

Brenneman's *Homies and Hermanos* also takes a comparative approach to investigating Central American gangs. A qualitative sociologist, Brenneman's work is based primarily on in-depth interviews with former gang members and participants in Church organisations with ministries and social outreach programs aimed at gang members. As the title suggests, Brenneman's study centres on the psycho-social transformation from gang member to Evangelical Christian, exploring the common adage in the region that one way to escape gang involvement is to convert to an Evangelical Protestant denomination. Brenneman complicates this association, demonstrating not only the ways in which it holds true for gang members across Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, but also the reality that the 'escape' is rarely as clean a break as the former gang member may have hoped. One of the strengths of this work is Brenneman's effort to interview a wide spectrum of former gang members in order to demonstrate the trajectories that facilitate exit from the gang, only one of which is religious conversion.

Drawing from a sociology of emotion framework, Brenneman convincingly argues that the primary draw of gang involvement in Central America is that gang participation offers a response to feelings of shame and humiliation. He advocates an approach that 'connects social contextual pressures with individual-level experiences and social-psychological traits' (p. 74). In doing so, he demonstrates that social exclusion, lack of economic prospects and repeated humiliation at the hands of family and community members combine to create a perfect storm in which a gang's promise of empowerment through solidarity and violence gives a tangible response to debilitating feelings of shame and lack of respect in young men. In other words, individual psychological dispositions are linked to macro-level social processes. It is within this context that religious conversion can offer some support against a resurgence of chronic shame by proposing an alternative framework of empowerment and self-understanding even if, as Brenneman points out, this framework is less appealing because it decries the macho behaviours associated with gangs through which youth seek empowerment in the first place – drinking, womanising, and toughness expressed through violence.

Brenneman's study highlights the importance of viewing gangs from a more holistic perspective as opposed to through the reductive lens of national security. While undoubtedly maras pose a threat to citizen security and democratic consolidation, any adequate policy reply must take into consideration prevention and rehabilitation as viable options, not just pumping up the security apparatus. Focusing only on the criminal behaviour of gangs narrows our view of the phenomenon. It is through studying the non-criminal aspects of gangs that we will discover their allure, their social import and their role in larger systems of governance. Brenneman's work is an important step in developing a more complex picture of gangs in Central America.

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Luis Roniger, *Transnational Politics in Central America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011), pp. xiv + 217, \$74.95, hb.

In a conference attended by this reviewer commemorating the 25th anniversary of the 1979 coup d'état in El Salvador, one of the military leaders of the coup recalled the pitiful arrival of members of the National Guard defeated by the Sandinistas.

He mentioned the event as one of their motivations to topple the Romero government. Salvadorean officers were deeply distressed by the sight of their Nicaraguan colleagues crossing the border penniless, with their careers destroyed, facing an uncertain future. As the story suggests, the resonance and impact of the Sandinista Revolution in the region could not be captured by mere mention of 'spillover effects' or the threat of falling dominoes. The social networks of armed forces were just part of the web of interconnections between the Central American nation-states that created bonds stronger and more complex than could be expected from mere geographical proximity. As Luis Roniger says, 'these societies have been affected on a transnational scale not only by the United States and not only in times of crisis' (p. 116). This being the case, Roniger has decided to use Central America as a case study to further the understanding of transnational processes (as opposed to using transnationalism as an analytical category to understand Central America).

In taking a transnational perspective as the framing device for his analysis, Roniger breaks away from most recent writings on the region that have put the Central American conflicts at the centre of the narrative structure. In the standard approach used by surveys of Central America, different aspects of the region's history, economy, politics and society have been deemed as deserving of attention inasmuch as they can be framed as antecedents, components or consequences of the conflicts of the 1980s. But as the memories of the Sandinista Revolution, the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala and even the neoliberal fevers of the 1990s recede, the image of Central America is shaped by discussions of immigration, gangs and organised crime that do not always fit comfortably within the conflict-centred frame. Roniger's transnational perspective seems more capacious, allowing him to deal seamlessly with the 'old' and 'new' sets of preoccupations. Or, conversely, the Central American case allows him to show the historical processes that shaped, strengthened, weakened and altered the numerous interconnections between the peoples of a region. If transnational processes have become more visible and attracted more scholarly attention in the last few decades, the Central American example allows Roniger to show that this is a phenomenon which has deep historical roots and has been subject to 'ebbs and flows', to borrow a metaphor used throughout the book.

