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Feuds and Relative Peace – (Dis)Agreement and Violence in São Paulo

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The city of São Paulo, Brazil, has been lauded, globally, as an example of violence reduction. Since 2000, homicide rates in this metropolis have declined by upwards of 80% in some of the most historically violent districts. Featured in 2011 UNODC report on global homicide, São Paulo appears to stand out not just in Brazil but also in Latin America as a sustained example of successful public security policy².

Yet within the inescapable drop in homicide, a sub-pattern of violence is apparent. Over the last decade, the city and its environs has played host to a series of incidents of feud-like violence, most notably in May of 2006 and in the latter half of 2012. These episodes of violence not only result in a great deal of bloodshed, they create widespread upheaval in the city, both for citizens generally, and for the public system in particular. In 2006, beginning on the Mother's Day weekend, an eruption of violence left more than 50 public security workers –street police, detectives and prison agents- and around 490 civilians dead. In 2012, from the last days in May until almost the end of the year, upwards of 90 police were assassinated. Police responded in kind, sending the number of *chacinas* – multiple homicides, typically carried out by masked men- and police killings of citizens – *resistencias seguida de morte*- through the roof.

At the root of these episodes of violence and period of relative peace, is a criminal group known as the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC), which monopolizes violence in São Paulo's prisons and enforces a strict moral system on large parts of the city's urban

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2011). *Global Study on Homicide: Trends, Contexts, Data*. UNODC. Retrieved from: http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/Homicide/Globa_study_on_homicide_2011_web.pdf

periphery. But more importantly, as I suggest here and argue in much greater depth elsewhere³, the relationship between the PCC and the state –sometimes formal, other times implicit-, runs much deeper, striking to the heart of the city’s homicide decline. For methodological, political and epistemological reasons, the role of the PCC beneath the city’s murder rate, in the years of relative peace and during episodes of violence, has been discussed in depth by only a handful of scholars⁴.

Until just recently, Police Commanders, the Public Security Secretary and the Governor of São Paulo himself would not admit the existence of the PCC, typically dismissing it as a ‘media fabrication,’ a loosely organized handful of criminals, or nothing more than another bunch of *bandidos* to be dealt with like all others – by shooting them. But the PCC is much more than a band of ruffians or a fleeting prison gang. It is a major and increasingly national and transnational criminal organization that has quietly garnered control over the most historically violent parts of this city.

³ This paper is based on two complementary research projects. The first examined the rise of the PCC in the prisons and in one urban district on the outskirts of São Paulo, published in part in Denyer Willis, G. (2009). *Deadly Symbiosis? The PCC, the State and the Institutionalization of Violence in São Paulo*. In: Jones, Gareth A. and Dennis Rodgers. (Eds.). *Youth Violence in Latin America*. New York: Palgrave. The second research project was carried out alongside homicide and other detectives in São Paulo over the course of three years. It is the basis for a book manuscript currently under review with a major university press.

⁴ See: Feltran, G. (2011). *Fronteiras de Tensão: Política e Violência nas Periferias de São Paulo*. São Paulo: UNESP. Dias, C.C.N. (2013). *PCC-Hegemonia Nas Prisões e Monopólio da Violência*. São Paulo: Saraiva. Biondi, K. (2010). *Junto e Misturado – Uma etnografia do PCC*. São Paulo: Terceiro Nome.

THE PRIMEIRO COMANDO DA CAPITAL

The PCC is a prison-based gang that emerged in the aftermath of the 1992 Carandiru prison massacre in which a police agency known as the ROTA (*Rondas Ostensivas Tobias de Aguiar*) killed 111 prisoners. An era in which state violence and prisoner on prisoner violence was rampant, the PCC constructed an alternative. In the face of violence, the PCC organized prisoners via a self-protection rationale and laid down a new set of strictly rules for prisoners, with the explicit aim to improve the conditions of life in the prison system.

As the organization's first statute of 1993 reads:

"The Primeiro Comando da Capital, founded in 1993 in a divisive and tiring fight against oppression and injustice in the concentration camp known as the Taubate Complexo of Custody and Treatment, has as an absolute mission, "Liberty, Justice and Peace."

