Critical Debates

Drugs, Violence, and Corruption: Perspectives from Mexico and Central America

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Robert J. Bunker, ed., *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Tables, figures, index, 210 pp.; hardcover $160, paperback $56.95.

Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, *Studies in Gangs and Cartels*. New York: Routledge, 2014. Tables, figures, index, 232 pp.; hardcover $168, paperback $54.95.

Michael Deibert, *In the Shadow of Saint Death: The Gulf Cartel and the Price of America's Drug War in Mexico*. Guilford: Lyons Press, 2014. Map, bibliography, index, 336 pp.; hardcover $24.95, paperback $16.95.

Alfredo Nateras Domínguez, *Vivo por mi madre y muero por mi barrio. Significados de la violencia y la muerte en el Barrio 18 y la Mara Salvatrucha*. Mexico City: Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud (IMJUVE)/Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), 2014. Figures, bibliography, 493 pp.; paperback.

Sala Negra de El Faro, eds., *Crónicas negras desde una región que no cuenta*. Mexico City: Aguilar, 2014. 350 pp.; paperback $17.

Héctor Silva Ávalos, *Infiltrados: crónica de la corrupción en la PNC (1992–2013)*. San Salvador: UCA Ediciones, 2014. 312 pp.; paperback $10.

Organized crime and street gang activity have gradually yet inexorably intensified throughout Mexico and Central America. The drug war waged by Mexican president Felipe Calderón (2006–12) prompted the criminal groups to respond to the government offensive and drug market changes by diversifying their criminal portfolio. Extortion and kidnapping multiplied, and control over migrant smuggling routes quickly developed into a highly lucrative business. Meanwhile, the Northern Triangle of Central America witnessed a startling increase of gang violence. Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, formed in Los Angeles by alienated Latino immigrant youth, developed in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras due to a combination of mass deportations and a lack of comprehensive gang policies.

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The government *mano dura* (iron fist) gang strategies, originally launched in 2002 and focused on mass arrests and detention of gang members in segregated prisons, fueled murder rates and turned both groups into more brutal but operationally more sophisticated entities. Extortion schemes, plotted from the penitentiaries, increased markedly as street-based gang members needed to raise funds in support of their incarcerated peers and their families.

While generalized violence and fear of victimization, extortion rackets, and gang harassment and recruitment displace a growing number of populations, corruption and coercion further debilitate already weakened law enforcement and justice institutions. The books reviewed here, written or edited by established academics and journalists, examine—through different methodologies—the evolution of organized crime and street gangs in Mexico and northern Central America, the role of states in this transformation, and possible institutional responses.

Gang and Cartel Evolution

Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas, a companion work to security and counterterrorism specialist Robert J. Bunker's earlier edited book *Narcos over the Border* (2010), adopts a prescriptive perspective on organized criminality. Comprising essays by police officers, journalists, and a weapons expert as well as insurgency and terrorism analysts, the volume is concerned with new and emerging forms of gang and cartel activity that have grown into national security threats. The book, previously published as a special issue of *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, is divided into three sections that cover theoretical discussions and delinquent structures—such as Los Zetas, La Familia Michoacana, and the *maras*—in the respective regions. Besides the excellent chapters on the sources of Mexican cartel weapons and on U.S. law enforcement corruption, this collection of writings entails a proliferation of concepts that obfuscate more than they clarify; it is largely based on news reports rather than academic and field research.

The study's analytical framework centers on the criminal insurgency, a notion that draws on Steven Metz's definition of a "commercial insurgency" as "widespread and sustained criminal activity with a protopolitical dimension that challenges the security of the state" (1993). Despite the political motivations the term implies, Metz, the military strategist, accepted that such armed groups did not seek to control the state but to follow delinquent pursuits free of constraints. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, a police officer with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, posit that violent, revenue-maximizing nonstate actors are fighting criminal insurgencies in various parts of the Western Hemisphere. At the same time, they fear, the fixation on Islamist terrorism has precluded the United States from comprehending and neutralizing the menace posed by drug cartels and certain street gangs.

