

In harm's way at the urban margins

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Abstract

Residents of poor barrios in Buenos Aires are deeply worried about widespread violence (domestic, sexual, criminal, and police) and about environmental hazards – two dimensions of marginalization that policy-makers tend to disregard and social scientists of the ethnographic persuasion seldom treat together for what they are: producers of harm. Based on 18 months of collaborative fieldwork, this article dissects poor people's experiences of living in harm's way.

Keywords

Buenos Aires, environmental hazard, violence, harm, collaborative fieldwork

The path created by the rubble keeps the mud from biting your ankles. Piles of trash here and there. Skeletons of stolen cars, already dismantled and burned. The sound of a shot on the corner, ten shots in return from the other. (Camilo Blajaquis, *La venganza del cordero atado*)

The other social inclusion

The recent 'left turn' in Latin American politics has placed the reduction of inequality, the 'alleviation' of poverty, and 'social inclusion' at the center of public discourse and policy-making in the region. In what Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (2010) recently called a veritable transnational 'fast-policy'

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development, CCTs (conditional cash transfer programs) have become the main strategy to deal with urban and rural poverty (Weyland et al., 2010). Initiated by centrist and right-wing governments more than a decade ago, leftist governments in the region have recently reassumed, extended, or launched these CCTs (Reygadas and Filgueira, 2009). In essence, these welfare programs are conditioned transfers; that is, low-income families receive payments from the state provided that they comply with a range of required activities (health check-ups, school attendance, etc.). The novel progressive consensus seems to suggest that citizenship (and democracy) cannot survive without the 'social inclusion' of the masses of marginalized individuals that, according to the new dominant diagnosis, were cast aside by decades of neoliberal economic policies. Both moderate and radical governments (from Bachelet in Chile and Lula in Brazil, to the Kirchners in Argentina, to Chavez in Venezuela, Correa in Ecuador, and Morales in Bolivia) seek to address what they call the 'drama of social exclusion' by tackling the lack of a proper income to satisfy 'basic needs'. Social inclusion means, first and foremost, access to a 'good enough' amount of cash.

During the past year and a half, together with one research assistant, we have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in one of the poorest districts of metropolitan Buenos Aires with the dual objective of: a) assessing the on-the-ground effects of the neoliberal transformation in what Loïc Wacquant (2007) calls territories of urban relegation, and b) evaluating current efforts to reduce poverty and inequality and the way they are affecting the everyday lives of the most destitute. In the course of our fieldwork, we talked to many residents about their strategies to make ends meet. While acknowledging the extensive implementation of the *Asignación Universal por Hijo* (the most important cash transfer program in Argentina), they still routinely express their persistent worries about the lack of adequate income (despite the fact that many of them are recipients of one or more welfare programs). But residents also express deep concerns about diverse forms of violence (domestic, sexual, criminal, and police) and about environmental hazards. In other words, residents, young and old, are deeply worried about two other dimensions of social inclusion that policy-makers tend to disregard and social scientists of the ethnographic persuasion seldom treat together for what they are: producers of harm.¹

Being in harm's way (a harm that, residents believe, might come from others – whether they be young drug dealers and/or the police and/or a violent partner – or from a dangerous physical locale) is a preoccupation that, together with lack of sufficient income, pervades the lives of the inhabitants of marginalized barrios. Based on 18 months of collaborative fieldwork, this article zooms in on the *lived experiences* of these two usually neglected dimensions of social exclusion.

Despite general economic improvement since the economic collapse in 2001, the Argentine urban poor continue to suffer extreme forms of infrastructural deprivation and violence, both state and interpersonal, that have hardly abated. This article presents a preliminary report on the ways in which these two different forms of marginalization are experienced by those routinely exposed to them.

As such, it joins two recent calls: one made by anthropologists to examine the ways in which diverse forms of violence form a continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004), and another put forth by urban sociologists and geographers to scrutinize the role played by urban infrastructure in the daily life of the dispossessed (McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008).

A realistic and crude portrait of his own shantytown, Blajaquis's opening quote points to the fact that, phenomenologically speaking, violence, infrastructural deprivation, and environmental hazards *appear together* in the lives of the marginalized: 10-year-old Charito is playing with her friend Estrella in a muddy street, adjacent to a polluted river, when dealers shoot at each other and at the police late one afternoon. Below, we explore how all these diverse damage-producing vectors intersect in real time and space. Analytically, however, these harm-producers should not be lumped under one heading, whether that be 'structural violence' or some other category. Physical violence of the kind exposed below should be differentiated from, say, the collective violence perpetrated by many (poor and not-so-poor) in the food riots that shocked Argentina in 2001 (see Auyero, 2007), or the violence exerted by police beatings against marginalized youth (Daroqui et al., 2009; Wacquant, 2004).

The ethnographic material presented here – only a slice of fieldnotes, interviews, and images collected over the past year and a half – highlights what a new generation of geographers and urban sociologists (e.g. McFarlane, 2008; Murray, 2009) are beginning to focus on (and what progressive administrations in Latin America would do well to incorporate in their efforts at poverty alleviation): how the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion (and of citizenship more broadly) are inextricably linked to the biophysical fabric of urban spaces. Written in an experimental narrative form, this article also draws attention to the 'peace time crimes' or the 'little violences' (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004) that define the everyday life in the communities where the urban poor dwell in contemporary Buenos Aires.²

