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From Primitive Socialism to Primitive Accumulation:

Gangs, Violence, and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua 1997-2002

By Dennis Rodgers

On January 23, 2003, Dennis Rodgers, a lecturer in development studies in the London School of Economics, visited CERLAC. Rodgers is a social anthropologist by training who has a particular interest in, and expertise on, issues related to violence and crime, youth gangs, urban poverty, and international migration in Latin America (Nicaragua, Argentina, and Colombia) and South Asia (India).

This following are excepts taken directly from Rodgers' lecture notes, in which he explored the pandilla*, or youth gang, phenomenon in contemporary urban Nicaragua. Based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a low income Managua neighbourhood in 1996-1997 and 2002, he traced the emergence and evolution of the Nicaraguan gang phenomenon, focusing on the role of gangs as social institutions and their multifarious ramifications for the constitution of social order in a wider context of urban poverty and social breakdown such as characterizes contemporary urban Nicaragua.*

This abbreviated text was prepared by Diego Filmus.

DYING FOR IT

War, Violence, And Development: Wars and conflict have long been recognised as among the most potent causes of human suffering and societal underdevelopment. But while war is perhaps the most paradigmatic manifestation of violence, it is by no means the only one, and it is certainly not the only one to have critical implications for human well-being and societal development.

Other forms of more "prosaic" – because war, although widespread, ultimately constitutes an extraordinary state of affairs – violence, such as domestic violence or crime and delinquency can also have devastating consequences, sometimes to the extent that from a teleological point of view they can be indistinguishable from war, as I hope to make clear today in relation to criminal violence, and more specifically to criminal gang violence in contemporary urban Nicaragua.

Crime: Crime has increasingly been recognised as a major development concern during the past decade. Crime has increasingly been recognised as a major development concern during the past decade. Crime can also be an important strain on the social fabric. Insecurity can lead to norms of trust and reciprocity being replaced by a Hobbesian "war of all against all", as local community links deteriorate, hampering collective action and co-operation.

On average, crime rates have increased by some 50 percent worldwide over the past 25 years, with a notable surge during the last decade. The phenomenon has affected the entire developing world, but has been particularly marked in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, where crime rates have more than doubled. This is perhaps especially apparent in contemporary Central America, where criminal violence is now so predominant that levels of violence are comparable or even higher than during the war period. In El Salvador, for example, the average number of violent deaths per year exceeded the average tally of the war years by over 40 percent throughout the mid-1990s, while in Guatemala the economic costs of criminal violence were calculated in 1999 to be some US$565 million, compared to an estimated US$575 million loss to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a result of war between 1981 and 1985.

In many ways, it can be argued that although the twin processes of demilitarisation and democratisation which have affected the region in recent years have 'resolved' the region's conflicts "at the formal level of peace accords between armies and insurgents", they have done little "at the real level of people's everyday lives, which remain overshadowed …by violence, today of a more social and multifaceted kind than the polarized and political violence characteristic of the 1980s" (Pearce).

Nowhere is the paradoxical juxtaposition of a less violent period of war and a more brutal peacetime more evident than in contemporary urban Nicaragua, however. Although the notorious war against the Contras in the 1980s grabbed international headlines and was marked by numerous instances of a rare brutality, it was overall a "low intensity war", with relatively restricted direct consequences which generally remained confined to the less-populated rural areas of highly urbanised Nicaragua.

As the Uruguayan sociologist Eduardo Galeano has pithily remarked in his excellent book *Upside Down*, the contrast between the past and the present is consequently all the more striking, for while peace reigned in the streets of the country's cities during the years of war, "since peace was declared the streets have become scenes of war, the battlegrounds of common criminals and youth gangs".

Nicaragua: The country was ruled by the longest-running dictatorship in Latin America history, that of the Somoza dynasty, which after 45 years of reign was finally overthrown in 1979 by the famed left-wing Sandinista revolution after over two decades of bloody civil war.

The triumph of the revolution led to an attritional civil war against the US-supported *Contras* during the 1980s, which only came to an end in 1990, following the electoral defeat of the *Sandinista* regime.

