COPS

THE RISE OF CRIME, DISORDER AND AUTHORITARIAN POLICING

PLUS

Youth Activism

Dominican Deportees
In April 2003, Brazil’s media convulsed with shocking and conflicting images, as they struggled to define new public debates on warfare—the war in Iraq “over there” and the war on narcotrafficking and violent crime “at home.” The metropolis of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s media capital and security laboratory, provided the stage where the contradictions of war, as reality and metaphor, would be worked out. In virtual unison, journalists proclaimed that “Bush’s war” was illegitimate and illegal, while “Rio’s war” was justified and required urgent escalation. The sympathy afforded to Iraqi civilian casualties was not extended to the innocent victims of police invasions in Rio’s favelas—the hilltop shantytowns inhabited by a quarter of the city’s population.

As the panicked momentum of militarization in Rio intensified, the city’s dominant TV broadcasters and newspapers, and Rosinha Garotinho, the Governor of Rio de Janeiro state, began to invoke the “T” word—terrorism. Globally, the deployment of this term in political discourse has come to signal governments’ abandon-
ment of human rights and concern for civilians in favor of punitive, televisible, explosive militarization, with counterterrorism seen as “justified” state terrorism. Headlines on Rio’s newsstands proclaimed “Terrorism: Our War.”

For the moment, the state abandoned proper procedures of investigation and suspect apprehension and unleashed police invasions and collective punishment, leading to the death of more civilian bystanders in Rio’s slums and the roundup of black males without proven attachment to specific crimes. But suddenly, in early May, things changed. The “T” word vanished from media and political discourse. The political language of paranoia and revenge was replaced by a sober and hopeful commitment to democracy and citizenship. Rio had tasted the temptations of militarism, yet had begun to renounce it. Why?

The about-face is explained by Rio’s remarkable ability to sustain a progressive, democratic reform agenda, while being constantly tempted and battered by trends toward nationalism, militarism, racism and brutality. To comprehend this process it is necessary to deconstruct the myths about the origins and character of urban warfare in Rio de Janeiro. As the innovations and new pragmatism of the city’s reform agenda become clearer, useful lessons will emerge for other world cities seeking to face violence without abandoning commitments to deepen democracy and strengthen human rights.

The thought that Rio may be about to turn itself into a world model of public safety and social integration, overcoming its image as a lurid capital of inequality, brutality and criminality, may seem surprising, but only because of the prevalence of dogmatic myth-based theories on the causes and character of the city’s violence. These causal theories—some vernacular, some scientifically elaborated—represent more than just errors in analysis. Crime myths—while they capture the local, national and international imagination—justify militaristic and counterproductive responses to violence, which further cripple human development and actually add incentives for crime. For Rio, the mythic causal theories can be grouped into four types:

- Age-old racial and economic inequalities naturally produce violence and criminality.
- Young black males, particularly “street kids” or favela adolescents, are the main instigators of violence.
- Narcotraffic cartels create parallel states that exist as an enemy state-within-a-state, outside the purview of normal government.
- International terrorism has infiltrated narcotraffic and criminality thus dragging questions of urban violence beyond the reach of democracy, justice and reason.

Rio de Janeiro is certainly a city of very visible inequalities among racial, economic and geographic divides. The favelas on the scenic volcanic hillsides of the city create rings and intermittent outcroppings in and around every luxurious neighborhood. Street vendors and homeless children, who are regularly attacked by Municipal Guards in full riot gear, punctuate the sidewalks of Rio’s most beautiful seaside neighborhoods. The “popular classes” do represent a mix of races, but the city’s poorest are largely black; and the upper-middle classes and elites are almost 100% white. But the facts show that this landscape of inequalities does not, on its own, produce violence or a culture of aggression.

Structures of social and economic inequality represent a centuries-old constant for the city. But the current scale of violence and patterns of police and trafficker militarization date back only to the 1980s. In 1982, annual homicide rates in Rio and New York City were at exactly the same level, 23 per 100,000 inhabitants annually. By 1989 the rate of homicides in Rio had nearly tripled, to 63 per 100,000, and in 1992 it reached 75 per 100,000 in the northern peripheries of Greater Rio. Since the early 1990s, however, violent crime levels have been dropping steadily. By 2002 homicide rates in Rio state had dropped to 47 per 100,000 residents though calls for militarization of the crime war escalated. But one violence indicator has been shooting up recently—rates of police executions of untried “suspects.” By 2000, the number of “suspects” (predominantly young black males) killed before investigation or apprehension by lethal police force (usually during favela invasions) had reached 427. By 2002 it more than doubled to 900. During the single month of April 2003, during the peak deployment of urban warfare tactics, killings reached 125 in one month alone. This trend, if continued, would have pushed the tally of police executions above 1,500 in 2003 in Rio state alone, approaching parity with Baghdad, beyond the realm of media metaphors, as the Iraqi capital suffered around 1,700 civilian fatalities during this year’s war.

