

2. Gangs in Central America's Northern Triangle: narratives and journeys

Ámparo Marroquín Parducci¹

In 2014, three Central American countries reported some of the highest homicide rates in the world: Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. According to *InSight Crime*,² El Salvador was at the top of this ranking and was by far the most violent country in the region, with a homicide rate of 68.6 per 100,000 people, above Honduras, with 66, and Guatemala, in fifth place, with 31. If the civil war in El Salvador had a death toll of about 75,000 victims,³ then the number of violent homicides over the subsequent 23 years has almost equalled it.

The emergence of gangs in the region has been a long process. It is not, as some believe, a new problem that emerged in the aftermath of wars and armed conflict, or a product of massive deportations of Central Americans due to restrictive US policies starting in the 1990s. Gangs are not the result of a single cause, and cannot be understood through generalisations; sometimes, within the same gang, decisions, organisation and the administration of violence vary from one clique [*clica*] to another. Indeed, countries in Central America's Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) have already produced an ample body of literature that enables a general understanding of gangs in the region.⁴

- 1 Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas aka UCA El Salvador.
- 2 D. Gange, 'InSight Crime 2014 homicide round-up', *InSight Crime*, 12 Jan. 2015, available at www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/insight-crime-2014-homicide-round-up?utm_source=Master+List&utm_campaign=cbbbec1e33-01_16_151_15_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e90c5425f9-cbbbec1e33-206756045 (accessed 14 March 2016).
- 3 Naciones Unidas, *De la locura a la esperanza. La guerra de 12 años en El Salvador. Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador* (New York/San Salvador: Naciones Unidas, 1992-3).
- 4 See, inter alia, AVANCSO, *Por sí mismos. Un estudio preliminar de las 'maras' en la ciudad de Guatemala*, Cuadernos de Investigación no. 4 (Ciudad de Guatemala: Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala, 1998); M. Cruz and M. Santacruz, *La victimización y la percepción de la seguridad ciudadana* (San Salvador: Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo/Instituto de Opinión Pública de la UCA, 2005); M. Cruz and N. Portillo, *Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del gran San Salvador. Más allá de la vida loca* (San Salvador: UCA editores/Hommies Unidos/Räda Barnen/Save

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This chapter seeks to study two processes. It first takes a social perspective that draws on existing research to conclude that, although gangs have for a long time been tied to processes of violence, in recent years they have become more refined in exercising force, especially in response to ‘firm hand’ [*mano dura*] policies and truces between gangs, particularly in El Salvador. The second process, which is symbolic, looks at different representations of gangs to show how they have been instrumental in propagating societal fears and in enabling their social control. In fact, particularly intense coverage of the reality behind gangs is capable of destabilising governments.

Gangs as a form of organised violence

Gangs are not a new phenomenon in Central America. Rather, in their earliest forms, they were often structured as youth organisations. In the case of El Salvador, some studies place their origin in the 1980s, while others go even further back. Cruz and Santacruz, for instance, look at the rivalry between youth organisations in the 1950s and 1960s, when student groups from different schools fought each other.⁵ Win Savanije, on the other hand, places their origin in fights between rival students in 1940.⁶

In Guatemala, researchers have identified a long tradition of youth movements going back to at least to the 1930s. These organisations had a political character and were often critical of dictatorships in the country. In the 1940s, students were often encouraged to participate in political movements and intellectual debates, and these structures grew in importance during the 1970s when many students participated in protests. Their presence in Guatemalan society starkly contrasted with that of gangs, which emerged in the 1950s and were ‘mostly

the Children, 1998); ERIC/IDESO/IDIES/IUDOP, *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica. Volumen I* (Managua, Nicaragua: UCA Publicaciones, 2001); ERIC/IDESO/IDIES/IUDOP, *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica. Pandillas y Capital Social. Volumen II* (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 2004); ERIC/IDIES/IUDOP/NITLAPAN/DIRINPRO, *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica. Políticas juveniles y rehabilitación. Volumen III* (Managua, Nicaragua: UCA Publicaciones, 2004); M. Liebel, ‘Pandillas juveniles en Centroamérica o la difícil búsqueda de justicia en una sociedad violenta’, *Desacatos. Revista de Antropología Social*, 14 (2004), 85–104; M. Santacruz and A. Concha-Eastman, *Barrio adentro. La solidaridad violenta de las pandillas* (San Salvador: UCA editores/Hommes Unidos/OPS, 2001); W. Savanije and M. Beltrán, *Compiendo en bravuras. Violencia estudiantil en el Área Metropolitana de San Salvador* (San Salvador: FLACSO, 2005); W. Savanije, *Maras y Barras. Pandillas y violencia juvenil en los barrios marginales de Centroamérica* (San Salvador: FLACSO, 2009). Further information can be found in the *El Faro* newspaper in its ‘Sala Negra’ section, available at www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/ (accessed 14 March 2016).

