

MARAS TRANSNACIONALES

Origins and Transformations of Central American Street Gangs

Sonja Wolf

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

De los Maras a los Zetas: Los secretos del narcotráfico, de Colombia a Chicago. By Jorge Fernández Menéndez and Víctor Ronquillo. Mexico City: Grijalbo/Mondadori, 2006. Pp. 290. MX\$199 paper.

Hoy te toca la muerte: El imperio de las Maras visto desde dentro. By Marco Lara Klahr. Mexico City: Editorial Planeta, 2006, Pp. 346. \$23.66 paper.

Ruta transnacional: A San Salvador por Los Ángeles: Espacios de interacción juvenil en un contexto migratorio. By Juan Carlos Narváez Gutiérrez. Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas and Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2007. Pp. 155. MX\$160 paper.

Las Maras: Identidades juveniles al límite. Edited by José Manuel Valenzuela Arce, Alfredo Nateras Domínguez, and Rossana Reguillo Cruz. Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, and Casa Juan Pablos, 2007. Pp. 382. \$32.95 paper.

With an estimated total membership of 100,000–140,000 individuals, Mara Salvatrucha (MS or MS-13) and Calle 18 (Dieciocho) are the largest street gangs in northern Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) and in the Central American immigrant community in the United States. Although MS-13 and Dieciocho are often referred to as Central American street gangs, because of the national origin of their members, this label is questionable insofar as both groups originated in East Los Angeles, where Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants seeking economic opportunities or respite from U.S.-sponsored civil war found themselves engulfed in racism and social exclusion, conditions propitious for gang formation. The debate as to whether they ought to be classified as U.S. or even transnational street gangs remains unresolved.

The United States has dealt with its domestic gang situation primarily through the suppression and mass deportation of foreign-born members. However, these practices are ineffective in tackling structural problems

and in discouraging the illegal reentry of deportees. Central America's own gang problem dates back to the 1970s, but it was long overshadowed by the political violence that swept through the region. For two decades, numerous territorial or neighborhood-based entities offered socially marginalized youths a means to hang out, party, fight their rivals, and engage in a range of illicit pursuits. With the end of armed conflict in the region, some of these groups dissolved, and the gangs that U.S. deportation implanted in the isthmus absorbed others. Disaffection and continued marginalization prompted many returning youths to continue what they knew best, and their comparatively smarter dress, wealth, and romanticized tales of gang life held a fascination that local adolescents found hard to resist. The importation of U.S. street gang culture, notably MS-13 and *Dieciocho*, and the conflicts between these groups, transformed the existing landscape in unprecedented ways.

Few territorial gangs survive today and their public security threat is minimal. MS-13 and *Dieciocho*, however, maintain a visible presence in many marginal metropolitan areas and have acquired notoriety because of their ready use of violence and the involvement of their members in robberies, homicides, extortions, and drug dealing. Although residents long ago identified a growing gang presence in their communities, authorities failed to develop a coherent antigang strategy. Only in 2003 did several governments unexpectedly adopt a *mano dura* ("iron hand") policy. Driven more by electoral ambition than concern for gang control, this policy not only witnessed a sharp rise in homicide rates but also increased gang cohesion and criminality by indiscriminately suppressing gang members and by concentrating them in special prisons.

The existing literature on Central American street gangs is largely concerned with their domestic dynamics and the responses that their emergence has elicited. In particular, these works explore gang-spawning factors and gang life, including violence and drug use. They also appraise public policies, rehabilitation programs, and the civil society initiatives that have arisen in response to the limitations of suppression-centered antigang efforts.¹ The proliferation of MS-13 and *Dieciocho* in the United States, Central America, and ostensibly Mexico, as well as their growing delinquency, has encouraged officials, journalists, and security analysts

1. See the four collective volumes *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica* (Managua and San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2001–2006); José Miguel Cruz and Nelson Portillo Peña, *Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del gran San Salvador: Más allá de la vida loca* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1998); María Santacruz Giralt and Alberto Concha-Eastman, *Barrio adentro: La solidaridad violenta de las pandillas* (San Salvador: Instituto de Opinión Pública and Organización Panamericana de Salud, 2001); and Marcela Smutt and Lissette Miranda, *El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador* (San Salvador: UNICEF and Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1998).

to characterize them as transnational street gangs that have mutated into organized criminal organizations.

