

Formations of Violence in Post-Dictatorial Contexts: Logics of Confrontation between the Police and the Young Urban Poor in Contemporary Argentina

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Formations of Violence in Post-Dictatorial Contexts: Logics of Confrontation between the Police and the Young Urban Poor in Contemporary Argentina

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The increase in juvenile violence in Argentina since the 1990s results from a combination of economic and socio-structural change and the reinstatement of repressive traditions that became particularly engrained in the armed and security forces during the 1976–1983 dictatorship. Growing unemployment and poverty led to the emergence of loose webs of juvenile delinquency, while increasing public concern about violent crime led to a revival of harsh “iron fist” policing measures by security forces that are often themselves involved in crime in connivance with local politicians. Groups of young urban poor (calling themselves *Pibes Chorros* or Crooked Kids) and the security forces regard one another with mutual hostility, and police/civilian casualties increased over the period. The music of the Crooked Kids, Cumbia Villera, expresses their life experience. From a comparative perspective, the absence of institutionalized gangs sets Argentina apart from other countries in Latin and North America.

The growth of crime rates and the increase in lethal police/civilian encounters during the 1990s in Argentina cannot be understood without considering two specific underlying processes. On the one hand, the transformations of the social structure (growing unemployment and poverty) that started under the military dictatorship (1976–1983), but had its most profound effects in the 1990s. On the other hand, the repressive traditions that accrued throughout the institutional histories of the local security forces. Although these traditions had been part of the institutional culture of these organizations since their beginnings, they were consolidated during the 1976–1983 military dictatorship and re-invigorated in the 1990s because of the increasing corruption of the political system and the *mano dura* or “iron fist” security policies applied in that decade.

In line with this standpoint we propose, *firstly*, that the growth of delinquency rates was mainly associated with prolonged and very profound changes in the social struc-

ture. Growing unemployment and poverty during the 1980s and into the 1990s brought forth a growing mass of marginalized youth increasingly alienated from basic social institutions such as the labour market, stable nuclear families or the educational system. These adolescents, socialized mainly in peer groups, progressively developed a confrontational identity where breaking the law and challenging conventional social institutions became core elements of identification. However, in contrast with what happened in other parts of Latin America these groups did not develop into stable or institutionalized gangs, but remained as loose webs of juvenile delinquency with no stable or extended organizational structures. In this sense, Argentina shows important differences to other countries in the region. Even if, as we will show later on, it shares some of the characteristics of other Latin American countries, the presence and incidence of juvenile criminal gangs seem to be smaller than in other regions of the sub-continent such as Central America or Brazil.¹

¹ Even if crime rates for all types of crime grew significantly in Argentina through the 1980s and 1990s they did not reach the levels of the more violent countries in the region. According to the *World Bank Homicide Data Set 1980–2008*, while Argentina

showed rates between 6.74 and 9.39 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants per year during the 1990s, Brazil had rates between 25.30 and 29.25 and Mexico between 25.27 and 19.47 (Colombia 57.00–68.90; Ecuador 10.75–25.90; El Salvador 40.95–34.79; Gu-

atemala 35.00–25.20). Not all these homicides were committed by juveniles, but in the countries with higher murder rates there is a strong presence of “institutionalized juvenile gangs” (for a more precise definition see below).

Secondly, the growth in crime rates increasingly favoured a social atmosphere that permitted the reinstatement of traditions that had become ingrained in the repressive organs of the state, the military and the police, throughout their history, but especially during the 1976–1983 dictatorship. The appearance of groups of young urban poor calling themselves *Pibes Chorros* (Crooked Kids) and assuming the habitual practices of marginalized youth – addiction to drugs, disorganized but violent crime and a demeanour of confrontation with conventional society (a “style” that involved specific tattoos, clothes and gestures) – increased the demands for citizen security through repressive “iron fist” policies which favoured the use of force and tough measures to deter crime.

In this context the traditional discourse of the armed and security forces that divided the population into the morally upright defenders of the legal order and the “enemies of Argentine society” found new fertile soil. Where communists, left wing Peronists and union leaders had traditionally been defined as “public enemies” by the security and armed forces, during the 1990s the Crooked Kids took their place as a new social menace. Thus the demands for iron fist policies and the constitution of new forms of alterity, gave the security forces a context in which to re-deploy their repressive methods.

However, the ambivalent traditions of the Argentine armed and security forces involved not only a supposedly strict defence of the legal order but also the violation of civil rights and even of criminal law. Historically, the police in connivance with the political administrations had participated in the illegal regulation of crime. But although this “administration” of illegal activities such as prostitution, informal commerce or gambling had always been mechanisms through which the police and political administrators obtained extra funds to finance their organiz-

ations and increase their personal earnings, during the 1990s this type of “illegal business” was extended to other activities with a greater impact on society at large, like the illegal arms market, drug trade or “road pirates”.²

Therefore, the increase in crime rates and especially the proliferation of certain types of violent crime were not only due to the growing marginalization of deprived youth, but also to the increasing participation of members of the police forces and the political system in the organization of criminal activities.³ Often the collusion between the police and elements of the political system involved the exploitation of adolescents in conflict with the law who were used as cheap labour (for example as drug pushers or car thieves) for a small part of the benefits. Hence, the confrontation between the forces of order and these groups of adolescents did not only grow out of the defence of the law undertaken by legal institutions. Confrontations also arose because adolescents often resented and resisted being used by the police and politicians in their corrupt schemes. In our view both the perception of the police as a quintessential enemy (that the Crooked Kids express in their style and in their music) and the increase in police/civilian casualties that took place in the 1990s resulted largely from this state of affairs.

This process seems to have peaked during the 1990s. Prior to that decade crime rates, although slightly rising, had not been a major issue in Argentine society, while police/civilian casualties actually experienced a significant decrease during the second half of the 1980s. Similarly, after the initial years of the twenty-first century property crime rates and police/civilian casualties also experienced a substantial decrease. Hence, we may state that a particular “formation of violence” (Feldman 1991) emerged in Argentina during the 1990s, but waned progressively during the initial years of the twenty-first century as institutional and social conditions improved.

2 “Road pirates” is the informal name given to those who steal trucks with consumer durables to sell them on the black market.

3 Although there are many possible definitions of violence, in this text we use its narrower sense, as the “use of physical force” to eliminate, subdue or intimidate others (Riches 1986). In this case lethal

confrontations between the security forces and civilians (mainly poor adolescents from the city suburbs in conflict with the law) are the most prominent, although not the exclusive, manifestation of the growth of violence during the 1990s in Argentina. Additionally, although not all forms of crime involve the use of physical force, the type of crimes com-

mitted by marginalized youngsters frequently involves this type of violence. Hence, although delinquency is not always violent it does constitute a context where violence frequently emerges. Therefore the growth in crime rates may be considered a metonymic expression for the growth of violence.

According to Feldman, formations of violence develop between actors that represent the official social order and the law – the forces of order and the state– and other actors that explicitly or implicitly question that order. In these contexts actors reciprocally define each other as irreconcilable enemies. Not only does each perceive the other as an occasional menace to its own security; in this dynamic the “other” constitutes a threat to the complete moral order and lifestyle of its opponent and thus, in this logic, “deserves” to be violently eradicated. Since these reciprocal definitions between social actors mutate over time, *formations of violence represent “moments” in a historical process* where systems of social relationships and patterns of social interaction are defined and redefined. Hence formations of violence may appear and dissolve again in temporal patterns of confrontation, as seems to have happened in Argentina in the 1990s.