Instead of demonstrating empirically to what extent the said entities match the depicted scenario, the two authors prefer to chart their evolution from common criminals to "criminal soldiers." Presenting a third generation (3-GEN) gang and a third-phase cartel model, Bunker and Sullivan contend that turf-based, petty crime–

focused street gangs may develop into entrepreneurial groups with a centralized leadership, and subsequently into profit-oriented, transnational networks. Conversely, cartels may grow from hierarchical, extremely aggressive organizations into more clandestine, cell-like networks, and finally into ones with the capacity to corrupt and co-opt state institutions. These projections, however, are rooted in law enforcement stereotypes, non–agreed-on definitions of street and drug gangs, and they incorporate no sociological analysis of how and why these groups might transcend different stages. Disconcertingly, Bunker and Sullivan suggest that the more evolved entities are no longer a policing problem and require a more robust state response.

In an interesting comparative chapter on gang and cartel penetration in Central America, veteran Latin America reporter Steven Dudley recognizes that the *maras* maintain no systematic collaboration with organized crime and constitute a danger to neighborhoods rather than to national security. Nevertheless, the cursory country threat assessments provide scant insight into local drug markets and distribution networks, and some affirmations about the criminal groups' ability to challenge states do not rest on solid evidence. The claim that El Salvador's street gangs manipulated nongovernmental organizations into spreading political messages and persuading the Mauricio Funes administration (2009–14) into negotiating a truce reads like an unsubstantiated accusation and does not capture the government's own interest in promoting a ceasefire. Those same gangs, Dudley suggests, possess a greater organizational and co-optive capacity than their peers elsewhere and are therefore well placed to eventually rival their criminal competitors in the region. This view, however, disregards street gangs' subordinate role in the criminal hierarchy and does not contemplate how their prison power and transnational connections compare in the region. Similarly, the journalist warns that Honduras is at greater risk than its neighbors of turning into a narcostate, but he does not elucidate the factors—beyond limited resources and ill-trained police forces—that diminish Central America's capacity to confront its security challenges.

Prison Socialization

Studies in Gangs and Cartels, the most recent book by Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, is—save for the last two chapters—also a collection of previously published journal submissions. Adopting a national security perspective on the subject, the volume brings together the analysts' writings on the evolution of crime and conflict that first appeared between 1995 and 2008. This compilation of stand-alone, often repetitive articles addresses the broader challenges street gangs and organized crime can present to states, specifically their position at the intersection of delinquency and war. Like the earlier *Criminal Insurgencies*, this essay series contains some poorly sustained claims regarding the national security threat embodied by the *maras*, such as their acting as surrogate governments, their domination of the informal economic sector, or their rule of 15 Salvadoran municipalities. Two themes that stand out are the impact of technology and organizational forms on the changing nature of crime and conflict, and the role of correctional facilities in gang transformation.

According to Bunker, globalization and the attendant growth in the informal economy spurred the growth of slum cities as breeding grounds for criminal soldiers. At the same time, the rise in communications technology and shifting travel and migration patterns permitted street gangs and criminal groups to adopt network forms of organization and to expand their influence across borders. Again, this research lacks a sociological viewpoint that could help us understand, among other things, how the dynamics in marginal communities feed into the aforementioned entities. Even so, the national security approach to gangs and cartels implies that they can imperil the integrity of the state.

Transnational security threats, Bunker fears, have already encroached on the United States and may forge links with local street gangs. This reasoning overlooks the influence of domestic factors on gang formation and development, as indeed was the case with the *maras*. Bunker, however, is preoccupied with the state responses that need to be crafted; he proposes that the police and military also form cross-border networks. Instead of contemplating the social prevention of crime and violence, he recommends that the United States hire private security actors that could combat crime wars without operational constraints.

Sullivan shares some important reflections on the function of prisons and prison gangs in the evolution of delinquent groups, albeit without offering a distinction between street and prison gangs. Penitentiaries serve as places to enlist new recruits, socialize and refine criminal skills, find shelter from law enforcement, strengthen group ties, and plan and order illicit activities. The discussion illuminates the unsavory effects of *mano dura*, but it insinuates that jail segregation—undertaken to reduce inmate-on-inmate violence—has fostered criminal opportunities, when the real problem in Central American detention centers is their overcrowding and ineffective management. The author ascribes the *maras*' growing complexity to the abilities of incarcerated deportees, pointing out that 60 percent of gang detainees in El Salvador alone were expelled from the United States. It is unclear, however, how Sullivan arrived at this rather elevated estimate when MS-13 and Barrio 18 comprise mostly local youth and reliable figures on incarcerated deportees are not publicly available.