The association of MS-13 and Dieciocho with drug trafficking and unconfirmed reports of their links to Al-Qaeda have stimulated transnational cooperation (mainly between the United States and Central American countries) for the purpose of their suppression. However, questions remain in regard to their behavior and organization. First, are these gangs transnational organizations with a single chain of command, or are they confederations of independent groups? Second, what is the nature of their ties to organized crime, particularly the illicit drug trade? Third, how plausible is their alleged connection to terrorism? The books reviewed here, two journalistic pieces and two academic studies, aim to shed light on these critical issues to understand the behavior of Central American street gangs and the threat they pose.

Hoy te toca la muerte traces the geographical spread of MS-13 and Dieciocho, as well as their conversion into foot soldiers for drug-trafficking organizations. Marco Lara, coordinator of the investigative unit of Mexico's *El Universal*, is particularly interested in how war-induced migration, *mano dura* policies, and deportations have shaped these processes. The book is most compelling in the first part, which recounts the history of street gangs in the United States and spotlights the experiences of Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants in the formation of Dieciocho and MS-13. However, a number of factual inaccuracies diminish its significance. More important, Lara does not consistently marshal evidence for his claims and maintains a selective and uncritical reliance on police, gang members, and other so-called experts, whose reliability and expertise he does not assess. Rather than offering an insider perspective of the gang world, as he promises, Lara paints a contradictory picture of this phenomenon.

According to Lara, MS-13 and Dieciocho have expanded to a global presence spanning the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Readers are referred to a map on the now-suspended website www.xv3gang.com, which indicated the alleged appearance of Dieciocho cliques across the world. Lara does not consult additional sources to ascertain whether these gangs have actually established themselves within and beyond the Western Hemisphere. Instead, he asserts that transnational growth, though initially fueled by deportations and other suppression efforts, reflects a strategic decision to extend gang territory and control over drug markets. This conclusion is derived from remarks by one gang member that may or may not reflect the genuine objectives of his clique. Lara does not consider the possibility that gangs expand because youths see membership as a means to meet otherwise unfulfilled needs. Furthermore, Lara surmises that close communication among gang members in the United States and Central America favors transnational growth. Such links are unsurprising; however, a

recent study found that these are few and not institutionalized.² Rather, it appears that MS-13 and Dieciocho constitute networks of autonomous gangs that share a symbolic, identity-based, and normative affiliation.³ Unfortunately, Lara does not resolve the tension between local and global factors in this regard.

Lara clearly maintains that street gangs develop not for criminal purposes, but as a response to social disorganization and structural conditions in the communities affected by gangs. Nonetheless, he suggests that MS-13 and Dieciocho have evolved into a new form of organized crime, as seen in their tighter structure, use of heavier weapons, and involvement in trafficking drugs, arms, and humans, as well as in extortion and *sicariato* (contract killings). Lara correctly emphasizes that *mano dura* policies have, on the one hand, discouraged tattooing by gang members so as to avoid police detection, and on the other hand, strengthened gang cohesion and delinquency; yet he does not sufficiently distinguish between criminal activity and organized crime. While illegal pursuits form part of street gang identity, there is no evidence that MS-13 and Dieciocho have the organizational skills, well-defined leadership, specialized group roles, and relationships with legitimate business and state institutions that characterize organized crime.⁴ Nor is it apparent, as Lara argues, that these gangs have the specialization (notably in drug trafficking) or hierarchical leadership that imprisoned *veteranos* (senior members) of criminal organizations typically exercise. A minority of Central American street gang members and cliques has developed ties to drug trafficking organizations, but gang crime continues to be versatile and independent.⁵ Similarly, leaders of these gangs enjoy influence, but they can be replaced. Lara highlights the emblematic case of “El Viejo Lin,” who was identified by Salvadoran authorities and mass media as the national leader of Dieciocho but was removed and sentenced to death by his gang following internal disputes over pilfered gang funds.

Central America serves as a drug transit zone, and Lara narrates how local gangs came to conduct low-level criminal activities, protect territory,

2. Nielan Barnes, *Transnational Youth Gangs in Central America, Mexico and the United States: Executive Summary* (Mexico City: Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, 2006), 8–9, available at http://interamericanos.itam.mx/maras/docs/Resumen_Ejecutivo_Ingles.pdf.

3. José Miguel Cruz, “El barrio transnacional: Las maras centroamericanas como red,” in *Redes transnacionales en la Cuenca de los Huracanes*, ed. Francis Pisani, Natalia Saltalamacchia, Arlene B. Tickner, and Nielan Barnes (Mexico City: Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México and Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2007), 363–364.