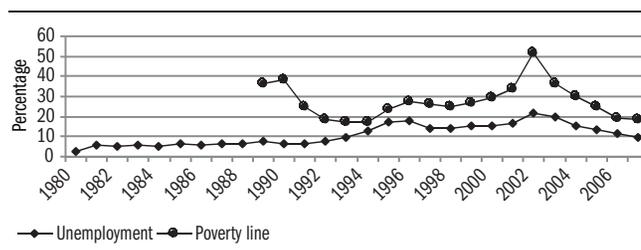
In order to expose the processes that underlie the formation of violence that arose during the 1990s in Argentina we will proceed, firstly, by examining the structural transformations that produced new forms of poverty and marginalization and created the conditions for the emergence of groups of young urban poor in conflict with the law. Secondly, we will show the processes that constituted the institutional traditions and cultures of repression in the local armed and security forces and the conditions of their re-emergence in the 1990s which led to a growing rate of police/civilian casualties. Thirdly, we will describe the identity that “defines” the Crooked Kids and show how it confronts the legal order, particularly as expressed by politicians and the police. Finally, we will show how these elements combined in a particular formation of violence and provide hypotheses to explain the differences between Argentina and other Latin American countries.

1. Central Aspects of the Structural Crisis

The structural transformations Argentina has experienced since the mid-1970s originated in an increase in unemployment and poverty. Since the mid-1970s a combination of low levels of productivity in the industrial sector and the economic “open market” policies applied by the 1976–1983

dictatorship and through the 1980s meant that Argentina was unable to generate sufficient jobs to include the new generations in the labour market. Unemployment consequently grew through the 1980s, especially among less qualified young people looking for their first jobs. These negative tendencies were aggravated under President Carlos Menem (1989–1995 and 1995–1999) when the open market policies were combined with the privatization of several public utilities (electricity, fuel, telephone services, etc.), which led to massive redundancies and increasing levels of unemployment. Labour rights were also reduced, making employment more unstable, with more members of the household (especially women and children) in the less well-off sectors searching for new jobs to guarantee a stable family income. This increased the pressure in the labour market that led to a growing unsatisfied demand for new jobs (Guadagni et al. 2002 and Becaria 2002 for a thorough account of the process).

Figure 1: Unemployment and Poverty in Argentina



Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (INDEC), <http://www.indec.gov.ar/>.⁴

Figure 1 shows the persistent growth of unemployment through the 1980s and 1990s. Regrettably there are no official estimates of the poverty line index before 1988. Private estimates (Ferrerres 2005: 450–61) show that while salaries fell 25 percent in the decade between 1980 and 1990, average prices of consumer goods increased by 724 percent a year (the average rate falls to 285 percent a year if we exclude the hyperinflation years of 1989 and 1990). Given that prices rose while salaries fell during that decade, we can infer that poverty grew consistently through the 1980s as well. At the beginning of the 1990s poverty rates decreased for a short period of time due to a recovery of the value of incomes immediately after the 1989–1990 hyper-

4 The poverty line has only been measured since 1988. As of 2007 INDEC changed its measurement

methods, so the data is not comparable with previous years.

inflation.⁵ But this was followed by a persistent growth of poverty until the initial years of the twenty-first century. As of 2003 the negative economic tendencies reversed in a more favorable international context that resulted from higher prices for traditional Argentine exports (essentially agricultural commodities) and expanded social welfare policies of the Peronist governments, and the levels of poverty and unemployment fell drastically.

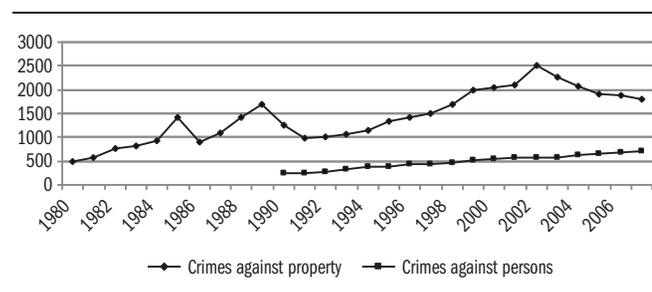
Although unemployment grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s its more notable impact occurred during the latter decade. Since initially unemployment rates were rather low, their impact among the population was not immediately felt. But during the 1990s the rate was consistently in two digits, and the level and persistence of unemployment during that decade turned it into one of the central worries of the population. From 1997 “insecurity” also rose from sixth to second place, to become one of the citizens’ principal preoccupations (Smulovitz 2003: 131).

The persistence of unemployment through the 1980s and 1990s not only implied an increase in poverty rates but also a change in the quality or type of poverty. Until the mid-1970s the predominant form of poverty in Argentina was of a “transitional” sort: poor people experienced upward social mobility, and were progressively overcoming material deprivation. Since the mid-1970s poverty has become mainly “structural” (poor people having no expectations of upward mobility) or resulted from pauperization (people from the middle classes falling into poverty). In this context material deprivation and social marginalization turned into permanent instead of transitional states, making them also an “inter-generational” phenomenon (Beccaria and Vinocour 1991).

Throughout this period crime rates grew steadily in line with poverty and unemployment. Between 1980 and 2002

there was a persistent increase in the rates of crime against property, which reversed thereafter following the unemployment curve. Although information for crimes against persons is only available after 1990, we find a growing tendency for the whole period, similar to crimes against property and the unemployment and poverty rates. However, in the case of crimes against persons the tendency does not reverse after 2003, showing a weaker association with the unemployment and poverty variables.

Figure 2: Evolution of Crime Rates



Source: Data from Sistema Nacional de Información Criminal (National Criminal Information Service), based on police reports.⁶

Another interesting element in Figure 2 is that the rate of crimes against property increased consistently, with two strong peaks during the fiscal and inflationary crises of 1989–1991 and 2000–2002. By contrast, the rate of crimes against persons seems less affected by the crises and shows sustained growth for the whole period. Correlation estimates reveal statistically significant levels of association between these social conditions and crime although, as expected, the correlation is somewhat weaker in the case of crimes against persons.⁷

5 Inflation decreased dramatically at the beginning of the 1990s: from 2314 percent in 1990 to 171 percent in 1991 and just 4.2 percent in 1994. This explains the relative recovery of real income and the transitory reduction of the poverty rate during those years.

6 Recording of rates of crime against persons began in 1990 when the Dirección Nacional de Política Criminal (national office of criminal policies) was created, but in 2007 the Ministry of Justice instructed it to stop making crime rates public.

7 There is already a vast literature showing that property crimes tend to be more associated with unemployment than crimes against persons, since in the latter case the motivations are more diverse than material deprivation and social marginalization (see Chiricos 1987 for a thorough analysis of the unemployment/crime association).

Table 1: Crime, unemployment and poverty correlates (1980-2007)

	Crimes against persons	Crimes against property
Unemployment	0.627(**)	0.782(**)
Poverty line	0.579(*)	0.747(**)

* p=0.01 / **p= 0.05 (two-tailed test)

Other, complementary studies show that the crimes registered in these statistical records involve mainly young males under 25 years of age from poor urban slums (Daroqui and Guemureman 2001; Guemureman 2002). Analyses of judicial sources also produce similar results. The correlation estimates for criminal counts of juveniles under 18 with the unemployment rate and the poverty line are 0.781 (p=0.05) and 0.626 (p= 0.05) respectively (Míguez 2008: 89). In addition, the social profile of the involved juveniles shows that they come mostly from poor urban enclaves of the major Argentine cities, in particular Buenos Aires. For example, Mariana Roigé (2010: 175) found that material deprivation (poverty) was a recurrent factor present in 90 percent of the households of juveniles with penal processes in the state of Buenos Aires.

