



The Politics of Violence

Gender, Conflict and
Community in El Salvador

Mo Hume

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The Politics of Violence Gender, Conflict and Community in El Salvador

MO HUME

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LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES



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**The Politics of Violence
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The *Bulletin of Latin American Research* Book Series

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The *Bulletin of Latin American Research* publishes original research of current interest on Latin America, the Caribbean, inter-American relations and the Latin American Diaspora from all academic disciplines within the social sciences, history and cultural studies. The BLAR/SLAS book series was launched in 2008 with the aim of publishing research monographs and edited collections that compliment the wide scope of the Bulletin itself. It is published and distributed in association with Wiley-Blackwell. We aim to make the series the home of some of the most exciting, innovative work currently being undertaken on Latin America and we welcome outlines or manuscripts of interdisciplinary, single-authored, jointly-authored or edited volumes. If you would like to discuss a possible submission to the series, please contact the editors at blar@liverpool.ac.uk

Dedication

For my parents, Pat and John

Preface

The Politics of Violence: Gender, Conflict and Community in El Salvador

BY MO HUME

University of Glasgow, UK

Bulletin of Latin American Research Book Series

SERIES EDITORS: DAVID HOWARD, JASMINE GIDEON,
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The *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (BLAR) has a distinguished history of publishing primary research from a range of disciplines in Latin American studies. Our readers have long been able to draw upon ideas from History, Geography, Politics, International Relations, Anthropology, Sociology, Economics, Gender Studies, Development Studies and, increasingly, Cultural Studies. Many of our articles have addressed thematic topics and debates of interest to all Latin Americanists, such as *mestizaje*, populism or the politics of social movements. This is one of the great strengths of being an area studies journal rather than a discipline-based publication. The current book series thus aims to complement the multidisciplinary of the journal by publishing original and innovative research from scholars who are working across disciplines, raising new questions and applying fresh methodologies. The series seeks to develop into a major forum for interdisciplinary work in Latin American Studies.

This second volume in the series arose from the author's longstanding engagement with El Salvadorean society as a development worker and researcher. Mo Hume has incorporated her depth of experience and knowledge to produce a new perspective on the processes of violence in the Americas, developing an original feminist standpoint on the multiple aggressions that shape the 'everyday'. Her work both illuminates previous studies on violence across the region, and builds on the importance of detailing a gendered ethnographic approach to reveal the overt, as well as more hidden or silent, spaces of violence in society.

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This book is a product of my evolving thoughts on violence. It has been enriched by conversations with many people and engagement with a broad range of existing work on violence. The analysis presented in the pages that follow does not pretend to be definite or complete. I am also very conscious that it is not an optimistic book.

Without the tremendous generosity of the research participants who shared their stories, this book would never have been written. To them I owe a huge debt that cannot be adequately expressed in words. Unlike me, they cannot retreat to the comfort of academic life to ponder on ambiguities and epistemologies. Instead, they must engage with the politics of surviving and resisting violence on an everyday basis. I particularly wish to acknowledge the students of the school in 'El Boulevar'. The drawing on the cover of the book is by 'Ruben', a thirteen year old boy from the community. It is entitled 'Mi Comunidad' (My Community).

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Introduction

The bus that used to go up the hill, well they killed the [bus driver]. They're always killing people up there and they're people from the same area and they charge them 'rent' ... They killed him. They always kill up there. There used to be another bus that took people up but they killed him too ... My brother goes from work straight home but they have followed him from work several times. Before, nothing happened to my brothers, they killed my cousin, but the violence here is down to the problem of poverty that there is in the country and that is why there is so much violence because they are even charging 'rent' to the shops, and the worst thing is that there is no work and a lot of violence. (Ana, San Marcos)

In October 2007, I returned to the municipality of San Marcos, a satellite town on the outskirts of San Salvador. I had previously worked in some of the communities on the steep slopes of the Cerro San Jacinto in San Marcos in the late 1990s as part of my work with a local women's organisation, *Movimiento de Mujeres Mélida Anaya Montes*. My role at this time was to work alongside the women of the communities as they articulated their development concerns and tried to lobby local institutions for their resolution. The issue that struck me most about the process was how different forms of violence shaped and constrained both women's livelihood concerns and their strategies to overcome them. In San Marcos, access to water in the communities was limited and the communal tap that served the neighbourhood was locked by a local resident who charged her neighbours for each *cantaro* or container of water. This was an issue of primary concern for the women, but not an issue that they felt they could address. The woman who controlled the water had two well-armed sons who 'protected' her interests. In addition, she was a member of the governing ARENA (National Republican Alliance Party) party that was in power from 1989 until 2009 and it was felt that she had contacts in important places that afforded her additional 'protection'.

