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BEING CRIME: YOUTH VIOLENCE AND CRIMINAL IDENTITIES IN BAHIA, BRAZIL

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In Brazil, a growing number of young citizens from the socioeconomic periphery embark on a career in crime, earning their living by armed robbery or selling drugs. Through the life stories and narratives of inmates of a juvenile prison in the state of Bahia, the article anatomizes what makes these young men take up and stick to a life in conflict with the law, despite the limited profits and substantial hardships involved. I argue that the experience of violence, both suffered and perpetrated, is central to the forging of the youths' criminal identities, and their persistent failure to change their life trajectories.

Keywords: Bahia, Brazil, crime, death, drug dealing, drug trafficking, police violence, violence, youth offending, youth violence

Youth as crime

Juvenile homicide rates in Brazil have spiralled up nearly fourfold since the 1980s.[2] They have reached unprecedented levels even in many smaller cities, particularly in the country's North and Northeast regions. At the time of my research, Brazil's three most violent cities, situated in the north-eastern state of Bahia, included Eunápolis, a rather unexciting place that calls itself "the biggest village in the world" and which, until the 1980s, was no more than a crossroads on the state highway from Salvador (the capital of Bahia) to Rio de Janeiro; Simões Filho, an industrial city part of Salvador's metropolitan area; and Porto Seguro, a popular beach destination for Brazilian and European tourists alike, which spreads out on the southern Bahian coastline – with homicide rates of 296, 281 and 268, respectively.[3] To give an idea what these lifeless numbers mean: at the height of the Iraq War, the war-related

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[2] According to data retrieved from the national mortality database SIM (Sistema de Informações sobre Mortalidade) deaths increased from 18.5 per 100,000 (1980) to 67.5 (2017) for the 15–19 age group. Deaths of 'undetermined intent' (CID-10 Y10–Y34) were considered as homicides with a coefficient of 78.6%, following the calculation of Cerqueira (2013).

[3] See note 2. Only cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants have been considered, calculating the arithmetic mean for the years 2016 to 2018.

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mortality of the general Iraqi population was roughly a third of the homicide mortality of young Eunapolitanos in 2017. Their risk of being intentionally killed approximated that of US soldiers in action. Some smaller municipalities (like Pojuca, also part of Salvador metropolitan area, with a youth homicide rate of 491) even greatly surpassed the US combat death rate.[4]

The vertiginous growth of juvenile violent deaths over the past two decades is closely linked to the shifting dynamics of Brazil's drug business. The country's first organized drug 'factions' (as drug gangs or cartels are called there) were established in the southern cities of Rio de Janeiro (*Comando Vermelho* or Red Command) and São Paulo (*Primeiro Comando da Capital* or First Command of the Capital) in the 1980s/1990s. However, due to the ready supply of cocaine from neighbouring countries, the drug trade soon expanded to other states, initially targeting their capitals. The *Comando da Paz* (Peace Command), for instance, was founded in the central prison of Salvador in the late 1990s (Lourenço and Almeida, 2013). In recent years, a number of emergent drug factions have appeared throughout the state of Bahia, competing fiercely for a profitable but limited market. The newer factions from the state's interior such as the *Bonde do Maluco* (Lunatic's Gang) or *Katiara* have succeeded in breaking the monopoly of the Peace Command, which was eventually forced to ally with its Rio de Janeiro counterpart, rebranding itself as the Red Command.

The never-ending turf war between drug factions is responsible for the bulk of juvenile deaths in Brazil. In São Paulo, where the First Command has come to hold a virtual monopoly of the trade, homicide rate have subsequently receded (cf. Dias, 2013), and in 2020 the overall homicide rate there amounted to only one fifth of that of the state of Bahia.[5] However, a significant share of homicides in Brazil is committed on behalf of the state itself: in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, police killings represented around a quarter and a fifth of all homicides in 2020, respectively.[6] Several of Brazil's state police units (like Rio's BOPE or São Paulo's ROTA) are notorious for the indiscriminate use of lethal force, targeting mainly poor young

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[4] The youth homicide rate in Eunápolis was 300 in 2017. According to estimates by the Iraq Body Count project, 29,526 civilians died as a consequence of combat or violence caused by the war in 2016, out of a total population of 27,448,124 (107.6 per 100,000). See https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/ and https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SP.POP.TOTL&country=IRQ (accessed 29 May 2020). Goldberg (2010: 222) estimates the mortality in combat (per year, per 100,000 troops on the ground) of the US forces in the Iraq War at 335.

