

# GANGLIVES

Global Portraits from the Streets & Beyond

Edited by

**Dennis Rodgers**

B L O O M S B U R Y

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# **GANG LIVES**

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**Figure 4.1** Via Lorenteggio, Milan, Italy, 2022.

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## Chapter 4

### ‘OBVIOUSLY, I DO NOT DENY IT, NOR WILL I EVER DENY IT’: AN INDIVIDUAL HISTORY OF THE *BARRIO 18* GANG BETWEEN EL SALVADOR AND ITALY

Paolo Grassi

#### *Introduction*

July 2021. From San Siro I head to Giambellino Lorenteggio. From one social housing neighbourhood of Milan to another.<sup>1</sup> They are marginal areas of Italy’s richest city, interstitial spaces populated by old and new forms of youth socialization such as rap crews, street groups and gangs.<sup>2</sup>

After a few weeks of chatting via WhatsApp, I have finally managed to get an appointment with Rebel,<sup>3</sup> a former member of a Milanese *clika* (chapter) of the *Barrio 18* gang, who is currently incarcerated with work release. Actually, I did not really know anything about him, but the way I obtained his contact says something about his story and the story of his gang. Some weeks before, in San Siro, I met Luca, a young man detained in the same prison as Rebel, also on work release. I was interested in his story because he had recently created a rap record label to work with young people from marginal neighbourhoods. To introduce myself, I outlined some of my previous ethnographic research carried out on gangs in Guatemala and Italy (Grassi 2018, 2023).

My search for interlocutors linked to the world of the Latin American gangs in Milan was then at a dead end. While Milan was frequently described – at least until 2017 – as the European capital of Latin American gangs (Valencia 2016), my fieldwork had only uncovered some tenuous traces of a social phenomenon that seemed to have almost disappeared. In response, Luca had said to me, ‘Hey, I know a “*marero*”.<sup>4</sup> He’s in prison with me, but he also works outside’, before then adding, ‘if you want, I could ask him if he wants to tell his story to you’.

So here I was. I parked my car along Via Lorenteggio, just after the sign for an Ecuadorian restaurant where Rebel works. The street is a hot desert, the ambient temperature is almost 35 degrees. I text him<sup>5</sup>:

‘I am here.’

‘Where? I cannot see you. Do you see the bar? Come in.’

‘OK.’

I recognize him by the tattoos that cover his arms and neck. He is wearing a t-shirt and a pair of shorts. We shake hands, and introduce ourselves:

‘I don’t even know your name,’ I tell him.

“‘Rebel’, is that okay?’, he replies.

‘Yes, that’s fine.’

We order: a Red Bull for him, a coffee and an iced bottle of sparkling water for me, although I would prefer a beer. We sit down at a small table in a corner of the room. I start talking. I explain to him who I am, my research, and how I got to him. Then it is his turn. We mix Italian and Spanish, compensating for our respective language gaps. Rebel tells me about his story, that of Latin American street groups in Milan, his experience in prison and his future plans. His narrative comes out somewhat randomly and in an often confused fashion. I reconstruct a logical thread only in the aftermath.

### *Two interviews, a life story*

The beginning of my research in Milan dates back to 2017. I was interested in analysing the relationship between ‘structural violence’ and urban space, starting from an ethnography of San Siro, one of the biggest social housing neighbourhoods in the city (see Grassi 2024). Initially, I collaborated with an action-research group at the Milan Polytechnic formed by urbanists and architects, but since 2019, I have also been developing a more ‘traditional’ ethnography of Milanese street groups, thanks to funding from two ERC projects, the TRANSGANG project led by Carles Feixa at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain and the GANGS project led by Dennis Rodgers at the Geneva Graduate Institute in Switzerland.<sup>6</sup> These parallel research paths ended up intersecting at a methodological and an interpretative level, as I came to interpret the street groups through a spatial lens developed thanks to my collaboration with the action-research group (Grassi 2023), while also reflecting on the relationship between violence and urban space in San Siro through the lens of its street groups (mainly rap crews – see Grassi and Sánchez-García 2021).

