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Friendly Mistrust: Coping with the Rule of Gangs in a Salvadoran Community

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of
Arts

in

Latin American Studies (International Migration)

by

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2016

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

EPIGRAPH

“... the ultimate spring of conduct is the thirst for dignity, which society alone can quench. For only by being granted a name, a place, a function within a group or institution can the individual hope to escape the contingency, finitude and ultimate absurdity of existence.”

Pierre Bourdieu

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Alex, thank you for walking steadily with me in those murky places that are the boundaries of our worlds. Thank you for showing me the point of no return.

Finally I would like to thank the Tinker Foundation, who financed the present study.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Friendly Mistrust: Coping with the Rule of Gangs in a Salvadoran Community

by

Areli Palomo Contreras

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies (International Migration)

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Elana J. Zilberg, Chair

This study focuses on strategies or practices that members of a Salvadoran community have incorporated to their everyday life in order to cope with gangs. Through time, gangs in El Salvador have transformed into powerful social actors, and currently, their dynamics distort the quotidian life of those who live under their rule. I argue that gangs have imposed rules or constraints to people's behavior, and that community members have incorporated these rules and produced practices to co-exist with gangs or to survive their rule. Among these practices of co-existence, I describe precautionary strategies, negotiations and finally exile.

This research is based on an ethnographic fieldwork that took place from July to September 2014 in a Salvadoran community of the state of La Libertad. I conducted 35 semi-structured interviews and participant observation during the above-mentioned period. I conclude that, through these strategies, it is possible to observe that gangs are parallel structures of power to the Salvadoran state and that in some cases strategies to cope with gangs also reproduce their power.

INTRODUCTION

Homicides, passengers burning inside public buses,¹ dismembered bodies scattered everywhere,² children migrating to the north, curfews emerging as acid falling from a dropper; soldiers, again, on the streets and on rural fields; rumors of death squads, extrajudicial killings, and of course... gangs. This mixture of events and actors not only constitute El Salvador's present, but they have been its reality for over the past two decades. With only 21 041 km² of territory and a population of 6.108 million, this country is the tiniest in the Central American region and also the most violent. According the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) 2013 global study on homicide "In 2011 and January-February 2012 [...] the average monthly homicide rate [in El Salvador] was 6.0 per 100,000 population, a value close to the global annual homicide rate, meaning that people were killed at the same rate on a monthly basis in El Salvador as in one year at the global level" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013).

Undeniably, violence permeates Salvadoran society, and most of it has been attributed to gangs. Until the present, there is no accurate indicator that can measure the number of homicides strictly related to gangs.³ But their influence and presence in communities is an overwhelming reality. Everyday, people living in communities ruled by gangs need to find out ways to cope with their power.

This is a study about practices undertaken by people living in communities where gangs have a strong presence. All practices are embedded in a context permeated by fear

¹ See the case of *la buseta* in Martínez (2013, pp. 105-110).

² See, the case of Rosa N. In Zilberg (2011, pp. 210-211) and Martínez & Sanz (2011/2013, pp. 53-57).

³ Thus far, the only indicator about the magnitude of homicides related to gangs' conflict is the homicide rate drop in 2012 attributed to the gang truce, which will be mentioned further.

of becoming a victim of gang violence, and by the uncertainty of knowing and not knowing who is related to gangs. I focus on different practices, which people in communities undertake to avoid conflict and to solve problems with gangs, and I contend that, when problems with local gangs can't be prevented or overcome, people must go into exile.

I argue that for some practices of coexistence, there is always a trade-off. Negotiations with gangs, even when forced,⁴ have deep implications in everyday life. Through a conflating process between gang dynamics and the everyday activities of communities, negotiations tend to reinforce and reproduce gang's authority in localities. Thus, giving gangs certain characteristics that parallel the state's power.

Transnational origins of Salvadoran gangs

In 1992 the Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and the Salvadoran government signed the Peace Accords that ended the Civil War that had ravaged Salvadoran society for twelve years. However, as Ellen Moodie (2011) writes, the end of the civil war didn't put an end to the violence brought by the conflict, and neither did the peace brought by the negotiations. She suggests that the many social, political and economic factors that have brought all these forms of violence have never been resolved, and violence has thus never ceased.

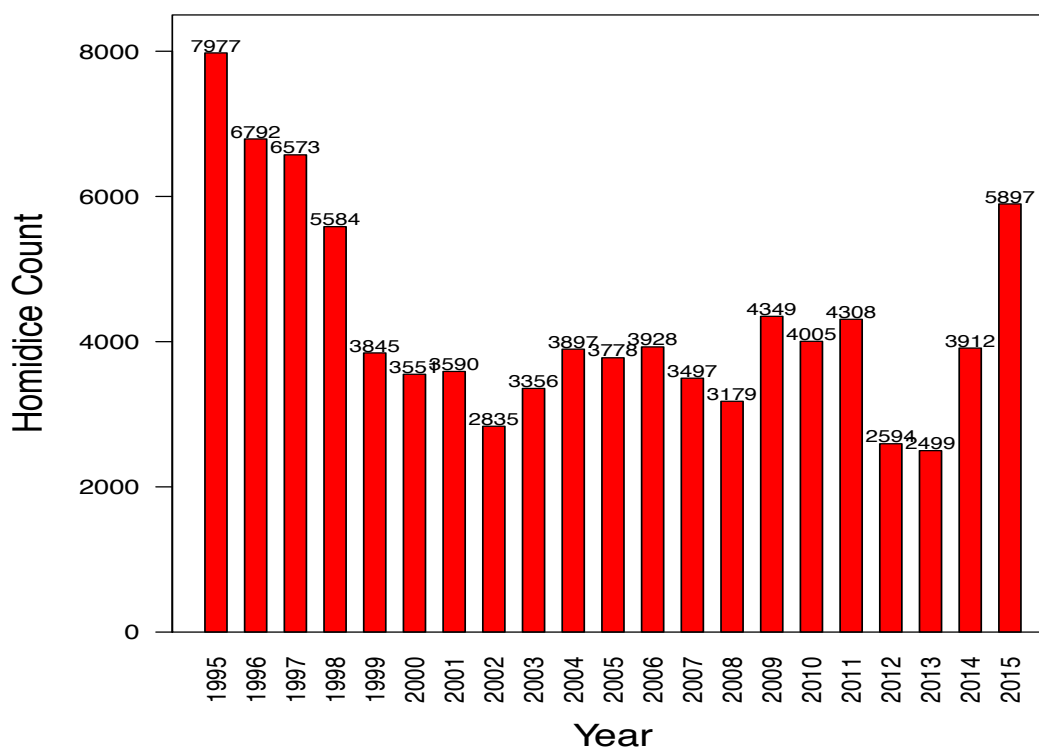
According to the data offered by the UNDOC, by the year 2012, a full decade after the end of the civil war, the homicide rate had already surpassed the number of war-

⁴ People in communities are compelled by circumstances to negotiate with gangs.

time deaths: 75,044.⁵ And by the end of the year 2015, El Salvador's Forensic Medicine had already counted 14,902 deaths by homicide. This represents a doubly return to the worst levels of violence since the end of the Civil War. Considering those gone uncounted, the total number of homicides likely exceeds this.

Graph 1: Homicide Count in El Salvador (1965-2015)

Created by author with compiled data from: UNDOC and Legal Medicine, El Salvador.



Twenty-three years after the Civil War, official statistics closed with 89,946 deaths by homicide.

The rampant presence of coercion, violent threats, torture, extortion, intimidation, and murder permeates the everyday lives of all Salvadorans today and challenges the effectiveness of the negotiated peace. Undeniably, violence continues to plague post-war

⁵ According to the World Bank (2014), the war left an estimate 75,000 deaths.

El Salvador, and it is ‘obsessively’ (Zilberg, 2011; Moodie, 2011), attributed to gangs. Even if, as other scholars have argued, gangs are the scapegoat of different forms of state violence (Zilberg, 2011; Moodie, 2011),⁶ it is undeniable that their presence and power has transformed and still transforms the everyday life of Salvadorans (Mijango, 2013).

Gang rivalries, among them the most notorious between Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 and the 18th Street gangs, have their roots in United States. Even if many scholars have argued that in El Salvador there were already small groups fighting against each other (Smutt & Miranda, 1998), it is undeniable that the more cohesive Los Angeles gangs, absorbed and channeled these other smaller groups into their own logics (Martínez & Sanz, 2013). Through time, the Los Angeles “gang type” was fully adopted and became dominant. Gangs gradually incorporated existing groups and became what Martínez has defined as:

[...] a new type of gangs [that, even if they] kept the original names that they were born with in southern California, they integrated certain values, concepts and rules both of the Southern California Chicano culture and other characteristics of the Salvadoran culture, resulting in a new hybrid identity (Martínez, 2015, p.125).

Salvadoran gangs have transformed into powerful actors in Salvadoran society and control large portions of territory. People in communities have had to endure living with them.

The origins of Salvadoran gangs dates back to the 1990’s. During the civil war,

⁶ The concept of neoliberal securityscapes has been conceived as a site where the United States and the Salvadoran government have produced and reproduced “the transnational gang crisis” in which gangs are the scapegoat of the violence that these states have created, without denying gang violence. In her work, Zilberg presents neoliberalism as a contemporary form of structural violence, and state policies as a façade masking its effects (pp. 2-4). Moodie writes about gang violence as one aspect of the generalized violence prevalent in El Salvador (pp. 181-187)

many Salvadorans fled the country and settled in the United States. After the Peace Accords negotiations in 1992, El Salvador entered the world stage as a post war miracle (Deseret News, 1995). It was declared a democratic triumph at the end of the Cold War. During the following years, the United States government began deporting immigrants at un-precedent levels; immigrants with criminal records were targeted and expelled to their countries of origin (Zilberg, 2011)⁷. Many of these deportees fled El Salvador's civil war when they were children. Most of them had grown up in the streets of Los Angeles and had become part of its gang subculture (Ward, 2013). El Salvador was a foreign country for them when they arrived (Zilberg, 2014).

Before we consider this episode in the formation of Salvadoran gangs, one must include that these deportees were once war refugees adjusting to life in the streets of Los Angeles. The history of the 18th street gang dates back to 1950's Los Angeles. Its members were individuals from different nationalities (Klahr, 2006). Then, at the beginning of the 1980's, what was once a heavy metal fans group transformed into the Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13. The MS emerged within the gang repertoire of Los Angeles, and was mainly constituted of Salvadorans (Ward, 2013). The profile of these gangs in the United States can be characterized, as Ward puts it “ [...] the result of discrimination and the victimization of impoverished immigrant youths [...] [who] suffered the indignities of being outcasts of society.” (Ward, 2013, p.75)

The deported members of the 18th street gang and the MS-13 found in El Salvador, marginalized youth, whom they could identify with and entice into joining their

⁷ For a more detailed account about laws fostering deportation and criminalization of Latino youth see Zilberg (2011).

ranks.⁸ Eventually they founded cliques⁹ with the rituals of passage and the rules that governed the ones back in the States. But, in spite conditions of marginality, Salvadoran gangs developed in a different social environment than their counterparts in the United States. In general terms, during the massive arrivals of deportees in El Salvador the mid 1990's, most of the Salvadoran population was living in conditions of marginality, conditions which persist today. Gangs developed in a country where marginality and deprivation are commonplace. Gangs created in El Salvador transformed and evolved into complex groups that gradually, but effectively found in the exercise of violence a source of power.

Throughout two decades (1995-2015) gangs have become powerful actors tightly interwoven in communities, and strongly associated with the exercise of violence. Gangs have been pulling their communities into their rivalries,¹⁰ so much so that Salvadoran society cannot be understood without an understanding of these gangs. Gangs do not exist at the fringes of society but rather maintain a central position in Salvadoran communities. Events like the 18th street's split into two factions –the 18th street Sureños and the 18th street Revolucionarios– which began in mid-2005, further rearranged and reorganized entire localities.¹¹ In the same line, the gang truce announced in 2012 substantially reduced the homicide rate during its implementation. However, the complex –national and international– political tapestry that gave birth and sustained the truce began to fall apart in mid-2013 (Martínez et al., 2013).¹² Sanchez Cerén, the new elected president in

⁸ For a portrait of Salvadoran youth engaging in gangs during the 1990's see Martínez et al. (2011/2013).

⁹ Gangs are divided into smaller groups called cliques.

¹⁰ For a short story –not an analysis– about communities and gangs daily relations see Martínez (2013).

¹¹ For a full account about the split see Martínez et al. (2011/2013).

¹² For a full account about the truce process through investigative journalism.

2014, declared just a few days after he took office, that “[his administration] would not continue with the truce (Mélendez, C. & Aguilar, J., 2014, Junio 13)”. The official announcement of the burial of the truce led the number of homicides during 2014 and 2015 to sky rocket.¹³ The truce marked the evolution of Salvadoran gangs into national actors in the political field. There are no systematic studies that account for their transformation.¹⁴ Likewise, the intertwining processes between gangs and communities have not been studied in depth and through time. The structure of these groups is informed by the exercise of violence within and among them. Gangs fight an endless war that engulfs and distorts all the material and symbolic spaces where they struggle. The necessities that are generated to sustain this long lasting battle –and the structural conditions that foster it– have shaped the everyday interactions in the communities where gangs belong. Gang presence in El Salvador is strong, and they rule through coercion and fear. How do people endure? How do people cope with gangs? What kind of strategies do people conjure to avoid conflict with gangs? Moreover, once in conflict, are there practices to solve problems with gang members? What happens when strategies or practices to coexist with gangs are exhausted?

Organization of the thesis

This thesis is organized into four chapters. The first chapter traces the relevant studies about Salvadoran gangs; however, it also includes works –which are not precisely about gangs– that address violence in contexts of marginalization and social exclusion.

¹³ Details on Graphic 1 above.

¹⁴ It has not been researched yet how gangs have become authorities in their communities and political actors -to some extent.

The second chapter focuses on the theoretical framework that has informed this research. I have based my analysis on Bourdieu's conception about the genesis of social practice in order to explain how gangs have normalized or regularized their power in communities.

The third chapter is the core of this work. I will present the main strategies or practices, which people use to cope with gangs whom. It is preceded by a foreword, in which I explain gangs' regulating social principle through which people derive practices of coexistence. Strategies to cope with gangs are divided in three main categories: precautionary strategies, negotiations and exile. Aside from depicting these strategies, I analyse the implication of last two types of strategies in the every day life. Finally, in my conclusions, I indicate that gangs have become a regular, normal social actor, and they are also the *de facto* holders of violence. I conclude that gang's shape the everyday, the quotidian, the ordinary life, and that through violence they are successfully recognized and included in the everyday.

CHAPTER 1: SALVADORAN GANGS AND MARGINAL GROUPS

In the following chapter, I will present a brief review of studies about Salvadoran gangs that are relevant for the present research. I will also include research, which has thus far not been directly tied to the study of gangs; however, I maintain that these other studies offer lenses that can clarify our understanding of gangs. Such associated topics include violence and the dynamics of other groups in marginal conditions. I will underscore the elements of those studies that reveal important aspects of the transformation of gangs in the Salvadoran context, and that show the implications of these transformations in the everyday life of the communities.

