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To Kill and to Die: On the Joys and Sorrows of Juvenile Drug Dealers in Bahia, Brazil

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Abstract

This article discusses the life and death of juvenile drug dealers in the state of Bahia, Brazil, where the drug business has become omnipresent and a growing number of youths from the urban periphery are taking up a career with one of the country's many drug gangs. The price most of them pay for their economic success as traffickers is high: they are repeatedly imprisoned under harsh conditions, suffer severe physical violence and, at times, die at young age. Drawing on the narratives of juveniles from Bahia and the writings of Bataille and Baudrillard, the youths' approach to life is discussed as a knowingly illusory attempt to regain their sovereignty within the boundaries of consumer capitalism. It is argued that their death is not a blow of fate, but rather the premeditated consequence of their acquisition of consumer-citizenship "on credit" and, ultimately, their refusal to constitute Brazil's modern precariat.

Keywords

Bahia, Brazil, death, drug trafficking, violence, youth

Introduction: Getting involved

In Brazil, the drug trade, and particularly drug traffickers' violence and state violence against (real and presumed) drug traffickers,¹ is ubiquitous in public discourse and the media, but also in the real lives of many suburban communities. The workforce of the country's innumerable drug "factions" (Port. *facção*, criminal gang) is mainly composed of children and youths, who take on most of the retail business and, depending on their age and expertise, a part of the auxiliary and administrative functions of the drug commerce (Dowdney, 2003). Though, evidently, most youths keep themselves aloof from all illegal activities, to become a drug

dealer has turned into a not too uncommon choice for a sizeable number of young citizens from the periphery.

In the north-eastern state of Bahia, the main focus of this article, in many economically underprivileged neighbourhoods, for a youth to get “involved” (*envolvido*) with trafficking has become unexceptional to the point that, in mainstream conversation, a conceptual division seems to be made between those who are “involved”, and those who are not. “He got involved”, for instance, is a set phrase to be heard when people explain why this or that youth has suffered a violent death. Then again, when a youth gets killed “without reason”, that is, falls victim to a common crime or is shot accidentally by the police, this fact is lamented, in private talk or by the press, by saying that it happened *although* the victim “never got involved”, stressing their occupation as either a student or a worker (cf. Misse, 2011; Lima, 2019: 228).

The number of Brazilian youths “involved” is, of course, impossible to quantify. Feltran, who likewise emphasizes that “the great majority” of youths from the periphery of São Paulo have never been “enrolled in the ‘world of crime’”, notes its growing dominion and the necessity of low-income families “to deal” with it (2008: 122).² In Bahia, in non-middle-class neighbourhoods even of smaller cities, it is difficult to find someone who does not know personally at least one or another youth who has become “involved”. As Oliveira observes, drug trafficking in Bahia is a “heated market, with high demand by consumers and the possibility of insertion of more sellers” (2016: 116). The heads of trafficking “don’t mind if anyone really wants to quit, because the number of people wishing to join is high” (Conceição, 2015: 74). Trafficking has become a profession of ill fame but high prevalence. Many youth “have known little else but faction domination of their community” and “many children do not see involvement in drug trafficking as an abnormal activity” (Dowdney, 2003: 132, on Rio de Janeiro).

What can be quantified, however, is the number of youths whose career in the drug trade ends with their premature death. Youth homicide rates in some Bahian cities have reached 300 per 100,000, which is around 60 times the overall US homicide rate.³ Though many youths get away with a black eye or manage to “quit drug trafficking without even having anything entered in their criminal record” (Conceição, 2015: 73), the majority sooner or later come into contact with law enforcement institutions, serving successive terms in juvenile prisons. Recidivism rates are high (close to an estimated 85%, see Zoettl, 2021), and many youths, upon reaching the age of majority, soon pass over to the adult prison system. Of those

who neither quit trafficking nor return to prison, a presumed majority lose their lives before the age of 30.⁴

The sombre prospects for drug traffickers in Brazil are not only known to youth workers, judges and the police, but evidently also to the juveniles themselves who, normally, soon after joining a gang, experience the “pains of deviance” at first hand. Intra- and inter-gang violence is rife, and the torture and the killing of suspects by the police frequent (Zoettl, forthcoming). At the same time, the income even of lower ranking dealers is fairly good compared to the average household income in the favela: a look-out for a drug den (the most common entry-level position, generally held by children) may receive around half of Brazil’s minimum salary,⁵ and a seller may make around two to four times more (Zoettl, 2022; Oliveira, 2016: 117). Higher ranking traffickers’ profits can only be estimated roughly: a den manager, depending on the turnover of the den, is able to earn around five to ten times the minimum salary (cf. Lima, 2019: 148-49). However, higher rank positions are generally (but not always) held by senior traffickers, and not juveniles (cf. Dowdney, 2003: 141).

It would thus seem reasonable to affirm that youths from Bahia take the risks of trafficking in view of the expected gains, allowing for the fact that, when entering the trade, they might misjudge the perils and overrate the profits. However, as I have noted elsewhere (Zoettl, 2022), the idea that they enter the trade as the outcome of a “rational” but erroneous calculus of the costs and benefits of trafficking fails to consider their quite realistic assessment of the opportunities they enjoy both within the legal and the illegal economies that surround them. Precisely due to the commonness of drug trafficking in Brazil, most youths who grow up in the favela have become virtual experts on “the world of crime” long before they join the trade. As Conceição notes, in Salvador (the capital of Bahia), one may “feel like a specialist on the topic just by frequenting the bars in the city”, where it is possible to learn “which factions are disputing the area and [where] even the succession of [traffickers’] deaths turn into common knowledge” (2015: 12).

