

## Introduction

### *How Violence Varies: Subnational Place, Identity, and Embeddedness*

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Late one night in Quito, Ecuador, two women were held in the office of a jail. One, a pregnant local woman with dark hair and skin, had been found in possession of a drawer full of watches. She covered her face as a police officer repeatedly pepper sprayed and berated her, demanding to know how she came by the watches. He complained that he could not throw her in a cell and be done with her because of her condition. The other woman, a white foreigner, had been arrested outside a nightclub for not carrying valid personal identification. An officer tried to intimidate her, threatening to put her “in the back” with other detainees—“they’ll kill you back there.” She did not take him very seriously and was released when an Ecuadorian friend turned up with cash to pay off the officers.<sup>2</sup>

This anecdote highlights not only that the police in the Americas (as in many other parts of the world) often behave unethically, but also that (in)security means different things for different people. The officers, although acting outside the regulatory framework of the law, were part of a system of police, political, and judicial collusion that provides corrupt and abusive individuals active and passive protection—the latter through a socio-political history of power over the masses. Democracy has not been able to shift this system of power (see Eaton and Prieto; Müller;

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<sup>2</sup> Hilgers, personal experience, spring 1997.

Durazo Herrmann; and Gay, all this volume; and Brinks 2007). The foreigner had the financial resources to buy her way out of the situation, and recourse to support from institutions and individuals in her immediate environment, including her embassy, multinational employer, and resourceful local friends. The officers knew this. The local woman, however, had no such resources. Her race, clothing, and gender, and likely the location of her arrest, gave her away as someone who could easily be abused. We can imagine that this was not the first time she suffered because her legal rights meant little in practice—without money or influential individuals to protect her, she was powerless. Identity and place matter to the structure and experience of violence.

Insecurity is a daily reality in Latin America and the Caribbean and has risen to the forefront of civil society concerns and political agendas over the past several years. In aggregate figures for the region and individually in twelve of the eighteen countries studied by Latinobarómetro (2013), crime and insecurity now precede unemployment and the economy as citizens' principal concerns. Based on the readily comparable national-level homicide statistics often used to evaluate violence (see Daudelin, this volume), their concerns are legitimate. The region accounts for only eight percent of the world's population, but generates 42 percent of all gun-related homicides (OAS 2008). Of the estimated 437,000 global homicides in 2012, the highest percentage (36 percent) occurred in Latin America and this was an increase of 8.5 percent over the 2010 rate. Central America has the highest regional average rate in the world (along with Southern Africa) at twenty-five homicides per 100,000 population, while South America's twenty-three per 100,000 put it in third place, and the Caribbean's sixteen per 100,000 is also significantly above the global average of 6.2 per 100,000 (UNODC 2013). Individually, El Salvador has the world's highest homicide rate at 103 per 100,000, with Venezuela (90), Honduras (57), and Jamaica (45) also scoring extremely high (InSight Crime 2016). Time series data since 1955 indicate that the Americas have always had homicide rates between five and eight times higher than Europe and Asia, the areas with the lowest averages (UNODC 2013). In addition, more than half of the countries in the world ranked "high" or "very high" for femicides (the killing of women because they are women) are located in the Americas. Here, too, El Salvador ranks as the worst in the world (UN Women 2015).

While homicide (and femicide) rates are one reason for security concerns, they do not explain the intensity of citizen fear. The region's countries have largely emerged from the era of civil war, genocide, and

dictatorship as formally peaceful democracies. But citizen perceptions of security have not improved. In fact, things may be worse. During times of war and state-led terror, there was some feeling that one could escape the violence by avoiding particular geographic zones or keeping political affinities quiet. Now, crime and assault appear ubiquitous and there is no reliable way of knowing where threats originate or when one might be struck: “‘[P]eace’ can be ‘worse than the war’ ” (Moodie 2010: 2).