There are no studies that specifically trace the evolution of gangs from small subculture (Smutt & Miranda, 1998) groups to the powerful actors they have become at a national level. Nor are there studies whose focus is in the intertwining of gangs into communities through time. Both processes appear in many studies on the subject as corollary effects or questions that are secondary to the main concerns of study. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that both, the gangs, and the communities that have experienced the gangs' growth and transformation, have also been transformed. From my perspective, this means that gangs' activities have merged with community activities, and that community members have developed practices to endure their presence. The present research is about these practices, but first I will present what the literature on the subject has already set forth.

The well-known war between the Mara Salvatrucha, MS-13 and the 18th street gang, travelled along with deportees from the United States to Central America at the end

of the eighties.¹⁵ During the past two decades, El Salvador has been associated with countless stories about gang violence. Nonetheless, a lot of the related research in this country has focused on their members, their rituals of passage, their behavior, their origins and the factors associated to their development. However, the existent research does not cover how their particular *dynamics* has affect the communities in which they are embedded, and how community members manage to cope with gangs' activities.

The study by Smutt & Miranda (1998) is among the first to address Salvadoran gangs' origin. She locates youths as the segment of the Salvadoran society greatly affected by an array of socio-economic factors that constitute the ground for gangs emergence. Therefore, she argues that gangs must be seen and understood as an expression of the interplay of many structural factors involving youngsters, and not as a public security problem (Smutt et al. 1998). She sustains that the emergence of gangs in El Salvador is associated with structural factors such as an historic culture of violence (Smutt et al., 1998, p.24), depriving economic conditions of youths and their families, lack of opportunities in the labor market, lack of educational opportunities, and the undermining of the family as a socializing structure (Smutt et al. 1998). She concludes that all of these elements must be taken into account in order to address gangs' origin. In this line, she contends that partial perspectives that address these groups as a public security issue, only set up coercive measures that repress and stigmatize youth in general (Smutt et al. 1998).

¹⁵ This conflict has taken different shapes in each country of the Central American North triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador).

Furthermore, the work of Cruz & Peña (1998) is the first research supported by gang members, and the data was collected in collaboration with them. Their study, such as Smutt's, accounts for the structural factors (i.e., poverty, culture of violence) at the outset of gangs. This pioneering study aimed to understand the perspectives, values, and social and economic conditions of youths involved in gangs, through their active participation in the inquiry.¹⁶ In the same line of thought, Santacruz-Giralt & Concha-Eastman (2001) re-edited this study five years later. By the beginning of the 21st century, these researchers found that structural factors associated with youths involved in gangs had accentuated, and the number of gang members had grown substantially in El Salvador.

These and other studies¹⁷ sustain that, even though deported gang members brought the cultural model of Los Angeles gangs, El Salvador already had a prolific *culture of violence*¹⁸ in which that model developed. Moreover, all the mentioned authors state that gangs were already a feature in El Salvador's landscape, which deportation processes and the "importation" of Los Angeles gang practices only helped to strengthen and structure (Cruz, 2005).

A number of studies followed during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Some deepened the implications of social exclusion in the formation and participation in gangs, and included the presence of *barras* or student gangs (Cruz, 2005; Savenije et al., 2005/2007; Savenije, 2009); others analyzed the growing concern regarding these groups

¹⁶ This was possible in collaboration with Homies Unidos, the emblematic non-profit organization formed in El Salvador by non-active gang members, which finally disappeared.

¹⁷ In the same line, a four-volume study about gangs in Central America can be consulted for a regional overview.

¹⁸ Cruz retakes the concept of culture of violence and complements it with some numbers and examples, but he doesn't expand or analyze the concept. (Cruz, 2005)

from different perspectives (Martel, 2006; Hume, 2007). Smutt et al. (1998) and Savenije (2009) begin to assess the exercise of violence as the structuring principle of gangs, but their work does not detail the magnitude and significance of violence within and among these groups. Savenije and Beltrán (2005/2007) are among the first to establish that power relations associated with the exercise of violence extends to the communities.¹⁹ From my perspective, it is the status generated by violence that is also extended into the social structure of the communities. The gang permeates the social dynamics. The status that the exercise of violence gives to gangsters within their group is also transferred or paired with other existing status in the communities. Gangs begin to be recognized as an important actor in the community.

Martel (2006) criticized the dominant-official discourse that demonizes youths and blame gangs for all the violence in El Salvador.²⁰ The Salvadoran state intensified its repressive measures against gangs and, all the while, gangs strengthened their presence and further evolved (Fariña et al., 2010).²¹ By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, gangs were the main actors of a “transnational crisis”. They were labeled as part of organized crime in the region and where associated with drug cartels (Lara Klahr, 2006; Fernandez Menendez & Ronquillo, 2006).²² As this kind of literature proliferated, so did its critique. In this line, Zilberg (2011) brings to the discussion the concept of “securityscapes”. The later is the concept of a site where the media, street gangs, the transnationalization of security policies, institutions, and the long history of U.S

¹⁹ Savenije and Beltrán (2005/2007, p. 18)

²⁰ Martel makes a Foucaudian analysis.

²¹ For a detailed legal analysis about state responses to gangs.

²² The first book is an example of the kind of out of place nuances between Central American gangs and organized crime groups such as Los Zetas. In the second work, the autor claims that both gangs, the MS-13 and the 18th Street gang have reached a global scale without evidence.

involvement in El Salvador conflate to create and reproduce violence in that country (Zilberg, 2011, pp- 1-20). Her ethnographic study provides an important insight on the consequences of the implementation of gang abatement policies, both in the United States and El Salvador. She also provides a clear statement of how the power of gangs is embedded in Salvadoran communities (Zilberg, 2011, pp. 188-192). Even if many studies have pointed out the continuing and worsening social, political, and economic conditions that favor the development of gangs, there is no particular study that traces gangs' transformation and simultaneously its constant interweaving with communities. However, *Segundos en el aire* –the first study dedicated to women gang members in prison– offers an interesting attempt to trace the evolution and changes in Salvadoran gangs, through the results offered by other studies (UCA, 2010, pp. 336-42).

This research shows that the transforming structure of Salvadoran gangs has had tremendous implications in communities. This study addresses the fact that gangs are no longer a sub-group in society as the first studies suggested (UCA, 2010, pp. 44-51). Conflicts among gangs have become more violent and more tied in with communities; membership to these groups have taken ubiquitous forms of recruitment and forced recruitment; gangs' evolution has fostered migration, and has gripped the public's life: the quotidian, the routine, the everyday.

Moreover, there are few studies about the Salvadoran case that explain the element(s) that moves or buttress the gang hierarchy and the dynamic through which positions in the group are gained or lost. Philippe Bourgois is among the first researchers to conceive violence as a means to structure groups in specific conditions of dispossession. Yet, these elements are fundamental to understand how, in the current

history of El Salvador, gangs seem to be such powerful agents capable of mimicking the functions of the State. In this sense, the war between the MS-13 and the 18th Street gang was not the only thing that came with deportation. The U.S.A actually exported the *structuring principles* that inform their war. The most relevant characteristic of these groups is the exercise of violence towards its rivals.

This is the *generating principle* of status and power within the gang. According to the most recent studies, Salvadoran gangs follow this principle. In a detailed article about the structure and functioning of gangs, Martínez (2015) explains how the exercise of violence is the element that grants and defines positions in the group hierarchy. Moreover, successful attacks towards the rival gang also cause shifts in the rival's structure. Thus, in a constant stream of reciprocal aggressions, antagonism defines and sets in motion the *gang dynamics* (Martínez, 2015, p. 125).

This latest ethnographic research about gangs in El Salvador can be located within the theoretical framework adopted in other studies. Sandberg (2008) and Bourgois (2003) are among the first to use Bourdieu's analytic tools to explain the set of values, codes, practices and strategies used by marginalized ethnic minorities in the streets of New York and Oslo. As Sandberg notes, Bourgois defined these set of elements as composing what the later named "street culture, (2003, p. 8)", which Sandberg finally conceptualizes as a form of "street capital (2008, p. 156)". On the street, there is a system of rules and behavior that enables marginalized inner-city inhabitants to oppose the dominant culture and to acquire respect, prestige and status. Street culture is, as Sandberg has suggested, a kind of "unorthodox field (2008, pp. 156-157)" in the sense that it is a space of struggles and relations of force that is particular to the streets and only has effect

on the streets. Street capital is then the ensemble of “ ... knowledge, skills and objects that are given value in a street culture (Sandberg, 2009, p.33).” Thus, Sandberg concludes that street capital is a kind of cultural capital.

In his study on the streets of Oslo, Sandberg also observes “violence is not only a metaphor, but a real organizer of hierarchies in the street culture (2008, p. 165)”, which goes in line with Martinez’s observations during his research in El Salvador. However, Bourgeois and Sandberg analyze marginalized and excluded ethnic minorities from the mainstream culture of metropolitan areas world-wide. In both studies, street capital has its limitations regarding its transferability to other forms of capital and its effectiveness in other fields or other social spaces (Sandberg, 2008, pp. 156-157).

However, if we analyze Martinez’s work through Bourdieu’s lens, and within the Salvadoran context, one can recognize the importance of violence, not only as a source of status within gangs, but also as a force that relates communities to gangs.

CHAPTER 2: BOURDIEU IN THE FIELD OF GANGS

I have explained that the rural and urban areas of Central American countries such as El Salvador do not appear to have anything to do with the street culture of ethnic minorities in the cosmopolitan cities of Oslo or New York. However, as mentioned above, the massive wave of deportation of Salvadorans at the end of the Cold War, and the civil upheavals in the region, brought the street culture of L. A. gangs and those particular dynamics to El Salvador and other countries in Central America. In the Salvadoran case, the gang dynamics, has reached inconceivable proportions. It has passed from being a mode of contestation, which is what Sandberg (209, Opp. 46-47) and Bourgeois (2003) advanced, to a social process in which these groups have challenged the “legitimate” monopolization of violence by the state. Mimicking the State, gangs have leveraged violence and gained control over entire communities. Likewise, gangs have transformed interaction by imposing rules in the communities in which they are embedded. Through a complex process of recognition, gangs have become authorities in their communities and have become parallel structures of power.

The objective of this study is then to elucidate and analyze the practices of co-existence generated in communities where gangs rule, and clarify what these strategies produce. In this line, as with Sandberg, I will explain and use Bourdieu’s analytic framework in order to explain the processes through which gangs emerge as authority figures in their communities and merge with the public life. Thus becoming parallel structures of power in El Salvador.

In Bourdieu's field

Bourdieu's theory of practice is one of the major attempts in the social sciences to elaborate a theoretical framework that overcomes the structure vs. agency binary (Burbaker, 1985). He puts forward the idea that the interweaving of these two elements account for social interaction (Waquant, 2002, pp. 11-15). For Bourdieu, in order to understand the way we interact, evolve, endure, and live in the social world, we need to consider how the existing social structures determine our behavior, and how agency comes into play. This is exactly what this research is trying to elucidate. The aim is to use Bourdieu's analytic tools in order to understand the interactions between the gang dynamics, its members and the members of the communities in which they are embedded. In turn, this will set out how gangs –as parallels structures of power– have imposed rules of behavior; hence, generating strategies through which people have learned to survive their whim.

Bourdieu developed the concepts of *social space*, *capital*, *habitus* and *field*, to combine the forces of structure and agency and explain the genesis of social practices or strategies. Through the interplay of these notions, it is possible to analyze the connections between the every day interactions and the social elements that determine and generates them. He conceived the *social space* as the site where human interactions occur (Bourdieu, 1985). Each individual or group of individuals has a position in this scenario, that which is determined by the total amount of the different kinds of capital that they possess (Bourdieu, 1985). It is convenient here to detail this last concept because it is crucial to explain it's importance in Martinez analysis of Salvadoran gangs, which, in

turn, will clarify and help us understand how people develop practices to cope with those groups.

Forms of capital

The French sociologist defines *capital* as a source of energy, a social energy that he equates to power (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-242). It is a resource that can be objectified or embodied; therefore, agents and groups of agents can appropriate it (Bourdieu, 1986).

He distinguishes four main types of capital. *Economic capital* refers to the level of income and/or properties that an agent possesses (1986). *Cultural capital* is this power or force related with informal and formal education, for example, our parents' teachings and school formation, respectively (Bourdieu, 1986). It is a form of capital that can be acquired through time and can be incorporated into agents or can take a material form (Bourdieu, 1986). There are three sorts of cultural capital. In its *embodied* form, it is the acquired and enduring inclinations or dispositions that are manifested in our vision of the world, it informs how we think and what we do, thus it is incorporated in our bodies (Bourdieu, 1986). It is the most fundamental social principle inculcated to agents because it is transmitted to the body through a constant process of incorporation and inculcation (Bourdieu, 1986). Embodied cultural capital is acquired through family education and formal education, but it is also collected rather unconsciously from the social context (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cultural capital also exists in an *objectified* or material form. This kind of capital might be found as books, paintings, and every object that reveals or is part of our social background. Material cultural capital can be easily transmitted. However, its acquisition presupposes the adequate set of dispositions and schemes of appreciation embodied in

agents in order to “consume” it. The last form of cultural capital described by Bourdieu is its *institutionalized* form. He refers specifically to academic titles acquired through educational institutions (1986).²³

Social capital is the ensemble of relations made in the course of our lives and that pertain to, for example, the place where we live, visit, hang out or the people who are part of family acquaintances or that we meet in our neighborhoods, schools, etc. Social capital is the network that integrates our social relations (Bourdieu, 1986).

Finally, *symbolic capital* is related to recognition (Bourdieu, 1991, p 163-170). It is a form of capital that actually derives from the other forms of capital; it is the acknowledgement of the value attributed to economic, cultural and social capital. Symbolic power is thus the recognition granted to those who hold these kinds of capital in the form of prestige, social status and respect (Bourdieu, 1991).

These sources of power are transferable and convertible; for example, a painting can be inherited or sold, and academic titles (MA, Phd, etc.) are convertible into a higher income in the academic field (Bourdieu, 1986).

To sum up, these sources, with which we are endowed and/or acquire in our lifetime, determine our positions in the social space and differentiate individuals and groups of individuals from one another. In other words, these are the *structuring principles* (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 52-65) that inform social structures and configure social hierarchies (Bourdieu). According to the *total capital* possessed, Bourdieu distinguishes between two types of groups: the *dominant class*, which is comprised by those who

²³ Bourdieu describes the recognition of institutionalized capital as imposed. Recognition is made upon competence regardless the cultural capital bared by the agent (1986, p. 248)

posses the greatest amount of total capital, and the *dominated class*, conformed by those who own the least (Bourdieu, 1998).²⁴

Violence as capital

Following Sandberg's conceptualization of violence as "a real organizer of hierarchies in street culture (2008, p. 156)", and Martinez work about Salvadoran gangs, violence within and among these groups can be conceived as form of capital. This goes in line with Bourdieu's conception of capital as a source of power and differentiation, and as a structuring principle of social status. As Martínez states in his article "Gang violence: beyond death", violence is a fundamental feature of Salvadoran gangs.

