The Uses and Forms of Violence among the Urban Poor
Javier Auyero, María Fernanda Berti, and Agustín Burbano de Lara

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Introduction: Violence(s) in Latin America

In the last two decades, most countries in Latin America have witnessed a sharp increase in new forms of interpersonal violence (Koonings 2001; Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Rodgers et al. 2012). Although violence has had a continual presence in the history of the subcontinent (Imbusch, Misse and Carrión 2011), the recent skyrocketing of brutality is said to be besieging many of the newly established democracies in the region (Arias and Goldstein 2010; Pearce 2010; Jones and Rodgers 2009; Caldeira 2000).

Although the “newness” of this violence has been the subject of much scholarly debate among academics (see, for example, Hume 2009; Wilding 2010), most agree that the region has seen a significant change since the early 1990s in the prevalent forms of violence. This recent 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). 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,” while other forms have multiplied (i.e. interpersonal violence, drug-related violence, domestic abuse, child abuse, and sexual assault). These forms of violence are quite varied and, in contrast with past modes, are now located mostly in urban areas. Moreover, this new urban violence affects the most disadvantaged populations in disproportionate ways (Gay 2005; Brinks 2008; CELS 2009), particularly adolescents and young adults (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011) – both as victims and as perpetrators. Most of this violence is concentrated within the slums and shantytowns of the region (Moser and McIlawine 2004; for Rio de Janeiro, see Gay 2005, Perlman 2011, Wilding 2010, Penglase 2010; for Managua, see Rodgers 2009; for Medellín, see Baird n/d; for Guatemala, see O’Neill and Thomas 2011) to the point of becoming “the defining feature of life in such settlements at the beginning of the 21st century” (Rodgers et al. 2012:15).

In the case of Argentina, and particularly the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, the increase of social and criminal violence is beyond dispute (ODSA 2011). 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 to 535 crimes against persons per 100,000 residents (DNPC 2008). Sexual and domestic abuse has also been on the rise during the last two decades (La Nación, February 24, 2008).

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
This paper takes the reader to the heart of where, to paraphrase Erving Goffman (1969), “the (violent) action is” – a high-poverty enclave in the southern Conurbano Bonaerense, a well-known “hot zone” of criminal activity and excessive levels of interpersonal violence (Torresi 1998) where homicide rates are four times those of the state of Buenos Aires. Based on 30 months of collaborative fieldwork in Ingeniero Budge, and emphasizing more the ethnographic showing than the telling, this paper scrutinizes the multiple uses of violence in the area and the concatenations between private and public forms of physical aggression. Much of the violence reported here resembles that which has been dissected by students of street violence in the United States, i.e. it is the product of interpersonal retaliation and remains encapsulated in dyadic exchanges (Jacobs 2004; Mullins, Wright, and Jacobs 2004; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Papachristos 2009). However, upon casting a wider net to include other forms of aggression (not only public but also sexual, domestic, and intimate) that take place inside and outside the home, and that intensely shape the course of residents’ daily lives, we argue that diverse forms of violence among the urban poor: a) serve more than just retaliatory purposes, b) link with one another beyond only dyadic relationships, and c) become a repertoire of action.

Decades of research shows that urban violence is indeed an intricate phenomenon at the root of which lies a plethora of structural, relational, and cultural factors. The violence that affects Buenos Aires’ poor areas with particular virulence is the effect of a complex causal chain whose origin lies in both economic and political dynamics (Rodgers 2009; Portes and Roberts 2005). First, the processes of deproletarianisation, informalisation, 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” (Auyero 2010; Segura 2009; Bonaldi and del Cueto 2009; Portes and Roberts 2005), are crucial explanatory dimensions of the extensive violence among the poor. Second, the intermittent, contradictory, and selective ways in which law enforcement works at the urban margins is also at the root of the pervasive interpersonal brutality (Auyero, Burbano de Lara, and Berti 2014; Verbitsky 2011; Dewey 2010; Sain 2009; Isla and Miguez 2003; see also Müller 2012). Third, the increasing reliance of economically marginalized and vulnerable people on the destructive drug trade is also a key factor in the perpetuation of violence (Sain 2009). As numerous studies have shown (for the U.S., 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.

But part of the “why so much violence” is in the “when and how” people use interpersonal violence. This paper provides an ethnographic account of some of the many ways in which people in the area employ interpersonal violence. The ethnographic material presented here tells a story that partially differs from accounts of daily violence in poor areas in the Americas (Bourgois 1995; Alarcón 2003, 2009; Venkatesh 2008; Papachristos 2009); the form that this pervasive violence takes transcends the one-on-one dyadic exchange described in most of the literature on the subject. In our site, diverse types of interpersonal physical aggression become connected, blurring the lines between street and home, or public and domestic spheres. Residents rely on violence to address individual and collective problems (from disciplining a misbehaving child to establishing authority in the neighborhood and/or at home). As a result, note, however, that although in the last three decades there has been a significant rise in crime, the overall crime rates in Argentina remain comparatively low (see UNODC 2011).

2 The Conurbano is the area, comprised of 24 districts, that surrounds the city of Buenos Aires.
violence takes the form of a repertoire of action – a routine way of acting on individual and collective interests. Conceptualizing violence as a repertoire, as we do here, does not mean that all of the residents in the relegated urban area under consideration resort to violence as a way of solving daily problems – in the same sense that the existence of a repertoire of collective action does not mean that all citizens participate in a particular form of joint action (Tilly 1986; 1995). Approaching violence as a repertoire, on the contrary, means that violence is an established “know how,” a familiar practice that is useful in dealing with the difficulties that daily life presents at the urban margins (a rape threat, a robbery, an “out-of-control” child, etc.).

