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## BOOK REVIEWS

**J. AUYERO, M.F. BERTI (2015), IN HARMS'S WAY, THE DYNAMICS OF URBAN VIOLENCE, PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, PP. 243.**

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*Rubén had disappeared for a few days. We couldn't find him anywhere. We looked everywhere. One day we got a text message saying that he was in the [nearby] squatter settlement. He was with this "junta" [bad company], taking drugs. I went with my husband to pick him up. When we returned home, I took him to the bathtub; he was all dirty. And I beat the shit out of him. I used a stick, and I smashed it in his back—I swear I am not a bad mother. But I don't know what else to do.*

*Claudia (forty-two) talking about her son Rubén (seventeen) p. 154*

The tiny protest sign held by the an eight-year-old child during a rally "Estoy creciendo en un barrio lleno de drogas y delincuentes. ¿Que hago?" [I'm growing up in a neighborhood full of drugs and criminals. What do I do?] (p. 163) as well as Claudia's explanations on the use of violence against her son both highlight the "what to do?" concerns of local population in a such remote place as Arquitecto Tucci, Buenos Aires metropolitan area. The book *In Harm's Way* is first of all the hearing of those claims, before being an innovative sociological analysis of the urban margins and their residents. The neighborhood was the theatre of a thirty months ethnographic fieldwork realized by Javier Auyero (sociologist), Fernanda Berti (school teacher) and Augustín Burbano de Lara (research assistant at the time) between 2009 and 2011.

*In Harm's Way* is about violence in the urban margins. But it is far from those organicist books seeking to cure some sociological disease-like spreading into society. Nor it is focused on the profound, substantial reasons of the poor 'natural' tendency for violent behavior. Here, violence is merely "the actions that intentionally threaten to harm, intent to harm, or effectively harm other people". As such, violence is understood as a pattern of social interaction included in a repertoire of action amid others. The study of those is the purpose of the book: "What type of habitus emerges out of constantly living in harm's way?" (p. 170) He concludes. The main idea guiding it would be the following: violence, as a part of the local repertoire of action is "a routine way of dealing with everyday life issues inside and outside the home" (p. 30) and there is a concatenation of acts of violence rather than a simple accumulation of them in Arquitecto Tucci. There is nothing new in such assumption. Simmel, the human ecologists and others have been dealing with the issue of violence as pattern of interactions at small-scale analysis for a century now (see Simmel 1903; Park 1937; Bourgois 2003).

However, Auyero demarks himself from them and explicitly recognizes that Tilly's and Elias' theories were its "main sources of theoretical inspiration" (p. 168). These two authors have in common that they sought to manipulate multi-scale and operational concepts: Charles Tilly's repertoire of action can be deployed either by any organization as a repertoire of *collective* action, or by an individual as a *local* repertoire of action (Tilly 1986; 2006). On the other hand, the (de)civilizing process underlined by Norbert Elias traces a process both global and inscribed in docile bodies (Elias 1994). Auyero guides us through this conceptual journey with a specific objective: he wants us to smash up definitely the wall separating those levels of analysis which lies behind the usual way of thinking the urban deviance. This pitfall was not avoided by the human ecologists and many other American sociologists according to him. That is why he contradicts so frontally one of the pillars of American sociology, Randall Collins who argues that violent confrontations in human interactions are the exception, not the rule, regardless the underlying situations in process (Collins 2008).

As such, Auyero definitely inscribes his sociological work in a critical perspective in a wide Bourdieusian sense. As a wink to the latter mentioned, he structured his book around cases that have often been highlighted by the French sociologist: The School, the State, the public space.

The first chapter *El Barrio and la Feria: Daily Life at the Urban Margins* is primarily about the material neighborhood and the daily life of youngsters going to Fernanda's class and secondly narrows to the social organization of *la feria de la Salada*, a huge fair nearby whose history is deeply rooted with the neighborhood's.

