To What Extent are Gangs Sources of Security or Insecurity in the Global South?

To What Extent are Gangs Sources of Security and/or Insecurity in the Global South Today?

Gang violence constitutes a considerable security threat in all regions of the globe. Particularly in the Global South – where vast inequality and weak political institutions are more common – gang activity has developed in to a complex and multifaceted issue, which threatens the security and wellbeing of millions. By analysing gang activity in various countries, this essay seeks to elucidate the extent to which gangs can be considered as sources of insecurity and, if ever, as providers of security. In the first section, the essay will define gangs in contrast to other non-state armed actors and debate whether the greed and grievance framework is useful to analyse their underlying motivations. The focus will be placed on Central America, and a case study of the *Mara Salvatrucha* gang will be used to substantiate my claims that gangs are indeed a grave threat to security. In the following section, the essay will present a reversal of perspective by depicting gangs as providers of security in certain situations, with the use of examples from Brazil and Kenya. A confutation of this idea will follow. In the final section, the essay shall focus on the boom in the private security sector, partly caused by gang-generated insecurity. The blurring of lines between public and private security will also be addressed, with reference to examples from Cape Town and Mexico City. Finally, this essay will speak of the failings of *Mano Dura* policies, and suggest that a more comprehensive strategy is necessary in the fight against gangs.

Gangs and Insecurity in Central America

Although this is a subject upon which many thinkers have dwelt, there is no universally accepted definition of "gang", as in fact there is "little, if any, consensus as to what constitutes a gang" (Ebensen 2001: 106). Nevertheless, for the purpose of clarity, it is essential that this term be differentiated from others which hold similar connotations. In this paper, gangs will be categorised as inherently different from "non-state armed groups", such as militias, rebel groups and guerrillas, as these are entities whose *raison d'être* diverges fundamentally from that of gangs. In the case of all the aforementioned groups, their goal is essentially a political one. Their ultimate aim is generally to overthrow the state, or at least to pose some sort of threat to it. Particularly in unstable and ineffective totalitarian states, they tend to see themselves as representing a legitimate and viable alternative to state authority. Gangs can also have certain political agendas, but here it will be argued that political power does not tend to be their main objective. Certain scholars, such as Max G. Manwaring, disagree with this idea as they *do* see gangs as having the political aim of taking over the state "one street or neighborhood at a time" otherwise known as a "coup d' street[*sic*]" (Manwaring 2008: 2).

The emergence of gangs is generally due to a combination of factors. They have a tendency to flourish in states which have been ravaged by war and which, as a result, have weak governments and high levels of inequality, social exclusion, and corruption. These economic and social elements, such as marginalisation and lack of prospects, coupled with the ready availability of arms and the pursuit of "machismo" (a particularly desirable attribute in Latin American culture), provide fertile ground for the proliferation of gangs (Rodgers & Muggah. 2009: 5). They often have the function of complementing the state in areas riddled with corruption and inefficiency by filling in for inexistent local state institutions, thus serving sections of the population that are underserved and unrepresented. Nevertheless, their

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intent is generally the pursuit of economic interests and the political functions tend to be a necessary means of maintaining the support of their community. A comprehensive definition of what constitutes a gang is presented in Rogers and Muggah's *Gangs as Non-state Armed Groups: The Central American Case:*

"Gangs in the proper sense of the term are much more definite social organisations that display an institutional continuity that is independent of their membership. They have fixed conventions and rules, which can include initiation rituals, a ranking system, rites of passage, and rules of conduct that make the gang a primary source of identity for members. Gang codes often demand particular behaviour patterns from members, such as adopting characteristic dress, tattoos, graffiti, hand signs, and slang, as well as regular involvement in illicit and violent activities. Such gangs are also often – but not always – associated with a particular territory, and their relationship with local communities can be either oppressive or protective (indeed, this can change from one to the other over time)" (Rodgers & Muggah 2009: 3).

