
Peter Peetz (2011)

Maras, Medien, Militär. Gesellschaftlicher Diskurs und staatliche Politik gegenüber Jugendbanden in Honduras

Münster: LIT Verlag, 251 S.

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The book “Maras, Medien, Militär” by Peter Peetz comes at a very timely moment for understanding contemporary violence, youth gangs – also known as maras – and the repressive government policies in Honduras – not only the most violent country on the planet according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, but also the least studied country in Central America (UNODC, 2011). In this sense, the book fills the gap in literature and studies on contemporary violence, youth gangs, and security policies in Central America, and particularly Honduras. Most of the scholarship focuses on path-dependency, policing, or democracy in postwar societies. Furthermore, existing literature tends to neglect Honduras. The book has a traditional dissertation format. Although viewed unfavorably in other academes and publishing houses, publishing a dissertation in its original format happens to be the norm in Germany in order to obtain the PhD degree.

Writing in German, the author, a political scientist, sets out to understand what led the Honduran government to react to the increasing social violence and proliferation of

the two main maras, Mara Salvatrucha and Mara Dieciocho, with repressive policies, namely Mano Dura (Iron Fist) and the Ley Antimaras (Antigang Law). The central argument is that Mano Dura emerged in a context of security panic or ‘moral panic’. These resulted from the members of the maras being perceived and constructed, both by the media and government discourse, as the main offenders. In order to develop this argument, the author employs a discourse and policy approach to analyze two government administrations (from 2002 to 2009) and the press (from 2001-2009).

The book is divided into three parts: 1) A brief historical overview of Honduran politics and society, as well as the contemporary context of violence, the mara phenomenon, and security policies; 2) Discourse analysis of the ‘maras’ as constructed by the Honduran press and political and social actors; 3) Policy analysis of Mano Dura and the Antigang Law under two governments: Ricardo Maduro (2002-2006) and Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009). The brief historical overview aims at contextualizing a country to readers who have probably never heard

of or know very little about it. This makes sense given the fact that most studies in Germany on Latin America focus on Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and, most recently, the Caribbean. The author's general information on Honduras' politics and society is based on existing literature from the United States, Europe, and some scholarly work from Central America. Surprisingly, the author leaves out seminal texts about Honduran history covering the period under study, particularly Dario Euraque's "Reinterpreting the Banana Republic" (1996). Including this work would have allowed the author to view the dynamics behind Honduran society and politics more critically.

The second part is an analysis of the government and media's discourse on the maras. The author draws upon the notion of 'moral panic' (Cohen 2002, Goode and Ben-Yehude 1994), defined as a 'social reaction [in which] a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests' (57-58). This concept is broken down into five different criteria (consensus, concern, hostility, disproportionality, and volatility) in order to analyze how the maras are constructed both in the press and among political and social actors (e.g., politicians, security agents, and police) as 'criminals', 'enemies', 'illness' of youth and society, and as the perpetrators of violence and crime in Honduras. 'Concern' emerges from severe anxiety or worry vis-à-vis the social phenomenon; 'consensus' is linked to 'concern' and arises when people in a society share or agree on issues, for instance, that the maras are dangerous for society; 'hostility'

refers to an 'othering'-process known as "the enemy other"; 'disproportionality' and 'volatility' denote the proportional disparities between the real problem and how the social phenomenon is being addressed. These disparities can be measured quantitatively and/or qualitatively (60-61). The author also examines discourses by NGOs and international organizations (e.g., the United Nations, local and international human rights organizations, the Catholic Church) that, on the one hand, challenged the dominant and stigmatizing discourse on the maras, and, on the other, demanded a more preventive approach to the mara phenomenon, as well as violence and crime. The author links the stigmatizing discourse on the maras to the government's security policy.

The third part of the book centers on a policy analysis of Mano Dura and the Antigang Law during the two government administrations from 2002 until the coup in 2009. The aim is to identify and understand the different actors (and institutions) involved in setting the 'security' agenda under Mano Dura policies and the Antigang Law. Using expert interviews with local scholars, staff members of different NGOs, as well as local reports and existing literature, the author gives insights into the paradoxes of the Honduran government's security policy. For instance, policies did not solely aim at repressing violence and crime. As the author observes, the Maduro administration also introduced preventive measures to combat violence and crime in the marginalized urban areas, such as the Policía Comunitaria (community police) or the Comités de Seguridad (security committees). The author is quick to point

out that, like the repressive measures, the preventive ones too faced problems due to poor coordination between local and central institutions, and general institutional weakness. Authoritarian and repressive practices are not just imposed from above. As the author observes, *Mano Dura* was positively received by Hondurans, which suggests how authoritarianism is deeply ingrained in Honduran society (161).

In sum, “*Maras, Medien, Militär*” contributes to understanding the transformation of Central American countries against the backdrop of contemporary violence and security policies. Both discourse and policy analyses are thoroughly showing the complexities and challenges underlying the Honduran government’s decision to introduce *Mano Dura* and the Antigang Law. However, the analyses could have benefitted from the extensive literature on contemporary youth gangs. For instance, the works of Vigil (1988), Venkatesh (1997), and Hagedorn (2008) demonstrate that gangs globalization and neoliberalism changed considerably gangs becoming more violent. There is also interesting work focusing on the stigmatization of youth gangs in the media (e.g., Thomson, Young and Burns 2000). Given the fact that *Mano Dura* and the Antigang Law target marginalized, unemployable males from the underclass, it is surprising that the author does not discuss issues of race, class, and gender. Imprisonment reshapes inmates’ masculinities and, as Wacquant (2009) points out, ‘security’/crime-control policies generally target the underclass. Bosworth (2004) has discussed how 19th century ‘love of taxonomy’ not only articulated and

mapped ‘Otherness’ giving birth to the prison, but also that it is intertwined with notions of race. Aside from these observations and the dissertation format, which may not appeal to some readers, “*Maras, Medien, Militär*” offers readers insights into contemporary social violence, as well as Honduran society and politics.

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