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Violence and the State at the Urban Margins

Javier Auyero[1], Agustín Burbano de Lara[2], and María Fernanda Berti[3]

Abstract
Based on thirty months of ethnographic fieldwork in a violence-ridden, low-income district located in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, this article examines the state's presence at the urban margins and its relationships to widespread depacification of poor people's daily life. Contrary to descriptions of destitute urban areas in the Americas as either governance voids deserted by the state or militarized spaces firmly controlled by the state's iron fist, this article argues that law enforcement in Buenos Aires's high-poverty zones is intermittent, selective, and contradictory. By putting the state's fractured presence at the urban margins under the ethnographic microscope, the article reveals its key role in the perpetuation of the violence it is presumed to prevent.

Keywords
urban violence, poverty, Argentina, state

In *The Civilizing Process* (1994), Norbert Elias posits the existence of a mutually reinforcing relationship between the pacification of daily life in a given region and the actions (or inactions) of the state that rules over that area. The "civilizing process" means, above all, the removal of violence from social life and its relocation under the control of the state.[1] Elias's insight is particularly

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pertinent to understanding and explaining the diverse forms of criminal and interpersonal violence that are ravaging the lives of the urban poor in contemporary Latin America (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011; Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Perlman 2011). Taking heed of Elias's general proposition, and confronted with the intensification of urban violence in the subcontinent, we ask: *When, how, and to what effect does the state police the places where the poor live?*

Based on thirty months of ethnographic fieldwork in a violence-ridden, low-income district located in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires (known as the *Conurbano Bonaerense*), this article examines the relationship between the state's presence at the urban margins and the de-pacification of poor people's daily lives.[2] Contrary to descriptions of destitute urban areas in the Americas as either "governance voids" deserted by the state (Anderson 1999; Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Venkatesh 2008; Williams 1992) or militarized spaces firmly controlled by the state's iron fist (Goffman 2009; Müller 2011; Rios 2010), we argue, by way of empirical demonstration, that law enforcement in Buenos Aires's high-poverty zones is, analogous to the forms of governance analyzed by Rodgers in Managua (2006b), *intermittent, selective*, and *contradictory.* By putting the state's fractured presence at the urban margins under the ethnographic microscope, we reveal its key role in the perpetuation of the violence it is presumed to prevent.

Social scientific and journalistic descriptions of violence in what Loïc Wacquant (2007) calls "territories of urban relegation" abound in the Americas (Alarcón 2009; Anderson 1999; Aricapa 2005; Castillo Berthier and Jones 2009; Friday 1995; Gay 2005; Goldstein 2003, 1998; Harding 2010; Jones 2009; Pine 2008; Venkatesh 2008; Wilding 2010). Studies consistently show that lack of economic opportunities coupled with geographic isolation foster "a climate where crime and interpersonal violence . . . become pervasive" (Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann 2010, 721) in inner cities, black ghettoes, *favelas, villas, comunas, poblaciones*, and *colonias populares*, just a few of the terms used to describe the urban areas where multiple forms of deprivation accumulate. Research in psychology and community studies reveals the litany of violence to which the poor are subjected and shows that different kinds of violence typically "pile up" (Farrell et al. 2007, 446). However, notwithstanding recent detailed accounts (Arias 2006a; Goldstein 2012; Rodgers 2006a, 2006b; Willis 2009), we know preciously little about the ways in which the actions or inactions of state agents may tame or increase this violence. This article seeks to fill this void.

This article begins with an overview of the kinds of violence emerging in Latin America and then provides a description of our field site and methodology. The article is then divided into two main sections. Based on newspaper reports, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork, the first section examines the

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different types of violence currently affecting the urban poor in Buenos Aires. The second section, based on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews, dissects the nature of state presence in one high-poverty area and shows the key role played by law enforcement in the reproduction of daily violence.

New Forms of Violence

Although violence has had a continual presence in the history of Latin America (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011), during the last decade a new kind of violence has been emerging in the region (Briceño-León 1999; Koonings 2001; Koonings and Kruijt 2007) and is now besieging many of the new democracies in the subcontinent (Arias and Goldstein 2010; Caldeira 2000; Goldstein 2012; Pearce 2009; Jones and Rodgers 2009). This violence is "increasingly available to a variety of social actors," is no longer an exclusive "resource of elites or security forces," and includes "everyday criminal and street violence, riots, social cleansing, private account selling, police arbitrariness, paramilitary activities, post-Cold War guerrillas, etc." (Koonings 2001, 403). Although the "newness" of violence has been the subject of much scholarly debate among academics (see, e.g., Wilding 2010), most agree that there has been a significant change in the forms of prevalent violence since the early 1990s.[3] As Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión (2011, 95) assert in their comprehensive review of violence research in the region, political violence "has now receded significantly in most countries of the continent," and it has been replaced by interpersonal violence, drug-related violence, domestic abuse, child abuse, and sexual assault. These forms of violence are thus quite varied and, different from the past, they are now located mostly in urban areas. Moreover, this new urban violence affects the most disadvantaged populations in disproportionate ways (Brinks 2008; CELS 2009; Gay 2005), particularly adolescents and young adults (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011)—both as victims and as perpetrators.