The second *Born Amid Bullets: Concatenated Violence* deals with ordinary violence, both criminal and domestic witnessed by Fernanda's pupils. It is also a chapter in which the authors deploy some key concepts further discussed: the repertoire of action, the de-civilizing process, the concatenated violence.

The third chapter *The State at the Margins* is about the role and position of the State whose intervention is intermittent, selective and contradictory (p. 135). To do so, the authors investigate the blurred role of the police agents, both "punitive arm of the state" and "crime perpetrators" depending on the individual they face (neighbors, drug dealers, young thieves).

The fourth chapter *Ethics and Politics Amid Violence* renews with the concepts mentioned in chapter two and operates several analytical distinctions: the repertoires of actions are dissected according to whom mobilize them, the concatenated violence is also scrutinized and categorized. Moreover, he explains that the violence's consequence on bodies and representations, giving birth to the feeling of fear among the residents, becomes the structuring instrument of local social interactions.

The conclusion chapter *Toward a Political Sociology of Urban Marginality* is though as an overall thinking on the fieldwork and the book delivered: the authors ask there many questions rather than responding to the ones previously raised. A comprehensive recall on the literature, from Randall Collins to Bourdieu discusses the book's findings in a wider perspective and can be heard as a claim for the rebirth of the discipline with new objectives toward the urban poor.

### **Collecting data under hostile environment**

The data collection and production process that have been developed in this book must be underlined for several reasons: the resource constraints, the many advantages of the team work and coproduction of data, the accuracy of key informants. As in many large-scale/low budget inquiries, the authors sought to justify that "given the dangerous circumstances and the abundant practical constraints [wherein they conducted the research] but not under conditions of [their] own choosing." (p. 191). The circumstantial constraints in term of research tools possibilities forced the authors to manage their data collection a different way. They had to stress their capacity to work in group and to precisely define what is 'collectable data' through their key informants more than attempting to access directly to the field ground of violence. As they specify in the appendix, the teamwork allowed them "to collect data from different sources at similar point of time" (p. 191) which is a valuable asset to produce synchronic analysis as they intended to.

As a result, we face heterogeneous data composed of semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, focus-group interviews, field notes, photographs and drawings co-produced with Fernanda's pupils and finally, Fernanda's diary which represent more or less 3 years of raw notes of the pupils' daily life. Such material has been accepted both as valuable data, even not often produced by scientists but rather by people from the neighborhood, manipulated by the sociologists afterwards, but also as arguments themselves, as seen in the author's choices to build the book around *vignettes*, moments of life that are summed up and pace the book's chapters. The considered as most relevant *vignette* of each chapter will be presented in the following paragraphs, as a way to better understand the purpose of the book and its rhetorical construction.

1. *El Barrio and la Feria: Daily Life at the Urban Margins*. The monopolization of violence in *la Salada*

The first chapter, as an opening view of the neighborhood from its material dimension, is an introduction to the built area in Arquitecto Tucci from the eyes of Fernanda's pupils: the muddy roads, the polluted creek and the uncollected garbage were the shot by the young boys and girls of the neighborhood's school during photography workshops. But what would strike the reader the most would be the scenes of violence in the huge community fair, *la Salada*, "the largest street market in the country" (p. 56). With 16 billion Argentinian pesos in annual sales mostly in cash, being the main source of informal employment in the area, *La Salada* gathers all the criteria that might produce violent conflicts from small robberies to murders in territorial wars between antagonistic factions. However, the tendency for violence, extremely high during the 1990', was to decrease the decade after as one informal local administrator explains: "Today there are very few chances of anyone being assaulted in the passageways of La Salada's markets" (p. 63).

