

# **Dreams of El Cartucho: Violence, Fear and Trust in a Bogotá Slum**

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## PREFACE

This dissertation explores the relations of violence to order, and the implications for the State. It warns against the essentialization of violence; arguing that violence does not have a totalizing effect, but is rather subjectively determined by each individual. An argument is advanced challenging the attempt to achieve broader impact by standardizing interventions into rule-based structures.

Much of the ethnographic of material El Cartucho comes from two works of the anthropologist Ingrid Morris sponsored by Bogotá's mayoral office to record the stories of the former residents of the demolished neighborhood: *En un Lugar Llamado El Cartucho: Una Crónica*<sup>1</sup> (2011) and a work coauthored with Germán Garzón *El Cartucho: Del Barrio Santa Inés al Callejón de la Muerte*<sup>2</sup> (2010). The majority of ethnographic material on El Cartucho is only available in Spanish and so I have done my best to faithfully translate into English the references presented in this work from such material.

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<sup>1</sup> "A Place Called el Cartucho: a Chronicle"

<sup>2</sup> "El Cartucho: From the Santa Inés Neighborhood to the Alley of Death"

# Dreams of El Cartucho: Violence, Fear and Trust in a Bogotá Slum<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** Violence can be understood in a myriad of simultaneous and contradictory ways. The meaning ascribed to an act (of violence) is subjectively determined as it interacts with each individual's personal web of meanings. The distinctions related to order / disorder and legitimate / illegitimate are thus necessarily the unique products of a given perspective. This indeterminacy presents a challenge for planning, and by extension, for the State itself. This work focuses on El Cartucho, a slum in Bogotá, Colombia in an exploration of the multiple meanings and framings given to violence.

## Introduction

During colonial times, the neighborhood of Santa Inés had been a highly respected neighborhood in the heart of Bogotá. But a series of transformations led the old families who had constructed their large republican homes to flee north, to what were then just the outskirts of the city. With the passage of time the neighborhood became nearly unrecognizable. The streets strewn with trash and taken over by all sorts of 'social undesirables' including the homeless, drug addicts, prostitutes, drug dealers and their hit men. People saw it as a place of rampant violence, drug use and depravation; a chaotic black hole that sucked people into its world of misery never again to see the light of day.

The slum that emerged took on the name of El Cartucho<sup>4</sup> and over a period of decades, became the 'symbol of death' (Gongora, 2008: 110) and the shame of the capital (Jimenez 2003). This local infamy of being overrun by drugs and violence becomes that much more disturbing when one considers that for many, Colombia itself is synonymous with drugs and violence. It is a country that has experienced a sixty-year internal conflict involving paramilitaries, guerrilla groups, Pablo Escobar, drug cartels as well as atrocities inflicted by the very own State military forces; according to one World Bank publication, 'generalized violence... now dominates the daily lives of most citizens.' (World Bank, 2000: v) Oddly juxtaposed with this violent image, is the fact that Colombia is also habitually described as the 'oldest democracy' in the region.

For many, slums such as El Cartucho begin to be seen as a perverse enigma, even inexplicable. From his famous study, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, William Foote Whyte observed that "[f]or many decades sociologists have been

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<sup>3</sup> The majority of ethnographic material on El Cartucho is only available in Spanish and so I have done my best to faithfully translate into English the references presented in this work from such material.

<sup>4</sup> The Spanish word, 'cartucho' has many meanings, ranging from a type of lily flower to cartridge. Some accounts claim that the name describes the flower-like shape of the space that resembles this particular lily, whereas others highlight the cartridge definition, thinking along the lines of guns and ammunition which marked the history of the area.

studying the slums in terms of social disorganization... but they had little to say about the social life of slum dwellers.” (Whyte, 1943: 34) By contrast he argued that, by looking within such spaces, [the sociologist] “will find many evidences of conflict and maladjustment, but he will not find the chaotic conditions once thought to exist throughout this area.” (Whyte, 1943: 39)

A first challenge then that is confronted by a nuanced exploration of slums like ‘Cornerville’, and El Cartucho is how to make sense of the apparent disorganization. Michael Taussig describes in *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia* how his role is expected to be similar to that of a translator between two such worlds.

*’nd this is of course is what people like me are meant to do, too: find the underlying logic that will make sense of the chaos. Your disorder; my order. Find the paths through the forest and over the mountains. Talk their language. Determine their self-interest. Square it out into real estate called “territory.” Then dip it into a fixing solution like developing a photograph.*  
(Taussig, 2005: 17)

A second challenge however is explaining why the order that emerged only after nuanced study appears so disorderly to outsiders. Central to clarifying these opposing interpretations of order are the associated meanings and connotations of violence and order. For instance, in Teresa Caldeira’s *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo*, violence and crime are consistently and repeatedly referred to as “arbitrary and unusual,” (Caldeira, 2000: 19) as something “... which disrupts meaning and disorders the world,” and therefore “[c]rime stories try to recreate a stable map for a world that has been shaken.” (Caldeira, 2000: 20)

In contrast, Philippe Bourgois’ description of violence in East Harlem amongst the street level drug dealers from, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* presents violence as part of an order.

*Regular displays of violence are essential for preventing rip-offs.... upward mobility in the underground economy of the street-dealing world requires a systematic and effective use of violence.... that appears irrationally violent, “barbaric,” and ultimately self-destructive to the outsider, can be reinterpreted according to the logic of the underground economy as judicious public relations and long term investment in one’s “human capital development.”*  
(Bourgois, 2003: 24)

Thus while Caldeira sees violence as synonymous to disorder, Bourgois shows how violence can be the very force underlying order. Bourgois states that what may appear to be disorder (irrational, barbaric, self destructive) and may in fact be order (systematic, effective, judicious) if seen from another perspective, simply out of sight for certain observers. But both then present violence as essentialized; that there are specific attributes that are intrinsic to violence. Whereas Caldeira says that violence is arbitrary, Bourgois suggests that what

might appear as arbitrary in fact has a clear reason behind it. Both accounts then present, implicitly or explicitly, this idea of something called 'order': a single regime regulating behavior within a given group or place. My argument challenges both claims on the grounds that violence does not have essential characteristics; its determination of being order or disorder is subjective and contextual.

