
Violence and the production of space

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Violence has quite a peculiar standing in the social sciences. Despite the large number of discussions, critiques and literature dedicated to it, several of its dimensions still remain under-theorized. Among them is the relation between violence and space. As Stéphane Rosière (2007) observed in the inaugural paper of the first issue of the journal *L'Espace politique*, "violence has been neglected by contemporary geography while it monopolizes, but in a certain way, the reflection in geopolitics. [...] violence remains too often considered as an effect of power, but not really as a central object." In this regard, it is interesting to note that Claude Raffestin's seminal work on power takes little interest in violence, of which he offers a very narrow definition by considering it essentially as "an extreme and brutal form of power" (2019, p. 156).

Things have started to change lately, as the spatial dimensions of violence have become the object of significant attention and conceptualization (Springer and Le Billon, 2016; Tyner and Inwood, 2014, p. 771)—pushing some to consider that a "spatial turn" to research in the field of violence has occurred. This special issue contributes in two ways to the articulation of the production of space and violence—and to the

implications for spatial justice. First, by bringing together very varied contributions from both an empirical and a theoretical point of view, this special issue attests that the notion of violence occupies, if often implicitly, an important place in critical works in human geography, with an especially important role being taken by new generations of researchers. Rather than thinking of this issue as presenting an exhaustive panorama, we think of it as a thematic and analytical “window” that invites the reader to pursue and deepen geographical approaches to the notion of violence.

Second, the aim of this issue is to show that recent research on violence is indicative of some of the major driving forces of the current production of space (a notion we discuss below). In particular, in the framework of the editorial positioning of the JSSJ journal, this issue wishes to show that thinking about the relation between violence and space allows us to better address spatial injustices in general.

Foundational themes on the spatial dimensions of violence

The spatial dimensions of violence have traditionally been investigated from two main angles. First, violence has long been explicitly at the center of scholarly works on war, that is, armed and ethnic conflicts, either at the local scale (Dorier-Apprill and Ziavoula, 1995; Walraet and Yéré, 2008) or from a more geopolitical perspective (Chauvin and Magrin, 2020; Magrin, 2008; Turco, 2007). In these works, (armed) violence is mainly understood as directly stemming from power relations, often with the state and its means of coercion and control at the center of the analysis (Clochard, 2007). Such scholarly works often stress that physical conflicts produce specific spaces of violence, such as “camps”, for instance (Cambrézy, 2001; 2007; Doraï, 2013), or specific spatial processes, such as mass displacements (Rosière, 2006) or shanty towns (Bourgey, 1985).

Second, cities have also been privileged spaces for the study of violence. In a way, urban sociology was born out of attempts to understand how industrial urbanization in Europe and North America was affecting sociality, including by fostering anonymity, animosity, alienation and violence (Mubi Brighenti and Pavoni, 2019). The “ecological” approach of the Chicago school of sociology, and above all Louis Wirth’s reflection on “urbanism as a way of life” (1938), crystallized these ideas: the urban had become, and in many senses still is, the place of choice for the exploration of the relations between space and (criminal) violence.

The neoliberal turn of the 1980s and the postindustrial transition in the Global North, together with urban theory becoming more global, have led to a diversification of scholarly work relating to violence and urban development. The production of

global and world cities, for instance, has been described as a violent process implying the exclusion of an important part of urban dwellers in the name of modernization and economic development (Burte and Kamath, 2017; Sassen, 2014). For others, violence—and its corollary, “fear”—favors the spread of specific urban developments, such as gated communities (Colombijn, 2018). Violence is thus considered to be a key determinant of various forms of exclusion and urban fragmentation (Coy, 2006; Landman and Schönreich, 2002; Low, 2001). In the Global South as well, the city is increasingly depicted as a space where specific forms of social violence take place, or as a privileged reflection of broader societal violence (see for instance Bourdin and Bertrand Chancelier, 2019; Calas, 1998; Dory, 2018; Folio, 2007; Ninnin, 2014; Pourtier, 2000; Théry, 2018).