Homicide statistics reveal little about victims, perpetrators, and the nature of violence. It is in disaggregating the figures for gender, age, race, and class at the local level, and in going beyond homicides to nonlethal experiences of aggression, that we come to grasp the scope and internal differentiation of violence. For example, young, black males are at much higher risk of dying a violent death than their white counterparts (Amparo Alves 2014; Willadino and Barbosa 2013); women are less likely to be killed than men (Daudelin, this volume), but—unlike men—will often be killed merely for the reason of gender (Prieto-Carrón, Thomson, and Macdonald 2007); women suffer high rates of physical and/or sexual violence (UN Women 2012; Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza 2012); and aggression among youth has exploded (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011; Auyero and Berti 2015). Femicides are particularly prevalent in certain zones of Central America and Mexico, youth violence is highest in drug trafficking areas, and race-related aggressions are widespread in the poorest areas. The criminalization of (often overlapping) poverty and race means that people living in poor urban neighborhoods are frequently under threat of police aggression (Müller 2012) and the remoteness of many rural areas, with their traditional social hierarchies, results in violence against local peasants and workers (Kay 2001). It is also difficult to generalize what will happen in what kind of setting, because the differences appear not only between races, genders, income levels, and geographic locations, but also *among* experiences of violence (Daudelin, this volume; Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza 2012). We have to focus on subnational spaces and actors to understand who are the victims of violence.

The need to dig into the data is also driven by the characteristics of the perpetrators of violence. In the 1970s, bureaucratic-authoritarian states monopolized violence to a much greater degree than contemporary democracies. Violence often had an intensely local character—particularly related to land ownership, natural resource bases, and market structures (see Roniger 1990)—but under bureaucratic authoritarian regimes with highly centralized state forms, hierarchies of power to

inflict violence were relatively easy to identify. Through the process of democratization, power has devolved and, with it, violence (Eaton 2006; Eaton and Prieto in this volume). Today, state agents, parastatal organizations, political parties, organized criminals, petty gangs, private enterprises, landowners, civil society groups, and individual citizens recur to violence to impose themselves on others or make themselves heard, with a view to generating a societal order in which they can strive for their particular personal, economic, and political goals (Arias and Goldstein 2010). Courts suffer from insufficient resources, investigative police are poorly trained, the police are militarized, and violence against the poor masses is culturally acceptable. Impunity reigns for white-collar or violent crimes perpetrated by elites and state officials, while the masses know that justice is beyond their reach (NACLA 1996; Ungar 2013; Müller this volume). Who engages in violence and gets away with it depends on subnational power structures and the connections among individuals with different types of resources; that is, on how people are embedded in their contexts, how they network, and how they exchange goods, services, and loyalty through patronage and clientelism.

We argue that contemporary violence is a moving target, characterized by configurations of historical legacies, economic structures, institutions, and actors that are embedded in subnational space and identity. The chapters in this volume examine cases from across the region, analyzing how identifiable political actors and institutions link down into people's lives. This meso level focus allows us to connect structural and physical violence, and to relate types of violence often studied in different disciplinary literatures, including criminal, electoral, and gender- and race-based violence. In polities that have grown out of centuries of violence and exclusion, identity-based divisions prevail, millions lack social and economic opportunities, and neoliberal democratization has led to institutional changes that have decentralized power and violence to regional and local levels. Organized and petty criminals, savage elites, and frustrated have-nots take what they can, using personal networks and clientelism linked into local, as well as national and transnational, sources of power to circumvent formal rules and regulations or to bend these to their will, while layers of rational-legal state actors, truncated by limited resources, do not have the capacity to monopolize or organize violence. How the map unfolds varies from one place to the next.

The collection is designed to shed light on the nature and causes of violence in the Americas. This introductory chapter begins with an overview of the debates surrounding violence as a concept, before considering its

changing forms, the embeddedness of its perpetrators, the importance of subnational space and identity to its understanding, and the methodological difficulties of collecting the data on which the chapters are built.

#### TYPES OF VIOLENCE

Violence is a debated notion, with scholars and practitioners applying a variety of definitions ranging in scope. In a chapter dissecting the concept, de Haan (2008) identifies twenty different forms, which he then further classifies based on internal distinctions. Thus, criminologists and legal scholars may define violence as illegal acts of force, while anthropologists might include social and cultural configurations in which the marginalization of certain groups or persons routinely exposes them to physical and psychological harm.

