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Discourses on Violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua: National Patterns of Attention and Cross-border Discursive Nodes

Abstract

It has become common to state that youth gangs and organized crime have seized Central America. For theories on contemporary Central American violence, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua present important test cases, demonstrating the need to differentiate the diagnosis. First, national discourses on violence differ from country to country, with varying threat levels, patterns of attention, and discursive leitmotivs. Second, there are border-crossing discursive nodes such as the *mara* paradigm, the perception of grand corruption, and gender-based violence tied to cross-national, national or sub-national publics. The paper explores the ambiguity and plurivocality of contemporary discourses on violence, emanting from a variety of hegemonic and less powerful publics.

Key words: Central America, violence, youth gangs, corruption, gender, discourse analysis

JEL Code: Q17

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Zusammenfassung

Gewaltdiskurse in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua:
Nationale diskursive Strukturen und grenzüberschreitende Leitmotive

Es wird immer wieder darauf hingewiesen, dass sich Mittelamerika in den Fängen von Jugendbanden und organisierter Kriminalität befindet. Costa Rica, El Salvador und Nicaragua stellen für Theorien zur Gewaltentwicklung in Mittelamerika bedeutsame Testfälle dar, die vor allem die Notwendigkeit einer differenzierten Diagnose begründen. Erstens variieren Gewaltdiskurse von Land zu Land und zeugen von unterschiedlichen Bedrohungsebenen und diskursiven Hauptachsen. Zweitens kursieren grenzüberschreitende Leitmotive, etwa in Bezug auf Jugendgewalt, Korruption und genderbezogene Gewalt. Der Artikel untersucht die Vielstimmigkeit und Mehrdeutigkeit gegenwärtiger Gewaltdiskurse, die in hegemonialen und weniger mächtigen Öffentlichkeiten zirkulieren.

Discourses on Violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua: National Patterns of Attention and Cross-border Discursive Nodes

Anika Oettler

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1   Introduction

Central America remains on the margins of international political life, but developments related to crime, violence and insecurity attract growing interest. It has become common to state that levels of violence in the region are as high as, or even higher than at the times of state terror, insurgent action and war of the 1970s and 1980s. The present paper questions this notion of regional vulnerability, indicating national differences as well as a variety of violent (and non-violent) realities.

This paper is part of an ongoing research project on 'Public Spaces and Violence in Central America', carried out together with Sebastian Huhn and Peter Peetz. The research project

examines the origins, development, and institutionalization of contemporary discourses on violence in Centralamerica. There is a wealth of theoretical writing behind our approach. First of all, it is based on the theoretical claims of Critical Discourse Analysis that is concerned with the 'social construction of reality' (Berger/Luckmann 1966). Critical Discourse Analysis examines how discourses (re)produce and challenge power structures and vice versa. We presume, thus, that the high level of Central American Criminal violence has become a fact, which is such, because it is commonly believed (for more details on our approach, see our previous GIGA Working Paper No. 34, Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b). Moreover, we hypothesize that the notion of exploding crime is part of a dominant ideological-discursive formation (Fairclough 1995) and not necessarily linked to 'real' threat levels or life-world experience.

This paper is concerned with discursive nodes and patterns of attention associated with contemporary violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua – three cases chosen for a variety of forms and contexts. We presume that the discourse on violence differs from country to country, with varying threat levels and objects of fear. The paper explores how different – powerful or less powerful – publics contribute to the Central American 'talk of crime' (Caldeira 2000). It focuses on the interconnectedness of hegemonic discourses and counter-discourses across media, public politics, academic spheres and the lifeworld. Empirically, the paper is based on newspapers, academic papers, publications and programs of political parties.[1] Moreover, it analyizes approximately 90 semi-structured qualitative interviews gathered in November and December, 2006, together with Sebastian Huhn and Peter Peetz. The interviewees represent a wide range of professions and social classes. As discussed below, social affiliation channels the perception of crime, violence, and (in)security. In examining discursive fragments circulating within political publics, media, and academic spheres, it has become clear that there is an ongoing struggle on the social classification of perpetrators and those to be protected in Central America.

The paper is organized as follows. As 'discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped' (Fairclough/Wodack 1997: 258), chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of the evolution of political forces since the beginning of the 20th century. The third chapter exposes national discourses on contemporary violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua, dealing with two basic questions: What are the main issues visible in public debates on violence, crime and insecurity? And: Where are discourses circulating? Chapter 4 explores the landscape of discursive arenas from a comparative perspective, focusing on the cipher of youth gangs, the perception of grand corruption, and gendered debates. The conclusion reflects on the social orders emanating from current discursive battles.

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[1]   A previous GIGA Working Paper (No. 33) on the macro-structure of print media discourse on violence has been pre-published in 2006 (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a). The research data we gathered include 227 essays written by pupils from nine public, private and rural schools and a theatre project (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2007).

2   Background: Political Spaces in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua

Central America encompasses a past that includes a common history as well as a variety of national and local histories. Political turmoil and armed confrontation flourished throughout the second half of the 20[2] century, with Costa Rica being the sole exception.[2] Democracy came by civil war (Costa Rica, 1948), by insurrection (Nicaragua I, 1979), by election (Nicaragua II, 1990), by military directive (El Salvador I, 1982) and by peace negotiation (El Salvador II, 1992).

Following the annulment of presidential election results in March, 1948, **Costa Rica** experienced a short civil war, bringing José Figueres into power. Since then, the political system has displayed high stability, based on a party system that has been effectively dominated by two parties, the *Partido Liberación Nacional* (PLN) and the *Partido Unidad Social Cristiana* (PUSC). The commitment to democracy, the abolishment of the army and the 'Bismarckian character of the Costa Rican state' (Davis/Aguilar/Speer 1999: 43) became core features of national identity. In contrast to other Central American countries, the non-communist political society was embedded into an institutional setting characterized by a high level of political freedom. While political interests were mainly channeled through the party system, a variety of labor unions, religious groups and, later, ambientalist and feminist groups emerged. The history of social movements is characterized by the growing strength of solidarity associations and cooperatives (Davis/Aguilar/Speer 1999:44) – and by subsequent waves of strikes, sometimes violent. Press freedom was mainly limited by news filters such as concentrated ownership (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a, for the concept of news filters see Herman/Chomsky 1988). If the second half of the 20[2] century was characterized by the consolidation of democracy and 'organized civil society'[3], the turn of the millenium witnessed a significant change. The 'transition to neoliberalism' (Booth 2000: 101) of the late 1980s implied the replacement of the social democratic model by structural adjustment and cut-backs in social security, education and health. While political decision making was dominated by decree, voters faced the increasing 'sameness of the PLN and PUSC' (Booth 2000: 96). As a result of the 2006 elections, the bipartisan model came to an end. Surprisingly, the *Partido Acción Ciudadana* (PAC), founded in 2000 by Ottón Solís, received 38.9% of the vote, and the PUSC suffered a devastating defeat, winning only 3.5% of the vote. The 'newcomer's' appeal to the electorate was successful, because he presented PAC as a force that was opposing free-trade and corruption. At this time, the political system was shattered by corruption affairs, with three ex-presidents and high-ranking officials from the most important public institutions being involved (Huhn 2006). It is

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[2]   While most explanations of Costa Rican exceptionalism refer to ethnic homegeneity and the egalititarian distribution of land (Woodward 1999: 213-14), John A. Booth points at the 'combination of increasingly powerful social forces, driven by socioeconomic diversity and political discord that forced the adaption of democratic institutions at mid twentieth century' (Booth 2000: 89).

[3]   'Civil society' has become a catch-all category, sometimes being defined as 'all non-state actors and institutions' (see Cohen/Arato 1992, Chapter 1). In this paper, the term *organized civil society* refers to organizations and (parts of) state institutions as opposed to the political right. The term *non-progressive civil society*, on the other hand, refers to non-state actors with strong ties to right-wing political parties and/or the government. Finally, we use the term *civil society* to indicate the non-state specter of society, whether organized or not.

important to note that 'profound long-term change is underway in Costa Rica. System support has steadily eroded, slowly draining the once ample reservoir of legitimacy' (Seligson 2002: 181; see also Lehoucq 2005, Vargas-Cullell/Rosero-Bixby 2006: 57).