In the case of Argentina, and particularly the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, the increase of interpersonal violence is beyond dispute (ODSA 2011).[4] Official data for the province of Buenos Aires show a doubling of crime rates between 1995 and 2008, from 1,114 to 2,010 criminal episodes per 100,000 residents and from 206 crimes against persons (i.e., homicides, assault, and battery) to 535 per 100,000 residents. Sexual and domestic abuse has also been on the rise during the past two decades (*La Nación*, February 24, 2008).

Sites and Methods

This article is based on twenty formal, in-depth interviews with residents of Arquitecto Tucci and, perhaps more importantly, innumerable informal

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conversations and direct observations carried out over a two-and-a-half-year period of team ethnographic fieldwork (June 2009 to December 2011). During this period, one of the authors also worked in the area as an elementary school teacher. The article draws on the detailed ethnographic notes she took based on her students' activities inside and outside the school, and on dozens of conversations with school teachers and parents. In order to identify residential patterns, sources of employment, levels of education, and the most common problems according to the population under investigation, we conducted hundred short interviews (which lasted between thirty minutes and an hour). We recruited the respondents via snowball sampling. Finally, we conducted archival research on local newspapers (all of them accessible online), focusing on instances of interpersonal violence (injuries in interpersonal disputes and homicides) between 2009 and 2012.

We tape-recorded, transcribed, and systematically analyzed our in-depth interviews for their content. We coded and analyzed our field notes using open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Applying the evidentiary criteria normally used for ethnographic research (Becker 1958, 1970; Katz 1982, 2001, 2002), we assigned higher evidentiary value to individual acts or patterns of conduct recounted by many observers than to those recounted by only one observer. Although particular in their details, the testimonies, field notes, and vignettes selected below represent behavior observed or heard about with consistent regularity during the course of our fieldwork.

Arquitecto Tucci (pop. 170,000) sits in the southern part of metropolitan Buenos Aires.[5] Located adjacent to the banks of the highly polluted Riachuelo River, this poverty-stricken area is composed of several historically working-class neighborhoods, squatter settlements, and shantytowns. The streets and blocks in neighborhoods and squatter settlements follow the pattern of urban zoning (known as the "*forma damero*" or checkerboard), while the shantytowns' winding alleyways and passages do not. Residents in the working-class neighborhoods are property owners and generally better off compared to shantytown dwellers and squatters, both of whom have still-unresolved land tenure. Extreme levels of infrastructural deprivation—or what Braun and McCarthy (2005) would term the material dimension of state abandonment—characterize the area: unpaved streets, open air sewers, broken sidewalks, scarce lighting, and random garbage collection.

But Arquitecto Tucci is not totally deserted by the state. The *Asignación Universal por Hijo* (AUH), as the Argentine conditional cash transfer program effective since 2008 is known, and many other welfare programs (*Argentina Trabaja; Plan Vida*) provide assistance to most of its residents. Patronage networks linked to the governing party and soup kitchens funded by Catholic charities are also sources of assistance for those in need in the area, as these sources provide crucial resources such as food and medicine.

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Finally, the informal labor market contributes to many household incomes in the area, and residents most frequently report working in construction, domestic service, and scavenging.

Together with state assistance, charity aid and informal jobs, the other main source of subsistence for the population is the largest street fair in the country, located north of Arquitecto Tucci. Known by the name La Salada, the fair consists of three different markets (Urkupiña, Ocean, and Punta Mogote) where, twice a week, thousands of shoppers buy counterfeit apparel and small electronics and food.[6] According to the Economic Commission of the European Union (*La Nación*, March 10, 2009), La Salada is the "world's emblem of the production and commercialization of falsified brand merchandise." Either as owners or employees of one of the thousands of stalls or as workers in one of the hundreds of sweatshops that manufacture the goods sold there, many residents from the neighborhood benefit from the presence of this vast street fair (D'Angiolillo et al. 2010). Roughly a quarter of our hundred interviewees regularly work at La Salada.

Violence on the Ground

According to the municipal Defensoría General, homicides in Arquitecto Tucci increased 180% since 2007—from a total number of 17 in that year to 48 between January and October of 2012 (the population of the municipality where Arquitecto Tucci is located grew only 4.2% between 2001 and 2010). The murder rate in Arquitecto Tucci is thus 28.4 per 100,000 residents—four times that of the state of Buenos Aires.

