



Deborah Levenson-Estrada. *Adiós niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 200 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5299-0; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5315-7.



Reviewed by Gareth A. Jones (London School of Economics)

Published on H-Childhood (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan (University of Western Ontario)

Youth and the Discourse of Death in Latin America

Over the past decade Mexico has experienced a significant increase in violence, including homicide, kidnap, and assault. This trend is largely put down to the state's war against drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and the activities of the youth gangs they occasionally employ. Media and security commentators often point to the presence of Guatemalans as a key factor in this violence, notably the role of former Special Forces (*kaibiles*) in the Zetas DTO, and of gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (MS-18). Some propose that the solution to the violence in Mexico is a Guatemala-style *mano dura*, with deployment of militarized police units, zero-tolerance measures, and mass incarceration of gang members. Yet very few commentators possess a detailed knowledge of Guatemala itself, much less an understanding of what has drawn young people there to gangs. As a Mexicanist, I welcomed Deborah Levenson's long-awaited ethnography *Adiós Niño*.

The book is a plea to pay heed to the historical agency of horror and trauma (p. 17). *Adiós Niño* analyzes how young people in Guatemala have developed

a close relationship with multiple forms of violence over the past century. The result has been a dramatic repositioning of youth within the political economy and cultural landscape. Once the symbols of modernity in late nineteenth-century liberalism and the beautiful tomorrows promised by early twentieth-century reformism, by the 1950s and 60s young people's vanguardism in political movements provoked state terror. Recent decades have gone further and cast youth as the radically dangerous present, chaos and death, an obstacle to the future instead of its herald (p. 2). By the mid-1980s the face of this danger was the Maras, even though the gangs themselves posed little threat to the state, elites, or society. By the following decade, however, gangs had become the victimizers that they were previously falsely accused of being. Rather than pin this shift on a single cause, *Adiós Niño* traces the effects of civil war, the weak economy, elite indifference, the near collapse of social institutions, and the rise of organized crime.

The book's first substantive chapter, *Death and Politics, 1950s-2000s*, shows, sometimes in emotive detail

for an academic text, the conduct and effect of the civil war; the role of terror; the extent of the massacres; the enrollment in the civil patrols that meant about 40 percent of the male population was socialized into fratricide; and the mass exodus from the country and displacement within. Levenson discusses how the impact of terror has been the rapid growth of squatter settlements in Guatemala City, many of which were formed through land invasions and became sites of interreligious rivalry as Pentecostalism grew via its recognizable assertion that life is hell. People coped with the traumas of violence, or what the military and Pentecostals preferred to call the conflict, by considering it part of the past and adopting a rhetoric that portrayed the present as a post-conflict situation. By the late 80s, the military and elites believed they had won, a view that shaped the conduct of the peace negotiations and resulted in the near-dismissal of reconciliation.

The next two chapters, *1980s: The Gangs to Live for* and *1990s and Beyond: The Gangs to Die For*, present the principal ethnographic material of the book. They detail an extreme version of a familiar story. Young people joined gangs for purposes of fun (they often involved sport and break-dancing); constructed largely masculinized identities; and showed little interest in serious criminal activity, confronting the state, or operating beyond their barrio. Until about 1985 these gangs were not referred to as Maras but by the decade's end the Mara as both an organization and an idea in social discourse had become well established. Nevertheless, Levenson's 1988 study of the Maras revealed members to be relatively normal young people, neither especially hostile nor restricted to one social class. The Maras had become vital social institutions, a substitute for affective family relations and community, organizations rich in life, ambiguities, creativities, and contradictions [that] had the possibility of developing in different directions, for better or worse (p. 75). Importantly, Maras involvement with violence was mostly low-level, although they were often subject to police and army violence in return.

Levenson admits that her earlier assessment may have been overly optimistic. From the 1990s, for better or worse became mostly worse. The Maras themselves were transformed, dominating neighborhoods through extortion, robbery, and violence. Levenson describes how the Maras killed bus drivers who resisted paying the taxes imposed on them; adopted a promotion system that rewarded members who killed on behalf of the gang; or were themselves killed by rivals, the state, or death squads. Everyday life was conducted with the pos-

sibility of imminent death. Indeed, the tacit understanding among *mareros* was that violent death controlled how life was to be lived. This, Levenson calls necro-living. This is a fascinating concept—and one that I wish Levenson had developed further. It captures, I think, the contrast between how the Maras talk in the 1990s and 2000s compared with youth of earlier generations. Then, youth talk revealed attempts to work out identities and justify actions through notions of class and ethnicity, aspirations to consumerism, and engagement with wider politics. For the Maras today, talk seems to be a set of ritual utterances—although how far these might be a dimension of the ethnographic encounter is unclear—about being bad or crazy. The Maras are not the rebels of yesteryear; their politics is uncertain and instead of leading humanity into modernity—if we accept that was once the role imposed on youth—they are now shoved into corners by the past (p. 130). Does necro-living mean there is no scope for progressive discourse among gang members?

The final two chapters do not offer much hope. Chapter 4 analyzes the space of the prison. As Levenson notes, at the end of the twentieth century the prison started to replace the barrio and factory as the new space of urban struggle (p. 112). As post-civil war Guatemala has become securitized in new ways, so *marero* identities are more closely constructed around time in prison. Pulled in from streets and barrios for being *mareros*, whether true or not, once in prison young people have to make a decision on whether to become *mareros*. Following trends seen in Brazil, South Africa, and elsewhere, prison is a space where identities are hardened, making gang life on release more likely. Securitization has its own self-fulfilling logic to construct a gang threat. Yet, *Adi's* provides an intriguing account of authority in prison, which is not determined by the Maras but by a range of actors including DTOs, ex-military figures now behind bars, religious groups, and transnational gang leaders.

The final chapter considers possibilities for life outside of the Maras. In the past, gangs were relatively unstable organizations; young people joined and left relatively easily. Today, it is not impossible to leave the Maras and Levenson traces some examples that cover well-known tactics such as conversion to Pentecostalism. The exact motivations for *mareros* to leave are difficult to grasp, but in exchanges with the author one thread seems to be about loving life again. I wondered if Levenson could have taken this back to her brief account of talk; is there a sense here of young people expressing a different worldview or, to use a gang term, be-

ing âcalmerâ? The irony is that for many, as the final pages of the book demonstrate, leaving the Maras is a death sentence even years after the act. Levenson explains the Marasâs apparent determination to kill anyone who leaves in rather melodramatic termsâthose who leave are dangerous: âBy animating life so, they a pose a threat to the micropower of death used to run the neighbourhoodsâ (p. 144). The reasons might be more mundane but they do present the reader with the catch-22 of gang membership. Joining the gang presents young people with one of the few routes to group identity, but marks them as a target and is likely to leave them dead before their mid-twenties. Leave, and they are likely to be killed, probably by their own âbrothers.â

AdiÃ³s is written in strong, often angry, prose. Levenson wants to shift the debate that has made young people the subject of a vicious politics in Guatemala. Politicians, elites, and media have marked urban youth as violent criminals and therefore the legitimate subjects of state and extra-state action. So ingrained has this discourse become that it threatens to be almost apoliticalâviolence is the natural quality of young men, and society and state are not responsible for their actions. *AdiÃ³s* suggests otherwise. It offers a powerful ethnography to unpack how lives of violence are produced over generations and how actions of the past leave deep formative traces in the present.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-childhood>

Citation: Gareth A. Jones. Review of Levenson-Estrada, Deborah, *Adiós niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39647>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.