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# Unseen peacemakers: bouncers, customers and informal resolutions in Italian nightlife

Journal of  
Organizational  
Ethnography

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Received 25 September 2025  
Revised 5 February 2026  
Accepted 6 March 2026

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This ethnographic study aims to investigate the complex social dynamics and conflicts within Italian nightclubs, analyzing the relationships between security staff (bouncers) and patrons. It seeks to challenge the perception of clubs solely as arenas reflecting societal dangers (*malamovida*), arguing instead for their recognition as sites where informal justice and conflict resolution occur.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research employed an immersive, open participant observation approach within four different nightlife venues (discotheques and clubs) in a prominent Sicilian urban center. The methodology involved over 200 h of direct fieldwork, focusing on the day-to-day interactions and detailed analysis of several specific violent or tense incidents involving bouncers, patrons, friends and family members.

**Findings** – The analysis of incidents demonstrates that conflicts in these highly crowded environments are often spontaneously resolved through non-formal means, including dialogue and informal mediation led by bouncers, friends or even relatives of those involved. These improvised methods effectively reduce the material and symbolic costs typically associated with formal justice procedures (e.g. police reports, legal suits or revenge fighting).

**Originality/value** – This paper offers a critical corrective to security-focused narratives about nightlife by conceptualizing the club as a “site of experimentation” for crisis management. It provides a foundational argument for policymakers and venue owners to recognize and formally integrate these emergent, de-escalatory conflict resolution methods into standard security protocols, moving beyond punitive measures.

**Keywords** Bouncers, Clubs, Violence, Mediation, Youth, Italy, Sicily, Safety, Security

**Paper type** Research article

## 1. Introduction

This ethnographic study, conducted across four Sicilian nightlife clubs, primarily investigates the role of bouncers in managing violence. A secondary focus explores alternative methods for resolving the consequences of brawls, aiming to move beyond the conventional, yet limited, responses of legal suits, customer bans and retaliation.

Interest in this topic stems from cyclical public concerns – especially during the summer – over the Italian *movida* (nightlife). These concerns involve alcohol, violence, youth gangs (such as *maranza* and “baby gangs”) and residents’ “right to the night.” Nightclubs are a focal point for these issues, reflecting broader tensions regarding urban life, quality of life and the relationship between different sectors of the city (Nofre *et al.*, 2025; Bertoni, 2024). In response to these concerns, the securitization of clubs has become a significant industry over the years (Hobbs *et al.*, 2002). This led to the 2009 Italian legislation regulating bouncers, the subsequent growth of security agencies, and the increased involvement of police and regulatory agencies in club operations. As a tourist-heavy and densely populated area, the case studied here is no exception to these general dynamics.

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Journal of Organizational Ethnography  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
e-ISSN: 2046-6757  
p-ISSN: 2046-6749  
DOI 10.1108/JOE-09-2025-0122

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Clubs, in sum, are compelling sites of study. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the direct observation of violence, the subculture of bouncers and the violent interactions of clients remain underrepresented in Italian sociological literature. While there are numerous studies on sexual interactions, dance culture and other hedonistic aspects of nightlife (Torti, 1997; Petrilli, 2020), violence is much less explored. My research, therefore, represents an attempt to fill this gap.

This article presents a collection of situations revolving around violence and “mediation.” Specifically, it examines seven episodes across three venues, characterized by bursts of violence, bouncer intervention and – with one exception – reconciliation between parties. The study demonstrates how the effort to contain violence through cooperation, rather than immediate exclusion, can limit tensions. By involving contenders, friends and staff, this approach helps avoid police involvement, penal consequences and the stigmatization of individuals as deviant. Furthermore, this attitude protects the venues themselves from being labeled as “dangerous” in the media or public perception. Mediation, thus, is to be understood as a “type of conflict management whereby an outsider or third party intervenes in a conflict, in a voluntary, noncoercive manner, in order to arrest its destructive tendencies” (Bercovitch, 1999, p. 403; Brummans *et al.*, 2021, p. 765). However, while one can certainly envision the possibility of training security staff in professional mediation (Greco-Morasso, 2011, pp. 6–7), this article primarily supports the cultivation of a widespread mentality that favors peaceful and non-penal resolution of conflicts in everyday life. My argument is that replacing one general mentality and its automatic responses (i.e. the propensity for banning customers) with another could be more effective, as the chances of fruitful mediation increase through the broad cooperation of the involved actors (victims, offenders, friends and venue/institution). Historically, professionalization efforts and technological interventions aimed at curbing bouncer violence faced widespread resistance from operators (O’Brian *et al.*, 2008; Haggerty and Tokar, 2012; McLennan-Dillabough, 2013; Van Aalst *et al.*, 2014; Farrimond *et al.*, 2018). Professional and social culture, in sum, is not something that can be easily changed through legislative acts or by means of mere acts of will. Often, in fact, it tends to resist innovation. At the same time, my hypothesis is that informal practices of mediation already exist, and they are indeed practices that security chiefs already utilize in their everyday work. The point, then, is to outline and stress their significance, hoping that their value is slowly acknowledged and systematically reproduced.

Far from being simply trivial, violence can be read as a sort of cultural text that sheds light on the salience of themes for a given group. In this respect, I will show how violence intertwines with topics such as gender or notions of fairness (Hobbs *et al.*, 2002). At the same time, the study will discuss how organizational aspects come to play a role in the manifestations of strains. Overcrowding and understaffing, for instance, are common and obvious elements that favor the explosion of violence. Bouncers’ approach to circumstances in the hall, for instance, is affected by the disproportion between available personnel and the customers. Their methods, thus, become brusque and even rougher. Often, this attitude determines serious consequences – consequences that in many cases could have been avoided if the management had not opted to save money on personnel.