**Beyond Retaliatory Dyads**

The increase of interpersonal violence in urban settings has been associated with a number of factors – from economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility in now classic studies (Shaw and McKay 1942; Kornhauser 1978) to the prevalence and interdependence of both informal and formal community networks (Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson 2012) and more political variables such as electoral competition and factionalisation (Villareal 2002). While the social-scientific study of aggregate characteristics correlated with crime and violence has produced some superb refinements and extensions of social control theory (Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Villareal 2002) and highlighted the “risk” and “protective” factors that give rise to or deter violence (Turpin and Kurtz 1997; Muggah 2012), it has deftly side-stepped one key issue first spotlighted by students of “street justice” (Jacobs 2004; Mullins, Wright, and Jacobs 2004; Jacobs and Wright 2006): the uses and forms of interpersonal violence.

According to Jacobs and Wright (2006:5): “[A] substantial number of assaults, robberies, and other forms of serious criminal behavior are a direct consequence of retaliation and counter-retaliation…. retaliatory conflicts contribute significantly to the violent reputation and reality of many high-crime neighborhoods” (see also Jacobs 2004). Retaliation is “widely threatened and used by urban street criminals to deter and punish predators” (Mullins, Wright, and Jacobs 2004:911). Street criminal violence has, in this approach, one main form – that of a dyadic exchange governed by the norm of reciprocity – and one chief use – that of retaliation. Violence is thus seen as the result of a *lex talionis*, a payback for prior offenses; or, in a recent approach, a Maussian “gift” of sorts – a “gesture that, if accepted, demands to be reciprocated” (Papachristos 2009:80): you assault my friend, so I try to kill you – tit for tat (Black 1983; Jacobs and Wright 2006). Much of this interpersonal violence, so these studies tell us, remains confined to dyadic relationships.

Ethnographic and journalistic accounts of violence in both Latin American shantytowns and U.S high-poverty enclaves – be they ghettos or inner-cities (Kotlowitz 1991; Bourgois 1995; Anderson 1999; Alarcón 2003, 2009; LeBlanc 2004; Venkatesh 2008; Jones 2009; Harding 2010) – attest to the fact that direct retaliation (i.e. “the retribution for a past dispute by the aggrieved or a member of the aggrieved’s group against the person or group responsible for the original affront” [Papachristos 2009:81]) sculpts much of the violence that takes place in what

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3 In his classic study of the U.S. ghetto, Ulf Hannerz’s uses the notion of repertoire to describe the individuals’ beliefs, values and modes of action – “items of culture which are somehow stored” (Hannerz 1969: 191) in them. I’m here using the notion in a more restricted sense to focus attention on the deployment of violence as a repertoire of action.

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Loïc Wacquant (2007) calls “territories of urban relegation.” Many an ethnographic and qualitative study also shows that a “search for respect” (Bourgois 1995), not necessarily retaliatory in a strict dyadic sense, is at the forefront of violent practices (Rodgers 2006; Jones 2009; Zubillaga 2009; Penglase 2010).

Our long-term ethnographic fieldwork, however, reveals that the search for retaliation and respect is not the only purpose of violence. Violence, we will show, is also used to advance or defend territory, to discipline children, to defend self and property, to acquire economic resources, and to establish dominance within the household – in other words, violence is deployed to solve pressing problems. Our ethnography also demonstrates that restricted reciprocity is not the only form that interpersonal violence takes. True, many a violent action that we either witnessed or reconstructed in its immediate aftermath sought to avenge a past (verbal or physical) attack – either individually (a punch in response to an insult) or collectively (vigilante violence in response to an attempted rape). But once we focus sustained and systematic ethnographic attention on the multiple forms of interpersonal physical aggression that take place both inside homes and outside in the streets, we begin to detect that violence transcends the one-on-one exchange, moving outside the dyadic relationship, and involves other actors who were not part of the original dispute. Instead of specific reciprocity confined to a delimited sequence, a bounded dispute over dominance (Gould 2003), we uncover a violence that seems to follow the course of diffused reciprocity where the “definition of equivalence is less precise, one’s partners may be viewed as a group rather than particular actors, and the sequence of events is less narrowly bounded” (Keohane 1986:4). A more comprehensive understanding of the interpersonal violence that is shaking poor people’s daily lives in contemporary Buenos Aires should approach it not solely as a reciprocal exchange confined to a dyadic interaction but also as a set of interconnected events.

Across the social sciences, research on diverse forms of violence remains “specialized and balkanized” (Jackman 2002:387): students of “family violence” (Tolan et al. 2006; Kurst-Swanger and Petcosky 2003; Gelles 1985), for example, rarely engage in conversations with researchers of street or gang violence (Jones 2009; Harding 2010; Venkatesh 2008; McCart et al. 2007; Bourgois 1995), even when the latter do recurrently detect the mutual influence between private and public forms of brutality; ethnographic and journalistic descriptions attest that violence outside the home usually travels inside and vice versa (see, for example, Bourgois 1995; LeBlanc 2004; Kotlowitz 1991). The study of violence is also highly compartmentalized in psychological studies where there is “very little crossover” in the examination of different types of violence (Tolan et al. 2006:558).

Although analyses of diverse types of violence have remained siloed, a number of scholars have begun to highlight their theoretical and empirical interconnections. Randal Collins (2008), for example, focuses on the theoretical connections between a vast array of seemingly unrelated violent interactions. “[A]ll types of violence,” he writes (2008:8), “fit a small number of patterns for circumventing the barrier of tension and fear that rises up whenever people come into antagonistic confrontation.” In other words, distinct types of violence share a “situational dynamic” (7). Mary Jackman (2002) and Elijah Anderson (1999) have pointed out the shared

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4 For two paradigmatic examples from Latin America, see, for example, Rocha (2005) on “the traido” in Nicaragua and Linger (1990) on the Brazilian “briga.”
origins or similar outcomes of a wide variety of private and public, interpersonal and collective, violence. Jackman (2002:404) notes that violence is a “genus of behaviors, made up of a diverse class of injurious actions, involving a variety of behaviors, injuries, motivations, agents, victims, and observers.” According to her, “the sole thread connecting [this diversity] is the threat or outcome of injury” (404). Anderson (1999), in turn, underlines the common source shared by many instances of violence. In Anderson’s rendition of U.S. inner-city life, the “code of the street” diffuses from the street into homes, schools, parks, and commercial establishments; permeates face-to-face relations; feeds predatory crime and the drug trade; exacerbates interpersonal violence; and even warps practices of courtship, mating, and intimacy. Diverse forms of violence, according to Anderson, can be traced back to the pernicious influence of a bellicose mindset.

