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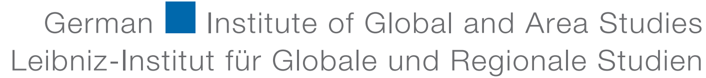

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Honduras as a Complex Adaptive System and What It Means for the European Union – The Case of Violence

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Honduras as a Complex Adaptive System and What It Means for the European Union – The Case of Violence

Abstract

This paper assesses why the various initiatives undertaken by the European Union in Honduras have not had the desired impact of reducing the extraordinary levels of violence in the country. The hypothesis put forward is that the EU's approach to the issue of violence has been unsuccessful because it does not match the complexity of the problem encountered. As an alternative, the paper puts forward complexity and human systems dynamics as conceptual frameworks for reinterpreting the issue of violence. It shows that violence is one of the results of an incoherent process of self-organisation which marks Honduras and suggests ways of influencing the conditions that make up this pattern in order to address the problem of violence. It also outlines what this new approach would mean for the actions and policies proposed and implemented by the European Union.

Keywords: European Union, Honduras, violence, complexity, human systems dynamics

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Article Outline

1 Introduction
2 The European Union in Honduras
3 From Linearity to Complexity: Constructing a Different Conceptual Framework for Violence
4 Honduras's Pattern of Self-Organisation as the Basis for Violence
5 What Does It Mean? Violence as the Expression of Incoherent Patterns of Self-Organisation
6 Now What? Options for Acting in an Incoherent Complex Adaptive System to Address Violence
7 Implications for the European Union in Honduras
8 Conclusions
Bibliography

1 Introduction

The European Union has a long history of involvement in Central America. Apart from its obvious historical connections, with EU member Spain having been the main colonial power, and its economic importance to the region – the EU is Central America's second most important market after the United States – it was also in Central America that the EU scored one of its earliest foreign policy successes as one of the key drivers of the peace process which brought most of the Central American conflicts to an end in the latter half of the 1980s.

These agreements, in turn, were important in defining the EU's role in the world, as the organisation sought to promote its own "Model Europe" of democracy and open markets across the globe (European Commission 2003; Abrahamson 2008).

Yet the EU's success in bringing the armed conflicts in Central America to an end has not translated into the creation of viable, prosperous, and secure states for the region's citizens: Central America is amongst the poorest and most violent regions in the world, despite considerable investments by the EU and many others, both politically and financially. Within this context, Honduras represents a particularly intractable case, having for many years held the title of the most violent country on earth; it is also one of the most corrupt and the most economically unequal.

The argument presented here is that the EU fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the problems it is encountering. It sees violence as a pattern which can, effectively, be resolved with the application of the right policies and adequate resources. What is argued here is, instead, that violence is the *expression* of a pattern of interdependent *conditions* which express themselves differently according to particular local circumstances across time and space and which are sustained by a set of what has been called "simple rules." This being the case, dealing with the problem of violence requires that either the conditions or the simple rules be changed and reinterpreted.

The aim of the paper is to identify these conditions and rules and make suggestions for how these can be changed.

2 The European Union in Honduras

For many years, EU involvement in Central America in general and in Honduras in particular was very limited. Due to the geopolitical realities of the Cold War, of which Central America was one of the key battlegrounds, and the limited political and economic interest in the region, there was little to be gained by engaging there (Joans 1982). It was only during the 1980s that the EU's interest in Central America intensified, in no small part due to the accession of Spain and Portugal in 1986, the two countries that had been the two principal colonial powers in Latin America. As Hoste (1999: 3) put it:

> [I]t is not pure hazard if this interest in Latin America suddenly increased after the entrance of Spain and Portugal within the Community. When those two countries joined the EC, it was legitimate for them to ask for the same kind of aid for their former colonies that France and Great Britain were giving to theirs through the EC.

However, this increasing interest did not, initially at least, change much on the ground. With the Cold War in full swing, the dominant role of the United States during this period in Latin America meant that the EU's room for manoeuvre was very limited (Abrahamson 2008).

Yet this is not to say that the EU did not have some impact. In 1984, the organisation established formal relations with the countries of the region within the context of the so-called San José Dialogue (European Commission 2003: Foreword). Through this dialogue, the organisation gradually assumed an important role in facilitating the peace process for Central America, which resulted in many of the Central American conflicts coming to an end in 1986 and 1987. This was a role for which the EU continues to receive considerable praise and which the organisation itself considers crucial in defining its foreign policy role as a peacemaker based on its own historical experience and as a model for promoting peace and stability in a region previously torn apart by conflict (Hoste 1999; European Commission 2003).

With the end of the Cold War, the EU became much more explicit in developing what many have called "Model Europe," using the European experience to push for regional efforts to promote democracy, open markets, respect for human rights, etc. (see Manners 2002; Prodi 2000; Börzel and Risse 2009). In this attempt, the three "Northern Triangle" countries in Central America – Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala – became early "experiments." They served as a test for the "Model Europe" strategy (European Commission 2003; 2007).

To this end, the three countries have received not inconsiderable and continuous financial investment. Just to give one example, the EU has committed EUR 235 million to Honduras alone until 2020 (European Commission 2014). This sum is all the more remarkable given the relative unimportance of both Honduras as a country and Central America as a region in political and economic terms for the European Union (European Commission 2012). Without doubt, then, there is a strong normative element to the EU's involvement in Central America, as the EU itself states (European Commission 2014).

