

NICARAGUA - From Telescopic to Microscopic: Three Youth Gang Members Speak

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[Revista Envío](#) - *Only proximity can help us understand the motivations, strategies and dead ends in the lives of youth gang members. Let's trade the sociological telescope and macro-explanations for a strong microscope to zoom in on three personal stories and improve our understanding of the best paths to rehabilitation.*

Thirty years ago, comedian and movie director Woody Allen predicted that in the near future rape and kidnapping would be predominant forms of human relations. We didn't have to wait long before seeing the lead role played by violence in establishing, modulating and cultivating human relations. The history of humanity has been marked by the use of violence as a means of sending messages, exercising domination and regulating the population. Perhaps Allen was just suggesting that rape and kidnapping were replacing wars, which had in turn supplanted or complemented ritual human sacrifice.

Before the French Annals of History school, the science of history was above all a sequence of episodes—most of the time violent ones—perpetrated by great men and imperial powers. New visions of history do nothing to undermine the conclusion reached by British anthropologist Keith Hart that the greatest concentrations of money in the history of humanity have gone to subsidize the food and arms of the planet's bully boys, who generate power and wealth through the exercise of violence. Today the ideology of "citizens' security," which aims for a society unpolluted by violence, tends to make us lose sight of the predominant tendency of human history by presenting certain acts of violence as exceptional events that have no place within the rule of law. Anathema as the only presumably civilized reaction to such criminal acts renounces the idea of unraveling the polysemy of criminal violence, which among other things expresses social unrest and, according to Mexican researcher Roxana Reguillo, "the most extreme face of the exhaustion of the legal model."

The violence of pups and paladins

Youth violence in Nicaragua must also be interpreted using a long-term perspective, removed from the exegetic canons of "citizens' security." From this viewpoint we need to remember that it's not something new, nor is it at its peak. Hundreds of thousands of young people participated in the war of the 1970s to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship, and then in the 1980s the Sandinista army ended up with some 134,000 soldiers, most of them between the ages of 16 and 25, the same age range with the highest proportional participation in criminal violence. The opposing faction contained more than 16,000 fighters. Both sides received the blessing of different states. The revolutionary rhetoric coined the phrase "Sandino's pups" to bestow on the youngsters who did their military service, a social distinction in line with the mythology of the times. Ronald Reagan compared those on the opposite side to the US founding fathers in a no less forceful political marketing effort for these supposed paladins of liberty. All those 150,000-plus armed men, most of them young, represented 18 times the total members of youth gangs when this phenomenon was at its height in Nicaragua at the end of the 1990s.

From guerilla fighters to youth gang members

What are the differences that make today's youth violence more visible, increasingly threatening and less likely to be extolled by the hegemonic voices? There are three fundamental differences: today's is de-ideologized; it has traded its rural stages for urban ones where it is more visible and likely to alarm the

middle and upper classes; and it isn't organized by powerful institutions.

The social unrest previously manifested in the form of guerrilla fighters now appears in the form of youth gangs, which lacks the blessing of states and powerful organizations. These gangs also lack any ideology, or else participate in the dominant hedonistic one. Previously, evil was incarnated in a dictator or very clearly-labeled "others" (Somocistas, Contras, Sandinistas), while good was represented by an ideology of "freedom," "revolution" or "socialism." The real evil now is the invisible hand of the market, which is more systemic but harder to rally forces to fight, so other demons are substituted.

Thus, where there were once guerrilla fighters, there are now youth gang members and fundamentalist sects fighting an omnipresent evil, which are de-ideologized ways of manifesting uncertainty and social unrest. That unrest is expressed in different ruptures of the social contract. Youth gang members do not subscribe to the great national or international social contract, preferring to invent their own. They're not the only ones who break the social contract, but they do so most belligerently and explicitly, with the exception of the big political gangs belonging to Arnoldo Alemán and Daniel Ortega, who redesign the social contract according to their whims and in full view of a seemingly eternally patient public.

