



Gang Rule(s): Towards a Political Economy of Youth Gang Dynamics in Nicaragua

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Abstract

This article explores the longitudinal dynamics of youth gang transformation in urban Nicaragua. On the basis of an overview of successive gang iterations that have emerged over the past 30 years in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor neighborhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, the article identifies key elements for the articulation of a political economy of both change and stability. In particular, drawing on Bourdieusian theory, it conceives of a gang as a “social field” rather than as a discrete organizational form. It traces how different processes of individual and collective capital accumulation underpinning the social order promulgated by distinct gang iterations emerge and interact with each other, and the consequences that this has for their evolution over time. In doing so, the article offers a better understanding of the logic of what might be termed “gang rule(s)”.

Keywords Gangs · Nicaragua · Longitudinal · Transformation · Youth · Bourdieu

Introduction

Youth gangs are fundamental and inherently revealing social institutions. As Thrasher (1927, 3) put it in his pioneering study of the phenomenon in 1920s Chicago, they are in many ways “*life*, rough and untamed, rich in elemental social processes significant to the student of society and human nature.” Certainly, youth gangs are associable with a range of critical social processes, such as socialization, identity formation, the exercise of power, territorial control, or the articulation of gender relations, amongst others, and as a consequence, are frequently primary vectors for basic forms of social ordering. Indeed, such processes are in many ways arguably observable in a much more direct and unmediated manner through the gang lens, to the extent that youth gangs can be said to constitute particularly insightful

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“bellwether” institutions through which to consider the nature of social order, all the more so as they are a global phenomenon, found in some form or another in almost all societies across time and space (Hazen and Rodgers 2014).

The first systematic investigations of youth gangs go back almost 100 years, and many extremely insightful studies of the phenomenon have been produced since, highlighting the sheer variety of forms, logics, and consequences associable with youth gangs across the world (Atkinson-Sheppard and Hayward 2019; Covey 2003; Hazen and Rodgers 2014). Much gang research has focused on refining the taxonomy of the phenomenon, proposing different forms of classification based on factors including the number of individuals involved, their age, origins, or the degree of violence exercised, for example. As Hagedorn (2008, 145) has pointed out, this kind of “nit-picking” categorization ultimately provides little in the way of real insight into the underlying dynamics accounting for the emergence, decline, spread and evolution of youth gangs, as well as the way that they promulgate distinct forms of social order. Indeed, Ayling (2011, 2) goes so far as to explicitly argue that with respect to the latter, in particular, “gang research has so far failed to develop causal issues fully.”

This article draws on longitudinal ethnographic research on youth gang dynamics carried out over almost three decades in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,¹ a poor neighborhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, to offer insights into the political economy of gang transformation. In particular, drawing on Bourdieusian theory, the article conceives of a gang as a “social field” rather than as a discrete organizational form. It traces how different processes of individual and collective capital accumulation underpinning the social order promulgated by distinct gang iterations emerge and interact with each other, and the consequences that this has for their evolution over time. In doing so, the article aims to allow for a better understanding of the logic of what might be termed “gang rule(s).”

The article begins by laying out its theoretical approach, explaining the logic for considering gangs through a “social field” lens. It then moves on to discuss the methodological underpinnings of my research, and in particular the key sources for my longitudinal understanding of evolving youth gang dynamics in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. After briefly situating gangs within Nicaragua’s general developmental trajectory, the article then surveys different successive gang iterations that have emerged in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández over the past three decades. Their key features are then discussed in relation to social field theory and a number of elements for the potential articulation of a political economy of gangland dynamics are identified, before a final section offers some concluding thoughts about why gangs endure as a social phenomenon, despite the fact that specific gang iterations are always finite.

Theoretical Approach: Conceiving the Gang as a “Social Field”

Gangs are highly volatile social phenomena, that can change very rapidly over time. Part of the problem is the fact that they clearly exist on a continuum, and “today’s youth gang might become a drug posse tomorrow, even transform into an ethnic

¹ This name is a pseudonym, as are the names of all the individuals and places mentioned in this chapter.

militia or a vigilante group the next day” (Hagedorn 2008, xxv; see also Wing Lo 2012). This institutional mutability makes them something of an epistemologically “slippery” phenomenon that is difficult to pin down (Hazen and Rodgers 2014, 7). The overarching trajectory of youth gang dynamics in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández over the past 30 years highlights this very well, insofar as this first involved the rise of a vigilante gang organized around a group of a dozen ex-conscripts in the immediate post-war period in the early 1990s, before the institutionalization of this vigilante ethos around local territorial identity concerns and expansion of the gang to around 100 members in the mid-1990s, to the latter’s shrinking to a 20 person predatory drug dealing gang in the early 2000s, to the elimination of this gang as a result of the professionalization of the drugs trade and the rise of a more powerful and organized criminal group known as the “*cartelito*” (little cartel) in the late 2000s, to the organic re-emergence of “classic” adolescent street corner gangs in the early 2010s following the fall of the *cartelito*, to the repression of these street corner gangs due to implementation of new forms of policing in the mid-2010s and their replacement by de-territorialized female gangs, to, finally, the rise of a more national regime of gang rule in the late 2010s and 2020s.

A narrow reading of this sequence might dwell on the fact that there are clear breaks in the institutional continuity of gangs in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, and also that some of the gang iterations outlined above are extremely different from each other. From a broader social ordering perspective, however, the above sequence can be considered as a single overarching trajectory, insofar as youth gangs remained the principal vector for local social order in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, as we shall see. The question is how to best conceive of this. There are obviously multiple ways through which to conceive of social ordering. Georg Simmel (1971), for example, talked about the emergence of particular “social forms,” that is to say, institutionalized structures that created the social conditions for the existence of consistent and shared cognitive norms and practices. Norbert Elias (1983; 2000), on his part, put forward the notion of “figurations” to highlight the fact that human beings are born into relationships of interdependency, and capture how these fundamentally shaped trajectories in ways that could not be reduced to individual actions or motivations.

The common element of both forms and figurations is that they point to the existence of social structures beyond individual agents, that fundamentally condition the actions of the latter, or in other words, are the basis for social ordering. At the same time, however, Elias and Simmel’s ideas have also been described as respectively “vague” (Barnes 2004, 71) and “unsystematic” (Goodstein 2012, 238), largely because they are more heuristically than conceptually developed. A more systematic conception of the nature of social ordering is arguably Pierre Bourdieu’s theorising around the notion of the “social field” (Bourdieu 1966; 1986; 1990). At its most basic, this idea refers to the existence of an arena within which certain social processes play out according to set rules and regulations. There can exist multiple, nested social fields within society, each pertaining to different forms of social action, but all of which at their most basic constitute “a field of forces, whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it, and a field of struggles within which agents confront each other, with differentiated means and ends according to

their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to conserving or transforming its structure” (Reed-Danahay 2004, 32).

The “struggles” which agents engage in pertain to the accumulation of capital, which Bourdieu (1986) argued is the most basic building block of processes of social reproduction. There exist different types of capital: economic, social, and cultural. The notion of economic capital refers to material resources (that is to say, money, physical assets, or property), that of social capital to resources linked to an individual’s social relations, while the idea of cultural capital refers to an individual’s knowledges, skills, and beliefs acquired through education and social status. At the same time, capital is inherently both individual and collective insofar as an individual’s capital and capital accumulation is collectively validated. Different types of capital are accumulated by social agents within a social field in different ways, although Bourdieu also suggests that capital can be “converted” and “transferred” both within and across different fields, which is what enables processes of change and transformation.

