

# Identity and violence in post-war El Salvador

*Meghan Gauld examines the history of Salvadorian gang violence and its deep connections to identity following decades of social conflict.*

**A**longside the similarly afflicted Central American nations of Honduras and Guatemala, El Salvador is and has long been suffering a crisis of social violence (Huhn et al. 2017, 45). The nation is fragmented by the pervasive influence of violent organised crime, which makes identity a troublesome concept in El Salvador. Individual identities appear stifled by the culture of fear that permeates a nation held hostage by brutal and arbitrary violence. Instead what matters is the collective identity of the state and the political, economic and sociocultural factors which have helped foster nascent gangs and subsequently allowed them to thrive. This article will firstly explore the role of the streets of Los Angeles, California in cultivating gangs by radicalising individuals, before exploring the material circumstances in El Salvador which allowed these gangs to take hold. We proceed to evaluate the current situation and suggest a possible solution to break up the gangs, allowing the citizens of El Salvador to forge a new identity apart from the violence surrounding them.

El Salvador is largely divided between two rival gangs: *Mara Salvatrucha* (abbreviated MS-13) and *Barrio 18* (abbreviated La 18). Prior to these established gangs (referred to locally as *maras*), there were a number of juvenile gangs operating in and among neighbourhoods, called *pandillas* (Arana 2005, 98). *Pandillas* differed from the *maras* of today as they were less violent, less organised, smaller, and tended to have significantly shorter lifespans (Arana 2005, 16-17). In pre-war El Salvador, inter-war LA, and post-war El Salvador, gangs formed as a means of survival for a poor, disenfranchised population existing in a locality that lacked infrastructure and opportunities for work and education (Rosen et al. 2018, 52). Yet, for the rigid gang structure of modern-day El Salvador to be established and grow beyond its pre-war and inter-war stages, there had to be a catalyst to consolidate gang rule. This trigger appeared after El Salvador's civil war in the form of the forced movement of tens of thousands of young men from the streets of LA into a struggling nation without the resources or will to provide for them (Arana 2005, 9).

The gangs originally formed in the streets of Los Angeles, California during the Salvadoran Civil War of 1979 to 1992 (Arana 1005, 98). The war was a gruelling twelve years of violence and terror, fought between the Salvadoran military-led junta government and a coalition of far-left groups called the *Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMNL)* (Huhn 2017, 47). Death squads deliberately targeted civilians and committed a range of human rights abuses, including the use of child soldiers (Huhn 2017, 60). Hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans fled their homeland, settling in Latino neighbourhoods in LA (Arana 2005, 98). The formation of prototype *maras* on these streets was a reaction to the conditions of the Salvadoran migrants' existence; most were poor, all were in unknown territory, and those who were able to were forced to defend their Latino minority community against the violence of the LA streets (Arana 2005, 7). It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that these gangs were precursors to the modern day *mara*, and born out of a struggle against poverty, well established city gangs, and the difficulties of a life in a foreign and often hostile country.

Thousands of Salvadoran men were imprisoned for gang-related crimes (Zilberg 2011, 85). Anti-gang measures implemented in 1992 in the United States (US) meant that minors could be tried and convicted as adults and subsequently sent to prison on felony charges (Zilberg 2011, 83). As a result, LA prisons became hotbeds of gang activity, with time in jail tending to further radicalise young Salvadoran gang members (Zilberg

2011, 83). Once released, they returned to the streets carrying further expertise in crime and violence and virtually no prospects for legitimate employment (Rosen et al. 2018, 53). Upon the end of the Salvadoran civil war, the US Congress passed legislation meant to harden the US' stance on immigration (Zilberg 2011, 84). A wide array of low-level crimes were incorporated into the list of deportable offences and the net of those liable to be deported was widened to include foreign-born citizens (Zilberg 2011, 85). This new legislation deported an estimated 20,000 young men back to Central America, some of whom had been settled in the US since they were toddlers and many who had never learned Spanish (Zilberg 2011, 85).