Para los pandilleros el uso de la violencia es fundamental ya que el punto central de su identidad descansa en el mantenimiento de un sistema de agresiones reciprocas contra la pandilla antagónica y es, precisamente, en virtud de este sistema que se generan ideas de estatus, poder y reconocimiento que los pandilleros aglutinan en la palabra "respeto". (Martínez, 2015, p. 126)

For instance, according to Martinez research, the exercise of violence –the constant aggressions among gangs– defines and unites them. First, violence defines. An individual becomes a gang member when he or she engages in specific violent actions. Therefore, someone becomes a gangster, a part of these groups, through violence. Moreover, collective aggressions against a rival gang define the group. In this sense, aggressions among gangs are exercised in Schmittian²⁵ logic: the rival gang will be

²⁴ See the two dimension graph elaborated by Bourdieu (1998, pp. 2-15)

²⁵ By defining the political as an antagonistic relation, Schmitt presupposes the existence of violence. "The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping. (Schmitt, 2007, p. 29)

aggressed and the friendly one will be helped. Thus, violence defines the group (Schmitt, 2007).

Los pretendientes son solicitados para demostrar sus capacidades de ejercicio de la violencia en contra de un grupo antagónico. Con esto el neófito está forjando las bases de una futura retribución – medida en grados de “*respeto*” – que obtiene tras sus actos de bravura (Martínez, 2015, p. 127)

Second, the exercise of collective violence unites. The exercise of collective violence also unites the members of a gang because, as any other collective action, it gives its members the sense of complicity. Complicity creates bonds among members and bonds are the basis of belonging. In this case, violent actions against rival gangs create this attachment, which has a unifying effect between its members. During his fieldwork, Martinez describes a particular act of collective torture, characteristic of an MS clique, that effectively bounds members in complicity.

En un municipio en las afueras de San Salvador una de las clicas de la Mara Salvatrucha se caracteriza por utilizar un método de tortura con soga. Este método consiste en atar al cuello de la victima una soga, dejando cada extremo de la soga a cada lado de la cabeza. En cada uno de los cabos se ubican varios pandilleros y tiran con fuerza, mientras otro le golpea el tórax a fin de sacarle el aire de los pulmones. El hecho de matar de forma colectiva tiene un significado de unificación. Al implicarse todos en la tortura se esta dejando claro que el destino de la clica es en realidad el destino de todos... (Martínez, 2015, p. 127)

Moreover, violence structures gangs’ hierarchies. It allows “social mobility” within the gang structure. The accumulation of violent actions committed against rival gangs –and just against the rival gangs– is the means to obtain respect, or symbolic power, within a gang. The more aggressions gang members commit against the rival

gang, and the more precise the attacks are directed towards gang leaders or respected gang members; the more respect will be obtained. This actions will trigger the movement of the relative positions that each gang member occupies in the group, thus readjusting its hierarchy. Again, Martinez research is crucial to conceive the exercise of violence as a form of capital.

De allí la importancia del quién y del cómo se mata. Si un pandillero logra asesinar a un enemigo reconocido de la pandilla enemiga, este adquiere un reconocimiento mayor que si hubiese asesinado a un neófito como él. El nivel de reconocimiento que alcanzará será equivalente con el estatus que el asesinado tenía en su pandilla. Además un asesinato con un arma de fuego obtendrá mayores meritos si el cadáver ha sido decapitado o vejado en el curso de la expedición. (Martínez, 2015, p. 128)

Thus far, I have established through Martinez work how violence is a structuring principle within a given gang and among rival gangs. This constant exercise of violence that defines opposing cliques buttresses the groups' structure or hierarchy, which means that it puts in motion a process of recognition that assigns a higher status to its members.

Violence –comprising any kind of atrocity– structures gangs in a constant process of reciprocal aggressions. This is what Martinez defines as the formative aspect of violence in gangs. However, many practices and elements derive from this process, and this is what Martinez defines as the gang dynamics, which function in and extend to a convoluted social space.

Social space and fields

Moreover, Bourdieu also describes the social space as constituted by *fields*, which are particular arenas where agents or groups of agents struggle for the different types of capital (Bourdieu, 1985, p16-20). In each field, specific rules govern social interaction.

For example, the academic field is the realm where the institutionalized form of cultural capital is at stake, and where it is reproduced. Agents or groups of agents struggle among each other to obtain it, and to be its legitimate holders. For example, professors and researchers in a university will compete among each other to obtain a full time job as faculty members and will engage in certain practices, abiding to the rules of the field, in order to obtain it (Wacziarg, 1989, pp. 17-20). There are various fields in the social space: the artistic field, the political field, the economic field, etc., all of which have their particular rules and institutions. In this sense, they are all autonomous, but relatively because they always belong to a broader social space.

Challenges in the field of power

For this study, there is a particular field of interest, which Bourdieu describes as the *field of power*. This is the site where all forms of capital are at stake and where all its holders compete for the preeminence of the one which they possess and the value of its transferability to other forms of capital.

The field of power is a field of forces structurally determined by the state of the relations of power among forms of power, or different forms of capital. It is also, and inseparably, a field of power struggles among the holders of different forms of power, a gaming space in which those agents and institutions possessing enough specific capital [...] to be able to occupy the dominant positions within their respective fields confront each other using strategies aimed at preserving or transforming these relations of power. (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 264-265)

In this particular field, the state reveals itself as a major actor because it is the holder of the *metacapital* (Bourdieu, 1998, p.41). This means that the state possesses a considerable portion of the different types of capital, and has the capability of regulating

the different fields and the relative value of the different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 33-34). Aside from concentrating all types of power, evidently, the state is also the holder of the legitimate use of violence and its means (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 42). It is the state that, through a long process, withdrew, through coercion, the use of physical violence, and its instruments, from the ordinary life (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 42-43).²⁶ Finally, the state gained recognition or became the legitimate holder of the use of violence, and its means, through a complex process of domination that was accompanied, for example, by taxation –among other elements (Bourdieu, 1998).²⁷ Thus, for Bourdieu, the use of physical force, the exercise of violence and the possession of the means of coercion are a kind of capital that was long ago concentrated by the state, and the state was recognized as its unique holder.

Accordingly, I suggest that in El Salvador gangs are not only challenging the assumption that the state is the legitimate holder of the exercise of violence as a form capital, but they have began a process in which violence actually *structures* and *differentiates* this groups internally and externally. Violence is a generative force because it generates status within and among gangs. It informs their identity, it brings members together through complicity, and it creates power relations between them and those who are not affiliated with them. This power relations transform the every day interactions of the population in the communities where gangs rule.

Habitus, rules and practice or strategies

²⁶ Bourdieu retakes the idea of Norbert Elias' "civilizing process".

²⁷ Bourdieu explains how it is also tied with territory, culture and nationalism. (Bourdieu, 1998, p.44-47)

The rules of each social space or field are not necessarily explicit, and they constitute constraints in individuals' behavior (Bourdieu, 1990).²⁸ This is where the other major concept of Bourdieu's theory of practice, *habitus*, comes into play (takes effect). *Habitus* is the set of dispositions, schemata of perception, incorporated rules related to the class or group agents belong to (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25; 1990, pp. 52-65). It is the embodied social schemes, in individuals, in action. Habitus is the embodied history that guides our present and produces practice (Bourdieu, 1990). The concept of habitus is the one that sheds light on the interplay between structure and agency, between the incorporated constraints, and the "permanent capacity for invention, indispensable if one is to be able to adapt to indefinitely varied and never completely identical situations" (Lamaison & Bourdieu, 1986 p.63). Habitus produces *strategies* or *practices*,²⁹ which agents implement in order to interact in the daily life. However, aside from habitus, in order to account for the production of strategies, one must also include the *rules* "more or less consciously produced and mastered by agents" (Lamaison et al., 1986, p.60), in a particular field or space.

Gang dynamics

In his work, Martinez describes *gang dynamics* as the constant exercise of violence within and among these groups. It is a process that generates status and power, but that is also bounded with territory and the people that live within it. Therefore, for the

²⁸ This sense of what agents in a field can accomplish or not is what Bourdieu calls *doxa* (pp. 66-67).

²⁹ De Certeau differentiates between tactics and strategies in the everyday life. Tactics are practices "ways of doing" that are related to the time and rules of its context. However, tactics are not tied to the generative principles that produce and reproduce them. Strategies, for Bourdieu, reproduce domination and in this particular context where gangs dominate, strategies to endure them also reproduce their power (1988, p.45-61).

purpose of this study, I extend this concept to other activities related to the exercise of violence, which do not necessarily generate status for its members, but that is imbricated in the prevalence and permanence of the gang. By these I refer to extortions to obtain economic resources, territorial and population control to protect the group, espionage, and the establishment of rules in the communities they rule.

Therefore, this dynamic extends and has consequences in the everyday life of the communities in which gangs thrive. Territory is a crucial element for gangs. First, because aggressions between gangs transform their hierarchy, clique's territories must be guarded to avoid shifts in the structure. Second, territory is bounded to gang's identity and survival. There is no gang without territory, and there is no powerful gang *–vis-à-vis* its rival– without a considerable territory. Therefore, because annihilation of the gang itself is at stake, territories must not only be guarded, but also expanded. Espionage – incursions into the rival's territory– is a recurrent practice to kill members of the rival gang, as Martinez research shows.

Puestos a prueba, solicitados por su pandilla, son estos neófitos quienes ejercen niveles de violencia más elevados y de apariencia más caóticos. Esta violencia demostrada se ejerce principalmente a través de las *misiones*. Estas pueden consistir ya sea en espionaje o en acciones directas. El espionaje es posible para estos jóvenes ya que aun no tienen mucho *bray*, es decir que por tener relativamente poco tiempo en la pandilla, no son conocidos por sus adversarios y les será fácil entrar en su terreno (Martinez, 2015, 126).

Nevertheless, in the course of this study, espionage is also a practice exercised by individuals with no affiliation to gangs. Sometimes, gang member acquaintances or relatives may venture to the rival gang territory, precisely, because they are not under suspicion.

I: Por qué piensan que las personas que no pertenecen a los grupos van a ir a espiar?

P: Ahaa!!! porque, un ejemplo: su esposo puede ser de un grupo y usted o su hijo no son, pero son familias de ellos, entonces quien a usted le acredita o le asegura que ellos aunque no sean de ese grupo no le están ayudando a su familiar? Entonces, ese es el problema de que ahora desconfian de todo mundo.

P0021. Student.

Participation in gang dynamics –forced or not– has led to significant increase in gang’s surveillance and control of the population of the territories they dominate. Thus people’s mobility has been severely affected. From enrollment in schools to people’s transit in their own communities, these and other normal activities have been disrupted by gang dynamics. Moreover, gangs have also established rules in the communities they dominate, which attest their power. The following section deals with different strategies or practices that people from La Libertad engage in to cope with gangs, but that at the same time, perpetuates gang power. However, in order to have a more complete view of these practices, I will also support my analysis with important concepts from other studies.

Linda Green’s (1999) depiction of the consequences of chronic fear in her studies about Mayan widow’s in Guatemala after the civil war, is the basis from which I construct the concept of “friendly mistrust”. I will show that the last is a common precautionary strategy that people engage in to avoid conflict in everyday interactions.

In her work Elana Zilberg (2011) develops the concept of securityscapes, which are the spaces through which violence is produced and reproduced. Through an interesting analysis about gangs as the new criminal type, she clarifies how gang

abatement policies were exported to El Salvador, just as gang members, thus producing and reproducing the violence the US aid to that country “aims to obscure”. She analyses how these policies have affected both Salvadoran and US youth and how the Salvadoran State stands in complicity. Her ethnographic fieldwork comprises a fine analysis of how the gang crisis unleashed coercive policies, both in El Salvador and the US, against youth in the former and against youth of ethnic ascent in the latter. Repression and stigmatization has followed since. Her research serves this study in many ways. It shows already that violence is convertible to economic capital. And that gangs are deeply embedded in communities. The most important aspect of her research to the present study is the term of house arrest, which she coins to explain a practice among youths to curb gang injunctions policies in the streets of Los Angeles. Paradoxically, this same practice was implemented by one of the participants of this study in order to cope with gang’s forced recruitment before going into exile.

Ellen Moodie’s (2011) work about the prevalence of violence in post-war El Salvador lays out the important link between neoliberal policies and people’s response to criminality, which she frames as the self-management of risk. This goes in line with self-imposed curfews that I depict as precautionary strategies that people use to avoid the violence of gang dynamics. Finally, I use Thuderoz & Bourque (2011) concept of negotiation as a legitimate principle that regulates social life in order to attest for the exchanges that people must engage in to cope with gangs.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the state of La Libertad, El Salvador from July 15th-September 15th, 2014. All names have been change in order to protect the Participants the participants of this study. I will name the community where I conducted this study *La Juega*. La Juega is one of the 22 municipalities of the *departamento* or state of *La Libertad*, only 16 miles away from the capital, San Salvador. La Libertad or La Juega, as many call it, is divided into 13 *cantones* (counties). While not featured in official maps, these *cantones* are further divided by the territorial claims and disputes of the MS and 18th Street gangs. The reach of this conflict extends all the way to La Juega's 1.2 km² of urban area and its 124.56 km² of rural area. In 2013, this locality occupied the 16th position among the most violent municipalities in El Salvador.³⁰ It is home of the *Jergueros Locos Salvatrucha* or JLS, the only clique from the MS-13 gang in the locality, and its penitentiary center hosts one of the most prominent leaders of 18th street R faction. Needless to say, in La Juega the conflict between gangs is particularly fierce. La Juega turned out to be the perfect setting to carry out my research given my interest in exploring community strategies for co-existing with gangs.

Juan Martinez, a Salvadoran researcher and writer, was my key informant and facilitated access to La Juega. I adopted a qualitative research methodology, which included intense ethnographic fieldwork, participant- observation, and in-depth interviews with community members of La Juega, including two school principals and a community leader, in territories dominated by both gangs and factions (MS-13 and 18th Street Gang).

³⁰ USAID report on the municipality.

Participant observation afforded me insights into the everyday relations and practices among members of the community with no affiliation to gangs, and to those who were affiliated. I lived in the urban center of La Juega within the JLS territory. During my stay, I contacted two community key actors who made my ethnographic fieldwork feasible: Allan, a health promoter from the ECOSF,³¹ and Rosa, a former social worker who was – at the time this study was conducted– working in the *archivo municipal* in the *Alcaldía*.³² Rosa introduced me to her acquaintances, most of whom she knew during her past work. With Rosa, I was able to transit both MS and 18th street territories. I accompanied Allan in his work in MS-13's territory. It was through them that I met two important figures: P380 and P005. As a health promoter, Allan has to visit households and check up on pregnant women and newborn babies. The semi-urban and rural areas that he had to cover were located within the MS-13 territory. Allan introduced me to P380. Participant 380 is a “retired” member of the JLS clique and the wife to the spokesman or *palabrero* of that group.³³ She is respected and feared by virtue of her association and daily communication with her imprisoned husband. She serves as a bridge between the clique's hierarchy and the members of the community. I visited her regularly after I met her and spent many afternoons in her home.

