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MY BODY IMPRISONED, MY SOUL RELIEVED: YOUTH, GANGS AND PRISON IN CAPE VERDE

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Urban street gangs flourish in the urban centres of the Cape Verdean archipelago. Most of their members belong to the male, young and economically disadvantaged strata of society. While in public discourse youth gangs are often peremptorily blamed for most of the violence and criminality that takes place in the country, the internal dynamics of gang life often go unnoticed. Based on fieldwork in the cities of Praia and Mindelo, the article discusses the mechanisms that make Cape Verdean adolescents and youths join urban gangs and stick to them, despite the state's politics of securitization and repression. Within this context, the experience of imprisonment is related to gang members' pre-prison biographies and the conceptualization of prison itself, reinforced during individual "careers" of marginality.

Keywords: Cape Verde, gangs, prison, violence, youth

Cape Verde has witnessed a steep rise in urban crime during the last two decades. The state has reacted to this situation predominantly with securitization politics, upgrading its security forces with financial help from its development partners in the European Union (EU) (see Zoettl 2014). The National Police was reorganized in 2005 and special police units established from 2007 on.² While crime rates have not dropped, the country's prison population has grown steadily. Although official statistics are not available, the swelling of the prison population can be estimated from the few published reports on the Cape Verdean prison system. According to these reports, the number of prisoners rose from 624 in 1997 (ASDZM 2000: 103) and 1023 in 2006 (UNODC 2008: 11) to 1428 in 2013 (USDOS 2013), that is, nearly 130% within the last one and a half decades. As regards the capital city of Praia on the archipelago's island of Santiago, the number of inmates has risen from approximately 567 in 2006 (UNODC 2008: 11) to 922 in 2013 (USDOS 2013), that is, more than 60% in less than seven years.

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² Following the adoption of Decreto-Legislativo no. 6/2005 de 14 de Novembro and Decreto-Lei no. 39/2007 de 12 de Novembro.

In a further attempt to handle this situation, Cape Verde has also “modernized” its penal laws, which follow, by and large, the model of the country’s former colonial power Portugal, having been adjusted, little by little, to Cape Verde’s postcolonial reality since 1975. A new penal code was adopted in 2003 (DL 4/2003), which replaced the Portuguese Criminal Code of 1852 and 1886. Likewise, a new Code of Criminal Procedure was passed in 2005 (DL 2/2005), replacing the then still valid Portuguese code of 1929. The adoption of both codes was not only the consequence of the obvious desire to establish a judicial order which would *de jure* and *de facto* break with Cape Verde’s colonial past, but also an effort to respond to the more recent challenges the country was facing. In the Foreword to the publication of the new Code of Criminal Procedure the then Minister of Justice acknowledges that one of its main objective was to:

adapt the implementation of criminal justice to mass delinquency, [and] to guarantee, at the same time, simplified procedures, new methods and new procedural approaches to the investigation and finding of the truth, thereby making it possible to respond effectively to new forms of criminality, particularly violent and organized crime, which are the scourge of the world today and, obviously, Cape Verde, too. (DL 2/2005)

The minister’s mention of “mass delinquency” and “violent” or “organized crime” is an overt reference to different manifestations of national and transnational crime the country started to face from around the end of the 1990s on, and which has been addressed, from quite different perspectives, by various authors.³ In public Cape Verdean discourse, the term “organized crime” is generally used to denote the international drug trade which, at roughly that time, had managed to establish one of its main African hubs on the archipelago. Usually conceptualized as an external threat to the country, this international trade in drugs (together with large-scale money laundering schemes) has, in the meantime, managed to penetrate Cape Verdean society from the inside as well. To give an example, the former head of the country’s stock exchange was one of nine people sentenced to imprisonment in June 2013 for, among other things, trafficking of 1.5 tons of high-quality cocaine, in the aftermath of a police operation that became famous as “*Lancha Voadora*” (“Flying speedboat”).

On the other hand, and within the same public discourse on crime, it is primarily a section of the country’s youth that is regularly blamed for much of the “violent crime” and “mass delinquency” taking place in Cape Verde, namely the members of urban street gangs that have mushroomed in the cities of Praia and Mindelo. Lima (2013: 4) estimates that in Praia – a city of only around 130,000 inhabitants – more than 90 (!) street gangs operate, totalling around 1000 members. While it is obvious that the proliferation of gangs in Cape Verde is related as

³ See, for example UNODC (2007, 2012), PN (2009), Pureza et al. (2012).

much to the ongoing marginalization of large segments of the population as it is to the proliferation of the international drug traffic, there seems to be a widespread consensus among Cape Verdean authorities and mass media alike that, especially when it comes to dealing with adolescent and juvenile offenders, “violent repression is the only [adequate] form of intervention” (Bordonaro 2012: 19; see also Peça 2012).