Violence and repression shaped the history of twentieth-century **El Salvador**. Since 1931, there have been six successful military coups and numerous fraudulent elections as well as short periods of democratic openings, being restricted to urban areas and usually ended by overthrow. In rural areas, paramilitary networks targeted peasant organizations, mayors, priests and church activists. Mass violence dates back to 1932. In the wake of a peasant uprising, organized by both local activists and members of the communist party (Dalton 1997, 163-220), military and paramilitary forces killed an estimated 30.000 people. The *matanza* is remembered as a main turning point of Salvadorean history (Martí i Puig 2004: 54). It was not until the late 1970s that the guerilla movement came to pose an armed threat to the state. In October, 1980, the major guerilla organizations merged into the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN). The last major guerilla offensive was launched in 1989, demonstrating the impossibility of ending the war by military means. The extra-judicial killing of six famous Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in November 1989, some weeks after the fall of the Berlin wall, fueled the international controversy. Under the auspices of UN negotiators, the Catholic Church and the 'Group of Friends', the Salvadoran government and the FMLN conducted peace negotiations that culminated in the signing of the Chapultepec accords on January 16, 1992. The FMLN converted into a political party. In the following years, the post-insurrectionalist FMLN experienced splits and fractional conflicts as well as political integration. The record of implementation of the peace accords is mixed (Studemeister 2001, Zinecker 2004). There have been positive achievements such as the demobilisation of military and guerilla forces, the subordination of the military to civilian authorities, and, most notably, the end of war. Nevertheless, the peace settlemet was 'undermined by halfhearted compliance' (Karl 1995: 75), and there 'have been notorious deficiencies' (Cañas/Dada 1999: 73).

It is important to note, however, that the 'political 'space' expanded prior to the formal accord' (Arnson 2001: 448; see also Foley 1996). The restoration of democratic rule in the 1980s was an 'elite settlement' (Higley/Gunther 1992), expressing the political project of 'self-modernized' sectors of the Salvadorean oligarchy (Zinecker 2004: 25). However, the commitment to democratic procedures coincided with counterinsurgency ideologies and repressive means. In the face of systematic human rights violations, organized civil society grew throughout the 1980s. Most of the human rights organizations, academic institutions, trade unions and religious groups, which were to constitute the core of organized civil society, were linked to transnational social movements. According to Karl (1995: 82), 'there has been a virtual explosion of nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, women´s and refugee groups, and peasant cooperatives'. Since the signing of the peace accords, NGOs have been criticized for being a tool of either international donor organizations or the FMLN. It is cru-

cial to note, however, that the 'updated segments of the traditional ruling classes' (Vilas 2000: 477) started to organize their interests via civil society as well, most notably, via the *Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social* (FUSADES), a neoliberal think tank that was established as a counterweight to the jesuit *Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas* (UCA) (Zinecker 2004: 32-38).

In contrast to El Salvador, popular uprising and guerilla warfare were successful in **Nicaragua**. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of building a transisthmian canal increased U.S. attention to the region. The following decades were marked by long periods of U.S. military occupation (1909-1919, 1912-1925, 1926-1933) and guerilla uprising headed by Augusto César Sandino. In the early 1930s, U.S. troops withdrew and gave way to the regime of the Somoza dynasty that was to rule the country for almost 50 years. As mentioned above, democracy came by insurrection. After the revolutionary triumph in July 1979, the Sandinistas encouraged a mixed economy and carried out national crusades against illiteracy and disease. It is important to recognize that the 'first half decade of Sandinista rule [...] featured experimentation, innovation, and some significant success in the area of politics' (Walker 2000: 74). Espousing an ideological mélange or 'sincretismo politico' (Cardenal 2004: 540), the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) aimed at fostering a system of mass organizations, with the Sandinista Youth, the Women´s Organization *Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses 'Luisa Armanda Espinoza'* (AMNLAE), and the Worker´s Associations *Central Sandinista de Trabajadores* (CST) and *Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo* (ATC) being some of the famous Sandinista organizations. One of the most grassrooted organizations was comprised of the *Comités de Defensa Sandinista* (CDR) that functioned as both, local administrative units for food distribution and neighborhood *vigilancias* (vigilance committees).[4] Although the second half of the Sandinista rule (1985-1990) saw important political achievements (constitutional process, elections), this period was shaped by the contra war and the steady decline of both, the economy and social programs. The gains in participatory democracy were reversed (Figueroa Ibarra 1993: 68-78, Walker 2000: 76-77, Prevost 1997: 154-155). Soon after the electoral defeat of 1990, the FSLN experienced internal frictions[5], and organized *Sandinista* civil society imploded. The Sandinista trade unions were engaged in the battle against structural adjustment and privatizations (Close 2005: 130), and the Community Movement faced the effects of both, political polarization and cutbacks in social service programs such as the children´s community centers run by the Community movement (Polakoff/La Ramée 1997). Large parts of the population, however, continued to identify the NGOized Community Movement and other Sandinista grassroots organizations with clientelistic structures, corruption, and 'totalitarian' ideology. In the early 1990s, feminist organizations mushroomed, forming 'the most

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4   Together with other grassroots organizations, the CDRs were part of the legislative branch of the state, the Council of State (OAS 1981, Chapter 1, B/b).

5   In 1995, the *Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista* (MRS) broke away from the FSLN, because the political stance of the post-insurrectionalist FSLN was dominated by the authoritarian pragmatism of Daniel Ortega, oscillating between cooperation and confrontation (see Close 2005: 123).

significant feminist movement in Central America and one of the most significant in Latin America as a whole' (Kampwirth 2003: 146; see also Babb 2001). A variety of organizations was engaged in different areas such as medical and psychological care, documentation, campaigning, and transnational networking. Since the late 1990s, Nicaraguan politics have been severely constricted by the *pacto*, a power-sharing pact between Daniel Ortega (FSLN) and then-head of state Arnoldo Alemán (*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista*, PLC). Even after Alemán was convicted of corruption in 2003, the *pacto* permitted president Bolaños little scope to leadership. Together with Cardinal Obando y Bravo, head of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, Ortega and Alemán formed a powerful triumvirate, spoiling democratic governance. Given the relevance of family networks[6], entrepreneurial institutions such as the *Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada* (COSEP) remain weak. In current Nicaragua, the traditional oligarchy continues to exercise political influence via informal channels and the media.

Throughout the **region**, political actors face shifts in the underlying conditions of both, globalized economy and political sphere.[7] In recent years, the political elites, social movements and entrepreneurial groups followed the new rules of the game, that is democratic procedures. While the 'capture of the state' (Whitehead et.al. 2005: 50) and the persistence of large-scale human rights violations shape political culture in El Salvador, political freedom is significantly higher in Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

It is important to recognize that political spaces in Central America have been increasingly connected to transnational actors. Notably, *organized civil society* as well as *non-progressive civil society* are inserted into international communicative spaces – and often dependent from external financial flows. Given the dissemination of concepts such as structural adjustment, the Costa Rican model lost its exceptionalism. Most notably, the *United States Agency for International Development* (USAID) supported the creation of the *Coalición Costarricense de Iniciativas de Desarrollo* (CINDE), an association that pressured the government to undertake neoliberal reforms (Vilas 2000: 220). More than a decade ago, Vilas stated that

> […] the combination of weak party structures, persistent personalist leadership, and family networks, reproduces and updates a political culture of backroom dealings and bargains among leaders [in Central America]; a culture which by deepening the distance between them and their constituencies opens the gates to direct conflict, violence and repression, as well as to apathy or feelings of powerlessness (Vilas 1996: 488).

In the meantime, Costa Rican political culture has been more and more 'Central Americanized' (Seligson 2002: 162).

