

# Unfinished democratization: the failure of public safety

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*Strategic military observation point with a panoramic view of the Rocinha Favela, in Rio de Janeiro, the largest in Latin America with 150 thousand residents.*

## Introduction

My studies of urban violence in Brazil led me to reflect on two paradoxes and an enigma that have developed in the country in recent decades, specifically since the return to democracy. The first paradox is that the democratization process, which began in 1978, was accompanied by growing rates of criminality and especially by homicides among young men. The second is that the nation was built on ideas of cordiality and conciliation recently abandoned in the face of criticism from heavyweight intellectuals concerning their apparent lack of a notion of citizenship. Nevertheless, since as neither forgiveness nor pacification were publicly discussed at the end of the military regime, what have replaced those ideals are mechanisms of personal revenge and uncontrollable aggressive impulses.

The enigma is that the brutal violence now savaging young men has seen no corresponding upsurge among women in general and men of other age groups. Unlike in ethnic conflicts, where women, the elderly and children are also killed or subjected to violence, sexual crimes in Brazil have not increased as much as homicide. Murders are committed among young men and have grown exponentially in many states of the Federative Republic. The average homicide rates among young men in the 15 to 29 age-bracket rose nationwide in the 1980's and 1990's. By the year 2000, 93% of the cases in this age group involved young men and only 3% women. The question is why?

Three dimensions are used to understand this. The first comes from abroad, more a fruit of the international context than of Brazil's own internal dynamic, while the other two are clearly home-grown issues.

First of all, I will analyze the importance and limits of the macro-social explanations for violent criminality, such as poverty and social exclusion, in terms of their interactions with the transnational mechanisms of organized crime surrounding drugs and arms dealing and the perverse symbiosis such trades have developed with poverty and vulnerable youth in many countries.

Secondly, I will focus on the institutional inertia behind the persistent violations of civil rights, as well as the historically deep-rooted inefficiency of the justice system and its articulations with the political field.

Thirdly, but by no means least importantly, it is also essential to look at the micro-social processes surrounding the involvement of young men in the drug trade. We must understand the subjective formations of street respect or credibility and a man's place in the pecking order, in other words, the concept of masculinity and how it relates to demonstrations of force and the possession of firearms. It is also necessary to discuss the long term institutional processes involved in this reflection. We must consider police violence against the poor in general and violence among poor youths that have been allowed to take hold in a society with a fragile Rule of Law and in a State that never had a monopoly on legitimate violence. In Brazil, there has always been a gap between the formal rights established by law and the reality in practice. Thus, it is important to focus not only on the letter of the law, but mainly on social processes, such as informal rules or the implicit practices of the actors.

### **The crime industry or globalized crime-business**

One of the main global problems today is the inability to control illegal drug use, and particularly the brutal criminal world that was created to ensure that narcotics circulate around the globe with impressive logistical efficiency. The illegal drug market is now said to be one of the world's largest economic sectors. Nevertheless, it is only part of the operational system of a crime-business with varying degrees of organization across numerous different

sectors, all using similar networks and mechanisms to make their operations appear legit.

As economic sectors, and especially the illegal ones, mix formal and informal markets, various legal and illegal sectors intermingle in client chains that run from governmental institutions to drug traffickers, allowing illicit businesses to penetrate into many legal sectors of society. These sectors frequently function in the formal economy, but obtain a part of their profits from the trafficking of drugs and other merchandise. Such activities are diverse in the sense that they imply other criminal acts, such as the theft of goods to bankroll the purchase of drugs and its precursors (Zaluar, 1994; Geffray, 1996; UNDCP, 1997). They also follow the financial networks to launder money that comes from many other illegal activities, such as contraband, government corruption and the many existing forms of trafficking.

This is clear in the case of banks, real estate agents and transportation companies that supply services to the illegal businesses and their key money-laundering mechanisms. But this is no open market (Luppo, 2002); even players who have always operated shadily do so with various types of restrictions, because in order to set up and run operations in such a lucrative business you first have to secure the trust and permission of kingpins within the crime network. In a context of slow economic growth, more people may feel the allure of the risky crime-business and begin to organize their actions in order to escape detection and criminal charges, and that means playing by the necessarily violent and tawdry rules of operations outside the bounds of law.

