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**A History of Nonviolence:
Insecurity and the Normative Power of the Imagined
in Costa Rica**

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A History of Nonviolence: Insecurity and the Normative Power of the Imagined in Costa Rica

Abstract

Crime, violence, and insecurity are among the most important social topics in contemporary Costa Rica. These three issues play a central role in the media, politics, and everyday life, and the impression has emerged that security has changed for the worse and that society is now threatened permanently. However, crime statistics do not support this perception. The paper thus asks why violence and crime generate such huge fear in society. The thesis is that the Costa Rican national identity—with Costa Rica constructed as a nonviolent nation—impedes a realistic discussion about the phenomena and their causes, and simultaneously provides a platform for sensationalism and the social construction of fear.

Keywords: Costa Rica, violence, crime, national identity, public discourse

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Zusammenfassung

Eine Geschichte der Gewaltlosigkeit:

Unsicherheit und die normative Kraft sozialer Konstruktionen in Costa Rica

Die Angst vor Gewalt, Kriminalität und Unsicherheit ist in Costa Rica eines der wichtigsten gesellschaftlichen Probleme. In den Medien, der Politik und dem Alltag nehmen Gewalt und Kriminalität großen Raum ein und es entsteht der Eindruck, die Sicherheitslage habe sich dramatisch verschlechtert und die Bevölkerung müsse in ständiger Angst leben. Auf der Grundlage, dass Kriminalitätsstatistiken diese gesamtgesellschaftliche Angst nicht rechtfertigen, geht dieser Beitrag der Frage nach, warum Gewalt und Kriminalität heute ausgerechnet in Costa Rica so große Angst und Unsicherheit erzeugen. Die These lautet, dass die costaricanische nationale Identität und die „nationale Erzählung“ – in der Costa Rica als gewaltfreie Nation gedacht wird – einerseits den Blick auf die Ursachen von Gewalt und Kriminalität versperren und andererseits die Projektionsfläche für die soziale Konstruktion gesellschaftlicher Angst darstellen.

A History of Nonviolence: Insecurity and the Normative Power of the Imagined in Costa Rica

Sebastian Huhn

Article Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Crime, Violence, and Identity as Enmeshed Constructions
- 3 Crime Rates and Fear of Crime in Contemporary Costa Rica
- 4 The Discourse about Crime, Violence, and National Identity
- 5 On the Genesis and Transformation of a Peace-loving Nation
- 6 Conclusions

1 Introduction

Violence, crime, and insecurity are major topics in contemporary political and societal discourses in Central America. With very different crime rates and varying thematic foci, these topics are discussed in the media, politics, and society. It is noticeable that the fear of crime and the public sensationalization of crime and violence vary significantly from country to country. Thus, low crime rates do not necessarily reduce fear and vice versa.

This paper is related to a research project about discourses on violence and crime in contemporary Central America,¹ and is based on the observation that the “talk of crime” is very prevalent in Costa Rica, a country usually known as being calm and peaceful. The extensive fear of crime becomes manifest in many different social spaces and contexts. Rico recently stated, on the basis of crime statistics and opinion polls, that a) many Costa Ricans do not have a clear idea, or even have a very incorrect idea, of crime rates in Costa Rica and that b) the number of Costa Ricans who have the impression that they could very likely become a victim of crime is remarkably high (Rico 2006: 30). In 2004, for example, 77.6 percent of the

¹ For further publications by the project see: www.giga-hamburg.de/projects/violence-and-discourse/.

respondents of a representative public opinion poll stated that Costa Rica is not safe at all (while 62 percent regarded their neighborhood as a safe place); 59.9 percent declared that one should not leave his home unguarded; 64.2 percent declared that houses need fences in Costa Rica; and 39.2 percent advocated for a watchdog in their houses (Rico 2006: 31-32). Furthermore, there is notable sensationalization of violence and crime in the Costa Rican mass media (Fonseca/Sandoval 2006; Bejarano 2006: 32-34) as well as in political debates about Costa Rica. An example of the extraordinary social significance of violence and crime compared to other topics is provided by the *Informe Nacional de Desarrollo Humano* 2005 of the UNDP. Out of all possible social problems, the UNDP picked violence, crime and insecurity for the Costa Rican report. In the Salvadorian report the focus was on migration; in Guatemala the report was about cultural and ethnic diversity; in Honduras the topic was democracy; and the Nicaraguan report was about social problems in the Caribbean. Apart from being a report worth reading, the choice of topic states a lot about the significance of violence in Costa Rica. Another example is a speech given by the Costa Rican president Arias in May 2008, where he named the country's four most important tasks for the next year: intensifying social policy, stimulating national production, fighting crime and drugs, and redetermining Costa Rican foreign policy (Arias 2008). Finally, the fear of crime is apparent in the extent of security activities. Most buildings in San José are wrapped in barbed wire, and the number of private security guards per 100,000 inhabitants is the highest in Central America (UNODC 2007: 82). The question is why violence and crime play such an important role, especially in Costa Rica, a country with comparatively low crime rates.

This paper points out the importance of the historical discourse about national identity as a key factor for research about the fear of crime in Costa Rica. The proclamation of a "problem" by the media or politicians does not necessarily or inevitably lead to acceptance among the people. The thesis of this paper is that the public discourse about violence and crime leads to confusion and panic in Costa Rica because it is in conflict with the collective identity of the imagined Costa Rican community (Anderson 1983). The specially imagined Costa Rican nation provides a common thread between violence and crime on one side, and confusion and fear on the other side. I point out the strong connection between discourses about crime and violence and those about national identity as linked social constructions of reality. I do so on the basis of very different sources or groups of narrators.

The paper is organized as follows. In the following section I first present the theoretical framework. In section 3 I briefly present Costa Rican crime statistics as the basis for further arguments. I show that Costa Rican crime rates do not naturally provide reasons for the extensive fear of crime. In section 4 I present the basic observations that led to our thesis. I analyze the cultural stereotypes of collective peacefulness vs. violence from different sources in order to prove that a specific imagination of the Costa Rican nation runs like a thread through many different discursive arenas. In section 5 I discuss the constructed national identity and the power of the public discourse on crime and violence. I then close by highlighting issues for further research in section 6.