[5] 7.27 vs. 35.47 per 100,000 according to the *Monitor da violência* (see http://especiais.g1.globo.com/monitor-da-violencia/2018/mortes-violentas-no-brasil/, accessed 30 January 2022).

[6] 1,245 of 3,662 + 1,245 and 814 of 3,343 + 814, respectively, according to the *Monitor da violência* (see footnote 5 and http://especiais.g1.globo.com/monitor-da-violencia/2018/mortos-por-policiais-no-brasil/, accessed 6 May 2022).

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black males (see Caldeira, 2000; Caldeira, 2013; Nunes, 2018; Alves, 2016). In Bahia, of all citizens killed in 2018 through legal intervention, 84% were 15–29 years old.[7]

Successively marginalized, demonized and criminalized, all across Brazil young people from the socioeconomic periphery have become a "counternation" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006: 270) to society at large. Some of them, as the phalanx of a legion of "flawed consumers" (Giroux, 2015: 225), seek career opportunities in alternative markets that do not, though, enjoy the "advantage of legitimacy" of state protection rackets (Tilly, 1985). Entering their neighbourhood's drug business – an "equal opportunities employer accessible to all *favela* residents" (Dowdney, 2003: 132) – seems for many a reasonable choice, reflecting their conditioned understanding of "the objective chances they face" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 130).

The stories of the juvenile inmates from Bahia testify to a variety of reasons for committing their first offences. Nevertheless, their life histories reveal similar dynamics that explain how their early deviant behaviour developed into a lifestyle based on crime, partly chosen and partly enjoined by the rules of their trade. Their existence as juvenile 'bandits' (the label ascribed to all kinds of offenders in Brazil), according to their narratives, is a way of being that requires readiness to endure and perpetrate violence, to cope with the pains of imprisonment and, ultimately, to acquiesce to the possibility of their own death. It is the indispensability of this readiness that, in their words, makes being a 'thief' (the youths' self-designation) not a choice but a condition: crime is not "something you want" but "something you are".[8]

Based on their stories, their criminal records and their prison dossiers, I examine what made the youths enter the 'world of crime' (a popular idiomatic expression which refers to the underworld of all illicit activities) and how they assess the risks and rewards of drug dealing or robbery.[9] I then discuss why the vast majority cling to a way of life that entails considerable psychological and physical suffering, and whose returns rarely meet the youths' initial expectations. Given their own interpretation of their experiences, I propose that the essentialized identity of the juvenile 'bandit', forged by the continuous exercise and suffering

[7] According to SIM data (see note 2), of a total of 603 deaths through legal intervention in 2018, 168 and 336 of those victimized were 15–19 and 20–29-year-old youths, respectively.

[8] All terms and quotes originally in Portuguese have been translated by the author. Juvenile offenders in Bahia mostly refer to themselves as 'thieves' (*ladrão*), while being referred to by others as 'bandits' (*bandido*). Both expressions are equally pejorative.

[9] Research for this article was carried out in a semi-secure and secure juvenile prison in the city of Salvador, Bahia (CASE Brotas and CASE Salvador) over the course of three years, during a total of six and four months, respectively. Formal interviews were conducted with a total of 35 inmates. Most observations in this article are based on evidence from CASE Salvador.

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of fellow traffickers' and the state's violence, keeps the youths trapped in a criminal lifeworld from which, according to their own and society's reasoning, they can only escape through an 'ultimate' act of violence – their physical extermination.

Becoming crime

The early biographies of most inmates of Salvador's juvenile prison are marked by abandonment, experiences of violence and involvement in crime. Not only of crimes committed but also, from childhood onwards, crimes suffered or witnessed. The story of Antônio, a youth aged 18 when I met him,[10] is paradigmatic – not for its extraordinariness, but rather for its commonness, reflecting successive ruptures in his life course with which he had to deal with from early on. As he recounted, his parents were separated "ever since", and he grew up between the shack where his father lived, his mother's place, and the streets.

When he was 10, the local prosecutor's office requested his referral to a children's home, not only because Antônio had stopped attending school and was reportedly dependent on the benevolence of others to feed himself, but also because his parents had turned over his then 13-year-old sister to a fellow citizen (who was later arrested in flagrante) for sexual exploitation. However, he soon ran away from the home, returning to his father's place. When his father died of cirrhosis, he jumped on a bus to Salvador, where his mother had settled in the meantime. There, however, he did not get along well with his stepfather, who kept beating up his mother, just as his biological father used to do before.

