

Ben Penglase

Loyola University Chicago

States of Insecurity: Everyday Emergencies, Public Secrets, and Drug Trafficker Power in a Brazilian *Favela*

This article analyzes how drug traffickers and police in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, co-participate in the creation of a state of (in)security in the city's poor neighborhoods. I draw on ethnographic research to argue that drug traffickers dominate Rio's favelas (squatter neighborhoods) by producing everyday emergencies (or "ordered disorder") and by deliberately manipulating secrecy. [Brazil, favela, violence, drugs, insecurity]

This article examines how drug traffickers attempt to exert control over residents of a *favela* (squatter neighborhood) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In exploring how drug trafficking organizations produce "ordered disorder," or what I call (in)security, I seek to expand upon previous analyses of the power that traffickers exert over favela residents. Prior analyses have shown how traffickers attempt to legitimate themselves by taking advantage of the Brazilian state's failure to provide public safety in these neighborhoods; in exchange for providing local security and enforcing social norms, traffickers have demanded the complicity and silence of favela residents. Building upon these analyses, and upon my fieldwork in a favela in Rio, I draw on Giorgio Agamben's (2005) notion of states of exception and Michael Taussig's (1999) concept of "public secrets" to show how traffickers also assert their control by alternating between states of security and insecurity and by deliberately manipulating secrecy.

My ethnographic analysis has larger implications for the analysis of how state and nonstate actors construct political orders. First, we can understand the nature of drug trafficker power and its relationship to the state more clearly when we view sovereignty as the ability to institute or suspend "normality," rather than as the possession of exclusive lawmaking authority over a particular territory. Rather than providing parallel structures of self-policing enabled by the state's absence from poor neighborhoods, traffickers depend upon divisions and tensions between various state actors and upon the state's "disruptive presence" in favelas. This allows traffickers to alternately impose their own rules in favela neighborhoods or suspend them and act as the force that institutes the "state of emergency." Thus, the state and nonstate actors are co-participants in the creation of a state of (in)security whose effects shape daily life throughout the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Second, by shifting attention from trafficker "governance" to a Foucauldian-inspired emphasis on "governmentality," we can examine security and governance not as given institutions and norms, but as discourses produced by particular social actors (in this

case, drug traffickers).¹ As a result, it becomes clear that attempts by traffickers to legitimate themselves depend upon favela residents' participation in the construction of "public secrecy." In so doing, residents of favelas both shape a larger city and nation-wide state of (in)security, yet also hold out the possibility of transformation.

Drug Trafficker Power in Rio's Favelas

The favela where I conducted my research, which I call Caxambu, is located in the northern part of Rio de Janeiro.² It is an old and "stable" favela: families first occupied the hillside that the favela is built upon in the early decades of the twentieth century, and most residents are connected to each other through dense and multistranded relations of kinship and long-term propinquity. Thus Caxambu would seem at first glance to substantiate earlier analysts' explanations for the effects of drug trafficking in Rio's favelas.

Analysts have proposed two models for understanding how favela-based traffickers have attempted to legitimate themselves. The first model emphasizes a reciprocal, if unequal, system of exchange, whereby traffickers provide public security in favelas in exchange for residents' silence about their criminal activities. The second model emphasizes clientelistic networks, arguing that traffickers have built upon and transformed older networks tying favela residents to political and economic elites.

In a pioneering article, Elizabeth Leeds argued that violence in Rio's favelas must be placed within a larger historical context and must be seen as the "visible and tangible form of the violence used by the state" against the poor (1996:50). Favelas such as Caxambu reveal this pattern. These neighborhoods have long occupied an ambiguous grey zone in Rio de Janeiro, at once officially "illegal," since their residents often did not own the land they built their homes upon, and yet also openly tolerated, as they were affordable housing options for the urban poor—which, in turn, helped to guarantee a cheap source of labor. Indeed, from the very beginning of settlement of Rio's favelas, the state played a dual role in organizing the poverty and racialization of neighborhoods such as Caxambu while marginalizing and excluding them.

The explosion of urban violence in Rio's favelas in the 1980s, Leeds argues, must be understood in this context of "the selective presence and absence of the state . . . and continuous violence and repression against the lower classes" (1996:49). While the state tolerated, or perhaps quietly encouraged, the city's poor and dark-skinned residents to build their own communities, city officials also denied these same neighborhoods access to regular city services. Not only have health, education, and basic sanitation services been inadequate or nonexistent, but the state has also failed to provide public safety. Rather than being a force that upholds the law, Rio's police have, since their inception, been charged with enforcing public order (Holloway 1993). In a society marked by sharp inequalities, police viewed favela residents (and other poor and dark-skinned residents of the city of Rio) as threats to the city's established social order and as real or potential criminals to be contained and repressed. At the

same time, the absence of regular provision of city services has ensured that favela residents have been an attractive target for politicians who promise “improvements” in exchange for votes. Thus, while favelas have been excluded from the provision of basic urban infrastructure and public safety, they have been deeply integrated into patron-client political networks and into the city’s economy (Leeds and Leeds 1977).

