

URBAN AREAS OUT OF CONTROL
Looking at Buenos Aires & Rio de Janeiro

It is not as some people may believe, that the respect for the law generate any form of order, is just the opposite, order is a consequence of an option from a society that decide to live under the law.

There is no order because of the respect of the law; there is respect of the law because there is order.

Julio A. Cirino

A careful look at Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires or Caracas — just to mention four examples — show us that slowly, almost imperceptibly, ‘society’ in these countries accepts forms of “small anarchies” and tolerances that make coexistence increasingly difficult. The limits between legality and the illegal gradually blur, and exculpatory rhetoric is available for almost all criminal activity, even the most aberrant. This is one direct consequence of populism on everyday political life.

This phenomenon is in full expansion in our hemisphere, and goes hand on hand with a vision on crime that takes responsibility away from the criminals and puts most of the blame on the society, other wise known as the social injustice theory.

Urban Areas out of Control

Defining “Urban areas out of control” does not imply talking about a “formal” and permanent claim of sovereignty over any portion of the city; rather, it is something more factual—it is a space needed by an illegal NGO to conduct ‘business’ without interference from either the state or a rival gang; there is no deliberate intent of confronting the state or dispute its sovereignty but rather this is just a “de facto” situation because the state is unable or unwilling to take responsibility for several reasons, such as lack of political will, corruption, or financial constrains.

All the “areas” have internal boundaries, highly dynamic, that are related not only to the locations of the gangs but to the popular perception that those areas are “off limits” for the police or any other state authority.

But again, these are always “de facto” situations without any recognition from any of the parts involved. Crime and territory are connected in different grades and forms. Every criminal wants to know the area where he operates, and operates in the area familiar to him.

Different kinds of crimes require diverse forms of territorial control. In some cases this is about “territorial control”; in others, it is more passive —more like a friendly environment in which to operate, for instance a store house , a “*desarmadero*” (chop-shop) or a “*cocina*”(kitchen) – of the narcotics; all of these call for different forms of influence or control. But even control is difficult to classify, as it takes many forms.

“Temporary control” is the kind that criminals set up for a bank robbery, or to get into a small shop, or to control the vicinity of a kidnapping action—this type takes minutes only and aims to make the action and escape possible.

“Area control” refers to the classic “turf” known by different names in different societies such as “*fumos*” or “barrios” —referring to the best places to sell drugs.

The existence of either of the above normally implies some degree of political and police corruption, which sociologists refer to as accommodation.

Armed confrontations are very common, particularly when a rival group invades, seeking to expand their influence by disputing the area or expelling it entirely. These also occur when internal disputes take place, for instance when authorities arrest a “*jefe*” (boss) and his lieutenants contest the right of leadership.

Kidnappings are a very profitable business: Kidnapping is becoming almost epidemic in the region, and politically-motivated kidnapping is giving way to a “for profit” mode, even if sophisticated gangs cover themselves with political pretexts. The most expert and sophisticated gangs carry out professionally planned and executed kidnappings in search of large amounts of money. They handle intelligence collection on the prospective targets, and set up the needed logistic and infrastructure.

Kidnappings always imply certain forms of territorial control at the moment of the capture, but also having houses to keep the victim hidden during the negotiating period, which may extend several weeks.

We will report in a separate paper about the Colombian case because is very specific and the victims are always keep in rural areas, using the territorial control the groups enjoy. Recently “express kidnapping” has become very well know (known in Spanish as “*secuestro al voleo*” or kidnapping at random) done by the more inexperienced gangs in search of quick money. They negotiate usually using the victim by mobile phone, from a moving car, and on more than one occasion the ransom money is used to buy their first cargo of cocaine or weapons to get “in business” in a bigger and more serious way.

The improvised, green horns or inexperienced gangs may use old weapons in bad shape, but this is rare overall. Seasoned gangs use weapons that overpower the police forces very often. Assault rifles, high caliber revolvers and automatics pistols, sub-machine guns and flak jackets are the order of the day.

As can be imagined, illegal weapons traffic is a booming industry, going most of the time through Paraguay. Usually, groups legally obtain weapons from Brazil, smuggle them into Paraguay, and then return them as “illegal” weapons to Argentina and Brazil.

Territorial projections of urban narco-terrorism

Favelas in Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo and *villas* in Buenos Aires are cases of contested territories that are becoming permanent—this should worry politicians more than it appears to do. The chances to regain control of these areas are very, very slim. These areas are becoming small cities without formal governments. The socio-economic needs that we all know and enjoy, and the absence of a state that has given up its responsibilities has serious consequences in that those human conglomerates adopt their own organization. Unfortunately, organized crime is a relevant part of the structure— most of the time it is all the structure.

During the last couple of years the growing relevance of cocaine, weapons and synthetic drug trafficking has brought together a sequence of phenomena almost simultaneously.

