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SLUM WARS OF THE 21ST CENTURY: THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF CONFLICT IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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Slum wars of the 21st century:
The new geography of conflict in Central America

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Abstract

Although the last of the civil wars that plagued Central America during the 1970s and 1980s was formally brought to an end in 1996, violence has continued to affect the region unabated into the 21st century. It has been widely contended, however, that there has been a fundamental shift in the political economy of this brutality, which according to various commentators now occurs predominantly in the more prosaic form of crime and delinquency rather than ideologically-motivated political violence. Drawing on the specific example of Nicaragua, this paper suggests that the alteration of the landscape of conflict in Central America can be interpreted differently, as a geographical transition from 'peasant wars' (Wolf, 1969) to 'urban wars' (Beall, 2006). The underlying nature of this new geography of violence is then explored, first theoretically and then empirically. Although past and present forms of brutality initially seem very different, present-day urban violence can in fact be seen as a continuation of past struggles in a new spatial context. The dynamics of these contemporary 'slum wars' suggest that this ongoing conflict is becoming more intense into the 21st century, largely as a result of this new spatial context.

'The only adequate conceptual framework for understanding the city is one which encompasses and builds upon both the sociological and geographical imaginations. We must relate social behaviour to the way in which the city assumes a certain geography, a certain spatial form.' (Harvey, 1973: 27)

Introduction

Although the last of the civil wars that plagued Central America during the 1970s and 1980s was formally brought to an end in 1996, violence has continued to affect the region unabated into the twenty-first century (Call, 2000; Londoño et al., 2000; Pearce, 1998). Indeed, in many instances, levels of brutality are now higher than during the previous decades of conflict. The annual number of violent homicides in contemporary Guatemala regularly exceeds the yearly tally of war-related deaths that the country suffered during the height of the civil war in the 1980s (Moser and Winton, 2002: 33), for example, while the economic cost of crime in El Salvador was estimated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to be US$1.7 billion in 2003,[2] or in other words equivalent to 11.5 percent of GDP, significantly higher than the country's estimated average annual loss of 3.3 percent of GDP due to war during the period 1981-5 (Ahrend, 1999: 7). To this extent, as Jenny Pearce (1998: 589) presciently pointed out, while 'the idea that the region's conflicts have been "resolved" may be true at the formal level of peace accords between armies and insurgents, this is less so at the real level of people's everyday lives, which remain overshadowed …by …violence, today of a more social and multifaceted kind than the polarized and political violence characteristic of the 1980s'.

The shift away from ideologically-charged conflicts over the nature of the political system towards more prosaic forms of violence such as crime and delinquency has been widely perceived as reflecting a significant transformation in the regional political economy of conflict, often pithily summarised as a movement from 'political' to 'social' violence (see for example Koonings and Kruijt, 1999, 2004; Moser and McIlwaine, 2004). This new dynamic is frequently linked to a broader Latin American 'crisis of governance', whereby economic liberalisation, weak democratisation, and intensifying globalisation have undermined the political authority of states and their ability to command a monopoly over the use of violence, lessening their importance as institutional channels for conflict, and making them less attractive 'spoils of war', so to speak (see for example, de Rivero, 2001; Friedman, 2003; Galeano, 1998; Méndez et al., 1999). Although such a 'governance' analysis is certainly plausible, the changed Central American landscape of violence can also be conceived very differently, in terms of a geographical transition. In contrast to the past, contemporary forms of violence are now overwhelmingly urban, and the transformation of the regional regime of brutality can arguably be said to have involved a general movement between 'the country and the city' (see Williams, 1973).

This paper suggests that a number of critical insights can be derived from conceiving the alteration of the Central American landscape of violence in geographical terms. It focuses in particular on the example of Nicaragua, the Central American country that is historically – perhaps paradigmatically – most associated with violence. After tracing the evolution of the predominant theatre of violence in Nicaraguan society from country to city over the past three

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[2] 'Special Report: Criminal gangs in the Americas', The Economist, 7 January 2006, page 24.

decades, the paper then theoretically characterises this transformation as a movement from 'peasant wars of the twentieth century' (Wolf, 1969) to 'urban wars of the twenty-first century' (Beall, 2006). It considers the nature of these new urban conflicts, highlighting how broader processes have led to the emergence of new forms of socio-spatial organisation in cities, which in turn suggests that these new 'urban wars' could be more precisely labelled 'slum wars of the twenty-first century'. The paper then explores two examples of the new 'slum violence' afflicting contemporary Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, and concludes that although past and present forms of brutality might initially seem very different, present-day urban violence arguably represents a continuation of past struggles in a new spatial context. However, the dynamics of these 'slum wars' suggest that this ongoing conflict is becoming more intense into the twenty-first century, largely as a result of this new spatial context.

