Social Theories of Urban Violence in the Global South

Towards Safe and Inclusive Cities

Edited by
Jennifer Erin Salahub, Markus Gottsbacher, and John de Boer

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Roberto Briceño-León

Introduction

The neighbourhoods where the poor of Caracas have built their homes sit on the slopes of the mountains or are sunk into the ditches carved by the rivers that flow through the city. The flat spaces of the three valleys that make up Caracas are occupied by formal urban scenery: homes, high-rises, and commercial buildings—all legally constructed, with official permits to occupy the land and build on it. But the areas where the poor live have no such authorisation. Their settlements were built in the interstices of private property, on rocky and difficult public land on mountains, or on the riverbeds where construction is hazardous and expressly prohibited.

On one of those mountain slopes lives 17-year-old Jonathan, whose house has a beautiful view of the city's towers and buildings. But the house's foundations are so fragile that it is in danger of collapsing. His mother had no money for repairs, so Jonathan decided to help her. He left school, joined a neighbourhood gang, and began stealing. Now, he unabashedly tells of having already killed two people.

Not far from there, at the edge of one of the mountain gullies, lives Ederson, another 17-year-old. When he was a boy, the rising river destroyed his family's home. They lost almost everything. But despite the danger, Ederson's father decided to rebuild the house in the same spot. The location may be illegal, but it's convenient for everyone in a central area of the city, near where the parents work and the children go to school. Ederson packed groceries at a nearby supermarket to help pay for the repairs and for his own education. He currently dreams of attending university.

Here are two poor yet ambitious young men, who grew up in the same conditions of urban poverty and exclusion. Why does one enter the world of crime and violence, and the other hope for higher education? This chapter will examine the results of research into criminal violence in three Venezuelan cities. With the evidence gathered here, I aim to establish a critical and constructive dialogue on the theories of urban insecurity.

Urban poverty and violence

The most popular theories explaining crime and violence place the blame not just on poverty, but also on the inequality experienced by poor people in the Global South, particularly in Latin America. According to this well-known hypothesis, Jonathan would become a delinquent and a killer because of his family's poverty, and as a reaction to the fact that he was living in destitution right beside a city full of wealth. But if those were the only two operative factors, why didn't Ederson become a criminal too?

The explanation of poverty and inequality as the causes of crime is rooted in a set of theories that originated in the Global North, which has social realities that are very different from those in Latin America. Applying those theories to this region's problems is an easy task, given the overwhelming evidence of poverty and inequality, and the weight of authority of the Northern academic and political tradition. For instance, we could explain Jonathan's criminal behaviour using the theories of functional "social disorganisation" (Shaw and McKay 1972; Finn-Aage and Huizinga 1990; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Laub and Sampson 2003). We could also turn to Marxist theories of crime (Russell 2002; Sozzo 2008; Camacho and Guzmán 1990), since Jonathan's family could certainly be classed as dysfunctional and his feeling of exclusion from urban life and consumerism could well lead to a class struggle. But then how do we explain the hundreds of thousands of other Edersons, with the same family and social circumstances, who never become thieves or murderers?

The reality of Venezuelan society forces us to creatively rethink some of those standard theories. In the early 2000s, for instance—the decade in which the country was wealthiest, not most impoverished—Caracas was the capital city with the world's highest homicide rate (UNODC 2011). Furthermore, at this time the government had the nation's largest expenditure in social assistance. That period in Venezuela—when homicide rates tripled, and it became one of the five most violent countries in the world—was when official reports proclaimed it to be the least unequal country in Latin America (CEPAL 2004). Under those circumstances, how can we sustain theories affirming that poverty and inequality produce criminal violence?

The radical transformation of criminality in Venezuela, and the differences in the lives of Jonathan and Ederson, show us that we need to consider other factors. The working hypothesis of the research I present here focuses on the normative dimensions of a society. I feel that this is a highly relevant factor, and one to which the dominant theories on urban crime do not pay sufficient attention. It is the rules of the social contract, both formal and informal, which govern relationships and make life predictable. My thesis is that the social institution acts to control violence, and that the tragedy of urban exclusion is not based on the lack of material things. Rather, it is *normative* exclusion that leaves part of the population outside the rule of law, and fosters the rise of crime and violence.