5 ERIC/IDESO/IDIES/IUDOP, *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica, Volumen I* (Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2001), p. 30.

6 W. Savanije and M.A. Beltrán, *Compiendo en bravuras. Violencia estudiantil en el área metropolitana de San Salvador* (San Salvador: Flacso, 2005).

composed of men who fought each other in territorial disputes with chains and knives, used drugs and were opposed to the political student groups'.⁷

The first youth unrest documented in Guatemala took place in September 1985, when youths took to the streets to protest against a hike in public transport costs. Unlike other protests, on this occasion businesses were looted. The Association for Advancing Social Sciences (Asociación para el Avance para las Ciencias Sociales – AVANCSO)⁸ points to the emergence of the Mara Plaza Vivar-Capitol, a group simultaneously involved in violent acts and in political activities, in this context.

In Honduras, the first studies on this topic situate the origins of the gangs in the period between 1985 and 1989. Castro and Carranza, for instance, have argued that the phenomenon was connected to the 'proliferation of drugs and their consumption by teenagers in the schools',⁹ such that its inception was linked, as in El Salvador, to a student gang culture.

After a period of accommodation, two main gangs came to dominate territorial and media attention in Central American countries: the MS-13, also known as the Mara Salvatrucha, and the Mara 18, names taken from gangs created in the neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, California. As many other commentators have already noted, the 18, initially known as the Clanton Street Gang, is the older of the two, having emerged in the 1960s as part of a complex movement by the Hispanic minority to defend itself from racist attacks and attempts at 'social cleansing'. Most of its members were Chicanos and Mexicans.¹⁰ The MS13 came into being in the 1980s, when the Salvadorian minority sought to create different spaces to express its own cultural identity. In this context, 'mara' means gang and 'salvatrucha' is a fusion of the term 'Salvadorian' and *ponerse trucho o trucha*, which means to smarten up or stay

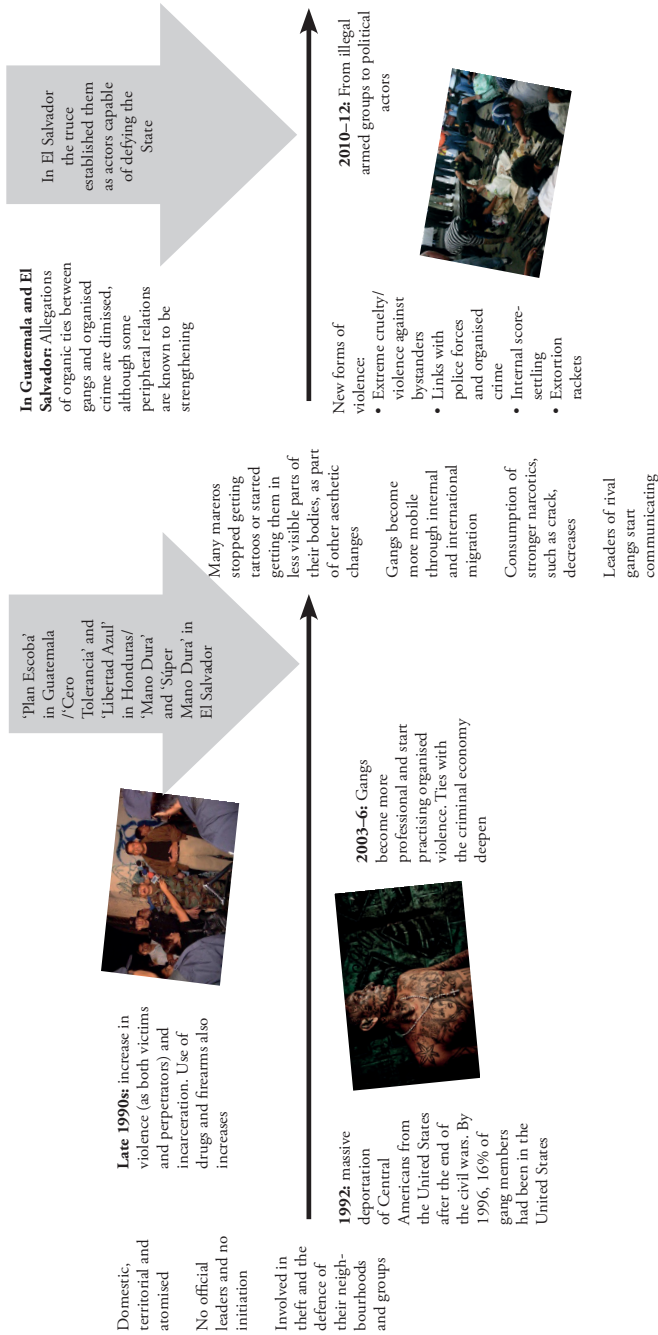
7 AVANCSO, *Por sí mismos. Un estudio preliminar de las 'maras' en la ciudad de Guatemala. Cuadernos de Investigación no. 4* (Guatemala: Asociación para el Avance para las Ciencias Sociales, 1998), p. 9.

