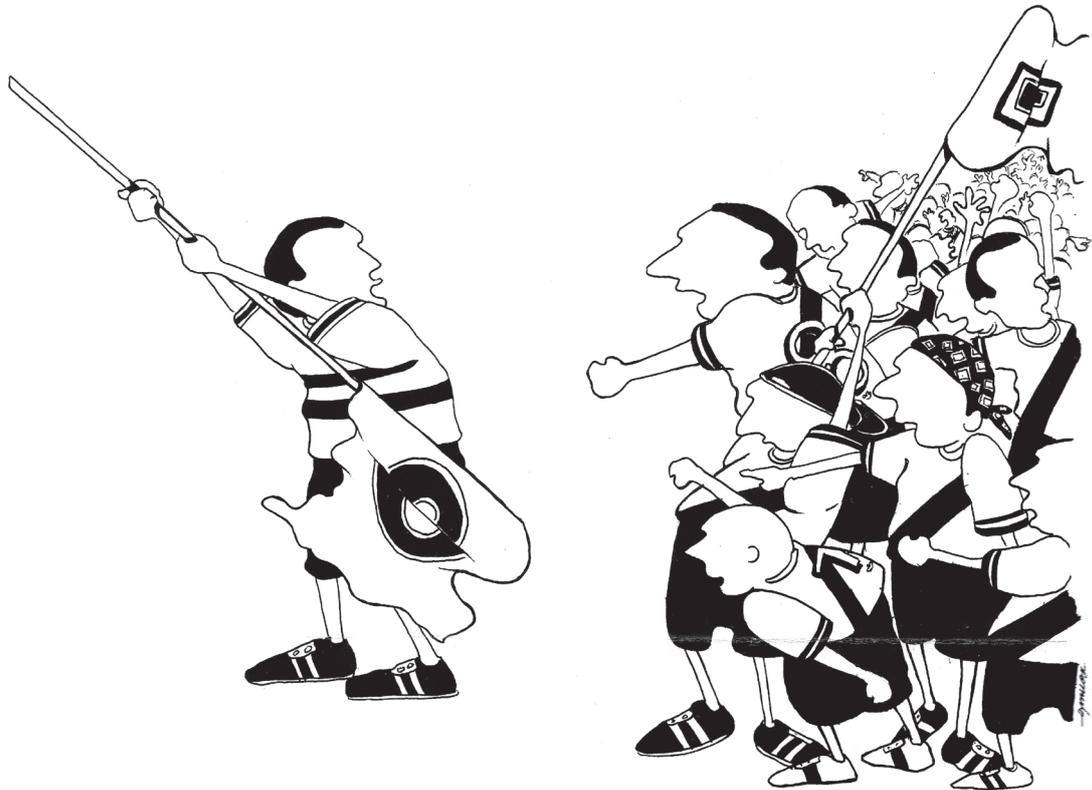




# Urban Violence and Civilization

Peter Burke



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# 1. Urban Violence and Civilization

Peter Burke

When I came to Brazil for the first time in 1986, an article in the *Folha de S. Paulo*, complete with maps and statistics, informed me of the probability of being murdered or assaulted in different quarters of the city. This year, *O Estado de S. Paulo* published a report on violence in the city, again with a map, noting that there was a record number of 2, 588 homicides in 1994 and suggesting that 1995 (with twelve to fifteen homicides a day at the beginning of the year) could beat that record. The increase in the homicide rate has been 47% in the last four years. Still more alarming, if not alarmist, was a more recent article in the *Estado*, headlined “São Paulo in the three most violent days of its history.” According to the military police, there were 58 homicides and 39 attempted murders between 8 a.m. on Friday, 23 June 1995, and 8 a.m. on Monday, 26 June in the São Paulo metropolitan area.

Homicide is only one form of urban violence. We also must study rape, destruction of property and what the British police call GBH, or “grievous bodily harm.” Between June 23 and 26, 445 cases of bodily harm (*lesões corporais*) were recorded in São Paulo. Nevertheless, São Paulo homicide statistics make a useful frame of reference for these historical reflections.

Specialists on violence abound, so much so that in the Spanish of Colombia there is a special name for them: *violentólogos*. I am not one of them, but offer these reflections as a socio-cultural historian, working on the “early modern” period of European history (roughly 1500-1800), when urban violence was a recurrent and inescapable concern, if not a constant one. Most of my examples will come from this period, with occasional references to the Middle Ages (less urban if not less violent), and the ancient world (for which the relative lack of surviving sources makes studies in depth much more difficult).

It would be unwise to study any aspect of urban life in isolation from the society which produced the cities. We should make clear at the start that, in studying violence, political and social historians of early modern Europe tend to emphasize two opposite but complementary changes. First, there was a dramatic rise in public violence, in the size of armies and in the destructiveness

of wars. This trend was linked to the process of state-building and to development of what contemporaries called “absolute” monarchy: rulers who did not share power with assemblies, nobility or clergy. The rise of absolute monarchy was linked in turn to what some historians call the “military revolution” of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. This revolution made infantry (the famous Spanish *tercios*, for instance) more important at the expense of cavalry. There was a new concern with drill and, most important of all, rapid growth in the size of armies from an average of something like 30,000 in the 16th Century to around 300,000 in the later phases of the “Thirty Years” War (1618-48).

Second, this period witnessed a gradual decline in private violence, a process which, like the growth of armies, was connected with the increasing power of the state and with its determination to offer what the American historian Frederic C. Lane called a “protection service.” In other words, the state extracted more money than ever before from merchants and others - taxes rose steeply to pay for the new armies - but in return for their money the state offered its people more security. This security may have been a precondition for the rise of capitalism. Rulers tried harder than before, or with more success than before, to break the military power of the great nobles who often had been able until then to recruit and maintain private armies. Bigger armies meant that nobles could no longer afford to compete with central governments in the military field. The idea that the ruler, the government or the state should have the monopoly of violence within its territory became increasingly accepted. According to William McNeill, there was a trend toward the “bureaucratization of violence.” One of the most important consequences of this bureaucratization was what the American sociologist Charles Tilly called the “disarmament of the civilian population.” The high level of unofficial violence in the United States today is often explained by the widespread possession of firearms. Swords and daggers were equally widespread in the 16th and early 17th centuries, as they had been in the Middle Ages, and as Muchembled’s study shows, what might be called “hilt-happy” individuals were as common then as trigger-happy individuals now.

