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The Malandreo and the reproduction of violence in Venezuela

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Abstract

This article explores the meaning and expressions of 'el malandreo', a Venezuelan gangster identity, with particular attention for the deadly violence it applies. Much of the deadly violence in Venezuela is attributable to malandros, people that identify with el malandreo, but relatively little research has evaluated this type of violence or its presumed protagonists in this context. Based on primary qualitative data gathered in two different cities, this article develops an understanding of el malandreo as an institution, that is, as a social structure that proscribes and encourages certain behaviours, in this case violent behaviours. Malandros, Venezuelan slang for delinquents of various trades and assignations tend to associate in relatively disorganised groups more or less embedded in the barrio. This article argues that what weaves these varying shapes and forms together is a conflictive network of fear and lethal reprisal. El malandreo has found a substantial following in Venezuela's barrios, providing predominantly young boys growing up among informality and relative insecurity with existential meaning and respect. What sustains and further legitimises this institution today, over and above poor living conditions, is its deadly, reciprocal violence. The malandro claims to protect the barrio from random violence, through what he considers to be legitimate violence, generating cycles of retaliatory violence. The 'culebra',

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a Venezuelan colloquialism for retaliatory violence, thus has important endogenous feedback effects, sowing the conditions for future violence and simultaneously sustaining el malandreo as a legitimate governance structure.

Keywords: Venezuela; (gang) violence; malandros; Relational Sociology.

El Malandreo y la reproducción de la violencia en Venezuela

Resumen

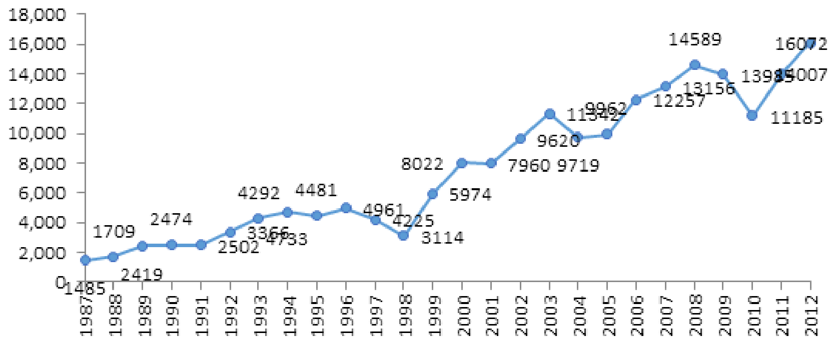
Este artículo explora el significado y las expresiones del 'malandreo', una identidad gánster venezolana, con particular atención en la violencia mortal que aplica. A pesar de que gran parte de la violencia mortal en Venezuela es atribuible a *malandros*, personas que se identifican con el 'malandreo', relativamente pocas investigaciones han evaluado este tipo de violencia o sus presuntos protagonistas en este contexto. Basado en un trabajo de investigación cualitativo en dos ciudades diferentes, este artículo desarrolla una comprensión del malandreo como una institución, es decir, como una estructura social que proscribe y fomenta ciertas conductas, en este caso, violentas. Los *malandros*, jerga venezolana para delincuentes de diversos oficios y asignaciones, tienden a asociarse a grupos relativamente desorganizados, más o menos integrados en sus barrios. Este artículo argumenta que lo que entrelaza estas formas variadas es una red conflictiva de miedo y represalias letales. El 'malandreo' ha atraído un número considerable de seguidores en los barrios de Venezuela, proporcionando respeto y un significado existencial a varones jóvenes, creciéndose en ambientes informales y relativamente inseguros. Lo que sostiene y legitima a esta institución el día de hoy, más allá de precarias condiciones de vida, es su violencia recíproca y letal. El *malandro* pretende proteger al barrio de una violencia gratuita, a través de lo que considera una violencia legítima, generando ciclos de violencia vengativa. La 'culebra', un coloquialismo venezolano para la violencia reciproca, tiene importantes efectos endógenos, sembrando las condiciones para nuevos episodios de violencia y, al mismo, tiempo sosteniendo al 'malandreo' como una estructura de gestión social legítima .

Palabras clave: Venezuela; violencia; malandros; sociología relacional.

Violence in Venezuela

Based on its homicide rate, Venezuela is considered one of the most violent countries in the world today (UNODC, 2014). Figure 1 below shows the evolution of Venezuela's official homicide rate between 1987 and 2012, the latest year for which official police statistics are available.

Figure 1 Homicides registered by police, 1987 – 2012[1]



(Source: MPPS, CICPC, Chacon 2012)

In 2012, a record 16,072 homicides were registered by police, representing a dramatic rise since the 1980s. Nevertheless, as is evident from Figure 1, the last few decades have not seen a continuous rise. We can identify periods of stagnation and even decline; a cumulative ebb and flow that echoes 'boom and bust' or 'rollercoaster' patterns found in other countries (Fagan et al., 2007; Goertzel et al., 2012). Further, the national homicide rate hides important variation across and within administrative boundaries. and its dramatic rise appears to be driven primarily by an increase in the use of firearms (Sanjuán, 2008; UNES, 2012; Vandenbogaerde, 2016). It shows many similarities to what is analysed as 'gang violence' in other countries, a violence between poor, young males that do not often know each other, in public places, frequently using guns and motor vehicles. It is difficult to relate this type of violence to aggregate socioeconomic indicators, such as poverty or inequality. These aggregate indicators reflect characteristics of neighbourhoods and, ultimately, the people living there, whereas the homicide rate reflects deadly interactions, not violent neighbourhoods, nor individuals. A core argument developed here is that explanations, for this type of violence at least, should then also be sought in the way people interact, not in their (aggregated) individual attributes.

1 Importantly, peaks and throws are registered in both sources, reaffirming the validity of general trends (Gabaldon et al., 2012).

Overall, given this dramatic rise in homicide rates, and its continued and devastating effects on young barrio men, a better understanding of this violence beacons. A number of insightful efforts have indeed be made to understand it (Antillano, 2016; Bolívar et al., 2012; Briceño-León, 2012; Chacon et al., 2012; Gabaldon et al., 2012; Gruson and Zubillaga, 2004; Olimpo et al., 2010; Pedrazzini and Sanchez, 1996; Sanjuán, 2008; Zubillaga, 2011), yet its essence, scope and magnitude remain painfully under-investigated, particularly through primary qualitative research at the micro-level. All the more so in comparison with the amount of research devoted to the subject in countries of the Global North, where this type of violence is relatively less common, or less deadly at least, yet data and funding arguably more readily available.

Gangs and violence in the literature

Research on violence is inherently limited due to the availability of data. Violent incidents, by nature, are rare and almost impossible to observe directly. Homicide statistics are frequently considered the most reliable indicators of violence. The severity of homicide, and difficulty to hide the consequences make it highly likely to be reported to, or discovered by, official institutions (Neapolitan, 1997). They are more or less readily available and often seen to be the tip of a violent iceberg, assuming that for each homicide there is a proportionally larger number of other violent crimes that do not become known (UNODC, 2011). Nevertheless, available data on homicide suggest that violence in Venezuela is extremely deadly, particularly through the use of firearms, and the homicide rate does not necessarily reflect a proportionally larger base of violent incidents (Vandenbogaerde, 2016). Further, aggregate homicide rates reflect the number of homicides in a geographic area, not the number of offenders, let alone their internal motivations. That an area has high official homicide rates does not imply that the people that live there are more violent (Morenoff et al., 2001). Studies that look at these rates can often count on substantial variation, but cannot account for individual differences in offending (Ponsaers et al., 2001). Self-report surveys ask people about their involvement in various delinquent or criminal activities and allow for exploring individual variation in violence (Thornberry and Krohn, 2000). The social and legal consequences of admitting to violence make these approaches highly sensitive and ethically difficult, particularly when it comes to more severe instances of violence (Lee and Stanko, 2003). Where homicide rates are usually related to the characteristics of geographical areas, self-report data are matched with individual characteristics, ignoring that over and above a geographical space, violence occurs in a specific relational space (involving a perpetrator, victim and often third parties), and that even the most violent individuals are violent only a minority of their time (Collins, 2009). Violence is ultimately an interaction, not a fixed attribute of individuals. However, this relational space is difficult to materialise in empirical research (Birkbeck and LaFree, 1993). Studies that evaluate the details of violent interactions are often qualitative and interpretive due to the need for intensive data collection.