2 Crime, Violence, and Identity as Enmeshed Constructions

Theoretically, this paper refers to the sociology of knowledge as well as to the debate on national identity and tradition. With regard to the latter, the academic debate has been strongly influenced by the works of Anderson (1998), Hobsbawm (1996, 1992), Laclau/Mouffe (2000), and Hall (1994, 1996). The basic theoretical idea is by now well known: national identities are not “real” or “natural” but rather culturally shaped, historically developed, and continually undergoing transformation.

Society does not have a “nature” that differs from its own imagination, its “invention”, and has no “identity” that could be ascribed to a “national core”, to “interests”, or to an ethnic “substance.”

(Sarasin 2001: 68)

National identity is thus formed by the national narrative. This concept can be attributed to Halbwachs’ idea of collective memory (Halbwachs 1967). According to this approach, every individual remembers not only the background of his own experiences but also those of others. So does society. Furthermore, memory is also always a process of selection. Not every individual memory is incorporated in the collective memory, and not every single collective memory necessarily becomes part of the overall collective, or in this case national, identity. Collective oblivion is as important as collective memory (Anderson 1998: 173-175). Although, there is not just one narrative, but rather many, of cause (Wodack/de Chilla 2007: 339), certain elements of these narratives coincide over very long periods and thereby become undisputed “truths” among the “imagined community.” Therefore, it is not the existence of certain customs or habits that shapes society, but their attribution as being essentially Costa Rican (Ricoeur cited in Wodak/de Cilla 2007: 343). In other words, society does not have a nature, but consists of a relative and precarious snapshot, which indicates a certain social order. Therefore, society can be seen as a symbolic order, using the terms of Laclau and Mouffe (2000). The historical narratives of a “nation” regarding itself are discursively constructed and reconstructed over and over again. As Anderson has emphasized, chronology is thereby turned around, and history receives a genealogy that extends from the present to the past (Sarasin 2003: 160). And “at the moment when a group looks back on its past it probably feels that it has remained constant and becomes aware of the identity that it always preserved” (Halbwachs 1967: 74).² While scientifically deconstructed or exposed as a social construction a long time ago, the concept of natural national identities remains powerful in society.

This paper is also based on the proposition of communicative constructed social reality and values (Berger/Luckmann 1969; Bergmann/Luckmann 1999). Violence and crime are often treated as objective facts with logical consequences (fear or panic), in politics as well as in

² The Halbwachs citations and references are also cited from Wodak/de Cilla 2007: 343-344. The authors explain the concept more precisely there than I do here.

the social sciences. Social scientists and policy makers thereby undervalue the importance of and the historical change in violence's meaning. Like all social "facts," violence and crime are constructed by discourse, and so, especially, is the fear of crime. When speaking of discourse, I do not mean a discussion or a negotiation process, but rather the sum of communicative contributions to a constructed reality. If this discourse is hegemonic, it constructs "valid knowledge" (Jäger 2004: 149). Thus, discourses are not shaped or managed by single persons or groups. Contrary to the widely accepted assumption that powerful actors can simply create beliefs or knowledge, I agree with Jäger, who states that no individual, but instead the whole society, determines discourse and that no single person or group is able to anticipate its definite outcome (Jäger 2004: 148). Certainly, powerful actors have a greater capacity to shape hegemonic discourse (see also Wodak 2001: 3). A famous example is the mass media, which hold and wield the symbolic power to construct and diffuse opinion, in the terms of Bourdieu (1992). Even so, there has to be an acceptance of and a transmission of these positions into everyday life for them to become "valid knowledge." If this translation into "valid knowledge" occurs, a collective imagination might become an "integral part of social organization" (Garland 2003: 106). In other words, hegemonic discourses emerge from circles without a beginning or an end. In the case of the discourse about insecurity in Costa Rica, the media write about violence and crime, for example, because they believe what they write and, simultaneously, because the people want to read about it. The people, in turn, hear about violence and crime from the media and politicians, and claim at the same time that the media has to write about it and that politicians have to respond. Politicians know about insecurity because "everybody knows," because the people call for them to know about it, and so on. Wherever we start, it is certainly never the beginning of a discourse.

To sum up: when I talk about national identity, violence, and crime in this paper, I am basically talking about social constructions shaped by communication and attitudes (social discourses). Violence plays an important role in the continual reconstruction of national identity and social order, and national identity reciprocally affects the perception of violence as well. Mechanisms to contain violence in society, government's monopoly on the use of force, and the question of "civilization" (often in contrast to the less civilized "others") are cornerstones of national identity and social order. Therefore, it is not violence and crime which are indicators of the state of society, but rather the way in which society perceives and deals with violence and crime. The social discourse about violence, crime, and insecurity therefore has to be investigated in relation to social order and national identity.

Thus, a final theoretical basis of this paper's discussion is that the individual elements of national identity or consciousness constantly run up against a continually changing lifeworld. National identity does not change from one day to another as a whole. The bigger part of a nation's self-invention stays the same over a very long period. However, some (more or less important) elements may become contradictory to everyday life and experience at a particular time. A "nation of peasants" encounters its limits in times of industrialization, for example. Therefore, research on changing national identity and consciousness is only possible

when undertaken in relation to a country's historical changes and crises. National identity changes when it is in crisis. Historical crises are the best place to analyze the transformation of national self-perception: "the history of discourses, in other words, becomes really interesting, wherever it fails to align with social reality" (Sarasin 2001: 75).

3 Crime Rates and Fear of Crime in Contemporary Costa Rica

A limited discussion of Costa Rican crime statistics may appear inconsistent in a paper which is based on the premise that fear of crime is less a consequence of rising crime than of public discourses. Nevertheless, public discourses in Costa Rica are based on the assumption that crime and violence have increased very significantly in recent years, to such an extent that if I were to disregard the statistics, the question of whether this assumption might be true would remain unanswered. Furthermore, there has in fact been an increase in crime, which should not be concealed.

