

The "codified" underworld of Salvadorian maras

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Faced with the rampant violence of maras, these armed gangs spreading terror throughout Central America, the Salvadorian authorities have decided to take extreme measures. Thus, the government recently announced the creation of a new force of a thousand men – 600 commandos and 400 elite police officers – tasked with hunting them down in rural areas. A delicate mission, insofar as the country is plagued by criminal organisations, the cruelty of which goes beyond imagination.

*Abiding by the law of retaliation – pushed to its climax – the maras, among which the Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS13) and the Barrio 18 are the most notorious, wage a ruthless turf war. Civilians, hampered in their freedom of movement, are its main victims day in day out. How did that happen? Here is a ten-point answer – with the insightful contribution of Salvadorian anthropologist **Juan Jose Martinez D'Aubuisson**, author of "Ver, oír y callar: Un año con Mara Salvatrucha 13" (September 2015, 128 pages).*

- **Where does the term mara come from?**

It all started with a piece published by German author Carl Stephenson in 1938 and entitled "Leiningens Kampf mit den Ameisen". It told the story of Christopher Leiningen, a millionaire who set out to found a cocoa plantation in the Amazon rainforest of Brazil before he saw his dream turn sour because of the invasion of marabuntas (or army ants), known for their voracity. This very popular story was first translated into English ("Leiningen Versus the Ants"), then adapted for the big screen in 1954 by American film director Byron Haskin under the name "The Naked Jungle" – or "Cuando ruge la marabunta" – with Charlton Heston in the lead role. The film enjoyed such great success in El Salvador that the word "marabunta" was shortened to "mara" to describe a large group of rather turbulent people. Gradually, this term has passed into everyday language, becoming an integral part of youth slang. However, at the time, it didn't carry the negative connotation it has today – that of criminal gang.

- **When and in what context did the maras appear?**

In the 1960s, some Salvadorian intellectuals and labour leaders began considering the possibility of resorting to armed struggle to overthrow the military regime backed by the old coffee oligarchy [*El Salvador is one of the largest coffee-producing countries in the world*]. But it was not until 1975 that the first armed groups capable of destabilising the State emerged. From then on, El Salvador progressively headed for a deep crisis which resulted in a civil war that lasted until 1992. The crackdown on the insurgents intensified – and even "technicised", with the support of the American government – so much so that in 1979, hundreds of disappearances and murders had already taken place.

The two warring parties – the government army on one side, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN, Marxist) on the other – were powerful and engaged in a fierce competition to attract thousands of young recruits. Caught in this crossfire, many Salvadorians fled for fear of the war or the reprisals of paramilitary groups. They sought refuge in countries like Costa Rica, Canada, Sweden and even Australia. But it's in the United States that they settled, and most specifically in Los Angeles, which already suffered from a bad reputation as "the Mecca of gangs".

These young, disoriented people arrived in a city torn apart by the bloody rivalry between gangs – Hispanic (mostly Mexican), Afro-American and Asian – anxious to preserve, but also to expand their territory of influence. They were discriminated against and marginalised by older migrants. This led them to form very close ties. The mara became a shelter, a symbol of identity.

In the mid-1980s, the fight against other Hispanic gangs sharpened. Many "mareros" ended up in jail for armed robbery and drug trafficking. There, they embraced the "Chicano" lifestyle. The alliance between the Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS13) and the Barrio 18 (a reference to the 18th Street in Los Angeles) held until 1988 when it was shattered for obscure reasons – some speak of a vengeance, others of a futile love quarrel. Today, these two organisations confront each other in a duel to the death.

- **How have the maras taken roots in El Salvador?**

In 1992, when the civil war ended, El Salvador was a shambles, with its infrastructure in ruins and its social fabric irreparably torn. There were countless unemployed and handicapped people, as well as orphans. Street and student gangs thrived on this "fertile" ground but, as a stroke of bad luck, the American government decided at that very moment that time had come to expel thousands of "pandilleros" (gang members) from California. Most of them were young men belonging to the Mara Salvatrucha 13 and the Barrio 18. They had left El Salvador when they were still children or teenagers. On their return, they were men. Making the most of their "American experience", they turned into voracious predators, like army ants. Soon, the youth of the country had no choice but to join either the MS13 or the Barrio 18, on pain of being killed. Over the years, the maras have grown (as has violence) to the point that the homicide rate in El Salvador is currently the highest on the American continent (104 per 100,000), together with Honduras and Guatemala.