Given these statistical realities, the relevant causal variables for the crime jump in the 1980s would seem to be connected to new phenomena emergent in this more recent two-decade period although not, of course, completely independently of older patterns of class, race and residential inequality. And the even more recent jump in lethal police brutality, another form of violent crime from a human rights perspective, can be correlated to another new variable, namely civilian officials tolerating or encouraging the intensification of police militarism and impunity in the “crime war” context. These less-examined factors that drive violence and criminality are political, institutional and state-related. And maybe that is why authorities have overlooked them, and hidden under the cover stories of...
urban warfare and black violence.

Towards the start of the 1980s, world and national political trends veered towards an unprecedented criminalizing, punishing and militarizing policy with respect to drugs. Brazil adopted the aggressive tone of this global political movement, launching waves of police invasions of favelas modeled on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism warfare. Under cover of urban militarization, global policy and urban elite actors deregulated “wealth trafficking,” institutionalized global finance havens (i.e. un-policeable networks) and facilitated transborder capital flows. In this context, narcotraffic became a more tempting market for state, police and transnational corruption rackets. And the global illegal arms trade emerged as another major illicit commercial sector, which investigations have consistently linked to organized crime, corrupt cops and political officials. Political sensitivities and links to wealth and power protect these crime-causing networks from thorough police investigation or media exposure. By default, inequality, represented as the black face of racialized poverty, remains implicated as the primary and exclusive suspect, the “cause” of violence.

But if structural and racial inequalities are not the real primary producers of violence, then why are so many young black males killing or being killed? To answer this question appropriately, we must look more carefully at why some forms of violence are represented as causes and spectacle, while others go untold. This dynamic of skewed perception tends to racialize notions of violence in Rio, and reproduces myths about who embodies criminality. The media in Rio continue to include the race of crime perpetrators and victims as essential information, but in other areas of reporting, where positive achievements of blacks might be highlighted, the race of the individual is considered irrelevant. Crime reporting remains fascinated by certain crimes in certain slum settings and neglects white-collar crimes, state corruption, elite money laundering and various other infractions perpetrated chiefly by white individuals. The most truly “suspect” phenomena—the corrupt activities, transnational relations and elite rackets that may be responsible for a particular crime—are imperceptible within dominant police and media “ways of seeing,” which reduce criminology to the art of spotting black bodies bearing suspicious attitudes. When Rio’s cops communicate to each other on police radios, they constantly repeat a certain racist euphemism: “The suspect element is of standard color.”

In order to shift attention away from the myths about black male violence, reform efforts in Rio de Janeiro have centered on two strategies. First, reformers have aimed to shift the focus of crime control and media coverage from youth deviance and favela conflict toward state corruption, transnational protection rackets, global money laundering and elite and police involvement in arms dealing and narcotrafficking. Second, reformers insist that state and civil institutions get involved in positive, preventative activities that generate more opportunities for black youth, so that fewer will be tempted by the offers of the corrupt cartels and organizations. But will Rio’s trafficker organizations allow these reforms to proceed without launching a counteroffensive? This kind of question assumes that organized drug crime represents a “parallel power”—an archipelago of counter states, counter norms and fierce opposition. Some romanticize these parallel realms as self-governing communities or collectives. But more often they are represented much more negatively, as organized perversions of modernity, as efficient but cruel.
In the current global context, the labeling of favelas and slums as "parallel powers" bears more than a coincidental resemblance to the polemical deployment of the term "rogue states" in the context of international and military affairs. Those designated as rogue states are topped by governments accused of engaging in international terrorism, and thus not deserving protection under international law. This political perspective—that illegal means can and should be used against illegal states, that inhumane treatment is required when facing irrational, barbaric adversaries—is as old as colonialism and inquisition.

