

Politics and History of Violence and Crime in
Central America

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PROLOGUE

Given its high crime rates, Central America is in the unenviable position today of being known as one of the world's most violent regions. As this book shows, this phenomenon calls for analysis that goes beyond terrifying newspaper headlines and simple statistical numbers lacking in context. The chapters collected here point out that violence and crime in Central America are not new phenomena and that they have always been highly multifarious. As a matter of fact, in the history of the isthmus violence has played an important role in the maintenance and reproduction of labour relations in agriculture, in the rivalry between those who have sought to achieve or to maintain political power, in the daily lives of families and communities in rural and urban areas, in gender relations and in the realm of daily crime. As we know, the region also experienced a long period of state terror and revolutionary violence. Last but not least, violence has also been the object of discourses and representations, as for example in the context of partial interpretations and memories of conflicts—as at least two of this book's chapters will discuss—or as the topic of important works of literature and art.

As is well known, violence is a universal part of social life. At the same time, however, it appears in specific forms of expression that are dependent on societies and historical contexts. For that reason it seems appropriate to identify some specific elements of Central American history that are relevant as the structural context for the understanding of violence in past centuries in the perspective of the *longue durée*. Here I refer to historical processes that have had long-term consequences (path dependency) since the time of independence as well as to the specific modalities of state

building, or nation building, of the establishment of political systems, and of ethnic and class relations in the different Central American countries.

If we take the epoch of independence and its demarcation from the colonial experience as an initial starting point, we can observe several particular characteristics in the region's history compared to Latin American history in general. First of all, it is remarkable that independence from Spain was not the result of a war of independence, as in the case of the other Latin American colonies of the Spanish empire. Central American independence was an inevitable consequence of Mexico's negotiated independence. The Central Americans did not experience war until after 1821—both in the wars of the Federal Republic and the armed conflicts within the particular states.

From the 1820s to the mid-nineteenth century, war was a chronic problem and the region became infamous for being politically unstable and dominated by political anarchy. During the first decades of independence, the countries of Central America also began to differ from one another in terms of their levels of political violence and the recurrence of war. Nicaragua became a political community that was entangled in civil wars again and again, for example, while Costa Rica became known as a stable and pacifist place. The countries of the Northern Triangle—Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—experienced several military conflicts, not least because of the attempt by the former to maintain regional hegemony.

The war against William Walker's filibusters was a moment characterised by severe violence in the region, and at the same time was a turning point, as its resolution decreased the frequency of armed conflict in the region itself and the various countries gradually attained the basic attributes of "stateness". After 1870, as liberals came to power across the whole region, the isthmus was largely pacified, even if José Santos Zelaya's regency in Nicaragua generated a degree of instability on a regional level until it was radically resolved by the United States via military intervention in the first decade of the twentieth century.

If we look at the world of the subaltern classes, we can see that there were not many indigenous rebellions or peasant uprisings after independence and during the nineteenth century in Central America. The only movement with broad importance was the revolt that brought Rafael Carrera to power in Guatemala. Rural banditry was also rather rare in Central American history. Isolated incidents occurred in Guatemala during the Carrera regime and in Nicaragua in the mid-nineteenth century in the context of civil war. The rebellion of Augusto C. Sandino probably

emerged from a tradition of banditry in the north of the country. Rural bandits may have been the most redoubtable delinquents of the region during the first century of independence.

However, violence in rural areas was not primarily the product of resistance by the dominated classes but rather was a structural part of the social relations of production. As one of this book's chapters shows, several forms of violence were essential for the functioning of coffee production in countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. During the liberal era, landowners and states used violence to enforce the transformation of land ownership conditions and to sustain labour relations that were based on non-economic force. It was this type of violence that was responsible for the uprising in El Salvador in 1932.

It is also noteworthy that urban workers and artisans only used violence sporadically in their protests between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. The workers of the banana plantations, on the other hand, were indeed involved in violent labour conflicts. Violence thereby was less the product of their actions and more the instrument of their repression by companies and governments. Starting with the urbanisation of the mid-twentieth century that was experienced in all countries of the region, forms of delinquency and violence appeared which Central America still suffers from today. Violence in the rural world obviously did not disappear. It rather gained another dimension, as it was in the rural world where the first expressions of revolutionary rebellion appeared, or where they were intended to be established.