Three stories "under the microscope"

There are many macro-explanations of the youth gang phenomenon, which has reached epidemic proportions in Los Angeles, Paris, Barcelona, Medellin, Bogota, Lima, Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, San Salvador, Guatemala, Estelí and Managua, to name but a few cities. But those great explanatory aggregates consist of many micro-experiences that often escape the supposedly omnipresent sociological eye.

To better see, feel and understand the experiences of youth gang members, one has to take a close look at personal stories, at "the long, hard life of the bum," as one of those interviewed put it. To facilitate that closer view, I've summarized below three interviews that had a real impact on me. They're not average, representative cases, if such a thing can be said to exist. But their stories do condense a number of experiences that recur among youth gang members. They are the stories of Walter, Ernesto and Camilo. Walter and Ernesto express two very different moments in the history of Nicaraguan youth gangs—1999 and 2006—while Camilo demonstrates the success of one model for dealing with youth violence.

Black Walter's story

Walter was 23 when I interviewed him in 1999. Four years earlier he had been a prominent member of the youth gang called *Los Comemueños*, located in the vast Reparto Schick neighborhood in Managua. Its name (literally, "eaters of the dead") referred to the fact that its members used to dig up fresh corpses to steal their jewelry before dousing them with gas and setting them alight. Very dark-skinned, muscular, of medium build and with a scar-scored face, Walter is one of the most pleasant human beings I've ever met. We talked at length in the headquarters of El Patriarca Foundation, across the street from the Roberto Huembes market.

"They call me Black Walter. I've got a deadly vendetta with *El Cejas*. The feud started when some others came into the barrio to attack it so we defended the territory and some people ended up dead. That's how they killed Yonki, from *Los Cancheros*. He came alone into *Los Comemueños* territory, intimidating everyone with his pistol, making out he was real cool. They did him in there and then. You only do something like that if your life really sucks.

"I was in the Modelo Prison [in Tipitapa] for three years. They put me there for stabbing Munra and Zanate, two members of *Los Cancheros*. I left Zanate shitting in a [colostomy] bag for six months. I took part in three other killings: one homicide and two first degree murders.

"I used to steal when I was drugged up; when I was high I felt like the master. If they put up a struggle, I stabbed them with absolutely no remorse. But now that I'm clean I regret having done it. "I've been doing marihuana, glue and *floripón* [a large flower brewed in a tea for its hallucinogenic effects] since I was

eight. I liked fucking around, hurting people since I was just a kid. I loved making people afraid of me. If they saw me stabbing three or four sons of bitches in the street, they respected me and did what I told them to.

"I haven't got a family; they left me in a garbage dump when I was three. I call the woman who brought me up my aunt. She lives alone without a husband. She had four children: three boys and a girl. She took in laundry.

"I left there when I was eight, and survived by stealing in the Huembes market. I slept there in the bus terminal. The best time to steal was 5 in the morning, when it was dark and the first passengers were turning up. I did a good stint every day.

"I went back to my aunt's house when I was 12, but I'd set off every morning in the early hours to go stealing. In a day I'd grab five or six necklaces and four watches. It was getting harder; there were fewer cops before and they didn't kill you just for stealing some shit.

"I think I joined a gang and started doing drugs because I didn't know my real parents. My stepbrothers told me they picked me up from a garbage dump, where my mother had abandoned me. That's always made me really sad; it's even made me want to kill myself. Before, I'd go off on my own to cry. The gang was my family.

"I had a girlfriend for five years. I lived in her house and kept her with the money I made stealing. She told me to leave that life of robbery, drugs and youth gangs. When her mom realized I gave them everything I stole, she started showing me affection. But sometimes they got mad, because the inter-gang feuds meant their house even got strafed. That girlfriend ended up a junkie.

"It's a problem leaving the gangs. They badmouth you, saying you're aspiring to be a *ponqui* kid—that's a plastic kid who dresses like a *cholo* with a brand-name cap. 'Aha,' they say, 'you turned yellow in the Modelo.'"