At the same time, at least in the studied area, bouncers are at the center of a system of relations revolving around nightclubs. This is a grinding world of classes and demeanors that meet and occasionally clash with each other. Bouncers themselves embody this principle. They are mostly representatives of an urban proletariat forced into double and triple jobs; that is, forms of employment, exploitation, and self-exploitation of their physical capital that know almost no rest and view time – as marked by the clock – as a resource to be fully exploited. They mostly come from the “margins” of the city and the labor market, yet they work in places that are central to city life. Before and during their careers, they learn much about the city, the people and the relations that unite and separate customers. Bouncers thus offer venue owners a “linguistic” competence and a capital of knowledge (i.e. social networks), both derived from belonging to a world of specific neighborhoods, streets, and individual and collective stories

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(Hall, 2002). Certainly, as noticed by others elsewhere (Winlow, 2001; Tomkins, 2005; Søggaard and Krause-Jensen, 2020), their way of performing their role is imbued with a working-class masculinity – and while the experience of juvenile violence transcends the borders of class and is quite universal, it can be concentrated in one class more than others. Moreover, bouncers are interpreters of the aesthetic project pursued by the owners or managers of the venues. That is, bouncers allow customers to enter on the basis of their adherence to the standards sought by the property (i.e. age and style). But even if the indications are strict, other considerations come into play. For instance: the criminal profile of certain customers; their provenance and their relationship to the bouncer at the door; the necessity of avoiding incidents; and the strategy of transforming a dangerous customer into an ally for the maintenance of order within the venue (something that appears particularly convenient in a place of organized crime). These are exactly those elements that pertain to their professional and social capital.

Unlike other similarly sized location, the area I studied does not guarantee the anonymity of the customers – nor for the bouncers. In such a context, “obligations” of various sort are always a possibility, and bouncers must therefore navigate the tension between the instructions received from the owners and the customers. This adds complexity to their role and makes their work somewhat “flexible” (Søggaard and Krause-Jensen, 2020). Nonetheless, there are behaviors that cannot be tolerated, forcing these workers to deploy methods that belong to their street culture (I refer to men because, in the context studied, women are excluded from security work within clubs; when women are at the door, they act as selectors accompanied by male bouncers). Although the style of the squads can vary based on the principles of their leaders, these methods generally prioritize quick action and minimal verbal engagement. Especially during busy nights when the club is overcrowded, the priority is to eject problematic customers as swiftly as possible, avoiding leaving the hall understaffed and unprotected for too long.

Although bouncers must attend a training course to be licensed, few truly believe that theirs is a profession that can be formally studied and learned. Instead, it is more often seen as a job that primarily requires aptitude and – equally importantly – a deep knowledge of people and the street. As stated, their way of relating to others and to violence is typically the result of an apprenticeship begun in front of schools or in neighborhoods, during altercations where these men were protagonists, peacemakers or otherwise involved in conflicts. These traits confer a specific reputation upon the profession. Nonetheless, my thesis is that there is much more to this role, and that non-violent systems for settling disputes are frequently deployed. While violence is the most obvious feature of the profession, the observation of a bouncer’s everyday life shows that the work is far less trapped within the circle of coercion than one might think.

These points will be discussed in the following pages. In particular, I will argue that clubs, in a spontaneous way, also serve as sites of experimentation. Tensions are sometimes resolved through dialogue and improvised mediation. These interventions are enacted by various individuals – such as friends of clients, relatives or the bouncers themselves. My proposal, then, is that these possibilities should be recognized and integrated into the services provided by security personnel as a form of alternative dispute resolution.

## 2. Context and methods

Bonomi (2000) shows that since the 1970s, Italy’s “districts of pleasure” – a complex industry including theme parks, fashion and new nightlife professions – have reflected the nation’s shift from an industrial economy to one based on services and immaterial goods. This transformation is epitomized by individuals moving from working-class militancy in the *Case del Popolo* to roles as artistic directors in the Rimini-Riccione area (Bonomi, 2000, pp. 107–118), an area that once hosted 190 discos and 300,000 nightly visitors within a 10 km radius (Bonomi, 2000, p. 66). By the early 1990s, this “Riviera model” had become the quintessential reference for Italian cities seeking to reinvent their social and economic identities through entertainment (Torti, 1997).

Despite recent shifts, the nighttime economy remains vital. Modern Italian discos have moved beyond simple DJ sets to host private parties and concerts, adapting to new social needs (Di Camillo, 2024). While classic venues face market pressures from unauthorized clubs and lidos (Netti 2025), the sector saw growth of 3–4% in 2024 and 2025 – a trend particularly notable in Southern Italy and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia (SILB-FIPE/Confcommercio, 2025; SIAE, 2025). In 2024 alone, the sector generated nearly 500 million euros with over 34 million attendees. This economic weight fuels ongoing collaboration with police headquarters (Questure) and prefectures (Prefettura), confirming the political relevance of nightlife (*movida*) regarding security and intergenerational conflict. Ultimately, clubs remain a focal point for concerns regarding urban quality of life and the friction between different components of the city fabric (Bertoni, 2024; Shapiro, 2023; Nofre et al., 2025).

In the province under study, a coastal corridor extending across approximately 60 kilometers of shoreline functions as a decentralized “pleasure district.” Within this linear coastal fabric, the leisure industry is spread between two main poles. To the north, a gateway town serves as the primary nightlife outlet for the metropolitan periphery, specializing in large-scale beach lidos that transition into dance venues at night. To the south, another hub has positioned itself as a sophisticated entertainment center, bridging the gap between the metropolitan center and a nearby global tourism icon located just a few kilometers further south.

The proximity of this global tourist destination – a world-renowned icon of luxury – is a decisive factor for the economic health of the entire area. As it attracts an elite international market, it elevates the profile of the neighboring towns through a significant “overflow” effect. In recent years, while the primary tourist center has focused on “highbrow” entertainment and exclusive cultural festivals, the surrounding coastal towns have absorbed the resulting market demand. This synergy creates a “trickle-down” effect where the saturation of the main tourist hub pushes visitors toward the more accessible clubs in the nearby municipalities.

This geographical and cultural interconnectedness has contributed to a 3–4% annual turnover increase in the sector, as these towns offer a “street-level” version of the luxury nightlife found in the more exclusive lounges and hotels of the primary tourist anchor.

Within the city, though, the contribution of local youth and university students – many of whom are from outside the region or are international students – represents the main audience for nightlife events.

This investigation was conducted across a major Sicilian urban center and two nearby towns on this Riviera between early July and mid-November 2024, covering 41 evenings and over 200 h of direct observation. The focus was on three separate security teams operating across four nightlife venues: discotheques (capacity 300–1,000), large lidos (capacity 700) and intimate clubs (capacity 150).

Each team operated autonomously under leads who managed contracts, scheduling and logistics. Varying the teams and venues allowed for a comparison of professional methods, entertainment, clientele and resulting interactions. Entertainment was largely consistent across sites, except for one small club that featured both alternative and mainstream music (during Erasmus night).