Part of a larger project that focuses on the ways residents of a poor neighborhood in the southern part of the Conurbano (a short 20-minute ride from the city of Buenos Aires) 'think and feel' (Wacquant, 2003a, 2003b) about their marginalization, this article concentrates on children's and adolescents' experiences of (and with) diverse forms of violence and their views on infrastructural deprivation. The article draws upon two main sources of ethnographic data: a) excerpts from fieldnotes taken by Flavia Bellomi, an elementary school teacher who was once an aspiring anthropologist and is now our research collaborator, and b) photographs produced by her elementary school students and their comments about what they sought to portray. The fieldnotes were written between May 2009 and December 2010. They are intended to simultaneously capture: a) her daily activities as a teacher in two public schools located in one of the poorest districts of metropolitan Buenos Aires – one of them adjacent to a new squatter settlement, and b) the diverse risks to which poor children and adolescents are exposed in their schools and in their neighborhoods.³

The first section of this article describes what we, borrowing from Karl Polanyi, call the great neoliberal transformation in Argentina, and presents its spatial effects in Buenos Aires. This brief section serves as the broader context for the experiences examined in this article. The second section introduces a few excerpts of Flavia's fieldnotes (taken between May and August 2009) reorganized along sequential (not chronological) lines as they move from inside one of the schools where she works to the surrounding neighborhoods. Flavia's fieldnotes vividly demonstrate that poor people's physical integrity is constantly assaulted by both interpersonal violence and the material living conditions inside and outside the school where they live, eat, play, and learn. In the third section, we spotlight the various kinds of violence visited upon children and adolescents in the neighborhood. We here draw upon detailed notes taken by Flavia on the many conversations her students have with her and among themselves. The fourth section presents a series of images produced by sixth graders that lucidly reveal their views on the wretched physical space where they live. After a brief summary of this article's empirical findings, the last section makes a case for integrating the study of daily violence with an examination of infrastructural deprivation for a better understanding of urban destitution and presents a series of issues that merit further investigation.

The great neoliberal transformation

Three decades of neoliberal economic policy have generated massive dislocations and collective suffering in Argentina. Although many of the economic changes brought about by the military dictatorship of 1976–1983 had neoliberal features, the main period of neoliberalization – as that truly political ‘vehicle for the restoration of class power’ (Harvey, 2005) – took place in the early 1990s (Grimson and Kessler, 2005) and had the following main characteristics: financial deregulation, privatization, flexibilization of labor markets, and trade liberalization (Cooney, 2007; Teubal, 2004). During the first half of the 1990s, the ‘swift and thorough’ (Teubal, 2004: 181) neoliberal experiment in Argentina generated high rates of economic growth (though decoupled from employment generation) and monetary stability; the longer term result, though, was a second, deep, wave of deindustrialization (the first one took place during the military dictatorship) and its attendant deproletarianization, resulting in a ‘growing heterogeneous mass of unemployed people without institutional protection from either the state, the unions, or other organizations’ (Villalón, 2007: 140). Economist Paul Cooney (2007: 23) puts it this way:

[Since Menem became president], there were major layoffs, totaling more than 110,000, as a result of the privatizations that took place. Secondly, the decline in manufacturing led to a reduction of over 369,000 jobs from 1991–2001, a 33.9% loss in total manufacturing employment. As a result of the two waves of deindustrialization, Argentina went from over 1.5 million manufacturing jobs in 1974 down to roughly 763,000 jobs in 2001, a loss of 50%.

The disappearance of formal manufacturing jobs went hand in hand with the growth of informal employment. As Cooney (2007: 24) states: 'Informal work in Buenos Aires and surroundings (*Gran Buenos Aires*) grew to reach 38% of all employment by 1999, and such jobs are estimated to have incomes 45% lower than formal employment.' Thus, from the early 1990s until the early 2000s, impoverishment of the middle- and low-income sectors was driven by the disappearance of formal work and an explosion in unemployment levels. In this, the Argentine experience with neoliberalism, despite being 'extreme' (Teubal, 2004), was unexceptional; as elsewhere it has resulted in 'a fall in popular consumption, a deterioration of social conditions, a rise in poverty, immiseration and insecurity, heightened inequalities, social polarization, and resultant political conflict' (Robinson, 2008: 20). Since 2003, poverty rates seem to be declining.⁴ The GDP has been growing at an annual rate of 9 percent and unemployment and poverty rates have decreased to the mid-1990s levels. And yet, 34 percent of the total population lives below the poverty line, and 12 percent subsists under the indigence line (Salvia, 2007: 28).⁵ Even after the economic recovery that began in 2003, poor people's material and symbolic conditions were deeply affected by the sustained decline of income levels in the lower rungs of the job market and the growth of informal employment.

The most dramatic physical manifestation of the generalized degradation in the lives of the dispossessed over the last three decades is found in the explosive growth of the population living in informal settlements, both *villas* (shantytowns) and *asentamientos* (squatter settlements), in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires (area comprising the city of Buenos Aires and the 24 bordering districts known as *Conurbano Bonaerense*). According to Cravino et al. (2008), as of 2006 there were 819 'informal settlements' — 363 shantytowns, 429 squatter settlements, and 27 unspecified urban forms — with approximately 1 million residents. This represents 10.1 percent of the total population of AMBA (Buenos Aires metropolitan area). This figure is almost double what it was in 1991 (5.2%) and much larger than it was in 1981 (4.3%).⁶

Between 1981 and 2006, the total population in the *Conurbano Bonaerense* grew by 35 percent, while the population in shantytowns and squatter settlements in the same region increased by 220 percent. If we look at the figures since the economic collapse of 2001, we see that most of the total population growth took place in informal settlements. Between 2001 and 2006, for every 100 new residents in the *Conurbano*, 60 are found in informal settlements, compared to 10 for every 100 between 1981 and 1991 and 26 for every 100 between 1991 and 2001 (Cravino et al., 2008).⁷

