

# Between New Terrains and Old Dichotomies: Peacebuilding and the Gangs' Truce in El Salvador

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**Abstract:** This article intends to challenge the dominant assumptions that undermine the potential application of peacebuilding frameworks beyond formal post-war contexts. It analyses the gangs' truce that recently took place in El Salvador as a privileged laboratory to rethink hegemonic understandings and practices of peacebuilding by specifically addressing the importance of overcoming dichotomised categories such 'war and peace', 'criminal and political', and 'success and failure'. It is claimed that while the truce fostered a discourse pointing towards an ongoing peace process and enlarged the public debate on the failings of post-war policies and on the structural roots of violence, it was also decisively undermined by the inability to surmount the dichotomy that juxtaposes the criminal and the political domains. It is argued that a peacebuilding framework, inspired by a set of critical perspectives on war and peace and on the nature of 'the political', may thus be of crucial importance for the future of policies aimed at curbing violence in El Salvador and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** El Salvador; Gangs; Truce; Peacebuilding; Violence; Political Subjectivity; Discourses.

## Introduction: peacebuilding in new terrains?

Peacebuilding has significantly evolved in recent decades as a concept and as a set of practices. This evolution results, in part, from the global changing realities of war and violence. As the occurrence of conventional armed conflicts decreased, academic and policy interests also turned towards non-conventional conflicts and disseminated violence, such as terrorism and organised crime (Beall 2007; World Bank 2011), as well as what was labelled, in the Latin American context, as 'new violence' (Briceño-Léon 2002). Nevertheless, in these contexts most policies are still politically and academically framed as internal security policies targeting delinquency and crime, reinforcing an apparent disconnection between the fields of public security and peacebuilding. In fact, the majority of security policies in Latin America seem mostly inspired by the 'military urbanism' and the 'pacification' approaches (Graham 2009; Agier and Lamotte 2016) rather than by achieving peaceful social structures. Even if some alternative approaches oriented towards negative

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and positive peace were implemented,<sup>1</sup> these tend to be circumscribed either territorially (focused on the urban level) or by targeting specific socioeconomic or ethnic groups – often depicted as the locus of violence reproduction.

Clear strategic reasons seem to justify the absence of peacebuilding discourses and analyses in other than formal post-war contexts. It could imply national governments' recognition of war-like dynamics taking place in their territories; the acknowledgment of political actors with whom to negotiate; and, potentially, facilitation of foreign intervention. However, it is argued here, the intellectual and political challenges induced by this kind of strategic reasoning go far beyond its description as obvious and undisputable facts analysed under the guise of an ontologically stable and homogenous perspective, based on 'interests' and 'rational-choice' assumptions that inform mainstream problem-solving approaches to security and peacebuilding. This has been the case for the majority of analyses produced on the ambitious experiment put forward in El Salvador between March 2012 and February 2015.

'The truce', as the process became known, was initially described as a ceasefire, or a renunciation of violence agreed between the most prominent gangs in the country, MS13 and two strands of Barrio 18, without the government's interference. This process was facilitated by civil society actors, who were in fact supported by President Funes' administration, and resulted in a historical drop in homicides at least in the first 12 months (Katz, Hedberg and Amaya 2016). However, when it officially ended, the homicides reached an unprecedented peak, achieving the highest level since 2000, with almost 1,000 homicides taking place only in August 2015 (El Faro 2015). Nevertheless, whereas the current governmental strategy does not seem to sustain this kind of approach, the gangs, supported by civil society actors, namely churches, are trying to put dialogue, and even demobilisation, back on the agenda (Martínez and Valencia 2017).

Taking cue from the risks and shortcomings of the process, this article refuses to follow a narrative of absolute failure usually concerned with the focus on negative peace and the post-truce increase in homicides. Rather, it will focus on how the process constituted in fact a privileged laboratory to rethink hegemonic conceptions and practices of peacebuilding. It is claimed that while the truce fostered a discourse pointing towards an ongoing peace process and enlarged and deepened the debate on the failings of post-war policies and on the structural roots of violence, it was also decisively undermined by the inability to surmount the dichotomy that juxtaposes the criminal and the political domains. I argue that a peacebuilding framework, inspired by a set of critical perspectives on war and peace and on the nature of 'the political', may thus be of crucial importance for the future of policies aimed at curbing violence in El Salvador and elsewhere.

## **Overcoming hegemonic conceptions of peacebuilding**

Notwithstanding its interdisciplinary character Peacebuilding Studies have been most decisively influenced by International Relations and by the discipline's hegemonic traditions, hence reproducing particular and dichotomised conceptions of war and peace and of what constitutes the political domain, as opposed to the criminal or the social domains. This

contributes to a mismatch between academic and policy-making peacebuilding agendas and discourses and the actual entanglements of war and peace embedded in everyday experiences and perceptions of people living in formal peace contexts such as El Salvador (Roque 2016).

This article, on the contrary, is inspired by the critique of the orthodoxy of ontological assumptions on war and peace (Richmond 2008: 119–148). Some authors have been re-directing the focus of peacebuilding towards an engagement with the infra-state level, the local, and the everyday (MacGuinty and Richmond 2013). This trend conveys a critique of the hegemonic liberal peace model, addressing issues such as: its focus on the international as the privileged sphere of conflict resolution and peacebuilding; the tendency towards policy standardisation; and the need to focus on legitimacy and emancipation through the lenses of local actors and dynamics. However, new concepts such as urban peacebuilding remain mostly applied in formal post-war contexts (Björkdahl 2013). The next step regarding research on peacebuilding could hence include recognising it both as a theoretical tool and as an intervention framework suitable for new terrains such as contexts of chronic violence (Adams 2011).