8 Ibid.

9 ERIC/IDESO/IDIES/IUDOP, *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica, Volumen I* (Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2001), pp. 221–8.

10 The term 'Chicano' has several meanings. The Portal de Cultura Chicana of the Centro Virtual Cervantes points out that it is 'derived from the term Mexican. The word mexicano lead to xicano and, as the x is sometimes pronounced as a ch, the result is Chicano, although others prefer xicano. This term has had different meanings throughout its long existence. Initially, it was derogatory. However, after the well-known Movimiento Chicano (1965 to 1979, which were explosive years for civil and human rights in the United States), it acquired very clear political connotations. As a result of this struggle, many doors in the dominant (Anglo Saxon) society were opened, including those to schools and universities. The term Chicano started to acquire a more prestigious semantic value, because in some cases departments of Chicano Studies were opened in many US universities. As a definition, it can be briefly stated that Chicana or Chicano is a US resident or citizen of Mexican descent' (J. Alarcón, *Presentación. Portal de Cultura Chicana*, available at www.cervantesvirtual.com/bib/portal/Lchicana/presentacion.shtml (accessed 14 March 2016)).

How have gangs evolved?



Graph 2.1. Historical changes in gangs

alert. One of the most complete historical accounts on the origins of these gangs is available in the digital newspaper *El Faro*, especially the 'Sala Negra' section.¹¹

In the 1990s, local newspapers in Central America documented how these gangs fought one another in territorial disputes that extended beyond the influence of clicas in Los Angeles. At that point, local groups started to emulate the forms of behaviour detailed in the media and referred to by some migrants. At the same time, a number of Central American gang members returned from the US to their countries of origin, bringing linguistic and cultural reference points that served to transmit the US 'cultural model of the original gangster'.¹² Local youths added their own elements and created syncretic expressions that allowed those who had never been to the US to reproduce the US gang lifestyle. This is where one of the most widespread myths about gangs originated, one that has been used time and time again in official discourse and reproduced by the media: gang members are deportees and, therefore, deportees are a threat to national security.

Little by little, gangs started to shift their strategies and means of using violence, as illustrated in Graph 1. The first great shift came about in the 2000s, when zero tolerance policies pushed gang members towards greater professionalisation and building new links from inside the penitentiaries.¹³ Thereafter, new forms of violence appeared, directed particularly towards citizens, as well as much more sophisticated extortion systems. The gangs became not only one of the most visible faces of criminal groups, but also one of the most extreme, incorporating certain mechanism of cruelty, violence and killing into the heart of social life. In this regard, analysts such as Roxana Martel talk about a self-fulfilling prophecy in that gangs ended up assuming as an inherent attribute of their different clicas everything that they had been accused of doing during the 1990s.¹⁴ It was also at this time that the first cases of migration caused by social violence were registered, as many families,

11 See *Evolución de las pandillas en El Salvador*, available at www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/83661/Evolucin-de-las-pandillas-en-El-Salvador-desde-1945#vars!date=1945-10-30_16:08:36! (accessed 14 March 2016); and the report by J.L. Sanz and C. Martínez, 'El viaje de la mara salvatrucha' starting at 'I. El origen del odio', available at www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201208/cronicas/9301/ (accessed 14 March 2016) and continuing with 'II. La letra 13' at: www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201208/cronicas/9302/ (accessed 14 March 2016).

12 M. Cruz and N. Portillo, *Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del gran San Salvador* (San Salvador: UCA Editores/Hombres Unidos/Rada Barnen/Save the Children, 1998), p. 51.