The proliferation of shantytowns and squatter settlements is a concrete geographical manifestation of the fragmentation of Buenos Aires's metropolitan space which in turn reflects and reinforces growing levels of social inequality (Catenazzi and Lombardo, 2003). During the last three decades, the income distribution in the country has been steadily widening and, with it, the disparity among Argentines (Altimir et al., 2002; Arondskin, 2001; Salvia, 2007) — a

dissymmetry that has become inscribed in urban space. The number of gated *barrios privados* (suburban communities which Pirez refers to as ‘corridors of modernity and wealth’ [2002: 3]) has been swelling alongside enclaves of deprivation (Svampa, 2001; for a general description see also Grimson et al., 2009; Segura, 2009). The rise in *barrios privados*, *villas*, and new *asentamientos* encapsulates the growing extremes of poverty and wealth that characterize contemporary Argentina. In other words, to borrow an expression from Patrick Heller and Peter Evans (2010: 433), *villas* and *barrios privados* ‘showcase the most durable and disturbing forms of contemporary inequality’.

It is important to emphasize that the new shantytowns are different from their urban relatives of the 1950s and 1960s. The shantytowns that spread throughout Buenos Aires and many other metropolitan areas in Latin America during the 1940s through 1960s were intimately tied to an economic model based on import substitution industrialization and its related internal mass migration (Grillo et al., 1995; Yujnovsky, 1984). By contrast, as in many other regions of the world, in contemporary Argentina slum growth and industrialization are now decoupled (Rao, 2006). As elsewhere (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2003) the ‘inevitable recipe for the mass production of slums’ (Davis, 2004: 11) is composed of neoliberal structural adjustment policies and its resulting deindustrialization – resulting in what Mike Davis (2004: 27) aptly calls ‘urban involution’.

Let us now provide an ethnographic portrait of how the relegation of impoverished and marginalized individuals created by the aforementioned structural transformation of the Argentine economy looks at the ground level. What follows should be read as a rough sketch of what we could call a ‘relegated space’ – one inhabited by masses of informal workers and unemployed individuals who barely make ends meet (‘a sink for surplus labour which can only keep pace with subsistence by ever more heroic feats of self-exploitation and the further competitive subdivision of already densely filled survival niches’ [Davis, 2004: 27]), and characterized by crumbling infrastructure, by dysfunctional institutions, and by all sorts of environmental hazards that the different levels of the state are unwilling and/or incapable of preventing and/or reducing.

Relegation in real time and space

Relegate: To consign (a person or thing) to some unimportant or obscure position, or to a particular role, esp. one of inferiority. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Dozens of pages of Flavia’s diary attest to the sad and simple fact that children in Buenos Aires’s neighborhoods of relegation attend relegated schools that warehouse future generations while hardly acting as bulwarks against the dangers of daily life. Anybody who spends a few days in either of the two schools where Flavia works would have trouble recognizing them as educational institutions. Between 8 am and noon, two full hours are spent serving breakfast, lunch, and

two breaks – as a consequence, students receive an average of 100 minutes of effective class time per day. During 2009, students never had a full week of classes – classes were cancelled once or twice every week either because teachers or auxiliary personnel were on strike demanding better working conditions and/or salary increases, or because of malfunctioning buildings. In both schools, the average student had three days of classes per week.

5 May: During lunchtime, a student from third grade shows his plate to the teacher. There's a dead (and cooked) cockroach. We told the school principal. The students kept eating as usual.

11 May: Today, the smell from the purifying plant (located adjacent to the school) is unbearable. We can't open the window of the classroom because we are right in front of it. During lunchtime, the kids don't want to eat. They tell me: 'It's really disgusting to eat with this odor.' The plant has been malfunctioning for the last 17 years.

15 May: In order to go to the cafeteria to have breakfast, we now need to go through the outside patio because the covered patio is closed. The roof there is about to fall off.

3 August: I arrive at school at 7.30 am and the principal tells me that part of the ceiling in the main area of the school fell off. This part of the school is now closed. The other area which was closed months ago has not yet been repaired.

6 May: As I am entering the school building, Luis's mother comes to talk to me. Luis has not been in school for at least a month. She tells me they've been living in the street, sleeping in a kind of storage space. They were allowed to stay there until 5 am. Then they would start scavenging the streets and asking for food in restaurants and bars. They are now renting a house in a nearby barrio. They are all from the province of Formosa [. . .]. She begins to cry as she tells me her story. She tells me that she was very scared while sleeping on the streets. She is worried for Luis: she doesn't want him to miss more classes. Luis's face is full of scars.

15 May: A friend of mine who teaches at a nearby school tells me classes had to be cancelled there because dead rats were found in the water tank. Dozens of teachers and students were suffering from gastroenteritis. Since last year, that same school has not had a working gas connection – thus, no heating; thus, no kid can drink anything hot.

18 May: Luis was very sleepy today. He went to bed at 3 am because he went back to scavenging with his family. He reminded me of another student I had in Villa Fiorito [a nearby poor barrio, birthplace of soccer star Diego Maradona] a couple of years ago. One day he came with his hand bitten by a rat. Apparently, he was eating and he fell asleep and the rat took his food (and bit his hand in the attempt).

7 May: In class, my students (3rd grade) tell me that there are new residents in the nearby squatter settlement (where most of them live) and that they have brought in drugs. Every night, they tell me, there are shootouts. They also say that there's now many more drugs around.

9 June: Manuel's mother came to see me. Manuel is my student and has been absent for many days. She tells me that Manuel is full of pimples – just like her eight other children... They live along the (highly contaminated) banks of (a dead river known as) the Riachuelo.

28 September: Jonathan's mother told me that yesterday she was doing laundry and saw lots of smoke coming out of her neighbor's cardboard shack. Luckily enough she had her bucket full of water and used it to combat the incipient fire. Inside the shack, there were two babies and two other very young kids.

