

the new *Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora* (Police Pacification Units, UPPs) that are attempting to stamp out drug trafficking and related crime and violence in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, 'we cannot deny that for the average police officer in Rio, all favela-dwellers are criminals'.

The triad favela–police–drug trade is made of a complex ecology wherein issues of economic survival, organised crime, identity and national security mingle and are difficult to disentangle. The UPPs undoubtedly represent a new possibility for the city, but as recently as 2007 the United Nations Human Rights Council produced a damning and embarrassing report on the abuses and violations commonly practised in the name of security. Alves and Evanson address this intricate scenario through a sensitive and unequivocal human rights framework that makes no concessions to the recent achievements of the Brazilian state. Through careful and detailed research and scholarship, this book makes a strong contribution to readdressing inequality in Rio and adds to the chorus of voices calling for a complete restructuring of the police apparatus in the city.

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Thomas Bruneau, Lucia Dammert and Elizabeth Skinner (eds.), *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. viii + 309, \$55.00, \$24.95 pb; Robert Brennenman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. xiii + 294, \$24.95, pb.

Over the past two decades, the northern tier of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) has been living out deep political and social contradictions. The ceasefires in the 1990s that ended the decades-long civil wars in the region were supposed to signal a brighter future for its citizens. At the very least, democratic transitions and consolidations were to bring political and economic stabilisation and an end to violent conflict. As even the casual reader of recent trends in Central American society and politics will note, such promises of a peaceful transition to post-conflict governance in the region have yet to be fulfilled. Instead, homicide, violent crimes, political instability and economic precariousness have noticeably increased, leading to perceptions of citizen insecurity and states on the verge of failure.

The phenomenon of gang violence is perhaps most emblematic of the failures of the Peace Accords and the diminished hopes of rebuilding a more just post-conflict society. *Maras* and *pandillas*, as various organised gang groups are known in Central America, have shifted from localised groups of disaffected and jobless young men who sought identity and support to a loose transnational criminal network that extends from major urban centres in the United States down through Mexico, into Central America and beyond. What had started out as multiple local groupings with their own names and territories has become more consolidated into the two largest gang franchises (and deadly rivals), the MS 13 (Mara Salvatrucha) and the Calle 18 (18th Street Gang). As local economies stagnate and political corruption further alienates citizens from effective governance, mara activity perpetuates palpable social and psychological insecurity. Two broad areas of concern emerge when focusing on the mara phenomenon. First, to what degree do maras, as a form of criminal violence, have

the potential to affect the political stability of Central America? Second, how do maras partake in the social fabric of Central American societies, remaking local communities, repositioning understandings of the self and interacting with social institutions such as kin networks, formal and informal economies and religious institutions? Two recent books on maras propose to address these concerns, each taking as their primary focus one of these two tracks.

*Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* takes as its point of departure the need to provide a historical and accurate description of the reach, activity and development of Central American gangs. The contributors to the edited volume hope to address the way in which the context of state formation and national politics has influenced the rise of gangs in the region. To this end, the volume provides a comparative perspective by juxtaposing chapters covering the history of gang development and political responses to gangs in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. The strength of this volume lies certainly in compiling just such a history and being able to demonstrate how different political realities have shaped the growth and activities of gangs. In particular, José Luis Rocha provides a deft and fine-grained portrait of the political complexities arising in post-Sandinista Nicaragua.

Two other contributions in the book stand out. Enrique Arias furthers Rocha's argument with a systematic comparison of the four countries in the region, providing a compelling portrait of how MS 13 and Calle 18 gangs have consolidated and come to be national-level players in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala but have failed to make inroads in Nicaragua. Likewise, José Miguel Cruz explores the repercussions of gang suppression policies, focusing on how informal measures have fostered the evolution of youth gangs into criminal organisations.

While many of the individual chapters prove worthwhile and serve to advance our understanding of the macro-political effects of gangs, the framing of the book by Bruneau and his collaborators detracts from its potential by highlighting the gang issue as primarily (if not solely) of interest because of its potential effect on national and regional security. The tone of the introduction and conclusion is alarmist and, at times, overstates the role of maras as the major source of citizen insecurity in Central America. Given levels of political repression and police corruption in the region, a more even-handed approach would acknowledge that maras are often a scapegoat for other equally pernicious root causes of inequality and insecurity. Indeed, many of the recommendations from the editors, as well as from some contributors (such as Clifford Gyves' troublesome chapter on using military intelligence in 'combating' mara activity), advocate a strengthening of policing, including the creation and support of special, elite anti-gang units. This is curious, considering the editors ultimately conclude that strong-arm (*mano dura*) draconian policies have done little to address the causes of the gangs' presence. Given the tangled relationships of police and military units in Central America, the proof of police and military abuses towards civilians, the corruption that exists within the police force and the evidence that many local police receive kickbacks from crime organisations, it would seem unwise to advocate such a course of action. Furthermore, elite military and police corps in Central America are breeding grounds for human rights abuses and further destabilisation of democratic gains. The tunnel vision of a security response fails to see other possible policy initiatives, such as strengthening NGOs working in areas of local community governance, life skills training and education for children and youth, and improving the economic outlook for the disenfranchised.

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.