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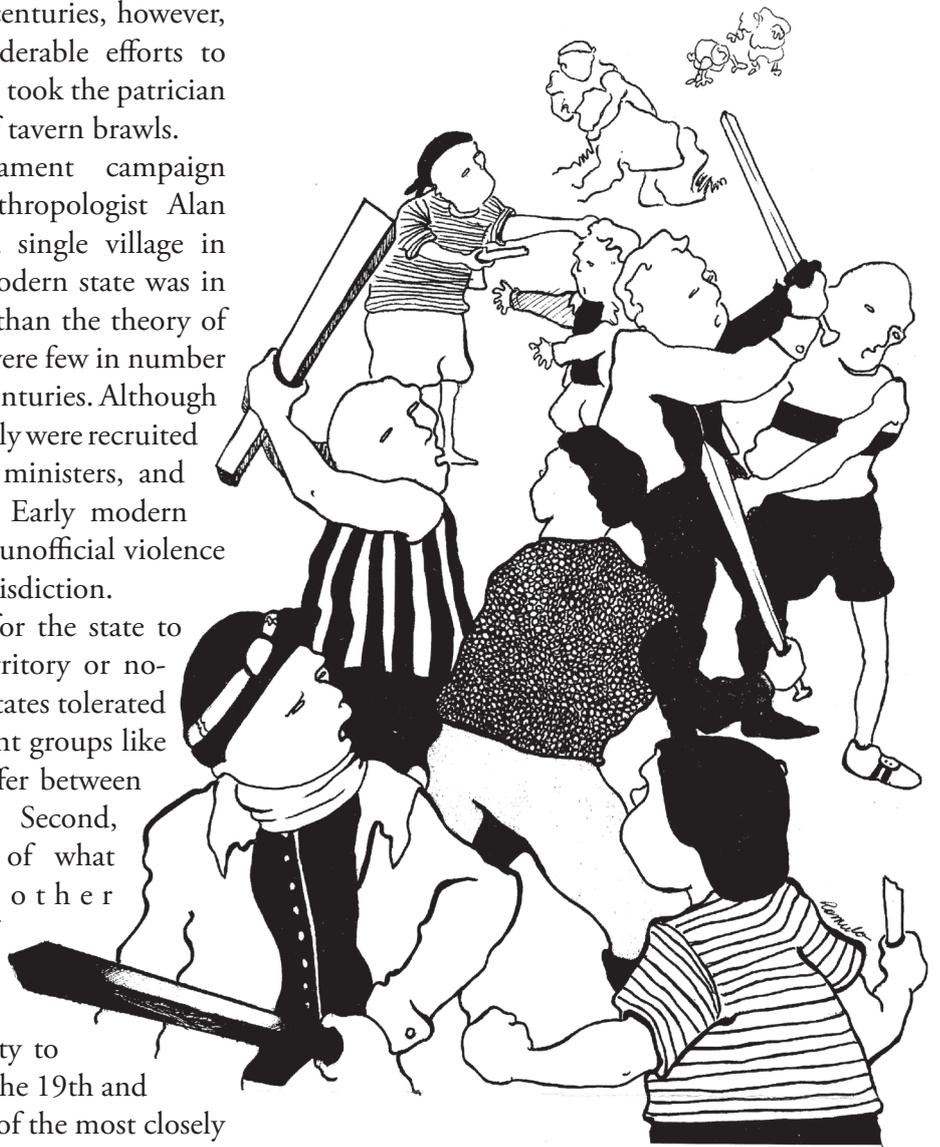
**Peter Burke** of Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge, is a leading historian of early modern Europe and a member of the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics. Among his many books are *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (1992) and *Venice and Amsterdam* (1994).

In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, however, European governments made considerable efforts to control unofficial violence, whether it took the patrician form of duels or the plebeian form of tavern brawls.

In some places this disarmament campaign was effective, as the historical anthropologist Alan Macfarlane argues in a study of a single village in Westmorland. However, the early modern state was in practice a good deal less centralized than the theory of absolutism supposed. Civil servants were few in number in comparison to the 19th and 20th centuries. Although armies grew rapidly, regiments normally were recruited by their colonels, not by rulers or ministers, and they were thus difficult to control. Early modern governments were unable to prevent unofficial violence at all times and places under their jurisdiction.

Three zones were most difficult for the state to control. First was the frontier, a territory or no-man's land rather than a line, where states tolerated or encouraged armed and independent groups like the Cossacks to act as a kind of buffer between themselves and neighboring states. Second, highlands often were the refuge of what contemporaries called "bandits" and other fugitives from justice or the power of the state. Third, certain locales within large cities. In all three zones, men went about armed and the propensity to violence was strong. In the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, frontiers became one of the most closely controlled parts of the territory of European states. In the age of the airplane, not to mention napalm, highland zones are no longer the safe refuges they once were. However, some inhabitants certain zones of certain cities can resist the modern state and its police with considerable impunity. Rio de Janeiro and Cairo provide dramatic examples of this.

Some valuable studies of modern urban violence, in Brazil and elsewhere, have a historical dimension. What seems to be lacking is a serious attempt to place this violence in a global-historical perspective, to examine violence over a Braudelian *longue durée* and also to make comparisons and contrasts between cities remote in either space and time, from ancient Rome to modern Delhi. Comparisons usually are confined to the present. *Vela*, the Brazilian news magazine, claimed that in 1985 the highest homicide rates per 100,000 people were in Cape Town (65), Cairo (56), Alexandria (49), Rio (49), Manila (36.5), Mexico City (28) and São Paulo (in seventh place with 26). São Paulo's murder rate since has risen to 40 per 100,000. Curiously, Bogotá is not on



this list, though the homicide rate for all of Columbia in 1988 was 80 per 100,000.

William McNeill wrote in an earlier issue of *Braudel Papers* that "violence is a prominent part of human life, and always has been." All the same, the main purpose of this essay is not to assert a simple thesis of continuity, *plus ça change plus c'est la même chose*. It rather pursues the idea that violence has a history just as it has a geography and a sociology, that it takes different forms in different periods. It also tries to define in a more nuanced way what part of the "cultural repertoire" of violence is peculiar to our own time.

Urban violence is not new but on the other hand it is not a constant in history, not even in big cities. We must distinguish structural and conjunctural violence (in other words, the endemic from the epidemic). We also must discriminate between types of violence, locales of violence, and occasions of violence. The emphasis in what follows will be on these differences in different places and times. We focus here on the binary opposition between "traditional" (including early modern) and "modern" (including contemporary) cities.

Omitted here is the question which Jean-Claude Chesnais discussed so thoroughly in his *Histoire de la violence* (1981): the quantitative problem of changes in the amount, rate or level of violence and the explanation for such changes. The question is important. The idea that demographic trends may underlie variations in the level of violence is certainly worth taking seriously. In early modern Europe, however, the shift from the rising population of the 16th Century to the stable population of the 17th Century does not seem to correlate with any change in urban violence. Another hypothesis was launched by the sociologist Norbert Elias in his book *The Civilizing Process* (1939). Elias became famous for his vivid social history of table manners, the use of the fork, and so on. However, his central argument is political, claiming that thanks largely to the rise of the centralizing state and its attempt to secure the monopoly of violence — westerners have become more and more self-controlled over the long term, from the 12th Century to the 20th.

Elias may well be right. Although he did not look beyond the West when he wrote his book, his hypothesis would seem to fit Japan even better. The country where the military elite of samurai developed one of the most extreme demonstrations of self-control, suicide by disembowelment, is now a country with an extremely low level of urban violence. The problem for a historian of early modern Europe who wants to test the Elias hypothesis, or indeed the demographic hypothesis, is that the rate of urban violence in that society is impossible to calculate. For a “serial history” of violence, we must find a series of documents homogeneous enough to allow a statistical analysis. Given the sources available for this period, the most that can be done in the quantitative mode is to study the rise or fall of one type of violence, such as homicide or rape, as recorded in the judicial archives of one city, Rome or Paris for instance, for a century or two.