With the resources granted, the EU has sponsored or co-sponsored a host of programmes in an attempt to address the main problems identified in Honduras, which range from rampant violence to corruption to environmental degradation to a lack of economic opportunity for the vast majority of the population (*ibid*). For instance, in 2011, the EU partially financed a programme to reform the Honduran security sector, with the aim of "contributing to the human development of Honduras through the protection of Honduran society against crime and delinquency" (PASS 2011). The main output of the programme was the development of a "national policy for the security and justice sector" (*ibid*: 1). This policy proposed a series of actions, such as the development of a strategy to "increase citizen participation" in security matters, increase awareness of existing programmes designed to help with citizen security, or improve systems to control the flow of arms both into and within Honduras (see PASS [2011], section 4, for all of the programme elements). The reform was to be embedded into the 2010–2014 government action plan, which, in turn, proposed a number of wide-ranging actions to improve citizen security and address problems related to social inequality, health, and education as well as a host of other issues (República de Honduras 2014).

Within this broad framework, and relevant to the present paper, the EU has also co-sponsored an initiative similar to a human rights observatory across the country, which is in-

tended to allow people to report human rights abuses, including those committed by authorities. These complaints are to be communicated directly to the Honduran government's Sub-Secretariat for Human Rights, the idea being to increase public confidence in the justice system. According to one government minister, this should lead to better communication between the state and its citizens, which, in turn, should lead to increased reporting of crime, as well as an improvement in police performance as a result of greater accountability, meaning that, eventually, people will trust the police force and therefore enable it to be accepted as a legitimate actor across the country.[1] The European Union itself has directly initiated a number of other programmes which deal with issues such as corruption, education, and education, among others. The author has visited some of these projects (European Commission 2007).

Yet, based on the EU's own figures, none of these programmes have had the desired impact. In fact, in many cases the situation is now worse than it was at the start of this century. For instance, in relation to criminal violence, the homicide rate in Honduras increased from an already high level of 54 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2001 to an extraordinary 86 homicides per 100,000 people in 2012. Whilst the government has claimed that there was a drop in this number in 2014, serious concerns have been raised about the reliability of these figures (Lohmuller 2015). Equally, in terms of economic inequality, poverty rates have increased since the start of the century, with the number of households living in extreme poverty increasing from 44.2 per cent in 2001 to 46 per cent in 2012 (European Commission 2014). At the same time, in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index for 2014, Honduras was ranked a poor 126th out of 175 countries (Transparency International 2014).

The questions that therefore arise are as follows: Why has it not been possible to reverse these trends? And what can be done in order to do so? It is here that the issue of how the problems identified are being approached becomes important. The case of violence is very instructive in this respect, as it is of particular concern to the Honduran population (Human Rights Watch 2014).

3 From Linearity to Complexity: Constructing a Different Conceptual Framework for Violence

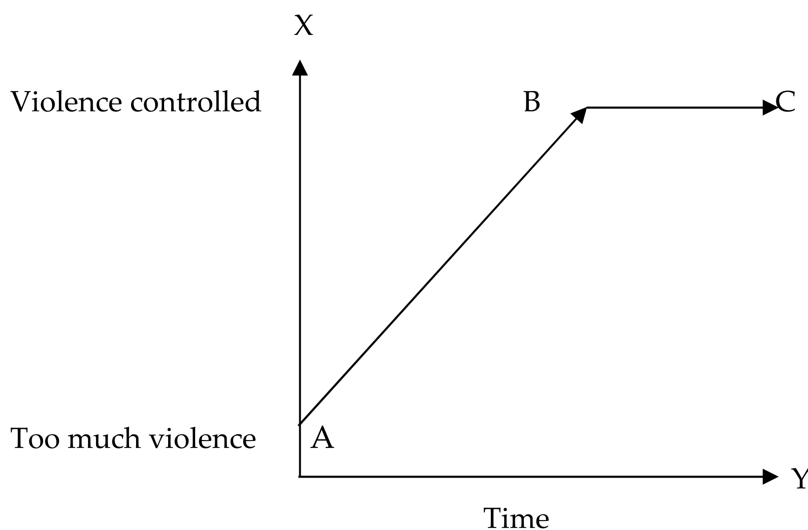
According to Chapman (2002: Introduction), most approaches to public policy see the issues to be tackled as "complicated," meaning that, with the application of the "right" policies and "sufficient" resources, "it is possible to work out solutions and implement them." There is a clear relationship between cause and effect, and the impact of proposed policies (i.e. solutions) can be predicted. In other words, the problems are "linear," with certain actions leading to predictable results (Geyer, Mackintosh with Lehmann 2005). Such an approach is

1 Interviews with senior officials from the Sub-Secretariat of Human Rights in Tegucigalpa in 2015.

deeply embedded in both public policymaking and the development of foreign policy (Lehmann 2011).

One can actually visualise the approach through a typical x–y graph: As shown in Figure 1, Point A represents the actual state of the problem, line A–B represents the policies being applied to address the problem of violence, and point B is the point at which violence can be said to have been brought under control. At this point, the key aim is to keep the levels of violence steady at an acceptable level for the longest possible time along line B–C. In our case, line A–B would represent, for instance, the PASS programme's reform of the Honduran security sector as well as the other policies proposed. Point B would be the point at which the policies have achieved their objectives, and the line B–C represents the attempt to maintain this new and satisfactory state of affairs for as long as possible.