In-depth interviews with physicians who have been working in the emergency rooms (ERs) at the local hospital and local health center confirm the skyrocketing of interpersonal violence. "Today," says a doctor with fifteen years of experience in the district, "it is much more common to attend to patients with injuries provoked by gunshots or knives . . . at least one per day." The director of the emergency room at the local hospital that serves the population of Arquitecto Tucci seconds this general impression: during the last decade, he says, there has been a 10% annual increase in the number of wounded by gunshots or knives (*heridos por armas de fuego y arma blanca*). The five interviewed physicians all agree that the two days a week in which the street fair is open, there is an increase in the number of patients injured in street fights. As one ER doctor puts it: "The fair is a source of conflict. There's an increase in interpersonal aggression during the days its markets opens to the public. Thousands of people come with cash to buy [goods] or with merchandise to sell. There are many robberies, lots of them at gunpoint."

According to information published in the local newspapers, out of the twenty-five homicides reported between 2009 and 2012, eight took place

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adjacent to the street fair—most of them in the occasion of a robbery attempt.[7] Unsurprisingly, violence is the main concern among residents. Among our hundred interviewees, an overwhelming majority cite delinquency, insecurity, robberies, and drug-dealing as their main preoccupations.

Small "bands" ("La banda del gordo Mario," "La banda de los Guille," "Los corsarios") devoted to the storage, preparation, and distribution of drugs are reported to have operated in Arquitecto Tucci and its surrounding area, fueling part of this rise in interpersonal violence (see, Sain 2009). During our fieldwork, many police operations, some of them including exchanges of gunshots between police agents and dealers, seized dozens of kilograms of cocaine and thousands of doses of free base cocaine (FBC) locally known as *paco*.[8]

During the two years and a half of fieldwork, Author 3 worked with three different groups of students (third-, fourth-, and sixth-graders aged 8 to 13) in an Arquitecto Tucci school. Among these students, shootings, armed robberies, and street fights are habitual topics of conversation—regularly present in their daily lives. In other words, violence does not need to be "brought up" by the ethnographer as a "theme" to be discussed and analyzed. During our fieldwork, not a week went by without one or more of the sixty elementary school children describing one or more episodes involving one or more forms of violence.

More or less trivial occasions inside the classroom—as the mentioning of a relative's birthday or a history lesson—become opportunities to talk about the latest violent episode in the neighborhood.

> May 5, 2010. "In May 1810," Author 3 reads aloud from the social science textbook to the fourth graders, "the King of Spain was deposed by Napoleon Bonaparte. Jailed in France . . ." "Teacher, teacher . . ." Carlos (age 9) interrupts, "my uncle is also in jail… I think he is in for robbery." Another student, Matu (age 9), then adds: "Right around my house, there's one guy who is a thief, but never went to jail . . . he has a new car." Suddenly, the lesson on the May Revolution becomes a collective report on the latest events in the neighborhood:

Johny (age 10): Do you know that Savalita was killed? Seven shots . . . some dealers wanted to steal his motorcycle. . . .

Tatiana (age 9): No, it wasn't like that. Savalita was the one who wanted the motorcycle. He tried to steal it from a drug dealer. Word, I knew him!

Johny: No, it was his motorcycle . . .

Mario (age 9): My neighbor is a drug dealer. The cops come and never do anything. . . .

Tatiana: Cops like to use drugs!

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Elementary school children see themselves as growing up in the crossfire – a sentiment shared by the anonymous author of the graffiti, sprayed on one of the walls outside of their school, who wrote: “I was born amid bullets, I was raised among thieves” [“*Entre balas he nacido, entre chorros me he criado*”]. A few blocks from the school where Author 3 works, two murals provide a visual reminder of the lethal consequences of this violence (Figures 1 and 2). Sixteen-year-old Acho was killed three years ago when a local storeowner shot him during an attempted robbery. It was Acho’s first robbery attempt. Dani, nineteen, was murdered two years ago under similar circumstances.

Figure 1. Murals in the neighborhood recall the lethal consequences of violence. Both youngsters were killed when trying to rob local stores.

Figure 2. Murals in the neighborhood recall the lethal consequences of violence. Both youngsters were killed when trying to rob local stores.

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Children and adolescents growing up in this neighborhood not only encounter criminal and drug-related violence, but intimate and sexual violence frequently put their lives in severe danger as well.