Conflict, country and city in Nicaragua

Conflict and violence are by no means new features to the Nicaraguan social context. The country is famous for its Sandinista revolution, which overthrew the Somoza dynastic dictatorship in 1979 after almost two decades of guerrilla struggle. Although the vanguard *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front – FSLN) combined both rural and urban tactics during its insurgency, it was primarily founded on a rural guerrilla strategy, inspired by the Cuban revolution and the Nicaraguan military leader Augusto César Sandino's historical struggle against the US occupation of Nicaragua during the 1920s and 1930s. Such a rural bent to the revolutionary struggle is by no means surprising. As Timothy Wickham-Crowley (1992) has suggested, revolutions occur as a result of propitious social conditions and in Nicaragua these were clearly chiefly precipitated by rural factors. Broadly speaking, the revolutionary insurrection mirrored the rise of agro-export capitalism in Nicaragua, which led to 'the erosion of traditional agrarian society over a single generation [and] created the conditions for broad masses of the …population to accept the revolutionary call and imbue it with the capacity to challenge the existing order' (Vilas, 1995: 18). The Nicaraguan peasantry naturally became the backbone of the revolutionary movement, and following the February 1978 uprising and subsequent crushing of the rural indigenous village of Monimbó – 'the spark that set Nicaragua alight', as the famous folk singer Carlos Mejía Godoy put it – began to join the FSLN's army *en masse*. Even if urban uprisings also became important as the insurrection progressed, its fundamentally rural character is clear from the fact that the insurgency is reckoned to have triumphed on 19 July 1979, the day that the FSLN's troops marched into Managua from the countryside, rather than 17 July, when the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle was actually toppled.

Although the Sandinista regime unquestionably introduced less alienating forms of economic organisation and property tenure in rural areas, clearly addressing some of the concerns of the Nicaraguan peasantry that had led to revolution in the first place, these reforms were often clumsily executed, particularly in the early years of the revolution (Walker, 1997). Timothy Brown (2001) and David Stoll (2005) have suggested as a result that the conflict that broke out in Nicaragua in the early 1980s – widely known as the *Contra*[3] war – therefore included a significant element of indigenous peasant resistance to revolutionary change (see also Kalyvas, 2004). Even if there are significant grounds on which to doubt the extent to which this characterization of the *Contra* war is accurate, it is certainly the case that it was principally a rural conflict. Indeed, although the *Contra* guerrillas had a devastating effect on the Nicaraguan economy, destroying and disrupting communication and economic

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[3] From the Spanish word 'contrarevolución' ('counter-revolution').

infrastructure, terrorizing and demoralizing the population (see Harrisson *et al*., 1988; Torres Rivas, 1991), they were never in a position to directly affect major urban centres, and all their military actions were confined to the countryside, to the extent that Rose Spalding (1999) labels the *Contra* war a 'low-intensity war' as a result.[4]

The end of the *Contra* war and the subsequent change of regime in 1990 arguably marked the beginning of a definite shift in the geography of conflict in Nicaragua, however, the logic of which was well summarized by Eduardo Galeano (1998: 314) when he remarked that 'while the streets of Nicaragua's cities were peaceful during the years of formal conflict, once peace was declared, the country's streets became scenes of war'. Although the first years of the post-revolutionary era were marked by the presence in the countryside of several organized bands of demobilized *Contra* guerrillas (*recontras*) and ex-Sandinista military personnel (*recompas*)[5] – as well as occasionally mixed groups of both (*revueltos*)[6] – pressing putative land claims or engaging in banditry, their *modus operandi* was significantly different to that of the warfare of the 1980s. This was well illustrated in July 1993 when a 150-strong group of *recompas* occupied the northern city of Estelí – Nicaragua's seventh largest – for several weeks, reportedly looting some US$4 million from banks and shops before regular army troops drove them out at the cost of numerous casualties, including many civilians. In contrast to the war years, then, not only did urban areas become theatres of violence, but engagements also significantly involved non-combatants, which had not been the case in the past. This is well illustrated by the fact that less than 15 percent of all casualties during the civil war of the 1980s were civilians (Walker, 2003: 56).

By the mid 1990s rearmed groups had declined to effective insignificance and the most evident exemplification of this change in the geography of violence is clearly the dramatic explosion in urban crime and delinquency that occurred in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. According to official Nicaraguan Police statistics, crime levels rose steadily by an annual average of 10 percent during the 1990s, compared to just 2 percent during the 1980s, with the absolute number of crimes almost quadrupling between 1990 and 2004. Crimes against persons – including homicides, rapes and assaults – in particular rose by over 460 percent.[7] While the overall trend of increasing urban crime is undoubtedly accurate, official statistics are highly problematic. As William Godnick et al. (2002: 26) note, 'given the anecdotal information on violence as portrayed in the Nicaraguan press and the general perception of violence in Nicaraguan society, these figures are suspiciously low'. The national homicide rate – the accepted international benchmark for measuring violence – is particularly problematic, standing at an average of 15 deaths per 100,000 persons between 1990 and 2003 compared to almost three times that many in Honduras and over six times that in Guatemala and El Salvador (Moser and Winton, 2002: 47), suggesting that underreporting is a serious problem in Nicaragua.[8]

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[4] This pattern of conflict is very well depicted in Ken Loach's graphic 1996 film *Carla's Song*.

[5] From the word '*compa*', an abbreviation of '*compañero'* ('comrade').