When Antônio's brother-in-law, who lived in the same household, was killed by the police, his mother and his sister preferred to move over to another neighbourhood. Antônio stayed behind, looking after himself again. In his memories, his mother forced him to "grow up with the world. My mother went away, left me in the house. Me myself. Without nothing to eat, nothing to wear, nothing to nothing. Nothing times nothing." According to his recollections, his career as an offender started when he was around 12, with minor shopliftings: "I did those old thefts … I went into the shop, got out … like all the kids do these days. Enter the shop, come out with this or that." Looking back six years later, however, he considered that "those old thefts" laid the foundation for what he was to become later: "[they] increasingly influenced [my] future, me being what I am today". Soon, he "thought of growing in the world of crime. I started robbing. Two years later, I started dealing."

[10] All names have been changed. Juvenile law in Brazil applies to offences committed by those aged 12–17 years. Custodial sentences, however, have to be served until the offender turns 21 (ECA, 1990: Art. 2).

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Unlike Antônio, whose early offending was imposed by the need to feed himself, most of his peers initiated their careers with small-scale drug dealing, some as early as at 8 years of age. In their narratives, their move to work for a faction was not a 'decision', but rather something that just happened. Most had family members or friends who were already working for the drug business, and almost all lived in neighbourhoods notorious for drug-related violence: "It's the *favela*…. There are neighbourhoods where some get involved [in the drug trade], others do work. But there [his neighbourhood], it's rather … they're all involved" (Beto, an inmate from Salvador).

While a few youths mentioned having undergone a sort of interview with a senior trafficker, procedures of admission were generally rather nonchalant: "You meet the *coroa* [head of trafficking] and ask for dope. Tell him that you want to sell dope. To start with, the *coroa* gives you *balinhas* ['candies', small wrapped portions of herbal cannabis]. Then, if the *coroa* realizes that you're a clever scamp, you'll gain ground in crime, and keep growing" (Caio, another inmate from Salvador). After their first experiences as a *vapor* (errand boy), *olheiro* (look-out) or *jóquei* (seller) for a *boca de fumo* (drug den),[11] a few young inmates managed to ascend to advanced positions in the hierarchy of the local drug trade, becoming a den manager, which implied dealing with considerable amounts of money.

In Salvador, a look-out may earn as little as R$100 (US $20) per week, while sellers can make around US $100 per week and den managers (who receive commissions) up to 5–10 times the equivalent of Brazil's monthly minimum salary (approximately US $200, cf. Lima, 2019; Zoettl, 2022). However, the small number of youths who came to manage a *boca* – which is different from owning it, a role reserved for senior traffickers who normally do not reside in the neighbourhood and run several dens at distance, even when imprisoned – bemoaned the responsibility and risks involved: "It's very risky, you keep drugs, a gun, a lot of things, of your responsibility. If you lose them, what's gonna happen? He [the owner] is the one who really makes money […]" (Danilo, another inmate from Salvador).

Though all youths confirmed drug trafficking to be a seller's market, with an abundance of clients and rapid turnover, it is also highly competitive. Drug gangs frequently organize raids (*bonde*) into competing factions' territory, not necessarily with the aim of taking over a particular area, but simply in retaliation for raids suffered before: "They raid us all the time. They raid here, we raid there. And so on. They kill one of us, we kill one of them. That's how

[11] In Rio de Janeiro, according to Dowdney (2003: 48) the term *vapor* is used for dealers who sell directly to clients at the *boca de fumo*, while in Salvador the term denotes youths who run small errands for a drug faction (Oliveira, 2016: 103).

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it keeps on going" (Caio). Even within a faction, there is a need to be constantly on the watch: "You can't trust anybody, because if you trust too much, that trust will lead to your death" (Danilo). Holding a lucrative position, such as manager or seller for a well-frequented den, means that "there's always someone wanting your place" (Enzo, another inmate from Salvador). "Crime is like this. Everyone cuts his own path. […] There's a lot of 'big eyes' [covetousness] out there. They see you're selling a lot of drugs, earning more prestige. Soon, they start to muck you about […]" (Fábio, another inmate from Salvador).

As in other professions, a successful career in the drug trade requires talent, skills and commitment. While it is easy to get started, it is more difficult to prosper. Many youths complained of what they saw as modest incomes, not only considering the risks of the trade, but also in relation to their growing aspirations as consumers. Gil, an inmate from Salvador who started selling drugs when he was 14, recalled that "it wasn't as profitable as I'd like it to be, it was barely enough for anything. I bought some clothes, shoes. It wasn't even enough for my food. When I was using drugs, the money ran dry quickly." Hélder, who started dealing aged 13 when the Lunatic's Gang installed a den in his neighbourhood, likewise mentioned that "those who use drugs work themselves to death". Making around US $150 per week, he argued that "to become rich, you have to rob. Dealing doesn't pay. Robbery does."