The fragmented city

Venezuelan cities, like much of Latin America, developed with a different pattern than that of European and American cities. The standard theory of urbanisation is that the process of industrialisation brought with it the growth of cities: industrialisation preceded urbanisation. In Latin America, something very different occurred, there was a process of urbanisation without industrialisation. Not only did it not come first, but, in some cases, industrialisation never arrived at all (Quijano 1977).

The urbanisation of Latin America was the product of Spanish colonisation, which, as a tool of political domination, displaced or replaced pre-colonial urban centres. Some of those Aztec, Mayan, or Incan cities were very large, and were likely developed for commercial and ceremonial purposes. In other areas, such as Venezuela, only small villages existed. For more than four centuries, the colonial city of Latin America was built in the form of a chequerboard around a plaza, as established in the 1576 Ordinances of Felipe II of Spain. It grew in a slow and orderly fashion with new blocks added onto its fringes, where new inhabitants of the city lived.

In the twentieth century, the situation changed when a predominantly rural continent suddenly became urban. This process was marked by three major traits: speed, magnitude, and incapacity.

- Speed: The process of urbanisation was a very quick one. In 1950, only 43 per cent of the population of South America lived in cities; 50 years later, by the end of the century, this had nearly doubled, with 80 per cent of the population being urban.
- Magnitude: South America has a very large population and much of it moved into the cities at once. In 1950, there were 48 million urban dwellers; in 2000, there were 279 million. Those 230 million new inhabitants of the cities meant an almost 600 per cent population increase (CELADE 2004)—the equivalent of building, in just half a century, six times the total number of all of South America's cities.
- Incapacity: For cities accustomed to slow growth, it was very difficult to welcome so many new residents. This scant capacity for urban integration was evident in the overloaded systems for housing and also in the strains placed on urban infrastructure such as roads, water, and sewers, and on services such as hospitals and schools.

That inability to assimilate so much new population growth, due to its speed and magnitude, was what led to the illegal occupation of huge portions of marginal territory that was not suitable for urbanisation: the mountains and gullies where Jonathan and Ederson live. These informal new areas, created by the inhabitants themselves, were both integrated into and excluded from the formal city: they are an essential part of it, but lack both legality and services.

These areas, known variously as *favelas*, *barrios*, or *tugurios*, have a situation of material exclusion that has been widely studied in the region (Valladares 2005). They also, as I indicated earlier, are in a state of normative exclusion and this makes them areas not strictly governed by the rule of law. They are social spaces in which the formal law is rarely enforced. Due to the circumstances of this abandonment, these spaces are governed by an informal institutionalism that offers some advantages for those who live in them, but also a number of serious problems (Calderón 2005).

Social theories on crime in society

Among the social explanations for violence and criminality, there are two major schools of thought. One believes that crime arises from poverty and inequality, and the other that criminality is driven by normative and institutional deficiencies.

The poverty-based explanation says that individuals commit crimes in order to quickly obtain the things they lack in life; they feel justified in this because of the inequality they observe in society, where others have the things they lack (Kruijt 2008; Moser and Shrader 1998). According to this perspective, since the poor have no legal access to the things they need, whether vital or superfluous, they decide to snatch them illegally by force. The attractive thing about this theory is that it removes the justification of crime from the active individual and his environment, and turns instead to a collective explanation that aims more to understand criminals than to condemn them. Its origin is found in a 1939 book written by two German-American sociologists, George Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer, *Punishment and Social Structure* (1968). With all the prestige of the Frankfurt School to which they belonged (Wheatland 2009), they demonstrated their new hypothesis attributing the causes of criminality not to individuals but to an unjust social order.

The explanations of crime from poverty come in various forms. In some cases, it has been a micro-social analysis, such as ecological studies, in which poverty (expressed as low household income, substandard housing, or percentage of youth that do not attend school) is the cause of crime (Shaw, van Dijk, and Rhomberg 2003). Alternatively, the macro-social perspective argues that the conditions of poverty are themselves a type of violence, known as structural violence (Galtung and Hölvik 1971; Del Olmo 2000). Another widely accepted explanation is based on the theory of inequality or "relative deprivation". The idea, first formulated by Marx, is that a person might feel anger if a palace is built next to their little house. The difference between the two buildings makes the house look like a mere hut (Marx 1968). Many other studies have considered inequality as a cause of violence, including Blau and Blau (1982); Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza (2002); and Buvinic, Morrison, and Shifter (2000), as well as publications by the World Bank (2011) and the World Health Organization (WHO 2000).

