

# ON SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE BANALITY OF CRIME

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*Gazing into the en-walled, electric-fenced garden of his new house in suburban Johannesburg, Juan Orrantia longs for the vibrant, crammed, bustling streets of his home city, Bogotá. There crime and the fear it induces has been met with an aggressive reclamation of public space. What would Mockus do in Johannesburg?*

In *Notes from a Fractured Country*, Johannesburg-based writer Jonny Steinberg writes how, when he visited Bogotá in 2006, he was struck by the sight of streets and sidewalks full of people, bustling cafés and parks full of activity in one of the most crime-ridden cities of the world. Compared to the wide avenues with small sidewalks and usually empty of people that one finds in the middle class suburbs of Joburg, the vibrancy he found outside his hotel room provided a sense of liveliness that one does envy. Fifteen years ago, Bogotá was ranked as one of the most dangerous cities of the world. So neighborhoods crammed with people in parks, streets, shops, cafes and clubs marked a sense of transformation that made the visitor feel at ease. But he also noted that surrounding these lively people were high numbers of armed men and women, military, police or private security blending into the surroundings.

I wonder then, if his feelings in my city were like a mirror image of my own feelings in his.

When I first arrived in South Africa people often asked how I found Joburg. And then, the crime question usually came about. I found that locals expressed a certain sense of relief when I said I was from Bogotá. It was as if I had, and shared, a set of experiences that would make me better off here; as if I had some kind of survival kit for crime that gave people a sense of comfort in the fact that I was somehow prepared to live in such a place. It seemed as if being from Bogotá had provided me with an apparent knowledge that allowed me to walk to certain places; to move around with a sense of precaution that would separate me from the more naïve foreigners coming from ordered societies in the north. I knew how to walk and look around and be on my toes all the time, and actually get away with it. Still, it wasn't long until my apparent crime kit was debunked by a banal sense of encroachment. I began to feel frustrated by things like reduced mobility, self-imposed restrictions, and even the rejection of a style of urban architecture and its charms that had initially caught my attention.

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I was raised in a house in the outskirts of Bogotá, where we lived for thirteen years before making the move to the city. It was a little piece of land, which gave one a sense of living in a more rural environment, away from the city but still close to it. Call it a kind of suburbia in the making, where middle class children like me would walk along the dirt road every afternoon to buy fresh milk from the neighbor, a peasant woman whose name I have now forgot-

ten, dressed as she was in the woolen poncho we call *ruana*. But soon enough the place became more populated – for lack of a better term to describe a rural process of gentrification – and it wasn't long before the place was reached by the criminal activities of the city.

In the early afternoon of a school day I remember seeing a car coming into the driveway. As I came down the stairs to see who it was, I ran into a man in a cheap suit with a machine gun in his hand. For what it's worth, my first impression was that he reminded me of a bodyguard, like the many I was so used to seeing all over the place, hanging out in the entrance of fancy apartment buildings or driving their Toyota's like maniacs. As I stared at the gun in his hand, the man made me walk to the living room. He was quickly joined by more men, who made me sit in a chair where they tied me up. They stated they were undercover agents. They said my dad was a drug dealer and were there to register the house. That is when Felix, the man who lived with us and helped us with the garden, turned to me and said, "Juan, don't listen to them, they're robbers". The men made Felix shut up, and to make sure, threw a bed cover over him. I was tied up with my father's neck-ties to the collar of my dog while we heard them rambling around, packing things up and then rushing out. A few hours later the police came and confirmed this was the work of a band of thieves that had been on the loose for a few months now. They were known for the use of false identity cards that identified them as members of the State's security agencies, the same rap on drug dealers being used again and again to break into houses in the light of day. It was this incident that made my parents consider that it was time to leave the outskirts and

make the move to an apartment building in the city. Because, when one is used to hearing about crime, when one is used to living with it, one can ignore it, until one day it just catches up with you, shaking your insides like a slap on the face.