The three groups studied are distinct. However, two of them exhibit marked characteristics that make them clearly distinguishable (namely the “gang” model contrasted with the “professional” model). The third group, operating in the alternative club, shows hybrid traits, making it largely similar to the latter, though it presents some elements of irregularity that also make it resemble the first.

The first difference between the two main groups studied is that the one active in the city (the gang-team) is smaller. It is also characterized by a prevalence of neighborhood ties, along with the shared membership of many bouncers in the community of combat sports practitioners. The majority of members on this team have also worked with the same colleagues for a long time (which defines them as a team). Although on average slightly younger than other groups (the average is just under 40 years old), they nonetheless boast a

long collective history. However, this also means that many of them carry criminal charges, are undergoing trials or have received final convictions for crimes related to the profession and beyond.

My presence in the field was explained to the members of the squads and the owners of the venues. With regard to the customers, as my study took place in a public space during public events, it was deemed unnecessary to inform the audience of my presence. Like any other person present, I was intended to act essentially as a witness – much like anyone else who happened to be near a meaningful interaction between customers or between customers and staff. In sum, the observation was not designed to have an experimental character, and the research plan did not envision any interaction with customers.

Apart from the preliminary stage, which necessitated discussions with the three team supervisors concerning my objectives and various elements of the operational structure, the study primarily drew data not from formal interviews but from spontaneous dialogues and direct engagement with unfolding situations (Swain and King, 2022). This also encompassed routine exchanges among bouncers and between bouncers and customers.

However, certain elements interfered with the original research plan. Staffing levels, ranging from 2 to 15 bouncers, were consistently inadequate. On peak nights, the crowd often surpassed 2,500 people, significantly exceeding regulatory limits and resulting in a worst-case staff-to-patron ratio of 1:167. In response to this burden, as reciprocal confidence grew, my engagement slowly increased. Initially, I would help set up and dismantle the barriers at the beginning and the end of the night. Later, I would be asked to go to the bar and distribute beverages to the staff, or to deliver messages when someone's radio was out of order. Finally, I was asked by a bouncer to assist him while he intervened in a small clash between customers. Due to this persistent shortage of personnel, over the course of a few weeks, my role in each venue and with each squad shifted from observer to active contributor – assisting with screening, monitoring and de-escalation – similar to findings in other studies (Preiser, 2016; Calvey, 2021). While mostly dressed in plain dark clothing, I occasionally wore the official uniform and even received unofficial payment.

Similar to Calvey (2018), I encountered several “ethical moments” during my work. At a later stage, in fact, from my new position as a “bouncer,” I engaged with guests during confrontations and various challenging scenarios. Moreover, almost invariably, from the viewpoint of the patrons with whom I interacted, I appeared to be a member of the security crew.

However, there were moments when, faced with appropriate circumstances, I deemed it more advantageous to openly declare my function as a researcher. This disclosed identity served to alter the dynamic and shift it away from what was, in essence, a hierarchical and unbalanced structure, or to circumvent scrutiny. To put it differently, I routinely alternated between concealed observation/involvement (from the standpoint of the clientele) and overt observation/involvement (when my investigative capacity was more discernible) (Strudwick, 2019). Nevertheless, every bouncer was cognizant of my true identity and objectives.

While semi-covert ethnography may sound problematic in ethical terms (Calvey, 2021), my experience mirrored that of many active “bouncers.” I use the expression in quotations because, indeed, much of the personnel work irregularly. Even in their case, the clear and the black melt together and are indistinguishable. That is, the certificates in their possession pertain to fire prevention or first aid, not to “bouncing.” In front of the authorities, the presence of many is justified only by this nominal role, and not by others. Nonetheless, their main function within the premises consists of maintaining order. In this sense, informality is structural – well beyond the bouncers – and it characterizes labor relations within this area and sector. My irregular presence, thus, was just one more addition to a general climate that did not bode well for conformity. Indeed, my status was in itself the premise needed for penetrating the real substance of labor within the venues (a fact made clear by later inspections by the authorities, following incidents or simple controls that are not the center of this article. These were moments, however, that disclosed further levels of secrecy and irregularity – levels that exceeded those I had initially been admitted and that had not been mentioned in any formal or

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informal conversation. Only my status and “membership,” thus allowed me access to them. In sum, I would say, alongside Calvey (2021, p. 52): “Put simply, I felt I could gain a more nuanced and intimate understanding of their stigmatized subculture by being one of them.” My own informality and the informality of my approach to the field were necessary if I wanted to penetrate the surface and the representation offered to the public.

The extent of my engagement in these operations signifies that the collected information is infused not solely with accounts of occurrences but also with insights derived from lived experience. This includes the physical aspects (the attainment of practical proficiencies) and affective components (a realm of feelings) tied to my deep immersion within these contexts (Lyng, 2005; Wacquant, 2003). Consequently, across the five-month span of scrutiny, I also underwent a progression from initial exhilaration to the establishment of routine, applicable to both duties and sentiments (Pink, 2009; Preiser, 2016; Spencer and Ricciardelli, 2025).

Such shifts are pivotal for adopting the role and, subsequently, developing a professional persona (Kupka *et al.*, 2017). The amassed data similarly reflect this evolution or redefinition of identity. This aspect is crucial for understanding not so much my own experience but, more critically, the bouncers’ working ethos. This ethos is marked by a disregard for patrons’ sentiments and an abrupt demeanor frequently used to swiftly remove troublemakers.

With regard to my motivations, I had been planning this study for many years. Social control, informal labor and class, whether studied autonomously or in combination, have been the focus of most of my research over the years. In addition, my interest in cultural phenomena (e.g. trap music and the criminalization of musicians and youth) has grown. Clubs, thus, emerged as the spaces where the simultaneous manifestations of all these topics could be observed. These places are at the center of many concerns regarding youth culture, intoxication, violence and public civility. They were, thus, the ideal location to study the intersection of precarious labor, social control and social conduct. Moreover, bouncers generally have a negative reputation. Intuitively, I knew they embody issues that have always been at the center of my interest – that is, order and disorder, formality and informality, and similar ambivalent themes. Due to my regular presence in some clubs, and my navigation of the city’s social life of the city, I knew two bouncers, each in charge of a team, and one regular bouncer. One of these men was the head of security of an alternative club, while the others were people I happened to meet in social activism circles (the regular bouncer, in particular, was a well-known trade unionist). By chance, through a common female friend, I happened to meet a third bouncer in a bar one afternoon. He himself was the head of a large team. Suddenly, my old project came to mind. I put the pieces together and informed all of the men of my intention. The bouncers showed interest in my study and agreed to include me in their teams as an observer. As previously mentioned, on three different occasions, after brief discussions with the management of the establishments, I was introduced to the squads and my journey began.