Figure 1. X–Y Graph of Traditional Policies to Control Violence



Yet this is a fundamental misunderstanding of what violence represents in Honduras. Rather than being a complicated problem which can be solved through the application of the right policies and sufficient resources, the problem of violence is *complex*. That is to say that it is a problem characterised by the following:

- The presence within the system of a large number of elements
- The interaction of these elements in a rich manner – that is, with any element in the system influenced by, and influencing, a large number of other elements
- Interactions that are frequently non-linear
- Feedback loops in the interaction
- The openness of the system and its elements to their environment
- The operation of the system in a state far from equilibrium
- The existence of a system history

- Elements of the system that are ignorant of the behaviour of the system as a whole

(Geyer and Rihani 2010; Geyer, Mackintosh with Lehmann 2005)

Dooley (1997) has defined such systems as complex adaptive, "a collection of semi-autonomous agents with the freedom to act in unpredictable ways and whose interactions over time and space generate system-wide patterns." As Chapman (2002: Foreword) has observed, such systems "have remarkable resilience in the face of efforts to change them." This is partly due to the fact that, in such systems, the elements and agents "are constantly changing, as are the relationships between and amongst them" (Eoyang & Holladay 2013: 16-17). As a consequence, "uncertainty becomes the rule" (*ibid*: 17).

Nevertheless, this uncertainty does not mean permanent instability or transformation. In fact, in most cases, changes in the relationships between agents take place within a framework of fundamental systemic stability (Ramalingam 2013). As Eoyang and Holladay (2013: 17) put it, interactions "simply change the conditions and relationships among the parts and the whole; they do not change the system in any fundamental way." The interaction between the parts and the whole often sustains existing patterns, as "parts interact to generate emergent patterns while the patterns influence parts and their interactions. The result is a self-generating, self-organizing reality of human systems dynamics" (*ibid*: 18) which is based on the interdependence between the parts and the whole of the system. Self-organisation here is defined as a process by which the internal interactions between the agents and conditions of a system generate system-wide patterns.

In such a situation, change is dynamical – that is, complex – as a result of multiple forces acting in unpredictable ways and generating surprising outcomes, which even the most powerful actors cannot control at all times. Change, then, is at best partially predictable and is characterised by what Malcolm Gladwell (2000) calls "tipping points," at which the dynamics of the system change profoundly to settle into a new pattern. However, it is impossible to know when and in what form the tipping point will arise. Even if an action could be executed as planned, it would not guarantee the "right" result. Because the elements of a complex adaptive system are multiple and interdependent, "one can never do only one thing"; one action will have multiple impacts, meaning that "unintended consequences abound" (Jervis 1997).

If one accepts these premises, then one has to accept that the future, in essence, remains unknowable. This being the case, an action taken within a social complex adaptive system cannot have as its principal objective the definitive resolution of a particular problem since the self-organisation of a complex adaptive system does not stop at a particular – and less so at an externally predetermined – point. Instead, "the best you can hope to do is to build adaptive capacity to coevolve with the system as it changes over time" (Eoyang and Holladay 2013: 25).

As such, actions have to be constantly evaluated and adjusted depending on particular local circumstances. Decision-making processes and the actions they produce have to be flexible, adjustable, and decentralised. They have to be able to respond to the unforeseen changes and circumstances that arise as agents of the system respond and adapt to any given policy. They have to be able to respond to change in a system with a high number of variables, many of which they will not have much, or any, control over. Still, there is enormous public and political pressure to show results – in our case, in the form of reduced violence.

To enable such an approach and effective action in such a system, with high unpredictability and uncertain outcomes, Eoyang and Holladay (2013: 30) propose what they call "Adaptive Action," a "method for engaging in dynamical change in an ever-emerging, always self-organizing world." They argue that it is necessary to approach any given problem not with a preconceived answer in mind but rather by exploring the current state of self-organisation, as defined above, so as to allow for targeted intervention that can change this pattern of self-organisation, which has given rise to, and is sustaining, the problem to be tackled. The process is based on three simple questions:

What?

The "what" question tries to identify the current state of the process of self-organisation, which, according to Eoyang (2001), is dependent on three conditions: the elements which hold the system together (such as shared objectives, geographical locations, social class, etc.), differences between the agents of the system which generate tensions that allow for change (such as different interpretations of a particular issue, class, resources, location, etc.), and the channels through which these differences can be expressed (media, assemblies and meetings, etc.). Eoyang (*ibid.*) calls these conditions "containers," "differences," and "exchanges" (or "connections") (CDE). She also shows that they are interdependent and influence each other across time and space. As such, they can serve different functions within different contexts. As mentioned above, for instance, social class can be a container in one context but serve as a significant difference in a different context.

Questions that might be asked to reveal the current state of self-organisation include the following: What do we see? What containers are the most relevant? What differences exist and what impact do they have? What exchanges are the strongest and what are the weakest? What has changed and what has stayed the same? What do we want these patterns to look like in the future? What did these patterns look like in the past?

So what (does it mean)?

The "so what" question tries to make sense of what has been observed. What do the patterns we observe mean for any possible action? Such a question is critical in that it generates options for action but also allows for the adaptation of action to different circumstances across time and space. In other words, the "so what" question is crucial to making actions adapta-

ble to the particular circumstances within which they have to be applied. Questions might include the following: So what does the current state of affairs mean to you, to me, and to others? So what does that mean for our ability to act? So what does that mean for the future development of the system? So what options do we have for action?

Now what (do we do)?

The "now what" question, finally, allows us to take action, having considered the current state of self-organisation and its implications. Crucially, this question allows for the consideration of different actions and different types of action across time and space. Questions may include the following: Now what will I/you/we/they do? Now what will be communicated to others? Now what will the results and the consequences be? Now what will be done in response to these results?

