

# Uses and Forms of Violence among the Urban Poor

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*Abstract.* Based on 30 months of collaborative fieldwork in a poor neighbourhood in Buenos Aires, Argentina, this paper scrutinises the multiple uses of violence among residents and the concatenations between private and public forms of physical aggression. Much of the violence reported here resembles that which has been dissected by students of street violence in the United States – that is, it is the product of interpersonal retaliation and remains encapsulated in dyadic exchanges. However, by casting a wider net to include other forms of aggression (not only criminal but also sexual, domestic and intimate) that take place inside and outside the home, and that intensely shape the course of poor people's daily lives, the paper argues that diverse forms of violence among the urban poor (a) serve more than just retaliatory purposes, and (b) link with one another beyond dyadic relationships.

*Keywords:* violence, poverty, crime, Buenos Aires

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*Introduction: Violence(s) in Latin America*

In the last two decades, most countries in Latin America have witnessed a sharp increase in new forms of interpersonal violence.<sup>1</sup> Although violence has had a continual presence in the history of the subcontinent, the recent skyrocketing of brutality is said to be besieging many of the newly established democracies in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Although the ‘newness’ of this violence has been the subject of much scholarly debate among academics,<sup>3</sup> most agree that since the early 1990s the region has seen a significant change in the prevalent forms of violence. This recent violence is ‘increasingly available to a variety of social actors’, is no longer an exclusive ‘resource of elites or security forces’, and includes ‘everyday criminal and street violence, riots, social cleansing, private account selling, police arbitrariness, paramilitary activities, post-Cold War guerrillas, etc.’<sup>4</sup> As Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión assert in their comprehensive review of violence research in the region, political violence ‘has now receded significantly in most countries of the continent’, while other forms have multiplied (interpersonal violence, drug-related violence, domestic abuse, child abuse and sexual assault).<sup>5</sup> These forms of violence are quite varied and, in contrast with past modes, are now located mostly in urban areas. Moreover, this new urban violence affects the most disadvantaged populations in disproportionate ways, particularly adolescents and young adults – both as victims and as perpetrators.<sup>6</sup> Most of this violence is concentrated within the slums and

<sup>1</sup> See Kees Koonings, ‘Armed Actors, Violence and Democracy in Latin America in the 1990s’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 20: 4 (2001), pp. 401–8; Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (eds.), *Fractured Cities: Social Exclusion, Urban Violence and Contested Spaces in Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 2007); and Dennis Rodgers, Jo Beall and Ravi Kanbur (eds.), *Latin American Urban Development into the Twenty First Century: Towards a Renewed Perspective on the City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Imbusch, Michel Misse and Fernando Carrión, ‘Violence Research in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Literature Review’, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 5: 1 (2011), pp. 87–154; Desmond Arias and Daniel Goldstein (eds.), *Violent Democracies in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Jenny Pearce, ‘Perverse State Formation and Securitized Democracy in Latin America’, *Democratization*, 17: 2 (2010), pp. 286–386; Gareth A. Jones and Dennis Rodgers (eds.), *Youth Violence in Latin America: Gangs and Juvenile Justice in Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in Sao Paulo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Mo Hume, *The Politics of Violence: Gender, Conflict, and Community in El Salvador* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Polly Wilding, ‘“New Violence”: Silencing Women’s Experiences in the Favelas of Brazil’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 42 (2010), pp. 719–47. <sup>4</sup> Koonings, ‘Armed Actors, Violence and Democracy’, p. 403.

<sup>5</sup> Imbusch, Misse and Carrión, ‘Violence Research in Latin America and the Caribbean’, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Gay, *Lucia: Testimonies of a Brazilian Drug Dealer’s Woman* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005); Daniel Brinks, *The Judicial Response to Police Violence in Latin America: Inequality and the Rule of Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press,

shanty towns of the region,<sup>7</sup> to the point of becoming ‘the defining feature of life in such settlements at the beginning of the 21st century’.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Argentina, and particularly the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, the increase of social and criminal violence is beyond dispute.<sup>9</sup> Official data for the province of Buenos Aires show a doubling of crime rates between 1995 and 2008, from 1,114 to 2,010 criminal episodes per 100,000 residents and from 206 to 535 crimes against persons per 100,000 residents.<sup>10</sup> Sexual and domestic abuse has also been on the rise during the last two decades.<sup>11</sup>

This paper takes the reader to the heart of where, to paraphrase Erving Goffman, ‘the (violent) action is’:<sup>12</sup> a high-poverty enclave in the southern Conurbano Bonaerense,<sup>13</sup> a well-known ‘hot spot’ of criminal activity and excessive levels of interpersonal violence where homicide rates are four times

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2008); Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, *Derechos humanos en Argentina: informe 2009* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2009); Imbusch, Misse and Carrión, ‘Violence Research in Latin America and the Caribbean’.

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Moser and Cathy McIlwaine, *Encounters with Violence in Latin America* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004). For Rio de Janeiro, see Gay, *Lucia*; Janice Perlman, *Favela* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Wilding, ‘New Violence’; Ben Penglase, ‘The Owner of the Hill: Masculinity and Drug-Trafficking in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’, *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 15: 2 (2010), pp. 317–37. For Managua, see Dennis Rodgers, ‘Slum Wars of the 21st Century: Gangs, Mano Dura, and the New Urban Geography of Conflict in Central America’, *Development and Change*, 40: 5 (2009), pp. 949–76. For Medellín, see Adam Baird, ‘The Violent Gang and the Construction of Masculinity amongst Socially Excluded Young Men’, *Safer Communities*, 11: 4 (2012). For Guatemala, see Kevin O’Neill and Kedron Thomas (eds.), *Securing the City: Neoliberalism, Space, and Insecurity in Postwar Guatemala* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Rodgers, Beall and Kanbur (eds.), *Latin American Urban Development*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Observatorio de la Deuda Social Argentina, *El problema de la inseguridad en la Argentina: factores que influyen en la delincuencia y disparan el sentimiento de inseguridad o miedo a ser víctima de un delito* (Buenos Aires: Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Dirección Nacional de Política Criminal, *Hechos delictivos registrados: 2008* (Buenos Aires: Ministerio de Justicia, Seguridad y Derechos Humanos, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Sebastián Lalaurette, ‘Creció 50% el abuso sexual de menores’, *La Nación*, 24 Feb. 2008. On the diverse forms of violence experienced by the Argentine poor, see Pablo Bonaldi and Carla del Cueto, ‘Fragmentación y violencia en dos barrios de Moreno’, in Alejandro Grimson, Cecilia Ferraudi Curto and Ramiro Segura (eds.), *La vida política en los barrios populares de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2009), pp. 103–28. On fear of crime and perceptions of *inseguridad*, see Gabriel Kessler, *El sentimiento de inseguridad* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2009). It is important to note, however, that although in the last three decades there has been a significant rise in crime, the overall crime rates in Argentina remain comparatively low: see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide: Trends, Contexts, Data* (Vienna: UNODC, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Erving Goffman, *Where the Action Is* (New York: Allen Lane, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> The Conurbano is the area, comprised of 24 districts, that surrounds the city of Buenos Aires.

those of the state of Buenos Aires.<sup>14</sup> Based on 30 months of collaborative fieldwork in Ingeniero Budge, and emphasising the ethnographic showing more than the telling, this paper scrutinises the multiple uses of violence in the area and the concatenations between private and public forms of physical aggression. Much of the violence reported here resembles that which has been dissected by students of street violence in the United States – that is, it is the product of interpersonal retaliation and remains encapsulated in dyadic exchanges.<sup>15</sup> However, by casting a wider net to include other forms of aggression (not only public but also sexual, domestic and intimate) that take place inside and outside the home, and that intensely shape the course of residents' daily lives, we argue that diverse forms of violence among the urban poor (a) serve more than just retaliatory purposes, (b) link with one another beyond only dyadic relationships and (c) become a repertoire of action.