Transnational organized crime has caused violence in some sectors to soar, especially drug trafficking. Those who occupy strategic positions in the large transnational networks can earn big and fast due to the combination of few institutional limits and wholesale violence and corruption. Globally, they employ underground and violent practices for resolving conflicts, including threats, intimidation, bribery, extortion, aggression, murder and in some countries even terrorism.

One problem in countries such as Brazil was summed up in an observation by Interpol chief Robert Kendall, when he said that far better than deploying the police to round up drug consumers or small dealers would be to channel much more of their resources into closing down the large dealers and money launderers. Unfortunately, the legislation, and much more so the police practices in various countries, including Brazil, steer them toward the former. For this reason, the symbiotic relations between different actors with common interests form a well-knit social, economic and institutional web that is difficult to escape once inside. This web composes what should be considered the systemic factors that exist inside and outside nations, in the transnational networks of criminal economic activities (Van der Veen, 1998).

Institutional corruption, disrespect for the law, inefficiency and discrimination in the Justice system in countries like Brazil cause urban

violence to increase at a disastrous rate. In Brazil, only recently have efforts been made to better understand illicit drug supply lines or the organizational strength of sales networks, especially their connections with the legal economy and its institutions.

Despite the expansion of government power and increased funds for public control of these activities during the 1990s, only very recently was attention given to the economic and political interests related to the drug trade, particularly the carefully articulated interactions between the visible and the invisible operations, the legal and the illegal, the formal and informal sectors of the economy. In other words, while the Federal Police has investigated organized crime in recent years, the civil and special branches of state police forces are mainly engaged in violent repression in the shantytowns and ghettos of metropolitan regions and state capitals. This has opened a niche for legitimate and clandestine private security forces, though with little impact on the pervading sense of danger and insecurity among urban residents.

### **Illegal drug consumption and new criminality**

The demand for drugs stems from lifestyle changes, which in turn, modify “style consumption” which is much more expensive than household consumption, that is, the domestic expenses related to traditional working and middle class families (Sassen, 1991). The sale of drugs can be considered an

Foto Silvia Izquierdo/Associated Press - 27.12.2004



*Five minors caught dealing drugs are detained in a police operation in a Rio de Janeiro favela. Dealers recruit minors at an increasingly young age.*



illegal sector related to the distribution of goods and services designated “mass style consumption “. This process also favors the impressive increase found in certain crimes against property (theft and robbery) and against life (assault and homicide) (UNDCP, 1997). Post-war society underwent an accelerated process of economic, political and cultural transformation that led to social fragmentation and a growing importance placed on leisure activities and consumption as a means of defining new social identities, in particular those of the youth. In terms of social control, these changes indicate that conventional moral restrictions, which exist without the law, have weakened and that control now comes much more from policing and law enforcement.

In fact, a revolution in consumption patterns also reached Brazil. A plethora of consumer goods, constantly changing consumption styles and immense centers of leisure and consumption were the most striking visible change. Cultural values accompanied these changes in subjective formations: fiercely individualist and mercantile values were disseminated during the 1970s and 1980s, translated by such common expressions as “making easy money” and “milking everything”. In other words, Brazilian society, we could argue, was colonized by the market, though unaccompanied by the moral limits usually supplied by social forces. As an illegal and invisible activity, suited to a trend like this, drug dealing is part of this new social, economic and cultural environment.

### **Multidimensional explanation for violence**

The consequences of the flourishing of these illegal businesses in Brazil, as well as the style that they took on here, cannot be explained by modifications in consumption or by poverty alone. Given that inequalities continue to exist on the social, economic and institutional planes, these new global forms of illegal and violent economic activity cannot be considered survival strategies by young people who often die before they reach 25. The combined effects of accelerated poverty and urbanization, without the necessary economic development to offer urban employment to migrants from rural regions and poor workers, are not sufficient to understand the armed conflict that kills young men.

In urgent need of discussion, considering the complexity of the situation, is how poverty and the lack of employment for poor youth is related to the mechanisms and institutional fluxes of the Justice system in its inefficient fight against organized crime. This cuts across all social classes and is connected to legal businesses and governments.