The approach adopted in this essay thus is qualitative rather than quantitative. Focusing on varieties of violence, I shall discuss seven themes: 1. the perpetrators of violence. 2. the victims of violence. 3. the timing of violence. 4. the locales of violence. 5. the motives of violence. 6. the technology of violence. 7. the management of violence.

In each of these cases I will try both to compare and to contrast the megacities of the 20th Century, especially São Paulo, with preindustrial cities, especially the larger cities of early modern Europe, with 100,000 or more inhabitants. The choice of 100,000 as the cut-off point is arbitrary but convenient. Nowadays, cities of 100,000

or more accommodate over a quarter of the worlds population. In 1800, however, they held only 3% of the population of Europe.

The percentage was still smaller 300 years earlier. Indeed, in 1500 there were only four cities of this size in Europe: Paris, Venice, Naples and Istanbul. The four cities of 100,000 people in 1500 had become 12 a century later, adding Lisbon, Seville, London, Rome, Moscow and others. Their number remained roughly constant in the 17th Century when the population of Europe was fairly stable. But between 1700 and 1800 it rose from 12 to 23 cities, including Genoa, Milan, Vienna, Hamburg, Berlin, Warsaw and St Petersburg. By 1800 the largest European city, London, had nearly a million inhabitants, making it probably the worlds second largest city at that time (Edo, now Tokyo, occupied the first place).

### Perpetrators

In the contemporary city, we can distinguish between violence by amateurs and violence by professionals. On one side there are “crowds” usually blamed for riots (though it would be unwise to assume that no professionals take part in these movements). On the other, the trained specialists in violence. They may be urban guerrillas (“terrorists”), as in the recent cases of Beirut, or Belfast, or São Paulo in the time of Marighela. Or they may be “strong-arm men” *capangas*, *pistoleiros*, *goondas*, *sicarios* and so on. (The army and the police will be considered below). In between come rival groups or “gangs” of young men, so visible today in London, Los Angeles or Rio. Violence is not their job, but it is a regular part of their lives.

All three groups had their precursors in the early modern city. The professionals included the retainers of noblemen and the men known in the Italian cities of the late Renaissance as *bravi*. On the amateur side, the crowd (or “the mob”, as Englishmen then began to call it), became an increasing concern of the propertied classes in the 18th Century. The crowd has consequently been studied by many historians, notably by George Rude in the case of late 18th-Century Paris and London.

In some cases at least, including the famous example of the attack on the Bastille on 14 July 1789, Rude’s careful analysis of “faces in the crowd” reveals that contrary to the stereotype of the mob the attackers were not unemployed or marginal but in the main respectable members of the Paris lower middle class: cabinet-makers, locksmiths, shoe-makers and so on from the Faubourg Saint Antoine, independent artisans rather than wage-earners.

As for gangs, a distinction seems in order. I agree with William McNeill about the important role in urban violence played by what he calls *Gefolgschaften*, or bands of “restless you men.” However, it seems that the young men of the preindustrial city fought for and identified with their district, rather than with gangs in a strict sense of the term, in other words organized groups with a collective life of several years or more. However, gangs with distinctive names and territories can be found by the 1840s, if not before; the “Bowery Boys” of New York, for example.

In all cases, amateur or professional, traditional or modern, what stands out is the predominance of YAMs, an abbreviation for “Young Adult Males”; whether this is because they are especially conscious of their physical strength, because they need to prove themselves, because they have less to lose than older men with family responsibilities, or because male bonding in formal or informal groups (which can easily be turned to violent ends) is a characteristic of their stage in the life cycle. If there is a fundamentally demographic explanation of changes in the level of urban violence, it may be found in the variations in the proportion of YAMs in the population at large. However, the general predominance of this group does not exclude some interesting exceptions to the rule. For example, women were extremely visible in urban riots in early modern England, France, and the Netherlands, riots in which the threat of violence, if not violence itself was significant. Women played a particularly important role in food riots. The march of the market women - and, contrary to the legend, women of higher social status as well - to Versailles in 1789 to bring the king back to Paris is a famous and dramatic example of female participation, but it is far from being an isolated case.

A second contrast between our own century and the early modern era concerns the role of elites. Cases of rape which came before the courts of Renaissance Venice not infrequently involved young noblemen. In England too, in the 16th and early 17th centuries, the propensity to violence among young noblemen was so common that, destructive as it was, the duel may be seen as a stage in the “civilizing process” in the sense of limiting the combatants to two at a time and imposing rules on the informal fighting which had preceded it.

Can we speak of noble “hooligans”? If by “hooligan” we mean someone who engages in violence for its own sake, for excitement, the answer will be “sometimes but not always”, since early modern noble violence was

instrumental as well as expressive. Political violence was widespread among the upper classes in the Italian city-state. There were frequent conflicts, virtually private

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## High walls, steel fences, security guards, alarm systems: today's fortresses and symbols of fear

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wars, between political factions (Guelphs and Ghibellines, Black and White Guelphs, and so on), as well as between families, especially at certain periods, including the age of

Dante, who was exiled from Florence when his faction lost the struggle for power. The 15th Century, by contrast, was more peaceful for Florentines.

In early modern London, aristocrats some times incited crowds to violence for political purposes. A famous example comes from the crisis of 1679-81, when the Whig party organized what would later be called “demonstrations” in the streets as part of their campaign to exclude Charles II's Catholic brother James Duke of York (later James II) from the succession to the throne. The street battles which took place in Westminster during the elections of 1784 and 1788 were also organized from above.

In the New World, the conflict between the Pires and Camargo families in São Paulo in 1650 makes a good example of this kind of faction-fighting. The main point is that in the preindustrial world, faction and vendetta were practices both widespread and “respectable.” Today, the practice of vendetta seems to be virtually confined to criminal organizations (Mafia, Triads, and terrorists of various persuasions) and to their opposite numbers the police. For a cultural historian, this makes the point that groups locked in combat over a long period frequently adopt one another's practices.

## Victims

In São Paulo in 1994, 93% of the recorded victims of violence were male and about 75% between ages of 15 and 49. Here too YAMs predominate. We must not think in terms of two completely separate groups, active and passive, aggressors and victims. A comparative analysis of executions would probably tell a similar story. In his book *The London Hanged*, Peter Linebaugh studies what he calls “Tyburnography”, in other words the collective biography of 1,242 people hanged in London between 1703 and 1772. Unfortunately, he does not pay the same attention to the age of the condemned that he devotes to their occupations and birthplaces, but the fact that more than a quarter of the English born outside London were apprentices already tells us something.

In many places and periods, urban violence has been associated with a “faction” or group structured by

vertical solidarity (as opposed to the horizontal solidarity of a social class); in other words, a group composed of patrons and clients. Their victims are the members of the opposite faction. In political conflicts in ancient Rome, Cicero, like his enemies, had armed clients, veterans, and slaves in his service. In 12th-Century Nishapur, a dispute between two Muslim schools of law (the Hanafi and the Shafi'i), mobilized two factions who have destroyed the city during their battles. Reading this account of medieval Persia, we are reminded of Tehran in the age of the *ayatollahs*.