Economically, the country is caught in a downward spiral of both societal and state breakdown resulting in part from the

inefficiency of state institutions, corruption, and reduction of state resources, as well as a profound socio-economic crisis. By almost any measure, Nicaragua is incredibly impoverished.

According to a joint UNDP-UNICEF study adopting a "basic needs" approach to the issue, in 1994, 75 percent of the Nicaraguan population lived in poverty, and 44 percent in extreme poverty. By 1999, these proportions had risen to 89 and 64 percent. Unemployment and under-employment are generally estimated to stand at over 50 percent combined. Job creation is scarce, and local industry is either ill adapted to the global economy or non-existent. Furthermore, inequality is extremely marked; the country's Gini co-efficient is 0.603, making Nicaragua the fifth most unequal in the world (behind Sierra Leone, the Central African Republic, Swaziland, and Brazil).

Partly as a result of these desperate economic conditions, the erosion of the social fabric has reached such dramatic proportions in Nicaragua that it is no exaggeration to talk of a veritable atomisation of life.

"It's each to his own" was a phrase repeatedly used by my informants to describe Nicaraguan social life in both 1996-97 and 2002, and indeed, traditionally solidary social units such as the family, the household, or the neighbourhood have shattered, and networks of trust and mutual aid disappeared. Public areas are neglected, and community organisation is virtually non-existent.

At the same time, while there is no doubt that the country's desperate economic predicament has contributed to this incipient social breakdown, another important factor is undoubtedly the massive rise in criminal violence in Nicaragua since the ending of its civil war in 1990.

Crime In Nicaragua: Certainly, criminal violence has undergone a veritable explosion. Crime levels have risen steadily by an average of ten percent every year since 1990, compared to an uneven average of just two percent during the years of war in the 1980s.

Although the official homicide rate stood at an average of just 16 deaths per 100,000 persons during the 1990s, it is clearly an underestimation. During 10 months of fieldwork conducted in the poor Managua neighbourhood Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996-97, I tallied in total nine crime-related deaths in the neighbourhood, which works out proportionally to a staggering 360 deaths per 100,000 for the same period. The neighbourhood was not so atypical as to make it an exceptional case, and while such a calculation must of course be taken with a pinch of salt considering the small size and unsystematic nature of my sample, it is definitely suggestive that official statistics are wrong.

When I first arrived in the neighbourhood in 1996, I was immediately struck by the prevalent manifest fear of leaving the perceived safe haven of the home, its most obvious manifestation being the passing away of the quintessential Latin American habit of spending one's evenings sitting on the curb side outside one's house, chatting to neighbours and watching the world go by.

By 2002, this had worsened and even the shelter of the home now seemed precarious, as houses were barricaded up, almost becoming little forts from which occupants would emerge as little as possible, and when they did so, restrict themselves to a few fixed routes and destinations.

Pandillas: Now, even if they are by no means solely responsible for the widespread criminal violence in contemporary Nicaragua, the most visible criminal actors are the pandillas, or youth gangs, that roam the streets of Nicaraguan cities, robbing, beating, terrorising, and frequently killing.

These are a ubiquitous feature of many urban neighbourhoods and without doubt significant contributors to the high levels of crime in post-1990 Nicaragua. Indeed, *pandillas* have to a large extent come to symbolically epitomize crime and delinquency in the contemporary Nicaraguan collective consciousness; whenever people talked to me of crime or delinquency, whether in 1997 or 2002, the word "*pandilla*" never failed to materialize in their discourses, to the extent that it was used very much interchangeably with more general terms such as "criminality" or "delinquency".

So, what is a *pandilla*, then? The expression refers to very definite local social institutions. At their most basic, these generally consist of a variably sized group of overwhelmingly male youths aged between 7 and 25 years, who engage in illicit and violent behaviour – although not all gang activities are either illicit or violent – and have a particular dynamic.
Most notably, *pandillas* are territorial and tend to be associated with a particular urban neighbourhood, although larger neighbourhoods frequently have more than one gang and not all neighbourhoods have a *pandilla*, for a variety of reasons including the level of social fragmentation, number of youths, economic factors – the richer the neighbourhood, the less likely it is to have a gang – and also what sort of opportunities neighbourhood youth might have.