The reviewed data shows that the structural transformations that Argentina underwent since the mid 1970s were associated with a persistent increase in crime rates. However, although this quantitative data shows clearly that there was an association between structural conditions and the evolution of crime rates, they do not show the particular nexus that underlies this association. More qualitative approaches reveal that besides the mere increase in the poverty and unemployment rates, the change in the type of poverty (from transitional to structural) had a significant impact in the expectations and forms of social organization of the less well off.

Family and ideals of social advancement and integration through work and education have always been central tenets of the lifestyles of the poor. As Kessler's investigation clearly shows (2000), the increase in structural poverty since the mid-1970s and its profound effects in the 1990s disarticulated this social complex by obstructing the traditional channels of social mobility. Structural poverty de-

based familial and local social ties and the foundations of personal life-projects. For example, the incidence of single parent (mainly female) households grew steadily from 9.4 to 16.1 percent through the 1980s and 1990s, with a greater incidence among the lower income sectors (Torrado 2003: 440-49). This led to a substantial crisis in traditional forms of social integration and a significant increase in the levels of social marginalization suffered by the young and poor from the urban peripheries (SIEMPRO 2000).

Successive qualitative investigations demonstrate how this debasement of the family-work complex constitutes a recurrent element in the trajectories of juvenile delinquents (Tonkonoff 2000; Duschatzky and Corea 2002; Kessler 2002; Míguez 2003). Traditionally family authority was conferred to the male head of the household who also acted as the main provider. As the experience of unemployment and structural poverty progressed this role suffered growing debasement as all family members began to act as providers. Sometimes adolescents even became the main providers of the household, thus challenging the patriarchal authority (Duschatzky and Corea 2002: 53). In this context, there was a substantial change in the moral criteria that separate legitimate from illegitimate sources of income. Whereas traditionally work was not only the legitimate source of the household income but also a dignifying experience for those at the bottom of the social ladder, in younger generations provision of sufficient income to meet the household's needs became the sole source of legitimacy, regardless whether the procured resources came from legal or illegal origins (Kessler 2004: 108).

In addition, erosion of familial authority and the de-structuring of traditional family ties introduced profound changes in the process of socialization of the younger generations. Although during adolescence peer groups are always a competing socializing force to the family, in these new contexts the "street corner society" (Whyte [1942] 1965) became the main socializing reference for some of the adolescents of the poor urban enclaves (Tonkonoff 1998). The bodily and subjective experience of adolescents from poor slums in these contexts is not congruent with what is expected from them in the educational system and work contexts (Míguez 2002). In many cases interviews

and ethnographic observation show that the aspiration to a stable nuclear family, a proper education and a job has not completely disappeared, even in the case of the more marginalized young urban poor (Kessler 2004: 143; Míguez 2008: 67). But research also demonstrates that their socializing experiences leave them ill prepared for successful performance in the educational and job markets; failure and frustration reinforce the tendency to become alienated from these (Duschaztky and Corea 2002: 194).

The qualitative research shows how in a context of growing material deprivation adolescents from the poor urban slums are socialized more frequently by the street corner group than in traditional nuclear families. This leaves them ill prepared to develop the habits required to build successful educational and working careers. This in turn is associated with alternative strategies to meet the household needs that blur the boundaries between legal and illegal activities. Hence the conditions found in qualitative research partly explain the processes that underlie the association between unemployment, poverty and crime. However, the material and familial conditions in which these adolescents grow up do not completely account for the particular forms of identification and idiosyncrasy that develop among them, nor totally explain the specific forms of action including delinquency and the use of physical force (violence) to confront legal powers such as the police. The way in which the security forces enact their repressive traditions to control these adolescents is crucial element to understanding their forms of perception and action, since these develop partly as an adaptive reaction to conditions set by the controlling public agents.

2. Repressive Institutional Traditions

As during other dictatorial periods in Argentine history, the 1976–1983 military dictatorship set out to “rebuild the Nation”, naming itself the “National Reorganization Process” (Proceso de Reorganización Nacional) and pursuing radically reactionary policies to eradicate what the armed forces and sectors of the ruling classes had traditionally per-

ceived as the root cause of Argentina’s problems: Peronism, its power in the unions, and the dissemination of left-wing ideologies. Accordingly, the political activity and rhetoric of the military deepened a confrontational logic that had progressively gained weight in Argentine society since the first two Peron presidencies (1946–1952 and 1952–1955). This confrontation became even stronger after the overthrow and proscription of Peron by the military in 1955.

The military dictatorship increased the social cleavages that traditionally divided Argentine society between Peronists and anti-Peronists by narrowing the margins of ideological acceptability to ever more idiosyncratic elements. They reduced the ideological scope to two basic stands: the defenders of a national ethos expressed in respect for private property, strong Christian – Catholic – morals and a patriotic spirit versus the immoral supporters of an anti-national ideology expressed essentially in communism and left-wing Peronism.

In order to impose its ideological standards on the whole population the military concentrated to an extreme extent all political power in their own hands and resorted to brutal repressive methods (prison camps, torture, mass murder and kidnappings – the infamous “disappearances”). In this process the narrowing of the limits of ideological dissent were taken to an extreme: all those who did not explicitly adhere to the ideological standards set by the military were considered at least accomplices of the morally dissolute “enemies of the Argentine nation” and thus could legitimately be subject to repression and extermination.

To an extent, the 1976–1983 military dictatorship represented just one more stage in the evolution of the political cleavages that had divided Argentine society since Peronism. But the dichotomization produced by the military’s redefinition of the ideological frontiers, the extraordinary use of force applied in brutal repressive methods and the concentration of power that characterized this last military dictatorship constituted a qualitative change that had profound consequences for Argentine society.⁸ In the issue

8 The effects of the dictatorship were vast and impossible to synthesize here, see Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo (2003) for a thorough account.

that concerns us here – the constitution of repressive traditions among the security forces – the conditions enforced by the military dictatorship boosted to an extraordinary extent the militarization and autonomy of the police. This consolidated an institutional culture that while certainly not new, gained strength and became so naturalized during the dictatorship that it was hard to neutralize after the restitution of democracy in 1983.

The history of the Argentine police, especially in the state of Buenos Aires, is permeated by a persistent tension. Initially created as a largely decentralized force answerable to the local authority, one of the central problems was its tendency to act in response to the interests of local political forces. This connivance often resulted in corrupt schemes where both parties (police and politicians) “administered” certain types of illegal activities for personal gain, namely gambling, illegal commerce and prostitution. These schemes often led to resources provided by the central state being diverted to personal accounts, disguised as maintenance costs of police equipment and infrastructure. In addition, the frequently close ties between local police chiefs and politicians resulted in the persecution of dissident political elements. Almost since the very beginning, the police force has had the “administration” of crime for personal benefit and the role of intimidating political dissidents as part of its constitutive traditions (Kalamanowiecki 2000).

In order to neutralize these tendencies there were efforts to extract the police from the local political sphere and create a more professional force under a more centralized administration. However, wherever these initiatives were successful a new problem would arise, since as the police force became increasingly autonomous of political power it developed its own corporate interests. Instead of complying with their role as servants of civil society the police officials stressed their function as a means of social control, acting essentially as a repressive force and according to their particular interests and political idiosyncrasy which they tried to impose on common citizens.

This tension was particularly clear in the 1930s when at the same time as an effort was made by the leading cadres of the ruling Conservative party to professionalize and bring the police force under the control of a central administration, local political leaders of the same party conspired with elements of the police force against these initiatives or simply disregarded them (Barreneche 2007a). Furthermore, at the same time as the policies of the Conservative Party aimed at more professional and centralized security forces, they explicitly attributed a political role to the police, persecuting members of the Communist Party and systematically deploying elements of the police force to produce the electoral frauds that kept them in power through the “infamous decade” (as the 1930s were named in allusion to the electoral corruption) (Béjar 2005). Hence, the efforts for centralization and professionalization were essentially fruitless in the face of strong contradictions in the (collective and individual) political agents that promoted them.

