
RESEARCH

The Puzzle of Social Accumulation of Violence in Brazil: Some Remarks

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The article comments on a new generation of researchers studying the illegal markets in Brazil. In doing so, I summarize the interpretative model of ‘social accumulation of violence’. Initially applied to Rio de Janeiro, several researchers have now expanded it to other Brazilian states as well as to countries with high violence rates, such as Colombia and Mexico. The model is both historical and social. It combines three main factors that have been feeding one another throughout times and expanded across several places: (1) social accumulation of disadvantages; (2) criminal subjection; and (3) expansion of acquisition strategies across networks of informality and illicit markets, for which the offer of political merchandise is decisive. As proposed in previous works, political merchandise means political assets originated from the privatization of segments of the State’s pretension to sovereignty over the monopoly of violence by different agents, who negotiate these assets in exchange for economic assets or other political goods.

Keywords: Violence; disadvantages; criminal subjection; illegal markets; political merchandises

Two articles in this special JIED edition bring very competent and original analyses of multiple aspects of what can be considered a core ‘puzzle’ related to social accumulation of violence in Brazil. In this article, puzzle means a theoretical challenge that lives on the edge of what shall be considered a successful sociological explanation. The article written by Daniel Hirata and Carolina Grillo is a great comparative synthesis of faction movements in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and offer an opportunity to reflect upon part of this puzzle. In her turn, by detailing the relationships of community agents (that work for the government) with drug dealers and *milicianos*¹ at a micro level, Marcela Araújo (2017) adds another critical dimension to our puzzle that is tied to the well-known issue of the alleged ‘absence of the State.’ This article addresses the consolidation of the most well-known, common aspects of a process that I have called **social accumulation of violence** (Misse 1999, 2006, 2018) and proceeds to outline the puzzle in question.

The process that I have called ‘social accumulation of violence’ has been taking shape since the 1980s and, today, is observed in practically all Brazilian urban areas. The homicide rate jumped from 12 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1980 to 30 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017, more than a twofold increase that has not showed signs of slowing down. The Brazilian prison population went from 60,000 in 1980 to around 800,000 in 2019—one of the largest in the world. The pattern of urban criminality went through dramatic changes within the same period; the occurrence of violent crimes has increased in comparison to non-violent ones (Adorno 1995; Zaluar 1994; Misse 1999). However, the greatest change was observed in the transition of small groups formed by individual criminals to large-scale criminal networks. Traditional family-based organizations (who were in charge of *jogo do bicho*² in Brazil over decades) were replaced with horizontal gang-like networks called factions (*facções*). Born from within prisons as a means of protection, factions were then combined under common leadership into networks of small drug-dealing companies that also perform

¹ The member of a militia.

² *Jogo do Bicho* (The Animal Game) is an illegal gambling game in Brazil; the lottery-type drawing game is controlled by criminal groups at a regional level. For a reference in English, please see Chazkel, A. 2011. *Laws of Chance. Brazil’s Clandestine Lottery and the Making of Urban Public Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

other types of crime. The amount of arrests for drug trafficking in relation to the total number of arrests in the period is a good indication of this transition.

The first factions date back to the 1980s, when they were first formed in the prisons of Rio de Janeiro. The term 'faction' was coined in relation to the dispute over the monopoly of protection and the illicit drug market. The most prominent criminal collectives in Rio are Comando Vermelho (CV), Terceiro Comando (TC), and Amigos dos Amigos (ADA), a dissident group that grew out of CV in the 1990s. Influenced by the demonstration effect of factions in Rio, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) was born within prisons in the state of São Paulo in the 1990s. It soon won the dispute against smaller factions and became the only major criminal collective in the state. However, unlike Comando Vermelho and Terceiro Comando in Rio, PCC looked to establish less vertical, (sort of) more equitable forms of power distribution—this will be the focus of this article at a later stage.