Although crime statistics are often labeled as objective indicators, many reasonable doubts can be raised about them. Firstly, the quality of data depends on the capacity of the institutions to collect and merge them. Helga Cremer-Schäfer (1998: 149) has rightly called crime statistics "a redefinition of police activity reports," which document police work, not crimes committed. More police, therefore, leads to higher crime rates, and fewer police personal leads to low crime rates. Secondly, the dark figure of crimes committed relates to these capacities to a great extent. Thirdly, there is often no consensus about what to collect as indicators: complaints, police investigation results, convictions? Crime rates depend very much on the data sources. In this context it is important, too, who collects data. Measurements of crime by different state institutions can differ very much. An article by the Costa Rican vice president and minister of justice, Laura Chinchilla, in *La Nación* proves that the question of legitimate sources of crime statistics is less clear in Costa Rica than one would expect. In the article she responds to a previous article in *La Nación*, in which the author had referred to what Chinchilla terms the "wrong" statistics or sources, respectively (Chinchilla 2005). Fourthly, not every crime is reported or defined as a crime. Someone must be aware that a crime has taken place, and has to report it to the police. This often does not happen in the case of minor crimes, in cases of domestic violence (where shame plays an especially important role), in cases where the next police station is too far away or where somebody does not trust the police, in cases where people take the law into their own hands, and so on. Altogether, against this background many crimes go unreported and are therefore not recorded in the statistics. Finally, the definition of an incident as a crime may itself change over the years (see for example: Wieviorka 2006: 210). To summarize, crime statistics are by no means an objective reflection of reality, but rather

constructions that generate particular views of some segments of social reality. They construct images of patterns of crime and criminal behavior. [...] But if the information

they give on crime is restricted, they may nevertheless reveal other facts about the society that produces them.

(Caldeira 2000:106)³

Against this background, homicide rates are the most accepted indicator of crime. Such a felony is usually less often ignored, misjudged, overlooked, or unreported.

Table 1 shows the increase in homicides in Costa Rica between 1990 and 2006. In spite of my criticisms of the statistics, there's no reason not to believe in an increase of homicides in Costa Rica. While in 1990 4.5 of every 100,000 inhabitants was killed on purpose or due to negligence, by 2006 this number had continuously increased to 7.7 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. But, with 7.7 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, the situation in Costa Rica is still much better than in all other Central American countries (UNODC 2007), in many US cities (Godoy 2008:191), and in comparison to the Latin American average (WHO 2002: 274). So what is an alarming homicide rate? This is not to say that 7.7 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in 2006 is not much. But why would this number be the final straw? Before I respond to this question, I would also like to introduce the numbers for thievery. In a statistical sense, the validity of these numbers is more problematic than those for the homicide rates, but they may show rough tendencies.

Table 1: Homicides in Costa Rica, 1990–2006

Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Population ¹ (mill.)	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.9	4.0	4.1	4.2	4.2		
Homicides ² (total)	139	132	160	160	182	184	189	210	224	245	240	251	251	292	265		
Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants	4.5	4.2	5.0	4.8	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.7	6.0	6.4	6.1	6.3	6.1	7.0	6.2	6.9 ³	7.7 ³

Sources: Author's compilation on the basis of:

¹ FLACSO (2005): *Centroamérica en Cifras 1980–2005*, San José, p. 30.

² Poder Judicial de Costa Rica, Departamento de Planificación, Sección de Estadística, Área Policial.

³ Poder Judicial de Costa Rica, Departamento de Planificación, Sección de Estadística, *Compendio de Indicadores Judiciales 2002–2006*.

Thievery is one of the crimes that is mentioned most often when people talk about rising crime in Costa Rica.⁴ Table 2 does not indicate an increase in thievery in Costa Rica (although I would not call these numbers objective evidence, and could even have chosen another statistic that would indicate the opposite). On the contrary, thievery rates seem to have

³ On the discussion about the validity, the sense, and the international comparability of crime statistics see also: Muncie 1996; Maguire 2002; Schmidt 2005 (general critique) and von Hofer 2000; MacDonald 2002 (survey and comparability).

⁴ In 2006, I interviewed Costa Ricans about their perception of violence and crime in Costa Rica. Thievery (especially of money and cell phones) was mentioned most often as an example of rising insecurity (see also Huhn 2008).

declined in recent years. This decrease does not match most people's perception (Huhn 2008) or the presentation of insecurity in the public (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006; Fonseca/Sandoval 2006). These numbers (both homicides and thieveries) do not indicate that every Costa Rican should feel threatened all the time.

Table 2: Thefts in Costa Rica, 1990–2004

Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Population ¹ (mill.)	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.9	4.0	4.1	4.2	4.2
Thefts ²	7,517	9,282	10,763	10,696	n.d.	8,815	n.d.	n.d.	9,830	9,364	8,305	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	7,836
Thefts per 100,000 inhabitants	242	290	336	324		252			266	246	213				187

Sources: Author's compilation on the basis of:

¹ FLACSO (2005): *Centroamérica en Cifras 1980–2005*, San José, p. 30.

² Poder Judicial de Costa Rica, Departamento de Planificación, Sección de Estadística, Área Policial.

Yet a lot of people in Costa Rica do. Contrary to the social perception, the statistics do not naturally account for the fear of crime in Costa Rica. The most recent *Latinobarómetro* report states that 16 percent of Costa Ricans think crime is the country's biggest problem, while only 2 percent of Nicaraguans, 2 percent of Bolivians, and 6 percent of Colombians name crime as their country's biggest problem (Corporación Latinobarómetro 2007: 21)—even though crime rates are much higher in these countries. In the last CID/Gallup public opinion poll (2006), as many as 35 percent of the people consulted in Costa Rica named violence and crime as the most important national problems (CID/Gallup 2006: 4).

In 2007 the Costa Rican government announced its "National Plan for the Prevention of Violence." On the first page, the plan says, "Violence and crime have become an enormity in the country, and there has been an evident and alarming increase in the perception of insecurity by our inhabitants" (Ministerio de Justicia 2007: 3). I agree with the second declaration but would deny the first one. Violence and crime have increased in some fields and declined in others, but they have done so within manageable dimensions.

Based on the observation that crime rates have not increased radically but rather to a manageable degree, and on the assumption that crime and violence do not have a negative impact on society per se but only if the corresponding discourses lead to a negative perception, it must be asked what else has changed in Costa Rican society. In the following section I will elaborate on some theses about the reasons for this extended fear and panic, some of which might have to do with specific elements of Costa Rican national identity (or the national narrative) and fundamental breaks in the country's history.