The tendency to essentialize the experience of violence can be seen even in discussions that specifically aim to flesh out the multitude of meanings that violence may take on. In the Introduction to *Violence in War and Peace: 'n' nthology*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois begin by stating, "Violence itself, however, defies easy categorization. It can be everything and nothing; legitimate or illegitimate; visible or invisible; necessary or useless; senseless and gratuitous or utterly rational and strategic." (2003: 2) While violence 'can be everything', the claim then is that violence may take many different forms, however nonetheless it is always clearly determinable. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois go on to say, "Thus, in this anthology we are positing a violence continuum comprised of a multitude of "small wars and invisible genocides" (2003: 19) What this translates into is that violence may be too unwieldy of a concept to 'easily categorize', but the reader is encouraged to believe that if violence were broken down into smaller subcategories, then, in that case it would be possible to categorize an act as violent, legitimate, necessary or useless, etc. The authors speak of categories such as "wartime violence" versus "peacetime violence", and "structural violence", which are presented along a "continuum that is socially incremental and often experienced by perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders – and even by victims themselves – as expected, routine, even justified." (2003: 22)

By analogy, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois present violence as similar to a chameleon; while it is true that it may always be changing color, an observer may determine at any given moment which color it is. I by contrast present violence more like circus mirror; one whose appearance is affected by endless distortions depending upon the perspective (time, place, context, etc). What is missed in these discussions shows that the challenge of categorizing violence is not properly grasped. The step forward is not to create subcategories and a continuum of infinite variations through the attempt to dessentializing violence, because this simply reproduces the essentialized view of violence and its meaning in the conceptualization of the newly created subcategories.

Being unable to cleanly categorize violence or acts of violence presents a challenge to the State since it relies upon the assumed common understanding of its actions. This is an assumption at the heart of the concept of the State, as it hopes to make decisions in one space and apply them via rule-based interventions in another. The very foundation of law is

based upon shared conceptions of order, legitimacy and justice presumed to be universal and constant across time and space.

The first section, *Conceptions of Violence* will contrast anthropological conceptions of violence, seen in Caldeira and Bourgois, with a discussion of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida's conceptions of violence. A second section, *The Birth and Death of El Cartucho* will introduce El Cartucho, from its emergence to its eventual demolition in a process of urban renovation. A third section, *Street Law*, will illustrate the multitude of meanings and interpretations ascribed to acts traditionally categorized as violent such as dismemberment and killing. A final section, *Materiality and Meaning*, will explore the implications of subjectively determined meaning to the State, supported by parallel discussions of the meaning of rules, codes and the Gift.

### **Conceptions of Violence**

In a *Critique of Violence* Walter Benjamin suggests thinking about violence as having either a 'lawmaking' or 'law-preserving' function (1978: 284). Such a framework permits conceiving the emergence of new, contradictory orders as well as the existence of multiple simultaneous orders. This framework coincides with Bourgois' discussion of the 'Regular displays of violence are essential for preventing rip-offs', which may be said to initially be lawmaking, when establishing the 'law' that enforced not being a target for rip-offs and subsequently, through its regular application, such regular displays of violence become law preserving in their maintenance of the established exigency.

However, central to any conception of law is its presumed adherence with a desired order, with justice. Derrida extends this analysis by questioning the grounds on which law gains its legitimacy.

*How to distinguish between the force of law [loi] of a legitimate power and the allegedly ordinary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have authorized itself by any anterior legitimacy, so that, in this initial moment, it is neither legal nor illegal – as others would quickly say, neither just nor unjust? (Derrida, 2001: 234)*

In line with Jacques Derrida's *Force of Law*, the present work challenges the possibility of intervening in the name of such a singular conception of justice due to the multiple and contradictory meanings ascribed to actions by different individuals. It is the possibility of a new emerging 'law' that interrogates the legitimacy of the existing law, additionally, considering that this emergence may be understood to become fully realized as a new law at different moments by different individuals. The individual exhibiting 'regular displays of

violence to prevent rip-offs' is likely to treat the ripoffs as an infraction of his own law before others recognize themselves it to be a law.

For some in El Cartucho, the description of a bloody quartering was an image of chaos and for others a confirmation of an order they were all too familiar with. The emerging space between law and justice does not so much result due to the existence of these two imagined orders (State law and Street law), but by the multiple and contradicting interpretations that individuals ascribed to an act, whether undertaken by the State or the drug lords.

This linking of violence with order is directly opposed to Caldeira's conceptions of violence. She states that, "Evil is ... conceived as being in opposition to reason" (Caldeira, 2000: 91) and violence is "arbitrary and unusual." (Caldeira, 2000: 19) Violence is thus seen as generating disorder and generally simply being meaningless. For her order is synonymous with justice, and an ideal exclusively maintained by the State; violence is correspondingly linked only with disorder and criminality.

Her discussion of police brutality speaks of the "violent and illegal means of controlling the population," (Caldeira, 2000: 139) as if 'violent' and 'illegal' were synonymous, in a refusal to recognize the role that violence plays in establishing and maintaining order. This perspective refuses to imagine the confluence of 'evil' *with* reason, insisting rather on the unquestionable power of reason to lead to the truth as determined from its own perspective.

For Caldeira, order is the very absence of violence, as violence creates disorder. The State and its law are seen as the very definition of order, and therefore violence results being seen as an act against the State. As Caldeira sees violence as a breaching of State order, she claims it serves to "delegitimize the institutions of order and legitimate the use of private, violent and illegal means of revenge." (Caldeira, 2000:38) As individuals suspect that the State is not maintaining order, they undertake private initiatives to supplant the role that the State was expected to fill. Order is presented as something clearly definable and shared amongst nearly everyone except for the delinquents.

For Caldeira, "The experience of violence always provokes changes," (Caldeira, 2000: 28) because it is seen as disorder and requires reaction as people attempt to reinstall order in their lives. By contrast, Bourgois shows how through the 'regular' and 'systematic' use of violence, it becomes 'effective' in regulating the behavior of others. Nonetheless, for Bourgois too, there is an order amongst the delinquents, clearly definable and shared by this subgroup.