Growing up within neighbourhoods dominated by drug factions, the youths are well aware that even high-ranking traffickers’ lifestyle is rather modest, notwithstanding the trade’s substantial turnover. The *soi-disant* mansions of the regional bosses, regularly televised by the press when one of them gets arrested (or shot dead) by the police, normally amount to no more than a single-family house with a small pool in the courtyard. Though it lies in the nature of the business that riches may not be publicly displayed, it is questionable how many drug traffickers in Brazil are actually successful from an individual point of view. Brazil’s biggest drug gang, the First Command of the Capital (PCC) of São Paulo, for instance,

reportedly transacted around US\$580 million in 2019.⁶ However, of its then eight top leaders, three have since been killed, and five are incarcerated in federal maximum-security prisons, where they are only allowed to spend their money on “small personal expenses” (LEP, 1984: Art. 28, § 1c).⁷

Risks and rewards

In what follows, I will explore the contradiction between the bleak prospects of being a drug trafficker and the popularity of the profession among Bahian youths.⁸ Criminological theories often struggle to grasp the contradictions inherent in juveniles’ biographies, tending to underrate offenders’ agency and their commitment to criminal activity. Young people’s offending behaviour is commonly explained either from an individualist (psychological, educational, etc.) or societal (labelling, culturalist, etc.) perspective, which conceive unlawful lifestyles as the result of a variety of factors beyond the control of the youth in question (lack of parental guidance, domestic violence, lack of proper education, socio-spatial criminalization, exclusion, marginalization, inequality, failures of youth justice, etc.).

Based on the narratives of young drug traffickers from Bahia, I argue that their way of being can be better comprehended by focusing on their own reasoning, engaging in depth with what they say and do, foregrounding how they conceptualize their lawbreaking and their relation to society at large, and acknowledging their agency as citizens. While not dismissing other approaches that seek to explain criminal behaviour, I suggest that offenders’ lifeworlds need to be understood both in terms of their inner dynamics (which corresponds roughly to what has been discussed as “crime as sub/culture”; see, for instance, Ferrell, 1999) and in terms of the societal (economic, cultural, etc.) frameworks within which they take place. However, this can only be achieved through detailed ethnographic accounts that capture not only the outer nature of criminal acts, but also what has been called the “lived experience of criminality” (Katz, 1988: 139; see also Hayward, 2001; Lyng, 2012).

Particularly theories that view offenders’ acts from a primarily utilitarian or “rational choice” perspective fall short of making sense of the often contradictory mindset of many (if not most) juvenile offenders. As the narratives of the Bahian youths demonstrate, a “weighing of perceived costs and benefits” (Farrell, 2010: 56) would expose their decision to work as a drug trafficker as not only irrational, but downright preposterous, given the extreme violence they endure and the likeliness of having to pay for those benefits with their life. Though the

notion of rational choice may be useful to examine an act of shoplifting, the idea that “all crime is a function of perceived pain and pleasures” (Exum cited in Farrell, 2010: 56) is unsuited to explain the Bahian traffickers’ persistent endurance of severe beatings and systematic torture.

On the opposite side of the criminological spectrum, critical criminology has emphasized “the complex relationships between individual actions, social interaction, institutional interventions and structural inequalities” (Goldson, 2008: 115), locating crime and deviance “within their determining contexts” (McLaughlin & Muncie, 2001: 70). Clearly, the biographies of the youths from Bahia provide ample evidence regarding the external circumstances that fostered their going astray: most of them suffered (if in different ways and degrees) material and psychical deprivation; they were subjected, from an early age, to diverse forms of physical and emotional violence, and they grew up in socio-cultural circumstances which favoured their labelling (and adoption of the label) as juvenile “bandits” (the etic term used for all kind of offenders in Brazil, see Zoettl, 2022).

However, as Hayward and others have observed, critical criminology’s focus on the determinants and sequels of crime has led to a downplaying of “the experiential (meaning to the offender) aspects of the criminal offence itself” (Hayward, 2001: 171-72). Other cultural criminologists (to whom I will return in the concluding section), have noted that critical/left theories’ reliance on “positivist methods and epistemologies” (that is, “objective”, measurable aspects of criminality) obscures rather “than reveal[s] the interactional process through which crime is constructed” (Ferrell with reference to Katz, 1992: 118). As regards the juveniles from Bahia, notwithstanding the numerous structural disadvantages manifest in their biographies, which surely shaped their life’s trajectories, it would be misleading to consider their careers in the drug industry as a straightforward result of their victimization in any way whatsoever. Instead, their acts, are driven precisely by their refusal to be othered “as calamity, as victim, as alibi” by what Baudrillard reviles as the modern “victim society” (1996: 138; 135).

If, for a young person from a destitute family, the money that can be made with little effort by selling a few grammes of crack on commission obviously poses a tempting opportunity, it is more difficult to fathom the extent to which the rather dreary lives of those who have made it to the top of the drug business pyramid serve as a model for kids growing up in the favela. Though it is true that the higher one climbs on the career ladder of trafficking, the more money one makes, there is a fundamental mismatch between the success of the drug business as an enterprise and the failure of its protagonists in terms of their

individual quality of life. Even Brazilian law enforcement agencies apparently struggle to make sense of this contradiction between the success of drug crime and the unsuccessfulness of drug criminals. A renowned prosecutor of São Paulo's organized crime unit (known for successfully pressing for the near total isolation of the PCC's upper echelons within federal prisons), for instance, recently mused that, if not the traffickers themselves, at least the relatives enjoy the fruits of their deeds, "feeding themselves like the children of [Pablo] Escobar with what their parents accumulated from crime".⁹

However, although every now and then press reports pop up about the "luxury life" of imprisoned PCC members' wives and the "luxury cars" in which they arrive on visiting days, the biographies of their families seem equally grim. The first wife of Marcola (the supposed present leader of the PCC who spent the last 20 years of his life in prison) was assassinated by a brother-in-law of Cesinha, one of the faction's founding members, who was himself later killed in prison (Dias, 2011: 220). Marcola's stepson was abducted by a São Paulo police officer and ransomed for R\$300,000 (US\$163,000).¹⁰ Marcola's brother is presently held in a high-security federal prison in Brasília.¹¹ Bandeirão, another PCC founding member, was killed after being visited in prison by his wife, who was herself assassinated soon after (Dias, 2011: 160). Geleirão, the last living founding member of the PCC, recently died of Covid-19 in prison, where he had spent more than 40 years of his life. Reportedly, without money to pay for a lawyer, he had kept sending handwritten appeals to the court of execution, without success.

