The Generation of the Coup: Honduran Youth at Risk and of Risk

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═══ Abstract ═══

In this article, we show how generation as a category is an important analytic for understanding social and political dynamics in Honduras. We argue that coming of age in the post-coup d'état era in Honduras has shaped young Honduran's sense of their own life chances, what they can expect from society and government, and what kinds of possibilities they imagine for their futures. Drawing from ethnography conducted in Honduras and with Hondurans during the 2018 and 2019 migrant caravans, we show how the category of youth is a potential source of risk for the regime in Honduras and, simultaneously, it puts those who are in it at risk. The article concludes with reflections on the legal limitations of generation as category and the lethal consequences of this limitation. [gangs, generation, migration, military coup, youth]

═══ Resumen ═══

Este artículo muestra cómo la generación como categoría es una herramienta de análisis importante para comprender la dinámica social y política en Honduras. Sostenemos que la mayoría de edad en la era posterior al golpe de Estado en Honduras ha moldeado la percepción de los jóvenes hondureños sobre sus oportunidades de vida, lo que pueden esperar de la sociedad y el gobierno y qué posibilidades imaginan para su futuro. A partir de una etnografía realizada en Honduras y con hondureños que formaron parte de las caravanas de migrantes de 2018 y 2019, mostramos que categorizar como *joven* es una potencial fuente de riesgo para el régimen en Honduras, a la vez que pone en riesgo a quienes integran este grupo. El artículo concluye con reflexiones sobre las limitaciones

legales de la generación como categoría y las consecuencias letales de esta prescripción. [generación, golpe de Estado, juventud, migración, pandillas]

Introduction

After Elmer[1] is deported back to Honduras from the U.S., I ask him what his dreams for the future are now. Elmer had spent nearly six months in detention in the U.S., eventually giving up on the asylum claim he had started. Imprisonment wore him down. Back in San Pedro Sula, he still faces threats from the gang that controlled the neighborhood where he'd grown up, so he couldn't return there. Instead, he shuttles between distant family members in different parts of the city, working nights in a market, unable to really settle anywhere. *I used to have dreams*, he replies, *but not any longer*. Elmer is just 21 years old.[2]

Elmer's answer reflects the existential crisis at the heart of life for many young, poor, urban men like him in Honduras: both literally and figuratively, they do not count on having a future. In this article, drawing on the experiences of young people like Elmer from Honduras's urban margins, we detail how coming of age in the post-coup d'état era in Honduras shaped young Honduran's sense of their own life chances, what they expect from society and government, and what kinds of possibilities lie in their futures. Using ethnographic examples from daily life, insights from a study of a group of young men who came together to defend their neighborhood from encroaching gangs, and research from the 2018 and 2019 migrant caravans, we argue that belonging to the category of youth, being part of a generation, is a political identity. Youth as a category is constructed as a potential source of risk for the regime in Honduras; at the same time, belonging to the *category* of youth – when it intersects with other salient social categories – is inherently risky. Membership in this generation defines life chances in Honduras and it shapes the strategies of contestation and survival which poor, urban, young men have at their disposal and feel capable of employing. This means political opposition in some cases but, frequently, narrows to violence and exodus.

This article is divided into three sections. After a discussion of our ethnographic methods, we trace the concept of "generation," detailing the relevance of generation as a category in Honduras socially, politically, and as a category of repression. The second section, drawing heavily from our ethnographic research, focuses on the *maras* as a representation of the risk that youth are thought to pose and the risk to which they are exposed. We show how poor, urban, young men are pulled into cycles of violence due to their geographic, social, and generational

location. The third section then moves to the migrant caravans and migration as a generational response to and rejection of delimited, untenable life chances.

Our theoretical engagement with generation as a category has broader, life and death, implications. We have each lent our ethnographic expertise to support the claims of asylum seekers in the U.S. and have been frustrated when people we know are most at risk are not granted protection because they do not belong to a "particular social group" as understood by immigration judges. We conclude this article, then, with reflections on the legal problem of generation as category and the lethal consequences of this limitation.

