



[Dennis Rodgers](#)

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Living in the Shadow of Death: Gangs, Violence and Social Order in Urban Nicaragua, 1996–2002*

DENNIS RODGERS

Abstract. This article explores the dynamics of the youth gang (*pandilla*) phenomenon in contemporary urban Nicaragua, drawing on longitudinal ethnographic research conducted with a Managua *pandilla* in 1996–97 and in 2002. *Pandillas* and their violent practices are conceived as constituting a form of local social structuration in the face of broader conditions of high crime, insecurity, and socio-political breakdown. This form of ‘street-level politics’ changed significantly between 1997 and 2002, however, evolving from a form of collective social violence to a more individually and economically motivated type of brutality. This transformation is related to wider structural processes, which are described as coming together and precipitating a form of ‘social death’ in contemporary Nicaragua.

Introduction

The past two decades have seen crime become increasingly recognised as a critical social concern. Crime rates have risen globally by an average of 50 per cent over the past 25 years,¹ and the phenomenon is widely considered to contribute significantly to human suffering all over the world.² This is particularly the case in Latin America, where violence has reached

Dennis Rodgers is Lecturer in Urban Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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¹ P. Fajnzylber, D. Lederman and N. Loayza, *Determinants of Crime Rates in Latin America and the World: An Empirical Assessment*, World Bank Latin American and Caribbean Studies Viewpoint Studies Series (Washington, DC, 1998), p. 11.

² R. Ayres, *Crime and Violence as Development Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean*, World Bank Latin American and Caribbean Studies Viewpoint Studies Series (Washington, DC, 1998); C. McIllwaine, ‘Geography and Development: Crime and Violence as Development Issues,’ *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1999), pp. 453–63.

unprecedented levels due to rising crime and delinquency.³ Although this is a general trend, it is perhaps most apparent in Central America, where crime is now so prevalent that levels of violence are comparable to, or higher than, those obtaining during the decade of war that affected most of the region during the 1980s.⁴ In El Salvador, for example, the annual number of deaths due to crime during the 1990s exceeded the average due to war in the 1980s by over 40 per cent,⁵ while in Guatemala the economic costs of crime were US\$565 million in 1999,⁶ compared to an annual US\$240 million loss to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) during the height of the civil war between 1981–85.⁷

In many ways it can be argued that there has been a shift in the political economy of violence in post-Cold War Latin America, with the most visible expressions of brutality no longer stemming from ideological conflicts over the nature of politics, as in the past, but from more 'prosaic' forms of violence such as crime.⁸ Although it is important not to underestimate the continuities between the past and the present – crime is not a new phenomenon, and political violence is by no means extinct – violence in Latin America has arguably become 'democratised', ceasing to be 'the resource of only the traditionally powerful or of the grim uniformed guardians of the nation and increasingly appear[ing] as an option for a multitude of actors in pursuit of all kinds of goals'.⁹ These new dynamics are widely seen to be linked to a regional 'crisis of governance', whereby economic liberalisation, weak democratisation and intensifying globalisation have undermined states and their ability to command a monopoly over the use of violence. The emergence of

³ J. Londoño, A. Gaviria and R. Guerrero (ed.), *Asalto al desarrollo: violencia en América Latina* (Washington, DC, 2000).

⁴ C. T. Call, *Sustainable Development in Central America: The Challenges of Violence, Injustice and Insecurity*, CA 2020 working paper no. 8 (Hamburg, 2000), pp. 7–14; J. Pearce, 'From Civil War To "Civil Society": Has the End of the Cold War Brought Peace to Central America?', *International Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 3 (1998), pp. 589–90.

⁵ Pearce, 'From Civil War to "Civil Society"', p. 590.

⁶ C. Moser and A. Winton, *Violence in the Central American Region: Towards an Integrated Framework for Violence Reduction*, Overseas Development Institute working paper no. 171 (London, 2002), p. 33.

⁷ This latter figure is expressed in 1999 current US\$, and calculated on the basis of R. Ahrend, *The Economic Consequences of Fighting and Ending Latin America's Civil Wars: What to Expect from Peace in Colombia?*, World Bank mimeo (Washington, DC, 1999), and data from the United Nations Statistics Division's online Common Database, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/cdb/> (accessed 14 April 2004).

⁸ T. P. R. Caldeira, 'Crime and individual rights: Reframing the Question of Violence in Latin America,' in E. Jelin and E. Hershberg (ed.), *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Society in Latin America* (Boulder, 1996), p. 199.

⁹ D. Kruijt and K. Koonings, 'Introduction: Violence and Fear in Latin America,' in K. Koonings and D. Kruijt (ed.), *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America* (London, 1999), p. 11.

‘disorderly’ forms of criminal violence epitomises this declining political authority, and signals a rising social chaos.¹⁰

This article develops a contrary argument and contends that far from embodying incipient anarchy, certain manifestations of this so-called ‘disorderly’ violence can instead be conceived as coherent modes of social structuration in the face of wider processes of state and social breakdown. This claim is made particularly in relation to perhaps the most emblematic form of brutality within the new Latin American political economy of criminal violence, namely youth gang violence. The lack of statistical data makes it impossible to determine the proportion of criminal violence attributable to youth gangs in Latin America, but they are widespread throughout the region.¹¹ They constitute an illuminating lens through which to explore the nature of contemporary Latin American violence, and this article presents a case study of an urban Nicaraguan youth gang, or *pandilla*, based on data derived from ethnographic research conducted in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,¹² a low-income neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua.¹³ It begins by providing an overview of crime in Nicaragua, including a description of its social consequences, and then continues with a detailed account of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* as it existed in 1996–97 and then in 2002. A theoretical discussion of the dynamics of *pandillerismo* follows, first situating the phenomenon within its wider socio-cultural context before outlining how it can be conceived as a form of local-level social structuration in the face of socio-political breakdown, and considering the sociological implications of this viewpoint. A final section presents some conclusions and looks to the future.

Crime in contemporary Nicaragua

Violence is not new to Nicaragua. The country has the dubious distinction of having suffered the longest-running dictatorship in modern Latin American

¹⁰ O. de Rivero, *El mito del desarrollo: los países inviables en el siglo XXI* (Lima, 1998); E. Galeano, *Patatas arriba: la escuela del mundo al revés* (Madrid, 1998); J. Méndez, G. O’Donnell and P. S. Pinheiro (ed.), *The (Un)Rule of Law and the Underprivileged in Latin America* (Notre Dame, 1999).

¹¹ D. Rodgers, *Youth Gangs and Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Literature Survey*, World Bank Latin America and Caribbean Region Sustainable Development working paper no. 4 (Washington, DC, 1999).

¹² This name is a pseudonym, as are all the names of informants mentioned in this article.

¹³ The first period of fieldwork was carried out July 1996–July 1997. The second period was conducted in February–March 2002 as part of the London School of Economics Crisis States Programme, which also sponsored another visit in December 2002. For methodological details, see D. Rodgers, ‘Un antropólogo-pandillero en un barrio de Managua,’ *Envío*, no. 184 (July 1997), pp. 10–16, and ‘Haciendo del peligro una vocación: la antropología, la violencia, y los dilemas de la observación participante,’ *Revista Española de Investigación Criminológica*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2004), pp. 1–24.

history, that of the Somoza dynasty, which was finally overthrown after 45 years in 1979 by the *Sandinista* revolution. The triumph of the revolution led to an attritional civil war against the US-supported *Contras*, which only came to an end in 1990 following the electoral defeat of the *Sandinistas*. Although the country has formally been ‘at peace’ since this date, violence remains an overwhelming reality, particularly in urban areas. As Eduardo Galeano describes, the streets of the country’s cities were relatively peaceful during the years of conflict, but ‘since peace was declared the streets have become scenes of war, the battlegrounds of common criminals and youth gangs’.¹⁴

Certainly, the country has experienced an explosion in criminal violence during the past 15 years. According to Nicaraguan National Police statistics, crime levels have risen by an average of ten per cent per year since 1990, compared to just two per cent during the 1980s. The absolute number of crimes more than tripled between 1990 and 2003, with crimes against persons – including violent crimes such as homicides, rapes and assaults – rising by over 460 per cent.¹⁵ Although this upward trend is undoubtedly accurate, the official statistics must be treated with caution.¹⁶ This is particularly true of the homicide rate, which during the 1990s stood at an average of just 16 deaths per 100,000 persons,¹⁷ a suspiciously low level when considered in a regional perspective.¹⁸ Certainly, during a year’s fieldwork conducted in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996–97, I tallied nine crime-related deaths in the neighbourhood, which works out to a rate of 360 deaths per 100,000 persons. While this calculation is unsystematic and only reflects the situation in one neighbourhood, it nevertheless suggests that official statistics are underestimations.¹⁹

¹⁴ E. Galeano, *Patas Arriba*, pp. 322–4.