However, a striking feature of modern urban violence, especially collective or crowd violence, is the choice of outsiders victims, whether one thinks of the endemic "Paki-bashing" in contemporary London, the epidemic of recent attacks on immigrants in Germany, the massacres of Tamils in Colombo in 1983, of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, and of Muhajirs in Karachi in 1986.

In India, what are called "communal riots" may go back only to the end of the last century, to the Talla riot in Calcutta in 1897 — the subject is controversial.

In other parts of the world, however, the tradition is much older. There were race riots in U.S. cities earlier in the 19th Century. There was a tradition of riots against foreigners in London — against Germans in the 16th Century, French in the 17th Century, and Irish in the 18th Century. In Moscow, riots against "Germans" — a term used to describe foreigners in general — took place in the 17th Century. Violence against religious minorities is even older. In 1572, in Paris and elsewhere, Catholics turned on and massacred the Protestant minority. In Spanish cities, attacks on Jewish and Muslim minorities were already common in the late Middle Ages.

Political regimes, national or municipal, are often the true "victims" or objects of violence, whether directed against officials or the buildings where they work. In the early modern period the rulers of England, France, Spain and other parts of Europe gave up their traditional nomadic existence and settled in the capital city. This

change in royal habits made ordinary people in these cities more politically conscious and more ready to protest about national issues than before, demanding the dismissal of unpopular ministers or even a new political regime. The barricades erected in Paris in 1789, 1848 and 1871 offer examples of the closer link between urban violence and national politics, although the local tradition of the barricade goes back at least as far as 1588, when rebels proclaimed that Henri III might be king of France, but that Henri duke of Guise was king of Paris.

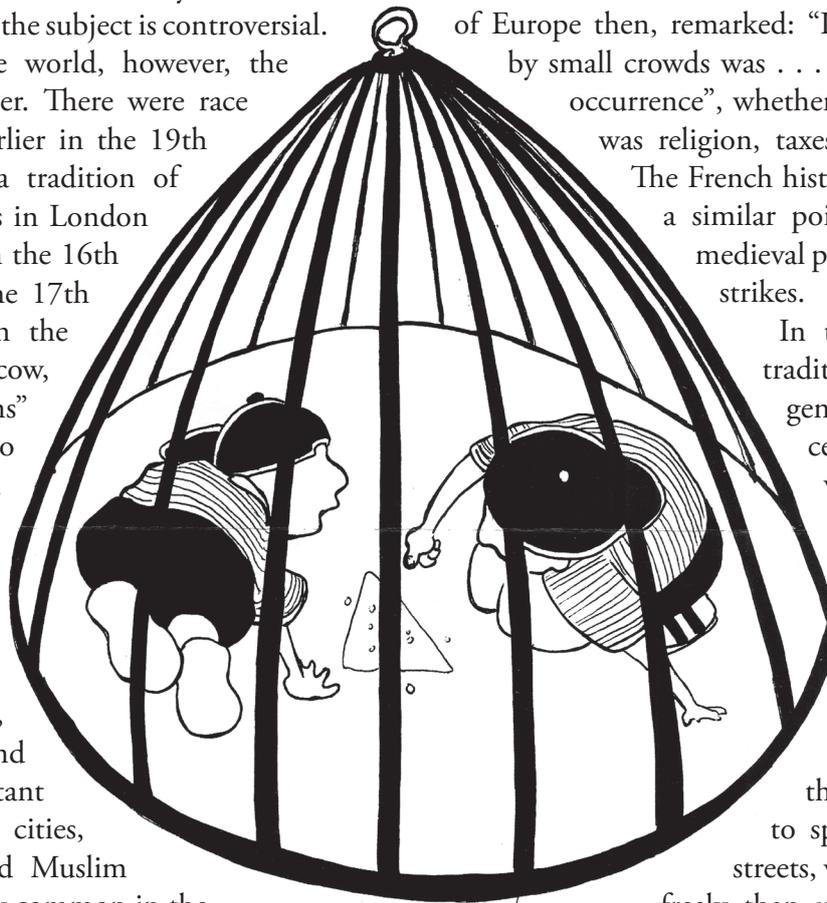
## Timing

An obvious and useful distinction is between violence which is "endemic" or "structural" on the one hand, and that which is "conjunctural" or "epidemic" on the other. A recent study of violence in India commented on the "normal, structural violence embodied in everyday life in Gujarat." A historian of 17th and 18th-Century cities in the Netherlands, one of the most peaceful parts of Europe then, remarked: "In Amsterdam, violence by small crowds was . . . considered an everyday occurrence", whether the occasion of rioting was religion, taxes or the price of food.

The French historian Marc Bloch made a similar point when he compared medieval peasant revolts to modern strikes.

In traditional cities, as in traditional societies more generally, violence like certain other activities was more intense during festivals. These were times when the population of the city swelled with country people come to see the shows, when work was forbidden so that the people were free to spend their time on the streets, when drink flowed more freely than usual, and so on. Thus

"Evil May Day" was the name for an attack on German merchants in 16th-Century London which took place on 1 May, a major English festival, at that time associated with spring rather than with organized labor. In 17th-Century London, Shrove Tuesday was often marked by attacks on brothels by apprentices, as if a festive manner of giving up sex during Lent. The celebration of the



feast of Corpus Christi in Barcelona in 1640 marked the beginning of a long revolt against control from Madrid. The Massacre of St Bartholomew in Paris in 1572 took place on the eve of a major festival. As for Carnival, an Englishman in Venice at the end of the 16th Century noted that on the Sunday night seventeen people had been killed and innumerable people injured, and that he had been told that there were murders every night of Carnival. This city of fewer than 200,000 inhabitants may have swelled to 300,000 at this time of year.

In the 20th Century, on the other hand, despite the regular Sunni-Shia conflicts at Moharram, violence seems to have less to do with festivals. This is true even for the Carnival in Rio, at least relatively speaking. The 1995 statistics for “a violência carnavalesca” show São Paulo with 74 homicides (one per 130,000 inhabitants); Rio with 44; and Belo Horizonte, Porto Alegre, and Salvador with five apiece. However, these figures are not very high relative to the “normal” homicide rates in these cities, or to the death rate in the carnivals of 16th-Century Venice! In Rio at the beginning of this century, fighting regularly took place during Carnival. Yet two deaths in a battle between two *cordões* in Botafogo in 1902, which received considerable coverage at the time and was long remembered in popular tradition, seem to have been exceptional.

A partial exception to my generalization about the decline of violence during festivals is the case of elections. Elections, which so often take festive or theatrical forms, were frequent occasions of violence not only in ancient Rome and in 18th-Century Westminster, as we have seen, but also in Brazil at the turn of the century and they remain violent in some places (in India, for instance, and in Mexico) even today. Why violence has more or less deserted elections in Brazil, for instance, or Venezuela, while remaining massive in other fields, is a question which seems worth asking despite the difficulty of giving it a satisfactory answer.

How and why did this change come about? In the case of the Carnival of Rio, the authorities incorporated the Escolas da Samba in the official carnival in the 1930s, with massive presence of police in the streets where the main events take place. It is less easy to understand the decline or dislocation of electoral or carnival violence over the long term. But one might point to the decline in the importance of festivals in general, not only as occasions for violence but also for spectacular displays of eating, drinking, sex and other forms of relaxation.