Drug Policy Failure

In the Shadow of Saint Death, the third book from independent journalist Michael Deibert, is a superb piece of reporting on U.S. drug policy and its devastating effects on drug-producing and transit countries in the Western Hemisphere. Ambitious in scope, the volume touches on themes such as violence and sleaze, media censorship, and the survival and resistance of local heroes. With rich descriptions, the author effortlessly recreates the atmosphere in villages and towns across Mexico and Central America that are reeling under the impact of the drug war. The narrative is constructed around the history of the Gulf Cartel and events in its home state of Tamaulipas. But the book is really addressed to a U.S. audience, to whom Deibert aspires to convey the bloody consequences of an insatiable drug demand and a futile prohibitionist approach to drug control.

In his biting critique of U.S. policy, Deibert shows how historically the prohibition of certain substances and the criminalization of their consumers have created corruption and illegal markets. Successive administrations—from Richard Nixon through Barack Obama—have pursued the drug war both at home and abroad, costing the country more than one trillion dollars without ever making significant inroads into this public health issue. In a brief but fascinating section on the Reagan years, the journalist reminds readers how political goals even prompted the United States to collude with known drug traffickers. If the drug war has not yielded the expected results, why does the United States insist on fighting it, and how has it been successfully exporting it around the world for so long? Deibert does not concern himself with the second question and answers the first puzzle by pointing to business interests—notably the private prison industry—and the electoral interests of politicians.

The author is adamant that current drug policies must change and alternatives to drug control and addiction be explored. In the epilogue, the most reflective part of the book, he predicts more violence for Mexico and its southern neighbors unless a fundamental shift in strategy occurs. The terms of the debate have altered, although the fight for drug policy reform is bound to be a long one. Sounding a hopeful note, Deibert cites a 2009 report by the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy—which pronounced the failure of the eradication and interdiction approach—and a 2011 document by the Global Commission on Drug Policy that urges experimentation with government regulation of drugs.

In the Shadow of Saint Death went to press before the publication of the GCDP's successor report (2014), which set out a roadmap for the creation of more effective and humane drug policies. Deibert identifies Guatemalan president Otto Pérez Molina as an example of leadership on drug decriminalization, even as he recognizes that the unexpected espousal of a progressive standpoint may mask other agendas. The book certainly makes a strong case for drug policy alternatives, but scientific research will need to demonstrate the viability of unconventional approaches.

State Weakness

With his doctoral dissertation, *Vivo por mi madre y muero por mi barrio*, Alfredo Nateras won first prize in the 2011 National Thesis Competition on Youth organized annually by the Mexican Youth Institute. An anthropologist interested in collective subjectivities, he had embarked on exploring how violence and death are constructed among MS-13 and Barrio 18 in northern Central America. Concerned specifically with the social and cultural meanings and significance of violence and death for gang members, the research aimed to dismantle the conceptual apparatuses that legitimize aggression in the logics of power. The project entailed ethnographic work in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, but some comments on the timing and context of the author's interviews help explain the nature and limitations of his findings.

Nateras had expected to spend an extended time in gang communities and hangouts. However, the difficulty of approaching members and obtaining their

trust, as well as the weariness that immersion in an insecure milieu spawns, led the academic to rush his ethnography—conducted between October and December 2008—and to rely heavily on other social actors. Nateras spent most of his time in El Salvador and carried out a total of only 37 interviews in the three countries, 12 of these with gang members and 25 with scholars, NGO staff, and community activists. Surprisingly, government officials, police officers, and journalists were excluded from this pool of experts, and it is unclear whether the anthropologist conversed mostly with older gang members, whose experience revolved more around solidarity than is common for younger generations.

Nateras acknowledges that suppression invariably altered the *maras*, making them cherish values such as solidarity and friendship less and pushing them to embrace *identidades nómadas* (nomadic identities), or an accelerated territorial mobility that would complicate detection by law enforcement. Even so, the author emphasizes the structural context in which gangs emerge and downplays their social and security impact. The use of obsolete data and a preference for ideologically akin informants allow him to claim that gang members are demonized and scapegoated as the foremost perpetrators of crime and violence in Central America. This argument, however, is difficult to sustain. Gang activity has worsened both quantitatively and qualitatively over the years, a reality that was already apparent by the time Nateras performed his own field research. In what might be dubbed a case of ethnographic seduction, the writer is so sympathetic to gang members' experiences of marginalization and victimhood that he loses critical distance from his interviewees and risks giving a distorted view of the *maras*.

