Mortal Doubles

Youth, Crime and the Police in Brazil

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ABSTRACT: Police violence and the killing of suspects are ubiquitous in Brazil, with most victims being young people from the urban periphery. Policing in Brazil has been discussed in terms of postcolonial and authoritarian continuities, the social construction of criminal identities, and racialized forms of citizenship. Drawing on documentary evidence and narratives from inmates at a juvenile prison in Salvador, Bahia, this article explores police violence from the victims' perspectives. It argues for an understanding of police (ab)use of force that considers both structural causes and the personal nature of police–suspect encounters, where the line between committing and fighting crime is increasingly blurred. The abuse and killing of juvenile offenders are conceived as the culmination of interpersonal and intergroup skirmishes between adversaries caught up in a spiral of mimetic rivalry, in which violence has become an end in itself.

KEYWORDS: Brazil, crime, death, drug dealing, police violence, torture, violence, youth violence

In 2023, according to official figures, 6,393 Brazilian citizens were killed—by the police. In the state of Bahia, the main focus of this article, police forces killed 1,699 people, resulting in a rate of deaths caused by law enforcement of 12.0 per 100,000 inhabitants (FBSP 2024: 57). This is more than 32 times the rate at which police kill in the US, more than 863 times the rate at which police kill in Germany, and more than 3,319 times the rate at which police kill in England and Wales.[1] The state of Bahia now leads the national statistics tables for police lethality, which, until 2022, were headed by the state of Rio de Janeiro. Police killings in Bahia account for more than a quarter of all homicides committed in the state, meaning that one in four homicides is perpetrated by the Bahian police themselves (FBSP 2024: 22–23). The proportion of homicides committed by the police may even be higher, as official statistics do not include those caused by death squads, which are often formed by current or former police officers (CPI 2005; IHRC 2011; Misse 2011; MPBA 2024; Nunes 2018). The victims are mainly young citizens, with almost three out of four individuals killed by the police in Brazil being under 30 years old (FBSP 2024: 67).

Scholars have discussed different aspects and causes of police violence in Brazil, such as the social construction of "disposable" criminal identities and the criminalization of underprivileged neighborhoods (Misse 2011); the broad social consensus and deliberate political incentives that encourage the (ab)use of police force (Albernaz 2020; Manso 2020; Misse 2011; Nunes 2018; Scheper-Hughes 2015); the racial imbalances in the distribution of violence and the "necropolitical" nature of police killings (Alves 2016; Vargas and Alves 2010); and judicial indifference toward evidence of police violence against suspects (Misse 2011; Zoettl 2021).

With regard to the institutional dynamics of policing in Brazil, researchers have explored the performative nature and "spectacularization" of police operations (Larkins 2013, 2015), police officers' quest to provide "instant" justice aimed at redressing perceived shortcomings in the criminal justice system (Caldeira 2000; Oliveira 2016; Rodrigues 2022), and the widespread use of violence as a means of investigation (Marques 2010; Soares 2019). In this context, a number of authors have traced historical continuities in the use of violent force by the police, from Brazil's military dictatorship (1964–1985) through to the current militarization of its police units (Manso 2020; Marques 2010; Misse 2011; Souza 2020).

The soaring number of police homicides suggests that the killing of suspects has become an ingrained aspect of policing in Brazil, rather than being a consequence of high levels of crime. In Bahia, despite a virtually unchanged homicide rate over the past decade, the proportion of homicides perpetrated by the police has increased almost sixfold.[2] Taking into account the structural causes of police violence outlined by the authors mentioned earlier, this article primarily focuses on its intrinsic characteristics. As Schinkel (2004: 5) notes, all explanations of violence, by tracing it back to other social phenomena, tend to marginalize an essential aspect of violence, namely the possibility "of violence occurring for no reason other than itself." In this sense, the narratives of young people's encounters with police officers presented here are intended to illuminate police violence from both what Schinkel terms a "determinist" and a "formalist" perspective (2004: 14). While the former examines violence as a means to a given end, the latter acknowledges violence's "autotelic" aspects, its aesthetics, and the ways in which it is often inflicted for its own sake, or in response to the actual or presumed violence of others.

