

The shutdown of Rio de Janeiro

The poetics of drug trafficker violence

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Fig. 1. Hillside houses in the favela of 'Caxambu', located in the northern zone of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

In September 2002 drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, brought the city to a standstill. In a dramatic escalation of a decades-long conflict with the state, Rio's drug syndicates used fear, threats and strategic innuendo to force businesses to close, schools to cancel classes and buses to stop running, momentarily paralysing a city of over 6 million people. Since that first shutdown, Rio's traffickers have repeatedly used this tactic as a way to send specific messages to local authorities and to demonstrate, as one trafficker put it, that the city's drug traffickers possess a 'power that they don't have'.

Drawing upon ethnographic research in a *favela* (squatter community) in Rio, I argue here that the violent actions of Rio's drug traffickers become meaningful, and their effects understandable, only when set within a history of local social practices and of cultural understandings of violence and authority. In shutting down the city the drug traffickers applied, on a city-wide scale, a tactic they had introduced and perfected in the city's favelas – that of instigating alternating states of order and disorder. The traffickers also issued statements justifying their actions that drew upon local favela-based conceptions of justice and the legitimate use of violence (see Zaluar 1985, Alviro 1996).¹

A culturally informed analysis of the drug traffickers' actions allows us to understand how they consolidate their power in the city's poor neighbourhoods, and how they are attempting to expand their influence. It was, indeed, the drug traffickers' awareness and deliberate use of the 'poetics' of violence that rendered their actions intelligible, and dramatically amplified their meaning.

The 'holiday of terror'

On the last day of September 2002 the Comando Vermelho, one of Rio's most powerful drug syndicates, temporarily brought the city to a halt.² On that Monday morning, shop

owners in the city centre and the wealthy southern zone closed their doors, claiming that they were following the orders of young men who had identified themselves as part of the Comando Vermelho (CV), and who had threatened violence if their 'orders' were disobeyed. Within hours a wave of panic spread through the city: according to news reports, 235 schools sent 50,000 students home; four buses were set on fire and 2000 buses never left the garage, leaving 800,000 passengers stranded; health clinics, supermarkets, shopping malls, banks and restaurants all closed.

The Comando Vermelho's shutdown of the city was probably implemented at the behest of Fernandinho Beira-Mar, one of Brazil's most powerful drug traffickers, who was being held in the Bangu prison. In the aftermath of a prison riot, the Rio state authorities had transferred Beira-Mar and several other traffickers to a more secure detention facility; Beira-Mar, or someone close to him, reacted by striking back with one of the most powerful weapons that the drug dealers possessed – the use of terror to disrupt 'normal' life.

In a phone conversation recorded on a police wiretap, Marquinhos Niterói, a drug dealer in Bangu I prison, instructed an accomplice: 'Black-out in the southern zone. Everything has to shut down, all the businesses. Stop it all.' When the accomplice did not understand, Marquinhos stated: 'We're going to show them that we've got power that they don't have' (*O Globo*, 2 October 2002).

By strategically generating fear, the Comando Vermelho manipulated the sense of normality and order that held in the city. Few people were aware of exactly who had issued the orders, but the ambiguity of the situation only heightened the anxiety. If the motive for the shutdown was murky, the potential consequences of not following the drug traffickers' commands seemed too real to risk defiance. As a result, uncertainty and fear fed off each other. One 19-year-old student stated: 'I'm really upset with this



BEN PENGLASE

Fig. 2. A mural in Caxambu calling for peace, painted above the pavement where the police killed a neighborhood girl.

1. Classic research in Rio's favelas (such as Perlman 1976, Leeds and Leeds 1977, Valla 1986), presented valuable arguments about these neighbourhoods, but predated the upsurge of drug trafficking in the late 1970s. For more recent ethnographic work in favelas, which inspires much of this essay, see Alvito 1996, Leeds 1996, Misse 1997, Arias 2001, Dowdney 2003, and the pioneering research of Zaluar 1985, 1994.

2. Rio's drug trafficking syndicates differ from North American gangs in a number of important respects (see Dowdney 2003). As a result, I will refer to them as drug traffickers, or will use the commonly used local term *tráfico* (literally 'the traffic'). For a more detailed analysis of this and other polysemic terms, such as *bandido* (criminal) and *trabalhador* (worker) see Rafael 1998 and Penglase 2002.

3. The city of Rio has one of the highest rates of firearms deaths in all of Brazil: in 2000 the rate of death by firearms was 43 per 100,000 residents, compared to a national rate of 19.4 per 100,000 (Peres 2004). Rates of firearms deaths are particularly high for males and for those aged 15-29.