3 June: A girl from fourth grade came to school with a serious injury in her abdomen. She had a fight with her sister who threw a glass at her. She went to the local hospital but there were no supplies to stitch up her injury. So, she went back home and then came to school. We had to call her mom to pick her up.

14 June: It was very difficult to reach the school today. The neighborhood is all flooded.

As articulated in the above fieldnotes, the food they eat, the air they breathe, the buildings where they spend parts of their days, their homes and neighborhoods, all put these children and adolescents in harm's way. Let us now further scrutinize these hazards by separating what in real life, as we said before, jointly shapes their daily lives.

Violences in chain

Fifteen years ago, one of us conducted eight months of fieldwork in a nearby shantytown and described what at the moment, borrowing from Loïc Wacquant's analysis of the 'hyper-ghetto' (1995, 1998) and Philippe Bourgois's examination of crack-dealing in the inner-city (1995), was defined as the depacification of daily life in the hyper-shantytown (Auyero, 2000). Knowing that at the time of the fieldwork the first author was living in New York, and drawing upon global stereotypes of localized violence, residents asked him if their neighborhood was 'just like the Bronx' (Auyero, 1999). Back then residents quite often experienced muggings in the early hours of the morning when they were heading to work or at night. And they complained about the occasional shooting and the increasing presence of drugs. But violence was confined to a specific group of known perpetrators (small-scale drug-dealers who, though a minority, managed to set the tone of public life in the barrio) and to certain 'no-go' areas of the neighborhood.

The violence examined back then pales in comparison to what residents are experiencing these days. Official data for the province of Buenos Aires show a doubling of crime rates between 1995 (year of my fieldwork) and 2008 (from 1114 to 2010 criminal episodes per 100,000 residents; and from 206 crimes against persons to 535 per 100,000 residents). Yet these numbers scarcely do justice to the violence that now suffuses everyday life in the neighborhood, keeping residents on edge, 'watching out' constantly; as people frequently warn each other, '*hay que tener cuidado*'.

A decade ago authors such as Kees Koonings (2001) and Roberto Briceño-León (1999) argued that a new kind of violence was emerging in Latin America. This violence was 'increasingly available to a variety of social actors and [it was] no longer a resource of elites or security forces' (Koonings, 2001: 403). This new violence was, according to this strand of scholarship, quite varied; it included 'everyday criminal and street violence, riots, social cleansing, private account selling, police arbitrariness, paramilitary activities, post-Cold War guerrillas, etc.' (2001: 403). How 'new' this violence was (and still is) has been the subject of much debate among academics. As Polly Wilding (2010) asserts:

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... (p. 725)

Although the discussion is important for those attempting to diagnose the course and form of diverse types of violence in the region as a whole (Pearce, 2010), the 'newness' of violence is beyond dispute for those residing in territories of relegation in urban Buenos Aires – in the streets, alleyways, classrooms, and community centers where we are conducting our fieldwork.⁸

On a daily basis, children and adolescents in the neighborhood are exposed to diverse kinds of violence. They witness shootings, murders, and episodes of sexual and/or domestic violence from an early age. During our 18 months of fieldwork not a week went by without one or more of them (whose ages range from 7 to 13) describing one or more episodes involving one or more forms of violence. State violence against the poor – what, in other work (Auyero, 2010), one of us labeled the state's 'visible iron fist' – has certainly not decreased; it now takes the form of arbitrary police violence, increasing prison rates, territorial sieges of marginalized communities, evictions, etc. – the first two being prominent in the neighborhood where we conducted our fieldwork.⁹ But the rampant daily violence of today is, in our view, lived as something unprecedented. In other words, in its intensity and in its variety, this is a new kind of violence.

In what follows we will present, in raw, un-edited form, the fieldnotes written by Flavia. Like those presented above, they seek to grasp, in real time and space, the kinds of violence experienced first-hand by her students. We re-organized them according to the type of violence they portray but, as it will become clear, these diverse forms often appear together in youngsters' narratives as well as in their daily lives. The fieldnotes thereby attest to a fact now well-known among anthropologists and psychologists: The violence (of the kinds these children and adolescents are routinely exposed to) 'does not occur in pure forms' (Margolin and Gordis, 2000: 452; see also Korbin, 2003; Wilding, 2010). *Violences*, these fieldnotes remind us, *come in a chain* that constantly threatens these youngsters' lives. The fieldnotes, in other words, illustrate what Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004) call a 'continuum of violence' affecting those living at the bottom of the socio-symbolic order.

Instances of close encounters with physical aggression or with its consequences abound in Flavia's notes:

30 March 2010: Marita asks me if I know Naria's father. I tell her that I don't. 'He is in heaven, he was shot in the head.'

8 April 2010: Samantha tells me that her neighbor, Carlitos, was turning 17 this past Sunday: 'A friend of him came to pick him up to go around the neighborhood. Carlitos didn't want to go, because it was his birthday. But his friend persuaded him and off they went.' Samantha tells me that she thinks they were armed. Carlitos was killed. 'Once dead, his friends carried him around the block [as in a procession]. I went to the funeral. His eyes were still open and his house [where the funeral was taking place] was full of his friends. Carlitos had many friends. The bullet came into his chest, and made a tiny little hole there. But the bullet went out through his back, the hole there was huge.'

20 August 2009: Victor tells me that yesterday, a little kid was killed close to his home: 'They were a band of thugs (*chorros*)... or maybe dealers (*transas*).' Samantha intercedes and says that she heard the shooting. Minutes before it happened, she was hanging out on the sidewalk. I tell them that they should be careful. And, in unison, both Victor and Samantha reply: 'We are used to it.'