The *greed and grievance* conceptual framework, which is most commonly used in relation to civil wars, can provide a useful lens for analysing the underlying stimuli of gangs. Grievance can be seen as the root cause for the emergence of gangs – a reaction to inequality, marginalisation, and a lack of political rights. Gangs are often born out of a desire to take matters into their own hands, in order to better their social standing. Greed, however, is what fuels them. In creating an alternate form of authority to which to pledge allegiance, their focus is swayed towards ameliorating their economic conditions through illicit activities. This desire for self-enrichment takes the upper hand and is met through the control and distribution of goods and resources, leading to their involvement in activities such as drug-trafficking, extortion, arms trade, contract killing, and human trafficking. Therefore, it seems that both greed and grievance play a part in explaining the nature of gangs. This conclusion is echoed in Collier's*Rebellion as a Quasi-Criminal Activity*:

"grievance and greed may be necessary for sustained rebellion: grievance may enable a rebel organization to grow to the point at which it is viable as a predator; greed may sustain the organisation once it has reached this point" (Collier 2000: 852).

This logic can be applied to the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) which, alongside its bitter rivals *Dieciocho,* is considered to be the most feared gang in the Americas. The gang originated in the slums of Los Angeles, following a huge influx of Salvadorans fleeing from the civil war in their homeland. It was the early 1980s, and the military-led government of El Salvador was embroiled in a fierce civil war against a coalition of left-wing guerrilla groups which went by the name of *Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front*. The uprising had erupted after peaceful attempts at reform had been violently suppressed by the U.S-backedSalvadoran government. Many consider this to be one of the last wars by proxy of the Cold War, given U.S and Soviet aid was provided to the opposing sides. In order to escape this bloody civil war that claimed between 70,000 and 80,000 lives, many Salvadorans fled to the U.S in search of asylum. Numerous migrants were refused refugee status due to the stern policies of the Reagan administration and were therefore forced to live as illegal immigrants. In the U.S, they found themselves excluded from mainstream society. Not only were they met by hostility and marginalisation, but they also suffered from low living standards, and struggled to integrate due to linguistic and cultural barriers.

Moreover, ever since the formation in the 1920s of the first Mexican street gangs in Los Angeles, Hispanics had been subjected to widespread discrimination. Fuelled by negative media coverage, Hispanics had been increasingly associated with criminality in the public eye. All this hostility and prejudice instilled a sense of grievance in the Salvadoran immigrants. And, unsurprisingly, many of these youths, who found themselves in L.A neighbourhoods in which crime and violence was already rife, either joined or started their own gangs. They finally found inclusion in a country which had impeded their integration. *Mara Salvatrucha*, a by-product of grievance and discontent, was conceived and soon became the bitter rival of *Dieciocho*, another Los Angeles-based gang composed mainly of Mexican-American members. The conflict between the two escalated in the late '80s and early '90s, and members of both were thought to have played a large part in the Rodney King riots in 1992.

Consequently, as gang violence intensified particularly in California, new legislation was introduced which increased the severity of sentences for gang members and permitted minors to be treated and charged as adults. In 1996,

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Congress introduced the *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act* which meant that non-US citizens, and also foreign-born US citizens, could be deported if sentenced to a year or more in prison. Many of those repatriated were members of MS-13, and upon their return to their country of origin, they found fertile ground for the spread of gang culture. The country had failed to improve on its structural inadequacies following the end of the civil war in 1992, and levels of violence were still extremely high. The state struggled to provide security and enforce the rule of law and "reductions in government expenditures on social services (…) served to limit young people's opportunities to pursue decent and dignified lives" (Perez 2013: 228).

As a result, much of this disenfranchised youth started joining gangs to escape marginalisation, much like the previous generation had in Los Angeles. A dramatic explosion of the gang phenomenon ensued not only in El Salvador, but also in other Central American countries such as Honduras and Guatemala. As the gangs grew in scope, so did the activities in which they dabbled. Gangs ceased to be solely a means of inclusion in society, a reaction to grievance, and started becoming businesses geared to self-enrichment and profit maximisation. They had matured as predators, and now greed was beginning to creep in. Gangs had already been sources of insecurity up to this point, but mainly to members of other gangs. However, as the gang phenomenon has grown, it has generated evermore violence and insecurity through the proliferation of drug trafficking, widespread extortion, kidnappings, and other activities. With the increase in commercial gain came a need to protect their markets and keep their competitors in check and this was accomplished through the use of violence. Furthermore, a similar level of forcefulness had to be used to halt the interference of police and other security organisations.

