Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera (2013)

Territories of Violence: State, Marginal Youth, and Public Security in Honduras

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 180 p.

Reviewed by Sonja Wolf

Institute for Security and Democracy (Insyde), Mexico City

Since their creation by marginalized Los Angeles-based Latino immigrant youth, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Dieciocho have undergone an important evolution in both their structure and activities. Introduced into Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras by deportees, these street gangs merged with existing neighborhood-based groups and have grown into a major social and security challenge to the three nations. Over the years, the maras have bolstered their organizational capacity, become increasingly violent, and increased their involvement in crimes.

The Mano Dura policies that these states have been launching since 2002, ostensibly to reduce gang activity and elevated homicide rates, contributed in large measure to their transformation. Conceived as vote-catching tools, these plans lacked serious prevention and rehabilitation programs, focusing instead on area sweeps, joint police-military patrols, and mass arrests which further fueled violence in Central America's fragile democracies and led to overcrowded prisons.

In *Territories of Violence*, political scientist Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera grapples with the puzzle of why Honduras experiences persistently high levels of social violence and why the latter is concentrated in certain areas. In her first book, an adaptation of her doctoral thesis, she chooses a political geography approach to studying the relationship between state and non-state actors, mostly in marginalized neighborhoods and prisons. Analyzing the actors' territorial strategies, Gutiérrez seeks to understand the challenges the Honduran state faces in controlling territory, for example through public security policies. The study's objective is thus not so much offering a greater understanding of the street gangs, but to explain how political and social processes have shaped the Honduran state's relationships with various social groups and, especially, why it has so spectacularly failed to reduce and control violence. The author argues that this inability is a result of the way in which the authorities organize and regulate territory, particularly neglecting to fragment space – such as neighborhoods and prisons – into smaller units for more control.

Traditionally, analysts have tried to comprehend the nature of the Honduran state by focusing on aspects such as the weakness of its institutions, the levels of corruption, and the country's fledgling democratization. Gutiérrez does not deny the relative weight of these factors, but takes issue with the widespread assumption that a state necessarily exercises control over its political territory along with the people and resources within it. The perspective of political geography allows her to cast a critical glance at the relationship between state and territory, as well as its embeddedness in historical processes. The book is structured in seven chapters that set out the analytical framework and the nature of the Honduran state, before examining violence, gangs, and state security policies. In chapter one, Gutiérrez clarifies concepts central to the production of space and territory, drawing specifically on Robert David Sack's notion of territoriality, a strategy aimed at asserting control over a geographic area in order to influence people and relationships within it. In this sense, Gutiérrez maintains, the Mano Dura policies were the Honduran state's effort to assert authority over areas where it had customarily lacked presence.

The author recognizes that, in addition to frail central institutions, factors such as social exclusion, easy access to firearms, and drug trafficking-related territorial disputes foment violence. However, Gutiérrez downplays the ways in which the politicization of security policies contributes to their failure. Furthermore, she suggests that the pursuit of similar territorial logics in Guatemala and El Salvador might explain those countries' high levels of violence. The latter, though, divides its municipalities into smaller administrative units, but for a long time registered a higher homicide rate than Honduras.

In chapter seven, the research touches on the struggles for prison control. Some of the work charts the history of street gangs in Honduras and implies that the penitentiaries were among the places where local gang youth and deportees mingled and recruitment into the maras occurred. Indeed, the circumstances in which the two gang phenomena merged remain little understood, and Gutiérrez' findings could be a starting-point for similar inquiries elsewhere. The real treasure of her study, however, lies in the fieldwork-derived descriptions of gang life in the detention centers. The problems afflicting contemporary Honduran prisons – including precarious infrastructure and services, overcrowding, violence, corruption, weak controls, and deficient rehabilitation programs – are well researched by the author.

Gutiérrez offers not only a fascinating glimpse into the host of economic activities taking place behind bars, such as the food and cigarette stalls run by the inmates, but also sheds light on the rondines system. The insufficient number of guards requires the prisoners' assistance in supervising and controlling the detainee population. The rondines, chosen for their good behavior, keep an eye on their fellow inmates, but also negotiate the establishment of the commercial stands. The mass incarceration of street gang members, however, upset the existing order, since the gang members

refused to accept the rondines' authority. The pursuit of for-profit activities in prisons has not been widely documented and Gutiérrez' discoveries will hopefully prompt further research on the subject across Central America.

Finally, chapter six discusses the idea of street gangs as social movements. This merits discussion. The author starts by reminding readers that although youth gangs have existed in Honduras since the 1960s, two decades later the state outlawed formal social organizations as part of its counterinsurgency strategy. The ban was not lifted until the mid-1990s, forcing marginalized teenagers to seek alternative forms of participation, for example membership in street gangs. MS-13 and the Dieciocho exhibit an important organizational and mobilizing capacity, yet why, Gutiérrez wonders, have they not transformed into "street organizations"? Gutiérrez suggests that the maras have not made this transition, because the Mano Dura policies turned them into more vertical, secretive, and violence-prone groups in search of survival. Yet, how realistic is the expectation that an entire street gang could be converted into a non-violent social movement?

Individual youth may well want to, and succeed in, abandoning their gangs in order to start a new life. However, the differences in age and motivations, as well as the leaders' difficulties in controlling members make this an unlikely scenario. This holds especially in the case of larger and more criminally-involved gangs. The complexity of the matter is apparent in El Salvador, where a gang truce apparently triggered an immediate drop in homicides, yet gang members have refused to cease extortions in the absence of viable economic alternatives. In the Central American context, these demands are unlikely to be achieved in the foreseeable future.

Territories of Violence, though slim in volume, is broad in scope and perhaps tries to accomplish too much. Some issues would have deserved a more extensive treatment than they received, such as the gangs' fruitless attempts to contest Mano Dura through truce offerings and a dialogue with the government. Others escape reflection entirely, for example, the dilemma of how to study groups that in response to the crackdowns have become increasingly hermetic and may refuse cooperation unless it is tendered by relatives or close confidants. Gutiérrez does not offer substantially new material on the maras, but she is to be commended for tackling a tough subject. Aside from the methodological approach, the strength of her study lies, above all, in demonstrating that states differ in the degree to which they control their territories and – in some cases – never lived up to the Westphalian ideal of the nation-state.