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Urban Violence Is not (Necessarily) a Way of Life

Towards a Political Economy of Conflict in
Cities

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Abstract

Cities generally ... comprise a motley of peoples and cultures, of highly differentiated modes of life between which there often is only the faintest communication, the greatest indifference, ... occasionally bitter strife, but always the sharpest contrast.

(Wirth 1938: 20)

As the world moves towards its so-called urban ‘tipping point’, urbanization in the global South has increasingly come to be portrayed as the portent of a dystopian future characterized by ever-mounting levels of anarchy and brutality. The association between cities, violence, and disorder is not new, however. In a classic article on.../

Keywords: urbanism, violence, gangs, Chicago School of Sociology, Wirth

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‘Urbanism as a way of life’, Louis Wirth (1938: 23) famously links cities to ‘personal disorganization, mental breakdown, suicide, delinquency, crime, corruption, and disorder’. He does so on the grounds that the urban context constituted a space that naturally generated particular forms of social organization and collective action as a result of three key attributes: population size, density, and heterogeneity. Large numbers lead to a segmentation of human relations, the pre-eminence of secondary over primary social contact, and a utilitarianization of interpersonal relationships. Density produces increased competition, accelerates specialization, and engenders glaring contrasts that accentuate social friction. Heterogeneity induces more ramified and differentiated forms of social stratification, heightened individual mobility, and increased social fluidity. While large numbers, density, and heterogeneity can plausibly be considered universal features of cities, it is much less obvious that they necessarily lead to urban violence. This is a standpoint that is further reinforced by the fact that not all cities around the world – whether rapidly urbanizing or not – are violent, and taking off from Wirth’s characterization of the city, this paper therefore seeks to understand how and why under certain circumstances compact settlements of large numbers of heterogeneous individuals give rise to violence, while in others they don’t, focusing in particular on wider structural factors as seen through the specific lens of urban gang violence.

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Cities generally ... comprise a motley of peoples and cultures, of highly differentiated modes of life between which there often is only the faintest communication, the greatest indifference, ... occasionally bitter strife, but always the sharpest contrast.

(Wirth 1938: 20)

1 Introduction

The world's imminent move towards its urban 'tipping point' is becoming increasingly associated with dystopian visions of a violent future, particularly in the global south (Buvinic and Morrison 2000; Davis 2006). From Mexico to Medellín, Cape Town to Cairo, and Mumbai to Manila, out-of-control urban growth is being repeatedly linked with spiralling levels of crime and delinquency (Brennan-Galvin 2002; UN-HABITAT 2007). In Latin America, for example, recent work at the World Bank has suggested that rapid rates of urbanization are associated with higher levels of homicide (Fajnzylber *et al.* 1998), while Inter-American Development Bank researchers Alejandro Gaviria and Carmen Pagés (2002: 190) find that a household in a city of more than one million inhabitants was 71 per cent more likely to be victimized than a household in a city of between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. At the same time, however, although such studies can, at first glance, seem very persuasive, as Alan Gilbert (1999: 16–17) points out, they often fall into 'the trap of confusing causation with correlation', and there exists equally believable counter-evidence suggesting that there is 'no obvious logical connection between urbanization and crime levels'. It is notable, for example, that many of the largest or fastest urbanizing human settlements in the world today, such as Tokyo in Japan or Chongqing in China, have very low crime rates (see Watts 2006). Indeed, historical research on long-term violent crime trends in Europe implies that there might even be a negative relationship between violence and urbanization, insofar as homicide rates declined markedly with the industrialization-spurred growth of cities from the eighteenth century onwards (Eisner 2003).

Urban contexts are nevertheless persistently linked with violence, to the extent that the association is held to be 'a matter of common sense' (Pinheiro 1993: 3). This paper argues that this state of affairs owes much to the existence of an underlying epistemological vision of cities that sees them as inherently 'unruly, unsettling and disorderly' (Bannister and Fyfe 2001: 807). Such a viewpoint is perhaps most explicit in the work of the famous Chicago School of Sociology, including, in particular, a classic article written by Louis Wirth entitled 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', which argues that cities are large, dense settlements of socially heterogeneous individuals and that, as a result, they promote high levels of violence, insecurity, and disorder, insofar as large numbers lead to impersonal social contact, high density produces increased competition, and heterogeneity induces differentiation and stratification. Wirth's theoretical statement has come 'to occupy by itself most of the central ground in its sort of thinking about urban life' (Hannerz 1980: 65); yet, the fact that not all cities are affected by high levels of violence and disorder – even when equivalent in size, density, and heterogeneity – raises questions concerning its universal applicability. Explicitly taking off from Wirth's characterization of urban life, this paper considers the potential effects of size, density, and heterogeneity in cities, and their possible consequences for violence, in order to re-assess why urban violence might emerge. The first section

