of gang members do not have any links with *clikas* beyond their immediate locality, and that those links that do exist are temporary and sporadic, and do not have an explicitly organizational or expansionist purpose.

Public interest in the transnational organization of youth gangs is more specifically related to growing concern over the extent to which *maras* have become involved with organized criminal networks, particularly the drugs trade, yet there is little evidence to support the idea that the *maras* are a regionally organized criminal operation.[11] While it is certainly the case that some gangs have aligned themselves to some extent with organized crime, these associations seem to be sporadic and patchy, and in cases where they do exist, they appear to constitute a strategy of survival, rather than expansion. In large part, these strategies have emerged in the face of anti-gang policies across the region, which have dramatically changed the context in which gangs operate, both within neighborhoods, and within the prisons where many thousands of gang members are held. The remainder of the paper focuses on the nature of this relationship between gangs and the state, and the effects of increasing state repression on gang activity and violence.

State-gang relations and the changing (spatial) strategies of maras

We have already seen in part how state interventions affect the formation of gangs in the case of US immigration policy. I have argued elsewhere that currently it is institutional factors that have

[10] It is notoriously difficult to obtain accurate information about the organization of gangs, since this is the information guarded most closely by gangs themselves.

[11] Perhaps more important in terms of criminality than whether or not they are key actors in the drug trade, is the more locally pernicious development of protection rackets, which have become an increasingly common strategy among maras in recent years (see Cruz, 2010).

perhaps the most significant effect on the functioning of gangs in Central America (see Winton, 2011). These institutional factors begin with recent (regional) legislation in Central American countries affected by *maras*. Understanding the significance and impacts of gangs (and state responses to them) can be enhanced by considering the differing degrees of vulnerability in state political systems in the face of the challenge that gangs present.[12] A vulnerable state whose already weak institutions have at once allowed, and been further degraded by the activities of gangs and organized criminal groups, a state which can no longer monopolize the legitimate use of violence, a state crippled by corruption, is a state lacking the fundamentals necessary to comprehensively deal with the threat that gangs present. While the regional spread of gangs in Central America springs from common experiences of fragmentation, insecurity, vulnerability, the formal regional response (overwhelmingly punitive and repressive) is inspired by panic, stemming from state weakness.

As part of a regional strategy to tackle the *maras*, national governments in affected countries in Central America and subsequently in Mexico, implemented anti-gang legislation (known generally as '*mano dura*', or 'iron fist') which in effect made it illegal to belong to a gang. There has been some national variation in the specifics of the legislation, but essentially it became possible for anyone with a tattoo to be imprisoned, regardless of whether or not they have committed a crime. Indeed, the cultural stereotyping of the 'undesirables' is remarkable: illicit gang association has been defined in El Salvador as 'groups of people who act to disrupt public order, or attack decorum and good principles, or who mark their body with scars and tattoos' (*Proceso*, 2003). This approach gained wide popular support, but has also received strong criticism both nationally and internationally, has had a range of pernicious effects (see below), and significantly, it has failed to reduce violence. While more recently there have been some moves to offset these punitive approaches through preventative and rehabilitative measures (driven in large part by foreign agencies including the UNDP), in reality there is little change on the ground in the way gangs are dealt with (Rodgers *et al.*, 2008).

Ironically, if unsurprisingly, the more repressive regional gang policy becomes, the greater the regional spread of the *maras* (being more mobile now than ever), and the greater their involvement in other criminal activities for survival. Heavy handed policies in Central America have had the indirect effect of aligning gangs with organized crime to a greater extent than in the past, including low-level drug dealing, trafficking of migrants, extortion and contract killings. In addition, the very fact that the *maras* have recently linked with other crimes and have 'diversified', has meant they have ceased to be just a 'barrio' issue, and has contributed to their becoming something of a regional obsession (see Reguillo, 2005). Also important has been the US identifying these gangs as a matter of national security, which has raised the profile of the issue at a regional level. All of these factors speak to the scaling up, or regionalization of the problem. As a phenomenon, it becomes not only translocal (under which guise it operates across borders, but remains a fundamentally local problem, and thus more forgettable at a regional level), but really transnational in its *threat* (*Ibid.*).

At a local level, as a result of these policies there have been many reports of worsening police brutality towards suspected gang members throughout Central America, and frequent accusations of social cleansing and vigilantism. In one *colonia* in Guatemala City alone, it was reported that 85 young people were killed in this way in one year, often brutally.[13] Such policies also further reduce state capacity to govern effectively, in obscuring other insidious forms of violence and crime.[14] As one retired gang member in Honduras notes,

> they say that it's only gang members who rob, who kill, who rape, but there are a lot of people doing

[12] Thanks to Charles Wood for this insight.

[13] Interview in Guatemala City, July 2007.

[14] In fact, gang members are much more likely to be killed than to kill. Of young people under the age of 30 murdered between 1998 and 2001, 34 percent were gang members (YCARE, 2007).

