

THE SPECTER OF MS-13: UNDERSTANDING FEARS AND PERCEPTIONS OF BELONGING AMONG DIASPORA SALVADORANS

Donna De Cesare

"We are watching what is happening in the US" – says Armando – "it concerns us". As a legal Italian resident, who emigrated from El Salvador 27 years ago to live, work and raise his family in northern Italy, he has grown worried about anti-immigrant rhetoric there. What Armando fears most is the stigma but also the potential spread of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and other transnational gangs with roots in the United States and Central America. While this concern is remote from the lives of most Italians, Central Americans have long felt the direct impact of violence in their homelands and of US politics and policies on their lives, even from afar.

Despite a seemingly secure future in Italy, Armando regularly monitors the news from the three countries that most affect his life and his family: El Salvador, US and Italy. Armando tunes into political news from El Salvador and the US by streaming television broadcasts on his computer. On his mobile phone he receives Facebook updates about US Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) detentions of undocumented immigrants, which threaten to divide families through deportation. Armando also keeps his ear primed for local community updates from a close-knit group of teammates from his soccer club.

And he reads the daily newspaper *La Stampa* to see what Italians are thinking and saying about immigrants.

Compared with European fears about immigrants from Muslim cultural backgrounds there is scant awareness of the Central American presence in Italy. Armando says that the press often run stories linking immigrants and crime. Salvadorans are largely unnoticed and absent from press coverage, but Armando recalls that an Italian journalist he met at a soccer match last spring kept asking about the MS-13 gang. Armando says there is no gang problem to his knowledge in the city where he lives, but there are reports of MS-13 in other Italian cities. For many reasons MS-13 is Armando's worst nightmare.

The US President frequently claims that illegal immigrants cause the loss of innocent lives and often cites the gang MS-13 as justification for harsh treatment of immigrants. Although the resulting fear and pain inflicted are most acute among those hard-working immigrants who have built their lives in the US, it also creates anxiety among Latino diaspora communities in Europe. The US has a long history of criminalizing and stigmatizing immigrants even though it also takes pride in being a nation of immigrants. Irish and Italians who migrated in vast numbers in the 19th and 20th centuries suffered discrimination and prejudice and were characteri-

tnote

TORINO
WORLD
AFFAIRS
INSTITUTE

Soyapango, El Salvador, 1995. A death squad known as the "Black Shadow" is carrying out a social cleansing policy aimed at youth in gangs. This graffiti appears on a wall near the place where one homeboy was killed.

© Donna De Cesare, 1995



zed in the US press and in political speeches as criminals, drunkards, brawlers, Mafiosi, undesirables. The danger in the 21st century is that these aspersions have not only broad repercussions, but are deeply socially divisive with potentially deadly consequences. Misunderstanding the adaptive nature of gangs like MS-13 results in policies which amplify violence and alienation in immigrant enclaves. Deportation can be akin to a death sentence.

My own visual ethnographic work from the early 1990s documented the early phase of the spread of both the MS-13 and Eighteenth Street gangs, from Los Angeles where they originated to Central America, when the Clinton administration began deporting youths who were non-citizens and had ties to these US based street organizations. As I further document in my book *Unsettled / Desasosiego: Children in a World of Gangs*, it was not uncommon, that non-citizen youths who entered the juvenile or adult prison system in the 1990s would be turned over to immigration for deportation on completion of their sentences if they were over age 18. Many of the gang members I met and interviewed in 1993 and 1994 in El Salvador had been deported from the US in this way. Separated from family and support networks, they had only each other.

I also met a handful of gang members who left the US voluntarily. Sometimes they returned to El Salvador to avoid testifying in legal cases against associates – the consequences for “snitching” against a fellow gang member are dire. In other cases, alarmed parents who believed post war El Salvador would be a safer place – far from the influence of US gangs – decided to send them back. Within a couple of years, the gangs had taken hold and spread. In the most marginalized barrios local youths often viewed them as heroic worldly figures and joined gangs not only in El Salvador but also in Guatemala and Honduras.

In some ways the logic of repressive gang responses such as US Gang Crackdowns or Mano Dura mirror the strategic and moral poverty of the counterinsurgency strategies employed by the Salvadoran army with US military support during the civil wars in Central America in the 1980s. At that time entire populations were targeted because of suspected association with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation (FMLN) insurgency. The effect was to create more insurgents. Gangs like MS-13 are not political insurgents and their ideology and goals are often contradictory, but they are tenacious and adaptive. In the case of gang members whose primary community allegiance is to their gang and whose main socialization is “in extremis” through conflict and survival of the brutal Salvadoran prison experience, the overwhelming tendency is a strengthening of gang bonds.

Law enforcement experts who see gangs primarily through a narrow security lens are often at odds with immigration policy experts who see the larger repercussions that result from viewing immigrant communities – the ones most victimized by gangs – as gang host communities. If police are de facto immigration enforcement, vulnerable community members stop reporting crimes and space opens for other actors to become local enforcers. While the FBI is aware of

these implications and concedes that MS-13 is much smaller than other US-based street gangs, they nonetheless define MS-13 as a sophisticated transnational organized crime group.

Scholars like Sonja Wolf are skeptical and see a dangerous distortion that puts US immigrant communities at greater risk. The failure to find credible evidence that MS-13 is amassing significant wealth even in Central America where its influence is stronger reveals as some would argue that MS-13 is more a response to structural and systemic inequity than a crime syndicate amassing power and wealth. An Insight Crime investigation published in February 2018 offers a summary of the gang’s history, structure, use of violence, economic limitations, contradictory values and goals, as well as its tenacity. Despite its reputation for spectacular violence, investigators conclude that MS-13 is a social organization first and a criminal phenomenon secondarily, and is more properly understood as a transnational gang than as a transnational criminal organization.

And yet the force of US policy has a way of bending reality to fit its narrative. In his recent Op Ed in *The Washington Post*, gang scholar Jose Miguel Cruz writes: “In pointing to MS-13 to try to scare Americans into harsh new immigration restrictions, Trump is overstating the danger the gang poses here in the United States. Worse, by using the gang to demonize all Latino immigrants, Trump is building inner-city walls that alienate communities and risk making criminal organizations more powerful, both here and overseas”.

Armando does not read *The Washington Post*. But he does not need to in order to know that what happens in the US and in El Salvador will affect Salvadorans in Italy. “If the US deports all those people back to El Salvador what will they do?”. He already knows many people who have been hearing desperate pleas from relatives in El Salvador who want to come to Italy. “People are doubling up and taking in relatives even when they do not have work themselves. This was not happening before. You did not come unless you had a job lined up” – Armando says shaking his head – “but the violence of these last years is much worse and with the US closing off hope... It is a time bomb”.

Armando fears that even a small or copycat MS-13 gang presence will capture attention in the Italian media and direct negative commentary toward his community at a time when political parties in Europe are using anti-immigrant sentiments to rally support. “What happens in the US... We worry it could happen here too”.

Donna De Cesare is an award-winning visual journalist, and an Associate Professor at The School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin where she is also an affiliate faculty member of the Theresa Lozano Long Center for Latin American Studies.



An off-shoot of the Human Security quarterly, published in Italian by T.wai, the T.note HS Series focuses on non-traditional security and conflict transformation.