The Nicaraguan National Police estimated that in 1999 that there were some 110 *pandillas* in Managua alone – which is made up of some 600 neighbourhoods and spontaneous settlements – incorporating about 8,500 youths. These figures are probably on the low side, and youth gangs are furthermore a growing social phenomenon in Nicaragua

At the same time, however, they are also a changing phenomenon.

The Pandilla In 1996-97: In 1996-97, the neighbourhood Luis Fanor Hernández pandilla was made up of about 100 youths, all males aged between 7 and 22 years old.

The gang was subdivided into distinct age and geographical subgroups. There were three age cohorts – the 7 to 12 years olds, the 13 to 17 years olds, and those 18 years old and over – and three geographical subgroups, respectively associated with the central area of the neighbourhood, the "*abajo*" (or Western) side of the neighbourhood, and the "*arriba*" (or Eastern) side of the neighbourhood.

These different subgroups generally operated separately, except in the context of gang warfare, when different age-cohorts and geographical subgroups would come together in order to defend the neighbourhood or attack another.

Much of *pandilla* activity involved acts of violence. Not all of the gang's behaviour patterns involved violence, of course, but in many ways, it was the group's distinguishing feature, setting them apart from other youth.

In 1996, most *pandilla* violence involved low-level petty delinquency, such as

mugging, pick pocketing, or shoplifting, although a significant proportion did also involve much more violent acts, including armed robbery, assault, rape, and murder, although it should be noted that a golden rule of gang delinquency was not to prey on local neighbourhood inhabitants, and in fact to actively protect them from outside thieves and robbers.

However, perhaps the most frequent form of gang violence at the time were the regular conflicts between gangs which transformed parts of Managua into quasi-war zones, as gang members fought each other with weaponry ranging from sticks, stones, and knives to AK-47s, fragmentation grenades, and mortars, with often obviously dramatic consequences both for gang members and for the local population.

Now, while at first glance these gang wars seemed highly chaotic and anarchic, they were in fact highly organised and displayed regular patterns, and moreover, even if unquestionably frequently deleterious for local neighbourhood inhabitants, they also had definite positive implications.

Although the triggers for gang wars ranged from assaults on individuals to territorial encroachment by other gangs, they always revolved around either attacking or protecting a neighbourhood, with much of the fighting specifically focused either on harming or limiting damage to both neighbourhood infrastructure and inhabitants

The *pandillas* organized themselves into "companies", which operated strategically, expertly covering each other whenever advancing or retreating. There was generally a "reserve force", and although weapons were an individual's own property, each gang member was distributed amongst the different "companies" in order to balance out fire-power, except when a high powered "attack commando" was needed for a specific tactical purpose.

The conflicts themselves were highly regulated, and indeed, one might say ritualised. For example, the first battle of a *pandilla* war typically involved fighting with stones and bare hands, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks and staffs, then to knives and broken bottles, then mortars, and eventually to guns, AK-47s, and fragmentation grenades.

Although the rate of escalation could vary, its sequence never did – i.e. *pandillas* did not begin their wars immediately with mortars, guns, or AK-47. Moreover, battles involved specific patterns of behaviour on the part of active participants, intimately linked to what the gang members called "living in the shadow of death" ("*somos muerte arriba*")

While on the one hand, this expression reflected the very real fact that gang members often found themselves in dangerous situations – something which in itself constituted a dimension of the lives of gang members which was critical to understanding the significance of the ways in which these youths related to each other and to wider society – at the same time, "living in the shadow of death" was more than just a corporeal state of being for the gang members, who used the expression to describe their attitudes and practices.

For them, "living in the shadow of death" entailed displaying specific behaviour patterns, such as flying in the face of danger, exposing oneself purposefully in order to taunt the enemy during battles – battles became almost a kind of ritualized ballet, with gang members running around, exposing themselves, shooting away, whatever the odds, and whatever the consequences.