focuses on Wirth's conception of urbanism, and discusses his tripartite categorization of city life and its concomitant social consequences. The next two sections focus on gangs – a form of violence considered emblematic of the inherently brutal nature of the urban context by the Chicago School – in order to illustrate how Wirth's framework does not necessarily explain their emergence, and also how it ultimately naturalizes both cities and urban violence, thereby obscuring the critical importance of political economy questions concerning access, control, and the distribution of resources within cities. A final section concludes that the persistent inherent association of cities with violence, in spite of both empirical and theoretical evidence to the contrary, serves to legitimize the pernicious binary logic that generally characterizes contemporary cities.

2 Urban violence as a way of life

Sociology's urban turn towards the end of the nineteenth century can be traced to the classic works of Tönnies (2001 [1887]) and Simmel (1950 [1903]), and their suggestion that the foundations of life in the countryside and in the city are fundamentally different, with the former organized organically on the basis of elementary social ties, while the latter is anonymous, impersonal, and therefore more unpredictable in nature. The consequences of this divergence for urban violence were, however, most systematically explored by the famous Chicago School of Sociology, a unique collective intellectual enterprise that was founded in 1892, and lasted as a distinctive current of thinking for over 50 years. The enduring significance of the Chicago School lies in its groundbreaking preoccupation with developing a unified framework of sociological thought that was rigorous, systematic, and based on sound empirical investigation, and explained how and why urban contexts generated what were perceived as deviant forms of social behaviour. The members of the Chicago School saw cities as critical new actors in world history that were shaping and releasing human nature in new ways with the spread of industrialization and the changing structure of national economies. At the same time, they also perceived them as 'laborator[ies] or clinic[s] in which human nature and social processes may be most conveniently and profitably studied' (Park 1915: 612). Over a period of 30 years, succeeding generations of Chicago researchers produced a remarkable series of empirically-grounded studies on a range of urban phenomena including immigration (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918), homelessness (Anderson 1923), gangs (Thrasher 1927), ghettos (Wirth 1928), slums (Zorbaugh 1929), and taxi dance-halls (Cressey 1932), among others.

Some of these works continue to be landmark reference texts today, but what collectively distinguishes this output is that they all shared a 'human ecology' outlook, seeing the dynamics of human behaviour patterns in cities as inevitably rooted in what they perceived was a natural relationship between a population and the territory it lived in. In particular, Chicago School researchers saw urban life as inherently violent and disorderly because of the underlying nature of the urban environment. The basic axioms underpinning this viewpoint were rigorously synthesized by the Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth in a famous article entitled 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', first published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1938, although reprinted many times since and still an extremely frequently cited article today. Building implicitly on previous Chicago School research output, Wirth (1938: 3) sought to lay out the basic dynamics of what he called 'the urban mode of living', or urbanism. As Hannerz (1980: 72) notes, the emphasis of Wirth's essay can thus be said to have been literally on a particular urban 'way of life' rather than any empirically specific phenomenon. He was explicitly aiming

to make a general theoretical statement, warning that ‘it is necessary to exercise caution in order to avoid identifying urbanism as a way of life with any specific locally or historically conditioned cultural influences which, while they may significantly affect the specific character of the community, are not the essential determinants of its character as a city’ (Wirth 1938: 7). In other words, what Wirth wanted to describe was the way in which urban environments universally determine the actions of individual agents, in a way that very much took its cue from biological models of natural ecosystems.