¹⁵ See A. Serbin and D. Ferreyra (ed.), *Gobernabilidad democrática y seguridad ciudadana en Centroamérica: el caso de Nicaragua* (Managua, 2000), p. 185; <http://www.policia.gob.ni/> (accessed 18 June 2004).

¹⁶ W. Godnick, with R. Muggah and C. Waszink, *Stray Bullets: The Impact of Small Arms Misuse in Central America*, Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper No. 5 (Geneva, 2002), p. 26. Statistical underreporting is mainly due to the Nicaraguan Police’s incapacity to systematically collect data. Since 1990, it has been reduced in size, to the extent that it is absent in 21 per cent of Nicaraguan municipalities (R. J. Cajina, ‘Nicaragua: de la seguridad del Estado a la inseguridad ciudadana,’ in Serbin and Ferreyra, *Gobernabilidad Democrática*, p. 174). This situation is compounded by a lack of funds, with the Nicaraguan Police having the lowest number of personnel per capita and per crime, the lowest budget per crime, the lowest budget per officer, and the lowest salaries in Central America (Call, *Sustainable Development in Central America*, pp. 24–5).

¹⁷ Serbin and Ferreyra, *Gobernabilidad democrática*, p. 187.

¹⁸ There were almost three times as many homicides in Honduras, and over six times as many in Guatemala and El Salvador during the same period (Moser and Winton, *Violence in the Central American Region*, p. 47).

¹⁹ Having said this, while Nicaragua is much more violent than official statistics would suggest, levels of violence are lower than those affecting Honduras, El Salvador or Guatemala.

The unreliability of official statistics notwithstanding, numerous indicators attest to the high levels of crime in contemporary urban Nicaragua. A CID-Gallup survey conducted in April 1997 reported that one in four inhabitants of Managua had been victims of crime during the previous four months.²⁰ Similarly, respondents to a national survey conducted by the NGO *Ética y Transparencia* in 1999 singled out crime as the principal problem affecting the country by a margin of over 30 per cent.²¹ Crime and delinquency were also clearly cardinal preoccupations in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, both in 1996–97 and 2002. Almost all my informants had been victims of crime at some point, and there was a pervasive sense of insecurity in the neighbourhood, as *Doña* Yolanda reflected well in an interview in 2002:

There's so much delinquency, it's impossible to live ... they'll kill you for a watch ... they'll kill you for a pair of shoes ... they'll kill you for your shirt ... they're everywhere, you've got to watch out ... they could be your neighbour, even your friend, you can never be sure ... you can't go out any more, you can't wear rings, bracelets, nice shoes, anything that makes us look a little better than we really are ... how can we live? It's not possible ...

This sense of insecurity was starkly reflected in the manifest fear of leaving the perceived safe haven of the home, with people restricting themselves to a few fixed routes and destinations whenever they went out. 'We are virtually living in a state of siege', *Adilia* told me in 1997, and in 2002 she claimed that: 'things are worse, people are scared to leave their homes, it's too dangerous'. This insecurity has had dramatic effects on local social organisation, with the erosion of the social fabric reaching such proportions that it is no exaggeration to talk of a veritable 'atomisation' of social life.²² Traditional institutions of social solidarity such as the extended family or *compadrazgo* had shattered, and there were few community networks of trust and mutual aid, as *Don Sergio* described in 1997:

Nobody does anything for anybody anymore, nobody cares if their neighbour is robbed, nobody does anything for the common good. There's a lack of trust, you don't know whether somebody will return you your favours, or whether he won't steal your belongings when your back is turned. It's the law of the jungle here; we're eating one another, as they say in the Bible ...

²⁰ *La Tribuna*, 2 May 1997, p. 4.

²¹ Cajina, 'Nicaragua,' p. 177.

²² Nitlapán-Envío team, 'The crisis is bordering on the intolerable,' *Envío in English*, no. 167 (June 1995), pp. 3–13; J.-C. Núñez, *De la ciudad al barrio: redes y tejidos urbanos en Guatemala, El Salvador y Nicaragua* (Ciudad de Guatemala, 1996); D. Rodgers, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Violence, Pandillas, and Social Disintegration in Contemporary Urban Nicaragua*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2000. Nicaragua's predicament can be linked to other factors, including the legacy of war or structural adjustment, but it was very much violence that emerged most forcefully as a key issue in the discourses of informants in both 1996–97 and 2002. Similar processes of social erosion due to violence have been noted elsewhere in Latin America (C. Moser and C. McIlwaine, *Encounters with Violence in Latin America: Urban Poor Perceptions from Colombia and Guatemala*, London, 2004).

In 2002, the situation was no better, as *Doña* Yolanda made clear:

You never feel safe in the *barrio*, because of the lack of trust. There always has to be somebody in the house, because you can't trust anybody to look out for you, for your things, to help you, nothing. People only look out for themselves – everyone, the rich, the poor, the middle class ... Life is hard in Nicaragua, and you've just got to look out for yourself and try and survive by hook or by crook. It was the same five years ago; nothing has changed, except that we're now five years on, and the future didn't get any better ...

The most prominent actors within this panorama of insecurity are undoubtedly the *pandillas* that roam the streets of Nicaraguan cities, robbing, beating, and frequently killing. The 1999 *Ética y Transparencia* survey mentioned above found that gangs were considered the most likely perpetrators of crime by over 50 per cent of respondents,²³ and over half of all those arrested in Nicaragua in 1997 were young males aged between 13 and 25 years old, which corresponds to a typical *pandillero* age and gender profile, although obviously not all were gang members.²⁴ People in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández often prefaced their complaints about crime with an expressive '*jestas pandillas, me matan, te digo, me matan!*' ('these gangs, they kill me, I tell you, they kill me!'). Indeed, gangs have largely come symbolically to epitomise crime in contemporary Nicaragua, with the words '*pandilla*' and '*pandillerismo*' often used interchangeably with 'criminality' or 'delinquency'.²⁵

At the same time, the word '*pandilla*' denotes a very definite social institution, consisting of a variably sized group of generally male youths ranging in age from 7 to 23, who engage in illicit and violent behaviour – although not all their activities are illicit or violent – and who have a particular territorial dynamic. Most notably, a *pandilla* tends to be associated with a specific urban neighbourhood,²⁶ although larger neighbourhoods often have more than one gang and not all have one, as there clearly needs to be a critical mass of youth in a neighbourhood for a gang to emerge, and they tend not to develop in richer neighbourhoods. The socio-economic opportunities available to the youth in a neighbourhood also affect gang formation more generally. For example, despite being extremely poor and having a large youth population, there was no gang in the central Managua *barrio* La Luz in 1996–97. This was due to an institutionalised pattern of circular labour

²³ Cajina, 'Nicaragua,' p. 177.

²⁴ J. L. Rocha, 'Pandillero: la mano que empuña el mortero,' *Envío*, no. 216 (March 2000), p. 20.

²⁵ This association is clearly reinforced by sensationalist reporting in the Nicaraguan media. Nevertheless, gangs are a real source of insecurity in Nicaragua, and it would be inaccurate to characterise them as a 'moral panic'.

²⁶ *Pandillas* are an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon principally found in Managua, although media reports do signal their presence in other urban centres, including Chinandega, Estelí, Granada, León and Matagalpa.

migration, whereby youths would travel back and forth to Toronto (Canada), where a community of *barrio* La Luz ex-inhabitants had settled during the 1970s and 1980s, and provided a welcoming environment and work opportunities.

