

Internal Wars and Latin American Nationalism

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During several months in 2010, a very peculiar story dominated global news, culminating in 24-hour coverage October 12th-14th. Trapped for several months and at one point presumed dead, 33 Chilean miners were rescued on global TV. The narrative arc of the rescue was a typical media spectacle of fortitude, technological know-how, and human dignity, topped off by incredible success. From the beginning, the Chilean story took on a nationalistic air. When the miners were discovered alive, their first spoken message to the world was the Chilean national anthem sung in unison. From that day onward, there were scanty few images of the site and the rescue process that did not include a Chilean flag.

For audiences in many parts of the world, the conjunction of tragedy, triumph, and jingoistic celebration would appear perfectly normal, and very much in line with similar events such as 9/11 and 7/7. What could be more typical than an expression of national solidarity in the face of a common threat? Yet for many Latin American observers, the Chilean response seemed somewhat odd. In fact, in country after country in the region, common threats do not soothe internal divisions, but actually seem to deepen them. One could have imagined many other political narratives in the region accompanying the original accident and subsequent rescue focusing on class divisions, regional complaints, or ethnic claims; to stand with the miners as workers is one thing, to stand with them as co-nationals is another. The very exceptionalism of the way Chileans came together behind their government during the mine rescue highlights the particular nature of state-society relations in much of Latin America and serves to bring forth a series of questions about nationalist sentiment in the region. Two issues deserve special attention: first what is the nature of Latin American nationalism and how does its development correspond to

the kind of stimuli associated with it in other parts of the world? The first can help us to understand the specific region better while the second might improve our analysis of the process of state and nation making throughout the developing world.

Nations and Identity in Latin America

How nationalist is Latin America? As with many such questions, it all depends on how one defines nationalism. Based on the often portrayed seas of flags accompanying national football (soccer) teams and the often irascible public response to perceived transnational (and especially American) encroachments on national sovereignty, we might classify Latin America as extremely nationalistic. Reversing Walker Connor's (1978) nomenclature, we believe these are better understood as expressions of *patriotism*. This is a general sentiment emphasizing a "love of a place." In general, there is a distinctive and strong *patriotismo* in the region based on pride in folklores, natural beauty, and culture. In fact, several authors have noted the strong link between a sense of place or territory and nationalist sentiment in the region.¹ There is also a strong tradition of anti-imperialist feeling concerned with national sovereignty. Patriotism does include a psychological bond between people and a conviction of their identity and differentiation from others; it refers to a perceived and identified community (Connor 1978: 377-383). Nationalism is a very different political animal and as a political force it must be understood in reference to a state. It is the identification with a state and the recognition of no higher duty than advancing its interests.² This is less a matter of celebration of identity and more of what Anderson (1991) notes as "colossal sacrifices" made in its name. The notion of sacrifice is also central to Joseph Strayer's

¹ See work by Luis Alberto Romero and Fernando Lopez Alves.

² On this distinction we follow George Orwell 2002. See also Gerth and Mills 2007; Fevre, Denney and Borland 1997: 560.

view of the development of nationalism: he noted the critical step in the thirteenth Century when people were more willing to sacrifice “lives and property “for the state than for the Church.”³

We emphasize this statist component because only then can we (following Connor again) understand the process through which the primary loyalty of a population is transferred to a set of political institutions. It is this loyalty (and corresponding actions) much more than any set of sentiments that make nationalism a potent political force. Obviously, this nationalism may also be expressed negatively: as a rejection of a set of institutions as deserving of loyalty or representing a community. In this chapter, we are less concerned with contending claims for such loyalty and obedience and more with its genesis in general. This has been one of the most important aspects of political development in much of the world and particularly Latin America.

Consider the results of two questions from the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University (LAPOP 2008). In one, respondents are asked about their sense of pride in being of a certain nationality. In the other they are asked about their pride in the political system of that country. Consistently, over 90 percent express a great deal of pride in being of a certain nationality, while the numbers for the political system are a small fraction of this (with exceptions such as Costa Rica). We want to suggest that the first is a measure of what we call patriotism, while the second is closer to what may be called nationalism, or at least state nationalism. Obviously, this is no more than suggestive, but in the absence of concrete data on nationalist or patriotic sentiment, the consistent gap between the two represents the peculiar status of Latin American national consciousness. There is broad agreement in contemporary scholarship that the link between any national community and the state as an institution was and remains weak and that the legitimation of political authority as the voice of the nation has been limited at best.

³ Joseph Strayer, “The Historical Experience in Europe”, in Karl Deutsch and William J. Foltz, eds., *Nation-Building*, New York: Atherton Press, 1966, pp. 22-23.

The dominant characteristic of LA from the very beginning of its modern history through today has been its social and political fractionalization; LA is a permanently divided region. We do not deny the existence of multitude of collective identities based on ethnicity, class, region, etc.,⁴ nor are we arguing for an extreme individualized atomization, but we contend that few of these identities have been able to embrace the entire nation or society (or even existed in opposition to the state as such in favour of a different definition of the territory). We need to recognize the essential absence of seemingly primordial identities that parallel those of nation-states. Obviously we can find a broad spectrum in the region, with Costa Rica on one end and Paraguay on the other. Nevertheless, there is enough commonality to make discussion of a regional phenomenon reasonable.

Latin America is defined by intra-statal divisions much more so than by inter-statal ones. We can begin with the obvious racial/ethnic legacy of the Conquest that still defines so much of Andean and Mesoamerican societies, and that of plantation agriculture, which characterized much of the Atlantic Coast. There are also the regional gaps that pervade practically every country: plains and mountains, coasts and interior, capital and provinces. There are also the class gulfs in this most unequal of regions and that help define the rhetoric and struggles of politics. Finally, there are the ideological ones of Left-Right and in between. That many of these divisions are congruent and interact makes the schisms even starker.