4 The Discourse about Crime, Violence, and National Identity

On the following pages I will trace the close relationship of the Costa Rican discourses about national identity and about nonviolence or peacefulness. The image of Costa Rica as the “Switzerland of Central America,” as the Latin American exception concerning political and social conflict, or as a country of peaceful and equal people is well established. Nevertheless, I will reveal the relevance of these elements of national consciousness on the basis of very different sources or discursive arenas and demonstrate the communicatively constructed truth value of these elements as well. The sources are 1) politicians’ statements; 2) newspaper articles; 3) the statements of Costa Ricans posted on the Internet discussion forum of a Costa Rican “tough-on-crime –initiative”; and finally 4) historical travelogues, to reveal the historical dimension of this powerful perception. I choose these different discursive arenas to prove that the thematic entanglement of nonviolent national identity and violence and crime appears in very different social spaces and has a long history.

4.1 Contemporary Discourses and the Imagined Peaceful Nation

Politicians

National consciousness is an essential part of political rhetoric. State representatives may sometimes have a critical personal view regarding the concept of national identity, but in their official role they have to speak to and of a nation with certain characteristics. Secondly, their statements have certain power and are to a great extent based on (and simultaneously create) consent among the citizens. Therefore, political statements are a valuable source for illustrating the importance and the natural character of nonviolence in Costa Rican national identity.

I start with the already cited Costa Rican “National Plan for the Prevention of Violence”: the text opens with the following words:

We Costa Ricans are known in the world as a pacifist and tolerant people because our relationships with other people—with each other and with other nations—are based on values such as peace, respect and empathy.

(Ministerio de Justicia 2007: 3)

In his inaugural speech as Costa Rican president, Oscar Ariás stated the following in May 2006:

Our foreign politics are based on principles and values that are rooted very deeply in Costa Rican history, such as the defense of democracy, the validity of the law and the promotion of human rights, the fight for peace and global disarmament, and the pursuit of human development.

(Arias 2006)

This statement is reminiscent of a speech by Ariás in August 1986, on the occasion of the first 100 days of his first presidency, when he stated,

The nationality of the Costa Ricans is a heritage of great value, which we have to save and strengthen. It includes aspects of everyday life, which aren't always easy to identify. It includes our love of freedom, the willing realization of democratic policies and manners, our love of peace, a sensation of brotherliness, and many other things that unite us and distinguish us from all other nations.

(Arias 1987: 30f.)

A statement by then vice minister of public security, María Fullmen Salazar, from January 2004 serves as a final example of references to nonviolent national identity by Costa Rican politicians:

It is urgent to provide a reliable, profound, and realistic analysis of this serious problem [high crime rates], which threatens the family life and democracy of a country that historically has been civilized, pacifist, and an example for other countries.

(*La Nación*, January 30, 2004)

The examples highlight the importance of references to nonviolence in discussions of Costa Rican national identity. Also remarkable is the special manner of testifying to national innocence and peacefulness. Firstly, none of the cited politicians or sources explicitly explains these assumed traits. The cited sources refer to these reputed characteristics as self-evident and undisputable. Secondly, the way these characteristics are declared makes them appear to be natural or even genetic in a way. Expressions like “we Costa Ricans” or “the nationality of the Costa Ricans” include every member of the nation, irrespective of social, economic or local differences among persons and groups. The statements of these very powerful and model persons already suggest that nonviolence is an important element of Costa Rican national consciousness that was socially constructed long ago and persists in the present. A look at other discursive arenas confirms this observation.

Newspapers

The mass media are important actors and forums in the social construction of “truth” or “valid knowledge.” They diffuse opinions (as elements of hegemonic discourses) on the one hand, and produce and transform them on the other hand (Bourdieu 1998: 28). Hence, they are a widely noticed forum for powerful actors as well as powerful speakers themselves. Cocco (2003: 57) refers to this dual capacity, when she says,

more than being a reproduction of reality, a newspaper article is a creation. Journalists imitate, but also create—create new reality, reorganize the world, and the present, recycle sense. Informing is not only communicating, but creating and talking someone into believing something.

In order to trace the link between the discourses about violence and national identity, we will take a look at Costa Rica's leading newspaper, *La Nación*. As a powerful representative

of the state, Vice President and Minister of Justice Laura Chinchilla periodically uses newspapers as a forum. In 2007 she wrote,

We Costa Ricans have been known in the world as pacifist and tolerant persons. Over the course of our history, we have cultivated values of respect and comprehension, inherited as part of our nature and our lifestyle.

(Chinchilla 2007)

Half a year later she stated in the same newspaper,

Costa Rica was known in the world as a nation of peace and tolerance. Over the course of our history, we learned to solve our differences and conflicts through dialogue and with respect for others. Nevertheless, these distinctive traits have been disputed in recent years due to the increase of crime and violence [...].

(Chinchilla 2008)

Violence and crime are picked out as a central theme in *La Nación's* editorial or feuilleton again and again. Some further examples will highlight the connection between the discourses about violence and national identity, the latter of which is diffused and continually echoed by the media as "valid knowledge." In March 2005, *La Nación* published an article about violence and alcohol consumption in its editorial. The article's subheading says, "It is necessary to fight, with all conceivable means, against the advance of this lifestyle [drinking a lot of alcohol], which is spreading in our society." As a reason for this statement, the author writes, "The reputation of the peaceful country is becoming discredited these days" (*La Nación*, March 25, 2005). Again, violence simply does not seem to fit with the Costa Rican collective consciousness.

In March 2007, Esteban Penrod Padilla wrote an article in *La Nación's* feuilleton about an upcoming demonstration in San José against the CAFTA agreement. He wrote about the calmness of all parties concerned in the conflict about the free trade agreement, and said,

This shows Costa Rica as an atypical case on our subcontinent, and attests that our historical roots as a regardful nation of civilized people still yield results and make a difference in the troubled world [...]. Being Costa Rican is synonymous with being a people of an oasis of peace.

(*La Nación*, March 7, 2007)

The newspaper articles cited above demonstrate that the discourse about Costa Rica as a nonviolent nation is spread in the media too. *La Nación* is simultaneously an arena for politicians to preach the peacefulness of the Costa Rican nation and a speaker itself—one which takes the same line as the politicians when publishing about violence, crime, and insecurity in Costa Rica.

Thus, I have shown that there is a strong connection in the Costa Rican political and media elite between the discourse on violence and the one about the nation's nature. But does Costa

Rican society also manifest the connection between the discourses about violence and national identity? If so, it would be revealing of the power of this specific discursive entanglement.