Although inspired by this literature that underscores empirical commonalities and theoretical analogies, our analysis draws more heavily on a strand of social scientific research that has called attention to the intertwining of different forms of violence. Moser and McIlwaine (2004), for example, highlight the causal connections between social, economic, and political violence. Along similar lines, Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) explore linkages between structural, symbolic, every day, and intimate forms of violence. Calling attention to the “continuum” formed by “peace time crimes” or “little violences,” Bourgois (2009) and Schepers-Hughes (1996; 1997) inspect the typically obscure nexuses between visible forms of violence – “whether criminal, delinquent, or self-inflicted” (Bourgois 2009:18) – and less visible ones – “structural, symbolic, and/or normalized” (2009:18). Concentrating on different forms of sexual violence, Liz Kelly (1988) also describes a “continuum.” In her case, the notion emphasizes commonalities (i.e. the shared “common character”) between the types of violence that buttress patriarchy. Finally, Hume’s (2009) and Wilding’s (2013) gendered analyses of violence unearth the co-presence and overlapping of diverse forms of physical aggression in the everyday life of marginalized communities in post-war El Salvador and contemporary Brazil respectively. Hume’s feminist perspective is of particular importance for the analysis that follows in that it challenges normative understandings of violence as “essentially public and masculinist.” As she states (2009:4), most analyses of violence in Latin America:

“are heavily reliant on an exclusively public reading of security. This belies the fact that much of the violence that affects women and children occurs in the home. The result of this separation between ‘public’ security and the safety of women and children has multiple implications. This approach misses historic practices of violence and keeps them hidden from public scrutiny. It also offers an incomplete analysis of violence, ignoring important linkages between violence in the home and violence in the street.”

Our examination of the uses and forms of violence in urban Buenos Aires complements and extends Hume’s (and Wilding’s) in that it concentrates not only on the co-presence of diverse types of physical aggression but on the lateral connections between them – i.e. on the many instances in which one form of violence leads to another. In other words, the focus of this article lies neither in the ways in which different forms of violence originate from some shared source (or result in a similar outcome) nor in the theoretical associations between them. We are mainly concerned with the uses of (and the horizontal, empirical concatenations between) diverse forms of violence – traditionally studied as separate entities – in the real time and space of materially and symbolically deprived communities. As stated above, focusing on the uses and the
interlinking (an empirical exercise that demands detective-like skills) leads us to consider violence as a repertoire to address individual and collective grievances.

Coined and popularized by Charles Tilly to understand and explain patterns of collective claim-making across time and space, the notion of repertoire focuses on the set of routines by which people get together to act on their shared interests. Repertoires are both cultural and political constructs. They are “learned cultural creations, but they do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle” (Tilly 1995:26). People “learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, organize special-interest associations. At any particular point in history, however, they learn only a rather small number of alternative ways to act together” (1995:26). This learned set of contentious routines, furthermore, is deeply political in that it: a) emerges from continuous struggles against the state, b) has an intimate relationship with everyday life and routine politics, and c) is constrained by patterns of state repression.

Scaled down and adapted to the study of urban violence, the theatrical metaphor of repertoire leads us to not only identify regularities in violent exchanges but also to examine their economic and political determinations and their cultural dimensions. In this paper we concentrate on the first task, and scrutinize the different things people seek to accomplish when they use or threaten to use physical force against others.

**Site and Methods**

Ingeniero Budge (pop. 170,000 [2012]) sits in the southern region of metropolitan Buenos Aires in the municipality of Lomas de Zamora. Located adjacent to the banks of the highly polluted Riachuelo river, this poverty-stricken area is characterized by extreme levels of infrastructural deprivation: unpaved streets, open air sewages, random garbage collection, polluted drinking water, and poor lighting. Ingeniero Budge is not only an economically deprived area, but also an extremely violent place. According to the municipal Defensoría General, homicides in Ingeniero Budge have increased 180% since 2007 – from a total number of 17 in that year to 48 between January and October of 2012 alone (the population of Lomas de Zamora, the municipality where Ingeniero Budge is located, grew only 4.2% between 2001 and 2010). The murder rate in Ingeniero Budge is thus 28.4 per 100,000 residents – four times that of the state of Buenos Aires.

The Asignación Universal por Hijo (AUH), as the Argentine conditional cash transfer programme effective since 2008 is known, and many other welfare programs (e.g., Argentina Trabaja, Plan Vida) provide assistance to most of Ingeniero Budge’s inhabitants. Patronage networks (Auyero 2000) and soup kitchens funded by Catholic charities are also a source of assistance for those in need in the area, providing crucial resources such as food and medicine.

