Media representations powerfully mold popular consciousness, thereby justifying policies and practices that actively stigmatize and reduce opportunities for certain populations. In the United States, public figures and powerful media outlets frequently circulate images and narratives that associate the governments and peoples of Latin America with political corruption, social instability, crime, and violence. Stories of lavishly corrupt (and/or communist) Latin American governments, job-stealing “illegal immigrants,” dangerously fertile peasants, and perversely violent drug cartels have strained relationships between the United States and Latin America for some time now. Donald Trump is but the most recent and most garish example of this fear-mongering trend.

The panel discussion “Theory in Action: Violence at the Margins” was a refreshing challenge to these stereotypical, discriminatory forms of analyzing, evaluating, and representing the violence of everyday life in Latin America and among the Latin American diaspora. Rooting their arguments in decades of ethnographic work studying violence in times of war, revolution, and peace, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Philippe Bourgois, and Javier Auyero discussed topics from their new book, Violence at the Urban Margins. The panelists reviewed their contributions to the study of violence in Latin America and beyond and invited audience members to think critically about the forms of violence that exist in many parts of Latin America today.
Javier Auyero’s presentation focused on the experience of violence among families living in the economically disenfranchised Arquitecto Tucci neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Using children’s drawings and narratives derived from hours of observations and interviews, Auyero showed how everyday realities of violence manifest themselves, shaping how the inhabitants of Arquitecto Tucci perceive their social world. On the one hand, there is a normalization of violence: the children’s drawings and narratives frequently represent violent interactions as a fact of life that is, on some level, accepted or even valued. On the other hand, there is a profound sense of dismay regarding the ubiquity of violence. Auyero shared a photograph of a child at a peaceful protest holding a sign that, translated from Spanish, read: “I am growing up in a neighborhood full of drugs and criminals. What can be done?” Although the child’s message is grim, the fact that the photograph was taken at an organized protest suggests an optimistic spirit of resistance to the destructive force of violence in Arquitecto Tucci.

In pointing out the tensions and contradictions in the experiences of Arquitecto Tucci residents, Auyero encouraged the audience to view violence as a “total social fact,” in the terms of French sociologist Marcel Mauss. Rather than restricting analysis of violence to isolated interpersonal acts, Auyero advocated for a more holistic view that explores the entangled relationships and sequences of interaction giving rise to violence. He also stressed that we must question the ways in which we assign moral value to violence. Although it is common to see violence as destructive and retaliatory, Auyero pointed out that it assumes many more forms that must be explored ethnographically. At the same time, he was careful to emphasize that ethnographers must also notice the countless acts of love and concern existing amidst violence. Rather than reinforcing the aforementioned negative stereotypes of Latin America and Latin American peoples, the task of the ethnographer of violence is to deconstruct and challenge these stereotypes.

Philippe Bourgois highlighted the role that political and economic relationships between the United States and certain Latin American countries have played in producing and maintaining violence. Bourgois looked at the colonial relationship that exists between Puerto Rico and the United States, linking it to his work on violence among Puerto Rican crack dealers in the El Barrio neighborhood.

A marginalized community in the heart of Buenos Aires.
of New York City. He pointed out that the structure of educational and economic opportunity in the U.S. inner city is such that young people cannot help but be seduced by the drug trade. He also stressed that U.S. policies and practices around immigration and drug control have led to increased levels of violence in Latin America. The militarization of the U.S. border and the government-funded “war on drugs” has created a situation in which Latino lives are regularly and prematurely lost. Whether trying to enter the United States in the hope that they will find work, reconnect with family, or escape violent regimes, undocumented Latin American migrants are likely to undergo countless experiences of abuse and, in many cases, suffer violent deaths.

When discussing the flow of drugs, capital, and people between the United States and Latin America, Bourgois raised a number of provocative points. Noting the history of European colonialism and U.S. imperialism in Latin America, Bourgois claimed that the irony of the drug trade is that it seems to be the one force that is reversing the flow of resources from the South to the North. He claimed that the fact of addiction creates an inelastic demand for drugs. In other words, addicts will keep buying drugs even if prices increase. Despite all the effort to stop the flow of drugs, there remains a profitable market of addicts in the United States, and Latin American drug trafficking organizations benefit from this reality.

One audience member questioned this point: Ana Villareal, a UC Berkeley Ph.D. candidate in sociology who also contributed an article on drug violence in Mexico to the book for which the event was held. Villareal noted that, while cartels do profit and thus bring capital to Latin America, this profit must be compared to those being generated by the militarization of the U.S. border and by for-profit prisons, which are disproportionately filled with people of color, many of them Latino.