Within a few short years, the moral order of the PCC spread throughout the prison system in São Paulo state, reshaping conditions for prisoners and establishing new notions of governance and authority. Where violence had been pervasive, it became regulated, serving as a new guarantee, backed up by the possibility of violence, of peaceful relations between prisoners. During a statement given to a parliamentary committee, the PCC's

supposed leader, a man nicknamed ‘Marcola’, put the rationale for the organization’s genesis this way:

“We are all sons of misery, all descendants of violence, from childhood we have been accustomed to live with it, in the misery and the violence. In any favela you’ll find a dead body, lying there all day. What I’m saying is that violence is normal for prisoners. This is normal. So, [prisoner groups] come along in an effort to restrain this normal violence. What do they do? They prohibit prisoners from certain behaviors that are otherwise normal, but that in this place infringe on the space of others...”

As violence in the prison system began to subside, the PCC began to expand its reach to another not so dissimilar context of violence – São Paulo’s urban periphery. Through the 1990’s, many districts on the South, North, East and West of São Paulo had crumbled into violence. Statistics from the time reflected an environment in which killing ran unchecked and with rampant impunity for those involved. homicide rates for many urban districts were regularly in excess of 100 per 100,000, with rates for young men reaching far beyond that. In one community where I did research many years later, the homicide rate for men between the ages of 15-19 was routinely more than 320 per 100,000⁵.

Though police were ineffective -if not totally absent- those committing violence on the street began to fill the prison system. New zero tolerance style policies started to change

⁵ Denyer Willis (2009).

the terrain. Between 1996 and 2005, São Paulo's prison population grew by 140%, coming close, by 2010, to 400,000 inmates. But the direction of the flows into the prison system (and back again) were obvious. People were being moved from spaces of violence in the city to a space in the prison in which a new system rules and authority had redefined the criminal identity. By 2000, São Paulo's prisons were exporting the PCC's governance back into the city and implanting it in the urban periphery. In the span of five years, from 2000 to 2005, the homicide rate in places like *Sapopemba*, *Campo Limpo* and *Capao Redondo* plummeted in declines of 50, 60 and, in some places, upwards of 80%⁶. The PCC's new regulation of violence in the most violent places in São Paulo had distinct consequences. As the safest parts of the city remained the same –with homicide rates similar to urban centers in the North- the overall urban rate fell dramatically. While the city had a rate of 59 per 100,000 in 2000, by 2010 it had fallen by four times to 15 per 100,000 residents.

More importantly, things were qualitatively different. When I did research in São Gotardo, a community on the Eastern periphery of the city in 2007, there was little doubt about what had changed. Residents very quietly told about a new system that was reshaping the terms of violence in the community. Residents could now walk day and night without fear of being robbed. They could leave their homes without getting stuck in a shootout between rival gangs. But this new way of being came with an obvious downside. Everyone necessarily was 'blind, deaf and mute' to the all of the

⁶ For homicide data see: Seade. (2012) Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados. Retrieved from: http://www.Seade.gov.br/produtos/distritos/index.php?page=consulta&action=var_list&busca=S_aude

transformation going on around them. Not just that, parents were terrified that their children –particularly their young boys- would see this new source of status and power as something to achieve.

Years later that worry continues, even as it is clear that the PCC has expanded its influence further still, albeit quietly, and with a strategy of flying below the radar of public discussion and politics. Today, the PCC's governance via a 'peace among criminals' system, complete with graduated punishment and alternative tribunals that mimic the formal system in their adjudicated of 'justice', is nothing less than normal in many parts of this Global City.

IMPLICIT AGREEMENTS

The PCC's regulation and security provision filled a spatial and social hole in what had historically been provided by the state. The initiative taken by the PCC to regulate violence that otherwise ran virtually unchecked was, in marked ways, good for the state. As dictatorship policing was dismantled and policing was devolved from Federal to state jurisdiction, police were unable to cope with runaway violence. Resources were concentrated in wealthy parts of the city deemed more important in political and social terms, leaving poorer parts to fend for themselves.