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[6]   As Vilas pointed out, this kinship network reproduced itself in varying circumstances and 'subsequently permitted some elements in the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie to resist Somoza´s *competencia desleal*, to transfer capital abroad, to ingratiate themselves in the Sandinista regime and participate there in high level policy-making positions, as well to join the anti-Sandinista UNO government' (Vilas 1992: 325).

[7]   In El Salvador, the power of the traditional oligarchy (the famous '14 families') channeled into a modern power bloc, dominated by five family-syndicates (Zinecker 2004:117-8) with transnational economic ambitions.

3 Contemporary National Discourses on Violence

3.1 El Salvador: The *mara* Paradigm

What is at stake in El Salvador? In many (but not all) academic and political publics, the debate on violence tends to be limited to homicide and youth gangs. Though many authors concede that homicide data are questionable, they choose this indicator to represent crime (UNODC 2007, Buvinic et.al. 1999: 2, Cruz 2004: 18-20, Cruz/Argüello/Gonzalez 1999: 4, Zinecker 2007: 3-4). The same choice tends to be made by Salvadoran print media. For instance, *El Diario de Hoy* published a leading front-page article, titled 'Rising Crime' (*Criminalidad en aumento*), on September 21, 2005. The lead refers solely to homicides. The whole debate on crime seems to be squeezed into a corset, centered around fatal violence. Moreover, there is a second constriction of debate mandated by a national and international obsession with youth gangs. The question 'How the Street Gangs took Central America' (Arana 2005) evolved as the core of public debates, prescinding from the multifaceted character of violence (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b).[8]

It is important to note that the current meaning of *maras* has been achieved through a complex, contradictory public process. Within a few years after the war, public concern about delinquency and 'low intensity peace' (Ribera 1997: 128) rose. In the mid-1990s, right-wing politicians drew upon the issue, calling for tougher law enforcement and, particularly, death penalty. While the academic debate was clustered around the role of the media and psychosocial explanations for exploding homicide rates (Armando González 1997, Cruz 1997), the *maras* remained on the margins of political and academic discourse. Within the particular context of political polarization, statements on delinquency became ever more focused on juvenile delinquency.

In July 2003, president Flores announced his anti-gang campaign *Plan Mano Dura* ('iron fist' plan), centered around raids and detention. One month later, according to El Nuevo Diario (END, 23.8.2003), the police had arrested 2,438 youths for tattoos and their dress style, with 1,505 of them already being released. In October 2003, the parliament passed the anti-gang law that defined gang membership as a crime, punishable by prison sentences. While the media heavily drew upon the 'total war' against youth gangs, repeatedly reporting on both anti-gang efforts and crimes supposedly committed by gang members, the official electoral

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[8] The article 'From Exodus to Exitus', written by Heidrun Zinecker, serves as an example of the way in which the *maras* are constructed as the core discursive object: 'Although the *maras* are not responsible for the vast majority of violence, in the following they will be presented as an exemplary violent actor, because they are currently the most relevant collective violent actor, because they experience significant metamorphosis that should be taken into account, and because the country´s whole policy of public security is targeting them'. (Zinecker 2007:5) Obviously, the *maras* evolved as the most prominent perpetrator to be targeted by Salvadorean security forces. Since the *mano dura* ('iron fist') was introduced in 2003, right-wing politicians have been particularly concerned with anti-gang policies. But how do we know that *maras* are the most relevant collective violent actor? The argument seems to be accepted, even though it is not a matter of fact (Huhn/Oettler 2006, Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b). Thus, it is important to note that the *mara* paradigm has amounted to a generally accepted argument, operating as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

campaign started. During the first *foro presidencial*, a media event held in November 2003, Saca was asked: 'Tony, why should the Salvadorans vote for Tony Saca?'. Interestingly, the ARENA candidate referred to honesty ('*manos limpios*'), liberty (expression, economy, religion), dialogue, and foreign investment – but he did not mention public security or anti-gang policies. Later, in the run-up to the elections, ARENA disseminated a manifesto, titled 'País Seguro. Plan de Gobierno 2004-2009'.[9] In this document, the 'iron-fist' against youth gangs is portrayed as the most important emergency measure to be taken.[10]

By constructing, or recycling, a particular representation of public insecurity, clustered around the vivid image of monstrous youth gangs, ARENA was restricting other accounts. However, it is important to note that differing versions of violent realities were generated within a networked and hierarchized public realm. Far from producing well-balanced representations of violence, the discourses on violence were, in Foucault´s words, 'interlocking, hierarchized, and all highly articulated around a cluster of power relations' (Foucault 2006: 540). As mentioned above, transnational networks of donor agencies and NGOs play a critical role in the definition of political priorities and, thus, violent realities. The *United Nations Development Programme* (UNDP) *Society Without Violence Programme*, established in 1998, provided an important public sphere from which the discourse on violence emanated.[11] A number of conferences were held, covering topics such as prevention strategies, media representations of violence, and gender-based violence (PNUD 2004, PNUD 2006). However, some of these issues were overlooked in subsequent debates. In 2006, for instance, the *National Commission on Citizen Security and Social Peace* was created, composed of representatives of political parties including ARENA and FMLN, universities, churches and the entrepreneurial *Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada* (ANEP). Only recently, the Commission released its final report that explains the 'objective dimension' (24) of Salvadoran violence. In this document, a short section on 'other relevant offenses' opens with robbery and bodily injury and ends with traffic accidents. In between, there is a paragraph dealing with violence against women and children with a text box beneath referring to robbery and bodily injury. This example shows how the debate on violence that is mandated by a definition of violence as fatal youth violence deflects public attention away from other issues such as gender-based violence. These issues are not completely silenced, but rather treated in discursive niches. A recent study, for instance, pointed out that Salvadoran newspapers 'prioritize and

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[9] The manifesto is a system of statements, through which a multi-faceted version of the Salvadoran reality is generated. In sum, the 'Plan de Gobierno' consists of 16 'areas of action' and 10 'presidential programs', each of them subdivided into a number of political measures and objectives. The first 'area of action' is citizen security, defined as a precondition for investment and competitive capability. The text concerning public security, composed of an introductory part and a list of 20 'sub-areas', focuses on preventive, integral and legal measures.

[10] Accordingly, only one type of perpetrator is specified in the text: 'The minor law-breaker and young adult in conflict with the law', 'the youths' and 'the *maras*'. When referring to delinquency and crime in a less specific way, perpetrators are not classified.

[11] In 2005 and 2006, the Programme implemented an Arms-Free Municipalities Project in two pilot municipalities, San Martín and Ilopango.

accentuate violent acts committed by *maras* and marginalize information related to violence against women' (Las Dignas 2006: 25, translated by AO).

As our qualitative data indicate, the awareness of daily insecurity tends to be multifaceted, with the hegemonic discourse on youth violence being questioned and other forms of violence being perceived as an imminent threat, albeit with varying degrees of wholeheartedness. An ambulance man told us:

> *Y ahorita pues entre comillas vivimos un proceso de paz por un conflicto armado pero en cuanto a la violencia esa no se ha detenido y no hablo solamente de la situación de violencia armada en el caso típico de llámesele hoy grupos sociales, mal llamados maras y todo esto sino hay violencia intrafamiliar, hay violencia en las calles, hay violencia automovilista, hay violencia de todas formas, tanto que no solo estamos trasladando a personas agredidas violentamente por gente armada no legal sino también llevando niños que han sido maltratados por sus padres, mujeres que han sido maltratados por sus esposos, y ya llegamos al punto en que hombres que son maltratados por sus mujeres también [risa]* (El Salvador, 7th December, 2006).