The patterns of action of gangs in the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) have a lot in common. On a local level, gangs are often involved in the intimidation and murder of their out-spoken opponents, whether they are political candidates, journalists, or even teachers. Extortion rackets are also extremely widespread and constitute the bread and butter for most Central American gangs. The transport sector is undoubtedly the most affected, although also teachers, students, sex workers, and shopkeepers, among others, are often forced to comply with the gangs' requests (Wolf 2012: 14). Failure to do so results in harassment and even death. Transport companies are forced to pay all the different gangs that control the areas in which their busses or taxis transit. In 2010, 130 bus drivers and 53 bus toll collectors were murdered in Guatemala alone. In September of the same year in El Salvador, the entire national transport system was brought to a halt for three days following threats from MS-13 and MS-18 due to the introduction of new anti-gang legislation (Seelke 2013: 12).

However, over the last decade gangs in the region have increasingly shifted their attention towards drug trafficking (Rodgers & Muggah 2009, 9). These countries serve as a critical point in the shipment of drugs, mainly cocaine, from the Andean countries to North America. These gangs are not generally involved in the wholesale of the narcotics but rather only have the function of facilitating their safe arrival to the Mexican cartels. It has been suggested that the flow of drugs in to the region, which has led to increased levels of drug consumption, has exacerbated violent behavioural patterns within gangs (Perez 2013: 229). The traditional route for cocaine traffic is through Honduras and Guatemala before arriving in Mexico, although in recent years El Salvador's role in the drug trade is increasing (Farah & Phillips Lum, 2013: 8). This is connected with the fact that MS-13 is the gang with most direct links to the drug trade, due to their interaction with "*transportista* organizations" and, occasionally, with the *Los Zetas* cartel (Farah & Phillips Lum, 2013: 9).

A lack of accurate statistical data makes it hard to determine how much criminal violence in Central America can be attributed to gangs. However, the link between gang activity and the disproportionately high levels of violence in the region is undeniable. In fact, The Northern Triangle of Central America has the highest murder rate of any region on the globe, with three of the five highest homicide rates in the world. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's 2010 report, the murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants is 60.9 in Honduras, 51.8 in El Salvador, and 49 in Guatemala. These statistics alone prove the extent of insecurity caused by gangs. Although not all of these killings are attributable to them, the vast majority most certainly are. The violence they generate permeates almost all aspects of daily life, making this the most insecure region on earth, and the most blatant example of how gangs generate insecurity.

Can Gangs Ever be Considered as Sources of Security? The Case of Rio de Janeiro and Nairobi

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In multiple instances, gangs can be likened to states. As previously discussed, they often arise in power vacuums that the state is incapable of filling – "They comprise an alternative social order (…) seeking to improve the competitive advantage of its members in obtaining an increase in material resources" (Jankowski 1991: 22). This is not the only similarity between states and gangs. Gangs usually have a hierarchical structure, much like governments, and are often based on certain ideologies which have a cohesive effect on the organisations. Most importantly, gangs have rules, norms, and a system of laws. They have rudimentary (and often barbaric) judiciary systems and more often than not have the monopoly on violence on the territory they control, be it a club-house, neighbourhood, or large rural area (Skaperdas, Syropoulos 1995: 62). Given that the ability to monopolize the use of force is debatably the most significant characteristic of a nation-state, at least in Weberian terms, then gangs in certain cases may be seen as legitimate organisations. Would it not be apt to classify gangs as legitimate rulers and thus providers of security when they offer the sole source of authority in areas where the state is absent and utterly powerless?

