

long. The question then is how much the violence rates are modified with measures like the public disarmament campaign now under way in Brazil.

An ecological-type study by Gawryszewski & Costa ¹ in the city of São Paulo used a multiple logistic regression analysis to show that the independent factors related to the homicide rate were income (with a negative correlation) and the proportion of adolescents from 15 to 17 years of age not attending school (with a positive correlation). These findings illustrate what the current author states, i.e., that violence is a problem that occurs with youth, and according to Gawryszewski & Costa ¹, with young people who are not in school!

Organized society needs to invest in citizens with social programs, education, medical care, and vocational training, but it also needs to look further. How can society provide education when the citizens' family structure is jeopardized, when citizens live in segregated urban areas with a weak state presence, lack of public lighting, recreation, and culture, and to top it off a limited job supply.

In order to modify society's structural factors, it is necessary to study their contribution to urban violence, or else one runs the risk of merely implementing isolated measures. The main challenge is identifying where and how to act to attempt to modify this panorama of urban violence in Latin America.

1. Gawryszewski VP, Costa LS. Homicídios e desigualdades sociais no Município de São Paulo. *Rev Saúde Pública* 2005; 39:191-7.

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The dynamics of social violence in Latin America

The paper by Roberto Briceño-León is an undeniably profound, mature, and sociologically and socially committed effort by the author to the process of transformation in Latin America, highlighting how the dynamics of violence corrupt the region's entrails. His erudite, methodical, and complex reflection on the convergence of factors that contribute to generate this phenomenon is certainly the most complete document of its kind produced in recent years, dealing with the issue in an explicative,

contemporary, and comprehensive way. His paper especially reveals an experienced sociologist, with vast capacity to read the international and Latin American classics, in dialogue with contemporary data on the region's demographic, epidemiological, educational, socioeconomic, and cultural transformations. Thus, without a shadow of a doubt, Briceño-León's paper is a milestone in the reflection on violence, due both to its original proposal and the wealth of theoretical and informational material provided to readers as the basis for his arguments.

In my role as discussant, I will attempt to raise a few questions to complement the reflection, in the understanding that a study of such breadth will leave out a few questions that need to be approached. In this debate I will mention three aspects: I will approach conceptual aspects; I will delve into some necessary distinctions in the Brazilian case; and I will contextualize the issue of contemporary crime (a term used throughout the paper as an implicit quasi-synonym for violence) in the world and Brazil, creating an ethos differentiated from the traditional forms of social transgression.

Conceptual aspect

The first point I wish to highlight is that Briceño-León does not refer exactly to violence as a multifaceted phenomenon ranging all the way from cruel and fatal aspects (e.g., homicides) to those that are taken for granted (like traffic violence) and covert, subtle forms (as in the case of intra-family violence, moral harassment, and others). Rather, he uses the phenomenon that is most visible and easiest to count, to treat statistically, and to compare, namely homicide. As a backdrop, his concept of violence runs up against the notion of crime, especially crime perpetrated and experienced by poor youth. In fact, this is an appropriate approach, as long as it is made explicit and viewed in a relative light, since homicide rates are the most reliable and sensitive indicator to reflect on social violence and its trends. However, this category does not encompass the entire phenomenon of violence which, from the public health intervention perspective, needs to be unveiled, understood, and explained in its multiple dimensions.

Further within the conceptual sense, and even referring only to the homicide phenomenon, Briceño-León leaves a conceptual gap when he omits the weight of subjectivity (and what kind of contemporary subjectivity is being created?). This theoretical and practical parameter is crucial for dealing with processes of

violence and victimization if we are not to believe in a historical trend moved only by economic and political macro-forces, responsible for the maintenance of secular inequalities and poverty. The presence and complicity of the historical subject, as Sartre ¹ reminds us, occurs even when he accepts all the determinations. Proof of the need for “subjects’ adherence to the crime” is the fact that, as Briceño-León recalls in his paper, the majority of poor and destitute young people, although victimized by inequality, behave peacefully, opting for the established order.

