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Contested Cornerstones of Nonviolent National Self-Perception in Costa Rica: A Historical Approach

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Abstract

Crime, violence, and insecurity are perceived as society's biggest problems in contemporary Costa Rica. This degree of priority is especially remarkable because the country has always been considered the peaceful exception in the violent Central American region. In this paper I analyze four cornerstones of the nonviolent national self-perception in the 1940s and 1980s as the fundamental basis for the current talk of crime: the civil war, the abolition of the military, the proclamation of neutrality, and the peace plan for Central America and the subsequent granting of the Nobel Peace Prize. The result of the analysis is the determination that these historical cornerstones were not publicly discussed as expressions of the nonviolent identity for which they are today cited as evidence.

Keywords: Costa Rica, violence, crime, social order, national identity, public discourse

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Zusammenfassung

Die zweifelhaften Grundpfeiler gewaltloser nationaler Identität in Costa Rica:
Eine historische Annäherung

Gewalt und Kriminalität werden in der costaricanischen Öffentlichkeit heute als die größte gesellschaftliche Bedrohung wahrgenommen. Diese Prioritätensetzung ist nicht zuletzt deshalb bemerkenswert, weil Costa Rica seit langem als die friedvolle Ausnahme in der gewalttätigen zentralamerikanischen Region gilt. Dieser Beitrag untersucht vier Säulen der gewaltlosen Selbstwahrnehmung in den 1940er und 1980er Jahren: den Bürgerkrieg, die Abschaffung des Militärs, die Neutralitätserklärung und den Friedensplan für Zentralamerika, für den Oscar Arias mit dem Friedensnobelpreis ausgezeichnet wurde. Der Beitrag zeigt, dass diese historischen Momente in den 1940er und 1980er Jahren öffentlich nicht unter dem Gesichtspunkt von Gewaltlosigkeit debattiert und wahrgenommen wurden und dass sich die damaligen Debatten nicht mit ihrer heutigen Interpretation als Belege einer gewaltlosen nationalen Identität decken.

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Nonviolent National Self-Perception in Costa Rica:
A Historical Approach

Sebastian Huhn

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1 Introduction

Violence and crime in society are among the most discussed topics in contemporary Costa Rica. Everybody talks about them; most people are very worried; and politicians and citizens try to act or react. Governments and parties have to address the topics, and different social organizations have been founded to make civil society's call for law and order more effective through demonstrations, petitions, or other actions with an effect on the public. The social debate is strongly mixed up with morals, stereotypes, national self-perception, and a discussion about the country's past and future social order. Two statements from very different social actors may be representative of the dominant discourse on the rise of crime and its reference to twentieth-century Costa Rican history.

In 2006 I interviewed, among many other persons, a businessman in San José about crime in Costa Rica.[1] He said,

> So, brutalization increased […] The Tico (Costa Rican) is normally a peaceful person. But he also likes to learn things and he has quickly learned how to make a fast buck. This is the influence of Nicaragua, of Colombia, and so on.[2]

In March 2008, Laura Chinchilla, then vice president of Costa Rica, stated the following in *La Nación*:

> Costa Rica was known in the world as a nation of peace and tolerance. Over the course of our history, we learned to solve our differences and conflicts through dialogue and with respect for the others. Nevertheless, these distinctive traits have been disputed in recent years by the increase of crime and violence.
>
> (*La Nación*, March 30, 2008)

Both authors refer to a reputed Costa Rican national trait which is taken to be universally valid and known by everybody, the pacifist character of the Costa Ricans as a nation, to emphasize their point: crime is rising and that is disturbing, not least because it contradicts the national identity. Both quotations point to the identity crisis that is topic of this paper: there is crime and violence in Costa Rica, but in a nation with a nonviolent identity, there should not be and, strictly speaking, there even cannot be.

This paper is based on two previous findings of my research. The first central finding is that in Costa Rica fear of crime and the call for law and order are today widespread—in the case of the call for the "iron fist" even more so than in Nicaragua and El Salvador, countries with higher crime rates and less capacity for crime fighting and prevention.[3] The second basic finding is that many Costa Ricans state that there is an extremely serious problem with violence and crime in contemporary Costa Rica while there was no such problem in the past at all. One of the biggest problems declared on this basis is that violence and crime seem inexplicable in Costa Rica, especially because "the Costa Ricans" per definition in the national identity are not a violent and delinquent people, which is taken to be proven by history itself.[4] The introductory quotes above demonstrate that the public discourse on violence, crime, and insecurity in Costa Rica is in many places conducted as a discourse about morals or the nature of the nation's character.

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[1] For an evaluation of the interviews see Huhn 2008a.

[2] The interview was conducted in San José on the November 10, 2006. All Spanish and German citations have been translated by the author.

[3] These findings were made in interviews conducted in the three countries between October and December 2006 as part of a DFG-funded research project at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies. Fieldwork in Nicaragua was carried out by Anika Oettler, in El Salvador by Peter Peetz ,and in Costa Rica by myself. The mentioned findings are published in Huhn 2008a.

[4] Whereby the concept of history is used as an objective knowledge about the past and a linear, teleological sense of the past itself. On the long history of nonviolent self-perception and attribution by others in Costa Rica see also Huhn 2008b.

In this paper I will reconstruct the historical transformation of the dominant discourse on the nonviolent national self-perception in twentieth-century Costa Rica. I will thereby focus on the four historical moments in Costa Rican history which are most frequently cited as proof of the nonviolent national identity: the civil war of 1948 and especially the reestablishment of peace and social order after the war, the abolition of the Costa Rican military in 1948, the proclamation of neutrality by Luis Alberto Monge in 1983, and Arias's peace plan for Central America and his subsequent decoration with the Nobel Peace Prize. As I will show, the historical transfiguration of these events adumbrates today's discourse on violence and crime, especially regarding their apparent consequences for social order in the country. The empirical corpus of sources of this paper is formed by key texts which were selected from more than one thousand newspaper articles—mainly from *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre*—published between 1946 and 2008.[5]

The paper is organized as follows: As a first step, I will present the theoretical basis of my argumentation. I will subsequently reconstruct the social discourses of the time about violence, crime, social order, and identity. Finally, in conclusion, I will discuss the findings on the basis of the contemporary discourse on violence, crime, and social order in Costa Rica. As there is no social meaning inherent in violence and crime per se but only as a result of the public discourse about them and as this discourse is subject to permanent change, I will show that a historical perspective enriches the public debate about Costa Rican self-perception as well as that about violence, crime, and social order.[6]

2 Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

In a subordinate clause of her groundbreaking book on discourses on crime and its social consequences in Brazil, Caldeira mentions the relevance of these phenomena to the discourse about social order: "Discussions of crime almost always lead to reflections on the state of the country" (Caldeira 2000: 53). Therewith, Caldeira addresses the academic debate about the nexus between the discourses about crime and about the general social order. Garland (2003) supplements this awareness when he states that—at least in the case of Europe and the United Sates—it is not so much crime and violence that have fundamentally changed over the last decades but first of all the social perception of these phenomena and the discourse about punishment and governance. The change in the perception of crime and punishment correlates with transformations of the social state, political culture, and social order (Garland 2003: 193-196). While Garland mainly refers to punishment, Wieviorka (2006) describes similar conditions, referring to crime, violence, social order, and social self-perceptions. Crime and violence, he states, are seen completely dif-

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[5] I collected these sources during fieldwork from August to December 2008 in the Costa Rican National Library. I owe Nadine Haas, Diego Menestrey and Rosa Wagner a debt of gratitude for helping me to sort the mountain of articles.

[6] On the argument that crime and violence are socially constructed problems see Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2007.

ferent in society over time. This changing perception relates to changing concepts of social orders and self-perceptions. Thus, the talk of crime is both an indication of social order as well as an integral part in the social struggle for identity. Both authors emphasize the historical character of the talk of crime and its transformations in different historical contexts.