In these contexts, gangs have many attributes of "primitive states" (Skaperdas, Syropoulos 1995), and they tend to live in symbiosis with the actual nation-state that surrounds them. As Tilly illustrates in *War Making and State Making as Organised Crime,* with reference to post-1600 European nation states, there are four ways in which states organise violence: war-making, state-making, protection, and extraction. For Tilly, war-making entails the elimination of rivals from outside the territory over which the state, or indeed a gang, rules. State-making is the eradication of rivals inside that territory. Protection is the removal of their clients' enemies, while extraction is the accumulation the assets which will permit the achievement of the first three activities (Tilly 1989: 181). All four of these activities can in turn be applied to gangs. In other words, both modern gangs and the states which are the subject of Tilly's analysis use coercion as a means for sustaining their existence. In modern times, gangs can therefore be seen as parallel states which assume state-like functions such as the enforcement of security, the provision of jobs and the taxation of businesses.

The gangs that dominate the *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro are a clear example of this phenomenon of parallel states. Some see an even more radical picture:

"More than just filling in space left by the government, illegal networks appropriate existing state and societal resources and power and use them to establish protected areas in which traffickers can engage in illegal activities. More than parallel 'states' or 'polities,' drug trafficking in Rio represents an expression of transformed state and social power at the local level" (Arias 2009: 196).

As illustrated in Arias and Rodrigues' *Myth of Personal Security*, the gangs that control the *favelas* aim to create an environment in which there is a perceived sense of safety. They do this be ensuring that there is interaction and constructive dialogue between themselves and the residents. The gangs have also created a system, that can be regarded as a distorted rule of law, based on the respect of norms, dispute resolution, and the management of crime (Arias, Rodrigues 2006: 56). Furthermore, in order to diminish the residents' perception of exclusion from society as a whole, they have created a hierarchical system within the communities which marginalises only certain members. Different classes of people have different levels of respectability: "the *trabalhador* (worker), *pai de familia* (family man), or *mulher de idade* (older woman) generally has more protection than a *viciado* (addict), *bebado* (drunk), or *vagabondo* (criminal, bum)" (Arias, Rodrigues 2006: 64). Also, as general rule, those who adhere to the laws of the community and are well-connected can regard themselves as being more secure than others. This means that the residents feel that their fate is in their own hands, as they have the ability to immunize themselves to an extent. Following these rules or belonging to these categories gives individuals a "perceived level of predictability and security" (Arias, Rodrigues 2006: 67) despite not having a guarantee of safety.

The creation of this sense of order means that the gangs themselves have to be particularly careful to respect the rules they have set out, as it is necessary for their own survival as leaders of the community. An attack or a constant abuse of power against one or more well-respected residents can create a sense of animosity which could lead to undesirable consequences. These could come in the form of protests and riots which could lead to a police intervention. This could also lead to residents breaking the sacred *lei de silêncio*, which prohibits them from speaking publicly about crimes or illicit activities perpetrated by the gangs. Alternately, the community could orchestrate the

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deposition of the traffickers by helping a rival gang in their quest for power. Therefore, it is in the interest of the traffickers to follow a political logic in maintaining order.

All the above contributes to "the myth of personal security" in the exceptionally dangerous and insecure *favelas*. But can this perceived safety be classified as security? The fact that the residents feel relatively safe does not mean that they truly are in actual fact. Given that the notion of security is central to this analysis, it is essential that the definition is clearly elucidated. Krahmann's *Security: Collective Good or Commodity* outlines three distinct ways in which security can be conceptualised. The first can be defined as preventative security: this definition focusses on the preventive elimination of the causes of threats. The second is principally concerned with deterrence, seeking to "hold off a threat from becoming an actuality" (Krahmann 2008: 382). It intends to change the perspective of the agent that would be the cause of insecurity, dramatically altering their view and thus causing them to incorporate much less desirable effects in the consequences of a proposed attack. Krahmann suggests guard dogs (on an individual level) and "highly visible military exercises" (on an international level) as examples of this mechanism of deterrence. The third definition offered by the author differs considerably from the previous two, as it does not focus on the causes of threats and prevention, but rather on the containment of consequences.