> October 13, 2009 (Author 3 field notes): "Julio's mother called the school today. She wanted to talk to her son. During the break, I spoke with Julio (age 8). He told me that his mom had to leave their house over the weekend and described why: 'my dad had been drinking and he beat the shit out of her. My dad is a slacker, he doesn't have a job. My mom gives him money and he spends it on wine. On Saturday, my mom asked him to turn the volume of the music down and he slapped her in the face, and then he grabbed her hair and dragged her through the house. He also destroyed all the things in the house.'"

> October 15, 2009 (Author 3 field notes): "Julio's mother came to the school today. She confirmed to me what happened a few days ago. She asked me to observe Julio to make sure he has not been beaten by his dad. In my presence, she also asked her son, Julio, to take good care of his sister because Julio's mother is afraid their dad will sexually abuse her [Julio's sister]."

One specific risk is more likely to affect girls than boys in these neighborhoods: sexual violence. Referring to the presence of "*violines*" (those who "*violan*," i.e. rapists) and suggesting one of the ways in which different kinds of violence relate to each other, Noelia (age 9) tells Author 3 that "my cousin was almost raped yesterday [a few blocks from the school]. Neighbors went to the home of those "*violines*," and kicked their door down." "What are the 'violines'?" Author 3 innocently asks the class. "Those who make you babies," eight-year-old Josiana answers matter-of-factly. This was hardly an isolated episode.

As illustrated in the following testimony, vigilante violence against sexual predators is a common feature in the area. Mabel, a mother, explains to Author 3 the origins of the bullet that her daughter, Melanie (age 10), has lodged in her leg.

> December 9, 2010: "See, that son of a bitch wanted to rape her. It was on December 24th. We have a big family; so we had asked a neighbor to roast some meat for us. This is a neighbor I've known all my life. My brother-in-law brought home some of the food, but some was missing so I sent Melanie and my niece to pick it up. When they got to the neighbor's house, he was drunk and had a knife in his hand. He wanted to rape them. He told Melanie and my niece that if they didn't suck his dick, he was going to kill one, and then rape and kill the other one. Luckily, they were able to push him aside – maybe because he was really smashed – and they escaped. They ran home and told us what had just happened. My husband, my brothers-in-law, my brother, and some other neighbors went to his house and beat

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the shit out of him (*lo recagaron a palos*). They beat his face to a pulp, he was full of blood. They left him there, lying on the floor, and came back home. After dinner, around midnight, that son of a bitch came to my house, and shot at Melanie. Luckily, the bullet hit her in the leg. All the men in my house went back to his house and beat the shit out of him again. I had to run to the Gandulfo (local hospital 30 minutes away). I spend the night of the 24th and the 25th there. They checked her out very well, to see if she had been raped. Luckily, the guy didn't get to do anything to her."

State (Mis)presence

Collective life in these neighborhoods is, as it should be clear by now, anything but peaceful. Violence abounds in the social spaces in which residents interact daily. It is experienced, witnessed, or talked about in homes, schools, and streets. In the face of violence that is neither tamed nor "behind the scenes" (Elias 1978), we ask, together with the author of *The Civilizing Process*: How does the state intervene in poor people's neighborhoods? The state is both an abstract, macro-level structure and a concrete, micro-level set of institutions with which the urban poor interact in direct and immediate ways. In this section, we concentrate on this second level, on the level of *state practice* (Gupta 2005; Haney 1996; Secor 2007), by focusing on poor people's routine, but not always licit, encounters with law enforcement officials.

As stated above, the area where we conducted our fieldwork sits adjacent to the biggest street fair in the country. Twice a week, thousands of shoppers (mostly from lower and lower-middle classes from metropolitan Buenos Aires but also traders from the rest of the country) come to its markets to purchase (mostly) apparel and small electronics; hundreds of thousands of pesos in cash and merchandise pass through the streets of Arquitecto Tucci, providing excellent occasions for what criminologists call "opportunistic crime."[9] Military-style, federal forces known as the National Guard (*Gendarmería Nacional*) patrol the streets hours before and during these "*días de feria*." Numerous and heavily armed with state-of-the-art equipment, the officers' imposing presence transforms the area into a militarized space. But this militarization of marginality does not last for long—once the markets close, the officers disappear from view until the fair's next opening. Poorly paid, trained, and equipped, the state police (known as *La Bonaerense*) patrol the streets when the National Guard is gone. Thirty months of observation, and innumerable conversations with residents (young and old) reveal the highly skewed and contradictory character of this intermittent law enforcement. In what follows, we rely on a series of vignettes to depict the

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particular presence of the repressive arm of the state in the area. We will see how the state contradicts itself when simultaneously implementing and breaking the rules it has itself created.

The Cop's Son

Julián (age 13) is in sixth grade, and his father is a policeman who works for *La Bonaerense*. During the first recess, he asks his teacher, Author 3, to hold his brand-new, high-tech cellphone while he runs around the playground with his friends. Author 3 has only seen them on TV and praises the object, "what a nice cellphone you've got!"