In Central America we can identify historical moments that have to be considered as indispensable as the context of contemporary violence, such as patterns of *longue durée* which have to be seen as the determinants in the production of violence and crime. The processes of state formation, the invention of nations, the political regimes, and ethnic and class relations are the general frame for the role violence has always played in social life in Central America.

In Central America, the process of political and military centralisation carved out a territory for the use of violence in which some gained authority while others were excluded. The process of acquisition of "state" attributes was very diverse and bumpy in the different states. This is why we use terms such as "failed" or—from a less ideological point of view—"fragile" to characterise several of the Central American states. In the early history of Central American state building we find a single state that was never built in the end, the Central American Federal Republic. As a

consequence of this failure, five micro-states were built, with very weak attributes of “stateness” in most cases. For good reason, the viability of its states is a recurring topic in Central American history.

The Central American states differ considerably in their level of success in state formation. In the long term, Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica were more successful in the process of political and military centralisation. Due to its internal power struggles and US military occupation, Nicaragua was not able to build a modern state until the time of the Somoza dictatorship. At the same time, Honduras was finally able to establish a state. Nevertheless, Honduras today remains the most fragile state in Central America. On the other hand, Costa Rica obviously became the most institutionalised state with the most visible social web across its entire territory. In sum, the level of political and military centralisation or, respectively, the success of state formation is a factor that defines an area for the existence and expression of violence in social and political life.

The nation, or the sense of national belonging, also constitutes a frame for the use and the expression of the different forms of violence. When the “imagined community” creates a strong sense of “us” it also has to modulate or condemn the use of violence and its levels and dimensions in social life. When the members of a society instead act separately on the basis of profound ethnic divisions or because of local or regional territorial loyalties which hinder the sense of being a “community”, different forms of violence seem more legitimate and acceptable. Guatemala is an extreme example of this, where discrimination, subordination and the use of violence against the indigenous population were naturalised. In Nicaragua, territorially based loyalties were determining factors in the processes of state formation and nation building. When the elites set themselves apart, assuming a position of superiority, and did not allow the subalterns to be part of an “us”, the nation remained unfinished or incidental, as was the case in El Salvador.

The question of the efficacy of the invention of the nation is undoubtedly connected to the level of state formation that was attained, but it is also related to the characteristics of the political regime. This relation is complex, making it impossible to say whether a state with an authoritarian regime is less capable of successfully inventing a nation than a state with a democratic regime. In Central America, the Costa Rican state became the most institutionalised and the most capable of bringing the population under its control and integrating it into the “imagined community”. This

success is known as the “Costa Rican exceptionalism” and it resulted in the lowest rates of violence of any kind in the long run.

The processes of state formation and the invention of nations are interconnected phenomena even in the global context. The Central American countries are “client states” of the informal US empire that was established in the region and in the Caribbean at the beginning of the twentieth century. The outcomes of this condition have been very contradictory. This became obvious during the approval process of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, for example, when the greatest resistance to this imperial move came from Costa Rica, probably the most “pro-gringo” country. The so-called “war on drugs”, in which the United States decided to make the Central American states its auxiliary forces, is for its part a decisive factor in the phenomenon of violence. The “war on drugs” leads to violence itself and people also perceive and discuss it as an important element of the overall problem of violence. Likewise, US and Central American migration policies have an immediate effect on the current violence on the isthmus.

In the light of tattered “imagined communities”, political regimes with low levels of legitimacy, and states incapable of providing the most elementary services to the people, it is no surprise that large proportions of Central American societies opt for the exit and vote with their feet, and that other segments of society, powerful and fearsome minorities, opt for the systematic use of violence. Paradoxically, political violence—which was a constant part of life in most Central American states after independence—is less important in the present, while other forms of violence, “horizontal violence” and crime, prevail. The Central American states are still not able to establish a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force, nor do they enjoy the respect and loyalty of large parts of the population. Competition between elites apparently became institutionalised, but today corruption is a structural element of the political system. Thus, this depends on and feeds violent crime and “horizontal violence” at the same time.

There are not many reasons to be optimistic in Central America today. The reorganisation of the illustrated long-term structural framework seems nearly impossible to achieve: real states with democratic political regimes, conclusive “imagined communities” and a redefinition of the condition of being “client states” of the United States seem like indispensable steps for finding a way to oppose the violence that prevails. In the face of this challenge it is much easier and more profitable for politicians and the media, as well as inevitable for a desperate population, to call for and to praise

punitive populism. It is in this light that it is so urgent and important to do critical research about violence and crime in Central America in the past and the present, as is presented in this volume.