Against this background, a historical investigation of the interaction between the talk of crime and the social self-perception in Costa Rica helps in understanding the evolution of contemporary discourses about crime and violence as indicators of moral decline and social disorder. The thesis is that through the transformation of meaning, through permanent repetition, through translation into a part of the national self-perception, through the suppression of opposite views and inconsistencies, and finally through manifestation in myth and heritage, the discourse—namely, the talk of crime—has been transformed into a cultural problem of national identity in contemporary Costa Rica.[7]

In conclusion, this paper therefore refers to the debate on national identity. Like violence, the national identity is also a constructed social reality. According to this understanding, society does not have an objective and static nature but rather consists of a relative and precarious snapshot, which has a certain history and which at any time indicates a certain social and symbolic order (see for example Bhabha 1990; Hall 1996; Hobsbawm 1992, 1996; Anderson 1998; Laclau and Mouffe 2000). Even if there is today no serious scientific doubt about identity being a social construction instead of a static character trait, the idea of "natural" identity remains very powerful in society. The first quote cited in the introduction may serve as proof of this. Therefore, the accentuation of the historicity of national identity remains indispensable.

Violence plays an important role in the continual reconstruction of national identity and social order, and national identity reciprocally affects the perception of violence as well. Mechanisms to contain violence in society, governments' monopoly on the use of force, and the question of the grade of "civilization" (in contrast to the less civilized "others") are cornerstones of national identity and social order, in general. Larrain therefore fittingly describes the nation as a constructed "moral community" (2000: 35). It is not violence and crime which are indicators of the state of society, but rather the way in which society perceives and deals with them, and attaches importance to them. The social discourse about violence, crime, and insecurity therefore has to be investigated in relation to social order and national identity. Some quotations in the following discussion illustrate how much this argument applies to Costa Rica.

Hall emphasizes the character of construction and the never-ending processuality of identity.[8] The understanding of identity as something "natural" and characteristic accounts for its social power:

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7   Caldeira defines the talk of crime as the everyday discourses about crime as a permanent threat—mediated in narratives, commentaries, conversations or even jokes—that "simultaneously make fear circulate and proliferate" (Caldeira 2000: 2).

8   Hall rightly prefers to talk of identification instead of identity. Although I agree with his differentiation between the terms identity and identification, I stay with the term identity in this paper, aware of its naturalistic

> Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, then they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity—as "identity" in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation.
>
> (Hall 1996: 4)

The diachronic comparative perspective allows one to analyze the above-mentioned processuality of national identity and its transformation in the collective memory (Halbwachs 1967) or, respectively, as a national narration according to the White's understanding—that is, as the attribution of signification to a historical chronicle which is senseless per se (White 1973).

The analyzed articles are interpreted as discourse fragments in a special social space—the mass media—which form discourse strands as a whole (Jäger 2001: 97-99).[9] This means that they are more than the personal statements of individuals on a certain topic; rather, they are contributions to discourses and simultaneously shaped by discourses (Fairclough/Wodak 1997: 258).[10] It can be seen from these articles what the topics of discourse were, what was possible to say in specific historical moments, and if there was consensus or dissent about certain topics and appraisals. The discourse fragments appear in an arena which can be seen to represent dominant discourses (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2009).

Mass media are generally very powerful actors in public discourses, as well as a mirror for dominant discourses (Iyengar/Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991; see also van Dijk 1995 on power and the news media; Bourdieu 1998: 28; Cocco 2003: 57); nevertheless, the importance of newspapers as one particular mass medium is less obvious. Therefore, I will briefly justify my selection of articles from *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* as my basic sources.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the first daily newspapers with a commercial and informative standard emerged in Costa Rica and they

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misinterpretation and aware of using a term I simultaneously criticize. Nevertheless, topic of the paper is exactly the power of social misinterpretation through the idea of the existence of identity, which is why the term constitutes the processes I investigate.

[9]   Many works that are based on the theoretical idea of the power of discourse as the motor of the social construction of reality are often labeled as discourse analyses or even proclaim themselves automatically to be such. Even though the objects of investigation and the theoretical approach of this paper are based without reserve on a theory of discourse in a Foucaultian and, accordingly, constructivist sense, I do not follow the methodological considerations subsumed under the broadly diversified field of discourse analysis. Nevertheless, the foundation of discourse theory accounts for methodological consequences. First of all, the paper's methodology is the historical interpretation of sources. The paper is based on a historically embedded quantitative as well as qualitative content analysis of Costa Rican newspapers. As language, linguistic subtleties, and semiotic acuteness do not play a role in the interpretation, my paper is not a discourse analysis in a narrow sense. Nevertheless, it is based on the corresponding theories.

[10] Simultaneously, the newspaper articles impart knowledge about Costa Rican history. This information is also usable through the eyes of historical science, which means a critical assessment of sources, even when the text is mainly seen as a discourse fragment.

started to sell well (Vega 1995: 89-92; Vega 1999: 95; Fumero 2005: 21).[11] As a result, newspapers became a very important arena in public debates, and the circle of those who participated grew. Literacy was the main precondition for the press to become this important. In 1927—when the newspaper market was already nationwide—the average literacy rate was 90.1 percent in San José, 86.7 percent in the urban centers, 68.1 percent in the small towns, and 57.8 percent in the countryside (Molina 1999: 42). Altogether, 65.7 percent of the population was literate. In 1950 the general countrywide literacy rate was already 78.8 percent (Molina/Palmer 2003: 28).[12] Therefore, it can be maintained that the majority of the population was able to comprehend and to participate in public discourses carried out in newspapers.

La Prensa Libre was founded in November 1889 and quickly became an important and independent national medium which has managed to exist up to today (Zeledón 1992: 11). *La Nación* was founded in 1946, in the middle of a politically conflictive decade, by adherents of the political opposition, which became the Partido Liberación Nacional after the 1948 civil war (Sandoval 2008: 101). It soon disengaged itself from the Liberal Party, became independent, and transformed itself into the leading national newspaper; a status it maintains to this day.

Today there is a strong tendency to media oligopolies in Costa Rica. The Grupo Nación owns *La Nación* as well as other important newspapers (such as *Al Día* and *La Techa*), about nine glossy magazines, and three radio stations.[13] *La Prensa Libre* is owned by *Grupo Extra*, a media group that also owns *La Extra* (founded in 1978 and today the newspaper with the highest circulation in the country), a radio station, and a national television channel (Sandoval 2008: 104).

To summarize, Costa Rican newspaper articles are a suitable source for a historical perspective.[14] In contrast to other media, newspapers existed in Costa Rica over the entire twentieth century and they have always been an important arena for public debate. *La Nación* became the most important news source soon after its creation in 1946 and remains so to this day. The readership of *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* was and is mainly Costa Rica's upper and middle classes. The majority of the lower classes initially weren't able to read and to afford newspapers, and today the majority of them prefer to read other newspapers, particularly *La Extra*. Therefore, articles from *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* in fact reproduce the public discourses of a limited but simultaneously large and especially socially powerful segment of society. While *La Prensa Libre* has lost readership in recent decades, *La Nación* in particular has managed to keep up its status as the most powerful platform for publicly discussing politics:

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[11] On the history of Costa Rican news media see also Blen 1983, González/Pérez 1990, Vega 1990, Vega 1995, Vega 1996, Vega 1999. On the perception of newspapers as a source compared to television and the radio see Foseca/Sandoval 2006. On literacy as a precondition see Molina 1999: 33, 42 and Molina/Palmer 2003: 28). On the special importance of *La Nación* see Sandoval 2008 and Garro Rojas 2000.

[12] These rates are very high in comparison to the rest of Central America. In Nicaragua, the literacy rate was 37.4% in 1950, for example (Molina/Palmer 2003: 28).

[13] See www.nacionmediakit.com/.

[14] Furthermore, unlike other media, newspapers are completely archived.

