

of the widest range of relations ¹ in both the private and public spheres, stems from the article's approach (unless we have misread it) to violence as a kind of disorder that parasitizes a society, that acts as foreign body in it and is therefore something to be extirpated. This point of view has consequences for the final focus of research and the localization of violence in specific geographic areas of cities, and in certain human groups, like youth and the poor, in certain regions of the country, placing the rest of society in the position of victims, which at least in the Colombian case has generated an infernal circular perpetuation of violence.

The other concept refers to the urban. The author's reflection on the distinction between "city, citizenship, and violence" is highly interesting. What is out of sync is that he has introduced something as a footnote which in our opinion should link the overall argument together, due to its huge explanatory potential. In our opinion ², urban violence does not relate necessarily to the topography where it occurs, but to the violations of various types of rights and freedoms that occur in interactions among citizens, and between the latter and the state or other organizations (all of whom are actors in our contemporary urban society); to the logics and dynamics woven into the construction of the urban and the city and its characteristic as a horizon for conflicts that gives rise to violence as a multifaceted and ubiquitous phenomenon.

1. Uribe MT. Nación, ciudadano y soberano. Medellín: Corporación Región; 2001.
2. Gómez JA, Agudelo LM, Álvarez T, Cardona M, De Los Ríos A, García HI, et al. Estado del conocimiento sobre la violencia urbana en Antioquia en la década de los noventa. In: Angarita P, editor. Balance de estudios sobre violencia en Antioquia. Medellín: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia; 2001. p. 163-92.

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In his article, Briceño-León develops the analysis of what he calls "*the stage for a silent and undeclared war*". The eloquence of the data and their relevance to almost any city in Latin America show the recurrent horror portrayed in the majority of the articles dealing with the issue of violence at the population level. But what should be done with such horror? How

can the silence of this undeclared war be broken? By speaking, generating one, two, a thousand, a million conversations to break this tragic muteness, this paralysis resulting from the horror. Such conversations must change the sense and meaning of what is said when talking about violence, proving that things can also be done with words. Violence is not a state, it is a process. Enough of cowardice!

We agree that in our countries the city of law has become the city of fear. That urbanization and television have democratized expectations, but that the result is inequality and exclusion, the connected and the disconnected. That violence and its consequences are reproduced numerically in the statistical reports, and that the subjective level increases the perception of becoming possible victims of violent acts. In his attempt to analyze the "object", Briceño-León develops a structuring proposal that he assumes as a non-universal model. This proposal has been used in the health sector, ranging from the Situational Strategic Planning logic of Carlos Matus ¹ to the work of Pedro Luis Castellanos ², who links Matus' logic to the study of the health-disease process under a structure of the general, the particular, and the unique. These interpretative processes are highly useful to approach the logic of actors and scenarios, so as to avoid crystallizations or simplifications that justify technocratic norms, or on the other hand the kind of inaction that results from economic over-determination.

Models, structures, and classifications, but what purpose do they serve? Yes, fine, if they hierarchically organize the interpretations of citizenship on the problem. No, not if they are to achieve "scientific explanations" that crystallize such a complex and dynamic process as violence. The risks of medicalizing violence are still present. By classifying the problem, to what extent do I accept it as part of my field of knowledge? If I accept it, to what extent do I problematize it at the social level? Or do I include it as an object of investigation in such a way as to ensure my reproduction as investigator? Is this a valid dilemma? Is this always the situation?

We should not simplify the process of violence. To avoid the temptations of graphs and to tackle complexity is part of being honest as researchers. Of course complexity should not be measured merely by speeches, but by acts (which include words) and better still, by their impact. Words and acts are nothing more than actions by subjects. Individual and/or collective subjects. Subjects of language.

It is difficult to take a step back as the discussant of a theme that affects us as deeply as

violence, an issue that we have experienced personally and which we fear experiencing again, since we do not know when, where, or with whom we will face another violent situation. We physicians, health workers, who imagine ourselves vanquishing disease, now face an “epidemic” or rather “pandemic” problem, the main cause of death among young adults in the majority of our countries. We find ourselves immersed in a process where we shift from subjects of knowledge to “objects” of violence. We must not be indifferent to this process; may it at least serve for us to review our ways of understanding the problems. We citizens of Latin America, men and women, must understand that we should not take violence for granted. We need to reclaim public space and build social citizenship that turns the city of fear into the city of law, of rights, and of social citizenship. I believe this is Roberto Briceño-León’s spirit when he ends his paper by quoting the old German saying “*Stad Luft mach frei*”.

1. Matus C. Política planificación y gobierno. Caracas: Fundación Altadir; 1987.
2. Castellanos P. Sobre el concepto de salud-enfermedad, un punto de vista epidemiológico. Cuad Med Soc 1987; (42):15-24.

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Nasty, brutish and short: violence and the unrul of law in Latin America

Urban violence in Latin America has become so ubiquitous that it can be seen not only as a problem of individual security but also of public health, as the WHO data cited in the first paragraph of Briceño-León’s article amply demonstrate. Any attempt to grasp the underlying causes of violence is to be welcomed, as an understanding of the causes is a necessary first step towards overcoming them and hence reducing violence. It is particularly to be welcomed when, as here, a broad-ranging analysis is presented that distinguishes the impact of various factors. Thus, Briceño-León differentiates between originating factors of violence, factors that foment, and factors that facilitate violence. This approach avoids the pitfalls of more simplistic explanatory theses, by distinguishing between causes in the strict sense of the term, and factors that tend to exacerbate the propensity to use violence. Thus, the wide-

spread availability of firearms is seen here as a facilitating condition, not an underlying cause. Canada, a country where firearms possession is fairly common, is at the same time a society with very low levels of violence because the originating factors – essentially Briceño-León identifies these as being related, not to poverty, but to inequality – are absent.

In the space allocated to me for this commentary, it would be impossible to do justice to the scope of this rich, wide-ranging, and thought-provoking article. Instead, I propose to point to two factors that I believe could usefully be given more weight in the analysis. I then turn to the role of the state as a factor of violence and end by linking this with the question of citizenship.

My first point relates to those factors that Briceño-León identifies as fomenting violence, i.e., they are not its originating causes, but tend to stimulate or encourage the use of violence. Briceño-León identifies three such factors: urban density, the culture of masculinity, and the drugs market. Two additional factors could, I believe, be usefully added. The first is the culture of hedonistic consumerism that has become pervasive throughout much of the world. Probably never before has the acquisition of material goods mattered so much to individual self-esteem and peer group recognition – especially among the adolescents that Briceño-León identifies as being particularly violence-prone because of their imprecise insertion into society in the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. He argues, compellingly, in my view, that there is a huge discrepancy between the democratization of cultural aspirations, in which television plays a crucial role, and the actual possibilities of fulfilling such aspirations in an increasingly unequal society: “*We are terribly equal in what we desire and frightfully unequal in our real possibilities to achieve it*”. So the culture of consumerism is present in his analysis; I suggest that it deserves to be treated in its own right as a factor that foments violence and its impact analyzed in the same way as he proposes for the culture of masculinity.

A further factor that foments violence and that, in my view, deserves rather more weight, is the discursive treatment of the phenomenon in the mass media. Discourse not only reflects, but also creates, perceptions of reality, and as Briceño-León points out, a subjective feeling of insecurity has real consequences for behavior, from the acquisition and hasty use of firearms to various forms of violent and sometimes anticipatory self-help. It is noteworthy that the