The Category of Generation/The Generation of the Category

The arguments presented throughout this article come from the long-term ethnographic fieldwork by both authors. Juan has been conducting fieldwork focused on gangs in Honduras since 2014. He has conducted lengthy periods of participant observation in *mara*-controlled neighborhoods, and among *mareros*, in both Honduras and El Salvador. His ethnography of the Mara Salvatrucha (Martínez d'Aubuisson 2015) will soon be accompanied by his forthcoming book on gangs in Honduras (Martínez d'Aubuisson forthcoming). Amelia has long researched Central American transit migration through Mexico (Frank-Vitale 2020). More recently (2017–2019), she conducted two years of fieldwork in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, focused on the everyday experience of violence and survival for those who were deported back to Honduras and/or are planning to migrate (For more on her methods see Frank-Vitale 2019). In addition, both authors accompanied different parts of the 2018 and 2019 migrant caravans as they left Honduras and traveled through Guatemala and Mexico. Throughout our research, we use a combination of intense, prolonged, and systematic participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Our combined research draws from hundreds of formal and informal interviews with current and former *mareros*, migrants, officials, and residents of many neighborhoods across the Sula Valley.

Recent Honduran history has been marked by a series of foundational events: a devastating hurricane in 1998; a 2009 coup d'état; becoming the country with the highest rate of intentional homicide in the world in 2012; and a fraudulent presidential election in 2017. This article takes the coup d'état and the 2017 election as pivot points to discuss the nature of a generation that came of age post-coup, through a period of rising violence. After the 2017 election, massive protests erupted across the country. Honduras was brought to a standstill as roads were blockaded across the country. Youth manned the makeshift barricades that prevented traffic from circulating in many parts of the country. Young men, mostly, with t-shirts covering their faces, burned tires in the arterial streets outside their neighborhoods and destroyed toll booths on the highways leading out of San

Pedro Sula. They were unified in one thing: they wanted an end to the government of President Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH).

Juan Orlando Hernández earned this fierce opposition that brought otherwise mortal enemies together through a mix of further militarizing the country, an earlier presidential campaign having embezzled millions of dollars from the nation's social security fund, and a widespread belief that he was directly linked to major drug trafficking operations.[3] Prior to his first term as president, he was the President of Congress, which, in Honduras, is the second most powerful position in the country. In this position, he ushered in the passage of laws which he would take advantage of during his first term as president, including the creation of the *Policía Militar del Orden Popular*, the Military Police. The Military Police are, essentially, soldiers taken out of their barracks and stationed among and used to patrol the civilian population.[4] The antecedents of 2017 are long and varied,[5] but one of the most frustrating aspects of Juan Orlando's determination to be reelected was that the coup of 2009 was justified by claiming that then-president Manuel Zelaya was illegally trying to stay in power longer than the constitutionally limited single term. In preparation for the 2017 election, Juan Orlando Hernández stacked the country's highest court to rule against the constitution, clearing the way for him to run for a second term.

During and after the 2017 protests, our interlocutors frequently commented on how the young were the protagonists of an emergent social identity turned movement, *la generación del golpe*, the Coup generation. Identifying the section of the population that came of age after the 2009 coup d'état, fits neatly with Karl Mannheim's formulation of what constitutes a generation, namely, the shared major event that defines and binds them in time and reference (Mannheim 2017). We do not mean, however, that simply being alive during the moment of the coup is enough to *make* the generation. It is, rather, the form in which these events – and their aftermath – were lived. It is the amalgam of similar memories and sensations, their personal and subjective experiences, that make people part of a social group, the *category* of generation. A crucial factor here is the experience of social class and geography. The coup d'état and its aftermath has not been lived in the same way for the children of elites as the children of the working class, the urban poor, or rural farmers, for example. It is not simply the coup itself that makes the generation, but the ripple effects of the fact of the coup and the kind of affect it engendered in certain sectors of society. Young people frame themselves in this way in Honduras, self-identifying as the generation of the coup. This includes the youth who take to the streets and who are persecuted and killed by state security forces because of their political involvement. It also includes, however, the youth who are looked at, broadly, as criminals, as potential criminals, as vandals and delinquents. The coup generation, then, extends far beyond those who are actively politically engaged in resistance to the continuation of the government that came into power with the

coup to the much larger population of teenagers and young adults who steer clear of protests and politics but who are, nonetheless, subjected to the increasingly authoritarian policing of the coup's legacy.

Aram, an 18-year-old young man from the Rivera Hernández sector, remembers how the police[6] stopped him and patted him down. He had come from working outside and he was dirty. The police treated him like a criminal. They spoke to him using the hyper-familiar *"vos,"* which, he adds, they wouldn't have done if he were a rich kid. "I'm going to school," he tells them, *"¿vos estudiás?"* they ask him, incredulously. And I go to church, he adds, I'm not a criminal. *"¿Vos asistís a una iglesia?"* I even sing Christian music, he adds. Oh yeah? Sing us something. Aram was livid and embarrassed, *like I needed character references just to walk down the street* he says.[7] This is everyday life for young men like him in Honduras.