Although *pandillas* can be traced back to the 1940s in Nicaragua, they were small-scale and relatively innocuous youth aggregations until the early 1990s, when their numbers increased massively and they became significantly violent. By 1999 the Nicaraguan police estimated that there were 110 *pandillas* in Managua alone, incorporating 8,500 youths,²⁷ double the number involved in 1996, and five times that of 1990, although these statistics undoubtedly err on the low side. The evidence as to whether *pandillerismo* has increased or declined since 1999 is contradictory. The police insist that the phenomenon is in decline, but Nicaraguan public opinion, media reports and my informants in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández all suggest that gangs have become an overwhelming feature of urban Nicaragua. It has been hypothesised that while the total number of youths involved in *pandillerismo* in Nicaragua may be declining in absolute terms, gangs have simultaneously become smaller in size, so that while there are less *pandilleros*, there are an increasing number of *pandillas*.²⁸ The case study of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* that I present next supports this conjecture, but also suggests that the nature of Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* is not what it is widely thought to be. In particular, gangs emerge less as contributors to the disorder that characterises contemporary urban Nicaragua and more as attempts to mitigate this ambient insecurity.²⁹

The barrio Luis Fanor Hernández pandilla in 1996–97

In 1996–97 the neighbourhood Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* was made up of about 100 youths, all males between 7 and 22 years old. Gang members originated indiscriminately from richer and poorer households, and other stereotypical ‘determinants’, such as family fragmentation, domestic violence, migration or parental alcoholism, did not seem significant in explaining membership. The only element that systematically affected membership was religious, insofar as there were no evangelical Protestant youths in the

²⁷ Policía Nacional de Nicaragua, *Boletín de la Actividad Delictiva*, no. 32 (2001).

²⁸ J. J. Sosa Meléndez and J. L. Rocha, ‘Las pandillas en Nicaragua,’ in ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica*, vol. 1 (Managua, 2001).

²⁹ My case study is limited to a single gang in a specific neighbourhood, so caution must be exercised in extrapolating about the general nature of *pandillerismo*. Anthropological studies have, however, amply shown the validity of drawing on small-scale cases to think about the dynamics of larger social processes. Certainly, there are many parallels between my findings in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández and other neighbourhood studies of *pandillas* in Nicaragua such as Núñez, *De la ciudad al barrio*; Rocha, ‘Pandillero’; J. L. Rocha, ‘Pandillas: una cárcel cultural,’ *Envío*, no. 219 (June 2000), pp. 13–22; Sosa Meléndez and Rocha, ‘Las pandillas en Nicaragua’.

pandilla. In many ways, this is hardly surprising since many of the activities associated with being a *pandillero* – being violent, stealing, drinking, smoking or taking drugs – are in contradiction with the tenets of evangelical Protestantism. Furthermore, the totalising nature of evangelical Protestantism means that churches often tended to provide a complete organisational framework for their members – more so than the Catholic Church – and thereby constituted an alternative institutional form to the gang for youth. Beyond the gang, evangelical Protestant churches, small networks of friends and intermittent groups coming together to play basketball or baseball, however, there was little in the way of alternative local collective social forms for non-*pandillero* youth in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández.³⁰

The neighbourhood gang was subdivided into distinct age and geographical subgroups. There were three age cohorts – the 7 to 12 year olds, the 13 to 17 year olds, and those 18 years old and over – and three geographical subgroups, respectively associated with the central area of the neighbourhood, the ‘*abajo*’ (West) side of the neighbourhood, and the ‘*arriba*’ (East) side of the neighbourhood. Groups were approximately of equal size: geographically, they ranged between 25–35 individuals, and within this each of the subgroups divided into three age cohorts of 7 to 14 individuals each. The different geographical subgroups had distinct names, respectively ‘*los de la Calle Ocho*’ (named after the alleyway where this group congregated), ‘*los Cancheros*’ (because of a ‘*cancha*’, or playing field on that side of the *barrio*) and ‘*los Dragones*’ (because all its members had a dragon tattoo).

These different subgroups generally operated separately, except in the context of gang warfare, when they would come together in order to defend the neighbourhood or attack another. At the same time, even if the different groups were very autonomous, individual gang members qualified themselves members of a generic neighbourhood *pandilla*, which was called ‘*Los Sobrevivientes*’, in reference to ‘*La Sobrevivencia*’, the neighbourhood’s pre-revolutionary name. There also existed a notion of generic neighbourhood *pandilla* territory, spanning the whole of the neighbourhood and some of the neighbouring wastelands, despite its variable occupation by different geographical subgroups and age-cohorts. Moreover, none of the subgroups, whether age- or geography-determined, ever fought each other, although fights did occasionally break out between individuals.

Although *pandilla* behaviour patterns often involved violence, not all did. There for example existed a distinct *pandillero* sartorial ‘fashion’, which included wearing one’s t-shirt inside out, sporting an earring and a tattoo,

³⁰ The labour market and schooling constituted partial exceptions to this at the macro-level, although the high levels of unemployment in Nicaragua mean that most youths’ experiences of work tended to be sporadic, and the school dropout rate was extremely high, especially after primary school.

and having a partially shaved head. All of these practices were to a large extent shared with various segments of the non-*pandillero* youth population, however, as were other non-violent gang activities such as smoking marijuana, sniffing glue, drinking heavily, or hanging out on street corners, and as such, they did not constitute distinguishing features of *pandillerismo*. In many ways, this is hardly surprising, as *pandilleros* were inevitably situated within a wider youth culture. But while they naturally engaged in the usual activities of youth – they talked, joked, exchanged stories, listened to music, danced, drank, smoked – they also regularly engaged in violent and socially disruptive activities, and it is this that distinguished them from other youth.

There were two major forms of gang violence: delinquency and warfare. Different age groups were involved in different delinquent activities, from low-level pick pocketing and stealing by the youngest, mugging and shop-lifting by the middle group, to armed robbery and assault by the oldest. A golden ‘rule’ of delinquency common to all groups, however, was not to prey on local neighbourhood inhabitants, but actively to protect them from outside thieves, robbers, and *pandilleros*. This happened frequently, although the *barrio* gang members were not always effective in providing protection. During the course of my fieldwork in the *barrio* in 1996–97, three inhabitants of the neighbourhood died as a result of delinquency by *pandilleros* from other *barrios*. In addition, one *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandillero* died while attempting an assault in another neighbourhood. The dynamics of delinquency were clearly social rather than economic. Even if the revenue from delinquent activities was not inconsiderable, amounting on average to about 450 *córdobas* (US\$50) per month – equivalent to two thirds of the average household’s monthly income in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996–97 – it was not as important as having a tale to tell the rest of the gang afterwards, with whatever had been stolen becoming an sign of the deed for all to see. Moreover, *pandilleros* never contributed any of their illicit income to their family economy, but always spent it quickly, on cigarettes, alcohol, glue, or marijuana, to be consumed communally with other gang members. Such collective activity contributed to the construction of a sense of identity, based on common emotions and shared pleasures.

Although gang delinquency was more prevalent than gang warfare, the latter was undoubtedly more spectacular, as rival gangs fought each other with weaponry ranging from sticks, stones and knives to AK-47 automatic rifles, fragmentation grenades and mortars,³¹ with frequently dramatic consequences for both gang members and local populations. During 1996–97, there were fourteen gang wars in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, which left three gang

³¹ It should be noted that these were homemade mortars – ‘*morteros caseros*’ – not military models.

members and two neighbourhood inhabitants dead (as well as several hundred injured). Although these gang wars initially seemed highly chaotic, they displayed very regular patterns, almost to the point of being ritualised. The *pandilleros* organised themselves into ‘companies’, and operated in a strategic manner. There was generally a ‘reserve force’, and although weapons were an individual’s own property, each gang member was distributed amongst the different ‘companies’ in order to balance out fire-power, except when a high powered ‘attack commando’ was needed for a specific tactical purpose. Conflicts revolved around either attacking or protecting a neighbourhood, with fighting generally specifically focused either on harming or limiting damage to both neighbourhood infrastructure and inhabitants, as well as injuring or killing symbolically important *pandilleros* (their fame being based on having killed a certain number of people or having a distinguishing physical characteristic or mode of behaviour, for example).

The first battle of a *pandilla* war typically involved fighting with stones and bare hands, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks and staffs, then to knives and broken bottles, then mortars, and eventually to guns, AK-47s, and fragmentation grenades. Although the rate of escalation could vary, its sequence never did, and *pandillas* never began their wars immediately with mortars, guns or AK-47s. Moreover, battles involved specific patterns of behaviour on the part of gang members, intimately linked to what they called ‘living in the shadow of death’ – ‘*somos muerte arriba*’ in the original Spanish.³² This expression reflected the very real fact that gang members often found themselves in dangerous situations, but it was also about more than just a corporeal state of being, as gang members used it to describe their attitudes and practices. For them, ‘living in the shadow of death’ entailed displaying specific behaviour patterns in battle, including flying in the face of danger and exposing oneself purposefully in order to taunt the enemy, taking risks and displaying bravado, whatever the odds and consequences, daring death to do its best. It meant not asking questions or calculating chances, but just going ahead and acting in a cheerfully exuberant manner, with style and panache.