In the present article, I will refrain from discussing the public Cape Verdean discourses on violence, and the symbolic and physical violence Cape Verdean youths suffer as part of their marginalization, which I have analysed elsewhere (Zoettl 2014, 2015). Instead, in what follows I will attempt to shed some light on the dynamics of the urban juvenile gangs themselves, addressing basically three questions: What makes young people “opt” for gang life – what makes them become urban gang members? Why do gang members, even in face of the imminent danger of being imprisoned or after having served a prison sentence, decide to stay in the gangs (if they do so)? And, finally, how do gang members – if they happen to be arrested and sentenced – experience their life in prison, and how does their prison experience relate to their life experiences outside prison? It is important to note that these questions will be primarily dealt with from a Cape Verdean perspective. As Trasher has noted, “no two gangs are just alike” (in Hagedorn 1996: 111), and even from a lusophone African perspective, there are far more differences than similarities in the history, organizational structure and day-to-day routine of urban gangs. While pointing out some of those similarities and differences within the limited scope of this article, I will primarily concentrate on the dynamics of gang life from a local point of view.⁴

Into the gang, out of the gang

To become a member of a street gang in Praia or Mindelo is an altogether “informal” affair. Cape Verdean gangs are not hierarchically structured organizations. They frequently do not have a “leader” (although older or more “powerful” gang members may have more say than others), and normally do not undertake criminal activities from a joint, “business”-like perspective. They thus differ significantly from urban gangs in other places, like Angola or the UK. Carvalho (2010: 76), for instance, describes gangs in Luanda as “organized groups, with a hierarchical structure and rules that define the interaction of its members”, the leader of the gang being responsible for deciding whether new members can join (2010: 78). Similarly,

⁴ The research for this article took place during two fieldwork periods of three months each in 2013 and 2014. Research included 20 interviews with imprisoned gang members in Praia and Mindelo, and a large number of informal interviews with youths from marginalized neighbourhoods in both cities.

Densley and Stevens (2014: 9) have pointed to “some forms of hierarchical structure” within street gangs in London, and the importance and formalities of gang member recruitment (2014: 10; see also Densley 2012: 302).

Cape Verdean gangs, to the contrary, do not perform any “initiation rites” whatsoever, and to become a member of a gang, in the first instance, means to join a group of youths of the same neighbourhood who are ready to “defend” their neighbourhood against other groups from other, often adjoining, neighbourhoods. It does not necessarily mean to become a criminal. It is a popular misconception in Cape Verdean public discourse that all gang members dedicate themselves to theft, mugging, burglary or other violent forms of crime, to the detriment of their fellow “orderly citizens”. Some surely do, but other gang members limit their activities to what they call the “war” (*guerra*) between rival groups. As a matter of fact, these gang “wars” are often decided in a quite violent fashion, but it is important to keep in mind that the gangs of Praia and Mindelo are not criminal organizations in the sense normally given to the term in legal codes.⁵

Lima (2012b: 58) has noted that the “thugs” (as gang members are called and call themselves in the city of Praia) are only apparently a new phenomenon: while the word itself “only entered the city of Praia’s vocabulary at the beginning of the 2000s”, already in the 1980s one could find a significant number of young individuals who “gave headaches to residents and judicial forces” and who later formed groups like the notorious *netinhos de vovó* (“grandmother’s little grandsons”). A good share of Cape Verde’s contemporary urban gangs can be traced back to neighbourhood groups of “gangsta” rappers, who were often in conflict with other rap groups from other neighbourhoods (Lima 2012b: 67, 2012c). Other gangs originated, as my own research suggests, from what was initially only a circle of juvenile friends who progressively became involved in inter-neighbourhood conflicts. Although Cape Verdean gangs have not (yet) become “adolescent quasi-institutions” in a way comparable to the Chicano gangs studied by Moore (1991: 7), they do thus share with some of their US counterparts a provenance from “friendship groups of adolescents” with “common interests” and their commitment of “defending one another, the barrio, the families, and the gang name” (1991: 31).

To exemplify the “unspectacularity” of Cape Verdean gang careers, I will recount at some length the history of one of my interviewees from Ribeirinha prison in Mindelo, who I will

⁵ The Cape Verdean Penal Code defines a “criminal organization” (*Organização criminosa*) as an “organization or group whose *objective* is to commit crimes” (DL 4/2003: Art. 291, emphasis added). In practically all of the cases I have knowledge of, gang members have been convicted for their individual crimes and not for involvement in a criminal organization.

call Paulo in the following,⁶ as his story is, at the same time, both ordinary and unusual in what concerns the manifest dynamics, regularities and contradictions of gang life – thus giving a good idea of the complexity of the phenomenon on the Cape Verdean islands. Paulo was born neither in Praia nor Mindelo, but in one of the economically less developed islands of the archipelago. Paulo's mother brought him along with her when she resettled on the island of São Vicente, where his father came from, and where Paulo grew up in a neighbourhood called Ribeira Bote. Ribeira Bote is a relatively poor but central neighbourhood of Mindelo, situated somewhere between the city centre and Ribeirinha area, where Mindelo's central prison is located. When Paulo was 2 years of age, his mother left São Vicente to move to the city of Praia, Santiago Island. His father – who, as Paulo remarked, was an alcoholic and regularly beat up his mother – was now in charge of his education, together with Paulo's grandparents.