I hope not to be parochial if I make some distinctions about the case of Brazil, a country of continental dimensions which, in addition to its metropolitan areas, has prosperous and dynamic large and medium-sized cities as well as very small county seats, the latter often formally classified as urban, but where the urban and the rural coexist indistinctively. First, in Brazil, despite high urbanization along with perennially poor and even destitute remote areas, especially in the Northeast, it is not true that the countryside is stagnated. On the contrary, in recent decades there has been an increase in cultivated land, agricultural and cattle-raising areas, and family farming, in an unprecedented process of agribusiness modernization, to the point where the country has become the world’s largest grain producer. However, the rural world in Brazil, which is undeniably changed and incomparable to various other Latin American countries in this regard, has failed to become less unequal or unjust.

In the distribution of violence, we have a quite diversified situation, and while population density is certainly accompanied by extensive poverty and lack of decent housing conditions and unemployment have become a predisposing factor for entry into the illegal work market where the labor force feels more valued, recognized, and better remunerated, there are many other intervening factors in localities with high homicide rates. According to a still-unpublished study by Souza (personal communication; 2005) in which the author works with compound indicators capable of orienting the interpretation of the main causes of violence in Brazil, taking 2000 as the base year, of 5,507 Brazilian municipalities (or counties), 48.0% did not record a single homicide. Of those with the majority of the country’s homicides, the first ten places were occupied by some capitals and metropolitan areas, in the following order: 1) São Paulo; 2) Rio de Janeiro; 3) Recife, Pernambuco; 4) Guarulhos, São Paulo; 5) Diadema, São Paulo; 6) Jaboatão dos Guararapes,

Pernambuco; 7) Olinda, Pernambuco; 8) Nova Iguaçu; Rio de Janeiro; 9) Brasília, Federal District; and 10) Osasco, São Paulo. The twenty municipalities with the highest violence and accident rates – which include seven capitals (out of the total of 27), 12 metropolitan areas, and a large city from the interior – cover 54.0% of all these deaths. In short, this remark is meant to say that the highest violence and crime rates occur in large urban concentrations. However, not all urban concentrations in Brazil (and perhaps not all those in Latin America as a whole) have high homicide rates and other rates of violence, and it is important to distinguish between different social dynamics.

Finally, besides the elements proposed by Briceño-León, I wish to add the specificity of contemporary violence, where the revolution in microelectronics and communications media and formats play a special role in mediation. The French social historian Wieviorka ², also cited by Briceño-León, Castells ³, and Minayo ⁴, shows the specificity of this global crime (operating in networks) linked by the most violent and despicable interests in the shadow of national states’ weakness, constituting an infra-politics in itself, linking legal and illegal apparatuses, international and national players, and perversely encompassing the poor, who are left with the warfront and the alternative of eking out employment in an increasingly restricted and exclusionary market. It is clear that current crime that has drastically increased the homicide rates in Latin America does not consist only of activity by organized groups acting in collusion. It reveals an exacerbation of growing social conflicts, without civilizing mediation and added to the traditional and culturally manifest threshold of violence present in the history of Latin American countries, merging all these dynamic relations that are expressed in the current homicides rates, where the various expressions feed on each other.

Is there hope? Yes. The study by Chesnais ⁵ on two hundred years of violence in European history shows the beneficial role of processes of social inclusion and rights, decreasing inequalities, and access to formal education as significant elements for a downward curve in homicide rates which in the 19th century were higher than in the most conflict-ridden countries of Latin America.

1. Sartre JP. Sartre. São Paulo: Abril Cultural; 1980. (Coleção Os Pensadores.)
2. Wieviorka MO. O novo paradigma da violência. *Tempo Social* 1997; 9:5-42.
3. Castells M. Fim do milênio: a era da informação. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Paz e Terra; 1998.