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5 The notion of repertoire brings together different levels of analysis ranging from large-scale changes such as the development of capitalism (with the subsequent proletarianization of work) and the process of state-making (with the parallel growth of the state’s bulk, complexity, and penetration of its coercive and extractive power) to patterns of citizen-state interaction (Tilly 1986; 1995; 2006). Tilly’s model exhorts us to conceptually hold together macro-structures and micro-processes by looking closely at the ways in which big changes indirectly shape collective action by affecting the interests, opportunities, organizations, and identities of ordinary people.
Finally, the informal labor market contributes to many household incomes in the area; residents most frequently report working in street vending in an adjacent street fair, construction, domestic service, and scavenging.\(^6\)

This article is based on twenty formal, in-depth interviews with residents of Ingeniero Budge and, perhaps more importantly, innumerable informal 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, Fernanda Berti also worked in the area as an elementary school teacher in two public schools. The article draws on the detailed ethnographic notes she took based on her students’ activities inside and outside of the school and on dozens of conversations with teachers and parents. 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, fieldnotes, and vignettes selected below represent behavior observed or heard about with consistent regularity during the course of our fieldwork.\(^7\)

At the beginning of our fieldwork, our conceptualization of violence was very much informed by scholarship in sociology and psychology that treats diverse forms of violence as distinct phenomena (domestic, drug-related, criminal, sexual, etc.). Early on, we tried to understand and explain a domestic fight as separate and unrelated to, say, a clash between a drug dealer and a consumer. The literature on the subject provides a plethora of good reasons to preserve this analytical distinction (Tolan et al. 2006; Gelles 1985; see Brush 2001 for a description of continuities between private and public violence). However, the case of vigilante violence against a neighbor accused of attempted rape that we reconstruct below alerted us to the potential relationships between diverse forms of physical harm and directed us to the literature on retaliatory “street justice.” What if, we asked ourselves, some of the episodes of violence that neighbors were constantly reporting were not only co-present but, in fact, interrelated? Once alerted to these potential links, our interviews with adult residents began to focus on other connections between seemingly unrelated violent episodes – connections that, as the ethnographic vignettes that follow show, transcend one-on-one dyadic retaliation. After briefly describing the constant presence of violence in the area, we present some of the concatenations between and uses of different forms of physical aggression.

Where the Violence is

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\(^6\) In order to identify residential patterns, sources of employment, levels of education, and the most common problems identified by the population under investigation, we conducted one hundred short interviews (which lasted between 30 minutes and an hour). We recruited the respondents via snowball sampling. For insightful accounts of the history and workings of the street fair and the surrounding neighborhood, see Hacher (2011) and Girón (2011).

\(^7\) Our study was approved by the University of Texas at Austin IRB (protocol # 2011-05-0126). Research participants (students, parents, and school authorities) were fully aware of Berti’s dual role as teacher and researcher.
We began our fieldwork at two local elementary schools where Fernanda Berti works as a full-time teacher. Our fieldwork with elementary school children and their families yielded straightforward results: on a daily basis, children and adolescents in the area are exposed to diverse kinds of violence. They witness shootings, murders, and episodes of sexual and/or domestic violence from an early age (Auyero 2013). During our 30 months of fieldwork, not a week went by without one or more of the 40 elementary school children with whom we worked (whose ages ranged from 7 to 13) describing one or more episodes involving one or more forms of violence (see Auyero and Berti 2013 for a full description).

In-depth interviews with physicians who work in the emergency rooms at the local hospital and health center, and with a social worker at the local school, confirm the skyrocketing of interpersonal violence registered in the 180% increase in homicides rates. “Today,” says a doctor with 15 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 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). Small “bands” devoted to the storage, preparation, and distribution of drugs operate in Ingeniero Budge and its surrounding area, fueling 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 locally known as paco. Unsurprisingly, criminal activity and its accompanying violence are the main concerns among residents. An overwhelming majority of our 100 interviewees cite delinquency, insecurity, robberies, and drug dealing as their main preoccupations.

Although no official figures exist, interviews with social workers and teachers at the local school indicate that sexual violence and physical aggression between family members and intimate partners have also intensified. Melanie’s case illustrates the presence of sexual violence, and the kind of retaliation it oftentimes produces.

Melanie lives in El Bajo, an area full of precariously constructed homes and meandering passageways, in the heart of Ingeniero Budge. Dirt roads, open ditches, broken sidewalks, stagnant and stinking sewage waters, and uncollected garbage characterize dwellers’ daily lives. Melanie’s dad scavenges for a living; her mother is one of the thousands of beneficiaries of the Asignación Universal por Hijo conditional cash transfer program. In the following excerpt, Mabel, Melanie’s mother, explains the origins of the bullet that her daughter has lodged in her leg.

“See, that son of a bitch wanted to rape her. It was on December 24th [Christmas Eve]. 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 not all, so I sent Melanie and my niece to pick up the rest. When they got to our neighbor’s house, he was drunk, and he 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. Luckily, they were able to push him aside – maybe because he was really drunk – 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 the shit out of him. 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 spent 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.”

Over the course of our fieldwork, dozens of times we heard stories of rape or attempted rape of girls by acquaintances or family members – in most of the cases, uncles or stepfathers. Over the course of individual interviews, parents articulate their fear: “I can’t let her go alone… what if they rape her? It’s frightening…” Despite this panic – a panic with a very real basis – neighbors like Mabel do not trust the police to address these kinds of cases. They think cops are slow in reacting against 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).8 Neighbors thus rarely rely on a legal charge (and a possible arrest). Instead they deploy targeted retaliatory collective violence.

However, a lot of the violence in the neighborhood is more than just retaliatory. There is, as the cases that follow show, a whole repertoire of action that deploys violence in a variety of ways and contexts. A dispute between dealers over missing payments, like the ones that oftentimes took place during our fieldwork, can be seen as the expression of retaliatory violence – and so can a woman’s violent reaction to the assault of her drunkard partner. But when dealers barge into a home, point a gun at the face of the mother of an addict and claim a drug payment, and when this same mother threatens to “break the fingers” of her addicted son (or, actually, punches him until she sees “blood coming out of his face,” or calls the cops she knows are involved in drug trafficking to have her son arrested and taken away) in order to prevent him from stealing things from her house, things, like a small TV set, that he then sells to finance his addiction but that do not belong to his mother but to her second husband who, enraged by the missing items, often beats her – then we are confronting concatenated violent exchanges.