> "My father gave it to me. He took it away from the thieves," Julián tells her. "Have you seen when the cops put the thieves against the wall and pat them? Well, that's when my dad takes away their cellphones, money, drugs . . . he never returns them. He keeps everything for himself. And he gave this one (pointing to the new cell phone) to me as a present. It's nice, isn't it?"

The natural, unaffected, way in which Julián told Author 3 about the cellphone's origins suggests that he believes that there is nothing wrong with his father's actions; but this is not the place to speculate about the kind of ethical lesson learned by Julián every time he hears about and benefits from his dad's exploits. We are concerned not with the crafting of children's moral judgment, but with what the story can tell us about the contradictory ways in which the state appears in poor people's lives. Julián's story points toward one prominent way in which law enforcement operates in the neighborhood: the police acts as the repressive arm of the state against criminals but also as the perpetrator of crime, police agents uphold the rule of law and simultaneously break it. This is hardly a secret for Author 3's students and the adult residents. As they repeatedly state: "they (the cops) are all addicts [*drogones*]," "They (the cops) are all thieves [*chorros*]."

Tucci residents are not alone in this belief. In a perceptive and detailed ethnographic account of shantytown life in Quilmes (state of Buenos Aires), anthropologist Nathalie Puex (2003, 66) examines shanty-dwellers' perceptions of the connection between criminal and police activity as well as the linkages between shanty youngsters and authorities:

> For many shantytown residents (*villeros*) the cop is another thief (*chorro*). . . . The police officer does not represent the law because he himself takes part in criminal activity. [This participation creates an] image of the police as both a repressive force and a provider of jobs. Most of the young delinquents in the shantytown "work" for the police; in other words, they are part of an illicit organization

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> directed by policemen who offer work to these shanty youngsters. Many of these youngsters obtain their income through participating in this organization.[10]

A former undersecretary of security in the state of Buenos Aires, and a highly perceptive analyst of the state police's (mis)behavior, asserts that there is a "perverse relationship between politics, crime and police action" (Sain 2004, 87). During the early 1990s, the government of Buenos Aires made an explicit agreement with the state police: in order to attain "respectable levels of public safety" (Sain 2002, 85), the government provided the police with a great amount of material and financial resources and an important degree of freedom of action (i.e., unaccountability). The state government also assured the police that it would not intervene in the illegal self-financing activities that had long been developed by the police. This "circuit of illegal self-financing," as Sain calls it (2002, 86), is the product of the participation of key members of the police hierarchy in an "extended network of criminal activities that revolved around illegal gambling, prostitution, drug and arms trafficking, and robberies" (86). Illegal practices are thus institutionalized in the police force (Isla and Miguez 2003b). Those living at the bottom of the socio-symbolic order are the ones who directly experience the effects of these clandestine connections.[11] Or as recent report from the CELS puts it, residents of poor neighborhoods in Buenos Aires "live and suffer the consequences of the connections between the local police and various illegal networks, such as those that sell drugs, steal, dismantle, and distribute cars and/or auto parts, and manage brothels" (CELS 2012; see also Dewey 2012).

The following two vignettes provide further evidence of the mutual imbrication between criminal activity and state action as experienced at the ground level by the poor residents of Arquitecto Tucci.

The Dealer

"I was a thief and a dealer (*fui chorro y transa*)," Jorge tells us. He is now in his 40s, and he is still reluctant to talk about his recent past. But we took advantage of what his close friends later described as a rare moment of "opening up" to inquire about the risks involved in his criminal activities (that, in his own words, included "almost everything"—from car theft to drug dealing). He is now "retired" from crime and has not touched a "joint or a beer . . . for many, many years." The kind of things he did and the tragic end of many of his friends would merit an entire book: "We were a group of eleven kids . . . only three of us are still around. The rest are either in jail or dead—one killed by the police, another one by a storeowner when he was trying to break in, and another one died of AIDS." What concerns us,

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however, is something more specific: his group's relationship with the police and the National Guard.

"We had an understanding ("*un código*"): you always need your neighbor. Many times I escaped from the police by hiding at a neighbor's house. He (the neighbor) knew I'd never ever touch any of his things." Neighbors, he believes, "felt protected. Now, all these *códigos* are broken." And, like most people in the neighborhood, he attributes this change to the new drugs that are now being consumed by the local youth: "It used to be only marijuana and cocaine, and now it's *paco*, free base. Now they'd do anything for drugs [*hacen cualquiera*]."