I met P005 through Rosa. P005 is a witty and smart woman, and one of the few women who works in agriculture. She is a well-know person among the *campesinos* within the domains of one of the factions of the 18th Street gang. I visited her during the

³¹ Equipos Comunitarios de Salud Familiar

³² The local government building.

³³ Within the gang hierarchy, *palabrero* designates a member of the gang who has the authority of the clique. There can be distinctions among spokesman, such as *primera palabra*, *segunda palabra* etc., which designates the order of rank.

morning, helped her with agricultural tasks and I spent time with her family and the in the area. Mobility in areas ruled by the 18th Street Gang was more difficult due to its division into two factions: the *Sureños* or S and the *Revolucionarios* or R. I was never able to attain consent to move “freely” in their domains. I conducted participant observation only within the territory of the R faction in the locality of *Las Flores* where P005 lives. She introduced me to the rest of the *campesinos*.

I conducted a total of 35 semi-structured and in-depth interviews that allowed me to have a deeper understanding about how the community deals with gangs on a daily basis. Semi-structured guides included questions that aimed to elucidate a better understanding of migration patterns due to violence. Participants in La Juega were contacted through my two informants. I assigned a participant number to all interviewees –P001 to P035– except for P380 who is a member of the MS-13 and P0022, the participant of the case study that I present in my final analysis. P0022 was not contacted through my informants. I met him by coincidence, on a bus. I was coming from Tapachula, the nearest Mexican city to the Guatemalan border, where I interviewed Rafael Zavala the director of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) local office. I decided to include his case in my research because it elucidates that present policies of gang abatement in El Salvador are complicit in triggering “draft events” of forced recruitment.

I also interviewed two US-AID members working on the agency’s “Crime and Violence Prevention Project”³⁴ implemented in La Juega. I followed media coverage of

³⁴ This program started in 2013 and includes a total of 55 municipalities from El Salvador. The program focuses on youth and violence prevention and on the creation of “policías comunitarias”.

two important issues at the time: the security strategy that the newly elected president, Sanchez Cerén, would take regarding crime, and in particular, his position regarding the gang truce.



Figure 1: Political division of La Libertad. Source: 156px-Mapa-de-la-libertad.png

CHAPTER 3: STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH GANGS: PRECAUTIONARY
STRATEGIES AND NEGOTIATIONS

Foreword

The rule of silence: *ver, oír y callar*

I am walking with Martínez by the streets of La Juega as we discuss our trip to *La Coyotera* –a place where he is conducting interviews and which is dominated by the 18th Street gang. I turn around to watch the surroundings and there it was, written on the walls of the streets of La Juega for everyone to see “*ver, oír y callar*”, the clear message reflecting the strong presence of gangs and the way they rule.

(Field notes, La Juega, July 17, 2014)

The message revealed in the form of street graffiti in the quote I cite above refers to the rule of silence imposed by gangs. According to this rule, one can see and hear, but may not speak of what is seen and heard. The last word “*y callar*” can be translated into “and remain silent.”

The rule of silence is also a formula for coexistence engraved on walls. It is a premise of survival set out by gangs in their communities, which prohibits people from talking about gang dynamics, but it doesn’t specify to whom. In fact, people do talk about gang activities and their members. Coping with the flow of information between people of communities ruled by gangs is crucial to cope with them. However, this rule is not directed to common discussions about gang dynamics between people, but between

people and members of the rival gang –or other people related to them³⁵– or the police. Indeed, people do talk about gangs; in La Juega, the information about gang affairs is a frequent topic of conversation. People do try to be reasonably informed about gang activities in order to reduce uncertainty, and to understand how gang dynamics may or may not affect their daily lives. But this information is not evenly distributed in the population nor it is easy to acquire. And this is where the rule of silence –this codified form of coercion- generates social practices or strategies, which people articulate to incorporate gang rules into their everyday. What is important is the spin that this rule makes people take: problems, conflicts, misunderstandings, dead threats, extortions or any other form of coercion, that may come from these groups, have to be dealt directly with the gang. Resorting to the police is forbidden. Thus, the rule of silence reveals the “bonding side” or productive side of coercion, which generates a twist in the logic of practices (or in the order of things) by breaking –or at least fragmenting– the state’s authority (protection racket) and conceding it, at least partially, to gangs.

Abiding by a rule does not ensure coexistence with gangs. It is the practices or strategies (Lamaison & Bourdieu 1986, p.111)³⁶ that derive from the constraints imposed by the rule (Lamaison et al., 1986) that makes survival possible. In the next section I will describe the strategies or practices that help people coexist with gangs. The first category of practices is precautionary strategies. I will also analyze how the second categories of

³⁵ There is a lot of room for relations between people in communities and gang members i.e. family, gang’s family friends, gang members’ friends, neighbors, etc. There is no precise way to know in which way someone can have a relation to gangs or its dynamics.

³⁶ “The notion of strategy makes possible a break with the objectivist point of view and with the agentless action that structuralism assumes. But one can refuse to see strategy as the product of an unconscious program without making it a product of a conscious and rational calculation. It is the product of a practical sense, of a particular game.”

practices, negotiations, also become a means for gangs to acquire recognition and a position of power in social life. Finally I will present a case study that is both a result of the breakdown of other practices to cope with gangs, and is in itself a strategy. Exile is commonly used among the young as a practice of last resort to escape one of the most recent features of gangs' dynamics: forced recruitment.

Precautionary strategies

In her book *Fear as a Way of Life*, Linda Green describes fear as a chronic condition among widows of a Mayan community after Guatemala's long civil war. In her study, she analyses fear as a collective experience. She explains how fear permeates society and disrupts social relations by "... driving a wedge of distrust between members of families, between neighbors, among friends (Green, 1999, p. 55)." This generalized state of fear couldn't be more accurate and more present in the current context of La Juega (Green, 1999, pp. 55-79). Ellen Moodie (2010, p. 83-112) discusses a similar state pervading post-war El Salvador.

La Juega is a community ruled by gangs. It is divided in 13 *cantones* or localities, which in turn are fragmented into territories dominated by the MS-13 and the two factions of the 18th street gang. Territories are always in dispute, which turns their boundaries into front lines. Attacks between gangs are not predictable; thus, uncertainty is always present. The social life in these territories is saturated by the fear of not knowing, and knowing, who is a gang member and who is –in one way or another– related to them.³⁷ One fears "disrespecting" gang members during interpersonal

³⁷ There is no possibility for people to know to what extent people in the same community is or not related to gangs. People might be related by kin or friendship; others can be neighbors of a gang member; a taxi-driver might be related to a gang because he circulates within the territory of a particular gang; a youngster,

interactions. But disrespect and respect towards gang members are blurry concepts and one does not know where, in Greens words, the “arbitrary line [is] until it is too late (Green, 1999, p. 67).” People fear, not just getting caught up in the cross fire, but also “crossing the line” with a gang member – or any of their relatives and sympathizers– and unleashing the gang’s aggression against themselves.

This generalized uncertainty about the abruptness of violence³⁸ warps people’s behavior; it gives normal interactions a tone of possible conflict and it also converts public space into a veritable minefield. In the course of this research and mostly during interviews, people showed and enacted recurrent ways that helped them prevent or reduce conflict in everyday interactions and in their routine. These are practices incorporated into daily life, which render fear less overwhelming and coexistence with gangs plausible.

In this venue, this work focuses on the practices that people use to deal with the most organized and visible social actor that, other than the state, uses violence as a source of power. In the next sections I will explain different practices observed to cope with gang’s dynamics of violence. First, I coined the term “friendly mistrust” in order to define a constant practice that people use to avoid conflict in random daily interactions; second, I will point out how people also engage in self-imposed curfews as a practice to curb gang dynamics and finally, I will show that self-imposed curfews are also a practice assisted by the state in a murky complicity with gangs.

without being a gang member, can be a sympathizer in the sense that he recognizes the gang as part of the place he inhabits.

³⁸ I refer to the fact that the violence that gangs generate is an unpredictable event.

Friendly mistrust

By coining the term “friendly mistrust” I aim to convey a form of interaction germane to contexts in which fear is a “chronic condition (Green, 1991, pp. 56-61)”. The later is a feature of the context in which people from Xe’caj struggled to survive in Green’s work. I define as friendly mistrust a kind of behavior that, as fear, “thrives on ambiguity (Green, 1999, p. 105)”. It is its mirror. It stands in between the cordiality of smiles, discourses of respect and non-discrimination for others, but, simultaneously, it invokes fear and mistrust of other’s power over us. It is a form of interaction between people that is cordial, but full of suspicion and fear. People in La Juega are friendly towards others, but because they don’t know when they can be in a circumstance that can engulf them in violence. Even though people from the communities can manage to know and, sometimes, know gang members, this information is not evenly distributed among people. Moreover, no one really knows what kind of relations the other may hold with a gangster or the group.

The term also tries to encompass what people try to achieve: regularity in their interactions with the actors that can exercise violence towards them. People “don’t mess with anyone” because they want stability in casual encounters with gang members or their affiliates. Likewise, when people know they are dealing with gang members or their sympathizers, this practice helps them not to upset their whim. Thus, the apparent friendliness or respect people show to others in their everyday interactions is plagued with mistrust. So this general cordiality towards others, this friendliness, sometimes embedded in discourses of respect and non-discrimination, which seems to come out so naturally, is a mechanism to contain the abruptness of violence.

The following excerpt comes from an interview with a former migrant living in Girón –a rural locality dominated by the MS-13–. He decided to come back to El Salvador in spite the fact that his family members and acquaintances had already warned him about the situation in El Salvador. He explained very clearly that one “gets used to” everything referring to the fact that, for him, violence is a common feature of the everyday life and that in order to avoid messing with the wrong people, one has to restrict any kind of conflictive behavior.

“P: Hoy que regresé? Sí, sí se ve. Cuando me fui, yo sabía que sí que estaba peligroso y bueno como uno a todo se acomoda y la gente, cuando yo hablaba que me iba a venir me decía “ no te vengas porque está muy peligroso “ y yo lo que les decía es que peligroso siempre ha sido, lo que pasa es que les dije yo, no hay que meterse con nadie. Y yo me voy a ir, ahora que me vine, igual, normal yo lo veo igual que como cuando me fui pues, una violencia, no más que ahora ya está más avanzada la violencia, pero como digo, a todo se acomoda uno, se acostumbra, entonces lo único que hay que hacer es tener cuidado y ya, no meterse con nadie.

I:Y en qué aspectos dices que está más avanzada?

P: En que hay más delincuencia.

I:Y qué es lo que ves tu de la delincuencia, que son grupos, que son bandas, que son qué?

P: ... por ejemplo, viene un muchacho de mara y me dice algo a mi y yo no sé que él es de mara y yo le respondo mal, él no va a hacer nada, tal vez sólo a mi, pero como tiene a los demás que son de él, y si yo estoy trabajando y estoy pasando por ese camino, siempre la misma ruta, así me checan, me pasa un accidente, mucha gente le da miedo y lo que decide es irse.

P013. Former migrant. pp. 3-4

The uncertainty of not knowing if the persons that one interacts with are

somehow associated with gangs was the background of the conversation about how being friendly or getting along with others was an effective strategy to lower the risk of engaging in conflict. Both were constantly evoked when the talk started to address the relation between gang violence and migration. People constantly repeated that “being friendly” with neighbors and with everyone were necessary to avoid danger. But friendship was obviously not what people wanted, but to achieve a minimum degree of certainty that “being friendly” will guarantee them a minimum peace of mind as the word “vivir tranquilo” or “estar bien” allude to in the foregoing vignette.

P: Si uno no se mete con las personas, no hay problema. Aquí tenemos que vivir tranquilos y no andar emprobleado porque, también, si uno anda en problema con los vecinos o con la gente también es peligroso.”

P016. Tortera.p.7

In a long interview with one of the *campesinos* of Las Flores –an area dominated by the 18th street gang– with whom I spent most of my time in the field, he explained that “getting along with everyone” or “being friendly” was how he had managed to avoid conflictive interactions or any serious problem in spite the fact that he lived in a very conflictive zone. As for other participants, generosity –forced or not– was a key component of being friendly. But most importantly, this murky friendliness and generosity were central in people’s view to deflect violence.

I: Usted ha tenido algún problema que lo amenacen o algo así?

P: Gracias a dios, no. Yo, por lo menos usted que los hemos visto así, yo siento que hemos hecho amistad bien tranquilo y todo, yo así es mi modo con cualquiera gente que sea, ya viene una gente, ya estoy comiendo, tengo yo que darles, les regalo, tomen llévense esto.”

P009. Agricultural worker. p.6.

People act with friendly mistrust as a reaction to this context of fear and uncertainty. It is a practice that mirrors the distress from being under the dominion of a group that rules with fear, just as the state (Moodie, 2010; Zilberg, 2011).³⁹ However, problems, in interactions that take place everyday, are not the only ones that people try to regulate. There are also other strategies that derive from distortions engendered by gang's dynamics and their rules of coexistence. I labeled as curfews two types of practices that involve self-imposed withdrawal from public spaces.

Curfews

There are two types of curfews: the ones that are self-imposed, which aim to avoid conflict in general, and the ones that are non-official, fragmentary and implicit *toques de queda*, each time the military come out on the streets. Self-imposed and fragmentary-implicit curfews in localized places are all ways to avoid the recurrent but sudden character of gang confrontation and the state confrontation with them.

Self-imposed curfews

The local people from La Juega that I interviewed during fieldwork also mentioned that withdrawing –as much as they could– from the public life was the best strategy to avoid violence. Again, it reflected the extreme situations that assault people given the background of fear and uncertainty, which compels people to think about isolation as the most viable way to keep violence away. Participant 002 is a social worker who was involved in many international programs for youth and violence prevention for over a decade. She introduced me to many of the other participants with whom I spoke

³⁹ Both authors address the reappearance of death squads in El Salvador during peace times.

and who, later on, allowed me to stay in one of the areas where I conducted participant observation. P002 has lived many extreme situations outside her job and she has always lived in a *colonia* dominated by the MS-13. Around her house one can see the imposing murals of the local clique: JLS or *JuerguerosLocos Salvatrucha*. She, as many other participants in this study, is forced to cope with the constant threat of being caught in situations that will inevitably result in disastrous consequences.

