

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Routinization of Violence in Latin America: Ethnographic Revelations

Diane E. Davis

Harvard University, US
ddavis@gsd.harvard.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

In Harm's Way: the Dynamics of Urban Violence. By Javier Auyero and María Fernanda Berti. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 239. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780691164779.

Violence at the Urban Margins. Edited by Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 323. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780190221454.

Bruno: Conversations with a Brazilian Drug Dealer. By Robert Gay. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 219. \$23.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822358497.

The Spectacular Favela: Violence in Modern Brazil. By Erika Robb Larkins. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 231. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520282773.

Cities, Business, and the Politics of Urban Violence in Latin America. By Eduardo Moncada. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 219. \$65.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780804794176.

Living with Insecurity in a Brazilian Favela: Urban Violence and Daily Life. By R. Ben Penglase. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 2014. Pp. ix + 197. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780813565439.

More than ten years ago, in 2006, I published a review essay in the pages of this esteemed journal called "The Age of Insecurity: Violence and the New Social Disorder in Latin America."¹ This is what I had to say:

The wave of violence and social disorder that appears to be sweeping the entire region has become so unsettling and alarming that it has captured widespread attention in and of itself, and from a variety of disciplinary corners. It has been a long time since a single subject has drawn Latin American scholars from fields as diverse as political science, literary criticism, sociology, economics, criminology, history, anthropology, and media studies into a common pursuit. The interdisciplinary breadth of the contemporary scholarship on this topic is nothing short of remarkable. But so too is the phenomenon itself, which has transformed fundamental power relations, the underpinnings of market economies, the legitimacy of long-standing political institutions, the basis for collective social order, and the psychological and social infrastructure of people's everyday lives and livelihoods.

Here we are, more than a decade later, and the problem of violence is far from gone. As tragically evidenced by the materials contained in the new crop of books reviewed in this essay, violence appears to be here to stay. Yet even more depressing is the fact that it seems to have become more pervasive and more institutionalized within an even wider range of social, political, and economic structures that mold the

¹ Diane E. Davis, "The Age of Insecurity: Violence and the New Social Disorder in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 41, no. 1 (2006): 178–197.

quotidian practices of daily life. The omnipresence and near normalization of violence not only poses a significant challenge to actors and institutions who seek to escape from “harm’s way,” to cite the apt if not understated title of Javier Auyero and María Fernanda Berti’s important new book. It also levies a heavy burden on personal health and family dynamics as well as community social life. Indeed, the insidious way that violence has entrenched itself in routine interactions and daily exchanges, coupled with its embeddedness in power relationships among the state, communities, and citizens, make it exceedingly difficult to think of a future without violence in urban Latin America.

This distressing state of affairs may help explain the apparent disciplinary turn represented by these six new books, all of which are focused on cities. The books I reviewed a decade ago included studies of rural areas and were written by scholars in a wide range of social science disciplines, many directly focused on the institutional or political restructuring of states or police systems so as to counter the waves of violence. In contrast, the sensibilities and methodologies of urban anthropology permeate this new crop of books. To be sure, the seemingly widespread embrace of ethnography as a privileged strategy for studying violence could just be circumstantial, related to decisions of the editorial staff at LARR about which authors should be reviewed in combination.² Whatever the rationale, the deeply ethnographic and anthropological perspective on violence embodied in these books is sorely needed and truly welcome, and can serve as a source of knowledge even for those who seek policy solutions to counter the threat and trauma of violence. It would be foolhardy, after all, to jump to constructive remedial actions without a deep understanding of the insidious nature of the problem.

Having said this, most of the authors reviewed here display little optimism for any exit from this troubled state of affairs, focusing instead on how citizens and authorities cope with, manage, or accommodate violence. Even the political scientist Eduardo Moncada, the single nonethnographer among our array of authors, whose book *Cities, Business, and the Politics of Urban Violence in Latin America* concerns itself with the conditions under which urban policy is most responsive to citizen needs, concludes his account with next steps for research, not action. Despite the fact that Moncada finds some variation in the nature of organized crime across three different cities of Colombia, he makes clear that local structures of power, citizenship practices, and urban development policies are infused with an alternative logic of violent entrepreneurship and clandestine negotiation that have irretrievably infiltrated community expectations and local governance responses, often with negative implications for participatory politics and local project development.