I want to propose that we think about a youth gang as a social field rather than as a type of organization.² The advantage is that the focus for understanding gang dynamics then becomes less the variable organizational manifestation of a gang, and more on the way its “gang-ness”—considered here to be its social ordering function—plays out, and how it reproduces itself over time. This is important to understand, because as the evolution of gang dynamics in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández highlights well, different types of organizations can occupy the social field of the gang. And as Abner Cohen (1969, 219) has pointed out, although there is often a relationship between a particular organizational form and its social function, neither form nor function are inherent to any given organization. Neither continuity nor change in either form or function necessarily entail continuity or change in the other, since different forms can achieve a specific function, while conversely, a particular form can fulfil different functions. In other words, a social phenomenon that we might deem to constitute a “gang” from the perspective of its social ordering function at a particular moment in time in a particular context might be replaced as a gang by a different type of phenomenon, or that same phenomenon may morph into something different to a gang. Seen from this perspective, it is clear that it is getting to grips with the underlying logics of such transformations and transitions that is most important in order to truly understand gang dynamics over the long-term.

² Bourdieu’s notion of the social field has been linked to gangs previously, for example in the work of Shammass and Sandberg (2015) or McLean et al. (2019), but these studies have associated it with the physical space of “the street.” While territoriality is often a key element of gang dynamics, a social field does not necessarily have to be linked to material space. At its most basic, a social field can be conceived as a more abstract, ontological kind of space.

Methods

The empirical materials presented in this article are drawn from almost 30 years of longitudinal ethnographic research carried out in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. In this regard, my investigations can be said to stand apart from many other studies of youth gangs, which often tend to be synchronic rather than diachronic in nature, providing temporally delimited “snapshots” rather than a long-term, evolving view of the phenomenon. This is the case even if my nine separate bouts of fieldwork stints totalling 23 months have been interspersed over 1996–97, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2020.

As Mosse (2006) has pointed out, the notion of “the field” as a temporally and spatially separate and bounded location that we can only engage with in situ increasingly makes less and less sense in this day and age. While distinguishing between “the field” and the “non-field” might have been feasible a century ago, when ethnographers travelled to far-flung locations to study so-called “primitives” with whom they never had any contact outside of “the field” due to the lack of means of communication and the one-sidedness of travel, this is almost never the case nowadays. I am, for example, in constant contact with individuals in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, by phone, email, and WhatsApp. This means that I am kept informed about new developments in the neighborhood, and regularly sent photos and video recordings—including some in “real-time”—all of which inform my understanding of how the situation in the neighborhood evolves between my revisits.³

I have written in more detail elsewhere about how I engaged with the gang and studied its activities (Rodgers 2007, 2019a, 2021a)—including in relation to ethical considerations—but my investigations have basically involved a mixture of participant observation and in-depth interviewing, as well as conducting mapping exercises and focus group discussions. I have also carried out a household survey of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, repeatedly photo-documented its infrastructural transformation over time, and I have researched a number of issues beyond gang dynamics including poverty, gender relations, labor, migration, remittances, history, memory, violence, kinship, urban development, politics, and urban planning. My principal source of information about gang dynamics in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández are the gang members themselves. Overall, I have had some form of direct interaction with almost all of the individuals who have been gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang since 1996, and I have carried out formal

³ This veritable plethora of communication has built up progressively since 1996, of course, and is very much a function of technological evolution. I actually lost touch with people in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández between my first and second visits, largely due to the fact that there were very few phone lines in the neighborhood at the time—and these were often only ephemerally connected—while postal services were extremely unreliable and letter-writing was not a common practice. Email use took off in the mid-2000s with the spread of internet cafés, while mobile phones only began to become common from the end of the 2000s, and smart phones—with cameras—only from the early 2010s onwards. Today, smart phones are ubiquitous and contact is constant and manifold, in stark contrast to previous times, when certain more connected individuals monopolized information and communication with me.

interviews with about half of the total number.⁴ This subset of 70 individuals was selected through a combination of serendipity, convenience, and purposeful sampling, and can be said to be generally representative of the population of gang members in the neighborhood.

From my second visit in 2002, I also engaged in regularly “repeat interviewing” a second, smaller subset of gang members. This was iteratively constituted with the explicit intent of carrying out multiple interviews over time, in order to collect their life histories in what might be termed “longitudinal real-time.” I began constituting this subset with an initial group of seven gang members whom I had previously interviewed in 1996–1997, adding two new individuals to my sample in 2002, two more in 2003, another two in 2007, three more in 2009, one more in 2012, two more in 2016, and one more in 2020, to reflect evolving gang member generations. On average, I have conducted four interviews with each individual, although obviously those from earlier gang generations have generally been interviewed more often than those included in the process later on, and external factors including death, migration, and imprisonment have also impacted how many times I have been able to interview specific individuals (see Rodgers 2023: 687–88, for a detailed overview). On the basis of my broader contextual knowledge, however, I believe that this subset of 20 longitudinally constituted life histories offer a set of “archetypal” *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang member trajectories that have been particularly valuable in relation to providing me with a dynamic picture of the gang’s evolving social practices, as the repeated interviews inherently offer a diachronic perspective.

Gangs and Social Order in Nicaragua

Youth gangs—or “*pandillas*”—have long been a feature of Nicaraguan society. Their origins can be traced back to the country’s rapid urbanization in the middle of the twentieth century, when Managua, in particular, grew from some 50,000 inhabitants in 1940 to more than 250,000 in 1963 (Kates et al. 1973, 982), and the country became one of the most highly urbanized in the region. These first gangs were spontaneous groups of youth that emerged organically in squatter settlements, defending them against eviction. They tended to last only as long as the peer group underpinning them stayed together, and were clearly not prominent; gangs are not mentioned at all in Téfel Vélez’s (1976) seminal study of urban poverty in Nicaragua, for example.

The famous *Sandinista* insurrection in the late 1970s followed by the revolutionary regime’s war against the US-backed *Contras* in the 1980s led to a definite decline in the gang phenomenon. During the insurrectionary period this was due

⁴ I have also carried out 11 formal group interviews, as well as several individual interviews with former gang members from before 1996. To these should also be added hundreds of hours of informal individual and group conversations and interactions, as well as more than one hundred interviews with non-gang member inhabitants of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, which have frequently included some discussion of gangs.

to the occupation of gangs' "street space" by more powerful violent actors (i.e. the *Sandinista* guerrillas and the *Guardia Nacional*), but during the war, this was principally due to the introduction of universal military service—the age of conscription was 16—and also because of the highly developed grassroots organization that was a hallmark of the revolutionary era, which included youth work brigades and extensive local neighborhood vigilance (Rodgers 2017a).

Gangs however began to re-appear in the late 1980s due to the war-fuelled erosion of the *Sandinista* welfare state, declining levels of local organization, the decreasing legitimacy of the revolutionary regime, and increasing numbers of youths deserting their military service (Lancaster 1992, 132). These new gangs principally involved groups of young men⁵ who had often been conscripted together, and who joined forces in order to better protect their families and friends from the rising crime and insecurity, displaying a vigilante ethos not dissimilar to that of the slum gangs of the 1960s, and filling a "governance void" (Kruijt and Koonings 1999) created by the discombobulating Nicaraguan state. Regime change in 1990, the dismantling of the *Sandinismo*, and implementation of neoliberal policies (Walker 1997) saw the spread of gangs accelerate, and they became a prominent feature of most poor urban communities in Nicaraguan cities. Although obviously associated with various forms of crime and delinquency that have significantly negative developmental consequences, gangs became the primary institutional vectors for the structuring and organization of social life in poor urban communities in Nicaragua (Rocha 2007; 2013; Rodgers 2006a; 2015).