Among psychiatrists, much debate has revolved around 'desensitization' to community violence (Guerra et al., 2003; McCart et al., 2007). We do not have evidence to argue that these children and adolescents are habituated to the violence that engulfs the neighborhood. Let us only point out that if by habituation or desensitization we mean that children are less likely to notice and pay attention to incidents of violence, then dozens of pages of Flavia's notes in which children talk almost compulsively about the latest shoot-out or murder should prove that they are far from being habituated. However, if by habituation we simply mean

familiarization – as in ‘*We are used to it*’ – then we think we should take what these children say at face value. Violence, for them, seems to be in the ‘order of barrio things’.

26 October 2009: During the break, Luis’s classmates tell me that the cops have arrested him for stealing a handbag from a woman who was going to the market: ‘Luis is really crazy these days. He is sniffing [glue] all day. And he’s armed. One of these days, he is going to get killed. If you go to visit him, let us know beforehand,’ they warn me, ‘because he lives in an area that is full of thieves. Luis is always hanging out with some grown-ups, and since he is a minor, they send him first [to steal] because, if arrested, his grandmother will pick him up from the precinct.’

14 September 2009: I ask my students if they know what’s going on with Luis. He’s been absent now for many days. ‘Someone must have killed him’, they reply. Luckily, it’s not true.

Sprayed on the wall of an elementary school located less than 10 minutes away from the ones where Flavia works, the first half of this graffiti shown in Figure 1 reads: ‘I was born amidst bullets, I was raised among thugs...’ In crude form, it depicts the type of violence most frequently mentioned in children’s and adolescents’ conversations: criminal and police violence – of the kind that can end Luis’s life, as his classmates matter-of-factly inform their teacher. It is because of this violence, the graffiti implies, that the neighborhood has a ‘name’ – a name that merits a tattoo (*de todos mi barrio es el mas nombrado por eso a “Lomas” yebo tatuado*). As seen in the drawing in Figure 2 – made as part of an exercise in which second-graders were asked to describe their neighborhood – Flavia’s students also feel that they are growing up ‘amidst bullets’. This student portrays his barrio as defined by ‘*se tiran tiro*’ [‘they shoot at each other’] and the lone presence of a police car.

The following narratives illustrate something implicit in the drawing: police and criminal violence usually meet and mesh.

23 September 2009: My student Yamila tells me that, on Saturday, her brother was hanging out with a group of friends. The police were following one of them but made a mistake and caught Yamila’s brother, Mario. The cop hit Mario’s face with a helmet and hurt him badly. They dragged him and hurt his leg. It looks as if the doctors will have to amputate Mario’s leg.

3–10 August 2010: Roberto showed me a few of his drawings. He likes to draw 9 mm guns. He tells me that both his brother and his uncle have one. [A few days later] he shows me a few more drawings of guns and tells me that he goes out to steal with his uncle as a ‘lookout’. He then remembers that another one of his uncles was killed by the police when attempting to rob a bus...

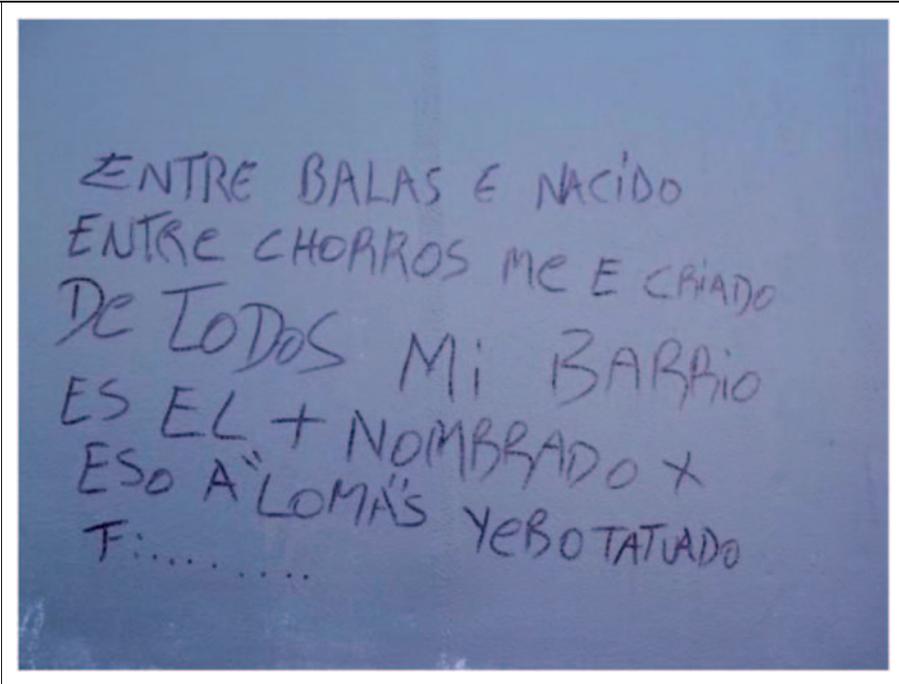


Figure 1. Graffiti on wall of elementary school.

