

CHAPTER 1

The Moral Economy of Murder

Violence, Death, and Social Order in Nicaragua

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INTRODUCTION

In his famous lectures to the College de France in 1975–1976, Michel Foucault (2003, 241) argued that politics in the modern era have become focused on life rather than death. While the power of medieval sovereigns was fundamentally based on their ability to kill with impunity, the contemporary epoch is the age of what he termed “biopower,” that is to say, a politics organized around the control and regulation of life. Foucault pithily summarized this as the ability “to make live,” which Stuart Murray (2006, 194) has contended effectively makes politics “a discourse on life that is *about* life as much as it appears, strategically, to *belong to* life itself, a natural extension of life’s sacred—and thus unquestionable—value.” As Andrew Norris (2000, 43) has pointed out, however, the inevitability of death means that it unavoidably assumes “a privileged place in the logic of the ‘meaning’ of human life,” and by extension will always impact on the terrain of the political, if one accepts—following Georges Balandier’s (1970) “maximalist” formulation—that the latter concerns the nature of collective social order at its most basic. Seen from this perspective—and against the grain of much recent theorizing on the biopolitical character of contemporary politics (e.g., Li 2009; Rose 2006)—I want to suggest that there is potentially much to be learned from adopting a focus on death rather than life in order to get to grips with the social “order of things” (see Foucault, 1970).

More specifically, through a consideration of the evolving norms, understandings, and significances associated with killing and dying in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández,¹ a poor neighborhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, where I have been carrying out longitudinal ethnographic research since 1996, I want to highlight how a “thanatopolitical” approach—that is to say, one based on a politics of death²—can reveal particular socioeconomic dynamics that are perhaps less obvious when our analysis is focused on life. I take as my starting point a conversation about a murder that I had with a barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang member called Bismarck in the mid-1990s, which revealed what initially seemed to be a highly apathetic understanding of death. Drawing on the events that followed the demise of another gang member called Lencho, I then explore how dying constituted a critical element in the discursive social construction of individual gang membership, but also for the maintenance of a broader sense of collective community belonging and order. The transformation of Nicaraguan gang dynamics and the rise of new armed actors in the 2000s fundamentally changed local understandings associated with death, however, and led to the emergence of a particular moral economy of murder, which I discuss in relation to the killing of another gang member called Charola. Ultimately, what this particular metamorphosis points to is the fundamentally dystopian evolution of the broader political economy of post-revolutionary Nicaragua.

BISMARCKIAN PERSPECTIVES

I first met Bismarck in December 1996, moments after he thought he had committed his first murder. I had been carrying out a photo tour of barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, when I came across two teenage youths, Jader and Bismarck, boisterously taking turns riding what was clearly a new bicycle. Jader, with whom I was previously acquainted, hailed me over to proudly show off their acquisition, and asked me to take a photo of the two of them. As I snapped them, I asked where they had obtained the bicycle, and they explained that they had just stolen it from a “rich kid” in the nearby *colonia* Las Condes. “It was a piece of cake, we cornered him down a dead end,” Jader elaborated, “although the *hijueputa* refused to hand it over at first, so we had to rough him up a bit.”

“Yeah, and then he started screaming like a *cochón*, so we had to really do him in properly,” Bismarck added excitedly.

“What do you mean, you had to do him in properly?,” I queried.

“Hah! I dropped a concrete block on his head, that’s what! It cracked right open, brains and all, and he stopped shouting forever,” Bismarck exclaimed.

“Shit, *maje*, you killed him? For a bicycle? You’re completely mad!”

“Yeah, Bismarck’s crazy, real *dañino*,” Jader injected, “but he’d never killed anybody before, you see, and you know how it is with first times, you get all excited and carried away, and *puf*, that’s what happened, he got carried away and killed the guy for no good reason.”

“Fuck you, *maje*, we got the bike, no?,” Bismarck retorted. “Who gives a shit about the rest?”

As it happened, I did, because Bismarck was a member of the local neighborhood gang that I was studying. Despite the fact that I had become closely associated with the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang (see Rodgers 2007b), and the gang members’ rather blasé attitude to murder was by no means unfamiliar, I had principally interacted with older members, whom I believed had become inured to death largely through their repeated exposure to the phenomenon. Bismarck, however, was a younger gang member who was just embarking on a murderous career, yet he seemed to display a similarly lackadaisical attitude toward death. I was therefore interested to learn more about the way he conceived of himself and his actions in order to understand the dynamics of what now seemed to me to possibly be a full-blown state of “cognitive dissociation” rather than simple habituation (see Festinger 1957). I asked Bismarck whether he was willing to let me interview him about both the murder and his life history more generally. He readily acquiesced, and we met regularly over the course of the next few months, as well as often seeing and greeting each other in the streets of barrio Luis Fanor Hernández.