It is this, more than anything else, that make Nicaraguan youth gangs socially significant, but at the same time, the nature of this "gang rule" has clearly changed over time (Rodgers 2017a), for both endogenous as well as exogenous reasons, including internal gang transformations as well as the fact that the Nicaraguan state has changed, and also because the "governance voids" of the early 1990s have transformed and dissipated, and new articulations of state and society have developed (Rocha et al. 2023; Rodgers 2006b; Weegels 2018a). Understanding the reasons for the particular transformation of gangs and the forms of social order that they promulgate is clearly a critical question, but one that can only be properly understood from a longitudinal perspective. The next section, therefore, offers a 30-year empirical overview of the evolution of gang dynamics in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor urban neighborhood located in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua.

Gangs in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández

Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández was originally founded as an illegal squatter community by rural–urban migrants in the early 1960s, one of many such informal settlements that mushroomed on the edge of Managua at that time. By the early 1970s, it had become absorbed within the city limits, but remained extremely poor, and came

⁵ Although female gang members are not unknown in Nicaragua, they are not the norm (see Rodgers 2006a: 285–86).

to be known as “*La Sobrevivencia*” (“Survival”) as a result. The neighborhood was completely rebuilt during the early 1980s within the context of the revolutionary *Sandinista* state’s housing development program, and renamed *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández (after a local “martyr of the Revolution”), although socio-economically it remained in the lowest quartile of Managua neighborhoods.

Since the end of the revolutionary period in 1990, the neighborhood has suffered significant infrastructural decline, although the rise of drug dealing the 2000s also led to some unequal local economic development (see Rodgers 2018). The settlement has always been infamous for its high levels of crime and delinquency but became extremely notorious in the post-revolutionary period due to the emergence of a very brutal local gang. This bad reputation has persisted into the present, although the gang has changed significantly over the past three decades, even disappearing completely during the latter half of the 2000s.

The evolution of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang iterations during the post-revolutionary period can broadly be said to reflect the general trajectory of Nicaraguan gang dynamics (see Rodgers 2017a), and can be divided into seven distinct phases, respectively an “emergent” phase (1989–1992), a “golden era” phase (1993–1998), a “drug dealing” phase (1999–2005), a “disappearance” phase (2006–2011), a “revival” phase (2012–2015), a “*combo*” phase (2016–2018), and finally a “post-April 2018” phase. The socio-economic background of gang members has not changed significantly across these different phases, and nor has their gender except in the “*combo*” phase, with all *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members until then being young men.⁶ On the other hand, the gang’s structure has evolved over time, both in terms of its size and organization. The spread and median age of members have also fluctuated across phases, with the former ranging from 7 to 26 years of age overall, while the latter has varied between 15 and 24 years of age. Beyond such mutations, however, it is the way that the different phases of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s evolution can each be associated with distinct types of violence, individual, and collective forms of capital accumulation, logics of governance, and occupations of “sociological (street) space,” including in particular relative to other violent actors, that is most significant, as I will now describe in detail phase by phase.

1989–1992: Emergent Phase

The first post-war gang emerged in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 1989 and lasted until 1992. The core was a group of eight youths aged between 18 and 20 years old who were former *Sandinista* Popular Army conscripts, and who had demobilized more or less simultaneously in 1989. They began to hang out together on a neighborhood street corner, along with four slightly older youths aged between 20 and 23 years old who had also been conscripts, as well as two younger individuals aged respectively nine and ten years old who gravitated to the group for idiosyncratic reasons (Rodgers

⁶ With one exception in the early 1990s—see Rodgers (2006a: 285–86), for more details about this person.

2016).⁷ This group of fourteen was quickly labeled a “*pandilla*,” both by its members as well as inhabitants of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández more generally, particularly once the members of the group began to engage regularly in a range of violent activities, including most paradigmatically beating up individuals who had robbed, attacked, or threatened the friends or family of gang members, something that happened frequently in the post-war context of heightened uncertainty that characterized Nicaragua in the early 1990s. This rapidly morphed into a pattern of regularly patrolling whole areas of the neighborhood, often with firearms smuggled back from military service, as a means of deterring potential criminals.

The impulse for this particular pattern of vigilante violence was clearly related to the ex-conscript nature of gang members. These systematically mentioned three basic reasons for joining a gang. First, the change of regime in 1990 led to an abrupt devaluation of their social status, which as conscripts defending “the Nation” had previously been very high within the local community, and becoming gang members had seemed a means of reaffirming themselves. Second, becoming gang members had been a way of recapturing some of the dramatic, yet marking and almost addictive, adrenaline-charged experiences of war, danger and death, as well as of comradeship and solidarity which they had lived through as conscripts, and which were rapidly becoming scarce commodities in post-war Nicaragua. But perhaps most importantly, becoming gang members had seemed to many a natural continuation of their previous role as soldiers. The early 1990s were highly uncertain times, marked by political polarization, violence, and spiralling insecurity, and these youths talked about how they felt they could “serve” and “protect” their friends and families more effectively as members of a gang than as individuals. Drawing on their military training, as well as the historical *pandilla* culture that in many ways was the traditional institutional vehicle for youth organization in poor neighborhoods prior to the *Sandinista* revolution, they formed gangs in order to better defend their social networks (Rodgers 2006a: 283-84).

This first generation of post-conflict *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members had clearly been “pre-socialized” into their distinct pattern of violence due to the group’s experience of conscription, as well as their having all lived through the *Sandinista* revolutionary period (Rodgers 2017b). At the same time, however, the gang also socialized together, and very quickly ended up regularly fighting other gangs at popular local nightclubs and bars on Friday and Saturday nights for reasons unrelated to their vigilante ethos, and more the consequence of drinking and macho posturing. These fights more often than not involved fist fights, but could also escalate to knives, broken bottles, “nunchakus,”⁸ and occasionally, firearms (although the latter encounters were often subsequently highly mythologized). While perceived as collective conflicts, most such encounters were in fact individual one-on-one fights, very much along the ritualized lines described by Linger (1992) in Brazil. Gang members also began to engage in crime and delinquency, generally on an individual

⁷ Two of the older members of the gang left the gang in 1990 (one migrated to the US).

⁸ These were made popular by Bruce Lee films, frequently shown on Nicaraguan television at the time. Real “nunchakus” were difficult to find and beyond the financial means of most youth, so these were mostly homemade, often personalized and painted with gang symbols (see Sosa and Rocha 2001, 359).

basis or in small groups of two or three, albeit very much in an “amateur” manner (Kessler 2004). Whatever the form of violence—vigilante, against other gangs at bars and nightclubs, or criminal—the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang rapidly imposed itself as the dominant gang within the district, for reasons that are not completely clear but may have to do idiosyncratically with the personalities and profiles of those involved in the gang (Rodgers 2016).

1993–1998: ‘Golden Era’ Phase

From 1992 onwards, the ex-conscript members of the first post-war iteration of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang began to “mature out” of the gang.⁹ Over a period of a couple of years, they were all replaced by new members who had no military background or significant experiences of *Sandinismo*. Yet the vigilante norms and practices of previous gang members nevertheless continued to influence new ones due to a transformation in the way that *Sandinista* revolutionary ideology was internalized by gang members. Rather than being based on gang members’ personal experience of “defending the Nation” and “the Revolution,” the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s vigilante impulse became linked to a local contextual sense of belonging to the neighborhood, linked to the shrinking of the collective social imaginary in post-revolutionary Nicaragua that Núñez (1995) has described as involving an ontological shift “from the nation to the neighborhood.” What this allowed for was an institutionalization of the conscript-derived vigilante ethos of the first iteration of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang, albeit in a transformed manner. Rather than deriving from general ideological considerations, this became linked to a specific form of local territoriality.