When Paulo reaches the age of 9, his mother (whom he knew only from photographs) comes to see him in São Vicente and, deceiving Paulo's father as to her true plans, takes him with her, first for a short "holiday" to the island where he was born, and later to his new stepfather's place in the city of Praia. There he continues to grow up, from age 9 to 11. The household of his mother and his stepfather is "relatively" wealthy, as his stepfather owns a barber shop in Achadinha de Cima. Paulo successfully attends the 4th and 5th grade of school although, as he put it, he had already become "a bit of a difficult sort of boy". When he starts to attend the 6th grade, his mother and stepfather's visa applications for the US are approved, and they leave Cape Verde. Paulo thus heads back to São Vicente, at age 11. There he first lives in a neighbourhood called Fernando Pó, initially with the wife of a brother of his mother, who is himself living on the island of Santo Antão. His uncle's wife, according to Paulo, "cared much more about her own children than she cared about me", and they start to quarrel over the money Paulo's mother sends for his keep from the US. Paulo starts to cut school and to smoke *padinha* (cannabis); finally he is expelled from school, after having to repeat the same year twice as a result of unexcused absence. "By the age of 14, I was already not doing anything any more," he remarks. At that time, there are still no gangs in São Vicente, but Paulo joins a *malta* (circle of friends) named, after a French gangster movie, "B13", which is having some conflicts with another clique calling itself "Kriskros". It is also at that time that he starts to smoke crack, which he buys with the money he is still regularly receiving from the States.

⁶ All names of prisoners have been altered, and reference to places omitted if this would allow the interviewee to be identified.

When he is 17, he gives up smoking drugs from one day to the next (“I just didn’t want to smoke this crap any more!”) and volunteers for military service in Praia, Santiago. On his return to São Vicente a couple of years later, in 2010, urban gangs have already mushroomed throughout the island’s capital. Some of his childhood friends from the Fernando Pó area are now part of the BBH gang (an acronym for “Black Brotherhood”) and, by accompanying them in their daily routine, he himself, kind of gradually, also becomes a gang member. The year before, the BBH gang had assassinated a member of the rival Cova gang from Monte Sossego, a neighbourhood next to Fernando Pó. Being now part of BBH, Paulo finds himself increasingly facing verbal and physical conflicts with the members of Cova. The first violent attack in public takes place, as Paulo points out, during a walk he was having downtown with the then pregnant mother of his first child. Whenever he sets out to visit his father or his grandmother (who are both still living in Ribeira Bote), he is now at risk of being attacked by the members of the Pintx’Andor gang who reign in Ribeira Bote, and which is allied with the Cova gang. When, eventually, members of the Cova gang attack his father, he decides “to take revenge”. In a “raid” of the BBH gang in Monte Sossego, he stabs a member of Cova. A couple of days later, another member of BBH is arrested by the police for attempted murder. To preserve his colleague from being convicted although innocent, Paulo hands himself in voluntarily and is sentenced to 12 years in prison.

To what point can Paulo’s story be considered “typical” of a member of a Cape Verdean juvenile gang? First and foremost, Paulo is, obviously, not part of Cape Verde’s *bourgeoisie*, but from those strata of society that make up the vast majority of the country’s city dwellers in conflict with the law: the urban poor. Cape Verdean gangs in this sense seem to differ from their Angolan counterparts, as it would be very hard to find gang members from Praia or Mindelo with a middle-class background – contrary to what has been reported for the case of Luanda (Carvalho 2010: 76, 80). While poverty is still much more pronounced in rural Cape Verde than in the cities,⁷ even in official statistics the percentage of city residents that consider themselves “poorer” or “poor” poor shows up as being 22 times higher in comparison to those who consider themselves “rich” or “very rich” (INE 2007: 63). Within the urban population, those without education, or with only primary education, account for 92.1% of the country’s residents living below the poverty line (INE 2007: 72). In the mostly urban Praia district, 62.6% of the residents affirm having “difficulty”, “some difficulty” or

⁷ The Cape Verdean Institute for Statistics (INE – Instituto Nacional de Estatística) reports a (relative) poverty index of 13.2% in urban areas compared to 26.6% in rural areas (INE 2007: 69).

“huge difficulty” in meeting their food needs from their monthly income. In São Vicente, the percentage is as high as 71.8% (INE 2007: 64).