For Auyero and his colleagues, this phenomenon is the result of 'another civilizing process' in which "pseudo state administrations" (p. 61) defined rules for the pacification within the fair, after years of struggle and the building of the different markets: Urkupiña in 1991, Ocean in 1994, Punta Mogote in 1999. These administrations ordered tax payments for stall vendors, organized and limited the use of violence within the limits of the fair, as a State structure would do. But what the authors reveal by studying the marketplace, is that process of civilization within the market limits was accompanied by a process of strong de-civilizing without them. The control of violence within the fair produces more violence in the surrounding areas according to Auyero and his colleagues. The increase in the number of injuries and the "special seasoning" of the neighborhood during market days as described by policemen working in the area can attest it (p. 70).

This double process of civilizing *within* borders and de-civilizing *without* them is crucial to understand the idea of concatenated violence developed in chapter two.

2. *Born Amid Bullets: Concatenated Violence.* Fernanda's drawing workshops and the domestic violence

*"Please, give me a hand with this; I can't take it anymore." 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."* (p. 105). Scenes of domestic violence between mothers and sons/daughters like the one mentioned above abound in the book. These kinds of 'care-work' vignettes are explored all along the chapter two. From collective retaliation against a presumed rapist, passing by a 'drug-related' fights between neighbors, to the sounds of a gun trigger, all of these moments are symbolically represented in Fernanda's pupils' drawings. Children do not care about aesthetics: their minimalist representations of their joys and fears depict a fairly realistic image of their surroundings, maybe better than any fieldwork in violent conditions. Many of them represented street shootings, others were dedicated to dead friends.

This profusion of violence cannot solely be understood as an accumulation of dyadic exchanges, but rather as "a part of a chain of events, one leading to another" (p. 98) as the authors argue. Here is one of the key idea they raise in the book: violence is concatenated in the sense that it "refers to the many different ways in which diverse types of physical aggression-typically conceptualized as discrete and analytically distinct phenomena-are in fact linked" (p. 98). It does not mean that forms of violence are concatenated with each other, but that violence is a social pattern of behavior that is considered as a legitimate component of a wider repertoire of action, individual or collective, side to side with pacified forms of social interaction. "Part of the 'why' so much violence exists is in the 'how' residents at the urban margins use physical aggression" he concludes (p. 114).

3. *The State at the Margins.* The police-criminal collusion

The chapter three investigates the position and role of the State at the urban margins, in the same time intermittent, selective and contradictory. The main argument the authors develops here is that the State has "a key role in the perpetuation of the violence it is presumed to prevent" (p. 117). This is not a side question: such assumption raises the State's responsibility in the violence it reprobates daily by sending youngsters to jail. But the authors put forward an analytical distinction of the State's definition full of consequences, drawing back on Elias' question: "how the state intervenes?". The abstract

representation of the State is not of interest here, but rather the level of “state practices” implemented by peculiar street-level bureaucrats, the police agents.

*“I was a thief and a dealer [fui chorro y transa],” Jorge tells us. [...] When we first started dealing, in Las Violetas [a nearby poor neighborhood], we had an arrangement with the police. Every weekend they would come to “pick up the envelope”. The cops knew we were selling drugs, but they didn’t bother us. They would release the area for us. Now, if you don’t pay them every weekend, you are in trouble. You’d end up in jail.* Such police-dealer arrangements are not the exception, but the rule in Arquitecto Tucci. Far from pointing out several ‘bad cops’ the sociologists illustrate a documented and established practice within police force. Furthermore, they argue that the police do not only tolerate crimes, but also commit them “The police act as the repressive arm of the state against criminals but also as the perpetrators of crime” (p. 124) from classic forms of police brutality to incitation to violence in their discourses to the neighbours.

The situation in Arquitecto Tucci is rather a situation of ‘neo-feudal’ arrangements than a situation of state collapse. On the contrary, the state, through its repressive arm represented by the police force, is extremely present in the territory. Violence containment and expansion are then a matter of state’s choices, and as such are profoundly political. The wider political dimension of violence is the core argument of the chapter 4.