In many ways, the idea of ‘living in the shadow of death’ can arguably be seen as a primary constitutive practice for the *pandilleros*, playing a fundamental role in the construction of the individual gang member self. Gang wars also contributed to the constitution of the gang as a group, reaffirming the collective unit by emphasising the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. But *pandilla* warfare was also about a broader form of social construction that

³² My translation is not literal, as the range of connotations the expression entails are not adequately conveyed by a verbatim rendition, which would be ‘we are [with] death above [us]’.

went beyond the gang group or individual and related to the wider neighbourhood community. Indeed, the *pandilleros* justified their fighting other gangs as an ‘act of love’ for their neighbourhood. As Julio put it, ‘you show the neighbourhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other *pandillas* ... You look after the neighbourhood; you help them, keep them safe ...’

This is not as implausible as it may initially seem. The ritualised nature of *pandilla* warfare can be conceived as a kind of restraining mechanism; escalation is a positive constitutive process, in which each stage calls for a greater but definite intensity of action, and is always, therefore, under the actors’ control. At the same time, the escalation process also provided local neighbourhood inhabitants with a framework through which to organise their lives, acting as an ‘early warning system’. As such, *pandilla* wars can be conceived as having constituted ‘scripted performances’ which offered a means of circumscribing the ‘all-pervading unpredictability’ of violence.³³ Although *pandilla* wars had negative effects for the local population, these were indirect, as gangs never directly victimised the local population of their own neighbourhood, protecting them instead. The threat to local neighbourhood populations stemmed from *other* gangs, whom the local gang would engage with in a prescribed manner, thereby limiting the scope of violence in its own neighbourhood and creating a predictable ‘safe haven’ for local inhabitants.

In a wider context of chronic violence and insecurity, this function was arguably positive, and local neighbourhood inhabitants recognised it as such, even if not always one hundred per cent effective. Although there was deep general ambivalence towards gangs among local neighbourhood inhabitants, they distinguished between *pandillerismo* and the local manifestation of the gang, to the extent that an analogy can perhaps be made with the notion of ‘social banditry’,³⁴ whereby the local manifestation of the gang was seen as an ‘honourable’ form of banditry within a wider context of ‘unsocial banditry’.³⁵ As *Don Sergio* put it:

The *pandilla* looks after the neighbourhood and screws others; it protects us and allows us to feel a little bit safer, to live our lives a little bit more easily ... Gangs are not a good thing, and it’s their fault that we have to live with all this insecurity, but

³³ H. Arendt, *On Violence* (New York, 1969), p. 5.

³⁴ E. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 1959).

³⁵ Certainly, local inhabitants never called the police about gang members, although it must be said that they rarely came unless the caller agreed to ‘pay for the gasoline’. Police patrols in the *barrio* were generally infrequent in 1996–97; as Police Commissioner Franco Montealegre admitted in a 2001 interview, youth gangs frequently out-gunned the police, making effective patrolling difficult (Nicaragua Network News, vol. 9, no. 6, 5–11 February 2001).

that's a problem of *pandillerismo* in general, not of our gang here in the *barrio*. They protect us, help us – without them, things would be much worse for us.

At the same time, however, the positive view of the gang did not only stem from its violent 'care' for the neighbourhood and the concomitant sense of security it provided. There also existed a clear sense of identification with the local gang and its violent exploits, which was particularly evident in the 'communal aesthetic pleasure'³⁶ that *barrio* inhabitants derived from swapping stories about the gang, exchanging eye-witness accounts, spreading rumours and re-telling various incidents over and over again. The gang thereby became a symbolic index of the neighbourhood that furthermore provided a concrete medium through which to enact an otherwise absent form of collective community identity in the *barrio*, and as such, stood in sharp contrast to the ambient atomisation and social breakdown.

The barrio Luis Fanor Hernández pandilla in 2002

The *pandilla* had changed radically when I returned to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 2002, and the gang was now constituted by a single unitary group of just 18 youths aged 17 to 23 known as 'Los Dragones' (all of whom had, however, belonged to the *Sobrevivientes* gang *Dragones* subgroup cohort of 13 to 17 year olds in 1996–97). Although certain patterns of behaviour persisted from 1996–97 – such as the *Dragones pandilla's* continued occupation the *Sobrevivientes pandilla's* territory – others had evolved, including in particular the nature of the group's violent and illicit activities. Gang warfare had disappeared, levels of gang-related violence had increased, and the gang was now intimately connected with a new and thriving local neighbourhood cocaine-based drug economy.

According to my informants, cocaine began to be traded in the *barrio* around mid-1999, initially on a small-scale by just one individual but rapidly expanding into a three-tiered pyramidal drug economy by the first half of 2000.³⁷ At the top of the pyramid there was the 'narco', who brought cocaine

³⁶ M. Bloch, 'La "consummation" des jeunes hommes chez les Zafimaniry de Madagascar,' in F. Héritier (ed.), *De la violence* (Paris, 1996), p. 216.

³⁷ Cocaine only became prevalent in Nicaragua from early 1999. Internationally, the late 1990s saw a diversification of drug trafficking routes from Colombia to North America due to improved law enforcement efforts in the Caribbean. Flows along the Mexican-Central American corridor increased, and, due to its proximity to the Colombian Caribbean island of San Andrés, Nicaragua is geographically a natural trans-shipment point. This route was under-exploited until 1999 because Nicaraguan transport infrastructure was very poor and traffic was slight. In late 1998, however, Nicaragua was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, suffering major infrastructure damage and resource drainage. This reduced the already limited capabilities of local law enforcement institutions, facilitating the importation of drugs. Furthermore, post-Mitch reconstruction efforts focused on rebuilding transport

into the neighbourhood. The *narco* only wholesaled his goods, among others to the half a dozen '*púsheres*' in the neighbourhood.³⁸ *Púsheres* re-sold the cocaine they bought from the *narco* in smaller quantities or else 'cooked' it into crack³⁹ which they sold from their houses, mainly to a regular clientele which included '*muleros*', the bottom rung of the drug dealing pyramid. *Muleros* sold crack to all-comers on *barrio* street corners, generally in the form of small '*paquetes*' costing 10 *córdobas* (US\$0.70) each and containing two 'fixes', known as '*tuquitos*'. There were 19 *muleros* in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández; 16 were *Dragones pandilleros* – the two non-*mulero* *pandilleros* were brothers of one who was, and shared in his profits – and the other three were former gang members.⁴⁰

The *Dragones muleros* hung about on neighbourhood street corners as a group, waiting for potential clients to come by, and taking turns selling them drugs. The rewards of such small-scale dealing were substantial: an individual *mulero* could make 5,000–8,500 *córdobas* (US\$350–600) profit per month, equivalent to between three and five times the average Nicaraguan wage, and considerably higher than a *pandillero*'s average income from delinquency in 1996–97. The spending habits of *pandilleros* had also changed compared to the past. Although a significant proportion of gang members' delinquent income was still spent on items such as alcohol, drugs and cigarettes, they also bought new items of 'conspicuous consumption' such as gold chains, rings, expensive watches, powerful hi-fi systems and wide-screen televisions, and moreover, a sizeable proportion was also being used to improve the material conditions of gang members' lives and that of their families. This was reflected in the infrastructural disparities that had developed between drug dealer and non-drug dealer homes in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, with the former displaying major improvements or having been completely rebuilt. Based on this measure, some 40 per cent of the neighbourhood seemed to be benefiting from the drug economy, either through direct involvement, or else indirectly, by being related to or employed by somebody involved.

Despite many in the neighbourhood benefiting from the drugs trade, there also existed a generalised wider ambivalence towards it. This was partly due

links, increasing the volume of traffic, which in turn made moving drug shipments easier. Those conveying the drugs take a cut to distribute it locally.

³⁸ The *narco* also supplied *púsheres* in other neighbourhoods. *Barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández was reputedly one of the principal provider neighbourhoods of Managua's cocaine trade, into which the drugs arrived into the city and from where they were distributed.