If one looks into Cape Verde’s prisons, the socio-economic background of the inmates mirrors the socio-economic background of the urban poor. The country’s prison population is made up, by and large, of those with little formal education and meagre pre-detention income. It is also predominantly young (and male). As of 1997 (the latest data available), 86% of the prisoners were younger than 40 years old, 58% between 16 and 30 years of age (ASDZM 2000: 16, 118). As of 1999, 75% of the prisoners had been “in precarious working conditions with low salary” before being imprisoned; only 3% of the prisoners had secondary education. (ASDZM 2000: 16). Considering his educational and socio-economic background, Paulo is therefore, without doubt, “typical”. In fact, practically all of the prisoners and ex-prisoners I encountered during my fieldwork in Praia and Mindelo were from the urban “lumpenproletariat” – a characteristic which they, of course, share with the “overwhelmingly young, male, socially and economically disadvantaged” (Morgan 2002: 1128) prisoners from other parts of the world.⁸

Paulo can also be considered “typical” from a socio-*spatial* perspective. Although some of the Cape Verdean gangs have started to commit burglary and muggings in the middle- and upper-class districts of Praia and Mindelo as well (presumably one of the reasons why the issue has become the number one concern of public discourse), they are all based in one of the countless neighbourhoods of the city’s “social periphery”. The majority of these neighbourhoods are peripheral both in geographic and in socio-economic terms. Others, while centrally located – sometimes directly adjacent to middle-class areas, like, for instance, the “Brasil” neighbourhood on the plateau of Achada de St António in Praia, where one can also find ministries and the UN building – represent “blotches” of poverty within thriving districts, a development which reflects the increasing social disparities of the country. In both cases, they represent what Lima (2012a) has called “disaffiliated neighbourhoods”, that is, urban spaces which have gradually lost their “affiliation” with Cape Verdean society at large, and whose inhabitants have, symbolically and materially, missed out on the country’s economic development of the last decades.

Paulo’s story might also be considered “typical” inasmuch as it involves family problems and drug abuse. Nevertheless, looking more closely at Paulo’s account it is possible to

⁸ Morgan is referring to the British prison population. For similar accounts of the Brazilian, Portuguese, US-American or German situation see, for instance, Wacquant (2003), Cunha (2002 2010), Conquergood (2002) and Enzmann et al. (2003).

observe that smoking *padjinha* and even *pedra* (crack) does not automatically mean that someone becomes a criminal, as is often asserted in Cape Verde. In fact, Paulo belongs among those gang members who, although part of a gang, never participated in any kind of delinquency apart from that directly related to the “war” between gangs. As mentioned above, he was able to finance his drug habits mainly with the money he regularly received from his family (“at that time, drugs were still cheaper”), and “kept a cool head”, as he put it, always “investing first of all in myself: When I had plenty of money, I dressed well, bought a lot of foodstuff, paid for my room. What was left, I spent in that other world ...” While many of the imprisoned gang members I spoke to in Praia in Mindelo had been consuming illegal substances before their incarceration (and some even in prison), others did not. The necessity to finance one’s drug consumption was referred to (“if I don’t steal, I don’t smoke”) mainly by those gang members who were indeed dedicating themselves to criminal activities outside the realm of gang life. Drug abuse is thus by no means a “condition” of becoming a gang member, as seems to be the case in the capital of Angola, following Carvalho (2010: 78). Gangs are also generally not part of Cape Verde’s “big” (that is, international) drug business, although there is evidence that some individual gang members have been recruited by the international drug trade as contract killers. However, some of the gang members I spoke to had been active in small-scale drug-dealing within their own neighbourhood.

The same observation applies to Paulo’s family problems: as I have stated elsewhere (Zoettl 2015), “broken homes” can be considered an important factor of juvenile deviance only in some cases but not in others. The “broken homes” discourse, popular with Cape Verdean politicians and media alike (who generally, in the same breath, deplore an alleged “loss of traditions” in the country of *morabeza*),⁹ points to a tentative translocation of responsibilities rather than an empirically underpinned explanation for the country’s rapidly growing crime rates of the 2000s. While Paulo in fact lamented the “lack of that love, that love of a mother who would be close by; to be able to say ‘Good morning, mother, how are you, mother?’”, other gang members had grown up in entirely “ordinary” families.

Although drug abuse and unstable family settings may without doubt be important factors in establishing an increased susceptibility to juvenile gang life, having suffered violence during one’s youth and childhood – be it physical or symbolic, state or personal violence – proved to be a much more common thread in all the “gangster” stories I collected during my research (for a more detailed discussion of these topics, see Zoettl 2014, 2015). Densley and

⁹ Regarding the Cape Verdean notion of *morabeza* (“gentleness”) see, for instance, Pina (2011), Vale de Almeida Vale de Almeida (2007) or Zoettl (2014).

Stevens' observation that many London gang members' "exposure to violence at home or in their community had primed them for a life of violence in gangs" (2014: 10) thus corresponds to the Cape Verdean context. However, much more than the singularity of any of the possible factors involved in the decision to become a gang member, what manifested itself as remarkably conspicuous was the "ordinariness" of Cape Verdean gang careers. The following quote of an inmate from Ilha de Madeira area of Ribeira Bote neighbourhood in Mindelo may give an idea of the prosaic nature of the process becoming a gang member:

I entered [the gang] as we went along, just hanging around with my friends. Later my friends had some problems with other guys. They [the members of the rival gang] show up, they see me hanging around with the guys from the gang, and they already suppose that I actually take part in the fights. But in the beginning, I was just hanging around with them.