This process of territorialization also affected the violent practices of the gang in a more practical way. The first gang’s vigilante violence had been rather ad hoc in nature, and principally aimed against individuals perceived as threatening to gang members’ families and friends. The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s mid-1990s iteration displayed more territorial dynamics, with gang members strategically placing themselves around the neighborhood and regularly patrolling its periphery, systematically challenging anybody who was not from the neighborhood. At the same time, much of the gang’s violence now revolved around semi-ritualized forms of gang warfare that obeyed a number of precise rules and practices and involved either attacking or protecting a neighborhood to engage enemy gangs, with fighting generally specifically focused either on harming or limiting damage to both neighborhood infrastructure and inhabitants, as well as injuring or killing symbolically important enemy gang members. Gang warfare was in and of itself constitutive of both the gang group and of individual gang members, as the latter were collectively socialized

⁹ Gang membership has generally been found to be a finite social role all over the world (Hazen and Rodgers 2014). Indeed, *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members from all epochs often told me that “there is no such thing as an old gang member”, and “maturing out” was generally considered the natural course of things by both gang and non-gang members, although the age at which this happens has varied in the neighborhood over time.

through combat, learning to fight for and with each other, as well as from each other, with younger gang members in particular learning from the actions of older ones. This meant that rather than deriving from a “pre-socialized” group’s military experience, the gang’s violence became institutionalized into the group’s dynamics, and it was not necessary for new members to have shared prior experiences the way that the first wave of conscript-gang members had (see Rodgers 2017b).

At the same time, collective gang violence responded to a new logic, one that aimed at imposing a form of territorial order rather than just protecting friends and family. Although gang wars often had deleterious consequences for local neighborhood populations, these were generally indirect, with the threat stemming principally from other gangs, whom the local gang engaged with in a prescribed manner that offered the wider local community a form of order and predictability. The first battle of a gang war typically involved fighting with fists and stones, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to sticks, then to knives and broken bottles, and eventually to mortars, guns, and AK-47s. Although the rate of escalation varied, its sequence never did—i.e. gangs did not begin their wars immediately with firearms. The fixed nature of gang warfare constituted something of a restraining mechanism, insofar as escalation is a process in which each stage calls for a greater but definite intensity of action, and is therefore always under actors’ control. But it also provided local neighborhood inhabitants with an “early warning system”, thereby offering a means of circumscribing unpredictability.

This positive function was widely recognized and indeed appreciated by local inhabitants, who not only frequently talked approvingly about their local gang, but also often provided assistance to local gang members, for example hiding them if they were chased into the neighborhood by other gang members or private security guards whilst engaging in the delinquent activities outside the neighborhood. Gang members returned the favor by never targeting members of their local community when they engaged in delinquent activities, which tended to remain small-scale, however, and were not a central element of gang member activities. At the same time, gang members actively went out of their way to protect local neighborhood inhabitants whenever they saw them being threatened by outsiders, and frequently providing (free) bodyguard services, as well as watching out for people’s property. The motivation offered by gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández for such practices was that they wanted to show their “love”—literally, “*querer*”—for their local neighborhood. “We show our love for the neighborhood by fighting other gangs”, a gang member called Miguel, for example, claimed, while another called Julio explained that “you show the neighborhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other gangs... You look after the neighborhood in that way, you help them, keep them safe”.

The gang’s local territorial identification was also evident in the fact that by 1994 or so, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang had given themselves a name, *Los Sobrevivientes*, in reference to the neighborhood’s pre-revolutionary name. This move from a peer group-based gang to a more territorialized gang was arguably critical to institutionally underpinning gang culture, as it meant that the gang developed structural autonomy, which was then consolidated through ritual conflict. This also allowed the “golden era” gang to be bigger and more organized than previously,

growing to having about 100 members at its greatest height.¹⁰ The overwhelming majority of members were new recruits, although a couple of individuals remained from the previous phase. These constituted major channels for transmitting the specialized martial knowledge of the first wave of ex-conscript gang members (Rodgers 2017b). During this “golden era” phase, the police also began to make occasional incursions into the neighborhood, albeit very rarely, and only after national or mayoral elections, when the newly elected President or Mayor would seek to begin their term with a bang (so to speak), and (temporarily) grant the police extra means to match those of the gangs (who often outgunned them—see Hernández 2001).

1999–2005: Drug Dealing Phase

Gang dynamics in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández changed dramatically around the turn of the century due to the spread of crack cocaine. Although drugs were by no means unknown to gang members in the neighborhood during the early and mid-1990s, the main drugs of choice at the time were marijuana and glue (for sniffing). The rise of crack cocaine fundamentally changed the nature of the gang, which moved from displaying a sense of solidarity with the local community to becoming a much more predatory organization. On the one hand, this was due to the fact that gang members became crack consumers. This made them very aggressive and unpredictable, and they began to regularly attack, steal from, burgle, and threaten local neighborhood inhabitants in order to secure either money or something to sell to obtain the means to buy another fix of the drug. On the other hand, the breakdown of the gang’s relationship with the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández community was also due to the group becoming involved in drug dealing.

Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández was one of a handful of neighborhoods through which cocaine arrived into Managua from the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, and from which it was then distributed. This impacted the gang significantly insofar as its members became involved in drug dealing. The latter was organized around an individual known as *el Indio Viejo* (the Old Indian), who originally came from the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, as a result of which he was able to source a regular supply of drugs. *El Indio Viejo* was himself a former gang member, and organically integrated current gang members into his business as individual street dealers, but also collectively, as a security apparatus. The gang group would act to guard drug shipments whenever they came in or went out of the neighborhood, enforce contracts, and also engaged in a campaign of terror to intimidate local inhabitants, to prevent denunciations and ensure that drug dealing occurred unimpeded and potential clients were not challenged or bothered. Contrarily to the past, then, when the gang sought to explicitly control the territory of the neighborhood, it now aimed to control its population, in order to violently underpin a process of exclusive (primitive) economic capital accumulation that enabled a small group of drug dealers to

¹⁰ The element of imprecision regarding this figure is due to the fact that the gang included both “core” and “peripheral” members during this phase, and the composition of the latter group was very fluid.

make it good within a broader context of poverty and limited alternative opportunities for economic capital accumulation (Rodgers 2016; 2018; 2021b).

The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang also changed structurally during the early 2000s, becoming smaller, reducing to 18–20 members. This was partly a consequence of the rise of crack consumption, which contrarily to smoking marijuana is an individual social practice in Nicaragua, but another reason was also that the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang became the security apparatus of the emergent drugs trade, which meant that functionally it needed to be a well-coordinated and tight-knit group, which its 100 members-strong previous incarnation would not have been able to be. The gang membership also became older. While gang members in the 1990s had been as young as 7 years old, and rarely older than 22 years of age, during the early 2000s, they fell between 16 and 25 years of age, and the majority had been gang members in the previous phase. This trend was also partly due to crack consumption becoming a major element of gang culture, as its well-known negative health consequences are magnified among the young, but it was also linked to the fact that it is necessary to be of a certain size and strength in order to be an effective street dealer.

