

## Pistoleros

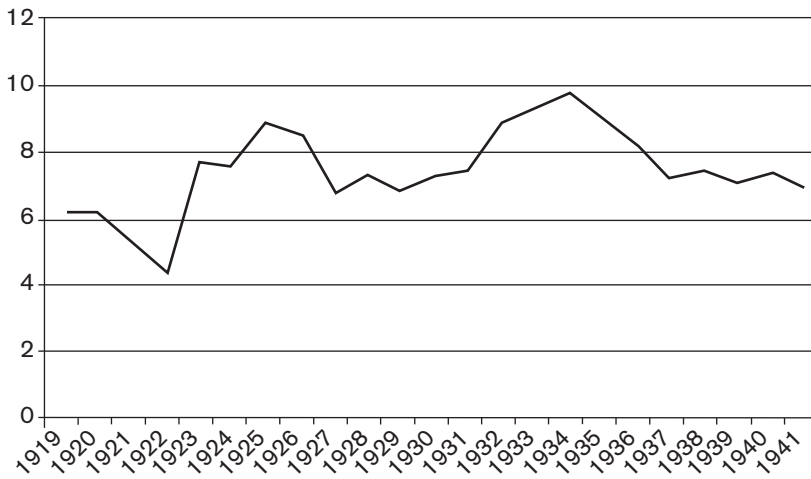
October 2, 1930: the Palermo woods. It's a pleasant morning. Neighbors are riding down the street on horseback. Others enjoy the day at a nearby sporting club. In just a moment they will witness the following chain of events (to be reconstructed later by police investigators): first, a car speeds up Vivero Avenue, coming from the direction of downtown Buenos Aires. The driver, the witnesses later find out, is transporting money—salaries for the workers at the National Office of Public Works. The car carrying the payroll is then cornered by another automobile, carrying two members of a seven-person gang. The remaining five quickly descend upon the scene in a third vehicle, the getaway car. Both the assailants and their targets are armed, carrying Winchesters and high-caliber revolvers. A brief shootout leaves a few wounded, and one dead. The assailants rush to the getaway car with the money in tow and speed off in the direction of Belgrano. It all takes place in a matter of minutes.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, those *porteños* who followed the news about the public works payroll holdup saw this episode as only the latest in a wave of similar crimes that had been the talk of the town: a subject of worried debate in police stations, a favorite topic in the press, and a fixture of conversations in cafés, on the trolley and in stores, social clubs, and neighborhood associations. By the end of the 1920s, the crime problem was common knowledge in Buenos Aires. Said one observer in 1927, “The outrages of the criminal underworld are generating alarm among all social classes; it has even become common to hear it said that people

live better out on the *pampa*, where there is some guarantee of safety, than in any corner of our cultured and opulent metropolis.”<sup>2</sup> No one would argue that the people of Buenos Aires were unaccustomed to living with crime. Gruesome chronicles had been circulating for years. Portraits of delinquents and dangerous perpetrators were regular elements of the city’s newspapers. Yet midway through the 1920s, a change began to insinuate itself into the nature and intensity of society’s anxiety over crime, swelling by the beginning of the next decade into a growing sense of imminent crisis. Editorials decried that the police and the penal system were ill-equipped to face the city’s increasingly arrogant bandits. Neighborhood petitions called for more police in the streets. *La Prensa*, *La Nación*, *El Mundo*, and *La Razón* all pushed for firmer laws and stronger enforcement. Some called for Congress to reinstate the death penalty; others demanded that the police be armed for all-out war.

Talk of the “new” crime bound together a range of anxieties and concerns, most frequently connecting it to the perverse effects of modernity: a decaying moral order (in the realms of family and sexual mores), an identity crisis brought about by the city’s rapid growth, the unbridled expansion of consumer culture, the rise of the entertainment industry and its cornucopia of dangerous fantasies and seductive stimuli, and so on. It activated a host of fears regarding the moral abyss besetting modern society. Crime was also perceived as an indicator of political decadence, suggesting a connection between power and rampant corruption. The illegal structural framework of *caudillo* control over vast territories of the province of Buenos Aires was, in the 1930s, part of the political landscape of any regular reader of newspapers, where anecdotes and scandals drew a picture of official complicity (both political and police) with crime or its related activities, particularly on the outskirts of the city of Buenos Aires. A complementary reading of the problem took the form of a more general critique of the state’s weaknesses and inefficiencies. The climate of anxiety and distrust left in the wake of certain high-profile cases cannot be ignored when we consider the context in which broader challenges to the liberal state were flourishing.

This chapter looks at a specific aspect of this phenomenon: the material evolution of illegal practices in the city of Buenos Aires. This emphasis suggests a hypothesis: that the motor of change can be found in interactions between technological modernization, the expansion of consumer culture, and the rise of a performative dimension of crime. New criminal practices emerged within the context of different local practices and traditions, but their performative quality allowed them to



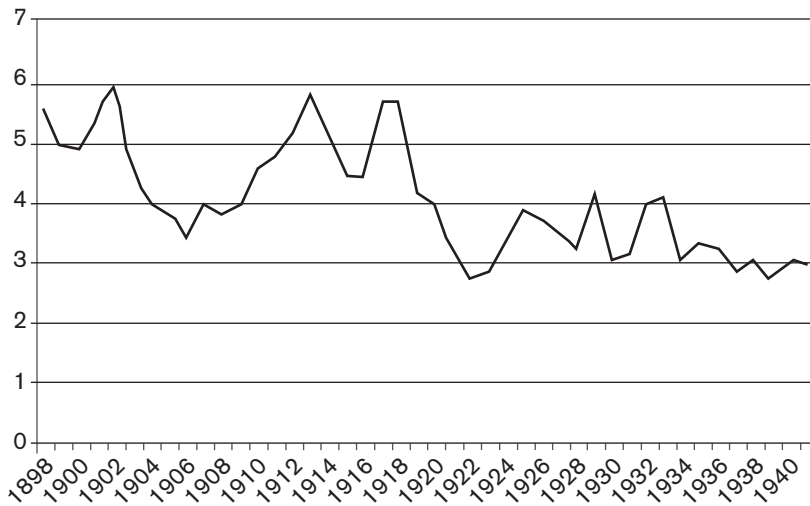
GRAPH 1. Number of crimes, per thousand residents, Buenos Aires, 1919–41. Source: Policía de la Capital, *Memorias correspondientes a los años 1919–1941*; Policía de la Capital, *Boletín de estadística: Delitos en general; Suicidios, accidentes y contravenciones diversas, anuarios 1920–41*.

be superficially grouped together and homogenized under a single conceptual mantle.

Was crime really on the rise in Buenos Aires? Police data provides no easy answer. The methodological problems in using these kinds of statistics are well known, but they warrant review. First, we should recall that police information only reflects reported crimes, which are themselves a highly uneven selection of real crime. Second, such data is labeled and filed according to institutional definitions of crime, which can skew perceptions. Third, crime reporting is gathered irregularly across time. Statistics thus reflect the typical problems of institutional data collection, including failures of efficiency, structural incentives to skew data, and the typical failings of information gathered by small offices. We should also note some specific problems associated with the Buenos Aires Capital Police's methods of data collection during this period. The data most cited in the press and by state agencies was not disaggregated in any way—the numbers were simplified as a global rate for reported crimes. Contemporary observers who sought data on crime noted that official information was insufficient to either confirm or deny perceptions of high crime. Yet, these figures remain the only numerical data available for analysis, and it is still the only quantitative information we have to map out these broader trends.