[6] From the expression '*huevos revueltos*', or 'scrambled eggs'.

[7] Calculated on the basis of Serbin and Ferreyra (2000: 185-7), http://www.policia.gob.ni/AD_tabla2.htm, and http://www.policia.gob.ni/estadisticas/dosier2003/dosier4.htm.

[8] There are several potential reasons for this. The most important is clearly the inefficiency and weakness of Nicaraguan state institutions. Since the change of regime in 1990, a painstakingly slow process of de-politicisation, and reductions in both size and budget – partly related to stringent IMF and World Bank-imposed budget-cutting efforts – have severely affected the operational capacity of the Police, which has only limited patrolling capacities in urban areas, and is completely absent in 21 percent of the country's 146 municipalities (Cajina, 2000: 174). Furthermore, the Pan-American Health Organisation (1998: 384) has estimated that over 50 percent of all mortalities in Nicaragua in 1995 were not registered due to deficient record-keeping by hospitals and morgues.

More qualitative indicators such as crime victimisation surveys clearly suggest that levels of violence are extremely high. For example, a 1997 survey reported that one in six Nicaraguans claimed to have been the victim of a criminal attack at least once in the previous four months, a proportion that rose to one in four in the capital city Managua,[9] where 40 percent of all crime occurs (Granera Sacasa and Cuarezma Terán, 1997: 32). Similarly, a 1999 survey found that urban crime was considered the principal problem affecting the country by a margin of over 30 percent (PNUD, 2000: 130). The high levels of urban crime were also very visible during the ethnographic fieldwork I carried out in 1996-97 and 2002-03 in the poor Managua neighbourhood *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,[10] and were starkly reflected in the social practices and discourses of local inhabitants. In 1996, for example, there was a manifest fear of leaving one's home, with people going out as little as possible, and restricting themselves to a few fixed routes and destinations. By 2002, even the shelter of home seemed precarious as houses were barricaded in an almost fort-like manner with high walls, iron bars, and barbed wire. An informant called Adilia described the situation as 'living in a state of siege', a depiction that takes on added significance when one considers that she lived through several 'real' military sieges during the revolutionary insurrection in 1978-9. Her mother, *Doña* Yolanda, echoed this graphically when she told me:

> '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...'

According to the 1999 crime victimisation survey mentioned above, over 50 percent of respondents identified youth gangs as the most likely perpetrators of crime in post-revolutionary Nicaragua (Cajina, 2000: 177). At one level, this is not surprising. Ever since the seminal gang studies carried out in the 1920s and 1930s by researchers associated with the Chicago School of Sociology (see for example, Thrasher, 1927; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Whyte, 1943), youth gangs have clearly emerged as paradigmatic forms of urban brutality in societies all over the world. At the same time, however, their emergence as significantly violent social forms in contemporary Nicaragua is clearly a specific hallmark of the post-revolutionary period. Until the early 1990s, Nicaraguan gangs – which can be traced back to the 1940s – were by all accounts small-scale and relatively innocuous youth aggregations. Their numbers increased massively partly due to *Contra* and Sandinista Popular Army demobilisation, and they rapidly became a ubiquitous feature of the streets of Nicaraguan cities, which they roamed robbing, beating, and frequently killing. At their most basic, these contemporary gangs can be said to consist of variably sized groups of generally male youths between 7 and 23 years old,[11] who engage in illicit and violent behaviour – although not all

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It should also be noted that both Presidents Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2001) and Enrique Bolaños (2002-06) made fighting crime a key element of their programmes of government and 'preferred' positive – i.e. low – crime statistics. Having said this, by all accounts Nicaragua is not as violent as El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, even if it is much more violent than official statistics would suggest.

[9] *La Tribuna,* 2 May 1997, page 4.

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

[11] Female gang members are not completely unknown in Nicaragua but are extremely rare. This gender bias clearly derives at least partly from the fact that being a gang member involves behaviour patterns that revolve around activities that are 'very much the essence of machismo's ideal of manhood' (Lancaster, 1992: 195), such as taking risks or displaying bravado in the face of danger, and therefore inherently challenge Nicaraguan machismo's ideal of womanhood, associated with subordination and domestic roles. To a certain extent it can be argued that being a gang member is in many ways a heightened expression of machismo.

their activities are illicit or violent – and have a particular territorial dynamic, namely being associated with a specific poor urban neighbourhood or slum (see Rodgers, 2000, 2006a).

