Claiming the City
Civil Society
Mobilisation by the Urban Poor

Edited by Heidi Moksnes and Mia Melin
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Introduction

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Violence has always been central to the understanding of urban life as seen in the literary exploits since Dickens and Zola and sociological accounts of the Chicago school. Increasingly, as well, urban violence is beginning to be seen as an important field of intervention within development discourse. A recent World Bank report (World Bank 2011) thus concludes that violence takes its toll on the possibilities of many urban residents, and that they often find it hard to cope with the consequences of violence. Within Peace and Conflict Studies, similar conclusions have been reached; for instance Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius Robben (1995) have explored the consequences of violence in terms of the loss of the ability to reproduce culture. Hence, there is a growing awareness that violence disrupts, an insight that becomes ever-more important as the cities around the world are growing.

However, violence is (and is sometimes wrongfully perceived as) an integral part of politics and governance. This points to the productive side of violence. That violence is productive does not necessarily imply that it is ‘good,’ simply that it also enables and forces particular forms of sociality rather than disrupts it. In this brief introduction, we will attempt to balance these two different interpretations of urban violence. In the first section, we will focus on the productive side of violence as we – departing from the three other chapters of this section – explore how different actors claim the city through violence. In the second section, and in keeping with the overarching theme of this conference volume, we will shift focus and explore how civil society groups try to reduce or cope with violence. By looking at urban violence from both sides, we are able to arrive at a clearer understanding of urban violence and politics.
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Claiming the city through violence

In order to understand urban violence as productive rather than only disruptive of lives, we need to locate violence within social relationships, which we can study and try to understand, rather than seeing it as anti-social behaviour, outside or antithetical to the social order. In the anthropological literature on violence, this is sometimes also expressed as the productive capacity of violence; violence and aggression are not just meaningless and antisocial behaviours but a kind of social practice that communicates between specific actors and groups and which not only produces and reproduces such relationships – but also may be productive in a range of other ways. Clausewitz’ famous (1832) assertion that war is the continuation of politics by other means extends to the small-scale kinds of violence we are interested in here; violence, in other words, is the continuation of social relatedness by other means. In order to understand this, we propose exploring different ways in which the city is being claimed by groups through violence, asking: What are violent actors claiming through their acts of aggression? In other words, what are the intended effects of acts of violence, and what relationships enable and facilitate these social practices? Without alleging to have produced a complete list, we suggest that there are at least five different kinds of claims that violent practices in the three following chapters, as well as and in other examples, express. They comprise claiming resources, claiming place, claiming community, claiming rights and claiming the future.

Perhaps the most obvious question raised in the chapters is: How are violent actors claiming resources? Through theft, corruption and other forms of more or less explicitly violent kinds of delinquency, violent actors – both within the state (police, public officials etc) and outside it (gangs etc) lay claim to resources, such as money and consumer items. But a more fundamental aspect of that claim is the claim to livelihood; of doing something rather than doing nothing. As one of the gang youths in Roy Gigengack’s chapter puts it: “We love to struggle for our lives” (p 176)! Claiming livelihood through violent practices is arguably a search for a socially meaningful role and an ability to look out for oneself, albeit through illicit means.
Secondly, how are violent actors claiming place? In several ways, violent actors – again both actors within and outside the state – lay claim to particular places within the city; gangs occupy street corners or entire areas or neighbourhoods, and other non-state actors take charge of their own security, for example by fortifying their houses with walls and barbed wire, as in Colman Msoka’s example from Dar es Salaam below.

A more social dimension of such claims may be posed as the question: How are violent actors claiming community? Violent actors organise collectively in networks that may or may not be related to specific places, in order to achieve a feeling of belonging, to identify with others. Organising collectively in criminal networks may be understood as a similar kind of mobilisation as we know from other parts of civil society – a way to respond to structural conditions that make it difficult for people to get by on their own.