The long shadows of a youth gang past

Walter was allowed to commute his last two years of prison for rehabilitation in the Patriarca Foundation, where he tried to stab another parolee. The anger was still eating away at him. He ended up running away from the farm where they had sent him for the final stage of his rehabilitation.

He had no use for any government, because as far as he was concerned, the Sandinista, Chamorro and Alemán governments respectively brought the plagues of war, drugs and hunger.

His gang, *Los Comemueertos*, took its name from an activity related to the most notable place in their barrio: the cemetery. The same was true of *Los Billareros* (the Pool Parlor Boys), *Los Cancheros* (the Basketball Court Boys), *Los Colchoneros* (the Mattress Boys), *Los Bloqueros* (the Cement Block Boys), *Los Aceiteros* (the Oil Boys), *Los Rampleros* (the Ramp Boys) and *Los Puenteros* (the Bridge Boys). A pool bar, a basketball court, a place selling mattresses or cement building blocks or oil, a ramp and a bridge were the distinctive neighborhood sites that generated territorially-based identity. That's why the greatest offense was for an enemy gang to penetrate one's own territory and the home gang's greatest duty was to defend it. Brandishing knives and throwing stones earned them a respect they were otherwise denied. They felt like the "masters."

The members' nicknames function as noms de guerre: Black Walter, Fat Manuel, Chayane and Cat Lung earned them fame for their warrior-like feats. Some first-generation gang members had done military service in the eighties and found space in the gang to relive the adrenaline-fueled drama and the camaraderie they had enjoyed when recognized as "Sandino's pups."

But Walter is from the next generation after them. For him and his contemporaries, the gang was a substitute family and a way of earning respect and power. They controlled the streets and ordered the

social chaos through a code of conduct. It was hard to leave because the people they'd shared so many adventures with would accuse them of chickening out and because they still had pending scores to the death with enemies. Their past followed them around like a long shadow. Their record was etched on the memory of their community and of their rivals. Once outside the group, they no longer had protection and were suspected of being not only cowards but also traitors. Their own personal demons added to this social conditioning to keep them locked within a cultural jail whose bars had been forged by those demons and reinforced by certain social institutions. Jail functioned as a training ground for their professionalization, because if the street was their school, jail was the institute of higher criminal learning. The publicizing of their feats in the mass media acted as an incentive for fame that helped them acquire the label that rounded off their criminal career.

Ernesto: "Really mixed up in drugs"

Ernesto's experience at the start of the new millennium has its similarities, but is marked by the anarchy that characterized many of Nicaragua's gangs in 2006. Ernesto is 19, with tattoos from *Guns and Roses*, a skull and the devil, which he had done in Costa Rica when he went there to play soccer and stayed on to work as a laundryman. He washed pants until he was ratted out and expelled as an undocumented immigrant. He's a man of few words, an unredeemed crack head and really feared when he loses his cool. Before we were introduced, he stalked me in the streets waiting for a chance to rob me.

"I was six when they killed my dad," he told me once we were deep in conversation. "He went over to Colombia and they killed him there. I've got problems with my family; with my mom. That's why I sleep on the street, on a mattress by the side of my gran's house. I didn't go to school. I've been a bum since I was small. I started hanging around with *Los Billareros* when I was 14 and now I'm with *Los Puenteros*. There's no fighting now, but four years ago there was. We fought with stones, homemade pistols and mortars against *Los Praderos*, *Los Búfalos* and *Los Comemuertos*. Those were the times when *Chuky* just went around splitting heads open. I stabbed one then *Los Cancheros* nailed him with a rocket and disabled him. That's when they split my brow open. I've been inside three times. My gran denounced me for stealing clothes from the house. All she ever says is, "Christ's blood!" And in the police station they always hit me with their bully sticks, because I don't let them get me without a fight. I hit 'em and throw stones. I always say I'm 17 or 16 so they'll release me fast, but sometimes not even that works. They had me locked up once for four months without a trial.