4. Caxambu is a pseudonym for a favela in the northern zone of Rio de Janeiro where I lived and conducted research. All of the names of my informants have been altered to preserve their anonymity.

situation. We're at the mercy of people that we don't even know' (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1 October 2002).

As Brazilian research organizations have pointed out, the fear of violence reflects a dramatic increase in homicides and gun-related deaths in Brazil over the last 20 years. According to the Núcleo de Estudos da Violência, between 1977 and 1994 there was a 160 per cent increase in homicide rates throughout Brazil (Peres 2004). Yet the fear and 'talk of crime' (Caldeira 2000) generated by this violence often obscure the highly uneven class, regional and gender distribution of different types of violence. For example, although these numbers should be treated with caution, it is clear that homicide rates vary widely: in the city of Rio in 1996, the homicide rate for men aged 15 to 34 in the wealthy neighbourhood of Leblon was 12.7 per 100,000 residents, while that in working-class Benfica was 214 per 100,000, equivalent to the death rate in countries experiencing civil wars (Cano 1997).³

In the wake of the city-wide shutdown, though, fear and uncertainty were rife: the media, local authorities and the residents of Rio speculated about the exact cause of the shutdown for days. The interim governor of the city, Benedita da Silva, spoke of shadowy conspiracies to 'destabilize' her (*O Globo*, 1 October 2002). But spray-painted slogans on the city's walls left no doubt about the drug traffickers' message: days before the shutdown, the slogan 'Parallel power' appeared on two downtown buildings.

The Comando Vermelho and the 'rules of the hillside'

While the city-wide reach of the Comando Vermelho's temporary shutdown of Rio was unprecedented, the tactic itself was not new. For years drug traffickers in the city's favelas have forced businesses in the neighbourhoods they control to close when local drug traffickers were killed or imprisoned. Such practices are so common that residents of the city's favelas often joke about 'holidays' declared not by the state or the Catholic church, but by 'the tráfico' (favela-based drug traffickers). In this way, traffickers have imposed their own temporalities upon local spaces. Forcing shops to close is, in turn, one of the more dramatic examples of a strategy that drug syndicates have used to consolidate their control in the city's favelas, that of manipulating structures of order and normality.

The power of the drug traffickers' ability to control normality is apparent in the extent to which it shapes local senses of history, and the way it marks local understandings of violence and normality. For instance Anacleto, a

resident of Caxambu, put it this way:⁴

I think that God has always blessed this hillside.⁵ There were never any intense shoot-outs [...] There was a time, yes, but it's not like that now [...] There was a time when other *traficantes* tried to take over the hillside, but they were from here. But they always had a... a politeness with the residents... and now there's this process in the neighbourhood that's the administration of the guy who's there now. I think that he manages to administer things perfectly [...] I think that he's well liked because he brings us a great deal of security.

The 'process' that Anacleto refers to is part of a strategy of asymmetrical reciprocity that the Comando Vermelho uses to consolidate its power: in exchange for the silence of favela residents, the CV committed itself to repressing crime in the neighbourhood and to abiding by a 'code' (known locally as the law of the hillside) which regulated relations between residents and drug traffickers.

The CV's actions in Caxambu were part of a much larger evolution in the region's criminal economy. In the early 1980s, as the regional trade in cocaine began to heat up, the Comando Vermelho emerged out of Rio's prisons (Amorim 1993). Initially a gang of bank robbers, the CV realized the profits that could be made from the cocaine trade, and initiated a war for control of Rio's hillside favelas, which became crucial stockpiling points in a city-wide trade in cocaine and marijuana. The CV began a systematic effort to take over the city's most strategically located favelas. They conducted this war not only through violence but also by using their familiarity with the social conditions and cultural contexts of the city's favelas. Three key strategies were the appropriation of pre-existing structures of patronage, their systematic repression of crime, and their imposition of a 'code' to govern relations between traffickers and the community. In all three cases it was the traffickers' ability to impose, or selectively withdraw, structures of 'order' and protection that was of paramount importance.

As several observers have pointed out, the drug trade in Rio's favelas did not emerge in a vacuum (Leeds 1996, Gay 1994, Misse 1997, Arias 2001). Local government officials had long used political patronage as a way of securing the votes of favela residents. Since favelas are squatter neighbourhoods, and did not usually receive regular city services, residents were particularly vulnerable to this form of political patronage (Fischer 1999). The patronage policies of the Comando Vermelho – promising sporadic assistance, occasionally providing short-term loans or financial assistance – were built on patronage

systems first developed by the political élite. But since most members of the CV originated from these communities, they understood local needs more intimately than politicians; they were also able, if necessary, to enforce ‘reciprocity’ through the barrel of a gun.