Year after year, the process that gave rise to Comando Vermelho and Primeiro Comando da Capital has been taking the stage in most Brazilian states, also emerging from within the prison system or in connection to it. The process is characterized either by the expansion of CV's and PCC's 'branches,' by the creation of 'franchises' of local criminal collectives, or by the inception of new collectives of prisoners that adopt new names and acronyms to dispute control over the wholesale/retail drug market and weapons market against CV and PCC in their local routes and cities. Criminal collectives of different sizes and relevancy are starting to make news and grow in importance in their states. Some examples include Família do Norte (in Amazonas), Família Monstro (in Minas Gerais and Goiás), and Okaida (in Pernambuco and Paraíba). In Rio Grande do Sul, local market and control is disputed by seven different collectives (Os Manos and Os Brasas are the oldest ones) engaged in conflicts inside and outside prisons. How have we come to this? What enabled the 'nationalization' of criminal collectives from Rio and São Paulo? How were CV and PCC able to expand to the extent that they now control the distribution of a significant part of the drug and weapons market originated in Paraguay and Bolivia?

The Social Accumulation of Violence

Such radical changes have been credited to a complex of factors involved in accumulative causal circularity. The model of 'social accumulation of violence' is an attempt to summarize the most important ones. Initially applied to Rio de Janeiro, several researchers have now expanded it to other Brazilian states, such as Alagoas and Espírito Santo, as well as to countries with high violence rates, such as Colombia and Mexico. The model of social accumulation of violence is both historical and social. It combines three main factors that have been feeding one another throughout times and expanded across several places: (1) social accumulation of disadvantages; (2) criminal subjection; and (3) expansion of acquisition strategies across networks of informality and illicit markets, for which the offer of political merchandise is decisive. As proposed in previous works, political merchandise means political assets originated from the privatization of segments of the state's pretension to sovereignty over the monopoly of violence by different agents, who negotiate these assets in exchange for economic assets or other political goods (Misse 1999, 2006).

Social Accumulation of Disadvantages

The social accumulation of disadvantages relies upon multiple factors throughout history and expands within the niche to which it pertains: Rapid urbanization and low capacity of public services (education, health, security, housing, transport) to absorb migrant populations, generating an ongoing increment of social accumulation of inequality; this population's will to be inserted in a consumer society marked by strong income inequality, producing high levels of relative deprivation and informal acquisition strategies, mainly among the youth; and cultural transition from hierarchical identities to of equal social identity demands, producing anomic changes in family structure, in the collective efficacy within the family scope, in vicinal and community forms of life and in the emergence of conflicts of race, gender, and of legitimation of authority at local and institutional levels, especially in relation to the police. Thanks to the use of overly repressive criminal policies to suppress the impact of these strategies on urban informal and illegal markets, particularly in the *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods, poor youngsters now fall victims to even deeper criminal subjection. Small thieves and poor youngsters who operate the retail drug trade on behalf of local bosses took part in an 'arms race' to protect their sales points from other similar gangs that looked to take over their places. Combined with armed conflicts against rival gangs and the police, the territorialization process of retail drug trafficking in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro resulted in several deaths and arrests, thus strengthening the cycle of social accumulation of disadvantages, now in relation to the state (especially the police, the criminal justice system, and the penitentiary system). This scenario led to more repression, marked by violent operations targeted at the population from the *favelas*. In response, the collectives grew

even stronger. The expansion of acquisition strategies across networks based on illegal markets and informality was the solution found by poor youngsters to produce resilience, create protection agencies, and resist the social accumulation of disadvantages. Nonetheless, this caused them to be even more vulnerable to criminal subjection, carrying their families, neighbors, and other community dwellers with them. The association of violent, arbitrary, and lethal police repression with police officers' offer of political merchandise to drug trafficking bosses led to an increase in the price of drugs and firearms and resulted in rebellions conducted by Comando Vermelho, who was not happy with losing part of its revenue to the police. The rampant incrimination of poor youngsters led to a systematic rise in incarceration rates, inflating penitentiaries beyond capacity and worsening life conditions in prisons, thus leading prisoners to organize to fight for their rights and to protect themselves against the violence perpetrated by correction officers and other inmates. The criminal subjection of various individuals started taking the shape of a collective identity in the early 1980s, influenced by the demonstration effect of political prisoners arrested by the Brazilian dictatorial government with whom they shared cells. This led to the creation of the first collective criminal subject still within prison walls: Comando Vermelho.