Some Latin American studies have sought an association between inequality and criminality (Cano and Santos 2001; Gawryszewski and Costa 2005; Bourguignon, Nuñez, and Sanchez 2003; Cramer 2003; Kruijt 2008; Moser and Shrader 1998). But they have found no convincing explanation.

A different perspective comes from studies that seek an explanation for violence in the interaction of individuals and the social norms that govern their coexistence. All societies have such standards and laws to regulate relationships, distribute duties, and establish which actions are acceptable and which are reprehensible. Society praises some behaviours and criminalises others with the result that the behaviour of most people is predictable (Guidice 2005). For simple societies, these mechanisms work well enough. But when urban society becomes more complex, they become even more crucial. Émile Durkheim, the founder of sociology, found that at times these normative provisions—the ones that set the guidelines for how individuals should act—are either not conveyed adequately, are not learned, or lose their impact. In such situations, the "criminal profession" arises (Durkheim 1978: 343). Criminal behaviour arises from shortcomings in society; it is learned in terms of relationships with other people and in the choices an individual makes between behaviour that accepts or breaks the rules (Sutherland 1955).

This perspective is revisited by Robert Merton, who interprets criminal behaviour as the result of the conflict that arises between an individual's desires and his limited means for achieving those goals (Merton 1965). Societies respond to those who break their rules; we might call this reciprocation "punishment" although Durkheim does not (Durkheim 1960). Punishment is the opposite of positive reciprocity in which kindness is met with kindness, and gifts with gifts (Mauss 1973). As a social norm, negative reciprocity translates into the willingness to inflict pain on a person in response to the pain that this person has previously inflicted on others. This process restores the universal value to the social norm that has been broken (Meares, Katyal, and Kahan 2004; Hart 2008).

This institutional perspective contends that the most important thing in society is the rules of the game since these allow individuals to control their behaviour, resolve conflicts without using force, and make life predictable. This normative dimension of the social contract is known as institutionality in sociology (Brinton and Nee 1998) and in economics (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009), and has recently been adopted by criminology (Messner, Rosenfel, and Karstedt 2013). Institutions reduce the motivation of individuals to wander off the prescribed paths and commit crimes by applying formal and informal mechanisms of social control (La Free 1998). This might help us to explain the non-criminal behaviour of Ederson, even though his condition of poverty was similar to Jonathan's. In his case, perhaps the presence in the family of his father and the parental teaching of institutional norms, including the value of work, were what prevented his participation in crime.

Theories of crime: the institutional dimension

To understand the singularity of crime and violence in Venezuela and Latin America, I have identified eight important factors that serve as material and normative determinants either alone or in combination with one another (Briceño-León 2005, 2008). These factors are:

- changes in family structure
- the double exclusion of youth
- the secularisation of urban life
- unmet expectations
- urban fragmentation
- the culture of masculinity
- the drug market
- criminal impunity.

I explain each of these points in detail below.

Changes in family structure

In previous generations and in rural communities, families were extended ones, but now the urban family is nuclear. In addition, two-parent families are decreasing and single-parent families are increasing (Jelin 2000). With these changes, the capacity of the family as an institution to convey values to children, and impose rules on them, has diminished. Studies now show a reduction in the normative role of the father and an increase in the regulatory role of the mother (Hurtado 1998). While their parent(s) is (are) at work during the day, many children are left alone at home or in the care of other children (since there are now few grandmothers to help). As a result, socialisation mostly occurs in the street. Some teenagers from deprived areas do not go to school, either because there are no schools where they live or because their family does not send them. When they are able to attend, classes only last until noon, leaving young people unattended for the rest of the day.

The double exclusion of youth

In adolescence, young people in cities can choose between continuing their education or entering the work force. However, a sizeable percentage of youth leave school, but do not manage to enter the work force—which leaves them doubly excluded. This fact not only leaves them with no training and no income, it also segregates them from the regulated social world. Such excluded youth are vulnerable to the allure of criminal groups, which may provide them with both an income and a sense of belonging.

The secularisation of urban life

The loss of the power of religion to regulate social behaviours in daily life has left a gap, since secularisation and civil law have not adequately replaced religious control. These changes may well have modified people's relationship with the divine; they have certainly affected the impact of their religious beliefs as a mechanism of social control (Levine 2012). The commandments "Thou shall not steal" and "Thou shall not kill" have lost their force; yet, no effective substitute is available in either secular morals or in the criminal justice system. The known shortcomings of the latter, however, mean that the religious institution is maintained as a reference in terms of morals and punishment.