The new role of the PCC played into the hands of elected officials. As homicide rates declined, many presumed and some have argued that improved public security policy has

been the cause⁷. The production of homicide statistics, after all, served as a clear indication that things were better –even if they could not say how. Many statements on the part of police high level police and politicians pointed to these statistics as both evidence *and* outcome, conflating, in advantageous political terms, control of homicide with a decline in numbers. Not just that, however, until 2011, the reticence of politicians and police leaders, would even admit to the existence of the PCC - even in the midst of police assassinations happening daily.

The official silence about the PCC until just recently⁸, certainly does not mean that there wasn't agreement or acknowledgement of the organization on the part of the state. There was in fact plenty, and dismissal, particularly for street level police, is has been impossible. For almost a decade, local level where police and members of the organization have struggled to negotiate their everyday interactions and competing interests with the growing influence of the PCC. For most police, the agreement between public security workers and the PCC is implicit, consisting of a series of mutually recognized boundaries and practices that guide interactions between the two. Governed by what some police have called an unspoken 'not shots fired' agreement, the PCC and police have learned to coexist by not stepping past mutually recognized boundaries in terms of policing practice and the use of violence.

⁷ Goertzel, T and Khan, T. (2009). The Great São Paulo Homicide Drop. *Homicide Studies*, 13(4), 398-410.

⁸ Observers will note a marked shift in the tone of the Governor over the past year. In this new turn, the Governor has stated that he “will not be intimidated” by the PCC – which, he also claimed, recently called for his assassination. Some, including his former Public Security Secretary have dismissed it as a campaign stunt For more see: <http://www.valor.com.br/politica/3323086/alckmin-busca-dividendo-politico-com-ameaca-do-pcc>

I identify a number of different modes of negotiation that allow for an 'equilibrium' to be established that, in turn, provides a semblance of everyday predictability for those involved. Three are most common:

Under the first are individual police actions that seek to avoid violence. Street level police do not benefit from a public security system in which functionaries are valued, untouchable or safe from being targeted for assassination by organized crime. As such, many police do their best to take themselves out of view –particularly when off the job. Police routinely told me that they obscure themselves beneath second or third jobs, behind stories of false identities, or by simply leaving everything that can connect them to the public security system in the police station –badge, gun, ID, uniform, for example. By distancing themselves from the public security system they limit the possibility that they need interact in unsavory ways with the people they are supposed to arrest. In doing so, they attempt to avoid becoming targets of opportunity, either as accessible targets for assassination in and around the spaces controlled by the PCC, or of being identified as police officer during a robbery. These police necessarily look the other way, putting their individual safety ahead of the integrity of the system.

The second type is police action that is predatory. These consist of police who organize with colleagues in order to extort street level PCC members. Common particularly as an off-duty job, these police use their authority to go after known criminals to either take their money or their drugs. This is typically not organized or routine – not constituting the paper-bag pay-off common in images of police corruption. These types of activity

serve to both give the police a sense that they are doing their job by making criminals pay while also making money in the process. Clearly problematic, it is a symptom of a system divided by suspicion between agencies, departments and functions, in which the transfer of information necessary for the public good is hampered but a near absolute lack of trust.

A third form is police action on the job. Police killings of civilians have been common in São Paulo, occurring until recently at a rate of more than one per day. Many of these killings are understood, both on the part of police and the PCC, to be an ordinary part of coexistence. It is legitimate for a police officer or a criminal to be killed during a confrontation or a shoot out between the two. People are routinely killed, on both sides, when police are responding to crimes in progress, suggesting an imperfect but normal practice between the PCC and police.

These three loosely defined realms of police action reflect some of the mutually observed boundaries observed by both groups. And not only do they play out locally, they are practiced and observed throughout the city –on the North, South, East and West- as common norms that guide what is ‘fair’ in the interactions between these two otherwise antagonistic parties. It is these ongoing negotiations that underpin the periods of relative peace in the city.