To highlight the anthropological turn is not to say that the usual disciplinary suspects of Latin American political economy, history, and governance are absent in contemporary studies of violence. This is quite clear from Moncada’s book, in which he analyzes how organized criminal violence interacts with reactionary, participatory, and clientelistic politics to affect urban project implementation. Nor is it to say that other long-standing themes and more conventional analytical frameworks are absent from the remaining ethnographic accounts. What is quite striking, in fact, is the way that these more anthropological and sociologically grounded accountings of everyday violence either reveal or revise accepted concepts associated with other disciplinary domains of inquiry. For example, a critical analytical thread uniting most of these books is the attention to state power as well as the struggle over the monopolization of the means of coercion and the notion of sovereignty—which I would define as the relatively autonomous wielding of power over territory and a body politic, no matter the scale. Such a framing appears most evident in Erika Robb Larkins’s *The Spectacular Favela*, which is also a deeply ethnographic account of the everyday realities of violence in Rocinha. The book’s narrative is peppered with concepts like drug bureaucracy, narco-state, penal state, de facto police chief, an “imagined parallel trafficker state” (9), and narco-soldiers—with the latter referring to nonstate armed actors as much as formal representatives of the state and its military. Through her formulation and appropriation of these terms, Larkins’s anthropological treatment of how violence structures relations of coercive power in alternative governance institutions and across territorial scales will be as highly legible to political scientists and sociologists well-schooled in Max Weber’s, Charles Tilly’s, and Benedict Anderson’s writings as to those familiar with anthropology’s more cited scholars, including Foucault and Agamben.³

² It also might be a sign of larger institutional changes in sources of research funding for studies of violence. Several of the authors cited here benefited from the SSRC-Soros Foundation programmatic support for research on drugs, security, and democracy, in which anthropologists were a uniquely high number of recipients. One result has been the generation of extremely productive dialogue among Latin American anthropologists surrounding the subject of violence and its relationship to drugs and other forms of livelihood production.

³ See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and “Politics as a Vocation,” in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press), 77–128; Charles Tilly, *Capital, Coercion, and European States* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined*

Likewise, although the notion of democracy hardly materializes in these books in any serious way (in noteworthy contrast to writings on violence over a decade ago), most of the authors remain alert to the political and social conditions that prevent citizens from avoiding the most egregious abuses of state power often associated with the authoritarian regimes of the past. Along these lines, concern with the insidious role the state plays in reinforcing and institutionalizing violence is in fact a key element in all of these books to a greater or lesser degree, ranging from Robert Gay's stirring account of a drug trafficker who started his career working for the Brazilian state as a customs officer, to Auyero and Berti's discussion of the "intermittent, selective, and contradictory form in which the state intervenes" (133) in neighborhoods through police action, and to R. Ben Penglase's framing of urban violence in Rio as a form of "peacetime war" (13) in which the transition to democracy has set the stage for contemporary police efforts to impose a political and social order that reproduces many of the same repressive conditions evident under authoritarian rule.

Concerns with democratic citizenship also hover over much of the ethnographic work presented here, particularly among those authors seeking to reveal the identity constructs—whether in the form of gender, masculinity, race, or class—through which repressive authority and coercive violence are wielded and normalized. A good number of these accounts are contained in *Violence at the Urban Margins*, edited by Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. In this volume various authors ethnographically document the politics of subordination within and across a variety of domains, showing how the assertion of interpersonal power relations between men and women, among families, and within communities (and not merely between citizens and the state) can be just as responsible for reproducing the long-standing patterns of human exploitation that many democratic movements in Latin America have historically sought to transcend, albeit perhaps without the same emancipatory discourses of citizenship. In all their complexity, these ethnographic narratives leave us with the disquieting sense that violence has "colonized the lifeworld" of Latin America, to borrow a phrase from Jürgen Habermas, and has done so in ways that demand ever deeper scholarly engagement to understand how and why.⁴