As with Paulo from Fernando Pó, the affiliation of this informant (I will call him Edson in the following) was happening quite gradually. He was imprisoned when he was only 16 years of age, but his relationship with the other gang members had started long before. Many of them were simply his neighbours and childhood friends, when Edson himself had still nothing to do with "gangster" life. He was living with his family in the lower part of Ilha da Madeira (close to the neighbourhood of Bela Vista, home to the "Black Enemy" gang) where he was also hanging around with his friends, many of whom were members of the Pintx' Andor gang. As a consequence, the youths from Black Enemy started to associate him with the gang his friends belonged to and, after some time, whenever they came upon him in public, as he reported, "they said: 'This guy goes around with that gang, let's attack him!' They say it, and all of a sudden they attack you." "In such a situation", Edson added, "if you manage to escape, you'll try to take revenge for the attack ..."

"Take revenge" (*diskonta* in Cape Verdean Creole) is a recurrent expression when talking to gang members from Praia and Mindelo. It points to notions of masculinity, where the defence of one's own "honour" is considered crucial for the preservation of self-esteem and social recognition. Similar notions of masculinity have been suggested as being central to gang ideology in Cape Verde and elsewhere. Kynoch (1999: 58), for instance, points to the linkage of "violent criminality and [...] aggressive masculinity" in the conception of South African township gangsters. Other authors have linked the higher incidence of delinquency among immigrant societies to a (presumed) "culture of honour".¹⁰ However, both Bordonaro (2012) and Kynoch (1999) stress that certain ideas of masculinity, which may eventually foster delinquent or violent behaviour, normally persist in society at large, and not only within

¹⁰ For a discussion of the concept of "culture of honour" see Enzmann et al. (2003).

the gangs. While Bordonaro points to the fact that police action (and police violence) in Cape Verde incorporates “the same logic of masculine supremacy”, and “thugs” and police officer alike would “operate according to the same ethos” (2012: 18), Kynoch notes the “high premium on a masculine identity that values fighting prowess and regards violence as the prototypical masculine activity” within both criminal gangs “and their political counterparts” (1999: 73).

When Edson turns 15, he eventually joins Pintx’Andor, his friends’ gang. The explanation he gave for this move (“when somebody sets out to attack you, you consider attacking first, before you get attacked yourself ...”) should not be dismissed as a pretext or a psychological “rationalization”. In fact, many of the gang members I met were leading, within the constraints of their mostly precarious economic situation, more or less regular lives which only over time gradually became increasingly difficult due to their geographic and personal proximity to established gang members. Edson, for example, was working as an attendant in a cyber-café in Mindelo’s city centre, which he was forced to give up after members of Pintx’Andor murdered a member of a rival gang. Although, at that time, he was still not a member of Pintx’Andor, on the day of the funeral of the 18-year-old victim from Bela Vista, Edson was threatened with death by the victim’s fellow gang members. The cyber-café where he was working happened to be situated on an avenue that marks one of the boundaries of the two rival neighbourhoods. Eventually, he decided not to take chances and give up his job.

While participation in gang life mostly takes place gradually, the actual “membership” (which is, as mentioned, not formalized or ritualized in any way) materializes first of all through participation in the “war” between gangs. As in Edson’s case, this may happen when someone is already (erroneously) considered to be a gang member by the members of a rival group, and he then decides to “take revenge” for an attack he has suffered “unjustly” at the hands of the rival group. Once part of the gang, however, many discover that it is difficult to take a step back, as the following quote of a remand prisoner from the BBH gang exemplifies:

I was playing at the *batucada* [drum performance] of carnival in the area of Cruz João Évora, when they caught sight of me and tried to attack me, using even knives. But the knife only grazed parts of my body and didn’t cause much injury. I was not a member of the gang, but when they attacked me it stuck in my mind and I began to attack the guys of that group [the other gang] whenever I came upon them on the streets, because I wanted to get my revenge. Later I tried to get away from this kind of life, as I realized it was something wrong, but I couldn’t go anywhere, and in particular couldn’t walk around on my own. Whenever I walked around on my own, they attacked me. I had to walk around in a group. Even though I wanted to, I couldn’t get away from this life, and so I continued doing the same.

The experience of being locked up in one's neighbourhood is usually what follows the "decision" (which is normally not experienced as such) to join a gang. On the one hand, gang membership ensures an experience of recognition and *communitas* and – for those who participate in joint *kasubodis* (muggings) – some, if not necessarily significant, improvement of one's economic situation: "We are all *companheiros* [comrades]. If one runs into difficulties, it's a concern of all of us," I was told by a member of BBH, while a gang member from Ilha de Madeira boasted: "I lived *cool*. I had three girlfriends. I had no lack of clothes." On the other hand, though, most "gangsters" deplored the loss of freedom of movement which the constant violent conflicts with other gangs entailed, the "apprehension that seizes one" when walking out of the confines of one's "own" neighbourhood. As another gang member of Pintx'Andor put it:

For example, I'd like to go to the city centre, by myself, but I can't do that any more, because they could even kill me or something like that. So I don't go any more to other neighbourhoods. And there is no way out of that. Even if you stop being part of the gang, the others don't know if you've really stopped. And so they will cause you problems again.