For statistical purposes, violence is often classified as homicide or other acts of force with discernible perpetrators and victims. Homicide rates are useful because they allow researchers to generate comparable indexes across locations and societies and because they are more easily recognizable and quantifiable than other indicators (UNODC 2013). Public health perspectives cast a wider net with their inclusion of “injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” resulting from applied or threatened force (World Health Organization (WHO) cited in Dahlberg and Krug 2002). This understanding of violence comprises self-directed, interpersonal, and collective behavior, with the latter perpetrated by groups or states for social (terrorism, hate crimes, mobs), political (war and state violence), and economic (for profit) reasons (Dahlberg and Krug 2002). The WHO’s attempt to deal with damage caused by behavior considered acceptable in some cultures, such as corporal punishment of family members, by focusing on outcome rather than process also has the benefit, like homicide rates, of facilitating cross-regional comparison.

Some sociologists and anthropologists take the meaning of violence beyond cases where perpetrators are readily identifiable, to include social structures that indirectly harm their victims. Galtung (1969) identifies violence as a situation keeping someone from reaching her full potential, thereby including any context in which the possibility of improving her physical, mental, and emotional condition exists, but the knowledge, freedom of action, goods, and/or services necessary to do so are kept beyond her reach. We may not be able to easily indicate who is doing the harming and who is harmed, but can say that power structures exist to create

winners and losers. Farmer summarizes this structural violence as “violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order . . . the social machinery of oppression . . . structures that are both ‘sinful’ and ostensibly ‘nobody’s fault’” (2004: 307).

In a similar vein, some feminists use the term *femicide* to draw attention to the intersection of different forms of violence against women. *Femicide* and *femicide* are often used interchangeably to refer to the killing of women because of their gender, but many Latin American feminists prefer the term *feminicidio* because it conveys the idea that the source of the violence is rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities, and also interacts with racism and local and global forms of economic injustice (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 4–5). The term *femicide* implicates both the state (directly or indirectly) and individual perpetrators, thus encompassing both widespread systematic and everyday interpersonal forms of violence (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 5).

Crossing the disciplines of anthropology and political science, Arias and Goldstein (2010) build on ideas of violence as a structure to identify Latin American democracies as inherently violent. Their concept of “violent pluralism” is also intended to further an understanding of the social order as violent per se, where physical violence between individuals is but a symptom of a broader reality. Constitutionally protected citizens vote in regular elections and are represented by politicians of all ideological stripes and personal backgrounds, but the regimes deviate from North-western normative ideas of democracy in that they are constructed on violence. States rely on violence against their citizens to maintain stability, nonstate groups use it to contest power, and citizens employ it to force state responsiveness. The legal (Weberian) and illegal uses are linked inextricably; differently from one place to another, but always such that they construct “particular forms of order” (Arias and Goldstein 2010: 26).

None of these definitions are without analytical and methodological problems. Encompassing ideas are appealing because they attempt to capture the effects otherwise hidden in social configurations. At the same time, umbrella terms such as structural violence or *femicide* can be counterproductive, when the causes and consequences of the various acts and situations, as well as the agency of perpetrators and victims, should be disaggregated (Wacquant 2004). For those interested in broad comparisons and quantitative models, structural violence is also difficult to operationalize: how might one identify, let alone measure, something like the effects of exclusion embedded in cultural norms? Violence then falls

into the category of stretched concepts, along with democracy, clientelism, corruption, and others (see de Haan 2008; Collier and Levitsky 1997; Hilgers 2011). Minimalist definitions, on the other hand, can also hide as much as they reveal. As Daudelin (this volume) argues, the national level homicide rates often used as proxies for violence gloss over significant subnational spatial and demographic variations, such as the coexistence of violent and secure locations and the differences in numbers of male and female victims, in addition to the problem that the rates of homicides and of other acts of violence may vary unrelated to each other. And, the minimalist perspective does not obviate data problems, as even homicide statistics can be inadequate or challenging to collect. They often have to be based on combinations of records kept by police, the public health system, and nongovernmental organizations, in order to arrive at reasonably reliable totals, not to mention statistics disaggregated by gender and age (UNODC 2013; Dahlberg and Krug 2002; Prieto-Carrón, Thomson, and Macdonald 2007).