Bismarck proved to be a hugely engaging informant. He was a happy-go-lucky sixteen year old, who always had a huge grin on his face and ready answers to my inquiries. He also displayed a lot of curiosity about my research, frequently responding to my questions with probing queries of his own or offering insightful commentary on my evolving analyses of gang life. It rapidly became obvious that my idea that gang members were “cognitively dissociating” from death—rather than simply habituated to the phenomenon—was a definite instance of academic over-theorization on my part. When I explained the concept of cognitive dissociation to Bismarck during our first interview, he listened patiently but then simply responded:

Death is death, Dennis. It’s not something that you can avoid or ignore, it just happens. My father died when I was four, one of my sisters died when I was ten, and

several of my friends have also died over the past few years. You can't distance yourself from death, because you don't choose whether people live or die. Death just happens.

I pointed out that this was not really true of the kid whose bicycle he had stolen, but he summarily dismissed this and claimed that life in poor Nicaraguan neighborhoods was governed by “the law of the jungle” (*la ley de la selva*), by which you either killed or were killed. Death was “a natural phenomenon, and you just ha[d] to accept it,” according to Bismarck.

Such an outlook toward death can certainly be linked to repeated exposure to the phenomenon, in a manner reminiscent of the situation famously described by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) in the Alto do Cruzeiro shantytown in Northeast Brazil, where she noted a ubiquitous apathy toward dying as a result of the high levels of child mortality, extreme poverty, pervasive hunger, and political and criminal violence. At the same time, however, Bismarck's fatalism in the face of death was by no means constant. The contrast between his attitude toward the death of his neighbor Don Antonio, and that of a fellow gang member called Lencho, was striking in this respect.

Don Antonio was Bismarck's neighbor, linked to his family through relations of *compadrazgo* (fictive kinship), yet his death in January 1997 seemed to barely register on Bismarck. He mentioned it matter-of-factly a couple of times during our interviews, but otherwise it did not change his usual routines. On the other hand, Bismarck experienced Lencho's demise as a major bereavement, as did the other barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang members. Lencho was killed during gang warfare against the neighboring *asentamiento* José Amador gang in February 1997. The evening after his death, the gang members gathered to mourn him, sitting together on a street corner drinking and smoking late into the night. Although there was some talk about Lencho's exploits and achievements, the mood was generally rather somber, and there was little of the bittersweet humor often associated with wakes in Nicaragua. The gang unanimously decided to change its graffiti from “SBV”—an abbreviation of *Los Sobrevivientes*, a name the gang took from the neighborhood's pre-revolutionary name of *La Sobrevivencia*—to “Lencho,” to honor his memory. Although this only lasted for a few months, even today, almost twenty years after Lencho's death, one can still find old graffiti of his name in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández.

To a certain extent, this emotional response to Lencho's death was due to the fact that there existed strong ties of friendship and camaraderie within the gang group that for many gang members

superseded kinship ties (both real and fictive). At the same time, however, when I subsequently asked Bismarck why he had reacted to Don Antonio and Lencho's deaths so differently, he did not distinguish between them on the basis of personal relations but rather claimed that his discriminating attitude was linked to the fact that as a gang member, Lencho had "lived in the shadow of death."³ Unlike most neighborhood inhabitants, gang members regularly found themselves in dangerous situations and "lived" knowing that death was not an abstract concept but a very real possibility, which could strike at any time, and in any place. Certainly, during my first stay in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández between September 1996 and July 1997, four neighborhood gang members died violently,⁴ and deaths occurred regularly over the subsequent years that I have been going back to the neighborhood. Seen from this perspective, as Silvia Kuasñosky and Dalia Szulik (1996, 57 [my translation]) remark in relation to their study of youth gangs in Argentina, death obviously "constitutes a dimension of the lives of gang members which must be considered a priori in order to understand the significance of the ways in which these youths relate to each other and to wider society."