The Comando Vermelho’s success in infiltrating favelas was also due to long-standing antagonism between favela residents and the police. From the moment favelas first came into being in the late 19th century, the police had never routinely patrolled there, entering the areas only to arrest alleged criminals or to enforce eviction orders. This antagonism generated a gap that the Comando Vermelho filled by exchanging the policing of crime and the resolution of local disputes for the co-operation of favela residents.

In contrast with the neglect of the élite and the sporadic, opportunistic help from politicians, or the arbitrary rule of local strongmen, the Comando Vermelho appeared to institute a form of order that the favela had lacked, and a set of ‘rules’ that governed interaction between favela residents and the drug gang. For the residents of Caxambu, it was the *tráfico*’s ability to provide stability and protection that was its main legitimate claim to authority. One resident told me, referring obliquely to the local head of the drug gang:

Now this... this guy who is here now is smarter... He doesn’t let anyone invade anyone else’s house. Do you understand? He doesn’t let his men... because he already has what he wants from the residents, and the residents need him, so we... understand? Not that... not that I’m in favour. But I’m also not against. I’m neither for nor against. I have... I have my own opinion, right? But he doesn’t mess with me... no... it’s like that.

As is clear from this view, residents feel highly ambivalent about this unequal exchange. Few favela residents defend the *tráfico* in absolute terms. Instead they view it as the lesser of two evils. Non-local drug gangs are feared because residents worry that they would not distinguish between the different categories of the neighbourhood’s residents – ‘honest’ workers, evangelical Christians and elderly residents, on the one hand, and local drug users and teenage troublemakers, on the other.

Likewise, the police are condemned for the seemingly arbitrary way that they apply violence in the neighbourhood. As Soares has pointed out, the contrast between the arbitrary actions of the police and the ‘rules’ of the *tráfico* has been central to legitimizing the power of the drug gangs in Rio’s favelas:

One can understand, then, why police terror is more feared than the barbarity of the drug traffickers when the latter disdains rules and enjoys an ad hoc morbid creativity, while the former holds to rules and subordinates its despotic practice to an intelligible and public order (2000: 40).

Yet while the residents of Caxambu appreciated the *tráfico*’s ‘administration’ and ‘politeness’, they were also aware that the *tráfico* generated new contradictions and dangers. At the time of my fieldwork, a city-wide rearrangement of the drug trade was giving rise to violent conflict between and among the CV, its various factions and its rivals. Thus awareness of current stability was always coupled with anxieties about the future. For instance, while Anacleto welcomed the current stability, he also told me: ‘Tomorrow, it could change tomorrow. Who knows if tomorrow it’ll be so stable?’

Residents also knew that the presence of drug dealers in their streets and alleyways and on their doorsteps exposed them to the danger of being caught in the crossfire between traffickers and the police. And residents were acutely aware of how the fear of crime and violence creates stereotypes that depict favelas as zones of ‘war’, where the rights of the residents can be systematically disrespected. As favela

activist Rumba Gabriel argues, this situation perpetuates the division of the city into the ‘official’ and legal neighbourhoods and the ‘unofficial’ and supposedly dangerous favelas:

The middle class and the élite see us as the accomplices of the drug traffickers; and bad policemen treat us like scum. This and the distance from the media mean that the individual rights that citizens of the rest of the city have, like freedom of expression and the inviolability of the home, don’t exist in the favela [...] So we are caught between the cross and the sword, perplexed and impotent in the face of a state that only appears in the form of violence and humiliation, and a parallel power that, paradoxically, on certain occasions even protects us (*O Globo*, 23 August 2001).

Favela residents also quietly, but insistently, pointed to another contradiction: while they appreciated the Comando’s ‘rules’, they were also highly aware that the drug dealers reserved to themselves the right to step outside the boundaries whenever it suited them. Residents of Caxambu, for instance, would say that the drug dealers respected local women, but would also mention the dangers that local girls and their families faced if the girls turned down the advances of local drug dealers. Similarly, favela residents combined assertions that ‘if you respect the drug dealers, they’ll respect you’ with warnings that drug dealers are often unpredictable and should be avoided as much as possible. A resident of Caxambu 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 miss the way in which certain members of the drug gang often deliberately flouted their own rules by, for instance, firing their guns at random or showing off their weaponry and intimidating favela residents for no reason. The message was unmistakable: we enforce the rules, but we don’t have to follow them. What this points to, though, is not simply the drug traffickers’ arbitrary rule, but rather the way in which their power is based on the ability both to institute local social norms and to dictate when the rules do not apply. It is hard to imagine a clearer example of how authority is based upon the figure who, in Agamben’s words, is ‘the point of indistinction between violence and law, the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes into violence’ (1995: 32). If sovereignty is conceived of as the condition of having ‘the power to decide upon the state of exception’, then the Comando Vermelho bases its power in favelas upon the ability to dictate what is ‘normal’.