Finally, it’s also important to emphasize that violence today is not considered the exclusive preserve of urban processes, as highlighted by the contributions of Mara Duer and Estefania Martinez Esguerra in this special issue. A number of studies have analyzed the various forms of violence that occur in rural areas in relation, for instance, to forced displacement and land grabbing (see for instance Baviskar, 1999; Hall, Hirsch and Li, 2011), the exploitation of resources (see Le Tourneau, 2020), and social conflicts in general (see for instance Krishnan, 2005).

Whether in geography or urban studies, the literature shows that the notion of violence has often been understood as a physical act or a tangible process and that the notion of urban space is mostly understood as a “container” of this violence. In the continuity of this conception of the relation between space and violence, other scholarly works defend the idea that space may be a form of violence in itself that is often encapsulated by the notion of “violence of space” or “spatial violence” (see Forde, 2022; Kolovou Kouri et al., 2021; Shaw, 2019). These expressions often point to deliberated organizations of space that are created to maintain a violent social order, to perpetuate social inequalities, or to physically exclude specific socioeconomic groups. However, such spatial approaches to violence may be problematic when they suggest that space and places are “in themselves” capable of, or may bear, violence. The idea that specific spaces can be violent also recalls the idea that certain parts of the world, or some spaces—quintessentially, the city—have a greater propensity for violence than others, or are inherently conducive to violence, an idea that has lasted for a long time in the Global South, for example (see Gallais, 1994, for instance).¹

1. An idea, incidentally, that may be implicitly reproduced even by simply using the Global South as the context of choice for investigating violence—an approach that is dominant in the field of urban violence, for instance (for further discussions of this problem, see Glass, Seybolt and Williams, 2022; Pavoni and Tulumello, 2023).

A “spatial turn” in the study of violence

As anticipated, the study of the spatial dimensions of violence has experienced important transformations during the last two decades. Inspired by several decades of philosophical and anthropological critiques that have unraveled how violence exists and acts in multiple, subtle and pervasive ways, geography and urban studies have looked beyond the reductive understanding of violence as the use of force (i.e., direct, physical violence). Relying on various thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Johan Galtung, Slavoj Žižek and Frantz Fanon, scholars have paid particular attention to the two interrelated notions of structural and symbolic/cultural violence—which refer, respectively, to the forms of violence resulting from the way structures impose unequal power and chances in life and to the cultural/symbolic forms that make structural violence invisible or justifiable.

Structural violence, a concept developed by Johan Galtung (1969), complemented by, and indeed complementary to, notions like “abstract” (Tyner and Inwood, 2014), “colonial” (Fanon, 1961) and “silent” (Watts, 1983) violence, is crucial in order to make the relations between space and violence visible. Political ecologists, for instance, have shown how the structurally violent nexus between race, class and space is at the core of the variegated impacts of pollution and environmental destruction through multiple forms of “slow violence” (Davies, 2022).

The lenses of “infrastructural violence” (Rodgers and O’Neill, 2012) have been developed to enrich the theorization of structural violence by emphasizing some of its concrete, spatial materializations. Because infrastructures—understood in broad terms as the dispositives and apparatuses that connect things, spaces and people—are increasingly crucial to contemporary sociopolitical arrangements, analyzing infrastructures reveals how “relationships of power and hierarchy translate into palpable forms of physical and emotional harm” (ibid., p. 402). Infrastructural violence, in short, considers how (structural) violence “flow[s] through material infrastructural forms” (ibid., p. 405).

The notion of symbolic violence has also played a leading role in the renewal of studies about the spatial dimensions of violence, particularly in the Francophone world. For instance, Marie Morelle and Fabrice Ripoll (2009) use the notion of symbolic, or “moral”, violence that researchers may face in their research fields. In her research on street children in African cities, Marie Morelle (2006) also distinguishes physical and visible forms of social violence from more “invisible” ones that unfold in family contexts or with regard to health issues. In his work on Jakarta, Jérôme Tadié (2006) makes violence a central geographical concept. He criticizes the “ethnocentrism” and normative propensity of sociological work on criminality and rejects the idea that

violence is just another social problem. However, by analyzing different forms of violence—not only physical, but also structural and symbolic violence, for instance—at various scales (from the national to the very local), he argues that violence is an integral part of urban life, social struggles, and strategies for appropriating resources in urban territories. In this context, violence is understood as a dynamic that is intrinsic to the power relations that organize social relations and struggles in urban contexts, which “allows a better understanding of the city and the urban society as a whole” (ibid., p. 11).