These three questions allow for the identification of the conditions and patterns which sustain a particular problem across time and space. They allow us to exercise "[c]onscious influence over self-organizing patterns [as they permit] seeing, understanding, and influencing the conditions that shape change in complex adaptive systems" (Eoyang & Holladay 2013: 30). In this particular case, they allow for the identification of the conditions and patterns that give rise to, and sustain, violence, as well as actions to address this problem. As such, it is useful to define more precisely what we mean by conditions and patterns.

Conditions

Conditions are the elements of the social system which, individually and in interaction with one another, determine the speed, direction, and path of a social system as it evolves (i.e. self-organises) into the future. As stated above, there are three conditions which determine self-organisation: containers, differences, and exchanges (or connections).

Patterns

As these different conditions interact across time and space they form patterns, here understood as "the similarities, differences and connections that have meaning across time and space" (Eoyang and Holladay 2013). In other words, patterns are the expression of the interaction between the three different conditions just outlined above.

Yet conditions and patterns do not emerge in a vacuum. They emerge within the framework of what are called "simple rules," according to which a complex adaptive system as a whole functions.

Simple rules

Simple rules are "systemic agreements which shape conditions and influence pattern formation during [a social system's evolution and development]." They "guide behaviours and interactions of members of a [complex adaptive system]" (HSD Institute 2015). As such, they

shape the macro level of a social system and serve as a link between individual behaviour and systemic patterns in an interdependent process. Social systems typically function according to a small number of such rules, which are action-oriented and accepted by the system as a whole. The existence and acceptance of simple rules across the various levels of any given particular society mean that social systems are often marked by a remarkable degree of stability, particularly at the macro level, even though at the mesa and micro levels lots of things are happening and lots of changes can and do occur. Nevertheless, how these rules shape the behaviour of particular groups and individuals within a social system depends to a significant extent on the specific conditions to which individuals and groups are subjected, which can often differ significantly.

These three terms have critical implications for action. They indicate that social problems, far from being patterns in and of themselves which can be changed, are in fact the expression of a pattern of interdependent conditions across time and space. This being the case, what needs to change are the conditions which form the pattern that sustains the particular problem or the simple rules according to which these conditions and patterns are being interpreted and applied.

Having defined this framework, it is now possible to apply it to the issue of violence in Honduras and to identify possible interventions to address this problem.

4 Honduras's Pattern of Self-Organisation as the Basis for Violence

If we apply the above framework to the topic at hand, it becomes clear that violence is not a pattern in and of itself but rather the *expression* of a pattern of interdependent conditions embedded in a framework of simple rules. Therefore, to address the issue of violence, policymakers – in this case those of the EU – would have to change either the simple rules that govern Honduras or the conditions that are expressed within the framework of these simple rules. Therefore, as a practical first step it is critical to identify the simple rules which govern the complex adaptive system that is Honduras, as well as the conditions which interact within this framework of simple rules to give rise to, and sustain, violence.

4.1 Identifying Honduras's Simple Rules

We may remember that simple rules are *general* statements that apply across the whole of a particular system at all times. In Honduras, one such rule is to *yield to power*. This is both in response to, and reinforces, the rigid social, political, and economic structure of the country, which also lies, as is outlined below, within areas controlled by gangs.

A second simple rule is to live in the here and now and, therefore, to attend to what you can see and to what is happening. This is a necessary survival mechanism given not only the rigid structures referred to above, which make change so much more difficult, but also, to-

gether with the first rule stipulated above, the colonial legacy: under the colonisers, "standing out" was risky and long-term planning was not useful (Arias, 2011). For large parts of the population, of course, poverty means that long-term planning is of no use in any case.

Bearing these first two rules in mind, the third one seems almost obvious: build alliances. In a society where progression is somewhere between difficult and impossible for large parts of the population because of the rigid economic, social, and political structures and where, therefore, most people get by on a day-by-day basis, building alliances is both useful and necessary for people to get what they need. At the same time, for the elites, building alliances is a useful tool for maintaining the status quo which serves them so well.

This last point, in turn, reinforces a fourth simple rule, which one might call "Remember who you are." In other words, as a society, the relative position of each member is constantly being reinforced by what they do, where they work, where they live, etc. People are constantly reminded of who they are and where they stand in the broader hierarchy of the system. This, as is shown below, has significant social implications.

These rules govern the behaviour of the agents that interact in the social complex adaptive system that is Honduras. As such, they significantly shape the way that conditions are expressed across time and space and, therefore, the way societal patterns manifest within the context of particular local circumstances. Let us now look at these conditions in Honduras.

a) Conditions

What is striking about Honduras is how few similarities there are between the different segments of Honduran society. It is a frequently noted fact in the literature that "nation-formation" in Honduras has been very weak and that as a result the "nation," such as it is, is built on very shaky foundations (Leonard 2011; Roniger 2011). As is shown below, even violence, which is seen as a problem by virtually everybody in the country, is interpreted differently within the widely divergent contexts.

Therefore, it is the differences between the agents of the system that predominate in Honduras. Here one can find deep social divisions between a very small elite which controls the vast majority of the national wealth and large parts of the population which are extremely poor – divisions to which the European Union figures cited above are a testament (Leonard 2011).

This enormous difference in the distribution of wealth has a huge bearing on a host of other differences that mark Honduran society. For instance, it contributes to, and reinforces, a geographical segregation, with poor people disproportionally living on the periphery of the big cities or in the countryside (IFAD 2011; Olson 2015). It equally reinforces professional differences, with poor people disproportionally working in service jobs – for instance, as maids, security guards, porters, and the like. It reinforces educational divisions between those who can afford private education and those who cannot. It reinforces differences in access to quality health care, which, in turn, has led to, and sustained, a remarkable difference

in life expectancy and other health outcomes (see, for instance, Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers 2009).