The youths quoted in this article naturally describe their encounters with the police from their own point of view. However, their accounts align closely with those of police officers, as documented in studies on policing in Brazil, from Rio de Janeiro (HRW 2016; Rodrigues 2022; Salem and Larkins 2021) and São Paulo (Nunes 2018; Souza 2020) to the state of Bahia (Soares 2019). In particular, Souza's (2020) autobiographical account illustrates the extent to which the violence perpetrated by officers reflects the bellicose ethos propagated by the police institution and partially re-enacts the violence experienced by police cadets during their training.

In what follows, I will first examine the qualities, techniques, and apparent purposes of the use of police violence, as manifested in the narratives of juvenile offenders from the state of Bahia. As their stories suggest, the illicit use of police force often serves investigational purposes and/or functions as a form of extrajudicial punishment. Similar observations have been made in police studies in different geographical contexts. In the US, for example, the use of violence to extract confessions, known as "third degree" interrogation, was found to be widespread (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993: 72–77). So-called curbstone justice or physical punishment "administered by policemen in lieu of the remedies of the penal code" (Bittner 1970: 104) has likewise been observed not only in the US but also in contexts as diverse as France (Fassin 2013), Portugal (Zoettl 2017), and India (Jauregui 2013).

However, the concepts of "violence for investigation" and "violence as instant justice" are insufficient to explain many of the encounters recounted by the young people from Bahia. According to their narratives, the unlawful practices employed by the police often hindered rather than facilitated their legal prosecution. To help explain this discrepancy, I will outline how certain practices relate to police officers' involvement in the illegal drug and arms markets in Brazil. The nature of police (ab)use of force must therefore be assessed against the backdrop of the intricacies of the police–crime relationship. Finally, I will argue that police violence not only stems from and furthers biopolitical notions of criminal identities prevalent in Brazilian society at large, but is also the result of seemingly mundane conflicts between two parties who are engaged in a war that has become an end in itself: officers of the police force and marginalized juveniles from the urban periphery, the prime victims of lethal police violence.

Evidence for this research was gathered over a period of three years at the Youth Prosecution Service, the Juvenile Court, and two juvenile prisons in the city of Salvador. At the Youth Prosecution Service and the Juvenile Court, the hearings and trials of more than two hundred suspects were observed. The mainstay of this article, however, consists of testimonies from male juvenile inmates (aged 13–20) in one semi-secure and one secure juvenile prison in Salvador (CASE Brotas and CASE Salvador). Recorded interviews were conducted in private with 35 inmates. Interviewees were selected less on the basis of formal criteria than on the rapport established during the initial period of participant observation. The trustworthiness of the youths' narratives was assessed according to their internal coherence, the reports of other inmates and staff, and their consistency with external records (including police and court files, press reports of crimes that had attracted public attention, etc.).

Slaps and Kicks

The killing of suspects by the police in Bahia usually does not happen "out of the blue." In most cases, the victims are known to the police as offenders and in some cases have received some kind of prior warning. Osmar, a youth from Salvador who was 17 years old at the time of the interview and had been convicted of drug dealing, robbery, and possession of firearms, recalled his first contact with the police as follows:[3]

> My first [encounter with the police] was in Manguinho. They ran into me, stopped me, and slapped me a few times in the face. He asked me if I was of age. Because if I were of age, if he'd caught me in the dead of the night, he would pass the fucking cutting line [cerol], brother. To kill me. Then they said, straight out: "Hey pal, I'm crazy about running into you at dawn, 'cause I'm gonna fire all my cartridges into your face. You'd better watch out!" (Osmar)

Slaps in the face are at the lower end of the scale of physical violence and appear to be commonplace during temporary detention and questioning. Other forms of aggression reported were punches and kicks to the body or head, blows with a pistol grip, gunstock or wooden slat, and the use of pepper spray. Physio-psychological or degrading "moral" violence (cf. Fassin 2013: 129) included cutting suspects' hair, breaking their personal belongings (e.g., bicycles or mobile phones) and, during overnight detention, depriving them of food or drinking water. Suspects were often threatened with death and, in a few cases, with sexual violence, such as anal penetration with a broomstick. Frequently, photos of suspects were taken and disseminated on social media or leaked to the press.