> And nowadays, well, in quotation marks, we live a peace process of an armed conflict, but with regard to violence, this has not been contained, and I do not only talk about the situation of armed violence, in the typical case of, let´s call them, social groups, miscalled maras and all this, but rather there is domestic violence, there is violence in the streets, there is traffic violence, there is violence of all kinds, so that we are not just transferring people assaulted by non-legal armed people but we are bringing children who had been mistreated by their parents, women who had been mistreated by their husbands, and we are already getting to the point that men are also mistreated by their wifes [laughter].[12]

As described above, the 2004 electoral campaign was a center from which the discourse on organized and monstrous youth violence emanated. However, the *mano dura* was not the only feature of the electoral process. The media and ARENA stoke the fear of communism, trying to establish a relationship between the FMLN and international terrorism. Moreover, the media highlighted the U.S. administration's preoccupation with leftist governments, adumbrating the possibility of deportations and dry-up of remittances, the financial pipeline that keeps the Salvadoran economy still running. The *mano dura*, thus, began to form an integral part of ARENA´s rhetoric repertoire, but not the only one.[13]

In the Salvadoran case, the entrepreneurial sector is decisive for both, political agenda-setting and policy formulation. While ANEP is participating in institutions such as the National Commission on Citizen Security and Social Peace, the right-wing think tank FUSADES has enforced a specific understanding of what is threatening to investors. FUSADES, far from restricting its debate to 'iron fist' policies, proposes a catalog of measures, including no-arms programs, law enforcement, prevention, rehabilitation, and institution building (Pleitez Chávez 2006). We presume, thus, that the obsession with youth gangs will fade, giving way to a more sophisticated concept of the enemy to be targeted and the measures to be applied.

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[12] All citations in italics were translated by the author.
[13] For the 2006 electoral process, see Guzmán/Peraza/Rivera 2006.

3.2   Nicaragua: Contested Evidence on Insecurity

In Nicaragua, the importance of insecurity in public discourse is much more difficult to detect. Is there evidence that there is no preoccupation with a rise in crime, whether imagined or real? Or does insecurity constitute a second major preoccupation? Could it be that the perception of insecurity does not serve as an important political argument? Most notably, public life in Nicaragua is overshadowed by the elite discourse of Nicaragua being a safe country (Rocha 2005). On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the National Police, president Bolaños reported on the state of (in)security: 'The citizen security we have achieved is enviable, beginning to constitute a legend in Latin America' (La Prensa, 6th August, 2004, translated by AO). On the same occasion, the head of the National Police, Edwin Cordero, referred to a decline in youth gangs (*pandillas*) and traffic accidents. According to him, the police achieved success in both, combating the sale of illegal drugs and establishing a net of women´s police stations. A consultant, working for a powerful semi-state consultant agency in Nicaragua, told us that

> *Nicaragua es uno de los países más seguros de Centroamérica. […] si se siente más la seguridad en la parte urbana, en la parte rural es un poquito más complicado o en las secciones más pobres de Nicaragua, o en los barrios pobres de Managua se siente un poco más de inseguridad por que pues es un poco tal vez un poco extraño pero si hay un poco de asaltos entre la gente más pobre* (Nicaragua, 14th December, 2006).

> Nicaragua is one of the most secure countries in Central America. […] yes, you notice security more in the urban part, in the rural part it is a bit more complicated, or in the poorest sectors of Nicaragua, or in the poor neighborhoods in Managua, you sense a bit more insecurity, because, o.k., maybe it is a bit, well, maybe a bit strange, but, yes there is a bit of holdups among the poorest people.

This image is reinforced by high-ranking police officials who repeatedly claimed 'that criminal violence is minimal' (Rocha 2005: 5). Given this image of Nicaragua being a safe country, most of the presidential candidates did not broach the issue of violence during the 2006 electoral campaign. The interviews with all presidential and vice presidential candidates except Daniel Ortega that were conducted by Ángela Saballos in August, 2006, are clustered around economics, the social system and political issues such as the *pacto*, overlooking (or: silencing) the problem of everyday crime (Saballos 2006). It is noteworthy, however, that the platform of the Sandinista MRS, that was, in contrast to the book written by Saballos, not exclusively addressing a small group of academics, highlighted the problem of insecurity.[14] The FSLN presidential candidate Daniel Ortega, who refused to participate in pre-electoral 'bourgeois' media events, addressed his electorate touring the country and via party struc-

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[14]   The platform is subdivided into four sections: (1) Restoring democratic rule, (2) economy and development, (3) the social sector, and (4) peace and security. Herty Lewites, the presidential candidate who died before the elections, proposed an integral policy of public security, based on both, the rule of law and preventive/re-integrative measures.

tures. His wife, Rosario Murillo, drew upon major preoccupations of poor people, including electricity supply and insecurity:

> It [vote for FSLN] is the only choice for the poor, the last chance for the poor! Because, if otherwise […] if there will be no profound change in this country, the people, like a brother here says […] will die of hunger! And the country will enter […] a total insecurity! Delinquency will multiply, because poverty is the root of delinquency, misery is the root of delinquency [...] (FSLN 2006: 26).

Prior to the 2006 elections, the feminist magazine *La Boletina* published a special number, including short transcripts of conversations held with female candidates to become member of parliament. These conversations tackled economic policies, health, violence and access to justice, education, and women´s participation in party politics as issues related to women´s preoccupations (La Boletina 2006: 18-35). The statements published on 'violence and the access to justice' indicate that the awareness of the problems is multi-faceted, with some candidates claiming the justice system to be reformed or public awareness to be risen. One candidate, however, blames women for violence against women, that is for subverting the natural order of creation.[15]

In general, our findings suggest that Nicaragua is a discursively divided country, with total insecurity and unrestricted freedom being antithetical public perceptions. It is crucial to underline that the image of Nicaragua being a safe country is not only produced by members of the elite, but also by people belonging to the lower strata of society. A well-educated employee of the security company ULTRANIC stated that Nicaragua

> *[…] es sano, relativamente sano y se da sus hechos […] Aquí es pequeño por que es un país pequeño, aquí todos nos conocemos, la capital no presta las condiciones para que digamos se organicen bandas [...]* (Nicaragua, 24th November, 2006).

> […] is sane, relatively sane, of course, there are incidents [...] Here it [the problem] is small, because it is a small country, everybody knows each other, the capital does not provide the conditions for gangs to organize […].

A moneychanger and a guard circumnavigated the issue of physical violence. Instead, the questions that were explicitly related to violent crime, served as a starting point for criticizing corrupt politicians and holding them responsible for 'total insecurity' (*inseguridad total*, Nicaragua, 29th November, 2006). Many Nicaraguans perceive crime as something being imported and happening elsewhere. '*Aquí es sano, pero…*' (here it is sane, but…) is a phrase often heard in Nicaragua, but also in other Central American countries. Anecdotal evidence

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[15] María Sorayda Chavarría (PAC): 'There is much violence against women, but the truth is that women themselves generate machismo and we make that our own sons become machistas. The solution is, above all, love, the love of god. The bible says that the woman has to be subordinate to the man and that the man has the responsibility to love his woman. Being like this, all will be excellently functioning.' (La Boletina 2006: 28-29, own translation).

suggests that many Nicaraguans criticize *El Nuevo Diario* for exaggerating the problem of crime. In contrast to *La Prensa*, *El Nuevo Diario* tends to publish front-page articles on crimes such as child abuse, 'exceptional slaughter' or the assassination of *transportistas*. In general, *El Nuevo Diario* highlights the dimensions of insecurity affecting the lower strata of society (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a).

Large sectors of society perceive violent crime as an important problem affecting the country. The 'talk of crime' often focuses on the poor. While some of our interviewees state that criminal behavior is a rational choice made by people facing famine wages and 'condiciones muy jodidas de trabajo', 'very fucked up working conditions'(theatre educator, Nicaragua, 25th October, 2006). The public debate on insecurity, thus, addresses socio-economic causes, with the lack of prospects being at the center of many statements on the landscape of crime. However, interviewees from higher strata of society tend to (re)produce prejudices against the poor. A judge stated that

> *La gente está en las calles, ingeriendo licor por los factores de que no hay trabajo [...] los niños están en las calles, los padres están tomados, las madres andan en prostitución, los hombres en cantinas, en billares o robando* (Nicaragua, 7th December, 2006).