But urban researchers, reformers and community leaders have been offering evidence for decades demonstrating that narcotraffic patterns do not form an organized "parallel power" existing outside of or opposed to the state. This critical perspective argues that the social organization and territorial concentration of narcotraffic in Rio de Janeiro results from state injustices, elite wealth trafficking and forms of internal political corruption. Research has traced how trafficker cartels were first organized in the prisons of Rio during the years of the military dictatorship, in the 1960s and 1970s. The junta's repressive "national security" campaign herded into its penitentiaries all elements of Brazilian society, from dissident politicians and union organizers to petty thieves. To facilitate management of these huge prison populations, wardens encouraged prisoners to organize hierarchical gangs and provide internal discipline. From these organizations emerged the prison gangs whose heirs run today's major drug cartels in Rio, such as the Commando Vermelho (Red Command). Other research focuses on "mediator" roles of crime, constituting as well as undermining the borders between state and society, and hierarchies within both spheres. Findings from this set of studies suggest that trafficking organizations function as intermediaries within institutions of political corruption and clientelism. They mobilize votes, buy cooperation, bribe police and public institutions, and also play the role of interlocutors between conflicting public and informal organs on the ground. Finally, we have the arguments of the geographers and urban sociologists who claim that state planning and registry institutions have been responsible for creating the breeding grounds for violence. According to these studies, the state consciously and regularly denies recognition, regulation and legal protection, which in the end amount to sociopolitical oppression. For example, registries, with painfully few exceptions, have refused to recognize the property rights of shantytown dwellers or to fully integrate them into grids of public services, governance or accountability structures. Services only come to favelas gradually and arbitrarily through vote-trading around projects linked to paternalistic party chiefs.

Perhaps the newest and most menacing myth surrounding Rio's trafficking organization is its alleged infiltration by international "terrorist" organizations such as Colombia's FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and Lebanon's Hizbollah (the Party of God). This specter threatens to embroil Brazil more directly in the global "war on terror." These ideology-laden theories create extreme unease for three reasons. First, linking Rio's drug traffickers to leftist guerrillas could rekindle Cold War containment prerogatives. Second, linking Rio's blacks to Arab migrants—Brazil hosts a dynamic Syrian-Lebanese migrant community of around four million—would merge powerful negative stereotypes and leverage intensified racism against both communities. And third, linking Rio's "parallel powers" to terrorists would pressure Brazil to abandon its democratic reforms in the policing and security sectors and further militarize its responses to crime and violence—or else risk being proclaimed a "breeding ground" for terrorism.

This rather extreme scenario is unfortunately not easily dismissed in Brazil, but resistance to inclinations of counterterrorism-type militarization has come from an
unlikely source—the military. Fortunately for Brazil, the national armed forces today are nothing like their praetorian predecessors. For the most part, they have firmly backed the civilian government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and have resisted temptations to leverage greater power by stirring up “national security” threats. In fact, the national armed forces have been instrumental in encouraging reform, improving training and fostering accountability among police forces in Rio de Janeiro. The new Brazilian armed forces have thus encouraged the demilitarization of society, fostered the rule of law, and backed preventative and constructive approaches rather than counteterrorist bloodletting.

Brazil does share a border with Colombia and certainly does experience flows of cocaine from that country. But no serious evidence has been presented to indicate that crime in Rio is pushed by a great international terrorist conspiracy. Crime and violence in Rio are generated at the intersection of many poorly investigated forms of corruption, exploitation, racism, coercion and profiteering. In this context, Rio’s crime cannot be reduced to a violent plot implicating foreign militants. Such misconceptions would only aggravate violence and derail reforms.

Partly as a result of Lula’s Workers’ Party coming to power, leaders in Brazil are increasingly willing to face the state, police, institutional, elite and transnational entanglements that really drive violence. A wealth of writings by leading policymakers, state officials and researchers working with high-profile civil society groups in Rio and Brasilia have refuted these myths about the roots of crime in violence. And a number of creative and influential democratic-security “think tanks” and police retraining centers have sprouted up all over Rio, providing valuable momentum for progress in this sector. Moreover, Brazilian political culture, police and criminal justice institutions value academic and community perspectives. In Brazil, critical thinkers have worked their way up the political hierarchy rather rapidly, perhaps facilitated by the flexible and diverse structure of party politics.

Dr. Luiz Eduardo Soares is one of the key figures representing the intersection of academic, civil society and political progressivism in the area of policing. Originally from Rio de Janeiro, Dr. Soares’ career began as an ethnographer of indigenous communities in the Amazon. He became a Communist Party militant during the dictatorship and later a political philosopher and critical criminologist. Dr. Soares was also a co-organizer of the premier anti-violence NGO “Viva Rio.” And more recently he penned Rio’s security reform plan and now serves as Lula’s National Secretary of Public Security—a post that combines responsibilities similar to those of an FBI director, Homeland Security chief and national police-policy coordinator. As his prestige has increased, his ideas have not been compromised but have become more inclusive, grounded and critical.