Furthermore, the analytical findings were presented to the participant bouncers to solicit their corrections and proposed changes. Ultimately, due to the delicate nature of the subjects explored, all specific locations, incidents and names have been pseudonymized during the analysis to safeguard the confidentiality of all involved parties.

Yet, with regard to the analysis, the bulk of details is not intended for the sake of mere descriptivism, but rather serves a methodological purpose. The scenes reported are, in fact, common in the sense that they occur in many different places within the same area and throughout the world. Details and thick description are a way to show how interactions and the actors’ attribution of meaning are shaped by the specific situations. Such details, therefore, demonstrate how the actors’ cultural compulsions determine the situation (Geertz, 1972). One aim of this paper, then, is to show how typical situations and outcomes can be modified through changes in attitude by the key actors within the situation – namely, the operators.

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### 3. Quelling conflicts

One night in August, well past 2:00 AM—the usual time for tension to explode (Suonperä Liebst *et al.*, 2020)—the first outbreaks of violence begin. I intervene three times quickly; the third was the most interesting. I find a group of boys fighting, isolate them, and am informed by one protagonist: “He’s been persecuting me for two years! He calls me an informer, a scumbag . . . Now he told my girlfriend she’s sleeping with others . . .” The boy repeats his two-year grievance with a plaintive tone, giving me the impression he was psychologically unstable. I ask him to calm down and stop approaching the rival group, warning that my colleagues would certainly expel him otherwise. However, when he again moves toward the other boys, intervention from other operators is inevitable; they grab and remove him. At that point, the veteran bouncer tells me: “Too many words! You mustn’t waste time. You can’t start listening to stories. Just grab them, take them out, and it’s their problem.”

The familiar divide between “talkers” and “fighters” in the world of bouncers was thus becoming clear to my eyes (Van Liempt and Van Aalst, 2015, p. 1256). It confirmed that the communicative approach I found in another team of operators is almost unknown here. On the contrary, this group (the “gang”) was mostly focused on action – certainly not on adopting communicative tactics aimed at defusing tensions rather than simply displacing them elsewhere. The premise I adopted is that communication-based approaches are superior to dislocation strategies because unresolved tensions, when merely displaced, are likely to re-emerge outside. This, of course, is even more probable when the contenders are supported by peers who do not cooperate to ensure peace. This means that the fight quelled inside will simply migrate outside the venue, forcing the operators to intervene again at some point – perhaps at the end of the evening, during the exit and closing.

This was, in fact, exactly what seemed poised to happen, but it was fortunately averted thanks to the intervention of two girls:

While I was outside the establishment, still talking to the boy, these girls delivered a crucial message from the expelled client’s rival. The message stated that if the boy beside me avoided further provocations, the rival would pass without causing any trouble himself. This is precisely what happened. In the meantime, however, the client, continued to ask me what he should do and how he could free himself from the burden afflicting him. He desperately wanted to explain to me what had happened. He recounted that two years earlier he had been savagely beaten by this evening’s rival. He then showed me a photo in which he wore a conspicuous turban-like gauze bandage on his head. The boy explained that this evening his rival, as many times before, had called him miserable and a scrounger because, to avoid reporting him, he had asked him for money as compensation for past damages. Meanwhile, the client obsessively continued to ask me how he could free himself from this burden. Fortunately, at this point, some of his friends realized that there was no point in waiting any longer and finally managed to take him away with them. Before leaving, however, the boy repeatedly thanks me for listening and advising him.

As can be seen, this was a simple intervention, but highly time-consuming. Time is a resource that the bouncers of this group are unwilling to waste and which, in fact, on an evening like this, is precious because the potential seeds of a brawl are numerous. Managing every conflict as I was doing would have been impossible. Firstly, because there was no intimate inclination to do so, and secondly, because it would have prevented adequate surveillance of the rest of the hotspots.

Another bouncer, however, was also called to handle a similar situation. Immediately after the episode described above, I found myself involved with this colleague in escorting a client who had been the protagonist of another fight, and who greatly fears being ambushed in the street by the contenders. We did not see anyone, however. The bouncer, who knew the rival of the boy we are accompanying, introduced himself to the boy. He repeats his name and suggests that if anything happens, the boy should tell his rival that he will have to deal with the bouncer later. With that, the operator and I returned inside.

This time, the threat of violence, rather than dialogue, was at play. Indeed, a particular form of alliance between the bouncer and the potential victim of a conflict is what proved effective.

The bouncer, by injecting his identity into the ongoing conflict, became a party to a clash that did not belong to him. In this sense, violence is confirmed for the bouncer as the code capable of preventing further violence.

Collectively, these observations confirm that institutional efforts to improve service quality and limit bouncer violence – including in Italy – have not eliminated violent practices (Roberts and Eldridge, 2009; Van Liempt and Van Aalst, 2015). Nor have they overcome the subcultural, hyper-masculine ethos centered on force. Instead, these pressures have forced bouncers to act flexibly, requiring them to continuously oscillate between deterrence and a friendly, welcoming demeanor (Søgaard and Krause-Jensen, 2020, p. 38). This service-oriented approach can be exhausting when dealing with repetitive or uninteresting stories from intoxicated clients. The institutional result appears to be a shift toward more conscious uses of violence and abrupt manners, rather than increased listening or abandonment of quick-fix solutions (Id., pp. 39–40).

That night, the shift ended at 3:30 am. Together with a bouncer, we noted that the venue had been filled with approximately six times the permissible capacity. We discussed how the official 307-person capacity was financially unviable given operating costs, but agreed the risk was “truly incredible.” What one can draw from this, however, is that for the purpose of de-escalating conflict, the ratio between the crowd and the personnel appears to be key. Mediation, thus, requires both sufficient staff and an audience that is not overwhelming.

#### 4. Capacity, safety and violence

The capacity problem became evident the next day at a different, large lido venue that had been extended by a third overnight without notice, leaving the team short-staffed. The crowd was later estimated at 3,000 people, far exceeding the official capacity of 1,700.