> People are in the streets, drinking hard liquor, because of the factors that there is no work [...] the children are in the streets, the parents are pissed, the mothers engage in prostitution, the men in drinking holes, billiard bars or robbing.

As described below, the Nicaraguan 'talk of crime' as being performed by women from poor neighborhoods or by women assisting female victims of violence, tends to be centered around machismo and alcohol.

3.3   Costa Rica: Crime and Moral Decline

In contrast to El Salvador and Nicaragua, political parties and decision-making bodies in Costa Rica tend to highlight the very perception of insecurity as a major problem. For instance, the final document of the PLN party congress in May, 2005, as well as the 49-pages PLN *Programa de Gobierno 2006-2010* refer to a dramatic increase in violence and insecurity, linked to persistent fear of crime. The PLN proposes both, to 'stop the increase in delinquency and [to] reduce the acute perception of insecurity that currently is a burden on the Costa Rican population' (PLN 2006: 24, translated by AO). In Costa Rica, thus, the 'real' level of crime and the perception of insecurity are often discussed as being two sides of the same coin. In recent years, the twofold problem of increasing crime/fear has been perceived as a main obstacle to human development in Costa Rica. Notably, awareness of rising insecurity circulated within the realm of academic debates linked to international organizations (Proyecto Estado de La Nación 2000, PNUD 2005, Rico 2006).

However, it appears that the twofold problem of increasing crime/fear was irrelevant to the electoral process in 2006. While the electoral platforms of both PAC and PLN included the

issue of insecurity, promising an 'integral-preventive vision' (PAC), the strengthening of the police, and the recovery of values and norms, media debates focused on free-trade, privatization, the social system, and, most notably, the personality of the presidential candidates. When a journalist asked Arias to explain his main proposals, he answered: 'I want Costa Rica to walk again', and referred to economic growth (La Nación, 21st January, 2006). His adversary, Ottón Solís, was asked to convince the undecided, and said: 'This country is badly governed and this would not be necessary. Give a new party a chance. Give me four years, and, if not, go back to *Liberación* [PLN] or *Unidad* [PUSC]. You will see that one can govern this country much better' (La Nación, 18th January, 2006, translated by AO). On 30th January, 2006, the frontpage of the country´s leading newspaper, *La Nación*, was dominated by a large-size photograph showing blasé and yawning people that attended the PLN´s end-of-campaign-event. Actually, voter turnout had never before been so low. The abstention rate grew from 30% in 1998 to 34.8% in 2006.

In Costa Rica, the increase in crime is not perceived as being explosive in nature, but rather linked to a steady socio-ecomomic decline since the mid-1980s. It is important to note that a perceived or real dramatic increase in robberies emerged as a thematic node associated with other leitmotivs such as drug consumption and moral decline (see, for instance, Rico 2006: 17, 25-26). In *La Nación*, the issue of 'ordinary violence' is not treated prominently, but intensely (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a). News coverage in *La Nación* reflects an ongoing concern that the country is facing a permanent decline linked to a deterioration of both the foundations of the social security system and the social fabric of society. By attributing crime to moral decline, *La Nación* as well as other important speakers establishes an argument that leads to the stigmatization of the youth. Consider, for example, Ottón Solís's *Convocatoria a la Ciudadanía*. In this document, the PAC associates crime and insecurity with social exclusion, loss of solidarity, impunity and corruption, the transnationalization of organized crime, and 'domestic violence, especially violence against women' (PAC 2006: 43-44). The chapter on insecurity culminates in a statement on rehabilitation measures, with *infractores* (lawbreakers), 'children and adolescents with criminal behavior', 'youth gangs' ('pandillas juveniles'), and 'marginalized youth from rural and urban areas' being the focus groups. How does the diagnosis of crime symptoms translate into the definition of perpetrators to be reinserted into society? It is crucial to note that the Costa Rican 'talk of crime' is not a talk of youth gangs, but rather a talk of moral decline, with the (imagined) criminal behavior of adolescents serving as a vivid leitmotiv.

There is a question that tends to be raised, and that is: 'Is there a upper limit for this increase [of crime] to be still considered tolerable?' (Rico 2006: 22, translated by AO). As the reciprocal effects between poverty, the decline of the welfare state, the education system and the increase in crime are highlighted, the whole society is portrayed as being caught in a violent downward spiral. A Costa Rican nurse referred to a

> *[…] proceso patológico, es algo que nunca va a terminar hasta que venga el gobierno de Dios* (Costa Rica, 31st October, 2006).

> […] pathological process, it is something that is never going to end until the reign of God will come.

A street vendor also used a medical metaphor, stating:

> *[…] ya se hizo un cáncer eso, se ha extendido mucho ya, por todos lados hay inseguridad, un lado cogen diez maleantes y aparacen veinte, ya tienen veinte y aparecen cincuenta, no, ya está fuera de control, no, no* (Costa Rica, 30th November, 2006).

> […] this has already become a cancer, this has already spread out a lot, there is insecurity everywhere, somewhere they remove ten wrongdoers and twenty appear, then they remove twenty and fifty appear, no, this is already out of control, no, no.

The notion of moral deterioration leads to another leitmotiv with broad explanatory power: The imagined or real criminal behavior of foreigners. It is important to note, however, that the image of criminal foreigners is achieved through a multi-faceted process, with a range of institutions being involved (see Sandoval 2004). The media play a core role, reporting extensively on criminal influences from abroad. In recent years, immigration policies have been high on the political agenda of the Costa Rican administration. The debate on immigration focused on immigration laws and restrictions for undocumented immigrants, mainly Nicaraguans. Given the current political conjuncture, many interviewees refer to immigration as an underlying reason for increasing crime. It appears that xenophobia is wide-spread. 14 out of 29 interviewees trace insecurity back to (male) foreigners. Notably, in our 2006 sample, xenophobia is distributed unequally among people. Xenophobic statements are hardly ever made by members of 'organized civil society', and more frequently by members of the poor sectors of society. Interestingly, all interviews conducted with more powerful speakers (state employees, businessmen and priests) contain xenophobic statements. In Costa Rica, insecurity is often perceived as an imported phenomenon. It is noteworthy that the image of criminal Nicaraguans coexists with the perception of a much more threatening 'invasion': Many interviewees refer to transnational organized crime, with drug trade and *sicarios* (Colombian killers) undermining the social fabric.

4.   Comparative Perspectives

4.1   Organized Youth Violence as Discursive Node

Representatives of the political establishment as well as members of international think tanks play a core role in the process through which the meaning of youth gangs (*pandillas, maras*) is progressively achieved. The life-threatening scenario of brutalized and hierarchized gang culture, however, evolves into something more fluid as we take into account other public realms.

The interviews conducted between October and December, 2006, shed light on the overall perception of youth violence. No Costa Rican interviewee centered her/his narration around youth violence. In contrast, only three out of 23 Salvadoran interviewees did not highlight the existence of *maras* and those were a guard, a feminist activist, and a trade unionist. While Salvadoran interviewees tend to associate *maras* with a hierarchic organization being responsible for murder, 'express-kidnappings' and extortionate robbery, Nicaraguan interviewees refer to *pandillas* as less organized and less brutal youth gangs. 8 out of 21 Nicaraguan interviews contain descriptions of groups of male adolescents being a threat.

In general, the interviews demonstrate that the 'fear of youth' is not necessarily linked to lifeworld experience. The image of *maras*, however, evokes feelings of fear, and gradually becomes internalized. This image of organized youth violence has emerged as a cipher for social deterioration and exploding crime. Our interviewees often drew on the mara cipher, when they were asked to compare the current situation with the past or to comment on the statement that Central America is one of the most violent regions of the world. A Costa Rican priest stated:

> *Yo si lo creo. Yo si lo creo. En otros países de Centroamérica está peor que Costa Rica y uno, por ejemplo, en El Salvador las maras es terrible, es terrible* (Costa Rica, 4th November, 2006).