13 See W. Savenije, *Maras y Barras. Pandillas y violencia juvenil en los barrios marginales de Centroamérica* (San Salvador: FLACSO, 2009); J. Aguilar, 'Los resultados contraproducentes de las políticas antipandillas', *Estudios Centroamericanos*, 708 (2007).

14 R. Martel, 'Las maras salvadoreñas: nuevas formas de espanto y de control social', *Estudios Centroamericanos*, 696 (2007), 957–80.

particularly from the 2000s, fled their homes and sought new locations to continue their lives.¹⁵

Since 2010, the gangs have refined their use of symbolic violence, extended their control of territories, and deepened their ties to organised crime and entry into illegal businesses. The most recent research from the Universidad Centroamericana's University Institute on Public Opinion (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública – IUDOP) shows that 'in the last decade, alongside murders due to traditional disputes between gang members, the gangs have become ever more active in the businesses of contract killing, extortion and drug distribution. In the past few years, many attacks perpetrated by gangs were not just directed at rival gangs but also at other actors, such as criminal bands and common offenders, ordinary citizens and even members of their own gang who might represent a threat to their business'.¹⁶

In this context, some clicas do not fit within the definition of 'organised crime' in the traditional sense, since they work as contractors for such organisations. On the other hand, some groups are moving ever closer to fulfilling this definition and specialise in certain kinds of smuggling. What is clear is that this evolution leads violence to become less predictable, more extensive, and capable of exercising control beyond the national borders of those countries.

In fact, the last poll by IUDOP shows that 4.8 per cent of Salvadorian children had to switch schools due to the threats and the danger that gangs represent; 4.6 per cent had to leave their homes and 8 per cent of Salvadorians had to flee their country with their families due to this situation.¹⁷ Gang violence and its impact on the number of homicides shifted from the gang truce in 2012 and murder rates plummeted, but the levels of forced migration and forced disappearances were not only maintained but even became higher at certain points during the truce. This would appear to indicate that the gang leaders found a new political use for homicide. It was not only a means of spreading fear, but also a way to pressure politicians and the State into negotiating favourable conditions both for imprisoned gang members and for the clicas that controlled the different neighbourhoods.

This reality also led to new symbolic and narrative constructions that sought to entrench themselves in society as outlined in the next section.

15 Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo. *Informe de Desarrollo Humano 2005. Al encuentro del nuevo nosotros* (2006).

16 Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, *La situación de la seguridad y la justicia 2009–2014. Entre expectativas de cambio, mano dura militar y treguas pandilleras* (San Salvador: IUDOP, 2014), p. 19.

17 Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, *Boletín de prensa Año XXVIII, no. 5, Evaluación del país a finales de 2014* (San Salvador: IUDOP, 2014), available at www.uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/144.pdf (accessed 14 March 2016).

As an instrument for the social control of fear

The danger threatens the stock of tradition as much as its recipients. For both it is one and the same: handing itself over as the tool of the ruling classes. In every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it.

Walter Benjamin¹⁸

Friday 23 May 2014 was a tough day for Salvadorians. Only eight days before the inauguration of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla member, homicides spiked alarmingly. It was to be a very violent year compared to the period of relative calm of the previous two years, as a result of the highly questionable gang truce that was never totally clear.

While the truce held, homicides rates dropped from 70 per 100,000 inhabitants to 40.¹⁹ When negotiations broke down, the murder rate in 2014 rose to 68.6 per 100,000 inhabitants, making El Salvador the most violent country in Latin America. The media highlighted this news in their headlines and dubbed that day 'Black Friday':²⁰ over 31 murders in a single day in a country of barely 20,000 square kilometres.

Beyond the overwhelming level of violence, its potential for instrumental use is also significant. Indeed, the morning after that terrible 'Black Friday' in El Salvador, the two main national newspapers carried headlines referring to these events and drawing attention to the extraordinary number of homicides. Red was the dominant colour used by both titles. Some of the published articles pushed the idea that this 'murder wave' was a gang strategy to force the new government into granting certain concessions to gang members in different detention centres, particularly to the *palabrer*os²¹ of the distinct clicas.