Lived illusion

In the everyday lives of the juveniles from Bahia, the fates of Brazil's famous drug traffickers like Marcola are, at the same time, close and distant. Marcola's life story is similar to that of many drug dealers from Salvador: as a child, he lived as an orphan on the streets of São Paulo, sniffing *cola* (glue), which earned him his nickname, and was imprisoned for the first time at 14 years of age (CPI, 2006: 91; 144; 82). Trafficking in north-eastern Brazil is still much less organized than in São Paulo, where the PCC has achieved a virtual monopoly on the trade (Dias, 2011). In Bahia, a number of drug factions are competing to dominate the market, and a neighbourhood which is controlled by one gang today may be taken over by another tomorrow. However, due to the trade's less hierarchical organization, Bahia's heads of trafficking are more approachable, and some of my interlocutors recounted having dealt

directly (personally or by phone) with one or another high-ranking *coroa* (head of trafficking), the majority of whom supervise their business from within prison.

In the early years of the juveniles' drug trafficking careers, most of them repressed the idea of their own imprisonment while simultaneously anticipating it. Some, like Gil,¹² a youth from Salvador, had internalised the public discourse on the impunity of underage offenders, trusting that, "if the guy is a minor, if he killed, if he was caught today, the next day he would be free". Others, like Uriel (a trafficker from a smaller city), at once acknowledged and repressed the prospect of being sent to juvenile prison, saying: "I always thought it would go wrong" and "Though they always told me about this here [the juvenile prison], I didn't believe it." However, nearly all youths had friends or family members who were serving or had served a prison sentence, and many of them had themselves been sentenced to one or more terms of 45 days pre-trial custody, before serving a full (three-year) term.¹³

Though the threat of imprisonment was felt by most juvenile drug traffickers, at least initially the monetary profit obtained and the pleasures derived from spending it were a more obvious prospect. Most of them had never been formally employed, and the majority had abandoned schooling during the 6th year, working sporadically as street vendors, carwashers or unskilled construction workers. The money they made in the drug business thus significantly improved their financial means, and was spent as quickly as it was gained. The idea of putting money aside seemed altogether unfamiliar to them, and even those who reported appreciable gains had to admit that, once freed, they would return to their neighbourhoods without a penny in their pockets.

Only two youths reported having made savings from drug money. Jaime, a trafficker from Salvador, mentioned having bought a house worth R\$43,000 (around US\$8,600), which he paid for in cash: "I used my mind. I sold the drugs and kept the money. I just gave 'em to the kids to sell it [on commission], and kept the money." All the others had "invested" their gains from trafficking entirely in consumer goods: "clothes, mobile phone, endless drugs, booze, party, necklace" (Kaique). Though the income from trafficking helped many to defray their basic needs and support themselves independently of their parents – most of whom were either unemployed, working in low-income jobs as domestic servants or street vendors, or were absent altogether because they had died, been imprisoned themselves or had abandoned their families – it was rather the possibility of rapid consumption which, in the youths' narratives, represented one of the principal charms of crime:

I used to spend everything. It was all for me rockin'. Partying. *Paredões*, that sort of thing. (Uriel)

At night, there was a *paredão*. I arrived all dressed up. With a new cell phone. All new clothes. So I went and spent. Snorting cocaine, smoking marijuana. (Gil)

A *paredão* (lit. “big wall”) is a transportable system of powerful amplifiers and loudspeakers, mounted on a car or truck trailer, which may reach some metres in size, comprising more than a hundred single speakers. Now popular all over north-eastern Brazil, and especially in the state of Bahia, they are employed during illegal parties that go by the same name, and are staged at short notice in the urban periphery. Due to the power of the equipment (which exceeds by multiple times the legally established limits), the open consumption of drugs and occasional outbursts of violence, the *paredões* are a nightmare for most of the local residents and authorities alike. Often organized by the drug business, the *paredões* represent, for many youths, a welcome opportunity not only to party but also to resell their stock of drugs acquired on commission.

Gil’s story is paradigmatic of the early career of most juvenile drug dealers in Bahia. Growing up in Salvador, he started out as a drug consumer when he was 12. At that time, trafficking in his neighbourhood was still an individual affair, rather than being controlled by a single drug faction. When he was 14, he made the step from being a mere consumer to becoming a seller on commission. By then, his area was under control of the *Comando da Paz* (Peace Command), and Gil had to share his profits with the area’s *coroa*: “For example: of [R\$]1,400, 1,000 was his, 400 mine.” He used to sell cannabis, cocaine, crack and *loló* (an inhalant made of ether, chloroform and ethyl chloride), mainly during weekends at the *paredão*, apparently without much effort: “I sold everything, in just one day.” However, the money he would make in the course of one weekend would never last longer than till the next: “I took this money and went to buy clothes, sandals, shoes, hats, designer clothes. Then, when the weekend arrived, I spent everything [that remained].” Though making considerable gains during the four years of his career (he was arrested shortly before turning 18), Gil never managed to fulfil his modest personal dream: “I was going to buy ... what I was really planning to buy, now, before getting imprisoned here, was a motorbike. For 2,000, 3,000. Used.”