Unmet expectations

The process of urbanisation also brings with it a major transformation in the expectations of citizens. The opportunity for equalisation was one of the major purposes of urban development: to overcome the conformism of the rural population—their ingrained tendency to be resigned to the status quo, in both material and cultural life, and to lack any ambition or desire for personal or family improvement (Stavenhagen 1973). But the economy did not offer the chance of wealth to everyone. Market research today shows that both rich and poor youth in the city aspire to the same tokens of luxury consumption, such as name-brand clothing and cell phones—but they do not have equal funds to purchase them. This asymmetry often leads poor youth to obtain them in criminal ways. In the Global North, it may seem unlikely for young people to be willing to kill a person just to get some Levi's jeans, Nike sneakers, or the latest iPhone. But in Latin America, this is not surprising.

Urban fragmentation

The informality and illegality that mark the urban landscape of Latin America, and often the Global South in general, bring about two material conditions that encourage violence. One condition is demographic, the other is topographical: high population density and the irregular design and layout of these mountain or ravine areas, the result of adapting to the land in the absence of any planning (Bolívar 1995), combined with the shortage of roads to make access difficult for outsiders. Steps and streets are steep, narrow, and twisted, and the sprawling layout of the area is like a labyrinth. The police, in their regular patrol vehicles, can barely get into such an area without being ambushed by criminals, nor can they establish a permanent presence in these areas as that would require almost a military operation. This fact allows for easy control by gangs. The rule of law in such territories is precarious and they are largely lawless.

Urban fragmentation demonstrates exclusion not just in terms of the built environment, infrastructure, and services, but also security. People living in such areas also do not have security of calling on the police for protection; they can easily be victimised by criminals. They are excluded from the security that the state must provide to its citizens and also from the normative mechanisms of conflict resolution (Pedrazzini 2005). These mechanisms offer ways to resolve differences peacefully, and with some institutionality. For example, one man does not work and stays up late at night playing very loud music. His neighbour works in the early morning and wants to sleep at night. How can the state help citizens to resolve such a conflict? Or when two neighbours both claim that a property boundary belongs to them. How should this situation be handled peacefully? Absent formal conflict resolution mechanisms, one person must either submit or defend himself with violence, thereby generating more violence. Whatever their other faults, the gangs at least offer those mechanisms: they act as judges, deciding who is right and who is wrong (even in cases of domestic violence between couples). Absent any better alternative, the gangs assume the role of the state.

The culture of masculinity

Social norms in Latin America define a man as a person who must be bold and not avoid confrontation. One result of this is that of all the homicides that occur in the continent, in almost nine out of ten, both the victims and the killers are men. The origin of this violence appears to be less in the biology of sex, and more in the rules of society that define how males and females should behave (Zubillaga 2003; Pedrazzini and Sanchez 2001).

The drug market

In cities, the highly profitable market for drug manufacturing and distribution is very competitive and, despite its illegality, strictly regulated by the gangs that run it. The business is enforced either by threats of violence or its actual use. Fights over territory or murders over the collection of debts express the strict rules that govern this perverse institutionality.

Criminal impunity

The criminal justice system, which should be a means of containing violence, is barely able to catch more than a small percentage of those who commit crimes and only a negligible proportion of them are actually punished (Briceño-León 2012). This invulnerability to prosecution on the part of criminals exists because the justice system is so overwhelmed with such cases that it has no ability even to apprehend or try criminals, still less the prison capacity to lock them up. Overworked prosecutors deal with hundreds of new cases every week and they can only choose which few to take up. The

majority are simply forgotten, meaning that the zone of impunity is ever-expanding. This situation means that law-enforcement authorities have lost all power in the cities of Latin America, and the gangs are well aware of it.

These eight factors help to explain the current state of institutionality in Latin America. They are present in all countries, but their magnitude and relevance varies from one society to another, which is why it is so important to study them in the field.

Methodological multiplicity

The study of institutionality and its impact on crime is a very complex matter. Some criminologists—such as Messner and Rosenfeld (2004)—consider it a difficult task, especially if only surveys are used. Indeed, qualitative studies are often too specific to be easily generalisable. To overcome those limitations, I developed an integrated model using both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the diversity of institutionality (Briceño-León 2003). It used qualitative techniques at the beginning of the study (focus groups, interviews, and case studies) and this was followed by the quantitative technique of a random national population survey to evaluate the magnitude and significance of qualitative results.