To supplement their income most youths involved in drug dealing thus sooner or later started committing armed robberies. Firearms and ammunition in Brazil are readily available (see Oliveira, 2016: 121; Zoettl, forthcoming) and may be bought at the city market or leased from the local drug faction. A calibre .38 revolver – spurned, among senior traffickers, as an entry-level firearm – costs around US $300–450. Gil, who turned to robbery when he was 17 and "realized that trafficking wasn't paying out for me", managed to keep two revolvers for himself when the Lunatic's Gang took over his neighbourhood from the Peace Command, his employer at the time: "I took them from the guys there, the guys died, they [the guns] stayed with me. Most of the stuff I handed over to the guys from BDM [Lunatic's Gang], as they told me to do. The guns, I kept." Though continuing to sell drugs (now for the Lunatic's Gang), owning two firearms enabled Gil to substantially increase his income by robbing butcher shops, bakeries and other businesses: "In one robbery alone, I made 6,000 [US $1,500]. In one day. Since it was me and another guy, it was 3,000 each."

In addition to its higher profitability, many youth mentioned what they called the "adventure" and "adrenaline" associated with robbery. Antônio, who in Salvador used to sell cannabis and cocaine for the Lunatic's Gang, explained that "I'm into drug dealing, but honestly, my addiction is robbery. It's the adventure that is good. The adventure of that damn

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life we lead, which is good." Danilo, who had never been arrested for selling drugs but was convicted for a felony murder during a robbery, said that he started robbing "to raise [his income]. But also because I like going out robbing. Adrenaline." Ítalo, another inmate from Salvador, stressed that: "I don't like to live on just one adrenaline. I like several adrenalines. So I robbed, to enjoy an extra adrenaline. When there was the chance to steal a car, we would take it. To steal a motorcycle, we'd go for it. There were times when we'd bring along three, four cars at a time, each driving one. That's true life!"

The adventurous aspects of crime were among the few positive memories the youths recalled when looking back on their short but eventful biographies. They referred to moments in life that attested to their social agency, that is, their role as autonomous actors and not mere victims of past deprivations or their present loss of freedom. Out on the streets, the adventures of crime, together with the consumer behaviour they facilitated, allowed them to live up to the "sardonic picture of a leisured elite" (Matza and Sykes, 1961: 715), if only ephemerally. Though many, like Antônio, looked back on a childhood of emotional and economic tribulations, others emphasized that "I wasn't in need. There was no reason for me to get myself into this kind of life" (Enzo) or that "I did it for the fun of it" (Jaime, another inmate). Reflecting on what made him and his peers enter the world of crime, Antônio pondered that:

> I am, like it or not, as much as I am today what I am…. But I have also suffered in my life. And many of us are in this life because we have suffered. Because we know the daily life of suffering. Many out there, many, enter the life [of crime] for the thrill. Because women come in droves, money comes rolling in, this and that comes rolling in. Money is falling into your lap almost all the time. […] So they get excited about crime. But many enter out of need. Because, as the saying goes, it's the need that makes the thief.

A number of youths frankly admitted having turned to crime out of an unwillingness to accept poorly paid and/or heavy work. Gil, who for six months worked at the wholesale market delivering coal, returned to robberies because "I didn't want to keep carrying heavy loads, I wanted to make it easy for myself. Easy money." Others felt that, in retrospect, the criminal career they had embarked on was just one option among others. Kaique, an inmate from a smaller city who was dealing for the defunct Skull faction (*Caveira*) and was serving a term for kidnapping and armed robbery, argued that: "It's the world we chose […]. We could have gone other ways. Study, work. But I found this path easy, so I took it."

Gil and Kaique's accounts seem to confirm theories of rational choice, which regard "criminal acts as calculated, utility-maximizing conduct, resulting from a straightforward process of individual choice" (Garland, 2001: 130). In fact, 'easy money' (*dinheiro fácil*) has become a much-cited catchphrase in Brazilian popular criminologies to explain the magnetic

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appeal drug factions exert over the country's youths. The idea that right or wrong individual choices pave the way into crime also pervades the judicial appraisal of youth offending (see Zoettl, 2021). A close look at the narratives of the inmates from Bahia reveals, however, that their turn towards a life in conflict with the law transcends the horizon of an economistic cost/benefit/risk analysis, representing rather a knowingly illusory attempt to regain their sovereignty within the boundaries of consumer capitalism (see Zoettl, 2022).