But, were incidents like this one – formative experiences, so to speak – that years later would allow me a certain aura or capacity to traverse other spaces of crime? Why then, did I feel so uncomfortable when I settled in Johannesburg and moved to the very popular suburb of Melville, attracted by its charming houses, the restaurants of 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and their funky crowds? Suddenly I found myself setting the alarm every night like my father used to, looking at the silent living room and hiding from the shadows of trees on the window moving slowly.

### Suddenly I found myself setting the alarm every night like my father used to

Every morning I would look out into the garden, a cute little enclosed space, and watched it transform into a jungle of cat piss, bird shit and mold for lack of care due to my own disinterest in such matters. This little enclave of hominess adorned by its own rose bush and lemon tree, surrounded by electric wires, a gate and a heavy and slightly crooked old wooden door, was a small version of an architecture for blissful enjoyment that is far removed from my vision of what domesticity should be like. No wonder the garden quickly became covered in leaves and tall grass, more of a muddy plot in its raw form than a tamed English version of nature. My former training in Bogotá had not provided the tools for the enjoyment of garden leisure amidst the walls and barbed wire of a crime-ridden city. Neither was I willing to endure the meetings and social gatherings that our



Bolivar Square panorama in Bogota  
Photo: Martin St-Amant  
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landlady invited us to when the growing crime in our street called for community action. The multiple signs of the security companies and their emergency numbers covering the green of our garage door were more of a nuance than a relief. I just wanted to be left alone to my own space, preferably from an upper floor where I could observe the effervescence of a city bubbling under my gaze. Was this simply apathy to social solidarity, to the suburban sense of a good neighbor? What had my tools prepared me for instead?

Growing up in the eighties was my classroom. If you know Colombia for its violence, this was when it was making the real bloody headlines. The final decade of the eighties and the early nineties were, by far, one of the most tumultuous moments of Bogotá's history. Back then it was a city of six million inhabitants growing rapidly as it received hundreds of people each day. Many of them were coming from the rural areas, forcefully displaced by the violence affecting the country for decades. Others were flowing in from smaller cities in search of better economic futures, as companies and multinationals filled the offices of a growing financial sector in the city. But in Bogotá the flows of capital were also beginning to materialize through the effects of the drug trade, which heavily influenced a boom in construction, commerce and finances, as well as politics, ethics and every other aspect of Colombian society.

As a teenager my friends and I walked to concerts in stadiums, sometimes drunk and irresponsible, traversing spaces where we could be mugged to say the least. We left parties at 4am, intoxicated and sweaty, sometimes drifting through the dark night, its yellow lights casting shadows on many a passerby. Life went on, but eventually it would be interrupted by a criminal act. Because things happened just like that. I remember an afternoon when my friend Juliana and I were off to a funeral. As the light was about to turn to red, our car was rapidly passed by two men on a motorcycle. We saw them approach the car ahead of us, which was being followed by a bodyguard escort. In a split second we saw the man pull out his gun, stop, shoot repeatedly, and drive off. Juliana and I just said "Fuck! Drive on and let's get the hell out of here". At the funeral we later learned the victim was a senator, and that she lay in hospital recovering from her wounds.

This was a time of many political murders, car bombs and kidnappings related to the drug wars. The sound of a bomb was ingrained in the bodies of my generation. We heard so many of them, and felt the windows tremble so many times; it's hard to forget that loud and deep boom that resonates silently across the city. But Bogotá was no Beirut. Such events were scattered in time, and the city was not a ruin. There was, however, an ever-present threat, a constant sense of being harassed by a way of life that had to factor in the possibility of criminal acts. Different forms of violence and historical trajectories merged into the growing effects of a city like Bogotá and its levels of petty crime. The rates of homicides were skyrocketing, becoming one of the highest in the world. A sense of fear and imminent chaos slowly began to parade the streets. Should we go to the movies or the dance clubs, or rather avoid public places? Some parents forbade their children, but only for a few weeks, because then the calm would return, and life would go on; until the next blast, the next assassination, or the next kidnapping. Social life in the public sphere eloped in a circle of continuity, a dance of interrupted rhythmic proportions between fear and its defeat, for which we were all slowly learning the steps.