Other cycles of relative violence or nonviolence are not difficult to identify. Take the case of São Paulo, in

which recent interviews with the residents of certain districts give the impression that the 1930s were a kind of golden age of non-violence, at least in their particular streets. There is an element of myth in the recollection, of older people, as Teresa Caldeira's study based on these interviews points out. However, there may also be an element of truth so far as the relative absence of certain kinds of violence is concerned, especially in certain locales, compared with the 1980s (the time of the interview) or the 1990s.

I am a Londoner, who grew up there after the Second World War. My memories of this relatively non-violent period are not unlike those of the people interviewed by Caldeira (in the 1970s, walking to the house of my parents at one in the morning, I was once stopped by a policeman who advised me to take a taxi, advice which would have been unnecessary in the 1950s). Allowing for an element of nostalgia, this experience suggests that a significant change had taken place.

### Locales

Contemporary students of the city often consider it as an arena or set of arenas for different kinds of activity. In this sense we might speak of “fields of violence” in the city as well as in the countryside.<sup>43</sup> The subject has occasionally been discussed (in the cases of criminality in Rio and riots in India), but it deserves more attention.

In Belfast, at least until recently, violence tended to occur in particular zones of the city, especially working-class areas such as the Shankill Road. In 1969, one of the many graffiti in Belfast proclaimed that “The Malone Road (a middle-class area) fiddles while the Shankill Road burns.” In Europe, these “hot” zones, as we may call them, are often peripheral because the poor are pushed out to the periphery. In the United States, these zones are often central because of the decay of the inner city. Other hot zones include factories, often the scene of strikes, picketing and confrontations with the police; prisons, often the scene of violent riots and still more violent repression, like the massacre of 110 prisoners in Carandiru in 1992); police stations; the roads in which traffic is most dense; and sports stadia and their vicinities, the violence of the fans often spilling onto the streets.

Violence and the expectation of violence have left many traces on today's urban landscape. In Chicago, the fortresses of the Black Muslim leaders are extremely visible. The *morros* of Rio may also be regarded as fortresses, or as “no-go areas”, as they say in Belfast, into which the police normally dare not enter. The modern

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condominium in São Paulo, New York, Los Angeles and other cities, with its spatial segregation, its high walls or railings and the security guards at the gates not to mention guard dogs and alarm systems — is another sign of the expectation of violence.

All this has happened before. No-go areas of more traditional cities include the so-called “rookery” of 19th-Century London, and its equivalent in 17th-Century Palermo, complete with underground passages between houses. By the 18th Century, if not earlier, guides to Paris drew attention to the more dangerous regions of the city. In the same period, Londoners and visitors (James Boswell, for instance), were well aware of the areas to be avoided after dark.

“Hot” areas generally included bridges, which were often the scene, as in the famous cases of Venice and Pisa, for ritualized clashes between the young men of different districts. They might also include parts of the city dominated by one kind of worker, for industrial violence was not unknown in 18th-Century cities. In London in 1768, the area in the east known as “Spitalfields” was the scene of violent confrontations between weavers using the traditional hand-loom and weavers using the new mechanical loom. The factory had not yet appeared in English cities, but Spitalfields had become, with Lyons and Nanking, one of the great silk centers of the world. It was already an industrial zone where a high proportion of the population were weavers working at home.

As for urban fortresses, Italy witnessed the rise of private towers from, around the year 1000 onwards: the 191 “noble towers” recorded in Bologna (two of which still survive in the middle of the city) and the forest of towers still to be seen by tourists to San Gimignano.

Even in Renaissance Florence, a grand building like the Palazzo Medici has much in common with a medieval castle. It was built for defense as well as display, its doors massive, its windows well above ground level and protected from missiles by iron grilles. What is more, the events of the Pazzi conspiracy of the later 15th Century, in which Lorenzo de Medici barely escaped assassination, show that palace-castles of this kind were still needed. Again, chains were placed across the streets in 16th-Century Perugia as they were in medieval Toledo, in order to defend the inhabitants from cavalry charges. These changes to the urban landscape of Mediterranean Europe in the late Middle Ages reflected not a general rise in the level of violence but rather its displacement, at a time when the barons deserted the country for the city.

## Motives of violence

The big question is surely this: is urban violence rational or irrational? Or as American sociologists say (or used to say), is it “instrumental” or is it “expressive”? In this case it does not seem particularly useful to distinguish between periods; no age, not even the Enlightenment, can plausibly claim to be more rational than another.

Take the case of political violence, assassination for example. However counter-productive it may be over a longer period, it is hard to deny its rationality in the short term, as a means likely to achieve the ends in view. Comparing the 20th Century with other periods, it is difficult to discover any obvious contrast between (say) the attempt to assassinate the journalist Carlos Lacerda in Rio in 1954, the murder of the liberal journalist, Libero Badaró in São Paulo in 1830, or indeed that of Admiral Coligny in Paris in 1572. What deserves to be emphasized is the fact that political assassination is much less common in some places and times than others. It has been rare in England even at times like the 18th Century when the level of urban violence was high.

The traditional interpretation of collective violence, from the descriptions by 16th-Century observers to the theories of the turn-of-the century psychologist Gustave Lebon, has stressed the fickleness, the irrationality and the “blind fury” of the crowd (not to say “mob”, “rabble”, or *canaille*). The “spasmodic” interpretation, as he called it, of the behavior of ordinary people as a sort of Pavlovian response to hunger and other stimuli was vigorously attacked by the late Edward Thompson in a now famous article on the 18th-Century English crowd. His own interpretation was exactly the opposite, viewing the crowd as a rational, moral agent.

Thompson’s witty and passionate critique of the prejudices, stereotypes and metaphors so common among upper-or middle-class observers of “mobs” was and is a salutary one. However, it would be a serious mistake to take his model of the English food riot and apply it indiscriminately to urban riots in general. Many of these riots were and some still are considerably less rational as well as a good deal more lethal than the attempts to enforce a just price which Thompson described and analyzed with such sympathy. Even in 18th-Century England, more violent riots occurred from time to time, such as the Gordon Riots in London in 1780, directed against Catholics, including Irish immigrants (also a target of London riots in 1736 and 1763). That violence was directed against property rather than persons (though 210 people were killed,

mainly rioters killed by soldiers). The main events of the Gordon Riots were pulling down or looting houses and shops and burning prisons and distilleries.

As in the past, today's immigrants are often perceived as "polluting" the area in which they settle (*empestar* is the word used by older inhabitants of Moóca to refer to the newly-arrived *nordestinos*). The urge to purify the community from "pollution" by outsiders who are perceived as less than human is surely inexplicable in rational terms, like the need to find or to create villains and scapegoats, or the desire on the part of individuals to lose or transcend themselves in the crowd. These needs, urges and desires require anthropological or psychological as well as sociological or economic analysis.

Such analyses need to take account of the local cultural forms, for example the myths in which such destructive desires are both articulated and justified. For instance, the Sinhalese who massacred Tamils in Sri Lanka in 1983 apparently saw themselves as reenacting stories from their epic the *Mahavamsa*, notably the slaughter of demons by prince Vijaya. Patterns of this kind can be observed not only in today's ethnic riots but also in traditional cities such as Paris during the religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. In these wars, both sides, Catholics and Protestants alike, perceived themselves as re-enacting the history of the chosen people in the Old Testament, purifying the land from unbelievers or idolaters.