This is not a new phenomenon. In many ways, these divisions are what defined the post-independence projects whereby a form of liberalism was attempted without the concomitant creation of a state able to impose unity or a sense of nation to inspire cohesion. The nineteenth century liberal project floundered precisely because it refused to do one of two things: impose an

⁴ The work of Florencia Mallon (1995), Peter Guardino, (2002) David Nugent (1997) and others clearly has demonstrated that such a community arose in the nineteenth century.

absolute order or open the society to redefine what that order should be (Centeno and Ferraro 2012). Over much of its history, the explicit hope of a verity of political projects has been that “progress” of one sort or another would lead to a social convergence. One version of this vision saw the historical mingling of groups as inevitably leading to a new form of nation. This is best epitomized by the Mexican ideology of the *raza cosmica* arising from the various conflicts, or the creation of a generic “post-racial” *guajiro* identity in the Andes and the Caribbean. A more “liberal” vision expected that with enough economic progress, these fissures would be closed. This was at the very heart of the *Concertación* discourse in Chile. But in actuality material, social, racial, and political progress have yet to close these gaps in the present.

We argue that in the case of Latin America, this fractionalization is a reflection of the failure of a post-conquest national hegemonic project on the continent. No side of any of the various divisions has been able to so defeat the others as to impose its own worldview or domination. Note that this is not necessarily a bad thing. The imposition of a hegemonic project and of a true class or racial domination is not a pretty sight and leaves destruction around it, but such imposition may be the only way to achieve the imagined national community. And perhaps no social process so facilitates the creation of a communal hegemony as war.

War and Nationalism

Most of the discussion on the relationship between war and nationalism is based on or makes references to a relatively limited set of cases. These are largely restricted to the “usual suspects” of historical sociology (the North Atlantic, Russia, and Japan), mostly deal with international wars (or, if civil conflicts, between institutionalized opponents as in the US 1861-1865), and are concentrated in the era defined by the predominance of the nation-state (1815-2000). These experiences are of limited analytical relevance for the most common type of armed

conflict today, which occurs outside of the OECD core and involves actors that are either not politically institutionalized, or fairly weakly so. This chapter questions the extent to which the old adages of nationalism and wars hold in these circumstances.

The centrality of war in nation making was recognized by the German idealists of the nineteenth century. Herder defined the origins of the German folk in the battle of the Teutoburg Forest, Fichte celebrated the spirit of Jena, and Hegel compared war to an ocean wind purifying the health of the people from the “corruption” of perpetual peace. The great historian of war, Michael Howard, claims that for much of nineteenth century Europe, “war was the necessary dialectic in the evolution of nations” (1992: 39). Georg Simmel could celebrate the start of World War I as an opportunity to consolidate national sentiment and cohesion: “the war heralded a purging in the Augean stables of the urbanized money cultures of the West, rooting out all that was ephemeral, superfluous, excessive and inessential in the experience of life” (Harrington 2005: 64).

The experience of war is generally central to the creation of national identity, providing it with the most passionate forms of expression. The more people become involved in domestic or international wars, the more they become aware of their membership in a political community and of the rights and the obligations such membership might confer. A call to fight wars in the name of the nation transforms a citizen from “a passive object into an active subject of political participation” (Holsti, 1996: p. 119). War gives an idea not only of what we are not (the enemy, the “other”), but also of what we are defending, who we are, and what we collectively represent. Violence and national identity are also connected by issues of legitimacy, of how government is perceived by its citizens. If a state or a government is weak in terms of popular perceptions and legitimacy, or in terms of sovereignty, it remains vulnerable to instability, internal conflict, and violence. To the weak state confronted by powerful opposition, the appeal of arguments of national

identity is that it both offers a degree of political legitimacy and is seen (at least by those in power) to legitimate and justify the use of coercion, repression, and violence.

Latin America has largely defied this tradition as political violence has not traditionally served as the handmaiden of such communities, nor have such sentiments helped to account for the level and type of conflicts seen in the region. One of the authors has already noted the failure to historically link martial prowess or even danger with a strong sense of nation in the region (Centeno 2002). In contemporary Latin America, we do have some cases where the classic war-nationalism dyad appears to have played out. On April 2nd, 1982, for example, Argentines almost unanimously signalled their support for the invasion of the Malvinas/Falklands. Despite its low legitimacy and support, the military regime appeared to have one more gasp of life as it sought to portray itself as the defender of national patrimony. This euphoria, however, did not last very long and, like the military dictatorship, could not survive the defeat.⁵ Similar popular sentiment may have helped bring down the Sanchez de Losada government in Bolivia in 2003 when it appeared to be accepting the now century old Chilean control of the Pacific coastline. A much longer term dynamic has existed in revolutionary Cuba. While many thought that the regime would follow its Soviet supporters into the dustbin of history, it has been able to survive four US presidents since the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is now widely accepted that it is precisely the American opposition and the nationalist core of the Revolution that best helps to explain its longevity.

As in much of the developing world, however, contemporary political violence in Latin America does not consist of conflicts between states, but struggles within them. In particular, the pattern in the region over the past few decades has been that states are not confronting well

⁵ Of much longer (if not larger) import was the boost that the victory gave Margaret Thatcher.

articulated and institutionalized oppositions that seek to replace national governments as more amorphous forces that challenge the authority of the state without necessarily offering an alternative project. It is this form of threat that most developing nations face.

In the rest of this chapter, we discuss three cases: Colombia's battle against FARC, Salvador's with the *maras* gangs, and Mexico's with the *narcos*. Obviously there are other possibilities in the region (and many, many more outside of it) including Peru's experience with Sendero Luminoso, the Contra wars in Nicaragua, and the military repression of various groups in the 1970s. Our account seeks to provide a basic narrative of the form of conflict involved. In the absence of agreed on measures of extent and intensity of nationalist sentiments, we refer to public opinion polls and public demonstrations of support. In the final section, we propose some ways to begin to understand the relationship between this form of war and nationalism.

Colombia and FARC

Over the past decades the levels of violence in Colombia have shown significant fluctuations (Bushnell 2007). The madness of La Violencia (1948-1958) was followed by the apparent reconciliation of the National Front. The anti-government groups *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) were founded in 1964 and the *Movimiento 19 de abril* (M-19) in 1970, but their scope of action remained limited. By the early 1970s, Colombia enjoyed its lowest homicides rates in the twentieth century (21 per 100 thousand). In the 1980s, however, Colombia saw a steep and continued increase in bloodshed and the intensification of violence was intertwined with the rise of cocaine trafficking.