In Aram's retelling, the palpable lack of respect that the police officers showed towards him was what hurt the most. The use of "*vos*" immediately places them as above him in the social structure and the incredulity they show that someone *like him* would be in school and go to church smacks of harmful stereotypes. In another instance, a woman from the same neighborhood went to the police station to speak up for another young man the police had taken in. He's a good kid, she tells them, he's a Christian! The police's response was revealing: Here there are no Christians, he snapped back. "*Aquí todos son diablitos.*" (Here all of them are little devils). Essentially, the way the police view young men from neighborhoods like Rivera Hernández is that they are all potentially culpable.

Here, it is the *category* of youth – and, we might specify, urban periphery youth – that is criminalized *as a generation*. This coheres with much of the work done to theorize generation since Mannheim's essay. At its core, thinking of society in terms of generations is one expression of the sociological process of social categorization (White 2013, 217). Some scholars, building off Mannheim, use social generation (Pilcher 1994) to distinguish between the socio-cultural concept and the biological usage of generations to distinguish age-groups, whereas others distinguish between biological, psychological, and cultural and historical location (Biggs 2007, 701). In migration studies, complicating the idea of generation has been critical, as immigrants and their children have been categorized as being of one generation or another, a tendency which elides the complicated and multifaceted nature of immigrant affective ties and experiences of belonging (Clark-Kazak 2013; Catania 2014). Edmunds and Turner extend the idea of generations to the global scale, suggesting that because of technological interconnectedness those traumatic or climactic events which shaped national generations may now be experienced globally (Edmunds and Turner 2005).

Others add the important point that social generations must be thought of as discourses, rather than groups, used for social differentiation (Aboim and Vasconcelos 2014, 168). Comaroff and Comaroff note that in the context of the "hardening

materials of life," social division is more pronounced along lines of generation, rather than the familiar axes of class, race, gender, or ethnicity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 284). Combining these two insights, generation as a salient category of social identity is a useful analytic in Honduras, as it reflects a discourse which references youth as inherently potentially criminal. Moreover, in the context of material hardening, generational lines of social division reinforce both the discourse *and* the category.

Scholars have explained how the category of youth itself is politically and socially constructed. Magaña argues that in Oaxaca's social movements, *joven* is an identity de-coupled from biological age, signifying social location and drawing upon a history of youth activism and government repression against youth activists (Magaña 2017). In Guatemala, Levenson shows how *la juventud* is invoked for disparate political agendas over time; from signifying the promise of "modernity," to the vanguard heroes of resistance, to the violent embodiment of the dangerous present (Levenson 2013). The *category* of youth is political and politicized. Youth, so often used to represent the future and, specifically, the promise of the future to be better than the present, now represents a violent present, an obstacle to be dealt with in order to reach a "better" future. In this process, the actual futures of individual youth like Aram are foreclosed. As a generation, their future, their dreams, are sacrificed, as they are positioned as the enemy to a prosperous and peaceful future for all – an "all" which does not include them. Being part of a generation, then, the category of youth as it intersects with other salient social categories, is political, regardless of the political engagement, or lack thereof, of each individual of the generation.

The criminalization of the young generation as category in Honduras is linked to the demographic political economy of the country. More than 50 percent of the Honduran population is under the age of 25, and the median age in 2018 was 23 years old (CIA 2019). More than 60 percent of Hondurans live in poverty, and nearly 40 percent live in extreme poverty (Mesa Editorial 2019). A low estimate, the labor force participation rates for Hondurans between the ages of 15 and 24 is calculated at 51.92 percent (World Bank 2019). The official unemployment rate in 2018 was 5.7 percent (ILO 2019), while the *underemployment* rate reached 62.8 percent (Diario La Prensa 2019). This means that more than 2.7 million Hondurans are "economically active" (out of 9 million) but do not earn sufficient wages to meet their needs.

A wide literature suggests that the presence of this "youth bulge" – when the young population far out numbers the older population – in developing countries precipitates conflict and violence. Numerous studies suggest that too many young people, without access to jobs, will turn towards criminality and violence, thus undermining the stability of liberal democracy, creating problems for society, and even constitute the main driving forces towards war (Cincotta 2008, 10; Idrees et al.

2015; Gries and Redlin 2019; Wagschal and Metz 2016). The insinuation here is always that the youth are predisposed to violence and the instability of the country is the fault of the generation. Many of these studies replicate the discourse of the state and society which criminalizes the younger generation. Richard Mabala, however, counters this discourse, noting that it leads to a "self-fulfilling prophecy: by neglecting or mistreating youth, they may become the very threats the proponents of the status quo fear most" (Mabala 2011, 157). Henrik Vigh concurs: "Young men are seen either *as* risk or *at* risk," (Vigh 2006, 33).