The *antagonistic* relationship that, when robbing, Jorge's group had with the state repressive forces turned into a relationship of *illicit collaboration* when this group engaged in drug dealing. In Jorge's recollections, both the police and the gendarmes are described as equally involved in "the business" (*el negocio*):

> 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" (i.e. to receive their cut). 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. Then we moved to another neighborhood. We were selling cocaine, lots of it, there. But there, the gendarmes protected us. The cops worked with a dealer from a different neighborhood. We were with the gendarmes. See . . . it's all about (different) territories, some for the cops, some others for the National Guard.

The Car Thief

"At that time," says Amelia referring to the late 1990s and early 2000s, "there were not many things a single mother with three kids and no job could do. I've done everything: stealing cars, selling drugs, robbing people in the streets . . . you name it, I did everything." Pointing at the different Tramontina knives that hang from the wall of her kitchen, she then adds: "See these blades? With this one, you can open up many cars . . . and with this little one, the whole dashboard comes apart." Amelia tells us that she worked with a group of very young kids who stole cars in the city and brought them to a big garage located a few blocks from her house. There, she and a small group of associates took the cars apart and sold the parts to traders from the city of Buenos Aires. "We use to disassemble the cars super fast. The next morning, traders would come and buy from us. It was easy, and the police wouldn't bother us. We would arrange with them beforehand and they would release the area from interference."[12]

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Our own observations (and dozens of local newspaper accounts) attest to the fact that the local police go publicly and aggressively after some dealers and thieves. However, as the testimonies above illustrate (and many more that reasons of space prevent us from presenting), and as described in other poverty enclaves throughout Latin America (notably in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* [Gay 2005; Perlman 2011]), the local police also protect some dealers and thieves—thus becoming an integral part of the crime they (say they) seek to combat. "It is easy to make a deal with the police . . . they come to you for their commission. Every night, you need to give them $500 or $600 and they leave you alone," two women involved in petty drug dealing told us. The police furthermore are a key participant in the black market of guns and bullets—many people we talked to in Arquitecto Tucci know that they can buy a gun or bullets from off-duty members of *La Bonaerense*.

When after *some* petty neighborhood drug dealers, policemen would employ shock and awe tactics, inundating a certain area of the neighborhood with police cars. In cases such as these, sirens, loud orders, and the usual shoot-outs mark its fast and furious presence in the neighborhood. The two parents and one uncle of Malena, a ten-year-old student of Author 3, were arrested in such fashion during the course of our fieldwork. The state's intermittent and frantic presence in Buenos Aires's urban margins is akin to the one described by Dennis Rodgers for the case of Managua—a state presence that incarnates a "qualitatively different form of state governmentality, based on the ability to repeatedly precipitate localized 'states of exception' through terrorizing raids that symbolically demonstrate the arbitrary power of the state" (Rodgers 2006b, 325).

Law enforcement is not only intermittent and contradictory (in the sense of doing mutually opposed or inconsistent things) but also highly selective. Police chase and incarcerate *some* petty drug dealers or thieves but, as in many other countries in Latin America (Goldstein 2012; Menjívar 2011; Hautzinger 2007), it is slow and hesitant to go after violent partners or sexual predators (see, for Argentina, Amnistía Internacional 2008). We repeatedly heard stories about domestic violence in which the police was nowhere to be found (as a social worker at the local school puts it, "If a woman goes to the precinct to accuse her husband, the cops just laugh at her"). Police agents are also slow in reacting to sexual violence ("the police always come late, to collect the body if someone was killed, or to stitch you up if you were raped") and/or complicit with it (rumors about the existence of what a neighbor calls "the blowjob police"—i.e., cops who demand sexual favors from neighborhood adolescents—run rampant).[13] Neighbors thus rarely rely on a legal charge (and a possible arrest) but on targeted collective violence of the kind described by Mabel in the testimony above.[14]

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Law enforcement is fast *and* sluggish, watchful *and* neglectful, depending on the kind of wrongdoing and the parties involved. For locals (and for the ethnographer), it is thereby hard (if not impossible) to predict what kinds of illegal situations will lead to what kind of police action. As a result, residents suffer all sorts of victimization but are unwilling to call on the police because they intuitively know that agents will not act on their claims, or they suspect that they are either the perpetrators of crime or in close association with criminals. Take the case of local drug dealers (publicly known as *transas*): Neighbors are fearful of going to the local precinct and denouncing their operations because they think that *transas* will learn about their report (from the cops) and will retaliate against them. At a local meeting we attended, neighbors said this quite explicitly: "Everybody knows where the dealers live, and everybody knows that the police is in cahoots with them . . . and we are afraid that if we report the dealers, we'll suffer the consequences."