Criminal Subjection

The concept of criminal subjection explains a social process that preventively anticipates incrimination, thus socially producing a subjectivity that is supposedly prone to crime (Misse 1999, 2018). In other words, it is a belief shared by large segments of society that crime dwells in the subject; that a subject may be prone to commit heinous crimes and is potentially unrecoverable. It also makes reference to the subjectivation process that, within the scope of social experience, builds this subject as a criminal subject to match that archetype and hence to be the object of extermination policies, religious conversion, and resocialization (Teixeira 2013). The kinship between the subjectivation process and one's belonging to low-income social groups and ethnic or racial minorities completes the process, whether by consolidating the dimension of their prospective preventive incrimination or by materializing crime subjectivation in their social experience. In Brazil, they are called *bandidos* (bandits) and are currently associated with drug trafficking and armed robbery (Misse 2018; Willis 2017). They constitute the *comandos*, or criminal collectives—actually, 'collective criminal subjects', as they have their own names and identities, stable networks, resilience, and are proud 'bearers of crime'; they bear 'violent sociability' (Silva 2016) as a threat to the police and whoever else does not side with them.

I now proceed to examine two of the country's most important models of such collectives, Comando Vermelho and Primeiro Comando da Capital. They have also been researchers' preferred objects of study thus far (about CV: Zaluar 1994; Misse 1999, 2006; Barbosa 1998, 2005; Dowdney 2003; Souza 1996; Arias 2006; Lessing 2018; Grillo 2013; Glenny 2016. About PCC: Jozino 2005; Dias 2013; Biondi 2010, 2018; Feltran 2011, 2018; Hirata 2018; Willis 2015; Dias & Manso 2018).

The Two Main Collective Criminal Subjects: CV and PCC

Two researchers who worked under my supervision, Luke Dowdney and Carolina Grillo, developed the framework I introduced in 1997 regarding the structure of Comando Vermelho's *bocas de fumo* in Rio de Janeiro, that I shall henceforth recover in greater detail. In fact, there are two frameworks: In the most general one, connections take place through distinctive, not very hierarchical networks—except for the relationship with CV within the penitentiary system, which is completely hierarchical. This is done through 'visiting connectors' (*conectores visitantes: fiéis, donos, advogados, familiares*, or 'believers,' 'owners,' 'lawyers,' 'relatives') or through prisoners' use of clandestine cell phones. In the other one, represented by *bocas de fumo* (territorialized sales points), there is a hierarchical structure that goes from *donos* all the way down to *soldados* ('soldiers,' armed drug dealers that protect the *boca*), *vapores* (drug retailers), and *aviões* (bagboys who resell drugs somewhere else). There have been reports of clandestine general meetings attended by dozens or hundreds of *donos* and general managers at critical times, but this does not happen often. The same model is adopted by other factions in Rio de Janeiro, such as Terceiro Comando (and its dissident group, Terceiro Comando Puro – TCP) and Amigos dos Amigos (ADA).