In the 1980s, as Brazil returned to procedural, if not substantive, democracy, urban violence began a decades-long increase (Pinheiro 2000; Caldeira and Holston 1999). In poor neighborhoods, a new set of political relations emerged as the legacy of dictatorship, especially impunity for police violence, became connected with the growth of the transnational drug trade.

Particularly important was the emergence in the early 1980s of a drug organization called the *Comando Vermelho* (the Red Command, or CV) (Amorim 1993; Penglase 2008). The members of this group realized that the city’s favelas provided strategically useful locations for the stockpiling of marijuana and cocaine destined for sale to clients in wealthier parts of the city. Drug dealers associated with the CV also turned antagonism between favela residents and the police to their advantage: in exchange for providing safety and conflict resolution and occasional short-term assistance, the CV demanded that favela residents turn a blind eye to their activities. This arrangement is known throughout Rio’s favelas as the *lei do morro* (law of the hillside).

Luiz Eduardo Soares argues that drug trafficker power is especially influenced by favela residents’ perceptions of the police. The arbitrariness and violent actions of the police, Soares argues, is contrasted with the order and intelligibility of drug trafficker rule. Violence by drug traffickers is deplored. But unlike the police, drug traffickers are seen as subordinating their “despotic practice to an intelligible and public order” (2000:40).

In her insightful ethnography of gender and humor in a favela in northern Rio, Donna Goldstein argues that favela residents often felt vulnerable in a situation where the police and judicial system were seen as corrupt or abusive. As a result, “the absence of the state in such areas means that these local gangs provide a parallel or alternative rule of law that deals with ‘private matters’ which the state is unable and unwilling to address” (Goldstein 2003:225). Likewise, Leeds argues that the services offered by the drug groups are valued because the state does not provide them: “the perception by favela residents—indeed, by most of the working class—that the formal justice system does not work for them has led a portion of the population to accept an alternative justice system” (1996:62).

Other analysts have complicated this picture by examining the ties that link drug traffickers and the state, and by arguing that traffickers’ claims to providing security should be seen as a rhetorical claim, or a “myth of personal security” (Arias and Rodrigues 2006:54). Recently Desmond Arias (2006) examined how traffickers have consolidated their control over favelas by constructing flexible and horizontal networks that link them to local social movements, politicians and state institutions, and global flows of illegal commodities. Through these networks, drug traffickers

can use their expertise in violence and their intimate knowledge of favelas to link themselves to wholesale suppliers of cocaine, corrupt policemen, and politicians and civic groups seeking access to favelas, all the while seeking to legitimate themselves by building support among favela residents.

In a similar vein, Michel Misse has argued that Rio's drug trafficking groups drew upon a pattern of "dangerous liaisons" that connected criminals to agents of the state (2006:179–210). Misse emphasizes, in particular, the links established between markets in illegal goods (such as the illegal lottery, contraband, and prostitution) and markets in political goods (such as protection or selective legal enforcement) offered by agents of the state. Misse argues that the gap between the criminalization of drugs, on the one hand, and demand for this illegal market, on the other, is part of a larger political economy; not only can corrupt police "sell" selective enforcement, but politicians can use their ability to encourage or discourage "crack downs" on crime as political merchandise to be sold for electoral support.

Misse's and Arias's clientelistic and network-driven models emphasize the links between the state and criminal organizations, and Leeds and Goldstein emphasize how nonstate actors provide security in the absence of state efforts to protect populations. Thus all of these approaches tend to emphasize how state and nonstate actors seek to create stability and normative orders. This emphasis on how state and nonstate actors produce order is important, but only captures part of the picture. As Kay Warren (2002) has warned, it is important not to reify stability and see violence as a threat to an otherwise "normal" social order.

To their credit, both Arias and Misse point out how networks and linkages are dynamic, conflictual, and unstable. Ties between traffickers and politicians, or between traffickers and favela residents, Arias (2006) argues, are based on the opportunistic political calculation by the parties involved and are always open to renegotiation or collapse. Arias and Rodrigues (2006) also show how traffickers often exercise their power arbitrarily, favoring more influential favela residents or those with whom they have stronger social ties. But this strategy has its limits: when traffickers undertake actions that are "consistently seen as an abuse of power that affects protected groups of residents . . . traffickers risk losing their limited legitimacy" (Arias and Rodrigues 2006:74). Misse likewise argues that ties between criminals and state agents are "dangerous" because they are subject to constant renegotiation, often through violence, and are characterized by a general lack of trust.