These are the kinds of rather placid statistics that police authorities cited when they cast doubt on the public perception of a crime wave. The data, they said, “shows that public opinion sounds a false alarm; it confuses a rise in news about crime with a rise in crime.”<sup>3</sup> These same statistics were used by those who defended the 1922 penal code against those who argued for harsher punishments. The graph suggests, in effect, that crime rates per capita remained relatively stable throughout the period, with a brief upswing during the early 1930s. This rise, as we shall see, was consistent with disaggregated statistics on violent crime and should be considered within the context of global economic depression. Just as in other societies, including those in which the consequences of the Depression were more profound and sustained, the relationship between the economic downturn and criminal activity is far from clear.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, public perception of rising crime actually preceded the escalation marked out in the statistics in 1930. Even if we isolate the period in which reported crime did rise (between 1931 and 1937), it is apparent that Buenos Aires’s crime rates were still far lower than those in other major cities. There was certainly less crime per capita than in Chicago, which represented the vanguard in the trend toward urban crime, with double the homicide rate of New York or Philadelphia. But Buenos Aires did not even approach the crime levels of European cities like Berlin or Paris—cities with which *porteño* authorities were most inclined to compare themselves. This was confirmed in statistics of “crimes against property,” a category that actually declined over the long term. The numbers consolidated at the beginning of the 1920s at a relatively low rate, between 3 and 4 per thousand, and did not change considerably during the crisis.

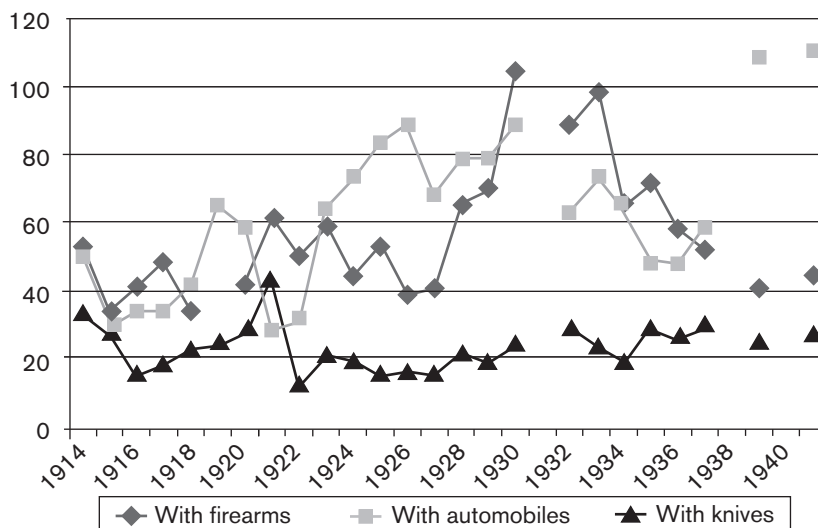
Rising crime? On the contrary, the statistics suggest years of relative calm after the wild peaks accompanying the rapid urbanization of the first two decades of the twentieth century. What, then, made *porteños* of the 1920s so certain that they were in the midst of a crime wave? Sociological literature describes a “crime wave” as a series of complex changes in social perception that can be independent of rises and declines in crime rates. The first studies on crime waves began to appear in the United States in the late 1950s, and hypotheses about the nature of the disconnect between real crime and perceived crime have become increasingly complex since. This literature shows that no matter how large the gap between perceived and real crime, perceptions generate a very real impact: social pressure can change laws, increase the presence of police on the street, and cause a dramatic change in the number of convicted



GRAPH 2. Number of crimes against property, per thousand residents, Buenos Aires, 1898–1941. Source: Policía de la Capital, *Memoria correspondiente al año 1941*, 227. Policía de la Capital, *Memoria correspondiente al año 1941*, 227.

criminals.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the ways in which crime was perceived and represented are crucial to our understanding. Yet before focusing on perceptions and representations, we must take a deeper look at criminal practices, because the symbolic renovation of the discourses and imaginaries of crime would not have occurred if *certain kinds of crime*—crime with high visibility and with great potential for sensationalism—had not actually been on the rise. Indeed, the relative stability suggested by the available statistics was hiding notable qualitative changes. The comparatively moderate (and relatively steady) crime rate in Buenos Aires was overshadowed by pronounced and evocative new kinds of crime that confirmed the feeling that the streets were becoming more unsafe.

Unsafe streets: this simple commonsense perception was, in fact, confirmed by statistics. But danger in the streets seemed to come more from negligence than criminal intent, from accidents rather than premeditated crime. Taking only homicide as a point of reference (since it is the crime that is least likely to escape police detection and that involves less symbolic construction), we can compare, for example, deaths caused by stabbing, by automobiles, and by firearms. The relatively stable rate of homicides by stabbing is the first point of reference. The two other sets of data, however, follow divergent paths: we see a rise in mortality from auto accidents that neatly correlated with the rise in number of automobiles present in the city



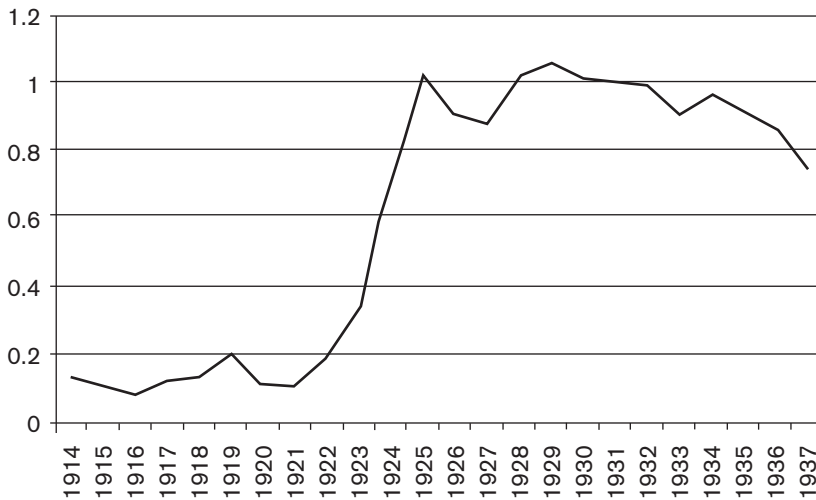
GRAPH 3. Homicides in the city of Buenos Aires, 1914–1941. Source: Policía de la Capital, *Boletín de estadística: Delitos en general; Suicidios, accidentes, contravenciones diversas, anuarios 1914–1941*. Policía de la Capital, *Memorias correspondientes a los años 1914–1941*. I removed data on homicides for the year 1919, as it includes the massacre of the Semana Trágica (Tragic Week) in its count. As the event was exceptional, the numbers would create an outlier that would detract from an analysis of more general trends.

during the 1920s. The rise in shooting deaths made them the number-one cause of violent death by the beginning of the 1930s.

As we can see, at the end of the 1920s traffic accidents were the principal cause of violent death in the city. They were also the number one cause of nonfatal injury, of which there was a dramatic rise during the decade.

In this case, there are few reasons to doubt the trends suggested by the numbers. The spike in “crimes against people” caused by car accidents was so swift that the category was soon subdivided further. Authorities found it necessary to disaggregate involuntary and voluntary manslaughter (car chauffeurs lead this group) and introduce distinctions between vehicles (trolleys, buses, taxis, private cars), the location of accidents, and so on.

Maps of violence produced by the automotive transport authority at the end of the 1930s, when accident rates had stabilized, showed that downtown streets were covered by a dense cluster of accidents. On some streets the concentration was so great that the trail of yearly accidents created an uninterrupted outline of the street plan. They became more widely spaced as they moved away from the downtown area, though no jurisdiction saw less than tens of wounded from accidents per year.



GRAPH 4. Number of nonfatal automobile accidents reported in the city of Buenos Aires, per thousand inhabitants, 1914–1937. Source: Policía de la Capital, *Boletín de estadística: Delitos en general; Suicidios, accidentes, contravenciones diversas, anuarios 1914–1941*; Policía de la Capital, *Memorias correspondientes a los años 1914–1941*.

As this data suggests, the feeling that violence in public places was on the rise was a perception rooted in reality, although the principal culprits were the new cars rather than the new crime. These two trends were not unrelated, however. As we will see in the next section, the rise of “new” crime was closely linked to the transformation of urban transport.