Three recently published books showcase findings of many years of research regarding Primeiro Comando da Capital. Gabriel Feltran (2018a), Daniel Hirata (2018b), and Bruno Paes Manso & Camila Dias (2018c) argue that the faction from São Paulo transitioned from a vertical hierarchical framework in its first years to a layered structure—called by the significant name of 'tuning' (*sintonia*)—in the late 1990s. The cell phone invention was decisive for the creation of an original management model. Tunings are cells built inside prisons and in neighborhoods where PCC is present. They are meant to be connected at local, national, and international levels. Each site has a PCC representative in charge of administering activities and mediating

local conflicts. According to Bruno Manso and Camila Dias, authors of 'A Guerra – a ascensão do PCC e o mundo do crime no Brasil' (published this year), the state of São Paulo houses the two top PCC instances: Sintonia Geral Final ('Final General Tuning') and Resumo Disciplinar ('Disciplinary Summary'), formed by a select group of prisoners from Penitentiary II, located in the city of Presidente Venceslau. Tunings in charge of activities in other states and countries reside outside of São Paulo. There are also 'thematic tunings', such as the *gravatas* ('ties'), in charge of hiring and paying for lawyers; the *ajuda* ('help'), that distributes food staple and support to the poorest members of the collective; and the *cadastro* ('registration'), that registers affiliations and 'baptisms' (a compulsory ritual for prospect members to join the *comando*; they also have *padrinhos*, or godparents, and take an oath, or *juramento*). All members that are not in jail must pay a monthly fee to the *sintonia da cebola* (the 'onion tuning'), the one in charge of this task. Some other examples are the cigarette tuning, in charge of the contraband of cigarettes; the '*jogo do bicho*' tuning and, particularly, the *sintonia do progresso* (the 'progress tuning'), that coordinates *sintonia do Bob* (the 'Bob's tuning', that trades marijuana); *sintonia da 100%* (the '100% tuning', that trades pure cocaine); and *sintonia da FMS* (the 'FMS tuning', that controls *bocas de fumo*) (Dias & Manso 2018: 14–15).

PCC seems to have accomplished CV's initial goal: Constitute a form of oligopoly, a political organization (in a broader sense, unrelated to political parties) to distribute drugs from cities' poor areas. In his book entitled 'Irmãos – Uma história do PCC', Gabriel Feltran compares PCC's organization framework to that of Freemasonry due to its 'brothers' and 'rituals', and the fact that decisions are made through 'debates' carried out by cell phone. The application of justice and death penalties are enforced after 'debates' among local tunings and stakeholders. Offenders have the right to defend themselves. Several authors mention the collectively constituted criminal subject's pretension of equitable management. PCC's ability to produce and control violence has been demonstrated in several occasions. Two of the aforementioned authors argue that PCC's social control skills evidenced through their 'debates', as well as the disciplines that rationalize interests in drug sales points and other illicit activities, have had more preponderant roles in the reduction of homicide rates in the state of São Paulo in the past 20 years than the governmental policies in force in the same period.

A Third Collective Criminal Subject: Cops, Militias, and Political Merchandise

By modernizing an old practice of extermination groups from the 1950s, a group in Rio de Janeiro set the stage for the emergence of a new model of illegal activity (Neto 2016). It is also a form of collective that reproduces, in a disciplined and *quasi* legal way, practices perpetrated by police officers against drug dealers decades ago. The early 2000s saw the onset of collectives of civil and military police officers, firemen, correctional officers, and other public agents, either active or retired, that took on the role of 'protectors' in neighborhoods supposedly under the threat of being occupied by drug dealers and/or assailants. They created the militias, who operate at armed capacity and are capable of killing and disposing of their victims' bodies. In contrast with extermination groups, who showcased similar means of operation but charged local retailers for their services, the militias charge all dwellers a monthly fee under the assumption that something could happen to them should they not be properly 'protected'. What is the moral and juridical category of 'extortion' if not a type of political merchandise? Political merchandise often involves asymmetrical and/or compulsory exchanges, as well as calculations of power and power relations among those involved. There is usually an offer of political assets—even of those supposedly reserved for the state—that are exchanged for economic assets as if they were private commodities. They are not 'taxes', since there is no effective pretension of territory's overall empowerment, but commodities that can (or cannot) be commercialized (Misse 2011). The militias face resistance from community dwellers and have already been defeated on occasion after denunciations to the government—several *milicianos* have been arrested, including city councilors. The militias thrive in several neighborhoods in Rio thanks to the population's tolerance of informality: protection offers are initially made by individuals or small groups, such as *flanelinhas* (people who watch cars in public places), illegal security guards who work for condominiums in middle-class neighborhoods, and other social types who make a living out of preventing the presence of criminal subjection in their workplaces. Articulated with the intent to suppress and physically eliminate alleged criminal subjects, the militias partnered with far-right politicians—even the Brazilian President's sons are being investigated for their involvement with those groups. The current Governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, a former judge, has publicly declared his support for the use of lethal force against crime. He has recently stated his support to the police after an incident in which security forces killed 13 young drug dealers from Fallet, in the hills of Santa Teresa—the episode is being considered a slaughter by many. The police reportedly ambushed the youngsters in a house and shot them repeatedly with machine guns after having tortured them.