Caldeira thus presents conceptual equivalences (State = order; violence = disorder) prevent the identification of the State as an agent of violence. This normative presupposition of the State as the unquestionable authority is challenged by identifying the establishment of a parallel orders and the very maintenance of order as violent. Bourgois presents a more complicated picture, with the implicit State order juxtaposed with the order of the street level

drug dealers. Violence does not always provoke change, as it may also be the measure by which order is maintained. This divide excises the normative perspective in Caldeira, but continues to see order as emanating from select centers (State and drug dealers) and uniformly understood as opposed to order both surging from and being given meaning by each individual.

What the experience of El Cartucho will show is that rather than these questions of whether or not an act of violence is legitimate or not, induces order or disorder, the focus must be *according to whom*.

### **Birth and Death of El Cartucho**

*'s of this year, Bogotá can say that it no longer has in its bowels a ghetto, an inferno, a place where a child once died in the streets, curled up, and in two days no one noticed and another one of 4 years was castrated. In its place there is a park where the children can once again be children; the elderly can peacefully sit on the benches under the sun and the only cartuchos<sup>5</sup> that remain are the flowers, as witnesses of the shame with which the city coexisted for nearly four decades. (Jimenez 2003)*

El Cartucho was believed by many to be a violently chaotic place, without any rhyme or reason. Many of the videos that appear online of El Cartucho have a voyeur-like feel as if one were watching a foreign species despite the mundane acts displayed of residents moving a box. (See for instance, VassalasColombia 2009) And photography of El Cartucho tends to show streets covered with a blanket of trash, and with groups of homeless people crowded around piles of cardboard as they pick through waste for objects that may bring some remuneration at recycling centers. Others lying on top of plastic bags surrounded by piles of trash while barefoot street children, beg a passerby for money. The buildings falling apart, windowless and with piles of bricks collapsed around the building they once were part of when it was still intact. The entire area seems to represent the result of a world shaken and left in disarray. The residents of El Cartucho seemed to live in another dimension foreign to everything as of yet known. Their daily habits, their appearance as they drift through the streets and sift through the trash for recyclables

The neighborhood had not always been like this, in fact, in less than the span of a century a radical transformation had taken place, “the brilliant architecture, the luxurious hotels and even the central market plaza were replaced by legends packed with drugs and blood.” (Morris, 2011: 23) The neighborhood of Santa Inés was once the envied abode of the Colombian elite, the neighborhood took on the name of El Cartucho and became considered by many a violent slum. The extent of the fall is evidenced by a 1998 report on

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<sup>5</sup> Cartucho has many meanings, flower, package, bullet cartridge



from the World Health Organization called El Cartucho “one of the largest, most violent and most dangerous drug centers of all Latin America.” (Morris, 2011: 52)

Most accounts tie this transformation into larger processes of fear and violence that the country as a whole was experiencing which resulted in a flood of immigration into the capital. People poured into the capital through a bus terminal in Santa Inés from across the country in search of work or fleeing from the violence affecting the country. “Some were fleeing the violence, others because they had no other economic alternatives and many more attracted by the promising opportunity to employ themselves as domestic servants in the ‘good houses’ of the capital.” (Morris, 2011: 35)

The convergence of this multitude of reasons led to a large wave of urbanization that transformed the capital, and particularly the neighborhood of Santa Inés because of its central location and concentration of elite residents. The neighborhood passed from being made of almost exclusively conservative old families of the city to a mosaic of images from across the country.

*The people that arrived from different places brought things typical from their regions that made the Santa Inés alleyways and sidewalks picturesque. The youth that studied in local schools saw the transformation of the neighborhood on par with its growth; surprised to observe how quickly its people no longer fit the mold of the conservative cachaco [name given to those from Bogotá], but also the paísa [name given to those from the department of 'ntioquia] business man with his briefcase, the llaneros [name given to those from the savannah] with their sombreros like the boyacenses [name given to those from the department of Boyacá] and other migrants from all the regions. (Morris, 2011: 31)*

The elite began to flee north escaping the new residents to what then were just the outskirts of the city, facilitated by the expansion of large roadways, like Avenue 10a and la Caracas. What few old residents remained mostly left the area after the 1948 assassination of presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in the center of the city. Gaitán was expected to win and his assassination set off the city wide riots known as el *Bogotazo* and the subsequent violent period called *la Violencia* (circa 1948-1958). The republican mansions were rented to the first interested party they could find. When returning to collect rent, many found their buildings inhabited by other tenants and their inquiries greeted with guns and the threat of violence. (Morris, 2011: 59)

With the exodus of the old residents of Santa Inés began the birth of El Cartucho as a center of social and moral decay taken over by drugs, violence and the homeless. The once republican mansions that had once housed the traditional old families of the city had visibly deteriorated exteriors were run over by drug addicts who used the different rooms to segregate consumption based upon the clientele’s intended consumption and capacity to pay. (Morris and Garzón, 2010: 105; 108)

With the passage of time, Santa Inés stopped being the lively center that everyone wanted to go to, and rather became a place to avoid. The area was taken over by,

*... vagabonds and those who live on the street, [those that] fall outside of 'civilization' and they have to be controlled. This can be perceived by the names used to designate them: the dirty one, the crazy one, El desechable<sup>6</sup>, the indigent, the druggie, and the prostitute. ' social representation of dirtiness and chaos... (Góngora and Suárez, 2008: 129)*

The residents of El Cartucho were described as wasting away their lives in a drugged out state of near unconsciousness. When cash was low, the body served as a substitute to be used as necessary for accessing the next fix. "Girls from 7 years old and up, adolescents, women, and even the elderly participated in prostitution such that the activity could be classified as one more means of subsistence." (Morris, 2011: 57)

This perception of the residents signified not only a sense of disdain from those well ordered individuals in modern society structured by the striking of the hour of the clock, but also generated a sense of fear. They were believed not even to value human life, and were said to relish the sight of blood. It was said, "... they were people who were only happy seeing blood" (Morris, 2011: 45) It was said that they killed frequently and randomly, whoever might be unlucky enough to cross their paths, simply for the pleasure of it.