The importance of *La Nación* is not only related to quantitative indicators of reader-ship, but it also refers to its capacity for translating its symbolic power into the agenda of the public sphere.[15]

(Sandoval 2008: 107)

Hall has established some fundamental considerations regarding the comprehension between author, text, and reader in his encoding/decoding model that describe this paper's under-standing of the meaning of newspaper articles. The author encodes information that has to be decoded by the reader. Since the decoding is far less individual or privatized than often pro-claimed but is rather determined by the limits of the thinkable in society, the encoding has to follow corresponding rules. While author and reader do not necessarily agree totally about content and reading, encoding already determines the limits of decoding. These limits mark the dominant discourse. If the author realizes that the said is incorrectly encoded, he has to encode it once again so it will be understood in the "right" way in further circulation. That is, it has to be encoded according to acknowledged social discourses (Hall 2001: 172-174). Addi-tionally, the author is influenced by the same social rules. As Hall notices regarding ideology, "ideological statements are made by individuals: but ideologies are not the product of indi-vidual consciousness or intension. Rather we formulate our intentions within ideology" (Hall 2002: 90). As the social codes—which constitute discourse—are not ahistorical, their historical analysis can disclose them.

The question elaborated in this paper is therefore how the dominant cultural order regard-ing national identity and violence was transformed in twentieth-century Costa Rica, and how *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* reveal this order by following the rules of the thinkable and the dominant cultural order.

3   Discourses on the Nonviolent Nation in Twentieth-century Newspaper Coverage

In the following I will discuss the changing discourse on social order in Costa Rica. As al-ready indicated in the introduction, in contemporary dominant discourse the Costa Rican social order is characterized as exceptionally peaceful and nonviolent. The 1948 civil war usually serves as the historical turning point, the moment where the Costa Rican nation broke with several violent habits of certain segments of society and from then on adopted a

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[15]   Lidieth Garro Rojas (2000) reaches the same conclusion in her analysis of *La Nación's* editorial commentator-ship between 1946 and 1949 and between 1979 and 1982. She reconstructs the discourse on national identity and its facets in these two periods of crisis and concludes that *La Nación* constructs a certain identity. Her in-vestigation complies with the analysis of this paper in many ways; she also describes Communism and the Nicaraguans as the constitutive "others" of the Costa Rican national identity and the positive self-perception of peacefulness and exceptionalism. Nevertheless, I do not fully agree with her representation of *La Nación* as an actor who consequently constructs one particular identity. In my view, *La Nación* is an actor in the con-struction of identity, but it is also a platform for a social struggle about identity and social order, and as an ac-tor it has not consistently followed one single path in providing the nation with an identity over time.

collective path of nonviolent and united identity. Laura Chinchilla, then minister of justice and vice president of Costa Rica, wrote the following in an article about rising violence in Costa Rica published in *La Nación* in September 2006:

> We Costa Ricans have adopted peace as something very characteristic of and constitutional to our nature and our lifestyle. However, it is time to rest on our way and ask ourselves if we still look after these noble conditions. If we analyze manifestations of contemporary social life, we see—with alertness and anxiety—tendencies which seem contrary to this pacifistic archetype of the Costa Ricans.
>
> (*La Nación*, September 21, 2006)

The citation subsumes the central elements of the national self-perception and the dominant discourse about the country's social order. The Costa Rican nation is perceived as remarkably peaceful. This characterization is constructed as natural and has proven itself in different historical moments. The underlying concept of identity is thereby teleological. The country's history makes *sense* in retrospect; national history is told in reverse chronological order to give sense to historical moments from the present point of view. History is re-encoded and nationalized (Sarasin 2003: 161-162). While I will describe each of the named historical events briefly, I will not extensively discuss historical research about them but will concentrate on how they were discussed then and how they are remembered today. Therefore, I will reconstruct the dominant discourse regarding the four events in order to find out which elements of the later national nonviolent identity already existed, how they transformed over time, and who was the subject of the common identity and who wasn't. Hall describes the importance of the constitutive outsider as follows: "Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly evoked, identities are constructed through, not outside difference" (Hall 1996: 4). Therefore, the identification of the constitutive "other" reveals much about the idea of a "we."

3.1 The Civil War of 1948

The 1930s and 1940s were very conflictive decades in Costa Rica. First the 1929 New York stock market crash and later World War II and also the Cold War called the liberal market model of the country into question and intensified social conflicts. In particular, urban workers and the employees of the United Fruit Company on the Caribbean Coast increasingly turned towards the Communist Party and organized strikes, blockades, and demonstrations; Costa Rica was ideologically divided in the shadow of the Cold War. The Costa Rican government reacted with a mixed strategy. On the one hand they tried to stabilize the economy and welfare with government aid and control; on the other hand they moved aggressively and violently against any social protest. The political elite of the country split into two factions with different visions of a future Costa Rica. President Calderón formed an alliance with the Communist Party and the Catholic Church in 1943 to unify the country. His successor Picado broke this alliance after his inauguration in 1944 and brought social re-

forms tentatively to an end. In the following elections in 1948, Otilio Ulate won according to the electoral office, but the Congress—dominated by Calderón supporters—disputed the election result and declared Calderón president. While Calderón and Ulate started to negotiate a solution to the conflict, a rebel army—headed by José Figueres—attacked San José eleven days after the election and started a civil war. The electoral fraud was the spark for this war. Figueres had long disagreed with Calderón's politics, and especially his alliance with the Communists, and had prepared for armed conflict well in advance of the election. The civil war lasted from March 12 to April 19 and claimed about two thousand victims. The war was therewith the most violent event in twentieth-century Costa Rica. After victory, Figueres formed a junta, outlawed the Communist Party, and banished many members of the beaten opposition, including the two former presidents Calderón and Picado.[16]

After Figueres's victory, all newspapers immediately sided with him. The civil war was declared a liberation—the self-proclaimed name of the rebel forces was Ejército de Liberación Nacional—whereby the main object, Costa Rica, was liberated from what in the eyes of the press was communism (*La Nación*, April 23, 1948; *La Prensa Libre*, April 23, 1948; *La Nación*, April 24, 1948; *La Prensa Libre*, April 26, 1948; *La Nación*, April 28, 1948; *La Prensa Libre*, April 30, 1948). Among the positive self-perceptions in newspaper articles from the weeks after Figueres's victory, peacefulness already plays a role, but it is secondary to patriotism, discipline, equity, diligence, and honesty. Victory is presented as the recovery of peace and social order, already destroyed before Figueres's attack, and the dead soldiers of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional are stylized as martyrs while the newspaper articles basically do not talk about dead soldiers of the defeated and the violent character of the coup (*La Nación*, April 28, 1948; *La Prensa Libre*, April 29, 1948; *La Nación*, April 30, 1948; *La Prensa Libre*, April 30, 1948; *La Nación*, May 1, 1948).

In a speech that was also printed in *La Nación* on May 1, 1948, Figueres stated that the civil war was waged to end violence. He also stated that he would reestablish peace (destroyed by Calderón and the Communists) for all Costa Ricans—for the entire nation (*La Nación*, May 1, 1948). Also in May 1948, *La Nación* published an article by Alberto Martén, member of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional. In the article he states that Costa Rica always was a peaceful nation. This peaceful identity resulted in passivity towards frauds, corruption, and violence, caused by Calderón and the Communists. Therefore, the rebels had to start a civil war to reestablish "real" peace. The author furthermore writes that the second republic will need strong armed forces to protect the future peace (*La Nación*, May 6, 1948). Figueres was cited once again the next day with the same statement. The bad rulers (Calderón and the Communists) could not have been fought without arms and violence (*La Nación*, May 7, 1948).[17]

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[16] On the civil war, its prehistory, the motivations of the different parties, the electoral fraud of 1948, and the junta of 1948/1949 see: Bell 1971, Lehoucq/Molina 2002, Molina/Lehoucq 1999, Solís 2006; Fichel 1991, López 1998; Molina 2005a, 132-139.