Around 1:30 AM, a group of boys is thrown out. One of them has been accused by a girl of touching her backside. The accused firmly denies what has been attributed to him and is resolute in wanting to confront the girl. One of his friends, however, is more belligerent because someone from the girl’s group put their hands around his neck. We keep the groups at bay. After a while, the girl at the center of the incident comes out, accompanied by her friends. She, from inside the barrier that separates the venue from the street where both her group and that of the supposed molester are now located, repeats several times that the boy did not just brush against her, but put a hand under her dress. The client’s friends, spurred on by these words, seek physical confrontation, hindered by the bouncers. I ask the girl to consider that here it will end “badly” and to ask herself if that’s what she wants. Given that the client was almost crying in an attempt to deny any responsibility and appeared frankly convincing, I ask the girl if it was possible to consider that it might not have been the identified young man who touched her. She had insisted and, loudly, had repeatedly asked me and other bouncers if we didn’t have daughters. However, I couldn’t help notice that in fact no one saw the young man extend his hand. Not even the girl herself. Moreover, I also observed that the first time a friend of the girl claims to have seen a movement of the suspected young man’s hands will only be much later, at the culmination of a very long conversation aimed at re-examining and recalling details that were previously claimed not to have been noticed, and then were suddenly remembered with absolute certainty. Meanwhile, she continued to appear totally immersed in a re-enactment of the violation she suffered, and showed no sign of wanting to help reconcile the spirits. She even took a photo of the boy who allegedly groped her because she wanted to remember who he is. He, for his part, after a while gives up the idea of being able to clarify his position and leaves.

The girls stayed by the barrier, sending their male friends to pursue the rival group. I found it useless to warn the protagonist that the situation would degenerate outside our security perimeter, as she just replied, “You cannot understand what it means! Don’t you have a daughter?!”

I also made the mistake of suggesting she reports the boy, noting also that the matter was legally untenable without proof. It might have been worth settling for the bad impression the boy made, assuming it was him who groped her. I was ultimately suggesting she de-escalate to prevent her friends from being charged with fighting. She and her group immediately shouted me down, yelling, “Ah, it’s my word against his. This too . . . But are you security?” At that point, I decided to ignore her because

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she and her friends showed no sign of abandoning their desire for revenge, repeating the mantra that I couldn't understand. The group finally left after what felt like an infinite time.

#### 4.1 Immediately afterwards

Before we could relax, another alarm sounded. I went with others onto the dance floor, where bouncers were arguing within a large, heated group. I immediately noticed two giants among the clients—one over 90 kg and the other over 115 kg, both much taller than the bouncers—and was relieved to understand they were trying to make peace.

This peace was short-lived. Fifteen minutes later at the entrance, I was surprised to see two bouncers arrive, each holding a client from that same group by the neck. The second bouncer not only escorted his client out but slapped him, sending him to the ground. The patron accepted the blow philosophically. I intuited this was the patron's way of acknowledging the bouncer was justified; this client had previously punched that same bouncer, and the loud slap was the bouncer's way of ending the dispute.

After 3:30 AM, we held a brief meeting. The evening was successful, but the team felt understaffed by four or five people, particularly with the major holiday, Ferragosto, approaching. The team leader confirmed he would try to secure more staff.

This summary of the evening clearly shows how venues tend to limit security expenses, frequently resulting in an insufficient number of operators for a given evening. The security personnel recruited for that evening totaled fourteen, compared to a real need – due to the undisclosed extension of the area – of eighteen. The saving of approximately 140 euros per worker in the face of tens of thousands of euros in revenue had led to a security crisis, which only professionalism and luck had prevented from resulting in worse outcomes. In fact, depending on whether the owner opts to hire regular or undeclared staff for an evening, a figure between just under 300 and just over 600 euros – both negligible amounts compared to the earnings of successful events like the one under discussion – can suffice to justify the choice to sacrifice security expenses.

The examples provided also suggest that customer cooperation is central. As in the case of the brawl initially involving two large-framed clients, their willingness to de-escalate the situation was central to determining an overall manageable course for the ensuing conflict. This willingness, conversely, was lacking in the case of the girl who felt harassed. The latter incident engaged a portion of the operators for a long time, concentrating their presence outside and further reducing the availability of personnel inside – a presence that would otherwise have been essential had other outbreaks erupted on the dance floor. This, precisely, is what by sheer luck did not happen in that time frame.

One obvious element that is nonetheless useful to highlight, moreover, is that mediation requires “Allies.” That is, mediation works more effectively if the social circle of the troublemakers cooperates to resolve the argument. The bouncer, therefore, must identify one or more points of reference within the circle of contenders and transform them into Allies. Failing to achieve this objective significantly reduces the chances of the conflict de-escalating.

#### 5. The nightclub as a public forum

Beyond the organizational aspects just discussed, it is also interesting to note how the nightclub can reflect broader public themes central to the current social agenda. The aforementioned incident involving the client who was groped by someone confirms this. The young woman adopted a language of gender-based violence that was highly prominent at the time of the incident (Saitta, 2024). This framing reinforced the client's sense of victimhood, which was equally shared by the group accompanying her. Moreover, this attitude was expressed through language borrowed from movements against gender-based violence – a

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framing of the event that, essentially, translated for the girl and her company into a perceived right to revenge.

In light of the centrality of this topic in Italian public debate, we can imagine that, as observed in other contexts (Levi Herz, 2025), the issues of vulnerability, gender-based violence and its prevention have become significant for a significant portion of the clientele. But operators are not immune to the effects of this societal concern either. This is demonstrated, for example, by an intervention that shows a notable overlap of issues: namely, attention to sexual harassment, homophobia, trauma and, finally, the possibility of alternative forms of justice.

The story begins with a bouncer misinterpreting a scene between a very young boy and his female friend as harassment, believing the boy's advances had been rejected. The operator firmly intervened and seized the minor. The intervention of his slightly older brother escalated the situation, causing other bouncers to arrive and escort both boys out.

The younger boy, Giovanni, called his mother, who later demanded an explanation from a bouncer outside the venue. The mother was reasonable and critical of her older, drunken son's inappropriate behavior. During their conversation, she mentioned Giovanni was called a "fucking faggot" (the boy is homosexual), though witnesses claimed the epithet came from an unrelated patron, not a bouncer.