I collected Rebel’s life story principally for the GANGS project, which I was invited to join due to my prior research on, and familiarity with, gangs in Central America. At the same time, however, it is important to note that contrarily to what is usually reported on in relation to research on gangs (see Whyte 1943; Bourgois 1995; Rodgers 2016, 2024; or Fontes 2018),<sup>7</sup> as well as with regard to anthropological research more generally (see Crapanzano 1985; Griaule 1997 [1948]), my collection of Rebel’s story did not take place after I had developed a solid and lasting relationship or a longitudinal exchange with him. I did not

know Rebel well and Rebel did not know me. Our relationship was initiated by a mutual acquaintance and broken off within a few months. It effectively amounted to two meetings and the exchange of a few messages between June and September 2021. At the same time, Rebel perfectly understood my role and the purpose of my interviewing him. And he simply wanted to talk to someone, share his point of view, giving it to someone, even a stranger – or a ‘Martian’, to use Oscar Martínez’s (2021: 38) term in his powerful book about his experiences as a journalist also interviewing gang members – so that they could write about it, and leave a trace of his story.

Is the way I collected my data necessarily problematic? It could be argued that Rebel’s story suffers from the transience of what might be termed our ‘investigative relationship’. There are certainly gaps, inconsistencies. As Pollard (2009) – amongst others – highlights, however, ethnography is very often unpredictable and an inevitably partial enterprise, one that will always generate incomplete representations. Despite the possible gaps, I am sure that Rebel’s testimony offers relevant and novel insights relating to the recent history and social dynamics of Latin American street groups in Milan. His story ‘fits’ within my broader research trajectory on gangs, in Italy and elsewhere. And it also has significant intrinsic value. There are very few academic – or even non-academic – articles that cite direct testimonies of former Latin American gang members in Milan. Even in recent years, the few researchers who have focused on this issue have experienced difficulties in obtaining similar contacts (see De Cesare 2018; Comunale 2020). Ultimately, what Rebel’s story offers us is a unique window on the way that gang membership can be something enduring, but in a way that changes over time and across contexts, thereby problematizing the mainstream narrative about the way that migration spreads gangs, as I will now endeavour to demonstrate, reconstructing his life history.

### *Growing up among gangs*

Rebel is a Salvadorian man in his thirties. He was part of the second wave of Latin American gang members in the city, those who were not initiated in their home countries, but rather in Italy, although still connected with their ‘mother’ gangs in their countries of origin. He became a member of the *Barrio 18* gang in Milan in 2007.

Rebel was born in the municipality of Zacatecoluca, in the province of La Paz, in El Salvador. He was thus a child of the civil war that afflicted that country between 1979 and 1992. The political issues underlying the conflict were not resolved, and perhaps not surprisingly, the ‘peace’ that followed war was characterized by high levels of ‘social’ violence linked to the emergence of youth gangs, whose escalation led that El Salvador being branded as ‘the most dangerous country in the world’ when measured by the number of murders in the first quarter of the 21st century (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP 2001; Demoscopia 2007; Martínez and Martínez 2018).

Rebel has a younger brother and sister, both of whom also live in Italy nowadays. Their parents separated when he was eight, his father abandoning them, his mother emigrating to Italy. Rebel continued to live in El Salvador until he was thirteen years, however. He did not live in the midst of ultra-violence as experienced by many of his peers in other urban areas of Central America (Rodgers 2009). His neighbourhood in Zacatecoluca was fully controlled by a *clika* of the *Barrio 18* gang. This meant there were no local conflicts with other gangs, which, from the point of view of its residents, meant there was peace, as Rebel explained: ‘Fortunately, the neighbourhood where I lived in those days was, I can say, quiet because the 18 controlled it well because they have always been in all those areas, there was harmony.’

Rebel also explained to me that at the beginning of the 1990s, Salvadoran gangs did not yet consist of the armies of youths that became so frightening in El Salvador, at least until a few years ago. Most gang members were ‘*muchachos*’, older young men who had grown up in the neighbourhood, and whose gang was not something to worry too much about. As Rebel put it, ‘at that time, I was only worried about having fun and playing football’. Things changed quickly, however: ‘If you joined the gang, they forced you to stay with them, you know? You could not go out. You had to report everything because if you did not do it for a week, they looked for you because they thought that you had become an informant or something, even if it was not true, you know?’