Such gangs are found in all of the larger Nicaraguan urban centres including Chinandega, Estelí, Granada, León, Masaya, and Matagalpa, for example, but are most prominent in Managua, the capital city. By 1999, the Nicaraguan Police estimated that there were 110 gangs in the latter, incorporating 8,500 youths, double the number in 1996, and five times that in 1990 (Policía Nacional de Nicaragua, 2001), although these statistics undoubtedly err on the low side. Even if not all acts of urban brutality in Nicaragua are perpetrated by these gangs, it is clear that they have largely come to symbolically epitomize urban violence in the Nicaraguan collective consciousness. For example, whenever my informants in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández talked to me of crime, of violence, or of fear, in both 1996-97 and 2002-03, the word 'gang' – *pandilla* in the Nicaraguan vernacular – never failed to materialise in their discourses, often in the form of an expressive and despairing exclamation along the lines of: '*¡Ay, estas pandillas, me matan, Dennis, me matan!*' ('Oh, these gangs, they kill me, Dennis, they kill me!'). Similarly, the admonition '*cuidado las pandillas*' ('watch out for the gangs') became a familiar refrain, punctuating all comings and goings from the household I lived in, to the extent that it almost had the equivalent verbal value of a more innocuous '*hasta luego*' ('see you later'). During the year that I spent living in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996-7, I tallied nine gang violence-related deaths, proportionally equivalent to a homicide rate of 360 deaths per 100,000 persons, for example, which compares highly unfavourably with the average annual civilian death rate of 124 persons per 100,000 due to warfare during the 1980s (calculated on the basis of Walker, 2003: 56).

From 'peasant wars' to 'urban wars'

The rural foundations of the Sandinista revolution are by no means exceptional. The starting point of Eric Wolf's (1969) classic exploration of the great popular revolutions of the 20th century is what he termed the 'peasant question', by which he meant 'the enduring presence of large, agriculturally based populations within societies that were confronting the challenge of change and modernization posed by the new century' (Wolf, 1999 [1969]: ix). Although the details differ in each of the six cases he outlined, Wolf (1999 [1969]: 276-9) argued that the world-wide diffusion of 'North Atlantic capitalism' was leading to processes of peasant alienation due to the general commoditisation of land, which meant that 'where previously market behaviour had been subsidiary to the existential problems of subsistence, now existence and its problems became subsidiary to marketing behaviour'. This was accompanied by an increasing monopolisation of agricultural resources by the owners of large estates, and a concomitant decrease of land holdings held by the peasantry. From this perspective, 'the peasant rebellions of the twentieth century [were not] …simple responses to local problems …but …parochial reactions to major social dislocations, set in motion by overwhelming societal change. The spread of the market [tore] men up by their roots, and [shook] them loose from the social relationship into which they were born' (Wolf, 1999 [1969]: 295).

Such an interpretation arguably fits the historical experience of revolutionary violence in Nicaragua very well, but is clearly less applicable to describing post-revolutionary brutality, which shows a definite movement from the country to the city. One obvious potential explanation for this shift is demographic. Urbanisation in Nicaragua has proceeded apace during the past decade and a half – the country is now the most urbanised in Central America, and the urban population has grown by over 54 percent since 1990 compared to just 29

percent in rural areas[12] – and urban settings have of course long been associated with violence. As the classic works of Ferdinand Tönnies (2001 [1887]) and Georg Simmel (1950 [1905]) suggest, for example, social relations in cities are weaker than in the countryside, with socially atomised urban dwellers therefore being both more prone to violence and to being violent. It can be argued that such a line of thought goes a long way towards explaining the changed geography of Nicaraguan violence, and accords well with the discourse describing the transformation of the Central American political economy of violence as a movement from political to social violence, insofar as the latter is typically depicted as a form of impersonal, anomic violence.

As Eric Hobsbawm (2005: 1) has pointed out, however, urban violence does not emerge in cities because they are inherently alienating spaces but rather because 'whatever else a city might be, it is at the same time a place inhabited by a concentration of poor people and, in most cases, the locus of political power which affects their lives'. In other words, urban violence is inevitably a function of the economic and political relations that exist within a city. This is something that Jo Beall (2006) also highlights in a stimulating recent article on cities, terrorism, and development, where she further suggests that 'Eric Wolf's (1969) *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* are increasingly giving way to what we might call urban wars of the twenty-first century' (2006: 110). Although she does not elaborate on this point, by establishing such a genealogical relationship between past and present forms of conflict, Beall draws attention to the critical fact that just as Wolf's analysis of the 'peasant wars of the twentieth century' was underpinned by a 'peasant question', there is likely to be an analogous 'urban question' underlying the new 'urban wars of the twenty-first century' such as the ones that have emerged in post-revolutionary Nicaragua.

The nature of this 'urban question' emerges very clearly in Mike Davis' (2004, 2006) recent work on the global proliferation of urban slums. Contrary to conventional explanations of the world-wide growth of slums in terms of increasing rural-urban migration connected to rapid economic expansion in cities due to intensifying globalisation, Davis contends that these new slums in fact house – so to speak – those who increasingly find themselves expelled from the formal economy. Rather than being the 'engines of growth' that they are widely considered to be, cities – particularly in the South – are rapidly becoming 'dumping grounds' for those who are excluded from globalising and increasingly technological and informational production processes, with slums emerging as 'a fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing the twenty-first century's surplus humanity' (Davis, 2004: 28). Davis maintains that these slums are consequently 'volcanoes waiting to erupt', and speculates that their explosion might lead to the emergence of 'some new, unexpected historical subject' bearing a 'global emancipatory project'. The similarities with Wolf's conception of peasant rebels as revolutionaries are evident, and Davis' analysis therefore provides a plausible 'urban question' to underpin Beall's 'urban wars of the twenty-first'. However, considering that these do not derive from the urban context *per se* but rather from the existence of slums, they ought to perhaps be more accurately labelled 'slum wars of the twenty-first century'.[13]