The preceding discussion constitutes the background to one of the key concepts that Nateras employs to aid our understanding of these groups. *Street gang*, he maintains, is a loaded term because of its association with crime and violence. Insisting that MS-13 and Barrio 18 members are not the monsters they are often depicted to be and that the violence they carry out denotes respect, social status, and virility, Nateras advocates the use of nondiscriminatory vocabulary. In order to reaffirm the symbolic and cultural dimensions of street gangs, he prefers the term *adscripciones identitarias* (identity-based affiliations).

The theoretical toolbox he assembles for that purpose borrows from sociologist Erving Goffman's 1993 work on stigma—a process whereby an individual with a negative attribute is rejected as a result of it—and sociologist Michel Maffesoli's writings (1990) on neotribalism. Maffesoli, inspired by Max Weber's notion of emotional community (1978), had used the metaphor of the tribe to explain that a microgroup—an ephemeral, territorially bound, and affective cluster of individuals—reflects the sociability that occurs in a given time and space. The idea of urban tribes or subaltern cultures has since found some acceptance in the sociology and anthropology of youth, fields that are concerned with studying youth cultures and identities. By applying this approach to the *maras*—groups that have made a qualitative leap in their exercise of crime and violence—Nateras ends up minimizing the very real harm they cause to vulnerable people and communities in Central America.

The theme of victimization continues in his examination of death squad activities in the Isthmus and their targeting of gang members. Discussing the periodic discovery of tortured and dismembered bodies, the scholar highlights state responsibility—through negligence or participation—in extrajudicial executions, particularly in a series of prison massacres in Honduras. Such killings, and the involvement of off-duty police officers, have indeed been documented, but Nateras sees the extermination of members of certain social groups as a state strategy against urban violence.

Exposing matters such as corruption or the lack of effective prison management is one thing, but the unsubstantiated claim that the authorities finance paramilitary groups in order to slay some of their citizens appears quite a stretch. Death squads, most notoriously perhaps the *Sombra Negra* (Black Shadow) that operated in El Salvador in the mid-1990s, have been intermittently revived through anecdote and rumor. Yet the anthropologist does not pause to wonder to what extent these tales match reality and whether gang members, rather than being easy targets of such practices, might in fact replicate them. An important underlying theme—considered in more detail by the remaining authors—is the fragility of states and their inability both to control parts of their territory and to ensure the safety of its inhabitants.

Invisible Victims

El Faro is a fiercely independent Salvadoran digital newspaper that, during its 17-year existence, has received numerous awards for its reporting. Its Sala Negra section was established in 2011 to write exclusively about the culture of violence, street gangs, organized crime, and prison systems in Central America. Determined to go beyond the daily body counts that characterize mass media coverage, its reporters employ investigative and narrative journalism in order to provide contextualized coverage of the security crisis in the Isthmus and enable readers to better understand—and act on—this reality.

Crónicas negras desde una región que no cuenta is an anthology of 18 extended chronicles that span topics such as the origins and two-faction split of Barrio 18, prison conditions, lynchings, and drug trafficking–related corruption and displacement. The volume contains no methodological or ethical reflections on, for example, research in dangerous environments or the threats it may invite against the journalists or their informants. The authors succeed in composing dispassionate stories yet conveying a fervent desire to ask uncomfortable questions, dig deep, and explain what may seem unexplainable. Sleaze and impunity are the themes that run through all the accounts, but the most revealing ones concern gang sexual violence in El Salvador and civil society mobilization against police corruption in Honduras.

"Yo violada," by Roberto Valencia, the opening chapter and perhaps the most unsettling one in the entire volume, relates the three-hour rape of Magaly by more than a dozen gang members and her steps to overcome the ordeal. The youth, some of them her classmates, had chosen her as a birthday present for one of their peers and dragged her out of school to a *destroyer* (gang hangout) where they took turns assaulting her, watching with laughter, and taking photos. Warned that her family

would come to harm if she spoke to anyone about the event, Magaly kept silent and ensured that she had not become pregnant or contracted HIV or would lose the school year.

During his investigations, Valencia discovered, to his horror, that assaults of this type constitute a systematic practice in gang-affected neighborhoods, and schoolteachers are aware of it but feel powerless to stop it. The journalist supplements the girl's testimony with an expert interview that helps comprehend the victim's seemingly aloof reaction to the attack. A local forensic psychologist not only explains that life in a violence-ridden setting makes rape appear a lesser evil than murder, but also shares his observations on the increasingly sadistic nature of sexual gang violence. The chilling tale of the rituals this involves, carried out by adolescents as young as 12, leads to the question of what kind of society produces human beings capable of such cruelty and tolerates it.