The idea that urban violence is a symptom of underlying problems also deserves to be taken seriously. Some recent studies of riots in Karachi, for instance, have stressed the effect on the inhabitants of the city of regular shortages of water and power and the collapse of other public services fraying nerves and encouraging the search for scapegoats. A similar point has been made about violent responses to breakdowns of the public transport system in Rio and São Paulo.

In pre-industrial cities, food crises had similar effects, at least on occasion, whether shopkeepers or tax-collectors were selected as scapegoats. In late medieval Spanish cities, attacks by Christians on the quarters inhabited by Jews and Muslims became more frequent after the great plague of 1347-8, the "Black Death", when about a third of Europe's population died. The role of myth in articulating and justifying aggression in some episodes of urban violence is taken over on other occasions by rumor. For example, the rumor of the kidnapping of children by the authorities, which led to violence in Paris in 1750, has been perceptively interpreted by two French

historians as a symptom of an underlying discontent with the monarchy, in similar fashion to Georges Lefebvre's interpretation of the "Great Fear" of 1789. This rumor about the imminent arrival of brigands, which began in Paris and swept France, was viewed by Lefebvre as an expression of popular distrust of the aristocracy

(whether this distrust was conscious or unconscious). An anthropologist working on Africa once described accusations of witchcraft as a "social strain-gauge", making

public hostilities between or within families which had long simmered in private. In similar fashion, sudden episodes of collective violence in the city may be interpreted as indicators of long-standing social tensions.

"Festive violence", as the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin has called it — using the phrase to refer to a particular style or mood of violence rather than to association with formal festivals — deserves a separate discussion. In the case of Brazil, one thinks especially of violence against public property, the so-called *quebra-quebra*, whether directed against street lights (as in Rio in 1904), or against public transport (as in Rio and São Paulo in 1974). The traditional explanation for this violence is neatly summed up in a carnival song, the *Maxixe Aristocrático* by Jose Nunes:

*Quebra, quebra, quebra e  
Requebra  
Vamos de gosto quebrar  
Vamos de gosto quebrar.*

Early modern parallels for this kind of violence are not difficult to find, from the London "bawdy-house riots" of the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the Roman custom of sacking the palace of a newly-elected pope. However, like the "spasmodic" theory of riot, this analysis raises more problems than it solves. Is the smashing (however joyous) fundamentally expressive, an end in itself? Or is it a relief for psychological tensions, provoked, in the Brazilian case, by the problems of the transport system? Or is it a conscious strategy, an attempt to force the municipal authorities to improve the system?

The violence of football fans inside and outside the stadium would seem to be a better example of expressive or festive violence. Or its equivalent in the preindustrial city, the regular "fist wars" in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Venice and their analogues in other cities, for example the annual "battle for the bridge" in Pisa. Hundreds if not

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## Carnival and football crowds explode into collective violence: What are the sources of riot?

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thousands of adult males, mainly from the “subordinate classes”, assembled on these occasions, usually at the frontier between two wards of the city, the object of the exercise being for one side to invade the territory of the other. Some people were killed and many injured in these clashes, in which fists were backed by sticks, stones and knives. The custom endured for centuries. Why?

At this point it may be worth raising the question of *machismo* as a possible key to violent tendencies in certain places and among certain groups. Has Spanish political violence anything to do with the cultural values traditionally expressed in the bullfight, with its glorification of courage and death? How can we explain the high homicide statistics from certain Latin countries (including Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines as well as Brazil)? However, any attempt to explain urban violence in terms of the stereotype of the “Latin temperament” is vulnerable to two major objections.

In the first place, the contrast between certain Latin countries, including neighboring countries such as Costa Rica and El Salvador or Colombia and Ecuador undermines the theory. In the second place, aggressive male values are not a Latin monopoly. Far from it. The high homicide rates in Cairo and Alexandria quoted at the beginning of this article fit very well into the picture of the traditional Middle East, its stress on physical courage, and its gangs of youths (*futuwwa*), as discussed by historians and anthropologists and portrayed in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz. Can we speak of a Middle Eastern *machismo*?

“Masculinity” might be a better term, precisely because the violence is not a Latin monopoly. We return to the role of the YAMS in various cultures. In certain places and times, at least, aggression is a central part of their definition of their masculinity. The language of insult may be revealing in this respect. After all, it is not only in the Latin or the Mediterranean world that men insult one another by reflecting on their courage and sexuality. In Contemporary Britain, for instance, the violence of football fans not infrequently follows the exchange of ritualized insults such as “wankers”, a way of asserting that the other side are not really men. One might compare the incident in Amritsar in 1984, when the army occupied the temple and the Sikh women taunted their men with questions like “Where is the starch in your mustache now?” The assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard followed soon afterwards.

The last example gives rise to another reflection. Major Indian cities such as Calcutta are surprisingly low in the current statistics for urban violence, low enough



to encourage speculation about the possible relevance of the caste system to urban peace-keeping in the sense that caste “insulates” different social groups and thus minimizes the possibility of clashes between them. All this within the Hindu world, of course. But communal riots make it clear that this form of insulation is ineffective in the case of clashes between Hindus and Sikhs, as in that of clashes between Hindus and Muslims.

### Technology of violence

An examination of the changing technology of violence for once allows a clear contrast between ancient and modern. In ancient Rome, stones were among the weapons most frequently mentioned in the sources, testimony to the state of the streets and also perhaps to the price of knives. In medieval Italy, by contrast, urban warfare was more technologically sophisticated, witness the use of boiling oil in the sieges of noble towers, or the use of cavalry in the streets (the police horses of today give us some idea of the impact of cavalry on pedestrians). By the 16th Century, the rapid increase of technological innovation in the means of violence was already worrying the authorities. The rapier, for instance, which rapidly became fashionable among young nobles in 16th-Century Europe, made dueling more lethal,

since the new weapon made it easy to run through one's adversary's body. Even more dangerous was the spread of the arquebus and its use in cities, in Genoa, for instance, as a contemporary diarist remarked, or in Paris where the Protestant leader admiral Coligny was assassinated with a firearm in 1572, thus setting off the Massacre of St Bartholomew.

In the 19th Century the bomb entered the arsenal of urban violence, associated with the anarchists in particular. Today we witness the rise and diversification of high-tech violence — machine-guns and long-range rifles in Rio, rocket launchers in Belfast, semtex bombs in London, poison gas in Tokyo, and so on. Similar changes have taken place in the technology of the methods of crowd control. We live in the age of police vans, anti-riot shields, plastic bullets and tear gas.

The transfer of technology and techniques between groups should be noted, as between Brazilian urban guerrillas with political aims and the organization of drug-dealers known as *Comando Vermelho*, a transfer which resulted from contacts between guerrillas and criminals in the prisons of Rio. This was not the first case of this kind of cultural transfer. In 19th-Century Spain, for instance, bandits learned from the techniques of the guerrillas against Napoleon.