"Living in the shadow of death" meant taking risks and displaying bravado, not asking oneself questions or calculating one's chances, but simply going ahead and acting, almost daring death to do its best. It meant being violent, and being exposed to violence, but with style, in a cheerfully exuberant manner, making it almost an aesthetic expression.

As such, gang member violence was more than simply a practice, but a veritable way of life, an enduring everyday process that became a primary constitutive force in the construction of the individual gang member self, as well as contributing to the constitution the group – *pandilla* wars contributed to the reaffirmation of the group, by emphasizing the primordial distinction between "us" and "them".

At the same time, however, *pandilla* violence was also more than just about the construction of the gang group or individual, it was arguably also about a broader process of social structuration, for the *pandilleros* qualified their violence as being primarily motivated by their "love" for the neighbourhood.

In an eerie echo of the discourse of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, the gang members of neighbourhood Luis Fanor Hernández justified their fighting other gangs as representing an "act of love" for their neighbourhood; as one of them called Julio put it, "you show the neighbourhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other *pandillas*… You look after the neighbourhood; you help them, keep them safe…"

Despite the often negative consequences of gang wars for local neighbourhood inhabitants, this is not as implausible as it may initially seem. In many ways, the ritualised nature of *pandilla* warfare can be conceived as a kind of restraining mechanism; escalation is a positive constitutive process, in which each stage calls for a greater intensity of action, and is always seen therefore as under the actors' control.

At the same time, the escalation process also provided local neighbourhood inhabitants with a framework through which to organize their lives, acting as an "early warning system".

As such, *pandilla* wars can be seen as having constituted "scripted performances", providing a means of circumscribing what Hannah Arendt has called the "all-pervading unpredictability" of violence.

Although *pandilla* wars clearly had deleterious effects for the local population of urban neighbourhoods, these were indirect, as gangs never directly victimised the local population of their own neighbourhood, in fact protecting them instead during gang wars.

The threat to local neighbourhood populations stemmed from *other* gangs, whom the local gang would engage with in a prescribed manner in order to limit the scope of violence in its own neighbourhood, thereby creating a kind of predictable "safe haven" for local inhabitants.

In a wider context of chronic violence and insecurity, this function was a positive one, even if it was not always 100 percent effective, and despite bystanders frequently being injured and even killed in the

crossfire of gang warfare, the local neighbourhood inhabitants very much recognized it as such.

As *Don* Sergio put it, "the *pandilla* looks after the neighbourhood and screws others, it protects us and allows us to feel a little bit safer, to live our lives a little bit more easily", and as a result members of the local community did not call the Police during gang wars, and nor would they denounce gang members.

In many ways, though, the local *pandilla* in fact arguably did more than simply provide the neighbourhood population with a certain sense of security, but also constituted itself as a symbolic index of community, as its "care" for the neighbourhood stood in sharp contrast with the wider context of fragmentation and breakdown which characterises contemporary Nicaragua.

This was also reflected in the fact that there existed a certain identification with the gang and its exploits among local inhabitants, and ultimately the *pandilla* constituted the principal anchor point for the existence of a collective *barrio* identity in an otherwise fractured community.

The *pandilla* and its behaviour patterns provided important institutional elements for the general collective organisation of social life, but it did so in a reduced manner, restricted to the local neighbourhood, and moreover did so in what in the final analysis has to be considered more of a palliative than an enabling way.

In this light, what the gangs arguably represented was a desperate form of social structuration, attempting to constitute a local collective social order through violent means in the face a wider societal process of social breakdown in the face of chronic violence and insecurity.

The Pandilla In 2002: Ultimately, though, this local social order was never going to be viable, and indeed, when I returned to neighbourhood Luis Fanor Hernández in 2002, both the neighbourhood and the local gang dynamics had changed radically.

The gang had reduced in size, from being a group of about 100 integrants aged 7 to 22 years old generically called the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang with age and geographical subgroups to a single group of just 18 youths aged 17 to 23 years old called "*Los Dragones*".