In addition, rapid urbanization did not leave enough time for the urban social practices of tolerance and civility to spread among the new inhabitants of the cities or for the traditional moral values to be interiorized in the same way by new generations of urban residents. Thus, many poor young men become susceptible to the allure of the crime-business because of family crises,

many of them incapable of dealing with the conflicts thrown at them by this multifaceted and unpredictable urban life. They are also vulnerable because of the widening gulf between adults and youth, an inefficient educational system, a lack of professional training and dwindling job opportunities. These young men become violent because of a lack of socialization in civility and in the arts of negotiation, particular to a more diversified cosmopolitan urban world less segmented into closed kinship or regional groups.

### **Private and secular violence in Brazil**

There are certainly connections between Brazil's current urban violence and its history of predominantly rural violence. But is it possible to explain the current wave of violence as a simple consequence of the geological layers of violence common to rural Brazil? As in all countries, Brazil has a long history of institutional violence, and particularly private violence. But unlike other nations, torn by civil wars between political factions, or ethnic, racial and religious groups, the country has not suffered from political violence.

In fact, political elections in Brazil were always historically organized around multiple clienteles and mediators. Even the most powerful rural bosses, known as colonels, had to please the lower colonels if they wanted to be elected to Parliament or to the central government. The votes of their clients were purchased with private goods and services, but also by making real improvements to a region and through some pressure on voters. The balance between the central government and the provincial oligarchies caused negotiation and manipulation to become more important than open and violent conflicts. Although there have been various local conflicts, they never divided the entire country.

Nor did slavery split the country into a civil war. Although it is true that slavery resulted in centuries of interpersonal violence between masters and slaves, any outbreaks of racial, religious or political hate were also transitory and localized. They never fractured the country into civil war. Some slave revolts ended with compromises in which the African descendents negotiated their rights to a weekly day of rest, as well as to dance and practice their religious rituals accompanied by the percussion instruments that characterized these rituals (Reis, 1986). It was thanks to this victory of slaves in Brazil that rural samba could be nurtured and eventually give rise to the urban samba of Rio de Janeiro, now a national trademark.

And so Brazil has none of the indelible traumas or deep-set hatred associated with civil wars involving ethnic, religious or political groups. Nor does it know the glories and suffering of revolutions. The musket, rifle or revolver never had the symbolic importance they acquired in other countries, although they were also used in conflicts. The cult of the firearm never developed in Brazil, as it did in the United States after the Civil War. Nevertheless, it is also true that violence did occupy a place, if limited, in the

social mindset, as it did in Portugal (Fatela, 1989). It is this private violence, and resulting social, economic and legal inequality that were the most important marks of Brazilian society, and they have persisted, in a transformed manner, to this day.

There is no doubt that personal power and private violence were the privileges of the masters of the sugar mills and other large rural landowners. The “colonels” received this title because they had private troops of “jagunços”, or armed men, under their command and patrolling their properties. These troops were also used to compose the National Guard during the Imperial period in the 19th century. Personal revenge linked to clan disputes were common in a society segmented by local and kinship groups that clashed among each other for power and land ownership, at times over centuries. These family feuds in fact marked the history of violence in rural Brazil until the 20th Century, particularly in the Northeast and in the hinterlands of other states, the most violent regions of the country for many centuries.

In these locations ruled by local chiefs, judges did not have autonomy and their decisions usually benefited the powerful, whose crimes remained unpunished. One cannot say that the courts were above local private power, except in Rio de Janeiro, the capital, where the superior courts acquired the necessary independence. As a consequence, impunity has a long history in Brazil. Police forces were also formed to satisfy the land owners and were subordinate to them, restricting their actions to controlling the poor, the blacks and the Indigenous.

As a consequence, such phenomena as the *cangaçeiro* in the Brazilian Northeast and similar bands of armed men in other regions of the country are explained by the moral dissatisfaction with the unjust functioning of the Brazilian institutions of the time and the codes of honor of a society segmented by kinship groups. These bands of armed men accompanied, in a visible and independent way, the family conflicts resulting from the struggle for local power, i.e., the control of land, wealth and institutions.

