

The Quantitative Tactics Used to Delegitimize a Right to the City Social Justice Movement in Bogotá, Colombia

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Introduction

On May 28, 2016, thousands of government officials, including SWAT squads, district police, and child protection officers, were involved in the violent intervention and subsequent elimination of ‘El Bronx’, Bogotá’s largest ‘*olla*’ or open air drug market and consumption scene. At least 2000 homeless citizens² were violently displaced from ‘El Bronx,’ scattered throughout the city and hundreds were then driven into the canal (see Figure 1). These homeless citizens were contained in the canal in inhumane conditions for weeks.

In May 2017, the organizations PARCES³ and CPAT⁴ launched a human rights report titled ‘*Destapando la Olla: Informe Sombra sobre la Intervención en el Bronx*’ (Uncovering the ‘Olla’: Shadow Report on the Intervention in ‘El Bronx’) on the brutal treatment of the homeless community during and after the police raid. The report reveals multiple forms of violence committed by the police, including physical violence, verbal violence, forced displacement, use of tear gas in confined space with limited air circulation, and death threats. After being driven into the canal, homeless individuals were subjected to violence by non-state actors as well, including being poisoned by

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² The number of displaced homeless individuals varies widely (see ‘*Destapando la Olla*’ for more detail).

³ Spanish acronym for ‘Peers in Action Reaction Against Social Exclusion’. PARCES was a Bogotá-based social justice organization that worked to defend the human rights of historically marginalized urban communities, including homeless citizens, sex workers, drug users and other street-connected communities in Colombia. PARCES is currently in the process of legal dissolution due to a complex intersection of circumstances beyond the scope of this article.

⁴ A Bogotá-based think tank working toward the collective construction of development and peace in Colombia in areas such as drug policy, critical urban planning and community-based harm reduction working with homeless drug users and other communities in Colombia.

food that was donated by individuals from surrounding neighborhoods (El Tiempo, 2016). Additionally, after a heavy rainstorm, multiple homeless citizens were swept away as the water rose in the canal and one individual was found dead (Ritterbusch, 2017).⁵



Figure 1: Canal in El Bronx, Bogotá, photograph by PARCES outreach team, 2016

During my fieldwork as part of the PARCES human rights team, I witnessed firsthand the inhumane conditions that hundreds of homeless individuals endured in the canal, including the humiliating gaze of thousands of passers-by by day and the violent intimidation tactics used by the police during

⁵ See the video launched along with the report '*Destapando la Olla*' produced by Sebastián León Giraldo and Gabriel Delgado Forero, available at <https://vimeo.com/239706601>.

the night. In this paper, I examine the inequalities faced by Bogotá's homeless and explore my complex positionality as both a social justice activist and a professor at Universidad de los Andes, especially how multiple political pressures from inside and outside of academia complicated my work on the police raid in 'El Bronx'.

The contextualization of the multiple complications that emerged in both my personal and professional life as an activist-scholar following the report launch, and that contributed, in part, to the demise of PARCES, is beyond the scope of this paper. I will, however, contextualize one of the dilemmas within my academic context through a close reading of a response published by colleagues at my university less than two weeks after the report launch titled "*Comentarios al documento: 'Destapando la olla: Informe sombra sobre la intervención en el Bronx,' preparado por Centro de Pensamiento y Acción para la Transición - CPAT y Pares en Acción Reacción Contra la Exclusión Social - PARCES* (Comments on the Document: Uncovering the 'Olla': Shadow Report on the Intervention in 'El Bronx,' prepared by CPAT and PARCES)."

The authors of the response are affiliated with the Center for the Study of Security and Drugs (CESED) within the Economics Department of Universidad de los Andes, a center closely connected to the Department of Security of the local government. The response includes a counter-analysis of the quantitative data presented in the report and also questions the methodological rigor of the qualitative data presented in the report. While I celebrate critical and constructive dialogue among academics, activists, and policy makers as a means of reaching across both methodological and ideological lines for social justice purposes and to promote progress in public science by drawing from multiple approaches to knowledge production, I am wary of work, such as this response issued by the CESED, that deepens injustice by delegitimizing the voices of social justice activists and the testimonies of homeless victims of violence. In this sense, in the following pages I respond to the critiques surrounding the qualitative approach employed by PARCES to document police violence and contextualize the urgent need for engaged and socially committed public science praxis that further justice and work against violence and inequality.