These descriptions of rampant violence could be seen in the crime statistics of the small neighborhood. One Colombian writer explained his interest in El Cartucho as follows,

*Between 1993 and 1994 I looked at some NGO reports that talked about how there were 185 murders on the Street of El Cartucho, that is to say 185 murders in one hundred meters, on just one block, a statistic of blood, a statistic we could say of crime and injustice... it seemed incredible to me that this had not occurred in the Iraq war, the first one from 1991, or the one of Bush senior. This had not happened in the Balkan war, and it had not happened in Chechnya either, that is in none of these conflicts had they murdered 185 people in just one hundred meters. (Bernal 2012)*

Ingrid Morris, the Colombian anthropologist whose texts of El Cartucho were central to the elaboration of the present work, describes how she grew up with images of El Cartucho as a place to avoid, for her own safety.

*From the memories of my infancy, I always remember the image of people around me when someone having spoken of the center of Bogotá, between perceptions and memories, they would comment on the existence of a place where one could not go, that who crossed those blocks would not have luck that day; who went astray driving a car would not come out in one piece. (Morris, 2011: 13)*

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<sup>6</sup> The term, which literally means disposable object', will be returned to later in this section.

The mere passing through El Cartucho was believed to result in one's death, and thus better avoided at all costs. These people were said to have "neither God nor law" to keep their behavior within reasonable limits.

*' If of these people were concentrated in the area, and after certain hours it was very dangerous to pass through there, because the risk of some sort of attack was a sure thing... (Garciandía, 2007: 574)*

Even amongst some of those who stayed, avoidance was a key strategy. If economic necessity drove them to find a place to sleep in El Cartucho, precaution drove them to maintain their distance as much as possible.

*I have been here 22 years; I was in charge of a resting house on this street. It had 120 people and all of them consumed... What I saw was very little, I never went into the street, and I never went to 9th street, over that way towards 11th, I didn't go there either. I was always here on Tenth Street... (Morris, 2011: 37)*

In response to such realities, many observers turn their attention to causes and 'responsible parties', how could such a space be recovered? And as Caldeira described in São Paulo, for many in Bogotá too, avoiding the problem was insufficient. The stories of the neighborhood's violence and overall degeneration functioned to evidence the failings of the State. According to Carlos Alberto Garzón, Vice Director in the District Secretariat for Social Integration,

*"...obscurity, abandonment and the permitted deterioration of the area was due to the State failing to fulfill its responsibilities and meet the basic needs of the area, permitting the consolidation of a market for alcohol and psychoactive substances. If there had been, from the beginning, a check on this phenomenon, perhaps this would not have happened" (Morris, 2011:114)*

This failing was responded to by private initiatives ranging from seemingly innocuous forced 'voluntary' relocation of those found elsewhere to El Cartucho. The mildest forms of social cleansing manifested themselves in acts such as "kindly" forcibly relocating social undesirables to where they would be less onerous.

*...every child or street urchin which covered himself in bed sheets of cardboard, the vagabond eating leftovers or the drinker of "pipo" (a mix of antiseptic alcohol with soda) that ended up in front of a bank, was picked up and "kindly" delivered to [El Cartucho]. Such actions were called "hygiene campaigns" and the ordinary citizens thought of it as completely normal. (Morris and Garzón, 2010: 47)*

The physical discarding of social undesirables within El Cartucho was a determining force in shaping the space. Beyond those physically relocated, some moved there to avoid the social exclusion and rejection they faced outside El Cartucho. At least within the

boundaries of El Cartucho they could do as they wish without feeling the condescending glances of those passing by.

The imagery of El Cartucho seemed strongly to resemble that of a landfill, in both physical and social terms. The streets were strewn with trash and the people were seen as moving litter. The inhabitants were collectively known as *desechables*<sup>7</sup>. The term is a “terrible Colombian expression... used to describe these people that are completely forgotten and abandoned by the society and the system. They do not exist, and in practice are the victims of “social cleansing.” (Lopez, 2004: 9) However, the progression of this practice combined with a reification of disdain for those categorized as *desechables*, which lead to increasingly violent practices.

*... the Cartucho area became a neighborhood synonymous with “social cleansing.” In the late 1980s and early 1990s death squads with names like Muerte a Gamines (Death to Street Children) acted in accord with local businesses and with the help of special police units, laid the base for urban “social cleansing.” Wearing ski masks and carrying automatic weapons, the death squad members rode motorcycles in twos throughout the poorest areas of Bogotá, shooting randomly at the homeless. In the first six months alone in 1989, for example, over forty bodies of homeless people (known as *desechables* or the “expendables”) appeared along roads in Bogotá. (Donovan, 2002: 21)*

As Donovan indicates, in many cases, social cleansing was undertaken with more or less tacit approval of the State. The full range of socially unaccepted persons who filled the streets of this small neighborhood, including drug dealers, drug addicts, prostitutes, transvestites, beggars, assassins, contraband dealers as well as those too poor to live elsewhere (shoe shiners, street vendors etc) were themselves seen as a threat to order. The degree of the disdain is perhaps best illustrated by the belief that they were “[t]hose nobodies that cost less than the bullet that kills them. (Morris, 2011: 83)

## **Street Law**

This section begins by looking at the *jibaros*, the head drug dealers, and the organizational structure that they built around their business. The highly organized nature of the Jibaros serves to question the supposed opposition between violence and order. Subsequently, I will focus on narratives of the meaning ascribed to violence, of how killings in El Cartucho were seen by some as a natural consequence of the breaching of norms. This section will end with the analysis of three narratives of a popular myth of El Cartucho, to highlight the multiple and contradictory meanings ascribed to the same event.