While the literature that is broadly influenced by structural and symbolic violence has contributed to exploring how space mediates pervasive forms of violence, a complementary field is that which considers how violence acts in and through different spatialities.

The “new” spatialities of violence

The renewal of research on the different spatial dimensions of violence covers many research topics in geography and urban studies. Developments in migration studies (see Luna Vives in this special issue), for instance, have integrated wider understandings of the notion of violence (e.g., physical, intimate, gendered) related to different forms of state and population controls and to the way individuals and families are experiencing migration processes (Bachelierie, 2020; Faret, 2020; Quiminal and Blum Le Coat, 2013; Schmoll, 2020). And the notion of violence continues to be questioned in another subject area, the study of the evolution of social movements and their strategies of contestation (in France, see for instance Chevalier and Sibertin-Blanc, 2021; Egon and Laslaz, 2020; Gondreau and Bridier, 2020). Research on issues concerning police violence (see also the Public Space section of this special issue), climate-related actions and identity-based struggles is now increasingly contributing to work on the “geographies of violence”. The uprisings in June and July 2023 in France demonstrated once again that violence is at the heart of both the mechanisms of exclusion and the social struggles against spatial injustice.

Some scholars have also shown how urban development processes and the making of the city and its imaginary are generating various forms of violence (Handel, 2021; Rodgers, 2016). Others have also recently pointed to the rise of new forms of violence—such as “financial violence” for instance—which echoes broader changes in municipal governance, housing production and financialization.

The renewal of critical theories has also nourished the diversification of works on the spatial dimensions of violence, especially with regard to the exclusion of specific

classes and specific gendered and racialized groups (Davis, 2020; Fields and Raymond, 2021; Jolivet, Khelifi and Vogler, 2021; Kern and Mullings, 2013; Najib, 2019; Recoquillon, 2020). Gendered and feminist approaches have prioritized individual experiences as well as the use and representations of specific spaces, such as the street, or public and domestic spaces; see also the Public Space section of this special issue).

The literature we have briefly touched upon above shows that multiple forms of violence and multiple understandings of the notion of space overlap. One of the implications of the relational approaches we advocate is that the relationship between space and violence can never be explained by binary causalities—if structures do produce violence, violence is never just the result of those structures, and space is a crucial mediator of such relations.

The challenge, in sum, is conceptualizing the relation between violence and space while avoiding several forms of reductionism and spatial determinism. With this goal in mind, we follow James Tyner and Joshua Inwood, who argue that “violence must be theorized as not having a universal quality—but as being produced by, and producing, sociospatially contingent modes of production” (2014, p. 771). At the same time, purely relying to a structuralist understanding of violence risks falling into yet another reductionism, what Andrea Pavoni and Simone Tulumello (2023; chapter 1) define the “abstraction of violence”: the idea that violence is simply a result of structural factors and power relations. Although capitalism is indeed one of the main drivers of violence, it cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of capitalism—and space matters. Here, we are helped by recent reflections on infrastructures (see above), which point us to the need to consider the complex entanglements among structures, spaces, places and things in the local materialization of global phenomena. In this sense, the nature of the relation between violence and space very much depends on the conceptualization and definition of both terms, as well as on the relations that tie them together. This means that a relational, processual and materialist understanding of space and violence becomes necessary (Springer, 2011).

Violence and the production of space

Several decades of critical urban studies have thus contributed to deconstructing the limits of the study of violence “in the city” inherited from ecological approaches: its parochial worldview, whereby universal theories were drawn from the study of only a few Northern cities, and its rigid understanding of the urban as an unquestioned “condition”. Thinking about the urban through a global lens has

profound implications for thinking about urban violence relationally and processually (see Pavoni and Tulumello, 2020; 2023).