#### [A sense of fear and imminent chaos slowly began to parade the streets](#)

But Bogotá also provided the stage for many other transformations taking place in Colombia, not only violent ones. It was the setting for a new political movement that would generate the 1991 Constitution – one of the most liberal Colombia has ever had with regards to laws on the discourse of tolerance,

and cultural and sexual diversity. Mega events like *Rock al Parque* (Rock at the park) were becoming landmark events in Latin America, as was the theatre festival, and a growing web of public libraries designed by famous architects. It was this convoluted atmosphere of fear and the growing possibilities of change and hope, that slowly taught us to live with the palpable effects of narcotraffic and its violence, the materialization of corruption, and the elimination of what, back then, people called the loss of value for life. Such circumstances led some to imagine real possibilities for change. The sense that fear and chaos were on the loose, and hence needed to be set back in track, was taken as a real matter of concern. Thus came Mockus.

Antanas Mockus was elected mayor of Bogotá in 1995, and later served another term in early 2000. His proposal, coming from his own career as an academic in philosophy and as Rector of the *Universidad Nacional*, produced two special traits that won him the election to what is Colombia's most important political seat after the Presidency. First, he represented an anti-politics, that is, he did not come from or follow the political apparatus; rather, his political premises were inspired by philosophers such as Habermas and opposed traditional bipartisan thinking. And second, as Rector of the *Universidad Nacional* – the largest and most important public university in the country – he had proven that he could engage and negotiate intolerance, violence and other attributes that many people imagined characterized the university. As urban anthropologists Austin Zeiderman and Andres Salcedo have written, Mockus represented an alternative way out of the disorder and chaos of the city, based on academic thinking that privileged knowledge, the

methodological tools of measurement believed to characterize the 'hard sciences', and philosophical and social science approaches designed to analyze and understand societal transformation.

#### [a set of minimal rules of coexistence that would lead to citizens' self regulation](#)

Mockus' program developed the idea of antidotes to the urban lifestyle that we had become accustomed to. This is how the idea of recreating a new social pact, where citizens would be in control of their own actions, was developed. The program came to be known as *cultura ciudadana*, and was premised on the slogan *la vida es sagrada*, life is sacred. One of its main proposals consisted of the learning of a set of minimal rules of coexistence that would lead to citizens' self regulation. The project was set forth based on the combination of measures of control and vigilance, put in practice through a series of symbolic and performative actions that would lead people to a more rational, and less aggressive, sense of being in the city. The theater for this program was the public sphere. Mimes and other performative actions, together with public restrictions on alcohol consumption for example, invited citizens to occupy and share the streets based on an ethic of an individually controlled sense of responsibility and community.

This growing culture of civility and self-control did actually lead to a reduction in homicide statistics: these decreased from around 80 per 100,000 inhabitants at its peak in 1993, to 22 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2004. Such facts improved people's perceptions of Bogotá considerably. It benefited the city and its image, with positive repercussions

for foreign investment and the like. A particularly notable effect was the transformation of the public sphere: sidewalks were enlarged, parks fixed up, more concerts and outdoor activities were offered, all inviting people to walk the city, to take to the streets and live life outside. These changes were also accompanied by an increase in security companies and in the numbers of police agents patrolling avenues and parks; because it was not the private space of the house that was the focus of protection, it was the street.

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However, the taking of the streets also followed historical lines of segregation. Many of the initiatives first imagined by Mockus, but especially those elaborated by his successor Enrique Peñalosa, involved dislocation and forced removal of street dwellers and drug addicts, mostly people outside the neoliberal logics of consumption that came with the enjoyment of the public sphere. The city's reoccupation was accompanied by tacit forms of exclusion based on the idea of potential threats. Historical lines were thus redrawn in order to keep some at a safe distance. I clearly remember the incident of private security bouncers who blocked access to poor people coming from the southern parts of the city, as they wanted to "enter" the perimeter of a trendy park where an ice-skating rink and a huge Christmas tree, crowned with the logo of a cell phone company, had been set up. And still, despite these measures and some of their problematic implications, the idea of a democratic public sphere has to a certain degree been developed. As years have gone by the number



"Eje ambiental", Bogotá  
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of public and free events continue to grow along the streets. There are by now established activities such as the weekly closing of certain main avenues for the public enjoyment of pedestrians and bicycle riders. And at Christmas time the main avenues are overtaken at night by thousands of people of all class backgrounds walking to the parks with their little ones, enjoying the light decorations.