It thus takes a stance on thinking about peacebuilding as a complex set of theories and practices that deal with the centrality and plurality of violences, as opposed to the centrality of war (Galtung 1969) at different but interdependent scales and dimensions. It also challenges the hegemonic conceptions of peace circumscribed to the analysis of formal processes and instruments of conflict resolution, focusing instead on structural and everyday peace, and on the material and discursive conditions that allow or prevent the reproduction of violence during peacetimes (Moser 2001; Shepherd 2010; Moura 2010; Sylvester 2011).

Hence, studying violence necessarily means studying its plurality and its invisible and normalised expressions. For the purpose of this article and situating gang violence and the response to it, it is particularly relevant to highlight the idea of a process of reflection of violence. This idea, associated to the concepts of everyday violence,<sup>2</sup> allows us to understand people's adhesion to the same social, political, and institutional violence that directly and indirectly victimises them, by reproducing it, in similar or differentiated ways, through the activation of a human potential to dehumanise and depersonalise the other (Scheper-Hughes 1997). This activation occurs as a reflection of a larger process of routinised and normalised political and institutional violence produced by particular instances of power and social control agents (police, churches, schools, politicians, media, NGOs), by ideologies that shape 'the implementation of law and order policies on a global scale' (Balibar 2001: 15), and, it is argued here, by discourses on violence, war and peace.

The article adopts an epistemological approach that is built on the constitutive role of discourses (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), on the ways in which particular conceptions, representations and mythologies are mobilised, either intentionally or unintentionally, by specific actors, and how these discourses influence the constitution of particular practices of war and peace (Jabri 2007; Müller 2008), as well as the emergence of new political subjectivities (Rancière 1996, 2011; Mouffe 2005). The focus is thus on the discursive and ontological preconditions that allow or obstacle social and political change.

The analysis, anchored on findings from my previous work,<sup>3</sup> is based on the examination of the literature produced on the truce (academic articles and policy papers); the exploration of media reports and written and broadcasted declarations of actors directly or indirectly involved in the process, namely the statements issued by the gangs during the process; and on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals directly involved in the process and with privileged observers.<sup>4</sup>

Several analyses have been documenting the successes, risks, and shortcomings of this process. The main criticisms that emerged address three major issues: 1) the lack of transparency regarding the terms of negotiation and the mishandled governmental communication of the process, which generated widespread suspicion, and the low level of civil society's participation; 2) the focus on the short-term and visible results of the truce – a decrease in homicides – without a consistent and sustainable plan to address structural causes of violence nor the demobilisation and rehabilitation of gang members; 3) and finally the risk of legitimising the gangs as political actors (see for example Peeters, Schulting and Briscoe 2013; Withfield 2013; Dudley 2013; Aguilar, Táger and Arévalo 2014; Lara 2015; Van der Borgh and Savenije 2015; Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016). Most analysts agree that the truce was an attempt to change traditional militarised and securitising approaches to gang violence but that it did not completely succeed in achieving a de-securitising approach since the 'challenge of developing an integrated security policy was not met' (Van der Borgh and Savenije 2015: 175). In fact, the truce ended up relying too much on 'paradoxical pactism'<sup>5</sup> and producing a short-term negative peace because major political support disappeared as soon as elections approached, whereas social disapproval of the strategy was high.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, some elements of this process can be recovered in order to build a more comprehensive and coherent peace strategy in the future.

My purpose, however, is not to analyse the truce *a priori* as a failed process that lacked institutionalisation, knowledge, and political will or that was over-politicised, but rather as a process that served as a political stage (Rancière 2011: 4) where competing ontologies – of war and peace, criminal and political – were mobilised through practices and discourses in order to perpetuate or rather defy specific configurations of power relations, prescriptions of order, and the production and legitimation of certain political subjectivities.

## **From practices/discourses of war to practices/discourses of peace: the truce as a peacebuilding laboratory**

El Salvador's success story of peace negotiation and peacebuilding<sup>7</sup> was short-lived. By the end of the 1990s, it was already clear that the end of the Cold War did not bring peace to Central America (Pearce 1998). As the rate of homicides started climbing, the country started to be labelled as one of or the most violent places in the world. In addition to the tremendous and persistent homicide rate, other common kinds of direct violence have been afflicting the Salvadorian society, primarily the poor, such as sexual violence, disappearances, forced migration, and displacements under the threat of violence. This was frequently seen as the result of the street gangs' proliferation. The country became

a paradigmatic case of 'pieces of war in peacetime' (Sylvester 2011: 1) embedded in both sociopolitical practices and discourses.

Until the beginning of 2000s, the most common political response to gangs was neglect, in part due to ignorance regarding the phenomenon. However, the prevailing security strategies for dealing with gang violence in El Salvador are essentially characterised by repression and massive incarceration. In 2003, similarly to other Central America countries and under the influence of the regional 'war on drugs' and 'war on crime', the Antimaras law was approved. This law, based on an 'iron-fist' approach, was aimed at criminalising gang membership *per se* and has aggravated the sanctions for individuals belonging to gangs. It was put forward by the Plan Mano Dura (2003) and Super Mano Dura (2004). Simultaneously, these hard-line public policies were highly publicised as a crusade in the sensationalist press which, in turn, increasingly portrayed the gang members as the scum of society:

To all those delinquents and bad seeds, I tell you with much confidence and determination: your party is over! Tonight, following the electoral promise of a safe country, we launch the Plan Super Mano Dura, which will give tranquillity to all of you, my friends who are watching me at home, and the Salvadorians who trusted in this public official to lead the country [...]. I ask the Salvadorians to join me in the great Super Mano Dura crusade against the *maras*, common and organised crime and the fight against drugs.<sup>8</sup> (Speech by President Saca when launching the Plan Super Mano Dura, 30 August 2004).

