The intersection of violence and early COVID-19 policies in El Salvador

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“What can COVID do to me?” Doña Paz asked me one day while discussing the COVID alert the Salvadoran government had just declared. Her question wasn’t so much about her lack of concern about her health (or that of her children) but rather spoke to the multiple day-to-day worries and dangers she navigated. For Doña Paz, COVID-19 was less of an immediate threat than the quest to survive and stay safe in El Cerro, an urban area of illegal squatters with some of the highest levels of violence and marginalization in El Salvador.1

In El Salvador, poverty has long been constructed as suspect and dangerous (Ross and Sanchez 2017). The social exclusion experienced by inhabitants of places such as El Cerro has allowed for early COVID-19 emergency measures to take the form of social triage (Biehl 2005). Through multiple forms of “threat governmentality” (Chappell 2006), the protection of the propertied class was made possible at the expense of people declared violent, of lesser value, and hence dispensable—state-crafted “bare life” (Agamben 1998). Confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Salvadoran government immediately earmarked US$75,000,000 to build the largest hospital in Latin America. All the while, the strict quarantine measures made communities such as El Cerro desperate for basic food supplies. In a country that still suffers from the consequences of a twelve-year civil war (1980–1992), communities such as El Cerro raised white flags indicating hunger and desperation—surrendering to the military occupation that enforced the quarantine measures via roadblocks and street patrols.2

This essay is written from the perspective of engaged scholarship. As part of my research, I cofounded and direct the Salvadoran NGO ACTUEMOS!, attending to the needs of youth, children, and their families in marginalized areas. In El Cerro, the focus of this essay, ACTUEMOS! runs an after-school youth center.3 At the height of the quarantine, we provided food for over two hundred families, mostly single mothers and their children. Much of the information presented here comes from working with the children and their families prior to and during the pandemic.

El Cerro was founded in 1990 when the military forcibly removed its first residents from their prior homes and forced them to start over next to a military post. At the time, the area had no streets, electricity, water, or sewers. Each family received a water barrel, some sheet metal, and cardboard to build their new homes, yet they were left far from employment opportunities and without support for any form of long-term survival. This forced relocation of poor Salvadorans during the civil war has to be understood as controlling the poor sectors of society, rationalized by claims that they were supporting the insurgents. The removal also made poverty invisible to the wider society. Yet these early arrivals at least all received legal ownership of small plots of land, allowing them to improve their homes over the years.

Shortly after El Cerro was founded, and following the end of the civil war in 1992, deportations from the United States brought members of the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs, founded in Los Angeles, to El Salvador (Martinez and Martinez 2018), transforming existing neighborhood youth gangs into today’s maras. Since the gangs derive income from territorial control, disputes over territory have led to increasing violence in many areas. Newcomers to El Cerro no longer fled from the war but rather ended up here out of economic necessity. They no longer receive land from the government and are forced to become illegal squatters in simple shacks. All the while, persisting social exclusion and the resulting lack of opportunities continue to push young people into gangs. This is the wider context of El Cerro, home of approximately two hundred families that ACTUEMOS! mainly attends to.

Today, gang violence is decontextualized in the public arena and fabricated as “public violence.” Marking areas such as El Cerro as violent simply continues the social exclusion of the population, while erasing the history of marginalization naturalizes the violence, justifying the state’s repressive response. Devoid of any context, gangs and gang violence are established as a public menace, normalizing other forms of violence as domestic, where no outside (law enforcement) interference is required or allowed.

A police guard post marks the entrance to the area during the day. It converts at night into a checkpoint, applying the border, questioning a person’s right to enter or leave. As a consequence, inhabitants of El Cerro are marked as outside the bounds of full citizenship. In the eyes of law enforcement,4 El Salvador has to be protected from people living in places such as El Cerro. The militarized police, the guard post, and public discourse mark inhabitants of El Cerro as “lesser citizens.” They live in El Salvador without forming part of it. Not surprisingly, much of the policing in El Cerro takes the form of “discipline” and “education.”
For example, Margarita, a twelve-year-old girl attending the ACTUE-MOS youth center, was beaten by a police officer for dressing like a pandillera, or “gang member.” Her pants and shirt were too big, yet they were all she had: used US clothing given to her by her church.\(^5\)

The construction of the inhabitants of El Cerro as lesser citizens represents the first step of the aforementioned social triage, shifting away attention and resources from one sector of the society for the benefit of another. This distribution follows the same lines of power that continue to employ the logic of segregation, making poverty invisible—erased through the language of violence.\(^6\) From an analytic perspective, the white flags, military presence, and invisible yet ubiquitous coronavirus force us to interrogate the notion of crisis as a tempting yet problematic lens through which to understand today’s reactionary politics (Biehl and Locke 2017, 19). These politics amplify the policing of queer spaces (Rana and Rosas 2006) by way of “threat governmentality” (Chappell, 2006; see also Dean 2010), represented in El Cerro by the police post and military patrols.

