

## Stream #19: Learning From Urban Conflict

### Extorted Life: Protection Rackets and Urban Governance in Guatemala City

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Extortion is the most common of crimes in Central America today, and the most despised. As a growing criminal phenomenon, it exemplifies trends prevalent across post-Cold War Latin America as well as other parts of the world. In many societies, the “democratic wave” and the triumph of market fundamentalism has been accompanied by deepening uncertainty: the state has become criminal, criminals counterfeit the state. For those caught in the middle, distinguishing between predator and protector is often impossible (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Goldstein 2012). Proliferating urban protection rackets are both a symptom of and answer to collective anxieties over the terms of everyday survival and the difficulty of determining just who is in charge. Such conditions are rife with opportunity for entrepreneurs who accrue power and profit by subsuming the sovereign threat of violence, combining it with a promise to protect (for a fee), and imposing their own brand of order.

Based on several years of ethnographic research and media analysis, this paper maps Guatemala City’s expanding geographies of extortion to trace the entanglements between the so-called law-abiding world and its underworld, in order to illuminate the conditions of deep uncertainty fracturing the terms of everyday urban survival. Since the end of Central America’s longest and bloodiest civil war (1960–96), Guatemala City has become an epicenter of homicidal violence, much of it blamed on *Barrio18* and *La Mara Salvatrucha*—Central America’s dominant transnational gangs (*maras*)—and their efforts to extract *la renta* (extortion tithes) from residents and businesses in their respective territories.

I begin with the rise of *mara* extortion rackets, but ultimately, the *maras* are not the problem. I show that while they remain the spectral face of extortion, they have in fact become a commonly mimed model and indeed a smokescreen obscuring vast networks of state agents, financial institutions, private businesses, and countless civilians feeding off the extortion economy. The endless conflicts over the “right to extort” draw in complex networks of state, criminal, and “civilian” actors vying for control over urban neighborhoods and businesses. The expansion and diffusion of extortion beyond “traditional” criminal networks links the terror in poor urban neighborhoods with considerable profits for individual and collective agents who will never need to carry out violence. In places like Guatemala City, extortion has become a way of organizing city life at the most intimate of scales. It is an alternative livelihood and a zero-sum game in which, willingly or not, knowingly or not, the majority of Central Americans must participate.

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