P: ...yo siento que la migración se da porque la gente se mete en problemas que no debe. O están en el lugar equivocado a la hora equivocada ¿vea? Como le pasó a una vecina que mataron a un muchacho en frente d la casa de ella y como ella vio, le dijeron “le damos 24 horas para que usted se vaya” y ni modo, tuvo que migrar porque si te quedás, van a empezar a investigar y ... entonces el problema que se da es ese, **por eso le digo que lo mejor es estar en su casa con puerta cerrada, así no se ve nada, no se oye nada y no hay problema.**”

P002. Social worker. p. 3.

A self-imposed curfew is a well-known practice enforced by the context of coercion and the rule of silence, from which it derives. The regulative principle of this rule is incorporated in the minds of people and it conditions their activities. This behavior resonates with what Moodie (2010) pointed out as the “market logic” in which individuals strategize and are responsible of their security (Brown, 2003; Zilberg, 2011; Moodie, 2010).⁴⁰ Here too, as she explains in her book, avoiding violence has become a matter of individual strategy (Moodie, 2010, p. 173). Public security is now a matter of citizen security, and citizens have to manage and deal with violence no matter who generates it: gangs or the state. Banishment from the public scene was implemented with

⁴⁰ Brown explores the neglected aspects of neoliberalism in the social realm; Moodie explains the self management of risk in post-war El Salvador as an effect of neoliberalism in collective and individual life, and Zilberg, she deals with the reproduction of the “gang threat” as a way to mask the transnational production and reproduction of state-led violence –without acknowledging that gangs also create this violence.

different intensity among participants. And during participant observation, I also noticed that there were other factors associated with this practice.

Fragmentary-camouflaged curfews

Gangs generate violence, but the gang abatement policies⁴¹ implemented to repress them have only increased the levels of violence (Zilberg, 2011, p. 177), thus have proven to be ineffective to solve the issue. However, in November 2009 the Funes administration (2009-2014) authorized the deployment of more soldiers on the streets and allowed them to carry out police functions such as “arrests, searches and check-points on roads (Savenije & Van der Borgh, 2015. P. 164)”. However –in my perspective and based on the field work I conducted– five years after Funes administration and the collapse of the *gang truce*, soldiers on the streets had implemented more than “arrests”. The military were supposed to “support” police operations, but each time they were out on the streets of the urban areas of La Juega or its rural zones, their presence represented a *de facto* curfew. When the soldiers were out, people from the surroundings opted to lock themselves up. Plus, this camouflaged curfew had another characteristic. It was fragmentary, in the sense that it only functioned within the localized area that the soldiers were patrolling. But as conflict between gangs, these *de facto* curfews are unpredictable, thus in this sense, the Salvadoran state is an accomplice of gangs in using coercion as a means to obtain recognition and perpetuate power. Local *toques de queda* were announced by the military in specific zones as the following excerpt from my field notes proves:

⁴¹ The *Mano dura* and *Súper Mano dura* anti-gang policies implemented by the past presidents, Flores and Saca, respectively, included joint police military operations.

It is past five o'clock and I am still at the *Alcaldía* of La Juega. I suddenly remember that my landlord had told me not to stay up till late around the market, and the *alcaldía* is just in front of the market. I still need to buy some stuff there, so I hurry up. Everybody at the market is picking up, everyone is in a rush; it is closing down. I can't find the stand that I'm looking for, everyone is looking in different directions, like looking for something, but I can't see anything; tension fills the vacuum left by the scattered rumor of the crowd; this place is getting empty. I step outside the market; the small shops around it are also closing. I stop walking, so I can think where to go. One of the ladies that I interviewed in the past days appears suddenly and asks me:

L: Eli, *cipota*, what are you doing here? What do you need? We have to leave here, come with me, let's go."

M: So it seems!

I tell her in complete confusion, but very glad to meet her. I follow her through the street that runs parallel to the *Alcaldía*; she walks quickly as we leave the market behind, I turn back to see what is going on and then I see them coming off the market, like sweeping people away, the soldiers. "Where are you going?" She asks, I tell her that I'm heading towards the central park. She tells me to hurry up and to go home as she turns on a corner. I walk swiftly to the park and stay there for a while to see if the soldiers show up, but they don't."

(Field notes, La Juega, July 29, 2014)

After that day I learned that the two streets that run parallel to the market are the murky limits that defined the territories dominated by the 18th street gang and the MS-13; most part of the market belongs to *la dieciocho*'s territory, but the *colonia* at the back of the market and left of it is already JLS's territory. So the territorial limits of the local cliques were there. The "sweeping" enacted by the soldiers, was the curfew sign for the market sellers to finish up and for the people living on the market's surroundings to go home and lock themselves up. These localized curfews didn't happen all the time; they were occasional, but not random. My landlord and roommate told me that night that soldiers were there when "something" happened, "like a burglary". My questions to him continued as I reproduce my field notes below.

E: But why would soldiers guard a market?

L: No. They (soldiers) are there to detain *mareros*, if they resist, they'll kill them and if they open fire they will kill them too".

(Field notes, La Juega, July 29, 2014)

Those were the last words of my landlord who found my last question awkward: Were soldiers there to kill everyone as they pleased because, who can distinguish who is a gang member and who is not?⁴² My point was that neither people nor the state knows who is a gang member and who is not. Gangs rule through fear, but so does the state. People in La Juega impose curfews upon themselves because they know they can be caught up in random crossfire and other violent situations, but the state assists these practices that distort the public life by announcing that, in localized zones, they too, will open fire. They “ring the bell” so people voluntarily engage in self-imposed curfews. The gangs dominate through fear, and so does the state, even when people misrecognize the state as a source of protection.

I have explained that people adopted practices of friendly mistrust towards others for the purpose of explaining that cordial and friendly behavior is in reality tamed by suspicion and mistrust because participants constantly feared friction in daily interactions with gang members or their close ones. I have also shown two types of curfews; the first is a self imposed strategy to avoid any kind of conflict with gang members or their dynamics; the second is also self imposed, but it is state-led. It is a *de facto* curfew led by the presence of soldiers on localized places where territorial disputes

⁴² Zilberg has already pointed out how racial police profiling in the United States and in El Salvador make youths with no affiliation to gangs more vulnerable (2011, pp.196-204). Soldiers “supporting” police operations like arrests, etc., act in the same way. However, currently, youths are even more vulnerable because soldiers are far more aggressive.

among gangs seem to be possible or where there might be a problem with gangs.

However, the last type of curfew seems to be just a state strategy to make people understand curfew practices as practices of protection and justify state violence. Nonetheless, are these strategies enough to avoid conflict? Is avoiding conflict all together even possible? What happens when people are already in the midst of a problem with gang members, their families, relatives, sympathizers, candidates or dynamics?

Bargaining with power

Adopting a series of precautionary strategies to avoid standing in the midst of a conflictive interaction with someone related to gangs or their dynamics is not enough. It is not enough because encounters and conflict with these powerful actors and their activities happen regularly –people fear the sudden advent of violence. In fact, the routine character of their presence is something that people in La Juega have to cope with every day. And in order to survive gangs’ whim they must bargain.

Negotiation –as a process that generates an exchange⁴³ is actually a common practice (Bourque & Thuderoz, 2011). As Bourque et al. (2011) explain, “negotiation, when extended to the ordinary social life, is a *legitimate* principle of social regulation (Bourque et al., 2011, p.7)”. It is a product of rules and it produces agreements in accordance to those rules (Bourque et al., 2011, p.7). Bargaining with gangs, as other strategies, is the result of the constraint imposed by the rule of silence or at least it is related to it. Since people cannot call the police or other actors with the same power to mediate conflict –as far as I was able to observe– any complicated situation with a gang member has to be dealt directly with the gang. People bargain for their lives, safety, their

⁴³ Main perspectives and specific fields of study about negotiation in Bourque & Thuderoz (pp. 27-28).

continuity in the community and stability –a dim stability with power– in exchange of recognition, in exchange of a *de facto* legitimacy, in exchange of status in the social life. Hence, negotiation with local cliques is an *effective* regulatory mechanism, which generates social bonds that intertwines these groups with communities (Bourque et al., 2011, p.8).

The following bargaining strategies or practices show how people have managed to solve problems with gangs, but with an implicit trade-off. I will show that in order to avoid death or exile, people are forced to regularize relations with gangs. This entails granting gangs' dynamics of violence a place in the public life; bargaining spaces of authority, making petitions to the gang hierarchy and finally, conceding them “small favors”.

The streetlight truce: merging fields

The exercise of violence among gangs informs their hierarchy. It creates status within and among them. In order to gain status, a gangster or gangsters must attack their rivals; they must elaborate strategies to go into their territories and kill them. This dynamic has a profound effect in people's daily lives –as the curfew strategies showed. Indeed, La Juega's market was part of gang's urban territorial limits. It was just a street that separated cliques from the 18th street from that of the MS-13. So, confrontations between cliques haunted the air, but no one seemed to know when they would materialize. But this tormenting situation is not the same everywhere in the community. In the rural areas of La Juega, clique's territorial limits are more apart. Because of the landscape of hills, long fields, *milpas*, etc., the immediate proximity of rivals is more reduced. But this doesn't mean that confrontations between gangs are any less in these

areas or less violent. In fact, cliques closely monitor their territories in the rural *cantones* of La Juega. These surveillance activities interfere with local public activity –with no chance of avoidance. The following case often shows on how addressing public services that interfere with gang territorial surveillance, resulted in incorporating the clique’s dynamics into the public, community space. P004 is one of the community leaders of *cantón Las Flores*. He was amongst the first participants with whom I started to spend more time. Aside from his role as the director of the communal center, and the one in charge of supervising and implementing projects coming from the Alcaldía, he is a dedicated farmer. He knows the area well. He grew up in La Juega, and *Las Flores* has always been his home. He has seen the growth and expansion of gangs in his community and he understands that besides corpses and coffins, little comes from confronting gangs.

He also knows that resorting to the police in case of conflict with the local clique is not just foolish, but fruitless. Therefore, P004 has had no choice but to figure out his ways with power. Among his various experiences on how he has managed to maintain the dim stability between the power of the local clique and his own role as a communal authority, his life and everything else, the following excerpt from his interview is the most elucidating.

P: Porque la zona más fregada es la de allá arriba, pero igual, yo fui allá arriba y este, aquél día fuimos para reparar unas lámparas con los de la alcaldía y estaban los muchachos ahí, me llamaron y me dijeron “quién es el que anda coordinando esas lámparas”. Yo. “¿Y vas a poner lámpara aquí?” Por qué, le digo yo “Porque fijáte que aquí nosotros pasamos cuidando y no queremos que pongan lámpara...” Si ustedes no quieren, no; si ustedes no quieren no porque yo no quiero generarles problemas a ustedes ni que ustedes me generen problemas a mi. De acuerdo, si ustedes no quieren, yo aquí me quedo, sigo para otro lado y ya.

P004. Community leader & agriculturer. p. 7

This experience is quite illustrative of moments when gang dynamics tie in with the public field. In other words, P004 experience captures the process in which community concerns give priority to gang necessities, thus conceding them importance, status, in the public life. The gang and the community seem to merge in dreadful agreement.

P: Bueno, ¿qué hago? qué estoy haciendo yo, lo que estoy haciendo es tratando la manera de allegar y no enojarme o decir... o molestarlos a ellos, ellos se sienten bien conmigo... “¡¡¡No que aquí yo soy mandado y que... !!!” Cada quien tiene derecho de opinar, cada quien tiene derecho de decir... de manifestarse pues ¿vea? porque si ellos dicen “fijate que [esas esquinas] son de nosotros, aquí no queremos aquella luz porque vienen los otros y nos ven de lejos...” ¡Ahí está! no hay pena, ahí está, ahí no la pongo y ahí estuvo y ahí estuvo pues, y los bichos “jefe y todo pues” me conocen pues, y por la gracia de Dios, me respetan.”

P004. Community leader & agriculturer. p. 7

The streetlight truce is a symbolic agreement in which the gang dynamic is considered as part of the public life. Gangs' dispute is accepted; their fight recognized and the necessities of the local gang are granted public status. By not installing the streetlight, P004 recognized gang dynamics as an important factor of public life, thus engulfing and intertwining it with the gang dynamic. However, this is not the only example. Local actors not only bargain with the clique's dynamics. Local school teachers also found themselves embroiled in complex situations where, the “jurisdiction” of gang seems to merge with the field of educational institutions.

Bargaining spaces of authority

Incorporating gang dynamics into the public life of the community is not the only way people bargain a relatively peaceful coexistence with these groups. The school is also an important site where schoolteachers and principals are also confronted with the powerful status that affiliation to gangs concedes to some of their students. The authority of the school staff in La Juega's school system has been severely affected by gang dynamics on many fronts. For example, as Zilberg has already pointed out, not only businessmen, but also school principals have been subjected to extortion and have contributed to the gang's treasury (Zilberg, 2011, p. 192).

However, power threatens power in many ways and in different arenas, and it is not just the convertibility of violence into economic capital that confronts school staff and adds to their fear. Their role as authorities in schools is quite often assailed by death threats. The authority status of teachers in their classrooms is challenged by the authority status that the exploitation of violence grants to clique members on the streets. The power on the street permeates the school. Given this circumstance; school directors have had no choice but to negotiate, find a solution –if any– by approaching these group's members, relatives, affiliates, sympathizers, and so on. During my fieldwork research in La Juega I interviewed two teachers; a principal and an assistant director of two different schools located on 18th street territories. In our conversations about interactions with gang members, sympathizers or students with some kind of relation to them, the situation that both teachers exposed deals with negotiating strategies that they implemented to keep the way gang's obtain their authority status on the street, away from entering the realm of the school. But as the interviews unfolded, this was already happening. They explained that

coercion had already been socialized as a means to satisfy needs. Both spoke with a resigned astonishment about how extortion was seen by students as an acceptable activity.

P006, the principal of a school located in the *colonia San Jacinto*, speaks about students that are relatives of gang members and that have come to normalize or speak naturally about their sources of income. “Why not take what I cannot earn?”. But she insists, and her teachers do too, on trying to present the school as a viable way of living. But they already know that the battle is a lost cause. The teacher’s disappointment is complete and her frustration becomes evident when she recalls that her authority is severely diminished by facts. She knows that education is not a way to improve, not anymore.

She explains a very complex context in which violence, as a means to satisfy needs is becoming normal. What can she teach to students when she acknowledges that her job seems to be less and less effective and violence more and more promising?

It is in this broader context where her status as an authority is challenged by the status secured through violence, on the street, to gang members and their affiliates and relatives. When the street permeates the school, as the excerpt from the following interview shows, part of the school activities froze. After a death threat made to a teacher by a relative of a gang member, the teacher had to suspend her activities; she was dispossessed of all protection. The institution couldn’t apply sanctions, so negotiations had to be brought to the front to restore the order.

P: Los maestros tuvimos que resolver un problema con un niño que amenazó de muerte a una maestra.

I: Y cómo fue eso?

P: Siempre hay malos entendidos entre los chicos ¿no? Este... seguramente no se sintió bien que la maestra le haya llamado la atención por una tarea, se molestó, lo comentó con otra persona y esta otra persona se encargó de... vía electrónica amenazar a la maestra.

