CHAPTER 4

Marginal Youth and the Maras

Introduction

Honduras is a country with a predominantly young population. In a country of eight million inhabitants, nearly two million are adolescents (aged 10 to 19; UNICEF 2011), and the young adult population (aged 20 to 24) was at two million in the country’s last census in 2001. This figure has surely increased in the last decade. One does not need to look at statistics or reports to grasp “Honduran youth.” Walking in the country’s main cities and even in the countryside, adolescents and young adults appear everywhere: in the corners, in the parks, on the sidewalks, in stores, on buses, in taxis, and at universities.

This is certainly a striking contrast to the city I have been living in the past decade: Berlin, Germany. In the second most populous country in Europe, the median population is around fifty years old. The birth rate is not only sinking, but demographers also predict that there will be fewer adolescents and young adults in the future. Germany is an aging country. Walking in Berlin, which happens to be one of the cities with the highest youth population, one is in constant contact with elders and middle-aged people. Teens and young adults are around, of course, but not in great numbers.

Being a teen and a young adult in Honduras is tough. Entering the labor market, even if you went to higher education, is not easy. There are not enough jobs, and many are not well paid. Furthermore, violence, drugs, and the political situation since the 2009 coup have limited perspectives in the country. Newspaper reports and research on contemporary Honduran youth remind us that the difficult economic situation, poverty, inequality, social violence, crime, and drug cartels have limited the opportunities for Honduran youth. Honduras’s current difficult situation for youth is not new.

Many adolescents and young adults in Honduras live in marginality and exclusion. For many Hondurans, this is evident with the massive summoning
of (mostly male) adolescents and young adults to the maras (i.e., Mara Salvatrucha [MS] and the 18th Street Gang [M-18]), which emerge as one of the main vehicles for expressing (masculine) youth ideals as well as discontent toward Honduran society.

This chapter looks at Honduran youth and the factors associated with their exclusion. It also looks at how structural marginalization of adolescents and young adults has led to youth gang participation as a social organization and youth lifestyles embedded in violence.

**Youth in Honduras: Facts and Figures**

Despite being the main demographic group in Honduras, what is known about adolescents and young adults, is mostly figures indicating population in urban and rural areas, access to school and health, and electoral participation. Other than figures in local and international reports, little is known about youth lifestyle, subjectivities, gender construction and roles, sexuality, or identities. As Jesús Martín Barbero (2005) notices, we only start paying attention to youth when they do something “wrong,” “deviant,” or “anomic”; otherwise, they remain invisible. Consequently in Honduras, youth only started to gain attention in the late nineties and in the past decade because of their “deviant” behavior and activities—their increased participation in violence, delinquency, and crime—especially the maras. The absence of studies, reports, and a public policy prior to youth’s participation in youth gangs and violence is an indication of the invisibility of Honduran youth.¹

Youth generally tend to be understood in terms of age group. International reports define youth as males and females aged between 10 and 24, whereas local Honduran reports as well as the state define Honduran youth as males and females aged between 12 and 29. There are other notions of youth that go beyond the understanding of a biological age group, such as a part of a vital cycle in the transition to adulthood or as a sociohistorical construction (Escotto-Quesada 2011). Furthermore, youth tend to be perceived as a homogeneous group, overlooking the complex issues involved (e.g., subjectivities and identities, sexuality, peer groups, and lifestyles) that are linked to macrostructural social, economic, and political processes. In this sense, it is more appropriate to speak about youth.

What do we know about Honduran youth(s)? Local reports, which consider youth to be males and females between 10 and 29 years old, estimate that 54 percent of the population in Honduras is youth (Casa Alianza 2006; Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2006). The UN “World Youth Report” (2007) estimates this figure at 21 percent, as it considers youth to be only males and females between 10 and 24 years old. Following the local reports, a little more