

# What Shall Become of Us Without Any Barbarians? Central American Gangs and the Utopia of Civilization in Latin America

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‘What shall become of us without any barbarians?’

Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933)

## 19.1. INTRODUCTION

2010 marks the bicentenary of the beginning of the Latin American struggles for independence, and is an eminently appropriate moment to reconsider some of the region’s contemporary dynamics through the lens of the past. Certainly, as the British novelist Salman Rushdie pointed out in his excellent account of his travels through Nicaragua during the mid-1980s, history is always important to take into account in Latin America, where ‘to understand the living..., it [is]

necessary to begin with the dead' (Rushdie, 1986, p. 17). At the same time, however, simply juxtaposing the past and the present is not enough according to the American historian Harry Harootunian, particularly when this occurs — as it generally does — in a way that is underpinned by 'presumptions of continuity and the conviction ... that the present constitutes no problem other than supplying a platform from which the historian can look back on the past' (Harootunian, 2000, p. 15). Instead, we need to adopt a perspective whereby the past allows us to 'deconstruct ... the present' (Harootunian, 2000, p. 101). This is perhaps especially important with regards to a contemporary Latin America widely associated with violence and brutality (see, for example, Koonings and Kruijt, 1999; Moser and McIlwaine, 2004; Rosenberg, 1991), in stark contrast to the nineteenth-century visions that optimistically saw the region as 'the land of the future', as Hegel (2007, p. 86) famously put it in his 1831 *Philosophy of History*.

Understanding the underlying nature of this putatively paradoxical transformation requires exploding 'the continuity of universalizing conceptions of history' (Hanssen, 1998, p. 66), such as the one famously formulated by Domingo Sarmiento (1998 [1845]), based on the critical distinction between 'civilization' and 'barbarism'. At its most basic, positing that Latin America was fundamentally characterized by a progressive evolution whereby the former spread at the expense of the latter, Sarmiento's dichotomy is all the more relevant as it is arguably increasingly coming back into fashion, at least with regards to a paradigmatic aspect of the contemporary panorama of Latin American violence, namely the Central American gang phenomenon (see Rodgers and Jones, 2009). Certainly, gangs in the region are widely portrayed as a form of modern-day 'barbarism', but a closer examination of their underlying dynamics suggests that such an analysis is potentially flawed, and points to a fundamental transformation in the nature of both 'civilization' and 'barbarism' in contemporary Latin America, at least relative to the way they were defined by Sarmiento. This chapter begins by situating the Central American gang phenomenon, before then considering how it has been portrayed as a form of modern-day 'barbarism'

emblematic of the region's dystopian social reality. It then goes on to consider this in light of Sarmiento's classic dichotomy, before concluding with some thoughts about the latter's contemporary relevance.

## 19.2. GANGS OF CENTRAL AMERICA

Although Central America has long been associated with violence, from the genocidal brutality of colonialism to the chronic civil wars and filibustering of the nineteenth century, as well as, perhaps most emblematically, the protracted revolutionary struggles against authoritarianism and imperialism during the 1970s and 1980s, contemporary levels of chronic brutality in the region are unprecedented (Call, 2000; Koonings and Kruijt, 1999; Londoño *et al.*, 2000; Moser and McIlwaine, 2004; Pearce, 1998; UNODC, 2007). This paradoxical situation is commonly attributed to the regional gang phenomenon, variably referred to as *maras* or *pandillas*. There is certainly no question that gangs have become highly emblematic of the violent social reality of contemporary Central America (Rodgers, 2009). At the same time, however, although they are often portrayed as a new phenomenon linked to the region's post-conflict circumstances from the early 1990s onwards, their origins in fact go back to the 1940s, and more specifically to the large-scale processes of urbanization that Central American countries underwent during this period. Gangs emerged principally in squatter settlements, as informal vigilante and self-protection groups in what were uncontrolled areas of rapidly growing cities. As such, they were an epiphenomenon of the first major regional push towards capitalist modernization, and their dynamics were not that different from those of the nineteenth-century New York gangs famously described by Herbert Asbury (1988 [1927]) — whose work was the basis for Martin Scorsese's 2002 film, *Gangs of New York* — or indeed gangs in many other parts of the world (see Hagedorn, 2008).