At the same time, however, Wolf's thinking was predicated on a class-based analysis, with peasant rebellions being ultimately seen as struggles over the means and relations of agrarian production. Although Davis (2004: 27) labels twenty-first century slum dwellers a 'vast

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[12] Calculated on the basis of data from PNUD (2000) and from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos* (Nicaraguan National Statistics and Census Institute – INEC) website: http://www.inec.gob.ni/.
[13] To be fair to Beall (2006), the focus of her article is much broader than the present concern, as she considers the way in which cities are more susceptible to forms of political violence such as terrorism than rural areas, thereby using the urban lens to challenge standard 'developed'/'developing' world dichotomies.

informal proletariat', his overall characterization of the contemporary slum phenomenon undermines this categorization insofar as it postulates the unprecedented growth of slums as being the result of the disconnection of a large swathe of the economically active population from the means of urban production, which is obviously the basis upon which class is constituted. In other words, if the 'slum wars of the twenty-first century' are to be seen as corresponding to a new form of class-based conflict, they must be about class, 'but not as we know it'.[14] To a large extent, Davis (2004: 28) recognises this, questioning whether 'an informal proletariat possess[es] that most potent of Marxist talismans: "historical agency"?', and he ultimately argues that slum dwellers lack the potential to 'constitute a meaningful "class in itself", much less a potentially activist "class for itself".' He nevertheless contends that 'the informal proletariat bears "radical chains" in the Marxist sense of having little or no vested interest in the preservation of the existing mode of production' – because they 'have been largely dispossessed of fungible labour-power' – and turns to forms of 'populist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity' as potential expressions of this radicalism, which he even goes so far as to suggest occupies 'a social space analogous to that of early twentieth-century socialism and anarchism' (Davis, 2004: 28-30).

Although Pentecostal Christianity has made significant in-roads in Nicaragua – and Central America more generally – during the past few decades (Hallum, 1996), it has had little in the way of any visible impact in terms of large-scale collective mobilisation among slum dwellers, as is exemplified by the fact that its proliferation has not translated into electoral votes for Pentecostal political parties (see Coleman and Stuart, 1997: 183). Indeed, it can be argued that the complete opposite holds true, as Pentecostal Christianity seems to be the only factor that systematically prevents youth from joining what is ultimately the most predominant instance of collective mobilisation in the socially atomised slums and poor neighbourhoods of urban Nicaragua, namely the gangs (see Rodgers, 2006a). Obviously, gangs constitute a rather dystopian form of collective action, closer to the 'ruthless Darwinian competition' that Davis (2004: 28) identifies as a possible unconstructive course of action for slum dwellers – whereby 'increasing numbers of poor people compete for the same informal scraps, ensur[ing] self-consuming communal violence as the highest form of urban involution' – than the 'emancipatory project' – of 'Heaven' for those living in 'Hell on Earth'? – of populist Islam or Pentecostal Christianity. Indeed, more generally it could be argued that they are in fact the complete antithesis of any form of revolutionary class-based violence, and therefore perhaps most accurately characterised as the reflection of a primordial condition that Hobbes (1996 [1651]: 88) famously described as 'warre, as is of every man against every man'. The next section explores the underlying nature of gangs as a key form of urban brutality in Nicaragua, diachronically tracing their role within the wider theatre of violence of Managua, the capital city of the country, which is more than ten times bigger than its second urban centre, and contains a quarter of the country's total population.

Battlefield Managua

Youth gang violence is undoubtedly the most paradigmatic form of urban brutality in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. As *Doña* Yolanda summarised dramatically in an interview conducted in February 2002:

> '[Gangs] threaten, attack people…, rob them of whatever they have, whoever they are… People are scared [of them], 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

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[14] With apologies to Dr. Spock.

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 neighbourhood, you have to be scared or else you're sure to be sorry...'

At the same time, it can be argued that there exists a clear difference in the social experience of gang violence depending on one's sociological and temporal standpoint. From a city-wide perspective, gang clearly seem to anarchically transform large swathes of cities into quasi-war zones, fighting each other with weaponry ranging from sticks, stones, and knives to AK-47 automatic rifles, fragmentation grenades, and mortars, with generally dramatic consequences for both gang members and the general population. When considered from a more localised perspective, the picture is much more nuanced, with gangs emerging as socially constitutive institutions in slums and poor neighbourhoods, albeit ones that have changed significantly over time.