Wirth’s (1938: 6) starting point was to establish a sociologically significant definition of the city based on those ‘essential characteristics which all cities ... have in common’, but that were ‘molding [of] the character of social life in its specifically urban form’. He proposed a now classic minimal definition of cities that circumscribed them as ‘relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement[s] of socially heterogeneous individuals’ (Wirth 1938: 8). This accordingly established the central problem of urban sociology as uncovering the forms and logic of social action and organization that emerge in relatively permanent, compact settlements of large numbers of heterogeneous individuals. In this regard, Wirth (1938: 12) contended that once a community numbered over a few hundred inhabitants, it became impossible for all its members to know each other personally, and city life consequently tended to be fundamentally ‘impersonal, superficial, transitory’. Cities were thus constituted as spaces of secondary rather than primary contacts, insofar as ‘the bonds of kinship, of neighbourliness, and the sentiments arising out of living together for generations’ characteristic of small-scale community life ‘are likely to be absent or, at best, relatively weak’ (Wirth 1938: 11). This led to individual alienation and the spread of anomie among the inhabitants of cities, with ‘the close living together and working together of individuals who have no sentimental and emotional ties foster[ing] a spirit of competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation’, a state of affairs that Wirth (1938: 15–16) characterized as ‘social disorganization’.¹

Superficiality, anonymity, and impersonality meant that city dwellers developed little in the way of empathy for each other, exacerbating competition and leading to widespread antagonisms that frequently manifested themselves in the form of spatial segregation. Thus, the city became ‘a mosaic of social worlds in which the transition from one to the other is abrupt’, thereby generating further ‘friction and irritation’ (Wirth 1938: 15–16). This reinforced the natural heterogeneity of cities, which Wirth linked to the fact that large numbers inevitably meant that there would be a greater range of potential variation between individuals, which, in turn, led to greater social differentiation. The general effect of this diversity was that ‘social interaction among such a variety of personality types in the urban milieu tends to break down the rigidity of caste lines and to complicate the class structure’ (Wirth 1938: 16). This made social action ‘more complicated, fragile, and volatile’ and led to widespread unpredictability and insecurity (Wirth 1938: 22), further aggravated by the fact that city dwellers tended to relate to each other on the basis of highly segmented roles, insofar as ‘no single group has the undivided allegiance of the individual. ... By virtue of his different interests arising out of different aspects of social life, the individual acquires membership in widely

¹ This particular conception of the nature of urban social relations is, furthermore, grounded in an implicit juxtaposition of violent urban contexts with peacefully bucolic rural life. Such an image of the countryside has, of course, been comprehensively deconstructed by Williams (1973).

divergent groups, each of which functions only with reference to a single segment of his personality' (Wirth 1938: 16).

Wirth (1938: 23) thus concluded that 'personal disorganization, mental breakdown, suicide, delinquency, crime, corruption, and disorder' would inevitably be primary features of city life, as a natural consequence of the environmental properties of urban contexts and the particular social relations they fostered. The fact that such a vision of things continues to be very evidently influential today is not surprising. As Hannerz (1980: 65) points out, Wirth's framework is a logical, elegant, and intuitively attractive statement that makes eminent common sense, insofar as anybody who has lived in a city will likely be able to relate to it. Which urbanite has never experienced frustration and irritation at overcrowded and congested transport or noisy, inconsiderate neighbours, for example? At the same time, however, the empirical evidence also suggests that the way of life that emerges from large numbers, density, and heterogeneity is not automatically violent. For example, Dakar, Hanoi, Medellin, and Stockholm all have approximately 2.5 million inhabitants, population densities of around 4,000 inhabitants per square kilometre, and between 10–20 per cent of non-locally born population; yet, they also have widely differing homicide rates, ranging from 3 per 100,000 (Stockholm) to 50 per 100,000 (Medellin).² This suggests a range of possibilities. It might be that size, density, and heterogeneity can have potentially variable outcomes on urban life. It might be that the urban social relations they foster can have variable consequences. Or else, it could even be that something other than size, density, and heterogeneity on the one hand, or the way of life that they generate on the other, gives rise to urban violence.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore all these different options systematically. What I want to do instead is to consider the relationship between urban life and violence by reversing the equation and concentrating on violence instead of cities. Obviously, there exist many different types of violence associable with urban contexts. Hobsbawm (1973: 220–33), for example, wrote a famous essay on the relationship between cities and food riots, while Traugott (1995) has extensively explored the link between cities and revolution. One form of violence that has been paradigmatically associated with urban contexts, though, including – rather appropriately – perhaps most emblematically by the Chicago School of Sociology, are gangs. As Herbert Covey (2003: 12) observes in the introduction to his comprehensive global survey, gangs exist throughout the world and, while they can be highly variable from country to country, they have two seemingly universal features: first, their association with violence, and second, the fact that 'urban areas appear to be generally more conducive environments for the rise and persistence of street gangs, regardless of country'. Seen from this perspective, the gang phenomenon arguably constitutes an ideal lens through which to approach the relationship between violence and urban contexts, and the next section thus draws on a range of studies in order to explore this, starting with Thrasher's classic research on gangs in 1920s Chicago.