At the same time, "living in the shadow of death" was more than just a corporeal state of being for gang members, who often actively used the expression to designate not only their predicament but also their attitudes, social practices, and even philosophy of life. For them, "living in the shadow of death" entailed displaying definite behavior patterns, such as flying in the face of danger, whatever the odds and whatever the consequences. It meant taking risks and showing bravado, neither asking oneself questions nor calculating one's chances, but simply going ahead and acting, almost daring death to do its best. It meant being violent and exposing oneself to violence, but with style, in a cheerfully exuberant manner reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's (1986, 301) famous "destructive character," who is "young and cheerful," and "always blithely at work." This could especially be observed during gang warfare, as gang members recklessly threw themselves into fighting, with an obvious enthusiasm and performative flamboyance which added to the highly ritualized nature of the fighting. A barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang member called Julio, for example, was notorious for systematically exposing himself to gunfire during battles in order to "better defy" his adversaries, "daring them to do their best to injure [him] seriously," as he put it.

The idea of "living in the shadow of death" was also observable in more prosaic circumstances, including a botched attempt by Bismarck and Jader to rob a car in the neighboring *colonia* Las Condes in May

1997. The pair of them had heard that a party was being organized there and thought they might be able to mug a guest or break into a parked car. They quickly spotted a vehicle with a partially open window which they managed to jack down. As they searched for something of value, an obviously privileged young woman on her way to the party stopped and challenged them.⁵ They told her to mind her own business, to which she responded, “What do you prefer, moving off or being shot?” Bismarck immediately answered “being shot,” and posed defiantly with Jader by the car as the young woman alerted local security guards, who came running within seconds. The pair waited until the guards began shooting before running off. They were chased around Las Condes but managed to get away without suffering injury. Neither was at all disappointed by their failure to steal anything, however, and Bismarck in fact concluded his dramatic account of their escapade to an enthusiastic audience of fellow gang members with a self-satisfied and expressive “*¡Hijo de la setenta mil puta, maje, ni un cinco reales, pero ni verga, clase de alboroto!*” (Son of bitch, mate, not even half a *córdoba* for all that, but fuck it, what a brilliant uproar!), which generated great mirth and no little admiration.

Seen from this perspective, the act of “living in the shadow of death” was a primary constitutive social practice for gang members, playing a fundamental role in the construction of their individual self. Gang members asserted themselves through constant and high-spirited risk-taking that effectively corresponded to an “ethos”. Indeed, they would often talk of their particular *onda*—a Nicaraguan slang term that can be loosely translated as “way of being”—which they would explicitly associate with “living in the shadow of death,” arguing that this was what distinguished them most fundamentally from non-gang-member youth, frequently and aggressively repeating the expression in a quasi-talismanic manner during everyday discussions about their lives and activities.⁶ As Bismarck and Jader’s recounting of their botched theft illustrates well, *onda* also underpinned gang socialization, with tales of particularly dramatic, comedic, or tragic instances of risk-taking, bravado, or courage repeatedly recounted to younger gang members by older ones. Younger members often attempted to imitate them, although not necessarily with the same degree of success. Lencho had in fact died as a result of incautiously exposing himself to gunfire during a battle, explicitly imitating his fellow gang member Julio. Although he paid a high price for “living in the shadow of death,” his death was considered distinctive from more prosaic, run-of-the-mill mortalities because of the actions that caused it.

SANCTIFIED SACRIFICE

The perception that Lencho's death was distinctive from other deaths went beyond the gang members. Almost half the neighborhood attended Lencho's wake or funeral, more than double the number that came to the wake or funeral of Don Antonio, despite the fact that he had been the patriarch of one of the original founding families of *barrio Luis Fanor Hernández*. But perhaps the most striking feature of Lencho's wake and funeral was the way that local inhabitants actively talked about how he had "sacrificed" himself for the neighborhood. This is not as implausible as it may initially seem to be. As I have written about more extensively elsewhere (see Rodgers 2006), although Nicaraguan gang wars in the 1990s seemed anarchic and disordered at first glance, they can be interpreted as having provided local neighborhoods with a functional sense of security. The first battle of a gang war was typically 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. On the one hand, the fixed nature of gang warfare constituted a mechanism for restraining violence, 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. On the other hand, it also provided local inhabitants with an "early warning system." Gang wars played out as "scripted performances," thereby offering local communities a means of circumscribing what Hannah Arendt (1969, 5) famously termed the "all-pervading unpredictability" of violence.

Even if gang wars often had negative consequences for local populations—bystanders were sometimes injured or killed in the crossfire—these were arguably indirect. The threat stemmed from other gangs, with whom the local gang engaged in a prescribed manner, thereby limiting the scope of violence in its own neighborhood and creating a predictable "safe haven" for local inhabitants. In a wider context of chronic violence, insecurity, and social breakdown, the inhabitants of *barrio Luis Fanor Hernández* very much recognized this as something positive, even if it was not always effective. As an informant called Don Sergio put it:

The gang looks after the neighborhood and screws others; it protects us and allows us to feel a little bit safer, to live our lives a little bit more easily . . . Gangs are not a good thing, and it's their fault that we have to live with all this insecurity, but that's the problem about gangs in general, not of our gang here in the neighborhood. They protect us, help us—without them, things would be much worse for us.