Dr. Soares’ National Public Security Plan is a coordinated restructuring strategy for reducing crime and violence in the country. It has been adopted by the officials of Rio de Janeiro and by the most populous and conflictual states in the nation. But it is in Rio, where the stakes are highest, that Dr. Soares’ heart is, and where the international and national visibility of success or failure matters most. The National Security Plan, given full backing by President Lula, entails four main projects.

First, the plan seeks to integrate the differing police forces that currently constitute an impossible tangle of conflicting roles, territories and procedural norms in each Brazilian state. During the framing of Brazil’s constitution in 1988, separation was maintained between Militarized Police (Polícia Militar who patrol the streets, invade favelas, control vehicle traffic, etc.) and Investigative Police (Polícia Civil who jail, interrogate and process suspects). The constitutional maintenance of a distinction between the two police forces is widely regarded as promoting impunity and duplication; but the split remained in the constitution as a concession to authoritarian hard-liners concerned that democratization would lead to public chaos. Although it would be unconstitutional for today’s National Public Security Plan to merge the two police forces, federal guidance can to some extent integrate them by leveraging control over earmarked funds to motivate police branches to work together under common frameworks of procedure, data collection, accountability and civilian oversight. The federal government can reward cooperative state and city police officials with better pay and training to instill a new set of preventative, constructive, pro-citizen objectives.

Second, the Security Plan shifts targets by aiming at networks of corruption, money laundering, arms trafficking and police racketeering. As a much more ambitious and complex strategy, it requires coordinating local investigators with monitored judges, Federal Police, intelligence services, bank insiders and international partners. If successful, this plan could make great strides in reducing lethal violence, police brutality and racism. It would also increase confidence in a state able to police itself and provide “human security” and citizenship.

Third, Lula’s Security Plan focuses on prevention rather than punishment, particularly when it comes to dealing with marginalized youth. Secretary Soares believes that youth who become involved in the drug trade or in violent crime do so only when other options for “arming” their self-esteem are exhausted. Instead of collectively punishing a whole favela with random killings and police invasions in order to “deter” participation in trafficking, prevention entails strengthening...
cultural, educational, collective means of producing pride and success among the youth. On the deterrence side of the equation, carrying firearms will be banned nationally.

Finally, one of the most ambitious parts of the Security Plan includes integrating aspects of police forces with academic institutions, research foundations, NGOs, human rights groups and community organizations. Police stations are being transformed into centers where citizen-service providers, human rights groups and community representatives are located alongside police officers, ensuring cooperation and transparency. The transformation renders police stations less intimidating and less akin to alien powers in the community. In addition, the plan establishes strong incentives for individual police officers to seek promotion and salary increases by participating in retraining courses that stress an understanding of citizenship and human rights. Their teachers include feminists teaching how to manage domestic violence cases, black-movement members leading seminars about the history of racism in Brazil and transsexuals guiding discussions about machismo and how to deter homophobic violence. In a related effort, several all-female police stations have been created, where women’s victimization can be dealt with in particular ways; and the world’s first all-lesbian/gay/transgender police station is under development. In addition, the Brazilian National Social Science Research Organization and the National Higher-Education Training Foundation are working to launch a Public Security University. The new university would train police in democratic practices and serve as an intellectual center for generating public tools and debates around human rights, crime and violence prevention, community participation and citizenship-based security.

In May 2003, shortly after the official end to the war in Iraq, Rio’s “war” on narcotraffic was in a sense abandoned. Rosinha Garotinho’s government quite suddenly dropped the irresponsible counterterrorist language and approach. The administration realized that the hypermilitarization of the situation was aggravating conflict, blocking solutions, terrifying tourists and investors, leading to more police brutality and having absolutely no effect on crime. Rosinha fired her militaristic Security Czar, Josias Quintal, whose career had been bankrolled by gun manufacturers, and replaced him with her own husband, former Rio Governor Anthony Garotinho. Despite his often contentious relationship with Secretary Soares and President Lula, Mr. Garotinho immediately fully endorsed the more pragmatic, less militaristic and structurally ambitious approach of the National Security Plan.

Subsequently, state and federal officials began twisting the arm of TV newscasters and journalists, leading them to focus much more on police brutality, money laundering and corruption issues. For the first time in years, black mothers of victims killed by police were interviewed on television, at the side of the National Security Minister. And the “T” word was dropped from descriptions of criminal activities and organizations all together. The Garotinhos abandoned their efforts to generate populist support through public panic and began emphasizing real data that revealed that crime and violence have actually been dropping in Rio de Janeiro for quite some time. The often sensationalist Brazilian press became disoriented and bewildered as Governor Rosinha began issuing statements that daily life in Rio was, in fact, quite wonderful and “not too dangerous.” She suddenly adopted a peace platform and became conscious about myths and paranoia. “We have problems, I know, but they are projected to a dimension beyond their reality...by the media,” she said.