This leads to a fourth category of claims: How are violent actors claiming rights? While it might sound counter-intuitive, violent actors lay claim to their right to make use of public spaces; to conduct different kinds of business; to affect the decisions that are made about their neighbourhoods and their livelihoods, etc. Claiming rights is a way of being acknowledged, of having a voice, of gaining influence – a kind of recognition that may not otherwise be available to marginalised parts of the urban population. These claims are of course not only articulated in relation to the state but to other powerful actors in the city, including NGO workers, neighbourhood associations, etc. In this way, violent practices may be understood as an integral part of urban politics: not Politics with a capital P, but the everyday negotiation of access to participation in the social life of the city. One entry-point for marginalised actors, however, is indeed Politics with a capital P. National political parties are well aware of the importance of mobilising especially the younger generations, in order to perform or demonstrate their popularity and of course to assure their votes, as research in especially West Africa illustrates (Utas 2012; Bjarnesen 2013; Christensen and Utas 2008).

Finally, violent practices are also geared towards making something happen in the future and we might ask: How are violent actors claiming
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the future? Arjun Appadurai (2004) has argued that poverty may best be defined as the deprivation of what he calls “the capacity to aspire”; in other words, the ability to envision a future for oneself and one’s family. Getting involved in violent practices may be some people’s only way of enacting a sense of agency over their lives, and therefore of envisioning their future, for example to avoid the sense that the young people in Reazul Haque and Ebney Ayaj Rana’s chapter (p 193) have of being “stuck in a position of youth,” unable to attain social adulthood.

Civil society responses to violence

Clearly violence is taking its toll on many cities around the world, affecting adversely the economy and multiple development initiatives. In a number of cities, violence and especially the fear of it has turned whole areas into no-go zones for outsiders, as well as seriously limiting the mobility of the residents there. As Jensen has described in Cape Town (Jensen 2008), violence marks out terrains that few people dare to challenge or ignore. In this regard, violent actors are no differently positioned, often stuck in very small territories inside their turf where no outsider can enter and from where they can hardly exit.

These areas that are associated with crime and violence – townships, favelas or ghettos – are often targeted by states wanting to end the violence. Often these interventions are inherently violent themselves in the form of raids, counter-insurgency and military-style policing, including sometimes extra-judicial killings and expansive imprisonment regimes, affecting significant parts of the young, male population. Other forms of interventions are less directly violent but often as intrusive, as when mothers are being asked to report on the criminal activities of their sons or face being lumped in with the latter as complicit in the violence. In this way, we might say that residents of these affected areas carry the burden of violence in several ways: their livelihood is affected adversely, and they are often caught between the proverbial rock and the hard place, between the violent practices of some of their fellow residents, often young men, and the state.

So how do they cope with this tension? As the World Bank (2011) reports, most of these coping mechanisms are highly individualised
and comprise *inter alia* “keeping silent, buying guns or acquiring other weapons, or relying (many times coerced) on extra-legal security groups for protection” (ibid, p xiv). The World Bank rightly laments the individualisation, noting that it might deepen violence even further. Instead, they argue for a stronger role of communities and civil society. While we concur with this recommendation, our research indicates a number of barriers to civil society intervention. Let us briefly discuss those before we end on a more positive note.

Much literature on civil society and community intervention rests on a number of implicit assumptions about the nature of community. Firstly, there are assumptions about communities and residents as being assailed from all sides. Contrary to this assumption, communities and residents are often implicated in violent structures and in what Janet Roitman (2006) calls ethics of illegality, in which legal codes are broken but where the acts are still legitimate. Examples of this abound across the globe. As one informant in Cape Town during Jenen’s fieldwork said, “Here there are no banks, only the (drug) merchant.” Furthermore, the violent actors are not, as the articles illustrate, outsiders to communities; often they are sons and neighbours. Finally, communities are often riddled with conflicts, in which some see their neighbours as those who bring violence – by informing the police, by supporting and defending their boys, etc. In this way, community or neighbours are often used as ideological markers in internal power struggles within a given area, as Helene Risør’s (2010) analysis of neighbourhood association and lynching in El Alto, Bolivia, vividly illustrates. Hence, we cannot assume the coherence or natural benevolence of the community.