For the qualitative part of this study, I used the case studies technique (Yin 1984), adapting the methodology in order to apply it to multiple cases. With the goal of obtaining greater diversity and reliability (Briceño-León 2016), I established seven case studies in four cities:

- Caracas, the nation's capital and the principal city for services, such as banking and commerce, and the seat of national government
- Guayana City, a port city in Bolívar state and also an industrial and mining town
- San Cristobal and San Antonio, both located on the border with Colombia and both specialising in livestock production and trade.

For the quantitative study, I used a population survey with a multi-stage randomised national sample. This allowed me to evaluate the results of the qualitative study.

Research results

The results of the study show the importance of the normative dimension in the context of security and inclusion in cities. This dimension has generally been overlooked in terms of providing evidence of poverty or physical exclusion, but it can be a very powerful tool for explaining increases in violence and the institutional responses to it. But with no institutionality to support social processes—to motivate people to behave well, convince them of the virtues of the norm, oversee its enforcement, and punish

offenders—security policies will always have limited effectiveness. In the six sections below, I examine the research findings and how they may affect the design of sustainable policies related to citizen security.

The positive contribution of informal institutionality

"Informal" institutionality refers to common rules for coexistence that are unwritten and not sanctioned by any formal authority. This factor had an unexpected relevance in the results of my research. Its study was included in the theoretical design, but much less weight was originally allocated to it; this changed as we encountered the phenomenon increasingly during the research. Notably, this occurred in all the study zones: in poor city neighbourhoods, in the marginal areas, and even in the behaviour of the police.

As I indicated earlier, a community that sprang up from illegal occupation of land and self-built housing, with no construction permits or legal status, exists outside the rule of law. When residents launch housing rental or sales businesses in an informal marketplace, none of those transactions is technically legal; however, the citizens do not consider them exactly illegal. We could say that they fit into a dimension of "paralegality", as the rules are legitimised by the stakeholders themselves. Their strength lies in the fact that they have proven to be quite successful. A smoothly functioning system has been created that includes a rotating credit arrangement between neighbours and especially the "real estate" and house rental market. All these operate with strict, but not formal, rules. This informal institutionality allows some important levels of internal social cohesion and social functioning. The rules are different from the formal system, as they are based on trust and personal ties between the citizens involved, but they are nevertheless recognised as legitimate.

Certainly some authors have emphasised "institutional diversity" (Ostrom 2005), but the phenomenon of informal institutionality is something much more powerful. Other studies (Helmke and Levitsky 2006) show that it involves a large percentage of the population who live according to different rules from those that formally govern social life. This is an important distinction: informal institutionality is not a fringe part of society, but a component that contributes to society's proper functioning.

Informal institutionality can be perverse

However, there is also a "perverse" aspect to the regulatory framework offered by informal institutionality, since these are the kinds of rules that can replace the law. Informal institutionality does not cause violence if its establishment is the product of coexistence among citizens. But when this is not the case—when it is imposed from the outside by organised criminal groups—it takes on a different aspect, and becomes a source of fear and

crime. In some marginal urban territories, the criminal gangs replace the state in three of its important functions: establishing regulations, collecting taxes, and imposing punishment. Under perverse institutionality, criminal gangs establish social rules as they like, at their whim. They charge "taxes" that simply extort money from people and businesses for the "protection" they offer—that is, usually to protect citizens from their own harassment. And they cruelly punish anybody who does not submit to their authority or obey their rules.

This situation is exactly what we encountered in the border areas where Venezuela meets Colombia and within the cities in the territories controlled by criminal groups. The criminal rules thus constitute an institutionality in themselves. Although perverse, these are still important to show the relevance of the normative dimension of social life; in order to do business, even criminals must establish and obey certain rules. Even perverse institutionality, when criminal gangs replace the state, can fulfil the same functions as the positive kind such as setting expectations (Luhmann 2005) and making people's behaviour predictable (North and Weingast 2000). The same perverse effect can be true of social capital with its virtues of trust and its networks of cooperation, when these are implemented by organised crime (Rubio 1999).