> these things who are nothing to do with gangs. They say they're all gang members. It's not like that. We're not like people to them –they blame us for everything.[15]

While it is important not to lose sight of the fact that fear of gangs is often grounded in real experience of crime and violence perpetrated by gang members, reliance on repressive policies is deeply counterproductive, not least since the rehabilitation of gang members becomes virtually impossible. Young people living as part of a gang generally rely entirely on that gang for economic and social survival, and if there is no viable alternative livelihood, there is little incentive to leave a gang. Moreover, rehabilitation means little when they are still very much at risk from persecution simply because of bearing the marks of the gang. In the words of a Barrio 18 leader, 'there are some who have a family, children and maybe work, but just for going around with tattoos they could be banged up, or even killed… it's a violation of human rights'.[16]

The logical, and often only option for gang members in such a situation is to reduce their visibility. Visibility has in the past been crucial to the performance of gang identity, but there is the sense now that their very essence is changing. As one representative of the Institute of Human Development (IDH) in Tapachula, Chiapas commented: 'now the kids go around well-dressed, they're just checking things out to see where things are calmer so they can carry on'[17]. Many gang members no longer use tattoos, no longer dress in the same way, or hang out in large groups; they have become an 'invisible' target.[18] In addition, it is possible that this new way of operating is more expensive for gang members (requiring the acquisition of private spaces, vehicles, etc.), which could be linked in part to increased criminality on their part to sustain the organization (Cruz, 2010).

Repressive policies in Central America have also physically displaced gang members, as Zilberg (2004:777) sums up: 'efforts to reassert national sovereignty through zero tolerance policing strategies only, and most ironically, reproduce transnational flows and formations'. As a spokesman for the Secretary of Security in Honduras enthuses: 'in the face of our offensive, thousands of gang members have fled to other Central American countries, and to the US and Mexico'.[19] The most significant of these movements has been recent 'incursion' of gangs into southern Mexico, where illegal border crossing and trafficking is said to have provided them with plentiful opportunities to survive. Police crackdowns in the border region of Mexico seem to have repeated this pattern of regional displacement, with gang members drifting north into other cities such as Oaxaca, and according to some accounts, even further north to the US.

If, as noted above, gang themselves slot into an absence of legitimacy and hegemony, (challenging legality in terms of confronting an *absence* rather than a presence) an authoritarian response, which is really an attempt to 'fill the absence of legitimacy with a double dose of legality' (Reguillo, 2005:77) is ultimately ineffectual. First, as Reguillo (2005:80) notes, 'when death, instability, uncertainty, hopelessness and detachment become rooted as everyday experiences, punishment by example is irrelevant', and second, prisons become an extension of gang life, a normalized experience (Hagedorn, 2007b).

In fact, it has been argued that the most significant sites of organization and operations for gangs in contemporary Central America are its prisons. As Cruz (2010:392) finds, prisons have created alternative spaces of organization for gangs, in which gang members from different areas of the country come together, and are able to become a 'sort of standing assembly where they could debate, make pacts and decide on structures, strategies and ways to operate'

[15] Interview in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, August 2004.

[16] Interview in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, August 2004.

[17] Interview in Tapachula, Mexico, November 2006.

[18] Tattoo removal has become common in Central America, although many young people have to resort to rudimentary and brutal techniques where removal is not available or is expensive.

[19] *El Universal*, 05/07/05.

Rather than rehabilitation, (increasingly overcrowded) prison may often reinforce gang allegiances, and strengthen links between different *clikas* of the same gangs, and between these and criminal groups. Mass incarceration serves not to dismantle gangs, but rather to reinforce and *transform* the way in which they operate: it becomes a space crucial for gang survival, a site away from the territory of the barrio, but which is nonetheless intricately tied to its spaces. Although it is certainly true that the extent to which gangs are organized in this way in prisons varies significantly,[20] it certainly marks a new and important development in the way in which gangs organize, with prisons becoming a key space to which gang identities and activities have been *relocated*.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we have seen how the global and local interact both in terms of constructing the *context* in which *maras* have come to operate, and also in terms of how gangs themselves *create* and *transform* the spaces in which they operate. It is of key importance to recognize, therefore, that transnational processes are produced and enacted at a local level. The fluidity and complexity of gang identities in the case of the *maras* is due in large part to their dynamic spatiality, emerging as they have from transnational processes, being enacted translocally, and possessing a fluid and dynamic territoriality, resulting in gang identities that are flexible, mutable, and mobile. In such a scenario, it becomes possible for gangs to transform rapidly, while maintaining their unity and identity, making them particularly difficult for the authorities to contain and control.

To ignore the importance of these *geographies* of gangs is to misunderstand the way they operate, to underestimate their capacity to transform and survive in the face of harsh repression. We know that poor understanding of gangs inevitably leads to ineffective interventions. It seems that there is still much work to be done to enrich our knowledge of gangs throughout the region.

[20] As one young female gang member noted in an interview in a prison in Chiapas, the conflicts of outside do not always crossover into the prison: "it's a barrio thing". Interview in CERESO 3, Tapachula, Mexico, December 2006.

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