Not being part of the gang did not mean not having any relations with it. The gang ‘was part of the *barrio*’, and Rebel knew its members, and would often meet them regularly on the streets everyday, something that is often thought to lead to joining gangs. In Zacatecoluca, however, Rebel lived with a grandmother and an uncle. He described his uncle as an authoritative figure, able to keep him ‘out of trouble’, a person capable of forging relationships with gang members who granted him and his family some protection:

‘If I went out to play baseball, they knew that they had to respect me, because I had a family behind me. Instead, so many times the family is missing there [in El Salvador]. Boys can stay on the street all day long and their parents are not there. Instead, my uncle had me under control.’

‘Was your uncle respected by the residents of your neighbourhood?’ I asked him.

‘He was respected because he was a friend of some powerful people, as well as of people known by the 18.’

Rebel eventually emigrated and joined his mother in Milan in 2006, something that clearly constituted a major turning point in his biography. He described this transition as both something dictated to him but also as a personal choice:

Until I was 13 years old ... it was then that I felt a little that I was growing up and that I realised that I ... I tell you like this: if I continued [to live in El Salvador],

you know? Maybe, just like all the guys, not only me, it could go bad for us, you know? I mean, I tried to come to Europe to get a better future, but on the one hand, no ... I used to feel ... I didn't want to leave some things there, you know? Some things of my home country. You come here [to Italy] because you know that you can eat better, you can dress better.

Rebel knew that moving to Italy could be a unique opportunity for his future, away from gang violence. Nevertheless, in Italy he paradoxically reproduced what he seemed to want to escape from. As if living a self-fulfilling prophecy, Rebel was unable to take an alternative route to the one that had seemed promised to him in El Salvador.

### *Latin American Milan*

On 4 July 2006, the Italian national football team was preparing to play the semi-final of the World Cup against Germany in Dortmund, at the Signal Iduna Park stadium. Italy beat Germany 2–0 after extra time and won the right to play the final against France, on Sunday 9 July in Berlin. Following the victory against Germany, all over the country people go out on to the streets, honking car horns and waving national flags. It is into this surreal atmosphere of celebration that Rebel first arrived in Italy, on an Iberia Airlines flight that landed at Milan Linate airport: 'I remember ... the emotion of getting on a plane for the first time ... But I also remember the semi-final party ... This is something that in El Salvador does not exist.'

Rebel moved in with his mother and her new partner. His younger brother had already joined them some years before. The family lived in via Padova, in one of the zones considered to be the most multicultural in Milan. As Cognetti and Lazzarino (2019: 63) have highlighted, in 2016, 34 per cent of the population of that area were foreigners, against a city average of 19 per cent, and they describe the area as, and as having transitioned from a traditional working-class neighbourhood to a 'chaotic and hybrid' multi-ethnic district.

After his arrival, Rebel was not enrolled in school. He fitted into the urban fabric of the city by playing football and meeting mainly Salvadorian youth like himself: 'I was training in an *oratorio*<sup>8</sup> for almost a year, I didn't manage to play in an official team because I lacked some documentation to obtain a kind of temporary document in order to be legally registered. Actually, I played illegally for a period.' Then, he added, 'When I arrived, I realised that everyone was hanging out with people from their own country, right?'

Rebel's narration testifies to the specific socialization that is linked to the migratory experience in the city during that period. Especially at the beginning of the 2000s, ethnically homogeneous groups formed by young foreigners started to visibly populate the public space of Milan:

I saw that Ecuadorians, and people from other countries, always had parties. We started to go to the parties, right? [...] but little by little we began to divide because we realised that sometimes they looked at us, they treated us, you know? [...] Then we started dividing, since we were already Salvadorans, we were only Salvadorans [...]. Sometimes I dressed like an Ecuadorian or wore a hat with pants on ... Guys looked at me, they stared at me as if they wanted to get into trouble. But I noticed a change if I dressed as a Salvadoran, if I shaved and put a bandana on my forehead. In this case, they ignored me ... That has happened to me so many times.