"I'm really into crack, and I also do marihuana and a mix of marihuana and crack. I did glue when I was a kid. That was before I got a job collecting bus fares on routes 19, 9 and 8. I go to the Venegas outlets to get rocks of crack because the mules don't come here. A joint or a rock both cost 10 pesos apiece (about 55 cents). Half an ounce of cocaine is worth 50 pesos (\$2.75) if the coke's crappy. There's a band of Colombians selling the coke. Some crack heads help them. They're the ones calling the shots. And if anyone rats them out, they kill them.

"I've been in several rehab centers, but I don't like them. One of them put me selling vegetables down at the lake, along the boardwalk, as if I was their slave. I escaped and made off with their telephone."

Younger and with No "code of honor"

Ernesto doesn't respect the tacit clauses of the ethical code. He steals from his family, steals in his own barrio and even robs those who try to help him. Drugs have turned into an essential spice of life, as they are for many youngsters of his generation. Producing, selling and using drugs are very common activities in his barrio. And they energize its economy the same way family remittances do. British anthropologist Dennis Rodgers found that remittances, taxis and drugs were the main forms of accumulation in the Managua barrio where he did his study on youth gangs.

Drugs are the great catalyst of gang-related activity. Tattoos have also become more relevant. Like the group names and nicknames, they generate identity and allude to a personal and community history. Tattoos turn stigma into an emblem, triggering segregation and pushing existing segregation to the extreme. And like the taste for all things gothic, they reflect an appetite for the transnational. Tattoos and

gothic styles are a “glocal” trend, cultural artifacts of globality recreated and doted with new local meanings.

The gangs have undergone many metamorphoses

Black Walter and Ernesto are continuing a tradition whose starting point goes way back. Walter insists “it isn’t true that youth gangs started in 1990. There was already a multitude of gangs in Reparto Schick in 1986: *Los Barilochi*, *Los Pitufos*, *Los Dragones*, *Los Brujos*. I was there, in *Los Brujos*.” But there’s a big difference between *Los Brujos*, whose members fought fist-to-fist, and *Los Comemueertos*, whose members used home-made mortars, machetes and even AK-47 assault rifles.

There were also a lot of changes between 1997 and 2006. The main ones were a drop in the average age of gang members, a reduction in the number of clashes, a loss of interest in defending the barrio, a relaxing of the code of honor, which includes stealing from people in the same barrio, a consequent erosion in neighbors’ trust of the gang members, a dissolving of gang identity, atomization of the gang and increasingly predominant interest in drug use and retail. Before crack came along, the rock fights were to gain respect and reorganize the social chaos. Now the interest is in other “rocks”—a combination of cocaine and bicarbonate of soda—which allow them to make a living and avoid the chaos. What persists is the anger, the vendettas and the difficulty abandoning violence as a way of sending messages.

Violence as message

In his latest book, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*, iconoclastic US historian Howard Zinn includes a chapter with the suggestive theme “Killing people to ‘send a message.’” It starts by stating that Timothy McVeigh—the young man who blew up the federal building in Oklahoma—and the government of the United States of America—which executed him for that act—have something in common. Both believe that killing people is a valid way to send a message. Timothy McVeigh committed his act outside of the law, which is why he was labeled a terrorist. The US government executed him by applying a law that authorizes the death penalty as punishment.

Violence is imbedded in culture. Max Weber subscribed to Trotsky’s declaration that all states are founded with violence. According to Trotsky, the concept of “state” would disappear if there was nothing more than social formations that ignored the recourse to violence. Not only state institutions but also private citizens continually use violence; the defense of private property provides a license to maintain private security guards.

The sale of citizens’ security by private companies is entirely legitimate and has become one of the fastest growing industries in Nicaragua. If we add freelance guards—security sold in the informal sector—to the over 10,000 private employees of the most buoyant security companies, we would undoubtedly find that security sector employment at the very least matches that of the *maquila* assembly plants for re-export, and with much less government propaganda. Such propaganda is certainly not required when the sensationalist news served up by the television channels continually fuels the terror on which Servipro, Ultranic and so many other security companies base their prosperity.