#### CRIME, CONSUMER CULTURE, AND TECHNOLOGY

“*Not in Any Hurry*” is pure Argentine.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “Inscriptions on Wagons” 1928

Changes in crime practices during the 1920s and 1930s illustrate the challenges that modern technologies posed (and continue to pose) to the established order.<sup>6</sup> They are testimony to the functional and semantic multiplicity of artifacts, to the repertoire of unforeseen appropriations, and to their potential use. They also reflect a context in which the structures of opportunities for crime were transforming—a historical moment in which engaging in illegal activity suddenly became easier. Telephones, radios, autos, firearms, and improved photography—to name only a few of the most relevant technologies of this period—were

readily available tools. The history of the relationship between the state and crime in the early decades of the century was, by and large, a race to discover the most avant-garde application of each new artifact.

It was often said that the era's greatest threats resided in mass access to certain goods and the subsequent misuse of these technologies by sectors of the population. Audacity, boldness, and vertigo: crime's descriptives emanated from the changing material conditions of the times. The "new" criminal became most closely associated with the automobile. The account of motorized robbery that opened this chapter serves as one window into the changes brought on by new forms of transportation. In 1917 and 1925 (respectively), local subsidiaries of Ford and General Motors opened dealerships, introducing U.S. automobiles into the local mass market. Argentine car consumption expanded drastically. In 1920, there was one vehicle for every 186 residents of the country. A few years later, the number had climbed to one car for every 27 residents, more cars per capita than in Germany. By 1926, Argentina placed seventh in the world in automobile ownership, with numbers comparable to those in France and Great Britain.<sup>7</sup>

The car was the most important consumer object of the 1920s—far more relevant than any domestic artifact. Mass production, financing opportunities, and the diffusion of advertising in the media transformed the public's perception of car ownership. The automobile shifted from being a luxury object to being an accessible consumer item that, while not cheap, nevertheless marked an aspirational horizon for a growing segment of the urban populace.<sup>8</sup> Car ownership was also a dream for those who, barring a stroke of good luck, could never hope to acquire one. With a mixture of compassion and disgust, Roberto Arlt described the poor characters who gathered at dealership windows to gawk: "They stop at all hours, implausibly unkempt, stealing glances at a machine priced over 10,000, as if seriously considering whether this was the brand that they should buy—all the while stroking in their pockets the only sad coin they have, which will likely be spent on lunch and dinner at an Automat."<sup>9</sup>

Argentina began constructing a network of national highways and roads in the 1930s. Until that time, automobile traffic was largely confined to urban centers, and most specifically, to their central commercial and financial districts. Traffic was an important issue for city officials and, in the emerging field of urban planning, controlling street traffic became a primary objective. In 1927, the weekly magazine *Caras y Caretas* announced that the city was being "invaded" by automobiles.

With Model Ts occupying half of the road, avenues were no longer avenues: “With their overwhelming ambition, the metallic coaches run up and over the sidewalks and drive into empty lots,” the article reports. Not even the sidewalks are free from the “plague” of “rubber-footed [beasts] with breath that smells of gasoline.”<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to “the madness, the vertigo of velocity that like an infectious micro-organism, is carried in the blood of every man who takes the wheel of a car,” a swift rise in speed transformed every intersection into a danger zone. The hurried anxiety unleashed by individual control of the accelerator prevailed over any punitive measure that the city might impose. For many witnesses, this new means of transportation reflected a culture of instant gratification and morally questionable modernity, where the tyranny of desire impaired new drivers’ capacity for self-control, spinning into a perceptual frenzy, an intoxicating stream of light and shadow. In 1927, the writer Manuel Gálvez published a story that put his protagonist—a marginal writer who rarely experienced such luxury—in the backseat of a rental car moving through the downtown streets of Buenos Aires. “It is a thrill to see corners crashing with each other and streets cowardly escaping. . . . The collapse of colossal buildings in the distance, houses built one on top of the other, automobiles flying away, pedestrians swallowed up by the somber caves of dark doorways, the quick combat of shadow and light, reflection upon reflection—my eyes devour all of this as I ride in the automobile.”<sup>11</sup>

For the police in charge of managing city traffic, the automobile was not a joy, but a burden. The authorities observed that even though drivers left behind a nearly constant trail of infractions, their violations were sanctioned less and less. Many of the drivers were men of such social and political importance that they simply refused to accept that their “triumphal, loud and unchained” new habit should be interrupted by a lowly police officer. The tension reminds us of another novelty of car culture: the sudden rise in interactions between police and members of the upper class—that is, men and women who were not accustomed to being stopped or questioned in public areas. And if police did not issue enough fines against the rapidly increasing number of traffic transgressions, this was also because the traffic cop was immersed in a broader acceleration of street activity. Indeed, authorities noticed that the police were losing the ability to even *perceive* violations amid the rising chaos of the street.<sup>12</sup> The noise of heavy tires on pavement, of brakes and motors, all raised street noise to new levels. Likewise, the blow of the officer’s whistle seemed to dissolve into thin air, no longer commanding attention. It

would have to be far louder if it was to be heard over the traffic, police authorities observed. The cars speeding through public streets transformed the experience of public space, as well as the acoustic ecology of the street, its traffic rules, its power hierarchies, and its risks.

None of this did anything to hinder the rise of this new consumer fetish. The car was associated with ideological prestige, the dynamism of U.S. postwar production in contrast to the decay of British railroad monopolies. It contained all of the glamour of the same lifestyle on display in entertainment and new advertising. Many were dazzled by the new consumer culture, but not everyone. On his return after a seven-year stay in Europe, a young Jorge Luis Borges deplored the ideological triumph of speed in the city of his childhood. Lamenting the new velocity of cosmopolitan urbanity, he treasured a certain unchangeable *criollo* essence where a slow possession of time and space was still a virtue. Ignoring the dizzying speed of traffic on Las Heras Avenue, Borges described a horse and cart moving at its own pace. At the reins was a “hefty criollo driver”:

There the plodding wagon is continually overtaken, but this very lagging becomes its triumph, as if the speed of other vehicles were the anxious scurrying of the slave, whereas the wagon’s slowness is a complete possession of time, if not eternity. (Time is the native Argentine’s infinite, and only, capital. We can raise slowness to the level of immobility, the possession of space.)<sup>13</sup>

The rush (“the anxious scurrying of the slave”) had begun in Borges’s city, with the trolley and the subway by then already incorporated into a new transport network. The *automobile*, as its name reflected, bestowed on the driver the power of acceleration. This sense of independence was the great novelty of the 1920s. While car advertisements typically connected automobile ownership to an ideal family life, rising tourism, and weekend trips, its freedom also opened new opportunities for clandestine affairs and sexual escapades. Like the bicycle during its heyday, the car gave women more independence. In Buenos Aires, as in other major cities, the “modern girl” who drove with a bobbed haircut and cigarette in hand emerged as an icon of modernity.<sup>14</sup>

The era’s mass-produced cars also became protagonists of the “new” crime. Crime stories were flooded with references to automobiles: “Authorities are searching for a suspicious car”; “The automobile used in the assault has been found”; “They say a phantom car appeared”; “The *voiturette* went that way!” “The automobile taken by the assailants is a Studebaker.” As a central component of criminal investigations, the car emerged as a new subject in police chronicles.