Various youths from Bahia reported the use of violence for investigational purposes, such as demands to reveal the hiding places of arms and drugs, or the names and whereabouts of other suspects. Yago, an 18-year-old from a small municipality near Salvador who had been convicted of robbery, recounted: "Whew, and how they beat me! They gave me a thrashing. They wanted me to hand over the gun, but I didn't tell them where it was." Similarly, Zacarias, a 16-year-old from Salvador, stated:

> They already began hitting me in the trunk [of the patrol vehicle]. He punched me in the face, they even broke my mouth …. [Then, at the police station] they started hitting me, wanting the gun. *In what way?* Punching me in the face. Kicking me in the belly. *What else?* Just that, wanting the gun …. Then they said if I didn't give them the gun, they'd kill me. (Zacarias)

The beatings suffered by Yago and Zacarias were apparently intended to facilitate the police investigation against them. In other cases, however, the purpose of using violent force was not

to establish the truth but rather to exercise a form of ad hoc justice for offenses actually committed or, alternatively, for a juvenile's presumed status as a habitual offender. Ítalo, an 18-year-old from the metropolitan area of Salvador who had been convicted of robbery and possession of firearms, reported that in most cases, when being detained by the police, "you go to the police station, get your beating, are released and go wherever you want." He also recounted that "sometimes they would stop me [on the street] just to beat me up," and that this happened "because they knew I was part of the movement [of drug dealing]." Gil, an 18-year-old from Salvador, recalled that once he was known to the police because "they had already caught me," whenever they encountered him, "it went like this: 'There's something for us here!' And [they] started beating me."

What the Salvador inmates report is consistent with findings from studies of policing in Brazil. With regard to investigational violence. Marques (2010: 111), drawing on the testimonies of Rio de Janeiro Civil Police officers collected by Benevides (1985),[4] notes that "many police officers justify the use of torture as an 'efficient' method of investigating crimes." One officer, for example, reflected: "We know he [the suspect] committed a robbery, but … did he really just commit one? And the others that I'm sure he has also committed, how do I get him to tell me about them?" (Benevides 1985, quoted in Marques 2010: 111). Similarly, Soares (2019: 64) quotes an officer of the Military Police of Bahia, who defends the necessity of using force to advance investigations: "If you do everything according to the letter [of the law], nothing works, nothing gets done. Unfortunately, you have to … give them a good beating to get them to open their mouths."

The use of violence as a form of delivering ad hoc justice has also been documented in research examining police practice in Brazil. In a study conducted by Human Rights Watch in Rio de Janeiro, for example, an officer described a torture session carried out on a murder suspect. The victim was beaten until he "didn't even have the strength to scream," which the officer said was done not to obtain any information "but to punish him" (HRW 2016: 17). The same notion of ad hoc justice, however, often implies not only painful physical punishment but also the killing of the suspect to ensure that the justice of the police will not be subsequently overturned by the proceedings of the judiciary. In this sense, Soares quotes another officer of the Bahian Military Police, who argues in the following way: "If I arrest him [the suspect], that pathetic bloke will be free again in two days and will go back to robbing people. I'm wasting my time. But if I kill him, he won't return to crime" (Soares 2019: 154).

Arms and Drugs

The idea of ensuring offenders get their just deserts is evident in many non-violent forms of police corruption as well. A significant number of the suspects questioned at the Salvador Youth Prosecution Service claimed that the police had planted drugs and weapons on them. Although such allegations are sometimes employed as a tactic of self-defense, the use of a so-called *kit flagrante* (lit. "in-flagrante-delicto kit," i.e., drugs and/or firearms carried by the police to incriminate suspects) has been observed by several authors, for example in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Misse 2011: 53; Nunes 2018: 201) but also in Bahia (Conceição 2015: 150–151).