Throughout the 1980s, Colombia lived a *bonanza coquera* that transformed the country into a hotspot for cocaine production (Díaz and Sánchez 2004: 9). A prospering cocaine business, as well as the considerably high prices of that drug meant that Colombian traffickers saw their

profits skyrocket (Frechette 2007). As a result, their power vis-à-vis the Colombian state also increased dramatically, and the drug cartels soon became important participants in the country's political conflicts. The government stepped up its antinarcotics operations, and the cartels responded with overwhelming force, unleashing a wave of violence that the country had not seen since *La Violencia*. Between late 1985 and the early 1990s, Colombia experienced a series of bomb attacks, kidnappings, and high-profile political murders related to the drug trade (Thoumi 2003: 205). Between 1985 and 1992, the murder rate almost doubled from 43 to 77.5 per 100 thousand inhabitants. In the face of a growing threat from stronger, wealthier drug cartels, the Colombian state increased its efforts against these organizations. In the 1990s Presidents César Gaviria (1990-1994) and Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) made it their priority to capture or hunt down the leaders of the Medellín and Cali cartels, respectively (Thoumi 2003: 208-227). By 1996, both cartels had been dismantled, their leaders either dead or in prison.

The dismantling of the Medellín and the Cali cartels opened the door for new, smaller syndicates to take over the business. In time, FARC and the ELN also became involved in the drug industry in order to finance their actions against the state, and right-wing paramilitary groups, originally and nominally created to fight the guerrillas, quickly followed suit (Díaz and Sánchez 2004: 22-23, 64-68). The guerrillas and the paramilitary groups started their involvement in the drug business by means of taxing the production of coca leaves and coca paste in the areas where they operated. However, eventually, insurgencies from both Right and Left became direct participants in coca cultivation, cocaine production, drug transportation, and sales (Thoumi 2003: 107-108). The drug trade and the internal conflict, initially two separate phenomena, had become powerfully intertwined.

Elected president in 1998, Andrés Pastrana agreed to establish a 42 thousand square-kilometre demilitarized zone for peace negotiations with FARC, by then Colombia's largest guerrilla group (Bushnell 2007: 399). During those four years FARC took over the production of cocaine in the zone, which allowed the group to obtain a significant amount of financial resources (PNUD 2003: 285). Realizing that his government was unable to succeed against the cartels and the insurgencies on its own, President Pastrana sought help from the United States, the single most important consumer of Colombian drugs. The result was Plan Colombia, a multiyear strategy of US counternarcotics aid that began in 2000, with the aim of reducing the production of drugs in the Colombia (Frechette 2007: 11-15). When the fight against terrorism became a prominent topic in American politics, the Colombian government persuaded the US to allocate Plan Colombia funds to military expenditures against the insurgencies. Soon after 9/11, the United States declared FARC, the ELN, and the paramilitary group known as *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (CRS 2004). Drugs and internal conflict had merged into one common war.

As a candidate and as President, Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) took a hard-line approach, which was well received by the voters. He increased defence spending considerably, intensified efforts in aerial and manual coca eradication, and made frequent use of extradition to the US for drug traffickers (Ministerio de Defensa 2007). The government's strategy began by retaking control of the country's main roads, as well as the areas surrounding important cities, which had significant guerrilla presence (Bushnell 2007: 414-15). Uribe's security strategy produced a series of important military victories against FARC. According to government figures, FARC had about 26 thousand members in 2002; by 2010, that estimate was 8 thousand (El Espectador 2010a).

FARC also lost many of the most important hostages that they had kept for years as bargaining chips.

The Uribe administration also dealt with the paramilitary threat, but in a very different fashion. In 2003, negotiations with right-wing paramilitary groups started, leading to the demobilization of some of their main structures in exchange for reduced sentences (Pearl 2010).⁶ The negotiations were marred by controversy due to the flagrant human rights violations these organizations had committed, and to the reduced sentences the law ordered for them. Moreover, some paramilitary units remained active. The government's treatment of paramilitary groups became even more controversial due to the scandal commonly called *parapolítica* and involving close ties between Uribe allies in various government branches and the paramilitary groups. The general perception was that the government had been much more lenient with the paramilitary groups than with those on the nominal Left. The campaign against the guerrillas was also stained by a significant increase in human rights abuses by government forces and the failure to adequately deal with the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the anti-guerrilla campaigns.

In spite of the controversy, Uribe had important results to show by the end of his eight-year presidency. In 2009, Colombian annual cocaine production was at its lowest level in twelve years (about 400 tons), while coca cultivation was reduced by almost two-thirds from its 2001 level, reaching 68,000 hectares (UNODC 2010: 6). Under the Uribe administration, the homicide rate also went down to levels not seen since the early 1980s and comparable to those of the first years of the National Front: 35 per 100 thousand in 2009 from 69 in 2001. The number of kidnappings per year, another major concern at the beginning of the 2000s, was lower than 200 in 2009, down from 2,882 in 2002 (El Espectador 2010b). All these statistics were hailed as successes by the

⁶ See also Hernández 2010.

Uribe administration and the Colombian mainstream media. Overall, the notion that drug cartels and the insurgencies were inexorably on the rise was dramatically challenged during the Uribe era.

In part, this was a product of a very consistent and powerful campaign on behalf of the government. Throughout the Uribe presidency, the government's rhetoric was self-righteous, Manichaeian, optimistic, and tough. The insurgencies were invariably qualified as "terrorists," and as enemies of both the state and the Colombian people. The topos of narco-trafficking was usually brought up in order to describe FARC, the ELN, and paramilitary groups, to the extent that "narco-terrorists" became a common adjective to refer to these organizations. This conveyed the idea that the insurgencies were not only perpetrators of attacks against civilians, but also criminals who manufactured and exported drugs in order to finance their war. The dichotomy between good and evil was thus easily created, as the insurgencies were taken to stand for violence, destruction, and the expansion of the drug trade, while the government and its military stood for exactly the opposite.

