Introduction

Snapshots of Collective Violence

- Dozens of middle-aged men and women, youngsters and children, are gathered in front of a small supermarket somewhere in the province of Buenos Aires. It's hot. Many men have naked torsos, most are wearing shorts. The store's metal gates are broken, and people are holding them up so that others can enter. People are moving in and out of the store quite fast, but not rushing. They look cautious, but not afraid. They come out of the store with their hands full of goods, as much as they can hold. The voice of the reporter says, "*Saqueos en el Gran Buenos Aires* (Lootings in Greater Buenos Aires)."
- Hundreds of people are gathered in front of El Chivo, a supermarket in the district of Moreno, in the province of Buenos Aires. Most are on foot, some walk around with their bicycles. Some have placed their looted goods on the ground, apparently waiting for others who are still in the store – which can be seen in the background. A group of youngsters put a couple of bottles of beer in a box and chat, seemingly trading goods. Suddenly, everybody begins to run away. Some use the supermarket carts to carry their recently obtained items.
- It's night. The blinds of a butcher shop are torn apart; youngsters are coming out with large cuts of meat. Sirens can be heard in the background. Suddenly the police arrive on the scene. One cop tells people inside the store to leave. People start running out of the store. Those holding pieces of meat are stopped by another police agent; they abandon the meat cuts on the floor and keep running.

Figure 1. Lootings in Conurbano, December 19, 2001.

Figure 2. Lootings in Conurbano, December 19, 2001.

Figure 3. Lootings in Conurbano, December 19, 2001.

Figure 4. Lootings in Conurbano, December 19, 2001.

- A woman from the poor barrio La Travesía in the western part of the city of Rosario tells the camera: "We were told that we were going to receive bags of food, and we didn't get anything. They (the police) started shooting. We are here to ask for food, only a little bit of food, we are not asking for more." The police begin to shoot at the crowd. Most people run away, while others throw rocks at the police.
- A reporter informs the public that in the southern part of the Conurbano Bonaerense,[1] protesters are heading toward a large supermarket and demanding twenty kilograms of food. According to one protester, the managers are offering only "five hundred grams of flour for each family." After "moments of tension," municipal officials assure protesters that food will be distributed and the money for their unemployment subsidies (known then as *Planes Trabajar*) will soon be available.
- In most of these scenes, people are quiet. They do not hide themselves from the cameras – which in many cases are there before the police arrive. They go inside the stores, get as many goods as they can and walk away. Occasionally, however, they speak to the cameras. They speak about hunger but also about shame. Some of them scream at the cameras, others cry. "What did you get?" asks a reporter. "Everything," a man replies, with a somber smile. "And are you satisfied (*Y está conforme*)?" the reporter inquires. The man, not showing any surprise with such a ludicrous question, answers: "To tell you the truth, yes . . . because we are dying of hunger (*Porque nos estamos recagando del hambre*)." He leaves the scene walking, while the rest of the human traffic is orderly going in the opposite direction, seemingly on their way to get hold of their own share. "I am 30 years old. Can you imagine how ashamed my father is (*la vergüenza de mi papá*) as he watches me doing this?" a woman cries in front of the camera. Another one shouts: "We are hungry! Where's the mayor? I am alone, I have four kids; no one lends me a hand." A third, also crying, pleads: "There's a lot of hunger . . . there're no jobs. I

[1] The Conurbano is the metropolitan area adjacent to the capital city. It comprises thirty municipal districts.

have eight children; my husband is sick, I don't have enough to survive."[2]

These are quite varied snapshots of a series of events that Argentines still remember well: the December 2001 lootings. Some of the images are heartbreaking: desperate people asking "simply for a bag of food"; store owners frantically crying, unable to speak, while looters calmly carry goods out of their stores. Other images are familiar to, at least, Latin American eyes: police shooting rubber bullets and tear gas at crowds. In displaying collective violence by crowds against (sometimes) unprotected stores, the images invite viewers to take moral positions: Even if looters are "truly hungry," are they doing the right thing? Do store owners deserve this? The images call for morality; they also hint at relationality. They all show us different kinds of interactions: among looters; between looters and the looted, between looters and the police; between looters, store owners, and local officials. An understanding of all these interactions, however, is not to be found within them. We need to move outside of them, so to speak, to get a better grasp of what is going on and why the violence unfolds in the way it does. Once we do so, we begin to unearth some other (less visible) kinds of interaction – between, say, some organizers among the crowds and some police agents, between some store owners and some police agents, and so on – that were crucial during these episodes. By taking heed of the perspective of contentious politics, this book will take us as close as possible to where the truth of all these (hidden and overt) interactions lies. *Clandestine, concealed connections were central in making the lootings.* In the pages that follow, I focus much of my attention on these usually understudied relationships. These clandestine relationships constitute the gray zone of politics. Empirical and theoretical attention to this area is crucial, I argue in this book, to understand both routine and extraordinary forms of popular politics.