#### 4. *Ethics and Politics Amid Violence. Making toasts*

Making toasts is one of those habits that gain resonance under certain circumstances, as Roger Rosenblatt wrote in 2010 after the death of his daughter. The image of the toast making will be reactivated all along the fourth chapter as an analogy to the relationships among Tucci residents. Symbolically, making toasts is a predictable habit (“we make toasts *every morning*”), and it is also an “act of care” (“we make toasts *for our children*”). According to Auyero, the “relational character of routines and practices are akin to making toast” (p. 141) in the sense that they both nurture what Veena Das calls “ordinary ethics” (Das 2012). Even the acts of extreme violence of mothers against their children must be understood within this framework: the violence they mobilize to discipline their children is a form of care, nonetheless the it often results with grave harms caused to the latter. The mother may mobilize violence as a last ‘resort tool of care’ within households. But the violence out of house holds the same meaning: residents of this harsh environment, albeit the fear, do respond to violence individually or collectively.

The nature of these responses, sometimes violent sometimes not, creates the local repertoire of actions that ought to be mobilized depending on the situation. But what is decisive in this chapter is not only that violence is a pattern of interaction, but

rather that the threat of violence inspires fear to whom is threatened, and that fear becomes a structuring instrument of social interactions in the neighborhood. “Fear has a demobilizing impact” (p. 145) in collective action against police abuse. As well as it has an educational value to discipline sons for a desperate mother (“*I smashed it in his back—I swear I am not a bad mother. But I don’t know what else to do*” [p. 154]). As well as they may call the police force to get their own sons with the same objective. This violence, nonetheless the duplicity of forms it takes, has to be understood in a continuum of practices whose main character is to incorporate in bodies the ‘sound of fear’.

### ***Toward a Political Sociology of Urban Marginality. Fernanda’s diary***

After this long and harassing journey through Arquitecto Tucci, the conclusion of this book underlines firstly that more than being a simple essay for sociologists, it “is a public archive that stores [the residents’] experiences of suffering and ethical coping” (p. 165). By their work, the authors sought to give voice to the inhabitants of the so-called ‘urban margins’. After having presented an overall sum up of the book content, Auyero puts it into perspective. On the topic of violence first: “the current ways of approaching interpersonal violence might need to be modified” (p. 167) to grasp its entire meaning, from the contextual acts of violence that might have been experienced by the individual, to the mental representation of a violent act as an ordinary ethic (i.e. a legitimate mean of expression), to the act itself. Such wider perspective of analysis, out of mere micro-sociological explanations of violence, is a call to reflect on the traditional research questions toward the violence phenomenon (he namely criticizes Randal Collins here [p. 166]). It also brings into the macro-sociological perspective the issue of household violence in the specific context of the urban poor.

Secondly, Auyero coins the integration of violence in acculturation processes, or “civilization processes” at the individual level by raising the following question: “What type of habitus emerges out of constantly living in harm’s way?”. To him, the specific context of Latin American countries, characterized by a fragile monopoly of violence disputed with factions, the preeminent role of informal economy in poor neighborhoods and the informal access to land illustrated by the informal settlements makes appear more sharply the State’s failures in such remote places. He does not say that the State is absent, but that while being present by other means, it fails to prevent violent acts and sometimes takes part to the ‘maelstrom’ (p. 172) through its police for instance.

Finally, by reviewing the literature of the urban poor in the Americas, Auyero advocates for a new political sociology of urban marginality that would take into account

“the less official and less public state actions, and the interactions that ensue” (p. 172). It is by no means a claim to a better understanding of informal activities *per se* but a better understanding of them in relation to the State through its representatives, policemen and politicians. It is the sociology of informal *state practices* (p. 179) that should be the core of the new sociology he advocates for in the urban margins.

### **A textbook for unaware practitioners?**

*In Harm's Way, The Dynamics of Urban Violence* is a complete “essai”, an “attempt” as Montaigne would say (Montaigne 1595). Through plenty of resources, organized by a sociological demarche, Auyero has a message to send, and he is not concerned whether it is received or not. It is an attempt because he develops some pioneering ideas in a saturated field of literature. Indeed, violence phenomenon has filled many libraries since Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (see Durkheim 1894 Weber 1919).