### **Cordiality and the art of negotiation**

The culture of negotiation and tolerance, developed over the 19th and 20th Centuries, left traces on the history of Brazil. In the 17th century, the country was as important a refuge for Jews as The Netherlands (Mello e Souza, 1987). It became so once again, before, during and after World War II. The Inquisition was present in Colonial Brazil, but never drove the population to fits of witch-hunting. In the 20th Century, immigrant Jews found a place in a country tolerant of different races and cultures.

This could be the reason why the arts of negotiation and conversation spread through the Brazilian population, especially in the urban areas of some Brazilian states. In a certain way, as expressed in numerous Brazilian songs,

these arts came to be part of the way of dealing with conflicts in various social fields. What appears to have always been celebrated and sung about in the urban environment was the ability to exchange ideas (Zaluar, 1985), especially among the poor population of the former federal capital, from where this practice spread throughout the country. An urban culture of tolerance and democratic culture of civility and of the arts of negotiation and conciliation, although restricted to some urban areas and only a part of the Brazilian political elite, came to characterize one of Brazil's political cultures.

This culture developed during at least a century of urban history in the arts of conversation and of pleasant sociability because they were cheerful and tolerant. It was exemplified by competitions among samba schools during Carnival, which were an important means of emotional venting, as well as sports and parliamentary sparring (Elias & Dunning, 1993). The city of Rio de Janeiro was accustomed to festivals that brought people from different areas together to compete or commemorate a given date (Zaluar, 1994 and 2004). At these encounters, the control of emotions, the basis for civilized behavior, was interiorized by the participants and infected others through a subjective formation associated with fair play and respect for one's fellows.

Even in the rural environment, where there were family feuds, it was shrewdness, much more so than truculence and the weapons of the powerful, that was sung about in prose and verse in the popular culture. Is this animated discussion about notions of the "cordial Brazilian man" not shifting the focus somewhat from this important capacity to negotiate and its cultural importance to understanding the restricted, limited, localized and private violence in Brazil?

It could be said, for example, that elections in Brazil, although they have generated local conflicts, have been less violent than in other Latin American countries, for never having triggered national armed conflicts. When results were disputed or not accepted, the debacle was restricted to municipalities or small regions of this vast country. The revolution of 1930, when Vargas successfully launched a *coupe d'état* after a single election, did not lead to a national civil war, because he came to the table with the local oligarchies, even in São Paulo (Lamounier, 1977).

### **Clientelism and the lack of citizenship**

After the deterioration of the personal power of the colonel, a new clientele was imposed: that organized by the political parties using the benefits obtained from government, namely tax revenues. But the system became more unstable for the politicians and less legitimized by the clients who came to consider the former as false bosses and friends (Zaluar, 1985). Even so, clientelism persisted as an authoritarian manipulation used to win votes, impeding a true commitment to voters' needs. The same manipulation is found in Congress as a means of winning a majority in the



house to get government actions approved. This form of negotiating the votes cast by parliamentarians paved the way to the corruption we still see today.

In fact, concerning the oscillation between centralization and decentralization, as well as the various interruptions of legality, parliamentary power had been institutionalized in Brazil since the Empire of the 19th Century. While there have been setbacks, it is undeniable that our liberal parliamentary tradition, established by the power that the oligarchies always had in various regions of the country, proved to be stronger than expected by supporters of authoritarianism and the military regime between 1964 and 1984. The National Congress was only briefly dissolved. Nevertheless, the politicians who corroborated the decisions of the military were seduced through the granting of concessions and special contracts to companies and state governments of their choosing. The government continued to use corruption and clientelism as a strategy of control.

The democratization that began in the late 1970s did not change the nature of the interplay between the Executive and Legislature. The opening of the regime was reduced to political rights and the electoral system: the direct vote for president. But democratization did not revive the urban culture of tolerance and the art of negotiation. It can thus be said that the worst effect of an exclusionary regime is that it destroys the democratic culture that is manifest in the daily social practices grounded in respect and civility towards others, in short, civic responsibility, including the art of negotiation traditionally nurtured in Brazilian cities.