These reflections, we surmise, have a value for understanding the link between space and violence that lies beyond the field of the “urban”—also because “urban”, here, is understood in line with recent discussions that have challenged the equating of the urban with the “city” and also the urban/rural dichotomy (more on this below). By considering space in processual terms—the production of space—in this special issue, we aim to contribute to a processual and relational understanding of the relations between violence and space in and beyond the urban.

Although the notion of the production of space has been the subject of much debate (among others, see Elden, 2004; Schmid, 2008; Soja, 1996), the purpose of this introduction is certainly not to discuss its various epistemological implications. Rather, let us briefly present the three main reasons we use this concept to question the violence/space articulation. First, starting from the premise that space is, above all, a “social product” (Lefebvre, 2000 [1974]), the notion of the production of space is a powerful one that can be used to unravel various aspects of social production, be it material, discursive or symbolic. Besides, the production of space also points to more phenomenological conceptions of space (Schmid, 2008) by arguing that space is also perceived, conceived and lived by individuals and through social relations. Following Christian Schmid, we thus understand space as an “intricate web of relationships that is continuously produced and reproduced” (ibid., p. 41). In this context, violence is understood as both a material and an immaterial dimension of this production and reproduction of space, as well as a key element of the social relations and processes that produce space in general.

Second, our use of the word “production” points to global forces that contribute to shaping space as a social product (not only capitalism, but also patriarchy, racism, power, etc.), as well as to the actions, discourses and representations of individuals and groups that are both facing and organizing these forces. On the one hand, this is a powerful lens to understand the importance of violence in the production of space, and the emergence, consolidation and generalization of the nation-state model. The production of borders is crucial to the reproduction of privileges for those who are on the right side of the line (Jones, 2017): the border is in and of itself a violent space, as we shall see in Mirna Pedalo’s and Luna Vives’ articles in this issue. At the same time, on the other hand, the border is a quintessential example of the need to not reduce the relation between space and violence to an epiphenomenon of capitalist development, not only because borders are increasingly becoming multiscalar

dispositives but also because it is in the crossing of borders that many see the possibility for a radical politics (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Third, our discussion furthers the current engagement with one of the most productive, and at the same time contested, conceptualizations that is derived from the production of space, namely the reflections on urbanization as a global, planetary process. As Henri Lefebvre (1970) argued long ago, the fast urbanization worldwide shows that global capitalism is putting the entire planet at the service of cities and urbanization. The generalization of this phenomenon is leading to the birth of a new human condition, a phenomenon he called “planetary urbanization”. In his view, the urban should no longer be conceived as the simple result of industrial capitalism, but rather as the *raison d’être* and driving force of capitalism. As such, the urban as a “complete” sociospatial logic that modifies and shapes, at the global scale, relations of production as well as political and social forces. On the one hand, the idea of urbanization as a planetary process (Brenner, 2013; Brenner and Schmid, 2014) has been productively used to capture the forms of violence that are engendered by the sociospatial restructuring necessary for the expansion and consolidation of capitalism in and beyond cities (Valayden, 2016; Arboleda, 2020; Pavoni and Tulumello, 2020). At the same time, critiques of planetary urbanization and calls to enrich urban theory through postcolonialism, comparative approaches, actor-networks theories or feminist studies (Buckley and Strauss, 2016; Merrifield, 2013; Peake et al., 2018) resonate perfectly with our interest in avoiding abstracting violence as a direct effect of dominant modes of production.

At this intersection, the production of space remains a powerful concept to articulate violence and space as it offers an epistemological lens through which to consider the macroscale dynamics set in motion by global processes—and, in particular, how the expansion of the urban generates violence within and beyond the city. Through the notion of the production of space, we also keep in mind the necessity to consider the “frictions” (Tsing, 2011) of global processes with local, regional and national conditions—namely the emergence of violence as a multifaceted social process.