Fabricating evidence is, of course, not unique to policing in Brazil. As Waddington (1999: 148) notes, referring to the US context, if officers "firmly believe that suspects have committed serious crimes, they may see little difference between building the strongest possible case they can and flagrantly concocting evidence." The "prospect of substantively guilty people … escaping justice because of procedural impediments to securing conviction,"

Waddington writes, "involves officers in corrupt activities that are done in the service [of] a higher ideal" (1999: 148). In Brazil, the idea that the courts impede the just punishment of criminals is reflected in the popular idiom "The police arrest and the court sets them free," suggesting that deviation from due process is necessary to ensure the delivery of de facto justice in law enforcement.

However, the inmates from Bahia reported that, on several occasions, the police thwarted their criminal prosecution rather than pushing it forward. For example, many offenders recounted episodes in which they were stopped and frisked by the police, only to be released without further ado after handing over personal belongings or illicit possessions such as drugs or firearms. Osmar, for instance, recalled that sometimes "they'd let me go in the middle of the road, they'd take the gun, the drugs, in a jiffy. My watch. And send me home. They'd let me go. Beat me up, leave me writhing in pain. Dropping me in the middle of the street."

Other youths reported similar experiences. Ronaldo, an 18-year-old who had been convicted of theft, robbery, and drug dealing, explained that, after robbing a driving school, "the cops arrested me with my gun and took it away. … They kept it. And they didn't even take me to the police station. They let me go, in another neighborhood." Alberto, from Salvador, convicted of robbery resulting in death, recalled being stopped by the police with a gun in his waistband when he was 13 years old: "But they didn't take me to the police station, you know? They didn't present the gun [at the station]. When we got to the main road, they pulled me out of the car. They gave me a few blows and told me to leave. The gun they took with them." Ítalo, in turn, claimed that the fabrication of evidence in one case had actually prevented his conviction in court:

> It was robbery and possession [of firearms]. [Article] 157, at gunpoint. *What kind of gun?* [Caliber] .40. But the .40, the cops kept it, and slipped another one on me, you know? They liked it, kept it, and slipped us another one. It was me and my partner. They got another gun and pretended that it was ours, you know? … They put a fake gun on us. That's why we got off [in court]. We had a real gun, a real .40. They kept the real one and slipped us the fake one. (Ítalo)

Arms and drugs in Brazil are the linchpin of an informal economy based on the imbroglios of law-making, law-breaking, and law enforcement. On the one hand, the drug commerce provides a supplementary source of income for local communities in economically disadvantaged areas. Even if the bulk of the profit from the drug trade—around 60 to 70 percent, according to Dowdney (2003: 60)—does not remain where it is generated, being retained by the heads of trafficking, who typically reside in other cities or states, the crumbs still contribute to the earnings of many favela households. Arms are an indispensable instrument of the drug trade, both to ensure that drugs sold on commission are actually paid for and to safeguard the territorial sovereignty of a drug gang (called a drug "faction" in Brazil) against its competitors. Easily accessible to anyone within the hierarchy of the drug trade, being either privately owned or borrowed/rented from the faction, guns are also used to commit robberies, which in turn generate part of the financial resources that keep the drug business running (see Zoettl 2022, 2023).

On the other hand, guns and drugs have become universal tokens of policing in Brazil, the iconographic insignia of crime per se. Whenever an offender is arrested, what was allegedly found in his possession is carefully arranged and photographed, usually against the backdrop of the coat of arms of the responsible police unit: mobile phones, banknotes, silver or gold watches and necklaces, wrapped portions of cannabis, cocaine or crack, ammunition and, last but not least, a revolver. Weapons and drugs serve both as trophies displayed to the public and as legal evidence presented in court, and are often the only proof of guilt that remains when a suspect

is killed in the course of what is recorded in police files as a shootout or, as it is often termed, officers' response to the "unjust aggression" of armed criminals (cf. Misse 2011: 33).

Trafficking in arms and ammunition in Brazil is as widespread as drug trafficking, albeit much less visible and more difficult to quantify. The country is the world's third-largest exporter of small arms, mainly selling to the US and Saudi Arabia (Nicolas et al. 2020: 21; annex). Domestically, arms are delivered to state security forces (armed forces, federal and state police), private security companies, and private individuals. A substantial proportion of these legal sales is diverted into the illicit arms trade, ultimately ending up in organized crime networks. A share of the exported weaponry is also reimported into the Brazilian black market, for example from Paraguay (CPI 2006b: 185).