These initial gang manifestations waxed and waned with economic cycles — as well as political factors, including in particular repressive authoritarian rule, but also military conflict and

conscription — until the early 1990s, when they suddenly came to the fore in much greater numbers and more violently than previously. The end of the Central American civil wars between 1990 and 1996 led to the demobilization of large numbers of youth who had acquired significant martial skills on an unprecedented scale. Although not all of these joined gangs, collectively they constituted a bigger demographic pool of likely gang members than had existed previously. Drawing institutionally on what was effectively a traditional form of youth collective action, many of these demobilized youth came together as gangs in an attempt to provide a measure of order for themselves and their local communities in broader postwar contexts of flux, heightened insecurity, and the emergence of local ‘governance voids’ (Koonings and Kruijt, 1999). From these relatively fluid and organic beginnings, these *pandillas* rapidly began to develop particular behaviour patterns that persisted over time, and which included semi-ritualized forms of gang warfare regulated by strict codes and expectations, generally revolving around territorial defence concerns, including in particular protecting local neighbourhood inhabitants from the vagaries of broader chronic insecurity. They also became much more institutionalized than past gangs, which had tended to be generationally ephemeral, and gave themselves names that persisted over time — examples from Nicaragua include *los Dragones* or *los Comemueertos* (‘Eaters of the Dead’), for instance — despite gang member turnover, as successive generations ‘matured out’ (see Rodgers, 2006a).

The other major type of Central American gang, the *mara*, is linked to a particular two-way migratory pattern. Formally, there are just two *maras*, the *Dieciocho* and the *Salvatrucha*, which only operate in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras within Central America, although they have reportedly begun to extend into Mexico as well. The origins of the *maras* lie in the 18th Street gang in Los Angeles, a gang founded by Mexican immigrants in the 1960s, although it rapidly began to accept Hispanics indiscriminately. The 18th Street gang grew significantly during the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of the influx of mainly Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees, many of whom sought to incorporate into the gang as a defence mechanism

against the widespread discrimination that they experienced. In the latter half of the 1980s, a rival — possibly splinter — group founded by a second wave of Salvadoran refugees emerged, known as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (a combination of ‘Salvadoreño’ and ‘trucha’, meaning ‘quick-thinking’ or ‘shrewd’ in Salvadoran slang). The *Dieciocho* and the *Salvatrucha* rapidly became bitter rivals, frequently fighting each other, and were heavily involved in the looting that accompanied the 1992 Rodney King riots, which led the State of California to implement strict anti-gang laws.

Combined with the 1996 US Congress’ Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, according to which non-US citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison were to be repatriated to their countries of origin after serving their sentence, this led to almost 70,000 felons being deported to Central America between 1998 and 2008, in addition to 200,000 illegal immigrants. Central America’s northern triangle — El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras — received over 90% of the deportations from the US. Many of these deportees were members of the 18th Street and *Salvatrucha* gangs who barely knew the countries they had just arrived in, and unsurprisingly reproduced the structures that had provided them with support in the US. Deportees rapidly began to found local *clikas*, or chapters, of their gang in their communities of origin, which in turn quickly attracted local youth and either supplanted or absorbed local *pandillas*.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that the *mara* phenomenon is not simply a foreign problem