4.ª EDICION  
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# LA RAZON

AGENCIAS EN EUROPA  
Buenos Aires, Miércoles 12 de Octubre de 1927  
DIARIO DE LA FAJADA

## SE SABE YA QUIENES SON LOS QUE ACTUARON EN EL AUDAZ ASALTO COMETIDO EN EL HOSPITAL RAWSON

Trátase de individuos militantes en el anarquismo, entre los cuales se encuentra el que facilitó la fuga de Ramón Silveyra - El automóvil ocupado por los malhechores fué secuestrado, habiéndose comprobado que le hicieron algunas transformaciones - Habría sido hurtado en Setiembre último de frente a la casa de un conductor - Allanamientos y detenciones de importancia

**Un poco de historia**  
El secuestro de Ramón Silveyra, el conocido "Viejo" Rosendo, y otros, que se produjo el día 12 de Setiembre, fué el resultado de una serie de hechos que se venían produciendo desde hacía tiempo. El día 12 de Setiembre, un automóvil fué secuestrado en la calle de Mayo, frente a la casa de un conductor. El secuestro fué realizado por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra. El secuestro fué realizado por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**El asunto**  
El asunto se refiere al secuestro de Ramón Silveyra, el conocido "Viejo" Rosendo, y otros, que se produjo el día 12 de Setiembre. El secuestro fué realizado por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**Impresión en el público**  
El secuestro de Ramón Silveyra, el conocido "Viejo" Rosendo, y otros, que se produjo el día 12 de Setiembre, causó una gran impresión en el público. El secuestro fué realizado por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**Confusiones a gran escala**  
El secuestro de Ramón Silveyra, el conocido "Viejo" Rosendo, y otros, que se produjo el día 12 de Setiembre, causó una gran impresión en el público. El secuestro fué realizado por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**Puntualidad en las coincidencias**  
El secuestro de Ramón Silveyra, el conocido "Viejo" Rosendo, y otros, que se produjo el día 12 de Setiembre, causó una gran impresión en el público. El secuestro fué realizado por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**El automóvil secuestrado por la policía de San Fernando**  
El automóvil secuestrado por la policía de San Fernando fué el mismo que fué utilizado en el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**Instalación eléctrica decorativa de la casa de gobierno**  
La instalación eléctrica decorativa de la casa de gobierno fué realizada por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. La instalación fué llevada a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**El gobernador y otras autoridades de Corrientes visitan Santa Rosa del Cuadrón**  
El gobernador y otras autoridades de Corrientes visitaron Santa Rosa del Cuadrón. La visita fué realizada por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. La visita fué llevada a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**Estadistas actúan de condescendencia**  
Los estadistas actuaron de condescendencia en el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra. El secuestro fué realizado por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**Calificación en la Escuela de Medicina y Purgue**  
La calificación en la Escuela de Medicina y Purgue fué realizada por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. La calificación fué llevada a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

**Lo recuerdan el dueño y el chauffeur**  
El dueño y el chauffeur recuerdan el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra. El secuestro fué realizado por un grupo de individuos que se identificaron como militantes en el anarquismo. El automóvil fué llevado a un lugar desconocido, donde se produjo el secuestro de Ramón Silveyra.

FIGURE 1. La Razón, October 12, 1927.

Not just any criminal group had easy access to an automobile, of course. But, by the end of the 1920s, this obstacle could be overcome with relative ease by stealing a car off the street, or hijacking a taxi. Both practices grew exponentially, introducing a new word into the modern lexicon: a "*spiantador*," or car thief. *Spiantadores* became the police investigator's primary target for raids in Buenos Aires and in neighboring towns.<sup>15</sup>

Writer and journalist Roberto Arlt portrayed this drifting "union of thieves" in his vignette "The Art of Stealing Cars," first printed in the daily *El Mundo*. In it he described the modus operandi of a band of thieves who were able to make 250 cars vanish "into thin air" over the course of two years. Unable to hide his fascination and envy, Arlt viewed these gangs as part of an equitable business arrangement, born of the "*reducidero*"—a most perfect consumer society, where everyone worked some and no one was exploited.

It is the most perfect because, as in the hive, there is one bee that brings the pollen and another that builds the honeycomb. In this case, there is one who changes the motor's number, another who repaints the body or modifies a

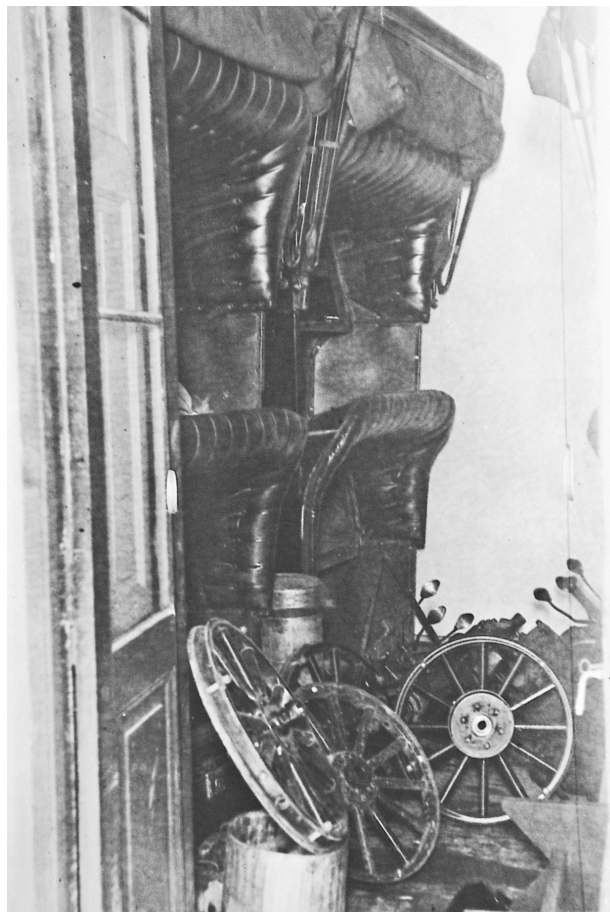


FIGURE 2. “Cars Stolen by a Group of Bandits: Police Found These Two Ford Automobiles Completely Disassembled and in This Curious Position.” *Caras y Caretas* archive, January 19, 1921; AGN, Department of Photographic Documents.

closed coach car into a “voiturette”; and then one, far away, who goes out into the street to get the goods; and the leader who watches over his accomplices and thanks God for making such good men. And then the guy comes in to say he’s found a buyer, and everyone rejoices, and there is no yes or no, or more or less; and one hand cleans the other and both wash the face, and they all celebrate the good things in life with generous drinks; and everyone works their own hours, without complaining, in perfect and total harmony; and there is no accounting book listing income and expenses; there are no dreaded tasks, no one buys on credit, not even Christ, but there are smiles and praise to God, for filling this land with fools.<sup>16</sup>

The car became a symbol of group crime. Each thief had a particular role to play: one handled the gun, one took the loot, the driver waited with the motor running, and so on. This type of organized or semi-organized plan, the police observed, began to attract cultivators of more individual illegal activities. One symptom of the rise of group crime in the 1930s was the recurring use of the term "*hampa*," a word for a gang with a collective modus operandi, internally established codes and language, and a certain level of hierarchy and specialization. Emerging within an illegal world of practices that the police and the press described as professional, or at least internally coherent, this type of organized crime could only be defeated in a "war," one for which the state would have to prepare and organize itself.

The car raised the tempo of crime, adding to the element of surprise as well as the incredulity left in the wake of any given episode. The quick sequence of events during these robberies, escapes, and disappearances, often followed by a car chase, fell into synch with the new rhythm of the street. The acceleration and independence of movement also increased the chances that a crime could occur at any moment. The protective cloak of night, so critical to the imagination of nineteenth-century crime, was no longer a necessary condition, regardless of whether a robbery was important or routine, meticulously planned or poorly conceived. Darkness had once accommodated an entire spectrum of stealth crime, creating dangers for the law-abiding city that were latent and invisible. The *punguista* (cat burglar) and the *escruchante* (a stealth lock picker) presided over an imaginary underworld of urban robbery, with a range of professional tools at their disposal: tool-boxes were filled with picks, hooks, files, bulbs, molds, and pins, a "Martín Pescador" (used to fish through open windows), gloves, and other utensils. These small tools were those of a professional who cultivated his skills of invisibility and anonymity under the protection of night. With quick, soundless footfalls he moved across rooftops, jumping, climbing, until he disappeared into a busy intersection or vacant construction site. The obsession with false identities was pervasive in the late 1800s, when servants with exotic accents, prostitutes, and other "accomplices to crime and vice" troubled police and criminologists. The conman's hits were imagined as part of a network of underground social exchanges that, in turn, helped him cover his tracks.