Another new trend that emerged during this period was that the police began to implement what might be termed a policy of “spectacular” policing, regularly entering poor neighborhoods in an arbitrary and intimidating manner, heavily armed and wearing riot gear, and more often than not specifically targeting youth. This was clearly due to the fact that the emergent drugs trade had led to gang violence in Managua no longer remaining contained within poor neighborhoods such as *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, but spreading throughout the city (Rodgers 2006b). The rise of such new forms of policing occurred in tandem with a spatial isolation of poor neighborhoods through major infrastructural transformations, which led to urban violence being very much “pushed back” into poor neighborhoods and slums, particularly in Managua (Rodgers 2004, 2012, 2019b). At the same time, this dual security approach had two consequences. On the one hand, this led to frequent violent exchanges between the police and the local gang. On the other hand, it also led to increasing engagement between the police and drug dealers. In *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, while this was initially confrontational, it rapidly became accommodating—perhaps not surprisingly considering that the Nicaraguan Police is the least well paid in Central America (Dudley 2012)—to the extent that within a few years a systematized collusion had emerged.

2006–2011: Disappearance Phase

Partly as a result of this systematic collusion between the authorities and drug dealers, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang underwent a process of “pacification” from the mid-2006 onwards that resulted in its temporary disappearance. As mentioned above, the local drugs trade had initially been organized in a very ad hoc manner around a single individual known as *el Indio Viejo*, the old Indian, who had been a member of the first neighborhood gang, and who had originally drawn on a network of both ex- and current gang members in order to run his drug dealing

business. Partly as a result of his increasing collusion with the authorities, he began to professionalize, and became more selective in his partners. By early 2006, his activities were principally associated with a shadowy group involving both youth and adults, not all of whom were ex- or current gang members, and moreover not all of whom came from *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, although their main base continued to be physically located in the neighborhood. This group was locally referred to as the *cartelito*, or “little cartel” (see Rodgers 2018, for further details).

Because crack consumption made gang members unreliable, and also because of their fundamentally amateur nature as drug dealers and a security apparatus, the *cartelito* began to exclude gang members from drug dealing, and developed its own, independent security infrastructure. In doing so, it rapidly clashed with the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang. The latter was, however, no match for the former, which was both better armed and more professional—members of the *cartelito*, for example, did not consume the drugs they sold—while the gang had furthermore been significantly weakened by a number of its older members retiring or in two cases, actually joining the *cartelito*. After a series of confrontations in mid-2006 which led to several gang members being critically injured and one killed, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang effectively ceased to exist as a collective unit. Although individuals who had been gang members continued to hang out alone or in pairs in the neighborhood streets and consume crack, local inhabitants generally identified them as “*vagos*” (delinquents) rather than “*pandilleros*.” Personal vendettas, or “*traidos*” (Rocha 2005), persisted between individuals, and were the principal vectors of local street violence beyond crime and delinquency, which continued to be a major activity of a certain number of neighborhood youth, some of whom had previously been gang members.

At the same time, the *cartelito* sought to consolidate its domination of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández and actively impeded the emergence of a new gang. Levels of insecurity in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández reached their high point between 2007–11, as unknown, armed individuals whom people associated with the *cartelito* randomly patrolled the neighborhood on motorbikes, arbitrarily intimidating the neighborhood population—“to train us,” as a local inhabitant called *Doña* Yolanda put it—as well as violently preventing youth from congregating in more than twos or threes on street corners, clearly to avoid their potentially coalescing into a gang. As it professionalized, the *cartelito* also fought against other equivalent organizations located both in Managua and beyond, in order to secure an increased share in the drug market. Shoot-outs in and around the neighborhood became commonplace albeit unpredictable occurrences, although the *cartelito* also sometimes employed the police as a proxy in its conflicts with rival organizations. This violence reached a peak around 2009–2010, after which it eased up when the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *cartelito* began to reduce its involvement in local drug-dealing activities and refocused on drug-trafficking instead. This was due to the much higher profits to be made in this line of activity, and also because *el Indio Viejo* was arrested in 2007. Following his release two years later, he decided that his arrest had been linked to the visibility of drug dealing, so he felt he needed to do things differently. His decision significantly changed local violence dynamics, as the *cartelito* no longer sought

to control the neighborhood, but rather avoided attracting attention, using *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández only as one of several operational bases.

2012–2015: Revival Phase

El Indio Viejo was arrested again along with most other members of the *cartelito* in 2011, reportedly because a rival who had developed close links to certain members of the Nicaraguan government was able to supersede the bribes that *el Indio Viejo* regularly paid to the police to be left alone. What remained of his group subsequently attempted to re-organize in a much-reduced manner around his former number two, but they effectively constituted little more than a loose group of local dealers sharing economies of scale, and by 2014 had effectively dissipated as an organized concern. This development allowed for the emergence of a new youth gang in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández as early as 2012, when a group of twelve 14–15-year-olds began hanging out together as a group on neighborhood street corners.

All were involved individually in a variety of petty criminal activities, although most local inhabitants considered them more or less innocuous as these were generally low-level and they did not carry out their delinquent activities in the neighborhood. (This was less due to any “love” for the neighborhood, and more for reasons related to preserving their anonymity when carrying out delinquent acts, as well as former gang members having menacingly “explained” to these new gang members that they were not to target local inhabitants following an “unfortunate mistake” shortly after the new gang began to coalesce as a group.) In July 2012, however, this new *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang attacked the gang in a nearby neighborhood, and although they were repelled with several injured—partly due to their attempting to engage in forms of spectacular individual violence during this conflict—this instance of collective violence by the group was seen as the beginning of a new cycle of gang warfare by *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández inhabitants, including *Doña* Yolanda, who exclaimed excitedly during an interview just after the event that “the gang is back”!

This impulse for this collective action had in fact been related to the group learning from former gang members about the neighborhood’s gang history and deciding after a heavy drinking session to emulate their predecessors, rather than any form of identification with the local neighborhood population or territory. Collective gang wars nevertheless became a significant practice of this new generation of gangs, despite the fact that they were less organized than any of the different iterations that had emerged in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández over the previous decades, and were also characterized by high member turnover and institutional ephemerality. Groups often lasted less than a year, although a new group would generally emerge very rapidly after one had dissipated. These groups were all very similar, generally involving between 6 to 12 individuals aged between 13–17 years, and sometimes individuals crossed over from one group to another. To this extent, the gangs of the “revival” phase can be said to very much approximate the classic “street corner gangs” famously described in the historic literature about gangs in the US (Thrasher 1927; Whyte 1943), with the age range suggesting that their organic emergence was likely also related to forms of adolescent rebellion. Certainly, the new gang conflicts

were often spaces where individuals often tried to “prove” themselves and sought to develop reputations for being “*dañino*” (bad).

The situation in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández was mirrored at the wider city-level and marked a resurgence in gang activity in Nicaragua after several years of widespread pacification due to a combination of the rise of *cartelitos* in some neighborhoods, new forms of policing, as well as a period of NGO activity that was subsequently curtailed by the Nicaraguan government around 2010 (Rocha 2013). Perhaps not surprisingly, gangs became perceived by the Nicaraguan authorities as a social nuisance, particularly as their increasing ubiquity constituted a visible contradiction of the government’s tourist- and foreign investment-friendly discourse about the country being “safe” and “crime-free” (Weegels 2018a; 2018b).