Navigating the Terrain Between Activism and Scholarship within a Social Justice Movement:

My Role in the Report and in the Fieldwork Documenting Human Rights Violations: I was on a brief sabbatical during the semester of the report launch and all of the preparations had to be done remotely. During the day, I locked my cell phone in the file cabinet of my office to avoid conversations with PARCES colleagues and to be able to focus on the writing that I had to accomplish before my return to the university. At night, I was on calls until three am or later working on the report with our PARCES outreach team and planning the report launch, among other tasks within the organization on other projects. This rhythm has characterized much of my academic life for the last six years since starting a tenure-track position at Universidad de los Andes. Academic labor and teaching during the day, activism and the associated emotional labor between classes and faculty meetings and during nights and weekends. The debate surrounding authorship of the report ultimately came down to choosing a side, between PARCES and Universidad de los Andes. After long discussions with both report team members and the communications officials in my department at the university, I decided to place my name within the report using only my Universidad de los Andes title in order to avoid breaches of the conflict of interest clause that university employees sign annually (thus silencing, for audiences outside the political context of Colombia, my PARCES affiliation). This was devastating on multiple levels, in terms of my convictions and practices as an activist-scholar, but also as I came to the realization that it would be difficult, moving forward, to speak out against injustice as both co-founder of PARCES and as an Associate Professor of the Universidad de los Andes.

My social justice work and split positionality had never been so public as on the day of the report launch, with 220,000 individuals connected to the live streaming and the 500-person auditorium in my university overflowing with individuals from different worlds, including human rights activists, homeless drug users, sex workers, government officials, international human rights organizations and funders, and members of the university community, including students, professors and administrative staff. I have never felt so much pressure to uphold my responsibility to the marginalized communities that our report represented, to my PARCES colleagues, in terms of speaking up directly and publicly in the face of political intimidation, and to the School of Government, in terms of representing the scientific rigor of my university and setting what was supposed to be a 'neutral' political tone for the event. Even though I tried to

set a 'neutral' tone, how neutral can you be when you have witnessed the inhumane treatment and brutal violence against a community that you have worked with and fought alongside for more than a decade?

As I opened the report launch event, I had to wait for my hands to stop shaking in order to be able to read my opening speech. My nerves were shot after weeks of not sleeping in preparation for the event and trying to balance a writing rhythm during my sabbatical. When I embarked on a path of social justice-oriented work more than a decade ago, I understood the occupational hazards and risks that fighting against violence and injustice implies on both personal and professional levels; however, I was not prepared for the institutional and personal implications of denouncing violence.

Qualitative Methodologies on the Frontlines of Social Justice Work

The report launch and the report itself, as we expected, was controversial and spurred multiple public exchanges between members of both organizations and government officials, in mainstream media outlets and in twitter. PARCES team members experienced different emotional and security consequences due to the added political pressure and from this point forward things gradually started to fall apart, in terms of the cohesion of our team, as other complex organizational conflicts came to a head, and as the mental health of multiple team members began to crumble.

Although not all of these issues are linked to the report launch, the gradual deterioration of the social fabric of our social justice movement can be directly linked to all members' emotional and physical exhaustion, to the generalized individual and collective burnout resulting from the demanding environment of urban injustice we had immersed ourselves within and to all team members being spread entirely too thin, across administrative and social justice responsibilities. There were also internal ideological conflicts that had been brewing for some time that contributed to the overall implosion of the organization post-report-launch.

Our qualitative fieldwork that informed the contribution of PARCES to the report (the 'Human Rights: Visions and Voices from the Canal' chapter), involved deep immersion for months within the humanitarian crisis of homeless citizens struggling to survive in the canal. Our team spent time during the daytime tracking the displacement of 'Bronx' exiles and documenting their experiences of violence during the police raid and during the weeks in the canal. In multiple social justice projects of PARCES, our team has employed qualitative

data collection techniques to document human rights violations. In terms of the fieldwork conducted for the human rights report *'Destapando la Olla'*, we conducted participant observation during nine months following the police raid in 2016, 20 interviews with 'Bronx' exiles and two focus groups in order to document the forced mobilities of the homeless through mapping exercises and group dialogue. One evening we stayed in the canal until five am in order to witness the intimidation tactics used by the police after the close of the public transportation system (the homeless were positioned in the canal directly below a highly-transited *Transmilenio* bus station).