Robberies conducted in broad daylight during the 1920s and 1930s contrasted sharply with this tradition. In this new economy of public performance, the fleeing criminal left behind plenty of witnesses who

could then help the press reconstruct the sequence of events. In this way, criminals' performances became the object of public opinion, and, as we will see, the most renowned figures of the underworld began to take their public audiences into consideration. Of course, nocturnal crime persisted, as did scams and cons. But each holdup, each robbery or event taking place in the light of day, enacted a powerful new grammar of violence. In this context, mounting anecdotes and cases of visible crime contradicted the police's placid quantitative data.

"The robbery happened just next door to the commissioner's office, or in front the Police Headquarters on Moreno Street? My good man! Do you think the audacious thief cares about such details, knowing his accomplice in the driver's seat is a master of his trade and the motor is running?"<sup>17</sup> This show of resignation on the part of the police suggests that in the late 1920s there was a close association between "new" crime and the figure of the skilled driver. Indeed, the driver had become an archetype of modern virility, with tales of escaping gangsters echoing the sport of car racing and reinforcing the link between driving and masculine prowess. One creative policeman went as far as designing a tool to stop getaway vehicles: a scissor-like device, studded with nails, that an officer could take with him and fold out across the width of the car, closing off the criminal's escape path.<sup>18</sup> The device apparently did not work very well. Escape cars prevailed, generating a fundamental change in the modalities of crime as well as in the conceptualization of police intervention. The car, along with the development of a network of roads during the 1930s, propelled crime into a larger radius of action.

The automobile also gave mobsters an ability to pass easily through the capital city and enter the far less monitored corridors of Buenos Aires Province. This newfound mobility was crucial to the development, in the 1930s, of large-scale operations like those led by "Pibe Cabeza," "Mate Cosido," and the mafia king "Chicho Grande," whose crimes exposed gaps in the law and caused innumerable jurisdictional clashes between police.

The car extended the geography of crime far beyond the city limits, dispersing into spaces as wide as the nation itself (and beyond). Their creative use of the automobile also allowed these new criminal celebrities to engage in some daring escapades, moving from the city to the suburbs, and then from the suburbs into rural areas, crossing jurisdictions and escaping authorities in each one. Pibe Cabeza (Rogelio Gordillo's alias) and his band "made a hit one day in Córdoba, then the next day in Rosario, then the next in Buenos Aires, disorienting the police, who were

left looking for him in the suburbs of the cities where he had last been seen,” one experienced police officer recalled.<sup>19</sup> In his objectives, technologies, and public relationships, Gordillo was a typical *pistolero* of his time. He and his band were also in constant motion. At the peak of his fame, in 1936, he might steal two cars to use in a holdup, escape into a nearby province, sell his stolen *voiturette*, and rob a third vehicle to get to his next target. After his robbery of the Nobleza de Tabaco Company, in the center of the city of Rosario, he escaped in a “magnificent car” with a license plate from the town of Moreno, in the province of Buenos Aires. The police began an interminable search for the gang. They raided hideouts and confiscated a long list of stolen vehicles between Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Santa Rosa. The band, meanwhile, kept moving, occasionally stealing trucks and even hearses or, most often, hijacking a rented car and disposing of the driver.<sup>20</sup>

All of this was made possible by the network of paved national roads that was constructed during the 1930s. As in the United States, this infrastructure made possible a quick escape and expanded the geographical range of criminal operations in a manner never before seen.<sup>21</sup> An intimate knowledge of possible escape routes from the cities, and the connections between large and secondary roads, became indispensable. Pibe Cabeza’s band was considered nearly untraceable because he counted on the services of drivers like Caprioli, or Ferrari “El Vivo,” who the papers noted was a skilled navigator with a detailed knowledge of roads. Caprioli knew “the neighboring streets and interprovincial routes between Santa Fe, Córdoba, Buenos Aires, and La Pampa thanks to his extensive travel as a car salesman and from his previous escapes.”<sup>22</sup>

The newspaper *El Mundo* reported that “city police, along with police from Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Córdoba and even Montevideo are mobilized and searching for the gang led by Pibe Cabeza, the author of the cinematic raid that ran from Córdoba to the suburbs of this city.”<sup>23</sup> The art of pursuing criminals had changed dramatically, leading to demands for a federal police force with jurisdiction across the entire country. The needed reform would be passed in 1943.

Taken together, mobile banditry and interprovincial car chases bolstered arguments for a national police force and an organ of federal power that could preside over provincial authorities. The subject first arose when the famed North American bandit Butch Cassidy appeared in Argentina. Escaping the United States, Cassidy fled to Patagonia, where he committed a series of surprise attacks on regional banks. These robberies spurred some of the first public calls for a national police force.

After one particularly stunning episode, a police magazine commented that the proliferation of such imported criminal behaviors posed a challenge in Argentina: “Is this not, then, the purpose of a *national* police force, which is to say a police force that can operate across the entire national territory, with a centralized authority, and not be bothered, nor slowed, nor inhibited by the inconveniences and obligations that arise in our current federal system of government?”<sup>24</sup>

In the 1930s, as organized crime went from being a rare occurrence to occupying the center of attention, policing also began to change. The First Police Congress (Primer Congreso de Policía) in 1933 prioritized methods of action against interjurisdictional criminal activity. In 1937, following several failed attempts to capture mobile gangs—in this case, the crew run by “Mate Cosido”—the chief of the Division of Investigation, Vacarezza, presented the National Executive Office with the first proposal for the creation of a federal police force. In July 1938, in response to a new wave of “*pistolerismo*” in the provinces, the government created the Gendarmería Nacional, a semi-military force with national jurisdiction.<sup>25</sup> We will return to these reforms at other points in this book.

Paradoxically, the expanding geography of crime, which moved from the metropolis out into smaller provincial towns, was also the result of the government’s extension of a network of national roads and the production of detailed maps of the countryside. The men who advocated for the road network, who wrote guidebooks, made maps, and lobbied for infrastructure investment argued that a national road network would stimulate tourism and foster the economic integration of the country. They were unaware, of course, that they were also helping the nationalization of crime.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, like the radio broadcasts of automobile races, the press coverage of the era’s high-profile chases through the *pampas*, Patagonia, the Chaco desert, and mountain towns, accompanied as it was by maps and detailed chronicles, added significantly to the public’s growing consciousness and knowledge of national territory.

#### ARMED MEN

You can tell how modern a city is, the detective thought,  
by the weapons you hear going off in its streets.

—Élmer Mendoza, *Silver Bullets*

The mobile bandit, escaping into neighboring towns after every hit, was of course armed.<sup>27</sup> It’s almost not worth pointing out, since his stylized figure—pistol-pointing, fedora, double-breasted suit—had become an

emblem of mob-era modernity. Among civilians, the circulation of firearms was no novelty in the 1920s and 1930s. On the contrary, the idea of the “armed citizen” was a critical component of the Argentine political imaginary in the nineteenth century and, despite initiatives to eradicate the practice, upper-class *porteños* long resisted giving up the time-honored practice of dueling.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, the mass production and sale of revolvers—which coincided with the decline of the gentlemanly duel—spoke to changes in the market and in modern, popular codes of male violence. Amid these changes, gun ownership lost its previous association with political citizenry.

Aspects of this phenomenon can be traced to changes in technology and the economy of the global arms trade. The privatization of the assembly and sales of arms dates to the end of the nineteenth century and is an example of triumphant capitalism, as evidenced in the trajectories of arms manufacturers such as Krupp, Vickers, and Remington. Representatives of these and other companies traveled the world, selling their products to state and private entities. Then, World War I saw advances in the design and manufacture of quicker, more precise guns. The war had not even ended when the technology developed to produce this arsenal migrated from the battlefield to broader society, expanding the market and making prices more accessible than ever. Until the mid-1930s, when the laissez-faire system that these companies had benefited from began drawing criticism, leading to calls in most western countries for greater oversight and the enactment of laws restricting gun ownership, commerce flourished for the gun manufacturers, whose only obstacle to growth was the law of supply and demand.<sup>29</sup> Even if we limit our analysis of gun sales to the realm of private consumption, leaving aside military sales in wartime (which also grew to unprecedented levels), we see that guns found a substantial market beyond the world of organized crime.

