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Research Statement

I am an Applied Microeconomist with an interest in understanding violence. My research employs historic and administrative data to understand causes and consequences of crime and political repression.

The first chapter of my dissertation studies the long term effects of large scale temporary violence in homicide rates. I analyze the case of Guatemala's civil war massacres and assemble data on their locations and homicides between 2016-2019, to test whether there is an association between the two. I find that highly victimized municipalities have fewer homicides today. Exploring precipitation variation as an instrument for massacres, I provide evidence that such relation is causal. Generalized trust is also higher in municipalities with more massacres, suggesting a mechanism connecting past violence and present peace through increased local cohesion.

This finding goes against some of the main theories for the origins of Central America's high homicide rates (e.g. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2007)) that blame the authoritarian and turbulent past for a significant part of the high homicide rates of the region. Although previous academic literature has found that early exposure to civil war violence increases the likelihood of criminal behavior later in life (e.g. Miguel et al. (2011)), other studies find that exposure to civil war violence can increase prosocial behavior (e.g. Bauer et al. (2016)). My results indicate that the second type of effects predominate, shedding light on the importance of social norms to the determination of crime rates.

The second chapter of my dissertation explore police archives produced at a time when Guatemala had an authoritarian government fighting a leftist insurrection. These documents were never intended to go public at the time of their making and were not redacted. The documents register a wide variety of police work and internal communication (e.g. repressive operations against political dissidents, human resources management, etc) providing a unique window to observe the police work in a repressive environment.

The main challenge of this project is that these documents were stored as scanned images of the original files, and thus could not be used as a regular dataset without extensive previous treatment. I am leveraging recent machine learning developments to transcribe the whole archive corpus, organize it and quantify its contents in an automated and easily replicable way. In the next months, I will investigate how much police effort was directed to different goals, like combating robbery or repressing political dissent. Additionally, I will research how this effort varied with time and space, and whether this variation was correlated with the political changes Guatemala went through throughout the studied period (1980-1990).

Although this project is still a work in progress, I hope it can be a relevant contribution to the fields of political economy and history. The final data will be publicly available, making it the first text dataset with near-universal coverage of police produced documentation. Previous archival works (e.g. Sullivan (2016)) often transcribe only core text fragments and transform it in quantitative data using hand-coding, a process not amenable to replication.

The data can be a valuable tool not only for academic researchers interested in police forces, but also human rights advocates and relatives of former persecuted individuals. Instead of looking the currently disorganized archives file per file, it will be possible to search by keywords, names, places, and browse by topic. This project has received funding from the CIDER Small Grants in Innovative Data.

Other research I made in the past also had violence and crime as relevant variables. In the remainder chapter of my dissertation, I study the impact of cultural and political practices of indigenous peoples of Mexico on their resilience to the effects of the drug war. Previous projects have focused on the impact of marijuana legalization and pedestrian density on crime frequency.

In the future, I intend to keep working on the determinants and consequences of violence. The police archives project is expected to be the base of more papers and, as I advance in better understanding the archive's contents, more descriptive and then causal research should follow. Additional projects will build on the tools and contacts obtained in the execution of the current projects. I intend to understand when and how state actors decide for the use of force and how these decisions shape state formation, institutions, and economic outcomes.

References

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