Gil’s and his pals’ habit of instantly spending their profits could be dismissed as the behaviour of youths who do not know how to handle money because they never had money. However, rather than reading their practice as a sign of improvidence, I suggest considering it, to the contrary, as an expression of their deeper consciousness regarding their “situation in the world” (Freire, 2005: 96), that is, their understanding of the workings of the society and the economies that surround them, and the roles they are allowed to play within them.

Bataille's notion of a "general economy", which he outlined in his study of *The Accursed Share* (1991; 1988), may help to place the youths' apparently mindless behaviour within a wider context.

Bataille argues that the riches produced by human societies cannot be indefinitely absorbed by a further growth of their economies and, sooner or later, will have to be "wasted", that is, consumed without generating new profits. According to Bataille, "the 'expenditure' (the 'consumption') of wealth, rather than production" is a critical social issue in most societies, as the surpluses that cannot be absorbed "must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically" (1988: 21). By "expending excess in collective, ritual practices which suspend everyday, productive existence, excess energy can bind beings and communities" (Pawlett on Bataille, 2016: 22-23). On the other hand, a society's "accursed share" may also be spent through catastrophic expenditure (as in warfare) or may be "expropriated and 'owned' by elites for their individual and private pleasure" (Pawlett, 2016: 23).

Employing Bataille's reasoning, Gil's "went and spent" may be construed as the – necessarily pointless – consumption of surplus wealth by juvenile citizens, whose restricted access to monetary resources prior to their involvement with the drug economy never allowed them to dispense money for anything other than the most basic necessities of life. Rather than indicating thriftlessness, against this backdrop their blithe spending of drug money configures a practice of savouring, through "needless" consumption, what Bataille calls "sovereign moments": occasions where "nothing matters except what is there, what is sensible [i.e. appeals to the senses] and captivating in the present" (1991: 198; 283).

Following Bataille, to become sovereign requires not only having resources at one's disposal, but also being ready to dispose of them: "Sometimes the bourgeois", Bataille writes, has the means "that would allow him to enjoy the possibilities of this world in a sovereign manner", but he does so furtively, giving to his expenditure "the appearance of servile utility" (1991: 198). For Bataille, it is precisely the *squandering* of wealth (as in the notorious Kwakiutl *potlatches*), in contrast to its accumulation, which is a sign of sovereignty and, concomitantly, a means to become sovereign. The futile character of non-essential consumption is thus intimately linked to its sovereign nature, and contrasts with the servility of all acts based on utility: it is "life beyond utility [that] is the domain of sovereignty" (1991: 198).

Sovereign experience

Applying Bataille's perspective to the lifeworld of juvenile drug traffickers, their insouciant spending of money at the *paredão* represents the counterpart of their refusal to take on the "normalize[d] precarious wage labor" (Wacquant, 1999) within the reach of Brazil's underclass. Unwilling to become "the equivalent of a tool which produces [...] being itself a product", through their engagement with the drug industry they are able to enjoy, notwithstanding their social position, a "life beyond utility" and to relish "the products of this world – beyond [their] needs" (Bataille, 1991: 218; 138; 198). In fact, most of the juvenile drug dealers from Bahia had, at least during some period of their lives, worked in precarious jobs, or had initially kept switching between the legal and illegal economies: "I wasn't very involved, no. There were times when I worked. There were times, when I didn't wanna work, [and] I used to sell drugs" (Wilson).

However, unlike their income from the legal economy, the money they made in the drug business allowed them to transcend the level of self-subsistence and experience "real" – that is, needless – consumption, spending "festively for [themselves] and for others alike that which the labor of all has accumulated" (Bataille, 1991: 241). The difference that the gains from trafficking made to their means was thus not only of a quantitative, but also of a qualitative nature. It permitted them to outgrow their status as "flawed consumers" (Giroux, 2015: 225) and become "righteous", money-spending citizens. Gil's nights at the *paredão* (recounted half proudly, half wistfully nostalgic), dressed up with "all new clothes" and "a new cell phone" paid for by drug money, meant far more to him than an enjoyable weekend distraction. They epitomized singular moments of him being, if temporarily, more than just another black *Zé Ninguém* (Jo Nobody) from the urban periphery and, if modestly, living up to modernity's role model of a "hero of consumption" (Baudrillard, 2016: 45).

To Gil and his peers, the *paredão* is the locus par excellence for immediate, purposeless experience, a site where young citizens of the underclass can enjoy "the present time without having anything else in view but this present time" (Bataille, 1991: 199). The prevailing music genre (the louder the better) at the *paredão* is called *pagode baiano* or *pagodão*, a north-eastern version of Brazilian funk music which has been stripped of the last vestiges of melody. Despised by the Bahian middle class and celebrated mainly by "black male bodies" (Pinho, 2014: 301), it is a genuine product of the favela, the public performance of which has become the object of a specific Bahian "Law against filth".¹⁴ To many youths like Gil and Uriel, to dance "in combat style" (Pinho, 2016: 134) to the strong bass rhythms of the

pagodão, to meet women, display the latest consumer goods and spend, unhesitatingly, the gains of a week, configured memorable moments of sovereign experience, giving them, “for a brief moment, the miraculous sensation of having the world at [their] disposal” (Bataille, 1991: 199).