The effects of this phenomenon were already visible in Argentina at the beginning of the century. The magazine *Sherlock Holmes* noted in 1912: “Along with the agricultural machines, manpower, and tools that arrive in our country like an army and an arsenal of labor, an invasion of portable arms has been on the rise for some time, imported in great quantities, and made available to the public for easy acquisition.”<sup>30</sup> Veteran police officer Laurentino Mejías remembered in 1927 that the revolver was not common during his early days on the force “because [the sound of its] thunder rattled the nerves of the *criollo*.” It was a pricey instrument that was rarely seen on the streets—“not like later,

[when the revolver was] sold cheaply, on display in the windows of any used clothing store or junk shop, available for all tastes and budgets.”<sup>31</sup>

A criminal seeking a gun did not need to turn to illegal trafficking to get it, since he was surrounded by thousands of completely legal offers. One need only peruse the illustrated magazines of the first four decades of the twentieth century to find advertisements for guns sold alongside other consumer objects. Payment plans made purchase all the more irresistible: “Free: without spending a cent you can obtain all classes of silver and 18 karat gold watches, rifles, revolvers of all kinds, fine footwear, electric lanterns, silverware, tea and coffee sets, and a great variety of other items,” announced the American Import Company. Said one advertisement, “For only five cents in stamps, your only cost, we will give you a Colt revolver, camera, phonograph, etc. Just send your name and address.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1920, Casa Rasetti tempted *Caras y Caretas* readers with automatic pocket revolvers for \$50 and a .38 caliber for \$90. If in 1920 a suit cost around \$40, a pair of shoes around \$15, a Kodak camera around \$100, and a sewing machine around \$150, it’s safe to say that these seductive automatic pistols were within reach of many consumers (without even taking into account the market for used guns, even cheaper). During the Christmas season of 1920, Casa Masucci, a well-known department store, displayed gifts for men and women: a wide array of rings, bracelets, and necklaces for her, and for him, a shaving razor (“with three free replacement razors”), a flashlight (“with a free battery and replacement bulb”), and a .28 caliber Colt (“with a free box of bullets”).

“Oxidized or Nickel-coated. Checkered walnut grip.” Some advertisements for Colt pistols appealed to the aesthetics of design. Others evoked the dark magnetism of the undercover detective: “For the investigator’s pocket: Colt *Detective*. Special Revolver (Double Action).”<sup>33</sup> Others appealed to militaristic martial law, calling their gun “the weapon of law and order.” There were guns for discreet use, marketed to “respectable” men. The Orbea revolver was the “best gun for PERSONAL SECURITY and for THE DEFENSE OF ONE’S FAMILY.” The “El Casco” brand offered its weapon to middle-class husbands who when they kissed their wives good-bye upon leaving home each morning, wanted to be comforted by the knowledge that they were starting the day with a gun in their pocket.

In Latin America, evidence of the circulation of guns is abundant, as is the familiarity of large sections of the male population with pistols and revolvers. Many of the guns that were bought and sold during this era were the product of the U.S. gun industry; the brands that had

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Sin gastar un solo centavo puede usted conseguir fácilmente relojes de todas clases en plata 900 o en oro plaqué 18 kilates garantido, carabinas, revólveres de todas clases, calzado fino, linternas eléctricas, juegos de cubiertos, juegos de té y café y otra gran variedad de artículos. Pida informes hoy mismo por carta a:

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COMPLETAMENTE gratis, sin gasto regalamos a SEÑORAS y SEÑORITAS, relojes pulsera plaqué oro 18 kilates, a CABALLEROS relojes tres tapas en plaqué oro o plata 900, revólver o máquina fotográfica Kodak. Pida formularios por carta a:

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FIGURE 3. *Caras y Caretas*, June 22, 1929.

developed pistol technology in the second half of the nineteenth century—Remington, Smith & Wesson, and, above all, Colt—had become synonymous with the advance of the U.S. western frontier. In Mexico City in 1917, for example, pat downs of men arrested for drunkenness yielded dozens of these brands of pistols. As in Buenos Aires, police statistics in São Paulo demonstrate a rapid shift away from stabbing to shooting homicides in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> The Spanish essayist Rafael Barrett, who lived in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Asunción during the period, described the situation:

In these streets each man carries five strangers' lives in the pocket of his trousers. The student [or] the mild-mannered employee cannot buy a watch, but can afford a revolver. The stylish youth leaves his Smith in the coatroom at the dance, next to his hat. Gentlemen go to the club to read the newspaper, armed with the artillery of a betrayed husband. Lawyers, doctors, even men of God leave their homes carefully armed. There is an air of tragedy; they think themselves heroes.<sup>35</sup>

Disturbing editorials and news articles noted that gun owners were unable to control their use of these new artifacts, as statistics clearly showed. In the 1920s, it became customary to celebrate the New Year with fireworks and a hail of gunfire. During the campaign preceding the election of Yrigoyen in 1928, shots were often fired during political rallies and street marches. Pistols and gunshots became part of clashes between unions. Conflicts that transpired “in the heat of the moment” also had a tendency to end in gunfire: citizens exchanged fire in bars, on street corners, and in the middle of domestic disputes. When cops and robbers

**SARMIENTO**  
esquina MAIPÚ  
Buenos Aires

**CARLOS RASETTI**

CASA IMPORTADORA  
DE ARMAS, MUNICIONES  
Y CUCHILLERÍA

LA CASA  
MAS ANTIGUA  
EN EL PAIS

FUNDADA EN 1857  
en la calle RIVADAVIA, 526

**Revólver SMITH**  
Wesson Militar  
Calibre 38, de 6 tiros,  
caño de 4 y 5 pulgadas  
\$ 90 y \$ 91

**PISTOLA**  
MAUSER

Ultimo modelo, de  
bolsillo, repetición  
automática de 8 tiros  
Calibre 7.65 . . . \$ 50

**ESCOPETA** fuego central, de dos tiros, caños  
de Damas Ruban, triple cierre Greener, fabri-  
cación mecánica, calibre 16, caño izquierdo  
Choke, correa de cuero, con funda reforzada  
para guardar la escopeta desarmada; cierra-  
cartuchera para 30 cartuchos, red para pájaros,  
baqueta de 3 piezas con dos cepillos, extractor  
de cartuchos, máquina para remachar cartu-  
chos, con medida para pólvora y munición.

**TODO por \$ 120**

Esta casa está en condiciones de vender to-  
dos los artículos a precios sin competencia  
**Visiten el nuevo local**

FIGURE 4. *Caras y Caretas*, December 11, 1920.

exchanged shots, onlookers often joined in, opening up a third line of fire. The more moderate anarchist leaders, for their part, felt obliged to remind gun owners to avoid engaging in “friendly” shootouts when out on a picnic, in order to reduce the number of weekend accidents. Routine violence interspersed the pages of Buenos Aires newspapers.<sup>36</sup>

Naturally, these gunfights called into question the state’s monopoly on violence. This concept, however, should be understood as more figurative than literal: in no society does the state expect to maintain effec-

tive monopoly over violence, provided that it possesses sufficient means to regulate the arms used by other sectors of society.<sup>37</sup> The problem arises when the coercive equipment the state uses to guarantee a society's *perception* of a monopoly is more antiquated than that used by the subjects over which it exercises control.