After a chapter bringing readers up to date with the recent literature on transnational theories, the author begins a historical survey that starts with the common origins of the Central American states as an administrative unit under Spanish rule and as a confederation after independence (Belize and Panama do not easily fit the model and are mentioned only sporadically). In a rapid succession of 14 brief chapters, Roniger moves swiftly from the break-up of the Central American Federation in the early nineteenth century to the formation of new separate states. In different measure depending on time and location, all five countries faced tensions between the memory of common origins, strong transnational undercurrents and their efforts to imagine separate nations and build state institutions. It is not until chapter 9 that we find a discussion of the conflicts of the 1980s, which are presented as one more space for numerous expressions of transnational phenomena. The logic of the book finds its fullest expression in the last four chapters, which explore the variety of ways in which transnational connections, never really absent, have been reinvigorated by migrations, remittances, illicit markets, gangs, human trafficking and, in a less negative tone, the proliferation of regional institutions.

One way or another, much previous work on Central America has paid attention to 'the interconnectivity across nations' and the 'social processes, political movements,

and cultural networks extending beyond nation-state borders' at the core of the concept of transnationalism (p. 7). In fact Roniger does an excellent job bringing together a broad array of recent literature, mostly in the social sciences but without neglecting the cultural turn, to create a comprehensive and well-crafted narrative putting transnational processes at the centre of the stage. (The book does have occasional lapses – a discussion of *mestizaje* in Central America without acknowledging the work of Jeff Gould?) Given the nature of the work, research on primary sources does not play a significant role until the last chapters.

The project of historicising transnationalism is successful, and Central America is an ideal case for exploring the concept. For someone more interested in Central America than in looking for insights on transnational theories, the book reads like an excellent, sharp, theoretically informed survey of Central America from a transnational perspective but is unlikely to modify the reader's basic understanding of the region. A transnational dimension has always been implicit in most authors' analysis, but putting the concept at centre stage is a very useful way of approaching the present-day reality of Central America and of thinking about the prospects for the near future.

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Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2010), pp. xviii + 286, \$29.95, pb.

In this excellent book Molly Todd illuminates the wartime flight of peasants in El Salvador's northern regions from pursuing government troops, their resettlement in refugee camps in Honduras and their wartime repopulation of abandoned villages and hamlets. Todd argues that these peasants, often portrayed solely as victims, organised themselves into a force that contested for political space and rights, and amidst difficult circumstances, scored victories over the years. In so doing they affected the war's outcome and post-war conditions. Many other studies of El Salvador's war, Todd asserts, either remove the displaced from history, see them as passive, fatalistic non-subjects, or see them as followers led by liberation theology priests or the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) guerrillas.

In Todd's compelling account, persecuted peasants from the northern provinces of Chalatenango and Morazán fled on foot in organised groups, which, although it made them easier for the enemy to spot, maximised collective security. Once in the refugee camps, the peasants – mostly women and older men – struggled with their 'protectors', such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the directors of the camps, various international NGOs and the Honduran government, for better living conditions, control of education and health care.

Eventually the peasants pushed to return to their home villages, as a matter of right, even though the war still raged. They negotiated with the Salvadorean government, which dragged its heels, and demanded safe passage. Once in their villages they wanted freedom from harassment by the military. They raised transport funds and enlisted the support of international actors and the Church in the form of material aid and bearing witness. Todd also accounts for the repopulations that emanated from