Through a combination of offensive and defensive measures, this type of security seeks to eliminate threats when they present themselves. Traffickers in the *favelas* do not overall prevent, deter, or eliminate threats. They may provide a certain degree of protection against thieves or rapists, but on the whole they *are* the sources of insecurity. Moreover, these offenders, who are generally guilty of interpersonal violence, are punished by means which are often more violent than the crime they originally committed. The idea that these gangs may be providing a level of security is highly paradoxical, given that the main threat to the community is generated by the gang itself. Furthermore, residents in the slums of Rio are exposed to double-prong attacks: not only must they worry about threats generated by gangs, but also by police who are targeting the traffickers with little concern for civilian casualties. As many as 1159 murders were attributed to Rio's police force in 2003 (Lemgruber 2004, cited in Arias & Rodrigues 2006: 57). It could be argued that the actual members of the gangs limit their personal insecurity by joining. However, often individuals sign up in order to escape the threats posed by the gang and are therefore aiming for personal security by joining the source of insecurity itself. Moreover, gangs are often embroiled in wars against rivals and as a result the members become targets and are more highly subjected to threats.

Another case, which highlights a different type of gang-state relations, is that of the *Mungiki* gang in Kenya which became extremely popular in the slums of Nairobi in the early '90s. The *Mungiki* philosophy is centred on the restoration of Gikuyu traditions (based on social order and egalitarianism) which had allegedly been eroded by European colonialists. Not only do they criticize cultural imperialism, but also the failing of the Kenyan state with regard to equality, violence, and political oppression. Local opinions on the organisation are extremely varied due to its "chameleon character"; however, there is little doubt over its involvement "in some way in all of Kenya's problems: religious and ethnic frictions, political struggles, property rights and security, which is Kenya's biggest headache" (Servant 2007: 552). By 2002, the estimated number of members ran into the hundreds of thousands, and the gang was embroiled in numerous illicit activities. There is no doubt that the group benefitted from the backing of powerful individuals in the political apparatus. There has been much speculation linking the group to the KANU party, which ruled until 2002. It is thought that the party employed the *Mungiki* gang to protect their supporters and intimidate their opponents, using them as "a potent political weapon to be deployed in the struggle for votes" (Anderson 2002: 552).

Much like the previously discussed gangs, *Mungiki* was born out of a desire for social and political improvement, but had swiftly moved on to the pursuit of materialist gains. The accumulation of economic resources came in the form of forceful imposition of services like garbage collection, and the near-monopolizition of *matatu* (mini-bus) routes in and around Nairobi. Most importantly however, they began providing a private security service in Nairobi's shantytowns where police presence was minimal: "the black market equivalent of the legal private security firms that look after the posh areas" (Servant 2007: 521). This urban vigilantism was regarded by many residents as a legitimate form of "community policing". They were often seen as protectors in the violent and anarchic slums, which were left disregarded by the inadequate police force. In fact, the police more often than not condoned the work of vigilantes and on various occasions even collaborated with them. The police would turn a blind eye to the vigilantes' possession of weapons, and in turn the vigilante groups would indeed consult the police in the case of major incidents. The

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cooperation between the two blurred "the distinction between the formal policing undertaken by the agents of the state, and policing undertaken by a variety of private security forces, including vigilantes" (Anderson 2002: 546). This can be seen as a case of hybrid authority, consisting of a partial shift of authority, albeit unofficial, to an informal provider of security.

Despite the implications, it would, however, be a mistake to consider the *Mungiki* gang as a legitimate provider of security, solely due to their political connections and to the fact that their actions are at times condoned by the corrupt and inefficient police force. Mungiki vigilantes are not held accountable for their actions, and are willing to break the law by using extreme physical force and intimidation in order to achieve their objectives. They are responsible for a multitude of atrocities, and are characterized by a mafia-like modus operandi. As Peter Kimathi, a spokesperson for Kenya Police, pointed out "their members are criminals; they are armed and terrorize residents instead of providing security. They operate like terror squads" (Muiruri 2002, cited in Anderson 2002: 547). The gang was banned in 2002 but continues to operate today, contributing to Nairobi's dire levels of public security. An examination of *Mungiki* in Kenya and gangs in the *favelas* of Rio has led to the conclusion that despite the fact that on the surface certain gangs may appear to provide a certain degree of security, a more in depth analysis suggests that this is far from the truth. Gangs can sometimes be considered as legitimate organisations, but they most certainly can't be considered as sources of security.

The Battle Against Insecurity: Private Security Companies, Blurred Lines, and Long-Term Solutions.