The idea of a noble fight for the protection of democratic values was a common theme in government rhetoric. The government often juxtaposed the concepts of democracy and violence, democracy and terrorism, and democracy and crime, and there was no question of what side the state was on. The idea of security, defined as a frontal fight against insurgencies and crime, was defended as a fundamental democratic value without which Colombia could not survive. Not in vain the government's defence strategy was called Democratic Security. The government also used the words liberty, peace, and prosperity as the objectives of its policies, while the insurgencies were portrayed to symbolize the contrary. FARC's use of kidnapping as a strategy to gain notoriety and bargaining power allowed the government to point to them as the enemies of freedom. Similarly, when the military regained control of the main roads around the country, the

government hailed this as a victory for the citizen's liberty to travel within Colombia. The military and police were depicted as heroes and the defenders of democracy and the constitution. Those soldiers and officers who died in action had an important place in the government's discourse, while those wounded in action usually took part in military ceremonies and parades in national holidays.

One of the elements that defined the Uribe presidency was the high approval rating that he and his policies enjoyed. When compared to the ratings of previous governments, the popular support for the Uribe administration is astounding (Semana 2010). According to polls by Gallup, President Samper reached a maximum approval rating of 69 percent at the beginning of his government, although this level fell quickly to the 40s and 30s (Gallup 2010). President Pastrana's maximum approval rating was a mere 43 percent during the first months of his administration, but his ratings soon fell to around 20 percent, where they stayed for the rest of his administration. In contrast, Uribe started his presidency with an approval rating of 72 percent, and he reached a maximum of 86 percent well into the sixth year of his administration. Throughout the eight years under President Uribe, his approval ratings never fell below 68 percent.

These opinion polls suggest that the majority of Colombians were strongly in favour of many of the government's policies. According to polls by Gallup, solid majorities (consistently between 61 and 83 percent) approved of the way the Uribe administration handled drug trafficking throughout his presidency. Regarding the internal conflict, the Uribe administration also managed to obtain strong support for his policies. During the first years of the Pastrana presidency, up to 59 percent of Colombians believed that the military was unable to destroy the guerrilla groups; by 2008 that percentage had shrunk to 8 percent, given the significant resources dedicated to the defence strategy. Similarly, during the Pastrana administration up to 63 percent of Colombians

thought that it was possible for the guerrilla to take power by force, but that number fell significantly during the Uribe era, reaching 10 percent in 2008. It is also noteworthy that throughout the last decade, Colombia's Police had an average approval rating of 70 percent, while the Military Forces' rating was of about 78 percent.

Support for the government culminated in the massive *marcha* (demonstration) of February 4th 2008 with 12 million participants. Importantly, while previous *marchas* had been in support of negotiations or generic peace, this one was very much in favour of the dissolution of FARC, even if it had to be achieved by force (El Tiempo 2008b). Former president Cesar Gaviria said that the demonstration "was an expression from civil society that the country had not known in all of its history. An expression that went beyond political parties, labour unions and institutions" (El Tiempo 2008a). This massive demonstration was the culmination of a dramatic shift in popular opinion. In 1999, FARC was still not considered a "terrorist group," but an armed group with a political status and many still believed that a negotiation process with the State was a realistic solution to the conflict. By 2008 the situation was markedly different. Six years of Democratic Security had convinced large portions of the public that military pressure against FARC was the best option. The government's rhetoric of a fight against terrorism had already been assimilated by the media and the Colombian public.

What can we learn from the Colombian case? First (and as in all the cases below) we lack adequate measures of the form of nationalist legitimacy we are studying. We admit to the imprecision of any judgment based on poll data and the like. Nevertheless, the Colombian case would seem to be one where the Manichaeian framing of a conflict did have popular resonance and where apparent success did generate political support. Are Colombians more nationalistic in 2011

than in 2000? We cannot say, but we can infer that the relationship between state and national community was at least temporarily transformed by the internal war.

El Salvador and the *maras*

In the early 2000s, El Salvador was one of the most violent countries in the Americas (UNODC 2007). A society historically shattered by poverty, social inequality, and political violence, it had suffered from decades of a bloody civil war and was far from solving the structural problems that contributed to the violence.⁷ In addition, the long civil war had left a fragmented and traumatized civil society, with tens of thousands internally displaced inhabitants, and the flooding of the streets with military grade weapons.

Gangs existed in this country long before the end of the civil conflict, but before the mid 1990s, they represented a minor problem of public security as their activities yielded only sporadic violence (Smutt and Miranda 1998). The pattern of turf-based youth gangs started to change after the end of the civil war in 1992, when many Salvadoran refugees living in the United States began to return to El Salvador, often through forced deportation (Thale and Falkenburger 2006). The influx of young gang members allowed for the diffusion of US patterns of gang membership including norms, values, and organizational and managerial knowledge. The infusion of newcomers also precipitated the consolidation of several smaller territory-based groups into the MS-13 and the 18th Street Gangs, which together account for 84 percent of all gang members in ES (Cruz and Peña 1998). These two gangs soon escalated their drug-trafficking operations and eventually transformed into more ambitious criminal groups (Carranza 2005). As these organizations grew in size, violence escalated throughout the country. By 1998, 27 percent of the Salvadoran population pointed out street-gangs or “*maras*” as the most important issue of public

⁷ By the early 1990s, 65 percent of the population lived under the poverty line and the poorest 20 percent received only 3.2 percent of the national income (PNUD 2003).

security the government should tackle (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública 1998).^a As the violence escalated, the newly elected government of Francisco Flores in 1999 pledged to address the problems of crime and gangs. Shortly after taking office, President Flores launched an emergency plan called “Public Security Comprehensive Strategy,” which increased police patrols in the streets along with the use of military units and the involvement of community organizations (Laínez 1999). However, the campaign met with very low public support. In a survey conducted three months after the implementation of the plan, only 10 percent of the population viewed the plan positively; most Salvadorans believed it plain was not working (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Publica 1999). In 2002, 50 percent of the population said that crime and violence had worsened during the last year; only 17 percent said that crime had decreased (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Publica 2003a). By May 2003, the percentage of people saying that crime had worsened climbed to 76.3 percent. Opinion polls also revealed poor public assessments of the overall performance of the government. Over three-quarters of the population believed that the situation of the country had worsened or stayed the same with the administration of Francisco Flores (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Publica 2003b).