As a result of this lack of communality between the different agents and groups of the system, each one has essentially developed its own containers. For instance, upper-class people and some middle-class people live in gated communities to which "outsiders" essentially do not have access, a trend which is evident across Latin America, creating a strong spatial container. Equally, it is virtually unheard of – and often considered dangerous – for outsiders to enter the poorer communities, as the author has found out personally. Essentially, gangs control who can and cannot come into their territories, and going into the "wrong" community can be fatal. Gangs, however, are a crucial container themselves, since, as we have seen, the role of power is crucial in Honduras. Gangs offer such power, as well as an opportunity to overcome, for instance, resource differences. They are thus crucial agents within the system.

As is shown below, this constant and pervasive segregation has a huge impact on the way violence is treated and perceived between and within different sectors of society, as well as how it represents a different type of problem and issue depending on who you are, where you are, and what you do. It also, as I show next, strongly influences how these ever-present differences are expressed.

To understand and underscore this point one needs to look at the exchanges that make up the self-organising pattern of Honduras. Here, one crucial role belongs to the country's media. Concentrated in the hands of a few families that are part of the elite and often very involved in politics, the means of communication play a critical role in pushing one particular narrative, which is very much aligned with that of the government. In fact, as Pine (2008) has argued, the media and the government are, in many ways, on the same page when it comes to the definition of problems and possible solutions. As a result, the differences outlined above are strongly reinforced, be it socially, politically, or economically. In other words, one of the key exchanges available in a social complex adaptive system – the means of communication, in the form of the media – does *not* serve to facilitate change. Rather this form of exchange exists to reinforce the status quo.

The question then becomes the following: What does this mean for the emerging patterns of self-organisation in Honduras?

b) Patterns

What emerges, then, is an extremely incoherent pattern of self-organisation. Coherence is defined here as "the degree to which parts of a system 'fit' each other or the external environment, and it is a necessary factor in sustainability."[2] In Honduras, the parts of the system do not "fit." Rather, the different parts and agents are in antagonistic opposition to one another.

2 Definition taken from http://wiki.hsdinstitute.org/patterns.

Patterns, if we remember, are similarities, differences, and connections that have meaning across time and space. Yet the conditions just described above point to patterns which simply do not have meaning across all of Honduran society. Rather, the conditions that mark the country primarily serve to reinforce differences between the different agents (Leonard 2011). What containers there are apply primarily to certain subgroups of society. For instance, the Honduran elite is bound together by an enormously strong container (wealth, access to economic opportunity, even geographical location, etc.), which in most other sections of society serves only as a marker of significant difference (for instance, most people cannot live where the elite live, or cannot dream to work where they work, or cannot go to the schools that the elite can send their kids to, etc.). As a consequence, what coherence one can find is not distributed across the entire system that is Honduras. Coherence, where it exists, extends only as far as particular subsystems.

Critically, what the above paragraph indicates is a lack of connections between the different parts of society. In simple terms, different agents acting within the Honduran system are essentially living separate lives. They do not come into contact with one another in such a way as to turn the tensions generated by their differences into opportunities for meaningful change. Rather, contact between these different segments of society serves exclusively to reinforce their respective status: each one essentially reinforces the other so that everybody always "remembers who they are," to go back to the basic rule already outlined above.

It is worth visualising this pattern for the purpose of clarity

Table 1: The Containers, Differences, and Exchanges (CDE) of Violence in Honduras

Conditions for self-organisation	Conditions present
Container	Violence as a problem "My" social class "My" community
Difference	Social and economic differences Experience of violence Geographical differences
Exchange	Media "Defence" of community Violence as defence mechanism
Pattern	Incoherent

In essence, what the above pattern means is that the system does not have strong enough containers to hold the differences that exist and allow them to be expressed in a way that would permit a coherent process of self-organisation. Violence is one, though not the only, expression of this incoherence and weakness. Corruption is another. Let us now look at how this incoherence underpins and sustains violence.

5 What Does It Mean? Violence as the Expression of Incoherent Patterns of Self-Organisation

Violence, then, is an *expression* of the incoherent pattern of self-organisation outlined above. It means different things to different groups and, crucially, serves different purposes.

For Honduran elites, violence does not, in most cases, represent an immediate threat to life or physical safety since the members of the elite are much less likely to become victims of violent crime (Leonard 2011; UNODC 2014). Yet this is not to say that violence is not important. On the one hand, it can and does eat away at the legitimacy of the state itself. Since the state, virtually for centuries, has served the interests of the privileged elite (*ibid*.), any notion of public revolt – for instance, as a consequence of real or perceived insecurity – becomes a potential systemic threat.

On the other hand, and coming from a different line of argument, violence serves to underpin and strengthen the status quo. As Pine (2008) and Frank (2012; 2015) have pointed out, violence in Honduras is structural; heavily concentrated amongst, and against, the poorest segments of society; and, often, committed by the state in those areas said to be violent. These characteristics serve particular political interests because they mean that violence can serve as a pretext to introduce often-draconian security measures which fall disproportionately on the very parts of society which most suffer the direct consequences of violence. Tough anti-gang legislation, for instance, has led to situations where youths have been imprisoned or even killed simply for having the "wrong" tattoos or living in the "wrong" neighbourhoods (Pine 2008). This, in turn, has underpinned and strengthened a tendency to portray particular neighbourhoods, as well as particular groups of people, as hotbeds of crime and violence and as the main perpetrators of said violence (*ibid*.), regardless of whether or not such assertions are backed by evidence.