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Nicaragua does not have *maras*, mainly because less than 3% of Central American deportees are Nicaraguan, and most Nicaraguans who emigrate to the US settle in Miami, where contrarily to the more ‘open’ gangs of LA, the local gang scene is dominated by African-American and Cuban-American gangs that do not let Nicaraguans join (Rocha, 2006). This is also a major reason why Nicaraguan *pandillas* are not as violent as *maras*, insofar as the transnational transposition of US gang culture to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has had much more brutal consequences than the rise of home-grown, vigilante-style gangs. In effect, the *maras* are much less embedded within a local institutional context than *pandillas*, and therefore less rule-bound.

imported by deportees, but rather has evolved and grown in response to domestic political economy factors, including in particular state repression in the form of the (in)famous *Mano Dura* laws (see Jütersonke *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, deportation rates have in fact dropped over the past few years, and the *mara* phenomenon is now clearly locally self-sustaining. Contrarily to sensationalistic media reports, however, although each local *mara clika* is explicitly affiliated with either the *Mara Dieciocho* or the *Mara Salvatrucha*, and while *clikas* from different neighbourhoods affiliated with the same *mara* will often join together to fight other groupings claiming allegiance to the opposing *mara*, neither *über-mara* is a federal structure, and much less a transnational one, with their ‘umbrella’ nature more imagined and symbolic of a particular historical origin than demonstrative of any real unity, be it of leadership or action.

This imaginary aspect of their transnationalism notwithstanding, *maras* and *pandillas* are a very real phenomenon. Official police statistics suggest that there are at least some 70,000 *pandilla* and *mara* members operating in Central America, although the estimates of NGOs and academics suggest that the number could be as high as 200,000 (UNODC, 2007, p. 60). Even the lower figure would, however, mean that there are a greater number of gang members than military personnel in Central America, as Nicaragua and Honduras have armies of about 12,000 soldiers each, El Salvador 13,000 soldiers, and Guatemala 27,000 (see Millett and Perez, 2005, p. 59). These gangs clearly contribute a significant share of the violence afflicting the cities of these countries. Reliable information is extremely scant, however, with official statistics in particular especially problematic due to chronic underreporting, deficient data collection, and issues of political interference (see Huhn *et al.*, 2006, pp. 8–13). Nevertheless, Mo Hume (2007) claims that *maras* in El Salvador are thought to commit between 30 and 50% of all murders that occur in the country — which is reputed to be among the most violent in the world — while Ailsa Winton (2004, p. 85) notes that in Guatemala the ubiquity of gangs is such that ‘there seems little need for the perceived severity of the problem to be verified by actual data’.

At the same time, although levels of violence in contemporary Central America are higher than those associated with the multiple civil wars and revolutionary conflicts that characterized the region during the 1970s and 1980s, and gangs are certainly key agents within the new political economy of violence, in contrast to sensationalist accounts linking them to migrant trafficking, kidnapping, and international organized crime, the various qualitative studies of Central American gangs that have been carried out over the past decade suggest that *pandillas* and *maras* are mainly involved in small-scale localized crime and delinquency such as theft, muggings, and racketeering. As Claire Ribando notes:

Gangs are generally considered to be distinct from organized criminal organizations because they typically lack the hierarchical leadership structure, capital, and manpower required to run a sophisticated criminal enterprise. Gangs are generally more horizontally organized, with lots of small subgroups and no central leadership setting strategy and enforcing discipline. Although some gangs are involved in the street-level distribution of drugs, few gangs or gang members are involved in higher-level criminal drug distribution enterprises run by drug cartels, syndicates, or other sophisticated criminal organizations. (Ribando, 2007, pp. 1–2)

