

Jon Horne Carter, *Gothic Sovereignty: Street Gangs and Statecraft in Honduras*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022. Photographs, bibliography, index, 368 pp.; hardcover \$31.95, paperback \$31.95, ebook \$31.95.

Howard Campbell, *Downtown Juárez: Underworlds of Violence and Abuse*. Austin: University of Texas Press 2021. Photographs, bibliography, index, 264 pp.; hardcover \$29.95; paperback \$29.95, ebook \$29.95.

Over the past five years, a remarkable amount of research has been published on violence and crime in Latin America, perhaps the most important social phenomenon facing the region today, due to its impacts on basic rights and the safety of individuals and communities around the hemisphere. The two books reviewed here reflect important anthropological interventions in this growing literature that provide new insights into the practices of state power in the region and the everyday experience of violence.

In *Gothic Sovereignty*, John Horne Carter analyzes Honduras's maras. The book builds on a critical framework centered on the writing of Walter Benjamin, offering a nuanced critic's reading of the experience of gang activity in that country. Carter presents a deep analysis of various aspects of gang activity.

At this volume's heart is the concept of gothic sovereignty, which brings together post-Foucauldian notions of state power as an emergency in which the state can determine when the rule of law applies and therefore who lives and who dies, and the exercise of a macabre gang counteraesthetic to critique state power and the legitimizing forces of civic and market liberalism in which the state's power is grounded. Carter writes,

I use the term “gothic sovereignty” to describe the two interlocking phenomena of the foundation of gang life in Honduras: The historical return of state actors licensed to carry out the excesses of sovereign power in states of emergency, and criminal aesthetics of gangs that draw their vitality from sovereignty's spectral lawlessness . . . . These two phenomena—the enduring impunity of lawless actors within the state and the seductive moral inversions of criminal worlds—anchor gothic sovereignty as a dialectical imbrication of historical fact and aesthetic practice (p. 15).

Gang tattoos loom large in this analysis. Carter writes, “Symbolic and yet fragmentary, tattoo images enact a ‘semiotic incoherence’ that bridges the often opposed realms of affect and symbol wherein the symbol-image is not a staid repository of meaning but a social actant with unpredictable consequences in the world” (15). What I take this thesis to mean is that sovereign power as exercised in twenty-first-century Honduras is one in which the state enacts a grim violence outside the law and in which the gang members respond to their social marginalization by

marking their bodies with gruesome images as a form of critique that illuminates the fissures of Honduran society, politics, and economy and reveals the varied fictions underlying the premise of a liberal polity, the market economy, and the rule of law.

This book also seeks to alter the social scientific reading of maras. Carter argues that there are two core readings of the mara phenomenon. In US policy circles, the maras are the products of weak states in the Global South that generate crime and disorder (52). An alternative story, Carter argues, focuses on the maras not as a Central American phenomenon but as a product of the United States, where young civil war refugees became gang members to protect themselves and, after deportation in the 1990s, returned to Honduras, forming maras (5–8). Carter, however, wants to ground the maras he is studying in the recent history of the country where they operate. He writes that it is important to understand not just where the maras came from but the conditions under which they thrived (5–9, 52). Indeed, he notes that as of the mid-2000s, relatively few mara members were deportees (6). Carter writes that the conditions that supported maras were deeply connected to Central American politics and, in particular, the dynamics of the Contra War, in which, he argues, United States-supported death squads and anti-Sandinista insurgents received income through drug trafficking activities that made use of CIA-provided infrastructure (9–10). These transnational state-paramilitary dynamics interwove themselves with underlying corruption in the Honduran state and wider social inequality to produce the particular criminogenic conditions that allowed maras to flourish.

These are important interventions in the debate on gangs in Latin America. Acknowledging the critical aesthetics of sovereignty in Honduras and how gangs reflect a challenge to that is an insightful contribution to understanding the implications of gang activity for state power and the ways that violence and governance are practiced that goes beyond much of the existing scholarship.

Perhaps the most important limitation to Carter's monograph is in its comparative context, which, in its empirical references, focuses almost wholly on Central America. The phenomenon of large-scale gangs is found throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Gangs arguably operate as a form of complex dissidence in other areas, as Alves has noted in his book *The Anti-Black City* (2018), or as evidenced by the activities of an array of well-organized and violent groups in Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, Jamaica, and Brazil. Poor people are exploited and marginalized around the region, and many, particularly in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Guatemala, are also deported from the US. Nowhere, though, save perhaps for El Salvador, do these Honduran dynamics of "gothic sovereignty" also appear. Many of Colombia's criminal groups are also partly products of counterinsurgency. Most of these groups thrive on corruption and the involvement of powerful actors in state and society in the international drug trade. Yet the "gothicness" apparent in Honduras does not appear in most places.

By failing to engage with the much wider literature on gangs, violence, and crime in Latin America and the Caribbean and the question of why gang engagement with state power differs in those locales, Carter misses an important opportunity to

investigate what shapes the maras and what brought them to the disturbing aesthetics he writes about. Something interesting has happened in Honduras, and Carter has illuminated elements of it, but without attempting to engage with the literature on violence in the region more broadly, it is left to the reader to figure out why the maras differ from other criminal groups. In the current framework, we are left with the idiosyncratic answer that it is Honduras, the Contra war, and the experience of deportation, but not why these dynamics produced gang practices and aesthetics here that differ somewhat from other places. This is not sufficient to understand how these groups fit into the regional contexts or to fully inform debates about the experience of gangs and violence.