Using the gangs as a trigger for fear, as a strategy to promote instability and a sense of insecurity, is nothing new. Shortly before her death in 2000, Susana Rotker explained how we have become citizens of fear:

To analyse the citizen's fear, or better yet, the citizenships of fear, one need only frame the big cities of Latin America as a representational space that is deeply rooted in what is real. It is not necessary to open the range of terror, because in the face of the risk that practitioners of the city live with outside and within their bodies (the expression is from *Certeau*), it is true that in that social space called Latin America there are some eighteen countries and that the shroud of terror does not cover them all equally nor in the same

18 W. Benjamin, *Tesis de filosofía de la historia y otros fragmentos* (México D.F.: UACM/Itaca, 2008), p. 23.

19 Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, *Boletín de prensa Año XXVIII, no. 5, Evaluación del país a finales de 2014* (San Salvador: IUDOP, 2014), available at www.uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/144.pdf.

20 *La Prensa Gráfica*, 24 May 2014, p. 1.

21 Leaders or bosses.

way. Furthermore, people (practitioners of urban space) carry on living: it is an undeclared war, but people celebrate their birthdays, visit each other, work, have children and love like they always have. Habits and geographies are modified, tranquillity or faith is lost, but not all forms of happiness are lost.²²

The form of participation proposed by the State is that citizens become informants. In this way, mistrust towards the Other increases. Already fragile social networks deteriorate as people see themselves as potential victims of out-of-control insecurity.

This leads to consideration of how this discourse has been constructed in a country like El Salvador. Although it is true that gangs have a long history in our countries, it is also possible to find a breaking point that shows, in the case of Northern Triangle countries, when they became socially visible and started being seen as the social Other – the scapegoat – and the root of all evil. It was not until the 1990s, when peace processes were ongoing, that a considerable increase could be found, not in gang activity, but in media coverage of these social actors, who emerge on to the public stage once peace negotiations in the region had closed.

In the case of El Salvador, these subjects vied for visibility as they were tied to stories about the ‘wave of deportees’ who had arrived in the country. In these stories, deportees were no longer ‘good Salvadorians’. They brought bad habits with them and were capable of degrading a wonderful reality in which Salvadorians respected one another and had decided to live in peace. On 7 April 1995, the then congressman and later defence minister, René Figueroa, was quoted as follows in *La Prensa Gráfica*: ‘antisocial individuals deported from the United States represent a ticking bomb that must be defused with a law that protects honest citizens’.²³ The next day, he stated that ‘it is absolutely unacceptable that any country in the world exports convicted felons ... it is an attack on the rights of all other Salvadorians, who are seeking to fight against criminality.’²⁴

In light of these circumstances, he proposed that the government should strip deportees of their nationality, thus preventing them from being deported to the country and leaving them in a kind of no man’s land, without citizenship or rights, far from *us peaceful and honest citizens*. From these first articles, up to the present day, the press and much of the other media has built up the image of a monster that, at least at the beginning, was totally identifiable and clearly delimited.

22 S. Rotker, ‘Ciudades escritas por la violencia (a modo de introducción)’, in *Nueva Sociedad Separatas* (2000), pp. 9–23, available at <http://documents.mx/documents/ciudades-escritas-por-la-violencia-susana-rotker.html> (accessed 14 March 2016), p. 16.

23 *La Prensa Gráfica*, 7 April 1995.

24 *La Prensa Gráfica*, 8 April 1995.

Ten years after these articles,²⁵ a 2007 study showed that newspapers in El Salvador were publishing an average of 2.43 articles about gangs per day, while their counterparts in Guatemala were publishing 1.13, and those in Honduras 1.87. Every day, people in the Northern Triangle were fed harsh articles, reports and pictures that constructed the image of a subject, the gang member, who was capable of the worst forms of violence, rape, torture, extortion and threats, with or without justification, and was always considered guilty. The presumption of innocence was not something that journalists bothered about while drafting their articles: gang members were always perpetrators. They were very specifically defined and followed a particular aesthetic: young tattooed men, with shaved heads and a hard stare, wearing loose-fitting pants. This image was in many cases assumed by gang members themselves who, with relish, developed their own *performance* and posed for the cameras, practising their poses of 'otherness' whenever their faces were lit by camera flashes or they were recorded on video.