Angry Citizens

In this section I will analyze “everyday knowledge” about the nation’s nature, as presented on an Internet forum about violence in Costa Rica. As a more or less anonymous arena, an Internet forum is a suitable place for direct arguments. The authors write their statements voluntarily and nobody forces them in a special direction (or their statements are not limited by their social position).

In recent years, a dubious citizens' initiative named *Recuperamos la Paz* (Recover Peace) has been making the headlines over and over again. One of the initiative’s leaders is Juan Diego Castro, former secretary of public safety (1994–1996), who has been campaigning for more drastic laws or judgments in Costa Rica for years (see for example: *La Prensa Libre*, March 3, 2007). *Recuperamos la Paz* reaches a broad audience through public statements, (promotional) videos, and advertisements. The initiative’s slogan is “We live under the law of the villain” (“*Vivimos bajo la ley del hampa*”) and its imagery is quite violent itself (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Recuperamos la Paz* Advertisements⁵



Source: <http://ramonenses.com/> (accessed on June 21, 2008).

The initiative is trying to force the government to strengthen its “iron fist” and to deepen fear of crime with its “if you are not afraid yet, you should start to be” rhetoric. Even the current government cannot ignore *Recuperamos la Paz* (see for example: *La Nación*, April 10, 2008). The danger of increased hatred and xenophobia due to the initiative’s rhetoric has already been revealed elsewhere (Federico Campos in *La Nación*, April 3, 2008). Nevertheless, a closer look at the initiative’s name is already enlightening in the context of this paper. “Recover Peace” is an interesting prediction in two different respects. First, it implies that there was peace before and that there is no peace today, which means it has to be recovered. In the

⁵ The first advertisement says, “Law XVI, Article 2: Hand over everything without resistance. We live under the law of the villain.” The second advertisement says, “Law VII, Article 14: Do not use your cell phone in the streets. We live under the law of the villain.”

context of the Costa Rican crime rates, the question would be when the war started. Secondly, the word “peace” refers (deliberately) to a powerful national rhetoric, as we have already seen. The initiative could serve as a perfect example of a powerful player in the social construction of fear, hatred, and panic. Nevertheless, I will not examine the initiative’s objects and actions further, but will instead focus on the statements posted on its Internet discussion forum.⁶ Do the authors of posts to the forum also refer to the nonviolent Costa Rican national identity when writing about crime and violence? Most articles are about the roots of crime and violence, punishment (mostly in terms of higher penalties),⁷ the supposed culprits, and enforcement by the police or through the reinstallation of the armed forces. The national self-perception plays an important role in many articles. So “jlundst” writes:

It is very important to recognize the drastic changes in our society from the 80s until today. We have many social problems: ethnic ones, those concerning work, and others. All this degrades the Costa Rican society we know. By now, we are no longer the country of peace.

(April 8, 2008)

Many authors, as a consequence, construct “the” Costa Ricans as victims and thereby argue on the basis of culture. “Irocasr” writes,

Maybe the problem is that we are a nation of people who always were very peaceful; the problem is that there are people who take advantage of the Costa Rican passivity.

(April 14, 2008)

“Gtfisher” states,

A country accustomed to peace, with pacifist roots, how can it achieve such high crime rates? It was achieved and is currently practiced by foreign influences. What do I refer to? Explicitly to the foreigners. If we want to take a look at the principal roots of the original Ticos, then we can see them in the rural areas, for example, where the number of immigrants is lower. You can see a great difference from the urban areas there, and that tells us that everything points at foreign influences.

(April 3, 2008)

And as a last example, the statement by “Sinuhe”:

If our grandfathers could see the present of our “pacifist” country, they would turn over in their graves knowing what has happened to the Costa Rican society, all the good habits, values, traditions [...].

(April 11, 2008)

⁶ See www.recuperemoslapaz.org/ (all accessed on June 21, 2008 and translated by the author).

⁷ There has been a discussion under way about higher penalties in Costa Rica for many years now. The advocates of law and order prevail in this discussion. In 1994 the maximum prison penalty was extended to 50 years (from 25).

The discussion on the *Recuperemos la Paz* forum reveals that the imagined collective identity of the peaceful Costa Ricans is an argument used not only by politicians, but also by citizens. Among many sources, the forum statements are a good resource for proving that. Hidden behind pseudonyms and unwatched while writing their texts, the authors feel safe saying what they really think.

The cited statements reveal two different things. First, they show that the assumed sameness, and the pacifist character, of the Costa Rican national identity is internalized in the society to the same degree as in political and media discourses. Arguments made by politicians or the media do not necessarily lead to acceptance in society. If they do, it is a sign of a very powerful or even hegemonic discourse. Therefore, it is important to consider everyday discourse as the subjectivation of elite discourses.

Secondly, the statements prove an essential finding of the theory of identity and national identity: the need for “the others” in order to define “the self,” or the need of distinctiveness in order to articulate uniqueness (Hall 1994; Hall 1996; Cilla/Reisigl/Wodak 1999). In the statements, it becomes clear that the immigrants, and especially the Nicaraguans, serve as a projection screen for incidents and habits that do not fit with the Costa Rican self-perception.

4.2 Foreign Travelers of the Nineteenth Century

As a final source, I will present travelogues from the nineteenth century, as both historical and foreign perceptions. These sources prove that the Costa Rican nonviolent collective identity has referent points in history, and that foreigners also certified (or constructed) this imagined identity.

In 1844, Robert Glasgow Dunlop, a Scottish tradesman, traveled through Central America. He later published his impressions in a book called *Travels in Central America*. Therein he wrote,

The people of Costa Rica are almost all Caucasian [...]. Their character differs very much from the people of all other Central American countries [...]. The life and properties are very safe there, and for the last four years there had been no bloody deed.

(Glasgow Dunlop 1844)

In 1857, the US citizen, author, and scientist Ephraim George Squier published a book called *Los Estados de Centro América*. About Costa Rica he wrote,

The Costa Rican people have a major part of pure Spanish blood, less mixed up with Negroes or Indians [...]. Nevertheless, their revolutions have generally been less bloody than those in Guatemala or Nicaragua, which probably can be ascribed to the circumstance of the social life and homogeneity of its inhabitants, which leads to a superior morality or a more tolerant spirit.