These data collection techniques were implemented within a participatory action research (PAR) framework, which was one of the critical philosophies underpinning the praxis of PARCES. As contextualized in the shadow report, the PAR work of PARCES:

“no es una metodología de investigación, es una posición ética frente al otro y frente a aquellas experiencias que no han sido tomadas en cuenta en la construcción y producción del conocimiento académico con el fin de catalizar procesos de justicia social...es no limitarse a estudiar el mundo sino cambiarlo, a construir un puente entre la academia y las comunidades y a enfrentar el mundo desde una conciencia crítica y desde la energía de una nueva generación 'sentipensante' en el sentido conceptualizado por Fals Borda ... (is not a research methodology but rather an ethical position in relation to 'Others' and in relation to those experiences that have not been accounted for in the construction and production of scientific knowledge [it is an ethical position that seeks] to catalyze social justice processes...it is not about studying the world but rather changing it, as a means of building a bridge between the academy and the communities and confronting the world through critical consciousness [driven by] the energy of the new generation of 'feeling-thinkers' in the sense set forth by Fals Borda)” (Tovar et al., 2017, 112).

The participatory and emancipatory philosophies underpinning our critical practices and principles have guided our work with homeless individuals, sex workers, drug users and other street-connected communities over the years.

In relation to these philosophies, the opening sentence of the response cites the ontological underpinnings of the report:

“Los autores señalan en el documento que su análisis ‘es un trabajo elaborado desde el corazón de dos organizaciones que pretende poner sobre la mesa el debate inexistente entre lo técnico y lo político que se nos plantea desde la opinión pública. Esto, pues toda construcción de política pública obedece a una concepción de sociedad.’ Siguiendo la misma premisa, con los comentarios que presentamos a continuación no pretendemos criticar la concepción de sociedad de los autores. Por el contrario, procuramos abordar el debate acerca de las políticas públicas sobre la base de la rigurosidad metodológica. Lo anterior implica que cada comentario se deriva de una revisión profunda del documento, que tiene en cuenta tanto los conceptos utilizados como el análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo (the authors discuss in the document that their analysis ‘is work elaborated from the heart of two organizations that place on the table the non-existent debate between the technical and the political, from the perspective of public opinion as the construction of public policy always emerges from a particular world view’...Following the same logic, with these comments we do not intend to criticize the world view of the authors. To the contrary, we approach the debate about public policy based on methodological rigor. This implies that each comment is derived from a profound revision of the document and takes into account the concepts utilized as well as the quantitative and qualitative analysis)” (Tobón and Zuleta, 2017, 1).

Was this opening quote included as a means of contextualizing the purported lack of academic rigor by exposing that our writing came from the heart of a social justice struggle? The positioning of this quote at the beginning of the response, followed by a sentence that questions the methodological rigor of the

report, seems intentional and perhaps placed to foreshadow the authors' central argument implying that engaged, qualitative scholarship and methodological rigor are mutually exclusive. It is also not clear that the response authors take into account the central concepts and focus of the report, as they claim to do. While the response focuses on generalized crime and homicide rates in the city, the report employed an international human rights legal framework to analyze the types of violations incurred and the central chapters focused on critical urban planning and the right to the city as the conceptual tenets underpinning the report.

Aligned with Behar's discussion of a critical anthropological practice she coins as 'vulnerable observation,' I position the research praxis that underpinned our qualitative fieldwork for the report in the following sense:

“in the midst of a massacre, in the face of torture, in the eye of a hurricane, in the aftermath of an earthquake...as a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, recounting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand?...if you can't stop the horror, shouldn't you at least document it?” (Behar, 1996, 2).

As soon as the horrors of police violence came to our attention in 2016, we began to document testimonies of violence through deeply immersed qualitative fieldwork. In terms of the tone and methodological arguments made in the response, I interpret the article published by my colleagues in the Economics Department in the context of the classic qualitative-quantitative paradigm war, which has historically “oscillated between philosophical and technical levels of discussion” (Bryman, 2006, 111). Scholars in multiple disciplines in the social sciences have contextualized the emergence of paradigm warfare as a “debate about quantitative versus qualitative research. Others have believed it is a debate between ethnographic and experimental paradigms. Still others have argued that it is about positivism and postpositivistic philosophies. Other candidate ‘causes’ for the debate are political agendas” (Kamil, 1995, 243; Bryman, 2006).

The response to the PARCES-CPAT report seems to follow several of these characterizations of paradigm warfare, including disciplinary and methodological misinterpretations on epistemological and ontological grounds. As discussed in previous qualitative scholarship, “[o]f course any research may

seem ‘poor’ if judged by criteria that are inappropriate to the approach. What could be said about quantitative research if we were to judge this broad church by criteria associated with qualitative research?” (Walsh, 2011, 9).