Money from drugs, in large sums, gives political power to whoever controls it. Even if it is very clear that drug lords don't live in the "villa" or the favela, their ability to buy influence and power is still very visible in those areas.

As strange as it may sound, the drug business brings peculiar forms of order to the neighborhood; after all, narco-traffickers are businessmen like all others-within a very specific context-and can't operate in a chaotic environment.

As the consumption of cocaine (in its various forms) increases, the volume of money involved becomes greater and the logistics heavier as there are more drugs to move, more to cut and pack, more sales points to man and protect, and thus the gang grows larger and more dangerous.

In terms of organization, Brazil and Argentina have specific situations. The *chefe da favela* (chief of the favela) in Brazil begins as something "informal," usually the person with the largest gang. But the situation evolves in such a way that his authority makes him "the person to talk to." Though it goes without saying that their position is usually very unstable, relying solely on the capability to exercise violence, the process of replacing the leader is never a peaceful one. This situation is specific of Brazil; in Argentina, in contrast, even if there are *jefes* (bosses), their authority is less visible, more underground, and territorialization is – at least for now – less important to the overall picture.

The cases of Argentina and Brazil should be studied as models of urban territorialization, instead of the Colombian model. In the first place, neither Argentina nor Brazil are producers of drugs, while Colombia is; secondly, Colombia's problems are closely related to the rural areas where the plant is cultivated, to the smuggling of chemical precursors, the installation and control of the "kitchens," and finally with money laundering operations. However this does not imply that there are no similarities in the rest of all common crime activities between Argentina/Brazil and Colombia.

Brazil on the other hand, just like Argentina, finds its worst crime concentrated in the "urban areas out of control" and the narcotics operations are connected directly with selling their product in large urban areas.

The geography of the *favelas* and the *villas* have many similarities, despite the fact that one is built vertically on the *morros*, or hillsides, while the other expands horizontally. These differences in topography, however, are overcome by the similarities in social, economic, and political issues. In both cases public services are either inadequate or non-existent; using a vehicle inside these areas is close to impossible and public transportation is very limited. The internal geography resembles complete anarchy; narrow alleys, limited visibility, and no light after dark and very limited displacement capability, even for those traveling on foot.

The structure of control of a specific gang thus follows a very limited pattern. The core is usually within an extended family to which a few friends may be added, often on the pretext that they served time.

Other gangs form a structure created solely in jail and thus lacks any family bond. These usually remain together for shorter periods of time and follow fewer rules, as everything depends on the acceptance of the leader and his success or failure in getting money.

A distinct point in the Sao Paulo scenario is that the most violent gang, *Primeiro Comando da Capital*, which attained notoriety in the last few months, was created in the jail system and then

extended its influence outward. The other peculiar thing is that throughout 2006 it has sought out armed confrontation with police forces, or at least it hasn't avoided violent situations. This model is a serious deviation from the norm and may indicate a worsening of the problem.

From the Narco "Soldier: to the Next Door Neighbor

The high value that cocaine has reached both in the internal and the external market (mainly Europe) has created a phenomenon previously unseen but very relevant in countries with high unemployment rates: drug smuggling has become an attractive source of employment. When a gang expands it has a greater need for members, drivers, cutters, packers, lookouts, delivery boys, and of course soldiers to protect the bosses, the territory and the selling point from rival gangs. There are many other functions that are indirectly related with drug smuggling operations but that are also part of the job network.

Those that study the Brazilian scenario (such as Dr. Argemiro Procopio from Brasilia State University) indicate that its very common for mothers to accompany their young children (between 7 or 8 years of age) to be presented to the *chefe da favela* to get their first assignment, usually to work as lookouts. Thus they are incorporated into the local group and find social acceptance in the place where they live.

The use of young children in criminal activities is also very common in Colombia; insurgent groups such as the FARC and the drug trafficking networks draft them at the ages of twelve or thirteen. Many graduate rapidly to become "hit-men" carrying out assassinations with impunity because they cannot be touched by the law and because they are easily conditioned to do the work, and because the social acclimatization allows them to do so.

There is another aspect which must be considered—the social image of the drug dealer. Although he is a rather vague figure, he normally generates negative feelings and is normally accepted, at least implicitly, as a harmful element for the society, and thus receives little to no "social sympathy". This is changing for the worst. The growing consumption of "paco" amongst the lower tiers of society generates a distribution infrastructure in the shanty towns which includes the "next door neighbor", this person that everyone knows and who needs to make a few extra dollars, who ends up selling drugs to his neighbors, particularly to young people. In the very neighborhood there is a tendency to shelter this "known people" and to actively reject any attempt from law enforcement.

This short paper is just an advance of an ongoing research project, that will be finalized during 2008 and that is focused on the evolution of violence in certain urban areas of the hemisphere, very closely related with the "ungoverned spaces" problem that develops mostly in rural or semi-rural regions.

In that regards, ideas, suggestions and comments are very welcome.

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