In a 2006 interview, Héctor Silva Dávalos, the then editor-in-chief of *La Prensa Gráfica*, currently a researcher at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at the American University, pointed out that 'if people used to believe that violence was a result of our violent nature, slowly but surely discourse changed and now gang members are responsible for violence'.²⁶ This was reflected in the media. The constant sensation of living in a warzone increased when laws and anti-gang operations worsened the performative and real acts of a violence that overwhelmed all parties. Nonetheless, the discussion on violence stemming from organised crime, drug trafficking and criminal groups associated with corruption received little space in the agenda built by political analysts and big media. If, in 2005, there were three daily articles on gangs on average, by September 2009 it was almost 13. One year later, in 2010, El Salvador had 17 per day, in episodes that included the burning of a bus in which 15 people were killed.²⁷

During these 15 years of media coverage certain myths have persisted and become more entrenched. The automatic reproduction of police analysis and discourse has led to a belief that crimes, in general, are carried out by gang-related youths. In many cases, this ignores the role of organised crime, which is

25 A. Marroquín, 'Indiferencias y espantos. Relatos de los jóvenes de pandillas en la prensa escrita de Centroamérica', in G. Rey (ed.), *Los relatos periodísticos del crimen* (Bogotá: Centro de Competencia en Comunicación. Fundación Friedrich Ebert, 2007), pp. 55–91.

26 Héctor Silva Ávalos, personal communication, San Salvador, El Salvador.

27 A. Marroquín, 'En la república de la muerte. Reflexiones en torno a las coberturas periodísticas sobre violencia en el triángulo norte de Centroamérica', in M. Zetino (ed.) *Delincuencia, juventud y sociedad. Materiales para la reflexión* (San Salvador: FLACSO, 2011), pp. 127–49.

linked with existing power structures, and it also leads members of our society to embrace and take comfort in our growing militarisation.

In many social spaces it continues to be affirmed that gang youths are deportees, when statistics and serious sociological, anthropological and journalistic studies show otherwise.²⁸ Some insist that gang members are men, when previously cited research, such as that by Miguel Cruz and Miguel Santamaría, reveals the complex reality of female gang members, many of them young women who have opted to join gangs to seek protection against the constant domestic violence and abuse to which they are subjected.

Gangs are considered a youth phenomenon, when age ranges are widening to also include older and younger individuals, and these structures have become organisations with both retired members and young children as new members, in addition to an important number of relatives who depend on the income from the gangs' criminal activities.²⁹

Gang members are still considered to be equal and to all act in the same way, when academia and journalism have pointed out that clicas are highly diverse. In this daily contingency, we Salvadorians sometimes forget the complexities of history and the long-running historical processes that have led to the society in which we live today. It continues to be believed that gang members can be understood from within a territory defined by the increasingly fragile limits of a particular nation-State when it is these organisations with increasing ties to organised crime that seem to have a better grasp of the logic behind globalisation and its implications for everyday life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, media coverage mostly reproduces the many clichés about gangs, but above all sustains three processes that serve an instrumental function for certain actors in Central American societies.

First, it serves to perpetuate fears that in many cases can be used as a political tool. Whoever is capable of offering the most immediate responses will gain popular support. Many politicians owe their election to their use of this discourse in the media.

Second, media coverage on gangs also allows the complex question of the origins of violence in the Northern Triangle to be bypassed by focusing on gangs. This explanation seeks to avoid answers pointing at organised crime,

28 From Miguel Cruz's aforementioned work to the more recent estimates, published in the *Sala Negra* section, also mentioned above, analysts agree that the percentage of deportees joining gangs is low, although they often rise to leadership in their clicas.

29 A. Marroquín, 'Las pandillas se han vuelto los nuevos proveedores económicos de la comunidad. Entrevista con Miguel Cruz', *Sala Negra*, 15 April 2012, available at www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201204/entrevistas/8308/ (accessed 14 March 2016).

corruption and a lack of transparency from many public officials in a region where journalists have already highlighted the fact that 'the government is one of the main actors behind threats to communication professionals'.³⁰ As long as gangs are the only available explanation, it is not necessary to delve into discussions on organised crime, which can be even more dangerous for these writers, as evidenced by the murders of journalists in Mexico and Honduras.

Lastly, media coverage on gangs has served to distract attention away from another process in the region: remilitarisation. Although the population is on guard against possible attacks by gangs, societies continue to strengthen their armies and direct an important portion of their budgets towards them. As the Mexican experience shows, the militarisation of security does not usually lead to positive results.

Hopefully, this reflection will allow the development of new proposals on ways of approaching these phenomena in all their complexity, going beyond traditional categories, in a creative exercise that allows us to understand the density of distinct forms of violence in the region, but also the redemptive possibilities through the vast majority of its population that seeks to live in peace.

30 W. Carballo et al., *Entre la censura y la discriminación: Centroamérica amenazada* (San Salvador: Fundación Comunicándonos, 2014), p. 7.