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<sup>7</sup> The term *desechable* literally translates to refuse or disposable object

*Just one block from the largest police station of the country, the Presidential Guard Battalion and Forensic Medicine, these streets had other owners and were governed by the law of the criminal underworld. Its decrees signed in blood. (Morris, 2011: 55)*

Rather than seeing El Cartucho as a place of disorder it is illuminating to see it as the site of an alternative order. In *Street Corner Society*, William Foote Whyte makes a similar observation,

*The problem of sociology in the slum (as elsewhere) is to determine the inter-relations of individuals within the in-group and then to observe the relations between the groups that make up the society... Proceeding by this route, he will find many evidences of conflict and maladjustment, but he will not find the chaotic conditions once thought to exist throughout this area. (Whyte, 1943: 39)*

This is not intended to glorify or praise the happenings of El Cartucho, but simply to recognize that amidst what appears as rampant, meaningless violence, there is a meaning communicated through the violence that is understood by many of its inhabitants, albeit with their own personal variations. In El Cartucho, the Jibaros owned the streets. “Each boss had at his command 20 well armed body guards with a license to kill.” (Morris, 2011: 55) Their will was the law of the land, and no one dared to question them – and those few that did were soon killed. “The Jibaro is the law amidst the “chaos” of the street. Breaking his “law” is punishable by death or exile.” (Góngora and Suárez, 2008: 131)

Within El Cartucho, there were different Jibaros, who each split up the neighborhood into their own parcels:

*...12th ' venue between 6a and 7a belonged to "Gancho ' zul" [Blue Hook], that is to say Luis Calderon. From 7a to 8a along 12th avenue was the territory of "El Rey" [The King]. From 8a street to 9a, along Twelfth ' venue belonged to the Martinez and was known as "Gancho Verde" [Green Hook]. Thirteenth ' venue, between 9a and 10a, was the domain of El Loco Calderon. From 8a to 9a, along 11th avenue was exclusively El Tigre's [The Tiger]. Each one of the bosses made sure he was respected; whoever failed to do so would die. (Morris, 2011: 55)*

Each Jibaro distributed his own product and unique spaces emerged under the shaping of each one. Clientele would go to the territory of one or the other Jibaros dependent upon his preferences. Additionally, the Jibaros aimed to protect the good name of their product and to avoid falsification and contraband of their product by marking their packages of drugs.

*The label included the word “hook”, and the color of the label, with the name of the Jibaro from which it came. For example, crack from los Cruz was identifiable by “yellow hook”. ' nd to avoid “contraband” or falsification, it also said “grey door”, which indicated the coordinates of where one could buy without intermediaries. (Morris and Garzón, 2010: 108)*

Rather than chaos, what is observed is a very regimented space split up by blocks and with clear ownership and rules for each. The Jibaros were not the only clearly defined role in the organization, only the head and therefore the most prominent. In addition, there were *taquilleros* who served as clerks at the point of sale of drugs and the *compañero* who provided security for the *taquilleros* albeit unlike the bodyguards of the Jibaros without carrying firearms. There were even *contadores* within the Jibaro organization that kept the finances in order. (Morris, 2011: 56)

One former resident describes how having been born in El Cartucho he adopted the ways of the area. “From a young age, I was born and raised in [El Cartucho], I saw how things worked, I learned to steal.” And the child extends his point by describing how a child’s role is primarily of that of a pickpocket due to his small and stealthy hands (GuiGui, 2012: 3:43-4:05) For both of these individuals, their surroundings provided structure and a clear example of ‘how things worked’. They do not describe chaos, but rather an order and a way of looking at the world that contrasts sharply with the view commonly held outside El Cartucho.

The sharp contrast between these shared understandings begins to emerge from a story of the *Bayona Cacique*, in what resembles a local version of Russian roulette.

*I didn't like one of those Caciques, "The Bayona Cacique", he was like "the bad one," he had many soldiers who watched his back... That guy would grab his pistol and drunk in the cantina, would peer outside the door and see those "ñeros<sup>8</sup>" and he began counting: 1, 2, 3, 4 and boom he would shoot, 1, 2, 3, 4 and boom he would shoot, and so on, he would simply and candidly drinking whisky and smoking junk as he had his soldiers to watch his back. No one defended themselves because he was the cacique and besides, we were all doped, when one is drugged one isn't anyone.... ' fter killing 4 or 6, he pulled out 20 or 30 small packs of cocaine and threw them into the air "it was impressive how everyone around there would rush over to try to get some... whoever picked one up had to take the cadavers to the container or to have them quartered. (Morris, 2011: 45)*

Despite how someone from outside might judge such a scenario, there is a remarkable order, a set of shared social understandings and behaviors despite what might be seen as good reason to behave differently. Each person present seems fully aware of the stakes for which they are playing as well as the prize and responsibility of the victors.

A series of possible traditional interpretations fail to provide sufficient explanatory power. Some outsiders may claim that the drug addicts care nothing about their own well-being and just seek to satiate their addiction and they care nothing about their well being. Such a claim would need to explain why they do not simply rush the Cacique; completely incapable of waiting for him to play his deadly game of chance. The drug addicts far

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<sup>8</sup> A derogatory term for the poor and/or inhabitants of the street

outnumber the caciques, and could easily overrun them should they attack in a craze over the tantalizing drugs. Alternatively, others may say that the law of the survival would tend to suggest that drug addicts run away at the firing of gunshots for their own safety. Instead, each waits patiently throughout the game and then rushes over to pick up the packets of cocaine; fully understanding that in exchange they will be responsible for dragging away the cadavers of the unfortunate addicts. What can be seen is a strict ordering, a sense that this is how things should be, or perhaps inevitably are. The Cacique's lottery, his Russian roulette of sorts, could bring the addicts what they seek or their death. Of this they seem clearly aware, none are described as shocked by the events taking place, not even the narrator.

The apparent order here described is clearly jarring for outsiders, and so understandably, many were warned of the dangers to the area, because their mere passage through the zone was surely going to result badly "... the possibility of coming out alive was minimal for someone who was not from the area and was not familiar with the cultural codes of the area." (García, 2007: 574) Yet, in such a regimented space, killings were interpreted as following a clear logic, rather than as meaningless. As one resident recalls El Cartucho, "Deaths and deaths, because there was a lot of violence, in El Cartucho there was a lot of violence because of infractions, of the people," (Guigui, 2012: 3:00-3:10) the death is perceived to be the fault of the deceased, punishment for his infraction, rather than seeing the killer as having done any wrong. It is as if the killing is simply part of the greater system, the killer is just fulfilling his role as would be expected. It was rather the deceased who should have known better. Perhaps much as one would not hold a prison guard for locking up thousands of inmates for the crimes the judicial system convicted them of committing.