Such is the aim of Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes's volume, which emerged from a two-day workshop at the University of Texas. Although this is the one book reviewed here that does not focus exclusively on Latin America, it contains accounts from leading ethnographers of violence across the Americas, with nine of eleven chapters focused on Latin America and two on the United States (Alice Goffman on Philadelphia and Randol Contreras on Los Angeles). The book is divided into four sections, the first of which is titled "Shared Understandings" and engages in discussion of the moral economy of violence and the ways that cultural assumptions and attitudes toward violence become the normative infrastructure of survival and meaning. A second section examines questions of gender and masculinity, followed by a section focused on how citizens experience fear and manage danger. A final section takes on questions of method and subjectivity, with a set of papers addressing "Ethnographic Positions and the Politics of Violence." The volume closes with Philippe Bourgois's sweeping and masterful discussion of the geopolitical and macroeconomic context in which violence has materialized and deepened in Latin America.

Building on a wide range of ethnographic research drawn from Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Brazil, as well as Philadelphia and Los Angeles, the volume's whole is in many ways greater than the sum of its parts. This is particularly so with respect to the emergence of several common themes, ranging from the contradictory and paradoxical ways that violence both destroys and establishes social solidarity (especially well articulated in the chapters by Ana Villarreal and coauthored by George Karandinos, Laurie Hart, Fernando Montero Castrillo, and Philippe Bourgois) to the ways that survival—not resistance—becomes the defining *modus operandi* of daily life for individuals, families, and communities. But the unifying thread in *Violence at the Urban Margins* that most comes through is its critical and self-reflective engagement with the practice of ethnography, a theme that both emerges within individual essays (see, for example, Contreras's discussion of his own liminal status in studying "Black and Brown" tensions in Los Angeles) and at the same time frames the volume's overall contribution to the discipline. In an introduction written by Javier Auyero, as well as throughout several chapters, and particularly in the deeply moving reflection on "Death Squads and Vigilante Politics in Democratic Northeast Brazil" by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the purpose is as much to reflect on the epistemological possibilities of ethnography as it is to reveal the lived experience of violence. The power of ethnography is beautifully summarized by Auyero, who

Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), and *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981).

suggests that ethnographic research holds the potential to break down developmental divides between the so-called global North and South, to reveal common dilemmas across various “marginal” sites and situations, and to offer a means for helping cultivate greater scholarly sensitivity toward the risk of stigmatization inherent in scholarship on violence. With respect to the latter, Auyero and others warn that research on violence has at times resulted in the “othering” of subjects in ways that may further marginalize them, thus situating anthropologists in a delicate moral and ethical position as they advance their careers. To a great degree, this volume’s most important contribution may be its own positionality with respect to the practice of ethnography, elucidated with both care and compassion.

It should be no surprise that many of these same themes can also be found in Auyero and Berti’s deeply researched ethnography of quotidian violence in Arquitecto Tucci, a neighborhood in Buenos Aires (perhaps because the publication date of *In Harm’s Way* suggests that it was being finalized around the same time as the coedited volume *Violence at the Urban Margins*). In addition to offering a much more extended set of authoritative arguments about ethnography, ethics, and the politics of violence, the book deftly reveals the crushing weight of poverty and violent crime in the daily life of barrio residents. As has been demonstrated in so much of his prior work, Javier Auyero is a masterful ethnographer with a keen sensibility for power and for the complex if not paradoxical role that states play in simultaneously creating and destroying social order. These skills have been sharpened and taken in new directions by Auyero’s collaboration with María Fernanda Berti, a schoolteacher whose work and personal life have tied her to the fate of a community in ways that are often difficult to replicate among academic scholars, no matter how many months they can carve out for fieldwork. As a team, Auyero and Berti are able to combine insights that affirm much of what is known about police, marginality, informality, and violence; but they also uniquely frame these observations through a deep knowledge of and engagement with children. Although there is considerable work on youth involvement in violence in Latin America, especially as mediated through a focus on gang affiliation and behavior, this book focuses on the relatively younger cohort of primary school children, among the other usual suspects. The end result is a heartbreaking picture of the normalization of violence among even the most innocent of subjects, treated with dignity and without romanticization—just as one would expect from an expert team able to combine scholarly distance with personal compassion in the study of such harsh realities.