I: Y miembros de pandillas o no?

P: Sí.

I: Y cómo se resolvió el problema?

P: Gracias a Dios son cipotes que han crecido aquí ¿verdad? Entonces hubo que abordarlos, como le decía como el problema de mi hija, diferente cuando usted dice: de dónde viene? porque tiene que negociarlo ¿verdad? entonces lo que hicimos es platicar con él, llevarlo a como centro escolar, nosotros tratamos la manera de, qué le digo, nosotros tenemos la filosofía, un cipote en la calle es un candidato más, entonces nosotros tratamos la manera de orientarlo, no le voy a decir que queremos llenar sus vacíos porque no podemos, hay vacíos que competen a los papás nada más! no a nosotros como docentes; sin embargo, tratamos de escuchar al cipote, aconsejarlo, cuando las etapas de su noviazgo, entonces, orientarlo un poquito aunque sea ¿verdad? Entonces este niño empezó aquí desde pequeño, por lo menos yo tuve que sentarme con él a platicar, de hacerle ver algunos aspectos y el niño gracias a Dios, entendió, y dijo: no seño, disculpe. Y lo resolvimos, no pasó a más. Pero sí existió esa presión de cierto momento ¿verdad? de la amenaza y más que los cipotes no se van con uno, se van con su familia. Y eso... uno de padres... quiere proteger a sus hijos ¿no?

I: Aaa, pero él le dijo a un miembro de su familia... de su misma familia...

P: Al hijo de la maestra.

I: Amenazó al hijo de la maestra?

P: Y a la maestra: dile a tu mamá que si anda con eso la vamos a matar, sino ya sabemos dónde estudian ustedes ¿verdad? es una amenaza directa. Y la maestra entró en crisis también y ya de un momento a otro quiso irse, pues, de acá, y de hecho una semana se ausentó y se presentaba a la departamental, por miedo a venir, pero tampoco podía vivir en una situación así todo el tiempo había que resolver.

I: Y nunca pensó en llamar a la policía... no... por lo mismo verdad... sí,

ya sé... ok...”

P006. School Principal. p. 5-16.

The teacher had to recognize the power of the gang on the street in exchange for the death threat withdrawal in order to secure a degree of autonomy between the different fields in which gangs operate and teachers operate. P006 had to remind the boy that threats cannot function in school. She needed to explain that status in school is acquired differently than on the streets. Through Bourdieu's lens, she had to make visible the fact that violence was not convertible as capital in school. However, students' accounts about the fulfillment of human necessities through dead threats to the wealthier, was also challenging for the teachers. According to them, some students described extortion as becoming the norm while they questioned the utility of the school system to satisfy their needs. As Squires (2009, p. 245) noted "...the limits of meritocratic individualism as a vehicle for widespread social inclusion has probably been reached in our late modern [...] societies." This couldn't be truer for the experiences of teachers in La Juega's school system. In the Salvadoran case, if there was ever a meritocratic system, now it seems totally shut down. Students question the utility of the school system to secure employment and regard street activity as a viable and legitimate alternative to securing a livelihood.

The next examples deal with people's approach to the gang hierarchy concerning, more or less, complex situations between them and gang members, sympathizers or relatives. As in any other hierarchical structure, there is a commanding

line that is based on the status or positions that a gang member occupies within the group. As explained, the highest positions in the gang hierarchy are not for those who can only exercise violence, but for the ones that can manage it. Indeed, as stated by Martínez, gangs are organized structures with a line of command in which the highest positions are taken by gangsters that also meet/have other skills. Between the highest and lowest ranks there is a series of intermediate posts. Gang's in El Salvador also have their bureaucracy.

This is a way to draw a picture of gangs as organizations that have a system of tasks according to the line of command and that any activity has to be communicated or known by the later. Even if, according to Martinez, the 18th street's structure is less vertical or hierarchical than that of the MS, for both parties and their factions, orders from the top of the clique or the gang cannot be disregarded by their members –or at least not without consequences. Therefore, in general, members in the lowest ranks are always subject to their superiors. This difference of power among members of cliques, that which orders decisions as well as actions, divides the groups.

Bargaining with peers

This section is about what Bourdieu refers to as counterparts in different fields or two individuals who wield the same status both in different fields of operation. In the following example, these concepts explain how peer recognition is crucial to establish channels of communication and negotiation between the gang and public schools. Knowledge about gang's functioning is also an asset for people under difficult circumstances to negotiate. Not all threats made by gangsters, sympathizers or affiliates are reasonable threats under gang dynamics. There seems to be, somehow, possibilities to

negotiate threats or at least to understand them. Threats to teachers in schools by their students because of their affiliation to gangs are more common than this study can prove, and it is also common to approach the gang hierarchy in order to bargain. P003 is the assistant director of a school located within 18th street territory. Her husband, a teacher himself, received an indirect death threat. It wasn't clear if the threat was real or just a simple joke made by gang's sympathizers or candidates testing power. However, again in this case the teacher's activities in school were suspended until the doubt about the truthfulness of the threat was clarified.

P:O sí! En el caso ese de la amenaza hacia mi esposo, sucedió eso bien gracioso, gracioso decimos hoy después nosotros. No pues en vez de recurrir a los oficiales, a la policía, investigamos porque la amenaza venía de un alumno hacia el profesor, pero con la duda si era rumor o no porque así se lo plantearon a él “oiga profesor dicen que a usted le van a hacer esto y esto” entonces quedamos como que será verdad, será mentira. Pues la cosa es que se investiga ¿verdad? pasamos a averiguar qué tan cierto iba a ser esa amenaza.

P003. School assistant director. p.6

Uncertainty about the situation made the assistant director engage in a more direct approach to solve the problem. She negotiated directly with the clique's leader of the area where the school is located. This negotiation has a deeper symbolic implication.

What was created lies in the realm of the symbolic because what was exchanged was recognition of power within the field of power. They are counterparts, authorities in their own fields. One is in charge of reproducing the institutionalized form of cultural capital; the other, violence. P003 represents authority within school authority, and she decided to look for her peer in the gang; someone with the same authority than hers. She was going to speak for the actions of her teachers, thus she was searching for someone

that could speak for the actions of gang members. She was looking for the one in charge; she was looking for an understanding with her counterpart.

P: Empezamos a voquear, empezamos a sondear porque uno en las comunidades sabe uno más o menos quienes son y quienes no son, empezamos a averiguar ¿vea? qué zona te toca, qué zonas dominás, qué zona es la que vos dirigís, aaa ok, entonces yo necesito que tu me hagas este favor, necesito que me averigües si esto se va a dar, si esto no se va a dar y por qué. Bueno, resulta que esto no, no es verdad, por lo tanto, usted no tenga pena, dígale al profesor que no, no va a pasar nada, la orden no está dada, no sé por qué. Entonces esto es un rumor de los niños, de algún niño que quiere sobresalir y llamar la atención. Aaa! pero ahí estaba la repercusión, y esos niños por qué, no tiene que tomar esos atributos, bueno. La cosa es que viene mi esposo y llama al menorcito y le dice “sabes tú en lo que te estás metiendo?”

P003. School assistant director. p.6

In this process, she not only gained access to the gang line of command, she also identified members and those who were not. She gained knowledge of the street and a risky capacity to negotiate in the event of another problem.

P: La amenaza se revertió hacia el menor, yo no voy a tomar parte de esto, la cosa van a ir ajustandose, pero gracias a Dios no pasó a más porque se le aconsejó al menor de que esa broma, ese rumor no se volviera a dar ¿verdad? porque después eso se vuelve realidad a oídos de otros, pero el hecho de que tuvimos que recurrir no a la policía sino que a... o sea así estamos, ese es el clima en que estamos viviendo nosotros los salvadoreños, a buscar el apoyo más de los muchachos que de la misma autoridad.

I: Eso es interesante.

P: Entonces, en el caso de nosotros yo más que todo busqué el apoyo de él mismo porque yo dije, y fue yo la que hablé y le dije: ok, si mi esposo ha cometido algo aclaremos aquí y ya por qué, en qué estamos fallando! No sí! Aquí hay que tomar al toro por los cuernos ¿verdad? y que me dijeran por qué. Uno a veces en el mismo trabajo en el gaje del oficio se acostumbra a tratar con gente así. Lo único que ya uno en esa situación ya detecta quién está o es simpatizante, entonces yo eso le dije a él, entonces aquí ya tenemos un aviso de quién es simpatizante, vos en

lugar de tenerlo de enemigo, aliátelo! que sea tu brazo derecho. Así estamos. Aquí sabemos porque aquí, la familia de los niños andan en pandillas y la zona es de pandilleros, pero respetan la escuela gracias a Dios.”

P003. School assistant director. p.6

Educational institutions and their staff have the authority over the education of the population and its staff must exercise this authority role with students. As mentioned, they are seriously confronted with students that bring to the classroom the power derived from their relation to gangs as shown in the last section. If we follow Bourdieu’s conception of a field, the importance of these exchanges at the institutional level through peer recognition, are quite significant. But beyond the conception of field, the significance of exchanges between gangs and formal institutions is that it formalizes its power and it validates them as actors in the field of power.

Favors and petitions to the hierarchy

Likewise, people with no particular roles in local institutions make favors to gang members and petitions to the gang hierarchy. These are also important exchangers in the symbolic realm and are not any less important in helping people endure gangs’ whim. Members of La Juega also resort to the gang hierarchy in order to counteract the inequality of power in which they found themselves when they have conflicts with gang members. In this sense, the concept of ‘protection racket’ serves to explain the symbolic exchanges in the two first examples.⁴⁴ The last one conduces us to think about the variety

⁴⁴ The term protection racket was coined by Tilly to describe the state as organized crime “at its smoothest” (Tilly, 1985, 169). In his words “ Which image the word protection brings to mind depends mainly on our assessment of the reality and externality of the threat. Someone who produces both the danger and, at a price, the shield against it is a racketeer.” (Tilly, 1985, pp.170-171). William Stanley (2010) applies this

and multiplicity of trade-offs that people engage in to avoid the final practice of survival: exile. In this vein, the last example will introduce the case study in which exile constitutes the breakdown of practices used to cope with gangs.

It's like a job

In general, in the everyday life of the collectivity, as with institutions, the socially productive side of violence -its use as a source of power- leaves those who do not exploit it in a completely vulnerable and adverse position *vis-à-vis* those who do –gang members in this case. Turning to the hierarchy is not just a way to counterbalance power, but to seek protection from the power that exploiting violence concedes to its members by resorting to those who manage it and have power over those who exercise it.⁴⁵ In other words, in order to normalize violence, to cope with its contingency, people seek protection from power through power or seek protection from violence from those who also manage it.

P: Bien, el año pasado me hueviaron elotes ahí arriba. Un ciento de elotes, 200 me llevaron, ahí por donde estuvieron ahora por ahí por donde estuvieron, por aquel palo de pino, de la mata de loroco para acá, 200 elotes me hueviearon. Ahora tengo que cuidar con todo [...] no tal vez no me la huevean, tengo que cuidarlo, tengo que andar en la barranca allá, aquí donde andaba abonando y en todo el plano que tenemos ahí...

I: Y supo quién?

P: Unos cipotes de allá al otro lado, y no se lo comieron sino que fueron a venderlos para tener pisto lo hicieron. Cuando yo estaba abonando,

concept to the Salvadoran military state. In his extensive work, he depicts the military as the state faction that “earned the concession to govern the country [...] in exchange for its willingness to use violence against class enemies of the country’s small but powerful economic elite (Stanley, 2010, pp. 8-7)”. El Salvador’s coercive state apparatus (both the military and the police) continues to represent a protection racket for the country’s modern elite (Robinson, 2003, pp. 87-102).

⁴⁵ This is a long held practice by the Italian mafia for example.

peinando y todo eso, no vienen a ayudar, eso es lo... yo digo que me dijeran “regaláme un puño de elotes” yo se los regalo, pero eso es lo que no se siente galán, da cólera, dan ganas de tranquearlos...

I: Pero, entonces, eran bichos que le ayudaban?

P: No. Ellos no le ayudan a uno.

I: Sabe si eran como pandilleros?

P: Algo les gusta.

I: Como que ahí medio...

P: Pero, no [...] a uno sí le dije algo, pasó unos días un chero, que no me hablaba, bien echó de ver, bien echó de ver yo que era él el que andaba, yo me di cuenta bien todito, pero no les dije nada, o sea no pasó nada pues, pero por allá vi otro chero, que es marero y el algo se las puede, ya les mandó a regañar que no estuvieran travesando.

I: Ya, bueno pero entonces usted sí habla con ellos pues.

P: Yo sí soy amigo de ellos, pero hay cosas que uno, aunque no quisiera uno que las anden haciendo, como [...] es normal, ellos hacen lo que ellos quieren.

I: Pero sí trata de dialogar con ellos, de platicar con ellos...

P: Tengo amigos de esos que son, va, como en esa volada son como en un trabajo: hay caporal, hay patrón y algo que manda el [...] entonces uno platica con alguien de esos para que ¿vea? para que no lo anden...

P009. Agricultural worker. p.7.

Aside from the recognition of the gang from the community members themselves as holders and managers of violence, there is also another element in this example that makes gangs an example of a protection racket. This is contained in people's understandings about the gang. The gang is seen as a corporate group and their structure as a bureaucratic division of labor. It is like a job. In this example, it is

compared to the agricultural division of labor. This comparison brings gangs to the everyday life, not to the legal realm, but to the space of the normal. It demystifies and decriminalizes gangs; they are brought to the ordinary, thus making the daily experience of coexisting with gangs bearable and also manageable. Powerful friends are always helpful. Especially if they are at the top of a hierarchical order and when being at the top means that power is not constrained by any rule.

The assembly

I met P380 thanks to one of my gatekeepers. Allan is a health promoter from the ECOSF⁴⁶. His job consists on checking pregnant women and their children in part of the center and rural areas of La Juega. The ECOFS assign to its promoters the areas that they must visit. This is never without inconvenience because of gang's territorial division. Most of the ECOSF's staff is from La Juega; therefore, the managers are aware that the assignment of areas to health promoters has to consider to which territory they belong. Allan's zone was in the MS territory. I accompanied him to his regular visits to the different households to which he was assigned. As explained in the methodology our dynamic went like this: he introduced me to the members of the household and then I explained to them my research and asked them if they could grant me an interview.

Through him, I came to know P380, a "retired" member of *the Juergueros Locos Salvatruchas* (JLS), the local MS-13 clique in La Juega. P380 is also the spokesman's wife who, at the time when this research was conducted, was imprisoned in the penitentiary center located in Ciudad Barrios. Even if she was not the street leader, and thus not engaged in the exercise of violence, her status as a retired member and his

⁴⁶ Equipos Comunitarios de Salud Familiar

relation with the leader made her a sort of bridge between members of the community that had no direct links to the JLS clique. Somehow, she was still involved in “clique affairs”. After a few visits to her house with Allan and a long interview in two parts, I proposed to visit her more regularly. She agreed. I visited her at least three times a week. People would visit her house around four or five o’clock in the afternoon, when the sun and the heat weren’t so merciless. They sit outside to take the air and enjoy the sun down, and if someone appears, they offer a chair, a rock or anything that can pass for a seat.