³⁹ Cocaine is distributed either as cocaine hydrochloride powder or as 'crack,' a mix of cocaine and sodium bicarbonate. Crack is much less expensive than cocaine powder, and is known as 'the poor man's cocaine'.

⁴⁰ All the actors of the drugs trade were linked to the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* in one way or another. The *narco* was an ex-gang member from the early 1990s and all the *púsheres* were either ex-*pandilleros* from the mid-1990s or else closely related to ex-*pandilleros*.

to the physical effects of regular crack consumption. Crack is a powerfully addictive drug that can have serious consequences for the health of users. At least half a dozen addicts in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández had died since 1999, and those who had not often displayed grotesque wasting effects, to the extent that they were popularly referred to as ‘*gárgolas*’ (‘gargoyles’).⁴¹ But a more important factor contributing to the generalised ambivalence about the drugs trade was the fact that crack consumption had heightened levels of insecurity in the neighbourhood. Although marijuana had been widely smoked by the *pandilleros* in 1996–97, it is a drug that has very different effects to crack, as an addict called Hugo explained:

Crack makes you crazy, like you’re flying, and then when you come down, it’s brutal, you’ll do anything to get another fix, even rob your neighbours, your friends, your own family even ... it’s not like marijuana, which just makes you feel at ease with everybody, happy, you know ... crack takes you over completely and makes you do what *it* wants ...

In particular, crack makes users extremely violent, a *pandillero* called Chucki emphasised:

This drug, crack, it makes you really violent, I tell you ... when I smoke up and somebody insults me, I immediately want to kill them, to get a machete and do them in, to defend myself ... I don’t stop and think, talk to them, ask them why or whatever ... I don’t even recognise them, all I want to do is kill them ... it’s the drug, I tell you, that’s where the violence comes from ...

Not surprisingly, perhaps, there were more acts of spontaneous public violence occurring in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 2002 than in 1996–97, and the majority were linked to crack consumption, as Adilia explained:

The problem is that now, anybody could be a potential danger, if they’ve smoked some crack, any time ... you can’t know what they’re going to do, with this drug people become more violent, more aggressive, they don’t care about anything, they don’t recognise you... you don’t know what they’re thinking or even if they’re thinking at all, they could just kill you like that, without a thought ...’

Although not the only crack users in the *barrio*, the gang was a privileged site of crack consumption, and *pandilleros* were deeply involved in such drug-related violence.

At the same time, however, this heightened sense of insecurity and the concomitant ambivalence towards the gang were the consequence of more than just their crack consumption. The *pandilleros* in 2002 were a much more intimidating and threatening presence in the neighbourhood, in no small part

⁴¹ Crack users were also described as ‘*son muerte abajo*’, which literally translates as ‘they are [with] death below [them]’. The fact that crack users were seen as condemned to die is an interesting reversal of the expression ‘*somos muerte arriba*’ used by the *barrio* *pandilleros* in 1996–97.

because the gang was longer imbued with an ethos of ‘loving’ the *barrio*, as one *pandillero*, Roger, made clear:

We couldn’t give a fuck about the *barrio* inhabitants anymore ... If they get attacked, if they’re robbed, if they have problems, who cares? We don’t lift a finger to help them anymore, we just laugh instead, hell, we even applaud those who are robbing them ... Why should we do anything for them? Now we just hang out in the streets, smoke crack, and rob, and nothing else!

Although crack consumption clearly influenced this changed behaviour pattern, it was arguably more a consequence of the gang’s intimate association with the local drugs trade. In addition to being *muleros*, the gang as a group acted to ensure the proper functioning and protection of the *barrio* drug economy, providing security services to the *narco* and to *púsheres*, roughing up recalcitrant clients or guarding drug shipments as they were moved both within and outside the *barrio*, for example, but also making sure that clients could enter the neighbourhood unmolested. Because they would have made it difficult for clients to come into the *barrio*, the ritualised gang wars of the past had therefore disappeared, although violent confrontations with other gangs did sometimes occur, albeit for different reasons and no longer in line with past gang wars. In early 2001, for example, a group of *muleros* from the nearby *barrio* Nosara spatially occupied one of the entrances to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in order to intercept crack clients. When they realised this, the *Dragones pandilla* immediately attacked them with guns, shot two dead and left three critically injured.

At neighbourhood level, the gang had similarly instituted a veritable regime of terror. *Pandilleros* would strut about the streets, menacingly displaying guns and machetes, repeatedly verbally warning *barrio* inhabitants of potential retribution if they denounced them or others involved in the drugs trade.⁴² They would frequently back these threats with violence, as happened in March 2002, when the gang beat up the son of an elderly neighbourhood inhabitant who lived next to a *púsher’s* house as a warning after she had harangued and thrown a bucket of water on crack buyers who had knocked on her door by mistake. *Doña* Yolanda summarised the situation in the following way:

Five years ago, you could trust the *pandilleros*, but not anymore ... They’ve become corrupted due to this drug crack ... They threaten, attack people from the *barrio*

⁴² Although there were more police patrols in the neighbourhood than before, these were perfunctory, generally only involving driving down one street of the *barrio* and driving back up another without stopping, and often going past the *muleros* on their street corner. There were occasional police raids on *barrio púsheres* – although never on the *narco* – but generally the *púsher* would receive a tip-off from a corrupt policeman in time to hide his wares. The one time the police did arrest a *púsher*, it was one who was reputedly trying to rival the *narco*, which supports the view in the *barrio* that the police was in the *narco’s* pocket.

now, rob them of whatever they have, whoever they are ... They never did that before ... They used to protect us, look out for us, but now they don't care, they only look out for themselves, for their illegal business (*bisnes*) ... People are scared, you've got to be careful what you say or what you do, because otherwise they'll attack you ... Even if you say nothing, they might still come and rob you, come into your home, steal a chair, food, some clothes, whatever they can find ... They often do, you know it's them, but you can't blame them, otherwise they'll come and burn your house down ... It's their way of telling you to be careful ... If you say anything to them, if you do anything, if you denounce them, then they'll come at night and wreak their vengeance ... We live in terror here in the *barrio*, you have to be scared or else you're sure to be sorry ... It's not like it used to be when you were here last time, Dennis, when the *pandilleros* were kids we could be proud of because of what they did for us and for the *barrio* ... They're like strangers to us now, they just do things for themselves and never for the good of the community like before ...

Gangs, violence and social order in urban Nicaragua

There exist a number of competing theories within the social sciences purporting to explain why youth gangs emerge. These include social ecology arguments that gangs are partial replacement structures for institutions such as families that have become dysfunctional as a result of the 'social disorganization' of poverty and social exclusion,⁴³ cultural theories that gangs are reflections of lower class 'subculture',⁴⁴ political visions of gangs as forms of resistance to 'blocked' opportunities,⁴⁵ economic conceptions treating gangs as informal business enterprises,⁴⁶ and psychological interpretations of gangs either as the result of gang members' deviant socio-pathological personality traits,⁴⁷ or else as vehicles for youth maturation processes and identity creation.⁴⁸ It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt to consider which of these approaches is most persuasive. Moreover, as Ruth Horowitz has sensibly pointed out, to a large extent they correspond to different dimensions of the gang experience that cannot be easily separated in practice.⁴⁹ Seen in this way, rather than trying to establish any kind of bottom-line determination about gangs, it is more fruitful to provide a sense of the varied underlying intertwined factors, examining how these interact and specifically influence their emergence.

⁴³ W. F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Structure of an Italian Slum*, (Chicago, 1943).

⁴⁴ A. K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (Glencoe, 1955).

⁴⁵ R. Cloward and L. Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs* (New York, 1960).

⁴⁶ M. Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley, 1991).

⁴⁷ L. Yablonsky, *The Violent Gang* (New York, 1963).

⁴⁸ H. A. Bloch and A. Niederhoffer, *The Gang: A Study in Adolescent Behavior* (New York, 1958); J. Katz, *Seductions of Crime* (New York, 1988).

⁴⁹ R. Horowitz, 'Sociological perspectives on gangs: Conflicting definitions and concepts,' in C. R. Huff (ed.), *Gangs in America* (Newbury Park, 1990), p. 53.