Militarized quarantines and the white flags of surrender invoked at least two different crises representing the living conditions and fears of two different sectors of the society. In a way, they contested each other’s right to define “crisis” (see Rosas 2006). Of course, the enumeration of these two crises cannot be separated from El Salvador’s past, both symbolically and with respect to the social divisions they represent. However, it is through the evocation of yet another crisis—the crisis of violence—that we must understand the contemporary construction of poverty in El Salvador as violent and dangerous.\(^7\) This latter marginalization allowed the Salvadoran government to answer the COVID-19 crisis with a strict militarized quarantine, ignoring the crisis it created among the country’s marginalized population.

From the start of the pandemic, the Salvadoran government took an extremely proactive stance toward mitigation. Even before the first case of COVID was detected, schools were closed and large gatherings prohibited. The airport and borders were shut for travelers, including Salvadorans abroad.\(^8\) Declarations of states of emergency and exception suspended the constitutional freedoms of transit, assembly, and to choose one’s own residence. All nonessential businesses were closed.\(^9\) The logistics of quarantine centers were put in the hands of the military.\(^10\)

With the first documented case of COVID-19 on March 18, a thirty-day military enforced quarantine was declared.\(^11\) Only one person per household was allowed to travel outside the home, twice a week, and only for “essential business.” Essential business was limited to the purchase of food and other household essentials. Travel for work or selling goods on the street as a way of making a living were no longer allowed. All public transportation was closed, ambulant military checkpoints were set up, and quarantine violators were forced into thirty-day quarantines at confinement centers.

Confinement centers frequently lacked basic amenities, such as soap, toilet paper, or even food, yet security personnel were always on hand.\(^12\) New detainees arriving at these centers were often not tested immediately, converting the centers into potential hot spots for infections.\(^13\) While the detention of quarantine violators in confinement centers was officially declared illegal by the Supreme Court on April 8, the president defied the ruling in a series of tweets, announcing potentially infinite quarantines:

You will spend thirty days there or until the health authorities can verify that you no longer carry the virus. This part could take a long time, given that you won’t have priority for testing. So, your departure from the confinement center could take longer than thirty days. You don’t like it? Easy, stay home and don’t put your life at risk, and that of your family and others. (translation by author)\(^14\)

Clearly, the fact that they were unconstitutional, the lack of attention, and the comments made by the president indicate that confinement centers were more punitive than public-health-oriented in nature.

For the inhabitants of El Cerro, such restrictions were disastrous. Within hours of the quarantine, large parts of the informal sector of the economy ceased to exist, and almost all families lost their livelihoods. At military checkpoints, the legal logic was reversed. Individuals had to prove their right to travel or else they would be detained without legal recourse. Possibilities for abuse abounded, with people frequently being blackmailed to avoid quarantine detention.\(^15\) Traveling became hazardous and expensive. Many local shops closed, as stocking them with merchandise became increasingly dangerous and expensive. The remaining stores increased their prices to account for higher risks and costs, as well as the lack of competition and having a captive clientele, who no longer was able to shop elsewhere. Prior to the quarantine, families traveled to the central market of San Salvador, where they had access to cheaper products. With public transportation closed, inhabitants of El Cerro often had to walk more than an hour to purchase essential goods at the nearest supermarket, all the while running the risk of being detained.

Not surprisingly, several of my older friends equated this situation with the civil war era. Arriving at a checkpoint, one’s fortune depended entirely on the officials’ willingness to understand one’s case. Such willingness was largely dependent on who traveled and where. In personal interviews, inhabitants of Escalón (an upscale neighborhood of San Salvador) described both a limited police presence and relative politeness on the officers’ part. Clearly, pandemic limits were being put in place in ways that benefited those higher up on the socioeconomic ladder.

Police and military guard posts, checkpoints, and foot patrols were already omnipresent at El Cerro prior to the pandemic. Yet the new pandemic regulations threatened further militarization under the guise of pandemic control. As a result, the three major gangs of El Salvador enforced harsh quarantine measures in their territories.\(^16\) At El Cerro, gang members threatened corporal punishment to quarantine violators. Their rationale was twofold: Preempting any justification for increased police presence while also protecting gang members from COVID infections. After all, many of them could not attend a clinic without the threat of being detained by the police.