From Bataille’s standpoint, it is precisely the illicit origin of the youths’ gains that allows for the experience of sovereignty in a way that, to them, as impecunious dwellers from the periphery, must appear, if not unattainable, at least elusive. As Bataille notes, living sovereignly basically implies spending the money of others: “the sovereign doesn’t labor, but consumes rather the product of the others’ labor”, whereas, “at the antipodes of sovereignty the slave and the man without means labor and reduce their consumption to the necessities [...] without which they could neither subsist nor labor” (1991: 198; 240). While some youths had grown up in extremely precarious conditions, the majority recognized that trafficking (and robbery) served to generate monetary surpluses rather than provide for their basic needs (see Zoettl, 2022). Trafficking, to them, was thus not a job like any other (with higher risks but better returns than those of the legal economy), but a means to generate *expendable* money – something that no other occupation within their reach would have been able to offer them.

At the same time, over the course of their careers most of them had gained a clear understanding not only of the risks taken, but also of the ephemeral character of the sovereignty achieved with the surpluses from trafficking. Antônio, a drug dealer from a smaller city, reasoned that money from trafficking, “the same way it comes, it goes away. The same way it comes easy, it goes away easily.” He also mused that, “Within that world of illusion ... women, booze, hotels. It all makes us spend money. Because we think that the next day we’ll have it all again. And it was true.” Enzo, from Salvador, summed up the three years of his life with the *Bonde do Maluco* (Lunatics’ Gang) as follows:

It’s like this: you start with little [amount of drugs]. You keep gaining [the boss’s] confidence, receiving more [drugs to sell on commission]. A lot. Suddenly, you find yourself surrounded with many things. With a lot of money. A lot of people around you. Women, drugs, arms, big gun power. A lot of guns. A lot of drugs. Confidence of the guy up there. So you get excited and start to think that this is life. But it’s just a matter of time. In this [snaps fingers], you lose everything.

Though the youths’ assessment of the pros and cons of trafficking changed with the experience gathered over the years and their coming of age (the majority had joined the trade aged around 13 years), neither a more realistic understanding of the risks involved nor the knowledge of the deceptive character of the benefits of trafficking made the great majority

seek to change their course of life. Enzo, who was considered a commendable inmate in Salvador's juvenile prison, having been released on probation after two years of internment, was detained again less than two months later (having attained his majority by then) and sentenced to four years in prison for armed robbery. During the interview, he had convincingly voiced his fatigue regarding the life of a drug dealer and his desire to live "the honest way now. The right way." Antônio was arrested a year after his release, carrying more than 200g of cocaine, and was sentenced to a prison term of five years.

The enduring dedication of Bahian youths to trafficking may be described, drawing on Baudrillard, as a form of "hyper-conformity" to societal demands (1983: 41-48). By means of their criminal activities, drug traffickers escape their status as sub-citizens and handicapped consumers (which, from the point of view of consumer capitalism, is synonymous), becoming hyper-consumers and thus hyper-citizens. Through their successful entrepreneurship within the drug industry, they manage to meet the expectations of the liberal market economy, of which their unrestrained consumption of the riches of trafficking is both a mark and a premise. Though intrinsically violent and violating the law, the youths' business is, however, not about insurgence against the state. Representing an intractable minority who make themselves heard with notable gun power, their way of defying the constraints they face is rather akin to what Baudrillard describes as the silent majority's "historical resistance to the social", by means of "destructive" hyper-conformity: "You want us to consume – O.K., let's consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose" (1983: 41-47).

Hate, kill and die

Bataille argues that there are two ways to violate the law: "I can neglect to observe it, violating it through ignorance; this is the attitude of rationalism. But I can consciously, without disregarding it, violate it with exuberance" (1991: 404). In Brazil, where illegal drugs are held responsible for most of the country's social evils, having become a ready marker of (forgone) citizenship (see Zoettl, 2021), to get involved with trafficking amounts to more than a rash attempt to make "easy money" (Gil). To join a drug gang in Brazil constitutes the – decidedly irrational – decision to take risks and accept pains that are out of proportion to the attainable benefits, for the sake of temporarily enjoying the, knowingly illusory, sovereignty and "exuberance" of a trafficker's life. Accordingly, notwithstanding the severe hardships experienced, Caio (who was working for the *Primeiro Comando da Lajinha* in Salvador) and

Murilo (a trafficker of the Lunatics' Gang from a smaller city) summarized their careers as follows:

It was a good time. I had everything. I had a gun, I had money, I had power. Everyone respected me. [...] For me it was a good time. (Caio)

My life was bad, in some ways. I made my mother suffer. That's the only thing I do regret. But the rest was all gorgeous. It was all marvellous. I lived 100%, with pleasure. 100%. In this way: I killed with pleasure, robbed with pleasure, trafficked with pleasure. (Murilo)

Both youths brought attention to the respect they had gained among their peers. "Trafficking is not for the fame. I'm not an actor," Murilo argued. "Trafficking is for you to say: I'm here. Trafficking is for the people around me to respect me." Both also asserted that they had equally enjoyed the respect of the residents of their neighbourhoods, a fact Murilo attributed to his polite manners and well-groomed appearance, and Caio to his own respectful behaviour. However, the "exuberance" of their unlawful lives before long entailed a notable degree of violence, both exercised and suffered. Both of them had joined trafficking around the age of 12 years and soon started to conduct robberies as well. Murilo was sentenced for homicide when he was 17 and Caio for robbery at 16 years of age. During the interview, Murilo, who knew about his imminent release on parole, mentioned that, while planning to complete his schooling once set free, he would still "get myself a gun" as, out there, "there are a lot of people who want to make a fool out of you". Less than a year after their release from juvenile prison, both were arrested again, this time for trafficking. Murilo's trial was still pending at the time of writing; Caio, then still underage, was released on parole. The following year he was reported as a "missing person" by the state Ministry of the Interior.