I have described this dual process in greater detail elsewhere (Rodgers, 2000, 2006a, forthcoming a), but want to place the gangs' evolutionary trajectory within a wider perspective, which raises important questions about the underlying nature of gang violence, fundamentally challenging the widespread notion that it is a form of anomic and dysfunctional brutality. This is most clearly the case in relation to what at first glance would seem to be an inherently destructive form of gang violence: gang warfare. Although gang wars frequently have extremely deleterious consequences, both in material and human terms, as homes and businesses were damaged and people injured and killed, there were also a range of socially positive aspects to gang wars as they occurred in the mid 1990s. Gang warfare was clearly a constitutive process for gang members, for example, playing a key role in the construction of the individual gang member's self-identity, while at the same time contributing to the constitution of the gang-group by reaffirming the collective unit in opposition to others. But it was also about a broader form of social structuration that related to the local neighbourhood community, as was well exemplified by the fact that gang members justified their wars as being motivated by their 'love' for their neighbourhood. This is by no means implausible. Gang wars followed set patterns: the first battle of a gang war typically involved fighting with fists and stones, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks and stones, then to knives and broken bottles, and eventually to mortars, guns, and AK-47s. Although the rate of escalation varied, its sequence never did – i.e. gangs did not begin their wars immediately with firearms. The fixed nature of gang warfare arguably constituted a kind of mechanism for restraining both the intensity and scope of violence. Escalation is a process in which each stage calls for the application of greater but definite force of action, meaning that it is always under actors' control. It also provided local neighbourhood inhabitants with an 'early warning system' that offered a means of circumscribing the 'all-pervading unpredictability' of violence (Arendt, 1969: 5).

Although gang wars often had deleterious consequences for local populations, these were arguably indirect. The threat stemmed from other gangs, whom the local gang engaged with in a prescribed manner. In a wider context of chronic violence and insecurity, this was very much recognised as something positive by local neighbourhood populations, even if it was not always effective. As an informant in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández called *Don* Sergio put it,

> 'the gang 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... Without them, things would be much worse for us.'

In many ways, however, gangs were not just the functional purveyors of a certain sense of security, but also provided local neighbourhood inhabitants with a medium for enacting an otherwise absent form of community. There existed a strong sense of identification with local gangs during the 1990s, which thus constituted the principal anchor point for a notion of community in a wider context of extreme social fragmentation and erosion of the local collectivity. Admittedly, this was limited, but as Charles Taylor (2002: 106) has underlined, the primary measure of any collective order is not its magnitude, but rather the degree to which it affects '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'.

Generally, then, it can be argued that gangs institutionally organised local collective life in the slums and poor neighbourhoods of Nicaragua's cities during the mid-1990s, providing micro-regimes of order as well as communal forms of belonging to definite, albeit bounded, collective entities, in a wider context of chronic insecurity and social breakdown. In many ways they arguably corresponded to forms of 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston, 1999: 158), attempting to violently construct new spaces for 'possible alternative futures' within the difficult context of urban slums, thereby making them comparable to the peasant movements studied by Wolf. The reasons for the emergence of such a form of 'insurgent citizenship' are clearly to be found in the broader structural processes of state and social erosion that post-revolutionary Nicaragua underwent during the early and mid 1990s (Isbester, 1996; Rodgers, 2000), just as those of the revolutionary peasant movements were grounded in wider processes of traumatic social change due to processes of economic modernisation. At the same time, however, Wolf's 'peasant wars of the twentieth century' were generally articulated around attempts to achieve more equitable distributions of the means of production that did not necessarily challenge the system as a whole. The difficulties the Nicaraguan revolutionary regime encountered attempting to collectivise the countryside's newly tenured peasantry following its land redistribution programme of the early 1980s is a testament to the fact that peasants rebels rarely seek to challenge the underlying basis of an existing social order, but rather seek to achieve a certain uniform self-sufficiency.[15]

Gangs in the cities of post-revolutionary Nicaragua, on the other hand, created a new form of social order that had critical consequences for urban morphologies, and in particular that of Managua, which became an extreme instance of what Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin (2001) have termed 'splintering urbanism'. Indeed, the city became so spliced up into a patchwork quilt of isolated, localised 'safe havens' constituted through routinised forms of everyday violence in a wider context of chronic and unpredictable insecurity, that questions can be raised about its concrete existence as an organic entity. This dysfunctional mode of urbanism led to a reaction by the city elite that can be said to have amounted to a 'disembedding' of the city in order to viably secure a part of it for their exclusive and safe use between 1997 and 2002 (Rodgers, 2004). Partly because of the small size of this elite, instead of the classic gated community model of urban segregation characteristic of many developing world cities (Caldeira, 2000), Managua was transformed through the constitution of a

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[15] Hence Karl Marx's famous comment in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852) that the peasantry 'is formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes'.

'fortified network' by means of the selective and purposeful construction of high speed roads connecting the spaces of the elite within the city: their homes, offices, clubs, bars, restaurants, shopping malls, and the international airport. The poor are excluded from these locations by private security, but also from the connecting roads, which are cruised at breakneck speeds by expensive 4x4 cars, and have no traffic lights but only roundabouts, meaning that those in cars avoid having to stop – and risk being carjacked – but those on foot risk their lives when they try to cross a road. In other words, a whole 'layer' of the city's urban fabric was 'ripped out' of the fabric of the metropolis for the exclusive use of the elite, thereby profoundly altering the cityscape and the relations between social groups within it.