Decades of research show that urban violence is indeed an intricate phenomenon at the root of which lies a plethora of structural, relational and cultural factors. The violence that affects Buenos Aires' poor areas with particular virulence is the effect of a complex causal chain whose origin lies in both economic and political dynamics.<sup>16</sup> First, the processes of deproletarianisation, informalisation and general degradation in living conditions that Argentina endured as the result of what we could call, borrowing from Karl Polanyi, the 'great neoliberal transformation',<sup>17</sup> are crucial explanatory dimensions of the extensive violence among the poor. Second, the intermittent, contradictory and selective ways in which law enforcement works at the urban margins are also at the root of this pervasive interpersonal

<sup>14</sup> Leonardo Torresi, 'Ingeniero Budge, una de las zonas más temibles del país', *Clarín*, 29 Nov. 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Jacobs, 'A Typology of Street Criminal Retaliation', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 41: 3 (2004), pp. 295–323; Christopher Mullins, Richard Wright and Bruce Jacobs, 'Gender, Street Life and Criminal Retaliation', *Criminology*, 42: 4 (2004), pp. 911–40; Bruce Jacobs and Richard Wright, *Street Justice: Retaliation in the Criminal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Andrew Papachristos, 'Murder by Structure: Dominance Relations and the Social Structure of Gang Homicide', *American Journal of Sociology*, 115: 1 (2009), pp. 74–128.

<sup>16</sup> Rodgers, 'Slum Wars of the 21st Century'; Alejandro Portes and Bryan R. Roberts, 'The Free-Market City: Latin American Urbanization in the Years of the Neoliberal Experiment', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 40: 1 (2005), pp. 43–82.

<sup>17</sup> Javier Auyero, 'Visible Fists, Clandestine Kicks, and Invisible Elbows: Three Forms of Regulating Neoliberal Poverty', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 8 (2010), pp. 5–26; Ramiro Segura, 'Si vas a venir a una villa, loco, entrá de otra forma: distancias sociales, límites espaciales, y efectos de lugar en un barrio segregado del Gran Buenos Aires', in Alejandro Grimson, Cecilia Ferraudi Curto and Ramiro Segura (eds.), *La vida política en los barrios populares de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2009), pp. 41–62; Bonaldi and del Cueto, 'Fragmentación y violencia'; Portes and Roberts, 'The Free-Market City'.

brutality.<sup>18</sup> Third, the increasing reliance of economically marginalised and vulnerable people on the destructive drug trade is another key factor in the perpetuation of violence.<sup>19</sup> As numerous studies have shown, the drug economy is a double-edged sword: while it sustains poor communities, it simultaneously tears them apart.<sup>20</sup>

Part of the answer to *why* there is so much violence can be found in *when* and *how* people use interpersonal violence. This paper provides an ethnographic account of some of the many ways in which people in the area deploy interpersonal violence. The ethnographic material presented here tells a story that partially differs from accounts of daily violence in poor areas in the Americas; the form that this pervasive violence takes transcends the one-on-one dyadic exchange described in most of the literature on the subject.<sup>21</sup> In our site, diverse types of interpersonal physical aggression become connected, blurring the lines between street and home, or the public and domestic spheres. Residents rely on violence to address individual and collective problems, from disciplining a misbehaving child to establishing authority in the neighbourhood and/or at home. As a result, violence takes the form of a repertoire of action – a routine way of acting in pursuit of individual and collective interests. Conceptualising violence as a repertoire, as we do here, does not mean that all of the residents in the relegated urban area under consideration resort to violence as a way of solving daily problems, in the same sense that the existence of a repertoire of collective action does not mean that all citizens participate in a particular form of joint action.<sup>22</sup> Approaching violence as a repertoire, on the contrary, means that violence is an established form of ‘know-how’, a familiar practice that is useful in dealing with the

<sup>18</sup> Javier Auyero, Agustín Burbano de Lara and María Fernanda Berti, ‘Violence and the State at the Urban Margins’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (forthcoming, 2014); Horacio Verbitsky, ‘¿Seguriqué?’, *Página/12*, 6 Mar. 2011; Matias Dewey, ‘Fragile States, Robust Structures: Illegal Police Protection in Buenos Aires’, GIGA Working Paper no. 169 (2011); Marcelo Sain, ‘El fracaso del control de las drogas ilegales en Argentina’, *Nueva Sociedad*, 222 (2009), pp. 132–46; Alejandro Isla and Daniel Míguez (eds.), *En los márgenes de la ley* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2003). See also Markus-Michael Müller, ‘Addressing an Ambivalent Relationship: Policing and the Urban Poor in Mexico City’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 44: 2 (2012), pp. 319–46.

<sup>19</sup> Sain, ‘El fracaso del control’.

<sup>20</sup> For the United States, see Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Nick Reding, *Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009). For Argentina, see Cristian Alarcón, *Si me querés, quereme transa* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*; Cristian Alarcón, *Cuando me muera quiero que me toquen cumbia: vidas de pibes chorros* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2003); Alarcón, *Si me querés, quereme transa*; Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Papachristos, ‘Murder by Structure’.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); and ‘Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain’, in Mark Traugott (ed.), *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

difficulties that daily life presents at the urban margins, such as a rape threat, a robbery, or an ‘out-of-control’ child.<sup>23</sup>

### *Beyond Retaliatory Dyads*

The increase in interpersonal violence in urban settings has been associated with a number of factors, from economic status, ethnic heterogeneity and residential mobility in now classic studies,<sup>24</sup> to the prevalence and interdependence of both informal and formal community networks,<sup>25</sup> to more political variables such as electoral competition and factionalisation.<sup>26</sup> While the social scientific study of aggregate characteristics correlated with crime and violence has produced some superb refinements and extensions of social control theory<sup>27</sup> and highlighted the ‘risk’ and ‘protective’ factors that give rise to or deter violence,<sup>28</sup> it has deftly side-stepped one key issue first spotlighted by students of ‘street justice’: the uses and forms of interpersonal violence.<sup>29</sup>

According to Jacobs and Wright, ‘a substantial number of assaults, robberies, and other forms of serious criminal behavior are a direct consequence of retaliation and counter-retaliation ... retaliatory conflicts contribute significantly to the violent reputation and reality of many high-crime

<sup>23</sup> In his classic study of the US ghetto, Ulf Hannerz uses the notion of repertoire to describe individuals’ beliefs, values and modes of action – ‘items of culture which are somehow stored’ in them. See Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 191. We are here using the notion in a more restricted sense to focus attention on the deployment of violence as a repertoire of action.

<sup>24</sup> Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1942); Ruth R. Kornhauser, *Social Sources of Delinquency: An Appraisal of Analytic Models* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Sampson and Byron Groves, ‘Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social-Disorganization Theory’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 94: 4 (1989), pp. 774–802; Robert Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Andrés Villarreal, ‘Political Competition and Violence in Mexico: Hierarchical Social Control in Local Patronage Structures’, *American Sociological Review*, 67: 4 (2002), pp. 477–98.

<sup>27</sup> Sampson and Groves, ‘Community Structure and Crime’; Robert Sampson, Stephen W. Raudenbush and Felton Earls, ‘Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy’, *Science*, 277 (1997), pp. 918–24; Villarreal, ‘Political Competition and Violence in Mexico’.

<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Turpin and Lester Kurtz, *The Web of Violence: From Interpersonal to Global* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Robert Muggah, *Researching the Urban Dilemma: Urbanization, Poverty and Violence* (Canada: IDRC, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Jacobs, ‘A Typology of Street Criminal Retaliation’; Mullins, Wright and Jacobs, ‘Gender, Street Life and Criminal Retaliation’; Jacobs and Wright, *Street Justice*.

neighborhoods'.<sup>30</sup> Retaliation is 'widely threatened and used by urban street criminals to deter and punish predators'.<sup>31</sup> Street criminal violence has, in this approach, one main form, that of a dyadic exchange governed by the norm of reciprocity, and one chief use, that of retaliation. Violence is thus seen as the result of a *lex talionis*, a payback for prior offences; or, in a recent approach, a Maussian 'gift' of sorts, a 'gesture that, if accepted, demands to be reciprocated'.<sup>32</sup> You assault my friend, so I try to kill you – tit for tat.<sup>33</sup> Much of this interpersonal violence, so these studies tell us, remains confined to dyadic relationships.

Ethnographic and journalistic accounts of violence in both Latin American shanty towns and US high-poverty enclaves – be they ghettos or inner cities<sup>34</sup> – attest to the fact that direct retaliation (that is, 'retribution for a past dispute by the aggrieved or a member of the aggrieved's group against the person or group responsible for the original affront')<sup>35</sup> sculpts much of the violence that takes place in what Loïc Wacquant calls 'territories of urban relegation'.<sup>36</sup> Many ethnographic and qualitative studies also show that a 'search for respect',<sup>37</sup> not necessarily retaliatory in a strict dyadic sense, is at the foreground of violent practices.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5; see also Jacobs, 'A Typology of Street Criminal Retaliation'.