Justice and morality

The drug traffickers’ actions also signalled their awareness that violence can be used symbolically to demonstrate their power. After another city-wide shutdown, in February 2003, the Comando Vermelho issued a press release which demonstrates their awareness of the ‘poetics’ of violence:

Now is the hour to react firmly and with determination and to show these repulsive and oppressive politicians that we deserve to be treated with respect, dignity and equality, because if this doesn’t happen, we will no longer stop causing the chaos in this city, because it is absurd that all of this keeps happening and always remains unpunished. (*Folha Online*, 24 Feb. 2003)

The Comando Vermelho’s communiqué also shows how drug traffickers draw on understandings of justice and of legitimate (and illegitimate) uses of violence that are widespread among Rio’s poor. The letter criticized corruption in the judicial and penal systems, then stated:

[I]f someone has to put a stop to this violence, that someone will have to be us because the people (*o povo*) aren’t able to fight for their rights, but clearly they know who is robbing and killing them and that’s what’s important.

5. Residents of Caxambu, like residents of most other favelas in Rio, use the term *morro* (or hillside) to refer to their neighbourhood.

Agamben, G. 1995. *Homo sacre*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Alvito, M. 1996. A honra de Acari. In: Alvito, M. et al. (eds) *Cidadania e violência*, pp. 147-164. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ.

Amnesty International 2003. *Candelária and Vigário Geral 10 years on*. London: Amnesty International.

Amorim, C. 1993. *Comando Vermelho*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record.

Aretxaga, B. 1997. *Shattering silence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Arias, E.D. 2001. ‘Crime, violence and democracy: The state and political order in Brazilian shantytowns’. Unpublished PhD dissertation, The University of Wisconsin.

Caldeira, T. 2000. *City of walls*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cano, I. et al. 1997. *Mapa de risco da violência no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Instituto de Estudos da Religião.

da Matta, R. 1979. *Carnivals, rogues and heroes*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Dowdney, L. 2003. *Children of the drug trade*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras.

Feldman, A. 1991. *Formations of violence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fischer, B. 1999. ‘The poverty of law: Rio de Janeiro, 1930-1964’. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University.

Freyre, G. 1945. *The masters and the slaves*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gay, R. 1994. *Popular organization and democracy in Rio de Janeiro*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Leeds, A. and Leeds, E. 1977. *Sociologia do Brasil urbano*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar.



Fig. 3. Teenage drug traffickers in a Rio favela.

Leeds, E. 1996. Cocaine and parallel politics. *Latin American Research Review*, 31(3): 47-83.

Misse, M. 1997. As ligações perigosas: Mercado informal ilegal, narcotráfico e violência criminal no Rio. *Contemporaneidade e Educação*, 2(1).

Parker, R. 1991. *Bodies, pleasures and passions*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Penglase, B. 2002. "To live here you have to know how to live": Violence and everyday life in a Brazilian favela. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University.

Peres, M., coord. 2004. *Violência por armas de fogo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Núcleo de Estudos da Violência.

Perlman, J. 1976. *The myth of marginality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rafael, A. 1998. *Um abraço para todos os amigos*. Niterói: EDUFF.

Soares, L.E. 2000. *Meu casaco de general*. Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras.

Warren, K. 2002. Toward an anthropology of fragments. In: Greenhouse, C. et al. (eds) *Ethnography in unstable places*. Durham: Duke University Press., pp. 379-392.

Whitehead, N. 2004. Rethinking anthropology of violence. *Anthropology Today*, 20(5): 1-2.

Valla, V.V. (ed.) 1986. *Educação e favela*. Petropolis: Vozes.

Zaluar, A. 1985. *A máquina e a revolta*. São Paulo: Brasiliense.

— 1994. *Condomínio do diabo*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ.

The writers appeal here to a view of legitimate authority as rooted in the patriarch's ability to use violence to defend the weaker (and often female or feminized) members of his extended family (Freyre 1945, Parker 1991). The powerful patriarch (the CV) is able to protect the weak (the 'povo', or the 'common people') by retaliating violently against common enemies. It is no surprise that the heads of drug gangs in favelas are often referred by two interchangeable euphemisms: the 'owner', or simply 'the Man'.