These deportees posed a significant problem to authorities in the countries to which they returned. The immigration rules imposed by the US meant that no criminal offences could be disclosed, and that local Salvadoran governments and police had no knowledge of their new citizens' backgrounds or criminal records (Zilberg 2011, 85). Underlying this new chaos were the ever-present problems plaguing Central America's northern triangle, and El Salvador in particular. The nation still struggled to rebuild from its devastating civil war and the resulting weaknesses were vital in the establishment of the *maras*.

The peace agreement ending the Salvadoran civil war created a delicate balance in which no faction won, yet none lost (Vilas 1995, 9). The new order presided over a population disproportionately consisting of those fifteen years old and younger, with a GDP per capita of around \$1,076 and a 7.9 percent unemployment rate; economists generally agree that unemployment above six percent is unhealthy (Vilas 1995, 10; Marston et al. 1976, 183). El Salvador's economy was in disrepair, poverty was the rule rather than the exception, and lack of infrastructure meant the masses of disenfranchised youth remained idle and hungry (Huhn 2017, 24). Additionally, urban youth populations in cities such as San Salvador and Santa Ana largely came from unstable homes which provided little of the emotional support often believed necessary for young children to become successful adults (Vilas 1995, 11). The gangs presented solutions for many of these children. The *maras* of today have a broad appeal to urban youth and a gang member can be someone for them to look up to. Young boys often find a kind of romanticism in the idolisation of gang members: their tattoos, their clothing, and the power and the familial connections they have realised by collectivising their identity in line with the *maras*. (Arana 2005, 15). As the *maras* formed, they began recruiting from the youth population as their main source of new membership. The *maras* initiated children as young as nine and served as a surrogate family for the disillusioned youth of El Salvador (Arana 2005, 12). These children began as lookouts and petty criminals, but would eventually graduate to drug dealing, burglary and contract killing, as well as colluding with organisations involved in smuggling both people and drugs (Arana 2005, 12). These activities largely explain the astronomical crime rate in El Salvador, as well as its homicide rate of 61.8 deaths per 100,000 people per year - the highest in the world in 2019 (United Nations, 2020).

Crime and its perpetrators are firmly entrenched in the Salvadoran psyche. The sudden influx of young Salvadoran-American gang members established a new and unprecedented reign of organised criminality over a fearful urban populace (Arana 2011, 98). However, their arrival served only as the catalyst for the manifestation of this order. The framework from which it was born already existed in the nation's cities, its disillusioned citizens, and the crumbling economy and infrastructure. As it tried to rebuild and revitalise after the civil war, El Salvador fit the criteria of a 'fragile state' (Rosen et al. 2018, 52): central authority existed but was weak, the police force was disorganised and unable to ensure the safety of citizens (Chavez 2016, 2) and public services were lacking as the new government proved unable to provide such basic services as healthcare, education, and employment (Chavez 2016, 2). The government's neoliberal restructuring of the state's infrastructure and institutions created wide-scale poverty and deprivation in both urban and rural areas (Chavez 2016, 4). Due to these problems, the government was plagued by crippling questions of legitimacy. This confluence of issues left El Salvador vulnerable to the emergence of social violence perpetrated by gangs and their founding members, the Salvadoran-Americans from LA (Arana 2005, 98).

Successive Salvadoran governments were confronted with the growth of gang control and a corresponding uptick in violence. The solution was a drastic crack-down on crime consisting of a series of hard-line, anti-crime measures known as the Mano Dura initiative (Chavez 2016, 5). Most important among these measures was the militarisation of the nation's police force and an increased amount of time served for gang membership (Chavez 2016, 5). While widely reported by Salvadoran media and strongly praised by the public, these measures were only short-term solutions (Chavez 2016, 5). Prisons filled up and joint police-military operations

claimed many lives, yet the gangs retained their hold (Van Der Borgh et al. 2014, 178).