In all, research on violence is often inevitably reliant on data that cannot entirely do justice to the relationships in which it occurs. Its theoretical explanations are then also

frequently sought in abstract community or individual characteristics. Perhaps due to these data issues, relational thinking, that sees people and their communities as a product of their interactions and relationships, is still relatively rare, particularly in traditional criminology. It is here this article aims to contribute, by taking an explicitly relational approach and looking at communities and individuals as defined by their relationships, rather than their attributes, and exploring how these relationships may be more or less conducive to violence.

This article makes use of institutional and network theories to frame the data. Institutional theory 'examines the processes and mechanisms by which structures, schemas, rules, and routines become established as authoritative guidelines for social behaviour (Scott, 2005). Network theory looks for patterns or regularities in relationships between interacting units (Papachristos, 2010). These theories are paradigms that have been applied in a variety of disciplines and adopted by diverse theoretical perspectives. They contain conceptual tools for organising empirical data in a more relational way.

As the deadly interactions that are the subject of this article often involve malandros, or people that identify with the Venezuelan gangster identity of el malandreo, I draw on a substantial literature on gangs. Gangs have been something of a hot topic in academia over the last few decades. Nevertheless, there is very little consensus on what gangs actually are, how they are organised, or whether and why people join them. Extensive reviews of these debates are offered elsewhere (Decker et al., 2012; Wood and Alleyne, 2010), a brief discussion of a gang definition is in place here (Ball and Curry, 1995; Esbensen et al., 2001). The influential Eurogang group has put forward a consensus definition that has allowed a productive strand of comparative research on the emergence of gangs, the people that identify with them, as well as the (often violent) activities they engage in. It defines a 'youth gang, or troublesome youth group' as 'a durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity'(Esbensen and Maxson, 2011: 5). The definition grew at least partly out of concern that the word gang provokes hyped connotations of hierarchical structure and organisation that are not usually observed in the field. This puzzle is more formally known as the 'Eurogang Paradox' (Klein, 2001). When authors started investigating violent youth groups in Europe they shied away from calling them gangs, because they did not fit a preconceived notion of gangs as highly organised and hierarchical. It was nevertheless soon established that very few gangs, even in the US, exhibit the type of organisation that is often ascribed to them. The consensus definition then, does not assume any type of organisation or structure, apart from some durability with regards to the group identity, rather than its members (Klein et al., 2006).

Some authors problematize the inclusion of illegal activity in a definition of gangs (Ball and Curry, 1995; Short, 1990). They argue a definition that includes the behaviour that also needs to be explained is tautological. By only including those youth groups that engage in illegal activities, possible explanations for their activities that are more generally a consequence of group behaviour are obscured. Whilst I sympathise with these authors' view of gangs as just another youth group, and agree that criminal or violent behaviours are only a minor part of gang activities, I also believe that the particular type of violence gangs use is what sets them apart from other groups. It will be argued here that this

violence helps legitimise the institutional structures of el malandreo. Without (lethal) violence between them, gangs might be criminal organisations, or indeed, any other youth group. The more fundamental problem with the definition above is the lack of clarification of what is understood by group (Fleisher, 2006). Conceptualising gangs as distinct groups with shared identities implies group boundaries and suggests these are clear and relatively static. I argue instead, based on the data I collected, that individual gang group identities are socially constructed, in interaction with other gang groups and the wider community. These interactions generate shared meanings that are reproduced through the cultural identity of el malandreo. Nevertheless, el malandreo is more than a cultural identity, it is a governance structure, an institutional framework that proscribes rules and generates expectations for the people that identify with it (Scott, 2005). Overall, I argue for understanding gang groups as local organisational expressions ('franchises' as Hagedorn (2008) calls them) of this institution. Rather than clearly defined groups, they are dynamic networks of interacting individuals (Morselli, 2009). Individual gang group identities or the broader identity of el malandreo are not essences of these groups or individuals, but a set of cultural values and norms that are recalled in particular interactions.

I further draw on social identity theories that evaluate the social construction of (violent) identities within the wider context of social relationships. Masculinity theories in particular argue that 'hegemonic' masculinities that convey masculine power are a response to a lack of other opportunities for achieving status and respect (Messerschmidt, 2005; Vranckx, 2011). In Venezuela too, el malandreo offers material opportunities in the informal spaces of the barrio. This chapter explores in further detail the construction of violent masculinities in interaction with the community. Nevertheless, it goes a step further by also exploring how violent interactions themselves maintain and reproduce these masculinities. Many perspectives singularly focus on disempowering social structures in explaining the meaning of these identities. These perspectives are important in fleshing out the exclusionary practices and contradictions that are so evident across the globe today, not least in Venezuela. Nevertheless, they often inadvertently provide excuses for deprived and disrespected offenders that have 'no other options' but to engage in a life of violence, tacitly assuming that in empowering young men, the gangs will simply go away. The Venezuelan case is interesting not just because it has a long history of gangs (Bolívar et al., 2012), but because they seemingly increased (deadly) violent activity over the last 10 or 15 years where inclusive policies have been introduced that should have made these gangs less attractive. Although these policies have not necessarily provided the target group of disenfranchised young men with more opportunities (Gonzalez Plessmann, 2010), it is questionable in how far simply doing so would deinstitutionalise the complex governance structures of el malandreo. It will become evident that, more than anything, violence itself is related to their continued presence. It sustains the gangs as much as it is produced by them. Further, where looking at the overall structure of relationships, the dense, informal networks in the barrio, can explain the meaning of violent identities, these theories cannot explain the actual occurrence of deadly violence.

Black (1983) suggests that violence is particularly likely in interactions where status is ambiguous and legitimate social control absent, he sees it as 'self-help'. Papachristos

(2009) reconstructs a gang conflict network based on gang homicide data in Chicago. He shows how interactions between just a few gangs account for the majority of these homicides, through retaliation and counter-retaliation. Zaluar (2001) and after her Arias (2009), uses the term 'horizontal reciprocity networks' to describe gang networks without strict hierarchical structures in Brazil. She argues these networks are efficient for the trade of drugs and guns, but equally so for the spread of violence. Similarly, Fagan and Wilkinson (2007), drawing on Burt (1987), suggest the 'structural equivalence', i.e. the fact they occupy similar social positions, of gang members facilitates the contagion[2] of violence. They talk of an 'ecology of danger', in which fear and gun behaviours generate expectations of future violence that allow violence to spread quickly.

The retaliatory gang violence identified in these different contexts has a name in Venezuela, la 'culebra', meaning snake. It is a fitting metaphor that refers both to the violent conflict or vendetta itself, as well as the person or group with whom the conflict exists (Zubillaga, 2011). This chapter engages with relational perspectives by showing how the dynamics of la culebra generate an ecology of danger, where fear and violence spread quickly. Malandros adopt ever-deadlier violence because it is (a) condoned (even expected) behaviour within el malandreo and (b) embedded in a chain of fear and retaliation, affecting evermore neighbours[3] in the dense reciprocity networks of el malandreo.

Methodology and ethical considerations

This article draws on a variety of data gathered over the course of 12 months fieldwork for my doctoral thesis, during three visits to Venezuela between May 2009 and December 2012. During this time, I collected primary data through participant observation, unstructured individual and group interviews and semi-structured personal network[4] interviews in two different cities, Caracas and Cumaná. This resulted in 122 audio files with 98 unique respondents (residents as well as stakeholders, some were repeat interviews) and 27 recordings of group interviews with a further 130 unique respondents that were transcribed for analysis. My informal interviews and observations also resulted in 239 typed pages of fieldnotes and some written notebooks. These fieldnotes and transcriptions were analysed through repeated reading, picking up quotes, and applying codes. The semi-structured interview data were coded and analysed in Excel, as well as E-net and Gephi for the network data.

2 This is perhaps an unfortunate metaphor that compares the spread of violence with the spread of disease. Talking about gang violence as if it were a medical condition that infects susceptible individuals muddies the waters. Gang members are not ill, they respond to interactional cues. Although I think diffusion may be a better word, I will use contagion to connect with the extant literature.

3 Network theory uses the term neighbours to refer to nodes, or actors, whom are connected.

4 Personal network interviews allow for evaluating the structure and characteristics of people's relationships (Wellman, 1999).