Such a discourse was common among barrio Luis Fanor Hernández inhabitants of both sexes and all ages, but the esteem in which gang members were held was also obvious from the way neighborhood residents almost always cheerfully greeted and bantered with them on street corners, were happy to give them glasses of cold water during hot spells, or offered them shelter in their homes during flash downpours in the rainy season (none of which they necessarily did for non-gang-member friends and relatives).⁷ The quasi-symbiotic relationship between the gang and neighborhood inhabitants was however especially evident from the fact the latter never called the police during gang wars, nor did they ever denounce gang members, often going so far as to actively hide them and provide false information to any authority figure asking questions about local gang members.⁸

Beyond the security that the gang provided the neighborhood, there also existed a clear sense of identification with the local gang and its highly performative violence. This was evident in the “aesthetic pleasure” (Bloch 1996, 216) that local inhabitants derived from swapping stories about the gang, particularly eye-witness accounts of dramatic acts by gang members, and spreading rumors and re-telling various incidents over and over again. As such, the gang and its violent ethos of “living in the shadow of death” can actually be said to have constituted something of an institutional medium for the symbolic constitution of a sense of collective communal identity in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, one that was otherwise lacking due to the widespread poverty and the postwar political polarization, disillusion, and chronic insecurity that characterized Nicaragua at the time (see Rodgers 2007a, 2008a, and 2014). Certainly, it was common to hear the expression “*la pandilla es el barrio*” (the gang is the neighborhood) used by both gang members and non-gang residents in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, and there was little beyond the gang that seemed to connect the neighborhood community.

Thus the notion that Lencho had “sacrificed” himself for the neighborhood makes sense, whether from a folk or an anthropological perspective (see Hubert and Mauss 1964, Girard 1977). At the same time, the notion of sacrifice also has particular resonances in Nicaragua considering its importance for *Sandinista* revolutionary politics, as Roger Lancaster (1988, 132–138) has described:

Revolutions write and act out their own mythologies, which provide the new moral exemplars . . . and it is on the basis of their example of self-sacrifice that the Sandinistas ultimately rest[ed] their claim of being the “vanguard organization” of

the Nicaraguan people . . . Nicaraguan [revolutionary] history recounts itself as a succession of martyrdoms, and depicts itself as a series of martyrs. These martyrs become the icons of class consciousness.

It is interesting to note in this respect that the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang members actively and aggressively claimed the mantle of *Sandinismo* in a neighborhood that had otherwise politically gone “cold,” as Doña Ursula Rivas, one of the neighborhood’s historic *Sandinista* organizers, put it. Gang members claimed to be “the last inheritors of *Sandinismo*” and maintained that they engaged in violence due to their “love”—literally, “*querer*”—for their local neighborhood. “*Así somos, nosotros los bróderes pandilleros* [that’s how we are, us gang member brothers], we show our love for the neighborhood by fighting other gangs,” a gang member named Miguel claimed, while Julio told me that “you show the neighborhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people . . . You look after the neighborhood in that way, you help them.”

To a certain extent, a conceptual parallel can be made here with the “love” that Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1969, 398) saw as the mark of “the true revolutionary.”⁹ At the same time, it was striking that the conversations about Lencho’s “sacrifice” at his wake and funeral were not framed in political terms but had a more religious tinge to them. For example, Lencho’s body was repeatedly described by well-wishers at his wake as “beautiful,” “glowing,” and even “saint-like.” Almost everybody who went up to his coffin to pay their respects did so in a hushed and reverential manner that contrasted strongly with the behavior at other wakes I attended in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, where emotions were generally very demonstratively expressed. In this respect, in his discussion of what he calls “the mythology of the guerrilla,” Lancaster (1988, 132) notes how it is something that became intimately associated with religion in revolutionary Nicaragua, insofar as “by undergoing his ordeal of struggle, the guerrilla [was] purified . . . he [was] *sanctified*.” This notion of *sanctification through sacrifice* provided “powerful religious resonances” to the revolutionary regime, to the extent that Lancaster (1988, 133 and 139) argues that “*Sandinista* authority derive[d] from the same fount as priestly or saintly authority,” and that “the rules of political authority so closely resemble[d] the rules of religious authority that the two very nearly merge[d].” Underlying this association is the fact that revolutionary praxis, like religion, can often be boiled down to certain repetitive tropes—e.g., good vs. evil, virtue vs. sin, bourgeois vs. proletariat, capital vs. labor, etc. Sacrifice, from this perspective, was “more than a mere

event; it [was] more even than self-abnegation; it [was] a story, a narrative, an allegory of much wider significance" (Lancaster 1988, 138), one whereby the *Sandinista* revolutionary guerrilla was perceived as redeeming the social life of Nicaragua as a whole, in the same way that Jesus Christ is considered by Christians to have died for humanity's sins.