Nonetheless, seeing stability as normative and violence as a breakdown of order, as Taussig (1992) has pointed out, often hides how political regimes naturalize their power by producing instabilities and uncertainties in the lives of people that they seek to control. My research in Caxambu reveals the importance of examining violence not as a breakdown of order but the "flipside" of what Taussig has called the "illusions of order congealed by fear" (1992:2). Insecurity and violence are not always the result of the failure of networks or of traffickers pushing their self-interests to the point where they violate their own rules. Sometimes traffickers and state agents co-participate in constructing political authority through the use of disorder, secrecy, and ambiguity.

Caxambu and the “Law of the Hillside”

At first glance, my ethnographic research in Caxambu substantiates earlier analyses of how drug traffickers attempt to legitimate themselves in Rio’s poor neighborhoods. In many ways Caxambu could be seen as an example of a classic CV-run favela, where in the absence of state provision of public security, the residents traded their complicity for “protection” by traffickers.³ Residents of Caxambu told me that once the CV “took over” the hillside neighborhood in the mid 1980s, they put an end to crime in the favela. For instance, Seu Jânio, a man in his sixties, told me:

Seu Jânio: I think that there is no better *morro* [hillside, the locally preferred term for favela] to live in than here.

Ben: Why is that?

Seu Jânio: Because this is a morro where lots of things that happen elsewhere . . . they’re rare here. So there’s peace, dignity. It’s a family-based morro (*É um morro familiar*).⁴ I know everyone. Girls here don’t get raped, like in other morros. . . . This is a morro that, thank God, despite everything is like a big family. The people have lots of respect. It used to be that the morro was really tough. Really tough. . . . Back then, just to give you an idea of what it’s like now Now you see lots of people out late at night. There was a time when no one would go out after six o’clock at night. [Laughs.]

Echoing the idea that trafficker rule is based upon a system of reciprocal exchange, residents of Caxambu would often state that because the traffickers “protected” them, they respected the drug traffickers. A central component of this relationship of “respect” is the “law of silence”: residents would not inform the police about drug-dealing in their neighborhood. It is essential to note that the exchange that underlies the law of silence is highly asymmetrical and is enforced by the willingness of drug traffickers to commit violence to punish real or suspected informants. And, as Arias and Rodrigues (2006) have argued, despite the rhetorical claims by traffickers to impartially uphold local social norms (or “respect”), actual application of the rules varied tremendously depending upon a resident’s social ties to traffickers or local position of influence.

The constant anxiety about informants also reveals the fear and ambiguity that are the flip-side of the traffickers’ “laws”; indeed, the most dangerous accusation that could be leveled at someone in the favela was to accuse that person of being an “X-9,” or informant, an accusation that teenagers threw around in arguments, and that, more seriously, would sometimes surface as a threat in local disputes between residents.⁵ As this concern reveals, the exchange between drug gangs and favela residents also depends on ambiguity and uncertainty: residents not only feared that they might be “unjustly” accused of being informants, but also sometimes attempted to use the arbitrary nature of trafficker justice to their advantage.

Residents were also aware that relations between residents and the traffickers were heavily influenced by the personality of the local head of the drug trafficking

organization. During the late 1990s the drug operation in Caxambu was run by Dê, who was allied with the CV. The leaders of trafficking organizations in Rio's favelas are often referred to as *o homen* (the man) or as the *dono do morro* (owner of the hillside). Favela residents often compare good donos with bad donos, and most residents stated that Dê was a good dono. A good dono must appear to be concerned with the community, eschew or seek to minimize violence, and discourage drug use within the community (see Alvito 2001). Many people in Caxambu felt that Dê fit this bill: he was relatively old for a drug boss (in his mid-30s), pursued a policy of negotiation with the police, he supposedly did not use drugs, and he was said to discourage young boys from entering the drug trade.

The relations between traffickers and residents are also mediated by shared social identity and shared ties to local places (Alvito 2001; Zaluar 1985). A key criterion for determining a good dono, for example, was if that person had grown up in the neighborhood. Residents of Caxambu frequently emphasized that Dê had grown up in Caxambu, "inheriting" the drug trade from his older brother, and that most of the traffickers in Dê's organization were locals. Residents often felt that the shared ties to local place brought traffickers and residents together in a common social community that moderated drug traffickers' violence.

Constructing (In)Security and the Power of the Secret

A more detailed ethnographic examination of how local-level drug-trafficking syndicates construct structures of power in Rio's favelas, though, reveals that in addition to trading "security" for complicity, traffickers also deliberately produce disorder, insecurity, and ambiguity. As Weldes et al. (1999) have argued, security and insecurity must be seen as culturally constructed and mutually constituted. Discourses about the production of security must not be taken as givens, but must be examined to reveal how, why, and when particular social actors claim to be providing order. These representations are part of a larger political economy, and are also crucial to the construction of the actors—such as "the state" and the "drug-gangs"—who respond to insecurity.