Negotiations were disrupted when Antonio, the older son, became provocative. I personally saw him raise his hand to hit the turned-away bouncer on the back of the neck and gently blocked his hand. After another provocative move, the bouncer exploded, threatening: "if your son lays a hand on me . . . I'll smash him." This halted all discussion. The woman became furious and demanded the bouncer's details, which he provided falsely. The team leader immediately removed the bouncer.

I remained alone and tried to convince the woman not to file a complaint. I explained that with over two thousand people present, the bouncers' goal is to eliminate the crisis before it spreads, not to determine fault. I also explained, supported by a witness, that the older son's abrupt intervention had likely caused the initial situation to degenerate.

At this point, moreover, I reveal myself. I tell her that I am a professor and that I have been conducting research on this and other groups of bouncers for some time. However, I see that she intends to go talk to the venue owners and perhaps even the police. To avoid further involvement, I then decide to leave, asking the woman to take my words into account.

A couple of days later, I was involved in a mediation orchestrated by the team leader, Franco, who had arranged a reconciliation meeting between the mother of the two boys and Ciccio – the bouncer who had previously issued the threat. The mother was firm: she demanded an apology for the operators' conduct, explaining that such actions inflict serious trauma on boys like her sons, who are "completely unrelated to violence or machismo."

The woman detailed the traumatic impact of the incident: Giovanni, the younger boy, felt such injustice and shame that he had to be taken to the emergency room for a saline solution, obsessively repeating to the doctor that he was a good boy. He was now distressed and refused to return to the club. She also showed videos made that evening, which featured carefree interactions between Giovanni and the girl, and finally, the bouncers' intervention.

When the video stopped, the team leader apologized, acknowledging the "hallucination" of the first, absent operator who had mistakenly determined there was harassment. I also participated in the discussion, framing the events within the difficult material context (crowding, low light) and the symbolic one. I specifically mentioned the heightened awareness of gender crimes among security staff, and, crucially, I insisted that the staff interpreted the older brother's intervention as a potential escalation of the fight.

Regarding the unforgivable expression used by Ciccio, the second bouncer ("I'll smash him"), I also point out how this should be understood in the context of an operator's daily experience, who may find himself confronted at the end of the evening by someone seeking some kind of revenge and trying to attack him bare-handed, using weapons, or perhaps a car to run him over. Ciccio, however, insists repeatedly that he never pronounced the phrase "fucking faggot." Even the witnesses do not attribute it

to him, and only the lady's son claims that he said those words. "We – explains the bouncer – have worked for years at queer parties, for Gay Pride, etc. If we hear homophobic insults, we throw out those who say them, not the gays!"

Finally, once we reached the entrance, we met Giovanni, who had been invited by his mother to meet us. I try to reassure him and also give him a speech about the shame he had begun to feel after the events concerning him. The boy will eventually enter the nightclub and remain there all evening.

In light of this account, nightclubs appear to be compelling sites of study because they encapsulate the issues, tensions and relationships inherent to contemporary society – themes that, in these spaces, have the potential to unfold in even more paroxysmal forms. Even more so than the story featuring the girl who was groped – and who, consequently, transformed into a "Fury" by adopting a definition of the situation borrowed partly from feminist movements and partly from mainstream interpretations (particularly regarding populist calls for punitive justice) – it is the scene involving the mother that is especially rich in nuance.

This interaction highlights, for example, gender issues related to male–female relationships as well as discrimination against homosexuals. It also touches upon themes inherent in different types of violence, the awareness of youth trauma, the role of parenting in the lives of young people and, finally, the possibility of practicing alternative forms of justice and reconciliation.

Under certain conditions, the nightclub can therefore be an ideal setting for experiments aimed at fostering dialogue between conflicting parties. A mother open to dialogue; a team leader who invests significant time in resolving the consequences of interventions; an owner willing to contribute; and, finally, bouncers who minimized their use of violence – all proved to be essential elements in avoiding a more classic process of police reports, complaints and the subsequent legal steps. The fortuitous co-presence of these elements provided the environment needed for fruitful mediation. While a stroke of luck helped gather the right people within this situation, the case also shows that mentality and attitude are key to solving conflicts in an alternative way.

## 6. Banning or reconciling

What we have seen so far, therefore, is that nightclubs can be spaces whose experimental potential extends beyond expressive planes (Torti, 1997), peer relationships (Petrilli, 2020) or harm reduction related to drug consumption (Nistri and Grillini, 2021). Clubs, which constitute the environments in which certain tensions manifest, can also be the natural sites for mending fractures or reintegrating relationships and individuals who have been expelled.

In this particular respect, banning – whether imposed or self-imposed – is a common mode of maintaining order in many countries. Hobbs *et al.* (2003, p. 384), for example, note how in England the threat of being banned from venues often prevents customers from filing reports in the event of a violent expulsion. Similarly, in the cases observed for this research, the practice of denying access to those who have been expelled for indefinite periods is far from rare.

It could also be said that banning is a cultural automatism. It persists not only due to the absence of the mediating conditions highlighted previously, but also because it represents a standardized custom. Moreover, it is relatively simple to implement and satisfies immediate organizational needs. How this cultural automatism functions is well illustrated by the following autumn scene, which takes place in front of the small club managed by the third team observed for this study.

I am at the door with three other bouncers. As we talk, I glance at the queue. To my surprise, I see that among the people who have passed the barriers and are about to go up the venue stairs towards the cashier, there is a group that attacked and sent two men to the hospital the previous week. The fight had happened outside the venue at the end of the evening. Having spotted those responsible for that fight, I draw the attention of Davide, one of the attendants who had let them pass and point to the group, whispering that "those from last time" are in the middle. The man stops these clients and reaches them on the stairs, courteously inviting them to turn back.

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Meanwhile, I inform the team leader, Peppe. Since the fight the previous week happened outside the venue and he does not feel this event is truly within our jurisdiction, the head of security appears particularly interested in the words that one of the boys – about 1.85 cm tall and weighing about ninety kilos of muscle, with a clearly trained physique – had addressed to one of the venue female employees on the same evening of the fight: namely, “Get lost, monster!” This story had been told to him at the end of that evening, and Peppe had promised himself to clarify the facts with the client as soon as possible. The head of security, thus, leads the boy a few meters away from the venue entrance. I follow them, staying on the sides, in order to provide support in case of a reaction from the client. Positioned at a safe distance, with a clear and calm voice, Peppe addresses the young man and says: “Next time I’ll throw you down the stairs and make you taste each step one by one.” The boy, with a confident voice, explains that he has apologized and cannot do more than that. At most, he can renew his apologies to the girl. The bouncer replies that “apologies do nothing. You have to think about things before you open your mouth.” The boy looks at him and me, with the air of imprinting our faces in his mind. Then he says he understood and walks away with an air that appears only slightly contrite. He begins to linger in front of the venue with his friends – all of his type; almost a bourgeois gang to look at. They are all very handsome boys and, apparently, would also seem well-mannered. In reality, however, I have seen that they can hit very hard.