Buying a firearm in Brazil is straightforward if the prospective owner registers as a collector, hunter, or sport shooter. Individuals in these categories are entitled to purchase large quantities of firearms and ammunition. Until 2023, collectors could purchase up to five firearms of permitted caliber and an additional five of restricted (police or military) caliber for *each* model in their collection. Hunters could purchase up to 60 firearms, and sport shooters up to 30. They could also purchase up to 5,000 units of ammunition annually for *each* permitted-caliber firearm and an additional 1,000 units for *each* firearm of restricted caliber.[5]

Surely even gun fanatics would find these quantities far beyond their personal needs. According to a 2006 parliamentary inquiry, more than half of all firearms seized at crime scenes and traced by the committee had been legally acquired. Around two-thirds of them had originally been sold either to private individuals or private security companies, while around 14 percent were reported to have been exported. Almost one-fifth of all firearms used in crime had originally been acquired by government agencies, mainly the police (71 percent) and the military (CPI 2006a: 11–15). A study conducted in Rio de Janeiro by the Small Arms Survey concluded that "state security forces – most notably the police – are the source of much of the assault rifle ammunition … leaking to criminal gangs" (Berman et al. 2007: 310).

Police studies confirm the use of illegal firearms to incriminate or kill suspects, thus corroborating Alberto's suspicions about his aforementioned encounter with the police in Salvador: that they had taken his gun without arresting him, intending to "keep it and [then] sell it to someone else. Or to keep it and kill someone, saying that they had returned fire." A São Paulo police officer interviewed by Souza, for example, recounts how he was unofficially instructed during his training in the use of a "cold" firearm ("one that was illegal and that the person didn't actually carry") to justify the killing of suspects by staging a gunfight (Souza 2020: 77). According to Soares, in Bahia the same practice is known as the use of a "candle":

> The candle is a weapon that, for example … the policeman is in a situation, he shoots in the dark in a problem neighbourhood, in a favela …. He fires shots here, he fires shots there …. A shot man is left behind, dead. … You can't be sure if the guy is a criminal. There's no weapon there to justify self-defence …. So you get a gun. That's the candle. … A candle like that can be worth gold when it comes to the freedom, when it comes to the job of the policeman. How will you justify the dead man there? … Whether he's a bandit or not, you take a gun, you put it in his hand, you fire a shot, so that the forensics can find gunpowder on his hand, [thus proving] that he shot at the police. (Soares 2019: 68)

Drawing on Thompson's concept of "moral economies," Fassin argues that, from the perspective of officers, unlawful techniques of policing are inscribed within "a set of values and emotions" that allow them to advocate what "otherwise would appear unreservedly immoral" (2013: 200). Their distrust of the judiciary, for example, leads officers to feel that "they have the right to take the law into their own hands" (2013: 197). Where "observers see flagrant abuse of ethical

precepts," Fassin maintains, police officers "are convinced they are acting in accordance with the moral code of their profession" (2013: 198).

Although this also applies to some extent to police work in Brazil, it is important to recognize the malleability of such "moral economies." The narratives of the Bahian youths show that the extralegal activities of the police are embedded in an adaptable value system, whose ethics are situational and subject to personal, political, and institutional interests. On the one hand, as Soares notes, police officers who engage in corrupt activities with drug gangs (e.g., demanding payment for not interfering with their activities) are considered by their colleagues to be "bad" officers who do not live up to the demands of the police's "warrior ethos," thus breaching the institution's internal morality (2019: 79–80). On the other hand, however, such practices (called *arrego*, or arrangement) are a well-known part of widespread local pacts between drug factions and the police (see Albernaz 2020: 121; Conceição 2015: 94; HRW 2016: 15;).