This is an especially appropriate strategy to adopt in relation to Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* considering the way it is a social form that is very evidently embedded within wider socio-cultural norms and structures. Perhaps the most immediately obvious is the long history of violence that characterises Nicaragua.⁵⁰ Certainly, there are clear links between the dynamics of *pandilla* violence and the war in Nicaragua during the 1980s, for example. The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla*'s militaristic organisation into 'companies' and 'commandos' during gang warfare is an obvious example, as is the gang members' familiarity with firearms and other weapons usually associated with martial situations. Sometimes the association is more subtle, though, such as the fact that *pandilleros* rarely went into battle against other gangs drunk or high on drugs, maintaining quite rightly that this reduced their capabilities, thereby echoing a similar norm proscribing drinking on combat duty maintained by *Sandinista* guerrillas during the years of revolutionary insurrection.⁵¹ More broadly, it can be argued that the ritualised nature of gang warfare in the 1990s reproduced the frequently 'predictable' nature of civil war engagements during the 1980s, when *Contras* and *Sandinista* Popular Army units often knew where they were respectively located, and could 'choose' whether to engage each other or not.⁵²

At the same time, however, neither the history of violence nor the specific experience of civil war in the 1980s can explain the emergence of gangs. As previously mentioned, *pandillerismo* in Nicaragua has antecedents going back to the 1940s, which was a period of relative peace in the country. The phenomenon moreover almost completely disappeared during the war years of the 1980s, partly due to military conscription, as well as the extensive organised neighbourhood vigilance promoted by the *Sandinista* regime, but re-emerged with the end of the civil war in 1990. The early 1990s in fact saw an explosion in gang formation, but it can be argued that this was less a consequence of the war but rather of the advent of peace. This came out strongly in interviews conducted with ex-*pandilleros* from this period in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández and another neighbourhood called *barrio* 3-80, after the *Contra* commander Enrique Bermúdez, the *barrio* having been established by post-war returnee *Contras* and their families in 1990-1. The vast majority of these ex-*pandilleros* had been 16 to 20 year old youths in 1990, freshly demobilised from the *Sandinista* Popular Army and the *Contra* forces. They systematically mentioned three basic reasons for joining a gang during this period.

First, the change of regime in 1990 led to a devaluation of their social status, which as conscripts defending the Nation, or as 'freedom fighters',

⁵⁰ J. Gould, *To Die in this Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880-1965* (Durham, 1998); D. Torres Peres (ed.), *Historia y violencia en Nicaragua* (Managua, 1997).

⁵¹ See L. Sepúlveda, *Rendez-vous d'amour dans un pays en guerre* (Paris, 1997), for a literary allusion to this.

⁵² I am grateful to Max Spoor for pointing out this analogy.

had been high within their respective social contexts, and becoming *pandilleros* had seemed a means of reaffirming themselves *vis-à-vis* a wider society that seemed to very rapidly ‘forget’ them. Secondly, becoming *pandilleros* had been a way of recapturing some of the dramatic, yet marking and almost addictive, adrenaline-charged experiences of war, danger and death, as well as of comradeship and solidarity which they had lived through as conscripts or guerrillas, and which were rapidly becoming scarce commodities in post-war Nicaragua. Finally, becoming *pandilleros* had seemed to many a natural continuation of their previous roles as conscripts or guerrillas. The early 1990s had been highly uncertain times, marked by political polarisation, violence, and spiralling insecurity, and by joining a gang these youths felt they could ‘serve’ their friends and families by ‘protecting’ them more effectively than as individuals.

These motivations for forming a gang provide substance to an interpretation of *pandillerismo* as something of a perverse ‘subculture of violence’ resulting from the trauma and reintegration difficulties of (young) ex-combatants. Certainly, the link between demobilisation and rising criminality has been widely theorised.⁵³ A crucial aspect of *pandillerismo* that cautions against such an analysis, however, is that being a gang member in Nicaragua is a finite social role. Generally, at some point between 18 and 23 years of age *pandilleros* ‘mature out’ of the gang,⁵⁴ either integrate mainstream society, or else becoming ‘*tamales*’ (professional criminals). Most – about 85–90 per cent in the case of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilleros* – join the mainstream rather than turning to full-time crime, but either way, the process of ‘maturing out’ means that by the mid-1990s the majority of the demobilised ex-*Sandinista* Popular Army and ex-*Contra* conscripts who had made up the first wave of post-1990 *pandillerismo* were no longer gang members, and had been replaced by new youths who had no direct experiences of the traumas of civil war.

The fact that most *pandilleros* do eventually integrate mainstream life and society implies that they actually share mainstream values, and that *pandillerismo* is therefore not a perverse ‘subculture’. This is not to say that a *pandilla* does not constitute a locus of particular values – it clearly does. As Ulf Hannerz has argued, however, an individual’s ‘cultural repertoire’ is largely situational.⁵⁵ Because *pandilleros* are embedded within larger social contexts and do not socialise solely within the gang – but also with their families and wider *barrio* inhabitants, for example – they are also exposed to mainstream

⁵³ D. Spencer, *Demobilization and Reintegration in Central America*, Bonn International Center for Conversion working paper no. 8 (Bonn, 1997).

⁵⁴ The process of ‘maturing out’ seems to be universal to youth gangs around the world, and is likely part of the inherent dynamics of youth groups (H. Covey, S. Menard and R. Franzese, *Juvenile Gangs*, Springfield, 1992).

⁵⁵ U. Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York, 1969).

social practices. These enter their individual 'repertoires' and indeed are often 'used' in relation to situations that do not touch directly on gang activities. While individuals are in the *pandilla*, however, their *pandillero* social role will be their primary one, and the corresponding 'cultural repertoire' will be dominant, with their mainstream 'cultural repertoire' constituting a secondary resource. Seen in this way, what 'maturing out' of the gang signals is a reversal of an individual's hierarchy of repertoires, with the mainstream one becoming dominant. This is well illustrated by Elvis's response when I asked him in 2002 why he was no longer a gang member:

The majority of those who were *pandilleros* then now have children, Dennis, and when you have children, you of course want to distance yourself from the whole *pandilla* thing, you know that you have to work in order to support your family, you've got to become like everybody else and you can't hang out in the streets anymore.

It is tempting is to interpret *pandillerismo* as something of a rite of passage for Nicaraguan youth. Certainly, it can be contended that there is a long-standing association between youth and violence in Nicaragua. In the late 1920s, one of the rebel general Augusto César Sandino's lieutenants was the 17 year old Santos López, for example, and a striking features of the *Sandinista* Revolution was the youthfulness of the *Sandinista* fighters.⁵⁶ In the final analysis, though, it is doubtful whether either violence in general, or *pandillerismo* in particular, do constitute features of a general Nicaraguan youth life-cycle, because ultimately not all Nicaraguan youth are violent and nor do they all join *pandillas* (about 15 per cent of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández youth joined the gang in 1996–97, and much less in 2002).

The same logic applies to the relationship between *pandillerismo* and another major structural feature of Nicaraguan society with which it is often associated, namely *machismo*. The concept of *machismo* encompasses a number of traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity, drawing them together into an ideological system that provides templates for accepted and acceptable social behaviour patterns on the part of both men and women. As noted above, Nicaraguan gangs are almost exclusively made up of male youths, and this gender bias certainly derives partly from the fact that being a *pandillero* involves behaviour patterns that revolve around activities that are 'very much the essence of machismo's ideal of manhood', such as taking risks or displaying bravado in the face of danger, and therefore inherently challenges Nicaraguan *machismo's* ideal of womanhood, which is associated with subordination and 'domestic roles, especially mothering'.⁵⁷ Indeed, seen in this

⁵⁶ R. Debray, 'Une "modération" radicale,' *Manière de Voir*, no. 36 (Nov.–Dec. 1997), p. 16.

⁵⁷ R. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, 1992), p. 195; R. Montoya, 'House, Street, Collective: Revolutionary Geographies and

way, *pandillerismo* can arguably be considered a heightened expression of *machismo*. But while this is no doubt definitely the case up to a point, it should also be noted that female gang members are not completely unknown in Nicaragua.

According to newspaper reports and urban legend there were two all-female *pandillas* in Managua in 1997, one in *barrio* 19 de Julio, and the other in the Ciudad Sandino satellite city. Moreover, although the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* was all male in both the mid-1990s and early 2000s, there had been a female member in the gang in the early 1990s. However, her femininity was downplayed whenever contemporary *pandilleros* talked about her. She was invariably described as having been extremely violent and fearless, both of which reflected the *machismo*-inspired ideal of what a gang member should be, and therefore arguably had something of a ‘masculinised’ status, which implicitly suggests an absence of female roles within the *pandilla*.⁵⁸ Although this ‘masculinisation’ process can be said to support the notion of a link between *machismo* and *pandillerismo* up to a point, it also highlights the dangers of making blanket assertions about the potential relationship between a structural feature and a specific social practice, however.