This essay posits that gangs constitute a grave source of insecurity, so what measures are being taken by states and individuals to minimize these threats? A sector that has certainly grown in size and influence, in part as a result of gang-generated insecurity, is the private security sector. The urban insecurity caused by gangs and non-state armed actors impacts on the everyday lives of millions of people. This has in turn led to citizens arming themselves, erecting gated condominiums and flocking to private security companies in drones in a bid to minimize the fear of being extorted, robbed, or attacked. All this contributes to the creation of an atmosphere in which threats and insecurity are often perceived to be greater than they are in reality. Worldwide, private police are gradually assuming the protection of transport routes, workplaces, and private homes at the expense of public police forces. The rise in popularity of private security companies is particularly apparent in countries of the Global South which have only recently democratized. As was previously discussed, these countries provide fertile ground for the emergence of gangs, but they also tend to have high levels of corruption and widespread impunity within the public policing apparatus. These hangovers from authoritarian pasts contribute to the growing trend of bypassing public police in favour of private alternatives.

With this shift from public to private security providers, the state loses a considerable proportion of legitimacy. Davis (2009) suggests this is a vicious cycle of sorts: unless the citizens actively fight for transparency and accountability, the state will not embark on the arduous mission of reforming the police and eradicating corruption; the lack of advances in police reform causes further disenchantment for the citizens and leads them to seek alternative options (Davis 2009: 238). This process entails a weakening of the state and a shift of the legitimate use of force from the state to civil society. In fact, "scholars have noted that the number of private police far outranks that of public police, thereby substantially adding to the physical presence of law enforcement" (Button 1999, cited in Davis, et al., 2003: 197). This is not to say that both now have the same level of power: private security is governed by restrictive regulations, while "public security authorities retain legislative authorisation and a breadth of jurisdiction that no other actors possess" (Abrahamsen and Williams 2007: 243).

Furthermore, the two do not have the same roles or objectives. Public police aims to protect the public as a whole, not only the interest of its clients, as it is indeed accountable to the entire public and not only to the market and its clients. This also means that the two have a different approach to security: public security punishes criminals for breaking the law, which acts as a deterrent; private security firms, on the other hand, are only concerned with reducing the risk of crime (Irish 1999: 7). Despite their differences, however, the undeniable reduction of the role of public police has led to the blurring of lines between public and private security, and in some instances to the creation of hybrid public/private structures.

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South Africa offers perhaps the most blatant case of extensive integration of public and private security, and an example of how the role of the state is mutating. The end of the apartheid was followed by an escalation of crime-rates and fear within the white minority. As a result, South Africa's private security sector experienced virtually unparalleled growth-rates of 30% after 1994 (Abrahamsen & Williams 2007: 9). These companies were initially subjected to criticism, as their prime objective of commercial success put in doubt their true commitment to crime reduction. Nevertheless, as Abrahamsen and Williams (2007: 10) observe, "the South African private security sector at the moment enjoys an unprecedented acceptance and endorsement of its contributions to safety and security". In fact, there are few cases that exemplify an effective public-private partnership better than the Cape Town Central City Improvement District (CCID) project. In a city riddled with violence, largely caused by gangs such as *Hard Living, Americans* and the infamous prison-gang *Numbers*, the reduction in crime has been palpable. It has been claimed that there has been a decline in crime of nearly 90% since CCID was launched in 2000 (Johns 2012), giving further potency to the idea that private security firms' "ability to act as legitimate and ever more pervasive private providers and public 'partners' is increasing" (Abrahamsen & Williams 2007: 15).

The situation in Mexico City, however, paints an entirely different picture. Here the citizens are witnessing not so much integration, as rivalry between public and private security. Mexico City also saw a boom in private security companies in the mid-1990s, and by 2002, close to 22,500 private security guards were operating there (Davis 2006: 76). Levels of insecurity are exceptionally high in the capital as the Mexican Drug War continues, with cartels battling rivals and government forces. As a result of these extortionate levels of violence, citizens and businesses have increasingly turned to private security firms to ensure their safety, which could not be guaranteed by the corrupt public police.