During the first two presidencies of Perón there were more successful initiatives to bring the police under a central administration. However this was done under a military scheme that transformed the police into an autonomous power with very little control by civilian authorities. Although there were efforts to assign the police a welfare role complementary to other social services (health, education, etc.), the military model reigned making “control” of the rival elements of civil society the prevalent component of the institutional culture (Barreneche 2007b). However, and in spite of a greater centralization and militarization, connivance between local politicians and police officials did not completely disappear. At the beginning of the Peron era, there were efforts to dismantle these types of police/political networks, but only because, initially, most communal political leaders belonged either to the Conservative Party or to the Partido Radical.⁹ As the Peronists themselves developed their territorial networks, the articulation between local political powers and the police regained some of its pre-eminence (Barreneche 2010: 49). Increasingly, it was the Peronists – or at least important factions of the Peronist Party – who established the more fluid rela-

9 The Partido Radical is a national political party founded at the beginning of the twentieth century

that basically represents the middle classes with a moderate social-democratic ideology.

tionships and systems of reciprocity and connivance with the police (Eaton 2008: 20). Moreover, as the Peronist Party lost part of its popularity towards the mid-1950s, the use of torture and political persecution became common practice among the security forces (Call 2002: 11).

After Peron's overthrow in 1955 successive civilian and military governments continued consolidating the authoritarian institutional traditions on which the 1976–1983 dictatorship was to base its even more repressive machinery (Pereira and Ungar 2004: 14). These were the (to an extent mutually conflictive) tendencies to administrate certain forms of crime for their own benefit, connivance with politicians in this type of manoeuvre, a propensity to become an autonomous force outside the influence of the civil powers and acting to control instead of serve civil society, and the frequent use of illegal procedures to combat crime, such as torture, murder and harassment of the civilian population.

During the 1976–1983 dictatorship military cadres were appointed as heads of the security forces. Particularly in the case of the province of Buenos Aires, the methods applied under the administration of General Ramón Camps and other top-ranking military cadres such as Miguel Etchecolatz and Carlos Suarez Mason represented a qualitative change in the levels of corruption, autonomy, confrontation with civil society and violence deployed by the security forces (Dutil and Raggendorfer 1997: 15).

These military commanders restructured the security forces of the state of Buenos Aires, merging them with military task groups and promoting the military “dirty war” tactics among the other security forces as well. The police thus became part of the repressive military apparatus, managing several detention camps where political prisoners were held for torture and future assassination. In most cases, these task groups would appropriate their victims' assets as “war bounty” to finance further repressive operations. But, progressively, the political purposes pursued by this repressive machinery were substituted by the personal economic interests of the top-ranked police and military officers. In this way, the repressive operations of the security forces progressively turned into economic op-

erations with the main purpose of enlarging the personal fortunes of the participating police and military officials (Dutil and Raggendorfer 1997: 16).

The repressive military tactics and the resulting institutional design and practices implemented during the dictatorship were not, fundamentally, new to the police. As shown, corruption, connivance with the political administration, confrontation with civil society and its resemblance to a military structure were all elements that had accrued as institutional traditions since its origins. However, during the dictatorship these traditions were taken to an extreme. The impunity given by the concentration of absolute discretionary power and the unprecedented levels of violence and flagrant participation in crime that this made possible took the tradition to a new level. While the administration of crime had always been part of the practice of the security forces, especially in “victimless crimes” such as gambling or illegal commerce, during the dictatorship the security forces became the perpetrators of all sorts of felony. They thus became an organizing and ruling force that could replace or subordinate common criminal gangs, not only administrating but also controlling and promoting most types of criminal activity (Isla 2007a).

After the democratic transition in 1983 several efforts were made to reform the police, to restrain corruption, moderate their procedures and limit their autonomy. The first elected president after the dictatorship, Raúl Alfonsín (1983–1989), sought to pass a law to bring the police under civilian control and restrict their discretionary capacity to arrest and detain citizens, but the initiative failed because it was opposed by the Peronist Party in Congress (Pereyra and Ungar 2004: 8). However, during those years citizen security was not perceived as a central problem and did not reign paramount in the political agenda. Hence, the issue went more or less unnoticed for much of the public. During the 1990s the situation changed significantly.

The rise in crime rates and the consequent pressure of civil society on the political powers to institute more efficient policing made citizen security one of the crucial elements of the political agenda (Smulovitz 2003: 132). There were several efforts during the 1990s to reform the police, both

at the federal level and specifically in the case of the state of Buenos Aires. Although there were certain timid attempts, specially in the state of Buenos Aires, to apply a “community policing” model, most security policies followed an “iron fist” (*mano dura*) approach (Pereira and Ungar 2004; Fuentes 2005).¹⁰ However, the policy failed even in these cases, since the strict and violent control of crime that is supposed by this approach clashed with the interests of the political and police officials who partake in crime. Hence, although the iron fist approach favoured the re-emergence of the use of force as a repressive tactic, connivance between the police and important elements of the political system made it an inefficient policy for combatting crime since “a good proportion of politics [was] financed through police corruption” (Ragendorfer 2002: 113; see also Klipphan 2004: 35; Saín 2004, 2008).¹¹

As we have established, there had always been connivance between the police and the political system in Argentina. But, during the 1990s the level of impunity granted by the political system to the police in its complicity with the criminal underworld introduced a qualitative change. Whereas, as reported by Sain (2002), after the return of democracy police officers shared monies extracted from small scale gambling operations and brothels with party leaders, “[t]he seriousness of crimes ... escalated through time, particularly the devastating crises of the late 1980s and the economic dislocations of the 1990s” (Eaton 2008: 19). As of the mid-1990s, the connivance between the police and the political system developed to a point where aside from profiting from prostitution and illegal gambling, “trafficking of stolen cars, kidnapping for ransom, trafficking of police reports and drug trafficking [composed a] ‘ladder of illegality’ that [went] from street-level police officers and districts’ political brokers to top rank officers, politicians and businessmen” (Fuentes 2004: 11).

Along with the impoverishment and marginalization that grew in the 1990s, this institutional context favoured the

proliferation of crimes with high impact on civil society that generated public demands for the iron fist. There was a massive increase in the consumption and circulation of drugs, leading, by the end of the 1990s, to a huge crack trade causing growing levels of interpersonal and delinquent violence (Epele 2010). Also, the illegal arms market grew considerably, with significant participation of members of the armed forces (police and military) acting as providers in the illegal weapons circuit. Additionally, other illegal activities such as auto theft and kidnappings for ransom also grew with the consistent participation of important sectors of the police forces as accomplices of these types of crime. Good examples of this were the *Banda de los Comisarios* (a gang composed of top police officers) who committed kidnappings for ransom, including the hijacking of the son of a well-known car industry boss (now mayor of Buenos Aires). Also, on several occasions the press discovered that in certain prisons guards were selling stolen car parts, releasing inmates for several hours to steal the cars that were then dismantled to sell the parts.

As part of the systems of reciprocity that were behind these crimes the police used poor adolescents from the urban outskirts who were in conflict with the law as a cheap workforce, sending the adolescents to commit the actual crimes (robberies, trafficking, etc.) but retaining the biggest share of the booty.

All in all, the current state of research suggests that after the dictatorship, at the beginning of the democratic period, the police basically returned to the practices of administering small-scale and essentially victimless forms of crime. Although there were violations of civil rights and even new cases of adolescents being ‘disappeared’ from rock festivals and political rallies (Tiscornia 2008; Pita 2010), a public opinion more sensible to the human rights cause, reduced levels of social marginalization and the relative low crime rates made the problem of citizen secur-

¹⁰ See Arzadún (2005) or Camou and Moreno (2005) for a detailed account of the police reforms in the state of Buenos Aires. Pereira and Ungar (2004) and Eaton (2008) provide a more global account of the processes.