Being a negative pendant to the notion of respect (and often the result of what is perceived as the disrespectful behaviour of others), "hate" is another recurring element in the narratives of the youths from Bahia. In Brazil, to be "full of hate" (*cheio de ódio*) is an idiomatic expression linked to the "world of crime", another set phrase frequently used by those who are labelled as "bandits" by society and call themselves "thieves" (*ladrão*) in Bahia. The state of mind it describes corresponds quite precisely to what Baudrillard identifies as the end point of the "indifferent passions" of societies which function by rejection and exclusion: an obscure, diffuse feeling of irritation against everyone and everything or, in Baudrillard's words, "an allergic form without any definite object, a profuse, diffuse creeping of the flesh, a sidelong sort of affect" (1996: 144-45). Uriel, for instance, remembered that before being imprisoned, "I was pissed off. Full of hate. I was full of hate, of everything." Murilo, in turn, mentioned having experienced "hate" since the age of 12, and that today, "I'm full of anger

against the police. Full of anger against the *alemão* [rival traffickers]. I'm full of anger against myself. And that's it."

In the youths' narratives, their feeling of "hate" was often nourished by experiences of violence, both physical and symbolic. In Salvador's juvenile prison, one could frequently find this or that inmate loudly exclaiming: "I'm full of hate!" As the inmates explained, their "hate" against what they denominated "the system" (the prison and its workings) was either the immediate consequence of the physical violence they suffered at the hands of the staff, or else their general impression of being "treated like an animal" (Wilson) by the institution. Osmar, for instance, mentioned that the so-called "socio-educators" of the prison "want to resolve everything through beatings", with the result that the juveniles would "feel more hate, more nightmares in their heads". However, the "hate" that many of them verbalized was also related to a vague notion of the social imbalances within their milieu and the many-faceted disadvantages they faced as favela youths:

The world we come from ... from the favela, the periphery ... it's a lot of things. The reality of life we are seeing. You see a lot of things. Day in, day out. You start developing hate. You see this guy there, day in, day out, laughing at you. Taking what is yours. Later on, occasions arise.... Somebody calls you to smoke pot, you go. The guy [says] 'Damn, man, this animal is laughing at you, why don't you kill this animal, man?' You keep thinking about it, thinking about it until you do it. (Kaique)

This country here is all for the wrong. I am proud to be Brazilian. But it's all for the wrong. Justice here is blind. Everything here is blind, in fact. I'm proud, but at the same time, I have hate. [...] I'm Brazilian with great pride, it's in my blood. At heart. But I feel hate for what's going on here. And there's nobody who takes a stand against it. (Antônio)

Drawing on the lyrics of São Paulo's hip hop group Racionais MC's, Caldeira points to changes in the self-image of the city's periphery, whose dwellers until the 1980s considered their neighbourhoods, as she writes, "a space of hope and opportunity where moral qualities abounded in spite of the overwhelming poverty", in contrast to the "space of despair" it would be conceptualized as today (Caldeira, 2006: 121). In 'Crazy Life, Part II', the Racionais MC's (highly admired also among the youths from Bahia) reflect on the disenchantment of many young Brazilians who, like themselves, have grown up in the periphery:

Poor is the devil, I hate to show off / Laugh at me, laugh, but don't you get fooled / It's just a matter of time, the end of suffering / A toast to the warriors, Joe Schmoe / I regret / Worms that drag their weight over the earth / Stop staring at me / Stop staring at me, get outta my way / I sleep ready for the war / I wasn't like this, I got the hate / I know what's bad for me / What can I do, it is what it is / Damned Crazy Life / Smell of gunpowder / And I prefer roses / And I, who always, who always / wanted a place / Clean, with a lawn, green like the sea / A white fence, a seesaw on a rubber tree / Flying a kite, surrounded by children.

Not discerning a sufficiently viable perspective to become fully fledged citizens within the legal economy, and refusing to eke out, like their fellow “poor devils” from the precariat of the favela, a living without access to the lures “beyond utility” (Bataille) of consumer society, the drug dealers from Bahia have set aside their dream of the “seesaw on a rubber tree” *sine die*, and got “ready for the war”. Like Gil, who had been working for a time at Salvador’s wholesale market, delivering coal, they “know what’s bad” for them, being well aware that they will soon be held liable for the costs of their, in any case illusory, hyper-citizenship as traffickers-consumers, defrayed with drug money: “I wasn’t afraid [to die]. ’Cause I know that this life is just like that. It’s either jail or death.” Caio, who had been arrested at gunpoint for the first time when he was 15, likewise stated: “I’m not afraid [of dying] no. One day, we are going to die, if we don’t die one way, we die another way.” Antônio, who at the time of the interview had been committed to Salvador’s juvenile prison for the fourth time, openly avowed:

I’ll only quit crime [when] I die. For all I’ve done in this world. For me to quit this life [of crime], I have to give my life to God. To leave the gang is not a problem. But if I quit crime, let’s say ... to become a street vendor, sell things somewhere else, I won’t do it. If I have to die ... either I die in crime or I give my life to God.

The youths’ discourses on death did not seek to minimize or repress the possibility of their own demise, but rather resembled the thoughts of mature adults who have settled their affairs. In fact, many of them had not only witnessed at close quarters the death of others, but had themselves gone through experiences that took them to their psychological and physical limits. Gil had been shot at by police while fleeing, and was nearly lynched by the street mob who seized him. On other occasions, he had been tortured by the police by means of electric shocks and asphyxiation with a plastic bag. Caio – who stated that “the majority of my fellows have died. [Either] at the hands of the *alemão*, [or] at the hands of the police”, and whose brother, a senior trafficker, was killed only two weeks after the interview – had also been shot at by the police while fleeing in a car, and observed the death of his accomplice: “He was sitting on the passenger seat [...]. I was 15 years old then. I stopped the car, got out. I pulled him out, put the guns on the ground. And laid myself down [on the street].” Antônio, who recounted in detail the lengthy torture session he had been subjected to by the police, remembered what at first crossed his mind when he was caught:

I thought I was going to die. But [then], the only thing I was sure about was that they wouldn’t kill me. Because many [people] had watched me, even though they didn’t know me, they had watched me. And at the Extra [a supermarket], on the catwalk, there’s a camera. It was registered, them [the police] catching me. If there hadn’t been a camera, I would have thought I would die.