And so, while the military regime maintained the practice of negotiation in Congress, it cut the process at the root when it came to other forms of association, such as trade unions, resident associations and clubs. Such was the interference within the unions that many of their leaders migrated to the outskirts where they continued with their militancy under the watchful eye of the police, at least until the clamp-down enforced by the national security doctrine: the so-called “war against the enemy within”. The class conflict therefore shifted from the workplace to the place of residence where they could re-establish their demands within the clientelistic practices of politicians hungry for votes to win a seat in Congress. Nevertheless, in the community associations, increasingly tougher talk and authoritarian practices were further accentuated during the 25 years of the dictatorship, along with the increasingly common and brutal use of violence during police incursions into these locations.

### **Non-intentional effects of the military regime**

Not everything was forecast and planned by the Brazilian Armed Forces during the military regime. Unexpected consequences helped to change the situation of criminality and its repression.

By having employed torture, illegal imprisonment and censorship, the military regime opened the doors for the dissemination of organized crime in various sectors. Some officials who had adopted these underground practices became members of death squads or extortion rackets. Others joined up with the bicheiros, the owners of the illegal numbers game, or with drug dealers (Gaspari, 2002). It was during the military regime that the bicheiros bought into and assumed control of the samba schools and their Carnival processions, transforming them into profitable companies.

The accentuated clientelism of the toughest years of the military dictatorship and the new ideology of the communities wound up, in turn, recreating the rigid segmentation on a local level. The shantytown became a *de facto* neighborhood, due to its great internal socioeconomic, religious and cultural diversity. This segmentation made it easier for armed gangs to enter and dominate the shantytowns of the city.

Moreover, the military personnel involved with organized crime related to illegal gambling and drugs were protected under the “National Security Law”, which was only repealed in 1988, as well as the Amnesty Law of 1979. As the law granted these officers immunity from criminal charges, those involved in spreading the practices of organized crime went unpunished. It is important not to forget that this form of conciliation imposed by the military was intended to repress the memory of their illegal acts, without proper public debate leading to conscious forgiveness and reconciliation on behalf of the Brazilian people.

The result was that they also failed to discuss the consequences of the militarization of the police forces during the military regime or the outmoded forms of action long surpassed by a criminal world now governed by transnational organizations linked to legal businesses. Since there were few reforms to the Justice system and, more importantly, hardly any change in the police practices towards the poor, it can be said that the effects of the military regime are still present in the functioning of these institutions, often blind to the civil rights of citizens.

During the 1960's, though the country did experience economic development during the military regime, this wealth was never distributed. This period was followed by a progressive recovery of democratic practices in elections and in the freedom of the press, but not in other social practices. Thus, during the democratization process in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, instead of economic growth, the country suffered various economic, moral and political crises initially provoked by spiraling inflation, and, after monetary stabilization, by problems within the Brazilian electoral system. Not only did the country have one of the world's worst distributions of wealth, but also enormous inequalities in terms of access to Justice. Even after the enactment of the new Constitution in 1988, which guaranteed civil rights to all, the poor continued to suffer grave violations of these rights at the hands of the police.

## Post-democratization institutionalility and violence

The Brazilian economy diversified and modernized, while the democratization of its political and legal institutions lagged behind. The result was that even its most dynamic sectors still practiced illegalities, with companies “cooking the books” to avoid taxes. This provided an excellent source of campaign funding for politicians willing to repay the favor with the concession of lucrative government contracts without the bidding processes required by administrative law. The country is now an electoral democracy, but campaigns are very expensive and candidates receive contributions, not always publicly declared, from many sources, including illegal businesses.

The galloping inflation from which the country suffered until 1994 was not only an economic reality, but also a social fact, at once material

and symbolic. It had notable, irreversible and perverse effects on attitudes and values among the population, especially those who depended on salaries that could lose 60-80% of their value in a single month. This monetary situation facilitated the operation of organized crime groups in the hinterlands, as the volatility and speed of financial capital helped create a mirage of “easy money” that made money-laundering much easier. In Brazil, those who began to practice increasingly audacious financial crimes abroad were helped by the growing difficulties in monitoring bank records and in maintaining control over public budgets and accounts.