Complementing this cultural tendency are companies that sell military training and simulated warfare competitions, recycling an activity that already functions in Nicaragua and presenting as a game what has amounted to a terrible tragedy for so many countries, families and individuals. The *Aquí entre nos* (Here among us) supplement in the April 20, 2007, edition of *La Prensa*, a newspaper that constantly laments today’s “loss of values,” dedicated text and photos to a mock warfare competition involving a number of well-to-do high schools: Notre Dame, Mont Berkeley, Saint Dominic, Anglo-Americano and Pierre y Marie Curie. The competition took place in the Paintball Xtreme Jungle training camp, with the participants spurred on by phrases like “What a killer instinct, kiddo!” The report concluded that “The adrenalin was pumped right up to the limit. All participants wanted to win first place at whatever price.”

CEPREV’s peace-building experience

Based on the theory that violence sinks its roots in culture, the Violence Prevention Center (CEPREV) has been doing laudable work to pacify young gang members. CEPREV is the only body apart from the Nicaraguan National Police that converts groups, not individuals, without neglecting personal attention. Working exclusively with individuals allows gangs to perpetuate themselves by recruiting new members, making it essential to work with the group.

That is largely the approach employed by CEPREV, an NGO with eight years' experience rehabilitating youth gang members, during which time its promoters have worked in over 20 barrios. Its method consists of giving talks in high schools to teachers, parents and students; psychological attention; neighborhood visits and workshops; home visits to gang members' families; and training sessions on self-esteem and self-knowledge that explore the origin of young people's anger and why they use drugs and arms, as well as raising their awareness of the consequences of violence.

Following a research study on civil society organizations that work with young people involved in youth violence, anthropologist Wendy Bellanger concluded that "the key to reducing the violence exercised by young people in gangs could lie in programs like CEPREV's, which attack the culture of violence without becoming totally absorbed in the specific issue of abandoning the gang." Without taking the youth gang members out of their environment or attempting to break up the gang, CEPREV builds up youth gang members' self esteem by sending psychologists to visit them, their families and neighbors. One the main mechanisms is training gang members to be "peace leaders," which in addition to changing the sign of the slogan that brings them together maintains their self-esteem and makes them agents of their own rehabilitation.

This lead role is rightly presented as one of the essential factors of their success. The camaraderie among the psychologists and other six team members makes the young people feel they've entered the world of the socially acceptable in an atmosphere of respect and ongoing learning on how to handle themselves in the organizational and social sphere surrounding them. In other words, while learning about machismo, violence and prejudices, they also learn the ways, the jargon and the values that will allow them to perform smoothly in the organizational atmosphere.

Machismo and authoritarianism are the cradle of violence

The CEPREV workshops usually transcend the merely informative and aim to treat psychological issues such as human relations, maternity, paternity, gender and machismo, contributing to people's emotional growth. Complemented by a frequent presence in the neighborhoods, the workshops try to help the young people discover their own forms of non-violent expression. They involve mixed groups of young gang members and other inhabitants from the same neighborhood, which helps foster a very tangible form of social acceptance of the gang members.

CEPREV also holds workshops with journalists, teachers and police officers aimed at changing the way gang members are treated. The awareness-raising work with journalists is a key element in influencing the public perception of gang members and youth violence. Over its lifetime, CEPREV has worked with 15,000 young people and indirectly with 30,000 people in 21 neighborhoods in Managua's District V, Tipitapa and Ciudad Sandino. Unfortunately, the organization's financial limitations have made it impossible to extend its work further.

CEPREV's promoters sustain that the causes of youth violence are cultural, citing machismo and authoritarianism. Based on a psychogenic approach, they identify "family disintegration first of all, because it's part of a cultural problem. We're raised in that atmosphere of an authoritarian family, although in gang members' families the father generally isn't present. If he is, he's the one who exercises most power." As a result, the young people "aren't accepted at home and hit the streets, going to a group where they're accepted and not discriminated against. And there they feel fulfilled in a negative sense, because that's where they drown everything very negatively with drugs and violence. That's where they vent all their anger." As a result, the CEPREV promoters conclude that violence "is a cultural problem, a problem of the roles imposed on us by our culture."