As many authors pointed out, the imprisonment of the majority of the gang members has led to the reinforcement of the gangs' structures and to the change of their modus operandi, increasing the level of violence and making them gradually more secret and their activities more criminalised (Savenije 2009; Cruz 2012). These laws and security plans have had no positive results on tackling violence levels or diminishing gangs' attractiveness among unprivileged young people.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the gangs themselves reproduced 'localised regimes of terror' (Rodgers 2006: 322), imposing war-like practices at the infra-social level (Roque 2016). Gang violence and governmental and non-governmental (such as death squads) violent responses to it fed each other, embedding war and terror in everyday life, as illustrated by these excerpts:

This is war. The difference between this and the war in El Salvador is that before, people fought for peace, for the rights of peasants, and now we fight for ourselves (Interview with Yasmín, gang member, San Salvador, 2007, cited in Roque (2016: 424)).

These death squads... they are the descendants of whoever killed Monseñor Romero [...] they want to kill gang members, because for them rehabilitation is impossible. What they want is to exterminate

us (Interview with Mariana, gang member, San Salvador, 2007 cited in Roque (2016: 242)).

Studies concerning the pre-truce period have precisely analysed the prevailing discourses and representations produced by politicians and the media about the gangs, unveiling an entrenched logic of producing public enemies without looking at the causes of violence (Martel 2006; Wolf 2008). Producing dehumanised enemies guaranteed wide social support of repressive measures despite their failing to contain violence. Consequently, one of the outcomes of these strategies was that the gangs' targets and enemies also evolved from a dispute among the different gangs towards a dispute between the gangs and the authorities, providing them new foundations for identity building and for progressively channelling their claims based on tangible grievances of human rights' abuses.

The Funes Administration, elected by FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional) in 2009,<sup>10</sup> did not change the 'iron-fist' approach that characterised the previous decade. Following a massacre perpetrated by the gangs in a bus in 2010, the government passed a law aimed at proscribing the gangs, as well as the death squads, and the control and policing of neighbourhoods in the metropolitan area of San Salvador were handed over to military forces. Reacting to the new law, the gangs started a series of threats that managed to paralyse the country by provoking a major strike on the transportation sector in September 2010. At the same time, they also demanded to be heard and reclaimed a dialogue with the government towards the end the cycle of violence. However, the idea of negotiating with gangs was continuously rejected by government officials (Lemus 2010). The appointment in 2011 of General Mungía Payés to the Public Security Office was also seen as a sign of the continuation of hard-line policies. These strategies were harshly criticised by civil society organisations and still did not decrease the level of violence, eventually reaching a stalemate.

It was within this context that unexpectedly, in 2012, Minister Payés and mediator Raul Mijango (a former guerrilla), with implicit support from President Funes, searched for alternative strategies to address violence, negotiating and mediating the truce between the gangs. This strategy was successful in achieving a short-term negative peace by reducing the homicides for at least 12 months (Katz, Hedberg and Amaya 2016). The halt in homicides ordered by the gangs' hierarchy in prison occurred in exchange for the improvement of inmates' conditions and the transfer of the gang leaders from a maximum-security prison to other establishments, which was justified as a way to better communicate their orders to the members outside the prison. As it evolved, new provisions,<sup>11</sup> as well as other smaller groups, were included. Additionally, from January to May 2013 the process broadened its spectrum though the launching of the peace zones programme<sup>12</sup> aimed at promoting a more comprehensive positive peace approach. The truce progressively came to an end with the new FMLN government and it was officially over when the gangs' leaders were re-transferred to a high-security prison in February 2015 (Martínez 2015).

Despite its short extent, the major change introduced by the truce was that, along with a policy shift, we witnessed a discursive shift adding discourses of peace to, although not totally replacing, the discourses of war, extermination, and dehumanisation.

In the first place, 'dialogue', 'mediation', and 'negotiation', which were proscribed words<sup>13</sup> in El Salvador, irrupted in the public debate and were in part progressively legitimised. Although demobilisation was never formally addressed<sup>14</sup> and provoked some discomfort among the gangs' ranks,<sup>15</sup> it seems that in the post-truce period, the issue is starting to be introduced, hence putting into question the narrative of absolute failure and absolute impossibility of such a process. Seemingly, the proscription of the words 'negotiation' and 'mediation' that took place following the withdrawal of strong political support to the process<sup>16</sup> and the persecution of anyone related to the truce by the anti-terrorism crusade of the previous Attorney General<sup>17</sup> seems to be replaced by 'dialogue', 'reconciliation', and 'reintegration' in post-truce attempts led by churches and gangs to pursue new paths to the same end<sup>18</sup>: to put an end to the cycle of violence.

The truce triggered an imaginary which changed the framing of security policies as responses to circumscribed criminal violence and turned them into policies that remitted to a national peace process. This shift towards a peace discourse is present in the several statements issued by the gangs, where constant references are made to the 'end of the social war', to the 'historic pacification process', and to the 'recovery of social peace', always addressing the 'Salvadorian people' or 'the Salvadorian society'<sup>19</sup> as a whole as their interlocutor. From the government side, the ultimate symbol of this process might have been the mention of the truce made by President Funes in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2012 (Funes 2012), introducing an internal security issue at the highest institutional forum of peace governance.