In the case of Brazilian favelas, the essential question to ask is: who defines security or insecurity? In many societies, state officials are granted the right to speak on behalf of the state, to identify threats and dangers, and to determine the best solution. These discourses are dominant, but are not the only ones: other social actors generate alternative discourses that clash with or appropriate the discourse of state actors (Weldes et al. 1999:19). But in Rio's favelas, and perhaps in poor and working-class communities in Brazil and throughout Latin America, statist definitions of "threat" or "safety" are not the dominant ones. Instead, traffickers and other nonstate actors often participate in generating discourses of safety and danger. Focusing on security as a discourse reveals how traffickers, various state actors, and favela residents all co-participate in the creation of a state of (in)security, a situation where security and insecurity are simultaneously present.

Two concepts, taken from Michael Taussig and Giorgio Agamben, help to understand the complexities of drug trafficker power: first, the idea of a “permanent state of emergency” or what I will call a state of (in)security; and second, the idea of the “public secret.”⁶ Rather than instituting a predictable, normative order, drug gangs deliberately create (in)security. They do this by abrogating to themselves the power not only to institute normative systems but also to violate the systems that they themselves create. In Agamben’s (1995) terms, they are the force that can declare the state of exception. Likewise, this authority is not founded on open discussion and consensus but on the deliberate construction and manipulation of secrecy and ambiguity, which Taussig has called a “public secret” (1999:2).

The Comando Vermelho and the Comando Azul

The authority that traffickers exert is enabled by, and thus dependent upon, the insecurity generated by police violence, crime, and the collapse of the Brazilian judicial and penal systems. Residents of Caxambu would frequently tell me that they felt safer in Caxambu than in the areas that were not under the control of the local drug gang, and that they trusted the traffickers more than the police. For instance, Pedro told me:

Everyone here likes you and your wife. Everyone here receives you with open arms. You can walk around at will, can leave that tape-recorder right here—“Oh, it’s Ben’s”—and no one will touch it. Do you understand? Because . . . the Man here [the head of the drug gang] respects people, and doesn’t want anyone to mess with anyone else. You see sometimes . . . I even leave the door of my house open . . . I trust them more than I trust the police.

The security provided by local traffickers was also dependent upon the fear generated by the tensions and conflicts within drug-trafficking groups. Residents were particularly fearful that the favela might be “invaded” and taken over by rival drug gangs, who might not be locals and might not respect residents. The threat of invasion and the rhetorical creation of the danger of foreign drug gangs—who were called *alemães*, or Germans, in local slang—can be seen as objects of exclusion upon which the discourse that constructed drug dealers as locals and protectors depended.

The residents of Caxambu followed news reports about wars between rival gangs and splits within the CV with keen interest, as they worried that rivalries in the drug trade might intensify violence in their neighborhood. For instance, on May 22, 1999, during my period of fieldwork, a leader of the CV and his son were killed in prison. The killing became a major topic of conversation in Caxambu. Some residents openly worried that the killings might disrupt the balance of power and lead to increased conflict as different factions fought for ascendancy.

The residents of Caxambu felt that the current stability in the neighborhoods was due to Dê’s skill in diplomatically navigating rivalries in the drug trade. Yet they were also aware of the fragility of this peace, because they knew that Dê could be arrested or killed at any moment. For example, I asked Anacleto if he thought the situation

in Caxambu could change in the next few years, and told me, “Tomorrow, it could change tomorrow. Who knows if tomorrow it’ll be so stable?”

Fears of violent and corrupt police and anxieties about drug-gang rivalry go hand-in-hand: the rise of the drug trade in the late 1970s and early 1980s fed off patterns of corruption and illegality in the police and justice system. Corrupt members of the police force realized that they could turn rivalries within Rio’s drug groups to their advantage. Corrupt policemen often supplemented their income by extorting payments from detained traffickers, sometimes threatening to turn dealers or seized weapons over to rival gangs. It was even widely speculated that certain battalions of Rio’s military police provided assistance to one or another of the rival drug groups.

This scenario of fear and anxiety, and of widespread concern with state corruption, fits with the argument that traffickers provide a sense of stability and safety where the state is unable or unwilling to do so. But trafficking syndicates also depend upon ongoing and constant insecurity, or at least the threat of insecurity, to legitimate their control. Without the twin threats of rival gangs and abusive police, the bargain that residents made with traffickers would have nothing behind it except brute force. Drug groups, like other forms of organized crime and the state itself, can function as protection rackets: they can produce real or imagined threats in order to “sell” security to their clients (Tilly 2002; Gambetta 1993).