There is mounting evidence, however, that this is changing, and that both *pandillas* and *maras* are becoming increasingly either directly linked to, or supplanted by, such higher-level criminality (Rocha, 2007a; Rodgers, 2006a). I have linked this critical evolution in other writing to the intensifying exclusion that is a key feature of contemporary Central American cities as a result of the urban elite's retreat into gated communities and the more general political economy phenomenon of 'urban involution' — eloquently described by Mike Davis in his 2006 book, *Planet of Slums* — whereby the vast majority of the impoverished urban masses have been increasingly left unemployable in the face of economic restructuring due to the global rise of disembedded and delocalized capital accumulation processes. Drug trafficking has become one of the few viable livelihood opportunities in the poor

neighbourhoods and slums of Central American cities, and their inhabitants are increasingly fighting each other to control what must inevitably be an exclusive economic activity. Gangs are, of course, ideally positioned, sociologically speaking, to dominate these veritable internecine ‘slum wars’, as organizations with quasi-monopolies over the local deployment of violence, and they are widely reported to drive localized regimes of terror that contrast strongly with their past community vigilante ethos, in order to ensure that they do not face competition or disruption of their new businesses (see Rodgers, 2009).

### 19.3. BARBARIANS AT THE GATE? THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF GANGS

Even if Central American gangs are not necessarily as violent as they are often perceived to be, they are clearly held up as a major contemporary regional security threat, whether by policy-making circles, academics, law enforcement officials, or the general population at large (see Jütersonke *et al.*, 2009). As Roxana Martel Trigueros (2006) and Mo Hume (2008, p. 63) both point out, the existence of such ‘hegemonic epistemologies’ has critical consequences for the way in which contemporary Central American gangs are symbolically constructed. Gang members are, for example, regularly depicted as evil and deranged sociopaths by the media (see Huhn *et al.*, 2006), sex-crazed personifications of Darwinist natural selection by academics (Rubio, 2007), and even the primary actors of ‘another kind of war ... being waged ... within the context of a “clash of civilizations”’ by policy-makers (Manwaring, 2008, p. 1). The latter description obviously has its intellectual roots in Samuel Huntington’s (1996) infamous vision of global geopolitics, effectively harking back to the imagined medieval fault-line between supposedly civilized Christendom and putatively barbarian Islam, a perspective that is implicitly echoed in the persistent — but spurious — association of *pandillas* and *maras* with international terrorism — and more specifically al-Qaeda — in Central American media.

This implicit association with barbarism is arguably critical, and in fact frequently becomes explicit, as is well epitomized by political



discourses such as the one delivered to the Salvadorean nation by the then President Francisco Flores on 23 July 2003, that directly associated gangs with barbarism and used this to justify the introduction of extreme forms of militarized repression: 'These groups have descended to dangerous levels of moral degradation and barbarism .... We are convinced that the combination of means proposed will give Salvadoran society the necessary instruments to fight this battle against criminals and their terrorism' (cited in Nowak, 2010, p. 40). This is an extreme example of this particular association, but it is one that is increasingly heard in a range of contexts in Central America, including, perhaps rather incongruously, in churches. For example, during a sermon that I attended in November 2009 at the local Catholic parish church near the poor *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, in Managua, Nicaragua, where I have been carrying out research on gangs since 1996, the priest delivered a homily based on the writings of Pope Leo the Great (*San León Magno*), famous for having prevented the barbarian Huns from ransacking Rome in 452 AD. He ended his speech admonishing his congregation to remember how Pope Leo had persuaded the leader of the Huns, Attila, to turn back through the demonstration of his unwavering faith in God whenever they felt that 'the delinquents that are the barbarians of today threaten to overwhelm your lives'.

At one level, this sort of social construction of gangs is by no means exceptional. The 'barbarian' label clearly serves to distinguish the legitimate from the illegitimate or, in other words, that which is acceptable versus that which must be suppressed and subjugated. Indeed, this is a process that has been a repeated feature of Latin American history, for example with indigenous people, communists, and now gang members (an interesting filiation to think about more broadly). The reinvocation of the label 'barbarian' is arguably a particularly powerful one, however, because the notion has a long history in the Latin American context, going back to Domingo Sarmiento's famous *Civilización y Barbarie: Vida de Don Facundo Quiroga*. In this work, first published in 1845, Sarmiento proposed 'the dialectic between civilization and barbarism as the central conflict in Latin American culture' (González Echevarría, 2003, p. 2), and presented an account of the career of an Argentine *caudillo*, Juan Facundo