Violence is in itself also a difficult issue around which to organise. As an example, Jensen (2010) has identified five consequences of violence on the ability to do local politics and community organisation in Cape Town. Firstly, the city government possessed the legitimacy and resources to define crime and violence in the townships as the perennial problem of Cape Town. As a consequence, many organisations, despite their often strong anti-state ideologies, had to follow in order to access resources. Contrary to issues of sanitation or education, the blame for crime and violence was located within the communities, not within the state. Hence,
organising around crime was organising against internal enemies, often intimate to one self. Secondly, in order to obtain state resources, civic organisations had to prove that they had a worthy case, that is, that their area was more violent than the next area, thereby reproducing the notion of the area as particularly problematic. Thirdly, as most people in the townships knew of people with connections to a variety of violent networks – gangs, police, vigilante groups – organising around crime was often tantamount to organising against family, friends and neighbours. Fourthly, while many anti-crime policies are designated as pro-poor and pro-women, they come to problematise both groups when they cannot play a part in the state’s attempts to curb crime. Finally, and most problematically, these policies sometimes even reproduce the very thing they were designed to combat, as gangs and politically radicalised segments of the urban population feed on the violence of the state (Keen 2006).

While it is often difficult to organise around issues of crime and violence, there are multiple interesting examples to be learned from (see Jessen et al 2010; World Bank 2011; Ward et al 2011). Rather than rehearsing these many examples, let us provide one illustration again from Cape Town on community activism in relation to what became known as the xenophobic violence that rocked South Africa in 2008. Briefly, the xenophobic violence consisted of a number of attacks that spread from Johannesburg townships to urban areas in the rest of the country against people in different ways defined as foreigners and outsiders. The horror of the attacks aside, this also became a moment of huge resurgence of civil society. Academics met and discussed the implications (Worby, Hassim and Kupe et al 2008); research institutes went into the field to study the phenomenon (IOM 2009); after a while, the police tried as best they could to protect people (Hornberger 2008); relief agencies went onto the ground to assist people; churches opened their gates; thousands of people in the townships around the country defied their neighbours to assist and protect (Hadland 2008); and social movements organised mass meetings across nationality to signal the centrality of multi-lingual approaches. Despite the wealth of information from the ground, many explanations of the violence focused on general issues like poverty, xenophobia, border control, inequality and sense of superiority. However,
as an IOM report (IOM 2009) argued, these factors could not explain why some areas were more severely affected than others. The report went on to identify the most important predictors for attacks as the absence of legitimate leadership groups, along with the emergence of vigilante groups and powerful development mafias who instigated and legitimated the attacks. Combined with historic use of forced removals as a tool of power; a lack of credible conflict resolution models, and an inability of local government to exercise authority in multi-party constituencies, this constituted a powerful mix leading to the violence.

These largely local modes of explanation resonate well with Jensen’s research in one ethnically mixed area of Cape Town called Vrygrond (Jensen et al 2011). When the reasons for Vrygrond not falling prey to large-scale communal and xenophobic violence were explored, a number of interesting and even surprising forms of civic responses seemed to have stemmed the violence. These included, among others, a presence of a relatively plural civil society that raised their voice against the violence. Hence, no single group was able to unopposed identify foreigners as problematic. This plurality was also supported by a number of women, often mothers and sisters of those threatening to perpetrate violence, who stood between the young rioters (often belonging to gangs) and the foreigners. Finally, faith-based organisations and other networks engaged in a number of practices that seemed to break the isolation of those targeted in the violence. These practices included, for instance, praying together and organising shopping for those confined to their houses because of the violence. What these localised practices all point to is that the violence could be prevented if the intended victims were not seen to be isolated and victimisable; rather than being alone and unprotected, the practices illustrated that someone cared.

By way of conclusion

In this brief chapter, we have discussed what animates violent claims to the city as well as the possibilities and challenges of civil society action against violence. Partly based on the chapters that follow in this section, we identified five claims to the city, including claiming livelihood, space, community, rights and the future. Focusing on these claims allowed us to
understand the extent to which violence is productive of social relations. However, recognising that violence also disrupts, we briefly explored how civil society organisations can and do organise against violence. Violence is often difficult to organise around because blame tends to be ascribed internally to the community itself. This difficulty of organising against violence also pervades the three chapters that follow this brief introduction. While they are more concerned with explaining the violence, the accounts are riddled with references to civil society endeavours, like for instance Colman Msoka’s analysis of the rurally-based Sungusungu that never managed to make inroads into the cities; in Reazul Haque’s and Ebney Ayaj Rana’s discussion of the role of families and communities in reducing violence in Dhaka; or in Roy Gigengack’s description of the impotence of organisations in helping the street kids. However, our case from Cape Town – and indeed from multiple endeavours around the world – still illustrates that civil society can play a role and with significant success reduce and prevent violence in ways that states would be hard-pressed to accomplish.

References


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