Yet such a definition also serves the government's agenda in that it portrays violence as a containable problem linked to specific circumstances. According to one Honduran ambassador, "70% of all homicides in Honduras are linked to the drugs trade." Following this line of argument, the key group responsible for the violence – and which is often directly or indirectly linked to drug trafficking – consists of the gangs which are "overwhelming Central America" (Boraz and Bruneau, 2006).

This narrative, in turn, is driven and reinforced by the media – part of the elite itself – which also pushes relentlessly for tougher law-and-order policies in order to eliminate *bandidos*. At the end of August 2015, for example, the Honduran Congress started a process to determine whether gangs should be classified as terrorist organisations, having already passed anti-gang laws that significantly increased the penalties for belonging to such gangs (Tabory 2015).

Such measures, whilst of dubious effectiveness in terms of reducing violence (Dudley 2010), are very popular with certain sections of society, particularly the middle classes, whose main container in terms of violence is one of fear of crime. It is no coincidence that the

current Honduran president, Hernandez, won the 2013 presidential election on a ticket of being "tough on crime" and putting "a soldier on every corner" (Phillips 2014). Soldiers, then, become, for this segment of the population, the significant difference in addressing their fears. Such a narrow definition of the problem of violence generates a sense of security in the idea that the problem can supposedly be contained, both socially and geographically.

That there should be a reaction to this policy in those areas hit by violence is hardly surprising. In Honduran shanty towns violence *is* a concrete, and daily, experience (Rivera 2013). Yet if one then takes into account the fact that, as shown above, violence is often portrayed as something that originates in the periphery, with those who live there portrayed as the primary perpetrators of such violence, one begins to understand the different perceptions of violence. This, in turn, has a significant impact on the perception and role of gangs in such communities.

As outlined above, gangs have become a key target for both the media and policymakers in their fight against violence. Yet, apart from instilling fear, in the areas they control the gangs also serve other, key functions. Firstly, they fill a power vacuum left by the absent state. As several commentators have pointed out – for all their differences – street gangs provide a framework of rules that allows those living under their control a modicum of security as long as they stick to those rules (Cruz 2012).

However, the role of gangs, at least in some instances and some areas, goes beyond violence and "protection": the gangs also provide vital services to the community which, in other parts of the world, are provided by the state. As Cruz (2012: 33) has put it: "[Gangs] also assist dispossessed neighbours to make ends meet, and even finance small local development projects such as corner stores serving the community, or the repairs of the sports court and the main community roads."

This existence of gangs as parallel power structures, then, plays into the broader trend visible in Honduran society of deep divisions between "us" and "them" – that is, the reinforcing of differences and of the importance of the subsystems that serve as the containers already discussed above. As a result, the gangs are viewed by some people –and in some situations – as defenders of communities habitually ignored or stigmatised by the state. Indeed, the MS13 gang in particular "seems to be working hard to shore up community support" (InSight Crime 2015: 35), thereby strengthening its own containers whilst sharpening the differences between it and the "outside world."

Quite apart from that, and playing into the differences already discussed, gangs often also provide important economic opportunities that are not available through formal channels or that are simply inaccessible. This is a phenomenon that occurs in many Latin American countries (see Lehmann 2012; Cruz 2013).

The above functions also give gangs enormous influence over the exchanges that are at work within a particular community. In simple terms, the fact that gangs control the flow of who comes into – or leaves – a particular area, as well as the fact that they can engender loy-

alty by being the provider of certain services and jobs, also means that they can and do strongly influence the narrative within which the issue of violence is being framed.

Violence, then, is a *reflection* of the incoherence of Honduran self-organisation and, in particular, of the fact that there are virtually no exchanges between the different agents that allow for the expression of these differences in any coherent way. Depending on one's particular circumstances, violence can be seen as oppressive (or active) or as something passive and defensive. This is critical since, in such circumstances, it is virtually impossible to devise coherent action that can be applied across, and accepted by, all levels of society and all agents within this society.

In order to address this difficulty, it is useful to look at whether there is something which unites these disparate views of violence, its causes, and its consequences. The simple rules are a good starting point in this respect, since closer analysis reveals that, despite all the different interpretations of violence from different agents within the Honduran system, all these interpretations are based on the same set of simple rules. The situation in gang-controlled territory is no different from the macro-picture presented by the Honduran state.

Gangs in slums, just like the elite of the Honduran state, fulfil crucial functions because they represent the "power" to which people "yield." Equally, the lack of trust between the different segments of society, as well as between society and the state, is reinforced by the simple rule of "remember who you are." Here, again, gangs can potentially become crucial facilitators enabling people to "build alliances," something that is done in order to get what you need to survive in a country where most people are poor and the state is weak and mistrusted, and in order to have any chance of getting ahead. This, in turn, plays into the rule of attending to what you can see and what is happening. In a country where most people struggle simply to survive, life is lived in the moment and not planned. Once again, however, this reinforces the role of gangs, which, as mentioned, often provide services and assistance to those who live in their community and respect their rules. Corruption is another by-product of such a context.

These rules, then, significantly shape the way that conditions are expressed across time and space and, therefore, the way societal patterns manifest themselves within the context of particular local circumstances.

All of this has significant implications for action.

6 Now What? Options for Acting in an Incoherent Complex Adaptive System to Address Violence

If we look at the problem from the perspectives described above, one of the crucial elements of any EU policy response is a redefinition of the problems the EU is seeking to address. Violence, from a complexity perspective, is social; it is the expression of an incoherent process of self-organisation. The key aim thus becomes *not* addressing violence but rather addressing

the conditions that sustain violence. The primary aim of the EU in its work in Honduras should be to increase the coherence of the patterns it is confronting there. Coherence is defined here as a situation in which

- meaning is shared among agents,
- internal tension is reduced,
- the actions of agents and subsystems are aligned with the system-wide intentionality,
- patterns are repeated across the various dimensions and in different parts of the system,
- a minimum amount of the system's energy is dissipated through internal interactions, and
- the parts of the system function in complementary ways.