Emerging peace discourses also (re)opened the debate on the structural causes of violence, on previous peacebuilding failings, and on the need to think in long-term and comprehensive peace processes. In the post-war period, El Salvador's political elites neglected two central dimensions which were key to mitigating violence: the reduction of social exclusion and income inequalities and the fight against impunity (Pearce 1998). The 'consequences of massive trauma [that] affect not only individuals but also social groups and cultural formations' (Suárez-Orozco and Robben 2000: 1) were steadily ignored but generated an important social disorganisation and fragmentation with long-lasting consequences, such as the normalisation of violence in everyday life (Hume 2008: 72). Social and political forms of organisation inherited by the war and based mostly on hierarchy and command (Binford 1999) remained deeply embedded in post-war high politics and everyday dynamics and translated into high levels of political and domestic authoritarianism and abuse, which became widely tolerated (Hume 2007; Cruz 2006). Nevertheless, as several authors have noted, post-war violence, and gang violence in particular, cannot be analysed as an exclusive and direct result of the war that occurred in the country (Savenije and Van der Borgh 2004; Hagedorn 2008). Post-war dynamics of massive migration, social exclusion, and governmental neglect are also crucial to understanding the dissemination of violence (Savenije and Van der Borgh 2004).



Therefore, before addressing the operational and strategic problems related to the truce, it is crucial to recognise the multidimensional impacts of decades of war and violence, and the truce certainly opened a window of opportunity for this change to come. Although these issues were already the subject of discussion among certain progressive strands of the political and civil societies, they were rarely openly and widely discussed in El Salvador until the truce. In fact, for the first time, discourses of peace entered the scene at the highest political level and managed to compete with hegemonic ontologies and ideologies of war, repression, and extermination.

In the course of this process, several actors had the opportunity to inscribe on the agenda long-term structural and integrated changes needed to address such a scale of violence, among these, for instance, the few resilient civil society organisations and individuals<sup>20</sup> that for decades have been working with gangs and excluded youths and advocating for a social justice and human rights based approach to violence. This certainly didn't happen without disagreements, since the exact terms and extent of the initial negotiation were never sufficiently clear for many observers,<sup>21</sup> some even calling it a 'mafia peace' (*paz mafiosa*).<sup>22</sup> In fact, the suspicious aura that surrounded the truce culminated in 2016 with the arrest of the principal mediator, Raul Mijango, and several public officials who participated in the truce process, accused of 'acting illegally to facilitate' the truce including 'fund[ing] perks for incarcerated gang leaders, providing them with fast food, cable television, video games, and dancers, among other things' (Tabory 2016). Although many criticisms of the truce emerged out of fear that it would only consist in a simulacra of peace, continuing to fail to address structural causes of violence, it seems nevertheless appropriate to think of this process as a laboratory for new and better strategies aimed at peacebuilding.

Religious leaders following the principles of liberation theology seem to be advancing an agenda focused on the structural causes of violence, including Medardo Gómez, a Lutheran Bishop. He is a member of the *Iniciativa Pastoral por la Vida y la Paz* (Pastoral initiative for life and peace – IPAZ), which is a movement gathering several religious leaders, created to support the pacification process, and that nowadays assumes an unexpected role within this extremely adverse context. They have been advocating for a comprehensive approach to peace that includes a dialogue with the gangs in the post-truce period. Medardo Gómez claims, in an interview for this article, that by taking this stance he is only following the 'theology of the cross', a pragmatic and contextual approach that looks at responding to the reality, the 'unbearable violence' that afflicts the Salvadorian society, addressing 'the pain of the people' in order to 'convert it into hope'. An assumed admirer of Monsignor Romero, murdered in 1980, he also integrates the *Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia*, a consultative forum that gathers several public, private, and civil society actors, and where voices favouring a process of dialogue and rehabilitation were progressively marginalised after the truce eschewed.<sup>23</sup> Although most of these voices are no longer allowed entrance in the prison system nor to develop any kind of formal negotiation, their actions seem to have produced a new period of decline in homicides in November 2015 (Martínez and Valencia 2015). The strength of IPAZ's approach may rely on the recognition of the blurred distinction between victims and perpetrators



in the current Salvadorian context, by putting the focus on the 'structural sins', to recover a liberationist concept, such as the social injustices that promote the spirals and reflections of violence, and by apparently refusing to stick to an approach based on the individual and spiritual reconversion of dehumanised sinners.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, taking cue on the previous shortcomings, they claim not to be pledging for a new truce or for negotiation, but rather for a process of dialogue that includes the gangs.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the most impressive transformation in the domain of discourses has its sources in the increased presence of gang leaders in the public sphere. The traditional sensationalist, moralistic, and impersonal media accounts on gangs may have remained dominant (Vásquez and Marroquín 2014) but they were complemented by a new form of discourse where gang members portray themselves as victims of the post-war failings and social exclusion and as workers for peace: 'peace will only be possible if all Salvadorians become protagonists and become owners of the process in order to achieve it [peace]. We are already doing our share.'<sup>26</sup>

A particularly striking example of this process is the content of an interview with one of the leaders of MS13 broadcast after the truce's announcement. In this interview he declared that had he been an adolescent in other times, he would not have been involved in the gang but rather in the guerrilla, in order to fight social inequalities (Canal 12 2012). Also, one of the best-known leaders of Barrio 18 recently defined the gangs as a social group:

We see ourselves as a large part of society. We believe that the problem here is social exclusion, discrimination, lack of education, lack of employment and unequal treatment by the law. We think that if you resolve these problems, the violence between gangs will end (Lin cited in Dudley 2013: 13).