Publicly described as enemies of the “honorable citizens” (ciudadanos honrados), the “gang terrorists” (terroristas pandilleros)\(^17\)
are clearly marked as outside the bounds of citizenship. These boundaries, in turn, are located in space through law enforcement practices, extending to entire communities. In El Cerro everyone is a suspect, and "in their [police's] eyes, one is always guilty," Doña Patricia remarked during an interview.

The forced quarantine and the confiscation of property at checkpoints continued despite the legislative assembly and the Supreme Court declaring such measures illegal. In fact, the president publicly defied the Supreme Court ruling—"I would not abide by a resolution ordering me to kill Salvadorans," I also cannot abide by a resolution that orders me to let them die— and asked police and the military to continue both the forced quarantine and the confiscation of vehicles and goods.

This, again, had immediate consequences for people at El Cerro. Traveling became more restricted as drivers feared for their vehicles, limiting even essential trips to doctors or the few remaining shops. Selling one’s belongings to purchase food became risky, too. Doña Paz sold her TV locally for about half its worth. However, she couldn’t risk losing the TV set altogether, or worse, being detained at a control post for a quarantine violation. Given the harsh detention measures, any travel threatened entire families. "What if I am detained on my way to wash clothes?" Doña Maria asked me during an interview. "Should I bring my daughters along so that at least we will be detained together?"

To counter some of the hardship, the government rolled out a $300 subsidy intended to reach 1.5 million families by the end of March 2020. People were asked to log on to a government website to receive their money, but large sectors of the population lack internet access. Even for those who did have internet, the system didn’t work. The website crashed almost immediately due to high traffic, forcing everyone to visit the respective administrative offices, only to be dispersed by police with teargas for gathering illegally under the COVID-19 restrictions. At ACTUEMOS! we learned about these situations personally. Providing internet service via cell phones and filling out forms for people who couldn’t write or read, we experienced the same shortcomings in government provisions that have been reported from all over the country.

Lacking an accurate and updated census, officials used preexisting gas subsidies to select beneficiaries. Yet, as illegal squatters, few families of El Cerro qualified for this program. Furthermore, government subsidies are usually made out to the male heads of households, leaving single-mother households (after separations) stranded with no support. Of the roughly two hundred families ACTUEMOS! services at El Cerro, less than 15 percent qualified for the cash subsidy—and only based on previous addresses. However, qualifying for the subsidy didn’t actually mean receiving money, as the program quickly ran out of funding. A second program, intended to hand out food baskets to families in need, showed a similar lack of attention and organization. Of the first two deliveries, not a single basket arrived at El Cerro.

Yet lack of organization is only one side of the coin. At ACTUEMOS! we used private donations to purchase basic foodstuffs to support the two hundred families of El Cerro for weeks, yet our trips to purchase and distribute beans, rice, oil, and sugar to the community were not automatically regarded as essential. Hence, navigating the quarantine posts became a complex endeavor of avoiding and explaining. Only on one occasion, and only due to a personal favor, did we gain access to a municipal vehicle, converting our travel into "official business."

The situation was all too real for Doña Paz. Her partner had left her and their two children a few months prior to the pandemic without providing any support. She got by washing clothes for one family, babysitting for another, making tortillas in the center of San Salvador on the weekends, and helping another neighbor once a week with her own business making and selling tortillas. The money was barely enough, and she was happy for the free school lunch her older daughter received.

With the quarantine, Doña Paz lost all her income opportunities, while the school closing took away her daughter’s free weekday lunch. Selling her TV brought her less money than she had hoped for, and obviously, she couldn’t afford the internet access (via prepaid cell phones) needed for her daughter’s online schooling. Previous gas subsidies were in the name of her former partner, so she did not receive any money from the COVID support. The family was struggling to survive, living for several weeks off handouts from neighbors and food that ACTUEMOS! supplied. Finally, Doña Paz gave up, sold her belongings for as much as she could, and moved into a room with her sister’s family.

And these are just the economic aspects of the crisis. Being quarantined in a house is one thing; being confined as a family to a hot and dusty shack with dirt floors and rain entering through the roof and walls is entirely different. Fever, headache, and coughing were regular guests at El Cerro during "normal times." They became major sources of distress during the pandemic. Stories like Doña Paz’s abound among El Salvador’s poor, creating despair within entire communities around the country. Being prevented by military checkpoints to leave their homes, families resorted to white flags begging for outside help. At the same time, the white flags echoed sentiments from the war, especially as they were once again contrasted by the military wearing camo, staffing checkpoints, or patrolling communities. Once more the white flags signaled surrender to the military, while begging for help (Ross 2020a, 2020b).