Howard Campbell's *Downtown Juárez* begins from a similar methodological, disciplinary, and thematic perspective as *Gothic Sovereignty* and yet produces a markedly different contribution to our social scientific knowledge of violence in Latin America. Whereas *Gothic Sovereignty* is broadly about Honduran maras, *Downtown Juárez* is much narrower, focusing on two neighborhoods in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. While Juárez itself has 1.5 million inhabitants today, this book focuses closely on the Avenida Juárez area and the adjacent Bellavista neighborhood that constitute central Juárez.

The product of Campbell's ethnography is fascinating. The book examines one portion of the life of the "underworld" in downtown Juárez, providing descriptions of the experiences of small-time drug dealers, sex workers, their clients, and Campbell's interactions with them. The stories reach, at times, a block by block, building by building level of detail that provides, at least to an outsider who has visited Juárez only once, a rich level of detail. Stories at times start with descriptions of particular bars, street corners, or communities in the city to tell a larger story that sometimes feels like a very rich travelogue. They provide important details about the experiences of the city and the author's at times harrowing efforts to conduct research there. These stories are powerful and important.

Despite this real richness, the book feels a bit schematic at times. The many stories the author tells are only lightly connected to social scientific debates. The core of the author's argument is built on the work of Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois, and others in suggesting that there are many causes of violence in Latin America. In this context, understanding violence in the region involves two important intellectual moves often missing from much of the literature. The first is to focus on everyday forms of violence rather than just the drug trade or gang activity. This approach, to which Auyero and Bertí (2015) draw attention, examines how the underlying stresses of poverty, inequality, gendered violence, and segregation produce dynamics that generate forms of violence rooted in people's lives that often go unobserved in much of social science. The second move in this rereading of violence is to understand that victims and victimizers are often deeply intertwined. By understanding how individuals frequently fall into both categories, and indeed, how being a victimizer often leads someone to become a victim and vice versa, Campbell offers a nuanced reading of violence in the region, drawing attention to often underanalyzed dynamics.

While the ethnography is quite rich, at times the reader learns more about Campbell's experiences than the life of the city's inhabitants. This, of course, is a risk in any sort of social science, and certainly Campbell is telling a set of largely unrecognized stories in the voices of Juárez's inhabitants, bringing to print experiences not otherwise available to many readers. Yes Campbell does not systematically examine some of these stories as subjects of research but rather are told only inasmuch as they briefly intersected with the author. This often gives the reader a feeling of the depth of Campbell's experience but not the depth of experience of the subjects of the research. The more extended case studies near the end of the book avoid this issue by providing the reader the opportunity to learn at length about the individuals the author studied.

This book compares in interesting ways to Robert Gay's *Lucia* (2005) and *Bruno* (2015). Both Campbell and Gay are more interested in the stories they are telling and the way the broader narrative informs our understanding of a city than they are in developing broader social scientific theories. Gay's books, however, stick much more closely to the individual stories of Lucia and Bruno, devoting an entire book to each of their lives. While Gay's ethnographic view is, of course, present in those books, and he describes how he came to develop the relationships that enabled him to undertake that research, most of the time Gay is in the background. Campbell's methodology, which focuses on telling the story of a city through various vignettes, forces the ethnographer into the foreground, since we are often meeting new subjects, which involves describing how each relationship developed and the author's experience of that relationship. While Juárez comes through in this book, the individual stories sometimes feel like the stories of Campbell's relationships with the subjects rather than the narrative of the subjects' experience.

Campbell is deeply committed to telling the stories as he sees them. The narratives are vibrant and often nuanced. They are a pleasure to read. At times, though, it feels as though the author is so committed to his narrative of Juárez that he loses track of the importance of these stories to advancing social science. In the discussion of the relevant literature, Campbell chooses relatively narrow pieces to directly analyze. A central part of Campbell's argument is that the causes of violence are multifaceted and synergistic. Campbell argues that many social scientists offer overly simplistic readings of violence in Mexico that focus singularly on neoliberalism or US counternarcotics or immigration policy or that blame governments instead of criminal organizations for violence. The now extensive literature on violence in the region, however, is much more nuanced than this, and at times, Campbell chooses as his intellectual interlocutors some less nuanced readings of violence than others that are already available.

Some important recent writings on criminal violence in Latin America, such as Durán-Martínez's book on Colombia and Mexico or Correa-Cabrera's work on Los Zetas (both 2017), receive only passing mention. Other important and highly nuanced writings on the causes of violence, such as Trejo and Ley's 2020 book on crime and politics in Mexico and Yashar's 2018 book on the multiple cause of crime in Central America receive no attention. I could go on. The limited

engagement with the wider literature is unfortunate because there are important places in these contributions that illuminate the problems of violence and victimhood in ways that would have strengthened Campbell's analysis.

Both Campbell and Carter are influenced by the writing of Walter Benjamin. Both reference *The Arcades Project* and Carter Horne devotes analysis also to the "Theses of the Philosophy of History" and other writings. Carter is clearly drawn to Benjamin's theories of history and his efforts to read cities and social life more broadly as a critic. For Carter, this lived experience is embodied in the practice of a type of literary critique in which aesthetic choices receive intense scrutiny for what they tell us about social relations. In Carter's case, this comes through most clearly in his very close reading of the iconography of mara tattoos. Campbell draws specifically on Benjamin's notion of the flaneur, the person about town, who walks through a city learning of its everyday public spaces and the people who inhabit them. While Benjamin used this to develop deep readings of places to derive his theories, Campbell is less interested in deriving broad and deep theories, choosing instead to highlight his subjects' stories and how they weave a narrative about Juárez.

Both books, despite their narrow engagement with the current social science on violence in Latin America, offer rich and powerful contributions to debates on the region. They bring the reader a level of detail relatively few books offer and provide different strategies and frameworks for understanding the challenges facing the region. Both are much appreciated.

Enrique Desmond Arias

Baruch College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York,  
New York, New York, USA

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