This use of the "youth bulge" to place the onus for social problems on the youth reflects a larger criminalization of youth that is often an aspect of the neoliberal state apparatus, as an "attempt to deflect social conflict and curtail expressions of dissent" (Coe and Vandegrift 2015, 135). This discourse which views youth as a social problem enables further repression, the reproduction of social inequality, and, ultimately, the protection of the status quo (Coe and Vandegrift 2015, 136). As anthropologist Adrienne Pine notes, in Honduras, "young people themselves have come to replace violence *against* young people as the central problem" (Pine 2008, 68). She terms this population an "excess demographic," with too many people for the needs of global capital (Pine 2019).

The presence of youth on the protest barricades in 2017 fused with the criminalization of young people from marginalized urban neighborhoods to propel rumors that, rather than *legitimate* protestors, those young men with their faces covered were *mareros*. By invoking this kind of language, the protestors could be painted at once as both criminal actors and non-political in their aims. To be clear, most young men in Honduras are not actively involved with gangs. However, coming from poor, urban neighborhoods is enough for the security apparatus and many members of society as a whole to criminalize them *as though they were*. It is their youth and social location that allows them to be tagged as *potentially delinquent* whether or not they have ever actually been involved with any criminal behavior.

While the majority of the young people involved in the protests, street blockades, and property destruction were not members of any organized crime groups, *mareros* were also part of the vast group of youth who felt like they had a stake in protesting. *Marereos* are, after all, also disaffected, marginalized youth. A young man who was part of one of the road blockades said, in hushed tones, "you know what's crazy here? all the *maras* are working together, each *mara* from Rivera Hernandez, they are all coordinating to keep up the road blockade, taking turns to man it and defend it." Usually these groups are engaged in an eternal, deadly rivalry, but they came together for a common goal, finding a common enemy in Juan Orlando Hernández. As one mara-involved young man would later tell me, what they saw as Juan Orlando's heightened cruelty towards them and their neighborhoods unified them.[8] While the language of *mara* presence was used to undermine

the legitimacy of those protesting, *mareros* are also political actors. The formation of *maras* in Honduras is a *consequence* of the marginalization of youth and their limited range of life chances. Manning barricades is one clear expression of how the post-coup generation contests this. In the following section, we will discuss how engaging in organized violence is another expression of this same contestation.

The Generation of the Coup: Battling Borders in Honduras

One of the direct reasons that Elmer left Honduras was because he became embroiled in the constant battles between young men to control small sections of residential neighborhoods. Elmer came from a neighborhood of Rivera Hernández controlled by one group, a gang known as the Vatos Locos, and, because he worked in a market controlled by MS-13, the Vatos Locos decided he was a spy and had to be banished or killed.[9]

Navigating dynamics like this is part of life for poor, young, urban men in Honduras. In this section, we discuss the *maras* and their meaning in Honduras. From there, we draw from our ethnographic chronicling of the battles for survival of a group of young men from one neighborhood, which we call Vesuvio, who tried to resist the domination of the gangs. Juan conducted long term participant observation with the young men of Vesuvio, sharing evenings as they discussed their plans, becoming close with their families. When one of the boys is killed in late 2019, his mother sends Juan the photo of his small frame, lifeless and marked by bullet holes. Here, we detail how it came to this, arguing that the ever-present possibility of dying a violent death at a young age is characteristic of the post-coup generation in Honduras, which informs their sense of possibility and future.

Gangs in Central America are a generational response to a combination of particular migration politics and security responses. Like the "oppositional street culture" described by Philippe Bourgois (1996), their initial existence can be understood as a kind of resistance. The Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) is the largest gang in Honduras and their fiercest rival is Barrio 18. Both gangs were born in California, but they grew and evolved into their current form in El Salvador (Brenneman 2011, 23).[10] Gangs converted from collective security groups based on racialized identity in opposition to discrimination and violence in California (Martínez and Martínez d'Aubuisson 2019) into identitarian groups defined primarily by social class. In Central America, they were marginalized not because of race or country of origin but because they were poor and young – and therefore dangerous. These young men were not folded into the neoliberal projects of the Honduran governments of the 1990s; they became, rather, their foil, pointed to as enemy number one of public safety (Pine 2008) *and the convenient scapegoat for the miserable effects these same neoliberal projects had for the majority of the population.*