On the evening of July 23, 2003, at a nationally broadcast press conference from a poor neighbourhood in San Salvador, President Flores launched the *Plan Mano Dura*. Using a wall full of graffiti as a backdrop, the president declared that he had “instructed the National Civilian Police and the Armed Forces to work jointly and *rescue these territories* and put the leaders of these gangs behind bars” (Alvarenga and Gonzalez 2003).⁸ President Flores was speaking from the heart of a neighbourhood controlled by the 18th Street Gang. As the president spoke live, flanked by the army chief and the police director, the broadcast intermittently flashed scenes of gang members

⁸ Italics are ours.

and their tattooed faces. He first announced the enactment of a national state of emergency by declaring that “all legitimate means will be used [to detain gang members] *including those emergency measures included in the Constitution.*” (Alvarenga y González 2003: 3) Second, he pledged to send an anti-gang law to the Parliament, asking congressmen to support the law without hesitation. And third, he announced that all gang members and people linked to them would be swept from the streets. President Flores finished his presentation by asking the Salvadoran people to support the plan.⁹

The “Anti Gang Law” penalized membership in the gangs – independently of there being an actual offence – and it allowed for persons under 18 to be trialled under a newly codified felony of “illicit association” (*asociación ilícita*) and gang membership. In both cases, the new rulings gave complete authority to the police, and in some cases to military personnel, to carry out arrests often based on arbitrary decisions and thin evidence. Additional reforms restricted the rights of detainees and limited the capacity of the judges to order provisional measures other than detention. The hard line plan also included the creation of special police squads to carry out mass raids against gang members (Cuz and Carranza 2006). Police could use the presence of tattoos, hand signals, dress codes, and a myriad of physical attributes as evidence of gang membership.

While the plan initially consisted of focused raids on gang-ridden neighbourhoods in the capital, police operations were also expanded to small towns in the countryside (Martinez 2003). After the first thirteen months of *mano dura* operations, the police reported that 19,275 suspected gang members had been arrested. However, not all detentions translated into formal imprisonment and court sentences. For instance, 91 percent of the gang members detained during the first year of the crackdown were released within days, usually because state prosecutors lacked the necessary

⁹ The Salvadoran *Plan Mano Dura* was not the first plan of gang suppression launched in Central America. In fact, neighboring Guatemala and Honduras had already enacted similar programs in 2000 and 2002.

evidence to convict them (Gutiérrez 2003). The administration was also unable to convince Congress to pass the provisions to suspend constitutional rights. As a result, many gang members were repeatedly imprisoned and released, turning jails into revolving doors (Beltran 2003).

This did not prevent the Flores administration from continuing the crackdowns and raids against gangs. Police units continued sending suspected gang members to jail, while the courts or even the General Attorney offices refused to present charges due to the lack of evidence (López and Sánchez 2003). These events submerged the Executive, Congress, and the courts into a bitter public dispute over the *mano dura* plan. The president called opposition to his plans “irresponsible,” (El Diario de Hoy 2003) and the government started to lay blame on the courts for the high rate of gang dismissals and accused judges of protecting gang membership (Gutierrez 2003; López 2003). In the midst of elections, the Supreme Court then decreed that the new policies were unconstitutional.

The apparent failure of the *mano dura* plan did not deter the next president, Antonio Saca, from launching his own version of the plan just three months after taking office in 2004 (La Prensa Gráfica 2004). This new plan, which was called “*Super Mano Dura*,” did not rely on a special anti-gang law, but on targeting gang leaderships through intelligence gathering and focal raids. The plan also included prevention and rehabilitation measures that complemented the suppression effort conducted by the police and the military. However, as with the first plan, the main focus revolved around gang imprisonment and a gang “manhunt” (Marroquín et al. 2004). This plan included the deployment of more than 12 thousand police officers (65 percent of the police force), 5 hundred special investigators and a thousand soldiers across the country (Salamanca 2004). A report by the National Civilian Police detailed that between July 23rd, 2003 and July 8th, 2005 the police captured 30,934 alleged gang members. Although most of detainees ended up being

acquitted by the courts, the intensification of the *mano dura* operations led to a serious overflow in the country's corrections system (Beltrán et al. 2004). The Salvadoran jails not only became a problem of humanitarian proportions, but also, since many new inmates were gang members, the *mano dura* crackdowns provided the opportunity for an expansion in gang organization and membership. By allocating all youth gang members together, the *mano dura* policies nourished a sort of long-term national gang assembly and facilitated communication among gang members both nationally and internationally (deportees with contacts in the US also served sentences inside the Salvadoran jails).¹⁰ Ironically, the rate of homicides did not decline. Homicide rates in El Salvador went from 40 per 100 thousand inhabitants in 2003, the start year of the *mano dura* plans, to 49 in 2004. When the *mano dura* plans were abandoned in 2006, the country had reached a homicide rate of 65 murders per 100 thousand inhabitants.

Despite their ultimate fates, the *mano dura* galvanized public opinion into considering gangs as the main national threat to the country. The overtly political nature of these plans required not only intensive advertising of the anti-gang strategy, but also a media campaign promoting a particular framing of the crime situation and the best way to handle it. Immediately after the first proclamation of the plans, the headline of one of the major national newspapers read “All-out war against Maras.”¹¹ The government would spend thousands of dollars publicizing the number of police raids and arrests of gang members in the national media. Newspapers and television newscasts promoted the notion that gangs were the major perpetrators of violence in Central America (Parducci 2007). During the *Mano Dura* and the *Super Mano Dura*, the police carried out

¹⁰ In 2001, a prison policy was implemented that separated gang members by their gang identity to prevent outbreaks of violence inside the prisons. In practice, this has led to certain jails being known as Mara Salvatrucha prisons and others as 18th Street jails. See Valencia 2009.