Those Latin American youth started to create their own street groups, sometimes joining the gangs of their home countries, such as the *Latin Kings*, the *Comandos* or the *Netas* in a first phase, and then the *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* gangs in a second one. The former were studied by the members of Codici,<sup>9</sup> an independent social research agency, whose studies (Conte and Bugli 2008; Conte *et al.* 2008) helped to interpret this first wave of gangs, and especially to understanding their differences vis-à-vis the Latin American context, and challenging the stigmatized understandings fomented by the state authorities and local media. Codici implemented an important mediation process that led to these street groups becoming formal juvenile associations (Conte and Bugli 2008), but unfortunately, this process stopped around 2010, and they did not have the opportunity to intervene in relation to the Central American gangs of the second phase.

Milan, like other European cities, only became an important destination for global migration routes from the 1990s onwards. Migration and integration policies were slow to develop (Fondazione ISMU 2006), and creating street groups, using public spaces, meeting at discos or in private houses, and drawing tags and graffiti could be interpreted as forms of resistance, or of a social refusal of marginalization, at the very least (Queirolo Palmas 2010). In other words, the Latin American street groups of Milan started to reinvent the city, a 'Latin American Milan' that was inscribed into urban space through new imaginaries connecting different countries, cities and neighbourhoods (Conte *et al.* 2008).

*Livin' la vida loca (but in full compliance with the rules of the gang)*

Rebel explained to me how at the beginning of 2000s there were some youth who had been gang members in their home country, before coming to Italy, but that this didn't impact on Milanese gang dynamics, that old rivalries and grudges did not travel. As he put it: 'There were people from the *Barrio 18*, but they were always drunk ... [And] we had even known that they shook hands several times with rival gang members, in nightclubs, and so on, and didn't do anything, you know?'

Nonetheless, as a local Milan Latin American gang culture developed, polarization between different groups developed organically, for reasons that were not related to previous gang dynamics in Latin America. Partly due to his feeling

of isolation and alienation in the city, Rebel – along with other youths – started coming together as a street group, both for comfort, and to make collective sense of their experience as young migrants in a foreign city. They drew very much on Salvadorian *mara* gang culture to do so, thereby reproducing what many of them were running away from.

‘Everything began between 2007 and 2008. We create a real *clika* (gang chapter), you know?’, Rebel told me. He explained how the *clika* joined the *Hoover Locos clika* of the *Barrío 18* from the Zacatecoluca area. This was important, because affiliation with a mother gang in El Salvador was a matter of prestige. To be a true ‘*marero*’ you had to show that you had a relationship with the centre of power. Rebel and his mates had constant interactions with gangsters in El Salvador. However, this relationship did not involve the management of criminal activities or strong transnational networks, it was just a matter of exchanging information, or explaining what was happening in Milan:

‘It was to refer information,’ Rebel said.

‘And weren’t you afraid of this connection?’, I asked.

‘No, we weren’t,’ he replied. ‘As I said, practically it is something that you eventually have to do. If you decide to find something here [in Italy], you have to follow the rules, you know? Obviously, there are so many things here that like ... they don’t work like there [in El Salvador], such as extortions, things like that, that don’t happen in Italy [...]. On the contrary, there life is riskier, because there are extortions, there is revenge for deaths, you know? Here, there are no deaths, you know? [...] We also decided to give information because if you start something here and you don’t keep updating, it is not useful, because no one will respect you.’

Rebel’s discourse is obviously rather ambiguous. Between 2019 and 2021, I managed to meet and interview somebody who claimed to be the former leader of the *Mara Salvatrucha* in Milan. His view on the relationship with the ‘mother gang’ in El Salvador was somewhat different. He claimed he wanted to inform it as little as possible, in order to be able to maintain a greater degree of independence. Independence for what, is the question. Valencia (2016), who wrote the above-mentioned article that defined Milan as ‘the European capital of Latin American gangs’, for example, asked a former *marero* why the *Barrío 18* and *Mara Salvatrucha* in El Salvador might have been interested in sustaining Italian *clikas*, since they didn’t seem to receive any economic benefit from doing so. The former *marero* responded that the main purpose was just to expand the global footprint of the gang.