- **Do the MS-13 and the Barrio 18 share the same background history?**

No. The Mara Salvatrucha 13 was formed in the early 1980s in Los Angeles, and more precisely in the Pico-Union neighbourhood. It was made up of Salvadorian teenagers who had found refuge in the United States. The Barrio 18, for its part, was created by the young sons of Mexican immigrants in the 1950s. This mara, however, opened to other ethnic groups, which enabled many Salvadorians to join, especially those coming from the Rampart neighbourhood in Los Angeles.

- **What are the activities of the maras and how do they finance themselves?**

"There are two approaches: one says that the main activity of the maras is to raise money thanks to drug trafficking and racketeering (90% of their "revenues"); the other – more 'culturalist' – underpins the fact that they are mostly into violence and rituals, the aim of which is to strengthen their identity. In fact, it is a hybrid of the two," explains Juan Jose Martinez D'Aubuisson, adding that "mareros" remain very poor.

- **What is the profile of "mareros" and how are they organised?**

A majority of them are young men from the lowest layers of society. They form small local cells called *clicas* which have their own name, their own leader (or *palabrero*) and enjoy relative autonomy. The members of a mara share the same symbols and values. The use of violence is fundamental to them as their identity is based upon a "mutual aggression system" vis-à-vis the opposing mara; a system that offers them a status, as well as power and recognition – in a word "respect" within the group.

- **Is there some sort of probation before joining a mara?**

Yes. New members must consistently prove their worth through a kind of highly codified rite of passage that is supposed to mark a clean break with their "former life". *El brinco* has long prevailed – a form of integration in which the newcomer had to endure the beatings of other "mareros" for some time.

As the antagonism between maras deepened, the enrolment process has become much more demanding. Currently, it can take up to a year. The aspiring must demonstrate his ability to exercise violence – i.e. assassinations, beheadings, torture (his "bravery" will later earn him the "respect" of his peers). Meanwhile, he is requested to perform menial tasks like fetching cigarettes, buying phone recharges or keeping watch. He doesn't have the right to attend the meetings of the *clicas* (the *mítin*) and must content himself with sounding the alarm in case of an incursion of a rival mara or a police raid.

When a novice commits a misdeed – for example if he mentions the name of the other mara or if he shows weakness in his private life –, he is subjected to physical punishment. The nature of the admonition is proportional to the gravity of the offence. It is not only a way of correcting actions that are deemed to be "deviant", but also of standing out from other smaller groups.

- **What about hierarchy within the maras?**

Inside a mara, "respect" alone does not guarantee a top position. Showing one's ability to use violence against the rival mara – whatever extreme it may be – does not suffice either. Some

"mareros" explained it in their own words: *"There are guys who can kill again and again but they will never become leaders. To get there, you must also have a certain mindset"*.

- **How many "mareros" are there in Central America?**

Estimates vary quite widely. Some authors say 200,000 for the whole region, others 60,000. As for El Salvador, the Civil National Police spoke in 2008 of 10,000 "mareros" divided into two groups: the Barrio 18 and the Mara Salvatrucha 13, the latter being the most powerful numerically. According to the United Nations, the country would more likely have between 10,000 and 60,000 "mareros".

- **Can the repressive strategy of the State meet the challenge of maras?**

Juan Jose Martinez D'Aubuisson doesn't believe it and rejects the attitude of both parties. In his opinion, the fundamental problem is not only crime, but also the decaying social situation in neighbourhoods. Hence the need for a more holistic approach. He concludes: *"The government does not address the problem with dignity. Bullets and blood cannot be an end in itself"*.

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