This is a time when people can sit and talk. During my visits to P380 I saw people coming to her place to talk about all sorts of things: a broken bridge, a boy that hit his grandfather, etc. Once, there was this lady who was explaining some kind of misunderstanding between her daughter and her boyfriend –a member of the JLS.

...P380 gets inside the house and brings some chairs so her neighbors and I can sit. She puts the chairs near the other women and one of them starts to speak about her daughter, P380 is not paying a lot of attention, but the woman continues. Apparently her daughter is dating an MS member...

(Fieldnotes, La Juega, September 4, 2014.)

The woman’s story went like this: her daughter was part of the school band, and the band’s leader had her on facebook. The problem was that the band’s leader’s brother was a member of the 18th street gang. Somehow, the latter appeared on her facebook page in a picture with his brother. and the lady’s daughter boyfriend saw him. The lady found her daughter very worried about the situation, which the lady tried to solve with no success, here is what happened.

Lady: ...so at school she has a classmate who is her friend and the leader of the group [a music band apparently], so she speaks with him, he is the leader and he doesn’t have to do with anything but his brother

does, he is from the “others” but she didn’t know, she has her classmate on Facebook and he has his brother on Facebook, so when he [the MS boyfriend] saw a picture of the brother of this kid with the big “ ! “ [18th sign] he just went... (the lady raises her hands and rolls her eyes, we all laugh) hahaha!!! ... yes, so, she told him what was the situation, but he just kept saying “ this is not right...” and he is just not listening, you know? but what can my daughter do, her classmate is the leader of the group, he doesn’t have anything to do with the “others” and what can he do? His brother is his brother. So I went to talk to him [her daughter’s boyfriend] and I told him – what is happening? why are you angry? And he just kept saying “yo ya le dije a ella” (I already told her), so well...

The laughs that came after the expression in her eyes go away. With her last word her eyes turn glassy, she smiles nervously and she rubs her hands, now on her lap, with anguish. She looks at everyone looking for sympathy. I just blink.

(Fieldnotes, La Juega, September 4, 2014)

With just a few words, her daughter’s boyfriend reminded her how things could turn sour. So she decided to go to P380’s house to explain the problem. She went there hoping that my host would be able to intervene on behalf of her daughter. She wanted P380’s to advocate for her within the highest ranks of the gang. Her daughter was no traitor it was an unfortunate coincidence. That was the message she was advancing with her request for protection. In her case, there was not only a process of recognition of gangs as authorities, but of the “side” the lady and her daughter belonged to. She was paying allegiance in exchange of their lives.

Small favors

I met Doña Paula during my visits to Allan’s assigned households. She is the local midwife, so her job is very related to Allan’s. They were sort of “partners”, but

there was tension between them. Both checked up on pregnant women, the newborn and distributed condoms among the local population. Allan often provided her with clinical material and condoms, but he was never too comfortable with her complaints about how the ECOSF managers treated her. She is another example of the symbolic exchanges taking place in negotiations that help people cope with gangs by establishing regular forms of interaction. Forced or not, Doña Paula managed to survive in MS territory by granting them “small favors”. But in her case, what was on her mind, aside her life was to avoid being forced into exile. Doña Paula goes on and on with the complaint. Allan listens as he checks the water in the *plieta* for mosquito warms and then he kindly interrupts her.

A: Ok Doña Paula, I understand, but you know what I think. We should work together. Here, I brought you the condoms.

He takes out a full box of condoms and Doña Paula takes them and changes the subject of the conversation.

Doña Paula: Ohoo! Thanks Allan! In that sense, you also know that people know me here and I prefer to give these [reference to the condoms], you know, as a form of prevention instead of having them with children, because they are young, you know, **they** come...

I start to imagine that she might be speaking about gang members.

Allan: Here, I also brought you some gauze too.

Doña Paula: Oho thanks! For me it is necessary to have these because, you know, they come here and I prefer to do the favor than to say no, it is better to be on good terms with them.

Doña Paula: If one can do the favor, why not? That is better than to be taken out from here and to be forced to leave here like others have. That is why I tell my son– tell your friends they can come here –. The other day, they came and they told me– Doña Paula, can you come to cure [someone], look, the thing is that he got shot. He was bleeding and I said yes. But when I arrived were he was, his other companions were taking

him to the hospital and I left my first aid kit inside the mototaxi because they had already done what I was going to do, and I left it there... I didn't recover my scissors...

Allan: That was the one that got shot three days ago?

Doña Paula: No, that was like eight or more days ago.

(Field notes, La Juega, September 3, 2014)

There are deeper exchanges in interactions that occur between gangs and the population where they dwell. Doña Paula's and the assembly's examples point out in this direction. I reflected that in both situations, people negotiate with gang members not only to maintain the *status quo*, but also to avoid exile, in the advent of a situation in which the threat of death becomes certain and plausible.

CHAPTER 4: EXILE: GANGS AND THE POLITICS OF FORCED RECRUITMENT

Thus far I have shown how Salvadorans are affected by the dynamics derived from constant confrontations between gangs. The violence of gangs has pervaded Salvadoran communities, transforming the quotidian interactions of its members in profound ways. Schoolteachers, peasants, social workers, taxi drivers, and *torteras* all must fulfill their everyday roles under stifling power relations. All Salvadorans are affected, but not to the same degree and intensity; not all are equally embedded or equally related within the dynamics of gangs. In this sense, youths are more vulnerable to these dynamics because they are the life-blood of gangs.

I argue that young men are the most affected by gang dynamics because they are particularly vulnerable to forced recruitment. I will show that the prevalent presence of gangs make forced recruitment a routine aspect of gang dynamics. However, particular state policies of gang abatement can intensify forced recruitment by triggering “drafts” launched by gangs when their territories are left unprotected. Precipitated by state policies or not, forced recruitment is by definition a non-negotiable practice. Therefore, youngsters are forced into exile.

It is important to note that the economic situation lived by most of the youths affected by gang dynamics is particularly hard. And as stated in the section *it's like a job*, gangs end up becoming a regular actor and the only available solution to a permanent precarious situation. Therefore, it is hard to have a clear perspective on which part of the

youth population migrates exclusively because of gang violence or poverty. In my view, the economic situation and the prevalence of violence in the country are the result of a complex structural political economy, which is not addressed in this work.

The Target Group

There is a particular demographic within the Salvadoran population that is most susceptible to the dynamics of gangs; youth,⁴⁷ in general, face the most complex position *vis-à-vis* the gangs. Youth between the ages of 11 and 25 years old, mostly from poor, rural and urban communities, have serious and complex relations with cliques and their members. Young men fill up the ranks of gangs and they represent the clique's source of expansion. Membership is an essential feature of Salvadoran gangs, defining how gangs are composed and how power is divided among them and in relation to society as a whole. Understanding the importance of membership in gangs sheds light upon the dilemma young men face. Youngsters also develop practices in order to avoid becoming gang members and, more generally, to cope with the routine and overwhelming presence of gangs in their communities. My research shows that it is almost impossible for youngsters from poor communities not to be, at least to some degree, involved with gangs. Furthermore, gang involvement is less a choice and more a necessity. There is no way youngsters can survive and endure gang dynamics with no connection with the local clique members at all. The dynamics of violence in which youth become trapped are part and parcel of everyday life. Gang members, their sympathizers, and non-gang members

⁴⁷ Sexual violence against young woman is another important aspect of gang dynamics, which is not included in this study.

are all mixed and interrelated by the same social context; they are all woven in the social relations that bind them to the communities where they belong. Non-membership and membership to a clique does not necessarily divide young Salvadorans. Members and non-members from any given clique, or from any given place in El Salvador have known each other during the course of their lives. Most of them have grown up in the same locality, they know the same people –the same social capital– and are bound by common experiences. That is a bond that is not easily broken; sometimes because it's convenient, sometimes because this bond represents friendship, sometimes because it is foolish to show contempt or hate to gang members, and sometimes because gang dynamics of violence have always been part of their daily lives. In this sense, forced recruitment is also a common feature of gang's presence.

The Politics of Forced Recruitment: We Want You!

By forced recruitment I refer to the gradual but systematic process embedded in structural socio-economic conditions by which youth are coerced into the gang dynamics. Most youths are persuaded by many circumstances to join gangs and it usually occurs with considerable regularity. It occurs systematically, but it's not always predictable; it is embedded in social relations and economic conditions. On one hand, the following vignette explains how, for example, economic conditions are crucial factors that force many youngsters into those groups.

Look, I see a very serious situation with young men... remember that we were talking about what gangs are, right? So, they [youngsters] are already *sofocados*⁴⁸ [by the economic situation] because they can't find a job or

⁴⁸ In common Salvadoran parlance *sofocado* means literally suffocated.

they have these jobs that are worth nothing even if you work night and day, and then they [gang members] come and if one of them tells the other [non-gang member]: “look, I’m going to give you this much and you are going to walk with us and you are just going to run small errands...” and that is maybe to collect the famous “rent”, so they [non-gang members think] “Oho well, I’m going to get this much... then I’m going to stay!”... that is how.

P005. Agricultural worker p. 9

On the other hand, forced recruitment is not a rupture in the everyday interactions between those who are gang members and those who are not; it is the actualization of coercion, which is always present and that leads everyone to establish relations to avoid it. The moment when someone is forced to join a gang can happen at any time, it illustrates the continuum of gang dynamics, which extends through the everyday relations between gangs and the communities where they reside. It takes place in a subtle manner as it is disguised in the routine character of gangs’ presence. In general, there are no specific events or “drafts” in which gangs engage in forced recruitment. However, this case will illustrate how, police raids, precipitated a generalized event of forced recruitment.

As I stated in the methodology section, I did not meet P0022, the main actor in this case, through any of my gatekeepers. I met him by coincidence, as I describe in the following excerpt from my field notes.

It was 5:30 in the morning when I arrived to the bus station in Tapachula, the closest Mexican city to the Guatemalan border. I was going back to El Salvador after having interviewed Rafael, the director of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in that city. I was still thinking about what Rafael told me “... what kind of choice is joining a gang, I can’t think of a situation that is not forced”. I was about to jump into an old-luxury, rusty bus that will travel for nine hours to the city of San Salvador. I liked it because it had two floors for passengers, and in the second level, you could sit and watch the road from above.

I was standing in line to board the bus. There were at least 15 people, but just four of us jumped on the second floor of the bus. Among us, there was a guy, tattooed to the neck. He was wearing a pair of heavy jeans, black sneakers, a hoodie, and he only had a small backpack, nothing else. He was out of place. He was no tourist. This *foreigner* sat on the first row across the bus corridor, just next to me. I would later find out that he was a fugitive; his passport had expired, he had no idea where he was going and he had Aryan brotherhood tattoos in his arms and neck.

There was this other man... an intriguing man; he said he was from El Salvador, but he had lived in Mexico for too long. Who knows where he was from. He had that smooth accent from Mexico City; he had that tricky and vivacious way to speak that converts what is spoken into mocking images, leading the conversation to laughs. He was very friendly during the whole trip. We talked about the routes to get to the northern border of Mexico, he knew the Mexican territory pretty well. I found out later that he was a *smuggler*.

The bus stopped at the border. We had to get our passports stamped before entering Guatemala. It was also the time to exchange money, buy an *atole*, some bread and a coffee for the trip. I jumped off the bus and went to get my documents checked. I changed a few bucks after bargaining for a while, and there he was, the *foreigner*, all the *cambistas* were trying to sell him *Quetzales* –the Guatemalan currency– for his dollars. He didn't seem to understand a thing. Then I saw the *smuggler* approaching the scene. I turned around and went to buy provisions for the road. I went back to the immigration office; our bus was parked just at the entrance. I was waiting for the bus to get open; I was zipping my coffee when I saw the smuggler trying to speak with the foreigner, he caught me overlooking at them and he smiled. The bus driver came and we all start boarding the bus. The smuggler suddenly started to tell me that the foreigner was about to change all his money and apparently he wasn't going to stay in Guatemala.

Me: Seriously?

Smuggler: Yes, I was asking him where is he heading to, but I don't understand what he is saying, so... I speak a little bit of English, but I don't get what he says. Where are you from?

I told him I was a student, and all the rest, while we jumped on the bus again. I sat and prepared to speak with my new acquaintance. But then, P0022 peaked out of his seat and asked me where I was going. That is how we met. He is a twenty-three year-old young men from *el Puerto Grande*. He is slim, but strong. Like the kind that has been doing physical labor all his life. His two front teeth are sparkling metal, like if someone had just poured liquid gold on to cover them all. The other two teeth were also delineated with the gold. He is a calm, gentle young man. He started

asking me what I was doing in El Salvador, so I explained again that I was a student and that I was after the connection between migration and violence. He didn't tell me right away that he was coming back from a four month stay in Mexico, waiting for his relatives to help him "jump"⁴⁹ to the United States, because he had fled forced recruitment from his hometown.

I asked him if he knew about applying for the refugee status condition in Mexico, but as many others, he answered that the process would take too long; nothing was sure, he was not going to be able to move in the country and he was unable to find work. In any case, things didn't work out. He stayed in Mexico and his family in the USA never helped him, so he was going back to El Salvador.

Me: You are going to get killed.

P0022: Maybe after a while! We'll see things are calm now...

We laughed, nervously. I asked him if I could interview him for my study and visit him, he agreed.

(Field notes, Trip from Tapachula to San Salvador, August 19, 2014)

The purpose of this case study is to show that the young face particularly hard circumstances and are limited in the strategies that they can implement to cope with gangs. P0022 represents one of the many cases in which all possible strategies to deal with the local clique have been exhausted. In the end, his life was in danger and bargaining was not a possibility. The following account will elucidate the subtle but systematic features of forced recruitment and how, in P0022's case, it became a precise "draft" like event precipitated by state policies. This case also sheds light on the uprooting process of exile, which is the regular, structural strategy to resist "gang politics" of forced recruitment.

⁴⁹ Jump means "brinco" in Spanish and it is generally used both to refer to gang's ritual of initiation and the act of crossing the U.S.-Mexican border.

Case study: P0022

P0022 lives near *El Tacaná*, one of the most attractive surf beaches in El Salvador. It is a gated tourist attraction reminiscent of Southern California life style. P0022 and his family have always been employed in this area for a salary that in return does not allow access to it. During the interview, P0022 described to me how year after year foreign investors, mainly from the United States, in partnership with the Salvadoran elite, acquired the lands near the beach, raising the lands' value as they re-fabricated the *way of life* from the foreign dominant culture. The new Salvadoran neoliberal upper class (Robinson, 2003) has undoubtedly encouraged and benefited from the small-scale *lifestyle* reproduction in El Salvador's landscape, by making their country "accessible" for foreign consumption. We came to this beach town for the interview because, as I'll explain further, it was literally impossible to speak in his house.