This article draws in particular on the – mostly unstructured – interviews and observations with respondents that had at one point or another engaged in el malandreo. My access to this particular population deserves some further attention. In Caracas, I selected Catia, a parish in the west, as my main fieldwork site. I first made contact with community organisations there through Red de Apoyo, por la Justicia y la Paz, a local NGO, and the Universidad Nacional Experimental de la Seguridad (UNES). In Cumaná, both the local government and statistics office (INE) introduced me to community organisations. These contacts were extremely helpful in helping me find willing respondents and organising group interviews, but they presented me mostly to people that were actively engaged in community activities and this hardly included people that had in one way or another been involved in violence. I decided to start interviewing people between the arguably safer confined walls of prisons and hospitals, an approach used by a.o. Wilkinson (2003) in her research with violent youth in New York. Unfortunately, after a number of enquiries I was not allowed to visit prisons in Caracas, but I did interview a number of victims of gun violence in Catia's three public hospitals, obtaining often hard-negotiated clearance from hospital directors. In Cumaná I was allowed in a police prison compound where I conducted a group and various individual interviews.

Around 9 months into my fieldwork I also gained access to a number of less artificial sites of encounter and exchange between malandros, two in Caracas one in Cumaná. These were mainly street spots where boys convened in variable numbers to chat, laugh, play computer games, and/or sell and consume drugs. In Catia I gained access through an ex-malandro whom was friend of a friend that had moved to a middle-class area from one of Catia's barrios. This ex-malandro was able to introduce me to the new malandro generations in his barrio. Around the same time a contact I made in hospital introduced me to her neighbour's son whom had started taking on a life of vice, as she described it. He himself identified as a malandro. Importantly, residents usually have a mental image of malandros as evil and ruthless killers, their neighbours' sons often do not fit this picture. Stereotypes abound and I certainly will not pretend to have been immune to their effects. Nevertheless, after having spent some time with malandros in Caracas, I myself came to see them as normal boys more than violent predators and gained confidence approaching them in different areas, including Cumaná. In Cumaná, I asked one of my contacts to introduce me to the local malandros in her barrio, and she happily obliged, often sitting with us as we chatted.

I mostly stood around chatting, laughing and joking with these young boys and men, sometimes sharing some beers. Other people went about their daily business as we stood around, so I never actually felt in imminent danger among them. Further, I mostly went to these places early to late afternoon and left before night fell. These spots are indeed hotspots for homicide, but it is difficult to appreciate when these might occur. The very nature of these boys' predicament, as I will explore below, is that they always have to be 'activo', on guard for trouble. I, too, was always on guard, looking around and ensuring I had somewhere to run should something happen. I always ensured my gatekeepers knew where I was. Being a woman, and sometimes also being a foreigner, helped me feel relatively safer. Sadly, as many boys confided, young men tend to garner suspicion, just entering

another unknown sector can make them a suspected individual and have them shot at. Arguably this is much less the case for women and I certainly never experienced this type of enquiries in any of the barrios I entered, partly because I was often accompanied and always introduced by trusted locals. I feel these boys were perhaps even extra protective of me, knowing that if something happened to me they could get in trouble with the people that introduced me to them. And as I started attending more, I gained more trust too. I never pressed for their co-operation, e.g. with the semi-structured interviews. I believe I gained substantial trust through making the research exercise a conversation, rather than an interview as such. These boys were incredibly interested in life in Europe and we exchanged stories more than I extracted them. We talked about the rarity of murders in Europe and things like legal marihuana, which incited them to tell their own stories. In all, this type of research is a delicate balance between obtaining trust and staying away from any more potential danger than being around malandros already puts you in. Turning down invitations to parties, for instance, meant that I was not exposed to any violence that is often said to occur at these parties, but also meant I always remained an outsider. In all, all these boys were incredibly respectful towards me, dramatically altering my own views on 'violent individuals'.

As a female, white middle-class foreigner I had an undeniable influence on the data I collected. Confidence was often hard-negotiated, but I feel that my appearance opened more doors than it shut. Though often denied, my skin colour remained symbol of my other-ness. In the barrio, I stood out immediately. My face spelled 'gringa' (meaning 'US citizen' or 'foreigner' more broadly), long before my accent. Attitudes towards Americans in particular, and foreigners in general are sometimes hostile. Government officials in particular were often reluctant to co-operate. Nevertheless, I strongly feel other people went out of their way to explain and introduce me to things Venezuelans would take for granted.

Throughout this article, all given names and references to places (apart from the place names of Catia and Cumaná themselves, and the well-known names of the prison gangs in Cumaná) were anonymised to ensure that what people said cannot be linked back to them personally.

Malandros as dynamic networks of interacting individuals

In this section, I look at the structure of relationships within the prison ward I visited, as well as the three sites where malandros hung out. I also explore external connections to the community and illicit drug markets, conceiving of these groups as I defined them above, as local organisational expressions (or 'franchises' Hagedorn (2008)) of the broader identity of el malandreo, that are shaped in interaction with other gangs and the wider community. The groups often take on the name of their street or sector, reinforcing their relationship with the community, and simultaneously setting them apart from groups in different sectors. Nevertheless rather than clearly defined groups, as these names would suggest, they are dynamic networks of interacting individuals (Morselli, 2009). The identities single gang groups in Venezuela might claim divert attention away from

a broader malandro identity that unites each of these competing groups in their defiance of debilitating conditions, but simultaneously sets them against each other through the exchange of violence.

Internal structure

Organisationally speaking, the malandros I observed in Caracas were quite different from those in Cumaná, but only the prison gang had an explicit top-down hierarchy. In Cumaná, two distinct gangs 'Carro Azul' and 'Carro Paisa/El Tren' are said to rule the city, evoking the classic picture of hierarchically organised gangs. It is not clear whether this reflects an actual top-down structure. Felson (2006) draws attention to mimicry at the core of gang myths and stereotypes. He notes that gangs often take on the name of better-known gangs, to foster a ferocious image. In the end this is a self-protection strategy that is meant to prevent other gangs from 'messing' with them. It appears that in Cumaná too, individual gangs are not bound necessarily by authority or monetary structures, but more by a symbolic allegiance that underlines their ferocity. They are 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) that are not based on everyday face-to-face interactions, but give the gang more clout. Both Carro Azul and Paisa have their origin in prison, where a strict separation is observed. When people enter prison they are put in the pavilion that corresponds with their affiliation. People that are not affiliated with either band are usually left to endure their time in peace, though they will certainly pick up relationships, tales and tricks that they take away for their lives outside. As people from different barrios 'graduate' from prison – they take these links and even identities with them, back to the barrio. Different sectors within the city of Cumaná appear to have signed up to one or other band this way.

Picture 1 Prison ward Carro Paisa (Cumaná, 2012)

(Cumaná, 2012)

I visited a prison ward ruled by Carro Paisa (see Picture 1). It housed around 30 prisoners in just a couple of dorms, surrounded by a courtyard with an inflatable pool. Unlike the gangs I met on the streets, there was a clear authority structure. The leader ('pran') of the ward proudly told me he was the only one allowed to eat with a knife and fork. To demonstrate his power, he threw a 'pan de jamon', a savoury stuffed bread that is a typical Venezuelan Christmas delicacy I had brought in, onto the ground, upon which prisoners fell to the floor and scrambled for pieces like a pack of wolves.

Picture 2 Alleyway in

Cumaná (2012)

The gang I met on the streets of Cumaná convened late afternoon in a group of around six to ten men in a local square, or Angelo's (37) house nearby. They had officially taken a less violent path; as part of a pacification project they had been offered jobs in return for putting down their arms. As I sat with them one Friday night, it looked like they were still involved in selling drugs, and as the night went by, they proudly showed me their guns. Wives and children assembled with us as transactions occurred. The conflicts they put to rest were those within the barrio, generating a fragile peace. The culebras outside the barrio remained, as did the necessity for keeping their guns. They had not sided with either faction of Carro Azul, or Paisa, yet kept their own name 'Los Lobos'.

The gangs I observed in Caracas did not have such distinct names, they identified with the street or sector in which they sold drugs and that were associated with their reputation and culebras.

Picture 3 Calle Real

(Caracas, 2012)

The gang of Calle Real had just 2 permanent members, Mauro (18) and Pedro (26). Pedro cut up drugs inside whilst Mauro kept an eye on the street. Mauro's dad lived on this sector, but he himself only stayed there from Thursday to Sunday and went away during the week, 'to avoid trouble'. At various points, mostly late afternoon and on weekends, up to ten others would join, congregating on Pedro's mother's porch. This included people that did not engage in criminal activity, as well as people that said they committed robberies and kidnappings, often 'freelancing' next to more formal, but irregular, jobs. Ramos (34) now lived quite a few miles away, and associated with a different group there, but still had family on Calle Real and frequented regularly.