In this collection of books, two others explore the experience of violence as it unfolds in a particular neighborhood, albeit with slightly different intents: Erika Robb Larkins’s *The Spectacular Favela* and R. Ben Penglase’s *Living with Insecurity in a Brazilian Favela*. Both are written by anthropologists, both are focused on Brazil, and like Auyero and Berti’s account both see the police, drug traffickers, and community members as central characters in the production, mediation, and experience of violence. Even so, there are fundamental differences between these two books, at least in tone if not in conceptual framing. Penglase’s is the more standard anthropological account, focused primarily on residents’ daily routines and infused with the same moral and ethical reflections about conducting ethnographic research in a context of violence that have been noted above. These concerns dominate the book’s introduction, even as the particular Rio favela in which Penglase conducted his fieldwork is not identified but referred to only with a pseudonym. In contrast, Larkins identifies her fieldwork location at the very outset (Rocinha), and focuses most of her introductory remarks on what she hopes to reveal about the history, culture, and performance of violence at the scale of the favela in which police are key actors, reserving any reflections on the conduct of ethnography for footnotes and other less prominent sites in the book. One wonders whether these epistemological differences are explained by the personal proclivities of the authors, their academic training, or perhaps even the timing and location of their fieldwork.

Although Penglase’s account was published in 2014, it appears that much of the ethnographic research took place in the early 2000s, with more recent updates about increased police presence in light of the World Cup and Olympics nestled into the introduction rather than embedded in the everyday observations and fieldwork that form the ethnographic basis for the book’s larger narrative. Because the active role of the pacification police in cleaning up Rio favelas did not kick in strongly until after much of the fieldwork was undertaken and in preparation for these sporting events, police are less central in Penglase’s narrative. His attention is directed primarily to the community and its relations to drug-traffickers, something which may in fact help explain his overriding concern with anonymity. Larkins’s book, in contrast, is built around fieldwork starting in late 2008, when Brazil’s pacification police emerged on the scene. Rocinha was one of the original Rio neighborhoods to be subject to the pacification police, thus suggesting that Larkin may have chosen this area of the city for specific reasons having to do not just with long-standing violence but also with the state’s particular policy responses to it. Larkin’s account of how and why residents in Rocinha

responded to and experienced violence is part of a very specific story focused on a particular police policy, not a more abstracted account of how Rio's urban citizenry has managed to live and cope with violence. All this perhaps explains why her final substantive chapter, titled "Peace," serves as a not-so-subtle tongue-in-cheek reflection on the book's larger argument about the persistence of everyday violence despite—if not precisely because of—the actions of pacification police at the neighborhood level.

Whatever the reason, these authors use somewhat different analytical entry points to frame the ethnographic task at hand. Larkins's book seeks to reveal the contested political relations between state and nonstate armed actors, the parallel and interwoven governance orders in play, and the ways such hybrid institutionalized practices seep into residents' daily lives, even with results that are not directly related to violence and may be more symptomatic of changed political conditions. Larkins's conclusions that police pacification efforts have made Rocinha a less homogenous, more class-divided neighborhood—and that such shifts have a bearing on the neighborhood's political capacity to make claims on the state or push back on the urban land market—are just one example of this. In contrast, Penglase is most interested in revealing the quotidian dynamics of the drug trade and its impacts on citizens and the physical spaces in which they live. He is less concerned with illuminating the nature of the state or the state-citizen contract in which these same dynamics unfold, although the specter of police repression appears menacingly throughout his account. All this is not to suggest that one approach is preferable to the other, because both contribute to our understanding of how people experience violence. But these two books do differ in the extent to which the ethnographic focus remains circumscribed by a more "bottom-up" preoccupation with citizens and how they live with insecurity, as opposed to a more "top-down" focus on the state and how it asserts itself over citizens and into the spaces of the city.⁵