¹¹ “Guerra total contra las maras”

their commando-like operations in front of cameras to be broadcasted later on prime time television.

The anti-gang programs and subsequent publicity promoted the public idea that youth gangs were the main national problem. A compilation of IUDOP surveys shows that before the *mano dura* plans only 2 percent of Salvadorans considered gangs as the main national problem. This percentage increased tenfold in August 2003, just one month into the implementation of the plan. Although three months later these percentages quickly decreased to 7-8 percent, national concerns about gangs experienced another modest boost with the launch of the *Super Mano Dura* Plan in August 2004. This increase, nonetheless, did not reach the levels of 2003, and the public anxieties about gangs dwindled as time passed.

However, the war against gangs received initial broad support from the population. According to IUDOP surveys, nearly 90 percent of Salvadorans supported the program during the first two years of implementation. This high level of support remained relatively stable despite mounting evidence that the plan was not working as expected and even after the plan had been abandoned in 2006. In December 2006, for instance, 66 percent of the population still agreed with the *mano dura* plans. Ironically, while the programs were popular with the public, they were also seen as ineffective. For instance, in September 2003, just two months into the crackdowns, only 55 percent of the population believed that the *plan mano dura* was successful in controlling gangs; one year later, this percentage had dropped to 45 percent. Similarly, in September 2005, only a third of the population believed the *super mano dura* plan was being effective, and by September 2006, less than 20 percent believed so.

As in the Columbian case, the El Salvadorian government saw its monopoly over the means of violence consistently challenged in the 1990s and 2000. Its response was the creation of

anti-crime programs full of bellic references. All indications are that the *mano dura* campaigns and the anti-drug efforts have not fostered any closer identification of the national community with the state. In part this may be because such campaigns have been widely recognized failures and El Salvador (like the other Central American states) sees itself more threatened today than a decade ago. Another important factor was that *maras* membership was never as finely delineated as that in FARC and the like. The identity of the enemy (and even the relevance of the threat) remained diffuse.

Mexico and the *narcos*

After the bloody years of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Mexico enjoyed a long period of relative stability, at least compared to its Latin American neighbours where revolutionary wars and coups were frequent throughout the twentieth century. While there were some isolated cases of insurrection against the government (most recently the 1994 Zapatista rebellion), they were quickly repressed by official forces. Nevertheless, starting in the late 1980s and especially after the year 2000, Mexican society has come to experience record levels of violence, mostly linked to the rise of powerful drug cartels that are increasingly challenging the state.

Beginning in the 1970s much of the Mexican drug business congregated around Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo, also known as “The Godfather” (El Padrino). During these years, the Sinaloa Cartel’s near monopoly of the drug market in Mexico reduced competition for territory. The Sinaloa Cartel had a pyramidal structure and internal differences were worked out through Gallardo’s intervention. His arrest on April 8, 1989 led to increasing tensions between his remaining lieutenants. The first contest was between the Arellano Felix brothers in Tijuana and Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, a leading boss of the Sinaloa Cartel. “El Chapo Guzman” sought to reorganize the drug business under his control within a “Blood Alliance” including the Sinaloa,

Tijuana and Gulf cartels. Violence across the country escalated when the Sinaloan “Blood Alliance” disintegrated in 2004, opening new war fronts amongst quarrelling factions as they fought bitterly over control of *plazas* (gateways for drug transport, especially into the US) and other powerful cartels began challenging the old syndicates, including “Los Zetas” in Tamaulipas and “La Familia Michoacana” in Michoacan.

Until the 1980s, the “rules of the game” that governed the activities of drug dealers and their relationship with state actors relied on a few key principles: discretion, not using Mexico as a market, and respect for government authority (Grayson 2010: 32). Criminal organizations were born, from the beginning, out of agreements with state actors at different levels: local police, state military commanders (and sometimes directly with state governors), and federal police agents. Having an alliance with the right government actors could be the difference between success and failure (Ravelo 2007).¹² Through these agreements, drug dealers had to provide payments to public officials (which would make their way up the chain of command). They also had to show deference to public figures and help the State political party (PRI) retain electoral control (often by linking opponents to drug trafficking). In Mexico, drug dealers did not seek public office (unlike in Colombia), but typically maintained a tight web of political contacts and allies.

This “live and let live” pact was in part broken by the sheer amount of profits available. US pressure on Colombian activities in South Florida forced the Cali and Medellin cartels to look for alternative routes to reach the lucrative US market and they began forming alliances with Mexican groups (Grayson 2010: 56). Soon, Mexican gangs began taking their “cut” in cocaine (as opposed to cash) and began operating their much more lucrative networks north of the border (Cockburn 1998: 361). The status quo was also transformed by the growing party competition,

¹² This was the case of the Arellano Felix brothers.

which meant that elected officials would come from parties other than the PRI. During the late 1990s the PRI sustained continuous defeats at the ballots and these losses weakened its hegemony. The increasing electoral victories of opposition parties provided structural openings for drug dealers to become more independent from state actors. As one analyst pointed out, “local power fell outside the corruption network, a situation that facilitated more autonomous actions of traffickers, federal agents, local police and corrupt officials, thereby increasing the probability of violent actions to impose new rules of the game” (Astorga 2001: 135).

The 1990s were characterized by growing violence amongst crime syndicates, high profile political assassinations and kidnappings, and a growing perception of insecurity amongst Mexican society in general. Beyond the previously untouchable high echelon, sections of the population began experiencing acts of violence (Trueba Lara 1995: 135). The hopes of many Mexicans that the electoral defeat of the PRI in 2000 would bring change and stability were quickly dashed as the crime rate kept increasing and larger sections of the population, including the middle class, were touched by it. The Vicente Fox administration (PAN, 2000-2006) sought to combat the cartels by confiscating drug shipments and arresting top capos (Grayson 2010: 51), but as before (and as in Colombia) the government policy of arresting bosses did not lead to smaller and more manageable cartels, but to more numerous and violent ones, and an intensifying crime wave in virtually every region of the country (Shirk quoted in Grayson 2010: 85). Furthermore, there was evidence that the Sinaloa Cartel had penetrated the Fox administration itself.