The gang of Calle Bolivar assembled in an alleyway a few sectors up from Calle Real. It was comprised of three drug sellers. Manuel (26) was their leader by seniority, though he vehemently denied any official leadership. Two associates had been killed on the street just a few months earlier, for 'personal problems'. Manuel did not want to talk about what happened and had relocated to an apartment block in a satellite city, in an effort to avoid these problems, returning frequently to oversee drug sales. He took pride in explaining to me that his rule was a proper democracy, the three members had equal rights to sales and incomes. Everyone sold what they could and took their own profits home. He saw himself as mere facilitator in a spot that had always been a drug spot, just outside his family home. He had retired from robberies when the old occupants vacated the spot.

As on Calle Real and with Los Lobos, there appears to be some sort of specialisation in terms of criminal activities, but this is based more on personal preference than a clear division of labour within the gang.

Picture 4 Surrounds of Calle Bolivar

(Caracas, 2012)

Although many of the boys I observed had killed and lived from illegal activity, group boundaries are blurry. Many boys show up irregularly, making an 'extra buck' after their daytime jobs. They identified with the sector they congregated in, but did not use markers, tattoos etc. to safeguard this identity. Many did not even live there anymore, at least not all the time, as was the case with Mauro, Manuel and Ramos. These sectors do carry a reputation, they are entangled in reciprocal conflict (culebras) with other sectors in the same barrio. Nevertheless, many people, like Ramos, who associated with two groups, identified more with the general figure of el malandro. These groups were not hierarchically organised, exclusive, or clearly delineated units. My observations suggest that they are not necessarily internally cohesive either, some boys are trusted more than others and internal conflicts occur regularly. Each of the observed networks thus involved a complex tangle of relationships, centred around a street corner, square or house, from where drugs were sold and people congregated in variable numbers. People of all ages and constellations would join and share an evening beer. This always included people that did not get involved in illegal activities, even police officers, as was the case on calle Real, where Pablo (26), Pedro's brother joined in too.

Relationships to others – community and other gang groups

Malandros thus have plenty of relationships outside of the group that they most obviously associate with. They are not just malandros, but brothers, lovers, sons, baseball fanatics, neighbours and fathers.

All boys had longstanding contacts, often family members, within the sector they associated in, allowing them to find out quickly if any trouble is stirring. Nevertheless, Antonio (45), an ex-malandro, took time and effort in berating these 'boys of today', looking back melancholically over his own glory days in the 90s. When he was in business he would listen to his elders, and his gang would invest in the community. His group had built the basketball court on the street and now it was just all left to waste. I did observe these boys in their community shepherd role – carrying shopping bags for the elderly, reprimanding children, but their relationship with the community seemed indeed fragile. Many people quickly walked passed, uttering a disapproving 'hola', hello. Residents commonly turn a blind eye to what their neighbours' sons get up to. Many tolerate rather than engage with them, salute them but do not talk to them. It is better to keep them at arms' length than cause problems or expose the neighbourhood to other malandros. My doctoral thesis explores in more detail this tenuous symbiosis between malandros and their communities, generating a fragile peace, or even informal social order, where the known (lesser) evil is tolerated before more frightening, unknown evils.

The gangs are structured into higher order patterns of illicit networks by violence (the culebras) and markets for drugs and stolen goods. These structures evolve but remain relatively stable as individuals come and go, and even the crimes they commit are adapted to what is most profitable and least risky at a particular point in time. Manuel for instance had learned from the guy before where to obtain drugs, and which sectors best to avoid.

All groups had minor drug businesses, supplying the local area. Manuel and Ramos took me to visit the sites where they buy their drugs, large quantities are transacted and rifles more openly carried. One was an apartment in one of the big housing blocks in the west, another a semi-abandoned site in between two sectors of a barrio. Even in these places, people hung around that were labelled 'sano', decent, they had nothing to do with any illicit activities and were welcomed, like me, as long as they did not cause problems.

All boys have malandro friends across barrio boundaries. Manuel made friends with a malandro from across the hill that had stolen his motorbike. As he negotiated getting the bike back, he realised this connection was advantageous to him and they had remained friends for years. Ramos also maintained contacts in his new sector. Relationships are formed through associates, encounters, and importantly, prison. These connections allow for the flow and diffusion of ideas, expectations and behaviours.

Malandros are indeed structurally equivalent, they occupy similar positions without a clear hierarchy, facilitating the spread of behaviour (Fagan et al., 2007). These groups can be seen as Zaluar (2001) conceived them in Brazil, as 'horizontal reciprocity networks' of structurally equivalent youth between whom drugs, but also violence and stories about this violence, are exchanged. These groups are not bound by an overarching criminal organisation that groups all the gangs of a barrio. Apart from prison, profits are not collected centrally or for group purposes, but rather are used for personal gain. They are collections of individuals enacting the unwritten rules of el malandreo and 'la calle', the street.

The groups with whom violence (usually in the form of culebras) is exchanged are the more pressing relationships for these malandros. They had few obligations tying them up into the illicit drug structure, but the culebras restrict their mobility and entangle them in cycles of reciprocal violence, as we will explore in more detail below. All of these boys said that getting them off the streets would imply resolving their culebras. Many felt trapped, dependent on the barrio, or more accurately (given not everyone in the barrio supports them and their relationships span across barrios), their networks, for safety. When I took public transport with Ramos, he was continuously looking over his shoulder, reassuringly touching the gun under his belt. Manuel roamed free through the main roads of his barrio on his motorbike, but would not dream of going into adjoining alleyways.

Focussing on el malandreo as an institution allows for incorporating each of these different shapes and forms as local expressions of more general scripts. It absolves us from looking for explanatory potential in single group structures, but urges us to look for it in the way they are intertwined. The following sections will look, first, at the construction of masculine identities in the barrio and, second, the construction of shared meanings and rules in interaction between malandros. I show how different meanings are generated from different types of interactions; those with the community lift malandros above their surroundings, as elite protectors of the barrio. Interactions with other malandros generate shared meanings about the violent other and legitimise violence against this other.

Cops and robbers; the making of men in the barrio

Picture 5 Mural painting in Cumaná

In the end, going to school here is about dying in silence

El Carro Azul

(source: Facebook)

This section looks at the construction of masculine identities in the barrio. Although the Venezuelan barrio is increasingly diverse, many people still rely on jobs in the informal sector. Further, there are some marked gender roles. Although women often rule the household, security provision (financial as well as physical) is still a male task. A man has to 'have balls', pay the bills, and protect the family. Men thus carry heavy responsibility in the informal and relatively insecure surroundings of the barrio.

Vigil (1988) explores in detail the identity processes that influence joining a gang during adolescence. He calls it a time that 'involves maximizing the distance between feared (what a person would not like to be) and real (what a person believes he is) identities and minimizing the gap between ideal (what a person would like to be) and real selves' (p.425). He argues that the masculine, tough gang provides distancing from the feminine, weak self. These issues are reflected in my observations. Many young people want to be 'special', 'to be someone'. That someone was often opposed to what they grew up in, different from the blandness and desolation of the barrio and many of its residents (their feared identities). They want to get ahead, like Pablo (26), Pedro's brother, himself a policeman. They had already lost their older brother to violence a decade ago. Overlooking the dirty, rubbish-lined Calle Real, where they spent the latter part of their young adult lives, I asked him why he had not started selling drugs like his brother:

> *I used the people in the street as a mirror – I decided I didn't want to be that way. I experimented with drugs too when I was younger, but I knew that if I continued that way I would end up dead, or in prison. I wanted to advance, have a better life, be an important person, have a family.*
>
> Semi-structured interview, policeman, Catia

Many men almost desperately wanted me to acknowledge how special they were, how different they were from their environments, convincing themselves thereof and opposing their real identities to the feared identity of not being anyone, 'just one of the million'. A 42-year-old malandro in Cumaná, who described himself as a 'fighter not a pistolero', eagerly started telling me his life story. He was under the stubborn impression I had come to write a book about his life. Wiping cocaine off his nose, he told me:

> *Delinquency isn't what people make it. There are many people here who just stay in their houses, they don't rob, don't do nothing, right? But who's going to write a book about their lives huh?*
>
> Unstructured interview, malandro, Cumaná

Barrio men, often emasculated through circumstance and an abundance of female role models (feared identity), thus resort to hyper-masculine tough identities: policeman, army officer or malandro. Identities that clearly reflect their masculinity. Additional kudos comes with carrying a gun. Young men (and women) are attracted to those professions and identities that instil them with power over life, and ultimately, respect.