The delight of "being somebody" as a gang member, as compared to being just another poor dweller in a peripheral neighbourhood, of "having no lack of money, no lack of women" (another prisoner) and experiencing the sudden boost in one's agency – linked to the individual and collective capacity to exercise violence towards others (cf. Bordonaro 2011) – in the course of time gives way to a feeling of imprisonment within the often tiny space delimited by the boundaries of one's neighbourhood area.

From gang to prison

It is therefore not surprising that many of the inmates of São Martinho (Praia) and especially Ribeirinha (Mindelo) seemed to be able to cope relatively well with the fact of being imprisoned. While suffering from (and complaining about) the harshness of their prison experience – due to, among other things, the bad quality of food, limited access to and precariousness of health care, lack of educational opportunities, arbitrariness of disciplinary measures, violence of some prison guards, etc.¹¹ – many of my interlocutors left me with the impression that their life, in many respects, had not been made worse in a dramatic way. While, on the one hand, the "pains of imprisonment" (Crewe 2011) were experienced to a

¹¹ The atmosphere in São Martinho prison in Praia was quite tense, and allegations of mistreatment of prisoners were frequent, while in Ribeirinha prison in Mindelo such allegations were much less frequent and prisoners in general seemed to have a positive relation to prison staff overall.

very considerable extent, on the other hand the fact that, from the point of view of street gang life, prison seemed to be a relatively “safe haven”, ameliorated the hardships suffered behind bars. Cape Verdean gang members often reported very similar experiences of “residual territorial confinement”, like those, for instance, who belonged to London street gangs (Densley and Stevens 2014: 11). Long before being imprisoned, gang members from Mindelo and Praia saw their freedom of movement being severely limited, to the point of interfering with their personal relationships:

You can't go anywhere, you can't leave your neighbourhood. If you have a girlfriend from another neighbourhood, you can't go there. If you want to visit a friend [from another neighbourhood], you can't. You end up isolated.

I had a girlfriend, we used to take a stroll, but now we can't even go to the festival [of Baía das Gatas], now she goes with her women friends, for her safety.

As far as pre-prison exposure to state violence is concerned, imprisoned gang members' narratives proved to be quite similar to those of their non-imprisoned fellows. The frequent police violence suffered by many gang members (see Zoettl 2015; Bordonaro 2012) was effectively substituted by, to make a rough guess, less frequent (Ribeirinha prison) or equally frequent (São Martinho prison) symbolic and physical violence perpetrated by prison guards. Inter-gang violence, however, was effectively prevented in both prisons, even if inter-gang rivalries continued. In both Ribeirinha and São Martinho prison, members of competing gangs were mostly placed in different blocks, and none of the inmates I spoke to reported violent incidents between hostile gangs. To the contrary, several interviewees said they had managed to make friends with other gang members who, before imprisonment, had been their declared (and prescribed) mortal enemies. While the gangs as a whole did not end their feuds, some prisoners confirmed having built a rapport with youths from hostile gangs. One of the prisoners from Pintx'Andor gang, for instance, related how he was, to his complete surprise, “cohabiting calmly in the cell with my greatest enemy from the *street* (a word used also in Cape Verdean Creole). Now we are *cool*. Within the same cell!” Two other prisoners affirmed that:

In prison you gradually make friendships with the other guys. On the *street*, it's only that clout, that stuff, you're not going for friendship with groups you dispute something with. Only at times, but then, you quickly become uneasy about it, because you're full of delimitations, your spaces are all limited.

On the *street* I had a lot of enemies. But in here, you start to respect [each other]. On the *street*, you run across somebody [of the other gang], and at once it's a hail of stones, a bullet or a stab with a knife. In here, there is coexistence. I feel easy here. That movement of paranoia out there, it doesn't exist here. Here in prison, you can make friends. On the *street*, you can't.

To escape from inter-gang hostilities was, however, only one of the reasons that made many prisoners note a certain “relief” in relation to their detention and subsequent prison confinement. Those who were facing severe substance abuse problems (almost exclusively caused by consumption of crack), experienced the sheer fact of their drug supply being cut in prison as an opportunity to “rest”, as one of the inmates put it. As a matter of fact, notwithstanding (relatively recent) efforts to combat the international drug traffic that thrives in Cape Verde (see UNODC 2012), cocaine derivatives are still readily available in the country. Owing to a lack of sufficient treatment facilities for a growing number of drug users (especially among juveniles, see UNODC 2008: 3f.), prison has turned into a kind of detoxification centre – at least for those who do not continue to use drugs within prison.¹²

Given the difficulty of escaping the dynamics of inter-gang violence, prison is often seen as a chance to “start all over again”. A couple of gang members came to rationalize their imprisonment as an escape from the constant threat of being killed outside, in the *street*.¹³ However, to be able to successfully break with their past, other prisoners underlined the necessity of migrating to a different island of the archipelago:

I could well have been killed. At one time or another. They already attacked me many times. I could have been killed. When you attack other people, you watch for them to attack you too. It's better my family comes to see me in prison than in hospital or at the cemetery.