The definition of rigor in qualitative research cannot be grounded in quantitative criteria but rather should refer to “the need for a tool or instrument to be *at least as* complex, flexible, and multifaceted as the phenomena being studied. In other words, ‘it takes a complicated sensing device to register a complicated set of events’” (Tracy, 2010, 841). Reciprocity in research relations has also been used to conceptualize rigor in qualitative inquiry, in which “[t]he trustworthiness of our research practices is inherent in the politics of what we do at any and every stage of the research process” (Harrison, MacGibbon and Morton, 2001, 324). In this sense, ‘rigor’ in qualitative research should also be reflected in our actions of accountability to the communities with which we work and who are represented by the qualitative data we share with the world. Do we sit on urgent data that contains human rights violations or act publicly and quickly upon it? Understanding rigor in qualitative work, especially in social justice and human rights settings where the stakes for human life and justice are high, requires that we “move past the methodological machismo into which many of us were socialized as graduate students” (Bochner, 2017, 6).

Considering this context of paradigm warfare and ‘methodological machismo,’ it makes sense that the first tactic used to delegitimize the report content and our social justice work defending homeless citizens’ right to the city was to position the report as lacking methodological rigor. The authors state the following:

“Todas las metodologías, sean cualitativas o cuantitativas, tienen limitaciones. La rigurosidad en el análisis obliga, por una parte, a advertir las limitaciones y por otra, a realizar los análisis de la forma más completa posible de manera que se logre disminuir la incertidumbre sobre las hipótesis que se discuten. En varios apartes el informe hace omisión de estos aspectos. Primero, como señalamos antes, muchos de los argumentos son contruidos con base en entrevistas. Dadas las características de la población objeto de análisis, la información de entrevistas exige ser complementada con un aparato empírico mucho más robusto y completo. Esto es particularmente importante por las implicaciones que tiene su

interpretación como la verdad sobre lo ocurrido. Los testimonios de abuso de autoridad y violencia policial son un ejemplo de esta falta de complemento...(All methodologies, whether qualitative or quantitative, have limitations. Analytic rigor requires, on the one hand, to discuss the limitations, and on the other, to complete the analysis in the most complete way possible in order to diminish uncertainty about the hypotheses being discussed. In various parts of the report, there is omission of these issues. First, as we discussed before, many of the arguments are constructed on the basis of interviews. Given the characteristics of the population who is the object of analysis, the information from the interviews need to be completed with an empirical apparatus much more robust and complete. This is particularly important due to the implications that the interpretation has as being the truth about what happened. The testimonies of abuse of authority and police violence are an example of this lack of complementary [information])..." (Tobón and Zuleta, 2017, 6).

Alluding to the necessity of “much more robust” methodologies is also reminiscent of paradigm warfare. The central objective of the qualitative fieldwork was to document and generate critical consciousness about the multiple human rights violations experienced by hundreds of homeless citizens. The interviews, focus groups and mapping exercises about the brutal treatment and multiple forms of violence exerted against the homeless through the inhumane use of tear gas, threats and forced displacement represent the window we have opened on the world of injustice. Additionally, we combined classic forms of qualitative research in this project including observation research and individual and group-based data collection techniques.

The tone of the response is clearly aligned with the “19th and 20th century’s obsession with prediction and control, its quest for certainty, and its epic preoccupation with technologies of distance, distrust of subjectivity, and desire to displace personal judgment with quantitative rules,” and a context where falsifiable hypotheses are methodologically necessary (Bochner, 2017, 4). Hypotheses and the linear logic of the scientific method are not relevant concepts for discussions of rigor or data quality within the reflexive, iterative

logic inherent in what is referred to as “the qualitative research spiral” (Glesne, 2006, 47). In the context of our fieldwork setting in the midst of brutalized and bleeding homeless citizens in the canal, prediction and control, and distance and objectivity would have been out of place and would have undoubtedly perpetuated more violence against participants. On the frontlines of a humanitarian crisis in the city, it is safe to say that a situated, participatory and socially committed methodology was the most appropriate approach to collecting data for the human rights report.

The authors therefore use ‘more robust’ as code for ‘more quantitative.’ Their underpinning argument implies that methodologies other than the engaged and embodied qualitative approaches used in the human rights report would have been better and more appropriate. Yet this would have unjustly demanded further distance and dehumanization, allowing the violence of academic abstraction to join the other forms of violence visited upon the homeless from the comfort of a university office, and delegitimizing the years of human rights work and relationship building in which PARCES, CPAT and other organizations have engaged across Bogotá’s urban and political terrain.