Foto Renzo Gostolij/Associated Press - 4.3.2004



*Janete Silva de Araújo cries over the blood stain left on the ground by the body of her child who was killed in an exchange of gunfire between police and dealers in the Pavão-Pavãozinho Hill in Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro.*

With inflation contained in 1994, thanks to the success of the Real Plan which stabilized the currency in Brazil, was only left the volatility and the magic of the new international financial arrangements and the permanence of the international systems for laundering dirty money from both government corruption and illegal drug dealing. Since then, financial crimes have attracted much more attention and some wealthy or white collar criminals have been arrested. Even so, Brazilian banks tend to earn their profits not from loans but from other financial operations.

The rise of new informal-illegal markets is the other thread of the Brazilian paradox. Informal markets have always existed in Brazil and constitute an important source of income for the unemployed and poorly qualified. These markets traditionally created networks and rules to organize the commerce of craftsmen and women on the main streets of the largest urban centers. Nevertheless, in recent decades, these streets have become occupied by ambulant street vendors hawking objects stolen from trucks, homes and passersby. Informal commerce, traditionally an escape from unemployment and menial work, became mixed-in with criminal economic activities. Illegal activities also cropped up in junk yards, jewelry stores, mechanics shops and antique dealers, which became centers for receiving stolen goods and laundering money. Companies in the transport sector participated in the network of cargo theft on Brazilian highways. This cannot take place without efficient corruption strategies.

Even recognizing the importance of economic factors, there is no way to discard another important element in the growth of violent crime in Brazil: the precarious and uneven-handed workings of the Justice system due to illogical organizational practices and a defective Criminal Code. Together, they create “islands of impunity” (Dahrendorf, 1992) and a culture that is indulgent towards illegal practices.

Once again, connections between political power and institutions remain in the background. Although the Judiciary is now an independent power, (too independent according to some), state governors indicate members of state fiscal boards, which oversee and investigate public expenses. Governors also appoint some of the judges to the highest state courts, as well as civil and military police chiefs. All of these positions constitute easy sources of corruption, given that those who occupy them do not have the autonomy required to effectively combat violations of the law.

The result of this was the development of an ethos of cynicism and disbelief towards moral values, which is clearly apparent among those who opt for criminal practices, regardless of their social class. This mark frontally distinguishes them from the rural outlaws who entered the bands of *cangaceiros* for moral reasons linked to kinship and the unjust operation of Brazilian institutions.

Government Reform is much needed yet moves slowly. The extremely inefficient and unjust workings of the Justice System in Brazil plays an important role in the crisis of morality and weakening work ethic that permeate criminal practices across the social spectrum. But accountability, greater transparency and more severe punishments for those guilty of serious crimes at all the social levels are absolutely necessary if this tragic framework is to be changed. This is already underway, but subject to delays, setbacks and discontinuities.

As such, the hardened core of discrimination in Brazil resides in the institutional sphere, that is, in the violations of the rights of the poorest due to the functioning of the justice system (Zaluar, 2001). This is particularly true of the bands of corrupt police who form the so-called “extortion rackets”, a more fitting name than “death squad”, as the main aim of these police officers is to extort a share of the intake of young dealers in poor neighbourhoods – the killing is reserved for those who don’t pay up. The main source of violent death among the poor youth, however, remains the armed conflicts between rival drug gangs.

### **The new criminality**

The urban violence largely perpetrated by people who knew each other in so-called “crimes of blood” (Fausto, 1984) decreased relatively after World War Two. A new wave of homicides among people who did not know each other increased exponentially in the late 1970s as the authoritarian military regime came to an end. How can this new criminality be understood?

The opening of the regime during the 1970’s coincided with a surprising growth in violent crimes, above all kidnapping, theft and homicide using firearms. These crimes grew very quickly in the capitals and metropolitan regions, in addition to some countryside cities in certain Brazilian states, such as Pernambuco, Espírito Santo, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Paraná. In the United States, this phenomenon had begun during the 1960’s, some fifteen years earlier.

A careful study of police investigations and of criminal suits in 1991 in Rio de Janeiro showed that 57% of the homicides committed that year were related to drug dealing. In fact, this is only one of the many indicators that suggest that the increase in homicide rates can be linked to a heavier influx of firearms and narcotics into the country, seen as both phenomena increased simultaneously in the late 1970s.