As we will see in the three ethnographic reconstructions below, violence acquires a form other than restricted reciprocity and is deployed not simply to retaliate. Violence, actual or threatened, is used to advance over (or protect) a territory for either semi-legal commerce (as in the street market that sits adjacent to our field site where the boundaries of, among other things, stalls and parking lots are defended with gun or knife in hand [Hacher 2011; Girón 2011]) or illegal transactions (as in the monthly, sometimes weekly, shoot-outs between drug-pushers, locally known as transas). Physical aggression is also used by parents to discipline sons and daughters – to make them stay away from “malas compañías” (friends deemed bad influences) or, if they “already fell,” to try to control their addiction to drugs or alcohol (“Next time I see you with a joint, I’ll break your fingers,” “He came home so drugged up, I punched him in the face until blood came out of my fingers,” or “I chained her to the bed so that she couldn’t go out and smoke”). When no other form of punishment works, parents might also resort to the police to have their own children jailed. Physical force (or its threat) is likewise deployed for defense of

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the self (“I’d kill him with my own bare hands if he tried to rape me” or “Last time my father attacked my mom, she threw a bottle at him and ran him out of the house”) or of one’s property (“My dad has a gun, he uses it every time intruders want to take a piece of our plot away from us”). Violence, furthermore, is used to obtain economic resources to support drug or alcohol consumption (as in the many robberies by youngsters in the neighborhood: “We ran out of beer and we jumped at this couple to get some money to keep drinking”) or dominance over a partner (as in the many domestic fights recounted to us: “He was mad at her because she didn’t come back home in time”).

These are analytical distinctions that, as we will see, get blurred in daily practice. In other words, there are multiple overlaps between the uses of violence (Hume 2009). A dealer seeks control over his territory in order to conduct his business. In the process he might deploy physical force against youngsters to obtain their silence and protection. The dealer might also use the fact that he is a “poronga pesado” [literally, “a heavy dick,” i.e. someone nobody “messes with” in a certain part of the neighborhood) to physically (and publicly) punish an adolescent deemed to be a bad influence on the dealer’s daughter. This open, brutal display of physical force against neighbors serves simultaneously to not only discipline family members but also to obtain their respect – and to perpetuate the dealer’s reputation. In the examples that follow we show the mutual imbrication between diverse deployments of violence. The ethnographic reconstructions also illustrate how violence is a routine way to deal with everyday life issues inside and outside the home – i.e. physical aggression takes the form of a repertoire of action.

**Lucía on the Uses of Violence I**

Responses to sexual violence do not always take the form of the vigilante retaliatory violence we described in Melanie’s case. The following episode portrays a less communal but equally brutal reaction. Reconstructed over a period of several days and after long and difficult conversations with some of the participants involved, the episode illustrates the porous boundaries between private and public violence and the diverse uses of physical aggression that will be further described in two subsequent stories.

Lucía and her friend, Soledad, are both 13 years old. They live on the same block. Lucía’s mother, Matilde, is a single mother. Soledad’s father, Juan, is a well-known drug dealer in this area of the neighborhood, “un poronga pesado” (someone “nobody messes with”). Soledad’s mom, Rosario, also has a reputation for being tough. As a neighbor told us: “He is a transa, and he is loaded with guns and has no problems if he has to shoot at someone. And his wife, I worked with her (robbing trucks going in and out of the street market), and I know what she is capable of doing…”

One Monday morning in early September, neighbors woke up to the sounds of Juan’s and Rosario’s screams. “She [Soledad] was raped because of you [Lucía]! You will see!” Right after publicly and loudly accusing Lucía for their daughter’s misfortune, they grabbed her by the arms, punched her in the face, and kicked her in the stomach and lower back. Then they pulled her inside their home. Inside, Juan held her firmly while Rosario swiftly cut her long hair. Lucía sprinted back to her house. When Matilde heard Lucía frantically crying under her bed in the fetal position, she ran out to the sidewalk to see what had happened. Outside, she was confronted by Rosario and Juan: “You better keep this to yourself or you’ll be in trouble,” they told her. Amanda, Matilde’s friend, later told us that she believes that Matilde does not have much of an
option to counter the couple’s brutality toward her daughter: “She can’t do anything. If she says something, they’ll kill her.”

Everybody in the block talked about the public punishment but the offense was not immediately obvious. What happened? Why did Juan and Rosario publicly and viciously scold Lucía? It took us a while to find out. That morning, Lucía and Soledad had come back home at 6 am after spending the night out with no more than a single phone call to their parents to tell them they were “on their way [home].” When they showed up in the morning, Soledad’s neck was “filled with chupones (hickies).” It didn’t take long for Juan and Rosario to realize that their daughter had sex and, equating a first-time sexual encounter with rape, they blamed her friend Lucía for the loss of their daughter’s virginity – though, as Matilde confided to us later, “Soledad was no virgin, no way.” The equivalence between a first sexual encounter and rape is not, we believe, far-fetched. Given Soledad’s age and the widespread fear of sexual violence in the neighborhood, the dreadful comparison makes sense.

“Lucía didn’t force Soledad to do anything she didn’t want to,” Matilde told us. But Juan and Rosario blamed her for their daughter’s condition – the attribution of blame took the form of harsh physical punishment carried out by those who see themselves as the de facto authority in this part of the neighborhood. Juan and Rosario are not alone in believing that; pace Hannah Arendt, power can come out of “the barrel of a gun” – or a punch, or a knife, or a stick. Violence, in many a resident’s view, does not “destroy power” (Arendt 1970) but actually gives birth to (and/or sustains) it. Violence is, for many in the area, foundational. It nurtures the power a man or a woman can hold both inside and outside his or her home, serving both disciplinary and reputational purposes. In both the private and the public spheres, authority is (thought to be) conquered and defended with physical violence – “Grab a stick, or a pipe,” Amanda offered as parental advice to Matilde, “and hit him (your son) hard with it, until he listens to you, until he obeys you. That’s the only way in which he is going to comply with you.” “You will learn a lesson,” screamed Soledad’s parents at Lucía as they punched and kicked her adolescent body.

The following two reconstructions exemplify other ways in which different forms of interpersonal violence are mutually imbricated. Regularly performed, violence takes the form of a useful repertoire to deal with routine problems at the urban margins.