(Eoyang 2001: 30)

In order to achieve increased coherence, one can change the conditions or change the simple rules. Each one of these options will now be considered in turn.

Change the conditions

As virtually all the literature on Honduras suggests, the profound differences discussed above are the result of often centuries-long processes of political, economic, and social development, meaning that they are extremely entrenched and are protected by equally entrenched interests. Therefore, "reforming" the justice system, necessary though that may be, will never be viable so long as those interests that protect its current state are not considered, *alongside* those interests which are currently not being served adequately by that same justice system.

When the situation is seen from such a perspective, the EU has to answer two questions: First, are there issues around which common interests can be defined, even by groups which have a seemingly diametrically opposed perspective on one and the same question? Second, are there channels through which the profound differences already identified can be expressed in such a way as to allow for change towards more coherence within the system that is Honduras?

It seems to me that, in order to answer these questions, it is not enough for the EU to engage with the government to reform particular sectors of the state. Nor is it enough to simply engage with those actors that are currently feeling disenfranchised. Rather, links need to be established across these different levels of society so that areas of common interest can be determined. Bearing in mind the profound mistrust that exists in Honduras against "others," agents that are trusted, or at least accepted, by all agents within the system need to be engaged. In practice this means that the European Union, in its programmes and with its policies, should make a concerted effort to engage, in particular, with non-governmental organisations and other actors at the *mesa level* that do, unlike the state or the gangs, have access to

and a certain influence on *both* the government and the people and groups "on the ground." This is critical since, regardless of one's opinion on any one of the agents that act within the system that is Honduras, these actors *are* part of that system, defend particular interests, and will not disappear.

This also means that the EU has to redefine its understanding of gangs. The latter are not an actor which is monolithic. Nor are gangs simply perpetrators of violence. Whilst they clearly do commit acts of violence, they also have different social and economic functions that give them a certain kind of legitimacy with parts of the population. In other words, they are as much an actor in the system as the government or NGOs.

However, from an EU point of view, in order to be able to engage on such a basis and exercise influence across the system, it is crucial to first of all define the narrative – the purpose – which guides EU policy in Honduras. What is striking about the EU is the frequently yawning gap between what it says in its strategies and policy papers coming out of Brussels and what it does on the ground. To give just one example, the current strategy paper for Honduras talks, in quite traditional EU language, about the importance of human rights, the need for democratic consolidation, the importance of involving civil society in the policy process, etc. (European Commission 2014). Yet a senior EU diplomat in Honduras defined the main aim of the organisation in the country as "the maintenance of stability."[3] Whilst one objective does not necessarily exclude the other, it is clearly possible to have stability without democracy or the involvement of civil society.

Such strategic confusion makes it virtually impossible for the organisation to engage actors across Honduras in the pursuit of coherence. In fact, from their different perspectives, both NGOs and government representatives have criticised the EU for "not knowing what it wants" in Honduras.[4] The EU is thereby adding, de facto, one more significant difference to the conditions and hence contributing to the very incoherence it so often bemoans. The EU itself, then, can make a significant contribution to the coherence of the system it is seeking to act in by clearly defining *its* container and therefore defining the basis upon which it wants to engage with other agents in the system in the search for common ground around which action is possible. This would signify that the EU is an active partner *within* the system – it is part *of* the system – rather than an external actor trying to change a particular system from the outside. The interdependence outlined above as a critical factor of social complex adaptive systems therefore also applies to the EU, which will need to adjust its understanding of its own role to one of active participant rather than neutral and external observer.

b) Change the simple rules

There is plenty of scope, theoretically, to change the simple rules that govern Honduras. For instance, the EU, by incentivising the involvement of civil society in decision-making and

3 Interview in Tegucigalpa, January 2014.
4 Interviews with NGO executives and a Honduran government minister in 2015.

policymaking processes, is already conceivably challenging the rule of yield to power, encouraging actors to instead hold power to account.

Yet the question must be how such a change could be brought about, bearing in mind that such rules were not imposed by a particular authority but emerged over time and within a particular context. In other words, simple rules are also products of the evolution of complex adaptive social systems, not just externally imposed "products" of policymaking.

A further point concerns the possibility of achieving change across the system. Yielding to power, for instance, is a survival strategy for many people, and it will simply not be possible to change this unless their safety can be guaranteed and unless there are incentives for people to take the risk of challenging or moulding or participating in power structures. Simple rules sustain themselves because, amongst other reasons, there are significant risks to challenging them.

Challenging these rules would also only be useful – and worth the risk – if those who currently benefit from the rules as they stand were to gain something in return. This applies both to societal elites as well as to gangs, which, as has been shown, benefit from the same rules in "their" shanty towns as elites do in other spheres of the system. The structures these rules spawn and sustain *do* extend across society, unlike the current policies of the European Union.

If we take all these conditions together, the odds of being able to successfully challenge and change the simple rules that govern a system such as Honduras are very long indeed, thus raising the question of whether it is worth investing political (and financial) capital in order to challenge them. Therefore, challenging simple rules could simply mean trying to *re-interpret* them, always with the aim of making the overall pattern of self-organisation more coherent.