¹¹ We are not implying that iron fist policies would necessarily be effective in the absence of corruption, but pointing out that in the Argentine case the connivance between political leaders and the police interfered to an extent even with this sort of policy.

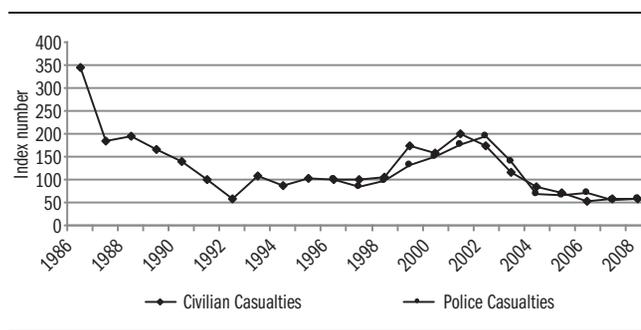
ity less pressing and the actions of the police more moderate. But as social marginalization, corruption and crime rates escalated during the 1990s there were increasing demands for citizen security policies.

Paradoxically, initiatives to reform the police, especially the iron fist policies applied in the 1990s that called for harsh repressive methodologies, facilitated the re-emergence of some of the worst traditions in the security forces. On the one hand, repressive iron fist methodologies revived the authoritarian predispositions that resulted from the militarized organization and culture that had long been part of the police traditions and that had deepened during the dictatorship. But concomitantly, it also strengthened the tendency to partake in crime, in connivance with elements of the political administration. In addition, the impunity given by collusion with the political system and the practices with which they had become familiar during the dictatorship favoured their participation in highly violent criminal organizations applying illegal force (harassment, torture, murder) to control and subdue elements of the criminal underworld. In sum, during the 1990s the traditions bolstered during the dictatorship were revived by the demands for iron fist policies and enabled by the levels of impunity provided by collusion with the political system.

This form of administrating crime by state officials resulted in very volatile systems of social relationships, where there were forms of reciprocity and even collaboration between the political administration, elements of the security forces and members of criminal networks, despite these last two sets of actors perceiving themselves as irreconcilable enemies. Hence, during the 1990s and at least until the change of economic trends and social policies at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new formation of violence was constituted. It opposed the security forces and the young marginal poor as lethal enemies. The latter, often in conflict with the law, were known as (and called themselves) the *Pibes Chorros* or Crooked Kids.

As shown in Figure 3 the consequences of these ongoing conflicts became clearly expressed in growing numbers of casualties on both sides (police and civilians) between 1992 and 2002. But, as we will show in the next section, they were also expressed in the confrontational attitude and aesthetic style with which the adolescents from the poor urban suburbs constituted an identity that defined them in opposition to the institutional expressions of the legal order and sometimes even to society in general.

Figure 3: Police/civilian Casualties in Metropolitan Buenos Aires



Source: Fuentes (2004: 12); Bazano and Pol (2009: 35), based on data provided by CELS (Center for Legal and Social Studies) and Human Rights Watch.¹²

Figure 3 shows that during the second half of the 1980s there was a very significant decrease in civilian casualties resulting from confrontations with the police. The years that immediately followed the democratic transition of 1983, through until 1992, were characterized by increasing moderation in the levels of force used by the police, and also a period of relatively low levels of social conflict and crime rates (except for the mass looting during the 1989–2001 inflationary crises that seem not to have had an impact on the number of police/civilian casualties).

After six years of decreasing rates of police/civilian casualties (1986–1991) between 1992 and 2001 there is a clear change in the trend. The ten years after 1992 show a persistent increase in the number of police/civilian casualties, making the rate for 2001 341 percent higher than in 1992.

¹² Regrettably there is no data prior to 1986 or after 2009; also data for police casualties is only available as of 1996.

Although in the case of the police force there is no data available prior to 1996, we can observe a similar tendency: the rate of casualties in 2002 is 232 percent higher than in 1997. Exploratory studies suggest that most police/civilian casualties occurred in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, among males between 16 and 21 years of age from the less affluent sectors (López et al. 2005: 4). Hence, the 1990s was a decade where a new formation of violence emerged; one which confronted, mainly, the young and poor from the urban outskirts with members of the security forces, resulting in a growing number of casualties on both sides. After 2002 the change in economic trends, the decrease in crime rates and the changes in the welfare and security policies applied by the government seem to have reversed the tendency, and thus produced a decline in the levels of confrontation.

Regrettably, the sparse character of the available data (produced mostly by NGOs based on media reports and with a limited regional scope) does not allow us to know if what happened in Buenos Aires is similar to what went on in other Argentine cities. As mentioned, exploratory studies suggest that most violence occurred in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires city, although it is probable that other big cities of the interior (like Rosario, Córdoba or Mendoza) underwent similar processes. Compared to other Latin American cities, during the 1990s Buenos Aires seems to have gradually reached or even surpassed the level of police/civilian casualties of some cities with higher general murder rates.¹³ For example, between 1990 and 1994 São Paulo had rates of police/civilian casualties double those of Buenos Aires, but between 1995 and 2000 the rates were similar: 1.61 annual deaths for every 100,000 inhabitants in the first case and 1.63 in the second. Both are far above the more violent North American cities, like Los Angeles with a police/civilian casualty rate of 0.5 and even Mexico City where the rate for that period was less than 1 per 100,000 inhabitants (Brinks 2003: 6–7).

Altogether, the evolution of the casualty rate suggests that during the 1990s the levels of confrontation between elements of civil society, especially young urban poor, and the security forces escalated significantly. As we have shown, this was partly due to a re-enactment of the repressive traditions that had accrued in the security forces since their constitution. These were bolstered during the dictatorship and reinvigorated in the 1990s by the relative impunity given by the connivance between political powers and the police. As a reaction to this situation, the young urban poor from the urban outskirts developed a confrontational attitude and aesthetic style that identified them as Crooked Kids. Paradoxically, this identity reinforced the perception of these adolescents as public enemies promoted by the supporters of the iron fist policies and the security forces, thus reproducing the cycles of violence.

3. Webs of Juvenile Delinquency

As has been shown in classical and recent research, conflicts between the institutional representatives of the social order and the young urban poor are usually mediated by collective systems of representation and practice, expressed in confrontational identities embodied in symbols, like gestures, tattoos, clothing, hair and music styles.

A comprehensive study by Hagedorn (2008a) shows that national or sub-national contexts may have a great say in the particular way in which these identities relate to specific organizational forms. That is, the social networks of marginalized youth involved in illegal activities may assume different morphological characteristics according to varying influencing factors. In general, Hagedorn relates the proliferation of gangs around the world to the growing levels of “polarization, social exclusion and the retreat of the state” (2008a: 6).¹⁴ The social networks of the young urban poor then develop as an answer to these relatively new forms of marginalization. Through them adolescents not only create a channel to illegally access the material resources that they

¹³ According to a comparative study by the Dirección Nacional de Política Criminal (National Office for Criminal Policies) of the Argentine Ministry of Justice, during the 1990s homicides in Buenos Aires averaged 6.70 cases per 100,000 inhabitants per year, while the rate was 41.10 for Rio de Janeiro and 20.44

for Mexico City. Although Buenos Aires had homicide rates substantially lower than in those cities, its police/civilian casualties were similar or even higher.