In response, as governor and then as president, Fox used militaristic language against the cartels: “For us it is a war and it is a war that we will take to its ultimate consequences” (Sarmiento 2005). He promised to give the “mother of all battles” against organized crime, drug-trafficking, corruption and impunity (Delgado 2005) and would also use terms such as *combat*, *battle*, and

struggle (Melgar 2004). Soon, Fox and other top government officials made public declarations calling for a “total war” using “all resources of the state” to “the bitter end” (*hasta las ultimas consecuencias*) (Aguayo 2005).

Fox’s successor and fellow PAN member Felipe Calderon began his presidential campaign in 2006 facing a formidable candidate from the left and struggling to create distance between his candidacy and the deeply unpopular Fox. Elected by a minimal (and contested) margin Calderon faced a deeply divided nation. He continued using the war metaphor but refined it and employed it in a more consistent way. On September 22nd, 2006, three months before his inauguration, Calderon presented what would become his administration’s framing of the “war”: “Public safety is now an issue of national security. Not only are the people, their lives and possessions, their families, been threatened, but insecurity and organized crime now threaten the Mexican State.” He added that organized crime “is a threat to peace, to stability and to the life of our nation” (Núñez 2006). Months later he would add that “we have no alternative other than acting and it is a war, it is an issue that I know will be very long, that probably I will not see come to an end as President.... We are waging this war precisely to have a safer Mexico, a Mexico that has public spaces for our children, for our families. And this implies risks and costs” (Núñez and Herrera 2007). He added that “we need for society to participate, we need that society sides with us, a society that recuperates the society in itself.” From being a presidential directive with Fox, the “war on drugs” became perhaps the most important State policy during the Calderon administration.

The call for national unity did not go unanswered. Antonio Martinez, the attorney general from Baja California, responded: “Mexicans to the call of war. Yes, Mr. President, we are at war and the members of the National Conference of Attorney Generals will be standing by the cannon

(*al pie del canon*)... this war belongs to everyone and it benefits everyone” (Núñez and Herrera 2007). In December 21, 2007, Calderon clearly identified that organized crime was not only a priority of the government (as Fox had maintained) but that it was “the enemy of Mexico.” “The enemy of Mexico seeks to maintain its power through violence and intimidation, but the more violence, the tougher will be the response of the Mexican State to punish them,” he claimed (Gomez 2007). Other top government officials and public figures also echoed Calderon’s war rhetoric and called for citizens to close ranks against the drug cartels. National columnist German Dehesa wrote that: “Felipe is at war- and we are with him... I think that in this battle, everybody, all Mexicans... have to be with our president with all the means at our disposal...” (Dehesa 2006). The archdiocese of Mexico published a message in January 2008 to its followers where it praised Calderon’s initiative against the drug cartels calling it a “true war” and asked Catholics to assume their responsibility in the fight against drug traffickers, organized crime and corruption on many fronts (Gomez 2008).

Calderon’s framing of the conflict resonated with the general public. In a national interview conducted by Grupo Reforma in 2007, 69 percent of respondents agreed with Calderon’s portrayal of the government’s effort against the drug cartels as a war” (Mancillas and Moreno 2007). Indeed, Calderon’s early decision to deploy the army against the drug cartels in Michoacán and then in other regions, appears to have boosted his approval ratings. According to a series of interviews conducted by BGC/Ulises Beltran, 70 percent of Mexicans believed that public safety in Mexico was “bad” or “very bad” in July 2006 (during one of the last months of the Fox administration). By May 2007, this number came down to 47 percent despite the fact that the actual homicide rate had increased. In 2006, 54 percent of respondents believed that drug trafficking was rising. During the first year of Calderon’s administration, in 2007, only 37 percent believed drug trafficking was

growing. In commenting on these numbers, political analyst Sergio Sarmiento wrote that “at least in the short run, Calderon’s strategy has worked: maybe not to decrease violence or drug-trafficking, but its perception... The big question is whether Mexicans will continue to treat Calderon with such benevolence” (Sarmiento 2007b).

However, Calderon’s popularity proved to be ephemeral. By 2008, the confidence of Mexicans in the Calderon Administration was rapidly eroding even if the number of people who considered drug trafficking and crime the biggest problem of Mexico (over economic issues) increased. In an open-ended question, Grupo Reforma has asked Mexicans since the beginning of the Calderon administration what is the worst problem facing the country. The percentage of people who believe that “crime” is a worse problem than “the economy” has gone up to 46 percent in 2010 from 39 percent in 2007. Nevertheless, a majority of Mexicans in 2010 considered that the government was losing the war against drug dealers. In other surveys, Calderon’s collapse in popularity ratings is more dramatic. According to a weekly telephone survey conducted by BGC/Ulises Beltran the percentage of Mexicans who have a lot of confidence in Calderon was only 6 percent by May 2008. Those who trust him moderately number 22 percent and 35 percent of respondents have zero confidence in him. In the same survey, the proportion of Mexicans that had a lot of confidence in Presidents Fox and Calderon had traditionally oscillated between 27 and 38 percent (Sarmiento 2008).

Why have people failed to rally around the government beyond the initial surge of support for Calderon’s administration? In part because of its cost. During the past four years Mexico has seen not only an increase in violence, but also its transformation into a special kind of savagery resulting in almost 40 thousand deaths by mid-2011. Drug cartels routinely behead and chop up their rivals’ bodies or dissolve them in acid. On September 15th, 2008, hundreds of people who had

congregated in the main square of Morelia, the capital of Michoacan, to celebrate Mexico's independence, were attacked with grenades. There were 9 casualties and 132 injured people. It was considered by many as the beginning of openly "terroristic" actions against civilian populations. The developing intra-gang wars highlighted the incapacity of the Mexican government to control even its most protected spaces, and the corruption and inefficiency of its prison system was a constant reminder of the futility of the anti-drug enterprise (Sarmiento 2005). As part of the "war against drug traffickers," Calderon had deployed more than 45 thousand soldiers by 2009 (Llana 2009). The militarization of drug enforcement in Mexico has stretched the armed forces "to the limit" (Camp quoted in Grayson 2010: 156). A shortage of ammunitions and aging equipment are widespread throughout the armed forces. Army desertions (close to 150 thousand between 2000 and 2008 including thousands from elite outfits) have become a significant problem. While many of these soldiers went to work for the booming private security industry in Mexico, others could have been recruited by the drug cartels (such as in the case of "Los Zetas") (Hanson 2007). Many believe that the Mexican Army has become "a highly unstable corporation. Just like it recruits elements en masse, it also expels them in the opposite direction" (Cota Meza 2009).