This process can be characterised as a veritable 'revolt of the elites' – to use Christopher Lasch's (1995) famous expression – insofar as it was an obvious reaction by the rich to the general insecurity of life in the city, which was particularly associated with the wide-ranging slum-based gang violence. Most of the process of urban transformation undergone by Managua was directly sponsored by the elite-captured Nicaraguan state, and is increasingly supported by new forms of urban governance that involve unpredictable and violent Police patrols targeting slums and poor neighbourhoods, aiming to precipitate localised conditions of terror in order to symbolically demonstrate the arbitrary power of the state and enforce the socio-spatial separation of Nicaraguan society into a small elite living in the disembedded Managua on the one hand, and those living in the slums and poor neighbourhoods that overwhelmingly make up the rest of the country on the other (see Rodgers, 2006b). Urban violence has as a result been very purposefully pushed back into city slums, so much so that the government promotes Nicaragua as 'the safest country in Latin America',[16] as the richer urban areas – those that belong to the 'disembedded' Managua, for example – as well as tourist destinations are now safe and visibly free of violence. But while this twin process of 'disembedding' and changed urban governance has unquestionably made 21st century urban Nicaragua a much safer – indeed, almost idyllic – place of residence for the rich (Babb, 2004), from the broader perspective of the city as a whole, it can be construed as a violent act of 'urbicide', to use the term Stephen Graham (2003: 63) – following Marshall Berman (1996) – applies to 'the deliberate wrecking or killing of the city'.

In the wake of the terrorist acts of 9/11, 11/3, and 7/7, the concept of urbicide has been mainly used in relation to acts of terrorist violence, but it was originally coined to describe 'a deliberate attempt to deprive people of the benefits of urban life' through processes of 'pernicious urban planning, evictions, involuntary relocation and the deliberate destruction of urban infrastructures for political purposes' (Beall, 2006: 111). All of these have been regular features of the urban political economy of Managua during the past decade as a result of the process of 'disembedding' that the city has undergone, for example, but the notion of urbicide is also particularly apt as it emphasises the fundamentally destructive strategic objective that motivates the dominating side in the process of veritable social warfare that continues to characterise 21st century Nicaragua. While the rebellious peasantry that rose against an oppressive dominating class still represented a potentially exploitable labour force to the latter, today's slum dwellers serve no purpose for the dominating groups in society, who feel no qualms in engaging with them in increasingly violent and extreme ways in order to keep them out of their lives. This is partly related to the growing transnationalisation of the Nicaraguan elite. Although the process arguably has its roots in the elite exodus that followed

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[16] See for example President Bolaños' speech to the 29th Caribbean Basin Initiative Conference, 5 December 2005,
http://www.presidencia.gob.ni/presidencia/files_index/presidente/Discursos/2005/Diciembre/29%20NA%20CONFERENCIA%20MIAMI,%20DE%20LA%20CUENCA%20DEL%20CARIBE%20CCAA-06dic.htm.

the 1979 revolution, when thousands of wealthy Nicaraguans left the country, today the country is increasingly characterised by an elite that looks to Miami and the US in terms of economic, cultural, and residential interests, although there has been a boom during the past few years in the construction of secondary homes in Nicaragua by US-based expatriates. Beyond eventually wanting to employ some of them as domestic workers, these have little interest in the broader mass of impoverished and excluded Nicaraguans, and are consequently impervious to their fate.

As Martin Shaw (2004) has dramatically pointed out, urbicide is a process that can be associated with genocide, which although defined in a restricted manner in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as relating to any act 'committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group',[17] can also be associated with the destruction of a social group. This is arguably what the elite-led process of urban disembedding in Managua can be said to be fostering. Obviously, I suggest this in a rather broad-brush manner; there is little evidence of an explicit mass campaign of intentional extermination against the urban poor in Nicaragua, and the association with genocide should therefore be made mainly on the grounds of negligence of the responsibilities that come by virtue of being embedded in a collective urban space constituted through a plurality of people (see Harvey, 2003). Such negligence is evident in the disembedding of Managua and concomitant neglect of the city's slums, which has led to the emergence of particularly deleterious social practices in the latter. This became rapidly apparent during my revisits to Nicaragua in 2002 and 2003. In particular, the nature of gangs and the violent social order that they promulgated had changed radically since the mid-1990s. What had been solidaristic social institutions had become intensely predatory, viciously attacking the populations of their local neighbourhoods instead of providing them with protection.