Being able to endure severe physical violence, the psychological pains of imprisonment and, ultimately, acquiesce in one's own death, are considered indispensable qualities for a "successful" drug trafficker by the youths from Bahia. In their narratives, these capabilities become condensed in the idiomatic expression of being a "man-fella" (*cara-homem*) which, to them, means much more than displaying supposedly masculine attitudes of determination and endurance in face of police, traffickers and prison violence. To be a "man-fella", to the youths, implies to become a truly sovereign being in Bataille's sense, which means to reject servitude and, as a prerequisite for this, to disregard "the limits that the fear of death would have us respect in order to ensure, in a general way, the laboriously peaceful life of individuals" (1991: 221).

To be ready to "die like a man" (Antônio) is, however, as Bataille notes, not the only way of doing away, sovereignly, with the "the limit of death" (1991: 222). To negate the limits of death may also mean to put up with, or even bring about, the death of others. To acquiesce in one's own death and to kill, to Bataille are like forms of escaping subordination and ridding oneself "of the aspect of a tool or a thing". Killing, Bataille writes, "is not the only way to regain sovereign life, but sovereignty is always linked to a denial of the sentiments that death controls" (1991: 221). Among the youths from Bahia, a number openly admitted having put an end to the life of other gang members, drug debtors or local residents who had violated the "laws of trafficking". While some remembered the scruples and remorse they had experienced before or after committing their first homicide, others hinted at the indifference or even pleasure the act of killing had brought them.

Murilo, for instance, noted that, in the beginning, he was "a little bit afraid" but still "killed with pleasure". After his first killing, he seemed to have experienced a feeling of detachment or elevation in relation to his fellow citizens: "I was looking at those people on the street, those people looking at me, talking. [I thought] 'Do they already know that I have killed?'" Coming to hold a senior position within the Lunatics' Gang, killing soon became a professional necessity to him, which, however, he carried out ceremoniously, preferring, as he recounted, to "catch from the front than to kill from behind. [...] To see his face, him seeing my face." To Murilo, to cause the death of others had become the final expression of the objectless "hate" he was feeling against everything and everybody: "In the life I was in, there was just hate. Whenever I caught someone, I shot off the whole magazine."

Conclusion: Violent sensations

Violence, suffered and exercised, is an inescapable epiphenomenon of being a drug trafficker in Brazil, particularly for those who aim to make the grade. However, trafficking is also a way to escape the everyday symbolic violence intrinsically knitted to coming of age in the favela. As Conceição (2015: 138) notes, juvenile residents of Salvador's periphery are often treated, presumptively, as law-breakers by the police and may, as such, pre-emptively get their ears boxed during police checks. In line with this, Leandro, a drug dealer from a smaller city, lamented that in his neighbourhood, "even if the guy is not a bum, the police there beat him", with the result that "the hate grows". To many youth from the periphery, becoming a "thief" or a "bandit" is therefore a way of dealing sovereignly with the violence they face, one way or the other. Rather than submitting to the humiliations tied to their social standing of destitute sub-citizens, getting "ready for the war" is the mode the juvenile traffickers from Bahia have come across, if not to rebel against the Brazilian state or capitalism itself, then to limit their subordination to both.

Cultural criminologists have addressed the emotional aspects of offenders' acts, to whom, as Fenwick and Hayward argue, "the most innocuous transgression may well represent an exhilarating form of experience" (cited in Hayward, 2001: 207-08). Moving away from the notion of "a rational agent working with, as it were, 'corrupt information'", emotions are considered to be "a generative force, a force which simultaneously compels and seduces individuals into committing illegal acts" (Hayward referring to Katz, 2001: 209). Others have pointed to the "risk-related 'seductions' of certain kinds of criminal behaviour", suggesting that often "the primary motivation for assuming these risks is the nature of the experience itself, even when material rewards are involved" (Lyng, 2012: 409-10).

While the narratives of the juveniles from Bahia testify to the emotional qualities of many of their acts, I am disinclined to hold certain sentiments attached to some of their criminal behaviour as etiologically responsible for their mode of living. It is true that many of them gave expression to the excitement associated with robberies, and the heavily armed raids on enemy drug factions are without doubt among the emotional "highlights" in the life of a young drug trafficker in Salvador (see Zoettl, 2022). However, even though emotions are an important aspect to be taken into account when discussing deviant lifestyles, their nature is frequently ambiguous, fluid and generally difficult to grasp. The exciting sensations that go along with hold-ups, for instance, contrast with the rather dreary routine of drug dealing,

which in most Brazilian *bocas* (drug dens) follows a tight timetable with long shifts and strict work discipline.

To hold the “thrill of transgressing the rule” or the “pleasure of transgression” and other sensations crime offers accountable for the “seductiveness of crime” (Hayward, 2001: 211; 2007: 239) is, though not wrong, at risk of disregarding both the mundaneness of the “world of crime” and the significant suffering that being part of it entails. The “mysterious, independent place” of “street life” where, as Katz writes, “dangerous, vaguely evil, downright sexy events transpire” (Katz, 1988: 148) in most offenders’ lives is accompanied by the tediousness of unemployment, the pains of imprisonment and, at least in Brazil, hard-to-take physical and psychological torment. There, the pleasures derived from being part of a drug gang are tarnished not only by the extreme violence delivered by police officers and enemy traffickers alike, but also by, for instance, the seemingly tenuous “cost” of not being able to lead a normal family life and bring up one’s children – a frequently voiced sorrow of my interlocutors, many of whom are underage fathers.