Leonardo on the Uses of Violence II

We first heard about Leonardo, when his mother, Ana, approached the second author at the soup kitchen. Knowing that Agustín Burbano had helped another neighbor to place her addicted son into a rehabilitation center, Ana sought his help. “Please, give me a hand with this, I can’t take it anymore.” Earlier that morning, Ana had beaten Leonardo “with the broom. I hit him everywhere, arms, legs… I lost it,” she says, crying. “I swear to you, I lost it, I didn’t want to stop beating him until I could see blood coming out.”

It took us several weeks to reconstruct the story behind the beating. We spent time with Ana and Leonardo in the precarious exposed-brick one-room home they inhabit. We chatted with Ana as she cooked lunch for dozens in the soup kitchen that, as with many of the women that work there, she joined to escape from her abusive husband. And we visited a rehab center (a one-and-a-half-hour train and bus ride from the neighborhood) together with Leonardo, after he expressed his desire to “rescue” himself from drugs.
Leonardo, who is now 16, dropped out of school when he was 14, and has been consuming pacó for at least two years. He also drinks heavily (“oftentimes, I get drunk, I get into fights, but then I don’t remember a thing… I wake up full of scars and don’t remember anything”). He has been financing his harmful habits by scavenging, by robbing inside and outside the neighborhood (which triggered several altercations with the police and one arrest), and by stealing from his mother.

Three times a week, Leonardo scavenges around the neighborhood with a cart – “I don’t have a horse, so I can’t go far,” he tells us. As many others, he combines this informal labor with illicit activities like robbing from passersby and from local stores. “I began to rob when I was 12, with a kid that now is a drug-pusher (transa). We used to cut school… at the beginning I was really scared. We would go walk around the store [we wanted to rob] or get close to the person we wanted to mug, but we wouldn’t dare to do it. You have to go with someone else, so that you get the courage (así te das fuerza). If not, if you go alone, you get frightened, and you don’t rob anyone.”

The “seductions of crime” (Katz 1988) were not only learned in the company of his partners. Leonardo’s older half-brother, Matías, acted as a “role model” of sorts. Although Leonardo never “went out (to commit a crime) with him,” he remembers “him coming home from work (a robbery)... taking off his (bullet-proof) vest, and leaving his guns in the top drawer, where I couldn’t reach... he would then lock it so that I couldn’t get my hands on his guns.” Leonardo respected and admired Matías. The latter was a “chorro” (thief) – in the symbolic universe of poor destitute delinquent youth, thieves have the moral upper hand over transas.9

Robbing from stores in the neighborhood is “difficult,” says Leonardo, not only because many “storeowners are armed... even more so if they are men,” but also because of the police. Together with his partner, Quito, he was arrested when trying to rob a grocery store in nearby Villa Itatí. They were placed in a detention center for minors for a few months. Leonardo has a scar on his cheek – a daily reminder of that arrest (“they stepped on my face and held it to the ground... there must have been a stone or glass there and it punctured my skin”). Violence is also inscribed on his body in the form of several tattoos: A black 22 mm pistol (“you can distinguish it from a 38 mm by the cylinder and the barrel”) on his chest surrounded by wings on each side, and five dots (four dots, representing inmates or thieves, around one that represents a cop) on his right leg (“if the cops see this tattoo, they take you to the precinct, and they beat the shit out of you, even if you haven’t done anything” he proudly states). On his right arm, he has tattooed his seventeen-year-old sister’s name Dalma. Dalma was arrested while carrying one

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9 Thieves, so the folk narrative goes, do not make deals with the police and are united in their collective hatred of cops. Transas, on the contrary, make all sorts of illicit arrangements with the police (“arreglan con la gorra”). Although the “thief vs. dealer” symbolic opposition organizes the moral universe of street crime (Alarcón 2003; 2009), in real life the boundaries between these two are less clear-cut. As our fieldwork taught us, people can be one or another at different points in time and families may have members involved in both types of shady street entrepreneurship (see also, Venkatesh 2009).
kilogram of pure cocaine. After months of detention without sentence,\(^\text{10}\) she was released – not before having been raped behind bars, apparently contracting HIV.

“She has stolen everything from me,” says Leonardo’s mother Ana, “We can’t live with him anymore.” She elaborates: “Leonardo has stolen many things from me. The first time I beat him was when he sold a cellphone he stole from us. The cellphone wasn’t even mine; it was from my second husband. I beat him really bad; I grabbed his fingers, and told him that if he did that again, I was going to break his fingers, one by one so that he couldn’t steal again. He never took a cellphone again, but he stole sneakers, t-shirts, socks. I buy stuff at the feria (street market) so that I can resell it and make some money [but] he steals it from me and resells it for 20 pesos so that he can buy his drugs.”

Ana beat Leonardo out of impotence but also out of fear. She is afraid her son will be killed. Examples of early, violent, deaths abound around them. Leonardo’s idolized half-brother, Matías, was killed (nobody knows by whom), in an attempted robbery a few months before we met (his half-dead body was abandoned, presumably by his partners in crime, in front of the local hospital). This loss, according to Ana, intensified Leonardo’s paco consumption (according to Leonardo, “since what happened to my brother, I really abandoned myself”). Weeks before we first met, Leonardo was hit by a bullet in his leg when he and a group of friends tried to mug a passerby in the middle of the night. Daniel, the brother of Leonardo’s friend Kevin (with whom Leonardo consumes drugs), was killed in that encounter. As Leonardo told us: “The guy [we were going to mug] pulled out his own gun and began to shoot. I started to run. I hid in an abandoned house, and realized my leg was injured...” It was the first time Leonardo was hit by a bullet. Ana fears that her losing control over him will result in him being killed (“Last night, he came back home high, drugged, aggressive. He still obeys me and he has not tried to hit me yet, but the friend with whom he does drugs [Kevin], does not even respect his mother, he is out of control”).

