Debate on the paper by Roberto Briceño-León

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The article analyzes one of the most important and fastest-growing problems in many Latin American countries: urban violence, a problem that (as Briceño-León indicates) results directly or indirectly from rapid urban population growth rates, producing huge urban agglomerations, and from increasing social and economic inequalities between the "haves" and the "have-nots". The article's main focus is thus of great theoretical importance and of even greater political significance.

The author's classification of Latin American countries in four categories according to the degree of violence (based on the number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants/per year) is especially pertinent and reinforces his research strategy, taking countries as his units of analysis, a decision he maintains throughout the article, even when analyzing feelings of insecurity (since they are country averages obtained through surveys in which individuals are the primary units of analysis).

The theoretical framework adopted by Briceño-León to interpret the data and develop his explanatory argument analyzes three types of factors affecting urban violence: factors that facilitate violence, factors that promote or stimulate violence, and factors that originate (or produce) violence. This is the article's real core and thus provides the author's main theoretical contribution to sociological theory. Among the "situational" factors he mentions as "originating" urban violence are poverty, and especially Latin America's increasing social and economic inequalities. In this sense, some changes could be made in Table 6 to facilitate its interpretation. The fact that two groups of countries are labeled "Group 1: Low violence" introduces some confusion. This could be avoided by replacing the chart with two four-fold tables, one cross-tabulating the degree of violence with the poverty rate, and the other cross-tabulating the degree of violence by the urban population percentage. A second solution would provide the correlation coefficients between the homicide rate and the poverty rate and urban population percentage, respectively. Other factors

he mentions as originating violence are the contrast between populations with more schooling and greater unemployment. This argument is well presented, and the author might benefit from the four-fold classification developed by Huaco [1] based on society's demand for skills versus their availability. Many current societies (probably including many Latin American societies) show a supply of skilled labor that greatly exceeds the social demands for it (mainly because of a deficient organization of society that is only "functional" for the power elites' interests). Regarding the contrast between growing aspirations and limited possibilities to satisfy them, Briceño-León might also benefit from analyzing the difference between the "objective level of living" and the "subjective living standard" [2], but the author's argument is well presented nevertheless. The importance of the declining influence of family and religion is also well explained and underlines the importance of the "cultural factor" in the Weberian sense, thus aligning with a growing trend towards research on values (e.g., World Values Survey, European Values Study) that emphasizes the explanatory importance of cultural values for human behavior and institutions.

Among the factors that promote or stimulate violence, Briceño-León mentions segregation and urban density (Durkheim's social density?), the culture of masculinity (most violence is practiced by men, not women), and the impunity of the urban drug traffic. It might be argued that the drug traffic's extraordinary importance is usually underestimated in sociological research, although it has deeply changed the lifestyle and social organization of current cities, especially among the younger generations. Among the factors that facilitate violence, Briceño-León mentions the increased availability of firearms, growing alcohol consumption, and other individual characteristics.

The article is certainly very provocative and (as mentioned above) makes a significant contribution both to theory and political action programs. In a sense it links with an important sociological tradition, that of social problems research (and particularly the old Chicago school of Park and Burgess), but also with the Weberian tradition of emphasizing the key significance of the "cultural factor". "Culture counts" could be the motto for this interesting and provocative article.

1. Huaco GA. The functionalist theory of stratification: two decades of controversy. Inquirí 1966; 9:215-40.
2. Díez-Nicolás J. Social position and orientation towards domestic issues in Spain. v. 3. Amsterdam: Polls; 1968.