This led to a change in the predominant forms of policing, particularly in Managua, where poor neighborhoods in particular came to be patrolled by a new, purposefully-created police unit known as *Los Dantos*. These were heavily armed, motorized units, dressed in anonymous black uniforms, who from 2015 onwards began to engage in a targeted national campaign of intimidation against urban youth, indiscriminately stopping and strip-searching, beating, and sometimes imprisoning both gang members and non-gang members. In *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, collective patrols of up to 20 motorcycles with a driver and a passenger carrying a shotgun or an AK-47 would be a regular intimidating presence, often “corralling” male youth in public spaces before strip-searching them, confiscating money and mobile phones, arresting anybody with drugs, and then arbitrarily loading one or two individuals into pick-up trucks that would drive to the other side of Managua where they would be left naked, something profoundly humiliating in Nicaragua’s *machista* social context.¹¹

2016–2018: Combo Phase

This new form of policing successfully stymied the spread of male gangs, both in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández and more widely, but had the (unintentional) consequence of leading to the unprecedented emergence of female gangs. Known locally as “*combos*”—a term that seems to have been borrowed from a popular Colombian telenovela shown on Nicaraguan TV at the time—these female gangs have very different dynamics to the male gangs of previous eras. In *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, the first *combo* came to the fore in late 2015, and was made up of 15 young women aged between 16 and 21 years old, most but not all of whom were from the neighborhood. They had all been to the same local school (albeit across different year groups)—and seemed to interact mainly via Facebook, but they would also meet in person “to party every Saturday” at neighborhood *fiestas* or nightclubs. At the latter, individual *comberas* would get into fights with other young women—who were often members of other *combos*—for reasons linked to *macho* pride—“I saw a girl dissing me and when I went over to ask her what her problem was, she started

¹¹ Neighborhood youth rapidly developed a system whereby somebody would follow the pickup truck on a motorcycle with clothes, and bring the stranded youth back as quickly as possible.

mouthed off, so I got angry and I challenged her to a fight”—but most frequently over young men—“she was dancing with a guy I liked, so I went up to him and told him that he should be with me, not her, and she got angry and challenged me to a fight”.

These fights were generally extremely violent one-on-one encounters, sometimes resulting in death—a 17-year-old girl from *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández was killed during my visit in November 2016—although most of the time they stopped when one of the combatants was seriously injured, ran away, or asked for mercy. These conflicts were prolonged on social media, however, as fights were often recorded and uploaded on Facebook, and the virtual platform was also used for rival *comberas* to trash talk—both individually and collectively—with each other about the fights, throw out personal or group insults, or else to upload semi-naked photos of themselves on the Facebook timeline/walls of young men that they liked, telling them to dump their current girlfriend because “this is what you’re missing,” “I’m more beautiful than her,” “I’m a better fuck than her,” etc.¹² Due to the semi-public nature of such communications, they would often lead to rival *comberas* challenging each other virtually, and then agreeing to meet and fight in person, mostly near nightclubs or at parties which they both plan to attend, but sometimes in the neighborhood streets. On occasion this also happened spontaneously, as was the case in November 2016, when two rival *comberas* happened to cross paths in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández one afternoon, started insulting each other, and then fighting, although the fight was rapidly broken up by local inhabitants, in stark contrast to the fights taking place at nightclubs and neighborhood parties, which always had audiences that egged fighters on.

The discourse of the *comberas* whom I interviewed explicitly related their behaviour patterns to the new police tactics involving the *Dantos* special forces, insofar as they had had a major impact on the territorial presence of young males in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández.¹³ Their marked absence on the streets was striking in 2016 compared to my visits in 2012 and 2014, and both male and female youths intimated that this had completely upset the local sexual economy. Previously, young men and young women had met each other and flirted on the streets, before then pairing off to court semi-privately in the neighborhood parks, squares, and patios. By 2016, this had ceased almost entirely as a result of police repression. The main space for flirtation and courtship between young men and women in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández were a couple of local night clubs and the occasional neighborhood *fiesta* (for example on 19 July or around Christmas) where the dynamics of social interaction were completely different: these are eminently collective, public, heated, loud, and hugely performative spaces, characterized by strutting, preening, and aggressive dance-offs, and so on. The sense of competition was extreme, and as a *combera* called

¹² The rise of *combos* was clearly facilitated by the sudden explosion of smart phone ownership in Nicaragua due to the flooding of the market with cheap Chinese handsets as a result of the Nicaragua interoceanic canal project (the company in charge of the project, HKND, is a Chinese telecommunications company).

¹³ Contrarily to the “disappearance” period previously, even individual male youth were targeted by the Police.

Olga told me: “girls who have developed reputations for being good fighters have a better chance of getting the boys they want without being challenged.” Indeed, she argued that the whole logic of the *combo* was about “getting a man.” Certainly, young women tended to “retire” from their *combo* once they had done so—as Olga put it, “now that I’ve got my husband, I’ve distanced myself from the *combo* and don’t involve myself like I used to.”

A sexualized political economy whereby female gang members resort to violence in pursuit of intimate relations is by no means unprecedented. Certainly, it’s something that Thrasher (1927), Moore (1991) or Joe Laidler and Hunt (2001) have all observed in the US context, for example. More generally, as Lancaster (1992) has highlighted, social relations in Nicaragua often inscribe themselves within a broader systemic violence that is linked to the prevalent *machismo* and patriarchy (see also Rodgers 2024). The rise of an all-female gang in a neighborhood where there had not been female gang members previously obviously raises critical questions. At a general level, the notion that it was related to the retreat of young men from public space makes a certain amount of sense, analogous to Bourgois’s (1995) observation that chronic unemployment and the concomitant weakening of the status of men in a New York neighborhood allowed (some) women to carve out autonomy and impose themselves as street dealers. What is more difficult to understand, though, is why it was specifically this particular group of young women who formed the *combo*, and I have to admit that I do not have a good answer for this. Answers to my queries about the issue ranged from “we were the bad girls [group at school]” to “just for the fun of it.” A couple of the *comberas* whom I interviewed had male siblings who had been gang members, but this did not seem to be significant. A core group of the *comberas* had, however, been close friends and had gone out to nightclubs and dances together before becoming recognized as a gang, and so there was perhaps some institutional path dependency in relation to this, moreover magnified once the local male gang disappeared.

Post-April 2018

In April 2018, Nicaragua was the theater of a mass popular uprising against the current government. Now only revolutionary in name, representing an elite oligarchy rather than the poor majority of the population, the *Sandinista* regime that returned to power in 2007 had become increasingly unpopular over the previous years as the end of Venezuelan aid following the death of Hugo Chavez in 2013 undermined the social redistribution programmes that had underpinned its clientelist political system for a decade. This was replaced by increasing repression and social control, in a broader context of increasing levels of impoverishment, rising inequality, and fiscal imbalance (Rocha 2018). The government’s attempt to implement huge pension cuts and tax increases were the spark that led to mass demonstrations across the country. Caught unprepared, the government violently repressed the protests, breaking up demonstrations, taking apart barricades, and instituting a reign of fear and terror through arbitrary acts of violence and the imposing of curfews in poor neighborhoods. Over 300 people were killed, hundreds more “disappeared,” thousands

arrested, while over 70,000 Nicaraguans fled across the border to Costa Rica. This “pacification” process took place over the course of several months, and involved the police as well as what were termed “*parapoliciales*,” or “parapolice,” that is to say, armed groups of civilians deputized by the police (Collombon and Rodgers 2018).