As I have mentioned, recent research has explored how drug-trafficking organizations are part of “destabilizing networks,” permeating Rio’s political and economic structures, connecting various legal and illegal markets, and perpetuating long-standing patron-client political structures (Arias 2001; Misse 1997). The complementary perspective should also be taken: state actors also often destabilized favelas, and these destabilizing networks co-participated in the perpetuation of local political orders. If the police did not occasionally invade and harass residents, if the threat of “invasion” by rival gangs was not omnipresent, if the fear of crime was not sustained, then the deal that traffickers made with the residents would collapse.

Some Rio state authorities clearly recognized that the structures of power created by favela-based traffickers depended upon the state’s disruptive presence. Leeds, for instance, quotes the former head of the military police in Rio, Colonel Carlos Magno Nazareth Cerqueira, as stating that police corruption and involvement in organized crime is the “greatest weapon that organized crime has at its disposal to allow it to operate freely” (Leeds 1996:64). Yet tensions and divisions within the state itself—particularly within the police force—ensure that arbitrary and violent policing works hand-in-hand with favela drug trafficking. Colonel Nazareth Cerqueira himself is a tragic example of the often violent divisions within the Rio de Janeiro state police: an active proponent of human rights and of fighting corruption within the police, he was murdered, under suspicious circumstances, in 1999.

A powerful example of the symbiotic relationship between violent policing and drug-trafficker power was what happened in Caxambu after the police shot and killed a local man known as *Ari o Sorveteiro* (Ari the Ice Cream Seller). On a Sunday morning, the police snuck up the hill on foot and opened fire on Dê, who was sitting

on a chair at the top of the hill. Ari, who had been talking to Dê, was killed in the cross-fire. After shooting Ari, the police placed several bags of cocaine near Ari to make it seem that he was a drug dealer.

For weeks after the shooting, no one dared to wash the large bloodstain on the sidewalk where Ari had been killed. The local drug dealers spray-painted red circles around the bullet holes that pock-marked the walls and scrawled *Paz* (Peace), near them. The day after the shooting, the local traffickers strung a banner over the road complaining of police violence and accusing the PM (the military police) of being “the real criminals.”

Residents were deeply upset by the shooting; not only had Ari been a well-liked person, seen as uninvolved with the drug trade, but the shooting happened during a time when lots of people were walking around the hillside. Several days after the shooting, the policeman who killed Ari drove into the favela, got out of his patrol car, and walked around at the top of the hill with his hand on the trigger of his revolver, seemingly taunting residents to complain about the crime. The shooting was never investigated nor was anyone ever prosecuted.

Because of the state’s disruptive presence, the police come to be seen as “just as criminal” as the drug traffickers, and were sometimes described as the *Comando Azul*, or Blue Command, comparing the police’s blue uniforms to the red of the *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command). But local drug traffickers drew sharp distinctions between the police and themselves. Although their practices are depicted as similar (both are violent), the fact that drug traffickers claim to abide by an explicit set of rules is held to distinguish them from the police. Without the anchor of the disruptive presence of the state, this discourse would collapse.

Tubarão (The Shark) and the Power of the Exception

As Carl Schmitt notes, the exception is more interesting than the regular case. The later proves nothing; the exception proves everything. The exception does not only confirm the rule; the rule as such lives off the exception alone. [Agamben 1999]

Analyzing the “law of the hillside” as a normative order risks examining drug trafficker power from the perspective of the traffickers themselves. Favela residents and traffickers in Caxambu both speak about reciprocal relations, however asymmetrical they may be, and about a normative code that guides their interactions. But as Arias and Rodrigues (2006) have argued, thinking of trafficker rule as based upon “laws” or “rules” is highly misleading (though both favela residents and some social scientists do this). Far from being founded on consensus, drug trafficker power in Caxambu was founded upon a highly unequal and uneven exchange, built out of fear and the threat of violence as much as upon shared social ties.

Traffickers impose their power not just by generating rules and security, but also by taking two additional steps. First, traffickers deliberately position themselves as the sovereign who is above, or beyond, the law. Second, they also occasionally—sometimes deliberately, sometimes “accidentally”—violate the very rules that they

institute. These actions are not exceptions to the laws of the hillside. Instead, the exception to the rule of “mutual respect” is how trafficker rule is instituted and continually reinforced.

Favela residents are highly aware that despite the CV’s rules, drug dealers reserve the right to step out of the boundaries whenever it suits them. Though favela residents often stated “if you respect the drug dealers, they’ll respect you,” they also warned that drug dealers were often unpredictable and should be avoided. A neighbor put it this way: “I grew up in the countryside. There you learn how to deal with snakes. If you pass by one you don’t make a lot of noise, you don’t bother it and make it angry. You just pass by as quietly as you can.” It was indeed hard to mistake how certain members of the drug gang would often deliberately flaunt the local drug gang’s own rules by, for instance, firing their guns at random or showing off their weaponry and intimidating favela residents for no apparent reason.