Víctor H. Acuña Ortega

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANCR	Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, San José.
ARDE	Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (Democratic Revolutionary Alliance), Nicaragua.
ARENA	Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance), El Salvador.
AVANCSO	Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales (Association for the Advancement of Social Sciences), Guatemala.
CEPA	Comisión Ejecutiva Portuaria Autónoma (Autonomous Portuary Executive Commission), El Salvador.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency, USA.
CICIG	Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala), Guatemala.
CNCG	Confederación Nacional Campesina de Guatemala (National Peasant League of Guatemala), Guatemala.
CNTG	Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores (National Labour Federation), Guatemala.
CRM	Coordinadora Revolucionaria de Masas (Coordinating Body of Mass Organizations), El Salvador.
CUC	Comité de Unidad Campesina (Committee for Campesino Unity), Guatemala.
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency, USA.
DIS	Dirección de Inteligencia y Seguridad (Intelligence and Security Directorate), Costa Rica.

DOS	U.S. Department of State.
EMP	Estado Mayor Presidencial (Presidential Guard), Guatemala.
ERP	Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army), El Salvador.
FAL	Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación (Liberation Armed Forces), El Salvador.
FAR	Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (Rebel Armed Forces), Guatemala.
FARN	Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional (Armed Forces of National Resistance), El Salvador.
FECCAS	Federación Cristiana de Campesinos Salvadoreños (Christian Federation of Salvadoran Peasants), El Salvador.
FENASTRAS	Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (Federation of Salvadoran Workers), El Salvador.
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), El Salvador.
FOIA	Released to author via a Freedom of Information Act request.
FPL	Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí (Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces), El Salvador.
FRAP	Fuerzas Revolucionarias Armadas del Pueblo (People's Armed Revolutionary Forces), El Salvador.
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front), Nicaragua.
FUR	Frente Unido de la Revolución (United Front of the Revolution), Guatemala.
IBM	International Business Machines Corporation.
IBSS	International Bibliography of Social Sciences.
IGSS	United Front of the Revolution (Guatemalan Institute for Social Security), Guatemala.
IMF	International Monetary Fund.
MCCA	Mercado Común Centroamericano (Central American Common Market).

ML	Movimiento Libertario (Libertarian Movement), Costa Rica.
MLN	Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (Movement of National Liberation), Guatemala.
NA	National Archives of the United States, Washington.
NYT	<i>New York Times</i> .
OPS	U.S. Office of Public Safety.
ORDEN	Organización Democrática Nacionalista (National Democratic Organization), El Salvador.
ORT	Organización Revolucionaria de los Trabajadores (Workers Revolutionary Organization), El Salvador.
PAC	Partido Accion Ciudadana (Citizens' Action Party), Costa Rica.
PAR	Partido de Acción Renovadora (Party of Renewing Action), El Salvador.
PCN	Partido de Concertación Nacional (National Conciliation Party), El Salvador.
PCS	Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (Salvadoran Communist Party), El Salvador.
PDC	Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party), El Salvador.
PGT	Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (Guatemalan Workers Party), Guatemala.
PLN	Partido de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Party), Costa Rica.
PN	Policía Nacional (National Police), Guatemala.
PNC	Policía Nacional Civil (National Civil Police), Guatemala.
PR	Partido Revolucionario (Revolutionary Party), Guatemala.
PRTC	Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (Central American Workers Revolutionary Party), El Salvador.
PTJ	Policía Técnica Judicial (Criminal Investigation Department), Panamá.
PUSC	Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (Social Christian Unity Party), Costa Rica.
REMHI	Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (Recovery of the Historic Memory), Guatemala
RG	Record Group.

SICA	Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (Central American Integration System).
SIECA	Secretaría de Integración Económica Centroamericana (Secretary of Economic Integration of Central America).
SP	files of the Ministerio de Seguridad Pública, Republic of Costa Rica.
UCA	Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” (Central American University “José Simeón Cañas”), El Salvador.
UES	Universidad de El Salvador (University of El Salvador), El Salvador.
UFCo	United Fruit Company.
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
US AID	United States Agency for International Development.
USAMHI/Lib	Library of the US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.
UTC	Unión de Trabajadores del Campo (Union of Field Workers), El Salvador.
WNRC	Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD.

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