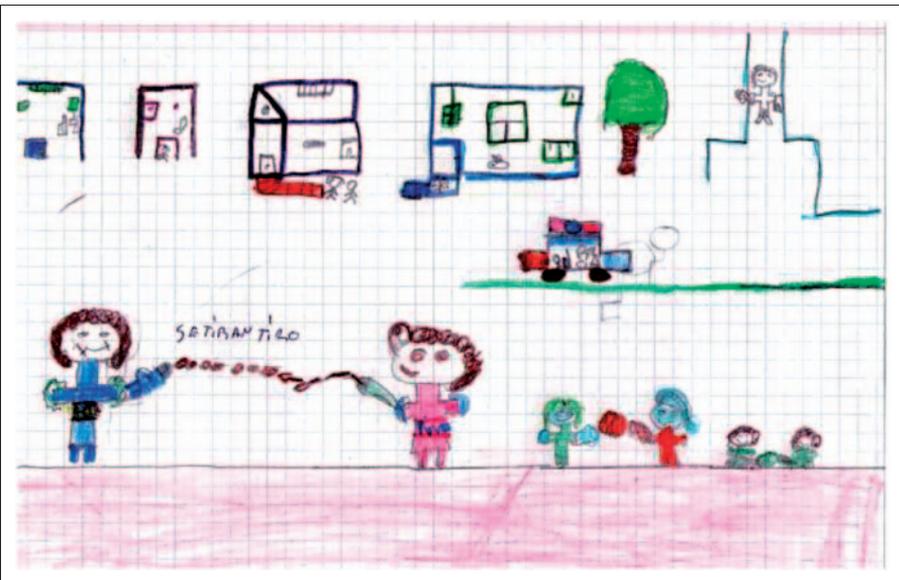


Figure 2. Second-graders describe their neighborhood.

Children and adolescents growing up in this neighborhood not only encounter criminal and police violence. Intimate and sexual violence frequently put their lives in severe danger as well.

13 October 2009: Julio's mother called the school today. She wanted to talk to her son. During the break, I spoke with Julio. He told me that his mom had to leave their house over the weekend because '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.'

15 October 2009: 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 she is afraid her dad will sexually abuse her.

17 March 2010 (first author's fieldnotes, Figure 3): Flavia asks her second grade students to open their notebooks. Several red spots dot Joana's notebook. 'Sauce', I think. 'She has been eating while doing homework.' But I'm wrong. It's blood. 'My dad beats me so that I do the homework', she states matter-of-factly when I innocently ask her about the red spots. 'My mom doesn't hit me', Mariela adds. During the break I asked Flavia if there's anybody in the school who can 'do something' about Joana. Frustrated, she tells me that the only existing counselor is on leave-of-absence since last year.

1 December 2010: Joana tells me that yesterday her dad threw a glass at her mom because she wanted to go out and 'find boyfriends.' Her mom was bleeding [. . .] She also brought me a present that she found while collecting trash with her dad.

One specific risk is more likely to affect girls than boys in the neighborhood: sexual violence.¹⁰ Referring to the presence of '*violines*' (those who '*violan*', i.e. rapists) and plainly illustrating the ways in which different kinds of violence relate to each other, Noelia tells Flavia that 'my cousin was almost raped yesterday [a few blocks from the school]. Neighbors went to the home of those "*violines*", kicked their door down, and then the police showed up.' 'What are the "*violines*"?' Flavia innocently asks the class. "Those who make you babies", Josiana, a seven-year-old, answers matter-of-factly.'

As stated above, in the everyday life of poor youth these diverse forms of violence do not present themselves in discrete forms. Most of the time, Flavia's students recount episodes in which criminal, police, domestic, and sexual violence intersect and interact, making it hard to tease out which one comes first and which second, which one causes what, which one translates into the other.



Figure 3. Joana's blood-spotted notebook.

The following dialogue between Flavia and two of her students illustrates this 'continuum':

12 August: While I'm writing on the blackboard today's tasks, Roberto asks out loud: 'Teacher, did I tell you that a cop in plainclothes killed my uncle while he was riding in a bus?' Augusto jumps in the conversation and adds: 'My brother-in-law can't walk well because he has a bullet in his foot. A cop shot him. And I better not say anything else...' 'Why?' I ask. 'Because he doesn't behave well with my sister. He drinks a lot, and beats her. She then comes to [meaning: takes refuge in] my house with her children in tow.'

Although causality is, at this stage of the research, hard to establish, one thing we know for sure: exposure to this chain of violence has a significant and harmful impact on children's and adolescents' subjectivities (Garbarino, 1993; Guerra et al., 2003; Korbin, 2003; Margolin and Gordis, 2000; Popkin et al., 2010; Walton et al., 2009). As Wilding (2010: 738) puts it in her study of daily violence in Brazil:

Such lived experiences of violence inform future encounters with violence, as they reinforce or challenge the boundaries of acceptable/legitimate aggression, albeit subject to contestation and revision. While violence perpetrated in public may act as a

conduit of socialization at a community level, violence in private contributes to socialization within the domestic sphere. Boundaries of acceptable violence in the private sphere also lay the ground for public violence, and vice versa.

Despite parents' and relatives' efforts to buffer children from surrounding violence (documented in our current fieldwork and the subject of much psychological research on resilience and protective mechanisms [Garbarino, 1993; Rutter, 1987]), it is hard for children and adolescents to escape unscathed from this hazardous maelstrom.¹¹ As Korbin (2003: 441) states: 'Children can sustain broken bones with no long-lasting effects. They cannot so easily recover from broken spirits, when their bones are broken purposively out of malevolence or disregard.'

Infrastructural deprivation

As part of our fieldwork, we replicated a methodological strategy – based on photography – that has been successfully applied in the study of environmental suffering (Auyero and Swistun, 2009). We organized a workshop with elementary school children (6th grade) at one of the local public schools where Flavia works. The second author taught students the basics of the craft of photography. As their final project, the students divided themselves into groups of two or three and took pictures of their neighborhood with disposable, 27-exposure cameras. We told students to take half the pictures of things they liked about the neighborhood and half of things they did not like. No further instructions were given. Once the pictures were all taken and developed, we talked with the students and asked them about what they had intended to portray and whether they liked what they saw in the pictures or not (and why). The pictures below capture how poor children view the places where they live. They were selected from among 330 images because they best portray the different groups' recurrent themes.