Certain missing links that illuminate

Although the promoters associate the micro-psychological problem with the macro-social one ("Politicians provide a bad example, telling us, 'They're stealing up there at the top, so we're going to steal, too'; or 'If the President and the legislators steal, why can't I?'"). They don't make the leap into abstraction implied by talking about the system and its de-legitimization. They explain everything psychogenically, as the result of learning roles such as thief or perpetrator of violence. This presents gang members as a phenomenon taken out of its socioeconomic context, which appears at a certain moment and keeps growing. "It started with break-dancing," explained one promoter, "with Sandino's pups, tattoos, music. From then on they started organizing on the street corners."

The psychogenic approach offers very useful tools for providing effective individual and group attention, but there's also a need to make the historical and socioeconomic link to avoid omitting certain elements that could illuminate and enrich their treatment, anchoring it in time and space. For example, they could extend their interesting theoretical framework to the social plane and to historical evolution by asking why the role of youth gang member as a form of youth violence appears at a given moment; how it interacts with other roles in Nicaraguan society; what differences and similarities there are between the gang members of the end of the nineties and those of the seventies and the eighties; what effect religious organizations have in modulating their roles and what impact their offer of spaces of collective life that complement or replace the family has on youth gangs; what indirect impact on youth violence is exerted by nongovernmental organizations that don't work directly on this issue but whose local promoter networks foster citizens' participation in local micro-politics.

Greater reflection on these issues would make CEPREV promoters more aware of which flanks are being affected by their intervention, even when not explicitly planned, and make them conscious of their work's real potential, even through avenues not contemplated in their strategy. None of this detracts from the invaluable merit of working on the ground level and entering into the "long, hard" lives of so many young people who have benefited from and converted to a non-violent culture.

Camilo Arce, " *El Piruca* "

One notable example of the kind of success achieved by CEPREV is the story of Camilo Arce, alias "El Piruca" [slang for a maintenance-drinker], who was 20 when interviewed and is one of those I am most indebted to in my exploration of the youth gangs. He shared his life, friends and time with me, making numerous visits and offering me protection.

Camilo's mother and stepfather both had problems with alcoholism. After bouncing from house to house belonging to his father and aunts, Camilo ended up in a tiny house in Reparto Schick with his mother, stepfather and younger sister. His anger found different expression from an early age. "Before I got involved with the gang," he recalls, "I was already rebellious because of the way my family treated me. So I came looking for a way to vent everything they did to me. I wanted to take it out on other people. I didn't last long at school because sometimes the teachers wanted to attack me like they did at home. They'd say, 'Shut up, Camilo!' or threaten us with a ruler. I didn't like that so I lashed out. I haven't studied for seven years now."

"I changed for my sister"

"I started getting mixed up in stuff when I was 13. But I didn't get involved with the gangs until I was 14. I joined because I liked it when the kids said, 'Hey! *El Piruca's* really tough, he doesn't ever lose his nerve.' Because they called me *El Piruca* in an affectionate kind of way. All of us adopted bad nicknames. What I liked most was when the guys said, 'That kid's no nonsense, don't let him die; he toughs it out, really gets into it.' The guys would praise me like a symbol, like the gang's trophy. 'This guy's got real guts; he never backs down.' It really pleased me when the guys said that about me. The more they said it, the deeper I got involved. I felt like a symbol, a shield for them.

"Later I set up a gang with some other bros called *Los Soyeros*, and it was big. Then the gang called *La*

Pradera started up and became famous because someone got killed. Then came *Los Gasparines*, made up of the younger kids. In my gang we were all “undefeated,” which means there were no deaths, just injuries. The gang fights were terrible because we didn’t even respect the police. We went at them with anything we had: bottles, whatever was at hand. If they shot at us, we’d run off down a path there. One day they got hold of me and kicked me in the chest and I fell off the top of a wall. Then they picked me up by my long hair, grabbed me by the pants and threw me into the patrol car, beating me up as they went. I coughed up blood for a week. I was dying and the judge told me to file charges, to go to the forensic scientist, but I told her I didn’t want any part of that, that I just wanted to die.”

