CITIES, CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE AND SUBNATIONAL RESEARCH IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

by Eduardo Moncada

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Scholars increasingly use a subnational approach to study longstanding areas of inquiry in comparative politics.[1] Subnational research refers to an analytic focus on "actors, organizations, institutions, structures, and processes located in territorial units inside countries, that is, below the national and international levels" (Giraudy et al. 2019, 7). Cities are fertile terrain in this subnational turn. Over half of the developing world's population currently resides in cities, and the majority of future population growth will take place in the urban Global South (Montgomery 2008). Decentralization has imbued cities with political power, financial resources and administrative responsibilities, while global cities now fulfill some of the functions in the international arena normally reserved for nation-states (Nijmann 2016). Issues long at the center of the comparative sub-field exhibit rich variation both across and within cities, including linkages between voters and politicians (Auerbach and Thachil 2018; Oliveros 2016; Paller 2019), the political economy of social welfare (Eaton 2020; Herrera 2017; Holland 2016; Post et al. 2018), the regulation of land markets (Rithmire 2015), the politics of preservation (Zhang 2013), redevelopment and gentrification (Pasotti 2020; Donaghy 2018), the fortunes of political regimes (Wallace 2014), and experiments in participatory democracy (Goldfrank 2007; Wampler 2010).[2]

The vibrancy and density of developing world cities, however, also makes them epicenters of criminal violence (Davis 2012; Moncada 2013). Across the developing world, diverse criminal actors govern everyday life in the territories they control. Emerging research identifies arrangements between criminals and state actors – including police, bureaucrats, and elected officials – that impact modalities of violence as well as electoral campaigns, civic life, and economic markets (Albarracín 2018; Arias 2017; Durán-Martínez 2018; Magaloni et al. 2020; Wolff 2015). My current research builds on this work by bringing victims of criminal violence into the analysis and studying how victims of similar forms of criminal extortion resist victimization in strikingly different ways throughout Latin America.[3] While much research on crime in the region focuses on illicit drug markets, most people

1. The number of studies that use a subnational approach published in top-ranked political science journals and academic presses has increased over the last two decades (Sellers 2019).
2. See Post (2018) for an overview of comparative urban politics research.
3. Moncada, Eduardo. *Resisting Extortion: Victims, Criminals and Police in Latin America* (under contract, Cambridge University Press).

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experience organized crime, not through spectacular acts of drug violence, but through everyday victimization under criminal extortion. In 2017, over half a million Mexican firms reported being the targets of extortion – a figure that is most likely an underestimate given the challenge of underreporting.[4] Furthermore, a recent study provocatively concluded that criminal extortion was so widespread in Central America that it had become "embedded in the [region's] culture" (GIATOC 2019, 3).

Classic studies of extortion focus on the extraction of money in return for protection (Blok 1974; Gambetta 1996; Varese 2001; Volkov 2002). Studying the economics of extortion is undoubtedly important. But my current research reveals that extortion entails more than the forced extraction of money. Extortion is the foundation for criminal governance in Latin America. First, criminal actors use extortion to make local populations legible and thus optimize informal taxation. Everyday interactions with victims enable criminals to gain knowledge that is otherwise not easily observable, such as whether a person has family members sending remittances back from abroad or the profitability of an informal business. Second, these interactions also generate information on who among victims might be inclined to denounce criminals to their rivals or to the state. As in wartime settings (Kalyvas 2006), this information is key for the ability of armed groups to sustain territorial control. Third, the subordination of victims obtained under sustained extortion reduces the potential threat to other criminal activities in the territory, such as drug trafficking, the sale of black-market weapons, or the commercial sexual exploitation of minors.[5] Finally, regularly physically traversing territory during extortion also enables criminals to monitor for incursions by potential rivals or state actors. These insights advance our growing understanding of criminal groups as dynamic and complex actors that, while not necessarily the precursors to states, do exhibit a range of state-like behaviors.[6] Attention to extortion as the foundation of criminal governance also invites us to complicate how we study victims and, more broadly, relations between criminals and victims.