[17] On the appropriation of national identity through the demonization of the pre-1948 years and through taking recourse to the decades before the 1940s by Figueres see also: Cruz 2000.

In the aftermath of Figueres's victory, the civil war and its violence was legitimated as the liberation of a peaceful nation from a violent threat in the person of Calderón and the Communist Party. The idea of an identity of nonviolence already existed[18] and was reconstructed by the junta and distributed by the media instantly after the war. As "Calderonistas" and Communists were the defeated other, the authors of articles (often new junta members) addressed the whole nation as a victim of Calderón and the Communists which had been liberated by a vanguard. The number of victims, the cruelty, and the different causes of the war were hushed up. The basic tenor of the news coverage was that the social order had been reestablished with force of arms. The thousands of dead Costa Ricans on both sides remained virtually unreported, with the exception of war heroes from the Figueres side.[19] War crimes, murders, and brutality on both sides after the civil war—such as those authorized by and discussed in front of the Tribunales de Sanciones Inmediatas—were also not much reported in newspapers in the decades after 1948, though they are very vivid in the memories of victims and perpetrators, as diaries and memoirs show (Solís 2008: 11-15). Thus, the genesis of the second Costa Rican republic was very violent, while this dimension of violence was concealed in the press coverage.

Particularly noticeable is the tenor of unity in media coverage of domestic policies and national identity after Figueres's victory. Without exception, all newspaper articles analyzed paint the picture of one Costa Rican nation and its united citizens, first repressed and ripped off by and now liberated from the Calderonistas and the Communists by an upstanding vanguard. The newspapers create the impression that within a few months after the 1948 elections it was already forgotten that the alliance under Calderón had received at least 44 percent of the votes and that Costa Rica was, ideologically, a deeply divided country at that time (Molina 2005b: 404).[20] The former voters for Calderón and the Vanguardia Popular are subsumed with the Ulate voters under the new, liberated Costa Rican nation. In the dominant discourse there existed only one united nation, the ideological schism of the 1930s and 1940s no longer existed in the official history reproduced in the media.

Historical research proves that this image of the united fresh start after Figueres's victory is inaccurate. The historian David Díaz Arias describes an episode recounted by a police officer who was called to a superior in October 1954. The superior asked him about his political attitude, and the police officer stated that as a matter of course he was supporter of Figueres. The superior then accused him of having been a follower of Calderón before 1948, and the police man admitted that he was supporter of Calderón in the mid-1940s as a young police

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[18]   See also Huhn 2008b: 13-19.

[19]   Whereby the number of victims was much higher on the side of the attacked than on Figueres's side (Bell 1976: 202).

[20]   Finally it might also be possible that Ulate tried to win the 1948 elections through fraud (Molina/Lehoucq 1999; Lehoucq 1991). Solís clarifies that electoral fraud does not explain the violent civil war anyway. Fraud was part of national political culture in the first decades of the twentieth century, and both sides had a history of fraud (Solís 2008: 6).

man in San José. The superior asked three other persons about the police officer's political attitude in the following days, then wrote a report and sent it to the minister of governance for him to decide what to do with the one-time Calderonista. The episode proves that not only in 1948/49 but also far into the 1950s there existed social conflict about the political breakup of Costa Rican society; there also existed revanchism by the victors of the civil war against their former rivals, even several years after the war. Díaz also describes acts of self-administered justice not only during but also after the civil war. Former Calderonistas and Communists were officially integrated in the "new" and united Costa Rica, but actually many of them were convicted according to victor's justice: several were executed, murdered, tortured, or excluded from society. Self-professed Communists suffered particularly in the years after the civil war. The state was not always the perpetrator of this violence; rather, it was mainly citizens who took law into their own hands and whose guidance was Figueres's "new moral" of the second Costa Rican republic. These processes of social cleavage, political violence, and social control did not end until the Echandi administration of 1958-1962, and it wasn't until 1961 that the parliament pardoned those who were sentenced as war criminals by the junta after the civil war (*La Nación*, April 6, 2008).

These social processes ran parallel to the persistent and unifying dominant discourse on the birth of the second republic. They were not the topic of news coverage about post-civil war Costa Rica and have never since been part of the collective memory of the Costa Rican majority.[21] For this reason, the war was and can be remembered as being consistent with the perceived nonviolent national identity.

3.2 The Abolition of the Military

In December 1948 Figueres's junta announced the abolition of the Costa Rican military. This was to later become the act with the highest symbolic impact on the nonviolent Costa Rican national identity.

On December 1, *La Prensa Libre* carried the headline "Closure of the National Army." The article is about the symbolic act of the same morning. Figueres had handed over the keys of the casern "Bella Vista" in the center of San José to Rómulo Valerio, future director of the National Museum, which would occupy the building from then on. Figueres is cited as follows: "Oh, America, of Lincoln and Washington, of Bolívar and Martí, may other nations donate you their greatness. Costa Rica with all its heart donates you its surrender to civilization and institutional life." He also declares that the money saved on defense will be spent on education in the future.[22] The front page finally states in big type, "Deep sympathy and extreme sensation was caused by the sensational act taken by the governmental junta in this

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[21] While they have been part of the memory of Communists and other dissidents (Días 2008).

[22] Which is not quiet right as Costa Rica from then on would always have a defense budget and would spend more and more money on police work.

specific moment in which the whole world arms itself for a future World War III" (*La Prensa Libre*, December 1, 1948). It seems it had already been forgotten that it was Costa Rica which had fought a violent war only a few month earlier. On the next day, *La Prensa Libre* published an article with the title "Without Army" in its editorial section. The author writes from the perspective of "we," the Costa Rican nation. He views the abolition of the armed forces as an amazing national act of civilization. While the article initially portrays the former soldiers as culprits, the tenor changes over the course of the text. In the end, the former soldiers are portrayed as having been the victims of a time of aberration, too. The author refers to an incident in August 1947, when participants in a demonstration by women for the right to vote were fired at by the army: "One awful morning they opened fire against the Costa Rican women." The abolition of the army is presented as a fundamental break with a nebulous past and as marking a fresh start for the whole nation, which has found its way back to its old, civilized path (*La Prensa Libre*, December 2, 1948). This was the point of view which would from then on be repeated constantly as an expression of and as evidence for Costa Rica's peaceful national identity—together with the famous photography of Figueres breaking down the walls of the cartel with a sledgehammer. The cruelty of civil war was forgotten, as well as the tactical reasons for the abolition of the military, for instance, the elimination of the risk of retaliation by the vanquished National Army, whose leaders had been allies of the vanquished political elite, or the signing of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance in 1948 (Høivik/Aas 1981; Peritore 1992).

Also forgotten was that there was not actually unity but rather a heated debate about the abolition of the army, which also took place in the national newspapers. In May 1948, a former rebel soldier wrote about the need for a strong army to protect the future peace in Costa Rica (*La Nación*, May 6, 1948). Two days earlier, *La Nación* had described plans for the restructuring of the armed forces. There was to be a reshuffling of personnel (which was obvious considering the fact that the national army had been defeated), the army was to be small in the future, and it was to be organized based on the model of the US Army (*La Nación*, May 4, 1948). On May 12, *La Prensa Libre* also published an editorial about the future character of the Costa Rican armed forces. They were to be reorganized in the light of democracy and the nation's freedom. The idea of abolition was not mentioned in the article. A few weeks later, the armed forces were put under the control of the Ministry of Public Security (*La Prensa Libre*, May 21, 1948 and May 29, 1948). The article covering this announced it as a reform, not as the beginning of demobilization. In September 1948, *La Prensa Libre* published another article about the future character of the Costa Rican defense forces in its editorial. The author writes that there would always be a military in Costa Rica, as there always had been, but that it had to be democratized (*La Prensa Libre*, September 10, 1948).