On a more practical level illegal activities provide them with 'easy' money and a relatively good life – they can dress well, buy motorbikes, attend baseball games, party in

trendy discothèques, consume weed (many do not touch the hard drugs they sell, or have a more leisurely habit) and, they get the attractive girls. A former malandro was told upon entering prison the first time;

> *First time hey? Listen up, do you like the ladies? The only good thing, [about el malandreo] the only good thing, is that you'll have women fighting over you.*
> Unstructured interview, ex-malandro, Catia

Manuel's girlfriend asked why she chooses to be with him says it this way;

> *At least for me, what can I say… respect? That they respect him. Everyone just has an incredible respect for Manuel. (…) I like feeling important, to put it crudely. (…) Being with any regular guy, I'd just feel normal.*
> Unstructured interview, unemployed resident, Catia

It is difficult to link joining a gang to individual characteristics or motivations. Many malandros do not fit the stereotype of poor and deprived offenders. Many of them have been to school, unlike many of the poorer boys in the barrio. They had other opportunities too. Carlos repeats what I heard from several boys when I asked him whether it was a lack of jobs that had gotten him involved:

> *A lack of jobs, no. I knew how to work, I knew. But laziness… It was just easy.*
> Semi-structured interview, prisoner, Cumaná

Young boys join gangs partly because they are there and they wind up experimenting with its offerings, as new social and sexual identities are contemplated in adolescence. In the absence of more formal institutions and masculine role models, street institutions do the socialisation. Antonio (45) puts it quite well:

> *My mum was always telling me, 'don't go down this street, just don't. Play here, but not there'. So I became really curious. It's curiosity. As a boy of 13, 12… I wanted to know, so I went and saw them. Smoking. One time I heard a gunshot. One of the big boys took out a gun. Boom. He shot it in the air. I stood there, looking at the pistol. The guy had fame, he had money, you know… He's dead today… I was curious about the street, but never about doing anything like that… Never. But as you're in the street, in a particular spot, you think the street belongs to you. And you need to make sure the street is respected. Otherwise you shouldn't be there. Those higher up come and tell you – 'what are you doing here? This is a bad life. The police come here and shoot you, because they'll think you're a malandro. It's better you leave'… If you insist and stay there, well… They've told you. Now you need to assume your responsibility… After a while you start doing everything on the street – breakfast, lunch, dinner. You get the money somewhere … Until you start doing things that don't, eh… Robberies… You get some nice shoes, you dress well…*
> Semi-structured interview, ex-malandro, Catia

Young men growing up in the barrio today are indiscriminately confronted with an easy approach to money, status and relative security. Death lurks behind the corner either way. Studies that focus on individual motivations for young people joining gangs are then as relevant as looking at how and why people take up smoking, or football. Just as only a few become addicted smokers, or professional football players, only a small number of young boys in the barrio end up identifying with el malandreo. Mario (38) recalls how malandros were just there, like many boys that never got involved, he hung out with them on the street corner:

> *Yes I hung out with them but I never had a gun or anything. I got back from work and started drinking with them, it's like, how to explain… it's a street corner where, there's a bakery, the school is there, there's a street, you see…*
>
> Semi-structured interview, carpenter, Catia

Ultimately, starting out with a gang is, as Antonio says:

It's a fashion. Just like lighting a cigarette, or having a beer (…) It's in the atmosphere.

Semi-structured interview, ex-malandro, Catia

What is much more puzzling is how these young boys get caught in its nets, and why and how they start killing others, with detrimental effects on their own lives. A life of violence may generate more deprivation than it solves. Malandros can often feel trapped, wanting to escape their culebras, but once they have engaged in them it becomes difficult to do so. Many of them are prisoners of fear, in networks where death and killing are indeed the norm rather than the exception. Death to them is routine.

> *[Respondent draws a hypothetical line between 'good' and 'bad' on my notebook] Those that are here [on the 'good' side] all are alive. All of them, Raul, Jose, Carlos, Ali. My generation, all of them have wives, kids. When I moved from here [good side] to there [bad side], to another 'ambiente' (…) I'm the lone survivor. The others, no. All of them are dead! (…) They perished in a war. Dead. It's a war. Of those that survived, of all the ones I knew, enemies as well as allies, only about 10 remain.*
>
> Unstructured interview, ex-malandro, Catia

Similarly, Los Lobos in Cumaná, took me through the photographs of their past, kept alive in a drawer with a 9mm gun. They pointed out the dead amongst the smiling faces, virile young men, often posing with children, working out, or boasting in groups of 10 to 15 peers. Most of them, too, had died 'in combat'.

These findings resonate with many of the issues identified by researchers in a myriad of other countries. El malandreo competes with other informal and more conventional identities in Venezuela's barrios for young people's souls; providing belonging, respect and livelihood. However, where achieving masculine status and respect may be reasons for joining a gang, they do not explain the violence these people use. To understand why malandros are so particularly violent, we need to look at the beliefs and values el malandreo portrays, and how these influence behaviour.

Myths and realities of el malandreo

The previous section showed that el malandreo offers individuals livelihood and respect. To fully understand its violence we need to look at the rules it proscribes for people that identify with it, and how these are filled in in interaction. This section shows that repeated interactions have generated shared meanings, 'myths' about callous, heavily armed malandros that kill for fun rather than reason, as well as a set of rules that condemns this type of gratuitous violence. These myths are assigned to other gangs, making violence against them both legitimate and immediately necessary. The culebra is driven by the contagion of fear and gun behaviours more than any infraction of the rules. Each killing generates new feuds, stringing ever more people together in a deadly cast. This violence itself continuously reinforces an imaginary of random violence and the moral superiority of the malandro, whom claims to protect the barrio from it. In all, el malandreo is a complex governance structure. An end to its violence will necessarily need to involve dealing with these structures, perhaps even co-opting them in a movement for change.

Imaginaries of the streets; the code and characters of el malandreo

Menor Petare es una prisión
Donde el malandreo es... Una Religión
Boy, Petare is a prison
Where el malandreo is... A religion
Guerrilla Seca.

Picture 6 Los Santos Malandros

(Caracas, 2012)

Malandros today are an inherent part of the contradictions of life in the barrio, as revered as they are despised. They are culturally embedded to the extent that they have their own perceived language, music, saints, YouTube series, dress style and alleged facial features – 'cara de malandro'[5] (malandro face). The 'santos malandros', malandro saints (see Picture 5), are probably the most prevailing expression of this rich cultural heritage. They are invariably pictured with guns and other vices such as marihuana or alcohol. They were the original malandros, protectors of the barrio in true 'Robin Hood' style (Ferrándiz, 2004). Legend goes that they stole from the rich to give to the poor. Although the malandros I spoke to did not have any of these images and no longer claim to share their proceeds with the barrio, they continue to echo its ideals – protectors of the barrio and the working-class. Today, the barrio needs to be protected from within, from crazy kids ('Chiguires', see below) that threaten it with their indiscriminate violence.

An imaginary of random violence

Ustedes dicen que nosotros incitamos a la violencia y los violentos no somos nosotros, violenta es la calle
You say that we incite violence
We're not the violent ones, the street is the violent one
El Prieto.

Current-day malandreo revolves around an imaginary of random violence, an imaginary that is reproduced by new media like Youtube, Facebook and the lyrics of Gangsta Rap, and finds a quick following in the dense reciprocity networks of el malandreo. I call it an imaginary because it is questionable that these media and lyrics recount the everyday reality of the barrio. They depict the barrio as a place where death and violence are the day's daily bread. This is a partial reality that I personally never saw or experienced first-hand. It is indeed more real for malandros whom are entangled in chains of reciprocal violence, but still not daily, nor entirely random. As in other contexts, malandros play on this imaginary to put on a front of toughness, to generate fear and fend off danger from other gangs (Felson, 2006; Howell, 2007). Part of gang life is posturing, projecting a tough identity to prevent being killed. Facebook is a where gangs display their guns (see Picture 6) as well as confronting pictures of those killed (not shown here). This is a major boasting and deterrence strategy that shapes expectations and feeds the imaginary of random violence.