In my current research, I use data collected in localities where the state is unwilling or unable to enforce the rule of law in Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico to analyze why victims of similar forms of extortion pursue different strategies of resistance. By resistance, I mean publicly observable strategies outside of the rule of law that victims direct at criminals to end or negotiate victimization. These strategies vary in their level and form of collective action, as well as state involvement, and range from one-on-one negotiations with criminal actors in Medellin, Colombia, episodic coordination with individual police to selectively assassinate criminals in parts of El Salvador, and forms of collective vigilantism against criminals in Michoacán, Mexico. Analyzing these outcomes builds on growing re-

4. *Reforma*. "Extorsiones en México, Régimen Feudal." December 19, 2018. Available at: https://www.reforma.com/aplicacioneslibre/articulo/default.aspx?id=1567664&md5=ecebf6c8bde97e2bcdb7e3a08fd2fb57&ta=0dfdbac11765226904c16cb9ad1b2efe. Accessed on March 1, 2019.
5. On obedience as a civilian behavior in wartime settings, see Arjona (2017) and Wood (2003).
6. On protection rackets as central to both state building and organized crime, see Tilly (1985).

search on the politics of extra-legal responses to crime in the developing world (Bateson 2013; Jung and Cohen 2020; Moncada 2017; Smith 2019). To explain this variation, I build a theory showing how criminals' time horizons, the nature of the pre-existing institutions available to victims, and whether police are captured by criminal actors combine to shape the strategies of resistance that victims pursue.

This essay draws on evidence from my fieldwork in Medellin to show how analyzing criminal extortion in urban settings can generate insights into three aspects of criminal governance within cities: the segmentation of urban space along invisible borders, the strategies that criminal actors use to sustain criminal governance, and the ways that victims resist. This case consists of several hundred vendors in a large informal market who were extorted by a criminal gang that was part of a larger drug trafficking organization. The police that patrolled the informal market were captured by the gang, who paid the police to turn a blind eye to their illicit operations. Over the course of five months between 2015 and 2019, I carried out semi-structured interviews, focus groups and other methodologies to map the dynamics of extortion in this locality and the vendors' strategy of resistance.

Invisible Borders and the Segmentation of Urban Space

Criminal governance within a city can be segmented when multiple and competing criminal actors enforce invisible borders behind which they govern aspects of everyday life (Moncada 2016, 24).[7] The resulting segmentation has implications for urban politics. More criminal competition is associated with greater levels of lethal violence (Friman 2009). Disorder, in turn, makes it politically perilous for local incumbents to move beyond hardline politics because of voter demand for order in the short-term and the potential for political opponents to paint incumbents as soft on crime (Moncada 2016, 24).

While researching the politics of criminal extortion, I found that threats to equilibriums in segmented territorial control reconfigure criminals' time horizons and, in turn, how they carry out extortion and how victims experience it. We can see this by comparing the dynamics of extortion before and after increased criminal competition in Medellin. Initially the informal vendors that I studied welcomed protection by the criminal gang because of the high levels of crime and violence in the city center. Here, gang members treated vendors with respect and vendors paid them for a valuable service where the state failed to do so.[8]

However, in 2013 a fragile city-wide informal pact between rival criminal organizations in Medellin broke down and catalyzed violent micro-level turf wars. Extortion became predatory as the time horizons of criminal actors shortened: the amount of money demanded from the vendors increased, payment was made obligatory under punishment of violence, and the promise of protection became an empty one.[9] As I detail in the next section, gang members began purposefully using disrespectful language and other forms of public humiliation as part of extortion while failing to provide protection.

7. See Kalyvas (2006) and Staniland (2012) on how control over territory influences civil war dynamics.
8. Frye (2002, 574) makes a similar point in a study of private protection organizations (PPOs) in Russia and Poland.
9. Magaloni et al. (2019) identify similar patterns in studying extortion by drug trafficking organizations in Mexico.

Increased criminal competition thus upended the equilibrium of segmented territorial control and prompted change in how the criminal gang ruled and how victims experienced extortion. This is akin to a shift from Olson's (1993) stationary to a roving bandit and, more broadly, invites us to complicate the notions that relations between criminals and victims are either static or always predatory. The evidence I collected from Medellin indicates that micro-level relations between criminals and victims are dynamic and sensitive to shifts in broader macro-level contexts. This shows that the invisible borders imposed by criminal actors within cities is a fertile unit of analysis with which to generate insights into a foundational aspect of criminal governance.

Strategies of Criminal Governance

Coercive capacity is necessary but insufficient to tax populations (Levi 1989, 13). I find that, much like political rulers, criminal actors also use social and political strategies of domination to sustain material extraction. Thus a focus on the material dimensions of criminal victimization, while necessary, is insufficient to understand the full scope of how criminals govern.

