

Book Review Essay

Gangsters Without Borders: An Ethnography of a Salvadoran Street Gang

By T.W. Ward

Oxford University Press. 2013. 230 pages. \$19.95 paper.

Homies and Hermanos: Gods and Gangs in Central America

By Robert Brenneman

Oxford University Press. 2012. 294 pages. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer: David Stoll, *Middlebury College*

Youth gangs have become a tricky subject for sociologists and anthropologists now that we define our research in terms of solidarity with the oppressed. Gang youth certainly are marginalized, and at least some of their bad press is exaggerated. They are also victims of our current economic order. So is widespread apprehension about youth gangs a moral panic? Are they actually scapegoats, symbolic villains for popular anger that should be directed against elites and their power structures? Or are gang youth so dangerous to themselves and everyone else that they need to be suppressed? This is an important question in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras where homicide rates have skyrocketed, youth gangs seem to be part of the problem, and out-of-control street crime has become a vote-getter for conservative politicians.

No gang is more demonized than Mara Salvatrucha (aka MS-13). On more than one occasion Salvatruchans have massacred bus passengers in El Salvador and Honduras. They are also famous for tattooing their faces and worshipping Satan. The organization is customarily traced to Salvadorans who escaped the civil war in their country by coming to the United States. In inner city Los Angeles, Salvadoran youth had to protect themselves from black and Latino gangs; when U.S. courts deported them, they spread Los Angeles gang culture to San Salvador and other poorly policed Central American capitals.

So goes the usual story, but participant-observation research in this realm is rare and I've never seen anything on MS-13. Now we have T. W. Ward's *Gangsters Without Borders*, based on eight and a half years (1993-2001) experience with MS-13 cliques in Los Angeles and another decade of follow-up.

Ward's title suggests a transnational crime organization, but this is not what he discovers. MS-13 originated as a stoner gang in the Los Angeles of the late 1970s, he reports. A stoner gang is less interested in gang wars than getting high. Beating up Disco fans was about as tough as this one got.

Interestingly, Ward dates MS-13's emergence in Los Angeles to before the Salvadoran civil war and mass migration to the United States. Judging from what later members say about their lives, their Salvadoran families responded to economic hardship with family migration strategies—that is, sending as many people north as possible. What traumatized future Salvatruchans at an early age was being left behind by their parents. They would have preferred to remain in El Salvador but migration was destroying their family bonds, and so, at a tender age, they were brought to Los Angeles where, in one way or another, they found a new source of security in MS-13.

What Ward has seen in Los Angeles, he argues, falls far short of the definition of organized crime because it is not very organized and it is not focused on profit. MS-13's famous code includes:

1. always maintaining “respect” (that is, the capacity to mount reprisals),
2. never backing down (at least if your friends are watching),
3. never ratting on another member (often violated to avoid long prison sentences), and
4. not taking orders from anyone, which, as Ward points out, makes Salvatruchans very resistant to any kind of organization. The cliques he got to know were deciding many issues by vote in a system of governance he characterizes as democratic anarchy.

Far from being a centralized organization, Ward's MS-13 is more like a name brand calculated to scare enemies who mainly comprise other gangbangers. I got the impression that, at least in Los Angeles, they are too busy victimizing youth like themselves to bother targeting other kinds of victims. But it's hard to tell because, as far as I know, Ward is the only ethnographer who has won the trust of active MS-13 members. Only some are into Satanism, he concludes, but one of his best sources claims that he was so upset by preparations to sacrifice an infant that he became a born-again Christian.

Ward's research with female members is especially interesting because of the well-known demise of Brenda Paz, an underage Honduran who agreed to testify against her boyfriend in Virginia. She was whisked off to a witness-protection program and then made the mistake of reconnecting with her homies. One source of female gang members, Ward learns, are families who send their adolescent daughters to the United States to earn remittances. They can be just as abused or parentless as the boys. Initiation into the gang wins a girl more respect than being a mere girlfriend, that is, a disposable sex object. But striving for the same kind of respect as the boys collides with a sharp double standard, e.g., male homies who wish to marry a virtuous “church girl” rather than a homegirl.

Oddly, Ward's Los Angeles cliques tend not to see the police as their enemy unless they perceive the police as corrupt, that is, shaking them down for personal profit. Nor do MS-13 cliques necessarily live up their reputation for violence;

one member voices appreciation of a police crackdown because it makes gang life safer. MS-13's famous rivalry with the 18th Street gang did not begin until the 1980s, according to Ward. While mutual protestations of hatred have taken hundreds of lives, members of the two gangs make common cause as soon as they reach the California prison system, where they both come under the authority of the Mexican Mafia—which is the point at which they could become organized in pursuit of profit. What I'm not sure that Ward explains is why MS-13 has acquired such a reputation for brutality. Do the facial tattoos and Satanic imagery make them easy to demonize? Have the drugs gotten nastier? Or does the answer to this question reside off Ward's canvas, in the deportation of gang members back to milieus that are even more lawless than inner city Los Angeles?

In Guatemala, between 2006 and 2010, MS-13 cliques, their 18th Street rivals and other gangs assassinated 630 bus drivers and 201 fare collectors for failing to pay protection money. Hit squads do not welcome sociologists, so as long as the violence stays at this level, the mainstay of Central American gang research will continue to be exit interviews. But these can tell us a lot, as demonstrated by Robert Brenneman's life histories of gang members who have joined born-again Protestant churches—a culturally recognized way of beating MS-13's "hasta la morgue" rule—that the only exit from the gang is death, either by dying honorably in its defense or by being executed for betrayal.

Usefully, Brenneman distinguishes the issue of how gangs emerge from the issue of why particular youth join them. To assume that individuals join the gang because of macrosocial ills (73), he argues, is to "oversocialize" juvenile quests for excitement and entertainment. It also begs the question of why most disadvantaged youth never join gangs at all. Echoing Ward's findings, Brenneman's sample of 63 former gang members in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras reveals that a disproportionate number grow up removed from both parents. His risk factors for joining a gang include migration to the United States by parents, domestic violence by parents or other elders and school failure. Physical abuse by alcoholic fathers looms large. According to Brenneman, abused children internalize ill treatment in the form of shame until they find a new, surrogate family out on the street—a gang of older youth who become their big brothers, who welcome them, protect them and teach them to lash back, but now against the gang's enemies. And so shame turns into violence.

How do gangbangers go on to become born-again Christians? Both gangs and churches operate on the family metaphor and demand heartfelt commitment ("de corazón"), and Ward goes so far as to detect "a hidden culture of compassion" in his L.A. Salvatruchans. Yet gangs and churches expect very different conduct from men. Brenneman learns that his homies-turned-hermanos had wrenching conversion experiences that spoiled their macho identity. Any kind of breakdown, such as into weeping, is to abandon "respect," the tough-guy exterior guaranteeing reprisal for any slight. Judging from a 2008 survey, in the evangelical churches of El Salvador, men may outnumber women. If so, evangelicalism is more than a stealthy feminist maneuver to corral men into the service of their families. It is also serving as a refuge from honor-driven violence.