As armed forces are not the only possible perpetrators of violence, in the context of the nonviolent national self-perception, *La Nación*'s news coverage on the day of the abolition of the army is very enlightening with respect to the then discourse on the meaning of the act for

the Costa Ricans. While the *La Prensa Libre* headline read "Closure of the National Army," the *La Nación* headline was "For the Security of our Country we Consider a Strong Police Corps Sufficient" (*La Nación*, December 2, 1948).[23] The article—targeted at the Costa Rican nation—does not imply an exceptional act of peacefulness and nonviolence but rather states that Costa Rica will not be defenseless against enemies inside and outside the country in the future. The headline is also a citation from Figueres's speech at the "Bella Vista" casern. The choice of this excerpt as title highlights the fact that the apparent peacefulness of the nation received much less attention in the moment of the abolition itself than it would receive later in the collective memory. *La Nación* focuses on the guarantee of the maintenance of social order, not on peacefulness, and the title implies that at least the editors of this important newspaper thought that the (if necessary, violent) defense of social order was most important, not the symbolic expression of a certain peaceful national identity.

To summarize, there was heated discussion about the future of the armed forces in the aftermath of Figueres's victory. Abolition was not considered in the first months after the civil war, and it also was not undisputed once it was realized. Newspaper articles from the late 1940s show very clearly that the idea of abolishing the national army emerged somewhere between May and December 1948. What was to be presented as a logical consequence of and a "natural" act of Costa Rican national identity from December 1 forward was not mentioned in the many speeches of junta leader Figueres between May and December 1948, though he would later present it as a plan that had always existed and that was the inevitable background to the nonviolent identity. Opinion-shaping newspapers diverted their course fundamentally in December 1948 and from then on communicated the image of the abolition as a deep-seated element of Costa Rican culture and national identity. The action would from then on also be remembered as the end of conflicts within Costa Rica, as a united action of the whole nation: "The" Costa Ricans abolished the army. Incidents such as the attempted coup d'état by Costa Rican soldiers and members of the Ministry of Public Security in April 1949 are not part of the collective memory in Costa Rica today (*La Nación*, April 3, 1949; April 5, 1949; *La Prensa Libre*, April 3, 1949; April 4, 1949; April 5, 1949).

In 1986, President Oscar Arias was able to state the following in a speech given at the United Nations General Assembly:

> I come from a nation without arms. Our sons have never seen a tank and do not know gun ships, warships or canons [...]. I come from a small nation that has rejoiced in democracy for over one hundred years. In my country nobody—no man and no woman—knows repression [...]. My nation is a free nation.
>
> (Arias 1987)

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[23] As *La Prensa Libre* was an evening paper and *La Nación* a morning paper, *La Prensa Libre* reported on the event on December 1 while *La Nación* published its main article about it the day later.

He was able to say so because the dispute about the abolition of the armed forces in 1948 has been forgotten in the collective memory, as has the attempted coup in 1949 or the odes in the Costa Rican press to Costa Rican patriots under arms during the attempted counterrevolutions between 1949 and 1955.

3.3 The Proclamation of Neutrality

In the early 1980s, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the Contra War played an important role among the Costa Rican general public. Firstly, there was widespread but diffuse fear of the Sandinista regime and its declared socialist ideology. Secondly, there was the question of how Costa Rica should position itself in relation to the Contras and the United States' request to transform Costa Rica into a southern front for the Contras fight against the Sandinistas. And thirdly, the actual combat operations and the retreats of the Contras onto Costa Rican soil were a topic of fear and heated discussion.

On November 17, 1983, President Monge reacted to these conflicts with the proclamation of "perpetual neutrality, active and not armed." The declarations of the proclamation were as follows: 1) Prevent Costa Rica from entering any armed conflict; 2.) Do not allow the deployment of foreign troops; 3) Do not allow the constitution of guerilla groups; 4) Disarm armed groups on Costa Rican soil; 5) Defend international efforts to solve political disputes peacefully; 6) Continue to have no armed forces for the Costa Rican state; 7) Defend the country within the limits of the international legal framework (Rovira Mas 1989: 98).

While in today's dominant discourse this proclamation is quoted as further evidence of the peaceful Costa Rican national identity, it was debated and criticized heavily in 1983. Monge first brought up the idea of neutrality in his speech before Congress on May 1, 1983. A week later, *La Nación* published an opinion article about it. The author criticizes the idea as being dangerous to national security. In his opinion Costa Rica needs strong allies and has to give something back in return for the defense of the country. Costa Rica cannot declare neutrality and be a member of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance at the same time (*La Nación*, May 8, 1983). Four days later the same author published another article on the same topic to underline his arguments (*La Nación*, May 12, 1983). The *La Nación* editorial from November 11, 1983 reveals two important things about the proclamation in the context of the nonviolent national self-perception. The text brings up the fact that the supporters of the declaration were already comparing it to the abolition of the armed forces in public discussion.[24] The declaration would in their eyes be another historical highlight in Costa Rica's peaceful history. On the other hand, the article itself sides with the critics, in whose opinion there were many arguments against the proclamation which had not been discussed in society (*La Nación*, November 1, 1983). A reply to critics by Fernando Berrocal, minister of the Presidency, published in *La Nación* in the days before the proclamation makes clear that in-

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[24]   Also referred to in *La Nación*, November 17, 1983.

consistencies and criticisms were taken seriously and as influential by the powerful protagonists (November 16, 1983).

On November 17, Monge declared the country's neutrality in a perfectly staged act in the National Theater. Among the nearly 1,000 invited guests were ministers; diplomats; members of Costa Rican and international organizations; the labor unions; university officials; the ex-presidents Figueres and Oduber; and Manuel Mora, the longtime leader of the Communist Party who had once been banished as a public enemy following the civil war of 1948 (Rovias Mas 1989: 97-98). The spectrum of guests highlighted the national unity initiated by the act. All social forces as well as the old civil war counterparts together applauded the president's proclamation.

On the day of the proclamation, *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* were the papers which paid the closest attention to the act. Both newspapers reported in detail about the evening event (*La Nación*, November 17, 1983; *La Prensa Libre*, November 17, 1983). Nevertheless, *La Nación* also published a full-page article in which four experts commented on Costa Rica's future neutrality. In this article there were some very critical voices. The experts interviewed did not unanimously agree with the proclamation (*La Nación*, November 17, 1983). *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* also published critical articles about the proclamation the following day, while Monge tried to demand and to stage unity and tried to explain the proclamation as a symbol of the well-known national identity. On its front page, *La Nación* reported about the previous night's event and cited Monge with the following words:

> Costa Rica is no economic power, nor can it be. Costa Rica is no military power, nor does it want to be. Costa Rica is a spiritual power, because the nation practices vivid faith in the force of common sense, in the force of volition, in the force of the moral.
>
> (*La Nación*, November 18, 1983)

Nevertheless, the author of an article in the same day's *La Prensa Libre* negated exactly this. The headline reads, "Nonexistent Unity in the Proclamation of Neutrality." The author emphasizes the absence of many national politicians in the act and cites many critical voices of parliamentarians (*La Prensa Libre*, November 18, 1983). In another article about the neutrality in the same day's paper, *La Prensa Libre* describes the previous night's act and states with reference to Monge's speech that Costa Rica is increasingly threatened by the neighboring countries' violent conflicts. The article is clearly referring to foreign conflicts and Costa Rica's future role. It says that Costa Rica has to tighten its efforts in surveillance and the avengement of crimes on home soil in order to comply with the proclamation. Outward neutrality requires armament inside the country. The article thereby turns the nonviolent character of the proclamation into its antipode, although the author does not want to criticize or trivialize the decision at all. He simply interprets the consequences the other way around. Declared neutrality requires willingness for combat; it is not the expression of a certain national identity, but rather a political act with consequences for further action (*La Prensa Libre*, November 18, 1983).