Before highlighting some of the key issues raised in the book, a further incursion into this field of sociology and its latest peregrinations can be outlined to assess to what extent this content is demarking itself from. The latest generations of critical research focus nowadays on *studies* which means that scientists in humanities break the wall of academic disciplines in order to apprehend a scientific object: gender, colonization science, law are some of them. These *something studies* are of great interest, and are now well established in the Academia, with dedicated departments everywhere in the world (*Gender studies* department exist whether in LSE University, London, or in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi). As their plural names of *studies* must underline, they advocate for a greater contextualization of sociological phenomena, and the vanity of attempting to create comprehensive frameworks in critical research. This realistic finding is allowable, since the ‘good old times’ of comprehensive ideologies collapsed with the Berlin’s wall in the 1990’.

But here, Auyero renews with a tradition of comprehensive framework using a single sociological method, based on Tilly’s and Elias’ general theories, in a critical perspective. Was he born the wrong century? I do not think so. Two ideas could be scrutinized after reading this book: the originality of the data collection and the new fields of research proposed, two real ‘attempts’ both methodologically and theoretically innovative.

On the methodological side, several innovations have to be underlined. The use of kid’s drawings as a raw sociological material is something uncommon in Western countries. In Latin America, sociologists and anthropologists like the Colombian author



Armando Silva already have been collecting data this way since 1992 (Armando 1992), with interesting results in other field of human sciences such as psychology and semiotics (*ibid*). Secondly, Auyero did not scruple to transform second-hand sources (Fernanda's diary) into first-hand source and into a tool that may help to enlarge his data collection work. Such way to look at what is and what is not valuable data is extremely intriguing for Western social scientists and many things could be learned from it.

On the theoretical side, Auyero finally opens the Pandora's box: he endorses the fact that lines between the State's activity and the informal ones are not only blurred, but profoundly intertwined. This early work has been made a long time ago in terms of formal relationships between the State' activity and the population since Foucault's work, but was not totally consumed regarding informal activities. By opening the field of *state practices* in the urban context, Auyero coins something that perhaps was not enough dug into in critical sociology. Has the State got an informal activity? To what extend this activity can be considered as a State activity? Is the contextual police practice the expression of the State's general one? Such interrogations remain to be answered today. This opening field of critical sociology is to be completed.

Finally, some remarks on the overall 'attempt' of Auyero have to be made. As an attempt, it contains some necessary imperfections: the innovations both in theoretical perspective and more importantly, in methods, are maybe too much in one book. By demarking himself both from traditional critical sociology and *studies*, plus arguing that pillars of mainstream sociology such as Randall Collins are wrong, this book might be interpreted as a manifesto more than a mere sociological work. Critical communication is, in this case, at least as important as critical thoughts. This book is written for people who are already inclined to read critical work, even though the rhetorical construction in *vignettes* helps to understand the message. But rhetorical artefacts come from novels and romans, or Montaigne's Essays, not from sociological arguments.

As such, this book should be considered by specific professionals such as urban planners or policy makers: what Auyero testifies here is the reality of consequences of terrible urban planning. As we explained earlier, it is not an evaluation of city planning in Buenos Aires, but an alternative way of describing urban violence in remote places. However, we can identify many scales of reading: a young-fresh-out of school urban planner may discover what is a concrete example, which consequences on people, his work might have, as a warning sign. A political activist may find an alternative way to formulate a criticism toward urban violence representations (i.e. the concatenated violence). Finally, the scientist in search of new sociological continents to explore may assess the virtue of original data collection that would be implemented elsewhere.

Overall, this book is a must read for anyone interested in violence problematics, and curious about new ways to observe such complex object. This fertile work might make you think, travel to South America and return home with many ideas and innovative methods that only wait for you to be tested in fieldwork.

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