For the purposes of our argument in this chapter, we adopt a broad definition of violence, including both its structural and its epiphenomenal aspects. We do not aim to undertake wide-ranging comparisons, but to understand the processes leading to, and the qualities identifying the character of, locally differentiated realities of violence. Our position is that the intersections between individual and group identities, social and political configurations of power, political institutions, economic characteristics, and history at the local, regional, and national, levels are constitutive of the different degrees and characteristics of violence from one place to another.

Aggregate statistics are interesting for overviews of basic global trends, but hide variations among domestic regions and municipalities and changes in their rates (see Daudelin in this volume). For example, Brazil's homicide rate has hovered around 26 per 100,000 inhabitants since the late 1990s, but the 2013 state-level figures range from 11.6 in the southern state of Santa Catarina to 65.3 for the northeastern state of Alagoas (Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2014). In the 2005 to 2012 period, the national rate increased by eight percent, but Rio de Janeiro state's decreased by 40.3 percent and São Paulo state's by 36.6 percent, while Paraíba's increased by 186 percent (Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2013). In 2009, the average homicide rate in the city of Rio de Janeiro was 52 per 100,000, but actually much lower—34 per 100,000—in its infamously violent favelas. Among favelas, rates ranged from 22 to 44, and in their immediate peripheries from 48 to 129 per 100,000 (Barcellos and Zaluar 2014). As we begin to break down the

statistics we uncover important questions about perpetrators, victims, and the processes leading to violence. Aggregates cannot help us to identify the groups and individuals involved or the socio-political structures and hierarchies that are integral to the quality and quantity of violence on the ground.

Although Wacquant (2004) considers Farmer's (2004) desire to express the oppression of marginalized peoples in terms of an all-encompassing form of violence as problematic for the same reasons we evoke for steering away from national statistics, the concept of structural violence *can* combine well with the disaggregation of data. It gives us the tools to imagine that the violence faced by so many people in the region is embedded in structures, institutions, cultures, and identities and to seek out the characteristics of the actors involved in order to understand how their links with the context place them in positions of active or passive aggressor and victim. The result of this effort is a volume that brings together contributions analyzing violence at the intersection of different spaces and identities—for example, Müller's chapter deals with direct human rights abuses committed by the police, while Lapegna's analyzes a more indirect form of violence in the effects of agribusiness pesticide use on the health of peasants—and is able to draw out the commonalities among them.

#### CHANGING FORMS OF VIOLENCE

The Americas are marked by a history of political and economic violence, as colonial powers, world markets, and their own elites exploited local populations. Spanish and Portuguese colonization of Latin America claimed millions of Indigenous lives in the sixteenth century and the nation-building policies of the newly independent nineteenth-century republics came close to exterminating many native groups (Gabbert 2012; Trincherro 2006). Colonial and postindependence economies in Latin America and the Caribbean depended heavily on slave labor and debt peonage (Gabbert 2012; Alston, Mattiace, and Nonnenmacher 2009). These racialized systems of oppression created unequal and exploitative agrarian economic systems (Kay 2001). Industrialization led to a demographic shift, as rural folk migrated to the cities, but the pattern of property-related marginalization continued with municipal governments seeking to remove the poor to inadequately serviced city outskirts with uncertain property rights (Davis 2014). Struggles for rural land access and urban housing, services, and jobs morphed into broader political



conflicts and then civil wars and/or military dictatorships in which hundreds of thousands perished (Kay 2001; Figueroa 2013; McSherry 2007; Ortiz de Zarate 2003). In the context of war and civil unrest, women faced particular forms of aggression. Rape was used as a weapon by opposing forces in El Salvador, Peru, and Haiti (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 2), and Guatemalan soldiers sexually enslaved Indigenous women during the counterinsurgency war in the 1980s (Ruiz-Navarro 2016). Patterns of violence did vary internally, depending on the type of interaction between colonizing forces and natives, the pervasiveness of the slave trade, the strength of local democratic regimes, and insertion into global trade routes and markets (see, for example, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Van Cott 2000; Stinchcombe 1995). Since the third wave transitions to democracy and the peace processes, however, a greater variety of subnational actors are taking on the role of perpetrators.