¹⁴ Hagedorn refers to the growing social differences and increasing levels of marginalization resulting from neoliberal policies applied on a global scale, which produced unemployment, poverty and a retreat of the welfare state that formerly guaranteed basic living conditions and forms of social inclusion.

cannot reach through legal means, but they also develop organizations that allow them to participate in territorial power relations and provide them with a meaningful identity when conventional forms of identification and participation are not available (2008a: xxvii).

However, although these forms of reaction to social marginalization are found across the globe they may assume different organizational forms. Hagedorn (2008a: 34) distinguishes essentially between institutionalized gangs and unsupervised peer groups. In the first case loose networks of juveniles involved in illegal activities acquire a more stable character expressed in an identity that may be passed down from generation to generation. Institutional gangs are not necessarily defined by very strict hierarchical structures with clearly identified roles. In general, they are composed of a loose network of juvenile groups that share an identity and participate in common activities, but do not necessarily have a centralized organization. Hence, instead of necessarily being rational criminal organizations, most gangs are “‘living organisms’ instilling in their members, as well as the[ir] communit[ies], a belief in the organization itself” (Hagedorn 2008a: 9). Although Hagedorn does not present a systematic definition of unsupervised peer groups, it may be inferred that these are rather small groups of marginalized youth who are involved in illegal activities but do not belong to any organizational network or express a collective identity in specific symbols and practices used beyond the immediate group of primary peer relations.

Several factors may contribute to turn unsupervised peer groups involved in illegal activities into institutionalized gangs. One influencing factor is the drug trade, which tends to structure youth in more stable organizations, especially when they are able to control specific territorial enclaves where the national state is weak or absent (Covey 2003; Briceño León and Zubillaga 2007; Zaluar, 2011). In these cases, gangs develop as territorialized power networks which are able to control urban enclaves, freeing those spaces from state control in order to develop their illegal

business. In exchange for neighbours’ acquiescence, gangs often provide the basic public services that the state does not deliver (welfare through informal reciprocity networks or protection from outside aggression) although this frequently comes at the price of a “reign of terror” that gangs impose on their turf and that strongly condition the life of its inhabitants (Souza da Silva 2006).

Another factor contributing to the institutionalisation of gangs, particularly in South America, has been civil war contexts. In many cases the organizational structures developed by juvenile institutionalized gangs comes either from imitation of the organizational structures of guerrilla movements, such as *Commando Vermelho* in Brazil (Riffiotis 2007), or by the transformation of former armed political organizations into common criminal gangs as in the case of the *Shining Path* (*Sendero Luminoso*) in Perú or *FARC* and *M19* in Colombia, or the evolution of guerrilla movements into territorial gangs, as it happened in Nicaragua (Zilberg 2004; Briggs 2007; Hume 2007; Rodgers, 2007).

Classical studies also show that immigration is a strong factor in explaining the particular constitution and morphology of gangs. The ethnic and cultural clash between groups of recently arrived migrants of different origins who coexist in proximate urban enclaves and the confrontations between them and the host culture and institutions have frequently given rise to adaptive organizations that often become involved in illegal activities (Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Suttles 1968). The constitution of institutionalized gangs in several Central American countries, namely in El Salvador, Guatemala and Ecuador, is a particular example of this, since it is partly related to a “reverse” process of immigration. The *maras* in Central America resulted from the massive deportation of former members of Los Angeles gangs like *MS 13* or *Calle 18* (Zilberg 2007; Wolf 2010).¹⁵ In general these were second generation immigrants who had no previous contacts with their original homeland, but brought their gang traditions with them. The powerful cultural symbols that were part of

15 *Maras* are a particular manifestation of Hagedorn’s “institutional gangs”, composed of youth involved in illegal activities who identify through bodily

marks and dress style. What distinguishes *maras* is their origin in this process of reverse migration and the resulting cultural synthesis between their origins

in the United States and their adaptation to the host national contexts which they were forced enter and accept after deportation (Hagedorn 2008b).

these traditions were highly appealing to local marginalized youth that had gone through brutal civil wars.

According to several scholars, the appealing character of the gang culture and symbols in Central America results from its similarities with the culture of violence that existed during the civil war years (Mosser and McIlwaine 2001; Cruz 2003; Rodgers 2003; Santamaría 2006; Kedron and Bensen, 2008). Hence, although gangs in Central America do not connect to the ideological tenets of former guerrilla organizations, they do at least aesthetically and in their opposition to the institutions that represent the legal order express rebellion through violent (forcible) behaviour. Savenije (2009: 214) and Kurtenbach (2008) question aspects of the “culture of violence” thesis as a central explanation of the proliferation of gangs in Central America. To them the fact that gangs provide a set of meaningful primary relationships and relevant identities for extremely deprived and marginalized youth has a far more important incidence on the process than the “violent” inheritance from previous civil war years.

It is interesting to note that despite Argentina being affected by many of the conditions that are associated with the institutionalization of gangs – such as political violence (especially in the 1970s), a very profound polarization of its social structure and a growing drug trade territorially based in slums and shanty towns – they have not “persisted for generations or reached the organizational level of their Rio counterparts, 1200 miles to the north” (Hagedorn 2008a: 14).

Instead of institutionalized gangs like Central American maras or Rio de Janeiro’s Comando Vermelho, what we mostly find in Argentina are what Hagedorn termed “unsupervised peer groups” and we prefer to redefine as webs of juvenile delinquency. Morphologically, these webs are composed of a loose set of interpersonal relations where mutual identification is based, essentially, on a particular use of slang, fashion, tattoos and hairstyle defined as the “Crooked Kids” style. These social ties and styles develop

in the free space provided by “un-ruled” and “un-patrolled” public spaces (street corners, bars or squares) where a confrontational spirit against conventional society, the law and its representative institutions is developed as a core element of identification. These webs become a channel for primary affective bonds and a system of social roles where those who have been marginalized by conventional society may find a space where they can be recognized and follow a “career”. In sum, the webs become a “social habitat” where poor and marginalized adolescents can find affection, an identity and socially valued “positions” (at least among the peer group) for which they find no homologues in the official social system.

It is hard to untangle the reasons why the same factors that caused unsupervised peer groups to turn into institutionalized gangs in other parts of the world did not have the same effects in Argentina. We will offer some hypotheses in the concluding section of this article. But what these webs of juvenile delinquency clearly share with institutionalized gangs is their capacity to produce an identity and a meaningful existence in the face of extreme marginalization and deprivation. As has been increasingly recognized since the pioneering studies of the School of Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Clarke et al. [1975] 2002; Hebdige [1979] 2002), aesthetic styles and music are central means not only of expressing but also of constituting these identities. The relevance of music and style in constituting these rebel identities has more recently been rediscovered by scholars such as Touraine (1995), Ferrel and Hamm (1998), Morales (2003) and Hagedorn (2008a: xvii).

Whereas hip hop seems to be the musical style adopted almost globally by institutionalized gangs as a means of expression and identification, in the case of Argentina a more local rhythm, *Cumbia Villera* (literally “Cumbia from the Slums”), condensed the identity that predominated during the 1990s among the webs of juvenile delinquency we describe.¹⁶ *Cumbia Villera* expressed a profound antagonism

16 We studied the different manifestations of the Crooked Kids’ style as part of a prolonged research programme on juvenile delinquency between 1998 and 2008. The research was based on intensive eth-

nographic fieldwork done in several contexts where we could observe the systems of social relationships that structure the webs of juvenile delinquency: prisons, rehab programmes, the juvenile penal sys-

tem, urban slums, street corners and squares. We also did participant observation in *bailantas*, the dance halls where young people go to listen and dance to *Cumbia Villera*.

towards the institutions that in the Crooked Kids' view quintessentially represent the social order: the police and the politicians that participate in corrupt networks and subject them to their power and interests. But the slang that composes the lyrics of this musical style also denotes social categories that constitute the role and status system that gives the Crooked Kids a meaningful identity and their particular form of (subordinate) social integration. For reasons of space we will not describe this specific system here (see Míguez 2006; Vila and Semán 2010 for a more detailed account). Instead we will concentrate on the basic symbols of identification and alterity that reveal the core of the Crooked Kids identity.

