MORTAL DOUBT: TRANSNATIONAL GANGS AND SOCIAL ORDER IN GUATEMALA CITY

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BOOK REVIEW
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M*aras* (transnational gangs) are part of the social reality mainly in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. However, national and international mainstream media, seeking bloody images and stories, have made them also a stereotype of that social reality. Who are genuinely those youngsters, mainly men with tattoos and scars in their bodies? Why are they able to kill in the cruelest ways? Are they a marginalized obstacle for society or a result of society's and state's failure that must be changed structurally? In *Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City*, Anthony W. Fontes reels off this phenomenon in the capital of one of the countries involved.

This book published by University of California Press in 2018 is the result of an almost ten-year in-the-field research. During the 2010s, Fontes interviewed different aged *mareros* (gang members), previous ones and their relatives, Police and Prosecutor officers, NGO representatives, journalists, activists, researchers, and ordinary people, among others, to understand and explain the nature of these groups and their members.

The text revolves around known keywords such as poor neighborhoods, suburbs, violent crimes, social order, social imaginaries, extortion, or contract killing. However, the author does not use them in order to reinforce the stereotype of what *maras* are but to go further with an ethnographic approach that joints personal stories, rigorous and contextualized explanations, and the storytelling of his investigation (and sometimes personal) process.

BACKGROUNDS

When it comes to *maras*, there is part reality, part myth, and part uncertainty. Those components have been feeding each other for decades as *maras*' internal history has been challenging to access, and because society and institutions have developed their own narratives. It is difficult to calculate how many members they have, but estimations suggest that in Guatemala, there are between 15,000 and 20,000, with one out of ten in prison.

Maras appeared around between the 60s and 80s in Los Angeles and southern California as a reaction of Central American young vulnerable migrants, mainly from El Salvador because of the armed conflict, against the threats and violence of local and Mexican origin gangs. Two main groups aroused, antagonized to death: first Barrio 18 and then Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13. In the late 80s and 90s, to get rid of part of a rising street violence problem, U.S. authorities started massive deportations, so many of the migrants went back to their countries turned into people who had mainly their belonging to the *mara* and a violence lifestyle and language.

Deportations coincided with the last years and the ending of the internal armed conflicts in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996). Many local youngsters, being or not local gang members, but generally with weak family structures and abandoned by the states, were an easy prey for *mareros* because they showed possibilities of arising and a sense of belonging. Since then, Barrio 18 and MS-13 have developed into transnational trademarks with associated cliques in each country, mainly in the big cities. In that process, they changed the violence paradigm from state counterinsurgency versus guerrillas to a new era of rooted-in-society criminal violence, being related to deeper realities like inequality, marginalization, and lack of the state's capacity.