Antônio, for instance, stressed that: "I never ask for anything from others. I take care of myself. Because I've always thought that the worst thing is if you depend on someone else." At the same time, however, he made it clear that for him the notion of 'neediness' transcends the bare necessity to feed oneself: "In spite of what I've been through, [like] suffering hunger…. At the end of the year, at Christmas time, any time of festivities…. To me, what you quoted, to be [well] dressed, [have] gym shoes … is a form of need. And any need leads people to this [crime]." In turn, Leandro, a youth from a smaller city who had been sentenced for homicide, argued that: "When I turned 14, I could no longer live at my mother's expense. I got involved in that life. I got involved in that life of crime, because I lacked [other] opportunities, which they didn't give me, out there."

Though Leandro's account may be read as a self-justifying discourse indebted to the institutional setting within which the interview took place (Leandro was about to be released on probation),[12] it attests – as much as Antônio's desire to appear at festivities in appropriate clothing – to the values of self-determination and personal responsibility of liberal consumer society. Given the youths' knowledge that the means they have chosen for their quest for comprehensive citizenship will make them fail in the long run, it would, however, be deceptive to mistake their "socially constituted sense of the game" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 120–121) for the calculated choice to live on the underside of law. Even if some inmates claimed to have trusted that only their comrades-in-arms (and not they themselves) would get arrested, most were expecting to sooner or later "pay for what we've done" (Vanderlei, an inmate sentenced for kidnapping and armed robbery). Their joining of the world of crime thus "obey[ed] an economic logic without obeying narrowly economic interests" (Bourdieu, 1992: 50).

Growing up amidst the omnipresent physical and symbolical violence of the suburban periphery, it is often very personal experiences that trigger a juvenile's crossing of the red line. Murilo, a youth from a small town in the interior, for instance, emphasized that: "I

[12] According to Brazil's juvenile law, custodial sentences are for a maximum of three years and have to be revalidated every six months (ECA, 1990: Art. 121, § 122).

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always had good shoes, good clothes, a good bike when I was a kid." However, when his father was shot dead by the police when he was 12 years old, he lost his way. Soon after joining the Skull faction in Salvador (where he quickly rose to the post of a den manager), he set about installing the faction in his hometown. At the age of 17, he was convicted for double murder:

> I started dealing drugs because I'm really revolted with my life. I'm a kid who had it all. Mom gave me everything, Dad gave me everything. My family was always present, but […] I'm really rebellious because of my father's death. It was like an outcry then, my mind turned upside down. I entered the life of crime, and I took pleasure in it. I like action, I like robbing. And I'm good at it.

Being crime

Scholars agree that not only joining, but also staying with or quitting a drug faction in Brazil is a voluntary decision. To leave Rio de Janeiro's Red Commando (CV), for instance, "doesn't pose a problem, as long as you don't owe money" (Misse, 1997: 13). The youths from Salvador confirmed that the decision to quit the faction would normally not even be frowned upon: "If you say: 'Hey *coroa*, it's enough, I'll let it be', then that's it. Without a problem. If you're owing, you pay what you owe, and quit" (Ítalo). Murilo likewise confirmed that "If I say, 'Listen, *coroa*. I'm no longer getting involved.' 'Really? Damn, that's fine. You'll take it easy?' 'I'll take it easy.' [...] There's not this pressurizing: 'get out of crime and you're going to die'. It doesn't work like that."

Many of the inmates from Salvador, most of whom on average were looking back on four years of involvement, expressed their weariness and their disenchantment with the promises of crime. Apart from the mentioned frustration with the narrow margins of drug dealing, the desire to be an ordinary citizen was evident in several narratives. Paulino, a 16-year-old youth from southern Bahia, for instance, reflected on the prospects of "Being part of society. Be able to walk around every day without fear of being checked by the police. [Not] to be afraid to enter a shop. [Of] someone passing by, looking askance at you. To be able to walk around with your head held high." Osmar, who started dealing in his hometown at the age of 12 and later moved to Salvador where he joined the Lunatic's Gang, likewise mentioned (he was 16 at the time of the interview) that he "often dreamed" of "quitting this life [of crime]". In turn, Enzo, who had started selling drugs aged 13, declared (now 17 years old): "That life isn't for me any longer."