After the gang split up and he got beaten up and then left his stepfather “shitting in a bag,” Camilo started fearing for his own safety and the future of his little sister: “Only when I got beaten up by so many people did I start to feel fear. I mulled things over and felt like what was happening inside me was a death zone, a risk... I got really scared; like deep-down fear of getting mixed up with the gangs again. I’d never known fear before; nothing frightened me. I was like a kind of super hero, like Superman, who nothing happens to. But after getting the shit beat out of me, I felt afraid and started thinking things over.

“I stabbed my stepfather, clubbed him and once bashed him on the head with a baseball bat, making a big wound. My sister saw it all, and it really traumatized her. So I started thinking over how something might happen to her later on down the line. I changed mainly to save myself and to keep my sister from turning bad later on. I love that girl so much, I’d lay down my life for her. That’s what made me change. My mom’s already into what she’s into, and so’s my stepfather, but my sister’s little, right? I wouldn’t like her to get messed up in what they’re into later on. My sister’s like an angel for me. She needs me and I need her. She helps me recognize I’m worth something.”

“Now I feel like a peace leader”

That awareness of his value as a person and his use of words such as “think things over” and “traumatized” reveal that Camilo has internalized the CEPREV discourse. He was induced to assume another social role, and that’s how he perceives it: “Now I feel like a leader in how to live, like a peace leader. Because I explain to them how they can change, too. They’ve told me that and I feel the same way.

“The kids support me and the most wonderful thing I’ve seen is that they come to my house when they’ve got problems. They say, ‘*Piruca*—because that old nickname stuck—look, I’ve got this problem...’ ‘Don’t worry,’ I tell them, ‘Come back tomorrow.’ Even those who messed with me come around. They say, ‘Look, *Piruca*, I’m only drinking booze now, no rocks, trust me, I give you my word.’ ‘Yeah, man,’ I tell them, ‘Don’t give me that. You know that later you’ll go out stealing and only bad will come of it.’ If I see them with drugs I start talking to them, because I’ve got leaflets, which I explain to them, and I tell them what happened to me. I say, ‘Remember when I took booze with Valium and all that? I nearly died, I got tachycardia. I know you’ve got the same symptoms. Want me to tell you why? When you run, you’re drowning. Your lungs could fill up on you.’ So the kids are getting scared. I know the score with drugs; I tell them how I felt.”

Getting to that point, where you become the subject of your own reinsertion, is a slow process that requires constant and tenacious work by the CEPREV psychologists. Camilo transmuted his social role from violent leader to peace leader. His cultural metamorphosis has been possible because of the leading role he’s played in many other metamorphoses. His story is similar to those of many kids in his barrio, but his particular transformation isn’t common, because the problem of youth violence is greater than the capacity of the existing institutions and because those fighting violence are swimming against the current: against Paintball games promoted by the well off and against the security companies that buy into the prevailing inequity in choosing their victims.

We need “sociological imagination”

Some recommendations can be drawn from the exploration of these three cases, including one rehabilitation initiative. The first and most obvious is the need for more research: comparative studies in different barrios, follow-ups of gangs and gang members over time, comparisons of Central America’s

different democratization processes, more in-depth study of the strategies some have termed “the rebellion of the elite” and their desire to segregate, and analyses of the evolution of the definitions of crime and of the dynamism and composition of the social networks, among other factors whose influence on youth violence can be reasonably presumed.

Such attempts to get a closer look at the reality of youth gangs require combining different disciplines: criminology, sociology, anthropology, psychology, social psychology, political sciences, etc. They also require risk-taking, because greater human proximity can help us understand the motivations, strategies and dead ends in the lives of youth gang members, and that closeness entails risks. But only getting close to those who’ve hit bottom in the great social mismatch can stimulate intellectual creativity. It’s what C. Wright Mills would call “sociological imagination.”