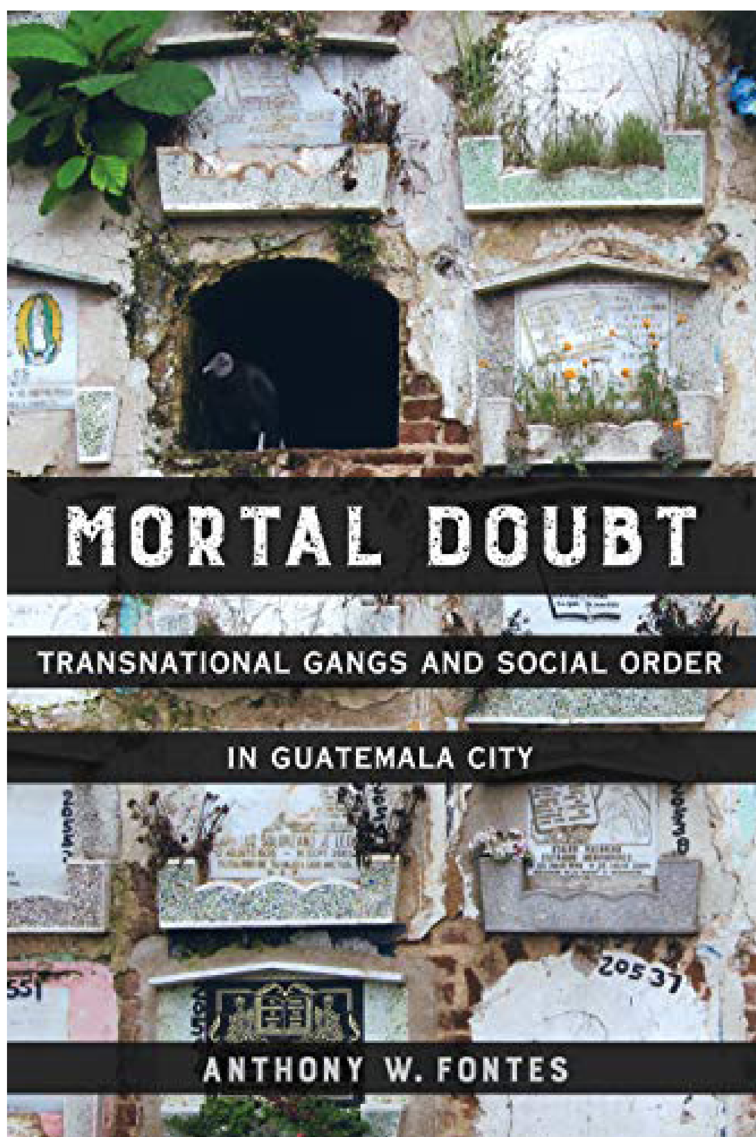
'MARAS' BROUGHT A NEW PARADIGM OF ROOTED-IN-SOCIETY CRIMINAL VIOLENCE

Fontes repeats a phrase in the introduction and the epilogue: "*maras* are not the problem, and the problem does not begin and end with them" (p. 3 / p. 241). He states that *maras* took violence from the past to the new national context. First, the state tried to fight them initially as insurgent groups, and in postwar, for the institutions, it has not been easy to investigate crimes. It has developed a "regime of rumor" (p. 17) in which is accessible to now that someone died killed, but not who or why.

Through the three parts of the book, Fontes explains from the streets, prisons, and institutions what *maras* are and mean in Guatemala City, what is behind their social symbolism, and what interpretations exist around them. Nevertheless, in his ethnographic approach, he avoids white savior writing. The author recognizes himself as a foreigner, a *gringo* whom there are stereotypes in local maras, and a person that, despite being shocked by what he acknowledges, writes the book as a researcher that authentically tries to understand from the other's perspective. Fontes even points out when his preconceived ideas bias his questions.

PART ONE: TRUTHS AND FICTIONS
WHEN REALITY MUST BE BUILT

One of the book's central ideas is that *maras* are neither understandable from just one point of view



nor always identifiable. They have blurred borders in many ways, from society components to physical spaces: between life and death, city and cemetery, institutions, and the underworld… With two essential characteristics: "symbolic meaning and material violence" (p. 35). The author's goal there to separate truth from fiction, understanding that interactions between both have remained as part of the social imaginary about *maras*.

For that purpose, Fontes first introduces Andy (gang nickname), an MS-13 member aged seventeen and protected witness for the Guatemalan government. With his short but experimented life story and the explanations about how does his clique operates, the author seeks to understand what would be the "portrait of a «real» *marero*," title of the first chapter.

Common characteristics of *mareros* include being young (they are usually killed before their 30s), lack of studies, an unstable family and vulnerable backgrounds, and the normalization of violence, including extortion, kidnapping, tortures, and killing, as their work and lifestyle to be somebody.

Fitting part of that image, Andy killed for the first time when he was eight years old and participated in a dismemberment when he was ten, and he seems to be okay with having been forced to do it because there was no more option. For the author, "the key distinction, the way to «recognize» a *marero*, is his capacity for violence without the psychological baggage that would paralyze a «normal» human being" (p. 46). He does not seem to assume it from his sensation in that interview, but from interviews and observation over the years, and he confirms it with the cases of Calavera (Skull) and others. As one continues reading, the book goes beyond the fake dichotomy of separating *mareros* from "normal" people.

At the same time, Fontes threads with expertise *maras*' history, *mareros*' stories, and academic background or representations about both. For example, he considers the movie *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993) as a "foundational text" of gang culture, not only because it fits with the image of Vatos Locos and Mexican Mafia gangs in the 70s, but also because it was shown to new mara members "to teach them the ethos, history, and meaning of the Latino gangs" (p. 53). The author also contributes context to the history of maras through different kinds of sources, like the investigative reporting of José Luis Sanz and Carlos Martínez in Salvadoran El Faro (2012) and pioneer studies by Levenson-Estrada (1991).

In the early 90s, *maras* in Guatemala City began defending urban territories in a post-Cold War context, where both armed forces and social movements were still stigmatized depending on the side. While expanding street violence, gangs started to get social

relevance, but not enough yet to be known as the relevant *mara* phenomenon they were going to become. However, even though it is clear that maras origin is in the U.S, that they have to do with migration and deportations, and that they grew initially during a postwar period, "gang history is an oral history" (p. 81). Therefore, its construction includes varied testimonies and assumed narratives hard to contrast. The same happens with past and contemporary issues, like the difficulty of clarifying daily murders or the changing positions of the government about *mareros*, having treated them from "youths without opportunities" to "terrorists."