Conclusions

Throughout the decade, over 10,000 suspects were killed in alleged confrontations during legal operations in Rio de Janeiro (Misse et al. 2013). The police's disproportional use of lethal force aggravated the 'criminal subjection' of poor black youngsters from the *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods, while officers charged drug dealers for various political goods on offer to retail traffickers (protection, release of faction members who had been arrested, inside information about police raids, and commercialization of firearms).

This matter has already been amply scrutinized by researchers in Brazil (and other countries) in the last three to four decades (Lima et al. 2000; Imbusch, Misse & Carrión 2011; Barreira & Adorno 2010). However, a few questions remain, accompanied by new concepts and, at least, one important puzzle in relation to the Brazilian State.

The most overarching analytical challenge arises from the contradiction between the state's modernization ideals (in Brazil and in across Latin America), an imaginary built upon an evolutionist line expected to ultimately lead the way to state model standards adopted in Western Europe or the US, and the everlasting resistance to these ideals that emerge from power relations, existing capital and market forms. The thesis of 'social accumulation of violence' I defend means that Latin American States drive violence while urging to control it. Overall, their responses are anachronistic and dysfunctional, as well as incapable of realizing the differences between the constitutive problems they intend to overcome.

Increasing violence has surfaced the state issue in Brazil and Latin America and thus revealed a type of state and society disjunction born out of a historic fracture of society itself, in its contradictions and internal differences. European and North American citizenship parameters cannot be used to classify the majority of Latin American populations, to say the least. Lack of state representation, persistent poverty, and massive social exclusion and inequality in terms of civil, political and social rights greatly account for the disjunction that affects the region and the forms of repressive normalization developed by states to deal with these populations. These factors also explain distinctive acquisition strategies used by public agents to own part of their sovereignty just to privatize it, producing different types of political merchandise. After all, what does 'absence of the state' really mean? Would it not be better to say that our puzzle consists of a different type of 'state presence,' instead? How can we move towards that direction?

A recent process of generalization of the criminal subjection beyond *comandos*, factions, and militias reached important entrepreneurial and political segments, who have recently been accused of creating 'crime organizations,' and helped in electing an Army Reserve captain who defends the memory of one of the country's most infamous torturers during military rule and introduces himself as a far-right leader, ideologically tuned to military power. To ensure support of his nomination, the army demanded the appointment of a general as his vice-president and several others as ministries in civil sectors. What is more, a federal court judge was invited to lead the Ministry of Justice—not any judge, but the one who set off the process of generalization of criminal subjection and that condemned former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who in turn was prevented from running (and probably winning) the last election dispute. Whether or not a representation of the crisis faced by the Brazilian State, the generalization of criminal subjection is justified as a means to fight against the generalization of political merchandise in the Brazilian party system and the countrywide expansion of *comandos* and factions from Rio and São Paulo. The Brazilian (and foreign) intellectual elite watches all these happenings in astonishment—much in the same way the populace watched the developments of the military coup that proclaimed the Brazilian Republic in 1889 (Carvalho 2019).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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