Over the next month, the dispute about neutrality continued, with both newspapers taking both sides. Some articles just praised (*La Prensa Libre*, November 23, 1983), others were skeptical (*La Nación*, November 28, 1983); others, in turn, arraigned the neutrality (*La Prensa Libre*, November 28, 1983, *La Prensa Libre*, May 9, 1984). One author stated that "the" Communists had arranged neutrality and that Costa Rica should actively support the United States in fighting the Sandinistas in order to achieve "real" peace, which would never be possible with a Communist regime in the neighboring country (*La Prensa Libre*, May 14, 1984). The following day, the Costa Rican tourist board published a full-page advertisement with the headline "The Pope Praises the Neutrality" (*La Prensa Libre*, May 15, 1984). There could not have been a stronger argument for the majority Catholic readership than the Pope's praise, as John Paul II was one of the most idolized popes ever in Latin America. It is remarkable that the tourist board tried to engage in the dispute with this killer argument. It indicates that in addition to any humanistic arguments, the economic one might also have played an important role. If there was a war in Nicaragua, it could not be on Costa Rican soil because this would scares tourists, who were becoming more and more important for the Costa Rican economy. Nevertheless, the number of and the publicity generated by the neutrality's opponents remained high. These opponents included the Chamber of Commerce and three former ministers (Rovira Mas 1989: 100), who accused the Monge administration of indirectly supporting communism in Central America by acting passively in response to the Sandinistas.[25] Society was divided and a complex dispute about neutrality was reproduced in the country's newspapers.

Finally, the government called out a manifestation for peace in San José (*La Prensa Libre*, May 9, 1984) and simultaneously denied that it was their initiative but rather the concern of the country's students (*La Prensa Libre*, May 10, 1984). On May 15, an estimated 50,000 people demonstrated for peace in San José and therewith rallied behind the president (Rovira Mas 1989: 100). *La Nación*'s editorial two days later ironically stated that there already was peace in Costa Rica and that most people generally supported peace as a matter of fact. Why did thousands of people feel that they had to emphasize the self-evident in the capital's streets? (*La Nación*, May 17, 1983). Persons who did not reveal their identities published several full-page advertisements in the following days in *La Prensa Libre*, with the already well-known quotes of foreign presidents in support of the neutrality (*La Prensa Libre*, May 19, 1984; *La Prensa Libre*, May 22, 1984). The quotes were several month old. The fact that they were recited again proves that the dispute was not considered settled after the peace march. The supporters of neutrality were still searching for strong arguments.

In November 2007, Alexander Mora, PLN member of Parliament, wrote an opinion article in *La Nación* about Costa Rica obtaining a seat on the United Nations Security Council. He stated that Costa Rica deserved the seat for being an exemplary country in the matter of peace and respect for life. He cited three incidents as evidence of the persistent peaceful national

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25   On the commingling of the anti-Communist discourse with the public discussion on neutrality see also Sojo 1991: 127.

character: the abolition of the military in 1948, the proclamation of neutrality in 1983, and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 (*La Nación*, November 6, 2007). In June 2003, several parliamentarians initiated a legislative initiative to enact neutrality.[26] In their explanatory statement, published in Costa Rica's official gazette, they stated,

> Democratic institutionalism and Costa Rican nationality have been enriched by permanent neutrality. This national strategy of peace is not the product of one sovereign, of one party or one government, but an honest expression of Costa Rican nationality in its purest essence […] Neutrality is not just a policy which our best actors choose to preserve peace. It is a tradition entrenched deeply in the Costa Rican soul.
>
> (Proyecto de ley No. 15,180)

What is cited here as evidence of the nonviolent character of the Costa Rican nation and its "natural" identity was highly disputed in the moment itself. In fact, the discourse about neutrality was not undisputedly linked to the discourse about national identity in 1983 and 1984. Unlike the press coverage of the civil war and the abolition of the military in the 1940s, *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* reflected the open dispute about neutrality in 1983 and 1984, while newspaper reading simultaneously proves that the government tried to unify the nation by initiating the proclamation itself as an act of national unity and by trying to send a clear message of unity in the peace march of 1984. In 1983 and 1984 the proclamation of neutrality was not presented as a sign of the nonviolent national identity. It was discussed and presented as a political act with regard to foreign affairs in the first instance and it was also stated that Costa Rica had to strengthen its forces to guarantee the contents of the proclamation.[27] Costa Rica also requested weapons from the United States to defend its neutrality (*La Prensa Libre*, May 11, 1984). Furthermore, simultaneous to press coverage about neutrality, *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* published articles about social violence and about political violence in Costa Rica. Neither were connected to the neutrality discussion and therefore highlight that these elements were not connected in dominant discourse.

Firstly, there were several social protests at the same time. In May and June 1983 social protests against the rise in electricity prices escalated increasingly and became mixed up with protests against the rise in public transport prices (*La Prensa Libre*, May 2, 1983; *La Nación*, May 3, 1983; *La Prensa Libre*, June 8, 1983; *La Nación*, June 8, 1983; *La Nación*, June 13, 1983).[28] In the same month the workers of the banana plantations in Limón striked (*La Nación*, May 14, 1983). In these cases newspapers focused on social tensions, socialist ideologies, and moral decline and even demanded state violence to restore social order (*La Prensa Libre*, June 9, 1983; *La*

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[26] On March 19, 2003, the Pacheco administration entered Costa Rica into the alliance of the United States against the Hussein regime in Iraq. Therewith, Costa Rica abandoned its declared neutrality, provoking heavy dispute in society. The constitutional court revoked the act as unconstitutional and forced the government to withdraw its signature. The legislative initiative was related to this context.

[27] On the actual armament of the Costa Rican police in the context of the Contra War see Muñoz/Romero 1991: 165-169.

[28] On these protests see Alvarenga 2005: 217-261.

Prensa Libre, June 10, 1983; *La Prensa Libre*, June 11, 1983; *La Nación*, June 14, 1983). Also in June, the Guardia Civil had to dismiss seven police officers who had attacked protesters and badly injured them (*La Nación*, June 21, 1983).

Secondly, several articles about the problem of social violence in Costa Rica were published at the same time as neutrality was proclaimed. These articles—never linked to the neutrality proclamation—painted another picture of peacefulness or, respectively, public opinion about law and order and the state of social order in Costa Rica. On November 7, *La Prensa Libre* published an article about rising youth crime and brutality and suggested tightening measures. In the same month the paper discussed abortion as a crime (*La Prensa Libre*, November 28, 1983). In the days of the peace march, *La Prensa Libre* also discussed the Costa Rican youth penalty system as being too slack (*La Prensa Libre*, May 7, 1984). These topics were often mixed up with the discourse about national identity, social order, and moral decline.

A *La Prensa Libre* editorial from May 1984 may sum up the common view at that time, which seems forgotten in contemporary discourse:

> We have to be armed to defend our national sovereignty, only for so long as the Communist dictatorship in the neighbor nation lasts. […] Our constitution proscribes the military, but it does not limit—not in its words nor in its spirit—counting on arms for national defense. Militaries or policemen, the important thing is that they guarantee that we are not defenseless and that we will be in the first line to defend our fatherland.
>
> (*La Prensa Libre*, May 4, 1984).

3.4 The Peace Plan and the Nobel Peace Prize

Finally, I will discuss the media coverage and the underlying discourse about social order in relation to a fourth cornerstone of Costa Rican nonviolent self-perception: the Arias Peace Plan and the subsequent granting of the Nobel Peace Prize. After his election as president, Arias continued the initiatives for Central American pacification started by his predecessor Monge.[29] While his economic and social policies met with strong criticism in 1986 and 1987, "the peace card was the ace," as Molina and Palmer fittingly call it (2007: 152). In May 1986, the Central American presidents met in Esquipulas, Guatemala to talk about a possible pacification of the regional armed conflicts. In 1986 and 1987, the "Esquipulas Process" continued, and in August 1987, the "Esquipulas II" peace agreement was signed by the Central American presidents.[30] The agreement codified the will for peace and democracy in Central America, and also provided a time plan for it. While there had been different proposals for a peace plan after the first Equipulas meeting, the Arias administration was able to gain acceptance for its plan (even

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[29] While Oscar Arias is today remembered as the initiator of a peace initiative for Central America, it should be put on record that Monge had already expressed similar ideas in 1982 (*La Prensa Libre*, September 11, 1982).

