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Crossing the tilted lands of urban violence

Review of the book: Pavoni, A., & Tulumello, S. (2023). *Urban violence. Security, imaginary, atmosphere*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 430.

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Urban violence can be strategically reconfigured as not the counterpoint to absolute security, but to security as care: be it physical or structural, institutional or insurgent, urban violence is the infra-structural force that debilitates the (collective) vitality of the urban, suffocating the excessive, 'surplus-value' of urban life that urban life itself continuously generates. As such, we believe, urban violence can be dealt with, without imposing further violence in turn (p. 340).

Urban violence is a Spinozian, affective endeavour. It is also an onto-epistemological exercise where the reader is invited to (re)visit and (re)discover the urban, with its contradictions and vital excesses. As the Authors emphasise, posing the ontological question of what is the urban, and, therein, how does violence emerge within the urban, also implies creating novel epistemological paths to research urban violence. The Authors set an ambitious goal here: doing justice to (ethically 'caring for'; '*cum cura*' (p. 331)) the excessive vitality of (urban) life, without flattening it out, while at the same time rooting both 'urban' and 'violence' into historical and political genealogies (e.g. the urban as a result of colonialism, 'civilisations', and orderings), and, importantly, political economy and capitalist urbanisation. The result is a profound, incredibly rich, and pleasantly tilted texture combining the two Authors' voices, gently accompanying the reader to immerse themselves into bumpy lands where vital materialism and affect theories intersect urban security infrastructures and the violence emerging therein. As may be clear from the above, I cannot recommend this book strongly enough, and I am also aware that this short review won't be able to account for the complexities and depths of the text.

Urban violence deeply resonates with my own research in a number of ways. I will mention three, tightly intra-connected, for brevity, and to open a dialogue with the Authors: data (in)justice in smart cities, algorithmic violence emerging from and within urban atmospheres, and difference for vs without exclusion. In Chapter 8, the Authors elaborate on the concept and material implications of smart cities, and the extent to which they are based on urban security policies and top-down technocracies aiming at controlling, policing, and administering the urban by subtly, yet violently, removing its excesses, whereby urban life remains frozen 'within predetermined behavioural patterns' (p. 294), for example through predictive policing interventions and other forms of algorithmic violence (see also Safransky (2020)), for the sake of reaching a utopian urban order. This resonates with my recent work on spatial justice and data justice, where agency—in terms of capacity to act/affect (Deleuze, 1988; Spinoza, 2009 [1677])—of non-human beings (for example data formations intangibly yet materially navigating city spaces) has to be taken into consideration in the (conflictual) negotiation and formation of just spaces (Tedeschi, 2022, 2024). Yet, while I mainly focus on the (positive or negative) multiple affections (at times transduced/translated into discriminatory effects) that these intangible beings may generate when encountering humans in a variety of everyday spatial practices, the Authors genealogically and politically ground the origins of such data formations, emphasising their violently differentiating, decomposing, and excluding roots into capitalist, liberal structures of power: 'Data-gathering practices are not anomalies vis-à-vis liberal regimes: they are

constitutive to them, in order to guarantee the security of freedom, and thus freedom in security' (p. 128) in normalised, ideally risk-free urban spaces (Brighenti and Pavoni, 2021).

Secondly, as mentioned, *Urban violence* is an affective endeavour in the original sense, in which Spinoza (2009 [1677]) intended the term ('affect') in his *Ethics*. As the Authors recalled, according to Spinoza, affect expresses the capacity/power to act and being acted upon (Deleuze, 1988). It is a relational concept, where multiplicity of affections holds (human and non-human) bodies together, which intra-act (Barad, 2007) to form spatial atmospheres, within (and through) which social imaginaries materialise and urban violence may emerge. Importantly here, violence does not need to be direct, immediately visible, and recognisable. Or calculated through crime statistics to be 'objectively described'. It may impalpably, yet materially, spread 'within and through bodies' (p. 230), forming a 'thick atmosphere to which a population is, at different degrees, affectively tuned' (p. 70). This atmosphere emerges as 'an asphyxiating force that debilitates urban bodies and their capacity to think, sense, imagine, move and live' (p. 216). Is the above-mentioned algorithmic violence also part of the violence infiltrating and permeating urban atmospheres? Algorithmic violence is indeed violence because, the Authors recalled, using a definition that reflects their view of urban atmospheres, it redirects 'individual life paths, asymmetrically diminishing our capacity to flourish, even without being explicitly "intrusive" or perceived and understood as such' (p. 304). Diminishing a capacity to act is in fact a form of negative, harmful affect. This resonates with my research, where I also look at how varieties of (digital) data formations feed imaginaries of cities as orderly, clean, and rationally planned and engineered atmospheric spaces (Tedeschi, 2019). Tech may affectively reinforce these same imaginaries and representations through assembled digital 'productive vitalities' (Rose and Willis, 2019, p. 411) that stick to bodies (Amin and Thrift, 2017). For instance, as Rose and Willis (2019, p. 421) point out, colourful images of city smartness shared in social media show 'smart touchscreens, lamp posts, smart operation centres, and doors and so on in smart city streets'. Such images represent smart cities as populated by people, usually men and white, 'giving presentations at smart city workshops and expos, or talking informally in the audience or exhibition hall' (ibid.). Here, the engineered atmospheres affectively (and violently) constructed upon difference, excluding marginalised populations, or segregated neighbourhoods, and co-emerging and visualised as representations of urban 'smartness', set the (hidden) agenda of whom the right to the digital, or smart, city (Kitchin, Cardullo and Di Feliciano, 2019) is (not) for, and where some differences are asymmetrically pre-determined as being *more equal* than others.

Recently (Tedeschi, 2022), I have also tried to theoretically reflect on how the concept of difference without exclusion (originally from Deleuze, and further developed by feminist geographers (Colls, 2012) and recently by e.g. Cockayne, Derek and Secor (2017)) is an affective, non-representational formation: a 'space "before" the difference of difference' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2007, p. 281). Yet, it keeps being violently pushed towards representations 'for exclusion', when (materially-discursively) co-implicated in (or intra-acting with) divisive socio-spatial contexts. In the end, every act of differentiating remains a subtle act of violence, of separation. In fact, it is unavoidable: humans *differentiate* all the time, and the paradox may remain unsolved (ibid.). As Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos emphasises, the onto-ethico-epistemological move here may be to dwell in, or, as the Authors would say, *care for*, such paradox: thus, dwelling in-the-middle of the pre-individual difference without exclusion, holding everything together, and, at the same time, the differentiating capacity, excessive power to preserve 'the whole composition, or "body", of which ... [we] are part' (p. 334). Thus, similarly, the Authors suggest, a possible way forward here would be to accept violence as part of bodies and spaces' multiple, contextual micro-ways of vitally making themselves every time different: '[Conflict] must surely be managed by minimising its toxic effects, and yet it can never be altogether suppressed, since it is a constitutive expression of society's multiplicity and

difference, and therefore the source of its vitality and power' (p. 329). In this way, the Authors look at the future and indicate the next moves: resisting any deterministic or causal approach, whereby a (hidden) violent socio-economic-political structure would trickle down to generate a number of negative effects in the urban, and, as such, should be (simply) removed; simultaneously, reinforcing, and *caring for*, the socio-spatial assemblages we dwell in, thus, empowering the richness of urban differences, while reducing and containing their harmfully excluding atmospheric effects (affect).

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