² Data from <http://www.citypopulation.de/cities.html> and <http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/> (accessed 24 September 2007).

3 Gangs and the city

In his pioneering study of the phenomenon, Thrasher (1927: 487) suggests that ‘the gang and its problems constitute ... one of many symptoms of the more or less general disorganization incident to ... the rapid growth of cities and all the internal process of kaleidoscopic movement and rearrangement which this growth has entailed’. Such a vision is clearly reminiscent of Wirth’s. Although the two do not use the same vocabulary, they belong to the same intellectual tradition when it comes to thinking about cities, and Wirth would definitely have been aware of Thrasher’s study, even if he did not explicitly reference it in ‘Urbanism as a Way of Life’.³ Thrasher (1927: 26, 37–8), for example, argues that ‘the beginnings of the gang can best be studied in the slums of the city where an inordinately large number of children are crowded into a limited area. ... Such a crowded environment is full of opportunities for conflict’, which ‘coupled with deterioration in housing, sanitation, and other conditions of life in the slum, give the impression of general disorganization and decay’. These conditions, he contended, led to the emergence of ‘an inevitable repertoire of predatory activities and a universe of discourse reflecting the disorganized social environment’, most obviously manifest in the existence of gangs. This trend was further enhanced by the fact that gang members were generally socially isolated, as well as the ethnic heterogeneity of the slums, which Thrasher (1927: 198) saw as inevitably leading to violent ‘antagonisms’. Certainly, of the 880 gangs for which he had such data, almost 60 per cent were dominated by a single ethnic group, with Polish, Italian, and Irish being the most common nationalities.

The parallels with Wirth are obvious, but Thrasher’s research is by no means the only study of gangs providing empirical evidence of the negative consequences of urban phenomena such as overcrowding, alienation, competition, anonymity, and disorder. Certainly, the second-generation Chicago School gang researchers such as Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942), or William Foote Whyte (1943), for example, also identified these as key factors in their studies, and the same is true of many gang researchers who are not associated with the Chicago School. Fischer (1975: 1328), for instance, points out that there needs to be a ‘critical mass’ of youth within any given population for a viable delinquent gang culture to emerge, and that this can only come about through population concentration. Cohen (1955), on the other hand, contends that gangs are sub-cultural institutional arrangements that reflect the cultural isolation and alienation of lower class youth from mainstream society, something that was echoed in a more psychological vein by Yablonsky (1963). Sánchez Jankowski (1991), for his part, depicts gangs as institutional vehicles for economic enterprise that result from the intense competition over scarce resources in low-income urban areas (see also Padilla 1992).⁴ Finally, my own work on gangs in urban Nicaragua has highlighted the direct and indirect roles that disorder and consequent ontological insecurity can play in explaining the emergence of gangs as forms of ‘social sovereignty’ (Rodgers 2006).

³ Both were contemporaries in the University of Chicago sociology PhD programme in the mid-1920s, and shared a supervisor in Robert Park, one of the School’s founders.

⁴ This economic perspective can, of course, be linked to Becker’s (1968) famous contention that the anonymous nature of social relations in cities affects criminals’ rational cost–benefit calculations of whether or not to commit a crime, generally inducing greater amounts of delinquency.

