# Street Sovereigns: Young Men and the Makeshift State in Urban Haiti

**João Fernando Finazzi***

Kivland, Chelsey. *Street Sovereigns: Young Men and the Makeshift State in Urban Haiti.* 2020. London: Cornell University Press, 306 pp.

As we witness the deepening of violence and the humanitarian and political crisis in Haiti, the award-winning book by anthropologist Chelsey Kivland must become a reference for all those seeking not only to understand street politics and violence in the country but also to reflect on the contemporary transformations of sovereignty, the state, violence, and governance in the world of neoliberal globalisation. The work, written over six years, is the result of in-depth ethnographic research conducted by Kivland in Bel Air, Port-au-Prince, where she lived between 2008 and 2010 and subsequently visited several times, closely following the daily lives of some political leaders in the neighborhood.

In her work, the author focused on constructing interpretations that were shared with her 'subjects', placing them as active and respected participants in the construction of the meanings of the cultural scripts to which they all submitted: as field partners and subjects of the globalised world. Thus, Kivland rejected the position that places researchers as possessors of an 'objective' interpretive capacity, and the 'natives' as subjected to partial, flawed, and biased views. The proposal, and the challenge, according to her, is to 'recast academic debates as public debates in which author and collaborator (as well as the reader) are engaged as consequential theorists.' (Kivland 2020: 14).

The book is divided into thematic chapters (Defense, History, Respect, Identity, Development, Gender, The Spiral), within which a chronological narrative follows, where the events and the evaluations made by the social actors Kivland accompanied underpin the reflection. The writing alternates between accounts of scenes and profound theoretical insights grounded in a large body of references from classical and contemporary social thought, closer to Political Anthropology. The fundamental support in Bourdieu, particularly in the concepts of field and habitus, is enriched by the more or less occasional recourse to various authors such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Greg Beckett, Philippe Bourgois, Frederico Neiburg, Arjun Appadurai, John and Jean

---
* Interinstitutional Graduate Program in International Relations San Tiago Dantas from the São Paulo State University (UNESP), São Paulo - SP, Brazil;. jffinazzi@yahoo.com.br ORCiD 0000-0001-8986-8858.

Comaroff, Yarimar Bonilla, Max Weber, Levi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss, Charles Tilly, and many others.

According to Kivland, the book seeks to trace the ways in which the impoverished men of Bel Air capitalised on the social perceptions about them regarding their potential for militancy and protests. Seeking to construct the State by taking its duties and powers into their own hands, these men began to act through the *baz*, a kind of neighborhood organisation, to achieve agreements as political aspirants, secure jobs in the government, and insert themselves into development economies. In general, the *baz* is a cultural response to a situation of structural, political, economic, and social violence (*ensekirite*), and can be defined as a community association that acts in the governance of a neighborhood. The *baz* is not homogeneous and centralized group but fragmented into various parts: social camarilla, band, political association, development organisation, defense brigade. Kivland emphasizes that the *baz*, as a social formation, does not seek to subsume local order under a dominant nation-state or place these two orders in rivalry. The leaders of the *baz* viewed their actions as an effort to bring the state into existence (*fè letat*) by performing a power like that of the state and by seeking to reconstitute local political representation relationships..

Thus, the book engages in discussions on the ''sovereignty of the streets' and 'subaltern governance', and may be relevant to those interested in approaches based on lived experiences during processes of (in)securitisation, and in discussions about the encounter between the sociology of everyday life and international relations; more precisely with regard to political performances, security governance beyond the State, and everyday security practices in a transnational perspective (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009; Bigo 2016). . With this in perspective, the work also follows the steps of authors such as Trouillot (2020) and Fatton (2021), in challenging particularistic views of Haiti that seek arguments for rejecting theoretical generalisations based on an idea of exceptionality.

Kivland makes it clear that the *baz* are not 'gangs', rejecting simplistic arguments that they engage only in criminal acts, lack ideological or moral affiliations, are purely driven by economic calculations, or that everything comes down to an undefined "culture of violence". According to the author, the gang label serves to criminalise and stigmatise an entire social group and a way of engaging in politics and performing authority that is distinct from the dynamics of elite and formal politics. Although economic incentives are an important force in the violent activities of urban poor, the author argues for a more complex explanations that also consider their legitimate grievances, their actual experiences, and how identities are accepted or contested by the actors. Thus, Kivland's work also contributes to another important research agenda on the political economy of violence and civil wars more familiar to scholars of International Relations (Berdal and Malone 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 2002; Keen 2012).

For many residents of the neighborhood, the *baz* defended their members and the community against a wide range of physical and social insecurities in a context of high unemployment, poverty, and precariousness. They provided protection not only against violent acts such as kidnappings, rapes, and murders but also in terms of neglected services by the government, such as electricity, water, waste collection, and policing.

Drawing on Galtung (1969) and Farmer (2003), Kivland alerts us to the frequent but limiting assumptions that the structural violence of conditions of misery predetermines deviant and violent behavior among the urban poor. This reflection leads us to the central argument of Kivland's work: the idea that defensive maneuvers against different sources of insecurity by the urban poor often become triggers for the intensification of hostilities and sources of their own vulnerability.

An important example of this transnational dialectic concerns what we could call a 'development-insecurity nexus': job and resource offers, often made in Haiti through development programs by international agencies and NGOs, sometimes favored aggressive risk-taking by different *baz*, deepening or creating resentments and social conflicts. This kind of violent competition, intensified by structural conditions, increased the possibility of violent actions by rival *baz* or by residents who did not share access to certain funding and circles of power in the state or who were overlooked during program implementation.

Kivland's book received the Isis Duarte Prize from the Latin American Studies Association in 2021.

## References

Abrahamsen, R. and M. C. Williams. 2009. Security Beyond the State: Global Security Assemblages in International Politics. *International Political Sociology* 3 (1): 1-17.

Berdal, M. and D. Malone (eds.). 2000. *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars. Boulder*: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Bigo, D. 2016. Rethinking Security at the Crossoad of International Relations and Criminology. *The British Journal of Criminology* 56 (6): 1068-1086.

Collier, P. and A. Hoeffler. 2004. Greed and Grievance in Civil War. *Oxford Economic Papers* 56: 563-595.

Farmer, P. 2003. *The Uses of Haiti*. Monroe: Common Courage Press.

Fatton, R. Jr. 2021. *The Guise of Exceptionalism: Unmasking the National Narratives of Haiti and the United States*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.

Galtung, J. 1969. Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (3): 167-191.

Keen, D. 2012. *Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars Is More Important Than Winning Them*. Padstow: Yale University Press.

Trouillot, M.-R. 2020. The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean and the World. *Vibrant, Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* 17.

## About the author

**João Fernando Finazzi** holds a Ph.D in International Relations from the Interinstitutional Graduate Program in International Relations San Tiago Dantas from the São Paulo State University (UNESP), the University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP). He previously worked as a lecturer at the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC-MG) and PUC-SP. He is also a member of the National Institute of Science and Technology for the Study of the United States (INCT-INEU) and the Research Group on International Conflicts (GECI/PUC-SP). His current research interests are US foreign policy, the political economy of violence and conflict, peacebuilding operations and US-Haiti relations.