A shift at this level, taking place gradually over the course of the 1930s, is shown in changes in the legal framework of the time (we will return to the changes in the police force in chapters 3 and 4). The availability of increasingly fast, precise, and powerful guns called into question the permissive context of their circulation, which was regulated by administrative edicts and resolutions. Buenos Aires's contravention code (which everyone ignored) was meant to regulate minor offenses, calling for fines between \$15 and \$30 and up to a month of jail time for publicly bearing arms in the street, in a store or in public space, or for shooting one's weapons within the confines of the city, including private property.<sup>38</sup> At the beginning of the 1930s, authorities modified this framework. The category of "arms of war" became part of the lexicon, designating any gun larger than 5 mm. Customs controls and regulatory taxes on armories became more severe. In 1932, a new, more zealous police edict limited the sale of individual arms over .38 caliber. Finally, in 1936 and 1939, two national decrees made it illegal to buy or sell automatic and non-automatic guns larger than a .22 caliber: "Practice has demonstrated that it is necessary to ensure, in the most efficient way possible, the lives of the population, continually exposed to the unpredictable danger of modern automatic repeating firearms and the effects derived from the caliber of its projectiles."<sup>39</sup>

In reality, the new mechanized speed of firearms was better represented by the machine gun than by the automatic handgun. Designed for trench warfare, the machine gun was the firearm with the most direct lineage to the battlefield. Its wartime connotations made it difficult to market in the postwar era—until organized criminals adopted the weapon during Prohibition.<sup>40</sup> The machine gun then became a weapon associated with the police and the most professional bandits, although it only occasionally made an appearance locally. In 1932, authorities categorized the machine gun as a weapon of "collective action," pushing its sale into the black market. There, it sold well. When authorities finally caught the anarchist gunman Severino Di Giovanni, for example, they found a small collection of an unknown model of Thompson machine guns. One observer remarked, "Only the devil knows how they got [them] into the country."<sup>41</sup> Anytime the rattle of gunfire broke out, the event was narrated in detail in the daily press. The machine gun had evocative power:

its presence in the urban and suburban scene paralleled the emergence of sound film and the arrival of gangster movies, which, in the early 1930s, enthralled the masses.

The availability of guns transformed the kind of duress associated with robbery and heightened the intimidating potential of each assault. Even if we accept the stable rates of crimes against property, as represented in police statistics, there is no doubt about the increase in the rate of homicides and nonfatal wounds—in other words, a rise in interpersonal violence. The rather placid curve in robberies and theft cannot be interpreted in isolation, nor should it be decontextualized from the rising number of persons killed by gunfire between the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. The strong association between robbery and automatic weapons implied a transformation in the nature of “common” homicide, something previously presented as being confined to the private sphere.

On the one hand, the armed and car-driving bandits were connected to a professional model of organized crime, known locally as “*el hampa*.” On the other hand, their rupture with certain codes of violence was perceived as a sign of the deprofessionalization of crime. Social sanctions often made reference to the form that violence took, not just its motivation. Thus, scenes of car chases and crossfire appeared as vain, amateur exhibitions. Control over firepower emerged as a central value in crime. With his public image in mind, the social bandit Mate Cosido pledged to do his best to avoid shooting civilians, including men who transported the money he was trying to steal. And if a robbery took a tragic turn, it was always someone else’s responsibility. He told the magazine *Ahora* that he would “avoid violence whenever possible and, as is within my power, reduce the possibility of homicides and the sort of unfavorable commentary that dishonors me, and the comrades who accompany me.”<sup>42</sup> A good (professional) *pistolero* was a man who knew when to use his coercive power, as distinct from the novice, who put at risk everyone but himself.

The increase in assaults called attention to the weakening of the rules of gun use among gentlemen. As was the case with so many changes brought on by modernity, the *pistolero* inspired nostalgia, a retrospective value placed on the more codified violence of the past. Amid yearning for the long-gone street corners of the old neighborhood, those sites of bravery and masculine ritual encoded in knife fights (the same fights that so fascinated Borges) acquired meaning in the context of the sudden irrelevance of those skills in an era of motorized armed robbery and the Colt .45. In a story published in the next decade, Borges would say:

“The singular style of his death seemed appropriate to them: Azevedo was the last representative of a generation of bandits who knew how to manipulate a dagger, but not a revolver.”<sup>43</sup>

The demise of the knife at the hands of the revolver—that “mechanical, instantly fatal invention, child of modern industry, born of the spirit of speed”—led to a romantic appreciation for men of the dagger and the blade, for the gaucho and the suburban *compadrito*.<sup>44</sup> This new nostalgia was built on arguments dating back to the origins of the firearm. They were distant echoes, to be sure, but the essence of their moral critique was unmistakable. It celebrated the centuries-old skill of the knight of early modern Europe, who donned a sword and cape, and whose legendary abilities fell prey to the vulgar speed of gunpowder. The early disdain for firearms, at the very moment of their birth, when the age-old knowledge of the art of war and fifteenth-century codes of gentlemanly honor were being left behind, elevated the aesthetic and moral value of the violence of the past.

The *pistolero* of the 1920s and 30s did not need a dignified skill in order to impose his will, a fact that devalued his status in relation to the *compadrito* or the cunning gaucho, who used his entire body in a fight, and whose weapon (an extension of his arm) brought him into intimate contact with his foe. What was now being challenged was the balance of power between battling parties, and a certain moral economy of the interaction. Wounds from firearms, produced at a distance, giving no chance to the adversary, were mediated by a simple mechanism called a trigger. The bullet holes it produced were as small and monotonous as the era that mass-produced them. By contrast, the knife (the gaucho’s constant companion, and thus Argentina’s national weapon) opened a wound that produced enormous quantities of blood, leaving marks that were rife with meaning. Sarmiento, who in *Facundo* had described this cult of courage with such disdain, highlighted the significance of facial scars resulting from knife fights. The idea was not to kill, but to leave a record of defeat: “His object is only to mark him, give him a slash on the face, leave an indelible sign on him. This is why the scars one sees in gauchos are rarely deep. The fight, then, is engaged for show, for the glory of victory, for the love of fame.”<sup>45</sup> Eighty years later, scarred faces were an anachronism and for that reason developed a positive connotation and a new association with national essence. The gunslinger knew nothing of the masculine codes honor of the knife fight. His reliance on firearms was proof that he had been weakened by the excesses of cosmopolitan civilization.

Overtuning hierarchies, the automatic pistol was modern also because it lacked a genealogy. Whereas “the legends of the primitive age made gods the bestowers of the sword, the invention of the revolver looks like the work of a rushed North American.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, no criminal figure had ever been so clearly a product of foreign influences as the *pistolero*. His plebeian disdain for all pedigree—including his own poor and morally questionable heritage—was at the basis of the mounting audacity of these casual robberies and motorized bands, which made violence such a banal occurrence. If the *pistolero* enjoyed any social legitimacy at all, it derived from his vanguard status when it came to boldness. “Audacity”: the term, which kept appearing in descriptions, alluded to the permission the *pistolero* gave himself to violate codes, as well as to the shock and ambivalent fascination of the public when he crossed that line.

In his influential (and controversial) book on the seductions of crime, Jack Katz argues that the study of crime must take into account its undeniably attractive elements, particularly its powerful emotional draw. Gang robberies and successful getaways in stolen cars, he says, have as much to do with the shared thrill of transgression as they do with the objective value of stolen property. To understand the experience of this kind of clandestine activity, one must appreciate how a society’s sensual structure relates to the world of fantasy and how these pleasures play into the local culture of violence.<sup>47</sup>

Drawing on the criminological common sense of the lay observer, contemporary descriptions of *pistolero* drew links between the new forms of crime and the dizzying language of consumer society, with its celebration of ever greater and more immediate pleasure. The *pistolero*, it was said, was willing to burn himself out in his rush to experience all the pleasures of the world. For his hedonism and obsession with fame, he was the most extreme example of the subject contaminated by modernity. In its way, his individualism was in synch with the greedy consumerism of his age. He was its reflection—distorted, yet recognizable nonetheless.

#### THE CRIOLLO PISTOLERO: A TYPOLOGY

*¡Qué falta de respeto, qué atropello a la razón!  
¡Cualquiera es un señor! ¡Cualquiera es un ladrón!*

—Enrique Santos Discépolo, *Cambalache* (1934)

During the interwar period, “armed robbery” became the most talked about form of crime. It was the *prototype* of crime, a standard format

that connected a wide variety of phenomena with various objectives, levels of ambition, and planning. When it came time to diagnose the rise in violence and criminality, certain operational coincidences—use of firearms, means of transport, daytime strikes—lumped together a range of practices whose logic and timing were actually quite varied.