Nevertheless, the fact that it involves the late armed conflict, the Northern Triangle of Central America socioeconomic crisis, drug-dealing tentacles, and the securitization of society in Guatemala's case, among others, gives a partial idea about the specificity of this phenomenon. As Cerón (2013) tries to untangle, are *mareros* sons of war or state orphans?

PART TWO: WORLD AND UNDERWORLDS 'MARAS' AS PART OF THE SYSTEM

Prisons are one of the stereotypes around *maras* and also one of the "few certainties" (p. 92). In 2003, through the *Plan Escoba* (Broom Plan), the Guatemalan government started massive incarcerations to face maras. On the one hand, it effectively took a few thousands of gangsters to prison. However, on the other, that amount, separating them according to their *mara*, together with the incapability of the National Civil Police, made prisons new criminal centers. With murders indoor, the phenomenon took society's attention.

Fragile institutions and *maras*' power inside some prisons have made them porous centers, as the author synthesizes. The prison system has been usually weak and collusive. Regarding maras, efforts have mainly focused on cutting their communications and reducing visits, deriving in riots, and having to do with women's roles. While sharing testimonies and explaining the implication of *mareros*' incarceration, Fontes narrates what he sees and listens from inside, confirming that the porosity of prisons can connect sometimes very diverse interests.

The most illustrative example is Captain Byron Lima Oliva, who was part of the top and most questionable structures of the Army. He was captured in 2000 for apparently being involved in the (unsolved) murder of bishop Juan Gerardi in 1998. Gerardi had promoted the document *Guatemala: Nunca más* (Guatemala: Never Again) for the historical memory of the conflict and was killed two days after its publication. From inside prison, Lima Oliva developed a network that included state officials, politicians, militaries, drug-dealers, and gang members that made him a potent player, disputing or actually controlling the prison system and even aspiring to the Presidency. After several transfers, he was finally assassinated in 2016, and the debate on which of his previous allies killed him is still open, with the possibility that there was more than one involved.

PRISONS ARE A STEREOTYPE ABOUT 'MARAS', BUT ALSO ONE OF THE "FEW CERTAINTIES"

Furthermore, also coinciding with Fontes' in-the-field research years and later, transnational gangs in the Northern Triangle have been focusing more on extortion than in other usual crimes, like contract killing and kidnapping. With their specific terminology, like the known "war tax", *mareros* extort mainly businesses and market owners and transport workers, which is known to happen also from prisons. It is a secure way of keeping social control in their territories of influence, based on a criminal co-governance. The general prevention against them and this crime have derived in extortion from third parties that pretend to be *mareros* or where there are armed forces officials involved. Likewise, that *modus operandi* mutation has led to questioning the effectiveness of the security policies to reduce homicides rates, which can also have to do with the decision of gangsters to focus on a more profitable and less showy activity.

That "extorted life," which gives name to the fourth chapter, has become part of Guatemala City's social

reality. According to the 2019 *A Criminal Culture: Extortion in Central America* report, by The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and InSight Crime, Guatemala's reported extortion rate in 2017 was 50 per 100,000 inhabitants, the highest in the Northern Triangle. Extortion concentrates in Guatemala City's department: in 2017, there were 3,552 reported cases, a 102.7 rate. Also, its economic impact at a national level reaches several million dollars a year.

As Fontes argues, extortion networks fluently operate because profits reach from underworld criminals to state agents, banks, and private security companies, which is a perfect cocktail for impunity and the perpetuation of this crime. That perpetuation has to do also with the terror or at least prevention that it has partially installed among most visible crimes, without complete certainty for society and authorities on what is happening in each case.

PART THREE: SPECTACLE, STRUCTURE, AND AGENCY EXTERNALITIES THAT FEED THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

National and international mainstream media have been feeding the *mara* phenomenon since it started calling their attention. However, the results have been mainly reinforcing stereotypes and pleasing morbid curiosity instead of unveiling facts (taking into account how hard it is to do so) and understanding what is behind them. Of course, *mareros* are usually also interested in those sensationalist images and information to spread. Fontes introduces the topic with a known case in which four human heads appeared in bags around Guatemala City, photo included, as with other crude cases that can open the debate on showing reality versus respecting victims in a public document.