<sup>31</sup> Mullins, Wright and Jacobs, 'Gender, Street Life and Criminal Retaliation', p. 911.

<sup>32</sup> Papachristos, 'Murder by Structure', p. 80.

<sup>33</sup> Donald Black, 'Crime as Social Control', *American Sociological Review*, 48 (1983), pp. 34–45; Jacobs and Wright, *Street Justice*.

<sup>34</sup> Alex Kotlowitz, *There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991); Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*; Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Alarcón, *Cuando me muera and Si me querés*; Adrian LeBlanc, *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx* (New York: Scribner, 2004); Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*; Nikki Jones, *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner-City Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009); David Harding, *Living the Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture among Inner-City Boys* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Papachristos, 'Murder by Structure', p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (London: Polity, 2007). For two paradigmatic examples from Latin America, see, on 'the *traído*' in Nicaragua, J. L. Rocha, 'El traído: clave de la continuidad de las pandillas', *Envío*, 280 (2005), pp. 35–41; and on the Brazilian *briga*, Daniel Linger, 'Essential Outlines of Crime and Madness: Man-Fights in São Luís', *Cultural Anthropology*, 5: 1 (1990), pp. 62–77.

<sup>37</sup> Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*.

<sup>38</sup> Dennis Rodgers, 'Living in the Shadow of Death: Gangs, Violence and Social Order in Urban Nicaragua, 1996–2002', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38: 2 (2006), pp. 267–92; Jones, *Between Good and Ghetto*; Verónica Zubillaga, 'Gaining Respect': The Logic of Violence among Young Men in the Barrios of Caracas, Venezuela', in Jones and Rodgers (eds.), *Youth Violence in Latin America*, pp. 83–104; Penglase, 'The Owner of the Hill'.

Our long-term ethnographic fieldwork, however, reveals that the search for retaliation and respect is not the only purpose of violence. Violence, we will show, is also used to advance or defend territory, to discipline children, to defend self and property, to acquire economic resources and to establish dominance within the household: in other words, violence is deployed to solve pressing problems. Our ethnography also demonstrates that restricted reciprocity is not the only form that interpersonal violence takes. True, many a violent action that we either witnessed or reconstructed in its immediate aftermath sought to avenge a past (verbal or physical) attack, either individually (a punch in response to an insult) or collectively (vigilante violence in response to an attempted rape). But once we focus sustained and systematic ethnographic attention on the multiple forms of interpersonal physical aggression that take place both inside homes and outside in the streets, we begin to see that violence transcends the one-on-one exchange, moving outside the dyadic relationship, and involves other actors who were not part of the original dispute. Instead of specific reciprocity confined to a delimited sequence, a bounded dispute over dominance,<sup>39</sup> we uncover a violence that seems to follow the course of diffused reciprocity where the ‘definition of equivalence is less precise, one’s partners may be viewed as a group rather than particular actors, and the sequence of events is less narrowly bounded’.<sup>40</sup> A more comprehensive understanding of the interpersonal violence that is shaking poor people’s daily lives in contemporary Buenos Aires should approach it not solely as a reciprocal exchange confined to a dyadic interaction but also as a set of interconnected events.

Across the social sciences, research on diverse forms of violence remains ‘specialized and balkanized’.<sup>41</sup> Students of ‘family violence’,<sup>42</sup> for example, rarely engage in conversations with researchers of street or gang violence,<sup>43</sup> even when the latter recurrently observe the mutual influence between private and public forms of brutality; ethnographic and journalistic descriptions attest

<sup>39</sup> Roger Gould, *Collision of Wills: How Ambiguity about Social Rank Breeds Conflict* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Robert Keohane, ‘Reciprocity in International Relations’, *International Organization*, 40: 1 (1986), p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Jackman, ‘Violence in Social Life’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28 (2002), p. 387.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Tolan, Deborah Gorman-Smith and David Henry, ‘Family Violence’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 57 (2006), pp. 557–83; Karel Kurst-Swanger and Jacqueline Petcosky (eds.), *Violence in the Home: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Richard Gelles, ‘Family Violence’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 11 (1985), pp. 347–67.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, *Between Good and Ghetto*; Harding, *Living the Drama*; Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*; Michael McCart, Daniel Smith, Benjamin Saunders, Dean Kilpatrick, Heidi Resnick and Kenneth Ruggiero, ‘Do Urban Adolescents Become Desensitized to Community Violence? Data from National Survey’, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 77: 3 (2007), pp. 434–42; Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*.



that violence outside the home usually travels inside and vice versa.<sup>44</sup> The study of violence is also highly compartmentalised in psychological studies that feature 'very little crossover' in the examination of different types of violence.<sup>45</sup>

Although analyses of diverse types of violence have remained in silos, a number of scholars have begun to highlight their theoretical and empirical interconnections. Randal Collins, for example, focuses on the theoretical connections between a vast array of seemingly unrelated violent interactions.<sup>46</sup> '[A]ll types of violence', he writes, 'fit a small number of patterns for circumventing the barrier of tension and fear that rises up whenever people come into antagonistic confrontation.'<sup>47</sup> In other words, distinct types of violence share a 'situational dynamic'.<sup>48</sup> Mary Jackman and Elijah Anderson have pointed out the shared origins or similar outcomes of a wide variety of private and public, interpersonal and collective, violence.<sup>49</sup> Jackman notes that violence is a 'genus of behaviors, made up of a diverse class of injurious actions, involving a variety of behaviors, injuries, motivations, agents, victims, and observers'.<sup>50</sup> According to her, 'the sole thread connecting [this diversity] is the threat or outcome of injury'.<sup>51</sup> Anderson, in turn, underlines the common source shared by many instances of violence.<sup>52</sup> In his rendition of US inner-city life, the 'code of the street' diffuses from the street into homes, schools, parks and commercial establishments; permeates face-to-face relations; feeds predatory crime and the drug trade; exacerbates interpersonal violence; and even warps practices of courtship, mating and intimacy. Diverse forms of violence, according to Anderson, can be traced back to the pernicious influence of a bellicose mindset.

Although inspired by this literature that underscores empirical commonalities and theoretical analogies, our analysis draws more heavily on a strand of social scientific research that has called attention to the intertwining of different forms of violence. Moser and McIlwaine, for example, highlight the causal connections between social, economic and political violence.<sup>53</sup> Along similar lines, Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes explore linkages between structural, symbolic, everyday and intimate forms of violence.<sup>54</sup> Calling attention to the 'continuum' formed by 'peace-time crimes' or

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*; LeBlanc, *Random Family*; Kotlowitz, *There are No Children Here*.

<sup>45</sup> Tolan, Gorman-Smith and Henry, 'Family Violence', p. 558.

<sup>46</sup> Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> Jackman, 'Violence in Social Life'; Anderson, *Code of the Street*.

<sup>50</sup> Jackman, 'Violence in Social Life', p. 404. <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>52</sup> Anderson, *Code of the Street*.

<sup>53</sup> Moser and McIlwaine, *Encounters with Violence*.

<sup>54</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (eds.), *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

'little violences',<sup>55</sup> Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes inspect the typically obscure nexuses between visible forms of violence, 'whether criminal, delinquent, or self-inflicted', and less visible ones, 'structural, symbolic, and/or normalized'.<sup>56</sup> Concentrating on different forms of sexual violence, Liz Kelly also describes a 'continuum'.<sup>57</sup> In her case, the notion emphasises commonalities, that is, the shared 'common character', between the types of violence that buttress patriarchy. Finally, Hume's and Wilding's gendered analyses of violence unearth the co-presence and overlapping of diverse forms of physical aggression in the everyday life of marginalised communities in post-war El Salvador and contemporary Brazil respectively.<sup>58</sup> Hume's feminist perspective is of particular importance for the analysis that follows in that it challenges normative understandings of violence as 'essentially public and masculinist'. As she states, most analyses of violence in Latin America:

are heavily reliant on an exclusively public reading of security. This belies the fact that much of the violence that affects women and children occurs in the home. The result of this separation between 'public' security and the safety of women and children has multiple implications. This approach misses historic practices of violence and keeps them hidden from public scrutiny. It also offers an incomplete analysis of violence, ignoring important linkages between violence in the home and violence in the street.<sup>59</sup>

Our examination of the uses and forms of violence in urban Buenos Aires complements and extends Hume's (and Wilding's) in that it concentrates not only on the co-presence of diverse types of physical aggression but also on the lateral connections between them – that is, on the many instances in which one form of violence leads to another. In other words, the focus of this article lies neither in the ways in which different forms of violence originate from some shared source (or result in a similar outcome) nor in the theoretical associations between them. We are mainly concerned with the uses of, and the horizontal, empirical concatenations between, diverse forms of violence – traditionally studied as separate entities – in the real time and space of materially and symbolically deprived communities. As stated above, teasing out empirically the uses and interlinking of different forms of violence leads us to consider violence as a repertoire that is employed to address individual and collective grievances.

