

include subjects such as ‘family’, ‘education’, ‘economy’ and ‘religion’ – each one a possible book in itself – is compensated for by their diversity. These sections are useful for framing Lucia’s concerns and might also serve as a reference in terms of both content and bibliographic sources. The portrait that is built up by Gay also points to other possibilities regarding the involvement of women with crime. Data from the Brazilian National Penitentiary Department shows that while the national incarceration rate among men increased 4 per cent between 2007 and 2008, the increase among women was 12 per cent. Just as elsewhere in Latin America, most of these women were convicted for drug trafficking. In many cases they were arrested for transporting drugs or other forbidden merchandise to their imprisoned partners. In other words, their involvement with crime is immediately related to their personal involvement with criminals.

Regarding research methodology, the book also brings a relevant contribution. The fact that Gay has known Lucia and her family for a long time gives him permission and knowledge to address delicate subjects. On the other hand, he has a connection with Lucia and her family that is no longer exclusively related to his researcher position and the impact of this can be perceived from the way the book’s argument is built. Throughout the consecutive interviews, the author inevitably circumscribes the subject that he wants to address by the questions that he poses. Lucia reacts, choosing what she wants to answer and to where she wants to drive the conversation. These dynamics express the relationship between interviewer and interviewed but also between friends, and make the book an inspiring source for a reflection on ethnography and its possibilities and limits.

Lucia can almost be read as a novel, in which the reader anxiously wants to know the outcome of Lucia’s trajectory and shares the author’s declared hope that she manages to change her life. As a result, it is inevitable that the reader ends by partaking in the melancholy expressed by Gay as the book reaches its conclusion.

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Marco Lara Klahr, *Hoy te toca la muerte: el imperio de las Maras visto desde dentro* (Mexico City: Editorial Planeta, 2006), pp. 346, \$23.66, pb.

Mara Salvatrucha (MS or MS-13) and *Calle 18* (*Dieciocho*) have developed into the largest street gangs in northern Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) and the Central American immigrant community in the United States. Mass deportations of foreign-born gang members exported the US street gang culture, notably MS-13/*Dieciocho* identities and the conflicts between these groups, and transformed the regional gang landscape in unprecedented ways. Their proliferation and growing delinquent orientation has fed the perception that these are transnational street gangs that have mutated into organised crime groups. At the same time, these developments have stimulated the rise of transnational anti-gang cooperation. However, it remains unclear whether MS-13 and *Dieciocho* do in fact constitute transnational organisations that respond to a single chain of command, and what kind of ties they maintain to organised crime, particularly the illicit drug trade. This journalistic piece aims to shed light on what are critical issues for

understanding the behaviour of the Central American street gangs and the threat they pose.

Hoy te toca la muerte traces the geographical spread of MS-13 and Dieciocho and their conversion into foot soldiers for drug trafficking organisations (DTOs). Marco Lara, coordinator of Mexico's *El Universal* investigative unit, is particularly interested in how war-induced migration, *Mano Dura* gang policies and deportations have shaped these processes. The book is at its most compelling in the first part, which reconstructs the history of street gangs in the United States and spotlights the role of the Mexican and Salvadorean immigrant experiences in the formation of Dieciocho and MS-13. However, its significance is diminished by a number of factual inaccuracies. More importantly, Lara does not consistently marshal evidence for his claims and maintains a selective and uncritical reliance on police, gang members and other 'experts'. This is not to dismiss the utility of these sources, but the author's failure to assess informant reliability and expertise more carefully inevitably skews his findings. Rather than offering an insider perspective of the gang world, as it promises to do, the book paints a contradictory picture of this phenomenon.