It must be clarified that I'm not assuming these statements as pure, true, and disinterested accounts of reality but as new forms of public discourse facilitated by the truce that nevertheless convey important issues to be addressed in a peacebuilding framework. They reflect that gangs are the product of specific economic and political orders and the ways in which structural violence and repression operate, showing that they are 'an old problem in a new world' (Wacquant 2008: 13). If unpacking this expression to the case of El Salvador, the old and permanent problem is the production of marginalised groups, whereas the old world refers to the peasant's destitution and oligarchic rule, to military governments, to Cold War ideological articulations; and the new world refers to urbanisation, massive migration, sweatshops, and consumption-based neoliberalism, disguised authoritarianism, and widespread impunity.

While the persistence of poverty, inequalities, and social exclusion were not addressed in post-war El Salvador, a sense of disappointment and frustration regarding the possibilities of political and economic change emerged and spread during the post-war period (CPDJS 2007; Binford 2010). In this context, some argued that the development of youth gangs in El Salvador could also be seen as the search for recognition of the remaining social margins through violence (Cruz 1997). The gang leaders' recent articulation of their

grievances hence resonate the discourse of actors such as some church members and activists, as well as the mediator's justification of the process (Valencia and Martínez 2015).

However, the peacebuilding imaginary does not automatically produce a radical peacebuilding strategy. In fact, the approach to violence and peace remained partial and superficial. If gang-focused interventions or even a local/urban security approach are important,<sup>27</sup> they are clearly insufficient. A national peacebuilding strategy is required to tackle the problem of violence in El Salvador, even if operating at different levels. The approach presented by the governmental plan *El Salvador Seguro*<sup>28</sup> (January 2015), for example, seems to rely on a precise identification and differentiation of peaceful and violent areas, and does not fully recognise the problem of violence as a multidimensional national challenge. It cannot only remain urban or specifically targeting stigmatised groups but also requires structural, national changes. This strategy should certainly include a serious debate on the psychosocial dimension of peace.<sup>29</sup> Programmes to support the victims of violence – who are also sometimes the perpetrators and their families – and to end impunity in a larger sense are crucial, though seldom implemented. Without this approach it will be improbable to achieve successful rehabilitation and reintegration processes.

The truce triggered an imaginary which changed the framing of security policies as responses to circumscribed gang violence and turned them in to policies that remitted to a national peace process. It opened the door for alternative ontologies of violence, war, and peace and consequently to alternative policy options; and this shift alone is already a major step for peacebuilding, even though its major outcome (peace) is postponed.

## The unfinished journey of creating political subjects

Conceptions of war and peace are intimately related to the definition of the political and of political subjectivities. If, for Realist approaches of International Relations, intra-state violence and actors, and therefore intra-state peacebuilding, are not even ontologically envisioned, for Liberal approaches, their consideration is still ontologically circumscribed by predefined criteria of the political domain – usually determined by the centrality of the state and the purpose of taking over/escaping the state apparatus, or the expression of a recognisable ideology (Kalyvas 2001). Since peacebuilding thinking and practices have been most decisively shaped by the liberal peace agenda, it is not surprising that a truce among and with the gangs should be viewed with scepticism. To add to this, with a few exceptions (Rodgers 2009; Moura 2010), most of the literature about 'new violence' in Latin America tends to frame it as mostly apolitical or infra-political (Briceño-Léon 2002; Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Wieviorka 1997).

This article, however, builds on alternative approaches to 'the political' that may help to reconceive peacebuilding in new terrains. The first assumption is that 'the political' is not a pre-existing or predetermined domain (Rancière 1996; Mouffe 2005). According to Jacques Rancière, the political emerges through action, through disagreement, it consists precisely in blurring the boundaries of pre-existing categories and creating new spaces and political subjects:

There is no political life, but a political stage. Political action [...] consists in blurring the boundaries [...] Politics is a way of re-partitioning the political from the non-political. This is why it generally occurs 'out of place', in a place which was not supposed to be political (Rancière 2011: 4).

These subjects are created through their own action, and due to the inherent contingency of the political order and to the exclusionary character of consensus, this can only be achieved through disagreement and through their struggle to mend the wrongs to which they are subjected by the hierarchical social order. The stance I take here is that, regardless of predefined criteria based on moral judgment or strategic considerations, gangs already are political actors; they have political meaning, roots, and impacts. The fact that the political meaning of certain phenomena, including violent phenomena, is not visible does not imply that this meaning does not exist, but can rather signify that it is not intelligibly articulated. Although gangs are seen mainly as forms of alienation, which they also are, one can also interpret some of their individual motivations, their paths, and their members' self-representation as scattered (and even contradictory) micro-expressions of resistance to an unfair and conservative social order, searching for freedom, equality, and solidarity (Rocha 2008; Roque 2016).

At the same time, violence can be seen as a form of searching for recognition, as a form of discourse and articulation used albeit in an obscure way by those usually silenced to make themselves noted. In this sense, the argument of Rancière, who considers that 'there is politics when the boundary separating those who are born for politics from those who are born for the "bare" life of economic and social necessity is put into question' (Rancière 2011: 3), could also apply to gangs' formation as well as to the new forms of articulation produced as representatives and advocates of specific political demands, channelled through dialogue and negotiation for peace.

Simultaneously, based on the definition of the political offered by Carl Schmitt – specified by the 'friend–enemy discrimination' and the 'the formation of a "we" as opposed to a "they"', and always 'concerned with collective forms of identification' – Chantal Mouffe exposes a model of thinking 'the political' as based on 'agonistic pluralism', where the opposition 'us–them' does not disappear, but where the 'friend–enemy' form is replaced by an opposition between adversaries – 'somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question', a 'legitimate enemy' who must adhere to 'the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality' (Mouffe 2000: 11; 15). This last point obviously raises a concern regarding the possibility of characterising gangs as followers of democratic principles. Nonetheless, before addressing this issue, I want to highlight that gangs were also produced as political subjects by practices and discourses about them/produced by them before as well as during the truce.