"We invite you to destroy the Kin supermarket this coming Wednesday at 11:30 A.M., the Valencia supermarket at 1:30 P.M., and the Chivo supermarket at 5 P.M." This and similar flyers circulated throughout poor

[2] These six brief stories were re-created on the basis of material taken from the visual archives of Channel Eleven and from the video *El Estallido*, produced by the newspaper *Página12*.

neighborhoods in Moreno, a district located in the west of the Conurbano Bonaerense, inviting residents to join the crowds that looted several dozen supermarkets and grocery stores on December 18 and 19. Investigative journalists' reports agree that the flyers were distributed by members of the Peronist Party, some of them local officials, others well-known grassroots leaders. The flyers betray a connection that analysts of the recent wave of violent contention in Argentina have consistently overlooked: the obscure (and obscured) links that looters maintain with established power-holders. The flyers, furthermore, point to a dimension that scholars of collective violence throughout the world have only recently begun to give due attention: the role of political entrepreneurs in the promotion, inhibition, and/or channeling of physical damage to objects and persons. By dissecting the specific actions of political brokers and the specific networks that they mobilized during the lootings of December 2001, this book sheds light on the intersection and interaction between routine politics and popular violence.

Neither the Kin, Valencia, and Chivo supermarkets nor most of the approximately three hundred stores looted throughout Argentina during the week-long wave of collective violence belong to supermarket chains. The largest chain supermarkets (known in Argentina as *hipermercados*) were, in fact, conspicuously absent from the list of stores ransacked by what mainstream newspapers described as "angry and hungry crowds." Several reports concur that the state police and the National Guard took special care when it came to protecting stores like the French-owned Carrefour and Auchan or the American-owned Norte while creating what grassroots activists called a "liberated zone" around small and medium-size stores – allowing political brokers and crowds to move freely from one target to the next. The spatial organization of repressive activities is indeed another key factor in the looting dynamics of that December. Together with an examination of the role played by party activists, the second empirical objective of this book concerns the form and the impact that the geography of policing had on the actual viability and variability of looting activity as well as on the amount of physical damage that was inflicted on stores and persons during the December 2001 episodes.

This book offers the first available analytic description of the lootings of December 2001. The research on which this description is based was

guided by a series of theoretical concerns regarding the existing continuities between everyday life, routine politics, and extraordinary massive actions. It was through an interest in the relational character of collective violence that I engaged in this project.[3] This book, however, is not only concerned with the food riots. Throughout the text, I will divert attention away from the lootings, branching out from that main empirical focus, in order to show that the kinds of continuities and relations present in these episodes of collective violence also exist in other – less spectacular – forms of political activity. Thus, this book is as much about the mutual imbrication between politics and violence in contemporary Argentina as it is about these specific lootings.

Before I move into a brief revision of the diverse strands of scholarship on which I draw in my analysis, let me clarify, in telegraphic form, the main substantive and analytical messages of the book in order to provide a handy blueprint for the reader. In terms of the book's substantive claims: I argue that *clandestine connections count* in the making of collective violence and in routine political life. This book explores the available empirical evidence and unearths a set of concealed connections between established actors (political brokers, repressive forces, etc.) that shape the distribution and form of collective violence. It also offers several examples of the operation of clandestine connections in everyday, ordinary, politics. In terms of the book's analytical claims: I argue that political analysis should start paying *rigorous empirical attention to this gray zone* of semisecret political interactions.

Episodic Collective Violence in the Literature

The main focus of this book is on collective violence, here understood as "episodic social interaction that immediately inflicts physical damage on

[3] My objective was the refinement of existing theory (Snow, Morrill, and Anderson 2003) or, in Burawoy's (1998) terms the "restructuring of theory" of collective violence along the lines suggested by scholars who study the roles that violent entrepreneurs and police agents play in the unfolding of transgressive contention (Tilly 2003). I did not follow an "inductivist" or "grounded theory" approach. Data collection in this sense should be properly termed data production in that it is intimately bound with the theoretical construction of the object (Bourdieu, Chamboderon, and Passeron 1991; Wacquant 2002).

persons and/or objects ('damage' includes forcible seizure of persons or objects over restraint or resistance), involves at least two perpetrators of damage, [and] results at least in part from coordination among persons who perform the damaging acts" (Tilly 2003:3). Thus, this book will concentrate neither empirical nor analytical attention on everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Bourgois 2001), symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1997; 2001; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), and/or structural violence (Farmer 2004; Wacquant 2004).

Explosions of Collective Violence in the North

Extraordinary outbursts of collective violence are hardly a monopoly of underdeveloped countries such as Argentina. During the last two decades, episodes of public unrest, in the form of massive lootings and riots, had also shocked advanced societies. Although a detailed review of each instance of urban disorder is beyond the scope of this book, I would like to briefly describe some of them and then concentrate some attention on one of the most recent episodes (the post-Katrina lootings). Despite dissimilar causes and forms, collective violence in the aftermath of a "natural" disaster shares common themes with the Argentine events under investigation here.[4]

Most North American readers are familiar with the explosion of civil violence that shocked Los Angeles in April 1992 following the acquittal of the four white police officers who were videotaped beating a defenseless Rodney King. Rioting and looting quickly spread outside the ghetto of South Central. Three days of violence left 2,400 injured and approximately 10,000 under arrest. The total damage was estimated at one billion dollars. As we will see in the next section, much of what we know about riot dynamics comes from social science research on these (and their 1960s' counterparts) episodes.