One response to a killing was documented in a newspaper as, "They killed Mastrangelo yesterday on 11<sup>th</sup> street, for squealing, because here one has to walk straight, neither towards one side nor the other, otherwise they'll think you're signaling (or squealing), and bam..." (Rubio 1991) Killing in El Cartucho was not a completely chaotic and inexplicable phenomenon, but often rather understood as retribution for infractions. For many, if someone was killed it was likely for a reason, he surely was in some kind of debt that they had not been able to pay off, and so, they paid that debt with their life.

What is being shown is that for many in El Cartucho, violence is not "chaotic", "arbitrary and unusual" as Caldeira described. Instead, there is a clear reason and meaning interpreted to the violence; a message of what is permitted, what is not, and what the consequences are for infringing upon Street Law. However, even so, this message is not universally nor uniformly understood. To clarify, the point is not to condone the violence, nor to suggest that those that see the violence as chaotic, should become 'enlightened' and adapt to the cultural codes of the area. The point

simply is to show how violence is used and understood by different actors, not just as the unexplainable but very much as a message itself.

In exploring this Street Law, Góngora and Suárez found that,

*... the most important thing had to do with the prohibition of speaking about how accounts are settled and regarding delinquency: 'I neither be a rat, nor do I know,' 'toys are not to be lent' and 'who owes nothing, fears nothing' are the colloquial expressions in the street slang. (Góngora and Suárez, 2008: 131)*

The 'law of silence' is found repeatedly amongst the discussions from within El Cartucho. And here, Góngora and Suárez present colloquial expressions that have solidified as evidence of this known mandate. Beyond the warning of squealing as a rat, the other saying seems to serve as reassurance, 'owe nothing, fear nothing' as the converse that there is much to be feared in owing something in El Cartucho. Without debts however, it would appear that one should have nothing to fear.

Perhaps the clearest example of the reason behind death in El Cartucho comes from a first hand account of someone who watched his friend killed in front of him.

*... the law of the street is inflexible and patient: "those who have it coming will get theirs." Deaths occur here on a daily basis. Many times they've killed people while they were talking to me. Four years ago, I was drinking around here in El Cartucho. I was drinking with a friend. Suddenly some other guy came in and told him: "Come out here" The young man walked outside and the other guy without saying anymore words, right then and there, shot him three times. That's the law here." (El Tiempo: 05/03/2001, as cited by Góngora and Suárez, 2008: 132)*

As Góngora and Suárez go on to explain that, 'The passivity of the young man in the story conveys that he understood the "instructive message".' (Góngora and Suárez, 2008: 132) Similar to the story of the Cacique's lottery is this story of one man apparently knowingly submitting to his own execution. As Góngora and Suárez explain, while outsiders may interpret this as chaotic, for others it is part of a system of meaning, and this violence is an example of how world follows an expected script. Those with debts will pay sooner or later, and that, in El Cartucho, they will pay with their life. It is with this context that the common street saying "owe nothing, fear nothing" carries meaning.

It should be clarified nonetheless that while El Cartucho was understood to have clear physical boundaries it is not the case that everyone within them universally and uniformly understood acts in the same manner. 'Street law' and State law thus represent systems of orderings but neither appears to be perfectly coinciding with the corresponding spaces they are believed to regulate. There were individuals in El Cartucho who recognized the order of 'Street law' whereas other residents rejected it.



I will now turn to a common myth of El Cartucho, that of *El Descuartizador*, a sort of 'Jack the Ripper' legend that removed the limbs of victims leaving just the trunk. I select three accounts of *El Descuartizador* to show how the specific manner in which the myth is talked about results in a substantially different meaning attributed to the myth. Representations vary wildly, from it having "traits of a divine figure... that emerges from the darkness of the city night like a phantom" (Garciandía, 2007: 595), to being in others the work of single man.

In the first account, *El Descuartizador* is single man, known as 'Whale' or Valle de Cauca man.'

*... there was a place on 9th Street with 14 called 'the CONTAINER', and the dead bodies were thrown in there and were only noticed when the garbage was taken out, but many of these corpses were chopped up and put in garbage bags. Of these many were found with bullet wounds, stabbed, beaten...[young body collectors] were given about 2000 pesos [1.2 USD] to take out [the bodies] in bags and there was one old man known as 'WHALE' or 'Valle de Cauca man' ...this man killed a lot of people and when he gave the order to get rid of a body and the boy did not do it, he killed him too and sent for another to get rid of both corpses. (Ritterbusch, 2001: 159)*

Here *El Descuartizador* is a real man, not some mythical monster. Nonetheless, he is presented as the hardened criminal *par excellence*, without a trace of humanity. Another version as told by one resident, Benjamin Rengifo, extends this image, from hardened criminal to bloodthirsty beasts.

*One of the atrocities I saw left a mark on me for life, and when I remember every once in a while I begin to cry. It was these four girls from the "high", "elegant chicks", between 15 and 17 years old. From good families... since that's where one could get the "pills" or weed, that sort of thing... and they apparently couldn't find any anywhere else and for this reason came to El Cartucho one day, around 7 in the evening to look for their "weed". I was blowing up by a recycling bodega... I noticed when they asked frighteningly "got some weed?" And someone came out and said, 'over this way', 'over this way'... that's where they "lost everything" because they were raped by about 60 men. Because this same person that came out began shouting, whoever wants to pay, over here there's "fresh meat!!" There they disappeared and with a chainsaw they killed them, and they were diced and quartered afterwards. Believe me! There was even some blood that splattered onto me." (Morris, 2011: 48)*

Fresh meat. Diced and quartered. Imagery that was all too frequent in El Cartucho. This story of the young girls being killed by a mob with a chainsaw seems much more chaotic than the previous one, yet both depict figures who killed for no apparent reason – although a class dimension may enter as Benjamin himself considers it relevant to highlight that these were "elegant chicks" from the upper classes. Violence represented in this manner may certainly appear as what Caldeira calls, "a traumatic event [that] divides history

into “before” and “after” (2000: 27). Even much later, just the memory of his experience makes Benjamin cry.