While the ad hoc "justice" delivered by the police in Brazil corresponds with a widespread social consensus that those involved in crime forfeit their civil rights and thus their entitlement to be treated according to the law (see Zoettl 2021), it is often motivated by quite prosaic values. Police violence and police corruption are not two independent phenomena but represent different facets of situational ethics and volatile value systems that permeate the police force. Rodrigues' (2022) study of police applicants in Rio de Janeiro exemplifies how illegal police activities are reinterpreted to fit the ethos of "just" law enforcement. Rodrigues cites the practice of taking "spoils of war" (i.e., the unofficial seizure of suspects' possessions), which "allows police officers not only to accumulate greater amounts of symbolic capital within the corps … but also significant amounts of economic capital from … reselling drug-trafficking booty" (2022: 10). To vindicate such practices, officers fall back on a variety of justifications, such as pointing to a supposedly "hypocritical society" of middle/upper-class drug consumers or arguing that they are merely pocketing the "dirty money" of crime (Rodrigues 2022: 12).

Torture and Death

Torture is a historically rooted practice in Brazil that became widely visible only during the military regime, when it began to be used against middle-class political opponents (Marques 2010: 91; Miranda and Lage 2007: 2). Its contemporary systematic use against "ordinary" offenders has been documented by numerous researchers (e.g., Caldeira 2000; Larkins 2015; Marques 2010; Misse 2011; Scheper-Hughes 1992). Consistent with these observations, several juveniles from Salvador and other Bahian cities reported having been severely mistreated during their detention or interrogation, with strangulation, waterboarding, suffocation with a plastic bag, and electric shocks being the most frequently applied techniques. Tarik, an 18-year-old from Salvador convicted of robbery and possession of firearms, recalled the following incident:

> When I left the little bar, they caught me. They took me to an abandoned house and started torturing me. … They started beating me up a lot. They got hold of a bucket, a towel. … They started to strangle me, a "lion-killer" [rear naked choke], I even fainted. I blacked out, stopped seeing anything, everything was dark. I woke up with a kick to my head, someone stepping on my face. Then, he already had the water ready, and started drowning me, and punching me in the stomach. (Tarik)

Comaroff and Comaroff (2016: ix) have pointed to the resurgence of the "punitive spectacle" in the form of "ever more flagrant 'expressive violence' of law enforcement almost everywhere." In the context of Brazil, Larkins (2013) similarly interprets the policing of Rio de Janeiro's favelas

as an "enactment of violent spectacle, performed by the Elite Special Forces" in order to "summon the state into being" (553; 569). However, with regard to torture—–the most extreme form of non-lethal violence—I argue that, while it is ritualistic and dramatic in character, it is not performative in the sense of representing a Foucauldian public enactment of crime and punishment, intended to restore social order.

Unlike the torments inflicted by drug factions on members of rival gangs or residents found guilty of serious misconduct (such as sexual crimes or informing on them to the police), which are widely circulated on social media, police torture generally takes place in private. While the former, in fact, serves as a theatrical display of a gang's violent power and readiness to exercise it, the latter, though often following a theatrical script, remains confined to the relationship between the police and offenders. In the narratives of the juveniles from Bahia, an "abandoned house" (as in Tarik's case) or "the bushes" (*o mato*) frequently feature as the scene of torture. Although it does occur that suspects are beaten up "in the middle of the street" (Ítalo), usually "the worst happens when it's just us and them," as Antônio, an 18-year-old from a small city near Salvador, reports. The following quotes illustrate a recurrent pattern of police torture in Brazil:

> Whenever they saw that I was about to black out … Because they pulled it [the bag over the head] until I fainted [saying that] if I wanted to say [confess] something, I should hit their leg. [Or] hit the ground, hit three times, if you want to say something. That's their code: hit three times if you want to say something. As I didn't have anything to say, I just hit to get some air. [But] they knew that I was hitting the ground in pretense. So they carried on, and made me black out. With the plastic bag, they made me black out five times. (Antônio)

> I said, "It wasn't me." Then they said, "When you're going to tell the truth, you hit the ground three times with your foot." When they saw me hit the ground three times, I heard them say, "Now he's going to talk." Then, when they took it off [the plastic bag from the head], I said: "No, I didn't do anything! You're going to kill me. You want me to own up to something I didn't do?" (Wilson)