The role of the automobile in urban violence should not be forgotten. Traffic accidents killed 1.708 people in São Paulo in 1994, against 4.494 homicides, some triggered by traffic problems in a city where many drivers keep a gun in the car.

### Management of violence

A contrast between traditional and modern also emerges from an analysis of what it is convenient to call the "management" of violence (often though not always a euphemism for repression).

The traditional European system was to rely on amateurs or semi-amateurs to keep order in cities; the watch, the militia, the Parisian *archers*, the Roman *sbirri*, the Amsterdam *schutterij*, the London "trained bands" and so on. These groups were often figures of fun because of their ineffectiveness as Shakespeare's Dogberry reminds us. To support these rather weak efforts, there was little available except ritual. In Catholic countries, the blessed sacrament was used on occasion as an instrument of crowd control, for example, in Naples and Palermo during the revolts of 1647. When the priests went out onto the streets with the host

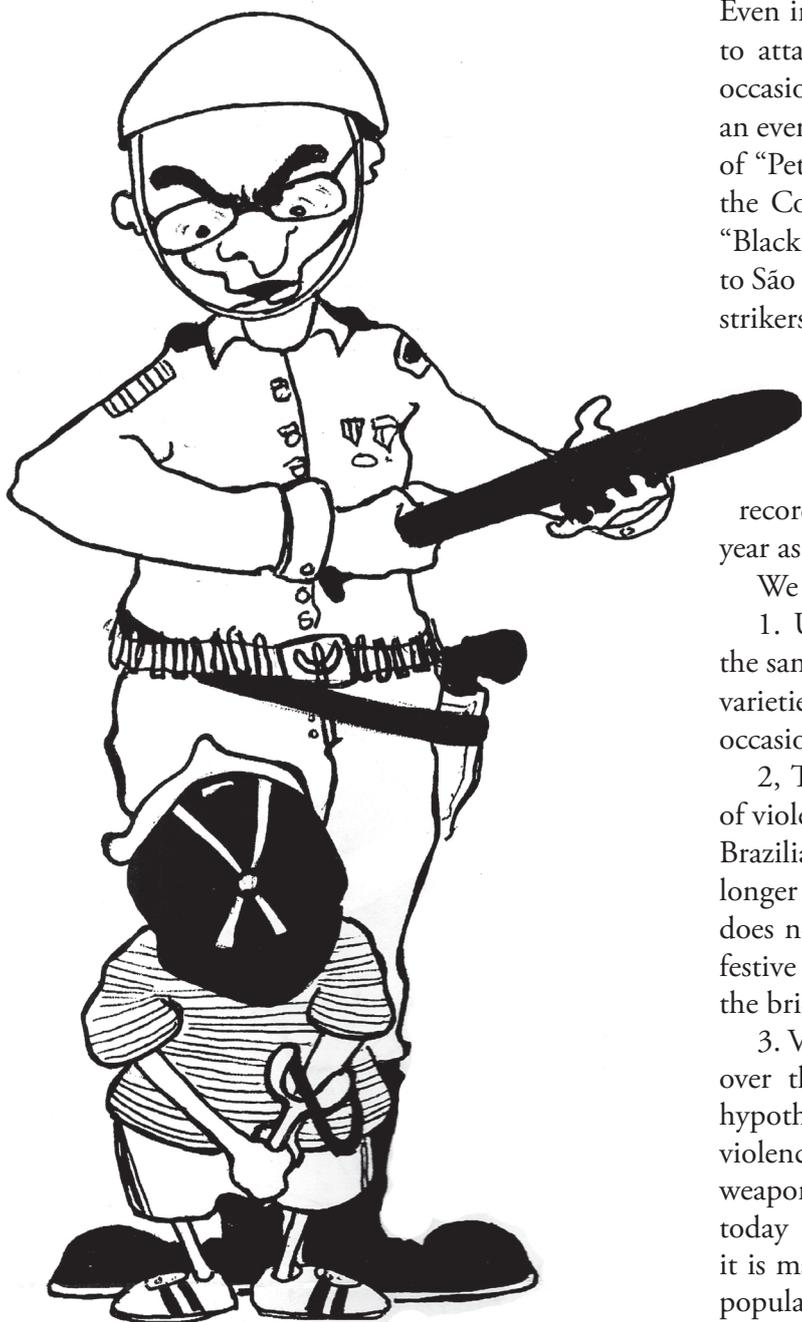
displayed, the rioters obediently stopped what they were doing and dropped to their knees. Unfortunately for the authorities, they did not stay on their knees for very long. Public executions may be also be seen as a ritual or a form of morality play, warning the public of the consequences of crime. To be more precise, they were staged for this purpose, using violence in order to discourage violence. Whether the spectators interpreted the events they watched in this way, or whether they regarded executions as entertainments or felt solidarity

### The civilizing process and violence by professionals

with the victims is a problem which continues to preoccupy historians. In similar fashion, instruments of torture were displayed in the streets of Rome

at Carnival to remind participants in the festival that there were limits to this moment of license. Public festivals of this kind were often supposed by the authorities to function as a safety-valve, a form of controlled disorder, although the association between festival and riot was well known. On one occasion at least, in Sicily in 1648, the year after a major revolt had taken place in Palermo, the authorities discussed the question whether Carnival should be banned as a cause of violence or encouraged as a cure for it. The fear of uncontrolled violence, no less than the fear of uncontrolled sexuality, motivated what I have elsewhere called the "reform of popular culture," a collective movement of lay and clerical elites of early modern Europe to tame the people and their festivals.

If violence did break out in the streets, there was little the authorities could do in the early stages, apart from ordering a curfew which was probably difficult to enforce. In the last resort, if the blessed sacrament did not work and the watch was ignored, it would be necessary to call in the army to restore order. The sudden shift from the relative impunity of rioters to their treatment as an "enemy" was a dramatic one. Townspeople were always alarmed to hear of the approach of an army. It mattered little whether the army was an enemy or was supposed to be "friendly", since the fear of sacking, looting, raping and torturing was the same in both cases. No wonder that in this period the billeting of troops in the houses of civilians was used as a punishment in France and Spain, as well as a solution to the problem of what to do with the troops in peace-time (in England, by contrast, the troops were usually quartered in inns). This system began to change only when governments constructed permanent barracks for soldiers, from the end of the 17th Century onwards, and the change only became definitive when professional police forces were organized in the course of the 19th Century.



All the same, violence from above persisted and still continues in cities all over the world. Colonial cities offer all too many examples, of which the Massacre of Amritsar, carried out by the British army against peaceful demonstrators, is one of the best-known.

Even in 19th-Century Britain, the troops were ordered to attack a peaceful demonstration on one notorious occasion, in St. Peter's Fields in Manchester in 1819, an event remembered with bitter humor as the massacre of "Peterloo" on the model of Waterloo. The attack by the Cossacks on a demonstration in St Petersburg on "Black Sunday" in 1905 is equally well known. Turning to São Paulo, one thinks of the violence of police against strikers early in this century, or the notorious attack on the crowd in Praça da Sé on 1 May 1919. Or again, of the well-documented violence of the ROTA during the military dictatorship. Or indeed of the fact that the military police are recorded to have killed 1,104 people in São Paulo in a year as recently as 1991.