Response to violence: strengthening the rule of law

The individuals we spoke to in focus groups strongly supported the idea that the government must use the army to control criminals. Their attitude was "*plomo al hampa*"— "fight scum with bullets". But alongside their enthusiasm for a "kill the bandits" strategy, there was also vehement support for the ideas of "negotiating with gangs" and "creating peace zones". These would be territories handed over to the gangs by the government, where the police could not go and where the gangs would be officially in charge with a mandate to reduce violence. This was considered a "least harm" compromise to avert political scandal; the bandits could still engage in extortion and selling drugs on the condition that they reduced the homicide levels.

In the survey, people had very different responses to these two proposals. The majority (77 per cent) supported sending in the army and only 18 per cent agreed with the idea of negotiation. The other 5 per cent were undecided. They wanted severe and decisive action to combat crime, not talk. However, this popular demand for an iron fist against crime has the potential to lead to extrajudicial excesses by the police and the military that, paradoxically, could end up destroying institutionality rather than strengthening it (Cruz 2011). And, from a methodological point of view, it was interesting to compare the results of the qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative surveys showed there was little popular support for negotiation approaches that had a lot of support in the qualitative work.

The gender dimension in social control

Our study showed that the most efficient operators for institutionality were not men, police, or members of the criminal justice system, but women. In their roles as mothers, teachers, or nuns, women were able to create pacts, agreements, and initiatives to promote positive informal institutionality. The female figures acted as protectors of the people and regulators of violence. Mothers were able to scold gang members that no one else dared to confront, teachers denounced delinquents if they came to school with guns, and nuns held street processions of saints to reclaim the public space from drug dealers.

Despite the government's failure to protect the people and uphold the norms, the wage research team discovered that women have made it possible for "traditional" institutions of social control, such as family, school, and religion, to be revitalised. These institutions remained valid despite having lost much of the power they once had in rural society or in small urban nuclei. They have maintained some of their legitimacy and represent great potential for resistance to crime and insecurity. This reality challenges the theories of modernisation, which maintain that social control is now the responsibility of a civil, impersonal, and secular state.

Violence produces and increases inequality

Our research found a different dimension of the link between violence and inequality. The results showed that inequality did not produce criminal behaviour and it was not the cause of violence. However, the opposite relationship was true: crime and violence increased social inequality. This happens because victimisation is not evenly distributed throughout the city. The poor are more likely to be victims of crime than other socio-economic groups and are also victims of more violent crime. This is the result of economic inequality in protection from crime. When the state fails in its duty of universal protection, citizens must protect themselves privately. Only the wealthiest people can afford to pay for private security, bodyguards, or armoured cars. The poor are more vulnerable because they cannot do this.

As well, there is inequality in the damage caused to the victims of crimes against property. Although the items stolen from the poor may be of lesser value than those of the rich, that lower value still represents a much higher percentage of the family assets than it does for high-income earners. The loss of the modest vehicle of the motorcycle taxi driver, for instance, whether due to robbery or because he had to sell it to pay the ransom in a kidnapping, represents a much greater economic burden to his family than the loss of a luxury car to a wealthy businessman.

There is even inequality in the impact of injuries and death. If a family member is wounded or injured in an assault, there is a large difference

between rich and poor in the economic capacity to afford the medical treatment needed to heal that person, ensure their survival, or cope with their being unable to work, and, in the worst case, to deal with the consequences of their death. The poor have much less ability than the wealthy to remedy the damage caused by crime and violence. This further impoverishes the poor and causes greater inequality in society.

Crime undermines the social legitimacy of success

Finally, our research showed that crime sets a bad example for honest young people. Theft, kidnapping, and selling drugs provide criminals with the kinds of money that law-abiding people cannot hope to obtain legitimately through their education and hard work. The criminals are well aware of this, and look down on students and young workers. Their nickname for them is *chigüire*, the local term for a capybara, a South American rodent. On a weekend night, one low-level drug peddler said, "I earn double what one of those *chigüires* earns in a month."

This means that the gap between youths' consumer expectations and their ability to satisfy them can only be bridged by criminal activity, which gives them access to large sums of money. As pointed out by Merton (1965), this reality devalues the accepted means of work, study, and saving as ways to achieve goals of social and financial success, and it reinforces the belief that only the prohibited means of crime can accomplish those goals. As Durkheim (1978) explained, these situations produce anomie: a breakdown of the social contract and the rules established by society.