A more significant example occurred one afternoon shortly before I had moved to Caxambu. I was invited to a Saturday afternoon *churrasco* (barbeque) at the home of Seu Lázaro, the head of the local Resident’s Association. When I arrived at his house, Seu Lázaro was sitting on his front porch drinking beer and invited me to sit down with him. A short while later a drug dealer nicknamed Tubarão (the Shark) came in through Seu Lázaro’s front gate. Tubarão was a wiry black man in his twenties with a clean-shaved head and a twisted broken-tooth sneer, and he always wore mirrored sunglasses. His sinister appearance and his eagerness to use violence accounted for his nickname. Tubarão was respected and feared. He was also often high on cocaine, making him even more erratic.

Seu Lázaro had a large cooler that he kept stocked with beer to sell on hot weekend afternoons. Tubarão sat down next to me and asked if Seu Lázaro had any cold beer to sell. Tubarão wasn’t wearing a shirt, and strapped to his bare chest was a leather holster that prominently displayed a 45-caliber revolver. Seu Lázaro looked over at Tubarão and said, “Sure, but come with me.” They walked over near the gate and exchanged a few words, and Tubarão stepped outside.

A few minutes later Tubarão returned. He had draped a white t-shirt over the revolver, though it was obvious that the gun was still there. We chatted a bit about a Mike Tyson boxing match that was going to be shown on television, and after a few minutes Danilo, Seu Lázaro’s nephew, came by with two bottles of Skol beer. Tubarão took them and walked out the gate. “You know,” Seu Lázaro told me, “I saw that kid grow up. I knew him when he was a little kid, in diapers.”

By brazenly revealing his weapon but then pretending to “hide” it, Tubarão was sending a clear message: while he would respect Seu Lázaro, being considerate of Seu Lázaro’s desire to create a welcoming atmosphere for his guest, there should be no illusions about who held more power. The larger message was unmistakable: local traffickers enforce the rules, but this does not mean that they will always follow them. A clearer example could not be possible of the status of the sovereign as the social actor who constitutes power precisely because he can stand outside of legitimately constituted normative authority—“the point of indistinction between violence and law,

the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes into violence” (Agamben 1995:32).

Secrecy and Ambiguity: The “Public Secret”

The fact that traffickers often violate their own rules also points to a second concept that helps to clarify the nature of trafficker power: the “public secret.” Taussig defines the public secret as “that which is generally known, but cannot be spoken” (Taussig 1999:50). Following the classic arguments of Simmel and Canetti, Taussig argues that secrecy is central to the constitution of power and social order. The secret simultaneously creates a community, generating social subjects who possess the most important social knowledge, who “know what not to know,” and yet instills murk and ambiguity at the center of power. This concealment “has the overt character of a prohibition (‘Thou shalt not profess to know X’) but whose heart is a dissimulation (‘Even when X is generally known, you are enjoined to act and think as if X cannot be known’)” (Surin 2001:206).

In Caxambu, the law of silence functions as a public secret; everyone knows that it is prohibited to speak about the activities of drug traffickers, even though everyone knows about the activities of drug traffickers. Particularly revealing is how favela residents use indirection in comments that seem to be talking about no one in particular, but which are, in fact, describing drug traffickers. For instance, one resident told me about how the current drug gang was different than former ones:

Now this *peessoal* . . . this *rapaz* who is here is smarter, more cunning. He doesn’t let anyone invade anyone else’s house. Do you understand? He doesn’t let the *peessoal* . . . because he already has what he wants from the residents, and the residents need him, so we . . . understand?

This conversation is typical of the use of semantically broad terms—such as *peessoal* (personnel), *rapaz* (guy), and simply *ele* (he)—to talk about individuals who are known to both speakers (in this case the head of the drug group in Caxambu and local traffickers). This semantic ambiguity was not only common in taped interviews, but was a constant feature of everyday talk, the use of a restricted code among participants who could assume enough shared understanding so that the meanings of deliberately vague utterances can be decoded.

Significantly, the local head of the drug trafficking organization was referred to by his direct name only in utterances where there were no other clear indications that he was, in fact, the head of the local drug gang. In all other cases, he was referred to simply as *o homem* (the man) or *o dono* (the owner). In other words, the use of secrecy (“hiding” Dê’s name), presumed that the listener actually shared in the “secret” knowledge. In this case, the purpose of hiding knowledge that was openly known was not to avoid revealing a secret, but to actively create a community of people who know what they shouldn’t know. Participating in knowing the “truth” of the secret was a way of marking oneself as an “insider” who could, it was hoped, count of the protection of drug traffickers.