The CV's letter goes on to draw sharp lines between the two opposing sides in its conflict with the authorities: on the one hand the poor and humble favela dwellers, and on the other the 'real' criminals, the political and economic elite:

No longer are criminals (*bandidos*) from the favelas or behind prison bars. Today, the people one finds living in a favela or behind prison bars are simply humble and poor people [...] Is there a greater violence than robbing the public treasury and killing people without a decent minimum salary, without hospitals, without work, and without food? Will this violence succeed in ending violence? Because violence generates violence. Among those imprisoned in this country is there one person who has committed a crime more heinous than killing a nation with hunger and misery?

The phrase 'violence generates violence' echoes a song by samba singer Bezerra da Silva (a former favela resident), and residents of Caxambu frequently employed this logic. Pointing to the hypocrisy of the powerful, and comparing this to the weakness and honesty of the poor, some favela residents maintained that the corruption of the wealthy was responsible for crime and violence in their neighbourhoods. Favela residents rarely excused young people in their neighbourhood who were involved in crime. Yet they repeatedly pointed to how inequality and poverty led some favela youth to choose what they called the 'life of crime'. The residents of Caxambu also insisted that the demand for drugs and larger trafficking networks do not originate in favelas. The rapper MV Bill, from the City of God favela, expressed feelings similar to those of many residents of Caxambu:

The real *traficantes* are in the southern zone, the owners of boats and planes that bring the drugs. People who live in favelas and have some involvement in the *tráfico* are just soldiers (*Extra*, 24 October 1999).

In this understanding of justice and morality, the wickedness of the wealthy is sharply contrasted with the moral purity of the poor, who have to struggle in this world but who will find ultimate reward in the next. Justice is conceived of in moral (indeed religious) rather than in legal

terms, and a recurrent complaint is that the law and state authorities are acting not only illegally but also immorally. The Comando Vermelho's press release, for example, stated:

We're not joking around; those who are joking are the politicians, with this total abuse of power and with this widespread robbery. The judiciary must start to empty the prisons and act within the law before it is too late. If the laws were made to be followed, why this abuse?

In justifying its actions as responding to the 'failure' of the law, the CV is, again, using a widespread dissatisfaction with legal norms to legitimize its extra-legal use of force. As observers have pointed out, many Brazilians view the country's legal and judicial systems as corrupt and immoral (Caldeira 2000, da Matta 1979). Perhaps the most persistent example used by residents of Caxambu was that the police themselves frequently disregarded the law. Statistics on police violence are indeed shocking: in 2002, the police in the state of Rio killed 900 civilians (Amnesty International 2003).

The CV's rhetoric draws upon such notions of the arbitrary violence of the law, and locates the CV on the side of the 'innocent'. By 'protecting' the poor against the corrupt élites and politicians, the *tráfico* draws upon traditional understandings of the patriarch's legitimate use of violence to guard his 'family'. Not only does this rhetoric stand in stark contrast to notions of universal and impersonal legal norms, but it also resonates more closely with how favela residents understand violence and legitimate authority.

Conclusion

As anthropologists have pointed out, violence must be seen as a discursive process, occurring within cultural and historical contexts and producing new meanings, practices and symbols (Whitehead 2004, Aretxaga 1997, Feldman 1991). Violence is both performative and poetic: violent acts produce effects beyond the merely instrumental, and often do so by drawing attention to the form within which they are executed and by deploying signs in new contexts, thereby altering their meanings.

Seen in this light, the Comando Vermelho's actions mark a profound transformation in local politics in urban Brazil. By shutting down the city, Rio's drug traffickers were engaging in a dramatic showdown with the state, claiming that they hold the power to dictate alternations between normality and states of emergency. As Kay Warren has argued, violent actors impose control not only through normative systems, but also through the 'creation of divided realities, the exploitation of radically different rationalities, and the blurring of victim and victimizer' (2002: 385).

In Rio de Janeiro new forms of power are being constructed, and a new type of war being conducted, at the very moment when there is a deep, region-wide disenchantment with democracy, and when the role of the state as the central economic and political actor is increasingly being called into question. Favela residents – perhaps because they have been a symbol of urban otherness within Brazil – offer striking reminders of both the novelty and the deep continuities in the way violence constitutes power in modern Brazil. What emerges from their comments is the continuing relevance of notions of legitimate violence, personal respect and ethics that draw upon and reshape traditional patriarchal ideologies. And part of the *tráfico*'s skill is its poetic manipulation of these ideological structures. As a result, authority and justice are increasingly experienced, spoken of and constructed in terms that are both old – drawing upon an image of the traditional patriarchal family – and at the same time new – as the city's drug traffickers spread fear to construct a simulacrum of governmental control. ●