The violent and illicit activities of five years before had been replaced by new ones. In particular, *pandilla* wars had come to an end, individual delinquency had increased, and levels of brutality had gone up. Most dramatically, perhaps, the communitarian ethos of "loving the neighbourhood" had disappeared, with gang members no longer caring about the community and in fact now actively preying on the local neighbourhood population.

As a gang member called Roger put it: "if people in the neighbourhood get attacked, if they are robbed, if they have a problem, who cares? We don't lift a finger to help them nowadays… We just laugh instead… Who cares what happens to them?"

A variety of factors have contributed to the change in *pandilla* dynamics, but probably the most important is the emergence of hard drugs, and more specifically crack cocaine.

Cocaine is usually distributed in two basic forms: either as a white crystalline powder or as an off-white chunky material. The powder form is cocaine hydrochloride, and is generally snorted or dissolved in water and injected.

The chunky form of cocaine, known as "crack", is a ready-to-use freebase, usually a combination of cocaine and sodium bicarbonate, although every dealer has his or her own personal recipe for "cooking" it, which often includes an extra, "flavouring" ingredient. It is widely known as "the drug of the poor", being very inexpensive – about US$0.70 for a double dose in Nicaragua.

Although modest quantities of hard drugs such as crack could be obtained in Nicaragua in 1996-97, they were not prevalent; marijuana was the most widespread drug at the time, along with glue, and both were domestically produced and sold on a relatively small scale. Crack began to supplant marijuana and glue as drug of choice from around mid-1999, however, rapidly spreading to such an extent that when I arrived it was omnipresent.

The reasons behind this trend are both international and national. Internationally, the late 1990s saw a diversification of drug trafficking routes from Colombia to the USA as a result of the improvement of law enforcement efforts in the Caribbean.
Flows along the Mexican-Central American corridor increased tremendously, and due to its proximity to the Colombian Caribbean island of San Andrés, Nicaragua is geographically a natural first trans-shipment point within the transit zone.

Nationally, in late 1998 Nicaragua was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, suffering major infrastructural damage and resource drainage, which have had highly negative consequences on the already limited capabilities of local law enforcement institutions, making trafficking easier than in the past.

Now, the relationship that gangs have to crack is dual, firstly as privileged sites of consumption, and secondly as drug dealing institutions. With regards to first, levels of drugs use among gang members have increased tremendously compared to 1996-97. Although consuming drugs was an important element of gang identity in 1996-97, less was consumed than today, and moreover, the main drug consumed then was marijuana, which has very different effects to crack.

But while crack consumption has caused a notable rise in spontaneous, individual acts of violence in the neighbourhood, in many ways it is the broader, generalised sense of increased insecurity and uncertainty that it has generated which is more important.

This of course contrasts starkly with the ritualised gang wars of the past, which by following set patterns circumscribed violence in such a way that local neighbourhood inhabitants could predict potential outbreaks and organise their lives around them
Gang wars have now completely disappeared, and the gang no longer acts as a bulwark against wider criminality, in fact now regularly preying on local inhabitants and threatening anybody who would dare denounce them with retribution.

But while this new pattern of behaviour is clearly linked to drug consumption, it is also the result of the *pandilla* having become a drug dealing institution. The drug trafficking route in Nicaragua passes through Managua and other urban centres, where those facilitating transport take a cut of the shipments in order to make money distributing it locally.

As a result, a veritable drug economy has sprung up in Managua during the past few years, with gang members buying wholesale from big time drug traffickers in order to sell on a small scale on street corners.

This drug economy is three-tiered; at the top of the pyramid was the "narco", the "big man" or "capo" of the neighbourhood drugs trade who brings the cocaine to the neighbourhood, and who only wholesales. Below the "narco are the "púsheres" who sell from their houses. Then there are the "muleros", who are all gang members and who sell their wares on street corners.

The average income generated for the gang members by this crack dealing is substantial in local terms – upwards of US$350 per month, which is over three times the average wage in Nicaragua. These rewards from crime are in striking contrast with the past – in 1996-97, a gang member's average revenue from delinquency was approximately US$50, and most of this was spent on items of immediate gratification such as alcohol, glue, or marijuana, or of conspicuous consumption such as a Nike cap or shoes.