At the same time, however, much of this gang research arguably simultaneously undermines Chicago School thinking about the relationship between the urban mode of living and violence. The ethnic nature of the gangs that Thrasher highlights in his study, for example, clearly contradicts Wirth's notion that violence emerges as a result of the superficiality and anonymity of urban social relations, insofar as it suggests that gangs can be based on forms of social connection that Wirth associates more with peaceful, small-scale community life than violent urban contexts. Thrasher (1927: 30) attempts to explain this paradox by suggesting that the actions of social agents cannot go beyond their individual experiences, and that gangs therefore have their 'beginning[s] in acquaintanceship and intimate relations which have already developed on the basis of some common interest'. In addition to ethnicity, he thus also lists kinship and feelings of local neighbourhood belonging as basic vectors for gang formation, all of which have also been highlighted by other gang researchers, including Suttles (1968) or Venkatesh (2000), for instance. While this makes eminent sense, the fact that a range of social ties play an important role in gang formation calls Wirth's contention that urban life is superficial and impersonal into question.

In many ways this is not surprising, however. Anthropologists have provided us with a plethora of studies of neighbourhoods, *barrios*, or *quartiers* in cities around the world that describe how urbanites effectively reproduce small-scale community forms of living within urban contexts by interacting repeatedly with relatively small numbers of individuals, moreover within a normally localized territory.⁵ As Lewis (1965: 497) puts it, 'social life is not a mass phenomenon' but 'occurs for the most part in small groups', and therefore 'any generalizations about the nature of social life in the city must be based on careful studies of these smaller universes rather than on a priori statements about the city as a whole'. Drawing on Lewis, Hannerz (1980: 71) suggests that Wirth's thinking was particularly clouded by a flawed understanding of the way social relations worked, and that he seems to believe that these entailed 'some fixed quantity of social involvements, spread thickly over few relationships in folk society, thinly over many in the city, and rather evenly over all relationships in both cases'. This is obviously not how social life is organized, as the relationships of individual agents inevitably vary in both quantity and quality, over space and time. In other words, according to Hannerz, Wirth's framework suffers from 'an assumption of sameness' despite its invocation of heterogeneity, which, indeed, is something that is also implicitly highlighted by the diversity of gangs around the world.

Similarly, the central Wirthian idea that heterogeneity naturally leads to social friction is by no means proven, particularly with regard to the ethnic diversity that Thrasher explicitly links to gang formation, for example. Paul Collier (2001) shows that ethnic fractionalization can be positively correlated with peaceful economic development (under conditions of democracy), for instance, while even Wirth (1938: 16) himself conceded that urban ethnic diversity might be a reason for the 'sophistication and cosmopolitanism' of the urbanite, insofar as exposure to different cultures and nationalities could breed tolerance and acceptance. Indeed, Jacobs (1961: 60) actually links heterogeneity to security in urban contexts, arguing that diversity is 'a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the street' because it fosters constant movement and intermingling in the city that prevents violent behaviour patterns. At the same time,

⁵ Hence Herbert Gans' (1962) famous notion of 'urban villagers'.

though, it should be noted that the fact that over 40 per cent of the gangs that Thrasher (1927: 191) studied were of ‘mixed nationalities’ clearly suggests that cosmopolitanism does not necessarily have to be non-violent. What this state of affairs arguably does highlight, however, is that ethnic difference is not necessarily automatically a vector for gang-based antagonism, and the same is likely to be true of other culturally constructed differences within urban society, which sub-cultural theorists such as Cohen (1955) suggest are key to understanding gang formation. As Covey *et al.* (1992) observe, a quasi-universal feature of gangs all over the world is that their members inevitably tend to end up ‘maturing out’, with the majority reintegrating mainstream society, which suggests that gang members are not culturally alienated as such.

4 The naturalization of urban violence

What this contradictory empirical evidence concerning gangs and urban contexts ultimately indicates is that, while factors such as population density, impersonal social relations, heterogeneity, competition, and disorder are clearly often important to take into account in explaining the emergence of the gang phenomenon in cities around the world, they are not *necessarily* critical. The same can logically also be said of urban violence more generally, which is obviously problematic for the general theoretical aspirations of Wirth’s framework, as it contradicts his central premise that the nature of the urban ecology intrinsically leads to violent outcomes. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Thrasher tried to explain the variable distribution of gang violence in Chicago by drawing on Burgess’ (1925) model of differentiated urban development, contending that, because the morphologies of urban contexts are variable, the social consequences that they engender will be similarly diverse. He contrasts newly founded Chicago slums and ‘the more settled, more stable, and better organized portions of the city’ (Thrasher 1927: 22), arguing that their different characteristics inevitably gave rise to different types of social relations, which, in turn, resulted in differentiated patterns of violence through the city, most notable in the fact that richer neighbourhoods did not have gangs. Although such a vision of the urban context seems more nuanced than Wirth’s, it is arguably nevertheless ultimately underpinned by a very similar epistemology that still seeks to consider urban processes in naturalized terms, and it is this that is at the heart of the problem with the Wirthian approach, however.