<sup>55</sup> Philippe Bourgois, 'Recognizing Invisible Violence: A Thirty-Year Ethnographic Retrospective', in Barbara Rylko-Bauer, Linda Whiteford and Paul Farmer (eds.), *Global Health in Times of Violence* (Santa Fe, NM: School of Advanced Research Press, 2009), pp. 18–40; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 'Peace-Time Crimes', *Social Identities*, 3: 3 (1996), pp. 471–97; and 'Small Wars and Invisible Genocides', *Social Science and Medicine*, 43: 5 (1997), pp. 889–900. <sup>56</sup> Bourgois, 'Recognizing Invisible Violence', p. 18.

<sup>57</sup> Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).

<sup>58</sup> Hume, *The Politics of Violence*; Polly Wilding, *Negotiating Boundaries: Gender, Violence, and Transformation in Brazil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> Hume, *The Politics of Violence*, p. 4.

Coined and popularised by Charles Tilly in order to understand and explain patterns of collective claim-making across time and space, the notion of repertoire focuses on the set of routines by which people get together to act in their shared interests.<sup>60</sup> Repertoires are both cultural and political constructs. They are 'learned cultural creations, but they do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle'.<sup>61</sup> People 'learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, organize special-interest associations. At any particular point in history, however, they learn only a rather small number of alternative ways to act together.'<sup>62</sup> This learned set of contentious routines, furthermore, is deeply political in that it (a) emerges from continuous struggles against the state, (b) has an intimate relationship with everyday life and routine politics, and (c) is constrained by patterns of state repression.

Scaled down and adapted to the study of urban violence, the theatrical metaphor of repertoire leads us not only to identify regularities in violent exchanges but also to examine their economic and political determinations and their cultural dimensions. In this paper we concentrate on the first task, and scrutinise the different goals that people seek to accomplish when they use or threaten to use physical force against others.

### *Site and Methods*

Ingeniero Budge, population 170,000 (2012), sits in the southern region of metropolitan Buenos Aires in the municipality of Lomas de Zamora. Located on the banks of the highly polluted Riachuelo river, this poverty-stricken area is characterised by extreme levels of infrastructural deprivation: unpaved streets, open-air sewerage systems, random garbage collection, polluted drinking water and poor lighting. Ingeniero Budge is not only an economically deprived area, but also an extremely violent place. According to the municipal Defensoría General, homicides in Ingeniero Budge have increased 180 per cent since 2007, from a total of 17 in that year to 48 between January and October of 2012 alone. The population of Lomas de Zamora, the municipality where

<sup>60</sup> The notion of repertoire brings together different levels of analysis ranging from large-scale changes such as the development of capitalism (with the subsequent proletarianisation of work) and the process of state-making (with the parallel growth of the state's bulk, complexity, and penetration of its coercive and extractive power) to patterns of citizen-state interaction. Tilly's model exhorts us to conceptually hold together macro-structures and micro-processes by looking closely at the ways in which big changes indirectly shape collective action by affecting the interests, opportunities, organisations and identities of ordinary people. See Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006); *The Contentious French*; and 'Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain'.

<sup>61</sup> Tilly, 'Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain', p. 26.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Ingeniero Budge is located, grew only 4.2 per cent between 2001 and 2010. The murder rate in Ingeniero Budge is thus 28.4 per 100,000 residents, four times that of the state of Buenos Aires.

The Asignación Universal por Hijo (Universal Child Allowance, AUH), the Argentine conditional cash transfer programme effective since 2008, and many other welfare programmes such as Argentina Trabaja and the Plan Vida provide assistance to most of Ingeniero Budge's inhabitants. Patronage networks<sup>63</sup> and soup kitchens funded by Catholic charities are also a source of assistance for those in need in the area, providing crucial resources such as food and medicine. Finally, the informal labour market contributes to many household incomes in the area; residents most frequently report working in street vending in an adjacent street fair, construction, domestic service and scavenging.<sup>64</sup>

This article is based on 20 formal, in-depth interviews with residents of Ingeniero Budge and, perhaps more importantly, innumerable informal conversations and direct observations carried out over a two-and-a-half-year period of team ethnographic fieldwork (June 2009 to December 2011). During this period, Fernanda Berti also worked in the area as an elementary school teacher in two public schools. The article draws on the detailed ethnographic notes she took based on her students' activities inside and outside of the school and on dozens of conversations with teachers and parents. We tape-recorded, transcribed and systematically analysed our in-depth interviews for their content. We coded and analysed our field notes using open and focused coding.<sup>65</sup> Applying the evidentiary criteria normally used for ethnographic research, we assigned higher evidentiary value to individual acts or patterns of conduct recounted by many observers than to those recounted by only one observer.<sup>66</sup> Although particular in their details,

<sup>63</sup> Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> In order to identify residential patterns, sources of employment, levels of education and the most common problems identified by the population under investigation, we conducted 100 short interviews, each of which lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. We recruited the respondents via snowball sampling. For insightful accounts of the history and workings of the street fair and the surrounding neighbourhood, see Sebastián Hacher, *Sangre salada* (Buenos Aires: Marea Editorial, 2011); and Nacho Girón, *La Salada: radiografía de la feria más polémica de Latinoamérica* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones B, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>66</sup> Howard Becker, 'Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation', *American Sociological Review*, 23 (1958), pp. 652–60; and *Sociological Work: Methods and Substance* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1970); Jack Katz, 'A Theory of Qualitative Methodology: The Social System of Analytic Fieldwork', in *Poor People's Lawyers in Transition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982), pp. 197–218; 'From How to Why: On Luminous Description and Causal Inference in Ethnography (Part I)', *Ethnography*, 2: 4 (2001),

the testimonies, field notes and vignettes selected below represent behaviour observed or heard about with consistent regularity during the course of our fieldwork.<sup>67</sup>

At the beginning of our fieldwork, our conceptualisation of violence was very much informed by scholarship in sociology and psychology that treats diverse forms of violence as distinct phenomena (domestic, drug-related, criminal, sexual and so on). Early on, we tried to understand and explain a domestic fight as separate and unrelated to, say, a clash between a drug dealer and a consumer. The literature on the subject provides a plethora of good reasons to preserve this analytical distinction.<sup>68</sup> However, the case of vigilante violence against a neighbour accused of attempted rape that we reconstruct below alerted us to the potential relationships between diverse forms of physical harm and directed us to the literature on retaliatory 'street justice'. What if, we asked ourselves, some of the episodes of violence that neighbours were constantly reporting were not only co-present but, in fact, interrelated? Once alerted to these potential links, our interviews with adult residents began to focus on other connections between seemingly unrelated violent episodes – connections that, as the ethnographic vignettes that follow show, transcend one-on-one dyadic retaliation. After briefly describing the constant presence of violence in the area, we present some of the concatenations between and uses of different forms of physical aggression.

### *Where the Violence Is*

We began our fieldwork at two local elementary schools where Fernanda Berti worked as a full-time teacher. Our fieldwork with elementary school children and their families yielded straightforward results: on a daily basis, children and adolescents in the area are exposed to diverse kinds of violence. They witness shootings, murders and episodes of sexual and/or domestic violence from an early age.<sup>69</sup> During our 30 months of fieldwork, not a week went by without one or more of the 40 elementary school children with whom we

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pp. 443–73; and 'From How to Why: On Luminous Description and Causal Inference in Ethnography (Part II)', *Ethnography*, 3: 1 (2002), pp. 73–90.

<sup>67</sup> Our study was approved by the University of Texas at Austin IRB (protocol no. 2011-05-0126). Research participants (students, parents and school authorities) were fully aware of Berti's dual role as teacher and researcher.