In community residents' minds, this meant that she was untouchable and free to act with impunity, restricting their access to water. Attempts to

lobby Administración Nacional de Acueductos y Alcantarillados (ANDA), the national water company, had proved futile and the women were resigned to the fact that they would continue to pay for the use of the tap. Another issue that concerned the residents at this stage was the need for a bus route to take them to the top of the hill. This was for security as well as practical reasons. Not only did women have to walk up a steep hill and often with heavy loads, but there were points on the hill where local youth congregated. Frequently they asked women for a *colon* when they walked past and there was some concern about the growing gang presence in the area.¹ In response, local women lobbied the Ministry for Public Works to fix the road and they petitioned the local transport companies to provide a minibus service (see MAM, 1999). Their petition was successful and a minibus route started in 1999. Almost ten years later when I returned to San Marcos, the service had just stopped. The narrative cited above is from a focus group with women in late 2007. The women explain that the bus driver had refused to pay local gang members *renta* or protection money. As a result, he was killed.

This is a book about violence. It is a story of how different forms of violence affect everyday lives in post-war El Salvador. The site of a brutal civil war from 1980 to 1992, El Salvador's peace remains characterised by violence and insecurity. The introductory narrative exposes a vicious circle of developing violence in which problems of fear, inequality and corruption continue to shape citizens' experiences and understandings of everyday life in the post-war period. It points to a world in which constant levels of threat have deeply destructive effects on individuals and communities, not only resulting in physical harm, but restricting livelihood opportunities. The women interviewed indicated that the perpetrators are local residents known to the community. Many are neighbours and friends. Restricted access to water not only highlights local corruption, but also the perceptions of impunity that are linked to national politics. In this context, the threat and actuality of violence does not come from a nameless stranger or group, but from the very people that form part of the community. Such experiences and perceptions of violence expose the immediacy and proximity of violence to everyday social interactions of many citizens of Latin America.

The episode of localised violence above uncovers some of the complexities of conflict and community in El Salvador. While the study is situated in localised structures of power in El Salvador, the stories that the research participants tell reflect larger narratives of oppression that are shaped along

1 The *colon* was the national currency of El Salvador until the US dollar was introduced in January 2001. Officially the *colon* is still in circulation but, in practice, the dollar has replaced it.

class, ethnic and gender grounds. The pages that follow are not merely a story of El Salvador; they offer insight into the lives of communities who must negotiate high levels of violence in Latin America and beyond. The empirical assessment of the multiple and often contradictory meanings of violence in everyday life provides important insights into the wider politics of violence. Without applying this knowledge 'from below' and reclaiming this interpretative space, the theorisation of violence is limited. Multiple expressions of violence overlap to shape everyday life and responses are often contradictory and confusing. This book challenges some of the socially accepted myths that contribute to the reproduction of violence, in terms of both its meaning and its material effects. By using the term myth, I do not wish to discount individuals' interpretations of their own realities. Instead, I am referring to the accepted (and often unquestioned) norms and values that shape both the ontological and epistemological appreciation of violence. How do individuals and communities live with the painful and emotive forces of violence in everyday life? How do individuals and groups come to understand and recognise violence in their own lives? To what extent do gendered norms and identities colour this process of definition? What dominant discourses within society inform and shape this process of making violence both visible and hidden?

The proposal here is to generate knowledge about violence in El Salvador beyond that which is deemed 'official' or that which relies on dominant voices. In this exercise, I draw on the methodology of subaltern studies which proposes an alternative historiography to that of dominant or elite groups (Guha, 2000; O'Hanlon, 2000a, 2000b; Rodríguez, 2001). Given the particular ideological and moral potency of narratives of violence, I am concerned with foregrounding the voices of those subaltern groups who have been historically ignored and excluded from 'official' definitions of violence and will examine the vocabularies of violence used by those people who live with it on an everyday basis. The analysis is informed by life histories of men and women from low-income communities. This approach is based on the critical understanding that an episode of violence only contains the *potential* for being defined as violence and whilst some actors may define the actions as violent, others may not (Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash and Lewis, 2001).