As a result of years that have seen booms in construction, an increasing population which has made Bogotá a city of almost eight million people, and the effects of decades of policies directed at reducing crime and increasing security, the urban architecture of Bogotá has long abandoned the 1970s houses and the mellow ambiance of a suburban atmosphere. Rows and rows of ochre colored brick apartment buildings rise over the streets, where people walk and run frantically, constantly gathering in coffee shops, stores, parties, marches and protests. Some of these buildings are now gated communities, and despite a growing tendency towards the evolution of suburban-like enclaves in the outskirts, life in Bogotá is mostly lived on the streets. Every day one can see and feel bodies strolling and shouting along sidewalks, walking under smog-stained buildings, forming layers of people and things amidst armed men.

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Jonny Steinberg's reflection on his own visit to Bogotá ends with him stating that in Johannesburg the middle class has not really lived an urban life. He blames the colonial influence based on cheap labor and land, and its desire for enjoyment within clubs and residential gardens. This legacy has then been coupled with the American inspiration of highways, the celebration of the car and the geometric designs of a landscape defined by sprawling suburbs. The result of such processes, he says, is an empty public space. And in such an empty space, my crime-ridden background, or at least my apparent training in it, doesn't seem to fit.

My history has made me addicted to the street and the pavement, to the vertigo of cityscapes from the top of a building, to a sense of individuality where bodies are much closer to each other, where houses with big gardens, nicely mowed lawns and good neighbors are but a thing of the past. The desire for the street sometimes hits me, producing feelings of entrapment, suffocation and frustration. I was apparently prepared to engage an everyday life not devoid of crime. I had the proper training. But I miss the streets so dearly, the flows of buses, even the toxic fumes, flowing around all across the city. I



Bogota plein

Photo: Iijicoo (GNU Free Documentation License)

miss the narrowness, the fast pace of bodies almost colliding and barely running into each other, even if this requires the constant clutching of my wallet and bag.

If there are lessons to be learned from these impressions on similarly divergent histories, I still wonder what Mockus would do in Johannesburg – especially now that he is running for President of Colombia, and is only second in the polls. I wonder whether, or why, the focus on the street is so important for a sense of urbanity. During my last visit to Bogotá just a few months ago, I heard a lot of complaints that people's perception of security was decreasing. I also read an article that reported how in some middle class neighborhoods people were being robbed by a gang posing as members of the State's undercover security agencies. But despite the statistics and the ongoing reports on crime in my own neighborhood in that city, I recently received images of people protesting on the street against the rise of crime. So, when I saw another statistics-based



Sunday is Cycling day in downtown Bogota

Photo: Flickr/MacAllenBrothers

article declaring that the average amount of green space per person in Bogotá is a meager 4.9%, while the World Health Organization recommends at least 9%, I was left wondering about my own reactions to garden care in Joburg and its status as one of the greenest cities in the world.

#### [How crime and cities define each other is an open-ended process](#)

I have since then left the Melville house, and now enjoy the bustle from Indian and African families that gather by the dozen on Sundays at the park around the corner, as well as sounds from activities at the cultural center across the street from our place. I have discovered that I am quite good at driving on the left, that plantains exist in the stalls of busy Yeoville, and I am learning of the different cultural pockets, artistic events, the diversity in African fashions, and the crossings of intellectuals of

all races that together make of this city what Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe have called an elusive metropolis. But I still struggle with the empty streets paraded by the Tactical Unit patrol cars and the constant changing of the guard in my complex. I miss the sense of proximity that relies on the crowd in the city as a whole. The feelings produced by the outreaches of the banality of crime-ridden histories creates a pot of emotions that get tangled in my daily activities. How crime and cities define each other is an open-ended process that has shaped my own desires for the street as much as it has the different trajectories of urban formations. So I am letting myself be reached by the silent commotion and vibrancy of a city that I am yet beginning to absorb, even if from the window of my partner's car.