According to Sergio Sarmiento (2008), another key element could be the decreasing levels of trust in several justice and security agencies in Mexico. According to a survey conducted by BGC/Ulises Beltran, only 10 percent of Mexicans have "a lot" of trust in the *Procuraduría General de la República* (PGR) and only 7 percent of Mexicans trust the *Policía Judicial* "a lot." Congress and the unions are trusted a lot by a mere 5 percent of the population while only 3 percent trust political parties "a lot." (Sarmiento 2008). Indeed, it seems like the lack of legitimacy of several key institutions in Mexico could be imperilling Calderon's call for national unity. Other critics have pointed at the increasing number of human rights violations in which the Mexican

army and security agencies appear to be involved. A famous example was the killing of two college students in the northern city of Monterrey. Many have also condemned the “militarization” of the country and criticized the army’s involvement in crime enforcement. However, in the same survey, 48 percent of Mexicans express that they have a lot of confidence in the army.

Some critics have questioned Calderon’s strategy of declaring war against criminals and drug traffickers in a setting where there are blurry boundaries. For Ximena Peredo, writing in “El Norte,” the war that was declared by Calderon is “delirious because it is impossible to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys.” (Peredo 2007). In some famous cases of military corruption, many top police chiefs have been charged with selling protection to drug cartels or actually running extortion and kidnapping rings (Peredo 2007). Several drug cartels have tried to exploit these blurred boundaries between organized crime and government agencies. Indeed, there is some evidence that some cartels have promoted public demonstrations against the army and have also engaged in limited (but very visible) development and welfare efforts in their communities.

As in Colombia, there have also been recurrent mass demonstrations against insecurity and crime. On June 27th, 2004 hundreds of thousands of people marched in Mexico City to demand “a Mexico without violence and the end of impunity for criminals.” (Ortega 2008) These mass demonstrations highlighted the public’s exasperation with increasing violence and with the inability of the Mexican political system to prevent it. Indeed, many participants have pointed out the common links between criminals and corrupt officials.

The Mexican case may be the most perplexing of all. The levels of violence have led to rumblings of “state failure” and a collapse of public order. Yet all indications are that despite the brutal assaults, the government has not come to be perceived as the institutional glue holding the country together or leading in its fight against a clear evil. In part this may be because whatever

political or institutional honeymoon occurred immediately after the victory of 2000 is over. In part, the continuing challenge to the electoral legitimacy of Calderon's presidency makes it even more difficult for his government to claim to speak for "all Mexicans." The popularity of *narcocorridos* and the romanticized image of the outlaw also suggest that the "otherness" of the enemy remains unclear.

Internal War and Nationalism

Despite the violence recounted above and government efforts to declare a war against the internal enemy, be it FARC, the *maras*, or the *narcos*, it is remarkable how little shift we may see in our (admittedly imperfect) measure of nationalist sentiment across the years in question. According to the Americas Barometer, pride in the nation and the political system remains fairly flat. There is some minimal movement upwards in the case of Colombia and down in the case of El Salvador, but nothing resembling, for example, the kinds of shifts associated with perceived national emergencies.

Polls and anecdotal indications would lead us to believe that Colombia's Uribe has been more successful in creating the "us-them" dynamic with the state as the legitimate representative of the "us" – or at least has done in significant parts of the population. It is impossible to tell at this point to what extent this marks a structural shift in Colombian's attitudes toward their government and how much it is a temporary personality driven phenomenon. The Mexican and Salvadoran cases indicate, however, that internal wars without popular support and with ambiguous enemies certainly do not guarantee the development of nationalist sentiment. If any comparative lesson can be drawn from these it is that it helps to win (or at least be seen as winning).

Rather than the distinction between them, what we believe is most remarkable about these cases is the extent to which an internal war can appear to become "normalized" and almost

accepted, and not generate the kind of expected classic responses of growth in solidarity and increased legitimation of the state. Mexico may be the most extreme example: the country has suffered an estimated 40 thousand deaths and yet the state does not appear to have received any long-term benefit of supportive sentiment. It is remarkable that whether against criminals or guerrillas, these states have not been able to create a more solid connection with their own population.

Two possible causal avenues suggest themselves. The first is a particularistic story involving the divisions that LA has suffered from since independence and that may represent an apparently permanent chasm between the state and large parts of the population (again, noting the exceptions of Chile and Costa Rica). To the extent that the state is perceived as belonging to and obeying some internal “them,” it may be impossible to forge the kind of expected solidaristic ties even under the pressure of military conflict.

The second alternative does not look to the nature of these societies, but rather to that of the conflicts themselves.¹³ The very ambiguity of the enemy in all of these cases (with Colombia perhaps offering the clearest opportunity for contrast), the possibility that large parts of the population may not feel that the groups representing the threat are illegitimate (but just the opposite), and the absence of a clear successful trend (again, the case of Colombia may be an exception) makes it difficult to use this kind of protracted internal struggle in the same manner as the classic bellic nationalisms. Given that these kind of struggles will most likely represent the military norm for some time, this means that classic forms of establishing state-society solidarity may no longer be available in the “nation- building” tool-kit.

¹³ An interesting contrast may be with the response to the killing of Osama Bin Laden by US troops, but while this shared some of the tactical characteristics of internal struggles, the enemy in this case had been more than demonized and his “otherness” was never in question.

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