5 I am not suggesting malandros have different facial features. One of the boys I interviewed in hospital had been accidentally stabbed in his cheek whilst playing games with his friend. He cried because he was extremely worried his 'cara de malandro' would effectively scar him for life.

Picture 7 Guns displayed on Facebook

Influenced by this imaginary, malandros always thought others were more ferocious than them. In Cumaná malandros believe their counterparts in the capital are much more violent than them.

> *What is the difference between the violence here [in Cumaná] and in Caracas? There they don't respect you, they're pure criminals out there. They kill you for a pair of shoes. Here, they still respect you. (...) There they kill police officers, they don't do that here. It's much larger, bigger out there, Cumaná is still small. [inaudible] The thing is that here, the government [i.e. police] also respects delinquents. In Caracas the government come and kill you. Pa pa pa.*
>
> Group interview, Los Lobos, Cumaná

In Caracas, other sectors (e.g. El Valle, Petare) are where the real violence is. Other gangs are 'el más malo', worse than them. A malandro at a drug transaction site repeats what they told me over and over:

> *Children of 13 are killing people. You say 'Oi, whats wrong with you?' they kill you. For a bad look, they kill you. So many things. Delinquency is very advanced.*
>
> Unstructured interview, malandro, Catia

Whereas these stories paint a picture of more or less random violence, the rules of el malandreo explicitly condemn this type of violence. The malandro protects the barrio from indiscriminate violence through his 'justified' violence. There is an important contradiction here that is resolved through projecting these types of behaviours onto others, immediately justifying violence against them.

Violence is part and parcel of el malandreo, though it is bound by rules. A true malandro does not kill innocent people. Violence is reserved for people that deserve it one way or another. People that have 'comido la luz', literally 'eaten their light'. This refers to traffic lights, they have skipped a red light, and can be called to justice. People that deserve respect, such as good students, caring mothers, hardworking fathers, the elderly, should be left alone. Manuel makes a distinction between the death of his brother and that of his friend Pablito. Pablito was a good boy, and those that killed him 'deserved' to die too.

> *It hurt me too, but that of Pablito hurt me more, because that of my brother was you know, I knew it would happen one day or another because he always looked*

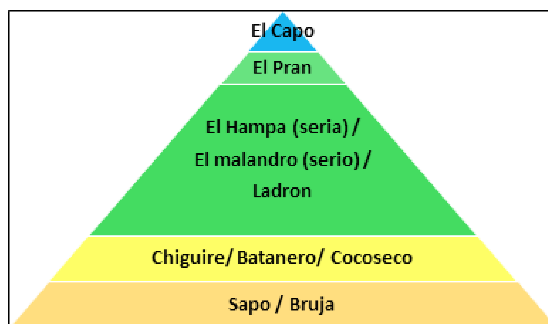
> *for problems, and when you know this mentally… at least when that day comes it hurts, but I knew he was going to die sooner or later. Pablito on the other hand… Pablito was a boy who didn't drink, didn't smoke. He went to university, worked for university… didn't swear, a very good boy, easy… what's more he always advised me, not to get involved in problems*
>
> ***Going back to your brother, did you avenge his death?***
>
> *No. That of Pablito, yes I did.*
>
> Semi-structured interview, malandro, Catia

Random and indiscriminate violence is not appreciated. It endangers the gang group by raking up problems, and the profession as a whole by eroding sympathy within the barrio. Vigil (2006) sees crazy people ('locos') in the gang as essential for demonstrating toughness. In Venezuela these locos are a curse more than a blessing. They do set the standard, but it is a dishonourable standard projected onto others. Stories abound of the evil other, people killing for a 'look', 'a pair of shoes', or even for 'fun'. These stories do have some basis in particular real events, but through urban legend and Gangsta Rap, these events accrue mythical proportions that shape malandros' cognitions, and ultimately their behaviour. The hierarchy of el malandreo projects these behaviours on crazy kids that are not worthy of the name malandro.

The hierarchy of el malandreo

Central to the imaginary of el malandreo is a code of behaviour that is inherently linked to a status hierarchy as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The internal hierarchy of el Malandreo



It is a loose hierarchy, not based on actual organisational structures, but the accumulation of respect. 'El Capo' is the 'invisible delinquent' (Bolívar et al., 2012), the person that controls the drug trade and has connections with law enforcement. In Cumaná he had two visible faces, Cheo Proyectil and Manuel Lanza; leaders of Carro Azul and

Carro Paisa/El Tren, the opposing groups that are said to rule the streets[6]. In Caracas, it was more difficult to put a face on the top of the hierarchy, the city isn't ruled by just a few well-known gangs. Nevertheless, malandros told stories of other barrios where these people ruled indeed. It is difficult to say whether these stories were part of the imaginary whereby other gangs are seen as el mas malo. It is certain that the malandros I spoke to were not inextricably tied to a capo, but they spoke respectfully of these figures.

The 'pran' is an equivalent figure, but he rules from prison. He controls a pavilion (a section of the prison), and collects a 'causa', a weekly protection payment of around 50 bolivars (at the time of fieldwork in 2012) from all prisoners on his ward, that allows him to buy guns, drugs, and possibly prison guards. Prans are also frequently linked to illegal activities on the outside, such as kidnapping. These people have made it within el malandreo, they are said to set the rules. A Facebook message from a self-proclaimed pran that was eagerly reproduced by a malandro reflects a number of important rules:

> *Street buddies… This is the serious underworld speaking from prison. This is for those minors who are out there robbing motorbikes. I speak clearly and in name of the people. Leave your 'chiguireo' because if you end up in prison for motorcycle robbery, you're looking at a minimum of 50 shots in the face… remember that us serious people we get around by motorbike too, just like family fathers who're out there making a living on their motorbikes… Let it be clear yeah… If you're looking for money do it were it is to be found, not robbing the same people that see us grow up in the barrio and are basically the same as us, looking for money to survive… Spread the word until it reaches the pigeons that go around robbing motorbikes… Yours truly, the pran of Yare I.*
>
> Facebook post, shared through account of one of my contacts on Calle Real

Prison is where malandros find their fate if they have garnered too much trouble on the streets. The prospect of ending up in prison establishes social control over malandros, ironically not through the application of formal social control (imprisonment) as such, but through the much more frightening rules of el malandreo. A member of Los Lobos says:

> *They'll pay for everything. They [in prison] know everything. What happens here is that they behave badly on the streets, but they don't know one day they'll be imprisoned and that'll be it…*
>
> Group interview, Los Lobos, Cumaná

6 Although it is doubtful there is an actual top-down hierarchy, as explained in

Picture 8 Mural painting of a malandro

** 'P.H.S. (Pura Hampa Seria) – I don't believe in anyone – Gossips, frogs and witches need not apply'*

(Source: Facebook)

The vast middle of this hierarchy is made up of delinquents of various assignations, commonly distinguished by their type of activity. El hampa, the underworld, refers to illegal activity more than a particular connection to the barrio, which is the malandro's habitat. El hampa engages more in 'outdoor' activities; he robs (the rich, of course). Some referred to these people as 'ladrones', robbers, although this word sometimes has a negative connotation too. The boys on Calle Real put it this way when I asked them what it meant to be a malandro:

> *Mauro: Not letting yourself be fucked with. Selling drugs. Killing, fucking around. Hanging around the street.*
>
> *Ramos: Ladrones rob to get money, they're quieter. Malandros belong to the barrio, they drink, joke around.*
>
> Group interview, Calle Real, Catia

In all, there is no clear status difference between el hampa, malandros and ladrones, although there is more organisation and connections instilled in the word hampa. They associate in structurally equivalent, but opposing groups of youth that all identify with el malandreo. Seemingly oblivious to the shared identity that ties them together, they are entangled in a reciprocal conflict network sustained by myths and culebras.

'Serio', serious, is a commonly used adjective, used to illustrate that someone means business. It distinguishes the in-group within this layer of equivalent groups, and sets it apart from 'chiguires' that mess things up for the serious malandro. 'Chiguires' (the Venezuelan word for the capybara – the world's largest rodent), or 'cocosecos', empty

headed people (literally ‘dry coconuts’), are looked down upon. They are inexperienced crazy kids that are often seen to take too many drugs and kill for the sake of it. ‘Bataneros’ (no translation) are equally despicable, they rob their own people. They are ‘sin verguenza’, have no morals. They are a danger for the gang, and the community. The terms ‘sapo’, frog, ‘paja’, snitch, and ‘bruja’, witch, are reserved for the lowest of the low; people that betray their friends, e.g. by talking to the police.