Several consequences follow from this essay. First, we need to take the naturalness out of natural disasters, exploring victimhood within a historical perspective (see Comfort et al. 1999; Gaillard et al. 2014). Specifically, we need to see how the inhabitants of El Cerro have been construed throughout history as a population in need of containment and control. Having been forcefully moved by the military during the war, inhabitants of El Cerro were now confined in place by the same military, closing the circle of marginalization, invisibility, and containment. Second, it is important to take a victim-centered approach to avoid the appearance of random or arbitrary victimization. I concur with Harris and Jeffrey’s (2013) critique of Gupta’s (2012) that victimization within structural violence is perfectly predictable when explored through the lens of social inequality (for a response, see Gupta 2013). Third, we ought to widen our conceptualization of disaster victims to include people affected by the responsive policy measures (see Seyhan 2020). While many Salvadorans were infected by COVID-19, many more were affected by the COVID-prevention policies put in place. In
the face of starvation, being afraid of COVID-19 constituted a luxury for many. Fourth, rather than focusing on structural violence (or any form of violence) as an analytical unit (Farmer 2004; Galtung 1969), we need to focus on the actors involved, their connectedness through power relations, and existing practices of social exclusion and their histories. Such a view allows us to understand early pandemic measures in El Salvador as a historically constructed social triage (Biehl 2005), sacrificing the well-being of certain sectors of society for the well-being of others. While the process of social triage is not limited to disasters or times of crisis, it becomes much more visible during or in the wake of them. This, in turn, forces us to critically reflect on the concept of crisis (Biehl and Locke 2017; Rana and Rosas 2006) as a tempting yet problematic concept. Crises are often evoked as part of “threat governmentality” (Chappell 2006), a process of policing and public discourse that serves to devalue certain sectors of the population. By doing so, they are constructed as lesser citizens, “bare life” (Agamben 1998), dispensable for the protection of the “honorable citizens.” I argue that we need to account for these processes by attending closely to existing social conflicts and their histories, whereas the invocation of specific crises has to be understood as a discursive tool applied within wider struggles.

No doubt, with some of the strictest quarantine measures in the world, the Salvadoran government was able to slow the rate of infections during the early phase of the pandemic. However, these early measures almost entirely focused on protecting individuals who could afford to stay in their homes, work remotely, or live off their savings. Inhabitants of areas such as El Cerro lacked such luxury, and the protective measures implemented by the government deprived them of their already insufficient means to survive. Historically constructed as lesser citizens, the people of El Cerro did not fall into the category of honorable citizens the Salvadoran president swore to protect and for whom he was willing to violate El Salvador’s constitutional law. Once again, Salvadorans living at the margins saw themselves opposed by the military, forced to hoist white flags of surrender. What more can COVID do to them, indeed.

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ENDNOTES
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2 https://elfaro.net/en/202007/el_salvador/24627/The-White-Flag-of-Hunger.htm.
3 See www.actuemoselsalvador.org.
4 Of course, law enforcement itself cannot be treated as a totalizable unit. Jauregui’s (2016) ethnographic work on policing in India is a good illustration thereof.
5 I don’t have the space to explore these “educational” aspects in more detail. It relates entire communities to the status of children. Not by accident, previous gang-related law enforcement approaches were called mano dura and super mano dura (“iron fist” and “super iron fist,” respectively), concepts often cited in tough-love child-rearing practices.
6 Police and military at El Cerro do not “serve and protect” the community (the motto of the Salvadoran police) but control and contain the population for the benefit of the thereby created “outside world.”
7 Zigon (2015, 505) calls such overlaps “intertwined knots of . . . non-totalizable assemblages.” In El Salvador, the war on gangs bleeds into global militarism, war on terror, anticommunist insurgency, carceral politics, and US weapon sales and migration policies (among others). In Zigon’s framework, these are all non-totalizable, diffuse assemblages by themselves. While I appreciate the openness and complexity of Zigon’s proposal (what he calls “horizontally deep”), his approach (as well as other posthumanist approaches) runs the danger of diffusing what Chappell (2006) has called “threat governmentality,” actors enouncing and activating threats (crises) as part of their governing strategies. Hence, when the Salvadoran president calls gang members “terrorists,” we have to analyze these statements as a discursive device, calling upon the global war on terror, the US immigration debate, etc., while being firmly grounded and rationalized in contemporary local discourses and social struggles.

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