According to Lara, their expansionary power has afforded MS-13 and Dieciocho a global presence spanning the Americas, Europe and Asia – a map on the now-suspended website www.xv3gang.com indicated the alleged appearance of Dieciocho cliques across the world. Lara does not consult additional corroborating sources to ascertain whether the gangs have actually established themselves within and beyond the western hemisphere. Instead, he goes on to assert that these developments, though initially fuelled by deportations and suppression-induced gang migration, reflect a strategic decision to extend gang territories and control over drug markets. This conclusion is derived from the remarks of one gang member which may or may not reflect the genuine objectives of his clique but are unpersuasively inferred to apply to entire gangs. The possibility that these groups continue to grow because marginalised youths perceive them as a means to meet otherwise unfulfilled needs is not really considered. Furthermore, Lara surmises that close communication between MS-13/Dieciocho members in the US and Central America favours transnational gang growth. However, although the existence of some such links is unsurprising, they are few and not institutionalised. Rather, it appears that MS-13 and Dieciocho constitute networks of independent gangs that share a symbolic, identity and normative affiliation. Unfortunately, Lara's book does not resolve the tension between recognising the gangs as autonomous, locally differentiated groups and depicting them as global organisations.

The volume clearly acknowledges that street gangs develop not for criminal purposes but as a response to community social disorganisation and structural conditions. Nonetheless, it suggests that MS-13 and Dieciocho have evolved into a new form of organised crime, as expressed by a tighter structure, the use of heavier armament, and involvement in the trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans, extortions and *sicariato*. Lara correctly emphasises that the Central American *Mano Dura* policies have served to discourage the use of tattoos and to strengthen gang cohesion and delinquent participation, yet he distinguishes insufficiently between criminal and organised criminal activities. While illegal pursuits form part of street gang identity, there is no evidence that MS-13 and Dieciocho have the type of mature, professional members with organisational skills, well-defined leadership, specialised group roles and relationships with legitimate business and state institutions that characterise organised crime. Nor is it apparent, as Lara argues, that these

gangs have undergone a sustained trend towards criminal specialisation (notably drug trafficking) and adopted a hierarchical leadership, typically exercised by imprisoned *veteranos* (senior gang members). A minority of Central American gang members and cliques has developed ties to DTOs, but gang crime continues to be versatile and independent. Similarly, gang leaders are better understood as shot-callers who enjoy influence but can be replaced. For example, Lara highlights the emblematic case of 'el Viejo Lin', identified by the Salvadorean authorities and mass media as the national Dieciocho leader, but following internal disputes the gang has removed this member from his post and sentenced him to death.

Central America serves as a drug transit zone, and Lara narrates how the Central American gangs have come to conduct low-level criminal activities, protect territories and facilitate drug trafficking activities on behalf of Mexican and Colombian DTOs. Paid in drugs designed for local distribution, gang members have gained significant control over domestic drug markets and have arguably begun to compete with the DTOs. Lara acknowledges that MS-13 and Dieciocho have not yet acquired the dimensions of drug cartels, but he perceives a growing integration between the gangs in Central America and their counterparts in the United States. There, he adds, Dieciocho has reportedly also 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, with the former typically purchasing drugs from the cartels for street-level drug sales rather than sourcing them independently. Second, US-based MS-13 and Dieciocho have recently upgraded their involvement in drug distribution from retail-level to wholesale-level activities, but there is no evidence that they have turned to imports; the US drug trade is dominated by Mexican DTOs, and Central American trafficking networks are not required to source drugs.

Overall, this is a comprehensive assessment of MS-13 and Dieciocho that draws on a wealth of sources. It lacks conceptual grounding, however, and leaves the reader in doubt about the nature of the threat and ultimately the policy responses it requires. The book will undoubtedly be consulted by many students of Central American gang transformation, but readers would do well to peruse its pages with a healthy dose of scepticism.

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Jennifer S. Holmes, Sheila Amin Gutiérrez de Piñeres and Kevin M. Curtin, *Guns, Drugs and Development in Colombia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. xiv + 192, \$55.00, hb.

In a country with a flourishing illicit drug trade, one would expect that in some way the national economy would benefit from it. But the situation in Colombia, as Jennifer Holmes, Sheila Gutiérrez and Kevin Curtin argue in their book *Guns, Drugs and Development in Colombia*, is that despite initial economic benefits, the long-term effects are negative as the drug trade imposes high costs, such as for security. Negative effects include the concentration of land ownership, deterrents to foreign investment and a capital inflow leading to an appreciated peso that in turn harms exports. Drug traffickers often launder their money by purchasing goods abroad and