I want to move to Sal [island]. Spend some time there. If I'll have the chance to go, I go. I have a brother there, who is a school teacher. If I stay here, I'll live my life here. And if they [the other gang] cause me trouble ... You can't stop it. Things just go on. I harmed a lot of people. I got a couple of enemies out there.

Apart from being considered an, albeit involuntary, escape from the dynamics of inter-gang violence, being locked up behind bars was at times referred to as a downright “ordinary” experience. In the first place, most gang members interviewed seemed to have anticipated their eventual detention and conviction. Then again, the “ordinariness” of their actual prison experience was corroborated by self-conceptions within which a passage through the prison system could be considered an obvious rather than odd part of one's personal life script. Imprisonment, from the point of view of many of my interlocutors, seemed to fit neatly into their course of life, which made their own narratives reproduce, unwittingly, certain Cape Verdean public discourses that paint juvenile delinquents as “lost causes” (see Zoettl 2015). Most inmates considered their “deviance” as a *condition* rather than something extraordinary

¹² According to the same UNODC (2008: 4, 32) report, 29% of all inmates were using drugs in prison. Drugs were supplied either by prison staff (18%) or visitors (10%).

¹³ I learned how real this threat actually is when the only interviewee I received notice of having been released from prison was assassinated only a year later in the city of Praia.

that would need a lot of explanation. Finding oneself in prison with a sentence of perhaps more than a decade, in the self-perception of many gang-members, was simply the consequence of not only one's acts but also one's "state of being" at a certain point in life. While, certainly, all of the convicts longed for a better life and nursed dreams for their post-prison future, imprisonment itself appeared only as a "detail" within an assumed biography of marginality. As a consequence, none of the inmates (nor ex-inmates and other gang members) expressed more than nominal fear related to the possibility of having to go (or go again) into prison:

Sometimes you think about it, having to go to prison, with a long sentence that breaks your life, completely. If I kill, I go to prison, with a long sentence. In the first place, I have to live my life. The rest is secondary. I may get a long sentence, but one day I'll be released. You have to have the right attitude and be strong.

Prison doesn't worry me too much. I already knew that sooner or later I could find myself in prison. Or that somebody could kill me or that I could kill somebody. And that therefore I could go to prison at any moment. From prison, one day one is released. And if you'll have to stay, then you stay.

I was never afraid of being arrested. *With so many of your colleagues in prison, you never thought that one day...?* I always thought that. I knew that one day I would go to prison. Because the life I was leading ... I committed a lot of crimes against society. I knew that one day I would be caught. I was already awaiting it.

The somehow fatalistic awareness that those who commit "many crimes against society" (an expression that points to the internalization of institutional discourses regarding youth delinquency) sooner or later "would be caught" bears witness to the deeply rooted acceptance that gang members often showed in relation to their role as social "outsiders". Cape Verdean gang members thus share, to a certain extent, the vision of their colleagues from other parts of the world. Densley and Stevens, for instance, report similar "fatalistic" attitudes of London street gang members, who reaffirmed not only "their slim chances of getting a decent job" but also their uncertain "prospects of living much longer than their 20s" (2014: 8). During my fieldwork outside prison in one of the marginalized parts of Achada de Santo António district in the city of Praia, I constantly felt the presence of prison in the daily lives and conversations of the youths: those who were not members of a gang nevertheless had friends who were in imprisoned, who were either members of a gang or who were serving sentences for other, non-gang-related crimes (like muggings or small-scale drug dealing). In fact, many of my imprisoned interviewees from Praia had been pointed out to me by my informants from the *street*, who were either their friends or former classmates, or simply living "next door" to them. In the course of the one-year interval between my two fieldwork stays in Praia, one of my informants from Achada had been imprisoned and another was facing charges for mugging, expecting to be eventually convicted to a prison sentence, as he told me.

As much as the move to join a gang, within the dynamics of inter-neighbourhood conflicts and, eventually, the lure of “easy pickings”, may seem natural to many youths from marginalized neighbourhoods, their subsequent confrontation with the state’s agents (police, judiciary, prison system) appears to them to be no more than a likely and inescapable episode within their life “career”. Within the *bairros* (neighbourhoods) of the social periphery of Praia and Mindelo, prison is as ubiquitous as it is, for instance, “an omnipresent reality in *barrio* life” of US-American Chicano communities (Moore and Garcia 1978: 98) or an “extension of the *bairro*”, a place that “has incorporated the *bairro*” in the periphery of Lisbon, Portugal (Cunha 2002: 195, 200). As such, it was never experienced, by the great majority of my interviewees, as a menace, but rather as an intrinsic dimension of what Becker (1963: 23) once referred to as the “orderly sequence” of deviant “patterns of behavior”.

A youth in prison

The taken-for-grantedness of one’s own marginal status and one’s physical and symbolic segregation in prison from society at large is, however, regularly accompanied by a deep feeling of loss by those who are serving long prison terms at a tender age: the loss of youth. I was frequently impressed by the serenity, humility but also the resignation of inmates of, at times, as little as 16 years of age, and the lucidity with which they seemed to analyse their personal situation, mostly free of (psychological) rationalizations. As the following quotes of three different inmates exemplify, prison confinement can be, at the same time, both a traumatic experience and a – dearly paid for – chance to take one step back in a life that has broken its stride.