Colonization, the slave trade, and independence were as violent in the Caribbean as in Latin America. After the decimation of native populations, first African slaves and then Asian indentured laborers were used to work plantations under brutal conditions (Klein and Vinson 2007; Northrup 1995). Postemancipation, white or mulatto elites retained positions of power and privilege, as race and status mobility remained closely intertwined—with the exception of Haiti, where exploitation has not been race-based. Since the slave revolution (1791–1804), Haiti's black political elite has been unable to create an “integral state”—one in which society recognizes its leaders' hegemony—and has ruled with predatory force (Fatton 2006). Local autocrats have also ruled in the Dominican Republic and Cuba, but, beyond these cases of nineteenth-century independence, colonial regimes survived well into the second half of the twentieth century, with several islands remaining as French, British, or American territories or protectorates even today (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011). Subnational actors have played a critical role in postindependence violence in the second half of the twentieth century. Political parties are key among these, especially in Jamaica, where competing parties' attempts to create fiefdoms populated by loyal voters developed into deadly conflicts (Sives 2002; Levy 2013; Campbell and Clarke in this volume). Gangs and drug traffickers now challenge the hegemony of political parties, ruling their territories according to their own laws, while parties in power counter gang violence with *mano dura* policing that overwhelmingly targets poor and black sectors of the population (Levy 2013; Campbell and Clarke in this volume).

As the contributions to this volume make clear, there is no easy distinction between violence under authoritarian and democratic regimes, as authoritarian practices—especially within the police—have carried into the contemporary era. The region’s authoritarian regimes were inherently violent, repressing, killing, or disappearing members of opposition movements and civilians suspected of subversive impulses, and riding roughshod over civilian rights. Under formally democratic governments, state and nonstate armed actors coerce and repress civilians in their territories, with the former justifying their actions with the need to ensure public security and the latter contesting that power (see Bonner 2014). What is the difference? Authoritarian governments ruled through violent coercion, while democratic ones try to create institutions that will allow for rule without violent coercion, but—mired in social, political, and economic problems—they often recur to it to maintain order (see the chapters by Müller, Gay, Durazo Herrmann, and Eaton and Prieto in this volume).

The new forms of violence in the democratic era are the result of a number of cultural, economic, and political forces. As much as insecurity tops political agendas and private concerns, the centuries-long prevalence of state violence along with state corruption related to human rights and security issues has created a culture of acceptance. State and civil society actors believe that violence is an integral part of the regional environment. This fatalism undermines the possibilities for change and enables new forms of violence (Arias and Goldstein 2010). Structural factors reinforce cultural ones. High rates of inequality, lacking opportunities for socioeconomic advancement among lower class youth, and low pay for law enforcement officials mean that drug gangs, paramilitary groups, and other criminal organizations with resources are able to attract youth and subvert the forces of order (Crisis Group 2012; Perlman 2010; Shefner 2008). Unforeseen side effects of democratization and electoral concerns have created an institutional environment that allows criminal elements to flourish. The increased local autonomy that followed transitions to democracy was intended to limit conflict and enhance representation and service delivery. Decentralization has had beneficial results in certain areas, but in others enabled criminal and paramilitary forces to capture local resources and power and use them to entrench and expand their activities (Gay 2012; Eaton 2006; Eaton and Prieto this volume). Containing violence has also been difficult because cohesive, effective programs are lacking. Policy directions change often and institution building tends to be piecemeal, so that the state—at all levels—cannot build