4. On the difference between organized crime and street gangs, see Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 186.

5. Barnes, *Transnational Youth Gangs*, 8.

and assist Mexican and Colombian drug cartels, receiving drugs for local distribution in return. Although Lara contends that MS-13 and Dieciocho have not yet attained the dimensions of drug-trafficking organizations, he perceives a growing integration between gangs in Central America and gangs in the United States, where Dieciocho has reportedly begun to import drugs. Again, this analysis shows a lack of nuance. First, there is reason to question the extent of street gang involvement in drug trafficking. In Central America, gang members and drug traffickers constitute two different groups, and the gang members typically purchase drugs from cartels for street-level sales rather than source them independently.⁶ Second, U.S.-based MS-13 and Dieciocho have recently upgraded their involvement in drug distribution from the retail to the wholesale level, but there is no evidence that they have turned to importation: Mexican cartels dominate the U.S. drug trade, and Central American trafficking networks are not needed for sourcing drugs.⁷

The Mexican journalists Jorge Fernández and Víctor Ronquillo more fully pursue the gang-drug connection. *De los Maras a los Zetas* seeks to narrate the secret wars of the drug trade in the Americas. Focusing on Mexico, it considers the effects of violence and corruption, gang expansion, and sicariato. This important subject warrants scrutiny, but the results of this work are disappointing. It is poorly referenced, and its heavy reliance on anonymous sources and anecdotal evidence undermines confidence in the veracity of much of the information that it offers. Perhaps the starkest example concerns a brief exchange between the reporters and an unidentified migrant, who relates how his group, when preyed on by machete-wielding gang members, seized one gang member and questioned him about his whereabouts and tattoos. The conversation is entirely innocuous, yet the authors implausibly conclude that it evinces “la ideología de la banda, el satanismo, la práctica de sacrificios humanos, que se justifica con un perverso misticismo, la acendrada violencia con la que actúan los mareros” (38). Overall, much evidence in this largely descriptive book seems tailored to fit the authors’ thesis, and they categorically depict gang members as violent and fearsome.

Fernández and Ronquillo begin their investigation of the gang-drug link by charting the much-commented-on expansion of Central American street gangs into Mexico. Nevertheless, their puzzling decision to adopt *Mara Salvatrucha* as a generic name for both MS-13 and Dieciocho

6. UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire* (Mexico City: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007), 64; U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2009* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 2009), 1:252.

7. UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Crime and Development*, 64; U.S. Department of Justice, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2009* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 2009), 43–44.

("MS Barrio 18") introduces a degree of confusion. Like Lara, Fernández and Ronquillo accept official accounts whereby some five thousand gang members maintain a presence in more than twenty Mexican states. Although they recognize that these are mostly local youths who merely reproduce the symbols and values of their counterparts to the South, they view them nonetheless as part of a transnational network. By contrast, a regional study suggests that Central American gangs have not spread into Mexico in an organized manner. Mano dura policies did trigger some gang migration to Chiapas, where MS-13 established control over the migrant train. However, a massive antigang operation, the destruction of the railway, and Mexico's relatively strong social fabric helped stop any further advance by Central American gangs. The few Mexican cliques that identify with these groups retain distinctive characteristics and are far from displaying the levels of violence seen in Central America.⁸ Contrary to alarmist rhetoric, Mexico has not been invaded by MS-13 and Dieciocho, yet the journalism of Lara, Fernández, and Ronquillo lends undue credibility to such reports.

Unlike the other books examined in this review, the work by Fernández and Ronquillo portrays these gangs as essentially criminal organizations, with a pyramidal hierarchy stretching from the United States to Central America. More disturbing, the authors accept the rumored links among MS-13, Dieciocho, and Al-Qaeda. Street gangs do not use systematic violence, or the threat thereof, in pursuit of political aims, and are therefore unlikely allies of terrorist groups. Despite the improbability of this connection and repeated denials by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Fernández and Ronquillo seem determined to construct a link, stating that "las pandillas son un grupo muy atractivo para cualquier organización terrorista o delictiva, ya que tienen armas y están muy enojadas con el gobierno" (170). The evidence, however, is spurious at best. Specifically, the authors cite an ex-gang member turned police informant who declared that MS-13 leaders received terrorist training in Afghanistan and that Al-Qaeda has financed Mara Salvatrucha in Honduras and El Salvador. For this, Fernández and Ronquillo argue, the gang should be classified as a threat to national security. Yet, although a number of MS-13's founders were ex-guerrillas and militaries, there is no indication that Central American gangs maintain ties to terrorists. Rather, it appears that some officials in the region used this claim to exploit U.S. counterterrorism concerns and secure additional funding for gang suppression. Applying the terrorist label to these groups obfuscates the nature of the problem and only distorts the search for appropriate policy options.