The religiosity that imbued conversations about Lencho at his wake and funeral suggests that he was similarly considered to have been sanctified through his sacrifice, which raises the obvious possibility of a conceptual parallel between gang and revolutionary guerrilla membership. A key difference between gang members in the 1990s and revolutionary guerrillas in the 1970s and 1980s, however, is that the former did not have a clear ideological agenda. At best, they constituted something of a Deleuzian "war machine," that is to say, "social phenomena that direct their actions against domination, but without necessarily having well-defined battle lines or standard forms of confrontation" (Jensen and Rodgers 2008, 231). The domination that the gang opposed was not that of a particular group or person but rather the more diffuse and generalized sense of insecurity, both real and ontological, that was a hallmark of Nicaragua in the 1990s, particularly in poor urban slums and neighborhoods (Rodgers 2007a and 2008a). This resistance can nevertheless be compared with the more explicitly political opposition of the sanctified *Sandinista* guerrilla insofar as it was fundamentally structural in nature, making the comparison between gangs and guerrillas at the very least symbolically appropriate.

Nicaraguan gang members' implicit resistance to their broader social circumstances can perhaps more plausibly be compared to the rage against oppression embodied in Eric Hobsbawm's (1959) famous figure of "social bandit." "Probably the single most influential idea in the modern study of bandits and outlaws" (Wagner 2007, 353), the notion of the social bandit refers to a particular type of criminal who, due to a (real or assumed) tendency to prey on the rich and to (sometimes) redistribute (some of) the proceeds of this delinquency to the poor, is seen as a hero and protector by the latter, who regularly aid, abet, and even hide the bandit from the authorities. Social bandits are therefore viewed as criminal by an oppressive state or a dominant class but are considered legitimate in the eyes of the local population, something that points to the existence of a differentiated morality of violence, clearly similar to the situation in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in the 1990s, where gang violence was seen as morally legitimate and gang member deaths were considered symbolically more important than other deaths.

VALE VERGA LA MUERTE

Hobsbawm argued that social bandits were ultimately doomed to failure: they were not proper revolutionaries but rather markers of oppression and difference. Most died, were co-opted by the authorities, or became oppressors themselves. This certainly proved to be the case for the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang, which changed dramatically with the turn of the millennium. This transformation was principally due to the spread of crack cocaine from 1999 onward, which led to the gang shifting from being an organization that displayed a sense of social solidarity with the local community to a more exclusive and predatory group. This was partly because gang members became crack consumers, many to the point of full-blown addiction, which made them aggressive and unpredictable. They began to regularly attack, rob, and threaten neighborhood inhabitants in order to obtain the means to secure their next fix. Gang members also become directly involved in drug dealing, however, both as individual street dealers and collectively as the drug trade's security infrastructure. The gang as a group enforced contracts and guarded drug shipments whenever they entered or left the neighborhood, and engaged in a campaign of sustained terror against local inhabitants, arbitrarily threatening, beating, and intimidating to prevent denunciations and to ensure that drug dealing could occur unimpeded.

Not only did the gang generate significant insecurity for local inhabitants, but it also (violently) underpinned a process of localized capital accumulation that enabled a small group of drug dealers to flourish in an otherwise impoverished environment with few economic opportunities. This particular function—which bears comparison with the “primitive accumulation” of North Philadelphia drug dealing described by Karandinos et al. (this volume)—suggests that, ultimately, there existed overriding exogenous factors shaping the gang's evolutionary trajectory, and more specifically, the reduction of socioeconomic possibilities that has characterized post-revolutionary Nicaragua. Certainly, the basic thrust of Nicaraguan development since the end of the *Sandinista* revolution can be summarized in terms of ever-increasing levels of exclusion and impoverishment among the majority of the population combined with a continuous concentration of wealth in the hands of a small oligarchy, a situation that the second coming of the *Sandinistas* from 2006 onward has not challenged but in fact consolidated and accelerated (see Rodgers 2008b and 2011). To this extent, because gangs are always epiphenomena of broader structural processes (see Thrasher 1927), the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang's transformation from an institutional

vehicle for community solidarity to a more predatory, parochial, and self-interested organization simply mirrors the broader dystopian—and rather Darwinian—developmental dynamics of contemporary Nicaraguan society.

