


Book Review: Violence at the Urban Margins by Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes

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Auyero, Javier, Philippe Bourgois, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, eds. *Violence at the Urban Margins*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xii +340 pages. Paperback, \$24.95.

Currently, as many times before, the superficial euphoria of a United States presidential election dominates the media's attention. Meanwhile, in the shadows of cities—the urban margins—the reality of everyday life continues to affect hundreds of thousands of people. Violence in the United States has gained greater attention of late, although mainly because of a number of fatal casualties directed at the police. However, coverage of the victims of violence in areas considered part of the fringe rarely receives attention, except for when a bizarre event begs for attention. Tragically, debates about public safety are dominated by persons from the middle and upper classes, not those from the lower class—the very people that suffer the most from violence.

Violence at the Urban Margins, edited by sociologist Javier Auyero and anthropologists Philippe Bourgois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, is a multidisciplinary book compiling the work of sixteen scholars from North America, Latin America, and Europe. The publication, resulting from a short workshop held at the University of Texas in 2013, delves into the role of violence in the lives of the urban poor in South, Central and North America. *Violence at the Urban Margins*' cutting edge ethnographic research is the single most valuable aspect of this book. The researchers lived and interacted with the people most affected by daily conditions of abject violence to gain from them a 'living' perspective. Standard theoretical models gained much strength from this field application.

Another valuable aspect of the book is its comparative geographic analysis. In the past, the United States media has overwhelmed the rest of the world with its journalistic coverage. As a result, it is not unusual for people to think of the United States as a violent nation. However, as demonstrated by the book's coverage of several, marginal, urban areas in Central and South America, it is apparent that violence is a shared phenomenon. With respect to these different geographic areas, the book's discussions are not limited to issues related solely to interpersonal violence. The role the state plays with respect to the violent reality within society is also examined, particularly as it applies to Latin America.

What is interesting is that the myth of violence—that violence at the urban margins is due to some cultural or racial defect—has been dispelled by the personalized fieldwork performed by the researchers. Whether they looked at the gangs of El Salvador or Brazil, the inner city violence in the United States, or the drug industry in all three geographic areas, the authors concurred that poverty is the root cause of perpetuating the violence.

Violence at the Urban Margins is divided into four parts, and each part engages themes that have not been dealt with in the current literature. The first part tackles the difficult task of finding out how those who commit violence feel about their actions. Not surprisingly, gender plays an important role in defining how violence takes place and in which form. Part two

analyzes the defined role of men and their masculinity in relation to the rigid social structure found within gangs, resulting in a greater understanding of the secretive gang society and the purpose of women. Part three examines the coping mechanisms people use to deal with the violence that surrounds them. The various strategies are explained so that the reader can capture the depths that people must go to in order to survive. In part four, the authors reflect on the trials and tribulations of researching topics related to violence in situ. These chapters provide invaluable insights to anyone contemplating work in the field.

This book is strongly recommended as a resource for professionals and advanced students of anthropology, sociology, and urban studies. It is an important contribution to the literature because it illuminates evidence that is absent from the existing research. Also, sections found at the end of each chapter which list the cross-disciplinary, cited works are very helpful for further exploration. Although more charts and maps, as well as more detailed explanations of the photographs, would have been welcomed, the book is an invaluable resource. *Violence at the Urban Margins* is a scholarly work, but it also humanizes the people that survive day by day in a horrendous, violent landscape and it advances the notion that they, too, are victims. How one ultimately exits from the cycle of violence is not fully understood; however, this book gets closer to finding a potential solution.

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