Rebel’s *clika* grew to about twenty mainly Salvadoran youth within a couple of years. New members were recruited from peer groups: friends and acquaintances who frequented the same areas of the city. The *clika* structured itself by mimicking the rules and values associated with the *Barrío 18* in El Salvador (Ranum 2008; Insight Crime and Center for Latin American & Latino Studies 2018):

‘The first thing,’ Rebel said, ‘is the tattoo: more than other things, this was what we imposed to ... everyone. Even if he was a kid, he had to have the “numbers” [18], you know? In order to understand the consequences of his choice. We also forced older guys to get the numbers. Because there came a period when many talked and talked, hanging around, you know? [...] So, we suddenly decided, from one day to the next, to start tattooing everyone ...’

‘OK, but did they accept this?’ I asked.

‘Some of them called us with an excuse, but most accepted ...’

‘And did you give nicknames to yourselves?’

‘Yes, the nicknames, but above all the most important thing was the internal discipline to know that there is a “pressure”, to know that if before you went to the clubs without any tattoo, tomorrow you will no longer have a clean body, you will go with identification, you know? You know that you can no longer go peacefully, you know that you have to have support behind you.’

‘So, you wanted to create a solid group.’

‘Yes, in our opinion the most important thing was having the numbers. This was more important than anything, to be counted and to respect our rules and roots [...]. Having a tattoo was a source of pride, you know? We knew we could feel safe, you know? That we were more and more.’

Rebel became the *‘palabrero’*, the leader of his *clika*. Unlike his mates, he was recognized for his ‘fairness’ and ‘seriousness’. Rebel did not smoke, did not drink, but above all, he was able to comfort and support the younger members of the gang: ‘I told them: “Look, you are not alone”, you know? There were two boys, in particular, two or three who felt alone. So, what I did with all those guys [...] was offer them support [...], I decided to give them moral support and met with them often to make them feel that they mattered.’

The only real differences between the Milan gangs and those in El Salvador concerned the control of territory – almost absent in Italy, as mentioned by Rebel above – and the more limited levels of violence associated with Milanese groups. At the same time, as group identities became more cemented, there began to be clashes between different gang groups in Milan. In the beginning, these mainly involved fist-fights and stabbings, including, for example, on 13 July 2008, when Ricardo, a member of the *Barrio 18* gang, was attacked by Necio and Pirata, members of the *Mara Salvatrucha*, and lost an eye. Then, things got worse.

### *A murder*

In 2009, Rebel killed a leader of the *Latin Kings New York* of Milan. What initially seemed like a settling of scores between *Latin Kings New York* and *Latin Kings Chicago*, had actually consisted of a semi-planned punitive expedition by Rebel’s *clika*, seeking to establish itself and its reputation. Rebel told me this without getting upset. His voice did not tremble, his eyes did not look away. As if that

incident concerned someone else. But his description of the event was chaotic and confused, almost stream of consciousness:

Despite the problems that had happened, we [the gang] made the decision, no, not the decision, it was a spontaneous thing, right? We decided to go up against those who are really important in the other gangs, do you understand me? Not to go to the first person you meet, small fry, only the big guys, do you understand me? And it is this that has meant that I am now paying a very long sentence, right? Because just that same day that happened, that same day that we went, I tell you, because we went with other people, right? But just that same day, hours before, there was an attack by the New York gang, some guys who ... attacked three of our guys, they saw them in a park ... About 50 guys from the New York, they were called, they came to the park because they had been given bad information, do you understand me? That the Chicago gang, with whom they were enemies, was having a meeting in a park. So they arrived 50, do you understand me? To look for the Chicago gang believing that they would find them. Instead they found those three guys from our gang, as I was telling you and they attacked them, do you understand me? They broke their heads, and they did a couple of other things to them. It was all very fast. We arrived in just 3 minutes, some boys told us what had happened, and we went there immediately, although we weren't that many, we were about 10. But there was nobody there anymore. We searched the sides of the park ... to see if there was still someone, we started ... we divided ourselves into groups of 3, because we were well armed that day, and each one had his own thing, and we looked for them at least to catch a group, but we didn't manage to. That same day we talked and decided to actually go, look for those who had been the main ones involved in that attack, do you understand? The leaders! This was not the first time that the New York had attacked our guys ... Do you understand? And so, we talked until a conclusion was reached about going to hunt them down that same night.