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Though aspiring to a life in accord with the law, the youths' biographies were characterized by constant reoffending. Paulino had been convicted at age 14 for armed robbery, was paroled after a year and a half, and arrested and sentenced around four months later, again for armed robbery. Osmar had been sent to Salvador juvenile prison for drug trafficking and illegal possession of firearms aged 14, was transferred to a semi-secure facility which he ran away from, and was newly arrested for trafficking two months later. Enzo had been arrested for the first time for robbery aged 14, when he received a conditional discharge, and a year later for armed robbery. He was remanded in custody for a week,[13] released, arrested again for armed robbery around six months later and eventually sentenced to a term in Salvador juvenile prison. Released on parole after two years, he was arrested two months later (having already attained the age of majority) for robbery and receiving, but later acquitted for lack of evidence. However, nine months later he was again arrested for armed robbery, and sentenced to four and a half years in prison.

The paradox of the simultaneous attraction to and disdain for the world of crime is familiar to all actors of Brazilian juvenile justice, as recidivism rates, though not officially kept track of, are known to be very high (see Zoettl, 2021). But even for the juveniles themselves, their convoluted life trajectories present a conundrum. Paulino, for instance, reflected on his return to Salvador juvenile prison: "I keep thinking every day [about the fact] that I've come here again […]. I keep asking myself anew every day I wake up. Almost [another] two years here … I keep asking myself [why?]." Ronaldo, a youth from a smaller city, who was arrested for the first time at the age of 15 and was in custody for the sixth time when I met him, recalled that after his last release: "I kept thinking … damn, I won't ever go back there [the youth prison], I don't want that crap for me. But, like it or not, after a while I started getting involved again. Robberies."

Several inmates interpreted this phenomenon of 'unintentional' recidivism (either by themselves or their peers) as an inherently contradictory failure of will. Beto, for instance, argued that: "For everyone there's way [out of crime]. But those who want [to quit], don't quit. Everybody wants [to quit], but nobody does quit. Because they don't want [to quit]." Others, like Antônio, pointed out their reluctance to do without the income from crime: "You have to have the financial means [to quit]. Because the means I have today, whatever I have saved, whatever I have to wear, what I wear today, comes from crime. If I get out of crime, I will lose all of that." While finding it difficult to put into words why they stuck to their life as 'bandits' in the face of high risks and modest returns, most youths agreed that, one way or

[13] Juvenile suspects may be remanded in custody for a maximum of 45 days (ECA, 1990: Art. 108).

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another, they had become accustomed to crime: "It's not hard to get out because someone will corner you. It's hard to get out because once you get used to it [crime], then there it goes" (Samuel, another inmate).

The youths' experience of habituation to crime – described by one of Oliveira's interlocutors from Salvador's adult prison as the "point where you can't go back, I mean, you can, but you get used to it" (2016: 110) – obviously points to a number of sociological accounts of deviance, be it in the tradition of Foucault's (1979) notion of the production of delinquency or Becker's (1963) theory of labelling. Without delving into these theories, it seems reasonable to assert that they focus primarily on the social conditions of the making or naming of deviant behaviour and the ascription of deviant identity, and less on the individual processes of adherence to deviance and adoption of deviant identity. Foucault's main concern, for instance, is to describe how, historically and by means of shifting techniques of governmentality (2007), disciplinary institutions like the prison have "succeeded extremely well in producing delinquency" (1979: 277).

Similarly, Becker – though taking individual life stories as his starting point – is primarily interested in exploring how "social groups create deviance" and in showing that the "deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied" (1963: 9). Even Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', which describes the social structuring of human behaviour and the interplay of social structures and individual "predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination" (1977: 214), seems to favour the analysis of the structures that produce practices ("the habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices"; , 1977: 82) over the analysis of how practices (re)produce structure.

The difficulty in resolving the contradiction between the youths' good intentions and their bad deeds points to Bourdieu's warning against "presenting the voluntary decision of the subject of practice as the principle of the original practice which generates the durable inclination to practice" (1992: 49) or, more simply, passing off "the things of logic as the logic of things" (Marx apud Bourdieu, 1990: 61). Applied to the lives of the Bahian 'thieves', this means distinguishing the situational rationale for their adherence to crime from the reasons that made them become deviant in the first place. It is the youths' adaptation to the social structures of the *favela* that has generated in some of them, to use Bourdieu's words, a "durable inclination" towards the practice of non-legal self-subsistence. The individual logic behind the voluntary decision to become or remain a 'bandit' – that is, the variety of personal reasons that make a youth act in a certain way at a certain point in his/her biography – is different from the social mechanisms that originally re/produced their delinquency (the logic

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of things). As Bourdieu argues, the underlying principles of individual practice must be sought "in the relationship between external constraints which leave a very variable margin for choice, and dispositions which are the product of economic and social processes that are more or less completely reducible to these constraints" (1992: 50).