This was also reflected in the transformation of the moral codes surrounding gang member deaths in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, as events surrounding the break down of the symbiotic relationship between the gang and local drug dealers highlight very well. Drug dealing in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández developed initially in an informal manner around a single individual known as *el Indio Viejo* (the Old Indian). He had been a member of the first neighborhood gang and had drawn on a network of both former and current gang members in order to set up and run his drug-dealing business. Over time, however, he professionalized his organization and became more selective in picking his local partners. By 2005, he was leading a rather shadowy group that involved individuals from outside the neighborhood, although barrio Luis Fanor Hernández remained the main base of operations. This group was locally referred to as the *cartelito*, or “little cartel,” and was highly feared, partly because it took on a more unknown quantity, involving individuals whom local inhabitants could not place or classify.

The *cartelito* developed its own security infrastructure, which rapidly clashed with the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang, at least partly in order to eliminate any potential challengers in the neighborhood for the local monopoly over violence. This led to a series of confrontations between the gang and the *cartelito* in mid-2006, which had rather predictable results, insofar as the latter was better armed and its members were not crack addicts and therefore much less prone to making stupid decisions. Members of the *cartelito* would wander around the neighborhood openly bearing arms, intimidating and sometimes shooting at any gang members they saw hanging around in the streets, to scare them and to warn them “not to get uppity,” as local inhabitants put it. After a few months of this, the gang decided to retaliate and attacked *el Indio Viejo*’s house one evening, which led to a shoot-out between the gang and members of the *cartelito*, during which a gang member called Charola was badly wounded. The other gang members fled, leaving him behind, and a member of the *cartelito* named Mayuyu went up to Charola and shot him in the head, execution-style, “as a warning to the others,” as he put it.

Charola’s death was experienced very differently to Lencho’s within barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. This was particularly obvious in the very different ways their wakes and funerals took place. Unlike Lencho’s, Charola’s death was met with widespread indifference. Although I was not present, by all accounts his wake and funeral were very poorly attended: there were no more than a dozen people at his wake, and only five—his immediate

family—at his funeral. What I was able to directly observe, however, was that all discussion about Charola was extremely critical. While Lencho had been sanctified and was talked about in hushed, respectful terms for weeks on end after his death—at least, until the next gang member death created another “*santo pandillero*” (gang member saint), as a rather amused Bismarck put it during a 2012 interview when I discussed some of my preliminary ideas concerning gang members and death with him—Charola was not talked about at all. Whenever I brought him up in conversation, he was invariably described as a “parasite” or a “gargoyle” (which is a Nicaraguan slang term for a crack addict—due to the wasting effect that the long-term consumption of the drug can have), and his death was clearly considered to be of no significance, and even senseless.

Everybody I interviewed about the events that had led to Charola’s death said that the gang’s raid on *el Indio Viejo*’s house had been “stupid” or “illogical,” and that it had served no purpose whatsoever. The general feeling was summarized very well by Julio, who during an interview in 2007 about Charola exclaimed, “¡Vale verga su muerte!” (Who gives a fuck about his death!) This sentiment was not just linked to Charola as an individual, but applied more broadly. The death of a gang member was no longer seen as anything socially significant within barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, partly due to the changed relationship between the gang and the neighborhood. Indeed, it was striking that local inhabitants no longer talked about gang members as having death “above them” but described them instead as “having death below them”—“*son muerte abajo*”—which in the context implied that death was something that was inevitably going to happen to them, sooner rather than later.¹⁰ This was partly due to gang members’ drug consumption, but it was also due to the new reality of the *cartelito*’s domination of the neighborhood and concomitant brutal attitude toward gang members, which local inhabitants rarely condemned. In other words, Charola’s death was clearly not seen as a sacrifice in any shape or form, and was not sanctified.