Rebel did not elaborate on how he carried out the killing, except to reiterate that it was something 'spontaneous', an escalation of violence whose foregone conclusion was death. But what is certain is that he was arrested shortly after this tragic event and convicted. He was eighteen years old.

### *The prison and the gang*

Prison represents a clear watershed moment in Rebel's life trajectory. The first prison he was incarcerated in was San Vittore. This is one of the three main prisons of Milan, together with the Carcere di Bollate and the Casa di Reclusione di Milano Opera. Conditions in Italian prisons can be very different from one institution to

another. In 2009, San Vittore was incredibly overcrowded. In an interview that appeared in an online newspaper (Biella 2009), a local politician stated:

The level of overcrowding, which has never been so severe in the years I have been visiting the prison, is such that it creates untenable situations. For example, on the second and fourth floors of the sixth wing, up to nine prisoners can be found sleeping in bunk beds almost touching each other. In a cell measuring a maximum of 10 square metres, they also have to cook in a small corner, and the beds are very close together.

Prison rehabilitation projects are few and far between, partly because most prisoners spend on average just two to three months imprisoned in San Vittore (Antigone 2018).

Rebel initially did not experience his imprisonment as a tragic event:

At that moment, I can tell you that it was not tragic because I saw it as a game. I looked at this thing as a game for many years ... Perhaps you feel the impact of being inside the prison, but because of your young age you do not realise what you created, perhaps. I reconsidered everything year after year, getting to know the weight of my ... The consequences that I had caused.

At the same time, Rebel could also count on the support of two ‘families’: one outside the prison, made up of his relatives, who never abandoned him, and one inside the prison, made up of other members of his gang.

Rebel was, however, transferred to the Opera and then to the Bollate prison. The Bollate prison has, since its foundation, sought to develop experimental reintegration projects. All sections are open and inmates can leave their cells during daylight hours, to participate in work, training or socializing activities (Antigone 2015). Entering Bollate prison marked another turning point in Rebel’s biography, as he described: ‘I had the opportunity to go to Bollate afterwards. Bollate is the prison desired by each detainee and I had the opportunity to go to Bollate where I began to change my mentality a little.’ He then added: ‘I felt all the years that I had lost ... I saw a computer after many years ... touching a mouse seemed strange to me.’ However, after three years in Bollate, in 2018 Rebel was transferred again:

‘Then [...] I had a disciplinary report and they transferred me. I went to Vigevano punitive section. In Vigevano I continued to have the disciplinary measure for a year and a half until I had the opportunity to finish high school. I can say that study is the most important thing I got from Vigevano, because if I had not studied ... I arrived in Vigevano, I always misbehaved, but I studied.’

‘What does misbehave mean?’, I asked.

‘Misbehaving, I had a telephone, do you understand me? ... and obviously you

can't have communications with people outside. But [...] I needed to have contact with the outside world because when I was in Bollate, I was able to leave for three months; then I already felt something about what life is like outside, a future life.'

'What does the punitive section mean?', I queried.

'The problem is that all the people who come to this punitive section are shitty people. They are people who take drugs and pills [...] Prisons are made by the people incarcerated there. In fact, if you find a calm, more mature person, you spend a peaceful coexistence at the end. If you don't live with the right person in the same cell, and if you see those people full of therapies, where you are going to walk around like ... you can't even talk to a person like that.'

After finishing his high school studies and graduating in early 2020, using this as a testimony of his reformed nature and good behaviour, Rebel asked to serve the rest of his sentence under a regime of 'semi-freedom' [*regime di semi-libertà* in Italian],<sup>10</sup> a measure that would have allowed him to work outside the prison and to return there only for the night and weekends. As his request was being considered, the Covid-19 pandemic exploded, however. The Ministry of Justice decided to suspend all special permissions, semi-freedom regimes, as well as family visits in all the Italian prisons from 22 February 2020. In response to this, protests and riots triggered by inmates exploded in prisons all over the country on Saturday 7 March 2020. Over the next few days at least ten rioting prisoners died in unclear circumstances and dozens of people were injured, including prison wardens and police officers (Antigone 2020; Rizzo 2020). This was linked to the pervasive problem of overcrowding, and the Ministry of Justice decided to let some prisoners serve out their sentences under domiciliary confinement. Rebel was one of them, and soon after his release from prison and return home, he started to work during the day in the restaurant in Giambellino Lorenteggio, near the bar where we met.