However, a third account presents *El Descuartizador* quite differently.

*I myself have seen it. My boss, Sargent D, once grabbed a woman that he said had ratted him out and made him lose six million pesos [about \$3300], and over a billiards pool table quartered her with a chain saw. They removed her arms, her legs, her head and only left her trunk. And there they drank beer and alcohol. Afterwards they put the parts in bags and they paid some indigent to throw away the bag in the dumpster. (F 57) (García, 2007: 593-594)*

Rather than an act of an unexplainable psychopath or bloodthirsty beasts, the violence here is inscribed with meaning. It does not cease to be brutal or gruesome, but there is a clear cause, “a woman that he said had ratted him out and made him lose six million pesos”. By identifying this cause the act does not necessarily cease to be seen from the outside as unacceptable, but it does appear less chaotic and on some level understandable. Not understandable in the sense of ‘reasonable’, but the existence of a cause makes it comprehensible, it conveys to the listener the message that ‘ratting out may get one quartered’.

The reaction of this 57-year-old woman giving this last account is quite different from Benjamin’s. Whereas one gets the sense that Benjamin avoided at all costs being with or associating those he saw kill those four girls, it seems from this last account that she continued to work for her boss.

A spectrum emerges from these stories, where the perpetrators are presented from beast-like to calculating villains. Yet a shared conception and collusion by many members – even in the second case where a message is sent ‘fresh meat’ which the others understand, and there is no discussion of fighting or disagreement amongst the ‘60 men’ that raped the four women and then cut them to pieces with a chain saw.

Likewise, beyond the perspective of the narrator of each of these memories, there are the different roles played by the actors within the scene. Each understands differently what is taking place, and while there certainly exists some overlap in comprehension that permits a degree of coordination, each follows their script for their own reasons, their own understandings of what might happen if they do not. These stories, and the implicit shared understanding of the actors get lost when removed from its context. Encountering the remains in garbage bags requires weaving a story too disturbing to envision what might have pushed an individual to go so far.

From the perspective from within an ‘in-group’ as presented by the account of the 57-year-old woman, the actions clearly communicate meaning. The story thus far begins to

deviate from Caldeira's description of the violence of São Paulo. This order is similarly conveyed by film maker Stanislas Guigui's documentary work of El Cartucho.

*But when people accepted me, we had a lot of fun. Most of the gangs and people there know me really well, and understood why I wanted to make the film. I ask a question at the start of it – who are the real thieves, the people or the system? Corruption is rife and the street people are killed by the paramilitaries. I was trying to bring a little justice to them. (Smyth and Laurent, 2011)*

Once Guigui was accepted, El Cartucho was a place where he could work with a camera but also have “a lot fun” with the gangs and people of El Cartucho.

Finally, a discussion of violence in El Cartucho could not be complete without reflecting on the decision of the then mayor of Bogotá, Enrique Peñalosa in 1998, to demolish El Cartucho as part of a process of urban renovation. The elimination of the slum was not only supposed to stomp out the illegal activity of the slum, but also to make place for ‘Third Millennium Park’ a place, where, according to the city's director of Social Wellbeing, Gilma Jimenez , children could play and the elderly could sun themselves. Over the course of the subsequent 10 years, over 600 buildings were demolished and some 10,000 residents forcibly moved.

*Peñalosa adopted draconian methods to deal with these problems... he dismantled the neighborhood of El Cartucho, arguably the landmark instance of this decay, located just two blocks from the political and administrative center of Bogotá. The administration relocated 10,000 residents and built a large new park, the Third Millennium Park, where their homes had been. Deploying all his office's institutional powers to pursue the initiative, Peñalosa invoked eminent domain measures and passed decrees to avoid resistance from both recalcitrant indigent organizations and real estate developers. Asked how he succeeded politically in such controversial plans, he simply acknowledged, 'It was simple: the law was on my side.' (Pasotti, 2010: 174)*

His justification, *'It was simple: the law was on my side'* evidences clearly the gap between law and justice to be explored further in the next section. Here law was simply a tool, no explanation or justification beyond itself deemed necessary, even in the context of displacing 10,000 people from their homes that would soon be demolished. Law here failed to define the contours of justice and by contrast permitted Peñalosa to place limits on the moral bindings that might have otherwise constrained him.

The mayor's office offered 100,000 COP (about \$55) for each squared meter but most residents refused considering the proposal offensive. (Semana 2000) Many of the residents, as squatters, lacked formal documentation of their ownership of the property and even of their status as citizens. El Cartucho was their home and had provided them a space to make their lives – independent of what property values suggested, the streets of El Cartucho were worth more to them than the pitiful money offered to them by the city.

The demolishing of the neighborhood involved night raids and armed resistance (Semana 2000) on behalf of the local residents. Gilma Jimenez stated that, "Because of the conditions of deterioration of their parents, around 600 children had to be removed from their homes - if one could call the place they lived that - for their protection." (Jimenez 2003) According to whom and by what standard were these children removed from their parents' side? She states that the entire process was undertaken with "total transparency of what was going to happen" (Jimenez 2003), and yet the question that this work builds up to would be 'transparency' as defined and understood by whom? This process of urban renovation was presented as in the best interest for everyone, but this affirmation of what was in the best interest for all was decided from one perspective and imposed upon others.

Replacing El Cartucho with Third Millennium Park did not solve the problems that the Mayor's Office saw. The park has not become the center of leisure of the city, where old and young come out together to enjoy the sun. And the dispersal of the population that previously inhabited the population has produced *Cartuchitos*, or little Cartuchos, such as the Bronx and the L.

## **Materiality and Meaning**

Based on this multiplicity of meanings ascribed to a single event it becomes nearly impossible to anticipate how an act will be interpreted and how it will be incorporated into each individual's framework of making sense of the world. Much less to hope that everyone will understand and respond exactly the same; all this becoming harder the larger the number of people involved.