<sup>68</sup> Tolan, Gorman-Smith and Henry, 'Family Violence'; Gelles, 'Family Violence'. See, for a description of continuities between private and public violence, Lisa Brush, *Poverty, Battered Women, and Work in U. S. Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>69</sup> Javier Auyero, 'Born amid Bullets', *Contexts*, 12: 1 (2013), pp. 24–9.

worked (whose ages ranged from seven to 13) describing one or more episodes involving one or more forms of violence.<sup>70</sup>

In-depth interviews with doctors working in the emergency rooms at the local hospital and health centre, and with a social worker at the local school, confirmed the skyrocketing of interpersonal violence registered in the 180 per cent increase in homicides rates. 'Today', said a doctor with 15 years of experience in the district, 'it is much more common to attend to patients with injuries provoked by gunshots or knives ... at least one per day.' The director of the emergency room at the local hospital seconded this general impression; during the last decade, he said, there has been a 10 per cent annual increase in the number of people wounded by gunshots or knives. Small gangs devoted to the storage, preparation and distribution of drugs operate in Ingeniero Budge and its surrounding area, fuelling this rise in interpersonal violence.<sup>71</sup> During our fieldwork, many police operations, some of them including exchanges of gunfire between police agents and dealers, seized dozens of kilograms of cocaine and thousands of doses of freebase cocaine known locally as *paco*. Unsurprisingly, criminal activity and its accompanying violence are the main concerns among residents. An overwhelming majority of our 100 interviewees cited delinquency, insecurity, robberies and drug dealing as their main preoccupations.

Although no official figures exist, interviews with social workers and teachers at the local school indicate that sexual violence and physical aggression between family members and intimate partners have also intensified. Melanie's case illustrates the presence of sexual violence, and the kind of retaliation it often produces.

Melanie lives in El Bajo, an area full of precariously constructed homes and meandering passageways in the heart of Ingeniero Budge. Dirt roads, open ditches, broken pavements, stagnant and stinking sewage waters, and uncollected rubbish characterise the residents' daily lives. Melanie's dad scavenges for a living; her mother is one of the thousands of beneficiaries of the AUH conditional cash transfer programme. In the following excerpt, Mabel, Melanie's mother, explains the origins of the bullet that is lodged in her daughter's leg.

See, that son of a bitch wanted to rape her. It was on December 24th. We have a big family, so we had asked a neighbour to roast some meat for us. This is a neighbour I've known all my life. My brother-in-law brought home some of the food, but not all, so I sent Melanie and my niece to pick up the rest. When they got to our neighbour's house, he was drunk, and he had a knife in his hand. He wanted to rape them. He told Melanie and my niece that if they didn't suck his dick, he was going to kill one of

<sup>70</sup> See, for a full description, Javier Auyero and María Fernanda Berti, *La violencia en los márgenes* (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores, 2013). <sup>71</sup> See Sain, 'El fracaso del control'.

them, and then rape and kill the other. Luckily, they were able to push him aside – maybe because he was really drunk – and they escaped. They ran home and told us what had just happened. My husband, my brothers-in-law, my brother and some other neighbours went to his house and beat the shit out of him. They beat his face to a pulp; he was covered in blood. They left him there, lying on the floor, and came back home. After dinner, around midnight, that son of a bitch came to my house, and shot at Melanie. Luckily, the bullet hit her in the leg. All the men in my house went back to his house and beat the shit out of him again. I had to run to the Gandulfo [a local hospital 30 minutes away]. I spent the night of the 24th and the 25th there. They checked her out very well, to see if she had been raped. Luckily, the guy didn't get to do anything to her.

Over the course of our fieldwork, dozens of times we heard stories of rape or attempted rape of girls by acquaintances or family members, in most cases uncles or stepfathers. Over the course of individual interviews, parents articulated their fear: 'I can't let her go out alone ... what if they rape her? It's frightening...' Despite this panic – a panic with a very real basis – neighbours like Mabel do not trust the police to deal with these kinds of cases. They think cops are slow in responding to sexual violence ('the police always come late, to collect the body if someone was killed, or to stitch you up if you were raped') and/or complicit with it (rumours about the existence of what a neighbour calls 'the blowjob police' – cops who demand sexual favours from neighbourhood adolescents – run rampant).<sup>72</sup> Neighbours thus rarely rely on a legal charge and a possible arrest. Instead they deploy targeted retaliatory collective violence.

However, a lot of the violence in the neighbourhood is more than just retaliatory. There is, as the cases that follow show, a whole repertoire of action that deploys violence in a variety of ways and contexts. A dispute between dealers over missing payments, like the ones that often took place during our fieldwork, can be seen as the expression of retaliatory violence, as can a woman's violent reaction to an assault by her drunkard partner. But when dealers barge into a home, point a gun at the face of the mother of an addict and claim a drug payment, and when this same mother threatens to 'break the fingers' of her addicted son or actually punches him until she sees 'blood coming out of his face', or calls the police, who she knows are involved in drug trafficking, to have her son arrested and taken away in order to prevent him from stealing things from her house (things such as a small TV set, that he then sells to finance his addiction and that belong not to his mother but to her second husband, who, enraged by the missing items, often beats her), then we are confronting concatenated violent exchanges.

As we will see in the three ethnographic reconstructions below, violence acquires a form other than restricted reciprocity and is deployed not simply

<sup>72</sup> See Javier Auyero, 'Deseos urgentes', *Página/12*, 19 Mar. 2012.

to retaliate. Violence, actual or threatened, is used to advance over or protect a territory for either semi-legal commerce (as in the street market that sits adjacent to our field site where the boundaries of, among other things, stalls and parking lots are defended with gun or knife in hand)<sup>73</sup> or illegal transactions (as in the monthly, sometimes weekly, shoot-outs between drug pushers, known locally as *transas*). Physical aggression is also used by parents to discipline sons and daughters and to make them stay away from ‘malas compañías’ (friends deemed bad influences), or, if they ‘already fell’, to try to control their addiction to drugs or alcohol (‘Next time I see you with a joint, I’ll break your fingers’, ‘He came home so drugged up, I punched him in the face until blood came out of my fingers’, or ‘I chained her to the bed so that she couldn’t go out and smoke’). When no other form of punishment works, parents might also resort to the police to have their own children jailed. Physical force (or its threat) is likewise deployed for defence of the self (‘I’d kill him with my own bare hands if he tried to rape me’ or ‘Last time my father attacked my mom, she threw a bottle at him and ran him out of the house’) or of one’s property (‘My dad has a gun, and he uses it every time intruders want to take a piece of our plot away from us’). Violence, furthermore, is used to obtain economic resources to support drug or alcohol consumption (as in the many robberies by youngsters in the neighbourhood: ‘We ran out of beer and we mugged this couple to get some money to keep drinking’), or to maintain dominance over a partner (as in the many domestic fights recounted to us: ‘He was mad at her because she didn’t come back home in time’).

These are analytical distinctions that, as we will see, get blurred in daily practice. In other words, there are multiple overlaps between the uses of violence.<sup>74</sup> A dealer seeks control over his territory in order to conduct his business. In the process he might deploy physical force against youngsters to obtain their silence and protection. The dealer might also use his authority as a *poronga pesado* (literally, a ‘heavy dick’ – someone nobody ‘messes with’ in a certain part of the neighbourhood) to physically (and publicly) punish an adolescent deemed to be a bad influence on the dealer’s daughter. This open, brutal display of physical force against neighbours serves simultaneously not only to discipline family members but also to obtain their respect and to perpetuate the dealer’s reputation. In the examples that follow we show the mutual imbrication between diverse deployments of violence. The ethnographic reconstructions also illustrate how violence is a routine way to deal with everyday life issues inside and outside the home – that is, how physical aggression takes the form of a repertoire of action.

<sup>73</sup> Hacher, *Sangre salada*; Girón, *La Salada*.

<sup>74</sup> Hume, *The Politics of Violence*.



*Lucía on the Uses of Violence*

Responses to sexual violence do not always take the form of the vigilante retaliatory violence we described in Melanie's case. The following episode portrays a less communal but equally brutal reaction. Reconstructed over a period of several days and after long and difficult conversations with some of the participants involved, the episode illustrates the porous boundaries between private and public violence and the diverse uses of physical aggression that will be further described in the two subsequent stories.