4. Cumbia Villera as Cultural Synthesis

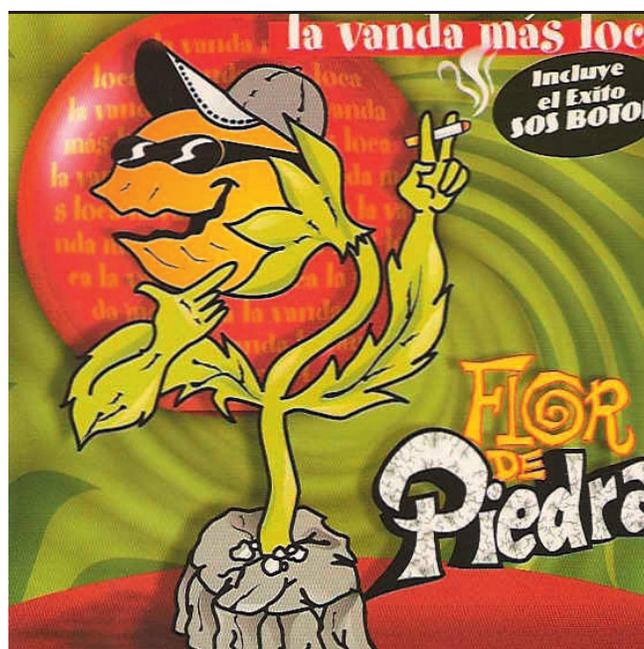
Cumbia Villera is a variant of the traditional Cumbia that was originally developed in Colombia and arrived in Argentina in the 1960s, where it became very popular among the working classes as a romantic and festive type of music. The more prominent Cumbia Villera bands emerged in the early 1990s and lasted through that decade, before either disappearing or introducing changes in their style to abandon some of what were initially the more disruptive elements in their aesthetic and lyrics: the celebration of drugs and crime. During the 1990s when the formation of violence was at its peak and police/ civilian casualties and crime rates climbed substantially, Cumbia Villera differentiated itself from traditional Cumbia by explicitly setting out to express the experience of young poor people who consumed illegal drugs, came into conflict with the law and had been through prison. The covers of Cumbia Villera records provide clear examples of this identification with the world of crime.

Cover 1



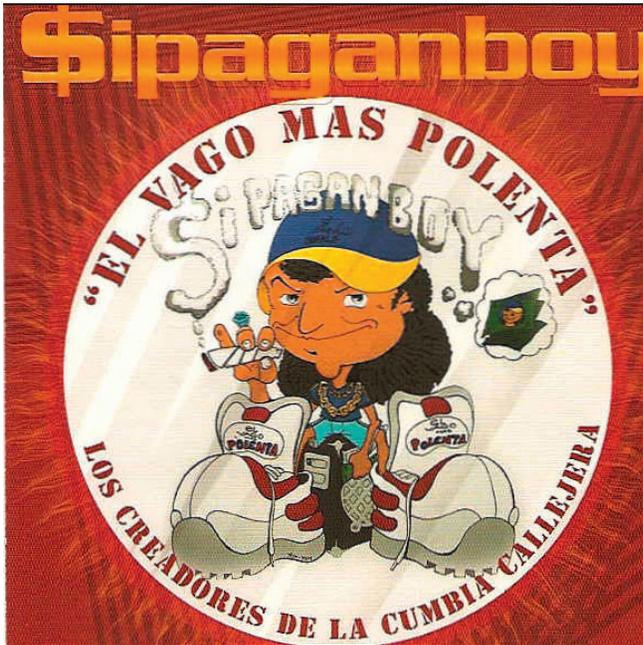
(by Andrea Cardinalli for Leader Music SACIM)

Cover 2



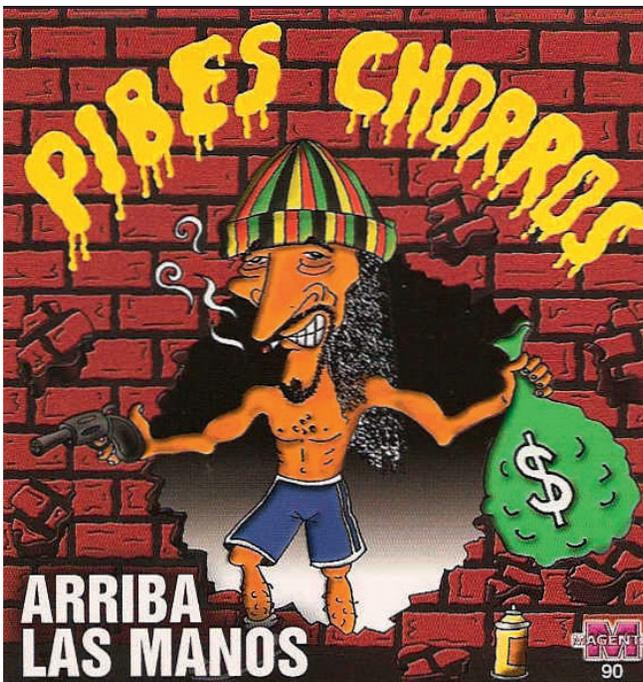
(by Moya Design and Andrea Cardinalli for Leader Music SACIM)

Cover 3



(by Martín Turalba for Leader Music SACIM)

Cover 4



(by Natalia Ruiz for Magenta)

While cover 1 shows a typical “street corner group” killing time on a slum street, the others clearly evidence identification with drugs (marihuana is alluded in the three covers) and crime. The lyrics also celebrate drugs and crime as in “I want vitamins”:

Quiero Vitaminas
I want vitamins [cocaine]
(by Pablo Lescano)

[...] I can't walk for sniffing so much.
I'm worn out, and I've got no vitamins.
I want to take [some more],
I buy a bag and I'm full of zip again.

In addition to its identification with drugs and crime, Cumbia Villera also evidences a confrontational attitude towards society. This can be seen, for example, in the song “Tumberos” (“Tomb-boys”: tomb means jail in the Crooked Kids’ slang), which contains a very explicit menace to those outside the world of crime (the song divides clearly between those who are outside the prison and “are going to die” from those who are inside and striving to get out to kill those outside).

Tumberos
Tomb-boys
(by Marcelo Moya and Edgar Navarra)

I'm from the tomb, I'm going to get out.
Tomb-boy I am, let's start the mutiny.
Tomb-boy I am, I'm going to get out.
And when I get out, you are going to die.

But even if it is possible to perceive a general confrontational attitude towards society in certain songs, most of them point to very specific types of alterity: essentially politicians and more specifically the police.

Ollas Vacías
Empty Pans
(by Omar Salto)

Empty bellies for our kids today
And in parliament only negotiations
We're going to burn them in the middle of the square.
You talk morality, and you're on T.V.
Politician sun of the beach, motherfucker ... People's Feelings!

Ladrón de lo Sacaste
Thief, where did you take it from?
(by Pablo Lescano)

I have to ask for my freedom
And they condemn me because I rob.
Why me?
When those who really steal are free.
That means most of the politicians and policemen.

These two songs show how politicians and policemen were perceived during the 1990s (and in fact still are) as those mainly responsible for the state of deprivation and marginalization that the Crooked Kids experienced in daily life. However, if the politicians were included as an “other”, it is the police that were perceived as the more extreme form of opposition.