About the issue’s articles

The five articles in this special issue address different categories, or modes, of the production of space and look into various forms of violence in relation to diverse geographies across South America (Colombia and Argentina), South East Asia (Cambodia) and Western and Eastern Europe (Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Two articles of this issue specifically address violence generated by the production of space through borders, in line with the work by Reece Jones on “violent borders” (2017). With a focus on border control, Luna Vives’ analysis about migrant children at the borders of Spain unravels two forms of state violence: the administrative violence of age-determination procedures and violence by spatial exclusion through denied assistance and expulsion. Mirna Pedalo looks at the production of space by combining the effects of borders, postwar financialization and urbanization. She examines more specifically the postwar violence linked to the discontinuities emerging from the Dayton Peace agreement’s Inter Entity Boundary Line of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The differential speculation investment flows in the land and real estate sectors along this “invisible divider” have opened the door to “slow violence”.

Gabriel Fauveaud’s article considers the production of space by land commodification, financialization and urbanization in Sihanoukville in Cambodia. This case study focuses on the historical dimension of land violence to show the transversal logics of land exclusion in the production of space. Although violence arises from the mere use of “force” for evictions, it also stems from power relations built over time that have rendered disadvantaged people invisible, informal and even criminal, and results in what Gabriel Fauveaud calls “land subalternity”, drawing from concepts of subaltern studies (Roy, 2011; Spivak, 2005).

Similarly, Estefania Martinez Esguerra also analyzes the historical dimensions of violence linked to land appropriation. The author takes the example of the postconflict production of space in Colombia’s Orinoco region. She examines the effects of the implementation of the ZIDRES law, which promotes large-scale agro-industrial development on lands presumed to be “vacant”. The author highlights the way in which this law has led to the formalization and privatization of land ownership on previously illegally grabbed land. Through this example, she shows that the violent dispossessions of the past are continuing today in more institutional and formalized forms. This case study thus represents an important contribution to existing works on conflicts in Colombia (see in particular Grajales, 2017a; 2017b).

Finally, Mara Duer’s article looks into the rice agroindustry in San Salvador, Argentina, which developed on the colonial premises of agrarian extractivism. The author analyzes how the pollution linked to the agro-city’s agricultural activities engenders a strong “environmental violence” that is spatially reflected in the emergence of “sacrifice zones” where cancer rates are abnormally high. This violence ultimately lies within “continuum of harm” (Maldonado, 2018; Randolphe, 2021) between rural and urban spaces.

Although these five articles and the contributions of the Public Space section do not aim to be exhaustive, they shed light on different linkages between violence and the production of space. They look at state-led violence emanating from the production of territories, whether these are nations, zoning areas, urban projects or individual properties. They provide insights into the spatialization of capital accumulation (urbanization, commodification, financialization, extractive processes, etc.) and the spatial manifestations of a violent social order in which violence towards certain groups such as migrants, so-called squatters or villagers becomes a “social practice” that is eventually considered acceptable (Gervais-Lambony and Dufaux, 2009).

All these contributions also show how violence is a central element in the perpetuation and aggravation of social and spatial injustices. In order to address these issues, it is essential to go beyond an “individualistic” approach to violence and to question the collective forces that organize it and perpetuate the logics of the oppression of specific social groups (North, Wallis and Weingast, 2009; Tilly, 2003; Young, 2011). Seen in this way, violence has to be considered the outcome of social organizations and relations that are producing space in various ways. The way societies define violence and integrate it into their institutional processes always reveals how they perceive the “social order” (North, Wallis and Weingast, 2009) and the means to maintain it. If violence will always exist, the spatialized forces that dictate its intensity, modus operandi and targets must continue to be analyzed further. In this context, approaching spatial justice through the lens of violence allows us to grasp in an intersectional manner the spectrum of exclusionary logics that feeds injustices and the struggles deployed against these. In a context of fading nation-states (Appadurai, 2006), failing political representation (Thomassen and van Ham, 2014), “democracies under threat” (Amin, 2014) or “antidemocracy politics” (Brown, 2019) that are unable to address people’s interests, the old revolutionary debates about the need for violence as an instrument to advance spatial justice find a ground for a popular revival. Therefore, the debate on the interrelations between violence and spatial justice may be more necessary than ever before.

To quote this article

Allaverdian Céline, **Fauveaud** Gabriel, **Tulumello** Simone, 2023, « Violence et production de l’espace » [“Violence and the production of space”], *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, 18 (<http://www.jssj.org/article/violence-et-production-de-lespace/>).

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