The anxiety about informants (known locally as X-9s) and about being erroneously or maliciously identified as an X-9 reveals that the constitution of this community was also fraught with anxiety and fear. According to the law of silence, no one spoke to the police. Yet residents knew that this was not always the case: the police sometimes coerced information out of residents through harassment, torture, or extortion; residents who had incurred the hostility of local drug dealers, often because of unpaid drug debts, were sometimes tempted to “turn informant” for revenge. There was also a constant concern that rivalries within the drug group might lead traffickers lower on the hierarchy to use the police to usurp power for themselves. The anxiety and concern generated by secrecy came to be a powerful weapon that residents could use in their own conflicts and disputes, threatening to “unmask” their neighbors as X-9s.

At a deeper level, the public secret is that traffickers do not always provide security or “respect” favela residents. For example, residents of Caxambu often spoke, though in hushed and veiled terms, of cases where local drug traffickers forced people to let them use their homes as hideouts, as drug or weapons stockpiling points, or places for “cutting” and packaging cocaine or marijuana for retail sale. In some cases drug dealers compensate homeowners for this use of their house, and the packaging of cocaine is often subcontracted out to residents for a set fee (Rafael 1998; Misse 2006). Drug trafficker intrusion upon the homes of locals was quietly alluded to, though often openly known. Other cases, where drug traffickers forcibly evict home owners or move into their homes, were rarely mentioned or were discussed openly only if the particular drug dealer responsible for these actions had been killed, imprisoned, or otherwise removed from power. Indeed, one of the most powerful complaints that residents made against traffickers was that they had “unfairly” evicted people from their homes.

Another complaint, though one voiced very cautiously, occurred when the traffickers set up *bocas de fumo* (drug-selling points) near homes. Residents worried that this exposed them to violence from the police, rival drug gangs, or paranoid (and occasionally “coked-up”) local drug dealers. In several cases in Caxambu, residents who had new bocas set up near their homes attempted to involve Seu Lázaro, the president of the local Residents Association, as a mediator on their behalf with the drug traffickers. Seu Lázaro’s anxiety in taking up such tasks was palpable, and for good reason; as Robert Gay has argued, the increasing power of favela-based drug groups has dealt a harsh, and often deadly blow to the once autonomous and combative favela-based social movements (2005:54–58).⁷ More commonly, rather than directly confronting drug dealers, favela residents voiced their concern by talking about their fear of stray bullets.

Other anxieties shrouded by public secret were parents’ fears about how to deal with boys in the drug trade who wanted to pursue relationships with their daughters. Thus, while residents of Caxambu would talk about how the hillside drug dealers “respect” local women, these statements often went hand-in-hand with commentary about the dangers that local girls and their families face if the girls turn down the advances of local drug dealers. Cases where this occurred were not unusual but were almost never openly discussed.

In all these cases, the public secret was that, although the traffickers claimed to respect residents—protecting them from outside threats but otherwise not harassing them—relations between traffickers and residents were far more complex and contradictory. Arias and Rodrigues have argued that the inconsistent manner in which traffickers implement the “rules” of the law of the hillside is part of a larger political logic whereby traffickers claim to uphold social norms, but in practice systematically favor influential residents whose support they cultivate (2006:65). Favela residents often acknowledge that rules and decisions made by traffickers vary according to the local status of violators or disputants or according to the whims of particular traffickers. In general this variation is tolerated as long as those who are “favored” by traffickers are locally influential residents. When traffickers are too arbitrary in imposing rules or fail to cultivate the support of influential residents, “the incidents provoke anger and outrage (*revolta*) among residents” (Arias and Rodrigues 2006:73).

If the often arbitrary and ambiguous nature of trafficker power is examined, however, as a “public secret,” then a different picture emerges. The “truth” of trafficker arbitrariness is not simply the revelation of a “hidden” reality, but is integral to how traffickers exert power through their ability to decide the exception. For Taussig, the drive to transgression is integral to the secret—that the traffickers often violated order and acted arbitrarily, and that residents often sought personal exemptions to the rules, does not mean that the public secret had been unmasked. Rather, the power of the public secret of the “law of the hillside” is exactly that everyone acts as if it were true, while knowing that the secret propels its transgression. If it is never clear exactly how and why traffickers will rule in a resident’s favor, then residents must simultaneously deny this “secret,” in order to maintain the fiction of predictability, while cultivating trafficker support in the hope that the “exception” will be ruled in their favor.

The power of the public secret is not that it conceals a more cynically self-serving political strategy, but that it provides a set of culturally familiar, and convincing, tropes to help people navigate the ordered disorder of their lives. The public secret functions much like the “hidden” truth of complex and conflict-ridden family relationships that are often systematically denied when speaking to non-kin. In this way, the law of the hillside draws upon tropes of family and kinship, ideas of respect based on common social identities, and common ties to a particular space. The point in keeping the secret is not simply denying the “reality” of family conflict, but of marking oneself part of a shared community of people united by “knowing what they shouldn’t know.”