We thus may remember three simple theses:

1. Urban violence is not new but it does not take the same forms at all times. It is useful to distinguish its varieties, the differences between kinds of actor, victim, occasion, locale, technology, and so on.

2. The importance of the dislocation and relocation of violence within the city deserves particular emphasis. Brazilian elections and carnivals, for instance, are no longer major sites of violence. However, displacement does not mean disappearance. In Europe, for example, festive violence has moved from traditional sites such as the bridge to new ones such as the stadium.

3. Violence may have been professionalized gradually over the long term, although we cannot verify this hypothesis by quantitative methods. Traditional urban violence, at a time when most adult males carried weapons, was mainly the work of amateurs, while today (with the significant exception of ethnic riots) it is mainly the work of professionals. The share of the population taking an active part in violence probably fell over the last few centuries. In that limited sense, despite the terrifying scale of violence in contemporary cities, we still may speak, like Norbert Elias, of a "civilizing process." We still do not know whether the strength of this civilizing process will match the power of new weapons.

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## 2. Rebuilding Public Institutions in the State of São Paulo

*The failure of public institutions of São Paulo State is a major event in Brazil's history. In January 1995 São Paulo's total state debt was \$ 58 billion, five times its annual tax revenues, barely enough to meet its swollen payroll and roughly equal to Brazil's entire debt to foreign banks (\$62 billion) before it got relief under the U.S. government's Brady Plan. Embroiled in São Paulo's financial desperation are issues of fiscal federalism that virtually go unmentioned at the current level of political debate. Present state revenues are barely enough to pay salaries, leaving debt service, investment and other operating costs of government, uncovered, São Paulo State was a pioneer in development of public health, education and modern infrastructure. These advances are receding under pervasive burdens of parasitism that impair its capacity to manage problems of scale. Police and civilian violence are out of control. The public health system approaches collapse. Adult mortality rose over the past decade for the first time in this century.*

*To deal with these difficulties, the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics is organizing an international conference on "Rebuilding Public Institutions in the State of São Paulo" to address the institutional and economic implications of the state government's fiscal problems. The purpose of our conference, and the research supporting it, will be to develop independent policy recommendations. A working group of leading Brazilian and international specialists in public finance will gather in São Paulo in the week of November 27-December 1 to analyze these issues in detail and to propose solutions to specific problems that are not contemplated in the present dialogue between state, local and federal authorities. This working group will be coordinated by Ambassador Rubens Ricupero, former Finance Minister of Brazil and Honorary President of the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics. Its policy recommendations will be debated at a public conference to be held in early December.*

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## 3. Violence, Poverty, Drugs

Alba Zaluar

Young men kill young men with increasingly modern guns. Brazil, famous today for the violent deaths of its children and adolescents, resounds with the echoes of history, as suggested by Peter Burke in his "Urban Violence and Civilization" in this issue of *Braudel Papers*.

The evolution of poverty in the past few decades defies the theory that crime goes hand in hand with poverty. My field researches in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro for the past 15 years shows that the share of poor people choosing a life of crime is low. Besides, we observe the highest rates of violent death in the richest and most productive states of Brazil, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, while the lowest rates are found in the poorest states, Maranhão, Bahia and Ceará", famous for primitive and spectacular ways of resolving personal conflicts as storied in Brazilian history and legend.

In our big cities, adolescents are being murdered by their peers. Of all violent deaths in Brazil, 70% are of adolescents 15-17 years old. Before children reach the age of 14, traffic accidents cause most violent deaths. But among adolescents 15-18 years old, firearms are the instrument of 43% of all deaths. Car accidents follow with 24% and then other instruments with 11%. Extortion groups, often involving corrupt police, become extermination bands. Gangs of drug pushers and robbers use similar methods, so fights among them over their spoils kill off their young peons.

The growing share of poor families headed by women with children under 10 intensifies destructive movements of these vicious circles. In 1989, 43% of families headed by women lived below the poverty line, 12% of the total of poor families. Despite a slight decrease in the share of children in the population, falling from 45% in 1980 to

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41% in 1989, half of all children and adolescents were in families with monthly earnings per capita under half the minimum wage, with 27% of them in families earning less than a quarter of the minimum wage. While not necessarily engaged in criminal activities, many of these children and adolescents are vulnerable to the influence of organized crime, exposed to them while working in the streets. Only a few end up in gangs of armed thieves and drug pushers. Tied to their peers, children and adolescents living in the streets suffer from all kinds of use and abuse, at the hands of adults receiving stolen goods as well as corrupt police. However, although they may commit lesser crimes there is a minimum of violent crime among themselves.

Violence has an inflationary effect. As the rate of violent crime rises, the fear and insecurity of the population threaten the quality of life gained at high cost in decades of economic development and social progress. Those fearfully shut up in their homes, be they in *favelas* or middle-class neighborhoods, cannot organize themselves. They participate little in local decisions that affect their lives, and avoid gathering among themselves. On the contrary. Many lock themselves up; buy guns or other arms, and prepare for the next danger, as if they were at war. What results is a general lack of respect for social norms, not to speak of fundamental rules for the safety of all, such as traffic rules, that involve all social classes.

Police data for Greater São Paulo show that the homicide rate rose sharply in the 1980s. In 1981 the rate was 21 per 100,000 inhabitants, which rose to 43 / 100,000 in 1990-94 and may reach 48 this year. Of these deaths, nearly half were among young males 15-24 years of age. In São Paulo population pressures on physical space brought fear to the members of poor and needy neighborhoods. The people complain not only of criminals but also that “justice is a farce, and the police fail and disrespect the law”. They blame new migrants from the Northeast for the intolerable situation. They demand toughness from politicians to reestablish order.

The most obvious results of these attitudes are not only high walls, gates, locks and alarms on houses but suspicion of strangers and lack of faith in democratic participation. The ideal of a community of neighbors yields to shrunken social horizons, cutting deeply into the web of confidence. The “civilizing process”, as described by Elias and discussed by Burke in the European context, suffered a defeat.

In Rio de Janeiro, where international drug traffic intensified at the end of the 1970s, possession of powerful firearms gave young gangsters a military power that not only led to killing among themselves but also destroyed the basis of authority. In the world of extortion and debts to drug dealers, youths start the vicious circle as drug users. They end up stealing, mugging and even killing to pay off their dealers who threaten them with death and force them to live like themselves. They are swept into this vicious circle to pay off debts and for protection from their new enemies.

The problem is knotted with the crisis in moral values emerging from the changes wrought by the new urban-industrial society. Ties of loyalty between parents and children and patrons and clients have weakened. So have the old values guiding the young, destroyed without creation of new values. All the people I interviewed in my field research revealed an individualist ideology in which the person's independence was linked to an extremely authoritarian conception of power. If the boss was seen as a man capable of imposing his will without restriction, he would demand total submission of his followers or victims. The lack of means of resolving conflicts, characteristic of a violent society, characterizes trade and power relationships within the gangs, opening a rigid separation between followers and leaders, as well as in the employment of children in subordinate roles. These criminals are incapable of creating durable institutions for themselves and thrive briefly, for the most part living and dying quickly, in the vacuum left by the failure of our society's modern institutions.