Before the truce, as previously analysed, the gangs were dehumanised and constructed as the absolute enemies of the civil and political society. The truce represented an opportunity to shift both practices and discourses from a friend–enemy dichotomy to the production of the gangs as adversaries and political subjects, hence at least partially

recognised as legitimate political actors, with partial legitimate political agendas. Several practical and discursive strategies aimed at building legitimacy were put in place by both sides: the mediators'/governmental side and the gangs'.

One of them consisted in the invitation made to Catholic Bishop Fabio Colindres to work as a facilitator of the truce, joining the principal mediator, Raul Mijango. It was clearly aimed at legitimising the process by including a respected institution. His participation in the truce raised awareness and sparked the debate on the responsibilities of spiritual leaders in promoting peace in the country. It has also promoted a more nuanced social perspective on gang members by humanising them through the celebration of religious ceremonies in prisons. Fabio Colindres even washed and kissed the feet of gang members during an Easter ceremony in 2014. However, if the symbolic rewards of Bishop Colindres' participation seem clear, it did not happen without generating tensions and misunderstandings. Some observers claim that the invitation and involvement of Bishop Colindres was solely a tactical decision,<sup>30</sup> and this became a widespread popular perspective. The Catholic Church has never officially participated in the truce and the process led to discussions among the Episcopalian Conference and to public acknowledgment of the divergent positions on the process. Official support from the Catholic Church would have been a major ingredient towards a change in discourses on the nature of the process.<sup>31</sup>

However, and instead, the feeble involvement of the institution highly contributed to increasing social mistrust. Similar processes of legitimacy building did not reach their end. This is the case with other attempts made at humanising the gang members, such as the initiative taken by Paolo Luers, one of civil society's personalities that joined the mediation efforts. Paolo Luers took two gang leaders to a broadcast ceremony of Tabernaculo Biblico Bautista (an evangelical church) which included an interview with both of them. This action had, however, paradoxical results. On the one hand, it provoked a crisis in the administration, since the Minister of Public Security was not aware that those leaders would temporarily leave the prison for such purposes. On the other hand, it didn't result in the intended positive repercussions; instead, it raised criticism on the way the process was being implemented and on the role of the mediators. The controversy was such that the pastor who conducted the interview, Toby Jr, publicly apologised for his participation.

Nonetheless, taking cue from Rancière and Mouffe's reference to political subjects operating within democratic principles, I argue that the incompleteness of this complex journey of creating new political subjects is mostly a reflection of the low democratic principles and engagements embedded in the specific sociopolitical environment and reflected by both sides of the process – and not only from the side of gangs, as is usually pointed out – hence contributing to the lack of preconditions for agonist pluralism to emerge.

Thus while gangs do not operate within democratic principles, it should be noted it is not theoretically and ontologically impossible to conceive of a democratisation of gangs. Gangs are in constant mutation. This means that they are continually produced by a combination of dynamics and characteristics that come from the specific contexts of each group and each local sub-group, as well as from a transposition and adaptation of subcultures and globalised practices which are co-opted in a highly variable intensity by organised crime networks (Zilberg 2007; Hagedorn 2008). In many cases they started by

shaping social order in a 'positive' way, by means of protecting their neighbourhoods and income distribution, then evolving to formatting social life in a 'negative' way, by means of force and arbitrary violence (Rodgers 2006: 322). In other cases (e.g. in several US cities or in Barcelona) the opposite trend took place, 'the collective transformation [of the gangs] into civil society entities that are active for the benefit of the community' (Planta and Dudoet 2015: 5–6). Even if this might not seem possible for the current particular case of El Salvador,<sup>32</sup> political imagination should not be narrowed *a priori*.

When gang leaders explain violence through a comparison with the past of collective violence and social struggles in El Salvador, as previously mentioned, they are trying to produce an intelligible, coherent, and legitimate framework for their actions and grievances. The gangs' efforts of self-representation and articulation around an agenda of social exclusion and human rights were critical to laying the foundations for the affirmation of a political subjectivity, as expressed in their own terms:

Human beings as social beings are essentially political [...] nobody is exempt from participating in politics, not even those who say they don't, because its effects can benefit or harm us all. The difference relies on what kind of politics we are participating in; it may be party politics, social and public politics, economic politics. In our case, when we took the decision to subscribe this ceasefire, we were aware that this would require that we involve ourselves as actors of a public policy with the strategic purpose of recovering social peace.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, the gangs failed to create a dynamic of collective democratic transformation within their ranks just as they also failed to change their overall perception as absolute enemies or moral opponents. The 'wrong' they wished to mend was obscured by other wrongs: some of them were real, whereas some of them were part of particular agendas against the truce.<sup>34</sup>

On the one hand, several observers and participants in the truce process agreed that it led to a reconfiguration of power within the gangs: some refer to their atomisation, others to anarchy<sup>35</sup> as a reaction to the concentration of power at the top of the gangs' hierarchies during the truce, which would have increased the level of violence in the post-truce period. Some argue that to be effective the truce absolutely ought to pass through the top level ranks of the gangs, since although a certain degree of autonomy might exist within the gangs, the reality is that their overall structure is extremely hierarchical and centralised.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, some argue that the truce helped to reinforce a superior 'caste' within the gangs, as well as to create distrust and resentment from those who hold lower positions in the hierarchy.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the participation of gang members in peace solutions should involve them as citizens and not as gang members.<sup>38</sup> This would require a deep internal transformation within the gangs, but also major shifts in the sociopolitical environment, including at the international level.