In this vein, I rely heavily on Derrida's critique of the possibility that a system of rules might be able to create a uniform effect in others. He indicates that, 'A gesture' of friendship' or 'of politeness' would be neither friendly nor polite if it were purely and simply to obey a ritual rule." (Derrida, 1995: 7) Friendship and politeness cannot be determined by a set of rules because their quintessential aspect implies a going beyond rules and obligation.

This can be seen as well in John Frow's discussion of the gift.

*There is nothing inherent in objects that designates them as gifts; objects can almost always follow varying trajectories. Gifts are precisely not objects at all, but transactions and social relations... As an order of social relations the gift economy is intimately bound up with the forms of the person as they are diversely constituted and as it constitutes them. (Frow, 1997: 124)*

The gift carries meaning beyond simply the material object given, because it is wrapped up in the person and context in which they are given. This is not however,

particular to the gift, but rather to all interactions between individuals. As has been argued in the present work, the same applies to an act of violence. An act of violence cannot be easily determined by the material or physical manifestations of an event, but through the context, the actors and their perceived means and intentions. As a gift may be, in another place or time, simply an object given; an act of violence may be seen as legitimate justice in another.

This does not however necessarily degenerate into a type of moral relativism where anything and everything is justifiable because no grounds can be established to contradict another. Instead, the implication presented here is that the grounds of justification are themselves dependent upon the context. This critique argues against an attempt to use rules to classify violence intend to provide a framework that may be uniformly employed across space and time.

However this elimination of ambiguity depoliticizes interactions, reducing individuals to rule following machines. Whereas the interests and interpretations of individuals might evolve through the very process of interaction with each other, the rule is fixed and prevented from evolving in the process. This in fact, is the very basis of planning and by extension, the State. In his critique of the State, James Scott criticizes it for having a high modernist ideology, which he says is

*... best conceived as a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws. (Scott, 1998:4)*

But it is important to highlight that this belief in rule-based change extends much wider than simply the confines of the State. Furthermore, reviewing his recommendation for planners to “take small steps” (Scott, 1998: 345), evidences that he has misidentified the problem. His analysis seems to smoothly shift between planners in forestry and social engineering, as if trees and individuals were comparable objects for a planer to arrange and manipulate with his rule-based plans. “Planning smaller” may reduce the scale of the problems associated with this kind of planning, but it does nothing to the problem itself – which relates to the challenge of any action, rule, or material object evoking the same meaning for a multitude of people.

There is a tendency to search out for the right institutional design, the right set of rules, with which to shape society. But implicit in this search is a belief that has been challenged by the present work, since everyone will interpret such a set of rules subjectively. The attempt to deliver a single, unchanging message across space and

time is confronted with the challenge of constant reinterpretations. This recalls the juxtaposition set forth in the introduction of Colombia being known as the oldest democracy in Latin America while simultaneously being afflicted by an internal conflict for sixty years. In the most expansive sense, Roberto Mangabeira Unger has said that “the first hope of the democrat [is] to find the area of overlap between the conditions of practical progress and the requirements of individual emancipation.” (Unger, 1998: 5) However in other accounts, as in Adam Przeworski’s *Minimalist Democracy*, (1991) the term is simply meant to connote a system of elections. This latter definition is how the ideal of democracy is reduced to a procedural characterization.

Some may be tempted at this point to ask then for a practical solution to the enigma posed, “What then can the State do? How should it plan differently?” Unfortunately I do not have easy 4 bullet points to offer as Scott did. I believe, that the naturalness of this sort of question should be understood as the degree to which we take the State as an unquestionable given. Despite whatever criticisms might arise, it is often presented as necessary to ward off the greater evils of chaos that one is expected to believe would arise in its absence. As Pierre Bourdieu however reminds us that, “Every established order tends to produce the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.” (Pierre Bourdieu as cited in Harvey, 1987: 279)

Through the case of El Cartucho I have hoped to convincingly show that the absence of the State does not imply chaos. And in fact, a disturbingly predictable order can be discerned. However, ‘order’ is subjectively determined, rather than an essentialized aspect of a set of social relations; what one may see as order another as chaos. The challenge that this poses for intervention of a depersonalized, rule based nature arises as each individual interprets the intervention from different and potentially contradicting sets of criteria.

## **Conclusion**

The residents of El Cartucho lived very trying circumstances. The present work has tried to communicate how complicated the area was, focusing primarily on the rampant violence. Throughout this work, I have made every effort to assure the reader that by identifying an order in El Cartucho I was neither intending to glorify it nor to advocate against intervention on any grounds.

Many who are familiar with El Cartucho and other similar miseries end up asking for a greater State presence. In fact, doing otherwise is more often associated with the ‘cold-hearted’ who would prefer to be allowed to continue their path without having to worry about

the misfortune of others. What I have tried to highlight here is how the State creates an arbitrary order, and how this order is based upon violence, only that as with anything else, individuals become accustomed to it and begin to see it as natural.

The central idea is that any act can be interpreted in many different ways from each observer. When something occurs, an individual might see it one-way, another might see it a second way, and yet another would see it a third way. This is a significant problem for the State that aspires to act in a just manner, yet detached from context and based simply on rule and laws of what it deems to be right. It hides behind the law as if it were justice itself, without considering what infuses the law with justice. If the law's claim to being just is simply because it is the law, all sorts of violence and infamy will be hidden behind the following of the law, which may only appear when two 'orders' collide as was evident in El Cartucho with State law and street law.

I do not elaborate an alternative vision, but the challenge here set forth is for a re-imagination of our personal relations, of how we might live without the State. Its presence perverts much of how we relate to one another, facilitating an attitude of the variety "That's not my problem, the State should intervene there," or 'such and such is a place where *the State* has failed to do X' All of this leads to a reduced need to speak to one another, to know each other, of helping each other directly, which subsequently leads to a downward spiral of distrust, indifference, disdain and hatred for the Other, as well as the apparent justification for more intervention on behalf of the alienating force of the State. We should be cautious of having trust in a higher order to compensate for the lack of trust directly between individuals.

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