Another indicator of the relationship between the wars among drug-dealing gangs and murder rates is the age of the victims. As the rates of violent mortality increased throughout the country, the most common victims were not children, but adolescents, more precisely male youths in the metropolitan and other wealthy regions of the country. In fact, this rapid growth in homicides particularly affects male youths from 15 to 29 years of age, the



majority of victims or perpetrators of crimes committed in public places among people who were neither intimate nor even acquaintances. This is the same model found in conflicts over the division and defense of territories and of earnings among dealers and armed robbers, as developed during the violent competition between gangs in the ghettos of Los Angeles, Chicago and New York at the beginning of the 20th Century, and later, during the heroin, cocaine and crack epidemics of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (Sullivan, 1992).

Moreover, the level of impunity in Brazil is also certainly a factor in the increased mortality among low-level dealers, given that these homicides are not carefully investigated. An incredibly high percentage of homicides are not subject to police investigation at all, and their authors are never identified. A study of the criminal justice system in São Paulo revealed that the largest percentages of condemnations are for those accused of drug dealing or theft and not those accused of homicide and armed robbery, the two crimes that generate most fear. Further proof is that, of 4,277 reported homicides, in only 4.6% was the perpetrator or motive identified and recorded. In Rio de Janeiro, another study showed that 92% of the cases were thrown out of court due to insufficient evidence (Soares et al., 1996).

The police have the power to open an investigation upon recording a crime or any other item of proof necessary for a criminal process. Impunity is thus another effect of their professional ethos, and their lack of motivation to incorporate new investigative know-how and techniques. A revitalization of the police force is underway, mainly in the Federal Police, though much less so in the civil and military police corps on a state level.

This is why a large percentage of criminals are never arrested or punished, which in turn is encouragement for them to commit further delinquent acts. As money can buy impunity, either by bribing policemen into not filing charges or hiring well-paid lawyers to get you off if they do, having both on the pay-roll has become a very attractive proposition for drug lords.

According to the youth, gang membership brings added security. In fact, as they supply legal assistance, the higher up a youngster is in the chain of command, the less likely he is to go down for killing other poor youths. If money can buy their defense, and if firearms offer protection, it makes rational sense to commit more and more crimes in order to get more money and more weapons, resulting in more kudos within the gang and therefore more access to its protection. The preference for armed assault is also explained by the fact that the act can silence any possible witnesses through intimidation, and impose respect among accomplices through a blend of fear and admiration. Firearms can also be used to bribe the police. These are some of the ways to escape prison and make condemnation more improbable.

In any case, events can frustrate plans. There is nothing to prevent a poor criminal from being beaten, tortured or extorted out of a quantity of money that he cannot provide. His weapon or the goods that he stole may be



*Presentation of ten rifles and a pistol that had been stolen by an armed gang from the Army Transport Center Establishment, in São Cristovão, Rio de Janeiro.*

taken, or he can even be arrested by police who may either want to raise their stake in the game or simply do their job. He can also be accused of crimes that he did not commit, which is a way of “solving” criminal cases more quickly. There are professional pressures and efficiency goals in the institutions that co-exist with the ancient practices of violence and corruption.

A new, complex, diversified and very well-armed organization arose in which commercial and personal conflicts were resolved with firearms, and which created a cult of virility and violent exhibition of power. This created conditions that attracted many underprivileged youngsters to become involved in this deadly war among dealers, but that remains restricted to particular areas of the city.

Unlike the Italian-American mafias, this organization in Rio de Janeiro never had the stable ties of loyalty that exist among people related by ritual kinship or blood. If there was some loyalty within the numbers rackets, this was never the case among drug dealers, making it much more difficult to maintain any link of personal loyalty, whether vertically or horizontally (as also occurred, incidentally, in the Italian Mafia, causing it to splinter) (Luppo, 2002), In these groups, conflicts are a much more common way to settle scores and distribute wealth and power.

Thus, drug dealing has become synonymous with war in many Brazilian municipalities, but with regional differences among cities and among neighborhoods in the same city. In Rio, even if not completely coordinated by

a Mafia-like hierarchy, the drug trade has an efficient horizontal arrangement. If there is a lack of drugs or fire arms in a favela, this arrangement makes it possible to immediately obtain more supplies from other allied shantytowns. These gangs or commands conciliate the mechanisms of a geographically defined network, which includes command centers and drug points, and other ones that are established at the basis of horizontal reciprocity. In Rio de Janeiro, firearms are more easily obtained because of the ports and various airports, as well as the most important silos of the Armed Forces. Many thefts took place and continue to occur in these warehouses, which do not have suitable stock control. As a result, drug dealing became more easily militarized.