Bourgois also pointed out that the violence of the drug epidemic is linked in certain ways to pharmaceutical companies. He noted that, in urban areas, the over-prescription of opioids (such as Vicodin and OxyContin) has created a population of addicts and has flooded the illegal drug market with pharmaceutical products. This juxtaposition of the legal and illegal drug economies raises interesting questions about social and legal definitions of “medicine” as opposed to “intoxicant.” Those with the ability to classify their products as legitimate medicines profit freely and openly, while drug peddlers — whose products are identified as intoxicants — are pushed into the underground economy. At the same time, Bourgois’s observations demonstrate the porousness of the divide between the so-called “formal” and “informal” economies. And here, too, the role of for-profit prisons in maintaining this divide must be considered.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes spoke about her decades of work among families living in the impoverished shantytowns of Alto do Cruzeiro in Northeast Brazil. Scheper-Hughes reviewed her controversial thesis that the constant insults and abuses of everyday life in the sugarcane fields, in service to the wealthier classes, and in starving shantytowns produced an indifference to child death among the mothers with whom she worked. She described how the women were perplexed by the sorrow she demonstrated for their sick and starving children, who they described as lacking the kind of fighting spirit necessary to keep on living in the treacherous world of the Alto. The women urged Scheper-Hughes not to feel sorry for their children, who would be transformed into “angel
babies,” rather she should feel sorry for the mothers themselves, who had to go on living in the cruel world.

Throughout her presentation, Scheper-Hughes highlighted the role of the Brazilian state and international interests in producing the violent political and economic contexts in which women were pushed toward indifference and acceptance of child death. She noted the period of military dictatorship and the violent role death squads played during and after. She also explained that the state sought to medicalize the hunger of shantytown dwellers, diagnosing symptoms of starvation as a psychological condition called nervoso and prescribing psychiatric drugs rather than acknowledging the dire need for food. Scheper-Hughes has also written about the role that transnational corporations have played in bringing violence and poor health to shantytowns. She describes how women from the Alto were persuaded, through various forms of discrimination and abuse, to see their own bodies as defective, and how this perception led women to judge their own breast milk as inferior to powdered formula. Viewing their own bodies as diseased and unclean, women preferred to feed their children Néstle’s formula, which they understood to be more sanitary and nourishing, and which made it easier to feed children when mothers were working long hours in the sugarcane fields.

Although the panelists clearly intended to condemn various manifestations of state and corporate violence, they also noted that multiple actors wield violence in various ways, making a blanket condemnation of violence problematic. Juxtaposed with narratives of death squads carrying out violent state projects were stories of family members deploying violence as acts of love and protection. Fearful that their children would end up in jail or dead in the street, some of the parents with whom Auyero spoke used physical punishment in desperate attempts to convince their children to stay out of harm’s way.

This juxtaposition of violent states and violent parents, however, should not be interpreted as an attempt to morally relativize violence. Instead, it is an invitation to think carefully about specific acts of violence and the relationships that exist among them. It isn’t that a desperate mother armed with a hairbrush is, in some sense, morally equivalent to a paid death-squad agent with an assault rifle. Rather, it seems that the violence carried out by parents is often a reaction to the everyday workings of violent state-funded political and economic structures. From the perspective of the panelists, the role of those who study violence is to disentangle the relationships among violent structures, the reactions those structures produce, and the strategies people devise to go on living surrounded by violence.

Regarding the state’s role in issues of structural violence, an audience member raised an important point.
He noted that in the U.S. inner city — where Bourgois has carried out much of his fieldwork — violence also can take the form of the absence of the state. Decades of neoliberal policy have eroded the U.S. social safety net, and the history of racial segregation ensures that wealthier, whiter areas receive a much larger share of public resources than poorer, less-white, inner cities. At the same time, it isn’t as if the state is totally absent from the latter areas; it just prioritizes surveillance and incarceration as opposed to education, welfare, and public works. This point suggests that those who study violence would do well to consider the role of the state in its multiple guises and functions, rather than representing the state as homogeneous in interest or undifferentiated in action.

A common criticism of the ethnography of violence is that it tends to unwittingly justify discriminatory policies by trafficking in images and narratives of violence that can be easily sensationalized and used against poor and marginalized people. However, the panelists resist the idea that the ethnographic study of violence among the poor necessarily lapses into a form of voyeurism, or a “pornography of violence” as Bourgois has labeled it. To accept this interpretation is, in a sense, to accept the moral binaries and forms of racism that pervade media discussions of violence. Given that the panelists drew so much attention to the violent workings of state and corporate structures, the overall effect of the event was not to exoticize Latin American violence, but to explore how institutionalized racism and inequality shape the perceptions and practices of us all.

On Friday, October 23, 2015, co-editors Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes discussed their new book, *Violence at the Urban Margins*, at an event moderated by James Quesada and jointly sponsored by the Berkeley Center for Social Medicine, the UC Berkeley-UCSF Critical Social Medicine Working Group, the Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice, and CLAS.

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