In various instances, public and private police have entered into conflict with one another. There have been cases of private police withholding information "in order to protect their own 'monopolization' of the means of coercion" which has grave implications for "legal procedures and democratic fundamentals associated with a single rule of law" (Davis 2009: 239). Private police have also been accused of violations of human rights, extra-judicial killings, and general abuse of coercive power, but given the state's apparent inability to limit private security forces, most complaints go unanswered. This has raised questions about a lack of institutional accountability and it has been suggested (Davis 2006) that there is widespread impunity in the private security sector due to the high numbers of ex-police or ex-military members. In fact, public police fired over corruption charges often move on to private security companies where they share "knowledge and personal relations" (Davis 2009: 239). In Mexico City, the blurring of lines doesnt come in the form of productive cooperation, but rather in the form of competition and scarce accountability. This fuels greater fear in citizens, who are left in a state of uncertainty over who will harm them and who will protect them.

Under a certain light, the proliferation of private security has its perks. In a utilitarian framework, it would seem that the increase in the number of personnel and quantity of capital invested in the provision of security automatically means that people are safer. However, a consideration of the various factors in play reveals that this is not always the case. When there is harmonious public/private collaboration, as in Cape Town, the outcome can be a potent force in the fight against crime. Nevertheless, it seems this result is only achievable in countries where democracy is more deeply entrenched – here the power of private police can be contained and restricted more effectively. In politically and economically fragile countries, where crime is rife and public police corrupt, inefficient and underfunded, individuals are unsure which armed actors will best protect them: gangs, private police, or public police. Competition between public and private forces, with the ambiguities that ensue over who has the power to do what, only contributes to making both forces less credible as providers of security. Consequently, in cases such as the favelas of Rio and Sao Paolo, the position of the ruling gangs is further boosted. Moreover, as suggested by Davis (2006; 2009), with more and more individuals carrying weapons as a condition of their job, violence becomes an increasingly common resolution, thus promulgating insecurity.

In sum, private security can be a force for good if it's sufficiently supervised and scrutinized by the citizens and the state. In those countries where this is not possible, all it does is contribute to the deterioration of security. Therefore, overall the private security boom in the last few decades, rather than countering the threat of gangs, has contributed to the general escalation of fear and insecurity. There are of course multiple exceptions to this, particularly on the

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individual level. A rich banker in Rio is certainly safer with his full private security package – including bullet-proof vehicle, gated condominium and entourage of bodyguards – than without.

Efforts by the state aimed at crippling gangs have also fallen short of their goal. The *Mano Dura* ("strong hand") policy introduced in 2002 by the Honduran president Maduro was soon emulated by other Latin American governments. The new approach, which authorized the imprisonment of individuals even if they were merely suspected of belonging to a gang, seemed to work temporarily but soon started to produce catastrophic consequences, as prisons turned in to "gangland finishing schools" (Arana 2005: 99) and gangs retaliated in the most brutal of fashions. The problem with these zero tolerance laws, aside from the violations of human rights they entail, is that they focus exclusively on harsh law enforcement, with no consideration for the underlying issues. A more constructive approach is needed to counter the mounting danger posed by gangs. Most importantly, social and educational reforms are necessary to avoid young people joining in the first place. They need to be presented with an alternative, a metaphorical carrot, which gives them the belief that going down the path of organised crime isnt the only option they have. Not only should targeted school programs be instituted, but issues such as overpopulation, corruption and weak democratic institutions must be addressed.

Conclusion

Grievance can usually be seen as the root cause for the emergence of gangs. Greed, however, represented by the involvement of gangs in activities aimed at commercial gain, is what fuels them. Gangs create fear and insecurity for millions, as they adopt violent measures to achieve their goals. In certain communities, they may appear to be providers of security, but on closer inspection, this is merely perceived safety. Partially as a result of gang violence, the private security sector has grown significantly in recent years. However, this phenomenon has not always produced positive outcomes, as competition between private and public security forces has at times led to greater insecurity. Government policies to counter the danger posed by gangs have often failed, due to an overemphasis on law-enforcement. The adoption of a comprehensive and multifaceted strategy is essential if the war against gangs is to be won.

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