In this article, we use the terms gang and *mara* interchangeably. The *mara* cultivates an identity derived from profound marginalization combined with a sense of systematic confrontation. The fundamental feature of the *mara* has to do with the generation of respect, power, and status, which can only be obtained through maintaining a system of reciprocal aggression with other similar groups. This system of reciprocal aggression is not the same as warfare; there is no possible cessation of aggressions, there is no desire for lasting peace. The logic of the *mara* involves the control of neighborhood-based territory, and the willingness to *defend* the neighborhood from incursions from outside forces – whether rival groups or state forces. In many neighborhoods in Honduras, this sense of respect, power, status and defense of the neighborhood also coalesces into mundane, though enforced through violence, activities: the *mara* is also often involved in taxation – dubbed a "war tax" – and the resolution of petty disputes among residents of the neighborhood it controls.

While the presence and power of the *mara* in Honduras is very real, it is also important to remember what *mara* means symbolically. As Jon Horne Carter reminds us, the term is a tricky one. Mara "is a synecdoche pointing to the intersection of state and criminal worlds of which street gangs are just the most visible appendage" (Carter 2019a). Initially, starting in the 1990s, joining a Honduran gang was a rebellious act, against authority figures and the monotonous, exploitative, and exhausting work expected of the working class in the *maquilas* and banana plantations. The *marero* rejects expectations with a new, irreverent, cynical, and arrogant discourse. The figure of the *marero* constructed an antagonistic social imaginary against official power and the neoliberal capitalist discourse of the government (Carter 2019b; Pine 2008). Yet *maras* also replicate many hegemonic ideas: the use of violence to solve disputes, men as both protectors and disciplinarians, a taxation system which serves to both fund the activities of those in power and serve as a proxy measure of loyalty. The *mara*, then, is both disruptive and normative in Honduras, an expression of contestation among the marginalized and, simultaneously, a mechanism reinforcing violent hierarchies of domination.

In this context, a group of boys[11] from a single neighborhood decide to come together to keep a *mara* from taking over. Vesuvio is a small neighborhood of about 60 families. It's surrounded by the Rivera Hernández sector of the city of San Pedro Sula. In this Sector, there are at least eight gangs or organized groups that fight with each other over control of small swaths of residential neighborhoods. Each one of the 59 neighborhoods that comprise the Sector are dominated by one of these groups. Barrio 18 took control of Vesuvio around 2000. For years, they engaged in this system of reciprocal aggressions with the gangs that controlled the neighborhoods around them: fighting off MS-13 and the Vatos Locos, among others. Around 2016, the Barrio 18 members in Vesuvio were exterminated by another cell of the same gang who accused them of theft. While this violent purge

was intended to eliminate the rebellious gang members, the vengeful cell did not take into account their replacements. For a *mara* to maintain control it must foster hyper-local, if low level, leadership. The "outside" cell of Barrio 18 did not cultivate loyalty and new members from within Vesuvio, opening possibilities for other gangs to take over.

Even in a neighborhood where the *mara's* strength is diminished, "taking over" is always a violent process. Substituting one gang for another involves intense fighting, and, when one group emerges victorious, they must then demonstrate their total takeover. Katy describes the process as she's lived it: "When they come, they pull people out of their houses. Especially the people who collaborated with the boys (gang members) who were there before. They evict people during the night, rape the girls, and sometimes they take away the young guys who they think had collaborated with the gang."[12]

The young men of Vesuvio, well aware of these dynamics, formed a self-defense group to keep MS-13 at bay, the gang who had most recently demonstrated serious interest in taking control of the neighborhood. They grew up listening to stories of murdered gang members; this reality is not new to them. Enrique, one of the boys, first came to live in Vesuvio specifically because his father had been a member of Barrio 18 and he'd been murdered. His mother, hoping to keep her young son from the same fate, relocated the family to a neighborhood not under the control of a gang – or at least that had been her hope.[13]

Forming this kind of group is a wager for these young men, resisting what they do not want to become without becoming that very thing through the process of resistance. The fight of these boys, however, is not a simple question of power and status. Their fight was one of intense desperation to reject the whole system. However, they used the same forms of organization and violence as the *maras*, drawing from the modes of resistance already in the available repertoire. Their fight was impossible from the beginning. The boys eventually succumbed to the system they were trying to defend against, even as they ended up emulating it. By early 2020, MS-13 had killed or run off the majority of the boys, and Vesuvio became one more neighborhood in that corner of Rivera Hernández controlled by MS-13.