8. Carlos Mario Perea Restrepo, *Pandillas en México* (Mexico City: Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, 2006), 95–104, available at http://interamericanos.itam.mx/maras/docs/Diagnostico_Mexico.pdf.

Fernández and Ronquillo focus much of their discussion on the gang-drug connection. They maintain that the drug trade is the lifeblood of gang activity and that, although MS-13 and Dieciocho have thus far relied fundamentally on street-level sales, “la [única] diferencia entre el narcotráfico a gran escala y el narco callejero es la visibilidad” (217). More controversially, they claim that MS-13 is trying to open its own drug-trafficking corridor from Colombia to the United States, and that it already controls existing routes between Panama and Mexico. More generally, they make an inappropriate comparison between Maras and Zetas (military-trained hit men of the Gulf Cartel) and wrongly deduce that isolated gang ties to drug-trafficking organizations reflect a dominant pattern. Indeed, in an interview, “El Viejo Lin” acknowledged that gangs are interested in a more extensive role in drug trafficking but are unable to make the immediate cash payments that the cartels demand.⁹

Juan Carlos Narváez explicitly addresses the transnational dimension of Central American street gangs in the short volume that grew out of his master’s thesis. *Ruta transnacional* proposes to examine new spaces for youth interaction in a transnational context, particularly MS-13 and the nongovernmental organization Homies Unidos. Narváez sets out, in particular, to understand the factors influencing the creation of these spaces, their economic and sociocultural flows, and the decision-making processes that permeate them. The overarching goal of exploring the density and diversity of connections between gang members in Los Angeles and San Salvador is especially promising as a means to comprehend the current configuration of Central American gangs. Narváez combines sociohistorical analysis with interviews, chiefly with gang members and nongovernmental organizations. This approach is useful in that it situates the emergence of MS-13 at the intersection of international migration and social ostracism within the United States, thus drawing out the fundamentally social nature of the gang problem. Yet, by privileging his interviewees’ interpretation of reality, Narváez neglects to undertake a sufficiently critical assessment of the material, as is particularly evident in his discussion of Homies Unidos.

Narváez begins by defining transnationalism as a “red de relaciones económicas, sociales, políticas y culturales que desbordan ámbitos geográficos y sociales limitados” (33) and that fosters new ways of organizing. This theoretical base distinguishes *Ruta transnacional* from the other works under review, but Narváez fails to capitalize on this start by explaining how transnational flows and interactions operate on a daily basis. An example is his analysis of the effect of deportations on the growth of MS-13. Interview data usefully underscore how local socioeconomic conditions

9. Christian Poveda, “Maras: La vida loca,” *Le Monde Diplomatique-Mexico*, April 2009, 18–20.

rather than active recruitment drive growth, but it would have been much more beneficial to ascertain how and to what extent gang members are connected across borders. Furthermore, one might question the decision to concentrate on MS-13. Narváez justifies this choice by arguing that the gang's expansion has become an international concern, yet he does not explore whether this group is as dangerous and fast expanding as is commonly claimed. In fact, the FBI's recent threat assessment of MS-13 asserts that it is spreading at only a moderate rate and presents a medium-level threat.¹⁰ Although the gang remains a serious public security problem, it appears that reports of its menace were exaggerated following a number of brutal incidents in the Washington, D.C., area.¹¹

Narváez presents Homies Unidos—an organization founded by and for gang members to help them abandon drugs and violence—as a hopeful initiative because of its peer-led efforts, its focus on prevention and rehabilitation, and its transnational activism. He deduces the latter from the fact that the group maintains offices in Los Angeles and San Salvador. Narváez assumes that street gangs can be converted into positive social capital, yet he fails to ask how feasible such projects are and to what extent Homies Unidos is truly a transnational actor. Gang members are generally ill suited for peer counseling, because they usually have limited educational and legitimate work backgrounds, and they tend to overidentify with their peers. More important, because of internal disagreements, Homies Unidos chapters have functioned independently in practice.¹² Cited as a facet of the transnational gang phenomenon, the example of Homies Unidos in fact challenges Narváez's argument. Participant observation would have allowed for corroboration of information gleaned from interviews and documents, and thus a more accurate picture of the subject matter.