Unsurprisingly, one common theme defines the local point of view on the subject of police intervention. Residents perceive the neighborhood as an area where perpetrators of all sorts of illicit activities can do as they please (or, as one neighbor put it, a community meeting devoted to discuss issues of safety and crime, as a place where "anything goes").

Conclusions

In "On Transformations of Aggressiveness," Norbert Elias writes that, in the Middle Ages, "robbing, fighting, hunting men and animals—all this formed part and parcel of everyday life" (1978, 237). Only gradually, as a "central power strong enough to compel restraint" begins to grow, do people feel constrained to "live in peace with one another." Relative restraint and "consideration of people for one another" increase in everyday life, and "not just anyone who chances to be strong can enjoy the pleasure of physical aggression" (238). In other words, for Elias (1978, 1994), the relatively peaceful collective life of large masses of people in a given territory is, in good part, based on the actions of a state that consistently pacifies the social spaces in which people interact. What we have shown is the exact opposite of the "civilizing process" that Elias describes. The intermittent, contradictory, and selective way in which law enforcement works at the urban margins reinforces the violence that regularly puts the poor in harm's way.

In a now classic piece, political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell offers a corrective to Elias's general statement that serves to further understand the current predicament of Argentine marginalized neighborhoods. In "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems," O'Donnell invites scholars to "imagine a map of each country" in Latin America

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> in which the areas covered by blue would designate those where there is a high degree of state presence (in terms of a set of reasonably effective bureaucracies and of the effectiveness of properly sanctioned legality), both functionally and territorially; the green color indicates a high degree of territorial penetration and a significantly lower presence in functional/class terms; and the brown color a very low or nil level in both dimensions. . . . Brazil and Peru would be dominated by brown, and in Argentina the extensiveness of brown would be smaller—but, if we had a temporal series of maps, we could see that those brown sections have grown lately. (1993, 1359)

Brown areas, O'Donnell points out, are "neofeudalized regions" where "the obliteration of legality deprives the regional power circuits, including those state agencies, of the public, lawful dimension without which the national state and the order it supports vanish" (1359). In these areas, state organizations become part of a privatized circuit of power, the public dimension of the state evaporates and, as a consequence, we have a "democracy of low-intensity citizenship" (1361). O'Donnell's is not solely a topographic argument; it is also a categorical one. Countries are diversely colored; and the less-advantaged populations, of the kind that inhabit our field site, are usually the ones who are affected the most:

> Peasants, slum dwellers, Indians, women, etc. often are unable to receive fair treatment in the courts, or to obtain from state agencies services to which they are entitled, or to be safe from political violence, etc. . . . [I]n many brown areas the democratic, participatory rights of polyarchy are respected. But the liberal component of democracy is systematically violated. A situation in which one can vote freely and have one's vote counted fairly, but cannot expect proper treatment from the police or the courts, puts in serious question the liberal component of that democracy and severely curtails citizenship. (1361)

The relegated urban area where we conducted our fieldwork is not a "brown area"—where state presence is "very low or nil"—but something much more complex—and empirically more challenging. The issue at stake is not state's absence, collapse, or weakness but of police–criminal "collusion" of the kind described by Desmond Arias in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*—an "active political constellation" that promotes violence (Arias 2006a, 2006b). In other words, the scenario described above is not one of "state abandonment" but of connections between state actors and perpetrators of violence—an "engagement" that erodes the rule of law and institutes "a separate, localised, order" (Arias 2006b, 324).

The Janus-faced character of the Argentine state is well known. The state partakes in crime and in its repression. As said, the Buenos Aires state police,

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for example, has been involved in gambling and prostitution for decades, and more recently became involved in kidnappings, car theft, and drug-dealing (Dewey 2010, 2012; Isla and Miguez 2003a; Verbitsky 2011; CELS 2012). On the latter, according to Sain (2009, 143), “police tutelage” (i.e., protection and monitoring) is crucial to understand the territorial expansion of the market of illicit drugs. All the while, rates of incarceration in federal prisons have grown almost 400% in the past twenty years fed, to a great extent, by the imprisonment of petty drug dealers and consumers (CELS 2009). What we lack—and what this article has sought to provide—is an on-the-ground account of the ways in which this kind of paradoxical law enforcement relates to the widespread interpersonal violence that is currently wreaking havoc on the urban poor.

Violence is the effect of a complex causal chain whose origin certainly lies in the actions and inactions of the state but also in the economy (Burkitt 1996; Mennel 1990; Rodgers 2009). The processes of deproletarianization, informalization, and general degradation in living conditions that Argentina endured as the result of what we could call, borrowing from Karl Polanyi, the “great neoliberal transformation” (Bonaldi and del Cueto 2009; Portes and Roberts 2005; Segura 2009) are, *together with state (mis)interventions*, crucial explanatory dimensions of the “whys” of the extensive violence among the poor. And so is the increasing reliance of economically marginalized and vulnerable people on the destructive drug trade. As numerous studies have shown (for the United States, see Bourgois 1995; Reding 2009; for Argentina, see Alarcón 2009), the drug economy is a double-edged sword: while it sustains poor communities, it simultaneously tears them apart.[15] Further research should scrutinize the concrete ways in which political and economic dynamics interact and fuel the violence in poor people’s daily lives.