DISAGREEMENTS

Just as there is relative peace, there are occasionally spikes of feud-like violence. Possible at the local level, but expressly visible when at the urban scale, these feuds come to pass when there is disagreement about the practice(s) of one party. São Paulo has twice witnessed episodes of feud like violence, in 2006 and again in 2012. In both cases, the violence emerged when the PCC felt its security at risk. In 2006, violence erupted following the mass transfer of a number of PCC leaders. In protest PCC affiliates assassinated more than 50 public security workers in a span of hours. In 2012, the PCC sent word to its members throughout the city calling for assassinations of police after it was revealed that the *ROTA* had executed a PCC member on the side of a highway. Memos from the organization's leadership, known as *salves*, obtained by police showed that each of the regional memberships were calling meetings to spread the order to assassinate police officers. Within days, police were being assassinated in their homes, on their way to work and while walking down the street. In the span of a three days while I was accompanying police in the homicide division, nine police were assassinated. These assassinations continued for months, as police killed PCC members and the PCC killed police, with each often targeting people they had wanted to –but couldn't– under the boundaries of relative peace.

In one case, a police officer that I will call Matheus was known and well liked in the community where he both lived and work. He was recognized by many for being diligent in making drug seizures and confronting the organization with regular arrests, taking an

obvious toll on their day to day activities. But it was clear that there were underlying antagonisms. He had survived threats during the violence of May 2006, and had been involved in arresting high profile local leaders in recent years. And yet the PCC did nothing until the right moment. One morning, as Matheus drank coffee at a food stand, two men approached him. They stepped past other bystanders and the man serving the coffee and shot Matheus over and over and over again, before grabbing his gun and running off.

Matheus had been receiving threats for weeks. His colleagues told of cars waiting ominously outside of their houses off and on since the beginning of the violence. Sometimes they would have to be late for work because they didn't want to leave the house until the car was gone. Some police had chosen to go on leave, fearing that they or their families would be assassinated imminently. They wanted to wait out the storm. Locals told of a system of power in Matheus' neighbourhood in which no one could rob, let alone kill, without the authorization of a specific PCC leader. The conclusion was clear: Matheus' killing was a much longed for conclusion that only came to pass when the moment was right.

EXPLICIT AGREEMENT

During episodes of disagreement, all of the rules are tossed out. In 2006, a report suggested that off duty police went on an extermination spree in retaliation for

assassinations of police⁹. The violence, in this case, only ceased after an explicit –though never truly public- agreement was made between the PCC’s imprisoned leader and the Governor and his Secretary of Public Security. Almost overnight the violence ceased, even as there was no public acknowledgement of an agreement, much less any acknowledgement of the PCC’s existence.

The consequences of this approach run deep, however. Though the reason for the 2012 violence remains under debate, the result of the 2006 agreement continues to bother many police. Though the acute violence subsided as a result, the agreement essentially pushed the PCC underground and allowed it to quietly expand its influence below the radar of public discussion and out of view in subsequent elections. Even to the contrary, the relative safety of the city played well into the hand of certain politicians. From the perspective of street level police, this has been extremely problematic, indicative of a seemingly limitless new pattern of violence in São Paulo, defined by deeply imperfect but long periods of relative peace punctuated by severe episodes of shocking violence.

What São Paulo’s Public Security system does to counter this pattern is both a point for debate and a pressing empirical problem. The influence of the PCC is unavoidable. Recent history suggests a militarized response could fracture the organization and destabilize its monopoly, resulting in large-scale violence as new factions emerge –as occurred in Mexico in 2007. Negotiations with the PCC, implicit and explicit –though

⁹ Cano, I and Alvadia, A. (2008). *Análise dos Impactos dos ataques do PCC em São Paulo em Maio de 2006*. Laboratório de Análise da Violência (LAV-UERJ). Retrieved from: http://www.observatoriodeseguranca.org/files/AtaquesPCC_IgCano.pdf

obscured-, have been the status quo. Knowing the security rationale of the PCC and what happens when the organization feels threatened, the government would do well to start with a modest but frank effort to open a dialogue.