The sustained, if ultimately futile, battle of this group against one of the region's most powerful gangs gives us insight into what young people understand resistance to be – and against whom they feel they must resist. A frequent discussion of resistance in Honduras centers around the political opposition movements that coalesced in the aftermath of the 2009 coup d'état (Frank 2018; Phillips 2015). Street protests are, of course, one of the clearest examples of the rejection of a hegemonic system thought to be abusive and tyrannical. For communities like Vesuvio, left to their own devices, the formation of and belonging to gangs is also a constant form of not only rejecting the system, but of creating alternative ones. And, just like with revolutions, sometimes replicating them.

The boys of Vesuvio, while trying to vehemently reject the limited range of expected life chances offered them in Honduras, replicate what they had endeavored to avoid. For many young men in Honduras, the only solution they see to their constrained options at home is to leave, exiting the system – and the wars they must confront – altogether. Migration and the desperate – and largely futile – resistance of the Vesuvio boys are two sides of the same coin. As of the writing of this article, most of the Vesuvio boys – the few who are still alive – have abandoned their version of resistance and have opted for the second one. Like so many of their generation, they are trying to leave Honduras.

The Caravan: the Coup Generation Against Borders

En caravana, pues ya no me queda nada,	In caravan, well I have nothing left
En caravana porque no tenemos lana,	In caravan, because we have no money
en caravana porque a mí me dio la gana.	In caravan because I feel like it
Pues el pueblo está cansado de tanta corrupción	Well the people are tired of so much corruption
se van de este país porque ya no hay solución	The leave this country because there is no solution
rompiendo las fronteras buscan otra nación	Breaking borders, they look for another nation
porque aquí ya no hay trabajo ya no hay libre expresión…	Because here there is no work and there's no freedom of expression
Fuimos libres soberanos y ahora estamos como reos.	We were free and sovereign and now we're like in jail
Presos de la política y de la ambición,	Prisoners of politics and of the ambition
por un corrupto que violó la constitución.	Of a corrupt [person] who violated the constitution
Si mi gente está migrando es por culpa del cabrón	If my people are migrating, it's the fault of this jerk
que se quedó en el poder por la puta reelección."	Who stayed in power through fucking re-election

The Honduran rapper Javier Alfredo Dimas, better known as Chiky Rasta, penned this song after he participated in the 2018 caravan and wound up back in Honduras. The song became popular in Honduras – and among the thousands of Hondurans who participated in one of a series of caravans in the fall of 2018 and the spring of 2019. Dimas's lyrics portray how, while the economic situation plays a part, the disenchantment with politics, the lack of free expression, and the authoritarianism of the current Honduran government – which leaves Hondurans *without a solution* – were the driving factors behind the caravan.

Caught in a system that allows poor young people like the Vesuvio boys or Elmer or Aram few avenues through which to opt out of a life of violence (whether as victim, perpetrator, or both), many young Hondurans look to escape Honduras altogether. In the years since the coup, Hondurans have been leaving in increasing numbers, with a noticeably sharp upswing after the electoral fraud of 2017. It is hard to measure numbers of people leaving the country without visas, but we can infer based on deportation numbers. Tellingly, for the first time in 2019, more than 100,000 Hondurans were deported (CONMIGHO 2019).[14]

When news spread in Honduras that a caravan was leaving from the San Pedro Sula bus station, young people across the country grabbed their backpacks, put on their best walking shoes, and made their way to the western border. What started as a group of a few hundred people gathered in the northern city quickly swelled to over seven thousand, and waves of caravans – groups of people joining together to make the trek across Guatemala and Mexico –would continue leaving Honduras over the months that followed. At least ten thousand Hondurans participated in this series of caravans, and the vast majority of the *caravaneros* were young people – between the ages of 15 and 30.

Many explanations have been offered for *how* this caravan happened – involving conspiracy theories and political intrigue in Honduras and the U.S. – but the real story is much less sensational.[15] The best organizer of the caravan was, however, HCH, the Honduran news channel closely associated with the ruling National Party government. Mabel, a 25-year-old single mother, and her two brothers set out to join the caravan a few hours after seeing coverage on HCH of the people gathering at the bus station. In Tela, on the northern coast, a young woman saw the news, called her husband, and they scooped up their three children and left. They had been trying to save up to hire a coyote, but they were still far short. Like so many of the *caravaneros*, they saw the coverage on HCH and decided that this was their chance.