4. Minayo MCS. A violência dramatiza causas. In: Minayo MCS, Souza ER, organizadores. *Violência sob o olhar da saúde*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fiocruz; 2003. p. 23-47.
5. Chesnais JC. *Histoire de la violence en Occident de 1800 à nos jours*. Paris: Robert Laffont Éditeur; 1981.

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The article provides a wealth of statistical information on homicides in Latin America and on some of the correlates traditionally discussed in the criminological literature. This information originally appears rather chaotically in different sources, and the author presents them here in an organized way, which has great merit for the debate on the issue and represents a huge research effort. Among the correlates are poverty, level of schooling, employment, family structure, and urbanization. Other traditional correlates, especially youth aspirations and religion, are treated at a more conceptual level. Even so, their treatment systematizes ideas which are not necessarily original, but which form a valuable theoretical framework.

Another highly traditional quality, yet still noteworthy in the overall context of Latin American sociology, is the fact that the article is based on a dialogue between theory and data, which naturally launches a disciplined debate. It is thus a source of satisfaction to encounter such a paper for these reasons. Following these remarks, we now approach our critical sociological position towards the study.

As for the simple information on homicides, a very important recent trend, already recognized in the literature, escapes the battery of data provided by the author, namely a highly significant *drop* in homicides in some key cities, like São Paulo (37.0% in five years), Bogotá (from 80 to 23 per 100 thousand in seven years), and Cali (25.0% in nine years) (Kahn T, Zanetic A. Personal communication; 2005). These decreases are relevant for the issue, since they may result both from successful public policies (Kahn T, Zanetic A. Personal communication; 2005), as well as cyclical historical trends^{1,2}, or both, and they find no echo in the argument presented by Briceño-León.

The discussion on cities and urbanization provides theoretical elements that are not mistaken, but which are far from constituting a basis for what the author calls a “*sociological framework for the explanation of violence*”. The

discussion at stake is limited to the assertion (as evident as it is un-analytical) that the cities are not what we wish they were, and are what we wish they were not. The affirmation that “*Latin America cities were a place of hope for security and law, hence the great rural-to-urban exodus in the 1940s and 50s*” simply fails to agree with the data³. In the latter study we find that in Colombia the attraction exerted by cities is equivalent to only 10.0% of the explanatory power of expulsion by demographic pressure and agricultural technology, the most important factors at the time. The etiological literature on migration generally did in fact contemplate the security issue, but in a localized way and in specific cases, and it has generally never been considered a determinant factor in Latin America.

The problem with the author’s structuring of a sociological framework in three causally different dimensions (macro-factors that “originate”, meso-factors that “foment”, and micro-factors that “facilitate” violence), begins when he abandons the causal epistemological status *proper* to each of the three traditional levels of analysis for crime: micro, meso, and macro. The traditional effort in the literature working with causal links between these levels is very clear, beginning with Sutherland⁴ in 1924, moving on to Cloward & Olshin⁵ in 1960, and reaching the “integrated models” in recent years (where the explicit objective of analysis is to work with this issue). This is what is at stake in terms of an epistemological framework, and not the three *ad hoc* dimensions of Briceño-León. It is true that the “violentological” and criminological specificity of Latin America should be understood at the macro level, which would justify placing this specificity as having originated at this level of aggregation. But contemporary urban violence in Latin America is not such a unique legacy for our continent, as shown by Gómez-Buendía⁶. The links are much more complex.

As for the author’s empirical analysis, it is generally limited to presenting data on each aspect or variable separately, after which, based only on their approximate contemporaneity, (!?), he derives conclusions on their causal nexus with homicides. In other words, the author’s empirical analysis contains practically no *relational* factual evidence where we might observe some types of co-variations or associations. The case in which the author approaches a relational empirical methodology is his analysis on the relationship between poverty, urbanization, and homicide rates. We do not refute that in a broad and generic sense, these