Having said this, the *cartelito*’s violence also went beyond gang members—between 2006 and 2009, individuals associated with it would regularly commit acts of random brutality against barrio Luis Fanor Hernández inhabitants, including arbitrarily killing two non-gang members in 2008 and 2009. Although *Doña Yolanda* contended during a 2009 interview that such actions were “to train people,” it was clear that they also contributed to reducing the significance of death generally. Certainly, it was striking that the three wakes and funerals I attended during my visits in 2007 and 2009 were all much less impressive events than any that I had been to in the 1990s. Even though the *cartelito*’s menace changed after it re-focused on drug trafficking in late 2009, and it became

less present in the neighborhood, seeking invisibility rather than territorial control, death clearly continued to be experienced in a symbolically impoverished manner. This was particularly striking in relation to the death in July 2012 of Doña Bertha, the very popular widow of Don Sergio, the historic barrio Luis Fanor Hernández community leader. If there was anybody in the neighborhood whose death should have had the potential to lead to significant social mobilization, it was hers, but less than fifty people attended her wake and funeral. The processes that affected the morality of gang member death were, in other words, affecting the wider community as well. Seen from this perspective, the transformation of the moral basis for understanding the social significance of gang member dying and killing was very much a reflection of a broader underlying process.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

At its most basic, what I have discussed concerns changing norms, their evolving codification, and how social practices are embedded within them. Another way of putting this is in terms of “moral economy.” The notion of the “moral economy” is usually associated with the works of E. P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976), who respectively used it to explain the counterintuitive actions of food rioters in eighteenth-century Britain and peasants in twentieth-century Vietnam. More specifically, they were concerned with the fact that although human well-being and status are generally enhanced by productive economic activity, economic action is often policed by community norms, expectations, and values that do not necessarily respond to an economic logic. Both British food rioters and Vietnamese peasants for example displayed marked anti-market tendencies, acting to prevent unequal capital accumulation and to ensure the availability of a certain threshold of basic goods. Thompson and Scott argued that this kind of action reflected the embedded nature of the eighteenth-century British and twentieth-century Vietnamese economies. Such “pre-modern” economies, they argued, were moral because they were an integral part of social relations, while more “modern” (contemporary) economies were less moral because economic activity was disembedded from social relations. As Thompson (1971, 131–132) put it:

It is difficult to re-imagine the moral assumptions of another social configuration. It is not easy for us to conceive that there may have been a time, within a smaller and more integrated community, when it appeared to be “unnatural” that any man should profit from the necessities of others, and when it was assumed that, in time of

dearth, prices of “necessities” should remain at a customary level, even though there might be less all round.

The concept of the moral economy is thus generally used specifically in relation to what might be termed “anti-economic” economic activity. Yet as Thompson (1971, 79) pointed out, “[w]hile this moral economy cannot be described as ‘political’ in any advanced sense, nevertheless it cannot be described as unpolitical either, since it supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of the common weal.” Indeed, in many ways the moral economy can be seen as first and foremost political, even before it is economic. Pace Karandinos et al. (this volume), it can arguably be seen as a proto-theory of justice—thereby highlighting how justice is always positional—that at its most basic implicitly postulates a theory of political motivation and agency. As such, it offers a basis for both interpreting and explaining the evolving nature of collective social order. This is perhaps best understood from a thanatopolitical perspective. To properly get to grips with this, however, it is perhaps instructive to turn back to Foucault’s ideas about biopolitics and, more specifically, to their articulation by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998, 103), who famously argued that the most basic form of power in the modern era rests upon the biopolitical categorization of persons into “valid” and “invalid” populations through the creation and re-creation of a fundamental distinction between what he terms “political life” (*bios*)—that which is imbued with sense—and “bare life” (*zoe*)—that which is nothing more than mere existence. This constitutes the “originary” point for the constitution of social order, according to Agamben, insofar as exclusion from “political life” establishes the limits of this order.

Many authors have pointed out both implicitly and explicitly that much of the population of the contemporary developing world, including in particular in its slums, is increasingly treated as being “bare life,” that is to say, invalid populations that have no purpose and must be kept at bay from a shrinking “political life” that is more often than not elite oriented and driven (e.g., Biehl 2005; Davis 2006; de Boeck 2009; McIntyre and Nast 2011; Tosa 2009). When seen from this perspective—and also harking back to the parallels of his circumstances with social banditry—it can be argued that the reason Lencho was so feted and lauded was that he fought—and sacrificed himself—against the spread of “bare life,” that is to say, against the exclusion of poor slum inhabitants from the body politic, and for the possibility of their being able to say “I am.” But just as social banditry was, according to Hobsbawm, at best proto-revolutionary, so too the kind of political action that Lencho and the gang represented did not sustain itself and was transformed under the combined pressures

of exclusion, poverty, and lack of opportunities that have characterized post-revolutionary Nicaragua. The gang's involvement in drug trafficking meant that it became more inwardly focused, more parochial, which transformed the moral landscape within the community, to the extent that Charola's death in 2006 was experienced as contingent and senseless.