Most English readers will likely come up with other recollections of collective violence: the several nights in Brixton during April 1981, when youth riots left more than 300 injured, 83 buildings and 23 vehicles

[4] On the extent to which Katrina can be seen as an "unnatural" disaster, see the excellent collection of articles published on the Social Science Research Council Web site, especially Cutter (2006), Fussell (2006), Jackson (2006), and Smith (2006).

damaged (episodes were followed by other riots in London and Liverpool during July of that same year), or the events in Bristol during July 1992 when hundreds of youths rampaged through a local shopping center after two local men riding a stolen police motorcycle were killed in a collision with an unmarked police car (episodes were followed by similar ones in Conventry, Manchester, Salford, Blackburn, and Birmingham during that summer).

Analysts agreed that these urban disorders combined the logics of "bread" and "race" riots – protests against racial injustice and against economic deprivation and social inequality. Sufferers – mainly the youth of poor, segregated, and often dilapidated urban neighborhoods – deployed "the most effective, if not the only, weapon at their disposal, namely direct forcible disruption of civil life" (Wacquant 1993:5).

This double logic is also true for the most recent episodes of explosive collective violence in the First World, namely the November 2005 riots in France. Soon after teenagers Zyed Benna and Bouna Taore were electrocuted after climbing into an electrical sub-station in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois (according to locals, they were hiding from the police), riots quickly spread through France. With youths burning cars and attacking public buildings and private businesses, violence multiplied in the suburbs of Paris and throughout "more than 270 towns" (*Guardian*, November 7, 2005) in the east (Dijon), north (Lille and Rennes), and south (Toulouse and Nice) of France, mostly geographically and socially circumscribed to the destitute neighborhoods of the suburbs known as "cités" or "quartier difficiles" (Roy 2006). Youngsters were again the main actors of the episodes, their manifest rage springing from "lifetimes of rampant unemployment, school failure, police harassment, and everyday racist discrimination" (Silverstein and Tetreault 2006:2). As of November 17, the violence resulted in "almost 9,000 torched vehicles and nearly 3000 arrests in nearly 100 municipalities across France" (Silverstein and Tetreault 2006:2).

Several commentators (Cesari 2006; Silverstein and Tetreault 2006; and Roy 2006) agree that the November riots were not isolated episodes.[5]

[5] See Silverstein and Tetreault (2006) for a summary description of episodes of violent popular unrest in France since 1980. On the recurrent character of French riots since

In point of fact, they are part of a long cycle of violent popular unrest that began in the early 1980s. As Kastoryano succinctly puts it (2006:1):

> Nothing is new with the last riots in France, they just lasted longer. . . . Ever since the 1980s, the press has been reporting the increasingly numerous riots in the French banlieues: among the most famous, Minguettes in 1981 and 1983, and Vaulx-en-Velin (both suburbs of Lyon) in 1990. These reports went along with pictures of burned-out cars, looted display windows, riots police, and young people throwing stones.

The point should be clear by now: Explosive collective violence, in the form of riots and lootings, is hardly a remnant of the past but part and parcel of life in contemporary societies of the advanced north – intricately tied to the very ways in which class, race, and ethnic inequities are structured and reproduced over time.

Contemporary First and Third World societies also witness the eruption of explosive collective violence in the immediate aftermath of "natural" disasters – usually in the form of food looting. This was the case after the flooding that devastated the state of Vargas in Venezuela in 1999, after the earthquake that shook the city of Armenia in Colombia that same year, and during the recurrent droughts that affect the Brazilian northeast. This was also the case in the first days after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans on August 29, 2005.

Although clearly "blown out of proportion" (Solnit 2005), looting "began at the moment the storm passed over New Orleans, and it ranged from base thievery to foraging for the necessities of life" (*New York Times*, September 29, 2005) – or what Christian Parenti calls "survival looting" (Parenti 2005). In the first days after the hurricane, dozens of drug stores, convenience stores, supermarkets, shoe stores, gas stations, electronics shops, auto parts stores, and gun and ammunition shops were ransacked (*Times Picayune*, September 1, 2005b; *New York Times*, September 29, 2005).[6]

the 1980s, see Roy (2006). For the different factors involved in the making of the November episodes, see Wieviorka (2006).

[6] The overwhelming majority (178 out of 223) of the suspects locked up in the temporary jail built in the New Orleans bus terminal ("Camp Greyhound") were accused of looting – most of them from Jefferson Parish (*Times Picayune*, September 9, 2005).