Quiroga, who was one of the dominant political figures of the country during the 1820s and 1830s. Argentina had yet to cohere as a unified entity at the time, and Sarmiento argued that this was because of the ‘barbarism’ of regional strongmen such as Facundo, whom he portrayed as ‘a wild beast’, ‘destitute of learning’, who ‘delighted in exciting fear’, ‘arranging all his actions so as to produce terror in those around him’ (Sarmiento, 1998, pp. 98–99).

Interestingly — in view of the sermon I attended in Managua — Sarmiento (1998, p. 95) even compares Facundo to Attila the Hun, but what makes his book especially striking is that he contended that, ‘in Facundo Quiroga I do not only see simply a *caudillo*, but rather a manifestation of Argentine life as it has been made by colonization and the peculiarities of the land’ (Sarmiento, 1998, p. 38). In particular, Sarmiento (1998, p. 10) associated ‘barbarism’ with ‘the constant insecurity of life outside the towns [that] ... stamps upon the Argentine character a certain ... violence’, and opposed this to life in the country’s major cities, including in particular Buenos Aires, ‘the only city in the vast Argentine territory which is in communication with European nations’ (Sarmiento, 1998, p. 12). Sarmiento saw Europe as a template (and the source) for modernization and progress — i.e. ‘civilization’ — in postcolonial Latin America, rejecting all indigenous or autochthonous practices as violence-inducing ‘barbarism’. In effect, his book is a manifesto concerning the nature of progress in Latin America, and he implicitly suggests that the region’s future trajectory is one that will lead to its increasing ‘civilization’ through ‘Europeanization’.

Thinking about Central American gang violence and its contemporary association with ‘barbarism’ in this light, it is clear that a significant difference between the beginning of the nineteenth century and that of the twenty-first is that while the former’s barbarism was associated with ‘the colonial past’ (Stavans, 1998, xxii), contemporary barbarism in the form of gangs is more a consequence of present-day global geopolitical and political economy shifts — such as large-scale transnational population movement and ‘urban involution’. These, however, are in many ways fundamental reflections of modernity, and would therefore theoretically be more readily associable with ‘civilization’ rather than

‘barbarism’ within Sarmiento’s scheme of things. This putative paradox suggests one of two things. On the one hand, it may well be that the dichotomy between brutal barbarity and peaceful civilization is perhaps no longer as clear-cut as Sarmiento once assumed it to be. On the other hand, it could also be that contrarily to the past, contemporary Central America’s modernity — i.e. its ‘civilization’ — may not be quite as progressive as Sarmiento assumed this historical state of affairs to inherently be. The exclusive and covertly repressive nature of contemporary oligarchic regimes characteristic of the region today — see Rodgers (2006b) — in fact makes both propositions eminently plausible.

Indeed, one could go even further and argue that a key feature of the contemporary moment in Central America is the emergence of an externally-shaped, violence-inducing ‘civilization’ that is intimately linked — rather than opposed — to present-day forms of ‘barbarism’ in the shape of gangs. Owing to the scarcity of alternative (legal/legitimate) economic opportunities, survival for the poor in Central America, including for gang members, effectively amounts to ‘ruthless Darwinian competition’, with tensions emerging over ‘the same informal scraps, ensur[ing] self-consuming communal violence as yet the highest form of urban involution’ (Davis, 2004, p. 28). Within this context, Central American gangs can perhaps be seen as something of an emergent vanguard — because youth, as Ziad Doueiri (1998), maker of the powerful film *West Beyrouth* (1998), has pointed out, ‘have a stronger instinct for survival than adults[,] ... no doubt ... because [they] adapt better and faster to exceptional circumstances’ — attempting to resist a contemporary social order characterized by historically unprecedented levels of social, economic, and spatial inequality. As such, they are epiphenomena of broader social and economic circumstances that have either been actively fostered, or negligently permitted to endure and worsen, by Central American states, and in this sense, the societies in the region today arguably hardly deserve the label of ‘civilization’.