Following a change in government, with the left leaning FMLN coming to power, Mano Dura ended (Vilas 1995, 9). The new government announced a 'de-securitisation' of conceptualising the gang problem, adopting a new approach which sought to prevent the underlying political, cultural and economic causes of gang expansion rather than the gangs themselves (Chavez 2016, 5). The government also stressed the need for dialogue and cooperation between the gangs and the government (Chavez 2016, 7). In 2012, it was revealed that the government had managed to broker a truce between the two major gangs: MS-13 and La 18 (Van Der Borgh et al. 2014, 176). The country was polarised with some against the truce and angry that the government was negotiating with violent criminals (Van Der Borgh et al. 2014, 176). The truce resulted in a sharp decrease in homicides, but other crimes such as extortion of local businesses continued unabated (Katz et al. 2016, 13) Ultimately, the truce fell apart after the succession of a new government (Katz et al. 2016, 666). Public opinion is currently critical of the truce, as well as any potential new dialogue with gangs due to the necessary corollary of cooperating with criminals (Vilas 1995, 8).

Salvadorans remain hopeful, especially at the prospect of new President Nayib Bukele, who has made ambitious promises to eradicate the gangs in three years (Markham 2016, 1). By refusing to cooperate with gang leaders in order to stop the tide of violence, he conforms to public opinion. Furthermore, his policies mirror those of the old conservative administrations, boasting tightened security and securing communities one at a time (Markham 2016, 2). However, militarisation historically tends to only work in the short-term and always has devastating repercussions, most notably loss of life (Zilberg 2011, 85). An ideal fix to the troubles the nation is enduring would be to give young boys and men educational and professional opportunities from a young age, thereby allowing them to build futures and find a place in society without the gangs.

As with many other crime-stricken regions across the globe, the most promising method of reducing crime is eradicating its causes. If the gangs are, as I have argued, a reaction to poverty, lack of infrastructure and a weak government, then addressing these root problems is the best way to go about limiting the power of *maras*. The majority of actions implemented to stop *maras* has been hostile - focus on targeting as many gang members as possible and hope that eventually there won't be any left to lead (Van Der Borgh et al. 2016, 176). The problem with this course of action is that the conditions of El Salvador itself create several new gang members for each one that police forces and the courts send to prison (Van Der Borgh et al. 2016, 177). The government exhausts its resources and the gangs barely contract. If the government were to redirect its focus and its resources on social issues - on educating the youth, creating jobs, and investing in infrastructure- it's possible the once fast flowing tide of new recruits will begin to ebb. Show young men they have the opportunity to build a life and identity that's not contingent on association with the gangs and they may well choose to do so.

In El Salvador, separating one's identity from the *maras* seems a radical thought - the omnipresence of the gangs seems to disallow it. They have killed millions and sent further millions fleeing the nation's borders to find asylum elsewhere (Does 2013, 3). Post-war El Salvador remains embroiled in a conflict that has outshone its civil war. The nation has fragmented with the rise of gangs - whose territories divide it into arbitrary sections- and a struggling government lacking the ability to put a stop to the violence. Questions of identity in El Salvador are complex. Original gang members began as immigrants; Salvadoran Americans forcibly returned to a country they did not know which lacked the infrastructure to provide for them. The streets are rife with young men who come from inescapable poverty, who feel gangs are their only escape, who find bravado and a sense of belonging in the *maras*. Salvadoran citizens inhabit a country haunted by traditions of fragility in authority, in services and in executive legitimacy - a country which provided fertile breeding grounds for the mass expansion of gangs into every facet of public and private life such that the only identities one could discern are gang members on the one hand and victims on the other. But if the government could invest in its people - and especially in the boys and young men struggling through poverty and disillusionment - a reduction in gang influence is possible. If the root causes for the rise of the *maras* is eliminated, so too can the *maras* be eliminated.

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