Many observers considered that Salvadorian society wasn't prepared for such a process of dialogue and negotiation,<sup>39</sup> either because they actually experienced the violent character of the gangs or because they were prevented from doing so by the socially em-

bedded narrative of the inhumane and suspicious monsters which was strongly disseminated through actors whose interests were not served by peacebuilding, ranging from organised crime to political opposition (Cruz 2014). The fact that the truce was brought to the public accidentally by the media and the government's double-speech, supporting the truce in international forums while refusing to play a direct role in the process when the speech was for internal consumption,<sup>40</sup> gave room to a spiral of rumours and suspicion in broad social terms, as within the gangs. This suspicious climate was further deteriorated by the United States Administration's approach to the truce, refusing to acknowledge the process as legitimate and also contributing to the government's lack of political commitment.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the main reason appointed by political parties and governments for refusing or hesitating to support processes such as the truce falls under the resonance of the repetitive global narrative that advises 'not to negotiate with criminals', when, in fact, the case for 'not negotiating with criminals' is mostly driven by populist temptations.<sup>42</sup> Truces with gangs as well as other kinds of negotiation are much more common than what is usually publicly accepted (Macguire 2013; Cockayne 2013).

A government, whether national or local, can, therefore, secretly negotiate wide or localised truces, while at the same time publicly claiming to follow an iron-fist approach. This was also the case of the conservative and right-wing ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista) in El Salvador. Therefore, low engagement with democratic principles is not a prerogative of gangs. Indeed, the process that led to the end of the truce revealed that the entrenched logic of the party's polarisation is not necessarily grounded on different ontological and ideological perspectives, but instead reproduces post-political assumptions on the moral nature of political divergences (Mouffe 2005: 5) and reveals the widespread volatility of adherence to democratic principles. As a matter of fact, a repressive version of security tends to prevail regardless of governments in power, since these coincide in the identification of a common immoral enemy. In fact, dehumanisation, social extermination, and repression are not exclusive to right-wing strategies. For instance, the FMLN's Minister of Justice and Public Security in office, Benito Lara, publicly affirmed that the rise in homicides was the result of the effectiveness of police work (Barrera 2015). If having more homicides is seen as a policy success, it means that the 'friend-enemy' dichotomy presides over strategy and policy-making and that the spaces where emancipatory struggles can occur are closed.

## **Conclusions: peacebuilding beyond dichotomies**

Improving peacebuilding processes requires going beyond absolute narratives of success and failure. If the initial success of the truce in decreasing homicides was limited, a plain narrative that erases any gains from this process must also be critically deconstructed. Therefore, we need to break with the dichotomised ontologies that hinder the search for alternative peacebuilding policies. More specifically, we need to rethink the ways in which war and peace, criminal and political interact, and how they are imagined. Hence, practices and discourses mobilised in this particular process may serve as a stimulus to

advancing alternative approaches to peacebuilding in several new terrains. This change in perspective is thus a major political gain. Although it might now seem impossible to reinitiate a similar process, it is feasible that over time, old and emergent political subjects will decide they want to mark their role in El Salvador's history not as followers of terror and violence, but rather as peacemakers and peacebuilders.

## Notes

- 1 I'm referring to efforts under what was called 'the Medellín model,' that is, 'a globally recognised effort to integrate historically neglected urban areas while reducing homicide rates and building a safer city' (Abello Colak and Pearce 2015: 199).
- 2 'The implicit, legitimate, organized, and routinized violence of particular social-political state formations' (Scheper-Hughes 1997: 471).
- 3 Fieldwork in El Salvador took place in 2007 and in 2009. The core of the analysis included 34 in-depth interviews with gang members aged from 18 to 38 years old who belonged to different strands of Barrio 18 and to the MS13. The findings from these core interviews were complemented and confronted with extensive fieldwork that included interviews with victims of violence, human rights organisations, experts, and governmental and non-governmental actors working in the fields of security, justice, youth and violence prevention, and youths without links to the gangs.
- 4 Interviews via Skype were conducted during 2015 with: 1) Maria Silvia Guillén, former director of FESPAD (Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho); 2) human rights expert wishing to remain anonymous; 3) Roberto Valencia, journalist, *El Faro*, specialised in violence and gang related issues; 4) Antonio Rodríguez, priest, social worker, and member of the mediation support group; 5) expert and practitioner wishing to remain anonymous; 6) Paolo Luers, journalist, member of the mediation support group; 7) Medardo Gómez, Lutheran Church, member of IPAZ.
- 5 Defined as 'temporary agreements that solve specific problems, but that do not address the general balance of power that underlies these problems', mentioned regarding the case of Medellín (Gutierrez and Jaramillo 2004: 19).
- 6 Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.
- 7 The civil war lasted 12 years, between 1980 and 1992.
- 8 Author's translation of the version found in Rodas and Arrázabel (2007).
- 9 In just two years, more than 30 000 gang members were arrested. However, the homicide rate increased dramatically, from 40 to 62 per 100 000 individuals between 2003 and 2006 (Cruz 2012).
- 10 Former guerrilla front, currently a political party. The FMLN won the Presidential elections for the first time in 2009. Since the end of the war (1992), the country had been governed by right-wing party ARENA.
- 11 Besides the decrease in homicides, the gangs also agreed to diminish sexual violence and recruitment in schools for instance, as can be found in the Public Statements issued by the gangs.
- 12 Several local governments, representatives of the national government, and local gang leaders signed Covenants for Peace with the support of local civil society – local associations, local businesspeople, Catholic parishes and Protestant churches – in order to put forward efforts to improve security and develop local strategies for prevention of violence and socioeconomic reinsertion (Aguilar, Táger and Arévalo 2014: 98).
- 13 Nonetheless, some previous secretive, small-scale and partial efforts to negotiate were made before, even during ARENA's administrations.
- 14 Interviews 5 and 6.
- 15 Interviews 4 and 5.
- 16 Interviews 1, 3, 5 and 6.
- 17 After the Salvadorian Supreme Court designated gangs as 'terrorists' in August 2015 (Rauda 2015), the



words 'truce' and 'negotiation' could no longer be used when referring to the gangs or to security strategies. Indeed, these words acquired an extremely pejorative connotation, and proponents of such measures tend to be viewed as criminals (Interviews 1, 4 and 7).