"Así es la Policía del país más violento del mundo," by Daniel Valencia Caravantes, is in some ways a more heartening story. Its background is the return to civilian control of the Honduran police and the botched efforts to purge the force of its corrupt element. The partial reforms permitted a culture of corruption and delinquency to flourish in the institution and even a criminal gang to develop dedicated to vehicle theft, extortion, kidnapping, and *sicariato* (contract killings). As Valencia Caravantes narrates it, the event that initially seemed to break with this past was the 2011 police killing of two university students, including the son of the chancellor of the National Autonomous University of Honduras. The assassination prompted victims' families and human rights groups to demand a thorough purge, but—contrary to the reporter's claims—it did not rouse a country accustomed to violence and corruption. Things continued much as before, demonstrating that only broad societal pressure can create the political will needed for institutional restructuring. Journalistic investigations can impel reform movements, which is the idea behind the final book.

Police Corruption

Héctor Silva, a veteran reporter at the El Salvador daily *La Prensa Gráfica* before joining the embassy in Washington, DC as deputy chief of mission, resigned from that post in 2012 over security policy disagreements and death threats. As a journalist he had covered corruption and organized crime, including a major Salvadoran drug-trafficking group and its accomplices in the *Policía Nacional Civil* (National Civilian Police, PNC). Based on primary sources and interviews with public officials, journalists, and members of criminal syndicates, his book, *Infiltrados*, tells the story of the PNC and its infiltration by organized crime.

Born with the postwar security sector reforms, the institution was intended to be what its militarized predecessors had not been: civilian, democratic, professional, and rights-respecting. Silva argues that the PNC advanced in that direction but failed to create a new organizational culture, effective accountability mechanisms, and scientific investigative methods. Examining five presidential administrations, the author maintains that the Funes government was the first to explicitly recognize

organized crime penetration of the state but, like its precursors, took no firm action to curb it.

A large part of the book is devoted to recording how this infiltration began in the PNC and how it manifests itself nowadays. The research details how—contrary to Peace Accord provisions—the tainted, militarized antinarcotics and criminal investigation units were transferred wholesale into the agency. Their officers, several of whom had been implicated in various offenses, held the police command and reproduced illicit practices within the institution. Silva discusses three emblematic murder cases and their respective police investigations to show how—behind a façade of professionalism—a culture of fraud and manipulation paralyzed the PNC and helped perpetuate impunity.

In order to elucidate this process, the analyst narrates the origins and transformation of El Salvador's principal organized crime groups, Los Perrones and the Texis Cartel. Both started out as contraband networks but gradually expanded their business through a symbiotic relationship with key contacts in the PNC. Like *Crónicas negras*, this is not a book that is concerned with concepts, but one that presents a wealth of corroborated empirical data about corruption and organized crime in contemporary Central America.

On the other hand, the work untangles the dynamics that enabled this institutional decomposition and ponders how the country might escape it. In this context, Silva underscores the political dimension of police reform and its roots in a quota system that permitted former combatants and civilians alike to join the PNC at its inception. During this crucial phase, the political right and the military establishment brought in trusted yet nonvetted members of the old security forces to ensure continued control over the agency and impunity of the wealthy and powerful. The journalist is eager to point out that the United States, El Salvador's main wartime military aid provider, bears a responsibility for these decisions and their implications, given that it tolerated Peace Accord violations to guarantee dependable officers a place in the new security organ.

Ultimately, Silva concludes, genuine police reform requires more than some lone heroes, such as the brave human rights lawyer who directed the internal affairs unit during the early years of the Funes administration. Whatever the means to reverse organized crime penetration—such as the creation of a United Nations–sponsored investigative commission or the forced retirement of the dishonest veteran officers—they require political will, and the United States could use its influence to cultivate it.

The six books reviewed here adopt a strong policy-oriented outlook, advocating a 180-degree change in the way North and Central America confront street gangs, drug control, and organized crime. A dividing line exists between the concept-rich academic studies that proffer comforting yet misleading black-and-white explanations and the journalistic investigations that do not claim to have all the answers but dig deep to connect puzzle pieces of a complex social reality. Although some of the volumes are explicitly targeted at U.S. decisionmakers, some will be especially useful for scholars and students of violence, security, and democracy, as well as for lay read-

ers interested in Mexico and Central America. Future research could explore the workings of local drug markets, current forms of displacement, and the role of municipal governments in social prevention, or could monitor and evaluate the results and impact of crime control, prevention, and rehabilitation initiatives.

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