Conclusion

The social sciences, and politics, have recently tended to view violence and insecurity in the light of theories marked by what Lahire (2016) has appropriately termed "the culture of the excuse". Remember Jonathan and Ederson, who grew up in very similar environments: in poverty, in a country that boasted of general wealth and had generous social policies for the poor. According to these theories, Jonathan would bear no responsibility for his thefts and homicides; poverty, inequality, familial abandonment, exploitation, or capitalism (depending on preference of theory) would all be sufficient to excuse his behaviour. Such excuses disguise themselves as understanding in order to forgive criminals their transgressions and place the blame on others: divorced parents, an exploitative economic system, the larger social structure, etc.

However, the research on insecurity and violence in Venezuela, with its major investments in social programs and a political effort to reduce inequality, refutes these theories on a macro level. And the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people like Ederson—who study and work, hard and honestly, to achieve their aspirations (and who are occasionally victimised

by people like Jonathan)—refute the theories on a micro level. There are no possible excuses for decisions made by individuals and for social policies that have negative consequences. These sociological and political theories were developed in the Global North, yet they are accepted without criticism in Latin America, continuing to affirm that insecurity has its origin in this kind of "violence of the rich" (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2013). But research in Latin America shows that violence is linked less to circumstances of poverty or misery, and more to social norms and managing expectations. It is significant that none of the people we interviewed rob or kill people to obtain basic necessities like food or shelter; they do it for luxury goods like fancy jeans, sneakers, or cell phones.

We must think of the difference between Jonathan and Ederson in terms of managing the legitimacy of the means and time required to achieve goals. The theories of rational behaviour affirm that some individuals choose the path of crime because they consider it an acceptable alternative, while to others crime is not acceptable (Wikström 2004). Hence Jonathan wants to achieve his goals of luxury consumption quickly, and he is not troubled by the fact that this can only be done by prohibited means. Ederson, on the other hand, does not accept the use of illegal means, his personal values and ethics forbid such a shortcut. His "institutionality", his sense of compliance with the law, and his preference for moral means to achieve his goals, all mean that deciding to become a thief or a murderer is not an option for him. Like many thousands of other law-abiding citizens, the vast majority in fact, Ederson is willing to make the effort of studying, working, and waiting until he can achieve his goals legally.

This mindset illustrates the social contract that makes it possible for society to work. Preventing or controlling crime cannot be done by the after-the-fact intervention of the police or criminal law. These institutions can play an important role in fulfilling the social contract and strengthening the norms by punishing offenders once a crime has been committed. But the framework of society relies on morals, values, standard rules of behaviour, and reliable mechanisms for conflict resolution. These mechanisms are intended to prevent people from behaving badly in the first place.

The theoretical difficulty is that the normative dimension has been understood exclusively from the perspective of law—that is, from formal institutionality (Robert 1988). This is not sufficient to maintain good order as the social contract and informal institutionality have a diversity of norms and agreements. They are both the shadow and the mirror image of the law: "shadow" because they maintain it as a reference and "mirror" because they tend to imitate it in an informal way.

Evolutionary psychology explains the predominance of young men as murderers and rapists in terms of biologically programmed youthful aggression. Young men are at their highest level of sexual desire and their violence constitutes a primitive expression of masculinity in terms of fighting to exercise reproductive domination (Collins 2008; Daly and Wilson 1988). So

why can Ederson control his sexual and aggressive impulses, while Jonathan can't? Why did one choose a life of crime and the other not?

To control people's impulses, society educates; to dissuade people from a criminal life, society punishes. We can assume that for Ederson, as for thousands like him, his self-control of his impulses worked. He accepted the choice of prescribed means and he believed in the threat of punishment. None of these were the case for Jonathan or for the thousands like him in the city who kidnap, steal, assault, rob, rape, and kill.

When a society's moral, normative, and punitive mechanisms work properly (Luhmann 2005), it expectations can be established either in a formal or an informal way. Either way, people know how they must behave and what they can expect from others. Formal or informal institutionality makes society predictable (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009), which reduces the potential for conflict and violence. This moral and normative dimension of informal institutionality allows formal institutionality and law to function. In the end, as maintained by Habermas (1996), what makes a society safe is not repression but the acceptance of a set of self-imposed norms that are valid for everyone. The same principle is true of Latin American cities: safety and security must be based on a renewal of the social contract. This contract includes everyone, not only in the material goodness of urban life, but also in the normative inclusion that allows the rights of citizens to be exercised.

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