To a certain degree, these distinct analytical entry points see their logical extension in the final two books to be discussed here. Robert Gay offers a finely grained ethnographic account of an individual whose life is embedded in a complex world of drug trafficking complicities, narrated in a slim but compelling book titled *Bruno: Conversations with a Drug Trafficker*. Although a sociologist by training, Gay has been working on drug violence in Brazilian urban life for years, and this book appears to be a deeply personal project allowing him to incorporate his long-standing insights about power relations within the prison system, the clandestine connections between the state and drug traffickers, and the precariousness of daily life for poorly educated Brazilians who seek to survive in a world of competing loyalties. With this ethnography, Gay is less interested in the political or even neighborhood context of violence, let alone in drawing generalizations about the pervasiveness and origins of violence in Brazil—although such insights are clearly embedded in his account—and more interested in revealing the paradoxes, treacheries, and moral ambiguities that confront individuals like Bruno. On the other end of the spectrum, and closer to the aims guiding Larkins's book, is Eduardo Moncada's well-researched account of the impact of organized criminal violence on the ways that political authorities respond to the everyday needs of urban residents. He reads the challenges of daily violence through the lens of politics and governance, seeking to make sense of how authorities negotiate this complex terrain for good and bad. In this sense, these two books enter into the world of violence from two very different scales—the individual, on one hand, and local governance regimes on the other—in ways that serve to reproduce the top-down/bottom-up distinction but that also differentiate individual versus collective responses.

That these two books study violence as either an individual or a collective problem raises several interesting questions, including what is gained and what is lost by approaching this subject through one lens versus another. To the extent that violence is coproduced by various actors through an array of decisions that transcend any given individual, it is in fact a collective action problem. And although it may be experienced individually, any movement forward on eliminating its worst excesses may also need to be a collective enterprise involving negotiations, alliances, and decisions on the part of multiple actors—including political parties—that tend to be sidelined in many purely ethnographic accounts. These dynamics are precisely what Moncada has tried to reveal in his comparative research on Medellín, Cali, and Bogotá, where we see that it is a wide constellation of political actors and institutions that determines the extent to which authorities are able to improve conditions within the confines of organized criminal violence. In this sense, Moncada's work places political relations, political parties, and political regimes—not merely violence perpetrators and

⁵ For a masterful ethnographic account that transcends this distinction, see Graham Denyer Willis, *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). Denyer Willis uses ethnographic methods to reveal the embeddedness of Sao Paulo's police and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). [NB: This book was included in the packet of publications slated for review but owing to conflict of interests was not included in this essay.]

their victims—into the picture. The complex relations established among all these actors will ultimately lay the foundation for what is possible; and even if they do not guarantee a future without violence, it is likely that certain assemblages of social and political relationships can establish room for greater maneuver. One takeaway from all this is that any movement forward must be part of a collective enterprise that counts on individuals but cannot be reduced to them. Building on what we already know from the excellent works surveyed here, it is likely that future scholarship—ethnographic and otherwise—will continue to reveal the ways that individuals experience the violence that is collectively produced through interactions among citizens, states, and other perpetrators. One can only hope that such revelations might eventually be turned into actionable knowledge capable of mobilizing citizens to recast the collective social and political relations and conditions that produced so much violence in the first place. Even if a clear pathway is not inherently obvious, all these books are essential for keeping any agenda of hope alive.

Author Information

Diane E. Davis is the Charles Dyer Norton Professor of Regional Development and Urbanism and Chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Trained as a sociologist, Davis has a variety of research interests including the relations between urbanization and national development, comparative urban governance, socio-spatial practice in conflict cities, and new territorial manifestations of sovereignty. Her books include *Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century* (Temple University Press, 1994; Spanish translation 1999), *Discipline and Development: Middle Classes and Prosperity in East Asia and Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2004, named the American Sociological Association's 2005 Best Book in Political Sociology), *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), and *Cities and Sovereignty: Identity Conflicts in the Urban Realm* (Indiana University Press, 2011).

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