The study is grounded in the politics of feminism and contributes more broadly to the critical theoretical propositions that question how knowledge is produced, for whom and by whom. My position is informed by a feminist interpretive methodology whereby a theoretical examination of violence is both framed and unsettled by empirical realities. In other words, I am concerned with 'how' violence becomes possible rather than the direct causal analysis of 'why' it becomes possible (Jansen and Davis, 1998). Knowledge from below can offer critical insights into how violence is understood,

mediated and legitimised in other contexts. Locating the analysis in local structures of power and oppression also uncovers organic strategies for surviving and resisting violence, those behaviours that James Scott (1990) might call 'hidden transcripts' of resistance. This contributes to feminist debates about situating theory in lived experiences. Edward Said (1986) reminds us that knowledge is more than self referential; it is always a product of power relations. I am therefore concerned with the gendered politics of violence: the recognition of an act as violent, contestation over meaning and the missing stories of violence. Feminism has provided a much necessary perspective from which to question and critique what is said about violence; crucially, it also demands an engagement with what is not said, particularly concerning violence against women (Radford and Kelly, 1998). Its intellectual rationale is rooted in silence and absence.

Important to this exercise is the recognition of the heterogeneous nature of subaltern histories that are themselves productive of competing narratives based on localised hierarchies of power (Gidwani, 2009; see also Scott, 1990). The central argument of this book is that this is a particularly gendered process whereby violence against women and children is normalised and rationalised under 'acceptable' codes of men's behaviour. This not only demands an analysis of women and children's experiences of violence, but a critical engagement with men and masculinities. Mainstream approaches to violence have failed to acknowledge or simply ignored the gendered politics of violence in both public and private realms. A key contention of a feminist approach has been that historic epistemologies of violence have been constructed on a reductionist and binary logic of exclusion/inclusion, with a clear distinction between what counts as violence and what does not, ignoring its important ideological and discursive dimensions (Kelly and Radford, 1996). Most analytical endeavours and political responses to growing citizen insecurity in Latin America are heavily reliant on an exclusively public reading of security. This belies the fact that much of the violence that affects women and children occurs in the home. The result of this separation between 'public' security and the safety of women and children has multiple implications. This approach misses historic practices of violence and keeps them hidden from public scrutiny. It also offers an incomplete analysis of violence, ignoring important linkages between violence in the home and violence in the street. More than a mere intellectual bias, it is a statement about the politics of power (Ramazanoglu, 1992: 341). In this vein, I hope that the book will contribute to a debate that moves an analysis of gender to the centre of the theorisation of violence, rather merely as a particular type or subset of violence.

El Salvador: Situating Violence in History

El Salvador provides a brutal case study about the use of violence by the state, its agents and within wider society. Salvadoran history does not make for comfortable reading; it is a history 'defined' by violence (Huezo Mixco, 2000). The small Central American republic was the site of a civil war between 1980 and 1992, which claimed over 75,000 lives and led to the displacement of more than a million men, women and children in the region (United Nations (UN), 1995; Ardón, 1998). Following a military stalemate by the end of the 1980s, the reduction of military aid from the United States, and increased pressure from the international community, the UN brokered the January 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords, signed by the high command of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and government members. The accords brought a very real hope of replacing violence with meaningful peace for Salvadoran citizens. Nonetheless, the reality of this peace remains contested (Popkin, 2000; Hume, 2008a). In an analysis of the ten years after the peace accords, the Central American University's Human Rights Institute (IDHUCA, 2002: 2) stated: 'there is little discernable difference between the point of departure and the point of arrival; the issues are the same: the majority of the population is excluded and vulnerable'.

Economics, politics and violence have been a potent and destructive combination in Salvadoran history and continue to undermine citizens' well-being. Historically, El Salvador has been one of the most unequal countries in Latin America and socio-economic issues are seen to be at the heart of political conflict. Nonetheless, the peace accords and subsequent government policies systematically failed to address the social and economic fault lines that had triggered the war. Pearce (1998: 589) disputes the idea that the region's conflicts have been 'resolved'. This may be true at the 'formal level of peace accords between armies and insurgents, but is less so at the real level of people's everyday lives', which remain marked by exclusion, poverty and violence. Rather than dissipating after the war, violence has characterised El Salvador's peace. The post-war period has seen a dramatic rise in crime, youth violence and so-called 'social violence'. Between 2004 and April 2008, there were 15,153 murders. In 2007, the year that registered the lowest murder rate since 2002, this averages out at 60.78 murders per 100,000 citizens (FESPAD, 2008).² In peace, the country stands out as one of the most violent countries in

2 2007 census figures estimate that the population is 5,744,113, significantly lower than the figures that had been managed by National Census and Statistics Directorate, which estimated that the population in 2006 was 6,980,279 (DIGESTYC, 2007: 3; FESPAD, 2008). This changes the per capita murder rate for previous years, which had been based on the higher estimates. These new figures indicate that the problem