[30] Oscar Arias (Costa Rica), José Azcona Hoyo (Honduras), José Napoleon Duarte (El Salvador), Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo (Guatemala), and Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua).

though the United States particularly disagreed with it as they did not want the Central American counties to sign a peace agreement with their enemy, the Sandinistas).[31]

While the Esquipulas II peace plan was not the sole idea of Oscar Arias, he was decorated with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987: "This year's Peace Prize, one of the six Nobel Prizes which are to be presented today, is primarily a homage and an expression of thanks to Oscar Arias Sánchez for the praiseworthy work he has done in the cause of attaining a lasting peace in Central America," Egil Aarvik, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, stated (cited in Abrams 1997). As already stated and proven by quotes, these two connected incidents are today considered to be proof of the nonviolent Costa Rican national identity. Nevertheless, the imagined unity and significance of the events was—once more—different in 1986 and 1987.

One widespread criticism of the Arias Peace Plan at that time again concerned the old fear of communism.[32] In July 1987, Marciano Campos published a paid advertisement in *La Nación* where he printed an open letter to the president. He stated that he was a voter for Arias but that, nevertheless, the plan as well as neutrality strengthened communism in Central America, meaning that they were not initiatives in favor of peace but rather war and social conflict (*La Nación*, July 7, 1987). On August 4, 1987—one day before Arias left for the signing of the peace plan in Guatemala—he met with ex-presidents Figueres, Echandi, Trejos, Oduber, and Carazo to demonstrate the high-level support for his policies. *La Nación* called the meeting a historical event (*La Nación*, August 4, 1987). Nevertheless, the criticism did not stop and *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* paid attention to this protest. On August 6, the day before the signing of the peace plan in Guatemala, *La Nación* published an opinion article in which the author fiercely critiqued the plan, saying there could be no peace in Central America if Nicaragua was a totalitarian regime governed by militant Communists (*La Nación*, August 6, 1987).

On August 8, Arias returned to Costa Rica with the peace plan, signed by five Central American presidents, in his pocket. Resentments were forgotten for a moment, and Arias was welcomed as a hero in Costa Rica. The motto of the moment was "Viva la paz!" (*La Nación*, August 9, 1987; *La Prensa Libre*, August 10, 1987). In the following days *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* published several international congratulations to Arias as well as positive evaluations of the plan. *La Prensa Libre* emphasized that Costa Rica had started to export its most important goods, peace and democracy (*La Prensa Libre*, August 13, 1987), and *La Nación* cited the Costa Rican entrepreneurship, which called the plan a victory for Costa Rican democracy (*La Nación*, August 14, 1987). On August 15, Luis Guillermo Solís, cabinet chief of the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Religion, lauded the plan in *La Nación*. He emphasized four major achievements. Firstly, that Costa Rica had gained a significant role in the world and would be an important diplomatic power from then on. Secondly, that Costa Rica had proved that it was the most important country in Central America in terms of politics. Thirdly, that Costa Rica had

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[31]   The US government, the Contadora group, and the government of Honduras in each case had alternative peace plans for Central America, which differed on certain details (*La Nación*, August 6, 1987).

[32]   On the tradition of anti-Communism in Costa Rica see also Molina 2007 and Muñoz 2008.

proven itself as a fortress of democracy and peace. And fourthly, that the plan normalized the country's relationship with Nicaragua. Thus, the author brought up two dimensions: the political dimension and the dimension of identity (*La Nación*, August 15, 1987). On October 13, Oscar Arias was finally decorated with the Nobel Peace Prize. *La Nación* published congratulations from all over the world and two articles on the significance of the award for the Costa Rican nation. One was headlined "Day of National Jubilation," and the other, "Our Nobel Prize" (*La Nación*, October 14, 1987). Eugenia Sancho, author of the second article, stated that a Nobel Peace Prize had rarely been more adequate than at that time and that a whole nation was being decorated for its love of peace.

While the general spirit was euphoric, both newspapers also kept publishing criticism. On August 12, *La Prensa Libre* reproduced an article from the *Wall Street Journal* in which the peace plan was called a sham: fighting communism should be the first concern, not peace (*La Prensa Libre*, August 12, 1987). Costa Rican authors agreed with this statement. The *La Nación* editorial from August 16 stated that peace in Central America was only possible without the "bloody dictatorship" in Nicaragua (*La Nación*, August 16, 1987). Another editorial in *La Nación* was ambivalent in its evaluation. The plan was great in a way, but in another way it had strengthened the Sandinistas (*La Nación*, September 30, 1987). The tenor of many articles was identical: the fear of the Sandinistas spoiled the euphoria about the magnanimous gesture of the Costa Rican nation and its president. In addition to the criticisms concerning the fear of communism, there was also another line of attack: while solving the problems of other countries, Arias was neglecting his own, many people sensed. On the day before the Nobel Prize ceremony *La Prensa Libre* published the opinions of ten citizens which provide a sense of public opinion at that time. These voices were more critical than one would expect in light of the importance and euphoria of the event.[33] José Molina stated that the president had earned the prize even though he had dedicated himself so much to the peace plan that he forgot the Costa Ricans a little bit. Rafael Rios disagreed with this critique: "Peace first, then the country." Ana Hidalgo said, "He is the first president who really cares about peace, and even if he sacrifices the problems of the country, peace is worth it." Alfredo Arias stated the same, unlike José Díaz: "What does this peace mean for us? In reality, the president does not solve our problems. It is fine that he fights for peace in Central America, but we here are those who suffer because we need him to care for our problems." Bolívar Meza stated, "I want peace in Central America, but he should be more preoccupied about peace in the country which will not last very long if we continue this way." Only two of ten interviewees did not criticize the president directly or indirectly (*La Prensa Libre*, October 13, 1987). Other newspaper articles also criticized the setting of priorities in foreign politics. On September 27, *La Nación* published an opinion article by an ex-parliamentarian. The title was "Internal Peace First." The author states

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[33] It also can be mentioned that there had been hope of being granted the Nobel Peace Prize for some time then. In 1983 there was a call for a Nobel Peace Prize for Luis Alberto Monge or even José Figueres (*La Nación*, April 13, 1983; *La Prensa Libre*, May 3, 1983; *La Nación*, May 18, 1983).

that Arias has closed his eyes to the many problems of the Costa Ricans while solving the problems of other countries (*La Nación*, September 27, 1987). The *La Nación* editorial from September 4 takes the same line. There are many social problems, and also a problem of social order, in Costa Rica which are more important for the citizens of the country than great gestures on the world stage (*La Nación*, September 4, 1987).

As a matter of fact, the peace plan was not the only topic in Costa Rican newspapers in August and September 1987. Another look at *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* reveals something else. During the same time there was a lively discussion about the undersupply of Costa Rican police. One reason mentioned was the problems on the northern border, where Contras and Sandinistas were fighting on Costa Rican soil, but the other problem was perceived to be general insecurity in the country (*La Prensa Libre*, August 20, 1987). There was discussion about crime and violence getting worse and worse in Costa Rica and that the peace intention of the government even enforced this problem and the lack of social order by neglecting it or by strengthening the Sandinistas (*La Nación*, October 26, 1987). *La Nación* published an article about the problem of insecurity and social disorder on the same day it reported on the awarding of the Nobel Prize in a quiet euphoric way (*La Nación*, October 14, 1987).