A few of the pictures point to the presence of crime in the neighborhood. Many students took pictures of the main plaza and stated that 'everything there was stolen' and that they don't like it there because drug dealers and/or consumers congregate in the afternoons. But most of the pictures reveal the daily denial of adequate infrastructure and routine absence of protection from environmental hazards and risks (Figures 4–11).¹²

These pictures and the youngsters' voices strikingly highlight what Braun and McCarthy (2005) would term the material dimension of state abandonment or what we could call relegation in the neoliberal space. In their likes and their dislikes, children consistently express their concern with the surrounding dirt (represented in the garbage-filled sidewalks, streets, and water-streams), with malfunctioning basic infrastructure and/or services (represented by the pavement – or lack thereof; by the absent swings and slides in the barrio's main plaza; and by the random garbage pick-up), and with other hazards such as dangling street lamps. Despite the fact that garbage (like violence) is part of the 'order of



Figure 4. ‘This is the (nearby) stream. It’s filled with garbage.’



Figure 5. ‘This is a dirt street. I like the asphalt. This one gets all muddy, and people throw garbage there. The paved streets are cleaner.’



Figure 6. ‘This is mud. I don’t like it because you sink every time it rains. And it floods . . .’



Figure 7. ‘I don’t like the plaza. Everything is broken. It doesn’t have any play sets. Everything was stolen. The slide does not have anything.’



Figure 8. 'I like this one. The street is paved. Almost no street is paved around here.'



Figure 9. 'I don't like this one. This is where I live. Every time it rains it gets all muddy.'



Figure 10. 'I don't like this one. I live here; people throw garbage in the ditch. I never see the garbage truck; I don't know if it comes.'



Figure 11. 'It's a street lamp. It's about to fall.'

things' in the barrio and that children are routinely exposed to it, their voices convey no sign of desensitization to the sight and smell of trash.

Citizenship in harm's way

But it was ridiculous, really. How could her mother have crawled away from that life and started anew? How could she have walked away intact? With what, sweeping brooms, dust pans? Here we go, honey, grab my high-heeled boots, put them in the wagon, westward we go. Stupid, she knew. (Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*)

The ethnographic material presented above illustrates the continuing exposure to environmental risk and vulnerability to hazards that poor people in Buenos Aires experience on a daily basis and, as such, reminds us that the promise of post-neoliberal 'inclusion' is far from being materialized – notwithstanding access to one or more cash transfer programs. As Martin Murray (2009) puts it in a recent analysis of the impact of 'unnatural disasters' in the lives of the urban poor in post-apartheid South Africa:

Because of their ongoing exposure to risk and vulnerability to hazards, the urban poor typically conduct their daily lives under a permanent state of emergency. . . . For those forced to live in this chronic state of abandonment, the crisis of everyday life finds material expression in the urban landscape: in its broken-down infrastructure, in its restricted opportunities, in its collapsing services and amenities, in its ruin and decay, and in its excess of uncertainty, violence, and danger. (2009: 169)

For a long time, scholars working on urban issues in Latin America have ignored what, paraphrasing Karl Marx, we could call the real grounds of poor people's history, remaining silent about poor people's degraded and hazardous environment and the way it affects their present health and future capabilities (Auyero and Swistun, 2009).¹³ In this way, social scientific studies of urban poverty and marginality in Latin America share with policy-makers (on both the left and right sides of the ideological spectrum) an ignorance about a simple fact somberly illustrated in these pictures and in the youngsters' voices: the poor do not breathe the same air, drink the same water, or play on the same playgrounds as others.

This brief preliminary ethnographic report demonstrates that the dearth of basic infrastructure and the profusion of various forms of violence are now *jointly* defining daily life in the poor neighborhoods of Argentina. Young residents of neighborhoods of relegation, this article shows, perceive their living spaces as *hostile places*. Who (if any) of the children we have been following during the last year and a half will be able to, as Colum McCann so brilliantly puts it, 'crawl away from that life'? And, in the event they manage to do so, what elements will she or he be able to gather to 'walk away intact'?

This report should remind us that any sociological sketch of urban marginality and its effects on socially organized suffering should pay sustained and systematic empirical attention to the dangerous surroundings where the urban poor dwell. Together with income, employment, education and other conventional variables, social scientific analyses of the causes and manifestations of urban deprivation should take account of poor people's relentless exposure to human and non-human hazards. In other words, if we want a better, more comprehensive understanding of 'the texture of hardship' (Newman and Peeples Massengill, 2006), and a more adequate grasp on the possibilities of a full-fledged social inclusion, the garbage-filled sidewalks, the polluted grounds and water streams, the open air sewages, the muddy streets, the broken plazas, and the diverse forms of violence described above are inescapable objects of analysis.

This report, furthermore, provides ethnographic detail to a trend identified by current scholarship on Latin America: urban violence is besieging many of the new democracies in the region (Arias and Goldstein, 2010; Caldeira, 2000; Pearce, 2010). In almost every single country of the sub-continent there is a palpable contradiction between the persistent and pervasive insecurity and violence that shapes daily life and the peace and equality that, after years of dictatorship and/or civil war, defined the democratic promise. Needless to say, violence (both state and criminal) is not affecting everybody in the same way (Brinks, 2008; CELS, 2009; Gay, 2005). The threats that assault young urban pariahs on a daily basis force us to wonder whether or not, formal equalities aside, any kind of meaningful citizenship can flourish and/or survive in such unstable, treacherous contexts. One is thus reminded of those 'brown areas' of 'low-intensity citizenship' political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell (1993) so presciently described almost two decades ago.¹⁴

Witnessing how daily life evolves 'in harm's way', one is also compelled to think hard about the kind of schemes of action, perception, and evaluation that are being forged while being routinely exposed to this harsh environment. What type of habitus emerges out of constantly living in harm's way? As fearful as they are, residents, young and old, do not stand passively in the face of the surrounding violence. The strategies that locals devise to avoid harm (the ways they use public space to avoid certain areas, the modes in which they raise their children to prevent them from falling prey to *malas compañías*, etc.) merit close scrutiny as well. Further investigation is also needed on the ways in which residents of marginalized barrios perceive (and act on) their degraded environment. How do they make sense of (and cope with) toxic danger? We have no answers at hand, but we firmly believe that asking these questions out loud is a way of challenging the generalized silence about the ongoing suffering of the urban destitute and of making visible the state of emergency in which they live their daily lives.