> Yes, I think so [that Central America is one of the most violent regions of the world], yes I think so. In other Central American countries, it is worse and one, for example, in El Salvador the *maras*, it´s terrible, it´s terrible.

A taxi driver from El Salvador said:

> *Y lo que nosotros tenemos aquí es violencia, es violencia nada más que yo pienso que se eliminaría esa violencia con solo eliminar esas maras* (El Salvador, 28th November, 2006).

> And what we have here is violence, nothing than violence, and I think that you will eliminate this violence only if you eliminate these maras.

A female cook answered:

> *Yo creo que si, que Salvador es país que tiene más violencia, más asesinatos, violaciones por nada pues, matan a la gente sin ningún objetivo, les roban sin ninguna razón por que hay mucho marero y mucho ladrón. Yo pienso que sí, que El Salvador es el que tiene más delincuencia* (El Salvador, 9th December, 2006).

> Yes, I think so, El Salvador is the country that has more violence, more assassinations, violations for nothing, they kill people without any reason, they assault people without any reasons because there are many *mareros* and many delinquents. I think, yes, El Salvador has more delinquency.

It is important to note that the cook identifies two groups of perpetrators, *mareros* and delinquents, and presumes them guilty for a variety of crimes. Although most interviewees also refer to other groups of perpetrators and other violent settings including, for instance, school massacres in the United States, the war in Iraq, suicide bombers, Colombian mass violence, insecurity in Somalia, it appears that the very notion of *maras* provides a strong argument.

In recent years, the concept of *pandillas/maras* has entered the political vocabulary. As political decision-makers, among them presidents, members of parliament, international consultants, began to turn their attention towards public security, youth gangs were increasingly labeled the perpetrator par excellence. It is crucial to underline, however, that the political intentions and socio-economic settings differed from country to country.

According to Rocha, various factors contributed to the discovery of Nicaraguan youth gangs as a major target group to be reached by policy interventions. What mattered most is the transformation of the Sandinista police into the National Police. The existence of Sandinista and traditional elite networks within the National police 'has generated different discourses and actions towards youth violence' (Rocha 2005: 12), with powerful international donor agencies such as the *Inter-American Development Bank* contributing to creating the focal point of rehabilitation/prevention of youth violence.[16] In general, it appears that Nicaraguan decision-makers use the efforts made to reintegrate 'young people at risk' as a marker of difference, indicating the democratic nature of Nicaraguan politics. It is important to note that decision-makers take up arguments that are circulating in other Nicaraguan publics. After the Sandinista electoral defeat in 1990, NGOs dealing with child protection mushroomed throughout the country. The *Instituto de Promoción Humana-Estelí* (INPRHU-Estelí), *the Centro de Prevención de la Violencia* (CEPREV), and the *Fundación de Protección de los Derechos de niños, niñas y adolescentes Infractores de la Ley* (FUNPRODE) are some of the most important Nicaraguan NGOs working on adolescents at risk. They share the characteristic of being dependant on foreign financial resources. A second, and more important feature they share is the participation in transnational advocacy networks.[17] Since the ideas of international consultants, Nicaraguan decision-makers and NGO-activists complement one another, the notion of youth violence emerged as a substantial issue in public spheres.

In contrast to Nicaragua, the networked organized civil society in El Salvador was a counterweight to official agenda-setting rather than a policy multiplier. While ARENA is using

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[16] Since the late 1990s, a variety of institutions dealing with youth violence and/or 'young people at risk' have been established, with the National Secretary of Youth Affairs (Secretaría de la Juventud) and the Special Ombudsman´s Office for Children and Adolescents (Procuraduría Especial de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) being the most important.

[17] Actors working internationally on issues such as human rights or environmentalism 'are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services' (Keck/Sikkink 1998: 2).

the *mara* label as a meta-symbol for the evil, trying to establish the idea of close ties between *maras*, Jihadist terrorism and the FMLN, the latter circumnavigates the issue of youth violence, and rather focuses on power-relations and the socio-economic dimensions of development. Given the high degree of political polarization, the discursive power of organized civil society has been severely limited for a long time. Since anti-gang policies have been adopted, human rights organizations, churches, universities and non-organized professionals have criticized the state for both, violating human rights and exaggerating the problem of youth violence. Backed by international NGOs and intergovernmental organizations, 'organized civil society' aimed at establishing a counterweight to official statements. In general, critical views on repressive anti-gang rhetoric can be articulated (they are, actually, shared by key representatives of the Salvadoran government), but tend to be silenced by the mass media. Only recently, however, U.S. and Colombian 'success'-stories appear to have created renewed interest for entrepreneurial sectors to promote alternative anti-crime strategies, whether repressive or not. Recent interventions by FUSADES might signal a strategic shift from anti-gang measures to both, zero-tolerance and community policing.

In Costa Rica, the stigmatization of the youth has not yet been translated into policies. So far, the classification of the youth as the social group most vulnerable to crime and anti-social behavior rather corresponds to the widespread perception that Costa Rica is facing a moral decline. The latest PLN´s electoral platform includes a similar argument, stating that Costa Rica suffers a normative and identity crisis. Therefore, state policies should 'promote generation rescue, inspired by new principles and norms, creating the conditions for a renewed culture of social cohabitation that allows to revert the observed tendencies' (PLN 2005: §151, translated by AO). Why is a generation to be rescued? Or, in other words, why do strategies designed to prevent crime overlook adult criminals and violators, and solely refer to the imagined perpetrators of tomorrow? As described above, adolescents at risk tend to be the only group of perpetrators that is *named*.

4.2   What if grand corruption was the big story?

The UNODC's diagnosis of the state of Central American crime contains a short chapter on corruption, summarizing Latinobarómetro, Transparency International and the Latin American Public Opinion Project survey data, and highlighting the existence of 'conflicting accounts of the relative degrees of corruption in Latin America' (UNODC 2007: 72). Given the relatively high percentage of people experiencing corruption, perceiving civil servants to be corrupt, or being pessimistic/cynical with regard to corruption, there is one important question that should have been raised: How is the perception of corruption related to the perception of crime and insecurity? Do Central Americans mention corruption when talking about crime? And, if so, how do they talk about corruption? Do Central Americans believe corruption to be the cause of crime, the effect of crime, or rather *a* crime?

Problems such as vandalism and insecurity are often perceived as being second-order problems. The interviews gathered in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua indicate that corruption is being at the center of many non-institutionalized debates on crime. While the semi-structured questionnaire we used for the interviews did not contain any question or word linked to corruption, most interviewees refer to bribery or corruption. It is important to note, however, that the interviewees reason within varying social contexts, producing an epistemically fluent notion of corruption. Many interviewees refer to corrupt police officers, requiring money for the fulfillment of their duties or protecting organized crime. A barkeeper from Costa Rica stated:

> *Y vivimos inseguros totalmente que no sabemos quínes son los delincuentes los que están vestidos de policía o los que están en las calles* (Costa Rica, 4th November, 2006).

> We live totally insecure, because we don´t know who are the delinquents, those who are dressed like the police or those who are in the streets [laughter].

A Salvadoran snack bar owner, when asked if violence constitutes a topic of his daily conversations, said:

> *[…] eso para uno es como la comida del día, de que sempre hay algo de que se tiene que hablar sobre la violencia y de ahí viene toda la delincuencia, las maras, los delincuentes de traje de los del gobierno* (El Salvador, 9th December, 2006).

> […] this is, you see, it is like daily food, as there is always something you have to talk about violence, and all the violence results from there, the *maras*, the delinquents wearing the dress of those of the government.