As Roger Lancaster has pointed out, *machismo* is more than just an ideology but in fact constitutes ‘a field of productive relations’.⁵⁹ In other words, relations between men and women, and notions of what it is to properly be a man or a woman, are defined not only at an ideological level but also through the evolution of social practices that are the result of interpretation and negotiation by distinct individual agents who are variably positioned, both socially and situationally. Simply attributing *pandillerismo* to patriarchal domination within Nicaraguan society fails to capture the way in which such social processes are never unmediated structural outcomes but rather the result of dynamic interplay between structure, agency and practice.⁶⁰ Although *pandillerismo* is readily associable with certain features of *machismo*, it is necessary to consider the specific contexts, social agents, relations and

Gender Transformation in Nicaragua, 1979–99,’ *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 38, no. 2 (June 2003), p. 63.

⁵⁸ There did not seem to be alternative female youth organisational forms in the *barrio*. There were female friendship networks, but these tended to be small, and were not tightly organised. This absence can be linked to the gendered organisation of local space along the lines of ‘street = public = male/home = private = female’ (S. Ekern, *Street Power: Culture and Politics in a Nicaraguan Neighbourhood*, Bergen, 1987, p. 55). Women who transgressed this spatial segregation were inevitably stigmatised, and young women were rarely seen in the streets past 15–16 years old. It should be noted, however, that such processes of status ascription – as with many other practices associated with *machismo* – are very much issues of contention in Nicaragua (Montoya, ‘House, Street, Collective,’ pp. 61–93).

⁵⁹ Lancaster, *Life is Hard*, p. 19.

⁶⁰ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984).

changing everyday manifestations that shape it as a social practice in order to grasp the underlying nature of the phenomenon.

This also applies more generally. Ultimately wider socio-cultural norms and structures such as a long history of violence or *machismo* can only be seen as contributing to rather than determining the institutional development of Nicaraguan *pandillerismo*. They constitute ‘building blocks’ that are drawn upon by social actors in variable ways through a process of ‘institutional bricolage’,⁶¹ whereby institutions emerge as a result of the *ad hoc* combination of different elements of pre-existing social forms. Seen in this way, although the actual ‘building blocks’ are important in their own right, they do not necessarily explain the underlying dynamics of the institutions that they are brought together to constitute. Rather, it is necessary to consider not only the context but also the primary institutional function of gangs in contemporary urban Nicaragua, and in this respect, although at one level it is undeniable that *pandillas* are violent organisations that contribute to the general insecurity of life, I want to argue that they are also fundamental socially structuring institutions.

This is particularly clear with respect to the material presented on the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla*. Although the gang obviously represented a source of violence and danger that frequently disrupted everyday lives in the *barrio*, it also generated significant measures of order. This is especially obvious in relation to the 1996–97 expression of the gang, which promoted an explicitly ‘solidaristic’ form of collective social organisation that drew together the whole neighbourhood, both practically and symbolically, but it is also true of the *pandilla*’s 2002 incarnation. Although this latter manifestation of the gang upheld a much more ‘exclusive’ order focused specifically on the management of a limited process of capital accumulation based on the local drugs trade,⁶² it nevertheless affected and constrained the whole *barrio* population and not just those involved in the drug economy. In both cases the gang and its violent practices can therefore be said to have constituted the institutional means for the construction and maintenance of localised forms of collective social organisation, providing a sense of order, laying down practical and symbolic rules and norms, which provided individuals and groups within the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández community with a

⁶¹ M. Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (London, 1987), p. 66.

⁶² This process of localised capital accumulation bears comparison with the notion of ‘primitive accumulation’ (K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, London, 1976, vol. 1, chapter 26). The analogy – which I owe to Jo Beall – is not perfect, considering that the drug dealing elite in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández is not exploiting the local population in the way Marx envisioned burgeoning capitalists exploiting an embryonic proletariat, but an extensive process of socio-economic differentiation has occurred in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández as a result of the drugs trade (see D. Rodgers, ‘La globalización de un barrio desde abajo: emigrantes, remesas, taxis, y drogas,’ *Envío*, no. 264, March 2004, pp. 23–30).

framework through which to manage their existences within a wider context of insecurity and social breakdown.

Admittedly, in both 1996–97 and 2002 *pandillerismo* constituted a rather limited form of social construction, but as Charles Taylor has underlined, the primary measure of any form of collective organisation is not so much its magnitude, but rather whether or not it is imbued with a ‘social imaginary’. This refers to the self-understandings that are constitutive of a collective unit, and therefore relates to deep institutional structure: ‘the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society’. It is ‘the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’.⁶³ These are precisely the kinds of social processes the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* achieved in both 1996–97 and 2002, symbolically and through its socially organising violent practices.

The traditional institutional purveyor of social imaginary in the modern era is of course generally considered to be the nation-state.⁶⁴ Its Nicaraguan expression is however clearly something of a ‘lame leviathan’,⁶⁵ as its incapacity to routinely ensure security within its boundaries due to its limited reach over society demonstrates.⁶⁶ Although gangs and their violence are restricted forms of social imagination, they are arguably one of the few working forms of collective organisation in the wider contemporary Nicaraguan context, and as such, they can be conceived as exemplifications of Ulrich Beck’s notion of ‘subpolitics’. This describes small-scale social practices that are imbued with political authority – which Beck defines as the ability to structure and change ‘living conditions’ – despite not pertaining to the formal, state-centred political sphere.⁶⁷ Subpolitical institutions are therefore normatively non-political informal institutions that become political by exercising influence over the social order in response to the limitations of formal politics. One could say that they are a kind of ‘politics by other means’, or in the case of *pandillerismo*, a form of ‘street-level politics’.

⁶³ C. Taylor, ‘Modern Social Imaginaries,’ *Public Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2002), pp. 91 & 106.

⁶⁴ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).

⁶⁵ T. Callaghy, ‘The State as Lame Leviathan,’ in Z. Ergas (ed.), *The African State in Transition* (New York, 1987).

⁶⁶ K. Isbester, ‘Understanding state disintegration: The case of Nicaragua,’ *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4 (Winter, 1996), pp. 455–476; Rodgers, *Living in the Shadow of Death*.

⁶⁷ U. Beck, ‘World Risk Society as Cosmopolitan Society? Ecological Questions in a Framework of Manufactured Uncertainties,’ *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1996), pp. 1–32.

The obvious question such an analysis brings up, however, is to what extent such forms of social construction are sociologically viable. In this regard, Robert Latham's notion of 'social sovereignty' – which extends the classical Weberian conception of the sovereign state by contending that sovereignty can be 'understood as an attribute not just of states but of other forms of social organization as well, operating within and across national boundaries'⁶⁸ – potentially offers a useful conceptual lens through which to consider *pandillerismo*. Latham claims that forms of non-state social structuration can be considered 'sovereign' if they are institutional arrangements possessing final political authority over a given community – which the *pandilla* clearly was in relation to the *barrio* in both 1996–97 and 2002 – and that such forms of 'social sovereignty' can constitute viable foundations for the establishment of stable political systems in their own right in circumstances where state-based forms of social organisation extend very irregularly. To this extent, the idea of 'social sovereignty' goes beyond the idea of 'sub-politics' in that it effectively constitutes gangs as forms of social structuration that are ontologically equivalent to state-based forms of sovereignty.

Although intuitively attractive as a conceptual framework, the nature of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla*'s transformation between 1997 and 2002 suggests that ultimately *pandillerismo* cannot properly be thought of as a form of 'social sovereignty' on a par with state forms of sovereignty. In fact, it could be argued that the situation is starkly opposed to Latham's characterisation when one considers that the gang's evolution constitutes a reversal of Charles Tilly's famous characterisation of the rise of European states as resulting from the gradual development of an encompassing interest by warlords over the areas they dominate, as their ties with these become increasingly ties of systematic economic extraction as opposed to one-off plunder.⁶⁹ Tilly's idealised sequence involves warlords incidentally establishing the institutional trappings of statehood within their domains as they provide autonomous rights to their subjects in order to maximise their own economic interest (large-scale systematic economic exploitation requiring collective coordination, and decentralisation being the most effective means to achieve this). The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang's evolutionary trajectory is almost precisely the opposite. In 1996–97, the *pandilla* was imbued with an encompassing interest for the neighbourhood that generated explicitly solidaristic behaviour patterns, both symbolic and practical. By 2002, however, this had changed such that the gang no longer displayed any solidarity for the

⁶⁸ R. Latham, 'Social Sovereignty,' *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2000), pp. 2–3.