The distinction between the middle and bottom layers is important, but ambiguous. Malandros project bottom behaviours onto others that themselves identify as malandros too. None of the people I spoke to admitted to having killed for a pair of shoes, or enjoying violence, they project this behaviour onto chiguires. They kill for ‘valid’ reasons, as the code proscribes. Each malandro thinks the same, justifying their own violence. We will see in the next section that the dynamics of the culebra facilitate these processes, in the exchange of violence these myths acquire real dimensions. They generate an ecology of danger where death is routine and safety is found in the in-group.

In all, God remains the ultimate judge in the barrio. Most malandros believe in God, and that they are doing right by him. This may be a way of coping with the extreme existential insecurity they face on a daily basis. They do not, in their own minds, disobey his rule of ‘Thou shalt not kill’. Rather, they extend it with a footnote, an exception, for their enemies, the evil other. True malandros only kill ‘bad’ people. Their ‘good’ violence is always reactionary – self-defence, it was him or me, or a proportionate response to an infraction of unwritten rules. This rather perversely makes them God’s representatives on earth, protectors of the barrio. El malandreo is like an elite force. Its rules are above, and more urgent, than the law. They are enforced by el malandreo itself, on the streets and in prison.

> *El hampa, more than the government [i.e. police]... El hampa is not braindead when it comes to killing people, when they kill someone here it’s because he did something, went around blaming, killing people and stuff (...) It doesn’t fuck about (...)*
>
> Group interview, Calle Bolivar, Catia

The dynamics of ‘la culebra’; the contagion of fear and retaliatory gun violence

> *Gang members do not kill because they are poor, black, or young or live in a socially disadvantaged neighborhood. They kill because they live in a structured set of social relations in which violence works its way through a series of connected individuals.*
>
> (Papachristos, 2009: 75)

Culebras have a wide range of obvious causes, most frequently a public challenge to masculine identity, a display of disrespect. 'A monster', as someone described it, 'with a thousand heads – drugs, women, music, money, alcohol, movies…'. This instance of disrespect can be either a personal or a group insult. It is difficult to say when malandros act individually or in the name of their sector. As Bolivar (2012) shows in el Guarataro, many culebras have acquired a territorial dimension, they are tied to sectors in which different gang groups convene. Nevertheless, that this conflict, whether between sectors or individual malandros, takes a lethal form in Venezuela has more to do with the endogenous dynamics of violence itself, than disempowering social structures or evermore gratuitous offenders. It is the embedding in chains of lethal violence, more than disrespect or infractions of the code that make it so deadly (Vandenbogaerde and Van Hellemont, 2016).

It is difficult to appreciate where a particular culebra starts or ends. Gang groups and individual malandros are often entangled in culebras that go back months or even years; one killing generated a culebra, which was resolved by another killing, which generated more culebras etc. They never end, as a malandro on Calle Real says:

When they disrespect you it's final, you have to… till the end. Time is both your friend and your worst enemy. The culebra sticks around. The people you kill have family. It takes a generation and still… these things don't pass, they may pass [temporarily] but more like clouds above your head, the culebra stays around.

Unstructured interview, malandro, Catia

He touches on the multiplier effect of a culebra, acting upon a culebra generates a string of new culebras, 'dolientes' (mourners) as they are called. This refers to people that are affected by a particular killing, and instant candidates to avenge this death. Shooting someone exposes a whole line of potential enemies. Los lobos looked back on the period before they had to put down their arms:

> *Respondent 1: And so it's not that this guy didn't want to pay, he wanted to kill a guy that was from another gang, but it was already on. They caught him, killed him and there it took off like a rocket. Cumaná exploded haha…*
>
> **How long ago?**
>
> *This is like 4 years ago, how long ago did he die? Respondent 2: Like 4, 5 years ago?*
>
> **So that's the cause of so many homicides?**
>
> *R1: Yep, from there on we started pa pa pa pa killing people, killing everywhere. R2: A massive war, many people with a whole lot of people more. R1: …After that they killed the brother of another mate, yet another boy, and more 'dolientes'… And that was that, 2, 3 deaths a day. 4 even.*
>
> Group interview, prison, Cumaná

This does indeed seem to correspond with a spike in homicide rates in Cumaná in 2007-2008, around 4-5 years before fieldwork. A homicide in one sector thus often triggers a

series of revenge acts in adjoining sectors. This area becomes 'candela', scorching. In what follows I explore how violence multiplies through the contagion of fear and gun behaviours, generating an 'ecology of danger' (Fagan et al., 2007) in which violence becomes a basic survival mechanism.

The contagion of fear and activation of network boundaries

These dolientes are of prime concern to malandros, they are an ever-present threat. A malandro has to be 'activo', 'pendiente', proactive and ready, always on guard. Mateo (29) has just been injured in a shooting that killed his cousin. He was not the instigator on this occasion, but he knows the people that killed his cousin will be expecting him to retaliate. He puts it this way:

> *I'm not going to feel at ease, feel comfortable until I see them all dead. Why? Because Caracas isn't big (...) Caracas is small (...) everyone knows everyone. I'll live with the fear that I'll be selling my gear and run into one or other of them, because I know what can happen (...) It has happened before, I ran into these types, and they saluted me out of fear, they don't usually, in the center they salute because if I'm carrying anything at that time, they know (...) I shouldn't say the words...*
>
> Semi-structured interview, ex-malandro, Catia

Amongst this fear, malandros find safety in their network. A few streets or sectors where everyone is known, and life (like death) is controllable, become the only place to hide.

This is also where group processes start to work. First of all, by activating the network. The battle cry when culebras are aroused is 'activense', literally 'activate'. Los Lobos quickly find out when their culebras are in the area:

> *R1: [the culebras] are out there, on the streets ... R2: Out there. It's cat and mouse you know. R1: Robin (sic.) and Jerry. R2: You can be quiet, but one comes out, look. The telephone, he's here. Buddy, it's going to take off. You take your gun... boom, boom, boom. R1: You may be just standing around and suddenly they call. Your friend says look there's a culebra of yours there. You take a gun and go there... R2: Cause there's plenty of people... R1: By telephone, that's it. Communication.*
>
> Group interview, Los Lobos, Cumaná

Secondly, within the relative safety of this network, stories about the violent other spread quickly. The immoral behaviours described above are projected onto the out-group, generating expectations of this dangerous other (and ultimately legitimising the use of violence against them). Other gangs do not play by the rules. A conversation with Manuel and some others at the drug transaction site shows how this type of story-telling, whereby the own group of friends is more valiant than others, further restricts them to places that are known:

You think I'm stupid for going to these sectors right.

R1: Yes. Manuel: Stupid no, crazy! R1: No, stupid. Stupid, because there are serious people like us who don't get women involved… Manuel: Others are really bad! … R1: There are boys, because of drugs they don't know what they're doing… Suddenly they'll shoot you in the leg or something. R3: You're basically playing with your life.

But you guys play with your lives much more than I do?

Manuel: *The thing is that we know, we know where we are. I'm not going to enter a zone I don't know.*

Group interview, drug exchange, Catia

The situation on Cumaná's prison ward, where gang boundaries are strictly enforced, reflects these processes even more clearly. Locked up in their separate pavilions, they showed me pictures of prisoners (supposedly) in the other ward playing football with a chiguire's head. They told tales of pigs eating the remains of sapos. The lack of contact except through the exchange of violence reproduces these myths of the evil other that not only justify, but make reciprocal violence immediately necessary. The presence of guns in these cycles of retaliatory violence adds a lethal twist that quickly affects expectations and interactions.

Reciprocity and the contagion of gun behaviours

The malandro is bound by rules but these are continuously rewritten in violent interaction. The overarching norm in the culebra is reciprocity. Gabriel (24) says:

There is respect. I'll treat you how you treat me. If you don't respect my family, I won't respect yours. If you don't respect me, I don't respect you. If you draw a gun on me, l'll draw two on you, that's the code of today.