Now, however, although a significant proportion of gang members' income from drugs is still spent on items associated with conspicuous consumption – for example, gold chains and watches – most of it is used to improve the material conditions of gang members' life and those of their families, as well as being reinvested into increasing their drug dealing business
This is starkly reflected in the infrastructural disparities between drug dealer and non-drug dealer homes (from what I could tell in February-March 2002, about a third of the neighbourhood seemed to be benefiting from the drug economy in one way or another, either through direct involvement, or else indirectly, by being related to somebody who was involved).

As a dominant institution within the neighbourhood social landscape, the gang was ideally positioned to become involved in the emergent drugs trade.

Due to the illicit nature of the goods being sold and bought, a drug economy cannot rely on classic mechanisms of regulation and contract-enforcement, such as the law, so the next best thing is to have the power to impose regularity onto transactions (which is pretty much what lies behind the power of the law).

Although drug dealing transactions are carried out on an individual basis by gang members, the gang as a whole acted as a cooperative interest group to ensure the proper functioning and protection of the local neighbourhood drug economy which it dominated.

Not surprising, it generally did so through extremely brutal means. For example, in 2001, *muleros* from a neighbouring neighbourhood spatially occupied one of the entrances to neighbourhood Luis Fanor Hernández in order to intercept the neighbourhood crack clients.

Contrarily to the gang wars of the past, the neighbourhood Luis Fanor Hernández gang simply fell on their rivals with their guns and shot two dead and left three critically injured.

In many ways, one could argued that the change in violent behaviour patterns and the decline in the gang warfare that was a feature of the crime panorama in 1996-97 were almost inevitable.

The *pandillas* have arguably transformed from being socially oriented institutions to economically oriented ones, and this means that gang members now have little interest in engaging in an activity which might discourage potential clients from coming into their neighbourhood (remember that the gang wars of the past regulated violence in the neighbourhood by making them no-go zones for outsiders).

Instead, their violence serves to uphold their drug transactions and ensure the smooth accumulation of capital.

The Evolution Of Nicaraguan Gangsterism Between 1997-2002 in Perspective: So, what can we draw from the story of the evolution of Nicaraguan gangsterism?

Although it would seem that the gangs in 1996-97 and 2002 are very different, with the first being more socially oriented institutions and the second more economically oriented institutions, they are also clearly linked.

To a certain extent, we're talking about the same gang (the *Dragones* subgroup was part of the old gang), the same individuals (the 18 that were in the gang in February-March 2002 were all in the gang in 1996-97), and even, at certain levels, the same behaviour patterns (violent, even if not necessarily in the same way). Seen in this way, what we have is a same institution, which has very different ramifications in two different contexts and two different times.

This in many ways challenges the conventional picture of institutional change, which tends to be conceived in terms of the replacement of existing institutions by new ones, often as a result of external shocks. What the evolution of Nicaraguan gangsterism suggests instead is that institutional change is in fact frequently a process of transformation rather than one of replacement.

The possible paths these transformations can take are neither obvious nor certain; rather, they are a function a whole myriad of factors, including both wider political economy issues – the emergence of the drugs trade in Nicaragua and concomitant effects on gangs and their violence is arguably a result of the particular nature of the global economy and Nicaragua's place within it, for example – and the particular nature of the institutions in play, as well as the specific ways in which these interact with each other.

In order to understand such processes of change, it is necessary to embed one's analysis within contextual and historical investigation, for institutions inscribe themselves within particular political economies which need to be traced and evaluated in depth in order to understand their evolutions in both time and space.

Nicaraguan gangs in 1996-97 were arguably a radical form of social structuration, emergent social morphologies attempting to step into the socio-political void precipitated by the crisis and breakdown characterizing contemporary Nicaragua. They did so at multiple levels – individual, group, community – but perhaps the most significant was their socio-symbolic structuring of the local neighbourhood. Their violent ways, in particular, constituted forms of social ordering

The point, though, was that it was a form of social ordering that was limited in scope, taking the neighbourhood as their ontological anchor point from which to rebuild a social imaginary in socially

fractured Nicaragua, rather than any national or even city-wide anchor point.