As many in the neighborhood, Ana and Leonardo are quite familiar with crime and violence. Ana herself had been a drug-pusher for a while (“but I didn’t make much money because I did drugs too...”). Ana’s first husband, Mario (Leonardo’s and Dalma’s dad), was a drug dealer “a transa pesado... a big fish, he had lots of money,” she tells us. Her second husband, Roberto (the father of Leonardo’s sisters, Florencia, 15; Laura, 9; and Roxana, 7), was a part-time thief: “He used to rob on the highway, every now and then, but he was no big fish, no pirata del asfalto (literally, not an “asphalt pirate”)...[he committed] small robberies...a cellphone, a wallet with 100 pesos, nothing big... he was even afraid of my first husband. Now, my first husband, yes, that man was scary.” Mario was not only a “scary” thug; he was also a menacing husband. “He used to beat me very, very often... He once chopped my hair this short (pointing to above her ear). He not only beat the shit out of me, he also starved me... Why do you think I began to work at the soup kitchen? They didn’t pay me but I got food there...he made my life hell. When I became pregnant with Florencia, he beat me really hard. And she wasn’t even his daughter, we were no longer together. But all the same, he wanted me to have an abortion, he punched me several times in my belly, screaming, ‘take that girl out of there, get rid

\(^{10}\) This is quite common in the province of Buenos Aires where 68 percent of inmates in state jails do not have a firm judicial sentence (i.e., they are imprisoned under pretrial detention) (CELS 2010).
of her!’’ Leonardo remembers these fights: “Once, he almost killed her. When I was a kid, I swore I’d murder my father.”

The day Leonardo had his appointment with the counselor at the local health center (so that she could do a “psychological evaluation” that would eventually authorize his admission to rehab), he was nowhere to be found. Despite his declared desire to “rescatarse de las drogas” (quit consuming), he missed the one chance he had to get free treatment. Ana did not see him until a few days later when he, drunk or high (Ana couldn’t tell), tried to break into her house. He was “out of control,” his mother told us. “He came home and when I was about to beat him, he yelled: ‘Now you will see who is Leonardo Jesús Ramírez. The Leonardo who was told what to do, that Leonardo is gone! From now on, I’ll do whatever the fuck I want, and if I die, I die en mi ley (by my law)!”

Later that day, Ana found out that Leonardo had had a fight with his partner Roxana. Leonardo had read a text message Roxana had received from a former boyfriend while she was taking a shower and, in a jealous outburst, beat her so badly that she had to be hospitalized. No authority intervened – Leonardo was not cited or arrested for the episode. All Ana could say when we last saw her was: “Believe me, Agustín, I know how it feels when somebody beats the shit out of you.”

Exposure to violence(s), the above story shows, comes in diverse forms: direct victimization, witnessing, or learning about physical harm perpetrated on others (Brennan et al. 2007). But the story also reveals that violence is regularly deployed to accomplish a variety of aims, and that, some of these uses, concatenate with one another. Our last ethnographic reconstruction illuminates these concatenations in great empirical detail shedding light on the dissemination of violent interactions beyond the confines of one-on-one reciprocity.

**Antonio on the Uses of Violence III**

Angélica (age 45) lives in a precarious house made of bricks, wood and metal sheets for a roof. The house bears the marks of her son, Antonio’s (age 17) addiction to paco. A big wood panel covers a hole Antonio made when, in desperate need of cash to buy his next dose of paco, he broke into his own house and stole Angélica’s clothes. Clothes are not the only thing that Antonio has stolen from his mother and siblings. The list, Angélica tells us, is quite long. It includes a TV set, brand new sneakers, plates, pots, pans, and a new portable washing machine.

Just a few blocks from their house there is a shop that specializes in buying items from desperate addicts and then re-sells them to either their original owners or anyone interested for a higher, oftentimes doubled, price. These days, Angélica seldom leaves the house (she stopped taking her little son to daycare and she failed to show up at the local hospital to give her two little children mandatory vaccines) because she is afraid Antonio will take whatever items of value remain – “the little TV antenna… he broke it, he uses it as a pipe to smoke.” But Antonio doesn’t just steal from Angélica. Recently, he has begun to take clothes from one of her other sons, Carlos. Carlos is an alcoholic and last time he discovered Antonio’s robberies, a huge bloody fight broke out between them. “They threw rocks and bottles at each other…” Angélica tells us. And many of her neighbors agree; the fights between the two sick brothers are infamous on their block. Impotent but hardly passive in the face of that violence (many times we witnessed how Angélica makes sure that there are no glass bottles or big rocks handy in their backyard so that
the brothers cannot severely hurt each other), she is very scared (vivo con miedo) at the prospect of one of them killing the other. In the following dialogue, Angélica recounts one recent episode:

Angélica: Antonio spent last night in the precinct.
Interviewer: What happened?
Angélica: He stole our bathroom’s toilet… and when he was carrying it through the streets, the police stopped him. The cops thought he had stolen it from a local depot. They arrested him…
I: Did you at least get the toilet back?
Angélica: No…I don’t have the money to bring it back from the precinct (she needs to pay a car service). And that’s not all. Carlos beat Antonio really bad for stealing the toilet. Today, in vengeance, Antonio threw a huge paving stone at his foot, to hurt him…
I: How did Antonio do that? Was Carlos asleep?
Angélica: Carlos has been drunk for the past three days, drinking wine, beer and whiskey… (crying) My life is not a life… Sometimes, I want to leave them all here and run away….

Violence between the drug-addicted son and the alcoholic one is not the only violence that threatens Angélica’s household where seven other children, ranging from 4 to 21, live with her. “I couldn’t sleep yesterday,” she tells us as we are walking towards the local soup kitchen on a Friday morning. “Antonio stole a bicycle from a neighbor, who is a friend of Mario, my other son. Antonio exchanged it for 20 pesos to buy drugs. At night, the owner of the bicycle came to my home and asked me for the bicycle. I told him that I’d get paid on Tuesday. But he doesn’t want the money. He showed me a gun and told me that, ‘if the bicycle is not here soon, I’ll kill your son.’” Angélica and the rest of her family didn’t sleep that night.