Lucía and her friend Soledad are both 13 years old. They live on the same block. Lucía's mother, Matilde, is a single mother. Soledad's father, Juan, is a well-known drug dealer in this area of the neighbourhood, a *poronga pesado*. Soledad's mother, Rosario, also has a reputation for being tough. As a neighbour told us about Juan: 'He is a *transa*, and he is loaded with guns and has no problems if he has to shoot at someone. And his wife, I worked with her (robbing trucks going in and out of the street market), and I know what she is capable of doing...'

One Monday morning in early September, neighbours woke up to the sounds of Juan's and Rosario's screams. 'She [Soledad] was raped because of you [Lucía]! You will see!' Right after publicly and loudly blaming Lucía for their daughter's misfortune, they grabbed her by the arms, punched her in the face, and kicked her in the stomach and lower back. They then pulled her inside their home. Inside, Juan held Lucía firmly while Rosario swiftly cut the teenager's long hair. Lucía sprinted back to her house. When Matilde heard Lucía frantically crying under her bed in the fetal position, she ran out to the pavement to see what had happened. Outside, she was confronted by Rosario and Juan: 'You better keep this to yourself or you'll be in trouble', they told her. Amanda, Matilde's friend, later told us that she believed Matilde had no option but to accept the couple's brutality toward her daughter: 'She can't do anything. If she says something, they'll kill her.'

Everybody in the block talked about the public punishment, but the offence was not immediately obvious. What happened? Why did Juan and Rosario publicly and viciously chastise Lucía? It took us a while to find out. Lucía and Soledad had come back home at 6 o'clock that morning, after spending the night out with no more than a single phone call to their parents to tell them they were 'on their way' home. When they showed up in the morning, Soledad's neck was 'covered in *chupones* [love bites]'. It didn't take long for Juan and Rosario to realise that their daughter had had sex and, equating a first-time sexual encounter with rape, they blamed her friend Lucía for the loss of their daughter's virginity, although, as Matilde confided to us later, 'Soledad was no virgin, no way.' The equivalence between a first sexual encounter and rape is not, we believe, far-fetched. Given Soledad's age and the widespread fear

of sexual violence in the neighbourhood, that dreadful comparison makes sense.

'Lucía didn't force Soledad to do anything she didn't want to', Matilde told us. But Juan and Rosario blamed her for their daughter's condition, and the attribution of blame took the form of harsh physical punishment carried out by those who see themselves as the *de facto* authority in this part of the neighbourhood. Juan and Rosario are not alone in believing that; *pace* Hannah Arendt, power can come out of 'the barrel of a gun', or from a punch, or a knife, or a stick. Violence, in many a resident's view, does not 'destroy power' but actually gives birth to (and/or sustains) it.<sup>75</sup> Violence is, for many in the area, foundational. It nurtures the power that a man or woman can hold both inside and outside his or her home, serving both disciplinary and reputational purposes. In both the private and the public spheres, authority is thought to be conquered and defended with physical violence – 'Grab a stick or a pipe', Amanda offered as parental advice to Matilde, 'and hit him [your son] hard with it, until he listens to you, until he obeys you. That's the only way in which he is going to comply with you.' 'You will learn a lesson', screamed Soledad's parents at Lucía as they punched and kicked her adolescent body.

The following two reconstructions exemplify other ways in which different forms of interpersonal violence are mutually imbricated. Regularly performed, violence takes the form of a useful repertoire to deal with routine problems at the urban margins.

### *Leonardo on the Uses of Violence*

We first heard about Leonardo when his mother, Ana, approached the second author of this essay, Agustín Burbano de Lara, at the soup kitchen. Knowing that Burbano had helped another neighbour to place her addicted son into a rehabilitation centre, Ana sought his help: 'Please, give me a hand with this; I can't take it any more.' Earlier that morning, Ana had beaten Leonardo 'with the broom. I hit him everywhere – arms, legs... I lost it', she says, crying. 'I swear to you, I lost it. I didn't want to stop beating him until I could see blood coming out.'

It took us several weeks to reconstruct the story behind the beating. We spent time with Ana and Leonardo in the precarious exposed-brick one-room home they inhabit. We chatted with Ana as she cooked lunch for dozens in the soup kitchen that, as with many of the women who work there, she had joined to escape from her abusive husband. We also

<sup>75</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970).

visited a rehab centre (a one-and-a-half-hour train and bus ride from the neighbourhood) with Leonardo, after he expressed his desire to ‘rescue’ himself from drugs.

Leonardo, who is now 16, dropped out of school when he was 14, and has been consuming paco for at least two years. He also drinks heavily (‘oftentimes, I get drunk, I get into fights, but then I don’t remember a thing... I wake up covered in scars and don’t remember anything’). He has been financing his harmful habits by scavenging, by robbing inside and outside the neighbourhood (which triggered several altercations with the police and one arrest) and by stealing from his mother.

Three times a week, Leonardo scavenges around the neighbourhood with a cart – ‘I don’t have a horse, so I can’t go far’, he tells us. Like many others, he combines this informal labour with illicit activities such as robbing passers-by and stealing from local stores. ‘I began to rob when I was 12, with a kid who is now a transa. We used to cut school... at the beginning I was really scared. We would go walk around the store [that we wanted to rob] or get close to the person we wanted to mug, but we wouldn’t dare to do it. You have to go with someone else, so that you get the courage [*así te das fuerza*]. If not, if you go alone, you get frightened, and you don’t rob anyone.’

The ‘seductions of crime’ were not only learned in the company of his partners.<sup>76</sup> Leonardo’s older half-brother, Matías, acted as a role model of sorts. Although Leonardo never ‘went out [to commit a crime] with him’, he remembers Matías ‘coming home from work [a robbery] ... taking off his [bulletproof] vest, and leaving his guns in the top drawer, where I couldn’t reach... he would then lock it so that I couldn’t get my hands on his guns.’ Leonardo respected and admired Matías. The latter was a *chorro* (thief); in the symbolic universe of destitute delinquent youth, thieves have the moral upper hand over transas.<sup>77</sup>

Robbing from stores in the neighbourhood is ‘difficult’, says Leonardo, not only because many ‘storeowners are armed... even more so if they are men’, but also because of the police. Together with his partner, Quito, he was arrested

<sup>76</sup> Jack Katz, *Seductions of Crime* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

<sup>77</sup> Thieves, so the folk narrative goes, do not make deals with the police and are united in their collective hatred of cops. Transas, on the contrary, make all sorts of illicit arrangements with the police (‘arreglan con la gorra’). Although the ‘thief versus dealer’ symbolic opposition organises the moral universe of street crime, in real life the boundaries between these two roles are less clear-cut: see Alarcón, *Cuando me muera* and *Si me querés*. As our fieldwork taught us, people can be one or another at different points in time, and families may have members involved in both types of shady street entrepreneurship. See also Sushir Venkatesh, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

when trying to rob a grocery store in nearby Villa Itatí. They were placed in a detention centre for minors for a few months. Leonardo has a scar on his cheek – a daily reminder of that arrest (‘they stepped on my face and held it to the ground... there must have been a stone or glass there and it punctured my skin’). Violence is also inscribed on his body in the form of several tattoos: a black 22 mm pistol (‘you can distinguish it from a 38 mm by the cylinder and the barrel’) on his chest surrounded by wings on each side, and five dots (four dots, representing inmates or thieves, around one that represents a cop) on his right leg (‘if the cops see this tattoo, they take you to the precinct and they beat the shit out of you, even if you haven’t done anything’, he proudly states). On his right arm, another tattoo bears the name of his 17-year-old sister, Dalma. She was arrested while carrying one kilogram of pure cocaine. After months of detention without sentence,<sup>78</sup> she was released – but not before having been raped behind bars, apparently contracting HIV.

‘He has stolen everything from me’, says Leonardo’s mother, Ana. ‘We can’t live with him any more.’ She elaborates:

Leonardo has stolen many things from me. The first time I beat him was when he sold a cell phone he stole from us. The cell phone wasn’t even mine; it was my second husband’s. I beat him really badly; I grabbed his fingers, and told him that if he did that again, I was going to break his fingers one by one so that he couldn’t steal again. He never took a cell phone again, but he stole sneakers, T-shirts, socks. I buy stuff at the *feria* [street market] so that I can resell it and make some money [but] he steals it from me and resells it for 20 pesos so that he can buy his drugs.’