Each family was always already on the verge of leaving. Like so many of the Hondurans who formed part of the caravan, the possibility for a future that was better than the present lied exclusively beyond the borders of their country. While the *caravaneros* would cite violence and economic insecurity among their reasons for deciding to join, these factors had long been present in Honduras. What is the element, then, that detonates this process *now?* While we can identify a variety of factors (the rising cost of hiring a coyote, heightened dangers of migration, externalization of borders, the circulation of the idea of caravans) Honduran *caravaneros* point toward a singular figure as responsible, Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández. They see him as the central obstacle to social change in the country. This is evident in the lyrics with which we began this section, and the frequent outburst of "*Fuera JOH*" among the caravans as they made their way across Mexico. The neoliberal system coupled with a dictatorial narco-state is

personified in Juan Orlando Hernández, and his regime effectively closed off the typical possible avenues towards social transformation. Claiming victory and staying in power despite widespread opposition and a clear electoral loss, left average Hondurans feeling like they could not determine the direction of their country through democratic means. In the lead up to the 2017 election, Irvin, another young man who had already been deported multiple times, said that he would stay if the opposition candidate won the presidency. Otherwise, he'd leave again. The only thing that Juan Orlando offers a young man like him, he said, is the *pozo*.[16]

The caravan was, at its core, disruptive. It breaks with a tradition of silence and clandestinity for unauthorized migration. It represents a rejection of traditional forms of resistance, while embodying resistance at the same time. It represents this coup generation changing the forms of doing resistance while, simultaneously, bringing resistance to the international realm. Their claim for rights, for respect, for dignity is not directed solely towards the Honduran government but becomes an international claim – towards Mexico and the U.S. – and reflects the reality that governance in Honduras is not independent from the policy priorities of the U.S. Whereas clandestine migration from Central America across Mexico is not a new phenomenon, the revolutionary nature of the caravan is precisely the un-clandestine nature of this kind of unauthorized migration (Frank-Vitale and Núñez Chaim 2020). The hypervisibility of the caravan – walking along major highways, setting up camp in town squares – keeps everyone safe(r) than they would be walking through remote areas, keeping to the margins and the shadows. At the same time, this hypervisibility also represents a political demand, in the collective action of the caravan, to be allowed to move through space as needed, to be allowed to access the life and space where hope might be recovered. The caravan as a form of dissidence is the materialization of a collective failure. The migrants, like the boys of Vesuvio, demonstrate their inconformity with the system, the former through violence, the latter through the political act of walking.

We can think about the range of actions we are describing in the terms offered by Reece Jones, as he carves out a "space of refusal" that exists between seeing everything as resistance and seeing the state as everywhere (Jones 2012). Migrating – even in caravans – is not necessarily thought of or enacted as a political act. Yet, we hold, doing so has clear political content and consequence. In the same vein, joining the *mara* – whether fully or contingently, whether enthusiastically or reluctantly – can also be understood within this space of refusal, refusing to exist within the world as it is and accepting the confines imposed upon you – especially as a young, poor, urban man. Trying to live – and often die – on one's own terms animates the decisions by youth in Honduras to become involved both in organized violence and in organized flight.

Conclusions: On the Legal Problem of Generation

Generation as a social category is critically relevant in Honduras, both as a form of self-identification among teenagers and young adults, those who came of age after the 2009 coup d'état, and also as an ascribed category by structures of power and domination, both the state and organized crime groups, that see youth as a particular category. The sociological coherence of generation as social category in Honduras, however, is at odds with an understanding of generation as inherently relative and mutable. The theoretical implications of this, while interesting, are minimal compared to the critical real-world consequences for these same young Hondurans – as they flee their country in hopes of finding safety elsewhere.

In 2019, over 10,000 Honduran asylum cases were decided in the U.S.; 86 percent were denials of all forms of relief (TRAC 2020).[17] There are many factors involved in this high rate of denial, but here we focus on one major impediment: in order for a person to be granted asylum in the U.S., they must be under threat both individually and because of their membership in a religion, race, ethnic group, political movement, or particular social group (PSG) that is unprotected or directly targeted by the state (see Blake 2014; Marouf 2019). The first four categories are clear, while PSG offers room for interpretation by judges. Precedent in the U.S., however, holds that there must be a nexus between the persecution a person suffers and the PSG to which they are a member and, most importantly for our discussion here, the characteristics which bind the person to the PSG must be immutable (see Cameron 2014; Sternberg 2011). Honduran asylum cases get denied for a host of reasons, but chief among them is the fact that their claims do not fit into the categories established.[18]

However, as we have seen, in Honduras young men are targeted because of their status *as young men*. Gangs see young men – specifically those in urban areas, who are neither employed nor in school – as either potential recruits or potential threats. The state's security forces also see this same group, urban young men, as criminals regardless of their behavior or activity. Henrik Vigh's work in Guinea-Bissau shows us that *generation* is not necessarily immutable but can be, in fact, socially produced. There, young men can age, perhaps, but they are socially stuck, confined to a *generational position* (Vigh 2006, 46). Though they might desperately wish to shed that identity, they cannot cease to be *youth* because of the social process wrapped up in the position. If, analytically, we can make an argument that *generation* can be considered a social category in the same way as ethnicity, race, religion, gender, then, what implications could this have for generation *as category* in the realm of the law? Isn't there a nexus between the persecution by both gangs and government forces of youth in Honduras because of their membership in the category of generation? Is generation really mutable if one is likely to die before they age out of the category?