By 2002, however, Nicaraguan gangs had become one of the central institutions organising the emergent drugs trade in Nicaragua, directing their violence towards ensuring the proper operation of drug markets for their own benefit, no longer protecting or caring about their local neighbourhoods.

The ordering function of the gang was no longer aimed towards maintaining a neighbourhood community but simply to maintain a local market and to better their own lives and those of their families.

In this light, what the evolution of Nicaraguan gangsterism during the past decade can be said to constitute, then, is a story of two halves, the first involving a desperate attempt to mitigate the fragmenting condition of Nicaraguan social life through the creation of a restricted and ultimately unviable form of local collective social order, a form of localised social sovereignty, and the second about the construction of a new, individual-based way of life, grasping a new opportunity for an improved way of life which has emerged in the form of the drugs trade. But one is a natural continuation of the other, with the second building on the ruins of the first

The big picture here is one of a continuing attempt to establish some kind of sustainable way of life in the poor neighbourhoods of contemporary urban Nicaragua, on a sociological basis which is constantly shrinking in scope, from the level of the neighbourhood, to the gang group, to the individual gang member entrepreneur, or in other words an inexorable slide from the collective to the individual…

Intuitively, such an idea grates with our idea of progress, particularly coming from a development perspective where we'd rather imagine a progression which takes us from the individual to the collective. Even if there are conceptions of progress which don't necessarily see it as a linear phenomenon, such as Arnold Toynbee's, Oswald Spengler's, or Walter Benjamin's, it is difficult to accept the idea of societal regression in this way.

But rather than seeing this process of dissociation from the collective to the individual as a regression, the evolution of Nicaraguan gangs can also be interpreted in another way. In many ways, the bigger picture epitomized by the evolution of Nicaraguan gangsterism is more one whereby the relative socio-economic egalitarianism of the 1980s and early 1990s is being torn apart by a process of socio-economic differentiation.

The political economy of Nicaraguan gangsterism is arguably creating the conditions for the rise of a local entrepreneurial elite, which is generating and distributing wealth, although in a rather limited and unequal manner. This, according to Karl Marx, is a *sine qua non* condition for the material development of societies, and in particular for the development of capitalism. He called this process "primitive accumulation", and so – borrowing again from Marx – a different way of interpreting the evolution of Nicaraguan gangs is to see them as having gone from being the means of fostering a form of "primitive socialism" to becoming vehicles for "primitive accumulation" at the local level.

In a Nicaraguan context where there seems to be little spurring any form of socio-economic progress, this might not seem altogether a bad thing, but the crucial question we need to ask ourselves, however, is just what it is that drives such processes of change and why

The German social thinker Georg Simmel has argued that "actual society does not result only from ...social forces which are positive [integrating], and only to the extent that the negative factors do not hinder them ...[but] is the result of both categories of interaction [positive and negative or integrating and disintegrating], which thus both manifest themselves as wholly positive."

From this perspective, Nicaraguan gangsterism in 1996-97 and 2002 can be seen as simply constituting two poles of a single evolving process, one whereby the "sum total" of Nicaraguan society is constantly configured and reconfigured. The question such a view brings up, however, is after having swung from collective gang social violence to economic individual drug entrepreneurship, where will this process of reconfiguration lead Nicaragua next…

Contact information:

Dr Dennis Rodgers
London School of Economics
Lecturer in Development Studies
Email: d.w.rodgers@lse.ac.uk
Telephone: +44 (020) 7955 7718
Homepage:http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/destin/rodgersd.html

On-line papers by Dennis Rodgers:

We Live in a State of Siege: Violence, Crime, and Gangs in Post-Conflict Urban Nicaragua
http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/destin/workpapers/Weliveinastateofsiege_DESTINwp.pdf

Joining a Gang... The violence of Ethnography in Contemporary Nicaragua
http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/Rogers.pdf

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