In Brazil, a number of scholars have sought to better understand both the attribution and appropriation of the, concomitantly, individual and social identity of the 'bandit'. Misse's concept of 'criminal subjection', for example, attempts to grasp the process of essentialization of a criminal self which entails "the domination (not only predominance) of the degraded identity over all other social roles of the individual" (2010: 23). In line with this, Teixeira has analysed how dealers from Rio de Janeiro gradually assimilate the lifestyle evoked by the social imagery of the 'bandit', in what is "not just a process of acceptance of the accusation, but a process within which the individual 'transforms' itself into the accusation, a process of construction of the 'bandit' as a subject: an individual recognized as the bearer of a peculiar, criminal subjectivity" (2009: 21).

Salvador's juvenile prisoners' acknowledgement of having "got used" to crime is the groped-for verbalization of this gradual, simultaneously imperceptible (from the actors' perspective of immediate practice) and conspicuous (as concerns its results) process of essentialization of criminal identity. As a lived practice, it is intrinsically beyond expression for the practitioner. Seeking to explore it, "something is constantly slipping away, something that can be neither said nor 'taught' but must be 'practiced'" (Certeau, 1984: 77). Beto's dialectical paradoxism – that it is possible to quit, everybody wants to quit, but nobody does quit – reflects this difficulty of comprehending (and thus, potentially, controlling) the mechanisms of one's gradual subjection to the idea of being a criminal. It is the youths' daily practice of 'being crime' that re/produces their "learned ignorance" of the causes of their slipping and sinking into the world of crime, concealing "even from their own eyes, the true nature of their practical mastery" (Bourdieu, 1977: 19) of their criminal lifeworld.

Violent identities

Even though virtually all juvenile offenders in Brazil grew up in the *favela*, it goes without saying that not every youth who grows up in the *favela* becomes an offender. The stories of the inmates from Salvador, however, display a recurring factor that persistently drives their deviant trajectories: the continuous experience of suffering violence and exerting violence. In

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their narratives about how they came to "being what I am today" (Antônio), severe physical violence is usually the guiding thread that links the pivotal moments in their biographies, from their early childhood to their modest or stellar careers in the drug business, their first encounters with the police, their multiple incarcerations, to their coming of age as adult prisoners and, sometimes, their premature deaths.

As with Antônio, often the experience of violence precedes the first steps into deviance. Several youths recounted that a close relative had died violently: Tarik, for instance, a youth from Salvador who was serving his fifth custodial sentence, had witnessed at the age of 10 his mother and aunt being shot dead by a rival trafficker of his uncle. Even those who were not directly confronted with violence before committing their first crimes normally grew up in a violent environment. As Feltran notes, from around the 1990s, drug-related violence in Brazil, "previously alien to 'families' and distant from 'workers' began to appear in the daily lives of all residents" of economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods (2010: 63). The memories of one of Oliveira's interlocutors from Salvador's adult prison exemplifies this omnipresence of violence in the life of many underage citizens:

> When I was about 10 years old, doctor, we had a little field in the back where we used to play ball. From time to time we would see the police come, open the boot and shoot, killing someone inside the car. At times, they would capture someone alive, beat them, give them a thrashing, throw them on the ground and then shoot them. (Oliveira, 2016: 171)

Soon after starting to deal drugs or commit 'minor' property crimes, such as mobile phone muggings, violence turned into an omnipresent reality for the Bahian youths. Although all have their own stories of how they dipped into the world of crime, most narratives testified to the unavoidability of violence within their life as 'bandits', and its main venues: the drug business, policing and youth custody. In the drug business, violence is the only means available to enforce a creditor's claims: "There are some [street dealers] who 'crash' […] the drugs, don't pay for the drugs [they received on consignment]. Or lose the gun [which they had borrowed] and don't want to pay for it. Some drug users buy on tick and don't pay. Then we have to go there and resolve the situation. *On the spot?* No, there's a deadline. But when the deadline runs out, we pass the squeegee [kill]" (Ítalo).