18 Interview 7.

19 Public Statements issued by the gangs, compiled by Roberto Valencia on his blog <http://cronicasguanacas.blogspot.pt>.

20 Advocating for social justice and human rights in a context dominated by the strategy of repression and incarceration of gangs was and is an extremely difficult, and potentially dangerous, task in El Salvador. This is why I refer to a few resilient individuals and organisations. Some examples to point out are, for instance, the role of FESPAD and its former director, Maria Sílvia Guillen, and of Antonio Rodriguez, both interviewed for the purpose of this article.

21 Interviews 1, 2, 4.

22 Interview 4.

23 Interview 7.

24 If, on the one hand, some churches provide gang members and their families with support that other entities and actors, including the state, do not but, on the other hand, some of the churches focus solely on the transformation of these youngsters at the individual level and present the notion of evil as rooted on personal characteristics, on sin as well as on devil possession. Nevertheless, from the point of view of individual trajectories, many gang members navigate between possibilities of transformation and conversion. Within these options, they find their own ways of 'peacebuilding' – both at an individual and spiritual level – which is denied by government institutions and policies.

25 Interview 7.

26 10th Public Statement issued by the gangs on 9 March 2013.

27 As stated in interviews 1, 4 and 6. Some localised experiences could be improved. For instance, the Violence-free Municipalities Programme could be an important basis for reflection and territorial expansion. Also, the initiatives of some entrepreneurs to participate in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts (with micro-experiences already developed on the ground) can also play a key role in improving sustainability of such efforts.

28 Safe El Salvador, a governmental plan produced in the framework of the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia, which is a consultative forum that gathers various public, private, and civil society actors.

29 Interviews 1 and 4.

30 Interviews 3 and 4.

31 Interviews 2, 3 and 4.

32 Interview 4.

33 Author's translation. Version found in the 12th Public Statement issued by the gangs, 8 May 2013.

34 Interviews 1, 5 and 6.

35 Interviews 3, 4 and 5. And also interview with Raul Mijango (Valencia and Martínez 2015).

36 Interviews 3, 5 and 6.

37 Interview 4.

38 Interview with Antonio Rodriguez. Rodriguez was a priest with a decade of experience in social work with gangs and disadvantaged youth in poor communities and was very appreciated by progressive social sectors. Although initially very critical of the truce, Rodriguez ended up integrating the group that supported the principal mediator. In his interview with the author, Rodríguez revealed strong criticism of the lack of transparency of the negotiation, the overconcentration of the process in the hands of the principal mediator, and the absence of a consistent approach based on multitrack diplomacy.

39 Interviews 3, 4, 5 and 6.

40 Interview 3.

- 41 References to economic pressures exerted over the Salvadorian government and the blacklisting of the MS13 during the process are recurrently framed as strategies used in order to make the process fail. Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and interview with Mijango in El Faro.
- 42 As previously put forward: ‘Mano dura policies were implemented and expanded not because they were effective – in fact, they made violence worse – but because they were popular: a terrorised population demanded that force be met with force’ (Aguilar, Táger and Arévalo 2014: 97).

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## Acknowledgments

My thanks go to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their extremely pertinent comments. Thanks are also due to those who were willing to be interviewed for the purpose of this paper. I am also very grateful to Juan Carlos Sánchez, Maria Silvia Guillen, Hector Nuñez, Mabel González, and Noelia Ruiz, whose helpful support and input was key to putting forward this paper, and to the Norwegian Peacebuilding Fund for supporting this research.

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## Entre Novos Terrenos e Velhas Dicotomias: a Construção da Paz e a Trégua das Gangues em El Salvador

**Resumo:** Este artigo pretende desafiar os pressupostos dominantes subjacentes à aplicação de enfoques tradicionais aos processos de construção da paz, para além dos contextos formais das políticas pós-guerra. Analisa a trégua das gangues que ocorreu recentemente em El Salvador, tomando-a como um laboratório privilegiado para repensar entendimentos hegemônicos e práticas de construção da paz, abordando especificamente a importância de superar categorias dicotomizadas como “guerra e paz”, “criminal e político” e “sucesso e fracasso”. Afirma-se que, embora a trégua tenha promovido um discurso voltado a um processo de paz continuado e tenha ampliado o debate público sobre as falhas das políticas pós-guerra e sobre as raízes estruturais da violência, a mesma foi ao mesmo tempo decisivamente enfraquecida pela incapacidade de se superar a dicotomia que justapõe os domínios do político e do criminal. Argumenta-se que um quadro de construção da paz inspirado por um conjunto de perspectivas críticas sobre a guerra e a paz e sobre a natureza do “político” pode, portanto, ser de importância crucial para o futuro das políticas de combate à violência em El Salvador e em outros lugares.

**Palavras-chave:** El Salvador; Gangues; Trégua; Construção da Paz; Violência; Subjetividade Política; Discursos.

*Received on 20 June 2016 and approved for publication on 25 April 2017.*



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