My youth stayed all in prison ...

It’s because the life I was leading was in fact no life at all. You may “live” at that moment. And be happy. You got a gun, you got drugs, you got women abounding, you got money, you smoke, you’re *sabe*.¹⁴ Later on, you learn better. If they don’t kill you, you will kill somebody and go to prison. And here in prison things are not easy. It’s tough here in prison. Very tough. I’m young, I came here at 18 and have 12 years to serve. It’s a many years I will serve here in prison.

The [first] three years [in prison] were difficult. My family rejected me. My family gave me up. Sure, I was a disgrace for them. But one day or another day, we all have to make mistakes. In one way or another, you have to burden yourself with guilt, one day. We all have our faults. My destiny was that one. To go to prison. I’m imprisoned, but out there on the streets, there are people that are more imprisoned than I am. Imprisoned within themselves. Not me. My body is imprisoned. But my mind freed itself. I felt that I was

¹⁴ Creole for “very well”, “very nice”, etc.

freed. From the first day of serving my sentence. I was a problematic kid, I liked to make trouble. But since I'm here I see things more clearly. Before, I saw things in an obscured way. I tell all my colleagues that for me, prison was a school. They don't believe it. But for me, it was a school.

Such praise for one's compulsory seclusion from the outside world as "a school" – within the context of prison institutions that present severe material difficulties and varying degrees of human rights problems – is, of course, only intelligible when put in relation to out-of-prison experiences. In fact, nearly all the gang members I encountered during my research had left official schooling at an early age, for different reasons. Some had dropped out voluntarily ("School, no thanks ... I'm good in school, but I don't like it. What is it good for, school?"), others were not allowed to continue in state school after having repeated the same year twice and had no money to pay for a private school. While their failure in school (or the failure of school) in many cases was one of the first occurrences that institutionalized (or de-institutionalized) their "deviance", a wide range of other problems gradually gave rise to a situation in life that made imprisonment seem a like-for-like, or even a lesser evil. The hardships, and sometimes brutality, of the prison experience were regularly attenuated by the state of "liminality" (that is, the transitional seclusion from life on the *street*) the confinement brought about, and within which a gang member's problems related to family, drugs, gang fights and confrontation with the police temporarily came to a rest.

While Turner (1974) reserves the concept of "liminality" for situations in which social hierarchies are inverted or dissolved, it is worth rereading his remarks on the similarities of "marginality" and "liminality": "Marginals like liminars", Turner (1974: 233) notes, are both "betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars", marginal individuals "have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity". Being marginal on the *street*, in one of the countless underprivileged neighbourhoods of the social periphery of Praia and Mindelo, is more a permanent state of exclusion, with only very slim chances of change for the better, than a transitional debarment from the riches and recognition of society at large. Within the life stories of the young urban poor, prison configures a kind of liminality within marginality, a transitional state of seclusion within an often permanent state of exclusion. The "ordinariness" of prison, its banalisation as an ever more common part of the curriculum vitae of youths from *bairros* who have been "forgotten" during Cape Verde's accelerated growth of the last decade, contrast with the "liminality" of the prison experience itself, which is often experienced as a time out from the "paranoias" of gang-life and marginality on the *street*.

Prison "as a space to reflect" (in the words of one prisoner) and a space to reconceptualize one's relation to society (be it members of rival gangs, state agents or society at large),

however, can only be useful insofar as the transitional state of physical segregation from society does not find a false resolution in a situation that is similar, or equivalent to one's situation before imprisonment. The dream of many of the young Cape Verdean prisoners to "be happy one day, *within* society", to "do an honest job" or to "change my life" (in the words of three of them),¹⁵ though, is often accompanied by the strong apprehension that their imprisonment outside prison, within a certain pre-defined, socio-spatial symbolic space, might be for their lifetime. The same confinement that is experienced through the perils of inter-gang violence in one's neighbourhood, is similarly sensed in relation to one's structural position within society – as an ex-prisoner, a gang member, a delinquent or simply a poor nameless dweller of just another shantytown. While marginality might also be a "site of resistance" (hooks 1990), it is primarily a site of inertia and self-fulfilling prophecies. "If they kill me, that doesn't mean anything to me," I was told by a member of BBH gang towards the end of our conversation in the library of Ribeirinha prison, "it's normal, it can happen. They can kill me, or I can kill somebody. But if they kill one of us, we'll want to kill too. And if they kill one, we'll want to kill more than one of them." Gang-related violence (as much as violence related to the international drug trade) is on the verge of becoming commonplace in Cape Verde, at least in the city of Praia. It will take more than a policy of repression, building on tougher laws, revamped security forces and larger prison facilities to break the cycles of marginalization and violence that are haunting Cape Verdean society at present, victimizing the country's poor and middle-class alike.

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¹⁵ Emphasis added.

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