⁶⁹ C. Tilly, 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,' in C. Besteman (ed.), *Violence: A Reader* (New York, 2002).

neighbourhood, and had instead imposed a predatory regime of terror that served its new drugs-related economic interests.

The specific reasons for this particular transformation are obviously multifaceted,⁷⁰ but they can be linked to an overarching process whereby the sociological basis of collective social life in contemporary urban Nicaragua has been shrinking during the course of the past two decades, contracting initially from the nation-state to the *barrio*, as Juan-Carlos Núñez described in his important 1996 study of the state of the social fabric in post-conflict Central America,⁷¹ and then from the *barrio* to the gang group. This is a process that bears comparison with the notion of ‘social death’ that Ghassan Hage develops in his thought-provoking analysis of Palestinian suicide bombing,⁷² which arguably also provides a more general framework for conceptualising *pandillerismo*. In contrast to conventional thinking, Hage contends that suicide bombing in Palestine/Israel is not an individually irrational act, but a coherent response to what he portrays as the systematic destruction of the institutions of collective life in the Palestinian territories under Israeli rule. He characterises this process as a form of ‘social death’, because it closes off traditional channels for becoming ‘socially recognized beings’, thereby reducing the ‘possibilities of a worthy life’, particularly among youth.⁷³ Suicide bombers ‘exchange’ their meaningless physical existences for lasting ‘symbolic’ ones as fêted martyrs known to all. In doing so they not only escape individually from constrained circumstances, but by becoming societal reference points they also force a degree of collective sociability upon the vacuum of ‘social death’, and constitute themselves doubly as a desperate act of political resistance against Israeli occupation.

Without wishing to push the analogy too far, it can be contended that the circumstances of insecurity and social breakdown in urban Nicaragua, the continued economic crisis, political corruption, and high levels of disillusion, despair, and apathy, have all combined to create conditions that are comparable to a context of ‘social death’. The possibilities of collective social life, particularly at the local level, have undergone a process of steady erosion, and *pandillerismo* can therefore also be seen as a fundamentally constitutive social practice attempting to counter these conditions of ‘social death’ in the same way as suicide bombing in Palestine/Israel (albeit a less extraordinary act, perhaps). Drawing on ‘building blocks’ such as *machismo* and violence, *pandillerismo* improvises a social order that is enacted in multiple

⁷⁰ See D. Rodgers, ‘When Vigilantes Turn Bad: Gangs, Violence, and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua,’ in D. Patten and A. Sen (eds.), *Global Vigilantes. Anthropological Perspectives on Justice and Violence* (London, 2006), 8–9 July 2005. ⁷¹ Núñez, *De la ciudad al barrio*.

⁷² G. Hage, ‘“Comes a Time We Are All Enthusiasm”: Understanding Palestinian Suicide Bombers in Times of Exigophobia,’ *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2003), pp. 65–89.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

ways – ritualised gang warfare, drug dealing entrepreneurship, symbolising community – and at multiple levels – the individual gang member, the gang group, the local neighbourhood community thereby ultimately constitutes itself literally as a desperate form of ‘living in the shadow of death’.

Conclusion

I have argued that *pandillas* and their violence constitute a form of sub-political social structuration in contemporary urban Nicaragua, rather than the source of chaotic disorder they are generally perceived to be. The case study presented of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang explored how this social structuration took on different institutional forms in 1996–97 and 2002. In both cases, however, I suggested they can be conceived as a form of ‘street-level politics’ – in other words, a type of Beckian ‘subpolitics’ – that establish localised regimes of order in wider conditions of social and state breakdown, constrained economic circumstances, and uncertainty. Drawing on Hage’s analysis of Palestinian suicide bombing as a response to ‘social death’, I have suggested that Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* can be seen as an analogous desperate – and ultimately failing – response to the shrinking range of social possibilities in contemporary urban Nicaragua. At the same time, however, the fact that the gang is a social form that changed over time, from a form of collective social violence in 1996–97 to a more individual economic violence in 2002, suggests that *pandillerismo* is not a sustainable form of social structuration. As such, in opposition to the ‘positive’ form of social organisation that the state constitutes in the modern era, *pandillerismo* can be categorised as a ‘negative’ form of social structuration, in the sense that the social structuration *pandillas* have provided in Nicaragua during the past decade is a process of ‘scaling down’ rather than ‘scaling up’.

The obvious question that such an analysis raises is ‘what next?’, and in this respect, there is little to offer by way of optimism after a return visit to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in December 2002, despite the situation having changed significantly compared to nine months before. Most strikingly, the gang as an organisational form had effectively disappeared. Gang members had continued increasing their crack consumption, and therefore needed ever-higher revenue to buy more drugs. They consequently adopted more efficient selling practices, no longer hanging around on street corners as a group, selling in turns, but now doing so as individual entrepreneurs, fulfilling the obvious last transition from the gang group to the individual in the grand picture of Nicaraguan social atomisation presented above. Drug dealing in the *barrio* was furthermore now clandestine, due to the increased police presence in the neighbourhood following measures taken by the Bolaños government that came to power in January 2002. These included

the recruitment of over 1,000 new policemen and an increase in the police budget. Policemen were now heavily armed, the number of patrols had increased, and between March and December 2002 there were several raids on drug dealers in the *barrio* that resulted in arrests and convictions.

To a certain extent, these evolutions can be interpreted as reflecting a change in the relative power of the gangs versus the Nicaraguan state, with the latter regaining some ground over the political authority carved out at the local level by the former over the past decade and a half. Whether this is a temporary condition or something more permanent remains to be seen, however, particularly considering the emergent model of exclusion and segregation that the elite-captured Nicaraguan state seems to be increasingly promoting.⁷⁴ Moreover, the *barrio narco* was ominously supposedly in contact with a Colombian drug cartel, discussing the establishment of an exclusive partnership.⁷⁵ Were this to come about, it would signal the introduction of a new violent social actor into the Nicaraguan context, one that has already proven in Colombia that it will not hesitate to brutally take on other actors in order to impose itself as a locus of power and domination in society.

⁷⁴ D. Rodgers, 'Disembedding the City: Crime, Insecurity, and Spatial Organization in Managua, Nicaragua,' *Environment and Urbanization*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2004), pp. 113–24.

⁷⁵ I learnt about these putative negotiations somewhat fortuitously. Although I know the *narco* from my first visit to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996–97, I kept my distance from him during my subsequent return visits. I, in fact, had to leave the *barrio* earlier than planned in March 2002 partly because of threats from the *narco*, who felt that I had gathered too much information on the details of the local drugs trade. He subsequently communicated via the family I stay with in the *barrio* that he was happy for me to return, presumably because nothing happened as a result of my research. During my December 2002 return visit, he made a point of seeking me out to apologise in person for his previous jitters. I was visiting Bismarck, a *barrio písber* who had been a *pandillero* during my investigations in 1996–97 and who was now a close collaborator of the *narco*, when he turned up with somebody whom he introduced briefly as 'Rodrigo from Colombia' (and who went a little boggle-eyed when it was explained who I was). When I later asked Bismarck about 'Rodrigo from Colombia', he explained that he was linked to a drug cartel in Colombia that was looking for potential business partners in Nicaragua with whom to explore the possibility of setting up 'exclusive arrangements'. According to Bismarck, the Colombian cartel was looking to control drug trafficking in Nicaragua directly, while the *narco* had recently had problems with irregular supplies from the Caribbean coast and wanted to establish a more reliable set-up. The negotiations revolved around the *narco* letting the Colombians take over his cocaine delivery arrangements between the Caribbean coast and Managua in exchange for becoming their sole business partner in Managua. 'Rodrigo' definitely did not have a Nicaraguan accent to his Spanish, and the Nicaraguan media does carry reports about Colombian citizens being arrested in Nicaragua on drugs trafficking charges, so it is not necessarily an implausible story.