On July 19, 2003, Anthony Garotinho also reflected the shift in mood and strategy. After signing on to Soares’ National Plan, and at a public viewing of the U.S. anti-violence documentary Bowling for Columbine, Mr. Garotinho proclaimed: “The culture of fear is greater than the reality. We should not plant fear, and the press has a great responsibility in this sense.”

As reflected in the discourse of its federal and state leaders, as well as its civil and community activists, Rio’s democratizing forces have regained their momentum, and the city has reinvigorated its efforts to overthrow the hegemonic myths that have spurred counterproductive approaches to crime-fighting in the city for decades. Rio has officially begun to implement a national action plan that may come to serve as a world model for democratic policing and security reform.

Rio’s democratic policing and security efforts serve as a cornerstone of Lula-era efforts to invest in human capital and in the infrastructure of equality, rather than in militarization and structural violence. Rio de Janeiro, the Cidade Maravilhosa (Marvelous City), South America’s finalist for hosting the 2012 Olympic Games, is already hosting a global competition of a much more urgent kind. For now, the contest is between opposing models of policing and security. The model that prevails will ultimately determine whether substantive democracy can survive in Brazil and continue to be extended worldwide in an age dominated by counterproductive myths about the powers of traffickers and terrorists, the proper roles of states and police, and the false necessity of militaristic approaches to violent crime.
The Rise of Authoritarian Policing


Law Enforcement in Mexico City

1. Information on police corruption and its relationship to political and economic liberalization comes from a long-term research project I am conducting with Arturo Avaladaro titled “Police Impunity and Deteriorating Rule of Law in Mexico,” originally funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Information on the violence and political challenges posed by the co-existence of public and private police comes from my own two-year project titled “Public versus Private Security Forces and the Rule of Law: The Transformation of Policing in South Africa, Russia, and Mexico,” supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

2. Among other things, Sigrid Arzt Colunga, Director of Political Analysis for the Fundación Rafael Peciado, a PAN research think tank, explicitly links the problems of police corruption and impunity to the involvement of the military in police affairs.


5. The historical separation of preventative and judicial police has itself been the source of many problems in the evolution of policing in Mexico, ranging from corruption to out-and-out conflict. For more on this see my “Detective Story: Tracking the Police in Mexico City’s Political Historiography,” in Sergio Tamayo (ed.), One Hundred Years in Mexico City (Mexico City: UAM-Azcapotzalco, forthcoming).


7. Strictly speaking, the police function in the entire Delegación Cuauhtémoc, which is larger than the barrio of Tepito. But Tepito is the main problem location in this delegation.

8. This information was gathered from our own participant observation in several training sessions, meeting with the psychologists, and interviews with the new head of the corps. Bernardo Gómez del Campo, as well as with Adolfo Savin Cravo, Subdelegado Territorial de Tepito.

9. The money was guaranteed by the private sector as part of a plan (with results only to be visible in four years, according to Giulianii) to fight the underworld. See Susan González and Laura Gómez, “Resultados ‘en cuatro años’ prevé Giulianii,” La Jornada, January 15, 2003, p. 1.

10. For more on this conflict, see “Se contradicen autoridades sobre el inicio de los enfrentamientos; sorpresa de capitalinos; patrullan mil 500 policías federales calle del DF,” La Jornada, December 4, 2001.


13. For more on this see my Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

14. Master archivist of Mexico City, Salvador Novo, has argued that that the word for bribe in Mexico City, mordida (bite), developed in reference to activities of back-door ticket takers on trolleys in the late nineteenth century.

Contested Battlefields


2. The law was widely condemned as unconstitutional, but the Supreme Court argued that only the executive branch—not the judiciary—has the discretion to use and interpret the law. Supreme Court judge Hildegard Rondón of Sanso, author interview, June 9, 1995.


5. OCEI (Oficina Central de Estadística e Información), República de Venezuela, Presidencia de la República (1993, 1995, and 2000): Anuario Estadístico de Venezuela, Caracas, OCEI.


10. Inspectors and subinspectors receive up to four years of education, but most PM officers only three months.


17. In 2000, the National Assembly discovered “parallel forces” in many of the country’s 327 police jurisdictions. “Mi evalúa a 327 cuerpos policíacos del país,” El Globo, November 25, 2000, p. 3.
26. The military received $US 240 million in 1995, compared with the police’s $US 140 million the same year.

Reform in Río


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