#### *Forever marero?*

Sitting at the table in the bar, I asked Rebel what he thought about his biographical trajectory. The *Barrio 18* still represented an important reference for his identity construction, something that was part of his habitus. Police informants were 'shits', the members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* as well. The gang helped to organize his vision of the world, the reality surrounding him: 'I could say that [the *Barrio 18*] represents a past and a present thing. However, I don't have "the mentality" anymore, you know?' Rebel felt he was still a gang member, but he also stressed that he was no longer active: 'Perhaps the things that I feel, I take them inside my heart without looking for problems ... without getting into trouble. It would

be stupid, you know?’ However, not being active certainly did not mean that he rejected his past:

Clearly, I do not deny it, nor will I ever deny it ... but I think that I can still lead a quiet life without getting into trouble. Clearly, there are always people who can look for problems. ... [But] I live quietly. I ... do not deny the person I am, but obviously, I already make that clear, you know? I don't feel like I have rivals. I walk down the street calmly, but if the occasion arises, first I would warn you. I'm not here for little things, that is, to argue over something stupid. Clearly, you can't come to talk to a kid, you know? Kids reason very differently.

This generational gap that Rebel alludes to is something that he also used to explain the latest development concerning Latin American gangs in Milan, and more specifically, the murder of Ernesto Odir Barrientos Tula, a Salvadorian citizen of thirty-four years old, in March 2019. Three Salvadorians were arrested some days after, and the police had talked about an internal fight among members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* (Il Giorno 2019). Rebel had, however, met Barrientos Tula in prison, and their encounter had almost turned into a fight:

The person they killed was a person who ... I was just entering the same cell by mistake and he jumped out of the cell and said to me 'here I am.' There were three of us, he started insulting me but he stayed there, without doing anything. [...] I realised that he was there, you know? [...] What happened to him is something that I think about because I know how things are in the street. If I actually go out right now, I would be calm, you know? I would say: 'I have to make a new life because I've been released from prison.' I wouldn't go to these new guys [gang members] who have just arrived. They can have direct contact with El Salvador, you know? In this world, you have to be more afraid of young guys like them than of older people [...]. So, he certainly made this mistake.

Rebel argued that *maras* were still present in Milan, as well as in the close cities of Varese and Como, but he confirmed that they were more hidden than before, and also had rather weak connections with their 'mother gangs' in El Salvador. I nevertheless asked him what he thought was going on in El Salvador, and how he saw the war on gangs over there<sup>11</sup>: 'Finding a solution is very difficult', he said, 'because of the "mentality" as I said, the mentality of so many people. It is very bad, right? There are so many who allow themselves to be brainwashed, there are always people who only think of acting as an armed force. There are people who always think only to be a soldier and stay in that mentality, right?'

I asked Rebel if he wanted to go back to El Salvador. His answer surprised me, perhaps showing a lack of knowledge of the current events of his home country:

'Of course, I would,' he answered.  
'But can you go, or not?'

‘Yes, I can. As soon as I finish my sentence, I would like to go to my home country, but obviously with all the precautions, especially economic ones.’

‘Aren’t you afraid of ... other gangs?’

‘No, I personally think that you have something to fear only when you have been a person who has not been upright, you know? Because ... obviously you already know which gang controls each area, obviously you don’t go anywhere. But I do know that also if I have any problems with my gang, I would face them. ... If they see you and you are wealthy ... They respect you. [...] When I was in El Salvador, I saw so many gang members who arrived with absolutely nothing [...]. If you arrive and have some resources, you are prepared.’

Essentially, Rebel seemed to be arguing that a person with enough economic capital would be able to move quite freely in El Salvador, clearly underestimating, however, the insecurity that certainly characterized the country at the time of the interview (Balutet 2024). After all, Rebel had not been back to his home country for about twenty years when we carried out our interviews. But these contradictions also showed the nature of the bond he had with El Salvador: a relatively weak and imaginative one – in many ways like that of the Milanese gangs with their Salvadorian counterparts ...