These events arguably marked a new phase in Nicaragua’s gang history. On the one hand, just as had been the case of gangs in the late 1970s during the original *Sandinista* revolutionary insurrection, the *combos* effectively dissipated in the face of more violent (and better armed) actors, who often patrolled nightclubs and cracked down on any form of violence and signs of dissent. On the other hand, many of those recruited into the *parapoliciales* were former gang members. The recruitment of gang members by the *Sandinista* government in order to disrupt opposition is not new (Rocha 2008; Rodgers and Young 2017), and responds to a clear logic of recruiting violence “experts,” but it has occurred on a much larger scale than previously, with the number of *parapoliciales* estimated to be around 10,000 in total. Military veterans, former policemen, and *Sandinista* party activists have also been recruited, but former gang members make up a significant proportion. This included at least two individuals in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández whom I interviewed in February 2020. One was a gang member in the early 2000s, and the other a gang member in the early 2010s. Both were recruited through the *Sandinista* party’s youth organization respectively in late 2018 and early 2019, and were provided with weapons and each paid 300 *córdobas* (approximately US\$ 10) a day to regularly enter other neighborhoods at night and randomly shoot to intimidate people. As the government ran out of money, it switched to offering immunity from prosecution to individuals instead, which has led to levels of crime and delinquency spiralling.

Violence and Capital Accumulation

The above evolutionary trajectory clearly suggests that two issues are particularly important to take into account when thinking about how different *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández youth gang iterations occupy the gang social field. Firstly, each of the iterations described above can be associated with distinct types of violence instrumentally related to different purposes. Secondly, the forms of violence associated with a particular gang iteration—and the purposes that they are instrumentally related to—are both individual and collective. Both of these point to the importance of taking into account the way different iterations of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang can be associated with different regimes of capital accumulation. These are relatively obvious in relation to economic and social capital, but a number of more precise forms of cultural capital can be identified to enhance our understanding of youth gang dynamics. These are “warrior capital,” “sexual capital,” “identity capital,” and what—borrowing from Zeitlyn (2015), although he uses the expression in a somewhat different way—might be termed “security capital.”

The notion of “warrior capital” was first put forward by Sauvadet (2006), specifically to analyze youth gang dynamics in France. He describes how much of the activities of the individual gang members that he studied revolved around the accumulation of what he termed a capital to “facilitate their access to all sorts of

symbolic and material resources” (Sauvadet 2006, 187, my translation). This warrior capital is accumulated by means of gang members displaying a range of physical attributes—strength, speed—but also a “defiant”—courageous, reckless—and “virile”—read: macho—ways of being, as well as acquiring and displaying specialized knowledge regarding violence—for example concerning the use of weapons, martial arts, etc. Gang members, thus, engage in forms of ritualized verbal and physical conflict, and act in particular ways, displaying interests in specific issues and topics, both performatively as well as to improve their skills and knowledge base. The more they accumulate this capital, the more they are likely to be able to climb up the gang hierarchy as well as engage successfully in delinquency. “Sexual capital” is conceptually comparable to warrior capital. It refers to certain practices and understandings that are considered to enhance the sense of sexual attractiveness embodied by individual social agents, and it is this that is accumulated through engaging in specific acts and ways of being in relation to the establishment of (sexual) relationships (Martin and George 2006).

In contrast, the notion of “identity capital” is a fundamentally collective form of capital. It refers to the fact that “identities... cannot be only reduced to territorial or social belonging, a category of ethnographic description or popular perception, but also reveal varying access to resources within the context of competition or inequality between different groups” (Dorransoro and Grojean 2014, 27, my translation). In the context of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, this capital is intimately linked to the notion of belonging to the local neighborhood community and relates to “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2002, 106). In the broader post-revolutionary Nicaraguan context of chronic “ontological insecurity” (Rodgers 2008), accumulating stocks of identity capital enables “the imposition of a sense of order in the chaos of many people doing many things with many meanings” (Nicholas 1966, 49). Partly related to this, “security capital” is also a collective form of capital, which at its most basic relates to the promulgation of a sense of fundamental safety that goes beyond any specific personal basis, but rather is related to the imposition of a sense of who within the collectivity—as defined by identity capital—is part of what might be termed the “security community”, and who is not.

The different iterations of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang deployed violence in different ways at different points in time in order to facilitate the accumulation of different types of capital, as summarized in Table 1 above. This distinguishes between individual and collective forms of violence, and individual and collective forms of capital accumulation. The “emergent” phase iteration of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang was involved in forms of collective vigilantism in favour of gang members’ friends and families and some group fighting at nightclubs, as well as forms of individual one-on-one fighting and delinquency. The latter can be associated with the accumulation of warrior capital, while the former with social capital, a weak form of identity capital, and a limited form of security capital. By the “golden era” phase, however, this security capital concerned protecting the whole neighborhood community rather than just the friends and families of gang members,

Table 1 The phases of the evolution of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang social field

<i>Historical barrio</i> Luis Fanor Hernández gang phase	<i>Individual forms of violence associated with the barrio</i> Luis Fanor Hernández gang	<i>Collective forms of violence associated with the barrio</i> Luis Fanor Hernández gang	<i>Types of capital accumulated through individual gang activities</i>	<i>Types of capital accumulated through collective gang activities</i>
Emergent (1989–92)	Individual delinquency; one-on-one fighting	Vigilantism; some group fighting	Warrior capital	Social capital; identity capital (weak); security capital (limited)
“Golden era” (1993–98)	Individual delinquency; spectacular individual violence	Ritualized inter-gang warfare; collective delinquency	Warrior capital; economic capital (disorganized)	Identity capital (strong); security capital (general)
Drug dealing (1999–2005)	Violence linked to drug dealing and consumption	Instrumental violence to support local drug economy	Economic capital (organized)	Economic capital; security capital (limited)
Disappearance (2006–11)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Revival (2012–15)	Individual delinquency; spectacular individual violence	Spontaneous inter-gang conflicts	Economic capital (disorganized); warrior capital	Identity capital (weak); Social capital
<i>Combo</i> phase (2016–18)	Ritualized individual conflicts; virtual violence	Virtual violence	Warrior capital; sexual capital	(Virtual) social capital
<i>Post-April 2018</i> phase (2018–)	Individual delinquency	Collective repression (for the government)	Economic capital	Security capital (limited, for the government)

as the existence of a “golden rule” of never attacking local inhabitants but rather always seeking to protect them testifies. At the same time, however, the gang’s collective forms of ritualized inter-gang warfare became a generalized mode of accumulation of identity capital that had an exogenous effects beyond the gang, as the fact that it was common to hear neighborhood inhabitants express that “*la pandilla es el barrio*” (the gang is the neighborhood) illustrates well. The gang also engaged in forms of both individual and collective forms of delinquency, which were associated with warrior and economic capital accumulation, albeit the latter in a disorganized manner.

During the drug dealing phase, the gang was involved in more instrumental forms of violence, both collectively and individually, which aimed at systematically accumulating economic capital in a highly organized manner, as well as accumulating security capital, albeit in a different way to the previously phase. In particular, where the previous mode of security capital accumulation had been based on providing local inhabitants with a modicum of personal safety, the drug dealing gang’s mode of security capital accumulation was more limited in scope, based on the perpetration of a climate of fear and terror in the neighborhood in order to enable the drugs trade to operate unimpeded. There was no gang in the disappearance phase, while the revival phase gang iterations engaged in spontaneous inter-gang conflicts as well as individual delinquency and spectacular forms of individual violence, aimed at accumulating economic and warrior capital individually, and collective social capital at the peer group level, and they also seemed to be generating a weak form of identity capital within the neighborhood. The gang iterations of the *combo* phase engaged in ritualized forms of individual violence, as well as both individual and collective virtual violence, which sought to facilitate the accumulation of warrior and sexual capital at the individual level, and (virtual) social capital at the collective level. The latter impacted on more than just the *comberas* insofar as it also affected young males of the neighborhood. Finally, the post-April 2018 phase of gangsterism saw (former) gang members engage in individual forms of violence in order to facilitate the accumulation of a collective form of security capital by the government, as well as individual economic capital accumulation.