In this paper, we focused most of our attention on how the state is *currently* intervening in a poor neighborhood, and on the ways in which this intervention perpetuates interpersonal violence. We are aware that the larger research question that animates our research has an implicit longitudinal character, and that more historical research on the transformations in policing the urban poor is needed to further substantiate the argument about the process of depacification of the urban margins.

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Notes

1. For uses, elaborations, and criticisms of the notion of "civilizing process," see Aya (1978), Burkitt (1996), De Swaan (2001), Mennel (1990), and Pinker (2012). For its application to the case of the African American ghetto, see Wacquant (2004).
2. For the purpose of this analysis, we adopt a restrictive definition of violence as including the actions of persons against persons that intentionally threaten, attempt, or actually inflict physical harm (Jackman 2002; Reiss and Roth 1993).
3. As Polly Wilding (2010, 725) points out: "Whether a perceived shift in actors and motives (from predominantly political to predominantly criminal) reflects a significant shift in the lived experiences of violence and insecurity is debatable. Arguably, actors have mutated but not changed; in some instances uniformed police officers are less likely to be involved in overt violence, but the same individuals may be functioning under the remit of death squads or militia groups. In any case, state violence against particular social groups, including poor, marginalized communities, as a form or result of exclusion and oppression, is an enduring, rather than new, aspect of modern society."
4. On the diverse forms of violence experienced by the Argentine poor, see Bonaldi and del Cueto (2009); on fear of crime and perceptions of "inseguridad," see Kessler (2009). It is important to note, however, that although in the last three decades there has been a significant rise in crime, the overall crime rates in the southern cone of Latin America remain comparatively low (see UNODC 2001).
5. The names of people and places in this paper have been changed to protect anonymity.
6. Although largely unregulated, the state makes random impromptu appearances in La Salada. As Scarfi and Di Peco write (2011: 9), the state can appear in the

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form of the state agency "demanding property taxes; then it might appear as the Judiciary, investigating violations of international copyright laws; it can also take the share of the Department of Health, demanding sewage systems that do not pollute the (adjacent) Riachuelo." For insightful accounts of the history and workings of these markets, see Hacher (2011) and Girón (2011).

7. Newspapers underreport homicides (note the discrepancy between number of homicides reported by local media and the number of homicides recorded by the Defensoría General). We include newspaper information in order to pinpoint the geographic location of the homicides. This information is not recorded by the Defensoría.
8. For journalistic reports on the effects of this drug among the marginalized youth, see "Lost in an Abyss of Drugs, and Entangled by Poverty," *New York Times*, July 29, 2009; "Perderse en la garras de la muerte," *La Nación*, September 20, 2008; "A New Scourge Sweeps through Argentine Ghettos: 'Paco,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, April 5, 2006. For an ethnographic account, see Epele (2010).
9. Estimates oscillate between US$125 million (D'Angiolillo et al. 2010) and US$4 billion (Girón 2011) in annual sales.
10. For parallel accounts in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, see Gay (2005) and Perlman (2011). For ethnographic accounts of intermittent police presence in low-income communities in the United States, see Sanchez-Jankowski (1991), Bourgois (1995), Venkatesh (2000), and more recently, Rios (2010).
11. The film *El Bonaerense* provides a very insightful and, according to the literature, accurate rendition of the way in which illegality is institutionalized in the police force. Learning to be a cop, the film shows, implies by necessity learning to be a delinquent—above and beyond the good intentions of new recruits.
12. On the relationship between the *Bonaerense* police and car theft, see Dewey (2010, 2012).
13. See newspaper report "Deseos Urgentes," published in *Página/12*, March 19, 2012 (www.pagina12.com.ar).
14. Police action is virtually absent when it comes to intervening in widespread, illegal child labor—many of Author 3's students (all of them under thirteen years of age) work in the nearby street fair either transporting, selling, and/or manufacturing goods in unmonitored sweatshops.
15. As Sain notes (2009, 143): "The storage, cutting, and preparation of illegal drugs for retail take place in territories and areas controlled directly or indirectly by the emerging networks of drug traffickers and criminal groups that have been constituted in extremely poor and highly marginalized areas and neighborhoods in large cities, especially in the city of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires." See also Alarcón (2009).

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