'Violences in chain' are fueled by various (sometimes interrelated) processes. Although, as we said before, causality is – at this still preliminary stage of research – not easily established, the depacification of daily life in the neighborhood is undoubtedly related to the 'great neoliberal transformation' outlined above.

Paraphrasing French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu we could say that the essential principle of the violences lived and seen on the ground, ‘the most striking testimony and the most dramatic experience’ (1999: 123), is elsewhere. Violences in chain are an effect of a complex causal chain whose origin lies in the economy (deproletarianization, informalization, general degradation in living conditions, increasing social isolation [Auyero, 2010; Bonaldi and del Cueto, 2009; Segura, 2009]) and in the state (the lack of institutions that address seriously and systematically sexual violence [Amnistía Internacional, 2008]; state’s losing monopoly of legitimate state violence [Dewey, 2010; Miguez, 2007]; increasing punitive regulation of poverty [Auyero, 2010; CELS, 2009]; low-intensity citizenship for the urban poor that translates into the routine denial and violation of rights [Brinks, 2008; Daroqui et al., 2009]; clandestine connections between the police and organized crime [Miguez, 2007]). To disentangle the complex set of factors that feeds the continuum of violence is the (both theoretical and empirical) challenge that lies ahead.

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Notes

1. The notion of ‘harm’ we are using emphasizes the structural and environmental determinants of human suffering, highlighting the ‘material constraints on individual human agency’ (Moore and Fraser, 2006: 3036) or, more specifically, the ‘constraints on choice that shape need, desire, and personal priorities among the indigent’ (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009: 106). In this sense, our understanding of harm is different from the concept of ‘harm reduction’ that became a ‘central plank in drug policy and practice around the globe’ in the last three decades (Moore and Fraser, 2006: 3036). See also Rhodes (2002).
2. In a recent piece, Philippe Bourgois (2009) offers a retrospective of his different ethnographic projects and calls for a more systematic examination of the linkages between diverse forms of violence. Of particular interest for our project is his interest in ‘the contemporary increase in intimate violence during the epoch of globalized neoliberalism’ (2009:18) and his exploration of the relationships that this kind of violence might have with other kinds (gender, political, structural).
3. As said, this article reports ethnographic work-in-progress. Most of the data presented here come from the notes taken by Flavia during the course of one year and a half. Her fieldnote-taking focused on incidents of violence reported by her students in casual conversations (incidents they witnessed or they heard about) in the classroom, during breaks, and while they were having breakfast and lunch in school. We had more focused conversations with her students during the photography workshop during which we asked specifically about the pictures and more generally about living conditions in the neighborhood. At the time of writing we are conducting a survey in the neighborhood

- (focusing on strategies of survival, employment, education, migration, and impact of prisonization in daily life) and in-depth interviews with adult residents (on similar themes).
4. Given the lack of reliable official data, considerable polemics revolve around existing figures (*La Nación*, 3 February 2009; *Página12*, 21 March 2009).
 5. Although no precise figures are available, the CCTs *Asignación Universal por Hijo* and *Argentina Trabaja* are believed to have brought down the levels of indigence.
 6. Shantytowns are the main form of informal settlement in the city of Buenos Aires, while ‘squatter settlements’ predominate in the Conurbano Bonaerense. On the difference between these two urban informal forms, see Cravino et al. (2008).
 7. For diverse descriptions of living conditions in shantytowns see Alarcón (2003), Auyero (2000), Auyero and Swistun (2009), and Epele (2010).
 8. On diverse forms of violence among the poor, see Bonaldi and del Cueto (2009); on fear of crime and perceptions of ‘*inseguridad*’, see Kessler (2009).
 9. A third of Flavia’s class (25 students) has a close relative behind bars. Although we do not have similar data that would allow for a comparison with the time of previous fieldwork in the area (1995), the first author’s own ethnographic observations and interviews at the time did not detect a pressing concern with imprisonment (or the actual absence of family members due to incarceration).
 10. We here agree with Polly Wilding’s recent analysis of gendered violence in the favelas where she doubts the ‘newness’ of this kind of violence. As she asserts (2010: 726): ‘It is arguably the persistence, as opposed to the novelty, of violence against women, particularly in the private sphere, that has excluded women from the debate on new violence.’ We do not have any reliable data on increase or decrease of domestic violence or other types of violence against women in the last two decades; what is important, however, is that such violence ‘exists and persists’ (Wilding, 2010: 726).
 11. For a discussion of parenting practices in marginalized communities, see Goldstein (1998) and Wilding (2010).
 12. In this way, and by default, the photographs seem to suggest that it is quite difficult for children to see and discuss the full range of *violences* that plague their daily life.
 13. For examples of this lack of attention, see González de la Rocha et al. (2004) and Hoffman and Centeno (2003).
 14. As O’Donnell writes, ‘[P]easants, 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’ (1993: 1361).

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