The most typical operation was the ambush of a truck transporting a company payroll or bank deposits. Access to automobiles made it possible for gangs to intercept these vehicles mid-transport, far simpler and less risky than holding up the bank itself, and more lucrative than robbing stores. The proliferation of this daytime crime inspired a host of new security measures: companies began to transport cash in armored trucks and pay armed guards to oversee the loading and unloading of cargo. Heists involving public monies came to be seen as the highest form of economic organized crime, lavishly covered in the printed press. Examples abound, though the first memorable operation occurred on May 2, 1921. In the middle of the day, two blocks from the Plaza de Mayo (and the Casa Rosada, seat of the executive branch of the national government), a car intercepted a customs agent transporting \$620,000.<sup>48</sup> Eleven years later, on December 9, 1932, three men boarded a train transporting railway workers' payrolls during a routine stop. A few minutes later, amid a hail of bullets and carrying a suitcase full of money, they jumped from the train and got away. Such a feat required good information, arms, a hideout, and excellent timing—the appearance of the getaway car coincided perfectly with the arrival of the train, and everything transpired in a matter of minutes after the train reached the stop. Payroll heists, which began appearing in the early 1920s and expanded over the next two decades, made some reputations. Mate Cosido, the most socially minded of the modern rail bandits, organized high-profile attacks on large companies like Bunge & Born, counting on an efficient network of informants and a thorough knowledge of national highways, shortcuts, and secret paths—not to mention the railway grid, which he resorted to when the highways were too well protected.<sup>49</sup> If the heist took place in the city, the automobile was used only to flee the immediate scene of the crime, as traffic often impeded a clear getaway. In that case, one or two members of the band would get out of the car a few blocks from the scene (with the money) and calmly board a trolley, then blend with the crowd by pretending to read the paper.

Payroll robbery required some organization. On the other end of the spectrum were amateur holdups of pharmacies, butchers, or garages. After emptying the register, thieves would often attempt to get away in

a car or a trolley. A third variant, which required little or no planning, was a carjacking, for which one needed nothing more than a gun and sufficient skill behind the wheel to make a getaway.

Not every *pistolero* fit this description, however. After all, firearms and automobiles were adopted by groups one would be hard-pressed to categorize as assailants, but who were nevertheless closely associated with this brand of thieves. Such was the case with the Sicilian mafias established in the province of Santa Fe at the end of the nineteenth century. As in other places with similar immigration patterns, ancestral practices of kidnapping, extortion, and threats were imported to the Santa Fe *pampa*, sowing terror among small- and medium-sized merchants. By 1930 these practices had become endemic to the area. Due to a combination of factors, including greater ease of mobility as well as concentration of power in the hands of certain leaders, the mafia's territory began to expand beyond the port city of Rosario, and its operations grew in complexity and visibility. As we will see in the next chapter, this expansion led to rising panic. Some high-profile kidnappings, like the case of young Abel Ayerza, who was captured and killed in the summer of '32–33, brought the figure of the powerful organized crime boss to the national stage. At the end of the 1930s, however, the age of mafias appeared to be over.<sup>50</sup>

October 1, 1927. Three men with bandaged heads were waiting in the hallway of Rawson Hospital with other patients. When employees transporting salaries arrived, the "patients" suddenly took control of the bagged money and shot their guns in the air, fleeing with \$141,000. A getaway car waited outside.<sup>51</sup> "Unheard of, a spectacular holdup, cinematic," gushed *La Nación*. That one of the most prototypical and famous criminal episodes of the era was not the work of common criminals but that of political activists—in this case, anarchists—speaks to the degree of operational uniformity in crimes against property.

Historians of anarchism have shown the problematic relationship between these "anarcho-criminals" and the old libertarian tradition, as well as the heated internal debates over the use of violence during the early decades of the century. They have illustrated the degree of concern over the precarious distinction between anarchist violence and criminal violence, a confusion resulting from poorly defined targets.<sup>52</sup> Even though it was condemned by central figures of the libertarian world, the *pistolero* turn within anarchism (part of the same repertoire that produced a marked rise in bombings during the 1920s) was a subject of great importance in Argentina, as it occurred within a context of grow-

ing radicalization and internal conflicts among anarchists, with more than a few internal battles settled with large fires, explosions, and armed conflicts.<sup>53</sup> The relationship between the anarchist assailants and the doctrine of direct action—which defended the use of *all* strategies leading to revolution—also presented important variants. Severino Di Giovanni and Miguel Roscigna, for example, embodied the most ideological expression of this kind of activism. Their “expropriations,” which did not exclude direct links with the world of crime, served the broader aim of the great anti-bourgeois revolution: financing *comités pro-presos* (committees that sought the release of political prisoners and raised money for their families), counterfeiting, funding their own publishing house, and so on. At the other end of the spectrum, the assailant Bruno Antonelli Debella (“Facha Bruta”) cultivated a more instrumental relationship with expropriative anarchism and, despite his libertarian connections, his criminal rationale was indistinguishable from that of other gangsters.<sup>54</sup> Although highly visible, expropriative anarchism had a relatively short run: it peaked at the end of the 1920s and underwent brutal repression following the 1930 military coup. By the end of that decade, its moment had passed.

Setting aside the question of the role of violence in the path toward revolution or its legitimacy within the anarchist tradition, what is most relevant here are the similarities between the methods of “expropriative” robbery and those of bands who intended to use their loot in a very different fashion. The links between anarchism and criminality were nothing new, but at the beginning of the century the figure of the “dangerous” anarchist was associated with a very specific kind of violence (bombings). By the 1920s and 1930s, this relationship had unraveled, allowing for a new hybrid figure to emerge: the “anarcho-criminal.” The relationship between criminal and anarchist methodologies, which was made clear in photographic reconstructions of anarchist holdups, fed into a larger perception of organized crime. In police reports the term “*pistoleros*” was reserved for anarchist expropriators. From the point of view of the material history of illegal practices, these bands were far from being an anomaly: in their public performance against the law, they belonged to their time.

It is difficult to determine how political violence was understood within the context of perceptions of a crime wave in the 1930s, but it was undoubtedly an important component of its interpretation. Moreover, the confusion between political violence and common crime was deliberately exploited, as uprisings against political fraud were narrated using

the vocabulary reserved for common criminality. During the Radical revolts of January 1933, for example, the Conservative paper *La Opinión* announced that headlines “inform the government about the *gang robberies* conducted in Buenos Aires and other parts of the nation.”<sup>55</sup>

Other expressions of “tough politics,” however, more than justified the kind of language that would conflate *pistolerismo* with the struggle for power. Such was the case with the *matón de comité*, a type of street thug who embodied the era of fraud, weapons, and gambling. With the heightening of confrontations between Radicals and Conservatives, some *caudillos* of Greater Buenos Aires made alliances with known *pistoleros* to reinforce their territorial control and eliminate the Radical Party’s threat in the streets. The partnership between Conservative *caudillo* Barceló and the thug “Ruggierito” is one of the best-known examples. On the borders of legality, where politics and police action intersected, gambling and prostitution served as a source of wealth on both large and small scales. The *pistolero* on the outskirts of Buenos Aires emerged as a player in this fight for political and territorial control. We will return to this subject in chapter 5.

The figure of the *pistolero* was the product of a convergence of factors in 1920s and 1930s Argentina. His rise, like his decline, can be located at the intersection of histories of modernization, consumption, and political life. Though scoffed at by traffickers, the regulation of the arms market placed limits on a model of masculinity associated with the mass circulation of pistols. The violent defeat of “expropriative” anarchism at the beginning of the 1930s eliminated some of the most visible practitioners of *pistolerismo*. The long road to the end of this period of political fraud marked, in turn, the marginalization of a way of doing politics that was rapidly losing legitimacy. During the Peronist period, further efforts to reform the Buenos Aires Province police would circumscribe the links between police and *caudillo* politics. There would also be changes at the representational level. In the thousands of newspapers that continued to relay stories of the *pistolero*, a new figure appeared: the modern police officer, summoned by radio and arriving at the scene of the crime in his new patrol car. To do them both justice, the languages of science and naturalist literature would have to yield to those of cinema and comic strips. This is the transformation explored in the next chapter.