(Squier 1857)

Also in 1857, the Chilean diplomat Francisco Solano Astaburuaga published a book called *Repúblicas de Centro América*. About the Costa Ricans he wrote,

The people of Costa Rica are generally uniform. There are not many Indians, and the Mestizos and Negroes are located on the coasts. Intelligent, strong, of good color, and regular lineaments [...]. The people have decent habits, helpful habits, are moral, and they love their country very much.

(Solano Astaburuaga 1857)

In 1859, the famous English writer Anthony Trollope published a book titled *The West Indies and the Spanish Main*. He wrote many pages about the extraordinary character of the Costa Ricans. Like the other authors, he also wrote about the Costa Rican “race” first. Unlike the previous authors cited, he believed that *the* Costa Ricans had “mixed blood,” and he described *them* as very ugly (especially the women). Nevertheless, he seemed to be less “disgusted” by their characters:

Maybe you want me to write my opinion, on whether the Costa Ricans are a honorable nation or not. In a certain sense, they are. They don’t steal anything; at least, they do not commit great robberies. They do not attack anybody in the streets, no life is in danger for violence [...].

(Trollope 1859)

With mixed emotions, the (at that time influential) German naturalists and geologists Moritz Wagner and Carl Scherzer also wrote about Costa Rica in a book published in 1856 under the title of *Die Republik Costa Rica in Central-Amerika*. They were particularly interested in Costa Rica’s flora and fauna. Nevertheless, they also wrote again and again about the population, too. Their descriptions careen between recognition and disdain. They label *the* Costa Ricans as more friendly than all other American “races.” Nevertheless, they see this character as a sign of cultural inferiority (Wagner/Scherzer 1856: 175). They sum up their observations as follows:

In spite of antipathy for the Hispano-American race, one can not deny the frugality and temperance of the Costa Ricans, once he gets to know them better. Nor their harmless, compliant, and peaceful minds. With a certain degree of honesty, they have an advantage over the Mexicans, the Nicaraguans, and all other Central American races. Property is far less safe in the European metropolises [...] than in San José. One may travel alone and without weapons through the whole county. One will not come across wild Indians close to the paths, and the halfway civilized original inhabitants in the countryside are as friendly to the white race as the creoles themselves.

(Wagner/Scherzer 1856: 175-176)

Finally, it’s worth mentioning the German journalist Wilhelm Marr, who gained doubtful fame as a vehement anti-Semite in Germany. In 1863 he published a book titled *Reise durch Central-Amerika*. Therein he enthused about Costa Rica, which he called a paradise, especially compared to Nicaragua, “the world of the lost race” (Marr 1863).

The travelogues cited prove that the perception of the Costa Rican nation as peaceful, honorable, and different from other Central American countries has a long history. Firstly, the authors use nearly the same stereotypes that are still part of the Costa Rican national consciousness. Needless to say, they also generalize about *the* Costa Ricans. Secondly, some of them express their view of the Costa Rican nation in relation to other Central American countries. In particular, Nicaragua serves as the negative counter-example, as it still does today, something we can see in the discussions about Nicaraguan immigrants on the *Recuperemos la Paz* forum. Thirdly, the authors infer the Costa Rican national character based on certain events or the country's history in general. As the belief in the concept of human races was very common in the nineteenth century, this conclusion does not surprise. Nevertheless, the authors ascribe Costa Rican history to the national identity and not to the exceptional forms of political, economical, and social organization in nineteenth century Costa Rica, where a more equitable land distribution system was one of many differences to the other Central American countries (see for example Lindo Fuentes 1993, Gudmundsun 1993 and Samper 1993). While Costa Rican politics, society, and the social contract have fundamentally changed again and again in the last 150 years, the imagination of the peaceful nation has persisted and has often been reinvented.

To sum up, it can be noted that there is a strong connection between discourses about crime and violence and those about national identity in all discourse arenas analyzed. Politicians use the stereotype of the peaceful Costa Rican nature, as do journalists and the Costa Rican population. Those making such arguments can resort to historical sources, such as the travelogues. So, on the one hand, the perception of a national identity is widespread and often propagated; on the other hand, violence, crime, and insecurity in Costa Rica do not fit with this self-imagination. The long history of this perception and its continual repetition in the present present a heritage that surely puts pressure on a society where this self-perception conflicts with current experiences and public discourses—that is, those about rising crime rates and increasing public insecurity.

5 On the Genesis and Transformation of a Peace-loving Nation

In the following discussion, I will describe the historical context of the Costa Rican national identity and its transformation in the twentieth century. I will show that there are different historical moments in Costa Rican history that might have enforced a reconsideration of national identity against the background of "reality." Although the subject of today's discourse about violence and crime is "common" violence and delinquency—while it was rather about political violence in other periods of Costa Rican history (or is so in the historical review)—I do not distinguish between different forms of violence in this paper. When studying violence not as a social fact but rather in terms of the relationship of the Costa Rican society to violence and crime, the differentiation does not exist (or disperses beyond recognition) in

the discourse itself. The abolition of the armed forces and any contemporary opposition to crime and violence are discussed as equivalent expressions of Costa Rican national identity in the described discourse arenas.