Davide, the bouncer who had blocked the group on the stairs after my signal approaches them, and I follow him. In a much gentler manner than Peppe, he reinforces some of the concepts expressed by the team leader. The clients then explain that they are good boys and are not accustomed to causing problems. When the fight from the previous week is mentioned, they prefer to gloss over that episode. After all, it took place in front of the venue, but outside its walls. They do admit, however, that their friend had used a truly unfortunate expression with the venue female employee. Nevertheless, they understand that they will not enter tonight and prepare to leave. Shortly after, however, the main protagonist of the incident returns, approaches the barrier where we are, and asks if he should consider himself banned forever. Peppe says that he is certainly banned *for a while*. When the boy is already distant, a colleague tells the team leader that the correct answer to give the client would have been that he was banned forever. As for me, *at that moment*, I agreed with the latter.

Returning to the question of whether reconciliation is possible for incidents in nightlife venues, the primary challenge is the punitive impulse that violence generates in both victims and witnesses. Reconciliation, therefore, requires a “systemic” ideology: it must be a goal pursued by venues and security management, largely in their own interest.

For reconciliation to become the predominant conflict resolution method, the commitment of those enforcing order must be genuine, not merely formal. This demands a fundamental reconsideration of security by owners and operators, shifting the moral emphasis away from violence and immediate action. Equally crucial is the collaboration of the involved parties, which requires a decreased willingness to invoke legal instruments. This is difficult because, since the 1990s, the prevailing external culture has increasingly favored criminalization as the preferred solution for social tensions (Luther Blissett Project, 2000; Garland, 2001; Ferrajoli, 2024).

The possibility of seeing personal, extra-legal, and autonomous reconciliation establish itself as a system-wide objective is, therefore, objectively utopian in the contemporary framework. Nevertheless, it is an eventuality that periodically materializes in practices found spontaneously in nightclubs.

As has been the case throughout this study, we continue this exploration into the different possibilities offered by the field by comparing teams and venues. Thus, we return to the city in the company of the other squad. The analysis begins on a calm evening, interrupted when a bouncer’s girlfriend reports a fight near the exit.

On the scene, bouncers are arguing with a protesting client—the friend of a boy bleeding heavily from his nose—insisting he leave. The source of his complaint is unclear, and he eventually moves away, restoring calm. A bouncer with blood-stained hands explains that the injured Italian boy was hit by a Filipino patron. Another bouncer clarifies that the aggressor was actually in the right. The Italian boy had repeatedly harassed the Filipino man’s girlfriend, but the bouncer had prevented a confrontation inside. Waiting until the end of the night, the Filipino patron calmly tells his rival at the entrance, “Now

I'll settle with you!" Two punches to the nose left the harasser a bloody mess. When offered medical help, the phlegmatic victim simply replied, "No, there's no need. I can take a couple of punches," and requested tissues.

Fast-forwarding a day, we return to the province for a highly successful evening that saw approximately 3,000 people in attendance. During that entire event, there was only one intervention:

a boy was expelled for moving carelessly and aggressively refusing to apologize. A bouncer removed him, leading to a protest outside where the boy argued with a supportive friend and an elderly witness. The man in his sixties, who had seen the scene, attempted to engage in a dialogue with the boy, even referencing his parents. When the boy reacted with pressing aggression, demanding to know if the man knew his parents, the man apologized, saying he had used the wrong word. The team leader then sternly demanded the boy show respect for the older man, which finally calmed him down. The older man then insisted the boy be allowed back in, offering to vouch for him, but the expelling bouncer refused. After the boy's friends reported a reconciliation with the original accuser, the boy's priority shifted to receiving an apology for his removal. The team leader facilitated a private discussion between the boy and the bouncer; they shook hands, the boy was readmitted, and he stayed until closing, leaving on good terms.

Here we see an intervention model that possesses paternalistic traits, attributable to the coexistence of young and old in the same space. It is, however, a model based on dialogue rather than the mere application of force. Once again, what made an accommodation possible – in addition to the dialogue-driven policy generally pursued by the team leader – were the characteristics of the subjects involved. First and foremost, the two groups were composed of young, not particularly aggressive, sober individuals willing to resolve the conflict. They found themselves surrounded by individuals who spontaneously acted as mediators and who, moreover, demonstrated intergenerational solidarity.

Even in this case, we see the application of a specific mentality. While the logic of expulsion takes for granted the average customer's (or even citizen's) preference for the removal of troublesome individuals, there are social forces that support their reintegration. In this sense, the club serves as a metaphor for the social realm; within it, the symbolic levels underlying the contemporary penal system are at work. While the logic of expulsion prevails, there is nonetheless a social logic that challenges this attitude. The presence of this logic demonstrates that there is room for a change in everyday practices – one that transcends the automatisms that public opinion and legislators take for granted.

## 7. Discussion

The findings of this study challenge traditional views of private security as purely a form of physical control, suggesting instead that it is a deeply discretionary form of social labor that relies on a subterranean understanding of the venue's social ecology.

A central finding in this discussion is the subversion of the "bouncer as brute" archetype. While traditional literature often emphasizes the deployment of physical capital, the scene involving the mother shifts the focus toward informal diplomacy. Indeed, even in other episodes, the bouncer operates as a rational actor who must identify "points of reference" within a circle of contenders. This co-optation of "Allies" transforms a potential site of violence into a site of negotiation. Consequently, the professional capital of the operator is redefined: it is not the ability to exclude customers that marks a successful intervention, but the ability to mobilize the social network of the "troublemaker" to perform the labor of de-escalation.