One way of thinking about this change is in terms of a transformation of the underlying basis of the *barrio Luis Fanor Hernández* moral economy. If this was initially implicitly predicated on resistance to "bare life" in the 1990s, it subsequently became based on the predominance of what might be termed "bare death." This term was coined by Jean Comaroff (2007, 203) in her writings about the politics of HIV/AIDS infection in South Africa, to describe the way that victims of the disease are obliterated from memory, both locally and nationally (see also Decoteau 2008). As Stuart Murray (2006, 208) remarks, "this kind of death exceeds biophysical death. It is not the mere cessation of life and not even merely an attack on the conditions of possibility for life itself," but instead "a form of death . . . [that radicalizes] . . . our existential uncertainty" by negating the social significance of death. Kevin O'Neill (2012) has described this very well in a recent article exploring the interrelation between infrastructure and violence in Guatemala City's central cemetery, where overcrowding and new public administration measures have led to demands for the family of the dead to pay regularly for the cemetery plots of their loved ones, with failure to pay leading to disinterment and relocation into mass graves. In doing so, the dead are stripped of their social significance, cast aside as worthless within a neoliberal body politic.

In other words, just as Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life distinguishes between two types of living—biological versus political—we can distinguish between two types of deaths. Lencho's death was obviously heavy with political significance, due to a particular moral economy regarding social action and agency, whereby gang members were seen as sacrificing themselves for the neighborhood. Charola's murder, on the other hand, was viewed as senseless and contingent, and was therefore a purely biological death, a "bare death." A critical distinction between "bare life" and "bare death", however, is that even if the former has been widely described as underpinning a new global politics of exclusion, it remains a fundamentally relational state of being—one that is implicitly defined in relation to "political life." In other words, "bare life" corresponds to an absence or a deficit, but always with regards to "political life." Indeed, Agamben (1998, 8) qualifies "bare life" as "inclusive exclusion." "Bare death," on the other hand, is not a relational form of categorization

but an absolute one, corresponding to a state of pure nonexistence. As such, it can be said to represent something of a rupture, as it effectively constitutes a negation of the social that must necessarily underpin the political. When seen from this perspective, the obvious question raised by the thanatopolitical analysis presented here is whether such a rupture can be reversed, or whether in terms of the general political economy of Nicaragua's developmental trajectory it signals a point of no return down a dystopian road that is all the more tragic in view of the country's inspirational utopian past (see Rodgers 2008a).

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NOTES

1. This name is a pseudonym, as are all the names of the individuals mentioned in this paper.
2. Foucault (2000, 416) used the expression *thanatopolitics* to describe "the reverse of biopolitics," but he associated it with specific instances of "wholesale slaughter" rather than the more generic application I am suggesting here.
3. My translation of the original Spanish—"somos muerte arriba"—is not literal, as I feel that the range of connotations the expression entails are not adequately conveyed by a more verbatim rendition of "we are [with] death above [us]."
4. While this may not sound like a very high number, it was equivalent to a 4 percent death rate for gang members. By contrast, the death rate for Union troops for the whole duration of the American Civil War (1861–1865)—often considered the bloodiest conflict in US history—amounted to 1.2 percent (calculated on the basis of Leland and Oboroceanu, 2010, 2, table 1).
5. I have no explanation why she challenged Bismarck and Jader, as this was rather unusual behavior for an unaccompanied woman, particularly considering her socio-economic status.
6. Obviously, the ethos of "living in the shadow of death" can also be associated with the prevalent *machismo* characterizing Nicaraguan society, insofar as this very much revolved around activities such as "taking risk [or] displaying bravado in the face of danger" (Lancaster 1992, 195). To a certain extent, it is not dissimilar to the "riding" described by George Karandinos et al. (this volume).
7. This is not to say that neighborhood inhabitants never had anything negative to say about local gang members or did not quarrel with them, of course. Parents frequently

- publicly expressed their worry about their offspring, for example, often berating them for the stress they caused them, and on several occasions during my first bout of fieldwork in 1996–1997, arguments broke out between neighborhood inhabitants and local gang members concerning the responsibility of the latter over damage caused to houses during gang warfare.
8. To a certain extent, this particular behavior was also due to the deep distrust of the police that existed in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, partly related to the fact that they rarely came when called unless the caller explicitly indicated that they were willing to “pay for the gasoline” (i.e., pay a bribe). It should be noted that police patrols in the neighborhood were generally extremely infrequent during the mid-1990s.
 9. This analogy is perhaps all the more relevant considering the strong associations between *Sandinismo* and the “Cult of Che” (see Lancaster 1988, 132 and 185).
 10. Parallels can obviously be made here with the “mala conducta” ascribed to drug addicts in Guatemala, as described by Kevin Lewis O’Neill and Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela (this volume).

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