As we arrived to *El Tacaná* I saw a checkpoint with three guards at the entrance. As we walked in, I couldn't help but see the resemblance of my surroundings to Pacific Beach or La Jolla Shores where UCSD is located. This place just looked the same, there were vegan restaurants, and restaurants selling burgers, smoothies and wood fire pizzas.

There is something macabre surrounding touristic places located in countries where wealth is extracted and concentrated in just a few hands. P0022 and his family –his mother, father⁵⁰ and brother– have always worked in the maintenance and security of private plots. This is an informal job frequently undertaken by poor people. These private properties are often referred to as *ranchos*. They work full time in exchange for meager

⁵⁰ His father left before he reached the age of ten.

pay and the chance to live on a small portion of the property. The family's income has oscillated between 120 and 160 dollars a month. P0022 recalls that, since he was six years old, him and his family have been working in the area. It has not been a steady job, thus requiring them to move from property to property over time. He couldn't finish high school because of the overwhelming fact that they needed "food in the house", and he just couldn't cover the educational expenses. He left school three times, and tried to go back three more times, before he finally abandoned his studies in order to work and help his family. At the age of nineteen he got his first job –aside helping his family in the *ranchos*– in the construction of a hotel located in El Tacaná. Afterwards he got a job as a janitor in the same hotel. But he quit because he had problems with a coworker. Then he started to work full time in the *rancho* where he lived with his mother and brother. His mother had been working in that property for three years, P0022 only lasted six months in that place.

The tragedy started when his mother had an accident. She fell down and hurt her foot; since then, she lost a lot of mobility, and was not able to perform her daily duties. What exactly happened to her was impossible for them to know, they didn't have money to allow an appropriate medical examination. His mother recalls what the owner of the *rancho* told her after the accident "why would she keep her if she was no longer useful". This was enough to kick P0022's mother off of the property, but he continued to work and live there. He was now responsible for the care of his mother and his little brother.

They never had a house of their own until the owner of one of the properties they guarded and lived in sold the place they were taking care of. Out of compassion, the owner offered them a small piece of land next to the main highway; very close to the *El*

Tacaná beach. There, they started to build, little by little, a home made out of rusty metal sheets. That is where his mother and little brother moved in after the accident. P0022's main job in the *rancho* –from where his mother and brother were evicted– was maintenance and security, until the owner started to rent the place. His responsibilities on the ranch increased. He then had to look after the guests, clean their rooms, and be available to open and close the gates for them at any time of day or night, among other things. He was exhausted and the money wasn't enough. He asked the owner to raise his sixty-dollar biweekly payment to seventy, but the owner's final answer was blunt “*tú eres el que me tiene que pagar por estar viviendo aquí en mi casa en mi propiedad*”. He left the job. Without a job, a sick mother and a brother to support, P0022 also began to face forced recruitment. This participant explained that at the beginning of 2014 there were two major waves of forced recruitment in *el Puerto* directly linked to police raids; when clique members are put into prison, the clique is left with few elements to watch the streets, hence there is a need to recruit those who are around. Plus, his situation was particularly complex because of where his home is located. When we set up our meeting, he invited me to stay over with him and his family. I agreed. He went to pick me up at *El Puerto de la Libertad*, the urban center of that coast. We took another bus to go to his house. On the way, he warned me not to talk about his case inside his house.

You see, the local clique spokesman's parents live next to my house. At the back there is the house of a *pastor*, but he speaks a lot with the spokesman. The house that is in the corner belongs to the *palabrero*'s brother and you can hear everything, you can hear everything, you can hear everything that they say and they can hear us too. That is why we can't speak about them in my house. Sometimes my mom and I listen to what they say, and they say things like “I'm gonna kill that *hijoeputa!*” And then you can hear them leaving and then coming back and talking on the phone and saying, “It's done.” So we can't talk about it at home because they can hear us. You'll

see why.

Fieldnotes, August 30, 2014

P0022's home is located along the highway. It is right in front of a dusty soccer field. Between the soccer field and the highway, there are some houses hidden in the vegetation, the rest of what appear to be some sort of buildings are shacks. One of those shacks is P0022's home, which is just in front of the soccer field surrounded by other houses. His house has a kind of hand made wire fence. On the side of the soccer field, there are big buckets that contain water and a *lavadero*, the bathroom is at my right, outside the house. These conditions are always egregious. P0022's house is made of metal sheets or *lámina*. Inside, there are four small improvised rooms: a kind of hall with no roof, a space where there is a table and a small gas stove, and two rooms separated with wood rafters and cloths, which divide where the beds are set. The mattresses of the beds are hard and seem to be made of some kind of straw. The inside of his house is exceedingly warm. There is no running water and the floor is just dust. There is no shower, and the bathroom is just a hole in the floor with a cement toilette to sit on. After meeting and conversing briefly with his mother, we leave for the *El Tacaná* beach where we can talk. Immediately after gaining some distance from his place, P0022 asked me if I figured out why we couldn't talk about gangs and forced recruitment inside his home. I answered that it was because of the metal sheets. They were obviously not thick enough and allow one to hear everything, whether they want to or not. As we walked towards the beach P0022 also mentioned that the soccer field, which is just in front of his house, happens to be the place where the local MS cliques of *el Puerto* hold their "meetings", as

he continued to teach me about his everyday conditions and interactions with gangs.

P: [...] Yo me fijo porque ahí se llegan a reunir frente a mi casa; entonces, se ponen a hacer las reuniones y ahí hablan algo digo yo porque pasan ahí bastantes horas hablando...

P0022. Forced Recruitment. p. 11.

Crucial Information

P0022 like many other young Salvadoran men reside in a social environment where gang dynamics are prevalent and dominant. When they enter into a clique, young men do not leave behind their relationships with their friends and the rest of the members in their communities. In this sense, even when youngsters are not part of any gang, they do have some sort of relationship – with local cliques and its members. Even though such relations stigmatize them, they are also channels for survival. P0022 began to realize that the MS clique members were “jumping ” young men against their will because he could see how boys “ desde diez años” were being beaten up in the soccer field in front of his house. But according to P0022, it was a friend of his, a member of the local clique, who warned him about the forced recruitment.

P: Esta vez los estaban forzando, a la fuerza tenían que meterse porque ellos los agarraban y se los llevaban y quisieran o no quisieran ellos los agarraban y los brincaban.

I: Y tú, cómo fue que te enteraste de que lo estaban haciendo a la fuerza?

P: Pues un amigo de que estaba en eso, tenía como una semana de haberse metido en eso de las pandillas, pero el se metió por lo que le conté... pero él se metió por gusto de él, entonces él me contó todo de que no anduviera saliendo mucho pues, porque me podían decir algo ahí, que me metiera y me tenía que meter después, pero yo le dije de que si yo quería me metía y si no, no.

P0022. Forced Recruitment. p.11.

But his bravado about his possibility to chose whether he “wanted” or not to join the local clique, faded away as P0022 explained what he had to do to avoid forced recruitment. P0022 explained that a few days after his friend’s advice, the tension on the streets escalated. He managed, as others had, to implement strategies to cope with the local clique. As previously mentioned in this study, through the practice of “friendly mistrust”, P0022 avoided upsetting the local clique members. He mentioned knowing several powerful gang members, and how this was necessary to allow a relationship of “good standing” with them. As we crossed the highway on our way to *El Tacaná*, he greeted at least three men, who he identified as members of the local clique. “Mientras te saluden todo está bien” he told me. Knowing them also helped him transit through MS territories when he had errands outside *La Libertad* state. Nonetheless, for P0022 and for his friends, the situation was much worse for them than for older cohorts in their community. Youth represent the life-blood of Salvadoran gangs because the possibilities to accommodate successful cliques short of membership are considerably limited. In any case, the ambiguous practice of friendly mistrust also helped P0022 not just avoid conflict in interactions with gang members –for a while– but this behavior helped him perceive when his precarious relation with the local clique was growing worse. Through this practice, P0022 was able to notice that his refusal to become part of the local clique had become a serious problem, despite his *bravado*.

P: Entonces fue que ellos ya se iban fijando ya lo que iba pasando con ellos y una vez me llamaron a una reunión y que querían que me reuniera y yo les dije de que no, bueno sí les dije “sí voy a ir”, pero ya cuando me dijeron “veníte para mañana a tal hora”, ya me dieron la hora ahí, yo ya no asistí a la reunión. Entonces fue que ellos empezaron más diferentes, enojados, porque yo no había ido...

P0022. Forced Recruitment p.11.

P0022 had to implement a different strategy when he realized that the local clique's members began to change his attitude towards him. Aside the incident mentioned above, P0022 encountered the street spokesman⁵¹ a number of times. The street spokesman told him that *el que lleva la palabra*⁵² had said that P0022 had to attend a meeting.

I: Cuánto tiempo te estuvieron insistiendo con que fueras, con que fueras?

P: Pasaron como una semana en eso, con que tenía que ir y que fuera ahí, yo les decía que no, cuando empezaban así, mejor no salía de mi casa para no estarlos viendo y que no me estuvieran molestando tanto.

I: Pero entonces te quedabas en tu casa?

P: Sí, ahí en mi casa pasaba, ya fue ahí que yo ya... presté el dinero y tenía una bicicleta que hasta la vendí porque ya quería comprar lo que es el pasaporte para salir para allá mejor, entonces fue que vendí la bicicleta y con eso fui a sacar mi pasaporte, para irme para el otro lado, pero con el pasaporte nada más llego hasta Guatemala.

P0022. Forced Recruitment p.11.

At this point, as if he was trying to cope with a similar power than the state itself, P0022 put himself into "house arrest"⁵³. The situation was a time bomb because, as explained, P0022 and his family were constantly involved in gang affairs whether they wanted or not. From his house, one could hear any kind of information related to gang activities. The danger was to hear them. What would happen in something they heard went wrong? They would become immediate suspects. They were continuously listening to information that put them in a place he never wanted to be. There was no choice, no

⁵¹ In gang's hierarchy, if the leader of a clique falls into prison, he designates a Street spokesman who represents him on the streets.

⁵² *El que lleva la palabra* or *palabrero*

⁵³ See Zilberg for 18th Street gang injunction in Los Angeles and its effects (2011, pp. 90-95).

agency, nothing. P0022 and his family didn't choose what to hear. They could cover their ears no doubt, but would that be enough reason if a gang operation went wrong and gangsters believed he snitched? Would closing his eyes not to see the soccer field would help him in any way? The choice of what he had to see and listen had already been made. It was not him who decided. Gangs know well where they thrive *ver, oir y callar*.

At the end, the situation for P0022 had become unbearable. The "We Want You" gang policy became unsustainable. There was no possibility to bargain with the clique and his house arrest couldn't last forever. The local clique members would definitely come for him. Gang politics send him, as many other young men and woman, into exile. The nervous laugh that we shared in the bus, when I told P0022 that he was going to get killed because he had come back, was a bitter reminder of his reality: his return to El Salvador did not suggest that the situation had improved, only that he had to face the consequences of not joining the gang.

Gangs have the tightest grip on Salvadoran society's youth. Youth are the target group of gangs' continuing process of recruitment, whose situation is always complex and liminal. However, security policies aiming to "clear" the streets from gangs, make youths precarious relation with gang members worse, and precipitate "draft" style practices of forced recruitment. In consequence, youth are force into exile, but as this case suggest, exile as a strategy of survival, is becoming less effective to save one's life.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this research I have argued that gangs are parallel structures of power to the state shaping the everyday life of the communities they rule. I have explained that Salvadoran gangs have evolved through time, but that there are no studies that have traced their transformation and the bonds that gangs have built in their communities.

However, I have shown that gangs are currently powerful actors with whom people must negotiate. For that purpose, I have used Bourdieu's lens. I have equated violence as a source of power or capital in order to explain gang dynamics, and its implications in the community life. With Bourdieu's concepts, adapted to the Salvadoran reality, I have explained how the rule of silence is the overarching premise that gangs impose to regulate people's behavior and that people must observe in order to be in compliance with them. But abiding by a rule does not ensure coexistence with gangs. It is the practices or strategies that derive from the constraints imposed by the rule that makes survival possible. Thus, beyond rules, people incorporate practices in their daily lives that can procure them certain stability in their unequal power relation with gangs. In this study, which I carried out in the municipality of La Juega, I observed and categorize different social practices that emerged from coexisting with gangs. Precautionary practices help people avoid conflicting interactions with persons associated with gangs and their dynamics. I explained that La Juega is a community permeated by fear, thus people interact with friendly mistrust in order to avoid problems in their everyday interactions. Self-imposed curfews are the result of the unpredictable character of confrontations between rival cliques, and camouflaged curfews in state security policies

attest to the Salvadoran state complicity in adding more violence to the climate of coercion already in place. As I have addressed, conflict with cliques is not always avoidable. Therefore I have provided an account of different strategies of negotiation that help people counterbalance the power that gangs exert on them. However, in the case of negotiations I have contended that these always entail a trade-off, and in the symbolic field, every negotiation conflates gangs' dynamics with the quotidian life in communities. Therefore, through Bourdieu's lens I have also shown that gang's shape the everyday, the quotidian, the ordinary and that through violence they are successfully recognized.

As I have discussed, conflict with cliques is not always avoidable or negotiable. Through the case study about exile, I have explained that young men are particularly vulnerable to gangs. Given gang's strong presence in communities, relations with gang members are essential to coexist with them. But these relations are always liminal and ambiguous, and entail regular processes of forced recruitment. As the case of P0022 has attested, particular events of forced recruitment are precipitated by police raids, which force youth to engage in strategies of house arrest in order to avoid being forced to fill up the empty ranks of the local gang. Unfortunately, as I have shown, forced recruitment or the threat of it in a place dominated by gangs usually ends up in exile.

There is no doubt that gangs have become a crucial actor –a regular actor– and a powerful one. Gang dynamics, defined as the set of activities that inform gangs' structure and sustain their power, comprise the continuous exercise of violence between gangs, which buttress and shifts positions within gangs' hierarchies. Moreover, other activities such as extortion, territorial surveillance and control over people's mobility function to sustain the power of gangs. Gangs are no longer marginal groups, but powerful actors in

their communities. As shown in the case of La Juega, gangs are the *de facto* authorities who have seemingly entirely monopolized violence, thus breaking the protection racket of the Salvadoran state and challenging it in the field of power.

Moreover, I have shown that gangs are the *de facto* authorities who have seemingly entirely monopolized violence. By imposing rules through the threat of coercion, and by imposing –through these rules– that solutions to any problem can only be dealt directly with them, gangs are both the “the danger and, at a price, the shield against it⁵⁴”, thus breaking at least partially the protection racket of the Salvadoran state. Thus, one may ask is the gang a state or is the state just a gang and killing has become a matter of bureaucracy? To what extent, in this case, is the state complicit to organized crime or is organized crime “the glue” between the state and the gang?

⁵⁴ (Tilly, 1985, p.171)

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