However, this agency is not exercised in a vacuum. The disproportionality between the crowd and the personnel, for instance, serves as a technical and moral threshold. This discussion must highlight that "expulsion logic" is often a byproduct of structural scarcity. When the audience is excessive, the time and emotional energy required for mediation become

luxury goods. In this sense, the analysis shows that the density of the crowd dictates the ethics of the method. High density breeds “automatisms” of removal, whereas an adequate number of operators and the fortuitous co-presence of Allies (such as the mother, the friends of a customer in the first scene, or the older customer in the last one) allow for the luxury of social participation in achieving peace. Even the general climate is crucial: if the night appears generally peaceful, even an insufficient number of operators might appear more keen to spend their energy on a single case.

Finally, the nightclub emerges as a profound metaphor for the social realm. It acts as a laboratory where the symbolic levels of the contemporary penal system are tested. While modern public opinion often demands the immediate banning of problematic individuals – a reflection of the broader punitive turn in society – the nightclub provides a rare, high-stakes environment where a reintegration logic can still prevail. This suggests that the experimental potential of the club goes beyond leisure; it offers a critique of the penal automatisms of our time. If the mentality of the operators can shift from exclusion to mediation under the pressure of the nightlife environment, it implies that the “inevitability” of punitive social control in the wider city is, in fact, a choice rather than a necessity. The study thus concludes that by changing everyday practices within these microcosmically dense spaces, we can observe the cracks in the broader logic of social exclusion.

## 8. Conclusion

The article suggests that violence in clubs is often fueled by organizational shortcuts. While these shortcuts help to reduce costs, they also hinder peaceful interventions. When understaffed, for instance, bouncers are forced to resort to aggressive methods, which acts as a multiplier for grievances. The piece, however, also suggests that while the propensity of some clients toward violence is certainly an issue, it is unrealistic to think that this can be entirely eliminated. On the other hand, according to operators, local violence has significantly decreased over the last twenty years. At least, the intensity of violence has diminished. In the months of observation, for example, various clashes and expulsions were witnessed, but the serious cases that left a mark on the collective memory were few – approximately five. This is, objectively, a limited number considering the tens of thousands of people who interacted during the observation period in the studied venues. This fact confirms the impression that most manifestations of tension are actually “allusions” to violence.

Such “allusions” – a term I place in quotation marks because it is difficult to categorize interactions that include physical contact, as well as language and postures aimed at humiliating and intimidating – evidently respond to social needs. In violence – especially that of “reduced intensity,” as we have defined it – one finds possibilities for emotional, expressive and aesthetic investment (Katz, 1990; Collins, 2009; Weininger *et al.*, 2019). From a psychological point of view, the structuring of a violent interactive situation is capable of generating forms of concentration and presence that are often denied in daily experience. At the moment it occurs, a conflict – especially if it has physical implications – induces a kind of seamless integration of mind and body. A clash, after all, requires studying the opponent, evaluating their real intentions and observing their movements to predict if and from where the next blow might come. But, at the same time, it is about controlling oneself – managing how one is perceived by others, as well as one’s breathing, language, and the calibration of one’s strengths in relation to those of the opponent. The lack of this particular form of psychophysical integration in daily life constitutes a source of suffering for many (Lombardi, 2016). The intentional use of physical force and words, moreover, can make a mundane present moment exciting. Not to mention that violence – starting from “optical violence” (Rigakos, 2008, p. 193), which materializes in the gaze – can respond to deep psychological needs, often rooted in a devaluation of the self that many experience for a plurality of reasons.

Tomsen (1997, p. 99) equates brawls to a “self-created form of carnival” – a direct reaction against the repressive control of leisure time inside the venue and the exaggerated

officiousness of staff. In short, violence implies meanings and motives that reside in general culture, in repression, and in psychological needs. It is, therefore, unlikely that it will disappear completely in hedonistic environments based on the underlying principle of “letting go.”

Precisely for this reason, recurrent violence in the situations we are discussing should not be simply sanctioned or prosecuted; rather, its resolution should be facilitated. It should be recognized as a flow dependent on both culture and emotions – a flow that cannot be simply repressed, because it is often repression itself that gives it new substance. Repression triggers symbolic mobilizations, and symbols, in turn, operate on the flow of individual emotions. This does not mean that violence should not be controlled – both by individuals who feel the impulse to practice it and by a security structure – but rather that when it explodes, it can, at least in some cases, be seen as a fundamental human fact. Violence, that is, can sometimes be recognized as a “need” characterized by many trigger points; provided it is recognized as an undesirable mode of conduct by those who practice it, it does not necessarily have to result in exclusion and banning.

What emerges from this reconsideration is that mediation, quite simply, benefits everyone whenever it is practicable. Whether for clients, owners or operators, the legal route entails high material, emotional and systemic costs, which frequently offer much less compensation to the individuals who resort to it than is commonly believed. It often fails from an emotional point of view because a conviction rarely mitigates the trauma experienced – especially when the sentence comes long after the trauma has been overcome, making the administered punishment appear little more than a belated formality. In terms of restitution, moreover, it is by no means certain that a convicted subject will be able to provide the compensation requested or imposed by a sentence. Furthermore, not all complaints result in a conviction, and the accuser can easily find themselves the recipient of a counter-complaint.

As for venue owners, they have everything to gain by avoiding disputes that escalate into criminal matters, as this carries the risk of a cycle of regulatory inspections with potentially very high costs. Finally – and this is perhaps the most important point – such a change in attitude could significantly contribute to challenging the hegemony that criminal and police dimensions have assumed in the regulation of social relations. The latter can be considered a consolidated form of cultural governance which, however, communicates an ontological condition of insecurity. This does not increase social well-being; instead, it spreads intersubjective mistrust, isolation and forms of conflict rooted in a generalized suspicion of others’ intentions (Garland, 2001).

This process entails substantial social costs. These include the costs of the justice system, of course, but these are negligible compared to the costs of funneling people into criminal careers or imposing stigmas that hinder their development and force them into marginality – a condition that often precedes new acts of deviance and violence (Becker, 1963; Christie, 1981; Ruggiero, 2016). Otherwise, another alternative remains: the one practiced by the boy who, after harassing a client’s girlfriend, decided – as he himself stated – to “take the two punches” that his opponent landed on him at the end of the evening. This suggests the possibility of recognizing violence – at least when it is moderate and, ultimately, provoked – as an option that does not necessarily have to result in lasting offense, and can instead be situated within a negotiated social code. This is, in short, the perspective offered by a realism that renounces the wholesale dramatization of violence and succeeds in placing certain manifestations of it within a shared cultural framework – a framework that makes its expression plausible under certain conditions and, in doing so, offers the possibility of containing it without recourse to punishment.

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