The fact that we can observe some repetition of different forms of violence and capital accumulation across different phases of the evolution of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang social field is not necessarily surprising. While gangs are highly variable social institutions, part of what makes their different iterations all ‘gangs’ are common activities and behaviors, and so it is not unexpected that there are similarities between different phases. Indeed, the continuities between the individual and collective forms of violence that different iterations of the gang engaged in during the “emergent” and “revival” phases could even be read as illustrating what might be considered basic originating processes through which gangs come to the fore as a social phenomenon, insofar as they are highly reminiscent of Thrasher’s (1927, 57) classic foundational observation concerning 1920s Chicago gangs that these “originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. ... The result of this collective behavior [was] the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit de corps*, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.” Similarly, the particular nature of certain forms of capital,

such as warrior capital, means that their accumulation must necessarily involve individual violence, and could explain the repeated correlation between the latter form of violence—albeit of different varieties—and the former type of capital accumulation across phases.

But how are we to understand the move from one form of violence to another, and the different forms of capital accumulation that they are related to? What triggers the transformation of the gang from one phase to another? Several trends can be identified regarding the articulation of specific forms of violence and specific types of capital accumulation across phases. While there are a number of clear continuities regarding both individual and collective forms of violence across phases, similar continuities only exist between individualized forms of capital accumulation; collective forms of capital accumulation consistently change across phases. This can be explained by the fact that individualized forms of capital accumulation respond to endogenous dynamics—whether internal to the gang or the neighborhood—while collective forms of capital accumulation seem to respond primarily to factors exogenous to the neighborhood. Certainly, the shifts in the forms of collective capital accumulation associated with different phases of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s development can all be directly related to external processes. For example, the move from the “golden era” to the “drug dealing” phase was precipitated by the arrival of cocaine in the neighborhood, the change from the “revival” to the “*combo*” phase can be connected to the transformation of policing patterns and the rise of the *Dantos*, while the shift from the “*combo*” phase to the “post-April 2018” phase was precipitated by national politics.¹⁴

The fact that exogenous factors provoke fundamental shifts in the regime of collective capital accumulation from one iteration of the gang to another can be linked to the way the gang, as a field of violent capital accumulation, relates to other local violent actors. There seems to be a clear process at work here, insofar as the gang’s transformation in its first three phases is one of increasing hegemonic domination over the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández territory and community; but the next four phases saw the gang dominated by more violent external actors. The exogenous introduction of drugs introduced a new actor, the *cartelito*, which did more than simply impose itself hegemonically, but rather sought and achieved a monopoly over violence, thereby obliterating the gang as a “social field.” The fall of the *cartelito* opened up a space for the gang field to re-emerge again in the “revival” phase, but in an iteration that was clearly struggling to establish any local hegemony and had to moreover face the introduction of a new violent exogenous actor in the form of the *Dantos* police units before it was able to institutionalize in any meaningful way. The rise of the *combos* as a result is a testament to this lack of institutionalization, and sociologically-speaking could be said to constitute an attempt

¹⁴ There is a partial exception regarding the shift between the “emergent” and “golden era” phases, where the gang continued to accumulate identity and security capital, albeit respectively in a weak or limited manner in the former phase and a strong and generalized way in the latter. This can be explained by the fact that the “golden era” phase in many ways represents the autonomous institutionalization of gang dynamics that originated in the “emergent” phase, and hence was arguably driven by endogenous dynamics.

to develop an alternative gang form that might circumvent the police hegemony, while gang members' induction into the government repressive apparatus following the April 2018 uprising arguably marks their demise as an autonomous social phenomenon in the face of overwhelming domination and "upgrading" of their local social field to a more national level.

Conclusion

While the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang's evolution might not be systematic in nature, clearly involving numerous contingent developments, it is also clear that it contains a number of recurrent elements that come to the fore repeatedly. In particular, certain forms of individual violence and capital accumulation articulate in particular ways on a regular basis, partly due to the inherent nature of the capital being accumulated—e.g. warrior capital—but also because past practices clearly offered templates to individual gang members. When there are systematic correlations between collective forms of violence and capital accumulation, this tends to be due to endogenously-driven processes of institutionalization, as occurred between the first and the second phase of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang's evolution. The disjunctive shift in both the patterns of violence and capital accumulation between from the "golden era" iteration of the gang and its "drug dealing" phase was however precipitated by exogenous factors, namely the arrival of cocaine in the neighborhood, while the subsequent transformations of the gang field in the "revival," "combo," and "post-April 2018" phases are similarly linked to external processes. Indeed, the latter is probably the most explicit exemplification of the way that exogenous factors can change youth gang dynamics, even if at one level, it could be argued that this phase has seen gangs return to the fore in collaboration with a weakened Nicaraguan state, now contributing to imposing a regime of "gang rule" that goes beyond the local but encompasses the whole country.

While these different transformations are relative easy to understand in general terms—the gang's transformation in the "drug dealing" phase makes economic sense, for example, while it is logical that the rise of a hegemonic but non-monopolistic local violent actor other than the gang might lead to a transformation of the gang as a social field of capital accumulation, as occurred between the gang's "revival" and "combo" phases—what is more difficult to understand are the specific features of different iterations. For example, why did the move from the gang's "revival" phase to its "combo" phase involve the rise of a female gang? As mentioned previously, this is particularly puzzling considering the lack of past reference points relating to female gang participation. Yet the commonalities that exist across phases between forms of individual capital accumulation, as well as their repeated connection to a particular type of violence, do suggest that there is some systematicity across the gang field's evolutionary trajectory, albeit more in terms of episodic recurrence of certain inherent articulations of these forms of violence and capital accumulation rather than any determined linear progression. Seen from this perspective, what can perhaps be said about gang dynamics and their transformation is that while the latter is never linear in nature, there are definite relations between actors,

violence, and forms of capital accumulation. Responses to endogenous dynamics lead to (stochastically) repetitive outcomes, and when they are affected by exogenous factors, they give rise to more unpredictable evolutions.

The bigger question, of course, is why does the youth gang endure as an autonomous social field despite its instability? Bourdieu argued that multiple social fields exist in a nested manner, but that certain fields can become dominant at different points in time. This is arguably what happened with the emergence of the *cartelito*, as well as in the post-2018 period, albeit in different ways, with the *cartelito* imposing a different sort of social order on the neighborhood, while the post-2018 period has arguably seen as “gangsterization” of the broader Nicaraguan social order. Certainly, research on gangs in other contexts has highlighted how the relationship between the gang social field and other social fields can vary; Arias (2006; 2017) and Auyero and Sobering (2019) have for example traced how the balance of power between gangs and states, as well as with other violent actors, can change over time, leading to gangs becoming more or less important. In the final analysis, though, gangs do seem always to return in some form or another after periods of retreat, and the gang social field continues to have relevance. On the one hand, this is clearly partly related to the “elementary” nature of youth gangs that Thrasher (1927) highlighted when he identified them as one of the most basic forms of social ordering. On the other hand, it can perhaps also be related to their youthful associations, insofar as youth generally “have a stronger instinct for survival than adults[,] ...no doubt ...because [they] adapt better and faster to exceptional circumstances,” as the Lebanese film-maker Ziad Doueiri (1998)—maker of the powerful film *West Beyrouth*—has pointed out, and they are therefore organically “prefigurative” social actors (see Rodgers and Young 2017).

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