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Speaker: Katherine Saunders-Hastings, Lecturer in Latin American Studies at the Institute of the Americas of the University College London, UK

Chair: William Booth, Adjunct Professor of Latin American Studies, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy; Faculty Member of St. Catherine's College, University of Oxford

“The Red Zone State: Politics and Practices of Security in Guatemalan Gang Territory”

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The widespread culture of gang violence and political corruption has plagued the countries of Latin America's Northern Triangle for years. Part of this unstable region, Guatemala is home to high homicide rates, drug trafficking and problematic state responses. Katherine Saunders-Hastings' research employs an ethnographic approach with a focus on poor urban communities. She uses the case study of Guatemala City with a particular focus on a field site – with the pseudonym Colonia el Romero – within Zona 18, an area of extremely high homicide rates, criminal groups and where few residents are employed in the formal economy. Through the study of Zona 18, Saunders-Hastings unpacks several key themes regarding the politics and practices of security in Guatemalan gang territory – the role of extortion, the methods of state intervention, and the relationship between residents and both state and criminal power.

While violence and murder pervade Guatemalan gang territory, Saunders-Hastings identifies extortion as a major factor denigrating the lives of residents in Zona 18. There is the systematic extortion of residents and their territories by gangs, who have thorough intelligence on the resources of residents and make demands accordingly. NGOs and charities have withdrawn from Zona 18 leaving residents even more vulnerable to gang orders. Families have abandoned their homes or avoid renovating them to evade the threat of extortion. This threat creates a climate of fear and mistrust, and prevents residents from wider, visible consumption, fearing that they may become targets. Guatemalan gangs are thriving in this “extortion economy.” Saunders-Hastings notes that gangs now primarily seek out territory for profit and business, rather than for more conventional “turf warfare.” Furthermore, she cites residents who view extortion as a greater problem than homicides in creating insecurity in their lives.

The role of the state has been twofold, in instigating mass incarceration and in placing a military presence in the area. Joint operations are nominally led by civilian police, but in reality military personnel dominate. Their goal is ostensibly to reduce the high homicide rates. Saunders-Hastings notes that this militarised Task Force is primarily impacting the community by making streets safer; though providing some benefit this is limited and does not address the wider problem in residents' lives: extortion. The presence of the military did not impact the economic role of gangs. However, the mass incarceration of gang members – real or alleged – has been more problematic. Prisons have been segregated into gangs, which has only perpetuated gang structures, as low-level members become further integrated by more senior members within prison walls. Guatemalan prisons are hugely overcrowded, which has exacerbated the problem of security, as prisons broadly function merely as containers within which to keep gang members. There are no guards past the

gates; inside they are controlled by the prisoners themselves and are not internally secure. The state cannot or will not assert control and prison guards would risk too much – and are not paid enough – to justify intervention themselves.

The relationship between residents and both state and criminal power is one of distrust and fear, but also one of limited choices. Historically and today, the state has neglected the challenges faced by poor urban communities, and wrought violence on its citizens. Although the state alleges that they are saving the neighborhood from the threat of violence, some question whether state presence is in fact a military occupation of Zona 18. Many residents have demanded greater security from the state while also believing that the very same state is incompetent and disinterested; such is their desperation they look to some form of “legitimate” power, however limited.

However, the state has largely failed to contest the economic power wielded by gangs, which continue extorting communities unimpeded. Gangs also permeate networks in Zona 18 to an extent the military cannot. Saunders-Hastings suggests that the state only seeks the appearance of control, rather than to meaningfully address issues of urban insecurity. Instead, there are different layers of power and control at work in gang territories, running largely in parallel. The state and gangs are content to settle for “thin” legitimacy in which these powers do not require justified consent for their actions and can continue governing through their different methods. Without substantive legitimacy, the residents of Guatemalan gang territories are prevented from gaining autonomy and remain means for others’ ends.