This transformation is partly linked to the emergence of a wholesale drug economy in Nicaragua, which has become for many living in poor urban settlements in Nicaragua the only viable means of economic betterment in a wider context of increasing socio-economic exclusion (Rodgers, forthcoming b). But it has also led to more parochial and exclusive forms of violence. In *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, for example, the gang now acted to ensure the proper functioning of this drug economy solely in the interests of its members and associated local dealers, who were all ex-gang members. The gang provided security services – roughing up recalcitrant clients or guarding drug shipments as they were moved within and outside the neighbourhood, for example – and constituted the lowest rung of drug dealing: selling in the streets. Because they would have made it difficult for clients to come in, the ritualised gang wars of the past that had provided poor neighbourhoods and slums with a modicum of order had completely disappeared. The gang instead upheld an exclusive social order through the imposition of localised regimes of terror based on an ethos that a gang member called Chucki summarised as 'we give the orders here'. Gang members were an intimidating and threatening presence, strutting about the streets, menacingly displaying guns and machetes, and verbally warning local inhabitants of potential retribution if they denounced them or those involved in the local drugs trade, frequently backing up these threats with multiple random acts of terrorising violence. Levels of everyday intra-slum violence had thus risen dramatically, with gangs imposing a new brutal and predatory form of order that is clearly not sustainable.

While the dystopian evolutionary trajectory of gangs seems to correspond to Davis' (2004: 28) prediction of 'ruthless Darwinian competition' and 'self-consuming communal violence'

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[17] See http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/genocide.htm.

emerging in slums, it is important to place such localised forms of violence within the broader context of cities as organic wholes. The way in which gang violence can be related to elite-sponsored forms of deeply iniquitous urban governance illustrates this particularly well, and suggests that the 'slum wars of the 21st century' characteristic of contemporary urban Nicaragua are less a form of anomic brutality that is antithetical to class-based revolutionary violence than a continuation of the 'peasant wars of the 20th century' in a new geographical setting. At the same time, they also clearly represent a new and more intense phase in this ongoing process of societal conflict, insofar as the poor seem to be inexorably losing out to the rich as they suffer increasing processes of exclusion, pauperisation, and – in view of Davis' allusion to 'self-consumption' – induced forms of 'social cannibalism'. Ultimately, this tendency is directly related to the new urban geography of conflict. As Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) famously underlined, the growth of 'urban society' fosters profound changes in social structure that have critical repercussions for the ways in which different social groups – such as historically constituted classes – relate to each other. Although he was strongly criticised for asserting that the 'urban problematic' was therefore supplanting industrialisation as the motive force of historical change (see Castells, 1972; Harvey, 1973), the 'delabourisation' of economies (see for example Rifkin, 1996) and concomitant rise of slums as outlined by Davis (2004, 2006) have arguably ultimately proved Lefebvre right, indicating simply that he was three decades too early with his analysis.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the implications of an alternative conception of the changed landscape of violence in contemporary Central America. This has been widely portrayed in terms of an evolution in the general nature of the regional political economy of brutality, namely involving a shift from political to social violence. I have proposed instead that the changes might be better visualised in terms of a geographical transition in the predominant terrain of violence from the country to the city. Drawing on the specific example of Nicaragua, I characterised this as a movement from 'peasant wars of the twentieth century' (Wolf, 1969) to 'urban wars of the twenty-first century' (Beall, 2006), and explored the way in which particular processes shaping the urban arena in turn shape the nature of conflict in the form of a contemporary 'slum question', analogously to Wolf's original 'peasant question'. I then examined the nature of Nicaragua's 'slum wars of the twenty-first century', noting that it is slums and poor neighbourhoods, rather than the urban context *per se*, that constitute the theatre of contemporary violence in Nicaraguan cities, and outlined how two different forms of the new violence that is characteristic of the 'slum wars of the twenty-first century' articulate together systematically.

Even if new forms of urban brutality in contemporary Nicaragua seem markedly different to the purposeful forms of revolutionary rural violence of the past, their underlying and interrelated dynamics suggest that they can in fact be seen as a continuation of the latter form of societal conflict in a new setting. At the same time, however, it is also clear that the new urban geography of violence has led to a more intense form of conflict than in the past, one that is particularly well epitomised by the expression 'urbicide'. The term signals the development of a qualitatively new and more brutal phase in what must ultimately be seen as the continuing process of Nicaraguan class-based societal conflict, one that seems to be leading inexorably to the victory of the upper class over a historically exploited lower class that has now been dispossessed of its labour-power and violently discarded. The notion of urbicide furthermore also points more generally to the critical importance of treating the urban context not just as a geographical space, but as a specific political realm, as Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) famously recommended in his classic book on *The Urban Revolution.*

Although Lefebvre has been severely criticised, the case of contemporary Nicaragua presented in this paper arguably supports his contention. At the same time, however, as Neil Smith (2003: xiv) points out in the foreword to the first English translation of Lefebvre's volume, it is effectively 'a paean to the space of the city and to the possibilities of revolutionary social change that comes from the streets'. Writing immediately following the events of May 1968, Lefebvre closed his book with a somewhat melancholic comparison of the student uprisings in Paris with the effervescent socio-political transformations that followed the Bolshevik revolution in 1920s Russia, wondering what went 'wrong' in France. Bearing in mind Lefebvre's assertion that the urban context is a unique political context, the question to ask is perhaps less where late 1960s France took a wrong turn, and more whether the political potential of urban contexts is inherently emancipatory, as Lefebvre implicitly believed. While the Nicaraguan evidence presented in this paper supports the notion that urban contexts are politically important in and of themselves, it also suggests that they tend to give rise to more intense and brutal forms of political conflict between social classes.

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