For many favela residents, this way of conceiving of power and authority—through tropes of kinship and “blood,” and based upon the idea that despite the real truth that families are often fraught with jealousy and conflict, when challenged by strangers families should stand united—is more convincing than two other dominant ways of conceiving of authority and legitimate uses of violence: ideas about universal equality and abstract citizenship; or tropes (which are equally familiar) of favela residents as threats to the stability of the rest of Rio who “require” violent policing. Indeed, trafficker rhetoric about favelas being families united against the brutality of the state

and the neglect of wider society is deliberately created as a counter-discourse to the old images of favelas as “savage” and “barbaric” (Abreu 1987).

Conclusion

The “old school” Comando Vermelho favelas, such as the one where I did my research, are now very much an exception and probably a relic of what, in the ever accelerating chronology of the rapidly mutating drug trade, counts as the dark and distant past (the late 1990s). Nonetheless, precisely because it more closely approximated the classic model of drug trafficker control, Caxambu serves as a useful ethnographic case; it demonstrates how traffickers attempt to consolidate their control over favela residents by both instituting and suspending “normality,” and by deliberately manipulating truth and secrecy to create a state of (in)security.

The type of power exercised by drug traffickers, it is worth emphasizing, does not occupy a vacuum left by the state, nor does it necessarily challenge or oppose itself to state power. Rather, the ability of drug traffickers in Rio’s favelas to institute the “state of the exception” can exist alongside the state’s role as the ultimate source of a normative social order. Traffickers appear to be content to allow the state to perform most of its functions, as long as they do not inordinately challenge traffickers’ interests. When this does occur, as I have argued elsewhere (Penglase 2005), traffickers have demonstrated their ability to suspend “normality” not only in favelas, but throughout the city of Rio as a whole.

The ultimate irony is that both traffickers and the state attempt to legitimize themselves by casting themselves as the purveyors of “impartial justice” and their opponents as the source of “arbitrary violence.” Yet both depend upon each other for their discourses and political-economic strategies to be effective. The state needs an illegal criminal market place, both to anchor its claims to provide law and order and, in many cases, as an attractive buyer of “protection.” Favela-based traffickers, in turn, need state agents both as purveyors of protection and as destabilizing agents that they can contrast with their own, apparently more “benign,” form of control. In this sense, both traffickers and the state co-participate in creation of state of (in)security.

For many favela residents, the “public secret,” the knowledge that is openly known and yet not speakable, is that both the state and the traffickers are responsible for creating the “everyday state of emergency” within which they are forced to live. As Agamben has argued, “the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (Agamben 2005:2). Perhaps residents of Rio’s favelas can teach us to pay attention to similar social constructions of (in)security and secrecy in apparently more stable and open societies such as the United States.

Notes

I would like to thank *PoLAR*’s two anonymous reviewers for their comments and, of course, to extend my thanks to the residents of Caxambu, whose names for obvious

reasons have been altered. An earlier version of this article was presented on March 17, 2006, as part of a panel on nonstate security communities organized by Kristina Mani for the Latin American Studies Association's annual conference, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and benefitted tremendously from the comments of Pablo Policzer and the other panelists.

1. By *governmentality* I mean, drawing upon Foucault, the “multiform tactics,” practices, discourses, techniques, and forms of knowledge by which selves are fashioned and subjects are governed (Foucault 1991:87–104). What I am highlighting, though, is the production of subjects through strategies of “abnormalization.”
2. *Caxambu* is a pseudonym for the favela where I conducted ethnographic research from 1998–1999 and in 2001.
3. By the late 1990s, according to both favela residents and social scientists, conflicts within Rio's main drug-trafficking organizations have produced a turnover in drug-group leadership, with a younger and supposedly more violence-prone generation of drug dealers assuming power.
4. In this context, *familiar* means that the favela is seen as marked by strong social ties, that it's a family-based neighborhood.
5. A popular funk song by Cidinho and Doca, “X-9 Torrado” (“Toasted X-9”) that I often heard in Caxambu, described how traffickers sometimes kill informants by placing old tires around them and burning them alive.
6. I am aware of the dangers of deploying concepts that have, at their root, the Nazi Holocaust as their paradigmatic experience (Hesse 2004). I hope, nonetheless, that these analytical tools can illuminate, rather than foreclose, the particularities of a Brazilian context marked by the legacies of European colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade.
7. Gay cites reports that one hundred community leaders in Rio's favelas have been assassinated by drug organizations between 1992 and 2001 (Gay 2005:187).

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