From this point of view, the enemy “commands” violently dispute the territories where they control business, and prohibit residents from areas controlled by their enemies to cross the borders onto their turf, even to visit friends or relatives. Hence the shantytown folk in certain neighborhoods of the city speak of an “interminable war” between dealers belonging to enemy commands or between the police and dealers. In this war, not only the gang members, but also the youth who live in these favelas or allied neighborhoods are required to donate their help each time the enemy attacks another gang that is part of the same command. The soldiers thus form a “bonde”, or “link” that will respond to an attack by another “bonde”, constituted in the same manner. For this reason, neighborhood residents do not have permission to cross the artificial borders between favelas. Many adolescents have been killed simply because they have passed from one sector to another commanded by feuding drug gangs, even if just to go to work or to a dance.

When “soldiers” are called up by the leading drug dealers, this call is aimed at youths who were able to get around the current regulations by which the Brazilian Armed Forces avoid recruiting youths from the shantytowns. In other words, they are those who have undergone military service, which is still mandatory. Even when they are not part of the drug gangs, these youths are “invited” to assemble and disassemble the army-issue automatic weapons stolen from military silos. They are called on to teach new soldiers involved in drug trafficking how to confront the enemies when the shantytown is invaded by the police or a rival gang. They must accept the “invitation” not so much because they are pressured, but because they feel obliged to collaborate with the gang that controls the neighborhood where they live. In any case, they know that refusal has a cost, on both the moral and physical planes: they would lose their recognition or consideration from the “boss of the hill”; they could be expelled from the favela; or even worse, executed. At times they are even invited to join the “bondes” about to invade enemy neighborhoods (Zaluar, 2001).

Due to these exchanges, adolescents are not only casualties of a war over the control of drug points, but also of a prevailing sense of status or

self-esteem predicated on demonstrations of virility and “manliness” (Alvito, 1996; Lins, 1997), not in the sense of a mannerly gentleman, but in one’s capacity and willingness to destroy the enemy (Monteiro, 2003; Zaluar, 2004; Cecchetto, 2004).

It is those vulnerable youths who succumb to this seduction that become the dead bodies pushing up murder rates nationwide, especially in cities that in bygone centuries nurtured the cultures of tolerance, negotiation and civilized dispute in sport and diversion. They compose the statistics and the violent practices that impede improvements in the living conditions of the poor, despite advances in the Human Development Index (HDI), including increased schooling, reduced child mortality from infectious diseases and the lower proportion of poor people in the country. For how long?

## Note

- 1 This is one of the main reasons why there is not a larger number of residents with firearms even today (7.5% in Belo Horizonte; 4.5% in Rio de Janeiro; 2.5% in São Paulo). Nevertheless, it is another indicator that though the tools of armed violence are in few hands, their effects are widespread.

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*ABSTRACT* - This article discusses two paradoxes and an enigma that have developed in Brazil in recent decades. The paradoxes are that the democratization process initiated in 1978 was accompanied by a spectacular increase in criminality and that a nation built upon ideas of cordiality and conciliation, recently shifted to mechanisms of personal revenge and uncontrollable aggressive impulses, given that neither forgiveness nor pacification were publicly discussed at the conclusion of the military regime. The enigma is that the brutal violence among young men is not found among women and other age groups. Unlike ethnic conflicts that affect everyone, in Brazil the vast majority of homicides is committed among young men and has grown exponentially in the 1980's and 1990's. Four dimensions are used to understand this: the international context of drug trafficking and fire arms; the importance and the limits of macro-social explanations of violent criminality that interact with the transnational mechanisms of organized crime; the inertia that explains the inefficiency of the justice system; and the micro-social processes or the subjective formations concerning the concept of masculinity in its relation with the exhibition of force, money and firearms.

*KEYWORDS* - Urban Violence, Drug Trafficking, Vulnerability, Youth, Masculinity.

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