The author dedicates the fifth chapter to what he calls "made-for-media murder": brutal violence methods against the victims plus the explicitly visible manifestations, which result in both media scandal reactions and an inevitable social shock. In Fontes' words, "images –digital and print– have become a primary vector through which violent death circulates in public" (p. 185). In national and local media, that kind of sensationalism is quite frequent, as the author shows. Regarding international media, it is also common that journalists ask their fixers for tattooed and scarred *mareros*, testimonies of tortures and murder, and even bloody scenes to capture or record on camera.

At the same time, it exists the argument that armed forces and political authorities echo these facts to take advantage of people's fears and keep control, as a heritage of armed conflict and Cold War strategies, through "strong hand" promises and policies that entail popularity. Guatemala's homicide rate is between 20 and 25 per 100,000 inhabitants (half of one decade ago), in a 17 million people country. However, it is hard to establish the correct proportions of *maras* and drug-traffickers' participation in it, also considering the cases with no identifiable murderer. For example, a 2016 USAID and InSight Crime report established that in the 18th zone of the capital (divided into 25 zones) between 2014 and 2015, 40.9% of the 154 homicides were gang-related and 35.1% unknown. Therefore, with a lack of information and truth, relativity on the importance of murders, and blurred borders between life and death, terror can be an advantage for those in power, both openly and in the underworlds.

Simultaneously to power games, social order, and violent crimes, there has been part of the official institutions and society working for a change. Prevention policies, rehabilitation programs, and even *mareros* themselves have developed initiatives to promote another kind of future. For example, El Diabólico (the Diabolical), MS-13's current leader whom Fontes mentions in the book and who committed crimes since a teenager, is trying nowadays to lead other prisoners *mareros* in an initiative of working in standard jobs, which not always succeed.

Considering that *maras* appeared, they can also gradually disappear with the correct operation of the public institutions and public policies, the articulation with social organizations, and also with *mareros* that want to try something different. Of course, there is a long way to go. That is why Fontes does not seek moralistic or forceful conclusions, but preferably a general wrap up with a realistic and open point of view, the mention of other significant topics related such as corruption and migration, and reflections on the life

stories he has shared. The book shows that the *maras*' phenomenon has many faces, including the ones of surrounding actors, and that it is about a hard and systematic reality that is far from structural change. However, for the author, there is a place for a hard-to-achieve individual and collective redemption.

According to Fontes, one of the main current challenges is that when someone finally leaves the *mara*, there are still links apart from the obvious ones, like the tattoos: temptations to go back are always there, and the past can even literally chase. In Guatemala, maybe regarding *maras* and how to face violent crimes related to profound social problems, it also happens on a broad scale.

FOR FUTURE READERS

Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City is a very well-documented and written book that offers an equilibrium between sensitivity and rigor. Sensitivity in terms of the selection of the precise words for a very human topic, and rigor because it is also a very complex one that needs structure to be understood. The author goes further in a grave regional issue by reaching its most profound components and involved actors. He does not tell his truth as an outsider but interprets it and builds it from what he listens, sees, and analyses from his interviews. Previous literature, official reports, among other sources, also surround a book where only more statistics or space for data visualization about maras' impacts could have helped readers to have a more comprehensive picture.

Maras will still mix reality, myth, and uncertainty, but knowing how do these three interact will contribute at least to overcome the commonplace and as much as the desire to study any of the subtopics. Therefore, the book will be useful for social sciences researchers seeking new literature on *mareros*' reality and the ethnographic point of view that its study has involved. It might also be enriching for journalists that want to get more in-depth knowledge of the Guatemalan and Central American underworld and for the general public interested in these harsh topics and keen to challenge prejudices.

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ANTHONY W. FONTES* is an Assistant Professor at the School of International Service of the American University. He has a Ph.D. in Human Geography from the University of California, Berkeley (2015), and holds a B.A. in Migration and Refugee Studies from Stanford University (2003). *Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City* is his first book, which gave him the William LeoGrande Award in 2018. His current book project, *The Walls Close In: Borders, Prisons, and the American Dream*, is about anti-immigration policies in the U.S. within the context of the recent and current migration crisis. Fontes' experience before academia includes having been an immigrant and refugee legal advocate in the United States, a freelance journalist in Guatemala and Egypt, an environmental justice researcher in India and Thailand, and an actor in South America. Apart from scholarly publications, he has also written for media sites such as Newsweek, Salon, and The New York Times. His research focuses on violence, migration and forced displacement, illicit transnational economies, mass incarceration, and the security policies in the Americas.

*Information collected from the American University's School of International Services and Anthony W. Fontes' websites. ●