Through interviews and focus groups I concluded that the criminal gang used practices of social domination to keep vendors from challenging its informal authority. This included regularly verbally humiliating vendors by insulting their lack of hygiene and old clothes, or simply vocalizing widely held notions of informal vendors as "disposable" social groups that sit outside mainstream society. As one vendor noted during a focus group: "[The criminal actors] just say what everyone in society already thinks about us."[10] Aligning with James Scott's (1990, 188) concept of "symbolic taxes," these and other practices of social domination fostered a loss of self-respect among vendors that constrained the willingness to contest criminal rule.

I also found that criminal actors invest substantial amounts of time in political domination to encourage victims to "accept their role in the existing order of things" (Steven 1974, 11). Gang members regularly told victims that the state had abandoned them and that key state actors, such as the local police, were more likely to work for them than for the vendors. Sometimes these strategies substituted for the costly use of coercion. One vendor recalled what a gang member told him after he hesitated to pay the informal tax: "He smiled at me because they are all *descarados* [shameless]. And he said to me, 'Of course, you could call the police, but even if they show up, it's more likely that they work for us than that they'll work for you.'"[11]

Conceptualizing criminal victimization as asymmetric but contentious power relations reveals processes that get overlooked when we conceive of crime, particularly violent crime, solely as a one-time physical offense (Moncada 2019). At the same time, unpacking extortion in a micro-level urban space unearths productive analytical links between criminal governance and broader realms of research on relations between subordinate and dominant actors.

10. Focus group participant (MDE_FG2_720), July 2016.
11. Interview, informal vendor (IV_MDE_1010), July 2016.

Resistance and the Politics of Criminal Victimization

The ways in which populations respond to criminal rule vary across space and time. Unpacking this micro-level variation can add to our understanding of the politics of criminal victimization within, but also beyond, cities. Existing research on fear of criminal victimization shows that people self-segregate in privately guarded housing developments (Caldeira 2000), while others mobilize to stop criminal groups from taking over their territories (Mattiace et al. 2019). I complement these analyses by theorizing how populations already under criminal rule resist it.

The vendors in Medellin engaged in "everyday resistance" (Scott 1989). This entailed using subtle individual-level practices to negotiate extortion in ways that bypassed traditional rule of law institutions. To resist material taxation, vendors appealed to the very asymmetry in power between themselves and their victimizers. This echoes Scott's (1990, 18) point that the "safest and most public form of political discourse is that which takes as its basis the flattering self-image of elites." For example, vendors would sometimes tell gang members that because they were the authorities in the market they should show benevolence by being lenient in their taxation. Reductions in material taxation were not always granted and, when allowed, were marginal: criminals sometimes told vendors they could skip a week's payment or pay only half the normal tax. Everyday resistance can mitigate but not end criminal victimization.

Vendors also used rhetorical practices to resist social domination by quietly but firmly urging gang members to stop insulting them because society viewed *both* of them as deviants.[12] And vendors contested political domination by publicly talking about their state-sanctioned rights to work and live dignified lives exactly when the criminals arrived to collect the tax.[13] Vendors did not affirm their relationship to specific state institutions, but instead to the abstract notion of constitutionally-sanctioned rights.[14] This exemplifies how the "myth of rights" (Scheingold 1974) can provide a catalyst for resistance to victimization. Vendors strategically chose to verbalize these rhetorical tools to remind the criminals that they were not the only authority in the vendors' lives.

Taken together, these dynamics belie the conventional notion of criminal victimization as a one-sided affair where criminals impose their will on helpless victims. In my broader research, I identify and study further empirical variation in the strategies and practices that victims use to resist criminal extortion across diverse spaces. Comparing criminal-victim dyads within and across cities can be a fruitful strategy to unearth contentious politics that may otherwise go unnoticed by a macro-level focus on the city as the unit of analysis. Centering on the criminal-victim dyad also enables us to compare features and change in criminal victimization across distinct territorial contexts, including the traditional rural-urban divide. This is particularly important given the understudied prevalence of different forms of crime, including criminal

12. Interview, informal vendor (IV_MDE_899), July 2016.
13. Focus group participants (MDE_FG8_1112), (MDE_FG7_101) and (MDE_FG7_1212), March 2017.
14. Interview, informal vendor (IV_MDE_911), July 2016.

extortion, across rural settings in Latin America and other parts of the developing world.

Conclusion

Subnational research in comparative politics builds on and extends the insights, concepts and theories developed through traditional cross-national comparisons. Cities offer generative spaces for studying diverse political issues within this subnational turn. Critical among these issues is the politics of crime. This essay used a case of resistance to criminal extortion in a major developing world city to generate insights into the segmentation of urban space through the imposition of invisible borders by criminal actors, the dynamics of criminal governance, and the surprisingly contentious nature of criminal victimization. ●

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