The essays in the volume that Valenzuela, Nateras, and Reguillo have edited use sociological and anthropological approaches to advance sociocultural interpretations of street gangs in the United States, Latin America, and Spain. Notwithstanding the title's reference to the Maras, the chapters on Barcelona, Ecuador, and Colombia (where the Maras do not operate) discuss other local youth gangs. These chapters draw attention to the pervasive stigmatization and suppression of these groups, yet they are less relevant to an understanding of transnational street gangs.

10. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *The MS-13 Threat: A National Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008), available at http://www.fbi.gov/page2/jan08/ms13_011408.html.

11. Connie McGuire, *Central American Youth Gangs in the Washington, DC Area* (Mexico City: Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, 2006), 29, available at http://interamericanos.itam.mx/maras/docs/Diagnostico_Washington.pdf.

12. Sonja Wolf, "The Politics of Gang Control: NGO Advocacy in El Salvador" (Ph.D. diss., Aberystwyth University, 2008), chap. 5.

In general, this book hopes to counter the current focus on crime and violence in studies of gang activity. Problematically, however, it equates street gangs with broader youth culture. This comes most clearly to the fore in Valenzuela's essay, which introduces the notion of *pachoma* to argue that Mexican *pachucos* and *cholos* shaped the symbolic, organizational, and behavioral repertoire of the Maras. However, whereas the former groups can be thought of as racial and cultural resistance, the Maras not only fail to make sociocultural or political demands but also adhere to a street code that encourages violent conduct and rewards it with respect.

According to Valenzuela, pachucos, cholos, and Maras also resemble one another in their transnational character. Although he does not clarify how cross-border presence and interaction have facilitated the expansion of MS-13 and Dieciocho, he spells out how we might understand their transnational presence. For the most part, their members have not traveled outside their country and do not know fellow gang members elsewhere in the region; but, by claiming affiliation with MS-13 or Dieciocho, they identify with, and belong to, what Valenzuela calls a "barrio ampliado transnacional" (48). Unlike the rigid organization with institutionalized transnational links that many observers ascribe to Central American gangs, this is a powerful way to describe their current form.

The collection's concern for sociocultural aspects of street gangs outweighs its analysis of their criminal involvement; indeed, the harm that gangs cause to local communities is almost downplayed. A number of contributors, particularly James Diego Vigil, emphasize the structural and community factors that facilitate gang development. Focusing on the United States, Vigil explains how "multiple marginality" (7) (manifest exclusion from mainstream society) can cause alienation and resentment, especially among youths who consequently turn to gangs as a place where they are not ignored. The implication of such analyses is that, while MS-13 and Dieciocho have become more involved in crime, they remain a social problem that needs to be addressed as such. As Carles Feixa and colleagues remind us, street gangs "constituyen una solución extrema, como otras, a la acumulación de tensiones que derivan de vivir necesidades básicas no satisfechas" (228). With such statements, the volume helps to dispel one of the myths that currently surround Central American gangs and misinform policy making and law enforcement.

A key argument of the collection holds that mass media has, to a large extent, amplified and sensationalized the threat of gangs. Of particular interest is Roxana Martel's portrayal of how Salvadoran political and media elites have presented street gangs as a public enemy that demands control. For Martel, the reduction of a social problem to a security problem is a political strategy aimed to sway public opinion in favor of authoritarian solutions and thus preserve the traditional interests and privileges of hegemonic groups.

Overall, this volume helps correct the prevailing view that MS-13 and Dieciocho are transnational criminal organizations that threaten the Western Hemisphere. Nevertheless, much of our knowledge continues to concern not aspects such as their geographical extension or ties to drug cartels, but the physical appearance of their members. Images of gang tattoos and signs, as well as dramatic reports of gang violence, have incited fascination with these now-almost-iconic groups and have sparked a proliferation of journalistic and academic studies. In his epilogue, the distinguished Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis affirms quite rightly that gangs remain little more than a series of photos and video clips. However, MS-13 and Dieciocho continue to evolve, and many facets of their organization and activities remain to be studied. Above all, reliable and empirical research is needed to develop effective policies to end the violent cycle that needlessly damages young people's lives and the communities in which they live.