In the case of Honduras, for instance, one simple rule – attend to what you can see and what is happening – could be reinterpreted to make it "attend to what you can see and prepare for what might happen." The rule "remember who you are" could be reinterpreted as "remember who you are and who you want to be." Such simple reinterpretations have the advantage of being open to debate and discussion, which in itself might incentivise change. It would also be useful if these reinterpreted rules did not exclude anybody, since regardless of position or perspective it is possible to prepare for what might happen, just as it is possible to imagine what one wants to be. These modified rules could therefore allow for the possibility of inclusive debates and inclusive – as well as possibly wide-ranging – change into the future across time and space.

The key challenge in such a reinterpretation is making sure that the system as a whole embraces such reinterpretation. From what has been said up to now it appears clear that such a process would face enormous challenges. So, from an EU perspective, the question would be where and how to incentivise the proposed reinterpretation, bearing in mind the need for application across the system. Here, the EU would have to, once again, engage ex-

tensively with those agents that have the capacity to facilitate application – that is, actors at the mesa level with reach both upwards and downwards. In order for the EU to do this, it would need to be clear what such actors could offer not just to the European Union, but also to the gangs, the slum dwellers, the middle classes, and the elites. ALL of these groups need to be part of change in order for it to be effective. How, precisely, this can be done will need to be the subject of further research.

It is worth noting, of course, that the distinction I make here between rules and conditions, and between changing rules and reinterpreting rules, is somewhat artificial. If conditions change and lead to new societal patterns across time and space, they will influence the simple rules that govern the system. New rules will give rise to different conditions. Reinterpreted rules may eventually lead to new rules and will change the conditions.

This interdependence between rules and conditions also means that whatever one does, outcomes cannot be guaranteed. As such, it is worth stressing again that none of the above options guarantee a particular result or can eliminate the inherent uncertainty of a society such as Honduras.

7 Implications for the European Union in Honduras

What does the above mean for the EU as it acts in Honduras? Essentially, it invites the EU to ask questions: questions about the type of problems it is confronting, about the objectives it can and should pursue in Honduras, and with regard to the outcomes it can realistically achieve.

Based on the argument presented here, the first question the EU has to ask is what type of problems it is confronting in Honduras. Here, a fundamental rethink is necessary, since it is clear that violence is not the problem in and of itself but the expression of an interdependent set of conditions. The EU needs to ask itself which of these conditions it can realistically influence, bearing in mind its relative status in Honduras and the resources it has available.

Having answered these questions, practical questions emerge: With whom should the EU engage with regard to what issues? As shown above, the EU has a tendency to engage primarily at the government level. That is fine, but in a system such as Honduras, where there is so much mistrust and disconnect between the government and the rest of society, such a choice takes the organisation down a particular path, which, I would argue, is much more suitable for the maintenance of stability (and, therefore, the status quo) than for the type of objectives the EU espouses in its programme documents.

If the aim is de facto change, then the next question for the EU would have to be how to allow the profound differences that mark Honduras to be expressed in such a way as to incentivise change towards more coherence. This would, in turn, signify the organisation's engagement with a whole host of agents and actors that it is currently not, or not sufficiently, engaged with, including not only civil society but also – directly or indirectly – gangs. As

shown above, the latter represent an important agent in the system which cannot simply be "cut out."

This, then, also leads to a final important realisation: the role of the European Union in Honduras is rather limited. The EU will not solve the problem of violence (or corruption or any other). All it can do is use what it has (resources) in order to influence the conditions and rules that sustain problems such as violence.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail on how all of these issues, and questions, could be addressed and how the solutions, therefore, could positively influence the patterns that sustain problems such as violence. The aim here was primarily to reinterpret the nature of the problem encountered and make suggestions as to what this implies for approaching such problems. Further research will have to go into the practical policy implications.

However, I do hope to have shown why the current approach is counterproductive and what it might take to change this approach. In other words, the present work represents a first step on a long road towards a remodelling of the EU's approach to its work in Central America in general and Honduras in particular which could, eventually, serve as a strategic blueprint for its role a global actor.

8 Conclusions

The present paper is little more than an answer to one fundamental question: What factors have led to the considerable investment made by the European Union in Honduras (relative to the country's importance for the EU) not having the hoped-for results, particularly in relation to violence? The answer presented here is that the EU has conceived of the problem of violence in Honduras the wrong way, seeing it as a linear problem which can be solved through the application of the right policies and through the reform of the relevant sectors of the state.

Through the application of complexity and human system dynamics to the issue of violence in Honduras, it has been possible to show that such an approach is doomed to fail because of the simple fact that it does not match the complexity of the problem encountered. The EU, therefore, has to rethink its approach and "complexify" in order to be able to engage across the social system as a whole and in order to have any chance of being able to apply policy results across the entire system.

For reasons of space, it has only been possible to scratch the surface of the question of how this can be done. A great deal more research is needed to be able to identify how conditions and rules can be changed, how the results of such changes can be applied, and how such changes can be made sustainable. Further research is also necessary to undertake comparative studies of EU involvement in other policy areas in order to see whether the conclusions from this one case study can be confirmed. However, this study has indicated that it is

necessary to adapt policy and evaluation processes to the reality of complex adaptive systems, making them more flexible and part of a normal and ongoing process of change, rather than the "end" of a linear process. A great deal of work is being undertaken regarding this question in the field of organisational behaviour and business, and it will be necessary to explore this work to see how it can be incorporated and adapted to international politics in general and the much larger systems of entire states and societies in particular. This is an urgent task for the simple reason that the results of the traditional approach – as demonstrated here for Honduras, but also in relation to many other issues (see Lehmann 2011; 2012) – have been so disappointing. Adapting complexity and human systems dynamics to international policymaking is therefore a question of good policymaking.

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