In terms of the quantitative critiques of *‘Destapando la Olla,’* the first five pages of the eight-page response present a counter analysis of the quantitative data presented in the report. The authors questioned whether homicides, theft, and automobile theft in Bogotá (and specifically in areas adjacent to or affected by ‘El Bronx’) had decreased or increased over the period 2014 to 2016. The authors present alternative quantitative analyses to those presented by CPAT in the report suggesting that homicide rates, among other crimes, at the district scale and focusing specifically on neighborhoods affected by ‘El Bronx’, decreased after the raid and subsequent elimination of ‘El Bronx.’

While the quantitative counter analyses presented by CESED researchers provide valid re-interpretations of the analyses presented by CPAT in the report, the political motivations of the response are questionable, given the close relationship between the CESED and the local administration. The CESED was previously directed by the current head of the Security Department of the local government, which is the government entity directly linked to the recent wave of repressive crackdowns on crime in Bogotá.

Additionally, the authors focus primarily on the presentation of quantitative counter analyses to demonstrate how “*la intervención pudo tener efectos positivos para la ciudad y la zona específica de influencia de El Bronx* (the intervention could have had positive effects for the city and the specific zone of

influence of ‘El Bronx),” a statement that can also be interpreted as politically motivated (Tobón and Zuleta, 2017, 6). The response seemed to be strategically positioned and timed as a mechanism to undermine the qualitative work done by both CPAT and PARCES, which was used to file a complaint against the Peñalosa administration in the Inter-American Human Rights Courts. The authors’ focus on the re-interpretation and verification of homicide rates and other measures of crime, representing only 4 pages of the total 118 page content of *‘Destapando la Olla,’* seems to have been employed to distract readers from the central objective of the human rights report, which was to publicly denounce the human rights violations incurred during and after the violent police raid.

It is also relevant to point out how the scales of analysis employed in the quantitative response to a principally qualitative report shift the focus from the state violence exerted against homeless bodies to the anonymous masses of citizens who can now enjoy a safer city. It is harrowing how hegemonic methodological practices, in this case and throughout the neoliberal academy, work to protect the interests of the urban elite and to buffer a system that deepens injustice in society by declaring which lives are worth defending in the name of security. What happened to listening to and prioritizing the voices of the victims of violence, which is a fundamental tenet of a ‘post-conflict’ Colombia? The response to *‘Destapando la Olla’* is more focused on disqualifying than on active listening for justice. In this sense, it is not surprising that government framings of urban development and security initiatives in Bogotá have been used historically in the city to smooth over institutional violence and human rights violations (see Góngora and Suárez, 2008; Ritterbusch, 2015). As Melissa Wright (2012, 564) contextualizes in the context of northern Mexico, “the violence that terrorized women and their families...exposed something awful about the state, about capitalism and about the hostility aimed at the country’s poor.” After years of fighting alongside the homeless for their right to the city in Bogotá, it is disheartening to witness how influential segments of the academy, as accomplices of the state, continue to silence voices, erasing homeless lives and their connections to place from the accepted content of urban social memory.

Concluding Reflections on the Role of the Academy in Social Justice Struggles

In conclusion, and in light of the controversy surrounding the *‘Destapando la Olla’* report, what is our role as academics in human rights and social justice struggles? As discussed by Routledge and Derickson, the bridging

of activism and scholarship “can be an effective strategy for producing knowledges that ‘abide by’ (Ismail, 2005) the struggles of marginalized communities in ways that reject, but do not ignore, the violent and imperialist histories of the academy...This entails commitments to channel resources and privileges afforded to academics for advancing the work of nonacademic collaborators” (Routledge and Derickson, 2015, 391).

In my case, my role entailed a daily balancing act as a member of PARCES and as a professor of Universidad de los Andes working in the streets and in the classroom for social justice in Bogotá. Although my particular situation of activist-scholarship has reached a complicated crossroads, I will continue to move forward, forging a space for my work both individually and in future collective endeavors.

As academics living and teaching in the context of extreme inequality in Latin America in particular, and in the global context of increasing violence, segregation and injustice in general, we should consider spending our ‘free’ time at our desks figuring out how to better support our ‘nonacademic’ collaborators who are brave enough to question the status quo and to take on institutions and structures that generate violence against the most marginalized populations in our societies.

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