Rather than introducing “emotions” as still another variable within the equations of crime, or seeking to extend crime models to the point of becoming meaningless – I suspect that to admit the possibility of an “irrational” (or “bounded” rational; see Farrell, 2010: 52) weighing of “perceived costs and benefits” by offenders renders rational choice theory tautological – it might be more instructive to examine the seductiveness of crime, as Hayward suggests, in view of not only “the excitement it brings” but also as “a way of seizing control of one’s destiny” (2001: 204). However, independently of one’s theoretical stance, offenders’ lifeworlds can only be made intelligible on the basis of firmly localized ethnographic accounts. Seeking to generalize offenders’ experiences wrested from their specific contexts easily falls prey to what Geertz has referred to as the “Jonestown-is-America” fallacy (1973: 20). Katz’s observation that youth gangs pride themselves on their ability to “move in a spirit of freedom and emphatic self-respect without accepting social limitations” (1988: 116), for instance, also holds for the traffickers from Bahia. Yet, his assertion that US working-class street fighters tend to embrace conservative values or “fascist forms” (1988: 158) contrasts with the very critical view expressed by the juveniles from Bahia regarding Brazil’s present right-wing government.

Amenable, like all youths, to ever new sensations, the traffickers from Bahia are far from being misguided “sensation gatherers” (Baumann cited in Hayward, 2007: 239), who might find it potentially thrilling to be asphyxiated with a plastic bag over their head. Their careers in the “world of crime”, though certainly adventurous, are neither a pleasure nor an

exhilarating pastime. The emotions adjunct to their acts are an epiphenomenon of their way of life, rather than the generative force behind it. They are seduced not by violent sensations per se but, ultimately, and like any other young citizen, by their longing to become “someone”, amidst the complex and often contradictory system of values and morals that prevails in the communities to which they belong and society at large.

Mauss, in his conclusion to *The Gift*, reminds us that in modern societies, as much as in traditional ones, the “unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior” (2002: 83). As it happens, the vertiginous rise of juvenile violence in Brazil during the last two decades has been altogether undeterred by state welfare programmes like the *bolsa família*, which guarantees a meagre minimal income to the country’s most indigent families. Charity, as Mauss observes, “is still wounding for him who has accepted it”, and not every youth from the periphery is willing to accept a “gift” which reinforces rather than undermines the socio-spatial confines of the favela. Enjoying the riches of consumer capitalism in a truly sovereign manner, that is, exuberantly and beyond one’s needs, is a more enticing perspective to juvenile “man-fellas” who are willing to pay the price for their extralegal hyper-conformity to the values of neoliberal society. Being anticipated by both society and the youths themselves, their death, and those of their victims, while being the result of numerous concomitants, is also the final, acknowledged consequence of their challenging of social limits, a lavish giving away of innumerable lives in exchange for the lived illusion of fully fledged citizenship.

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Notes

1. In this article, the terms “dealer” and “trafficker” are used conterminously to refer to anybody who trades in illegal drugs, selling either directly to drug consumers (colloquially called “dealers”) or selling to intermediaries (colloquially called “traffickers”).

2. All terms and quotes originally in Portuguese have been translated by the author.
3. Brazilian data referring to youths aged 15–19 (arithmetic mean of 2016–2018, see Zoettl, 2022), according to Sistema de Informações Sobre Mortalidade (see <https://datasus.saude.gov.br/>). The US “Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter rate” was 5.0 in 2018 (see <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/topic-pages/tables/table-1>). Both accessed 21 October 2021.
4. In a survey of former inmates carried out by the author in collaboration with Salvador’s Youth Prosecution Services in 2019, the death of 8 out of 101 youths charged in 2012 had been officially registered.
5. Brazil’s minimum salary at the time of writing was R\$1,100 (around US\$214). IRS average exchange rate for 2019 (5.151) has been applied.
6. See: <https://noticias.r7.com/sao-paulo/pcc-movimentou-r-3-bilhoes-com-o-trafico-de-drogas-diz-promotor-08052021> (accessed 13 May 2023).
7. See: <https://ponte.org/cupula-do-pcc-volta-a-se-encontrar-em-brasilia-apos-sete-anos-de-isolamento/> (accessed 13 May 2023).
8. Ethnographic evidence for this article was collected over the course of three years in a semi-secure and a secure juvenile prison in the city of Salvador, at the juvenile justice courts of Salvador, and at the youth prosecution office in Salvador. Formal interviews were conducted with a total of 35 sentenced inmates. Documentary evidence includes the inmates’ files and their criminal records.
9. *El País* (<https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-06-30/lincoln-gakiya-o-pcc-nao-acabara-com-o-fim-do-marcola-e-desses-22-lideres.html>, accessed 13 May 2023).
10. See: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/cotidian/ff0105200808.htm> (accessed 13 May 2023). IRS average exchange rate for 2008 (1.840) has been applied.
11. See: <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/irmao-de-marcola-transferido-para-presidio-federal-de-brasilia-23450148> (accessed 13 May 2023).
12. All names have been changed.
13. Youths aged 12–17 suspected of having committed felonies may be held in pre-trial custody for a maximum of 45 days (ECA, 1990: Art. 174 and 183).
14. *Lei Anti-baixaria* (Lei no. 12.573 de 11 de abril de 2012), cf. Pinho (2014).

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