Identity after the Foundation of the Nation State

It is no big surprise that nineteenth century travelers perceived Costa Rica as a quiet and peaceful place. The former colony had just declared itself independent from Spain (1821), had constituted itself as an independent state (1838), and had proclaimed itself a republic (1848). Land was distributed much more equitably than in the neighboring Central American countries, a relatively wide middle class inspired by the French revolution had emerged, and the political system was stable and more or less democratic most of the time. The genesis of the specific Costa Rican national identity was related to the foundation of a liberal state which made remarkable social achievements (Molina/Palmer 1992; Acuña 1993; Acuña 1995; Molina 1993; Gólcher 1993; Malavassi Aguilar 2005). Foreign travelers with concepts of natural national identities and human races in the back of their minds could perhaps not help but see an egalitarian, ethnically homogeneous, and integrative society of small coffee farmers. Even then that picture was not true. Needless to say, the travelers as well as many Costa Ricans confused social order with national identity. They also picked out some criteria and ignored others in order to form their opinions, and they did so in the light of their own experience and knowledge (Todorov 1982). Firstly, their view only implied the *valle central*, the central valley, the country's political hub and most populated area. Life on the coasts and in the country's periphery was very different. Secondly, even in the *valle central* social life and political order were far less peaceful and egalitarian than the Costa Rican national myth indicates (Palmer 2004; Malavassi Aguilar 2005). Thirdly, violent elements were part of the national consciousness in this age too (Garro Rojas 2000: 193). The figure of the national hero Juan Santamaría may serve as an example. In 1856 the workman and soldier Santamaría sacrificed himself in an assault against the outclass army of William Walker, who tried to occupy Costa Rica. His sacrifice won the battle. Juan Santamaría is today a Costa Rican national hero. Many buildings—like the international airport—are named after him, and April 11 is his official commemoration day. This national narrative stands for people's love of freedom, not for their peacefulness. The national symbols also suggest that the nonviolent element of national identity already existed, but was less solidified than it came to be. The national emblem contained cannons (which were removed in the twentieth century), and the national anthem (written in 1903) says, "If anybody tries to tarnish your [the nation's] reputation, you will see that your people, brave and male, will change their tools for weapons." All these examples do not really fit with the image of the later state, without an army and with a naturally peaceful population. Peacefulness was already part of the spare parts warehouse of national narratives in the early twentieth century, but it wasn't yet an essential part of national identity.

The Epoch of the 1940s

In 1948, Costa Rica experienced its most violent moment of the twentieth century (Lehoucq 1993; Lehoucq 1998: 97ff). Although the armed conflict only lasted some weeks, nobody would deny the violence of this epoch. The civil war was the culmination of the violent decades of the 1930s and 1940s. Following the world economic crisis of 1929, the living standards of many Costa Ricans changed notably. The apparent egalitarianism of bygone times was gone, if it ever had existed before. Especially on the banana plantations on the Caribbean coast, but also in the *valle central*, socialist ideas began to gain more and more acceptance in greater parts of society. The government reacted with a double strategy. On the one hand, demonstrations, strikes, and other struggles (like occupations of factories) were put down with a lot of violence by the police. On the other hand, the government started to enhance living standards through the implementation of a welfare policy. The civil war emerged mainly due to differences about communism and its integration into politics. President Rafael Ángel Calderón came to a pragmatic agreement with the communist party and the labor unions to implement social policies, while his opponent José Figueres insisted on strong anti-communism. After prevailing over the government in the civil war, Figueres continued with the social reforms but banned the communist party (Bell 1971; Lehoucq 1993; Lehoucq 1998; Molina/Palmer 1998; López 1998). Most important is the fact that the civil war did not lead to an authoritarian regime, as was typical of coups d'état, but to another democratic regime and the building of an exceptional welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century.

The action with the most powerful influence on Costa Rican exceptionalism was the implementation of the welfare state. The act with the most symbolic power and of greatest importance to the transformation of Costa Rican national identity was the abolition of the armed forces. This act is the most powerful symbol of peacefulness in the national identity today. In fact, back then it was more like a clever move to eliminate a powerful risk factor for the young *junta* and to avoid paying back old debts to the authoritarian regimes in the neighboring states, who had armed Figueres for his ordnance. Morales-Gamboa and Barany describe the consequences of the civil war for the national consciousness as follows:

This mythical sense of identity was enhanced by the outcome of the civil war, by the consolidation of new state-civil society relations and the resultant accentuation of differences with neighboring countries. After 1948 the self-image of Costa Ricans as the "Swiss of Central America" became a cornerstone of national consciousness.

(Morales-Gamboa/Barany 2003)

According to Sarasin, the discourse about the nation's nature collapsed because of the reality in this crisis, the civil war, and therefore transformed itself. The nation had to reinvent itself after 1948 in order for this break to become not a trauma but a recommencement.

Identity and Peacefulness after the Lost Decade of the 1980s

After its victory in the war, Figueres' *junta* proclaimed the Second Republic of Costa Rica. In the following years, the educational system was reformed, social security systems including health insurance and a pension system were established, and other steps to improve infrastructure and living standards were taken. Therefore, institutions such as the banking houses were nationalized and many public institutions were founded, for instance, the *Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad* (ICE), which would later provide electricity and telecommunication for nearly the entire society (Hoffmann 2007: 11). During this period, the idea of the peaceful nation expanded (or experienced a revival) and became established as a cornerstone of national identity.

In the 1980s, Central America tumbled into two crises, an economic and a political one. Following the world economic crisis of 1979, prices increased worldwide. People had to abstain from things that weren't essential. Therefore, the Central American "dessert economies" lost their markets due to the drop in demand for their main export products: coffee, sugar, and fruit. The living standards of many Costa Ricans changed for the worse, and unemployment, public debt, and poverty increased (de Alonso 1994; Rovira Mas 1989; Bulmer-Thomas 1987: 237ff).

Costa Rica was able to water the social crisis down through both the provision of social programs and reinforced industrialization. Nevertheless, agriculture and country life began to change and, accordingly, elements of the national identity again began to conflict with social reality.

The image of a white, rural, yeoman farmer, peaceful, and egalitarian Costa Rica—to name the essential components of that identity—has been eroded by rampant urbanization accompanied by greater violence (especially domestic violence), and, above all, by the consolidation of a class culture.

(Palmer/Molina 2004: 320)

While corresponding less and less with social reality, peacefulness became a more and more powerful national symbol in the context of the second Central American crisis—the political one. This crisis was marked by the violent conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The contra war in Nicaragua led to increased Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica. Contra troops also operated in the Costa Rican north. Therefore, the government had to react to the conflict, and society started to react to the appearance of "others." Immigration became the focus of public discourses about "being swamped by foreigners"; the overloading of the social system; and possible dangers emanating from the immigrants, especially rising violence and crime (Huhn 2005). To articulate differentiation, the Costa Rican's own identity had to be defined or verbalized again. Costa Ricans were able to resort to many tropes about themselves and about the Nicaraguans. The old story of their supposed peacefulness and the coexistent savagery of the Nicaraguans was an important one, also fed by political processes. Nicaragua was in civil war; Costa Rica declared itself neutral and the president (Óscar Arias) received a Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. The nonviolent national identity seemed more

than obvious. Another quotation from Óscar Arias, from a speech given in the United Nations General Assembly in 1986, closes the cycle of the discourse on peaceful national identity between 1948 and the 1980s:

I come from a nation without arms. Our sons have never seen a tank and do not know gun ships, warships or canons [...]. I come from a small nation that has rejoiced in democracy for over hundred years. In my country nobody—no man and no woman—knows repression [...]. My nation is a free nation.