Ana beat Leonardo out of impotence but also out of fear. She is afraid her son will be killed. Examples of early, violent deaths abound around them. Leonardo’s idolised half-brother, Matías, was killed (nobody knows by whom) in an attempted robbery a few months before we met (his half-dead body was abandoned, presumably by his partners in crime, in front of the local hospital). This loss, according to Ana, intensified Leonardo’s *paco* consumption (according to Leonardo, ‘since what happened to my brother, I really let myself go’). Weeks before we first met, Leonardo was hit in the leg by a bullet when he and a group of friends tried to mug a passer-by in the middle of the night. Daniel, the brother of Leonardo’s friend Kevin (with whom Leonardo consumes drugs), was killed in that encounter. As Leonardo told us: ‘The guy [we were going to mug] pulled out his own gun and began to shoot. I started

<sup>78</sup> This is quite common in the province of Buenos Aires, where 68 per cent of inmates in state jails are awaiting trial or final sentencing. See Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, ‘Denuncia incumplimiento, propone medidas, solicita audiencia pública’, 2010, available at [www.cels.org.ar/common/documentos/denuncia%20incumplimiento%20%20solicita%20audiencia%20%20publica%20final.pdf](http://www.cels.org.ar/common/documentos/denuncia%20incumplimiento%20%20solicita%20audiencia%20%20publica%20final.pdf) (last checked May 2014).

to run. I hid in an abandoned house, and realised my leg was injured...’ It was the first time Leonardo had been hit by a bullet. Ana fears that her losing control over him will result in him being killed (‘Last night he came back home high, drugged, aggressive. He still obeys me and he has not tried to hit me yet, but the friend with whom he does drugs [Kevin] does not even respect his mother; he is out of control’).

Like many in the neighbourhood, Ana and Leonardo are quite familiar with crime and violence. Ana herself was a drug pusher for a while (‘but I didn’t make much money because I did drugs too’). Ana’s first husband, Mario (Leonardo and Dalma’s dad), was a drug dealer – ‘a *transa pesado* ... a big fish, he had lots of money’, she tells us. Her second husband, Roberto (the father of Leonardo’s sisters, 15-year-old Florencia, nine-year-old Laura and seven-year-old Roxana), was a part-time thief: ‘He used to rob on the highway, every now and then, but he was no big fish, no *pirata del asfalto* [literally, ‘asphalt pirate’] ... [he committed] small robberies ... a cell phone, a wallet with 100 pesos, nothing big ... he was even afraid of my first husband. Now, my first husband, yes, that man was scary.’ Mario was not only a ‘scary’ thug; he was also a menacing husband:

He used to beat me very, very often ... He once chopped my hair this short [pointing to above her ear]. He not only beat the shit out of me, he also starved me ... Why do you think I began to work at the soup kitchen? They didn’t pay me, but I got food there ... he made my life hell. When I became pregnant with Florencia, he beat me really hard. And she wasn’t even his daughter; we were no longer together. But all the same, he wanted me to have an abortion. He punched me several times in my belly, screaming, ‘Get that girl out of there, get rid of her!’

Leonardo remembers these fights. ‘Once, he almost killed her’, he says. ‘When I was a kid, I swore I’d murder my father.’

The day Leonardo had his appointment with the counsellor at the local health centre (so that she could do a ‘psychological evaluation’ that would eventually authorise his admission to rehab), he was nowhere to be found. Despite his declared desire to ‘rescatarse de las drogas’ (stop using drugs), he missed the one chance he had to get free treatment. Ana did not see him until a few days later, when he, drunk or high (Ana couldn’t tell), tried to break into her house. He was ‘out of control’, his mother told us. ‘He came home and when I was about to beat him, he yelled: “Now you will see who is Leonardo Jesús Ramírez. The Leonardo who was told what to do, that Leonardo is gone! From now on, I’ll do whatever the fuck I want, and if I die, I die *en mi ley* [by my law]!”’

Later that day, Ana found out that Leonardo had had a fight with his partner Roxana. Leonardo had read a text message that Roxana had received from a former boyfriend while she was taking a shower and, in a jealous outburst, beat her so badly that she had to be hospitalised. No authority

intervened – Leonardo was not charged or arrested for the episode. All Ana could say when we last saw her was: ‘Believe me, Agustín, I know how it feels when somebody beats the shit out of you.’

Exposure to violence(s), the above story shows, comes in diverse forms: direct victimisation, witnessing violent events, or learning about physical harm perpetrated on others.<sup>79</sup> But the story also reveals that violence is regularly deployed to accomplish a variety of aims, and that some of these uses concatenate with one another. Our last ethnographic reconstruction illuminates these concatenations in great empirical detail, shedding light on the dissemination of violent interactions beyond the confines of one-on-one reciprocity.

### *Antonio on the Uses of Violence*

Angélica (age 45) lives in a precarious house made of bricks, wood and metal sheets for a roof. The house bears the marks of her 17-year-old son Antonio’s addiction to paco. A big wooden panel covers a hole Antonio made when, in desperate need of cash to buy his next dose of paco, he broke into his own house and stole Angélica’s clothes. Clothes are not the only thing that Antonio has stolen from his mother and siblings. The list, Angélica tells us, is quite long. It includes a TV set, brand new sneakers, plates, pots, pans and a new portable washing machine.

Just a few blocks from their house there is a shop that specialises in buying items from desperate addicts and then re-selling them to either their original owners or anyone interested for a higher, often doubled, price. These days, Angélica seldom leaves the house (she stopped taking her little son to day care and she failed to show up at the local hospital to give her two children mandatory vaccines) because she is afraid Antonio will take whatever items of value remain – ‘the little TV antenna... he broke it, he uses it as a pipe to smoke’. But Antonio doesn’t just steal from Angélica. Recently, he has begun to take clothes from Carlos, one of her other sons. Carlos is an alcoholic and the last time he discovered Antonio’s robberies, a huge, bloody fight broke out between them. ‘They threw rocks and bottles at each other’, Angélica tells us. And many of her neighbours agree; the fights between the two sick brothers are infamous on their block. Impotent but hardly passive in the face of that violence (many times we witnessed how Angélica makes sure that there are no glass bottles or big rocks handy in their backyard so that the brothers cannot

<sup>79</sup> Robert Brennan, Beth Molnar and Feltron Earls, ‘Refining the Measurement of Exposure to Violence (ETV) in Urban Youth’, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35: 3 (2007), pp. 603–18.

severely hurt each other), she is very scared ('vivo con miedo') at the prospect of one of them killing the other. In the following dialogue, Angélica recounts one recent episode:

Angélica: Antonio spent last night in the police station.

Interviewer: What happened?

Angélica: He stole our bathroom's toilet ... and when he was carrying it through the streets, the police stopped him. The cops thought he had stolen it from a local depot. They arrested him...

Interviewer: Did you at least get the toilet back?

Angélica: No ... I don't have the money to [pay for a car to] bring it back from the station. And that's not all. Carlos beat Antonio really bad for stealing the toilet. Today, in vengeance, Antonio threw a huge paving stone at his foot, to hurt him...

Interviewer: How did Antonio do that? Was Carlos asleep?

Angélica: Carlos has been drunk for the past three days, drinking wine, beer and whiskey ... [crying] My life is not a life ... Sometimes, I want to leave them all here and run away...

Violence between the drug-addicted son and his alcoholic brother is not the only violence that threatens Angélica's household, where seven other children, ranging in age from four to 21, live with her. 'I couldn't sleep yesterday', she tells us as we are walking towards the local soup kitchen on a Friday morning. She continues:

Antonio stole a bicycle from a neighbour, who is a friend of Mario, my other son. Antonio exchanged it for 20 pesos to buy drugs. At night, the owner of the bicycle came to my home and asked me for the bicycle. I told him that I'd get paid on Tuesday. But he doesn't want the money. He showed me a gun and told me that, 'if the bicycle is not here soon, I'll kill your son'.

Angélica and the rest of her family didn't sleep that night.

Antonio is not only addicted to *paco* but, lately, he has also been purchasing drugs for other youngsters in the neighbourhood, acting as a courier of sorts. One night, a group of youth angrily stormed into Angélica's house looking for Antonio. They had given him money earlier in the day and by late afternoon he had not returned with the drugs (or the money). 'They looked for him everywhere and they had weapons', Angélica said. 'They threatened me and told me that they would kill him because he had kept their money. I told them that I'd pay them. I told them that he didn't know what he was doing. I asked them to please not hurt him.'