There is a national self-perception evident in many articles in *La Nación* and *La Prensa Libre* in the context of the Arias Peace Plan and the Nobel Prize. But there are also many critical voices. Even if euphoria dominated, the criticisms demonstrate three important things in the context of the topic of this paper. Firstly, there was no national unity and unanimous euphoria about the plan and the Nobel Prize. If both were and are presented as the expression of a peaceful national identity of all Costa Ricans by actors at that time as well as today, it was not consensus then. Secondly, influential persons defended the fight by Costa Rica against its enemies: the Communists. Willingness to enter combat was preferred over "peacefulness at all costs." Thirdly, the peace plan and the Nobel Prize were seen in the context of Central American rather than Costa Rican problems. And finally, there was a simultaneous debate about and perception of national social and security problems and a perception of rising violence. Once again, the Arias peace initiative and the Nobel Peace Prize did not block out the discussion about homeland security; on the contrary, some authors, as well as the citizens cited, even saw security as being jeopardized by Arias's top priority.

Today's argument that the peace plan and the Nobel Prize prove that there were no or fewer problems concerning violence in Costa Rica at that time does not represent the discourse of 1987. Peace was a key cornerstone of national self-perception in the discourse in 1987, but greatness, firmness, national power, anti-communism, combat willingness, fear of crime, and moral decline were also prominent.

4 Conclusions

A particular discourse on how to remember the past is dominant in contemporary Costa Rica. As several quotes from powerful political actors in this paper prove, the current discourse about violence, crime, and social order is based on the collective symbolism of the Costa Rican nation being nonviolent by nature. Given this premise, violence and crime are seen as extrinsic and idiosyncratic.

As I have shown, the mixture of collective memory and collective amnesia about certain cornerstones of Costa Rican history that forms the current consciousness does not correspond with the discourses and opposing discourses of the past, which were far more disputed than today's collective memory implies. The press coverage of the first case discussed in this study, the civil war, is an exception. Press coverage was less inconsistent than in the other three cases, and the argument of a nonviolent national identity was constantly emphasized. This exceptional character was due to the fact that press was dominated by the victors of the war while the defeated were not allowed to speak in the national press. It was also the only case where public discussion was centered on Costa Rican domestic policies. Nevertheless, the basic argument was that violence was necessary to save the nonviolent nation. In the following decades, the violence of the war itself was increasingly downplayed in public discourse and the violence of the following years was publicly ignored. Thus, the discourse, then and today, about the civil war has developed differently than in the other three cases analyzed. In the cases of the abolition of the military, of neutrality, and of the peace plan and its recognition with the Nobel Prize, there is a verifiable inconsistency between then public discourse and today's dominant reading in collective memory, which corroborates the main thesis of this paper. This finding has also been made in some of the cited works of Costa Rican historians. The reconstruction of media coverage proves first and foremost that the Costa Rican society noticed the conflicts, participated in them, and interpreted them in varying ways, even though they are convincingly presented as "common sense" in today's dominant discourse about the past and present of the Costa Rican nation.[34]

The events which serve as proof of a nonviolent national identity in the contemporary discourse about violence, crime, and insecurity were basically understood as a strategic position in matters of foreign policy in the past, with the exception of the civil war. Although the powerful political protagonists tried to stage national unity about the events in all cases researched and tried to address a nation with certain national characteristics, with the exception once again of the civil war, these national traits were not peacefulness and an ideal social order.

While the rhetoric of an exceptional self-perception was part of public speaking and the staging of the events, historical research clearly proves that it was not the trigger nor the intention of the measures. In press discourse the events were rarely discussed in the context of a nonvio-

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[34]   On the basis of Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, Eagleton (1991) underlines the interpretative authority of "common sense" as the feeling that things are a certain way by nature and therefore could not be different.

lent national identity and national unity. On the contrary, the reconstruction of the press coverage of the events proves that there was a) no unanimity at any time; b) a simultaneous debate about absolutely opposite interpretations of the events, such as fear of communism, national combat willingness, and armament to fulfill the intentions of the events; and c) a coexistent public exchange of views about homeland security, social disorder, moral decline, and insecurity. All of these elements are negated by today's allocation of meaning to the events.

Today there is no serious scientific doubt about national identity being a social construction instead of a static character trait. Nevertheless, as the quotes from powerful politicians, common people, and the programmatic publications of the government prove, national identity remains a powerful construction in the evaluation of social order in Costa Rica. The fact that the nonviolent national identity almost automatically prefixes every statement on violence and crime as problems of social order without a questioning of its meaning and its truth value fundamentally influences public perception in at least three ways:

(1) The national identity is presented as the natural character of the nation instead of socially constructed and permanently changing. The fact that historical happenstance is presented as a meaningful, complete package which describes the nature of the Costa Rican nation in a teleological mindset results in an identity crisis as an integral part of the social discourse on violence and crime.

(2) Another contribution to this problem is the collective amnesia about other processes of great and partly contradictory influence. While the abolition of the military is remembered, the simultaneous reinforcement of the police is not. While the Arias Peace Plan is presented and remembered as an expression of the collective pursuit of peace, the labor disputes and the widespread sensation of rising insecurity at the same time are ignored. The collective memory of the cornerstones of the argument for the nonviolent nation and the simultaneous collective amnesia about everything contradictory to it romanticizes the past with consequences for the present.

(3) The collective memory in which the events are thought of as proof of a national character also implies a steady unity of the Costa Rican nation. Even during the events analyzed this unity was being constructed in each case. In 1948 the whole nation was liberated from Communists and a rogue regime; a year later the entire nation chose defenselessness over violence by abandoning the military; and in the 1980s the nation proved its love for peace on the world stage and was honored with the Nobel Prize. The permanent and not insignificant social dispute is negated. This imagined unity of the past unavoidably leads to the sensation that society today is multiply fragmented.

In the introduction of the *Plan Nacional de Prevención de la Violencia y Promoción de la Paz Social 2007-2010*, former Costa Rican vice president Laura Chinchilla writes the following about the background of the rising violence and crime:

> We Costa Ricans have been known in the world as pacifistic and tolerant persons, because the relationships we maintain with each other and with other nations are based on values such as peace, respect, and empathy. On this basis we have developed a culture that allows us to solve a great part of our conflicts via dialogue and respect for institutions; this characterizes us as one of the oldest democracies in Latin America. These very values made it possible for us to make the celestial decision to abolish the military and to eliminate authoritarianism from our political life. These values also inspired many of our great men and women to promote—from this little country—great causes with the benefit of peace in the whole world. Among them Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez, who was granted the honorable recognition of the Nobel Peace Prize.
>
> If we Costa Ricans have also adopted peace, respect, and empathy as very proper values, constitutional to our character and our lifestyle, it is time to stop and to ask ourselves if these noble conditions are still valid.
>
> <div align="right">(Ministerio de Justicia 2007: 7)</div>

Interviews I undertook from October to December 2006 and the essays of secondary school students from the same time prove that fear of crime is very real in contemporary Costa Rica.[35] I do not want to imply that fear is an illusion or unjustified. Nevertheless, the argument of a nonviolent national identity and the corresponding self-perception obfuscate a realistic debate about the complexity of the problem, its dimensions, and its meaning for social order. The derationalization of the problem through the argument of identity conflict and a break with a meaningful history is therefore very problematic. A rational debate becomes impossible because a problem with a "natural" identity negates every rational approach. The rational reasons for and dimensions of a problem become clouded, and an irrational panic that sanctifies any action is fomented. The strengthening of law and order becomes justified again by the argument that the "others" have left the path of humanity and civilization, something which has to be recaptured at any cost.

There is crime and violence in Costa Rica as in every other country. Compared to some states (such as those in Western Europe, for example), crime rates are high in Costa Rica; compared to other places (the rest of Central America, most cities in the United States, or several countries in South America) they are low. Many factors may explain the moderate increase in certain kinds of crime, for instance, changes in opportunities, urbanization, increasing inequality in society, social segregation, and especially the transition away from the welfare state. A mixture of the discourse on violence and crime with national identity in either case is eye-wash. The investigation of the actual development of crime and of law and order, together with the investigation of social changes as possible causal variables in the transformation of discourse and perception, will be the next steps in rationalizing the Costa Rican crime problem.

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[35]   See Huhn 2008a; Oettler 2007, Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2008.

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