Since the Maras appeared in Central America in the 1990s, scholars have explored the evolution from street gangs to Maras, governments’ hard line response, migration and border movements of gang members, and gang violence. Scholarship tends to look at the subject at a transregional level because of Maras’ activity in various countries. Deborah T. Levenson’s *Adios Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death* is somewhat different. Without ignoring the transnational level, she analyzes youth involvement in violence at the national and city level in Guatemala. In analyzing these two levels, Levenson looks at the historical specificity and the underlying politics of youth’s involvement in the Maras and violence in Guatemala City.

Why is youth in Maras so violent? In the case of Guatemalan youth, Levenson contends that youth’s involvement in violence and violent deaths is connected to transformations that have taken place in Guatemala since the 1980s. These comprise: the downfall of urban subculture from the working-class, the military victory through genocidal war in the 1980s, the arrival of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and the Eighteenth Street Gang (M-18), and the rise of the drug trade and drug use. She argues that youth’s coexistence with violent deaths cannot be understood in isolation from state violence, which, in Guatemala, has led to the ‘negation of life’ (p. 4) and the use of ‘spectacular and reverberating necropolitics’ (p. 4). Levenson, an oral historian, draws on fieldwork conducted in Guatemala City for over a decade, as well as interviews with social workers, gang members, parents, neighbors, and psychologists, and other sources such as newspaper articles, surveys, and reports. The book is a contribution to the literature on contemporary gangs and youth, in a country where war, genocide, and violence has shaped Guatemalan society, and in particular youth.

Levenson’s argument is stated concisely in the three quotations on the first page of the Introduction. The quotations, from three different historical periods of the twentieth century, illustrate how youth went from being the ‘future of the [Guatemalan modern] nation’ in the early twentieth century, to being brutally murdered by the military during Guatemala’s genocidal war in the 1980s and becoming perpetrators of crude violence themselves toward the end of the twentieth century. How did this happen?

Levenson develops her argument in five chapters. The first chapter focuses on two historical periods, the 1950s and the 1980s, and how violence shaped Guatemalan youth and the Maras later. After the coup that ousted Juan Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, the Guatemalan state unleashed political violence and terror that was ‘spectacular,’ ‘imaginative,’ and ‘grotesque.’ Against this
background, the country witnessed the emergence of urban movements with a working-class foothold and the participation of youth. However, state terror and violence changed in the 1980s when the military took over and carried out atrocious genocidal acts on the Mayan population. The author points out the difficulty that contemporary Guatemalan society had in dealing with its history of violence – the terms ‘La violencia’ or ‘el conflicto’ express the country’s violence superficially and apolitically yet paradoxically brutal acts of violence have become normalized.

Chapters 2 and 3 center on the Maras and their ties to the MS-13 and M-18. Female and male youth entered the Maras, which appear to be local street gangs different from the MS and the M-18. Using rich material Levenson details life in the Maras such as issues of identity, loyalty, sexuality, and gang members’ discontent with the class and racial differences in Guatemalan society. In the early 1990s the Maras started establishing ties with the MS-13 and M-18, becoming more violent and alienated. The evolution of local street gangs into the MS-13 and M-18, an important aspect of contemporary gangs in Central America, has hardly been explored. As scholarship points out, the transformation of local street gangs is linked to changes in the U.S. migration policies which led to the massive deportation of MS-13 and M-18 members to their ‘homeland.’ However, little is known regarding how the local street gangs in Central America got involved with these deported mareros. Unfortunately, Levenson does not address this. Nevertheless, interviews with the mareros reveal that this brutal violence is connected to masculinity, that is, the construction of a violent masculinity, which, in turn, is linked to Guatemala’s history of massacres, disappearances, and genocidal war.

Chapter 4 deals with the responses to the mareros and prison life under the government’s new security agenda. The prison has become the ‘center of sociability par excellence’ (p. 113). As in other prisons in Central America, mareros set up self-governing order that clashed violently with the rest of the prison population as well as the rival gang. Although the book centers on national and city processes, it would have benefited from discussions on the global crime control policies (e.g. Garland’s Culture of Crime Control, 2002), which directly shaped the national security agendas of many Latin American countries, including Guatemala.

The last chapter deals with the mareros when they leave the gang and the challenges they face. Some exit the gang converting to Pentecostalism, others quit as part of the transition into adulthood and because of exhaustion from leading a violent life. Life in or out of the gang is simply crude and harsh for Guatemalan youth not only because of the lack of opportunities but also because of necropolitics that has become so normalized in Guatemalan society, which Levenson has explored in her book. Ultimately, Adios Niño is a book about youth, the subject of fantasies of ruling elites' national modern projects, or political projects involving violence and torture. In such a crude setting mareros necroliving ‘crystallizes’ the country’s necropolitics (p. 4). As Levenson notes, some decide
to take a different path, attempting bravely to ‘write their own scripts’ (p. 144); in doing so, they destabilize the world of necropolitics and necroliving.

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