The accounts of Antônio and Wilson depict torture as an almost playful, if violent, rite of subjugation. On many occasions, according to the youths' narratives, torture is used to extract information about the hiding places of drugs or arms that suspects are believed to have stashed away (Tarik: "If you have one [weapon, they think] you have another, you have drugs"), or else to make suspects inform on other offenders (Gil: "The [plastic] bag serves to make you betray the others"). As all offenders are familiar with torture, either through personal experience or via accounts from others, many youths have devised tactics to deal with it. These include pretending to faint or providing false information in the hope that the police will let them off: "There are times when you have to give them something. If you don't, it's torture without limits" (Ítalo). Another approach mentioned was to claim to have hidden guns or drugs at home, in order to persuade the police to take them where they can be watched by relatives: "Then they said that if I didn't hand over the gun, they would kill me. *What did you answer?* I said the gun was at my house. … That was a lie, just so they would take me to my home" (Zacarias).

A review of the interrogation records at Salvador's Youth Prosecution Service revealed that a number of suspects had not only confessed to their own crimes but also incriminated others. However, regardless of what prompted the youths to make statements while in police custody, it was evident that, in some cases, at least part of the information provided was either false or misleading. In light of the juveniles' accounts, the investigational value of police torture thus appears to be rather limited. While many of their stories point to the use of torture to coerce confessions, apparently little attention was paid to whether these actually corresponded to the

truth. Murilo, a 19-year-old member of a drug faction, for example, stated that the police had suffocated him with a plastic bag "just to torture me and make me confess to what I told them I did not do." Wilson, a 19-year-old from rural Bahia convicted of robbery resulting in death, recalled that "They had no proof it was me. They beat me, so I would take the responsibility." Xavier, also from rural Bahia, recalled the following incident:

> [They] beat me. They took me into the bushes. They put a gun in my face. Me saying: "It wasn't me." Him saying: "Yes, it was you." Me: "No, it wasn't me." … They started punching me in the back. They started kicking me with the tips of their boots. … Then they put a bag over my head, squeezed it so that I lost my breath, several times. … To see if I would say it was me. But I said I had nothing to do with it. (Xavier)

Xavier was, in all likelihood, innocent of the homicide for which he was later convicted. While all the inmates in Salvador ultimately admitted to their crimes over the course of their sentences even if they had denied them in court, Xavier continued to disavow any involvement almost two years after his arrest. He also claimed that the police had taken him to the scene of the crime and photographed him beside the body.

Legally speaking, a statement made by a suspect to the police, in itself, is of limited value. Not only are judges in Brazil aware of extralegal police practices, but acknowledgments made to the police can also be retracted at any time in court. Officers' zeal to extract confessions rather points to what Kant de Lima has termed the "inquisitorial nature" of the Brazilian police (1989: 66). Policing in Brazil, to some extent, continues to reflect the secretive procedures of the Portuguese Inquisition, within which torture played a central role in establishing legal (as opposed to actual) truth. As Kant de Lima (1989: 82) argues, the "discretionary, arbitrary activity of the inquisitorial police" enables the judiciary "to remain 'innocent', 'pure' with regard to the practical consequences of the application and enforcement of the law," which may also explain the aforementioned leniency of judges when faced with signs of police violence against suspects.

The testimonies of the Bahian juveniles suggest that, for the police, a confession is often more an end in itself than a means of investigation. By making a confession, the suspect acknowledges the superiority of police power and submits to the order of the state. Thus, it is of little importance whether a confession actually corresponds to the truth. By confessing to an offense they have committed, may have committed, or might possibly commit in the future, the presumed delinquents submit to their tormentor's authority, regardless of the outcome of any further judicial proceedings. While they may be able to evade justice once more before the judge, having "admitted" their guilt and, concurrently, their status of marginality under the pains of torture, order as such, understood as a system of social hierarchy, is re-established. As Kant de Lima (1989: 82) notes, one of the functions of the police in Brazil is precisely to "attribute different degrees of citizenship and civilisation to different segments of the population," sorting out those who are entitled "to their constitutional rights and the accusatory process" from those who are not.