Semi-structured interview, malandro, Catia

As one person adopts (or is alleged to adopt) a mutation of the code, they redefine the rules for the next interaction. A malandro in Cumaná puts it this way:

You can't kill someone's family because you know… You'll pay with a family member as well. (…) inaudible (…) When something like that takes off its very sad… they kill your mom, your dad. It's crazy.

Unstructured interview, malandro, Cumaná

Guns change the rules of the game, by introducing a much higher level of threat. Partly under influence of the imaginary described above, gangs engage in an arms race. Guns always existed but were often considered cowardly in the past (Bolívar et al., 2012). How and when they became more commonly used to resolve culebras, or whether this was a rapidly spreading myth, is unclear, but the impact this belief has on future interactions is

certain. A generalised expectation that guns will be used by the other side condones their pre-emptive use:

> *Today you can't fight anyone like that, with your fists, bats. No. today, these youngsters have lots of guts, we have to live with that, always on alert... ... Almost every weekend they kill someone in the barrio... Last night they killed someone*
>
> Semi-structured interview, prisoner, Cumaná

It becomes important for survival to shoot the other first, which may offer instant gratification, as a prisoner suggest below. Nevertheless, it reinitiates the process by generating more culebras.

> *First you feel happy, one less person who's going to kill me on the streets. And if he has money we take the debt. Pa pa. I killed this dog. Let's celebrate, smoke a little weed... Say you have 5 culebras, you kill one, tomorrow you have 20 culebras... They come looking for you... Before you know it, a whole barrio is looking to kill you.*
>
> Group interview, prison, Cumaná

This type of violence ultimately is 'self-help' (Black, 1993), social control in the informal order of the barrio. It becomes a question of him or me, if he does not kill, the other will kill him.

> *I was there with him. [Hand on head like a pistol] that's where they start begging 'don't kill me please, I have a child, I know where the motorbike is, I'll get it to you' [shakes his head]*
>
> **It's too late?**
>
> *It's too late... You can't allow this. If you do, you're dead. It's you, or him. It's too late... Too late.*
>
> Unstructured interview, malandro, Catia

The culebra thus sets up an ecology of danger where malandros need to be continuously activo, within a small world of trusted others, and kill before they are killed themselves. This type of violence is defined more by previous violence, fear and self-defence than it is by disrespect or intrusions of the code. Although it is justified post-fact by this code, they are evil, we are serious malandros. Nevertheless, much more than a demand for respect, it is a desire to stay alive.

> **When do you use violence?** *R1: Against the enemy. R2: The enemy.*
>
> **But you're killing people who are equal to you, why?** *R2: Because they're culebras. R1: Because they're problems.*
>
> **But they're equals?** *Enemies.*

> **They live doing the same?** *Because if you don't kill them, they kill you, it's as simple as that. R2: You kill to survive.*
>
> Group interview, prison, Cumaná

Once one has engaged in a culebra, it is hard to get out. It becomes difficult to get a formal job, regular hours expose malandros to their culebras. Further, to be safe on the street, in absence of formal social control, but knowledge of other gangs' arms, malandros need to buy guns and bullets. Formal, regular jobs do not pay enough and put them in more danger. Drugs, robberies and kidnappings then necessarily provide the money for arms and offer the additional advantage that they can be planned and executed from the relative safety of the street corner. Malandros that have engaged in a culebra soon get caught in a vicious cycle of different illegal activities sustaining each other from which only few escapes exist; moving away, death, or evangelicalism[7].

The experience of Los Lobos in Cumaná shows relieving the culebras does indeed take the immediate pressure off, but it does not dissolve the complex governance structure of el malandreo. It was the truce between gangs in the barrio that managed to stop the killing between the gangs of a particular barrio. The gang members today had legal, but still irregular work on construction sites. They preferred this way of making honest money, but guns and drugs remain defining aspects of their lives. The meaning of the gang, and particularly their culebras with other barrios, remained unaltered. The mere calling of a truce does not solve years of posturing and scaremongering between different sectors. The guns are kept, just in case. Further, the law of the street has become superior to that of the government. In absence of formal social control, malandros still take up the responsibility to deal with defectors.

> **But something's missing right – why does the killing go on?** *Well because, eh… they continue to kill but they kill people for instance that eh 'se comen la luz' – jump a red light. They pacified right. I know what becomes me now, I'm a rehabilitated person… we know that at night the arms come out… this will never change. Before there were like 7 murders daily here, today no… a small death every once in a while, you know…*
>
> Group interview, Los Lobos, Cumaná

This section has shown that the horizontal reciprocity networks of el malandreo are sustained by myths and retaliatory violence. The violence generated by the dynamics of the culebra feeds back into an imaginary of random violence, continuously reinforcing the moral superiority of serious malandros that protect the barrio from this random violence. In this way, violence continuously legitimises the governance structures of el malandreo.

7 Smilde (2005)describes how identifying with the evangelical faith can protect malandros from their culebras, religious people should not be harmed.

Conclusion

En el momento en el que las bandas lleguen a considerar que su palabra, sus ideas, sus proyectos, pueden ser también respetados como lo son sus armas o su fuerza física habitualmente, estaríamos en la evidencia de un progreso determinante
(Peddrazzini and Sanchez 1996: 26)

In conclusion, the informal and relatively insecure spaces of the barriohave led to the emergence of an informal hierarchy of delinquency where wealth is obtained through illegal activities and status contested through violence. El malandreo is a noun that commonly reflects these activities – selling drugs and protecting the barrio, sometimes robbing, kidnapping, and often killing. It offers young boys growing up in insecure surroundings access to respect and livelihood. Further, it has developed into a proper institution, with an internal hierarchy and proscribed rules. The sad –in this case– fact about institutions is that, having grown out of certain interactions, they resist change to these interactions, they are resilient (Scott, 2008). This way, el malandreo ends up recreating the insecure conditions that generated it. The violent dynamics of el malandreo reproduce a climate of fear that paradoxically sustains the need for it. Among an imaginary of random violence, malandros use supposedly 'justified' violence and portray themselves as protectors of the barrio. In this way, even though many side effects do more harm than good to individuals as well as the community, the institution continues to survive. Malandros are caught up in a deadly dynamic that offers very little protection in the grand scheme of things. Quite the opposite, it locks them in a seemingly never-ending spiral of violence.

This article argued that, where the circumstances of the barrio help explain the attractions and institutionalisation of el malandreo, they do not adequately explain the violence used in its name. Young people the world over hang around on street corners, talk about the opposite sex and consume alcohol and drugs. The violence malandros use is embedded in a lethal chain of action and reaction. Rather than seeing violence as embedded in abstract social structures or violent people, this article argued we should embed it in the interactions and relationships that reproduce it. Although this deadly violence does define el malandreo, it does not define the people who identify with it, whom use violence only when their malandro identity provokes it. The young protagonists of Venezuela's deadly violence maintain healthy or at least relatively normal relationships with friends, family and even boys that do not get involved in el malandreo. Violence is not a characteristic of people, but of a limited number of their interactions. In the case of el malandreo, violent interactions are provoked through previous violence and an imaginary of random violence in which deadly retaliation becomes the prime option to survive. deadly gun violence in Venezuela thus spreads through contagion, adaptation of certain behaviours in close-knit interaction groups. This violence is not linearly related to aggregate social indicators nor the sum of isolated events, it follows a rollercoaster or boom and bust pattern, reflected in the homicide rate in Figure 1 and identified in a variety of different contexts the world over

(Fagan et al., 2007; Goertzel et al., 2012). That similar processes seem to apply to gang violence in a context as different as Venezuela is perhaps the most important finding of this article, with several implications for theory, policy and practice. It renders traditional neighbourhood – and individual-level theories of violence more or less irrelevant; neither neighbourhood nor individual characteristics are as important in regenerating gang violence as is the prior presence of violence itself. The dynamics of gang gun violence are endogenous, not exogenous.

Seeing el malandreo as an institution with a varied following of complex and capable individuals organised into violent networks offers hope for transformation, and potential for turning these governance structures towards constructive goals, rather than destructive ones (Hagedorn, 2008). The first step towards this goal will need to be an appraisal and resolution of institutionalised violence between different factions. Part of the answer may lie in finally accepting gang members as intelligent and capable actors and co-opting their networks in a movement for change. None of the people I interviewed enjoyed the violence. Some were able to justify it better than others, but many were fearful and felt trapped. Depressingly, none saw an immediate end to the violence.

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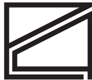

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