The constant – and, as far as we were able to see, increasingly dangerous – fights between residents can, in part, be understood as the

psychopharmacological product of the consumption of drugs and alcohol. As research has shown, the ingestion of alcohol and drugs can irritate, excite, enrage or embolden people; these emotional states can translate into violent behaviour.<sup>80</sup> Antonio's petty thievery, compelled by his craving for drugs, illustrates yet another individual-level relationship between drugs and violence – what Goldstein labels 'economic compulsive'.<sup>81</sup>

Until the proliferation of crack use in the United States, most research attributed the violence triggered by drugs either to 'the physical or psychological effects of drug ingestion or to the attempts of drug addicts to acquire economic resources that are needed to support the habit'.<sup>82</sup> Since the mid-1980s, research has uncovered a third way in which drugs and violence are coupled. *Systemic* violence refers to the violence that can develop 'from the exigencies of working or doing business in an illicit market – a context in which the monetary stakes can be enormous but where the economic actors have no recourse to the legal system to resolve disputes'.<sup>83</sup> In this third way, which accounts for most of what is known as 'drug-related' violence, violent interactions are 'an outcome of attempts at informal social control carried out by drug market participants who are unable to rely on formal social control agents (e.g. the police) to handle their grievances'.<sup>84</sup> Disputes between rival dealers and punishment for stealing or failing to pay for drugs, or for selling adulterated products, are commonly cited examples.<sup>85</sup> Angélica's family also had first-hand experience with this violence; and so do most of Fernanda Berti's students, as attested by the many times that they have reported night-time exchanges of gunfire between neighbourhood drug dealers: 'In the neighbourhood, every night, dealers shoot at each other.'

The above story illustrates more than the coexistence, in real time and space, of the three ways in which drugs and violence are related. When, in his

<sup>80</sup> Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine (eds.), *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Robert N. Parker and Kathleen Auerhahn, 'Alcohol, Drugs, and Violence', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), pp. 291–311.

<sup>81</sup> Paul J. Goldstein, 'The Drugs/Violence Nexus: A Tripartite Conceptual Framework', *Journal of Drug Issues*, 14 (1985), pp. 493–506; see also Paul J. Goldstein, Henry H. Brownstein, Patrick J. Ryan and Patricia Bellucci, 'Crack and Homicide in New York City: A Case Study in Epidemiology of Violence', in Reinerman and Levine (eds.), *Crack in America*, pp. 113–30.

<sup>82</sup> Graham Ousey and Matthew Lee, 'Examining the Conditional Nature of the Illicit Drug Market-Homicide Relationship: A Partial Test of the Theory of Contingent Causation', *Criminology*, 40: 1 (2002), pp. 74–5.

<sup>83</sup> Goldstein, 'The Drugs/Violence Nexus', p. 496.

<sup>84</sup> Ousey and Lee, 'Examining the Conditional Nature', p. 75.

<sup>85</sup> Reinerman and Levine (eds.), *Crack in America*; Ousey and Lee, 'Examining the Conditional Nature'; Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*; Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*; Reding, *Methland*.



attempts to finance his habit and/or pay back his debts, Antonio steals from his family members and ends up in a fight with his brother, or when young addicts terrorise Angélica and her family over missing drugs, we also see how reciprocity diffuses and violence is used for many purposes other than retaliation (to obtain economic resources, to discipline and so on). Diverse forms of violence that have traditionally been examined as separate and distinct phenomena (interpersonal, domestic, drug-related) connect with one another. As drug dealers, couriers and consumers fight over payments, theft or drug quality, their public violence – a violence that is inherent to the structure of the market for illicit goods – may migrate inside homes and become a private, sometimes brutal quarrel between family members.

### *Conclusions and Tasks Ahead*

Interpersonal violence at the urban margins is not only used to seek retaliation, and it is not confined to dyadic relationships. Different forms of violence are not only co-present but are also concatenated. This paper has provided an ethnographic report on the multiple uses of violence and on the interlinked forms that physical aggression takes in a poor neighbourhood.

Regularly performed in a variety of instances, violence becomes a repertoire that serves to address a diversity of daily problems. Conceptualising violence as a repertoire leads us not only to identify regularities in individual and collective deployments of physical force (the task of this paper), but also to examine their cultural and political dimensions. Regarding its cultural dimension, we need to scrutinise not just the different things that people seek to accomplish when they use, threaten to use or refuse to use physical force, but also the things they learn in the course of violent interactions: from how to use their bare hands to stop (or initiate) a physical attack, to where to purchase (or rent) guns (and to distinguish between their different calibres), buy bullets or conduct a robbery, to how to make a deal with the local police in order to pursue an illicit trade. There is, in other words, a ‘learned character’ to the daily violence that should be further scrutinised in order to understand the role played by violence in socialisation – this is hinted at in the stories presented above (Leonardo’s in particular) and has been dissected by Lancaster in Nicaragua.<sup>86</sup> We also need a more adequate account of the experiential dimension of interpersonal violence (to inquire, for example, whether or not violence becomes ‘normalized’)<sup>87</sup> and of the way this experience affects, in repertoire-like fashion, subsequent ways of acting (as gleaned in Ana’s story).

<sup>86</sup> Roger Lancaster, *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press). <sup>87</sup> Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*.

Regarding repertoire's political dimension, we should note that the interpersonal violence that suffuses the lives of poor people in Ingeniero Budge lacks the redemptive properties that Franz Fanon, to use a classic example, attributes to the violence of the subaltern. The violence under examination here is neither a 'cleansing force' that 'frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction', nor an energy that makes the poor 'fearless' or restores their 'self-respect'.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the street violence placed under the ethnographic microscope in this essay is not the subaltern violence, often dissected by historians and social scientists, that is directed against the state, the powerful or their symbols.<sup>89</sup> Although this violence is neither used by the oppressed or the excluded as a weapon to reconfigure structures of domination nor deployed as a strategy to assert and/or celebrate popular power, it does have a political character. The theatrical metaphor of repertoire is deeply political and, as such, it should compel us to investigate more closely when, how and to what effect the state polices poor peoples' disputes and how this policing affects the character and course of individual and collective responses to violence.

### *Spanish and Portuguese abstracts*

*Spanish abstract.* Basado en 30 meses de trabajo de campo colaborativo en un barrio pobre de Buenos Aires, Argentina, este artículo estudia los múltiples usos de la violencia entre sus residentes y las concatenaciones entre formas públicas y privadas de agresión física. Mucha de la violencia reportada aquí recuerda a aquélla que ha sido analizada por estudiosos de la violencia callejera en los Estados Unidos, es decir como el producto de revanchas interpersonales y que queda encapsulada en intercambios binarios. Sin embargo, al desarrollar una red más amplia para incluir otras formas de agresión (no sólo criminal, sino también sexual, doméstica e íntima) que se da dentro y fuera del hogar, y que configura intensamente el devenir de las vidas diarias de los pobres, el material señala que las diversas formas de violencia entre los pobres urbanos (a) funciona más allá de las meras revanchas y (b) se vinculan entre sí en un marco mayor a las relaciones binarias.

*Spanish keywords:* violencia, pobreza, crimen, Buenos Aires

<sup>88</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 74.

<sup>89</sup> Natalie Davis, 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France', *Past and Present*, 59 (1973), pp. 51–91; Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: New Press, 1994); James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Marc Steinberg, *Fighting Words: Working-Class Formation, Collective Action, and Discourse in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

*Portuguese abstract.* Baseado em 30 meses de trabalho de campo colaborativo em um bairro pobre de Buenos Aires, Argentina, este artigo escrutina os múltiplos usos de violência entre moradores e as relações entre formas públicas e privadas de violência física. Grande parte da violência reportada pelo artigo assemelha-se àquela que já foi dissecada por estudantes de violência de rua nos Estados Unidos, ou seja, ela é o produto de retaliação interpessoal e permanece encapsulada em trocas bilaterais. No entanto, aplicando uma abordagem mais ampla e que inclui outras formas de agressão (não apenas criminal, mas também sexual, doméstica e íntima) que ocorrem dentro e fora do lar e moldam intensamente a dinâmica da vida diária de pessoas pobres, este artigo argumenta que as diversas formas de violência entre a população pobre urbana têm (a) propósitos que vão além da simples retaliação e (b) interconexões que vão além de relações dicotômicas.

*Portuguese keywords:* violência, pobreza, crime, Buenos Aires