Exercising sociological imagination with ethical responsibility involves not letting oneself be duped by the smoke screen of “citizens’ security,” which masks the problem, focuses on stigma and reinforces the criminal career. Understanding why gang members don’t respect a social contract that has confined them to the garbage heap is only possible by redefining citizens’ security as job security, secure quality of life, old age security, disability and death security, among other spheres of security that build citizenship, i.e. a sense of belonging to a legal community.

Sociological imagination shows that the problem of youth gangs—which is at bottom a symptom of far greater social problems—must not be reduced to its manifestations of street violence. The growing suicide rates, which affect young people more than any other age group, must also be included in the analysis. And no less attention should be paid to the slow but very effective self-destruction through drug abuse, because there’s a danger that the analyses will dismiss young people who destroy themselves taking crack on a street corner as non-problematic, concentrating only on drug abusers who stand out because they exercise violence. There’s also a danger of neglecting the effects of middle- and upper-class ostentation, of those who shamelessly display their opulence with no awareness of its direct and collateral damage and stimulate the compulsive obsession with brand names that idolatrizes certain merchandise.

Why not recognize that value?

There is an urgent need for both more analysis and more action. The National Police must restrict its actions to the dictates of the Code for Children and Adolescents, control and restrict arms possession more and multiply its invitations to turn in weapons. Police commissioners should not be permitted to invest in weapons shops and private security companies. As the most visible face of the state, the police force has a presence even in places with no schools, electricity or health centers. And in its role as the coercive apparatus, it has had and will continue to have a determining role in the relationship between the state and youth gangs. The ways in which it confronts them define a cultural pattern, making it an indispensable element in bringing about change. Its collaboration with organizations such as CEPREV, or even reproducing its peace-based model on the national level, would make a hefty contribution to changing the role of youth gangs.

Door-to-door work is still the domain of civil society, but it also has macro-tasks. It must continue pressuring for an administration of justice in Nicaragua that builds credibility in the judicial system and in the legislative framework. The first step toward such credibility is the fight against the big tax evaders who are emptying the state coffers and against the existing tax structure, which perpetuates inequity.

As part of civil society, the media have an enormous responsibility in the way they mold perceptions of violence. Their ethical responsibility not to continue feeding stigma by presenting youth gangs in a skewed way—covering the crimes but hardly touching on successful rehabilitation experiences—must be highlighted and demanded. They must present the multiple meanings of the youth gang phenomenon. Why not recognize them as questioning the social order? Rather than demonizing them as sick or deviant, they could show them as sensitive, even allergic to the chaos surrounding them. Rather than glibly labeling them countercultural, they could show them as a crude manifestation of the cultural refrains of our times: the obsession with brand names, hedonism, every man for himself, unsatisfied expectations, risk...

Redemption through art?

Nobody has yet explored in Nicaragua the rehabilitating potential of certain youth activities, for example redemption through art. Youth gang members share two compulsive obsessions with many other youths from marginalized neighborhoods: drugs and the transnational trend in artistic expressions. Although the two are very different, they are sometimes lumped together and demonized.

The transnational artistic expressions are rarely taken up by lazy policy scribblers who prefer to avoid any danger of a mental hernia by proposing the perennial panaceas of sports and employment. Offering these young people chances to express their artistic creations (songs, graffiti, drawings) with some level of public recognition and notoriety would make a forceful contribution to transmuting the violent orientation of their energies. It would allow their righteous inconformity to be listened to and open up arenas for their participation based not on sticks, stabbings and mortar blasts, but rather on arguments, illustrated with images and endowed with inventiveness.

Among the Walters, Camilos and Ernestos are many artists and citizen apprentices looking for ways to express themselves. There's a lot to do, but few are heading in the right direction. While CEPREV is making unflagging efforts to transform the culture of violence, the businesspeople behind Paintball Xtremo Jungle continue to legitimize it and sell it as fun.

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