Thrasher (1927: 22–3) justifies focusing on slums – which he likens to frontier zones – by arguing that they constitute ‘geographically ... interstitial area[s] in the city’, and that just as ‘in nature foreign matter tends to collect and cake in every crack, crevice, and cranny’, so ‘*life*, rough and untamed’ materializes in the interstitial areas that constitute ‘fissures and breaks in the structure of social organization’. Gangs, from this perspective, are ‘rich in elemental social processes significant to the student of society and human nature’ (Thrasher 1927: 3), because they effectively represent an unmediated form of life, a primordial reflection of the violence that inherently bubbles under the surface of things and inevitably erupts at points where the social fabric is weak. Such a perception of violence manifesting itself when social order breaks down clearly constitutes the phenomenon as something that exists outside of the social order. Although this kind of thinking is part of a long tradition, which perhaps finds its most obvious expression in Hobbes’ (1996 [1651]) classic argument that violence is an incipient facet of being human in a state of nature that is held in check by the establishment of an encompassing social order, it is a viewpoint that also naturalizes

violence by projecting it as an autonomously pre-existing phenomenon that comes to the fore organically and automatically as a result of the existence or absence of certain objective conditions. For Hobbes, this was the absence of the Leviathan, but in relation to Wirth's (and Thrasher's) framework, it was the existence of cities, or, at least, of the particular social relations that they associated with the spatial characteristics of cities.

To this extent, it can be argued that Chicago School researchers did not see urban space as violent per se but, rather, as a particular form of territorialization with intrinsic characteristics that naturally unleashed the violence inherent to being human. As Harvey (1973) points out in his classic work on *Social Justice and the City*, however, the notion of space is not only concerned with the territorial environment; it is also fundamentally about social relations. Once again, the gang literature provides us with an illuminating window onto this, including for example Philippe Bourgois' (1995) ethnographic study of drug-dealing gangs in East Harlem, New York. This presents a nuanced and multifaceted analysis of the gang phenomenon that balances economic motivations and individual choices with structural constraints, showing how the Puerto Rican gangs that he studied could be understood in terms of a mixture of local resource distribution, identity considerations, and implicit political resistance. Bourgois describes in great detail how gang violence was an instrumental means to protect markets, enforce contracts, and ensure that the local drug economy ran smoothly in order to provide for neighbourhood inhabitants in a context of limited resources, and how it built on local cultural norms and networks. But he also links the emergence of gangs to the way in which the wider New York urban labour market effectively condemned the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods such as the one he studied to dead-end jobs, which thus made joining drug-dealing gangs a logical aspiration, particularly for youth rejecting the low-grade options otherwise on offer to them. In doing so, Bourgois highlights how gangs in East Harlem emerged not only as instrumental adaptations to a context of limited resources, but also very much as responses to a broader context of limited access to resources within an urban system characterized by extreme socioeconomic marginalization.

Bourgois thereby suggests that gangs are not a natural ecological feature of a city's spatial form, but rather epiphenomena of socio-political circumstances. As such, he is drawing on a very different epistemological tradition to the Chicago School sociologists, and assuming that questions pertaining to the distribution, allocation, and use of resources are the fundamental organizing vectors of society, with violence not a natural phenomenon unleashed by social breakdown but a means through which control over resources, or access to them, is achieved instrumentally. The best-known proponent of such a view is undoubtedly Karl Marx, although numerous other scholars of different political persuasions have argued the same point, including Robert Bates (2001: 50), for example, who explicitly contends that 'coercion and force are as much a part of everyday life as are markets and economic exchange'. Drawing on the historical record, Bates goes on to make the critical point that it is the way in which conflict is structured and organized within society that determines the presence or absence of violence. Widespread violence signals a contested political settlement, while peace or circumscribed violence means that conflict is being successfully managed, or, at the very least, channelled. When viewed from this kind of political economy perspective, the nature and dynamics of urban violence become very different to those imagined by Chicago School sociologists, and have to be related to issues of power and regulation within cities rather than any naturally occurring processes resulting from a putative urban ecology.