(Arias 1987)

The collective imagination of the naturally nonviolent character of the Costa Rican nation had arisen invigorated from a crisis of national identity discourse once again.

For some years, Costa Rica has again been stuck in a crisis. After being ignored for a long time, the problem of corruption became the focus of public discourse when three former presidents were convicted of corruption in 2004. At the same time, the government had started to break down the Costa Rican social state by privatizing the old pillars of the system: the state-owned institutes and companies. The controversy regarding the privatization of the ICE has been a particular symbol of social conflict since 2000 (Hoffmann 2007). The debate about the future of the exceptional social state peaked during last year's CAFTA conflict. Both conflicts have destroyed national unity (or revealed that there never was unity) and provoked revived identity crises. Costa Rica has been divided into two embittered parties in each case. The corrupt ones and the righteous ones and the self-proclaimed advocates of social justice and the self-proclaimed advocates of economic progress, respectively. All parties consider themselves to be the legitimate keepers of the holy grail of Costa Rican national identity, while the gap between self-perception and social reality gets bigger and bigger.

6 Conclusions

Violence and crime in Costa Rica as physical acts are no invention or imagination. I do not want to create the impression that there is no "real" crime in Costa Rica (although an act is not a crime per se, but only when it is labeled and socially accepted as such). However, there are problems in the public exposure of violence and crime which result less from the phenomena themselves than from the public discourses about them. As Laclau and Mouffe point out, even if an earthquake happens or a roof tile falls down, factually, really, and beyond anyone's will, the question remains as to whether its objective specificity is socially constructed as a natural disaster or God's will (Laclau/Mouffe 2000: 144).

The public perception of insecurity and calls for law and order have increased significantly in Costa Rica in recent years (see also Córdoba 2006: 13), and fear of crime is out of all proportion to crime rates. According to Garland, this trend also exists elsewhere:

Public opinion polls since the 1970s [from Great Britain and the United States] show that the majority of people believe that the crime problem is bad and getting worse and that crime rates will continue to rise in the future: a belief that persists even in periods where both recorded and actual rates are stable or declining.

(Garland 2003: 107)

The media, politicians, and also neighbors fuel this fear through the continual repetition of the affirmation that crime and violence are a widespread problem and a threat to everybody. This constant repetition creates a problem perceived as “real.” In an investigation about the social perception of public insecurity in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua, we found clear signs that the validity of insecurity in Costa Rica is socially constructed. In interviews, most of the people argued that they know about the omnipresent threat because they read or see it in the news everyday, because the government confirms it, and because people talk about it all the time. The authentication, in turn, leads to prevalent calls for law and order, higher penalties, and tightening of the law (Huhn 2008). We have highlighted different aspects of this powerful discourse (see also Peetz 2008; Oettler 2007). The mediative element between crime and fear is the public discourse:

Sensationalist treatment of violence and delinquent events can generate a climate of fear and a strong feeling of vulnerability in the population, which is not always real or in correspondence with the observed level of violence.

(Arriagada/Godoy 1999: 10)

Fear of crime in Costa Rica can not be seen as a logical consequence of crime rates or a “real” threat. The crime statistics—as the most frequently named reference in public—do not necessarily support the social relevance of crime and violence and the fear of crime. Nevertheless, the sources cited prove the existence of another nexus that could be more illustrative against the background of the introduced theory. As I have shown, crime, violence, and insecurity in Costa Rica are often discussed as problems of national identity, while, conversely, the image of national identity is based on the absence of violence. This clash of identities remains abstract when seen as antithetic facts. The theories introduced at the beginning of this discussion help to resolve the apparent contradiction. As I have shown, the public discourse about violence, crime, and insecurity in Costa Rica is conducted as a discourse about morals or the nature of the nation’s character—at least partly. The continual affirmation that social facts such as crime and violence are unimaginable in Costa Rica due to the peaceful national identity obfuscates social processes and changes and simultaneously affects public discourses on violence and crime. The reference to a nonfactual peaceful identity constructs a diffuse in-group that needs one or more out-groups to define itself. This process leads to mistrust, xenophobia, generational conflict, and social exclusion, rather than to a solution to the problems. Crime and violence could therefore be seen as such a big social problem simply because they shouldn’t exist in Costa Rica. In the Costa Rican self-perception, violence and crime are unthinkable, or they are perceived as exterior to the iden-

tivity of the protagonists. Violence and a nonviolent identity are entangled constructed realities in Costa Rica.

Finally, I want to underline the historical dimension of the constructed Costa Rican social reality as well as the social context of the discourses. As the Costa Rican national identity is not a natural fact, it was not created in one piece in one historical moment. Its continual reinvention has an enlightening history. To answer the questions of why Costa Rican identity is in crisis over the discourses on violence and crime, and vice versa, and why there is a specific discourse on violence and crime on the basis of identity and tradition, the historical perspective is crucial. Therefore, the historical analysis of the continual self-invention of the Costa Rican national identity reveals much about the country's past and present and allows for well-founded conclusions about the structure and meaning of current social discourses about the state of society.

Further investigations of the interaction between the Costa Rican national identity and "the talk of crime" should analyze and empirically solidify

- a) the genesis of the idea of national nonviolence, its transformation over the years, and especially its mediation in society and
- b) the formation of violence and crime as social problems. Here, the transformation of the social concepts of violence and crime has to be analyzed, too. Finally, not everything that is discussed as violence or crime today was always sensed or discussed in that way. For example, domestic violence once did not exist as a named element (and was therefore not "real"). Nor did specific forms of violence against children at schools. Caning was education, not violence.

An extensive inspection of the historical changes in the form and substance of the entanglement of the discourses themselves and their mediation in schools will be the next steps.⁸ This investigation has to account particularly for social changes as possible cause variables in the transformation of discourses and perceptions. Many trails lead to a better understanding of the changing reality in Costa Rica. Blackouts on the basis of the affirmation that these processes are unexplainable in the naturally nonviolent Costa Rican nation are not part of the process; they lead only to simplistic and stereotypical interpretations.

⁸ School books or teaching materials are important sources, because they contain "valid knowledge" about their time. What is taught at schools is widely undisputed in society.

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