This is perhaps even more obviously the case in view of the veritable regional ‘war on gangs’ that Central American states have declared during the past decade. The opening salvo of this campaign

was El Salvador's adoption of a *Mano Dura* ('Iron Fist') policy promulgated by the Salvadoran President Ricardo Maduro in July 2003, which advocated the immediate imprisonment of youth simply for having gang-related tattoos or flashing gang signs in public, something that became punishable with two to five years in jail, and applicable to gang members from the age of 12 onwards. Between July 2003 and August 2004, 20,000 youths were arrested, although 95% were eventually released without charge when the *Mano Dura* law was declared unconstitutional by the Salvadoran Supreme Court for violating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). A new *Mano Super Dura* package of anti-gang reforms was rapidly pushed through, which respected the provisions of the UNCRC but stiffened the penalties for gang membership to up to five years in prison for ordinary gang members, and nine years for gang leaders (Aguilar, 2006). Although under the new law the police need to have some proof of active delinquent behaviour in order to arrest an individual, El Salvador's carceral population has doubled over the past five years, from 6,000 to 12,000 prisoners, 40% of whom are gang members (Hume, 2007).

Honduras implemented a comparable policy called *Cero Tolerancia* ('Zero Tolerance') almost simultaneously in August 2003, which was also partly inspired by Rudy Giuliani's (in)famous eponymous policy in New York. Among the measures that this package promoted was the reform of the penal code and the adoption of legislation that established a maximum 12-year prison sentence for gang membership, a penalty which was later increased to 30 years, as well as provisions for better collaboration between the police and the Honduran army in urban patrolling. Guatemala likewise adopted its *Plan Escoba* ('Operation Broom sweep') in January 2004, which, although not as draconian as the Salvadoran *Mano Dura* and the Honduran *Cero Tolerancia*, still contained new provisions allowing minors to be treated as adults, and the deployment of 4,000 reserve army troops in troubled neighbourhoods in Guatemala City. Nicaragua, similarly, regularly implemented a range of anti-gang initiatives from 1999 onwards, although these were of a significantly 'softer' nature, partly because of the less violent nature of the *pandillas*

compared to the *maras*.<sup>2</sup> Although these crackdowns have been very popular with the general public in all the Central American countries, they have also been vigorously opposed by human rights groups who are concerned with the potential abuse of gang suspects. More ominously, organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have presented evidence — corroborated by the US State Department in 2005 — of the existence of paramilitary death squads in Honduras and El Salvador that are deliberately targeting gang members, and often youth more generally, moreover in collusion with state authorities (Faux, 2006).

At a more regional level, Central American states have also begun to engage in unprecedented forms of cooperation in order to deal with gangs, which a September 2003 regional summit of heads of state declared to be ‘a destabilizing menace, more immediate than any conventional war or guerrilla’. In January 2004, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua agreed to lift legal barriers to the cross-country prosecution of gang members, whatever their nationality, while in March 2005, Presidents Tony Saca of El Salvador and Oscar Berger of Guatemala agreed to set up a joint security force to patrol gang activity along their common border. The Central American states have also sought to involve the US, which was initially resistant to participate in anti-gang initiatives until June 2004, when the Honduran minister of Security, Oscar Alvarez, rather ludicrously claimed that a suspected Saudi member of al-Qaeda, Yafar Al-Taya, had arrived in Salvador in order to meet with gang leaders. Although clearly a completely unfounded assertion, by December 2004, the FBI had created a special task force focusing on Central American gangs, and in February 2005 announced the creation of a liaison office in San Salvador to coordinate regional information-sharing and anti-gang efforts. Following a new (and no less ludicrous) claim by Oscar Alvarez to have thwarted

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<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that although the Nicaraguan police force has gained a reputation for focusing on ‘preventative’ rather than ‘repressive’ anti-gang policies, the evidence of its practices on the ground tends to belie this (see Rocha, 2007b).

a Colombian FARC-*mara* plot to kill President Ricardo Maduro in April 2005, the region's military leaders formally called on the US Southern Command for assistance in the creation of a multinational force to tackle organized crime and youth gangs, although this has yet to be implemented.