### Conclusion

Rebel’s story offers a challenge to dominant discourses on gangs and street groups, showing how gang affiliation evolves over time and shifts depending on specific dynamics, even when it reflects common trajectories of deviance and eventual redemption (see Covey et al. 1992; Hazen and Rodgers 2014). Raised in a gangland in El Salvador, Rebel reproduces the violent dynamics he was socialized into as a response to the socio-economic marginalization he later faced in Italy. Through this experience, he formed a gang very much based on the template of gangs in his country of origin, even establishing transnational links with the putative ‘mother gang’ in his homeland, though this connection clearly remained very tenuous. The definition of Rebel’s identity revolved around the gang that welcomed him, first on the street and then in prison. Rebel recognized himself in this cosmogony. He felt like a *marero*, between two countries and two continents, although the relationship with his home country was probably not as close as it had been when we carried out our interviews.

Part of the reason for this is that Latin American gangs in Milan are clearly different from their counterparts in Latin America. They have different dynamics, and most importantly, operate in a different context – one that is less violent, less punitive and offers more opportunities for second chances, even after being involved in violent tragedy. Such contextual factors are important. While imprisoned, Rebel was able to take advantage of opportunities to educate himself,

and also to work. At the same time, he was only able to do so once he was transferred into the prison that offered it to him. In this sense, Rebel's story shows how the Italian prison system is not a homogeneous and standardized reality. Paradoxically, even the pandemic was an opportunity for Rebel because it allowed him to reconnect with his family and experience a kind of freedom through a domiciliary confinement programme.

At the same time, Rebel did not blame anyone or anything for his destiny. This is how things went and they could not have gone any other way. Apart from the incongruities of his murder narration, I never registered any sorrow or shame in Rebel's discourse. In one way, this very much corresponded to the ethos of the tattoo he had on his left hand of three black dots in a triangle, symbolizing the *mara*, death and prison: the only three fields within which a *marero* can place himself. On the other hand, Rebel's life history also testified to an existential horizon that seemed to transcend these elements. Beyond the mythology of the gang, through his narration Rebel showed that he possessed other reference points – family, education, work – and aspirations, including, in particular, the possibility – despite all – of living a new and different life. Rebel looked forward to his future with cautious optimism. Whether his optimism was warranted, and whether he can build this alternative future, is another question, but leaving my academic stance aside for a moment, I will just hope that he is right and that he will be successful.

### Notes

- 1 By 'social housing', I am referring to groups of houses owned by the Lombardy Region or the Municipality of Milan that are allocated to people in need through special calls for applications. In Milan, the Lombardy Region manages about 35,000 social housing units through the Aler company. The Municipality of Milan, on the other hand, manages about 23,000 dwellings through the MM company. See Cognetti and Padovani (2018) and *Immaginariesplorazioni* (2012).
- 2 I will use 'gang' and 'street group' interchangeably in this chapter, although traditionally, 'gang' is a term generally used by media, the authorities, as well as youth themselves, while 'street group' is more of an academic construction aimed at avoiding criminalizing and stigmatizing interpretations of the complex social phenomenon that is a 'gang' (Brotherton and Barrios 2004).
- 3 All names have been changed to protect the subjects' anonymity and security.
- 4 The word '*mara*' is used to denote gangs in Central America; a '*marero*' is a gang member.
- 5 All translations from Spanish and Italian into English are my own.
- 6 See respectively <https://www.upf.edu/web/transgang> and <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/research-centres/centre-conflict-development-peacebuilding/gangs-gangsters-and-ganglands-towards>.
- 7 In all of these works, the researchers manage to develop deep relationships with their interlocutors that have allowed them to access their intimate symbolic universes.
- 8 An *oratorio* is a juvenile centre connected to a Catholic Church.

- 9 See <https://www.codiciricerche.it/>.
- 10 A method of enforcement of detention, provided for by Law 354/1975, which mitigates the deprivation of liberty.
- 11 Since 2019, through a series of states of emergency and mass incarcerations, the Salvadorian President Nayib Bukele appears to have curbed the violence associated with the *maras*.

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