*El Barrio*: The Transnational Roots of MS-13

“The MS13 began in the late 1970s in Los Angeles, California, where Salvadoran refugees were looking for more economic opportunity and fleeing a growing civil conflict in their own country. Mostly teenagers and young adults in Rampart Village, Pico Union, Korea Town and Westlake gathered, listened to rock music and smoked marijuana. They called themselves ‘Stoners,’ an homage to the music and the drugs. The Salvadorans among them – mostly in Korea Town – formed what they called a ‘clica,’ or ‘clique,’ near where Pico Boulevard crosses with Normandie Avenue.” (13)

“By the mid-1980s, the MS13 was growing as a result of the steady influx of Salvadorans fleeing what had become a full-fledged civil war in their country, and it was transforming into something anticipating its modern form. Those entering its ranks were equal parts fearful and curious. They sought protection from other Latino gangs but also a means to connect with their fellow Salvadorans. Knives, machetes and even axes soon replaced fists. Territory became more important to the gang’s identity than music or drugs. ...

“The MS13’s main enemy was the Barrio 18, a gang that had been in the area since at least the 1960s. The Barrio 18 was a rare Latino gang that accepted many nationalities. At first, the two gangs were friendly. But in the late 1980s, for reasons that are in dispute, a battle broke out between them. The killing has since spread throughout the hemisphere and has come to be a core feature of the MS13’s ethos. Younger members of both gangs have little idea of its origin and simply accept it as part of gang life. The gang depends on this rivalry to create cohesion and loyalty. Some would even argue that without this rivalry, the gang would suffer an identity crisis.” (14)

“Enforcement efforts [by US authorities] also led to more deportations and gang migration within the United States. The Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras bore the brunt of these deportations. Gangs with US brand names began appearing in the early 1990s in these countries. This process accelerated in the late 1990s and through the 2000s after changes in US laws in the mid-1990s opened the door for massive deportations of ex-convicts back to their countries of origin.” (15)

“It is important to understand that the MS13 is a mythic construct, an idea as much as a real group, a brand name as much as a substitute family. In conversations, gang members make clear that it is centered on the notion of community, which they loosely refer to as ‘el barrio.’ The words literally mean ‘the neighborhood,’ but it is more a reference to its most intimate circle. The idea of el barrio is not exclusive to the MS13. Other gangs also refer to el barrio, which has become shorthand for Latino gang. In the case of the MS13, gang members also use the term interchangeably with the word ‘mara,’ the gang’s shorthand for itself.

“El barrio encompasses the best and the worst of the gang, an expression of its bipolar personality that is the defining characteristic of this group. El barrio is a physical space. It has borders, and the gang marks those borders with graffiti and other public symbols. It posts its members at the edges of these borders to ensure others do not encroach on its space, and members protect this space with their lives, if necessary. It draws revenue from this territory and, in some cases, builds social and political ties with its residents, even while it is victimizing them.

“But el barrio is also psychological. What seems to bind all these groups is that they are looking for a sense of place: a space where they can get protection and nurturing – both positive and negative; a space where others are supportive of one another; a space it can call its own, henceforth its near constant references and symbols that beckon the homeland. That space is what they call el barrio.

“What separates the MS13 from other criminal organizations and gives it durability is that the construction and the maintenance of el barrio is fundamental to all gang members. Efforts that put anything above this idea run into stiff resistance. This is as tricky as it sounds and strikes at the heart of the key dichotomy of this gang. The MS13 is not about criminal proceeds as much as it is about creating a community that is constructed and reinforced by shared, often criminal experiences, especially acts of violence and expressions of social control. Criminal activities or deeds need therefore to service that community, not the individuals in that community.” (23)

“Communication between the diaspora and the home country has also always been strong. Cross-border connections exist because the gang was largely made up of migrants. They communicate to their families and friends. Some of these relatives and friends are or become part of the gang’s network, if not full-fledged members. Most do not, but that communication is a lifeline, so much so that it has taken on symbolic value both inside and outside of the gang. Vendors sell hats, T-shirts and other paraphernalia with the numbers ‘503,’ El Salvador’s telephone country code, denoting a sense of national pride as well as nostalgia for home. Those numbers have also become a gang calling card. Differentiating between the two meaning – pride and nostalgia versus gang identity – has proven difficult for authorities and will continue to be.” (61-62)

Source: *MS-13 in the Americas: How the World’s Most Notorious Gang Defies Logic, Resists Destruction*. InSight Crime and the Center for Latin American Studies at American University. <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1043576/download> Accessed July 24, 2019.