Indeed, this is something that Bourgois (1995: 19–47) underlines starkly when he discusses the situation of East Harlem as representing a form of ‘urban apartheid’, emphasizing the active and purposeful process of segregation that occurs between the inner city and the rest of New York in the form of particular patterns of police patrolling and the targeting of specific racial profiles, oppressive architecture, technologies of surveillance, deficient social service provision, and cultural stigmatization. At the same time, however, he also comments how, if inner city neighbourhoods such as East Harlem represent ‘the United States’ greatest domestic failing, hanging like a Damocles sword over the larger society’, ‘ironically, the only force preventing this suspended sword from falling is that drug dealers, addicts, and street criminals internalize their rage and desperation’, and ‘direct their brutality against themselves and their immediate community rather than against their structural oppressors’. The reasons for this are a complex ‘mesh of political-economic structural forces, historical legacies, cultural imperatives, and individual actions’ (Bourgois 1995: 318) but, in the final analysis, reflect the fact that gangs are desperate forms of social mobilization, whether viewed from a micro or a macro perspective. Locally, they only benefit a minority within the ghetto, while at the macro level they simply do not have the strength to challenge the city-wide system of oppression, which is backed by an extensive apparatus of power and control. Seen from this perspective, it can be argued that it is this latter form of structural subjugation that is ultimately the most devastating type of urban violence that can afflict cities.

5 Conclusion

This paper has argued that approaches that inherently link violence to urban contexts solely on the basis of the territorial morphology of cities, such as Wirth’s (1938) famous ‘Urbanism as a Way of Life’ framework, are critically flawed. Urban violence is clearly not an intrinsic feature of cities, as the literature on gang violence, considered a paradigmatic form of urban violence by the Chicago School of Sociology of which Wirth was a member, shows well. Although much of the gang literature provides empirical support for Wirth’s approach, demonstrating how certain elements of his framework can clearly contribute to the emergence of gangs and their violence, the same literature also highlights the fact that they do not *necessarily* do so and, moreover, that the basis upon which gangs emerge actually often contradicts the dynamics that Wirth imputes to the emergence of urban violence. To this extent, the gang literature can thus be said to highlight the fact that Wirth’s framework problematically naturalizes both cities and urban violence. Furthermore, research on gangs also shows how, by treating urban contexts as territorial spaces that inevitably and organically give rise to violence, a Wirthian approach obscures the way that specific human practices create and make use of space in particular ways, especially with regard to accessing, controlling, and distributing resources between different groups within cities. Bourgois’ (1995) study of gangs in East Harlem, for example, shows clearly how these emerge less as natural ecological features of urban space and more as epiphenomena of the iniquitous political economy of US cities.

Despite the empirical and theoretical evidence in favour of approaches that take questions of political economy into account (see also Walton 1993), the vision that violence is an inherent feature of urban contexts nevertheless continues to be extremely persistent. One possible reason for this is that a framework projecting violence as a

naturalized feature of cities effectively obscures and shifts the blame away from the pernicious socio-political urban regimes that studies such as Bourgois' show are often at the root of violence in cities. Drawing on St Augustine's distinction between the Heavenly and the Earthly City, whereby the former was the site of all that was 'holy and spiritual', while the latter included all that was 'foul and wicked', Bülent Diken (2005: 319, 311) has shown how ghettos, slums, and shanty-towns condense into a Lacanian 'fantasy space' of what the rest of the city is not, 'a kind of negative photographic image, which operates through the logic of oppositional differences between normality and perversion, law and despotism, mind and body, reason and desire'. This creates an illusion that outside the ghetto, the slum, or the shanty-town, there exists a 'non-antagonistic, not chaotic city in harmony', and therefore implicitly provides a justification for processes of exclusion, segregation, and marginalization that aim to keep the intrinsic violence of these 'wild zones' at bay. To this extent, although cities are clearly not necessarily inherently violent, it can certainly be contended that they are likely to be almost 'always ... antagonistic' (Diken 2005: 314).

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