Gatillo Fácil
[Happy Trigger]
(by Pablo Lescano)

They call him happy trigger,
He killed that kid in the street that came in his way.
He calls himself a macho,
with his police shield, heavy gun and the right to kill.
Don't forget Cabezas, Bulacio, Bru and Bordón.¹⁷
The list is so long I can't mention them all.
Hope God saves you from being the next in the queue.

This song, whose content is similar to fifteen or twenty other songs by other Cumbia Villera bands, shows that the police were perceived as a power that not only represented the law within the local space – the corner or the square – of the young urban poor. The police were also seen as a power that acts outside the law. At the same time as the police is seen as abusing power while persecuting those “outside the law”, they are also seen as in conflict with the legal order committing the same type of crimes that they supposedly persecute but with the protection and impunity that comes from being a state power. In this way the opposition to the police that partly defines the Crooked Kids identity was based on an image of this institution shared by most of the population: the police appeared as a corrupt and arbitrary force more interested in defending their own corporate interests than the legal order as such. This is an image that was particularly strong in the suburban slums (Puex 2003; Isla and Mancini 2008).

In sum, the confrontation between the police and the Crooked Kids was not only a conflict between the legal order and those who trespass against it. It was also a confrontation between two types of criminal groupings engaged in an unequal dispute over power and material resources. Hence, the logic of mutual confrontation expressed in the growth of lethal police/civilian encounters in the 1990s was partly based in an opposition between (legal and illegal) orders. But, in addition, it also resulted from a confrontation between a paradoxically illegal – and in that sense arbitrary – state authority and those who resisted the abuses of this capricious power.

Besides the songs, these confrontational logics were also expressed in the ways in which the Crooked Kids tattooed their bodies. Good examples of this are the “Crooked Kids' saint” (an image of a saint smoking marijuana that offers protection from the police to young criminals) or the “five dots” mark or the knife killing a snake (see images below) which manifest enmity against the police.

¹⁷ These are the names of some of the more renowned people kidnapped and killed by the police since the return of democracy.

Image 1



Crooked kids' saint painted in an institute's wall.

Image 2



Five dots mark and knife tattooed in an inmate's arm.

These images may be found in the street refuges where the Crooked Kids transit during the day or stay at night or painted on walls. But identity rites also require them to be tattooed publicly on different parts of the body. Initially, at the beginning of the 1990s, the tattoos were placed on visible parts of the body, like the forearm or chest. Since this made the Crooked Kids easily identifiable to the police, they began to put the tattoos on less visible parts of the body, but that could still be shown to fellow members of their groups. The fact that the tattoos had to be done in public, by a close companion, shows that it is part of a rite of passage in the strict sense of the term. The tattoos strongly mark membership and identity; they are a point of no return, since those who have the tattoos know that if they are detained by the police they face harsh reprisals, if not death. Thus, tattoos are not only an aesthetic mark of identification, they define a pattern of interaction and produce specific bodily experiences – to be tortured or killed – for those who bore the identification mark (Míguez 2002).

At this stage it is paramount to stress that this confrontational identity assumed by the Crooked Kids through these symbols and practices was a reaction or counterpart to the actions and rhetoric of the political and administrative leaders of the police forces who adopted iron fist policies. The heads of the police organizations often identified the young and poor from the urban outskirts as dangerous and a menace to the common citizen and the social order. In line with this rhetoric, the mere demeanour of a youngster could expose him to police reprisals, jail and torture only for loitering in the street or having an “attitude” towards authority, even if they might not have committed any crime.

5. Conclusions

The particular formation of violence that emerged in Argentina during the 1990s and lasted until the initial years of the twenty-first century resulted from the confluence of two main factors. One of these was growing levels of unemployment, marginalization and structural poverty that affected mainly the young urban poor. As in other cases in Latin and North America, this context favoured the emergence of juvenile oppositional identities where groups of “young and poor” could find alternative forms of social recognition and integration. Notably, delinquent identities in

Argentina did not turn into stable organizations akin to North American gangs or Central American maras. Instead, the forms of integration and recognition in Argentine delinquent identities took place in more loose social webs where individuals identified by sharing common moral and aesthetic codes.

The current state of comparative research makes the reasons behind this contrast hard to unveil. However, our research suggests a few *plausible hypotheses open for further exploration*. On the one hand, the Argentine oppositional identities did not have a strong ethnic component. According to classical and current research, racial contrasts and immigration are a significant force behind the emergence of institutionalized gangs. Although Argentina had strong waves of migration at the end of the nineteenth century and between the 1930s and 1960s, these did not rise to ethnically organized gangs with an intergenerational perdurance. Hence, in contrast with what happened, for example, in the United States, race is not an element of “distinction” and confrontation among members of different gangs.¹⁸

Another factor associated with institutionalized gangs is their predisposition to imitate former armed political organizations or for these organizations to abandon (at least to a great extent) their original political ends and turn into common criminal structures. The webs of juvenile delinquency in Argentina developed essentially in the 1990s, long after the armed political organizations had been eradicated by the brutal repressive methods of the dictatorship (1976–1983). Hence, in contrast with the Central American cases where gangs often developed in connection with armed groups or directly after civil wars, in Argentina the time lapse between the presence of armed political organizations in the 1970s and the Crooked Kids of the 1990s possibly precluded political organizations turning into criminal gangs or unsupervised peer groups inheriting the organizational strategies of the former.

Another factor that underlies the constitution of institutionalized gangs is the drug trade in “defensible”

urban enclaves that can be removed from state control. These conditions are clearly present in many Argentine cities. However, although one may find certain groups of young people involved in drug trafficking, who even may exert certain levels of control and power in a particular territory, they thus far have not evolved into stable organizations with specific symbols or a strong corporate spirit.

It is hard to fully explain this contrast with the Central American or Brazilian examples. One possible reason is that, in this respect, the conditions conducive to the growth of stable institutionalized gangs only lasted for a limited period in Argentina. As we saw in the data described above, criminal activity and violence resulting in police/civilian casualties reached its peak during the 1990s, but it was not as present during the 1980s and seems to be declining since 2002 or 2003. Hence, the limited duration of the process might be precluding the emergence of stable organizations and identities.

Another factor might be the power asymmetry between unsupervised peer groups and the coalitions generated by collusion between the police and elements of the political system that re-emerged in the 1990s. The traditions that originally accrued in the security forces favoured collusion between elements of the political system and the police to run illegal activities. During the 1976–1983 dictatorship the security forces became used not only to administering crimes, but to directly participating in the organization and command of criminal groups, displacing or eliminating common criminal gangs. Although in the 1980s these practices remained relatively dormant, they were revived in the 1990s. This suggests that the lack of stable institutionalized gangs may be due to the fact that the control of the types of illegal activity that are usually associated with institutionalized gangs were (and still are) to a great extent governed by official powers that obstruct the development of parallel competing organizations.

Now, if this ambivalent character of public organs vicariously and paradoxically hindered the development of in-

18 There are however certain embryonic organizations in some slums in Buenos Aires city, where the drug trade is being by groups of recent migrants.

However, this is not an extensive phenomenon and has not so far led to open confrontations between ethnically identified gangs.

stitutionalized gangs, it also enhanced the levels of resentment among adolescents and may also explain the growth of lethal police/civilian encounters that took place in the 1990s. The recurrent involvement in criminal activities of state agents that are supposed, at least symbolically, to embody a basic social consensus turns them into an arbitrary and, as such, at least partially illegitimate power. Hence, the Argentine formation of violence of the

1990s may be partly based on a configuration of irreconcilable enemies divided by the “rule” of law. But, since this “rule of law” was actually circumstantial to the actors involved and other random factors, the increase in lethal police/civilian encounters that is part of this formation of violence may have also resulted from the anomic social atmosphere that predominated in Argentina during those years.

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