Antonio is not only addicted to paco but, lately, he has also been purchasing drugs for other youngsters in the neighborhood – acting as a courier of sorts. One night, a group of youth angrily stormed into Angélica’s house looking for Antonio. They had given him money earlier in the day and by late afternoon he had not returned with the drugs (or the money). “They looked for him everywhere and they had weapons,” Angélica said. “They threatened me and told me that they would kill him because he had kept their money. I told them that I’d pay them. I told them that he didn’t know what he was doing. I asked them to please not hurt him.”

The constant – and, as far as we were able to see, increasingly dangerous – fights between residents can, in part, be understood as the psychopharmacological product of the consumption of drugs and alcohol. As research has shown (Reinarman and Levine 1997; Parker and Auerhahn 1998) the ingestion of alcohol and drugs can irritate, excite, enrage or embolden people; these emotional states can translate into violent behavior. Antonio’s petty thievery, compelled by his craving for drugs, illustrates yet another individual-level relationship between drugs and violence – what Goldstein (1985) labels economic compulsive (see also, Goldstein et al. 1997).
Until the proliferation of crack use in the United States, most research attributed the violence triggered by drugs either to “the physical or psychological effects of drug ingestion or to the attempts of drug addicts to acquire economic resources that are needed to support the habit” (Ousey and Lee 2002:74-5). Since the mid-1980s, research has uncovered a third way in which drugs and violence are coupled. Systemic violence refers to the violence that can develop “from the exigencies of working or doing business in an illicit market – a context in which the monetary stakes can be enormous but where the economic actors have no recourse to the legal system to resolve disputes” (Goldstein 1985:116). In this third way, which accounts for most of what is known as “drug-related” violence, violent interactions are “an outcome of attempts at informal social control carried out by drug market participants who are unable to rely on formal social control agents (e.g. the police) to handle their grievances” (Ousey and Lee 2002:75). Disputes between rival dealers, punishment for stealing or failing to pay for drugs, or for selling adulterated products, are commonly cited examples (Reinarman and Levine 1997; Ousey and Lee 2002; Bourgois 1995; Venkatesh 2008; Reding 2009). Angélica’s family also had first-hand experience with this violence; and so do most of Berti’s students as attested by the many times in which they report night shoot-outs between neighborhood drug dealers: “In the neighborhood, every night, dealers shoot at each other.”

The above story illustrates more than the coexistence, in real time and space, of the three forms in which drugs and violence are related. When, in his attempt to finance his habit and/or pay back his debts, Antonio steals from his family members and ends up in a fight with his brother, or when young addicts terrorize Angélica and her family over missing drugs, we also see how reciprocity diffuses and violence is used for many purposes other than retaliation (to obtain economic resources, to discipline, etc.). Diverse forms of violence that have traditionally been examined as separate and distinct phenomena (e.g., interpersonal, domestic, drug-related) connect with one another. As drug dealers, couriers, and consumers fight over payments, theft, or drug quality, their public violence – a violence that is inherent to the structure of the market for illicit goods – may migrate inside homes and become a private, sometimes brutal, quarrel between family members.

Conclusions and Tasks Ahead

Interpersonal violence at the urban margins is not only used to seek retaliation, and it is not confined to dyadic relationships. Different forms of violence are not only co-present but are also concatenated. This paper provided an ethnographic report on the multiple uses of violence and on the interlinked form physical aggression takes in a poor neighborhood.

Regularly performed in a variety of instances, violence takes the form of a repertoire that serves to address a diversity of daily problems. Conceptualizing violence as a repertoire leads us to not only identify regularities in individual and collective deployments of physical force (the task of this paper) but also to examine their cultural and political dimensions. Regarding its cultural dimension, we need to not only scrutinize the different things people seek to accomplish when they use, threaten to use, or refuse to use physical force, but also the things they learn in the course of violent interactions: from how to use their bare hands to stop (or initiate) a physical attack, to where to purchase (or rent) guns (and to distinguish between their different calibers), buy bullets, conduct a robbery, or how to make a deal with the local police in order to pursue an illicit trade. There is, in other words, a “learned character” to the daily violence that should be further scrutinized in order to understand the role played by violence in socialization – hinted at
in the stories presented above (Leonardo’s, for example) and dissected by Lancaster (1992) in Nicaragua. We also need a more adequate account of the experiential dimension of interpersonal violence (to inquire, for example, whether or not violence becomes “normalized” [Bourgois 1995; Schepers-Hughes 1992]) and of the way this experience affects, in repertoire-like fashion, subsequent ways of acting (as gleaned in Ana’s story).

Regarding repertoire’s political dimension, we should note that the interpersonal violence that suffuses the lives of poor people in Ingeniero Budge lacks the redemptive properties that Franz Fanon, to use a classic example, attributes to the violence of the subaltern. The violence here under examination is neither a “cleansing force” that “frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction” (Fanon 1990:74) nor an energy that makes the poor “fearless” or restores their “self-respect.” Furthermore, the street violence here placed under the ethnographic microscope is not the subaltern violence that, oftentimes dissected by historians and social scientists, is directed against the state, the powerful, or its symbols (Davis 1973; Darnton 1991; Thompson 1994; Scott 1985; Steinberg 1999). Although this violence is neither used by the oppressed or the excluded as a weapon to reconfigure structures of domination nor deployed as a strategy to assert and/or celebrate popular power, it does have a political character. The theatrical metaphor of repertoire is deeply political and, as such, it compels us to inspect when, how, and to what effect does the state police poor peoples’ disputes and how does this policing affect the character and course of individual and collective responses to violence. Much work lies ahead.

References


PERIODICALS

*La Nación, Página12, Clarín.*