It is crucial to note that the notion of corruption, as related to crime, violence and insecurity, was not on the top of national political agendas. Consider, for instance, the comprehensive 125-pages document 'Security and Peace, a challenge for the country: Recommendations for a Citizen Security Policy in El Salvador' (*Comisión Nacional para la Seguridad Cuidadana y la Paz Social* 2007). Corruption is mentioned only once, appearing in a summary of the 2003 UN Palermo Convention against Organized Crime (p. 80). When dealing with the security sector, the paper refers to the need of modernization, empowerment, reorganization, and efficiency rise. When describing the 'subjective dimension', the authors summarize survey data with regard to victimization and individual protection measures. The National Commission for Citizen Security and Social Peace, thus, in no way addresses corruption as one of the core subjective dimensions, nor does it provide any argument to suggest a change of political culture.

While the corruption argument tends to be neglected in national debates on public security, it is disseminated by the media. In Central America, the macro-structure of press discourse on violence is characterized by ideological flexibility and commercial interests. In general, news coverage on violence differs from country to country, from year to year, and from newspaper to newspaper (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a). Moreover, there is a complex relationship of news on 'ordinary violence' and other issues that are treated prominently in the

news. The analysis of front-page coverage of Central American newspapers, however, reveals that grand corruption receives high media interest. Figure 1 shows how Nicaraguan La Prensa covered violence and corruption on its front-page in 2005. The x-axis is indicating the months (January-December 2005) and the y-axis is showing front-page stories dealing with crime, violence and corruption.[18]

Figure 1: Front-page Coverage on Crime, Violence and Corruption in the Nicaraguan La Prensa, 2005
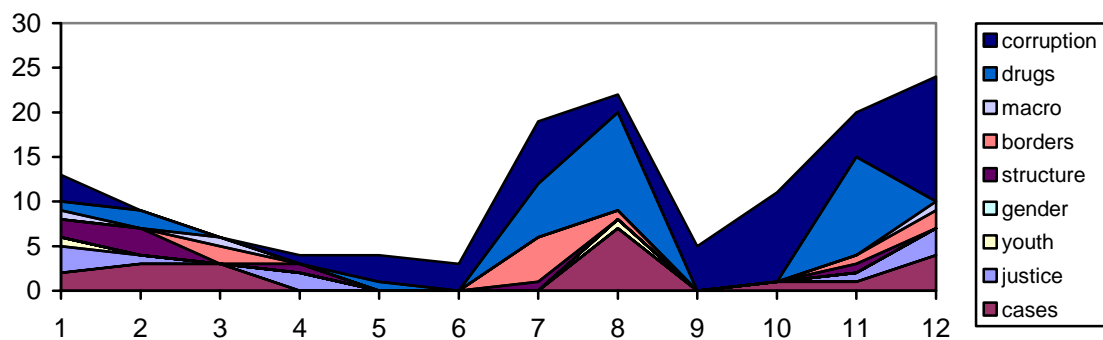
Source: Author's compilation.

In Nicaragua the issue of grand corruption, especially two scandals involving ex-president Alemán and high-ranking government officials, received high media interest in 2005. One year later, for some of our interviewees, the talk of crime was mainly a talk of grand corruption.

4.3 Gendered Publics and Violence

The talk of intentional crime, whether homicide, organized youth violence or grand corruption, is by no means the only talk of violence being performed in Central American publics. Numerous writers have drawn attention to a pattern of violent phenomena, usually referred to as 'domestic violence', 'sexual violence' or 'intimate partner violence'. Each of these terms, however, has its own weaknesses. In this article, we use the term 'gender-based violence' to refer to a wide range of phenomena including child abuse and neglect, intimate partner violence (physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence, financial depriva-

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[18] The project 'Public Spaces and Violence in Central America' examined the online-versions of all front-pages of six leading Central American newspapers published in 2004, 2005 and 2006. We saved and filed all front-page stories dealing with 'ordinary violence', and we assigned them to the 'families' of topics: macro = Violence and Society; frontiers = Frontiers and Violence; drugs = Drugs and Crime; gender = Gender, Family and Crime; youth = Youth Violence; structure = Social Structure, Spatiality and Crime; judiciary = Judiciary and Violence; cases = Cases. As articles could be assigned to more than one 'topic family', the figure does not show the absolute frequency of press reporting, but rather the conjunctures of topic clusters, for more details on the data, see Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a.

tion and controlling behavior) and sexual violence (domestic and non-domestic).[19] Being crucial issues of everyday life, these forms of violence refer to different types of perpetrators, victims and motifs. Certainly not everyone is equally at risk of becoming a victim (or perpetrator) of acts of gender-based violence. The overwhelming majority of these, although the exact numbers are unknown, are perpetrated by men and experienced by female victims (Carcedo Cabañas 2006, Ellsberg 1997, UCR/CIEM 2004). While violence against women gets more and more visible in Central American publics, however, sexual abuse of boys or male suicidal behavior tend to be even more stigmatized and, therefore, invisible.

In general, public attention to gender-based violence is a sensitive barometer of power relations, with violence against women being at the center of most public debates. It is crucial to note that violence against women is a key aspect of hegemonic Central American masculinities that is performed in public (Lancaster 1992). It is part of the social order, with its power relations, its economic imperatives, its privileges and its subordinations. In general, the Central American way of life is shaped by the binary code of *machismo* and *marianismo*, with the former being characterized by male domination and sexed social behavior and the latter being based on motherhood and self-abnegation.

In Central America, the issue of gender-based violence has a forum, albeit with varying relevance to the wider public. The feminist movement, international donor agencies and national NGOs give a voice to women and children affected by domestic or sexual violence. Nevertheless, discursive articulations and political strategies related to gender-based violence evolve within public spheres that have been reconfigured since the end of the Cold War. The feminist movement is characterized by the 'deployment of discursive frames and organizational and political practices that are inspired, (re)affirmed or reinforced, though not necessarily caused, by their engagement with other actors beyond national borders' (Alvarez 2000, 2-3). Most notably, the notion of femicide, referring to individual female victims as well as to a systematic pattern of fatal violence against women, has entered Central American public debates (see, for instance, Carcedo/Sagot 2002). Femicide first attracted international attention in 1993, when hundreds of brutal murders of women were registered in the US-Mexican border town Ciudad Juárez (Washington Valdez 2005). Since then, the feminist movement throughout the continent has tried to alert to the combination of brutal killings and impunity that is affecting all countries, albeit with varying magnitude.

In recent years, the feminist movements in El Salvador and Nicaragua were subject to fierce discursive attacks. Right-wing governments as well as conservative women´s organizations blamed the leftist NGO sector and, especially, feminist groups, for social problems and moral decay (Kampwirth 2003). On the other hand, feminist groups had to deal with the 'sexist ideology and practices' (Alvarez 2000, 8) of the local left. In Nicaragua, sexual violence and gen-

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[19]   Self-directed violence (suicidal thoughts and attempts) is a phenomenon explicitly addressed by some of our interviewees. It constitutes a phenomenon that is often associated with previous experiences with sexual, emotional or physical violence.

der images have been brought into focus in 1998, when Zoilamérica Narváez accused her stepfather, Daniel Ortega, of sexual abuse. The press was prominent in disseminating the scandal, with some issues offering detailed descriptions of the abuse. Meanwhile, Narváez´s mother, Rosario Murillo, supported Ortega, by putting her daughter down as a liar. Daniel Ortega referred to a political plot. After the courts refused to lift Ortega's parliamentary immunity, Narváez submitted the case to the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights. In 2002, Zoilamérica Narváez stated that 'the state became an accomplice of the way that Daniel Ortega chose to handle the case, first by hushing it up and then by closing it' (Envío No. 248, March 2002). The scandal, however, shed light on public approaches to gender-based violence. The political maneuvers following the public accusations demonstrated that the political establishment did not regard long years of sexual abuse, rape and harassment a high priority. In the aftermath of the scandal, Nicaraguan publics were divided about the truth of Narváez's testimony. Many Sandinistas defended Ortega, saying that the accusations were part of a conspiracy against him and the party. One might speculate, however, on why the behavior of an ex-president, who was accused of abusing his stepdaughter from age eleven, and who evaded prosecution on the grounds of parliamentary immunity, did not lead to declining confidence in both, political leadership and state institutions.