Drug factions also sanction what they consider misconduct by their members or the local population. For repeated or severe transgressions, the standard penalty is death, often preceded by torture. Much like the police's arbitrary exercise of the Brazilian state's crumbling monopoly of violence, traffickers' violence often represents rather a ceremonial "manifestation of force" than "an act of justice" (Foucault, 1979: 50), and for a faction's

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novice, to step forward for the execution of a death warrant is an "effective way of showing one's value and determination" (Conceição, 2015: 69). Uriel, a youth from a smaller city, for instance, was approached by the local head of trafficking to eliminate a rival who had killed a member of the faction, responding, as he recalled: "Right away, *coroa*, right away!" Still new to the trade, however, it took him three attempts to complete the job: "Twice, I got scared. The next time, I poked the bullet [shot] and came here [to the juvenile prison]. I told him [the *coroa*] that I had never done this before, but he said, 'Take it easy, there'll be plenty of opportunities.'"

The youths' experience of intra- and inter-faction violence is sooner or later accompanied by the experience of the equally ubiquitous police violence. The modus operandi of policing in Brazil and its extraordinary death toll have been explored by a number of authors (see, for instance, Caldeira, 2000; Dias et al., 2015; Larkins, 2015; Misse, 2011; Nunes, 2018; Alves, 2016) and exceed the scope of this article. Suffice it to note that almost all inmates reported having sustained physical violence in the course of their frequent arrest, with some of them describing in detail the variety of torture techniques they were subjected to (see Zoettl, forthcoming). To quote just one example, Gil recounted having been asphyxiated with a plastic bag (the most commonly used technique in Brazil, see Larkins, 2015) on several occasions, which led him to develop a (somewhat inefficient) tactic to escape the torment of suffocation: "The first [bag] I was able to rip, I ripped it with my teeth. I pulled it in with my breath and ripped it. After I had ripped that one, he picked another one and put it [over his head]. Then they started beating me. Both my eardrums burst, my mouth, my nose started bleeding. Then I fainted."

Eventually sentenced to a term in juvenile prison, the youths' experience of violence continues seamlessly, if in a more moderate fashion. Juvenile custody in Bahia mirrors both the horizontal (between youths) and vertical (between youths and state actors) violence experienced at liberty (see Zoettl, 2021). In Salvador juvenile prison, novice inmates undergo a kind of rite of passage called 'flouring' (*farinhagem*), which puts to test a newcomer's resilience and discretion. Those who hold out against the physical anguish inflicted on them by their peers (which include blows with the elbow into the thighs, tying up and pulling of fingers, thumbs or the penis with a thread, and chokeholds that cause temporary loss of consciousness) are considered righteous 'thieves'. Those who fail to do so (calling for help) are regarded as 'rats' (*caguete*) and end up being plagued throughout their incarceration. For both 'rats' and 'thieves', however, suffering physical violence at the hands of the prison's

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staff is a commonplace experience: "A guard who [says he] has never beaten up a bandit, he's lying. All of them have thrashed bandits" (Caio).

Conclusion: Youth as crime, crime as youth

In Brazil, the forging of juvenile identities through continuous experiences of violence has produced a whole new class of citizens, identified and identifying themselves with the social picture of the criminal anti-citizen. In the process of 'becoming crime', to be considered a 'bandit' and considering oneself as such turn into the two indistinguishable halves of a young citizen's self/image, simultaneously socially engendered and individually reified. As the narratives of the inmates from Salvador demonstrate, Brazilian 'bandits' share not only "the label and the experience of being labelled as outsiders" (Becker, 1963: 10), but pre-eminently a history of facing and exercising physical violence that goes hand in hand with their socioeconomic marginalization. Being a 'bandit' means to be, concomitantly, the product and instigator of a spiral of violence in which organized crime and the state's response to it (which often amounts to state crime) keep crushing the lives of young citizens and their mostly juvenile victims.

Entering the labyrinth of crime at an early age, it quickly becomes difficult to escape the dynamics of a lifeworld within which one acts both as host and vector for the proliferation of violence. The vicious circle of suffering and exerting violence, whether in the *favela* or in juvenile prison, is a process whose only possible resolution is seen, both by society and by the youths themselves, in taking it to its end point. The popular Brazilian saying "A good bandit is a dead bandit" mirrors the peremptory character of the social ascription of the juvenile offender as a "subject who 'carries' crime in his soul" (Misse, 2010: 21). At the limits of criminal essentialization, ceasing to be a 'bandit' can only mean ceasing to be a person. Impersonating the idea of a criminal self, the juvenile 'bandit's' identity cannot but be thought in terms of criminal violence, socially and individually. As Antônio said: "We who enter this life already know what will happen. It's prison or death. In prison, I already am."

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