Notes

[1]This and all names are pseudonyms.

[2]Frank-Vitale fieldnotes, 2019.

[3]Many of the popular allegations against Juan Orlando Hernández were confirmed when, in 2019, his brother, Juan Antonio Hernández, was tried and convicted of charges related to international drug trafficking in the Southern District of New York. The prosecutors listed Juan Orlando Hernández as "co-conspirator 4" in the charges, arguing that Honduras, under Juan Orlando, was a "state sponsor of drug trafficking."

[4]Using the army against civlians, and the general militarization of civilian life, is not *new* under Juan Orlando Hernández (for a full history of Honduras see Euraque 1997). Neither is the 2017 fraudulent election without precedent. In the 1980s, when Honduras was used as a staging ground for U.S. counter-insurgency operations in Central America, the Honduran military's infamous 3-16 Batallion disappeared and tortured civilians. Ricardo Maduro, president from 2002-2006, implemented the first wave of "mano dura" anti-gang policies aimed at quashing the country's still small but burgeoning presence of gangs. These laws, which heavily criminalized urban young people, resulted in the entrenchment of gangs and are one factor that contributed to Honduras's tremendous increase in homicides by 2011.

[5]The 2009 coup d'etat was orchestrated by then President of Congress, Roberto Micheletti, from the more conservative side of the Liberal Party, the same party as ousted President Manuel Zelaya. Micheletti had the support of the army and the opposition party, the National Party, and became interim president. Despite much international opposition – with the notable exception of the U.S. - regularly scheduled elections were held in 2009, and Profirio Lobo, of the National Party, became president. In 2013, the country's left had reorganized itself outside of the Liberal/National bipartisan structure into a new party, called LIBRE, and Xiomara Castro, Manuel Zelaya's wife, was the candidate for the presidency. There were widespread allegations of fraud in the 2013 election, but less of a clear concensus than in 2017, and Juan Orlando Hernández was declared the winner, taking office in 2014.

[6]Honduras has seventeen different police forces; in neighborhoods like Rivera Hernández, two are primarily present: Policía Nacional and Military Police. Officers stationed in a given neighborhood are never from there, the logic being that if they knew the residents, they would be more easily corruptible. Many of the military and national police are from rural parts of the country, sent to patrol urban sectors, but urban young men do also, sometimes, enlist as one of the few "careers" available to young men without more than the basic level of formal education. In general, police officers do not come from a substantially different social class (or age range) than the young men they are patrolling; their position facilitates a feeling of social superiority.

[7]Frank-Vitale fieldnotes, 2019.

[8]Frank-Vitale fieldnotes, 2019.

[9]Frank-Vitale fieldnotes, 2019.

[10]There is also a patchwork of smaller gangs that control neighborhoods in Honduras, like the Vatos Locos, who draw from ideas about California gangs but were born in Central America.

[11]With one exception (a 25-year-old father of two) they boys are between the ages of 16 and 21 years old.

[12]Martínez fieldnotes, 2019.

[13]Martínez fieldnotes, 2019.

[14]Since 2014, just over half of all Hondurans have been deported from Mexico, under the direction and with the material support of the U.S. A small number of Hondurans are deported from Europe and other countries in Latin America. The rest, just under half, are deported from the U.S.

[15]One prominent story involves Bartolo Fuentes, a journalist and activist with LIBRE. He was tagged as "the" organizer of the caravan and detained by authorities. While Fuentes was privy to early organizing conversations and covered the caravan from the very beginning, he is not responsible for its magnitude.

[16]Frank-Vitale fieldnotes, 2017. "Pozo" translates to "well" – as in deep, dark, hole – and is used to refer to Honduras's recently-built maximum security prisons.

[17]In the 2018-2019 FY 188,416 Honduran "family units" were apprehended at the U.S. southern border, in addition to 65,379 Honduran individuals. Data are not available to tell us how many of those people apprehended began an asylum claim (CBP 2020).

[18]For a longer discussion of how Honduran asylum claims work out in court see Phillips 2018.

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