In general, our data corroborate the importance of mass media as a vehicle of maintaining or creating cultural values and social norms (Bourdieu 1998). It is important to note that gender-based violence is not ignored by the Central American press. However, there are various ways in which the issue is dealt with. While Salvadoran newspapers tend to relegate it to the fringe, Costa Rican newspapers provide more comprehensive reports on gender-based violence, with 'domestic violence' and 'sexual exploitation of children and minors' being treated prominently. As our analysis of news coverage of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Spain (30th June, 2005) demonstrates, the global news infrastructure allows tabooed social themes to pass ideological news filters (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b). The editorial stances and the depth of analysis, however, differ from country to country and from newspaper to newspaper.

Despite increasing recognition and awareness of the problem of gender-based violence, however, there are examples of paradoxical negation. A taxidriver from Soyapango, San Salvador, described the increasing level of brutality, stating that

> […] *no había tanta violencia, la violencia eran los 'bolos' digamos que se ponían ebrios en las cantinas, en los chupaderos pero esa era la violencia, marido que le daba duro a la [...] y los ladrones también [...] pero no era una violencia extrema como la que hay ahora. Por que ahora si lo asaltan ya no solo lo asaltan, ahora a uno le pegan un par de balazos* (El Salvador, 28th November, 2006).

> […] before, there was not so much violence, there were the skittles, let´s say, those who get drunk in the taverns and drinking holes, but this has been the violence, a husband who hardly beated up his

[...] and also the thugs [...] but this was not an extreme violence like there is today, because today, if they rob you they do not only rob, nowadays they hit you with a number of shoots.

Interestingly, physical violence against women is recognized as violent behavior and, at the same time, characterized as a harmless form of violence. In his statement, the taxidriver does not explicity name the victim but rather refers to the perpetrator. Elsewhere, his position is even more evident. He states that the problem of youth gangs was increasing because the laws were so weak:

> *[…] cómo es que a un ser humano que golpea a su mujer por que está lo engaño a ese no lo defienden [...] lo refunden, lo meten [...] y ese no tiene derechos humanos pero a un marero que mata y todo, vés las masacres pues que hacen [...]* (El Salvador, 28th November, 2006).

> […] how can it be that a human being who beats his wife because she is betraying him, that they do not defend him [...] they beat him, they imprison him, they put [...] and he has no human rights but a marero who kills and everything, you know, the massacres they commit [...].

The message is clear. The interviewee, supposedly assuming that the (male) interviewer would agree to his justification of gender-based violence, represents the machismo mentality that perpetuates the cycle of 'domestic' violence. It is important to note that violent behavior remains socially acceptable whithin 'macho-dominated' public spheres.

On the other side, what matters to many of our interviewees, are forms of gender-based violence as related to the 'policing of sex' (Foucault 2006: 517). Many female and some male interviewees sketched out the contours of a violent reality, centered around gender-based violence. In contrast to the idea of youth gangs being the sword of Damocles hanging above daily life, many interviewees (for instance, female pupils, women from marginalized neighborhoods, psychologists, nurses and priests) identified intoxicated men as an omnipresent group of perpetrators. While male adolescents tend to be portrayed as gang members and criminals – whether brutal (El Salvador), amoral (Costa Rica) or nonviscous (Nicaragua) – male adults are often described as drunk thugs and wife beaters, constantly posing a sexual, verbal, physical and financial threat to women, children and female adolescents. The awareness of this threat is closely associated with the perception of wide-spread impunity related to gender-based violence.

Our data suggest that the discourse on gender-based violence is polymorphous, with antagonistic public spheres being involved. Throughout Central America, feminist organizations tend to be accused of promoting lesbianism and, therefore, of degrading culture and morality.[20] The feminist movement´s counterpart is constituted by both, the conservative women´s movement and evangelicals producing and reproducing certain systems of social rules. Both groups are capable of making and disseminating public opinions. What we are observing in Central America, is the prevalence of conservative statements on how the problem of domes-

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[20]   In Nicaragua, as homosexuality is legally defined as a crime to be punished, this discursive motif is often found in public debates on gender-based violence.

tic violence should be treated. While evangelicals usually promote male and female asceticism, and thus an alternative masculinity, conservative women´s organizations as well as international NGOs and donor agencies campaign for the nuclear family model that had never been the predominant family structure in Central America (Dore 1997). The promotion of the 'democratic family', consisting of the 'responsible husband', the 'independant wife' and two or more children evolves as the center of many prevention strategies (CEPREV 2005).

5 Conclusion

It has become common to state that criminal violence has superseded political violence in Central America. Based on the dictum that reality is socially constructed (Berger/Luckmann 1969), we hypothesized that the high level of criminal violence may be understood as a social fact, which is such, because it is commonly believed. The seed of fear is, thus, not automatically nourished by 'real' violent incidents but rather by discursive events. Moreover, we presumed that the public discourse on violence is not a monolithic phenomenon, but rather a series of overlapping or contradictory discourses, emanating from a variety of hegemonic publics and 'counter-publics' (Fraser 1992). Our main findings can be summarized as follows. First of all, the discourse on contemporary violence differs from one public sphere to another. The talk of crime is performed within ever-shifting intersectionalities of ethnicity, class, and gender (see Anderson/Hill/Collins 2001, Johnson 2001). Moreover, public spheres are often divided along residential lines. In the rhetoric of (in)security, various domains of both, oppression and privilege come together. As our data indicate, the 'talk of crime' (Caldeira 2000) serves to create and perpetuate a patchwork of inequalities. There are, for instance, white female NGO activists reproducing prejudices against the poor. There are people from poor neighborhoods identifying other poor neighborhoods as the danger spots, and there are machos from all strata of society burdened with prejudices against women. On the other hand, there are men constructing feminist messages, there are people from poor neighborhoods demystifying the vision of dangerous poor. And, of course, there are white feminists engaged in the struggle against prejudices. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that discourses on violence are plurivocal and often ambiguous, with a wide range of speakers bound to different public realms.

Secondly, public life in the three Central American countries analyzed in this study is shaped by the fear of crime, albeit with varying threat levels and different objects of fear. In general, we detected cross-sectoral discursive strings that characterize national discourses on contemporary violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua. As described above, the perception of violence differs from one country to another, with important thematic nodes being linked to the political history of the countries. Our qualitative data indicate that national discourses on violence are intrinsically tied to national myths. The myth of Costa Rica being the nonviolent Latin American exception and the myth of Nicaragua being a se-

cure country are key features of contemporary national debates. In El Salvador, on the other hand, the myth of a war-torn country being invaded by criminal adolescents seems to be produced and reproduced only recently.

Thirdly, there are cross-national discursive leitmotivs. In this study we focused on three controversial areas that are treated or denied as violent social facts: Youth gangs, grand corruption and gender-based violence. The notion of organized youth violence has amounted to the most important feature of national and international debates on violent Central American 'realities'. The vivid image of monstrous youth gangs is wide-spread but by no means automatically associated with life-world experience or sufficient empirical evidence. The perception of grand corruption and gender-based violence demonstrates that there are border-crossing and controversial discursive strings that should be taken into account when analyzing current political processes in Central America. While gender-based violence has entered the agenda of international donor organizations, national NGOs and state institutions, it tends to be still treated in discursive niches. Perceptions of insecurity are closely tied to a matrix of privilege and discrimination, with earnings, partnership, sexual orientation and residential background being important, albeit not determinative, factors affecting fear. The debate on grand corruption points to a discursive leitmotiv that is circulating within a variety of counter-publics, but rarely taken into account by politicians, international think tanks and the entrepreneurial sector. While many less powerful speakers identify grand corruption as one of the most devastating criminal behavior, powerful speakers tend to ignore the issue.

In sum, the perception of insecurity is multifaceted, with cross-sectoral and cross-border discursive strings as well as national and sub-national peculiarities. The complex nature of socially constructed violent realities, or the 'objectivity of the subjective' (Bourdieu 2005: 135) has to be taken into account when analyzing contemporary Central American societies.

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