While it has been widely reported that the different anti-gang initiatives seemed to initially reduce crime quite significantly, the evidence suggests that this was a temporary state of affairs, if ever true. There are increasing numbers of reports that the widespread repression of gangs is leading to their becoming more organized and more violent (Aguilar and Miranda, 2006, p. 42). This is something that was well illustrated by the tit-for-tat violence that certain *maras* engaged in with the Honduran government following the implementation of *Mano Dura*. On 30 August 2003, one month after the promulgation of the new anti-gang legislation, gang members attacked a bus in the northern city of San Pedro Sula in broad daylight, killing 14, and leaving 18 wounded, as well as issuing a note to President Ricardo Maduro ordering him to withdraw the law. The following month, in the town of Puerto Cortes, a young woman's head was found in a plastic bad with a note addressed to President Maduro saying that this was a response to the extrajudicial assassination of a gang member by the police. Over the course of the following year, more than 10 decapitated corpses were left in various cities with messages from gang members to the Honduras president, each time in response to a putative extrajudicial killing, and on 23 December 2004, in Chamalecon, gang members again attacked a bus and killed 28, once again leaving a message claiming revenge for the May 2004 deaths of 105 gang members in a prison following a suspect fire. Similarly gruesome events have been reported in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Despite such events, and notwithstanding a rhetorical turn promoting the adoption of less repressive policies, there is little evidence to suggest that Central American states are really changing their stance vis-à-vis gangs (Jütersonke *et al.*, 2009). To a large extent, this is because the design and implementation of social policy within any given set of circumstances will inevitably mirror the political dispensations and economic dynamics of the context in question. As such,

arguably the single biggest obstacle to developing a more effective approach to gang violence in Central America is the deeply entrenched oligarchic nature of the societies in the region alluded to above. Central American governments are, to a large extent, undertaking their visible and widely-publicized crackdowns on gangs in order to avoid taking action regarding much trickier issues relating to exclusion, inequality, and the lack of job creation. Or put another way, gangs have become convenient scapegoats on which to blame the isthmus' problems and through which those in power maintain an unequal *status quo*. At the same time, however, they arguably also simultaneously embody the risks of violent social action that will inevitably erupt in the face of attempts to preserve an unjust society.

#### 19.4. CONCLUSION

The gangs of contemporary Central America and the repressive policies that have been put in place by regional states to deal with them squarely raise the question of what constitutes 'civilization' and what is 'barbarism', as well as the social processes that these are respectively associated with in contemporary Central America society. If the social and political structures of the latter are to be considered 'civilized', and the gangs as 'barbarians', we can certainly ask ourselves a question along the line of the epitaph by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy reproduced at the beginning of this chapter, which is, where would we be without any 'barbarians'? As Franz Fanon observed in his 1961 classic *The Wretched of the Earth*, although the gangster is often 'a thief, a scoundrel or a reprobate', he can also 'light ... the way for the people' (1990, p. 54), particularly when his violence is directed against domination and injustice. Seen in this light, Sarmiento's critical distinction between 'civilization' and 'barbarism' becomes less a utopian blueprint for the progressive development of Latin American society, and more a revealing *longue durée* lens through which to expose the dystopian nature of the region in 2010 as compared to the 'brave new world' of 1810, and to force upon us a clear-eyed understanding of the way in which progress and utopia are often extremely tenuous notions.



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