Referring to the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Portugal, Lima (1986: 70) argues that confession is "first and foremost a ritual of subjection," in which the accused "legitimises the penalty received and acknowledges the order in the name of which he was punished." In modern Brazil, police torture partly serves a similar purpose: suspects submit to the power of the police and, by extension, to the order of the state, while simultaneously legitimizing, through their confession, the violent treatment received. Yet, even torture is reserved for those offenders deemed reformable in the eyes—and by the hands—of the police. Those considered incorrigible, and thus beyond redemption, face death rather than torture as the punishment of choice.

Death is as omnipresent in the lives of juvenile offenders in Bahia as torture. Many of my interlocutors reported being shot at by the police, and, at the time of my research, several suspects appeared before the public prosecutor with bandaged gunshot wounds. Almost all had lost friends or close relatives in confrontations with the police. Osmar, for example, recounted: "One is still alive. Another has left crime. Others have become Christians, they abandoned us. … And some have died, from gunshots. Now it's only me and a few others who are from my time" (Osmar).

Oliveira (2016: 178), in her study in Salvador's Central Prison, notes the ordinariness with which death is treated by inmates, who "minimize the possibility of dying, as if it were something banal." The shooting of suspects during police raids is common in Brazil and is generally condoned by the public, the judiciary, and other authorities (Misse 2011: 128). In Salvador, for example, in 2015 the Military Police shot dead 12 young people during an operation in the periphery that became known as the Cabula massacre. Of the 143 shots fired by the officers of a special police unit, 88 of which hit their targets, many were aimed either at the backs of the victims or from a top-down angle, suggesting premeditated homicide. Despite this, all officers involved were acquitted by the court of first instance.[6]

As with non-lethal police violence, scholars have discussed the summary killing of suspects as a form of extrajudicial law enforcement. Caldeira (2000: 194), for example, notes that such executions are viewed by the public as a form of immediate retribution "without the mediation of the justice system." Nunes (2018: 25) has linked the high number of killings by the Military Police in São Paulo to a "subculture within the police milieu that regards the practice of homicide as an efficient form of crime control." The stories of the youths from Bahia suggest that not only are actual or suspected crimes punishable by death, but also a suspect's presumed affiliation with the world of crime per se. Murilo, for instance, surmised that the police killings in his hometown represented an attempt to "cleanse" it of undesirable elements:

> Nobody there cares to investigate when a crook dies. They're only interested in rich people. … And who believes a crook anyway? Nobody does, that's life. … Like those policemen who think crooks should be buried under seven palms. … It's more about the killing itself. "You have to kill them because it's better for us." Clean up their city. … Guys who sold drugs, guys who stole, sometimes even drug users. … I saw many pivetes [street urchins] die. Pivetes who were dealing for me, dealing for my partners. … The police just killed them. (Murilo)

In the eyes of the media and the general public, the killing of suspects by the police confirms their status as criminals and is therefore rarely questioned. As far as the judiciary is concerned, Misse (2011: 131) has traced how, in practice, the investigation of police killings "constructs a 'truth' already known in advance." If a victim is found to have a criminal record, Misse notes, "in the opinion of many [legal] actors" this is seen as evidence "that he was a 'delinquent', 'enemy', 'felon' or 'subject'"—with the result that the killing is legally classified as self-defense (2011: 114). Consequently, investigations into police killings often examine "the dead, not the deaths" (Misse 2011: 52).

The killing of suspects by the police in Brazil not only constitutes a deadly, socio-hygienist strategy of crime control but also establishes, by the very act of killing, the delinquent identities it purports to eliminate. As Mavelli (2016: 123) observes, violence in late modernity has become "a governmental practice whose instrumental task is not, primarily, to contain or eliminate the threat stemming from certain populations, but to construct identities and subjectivities." Ultimately, it is the purging of the city of unwanted citizens, as mentioned by Murilo, that transmutes their worthlessness within the consumer economy into a reified social dangerousness—remedied by their elimination at the precise moment their criminal identity is constructed.

Mortal Doubles

From a less metaphysical point of view, the skirmishes between youths and the police in Brazil exhibit a number of fairly mundane characteristics. As other authors have noted, police killings often follow patterns of retaliation (Dias et al. 2015: 162). Caldeira (2000: 209) argues that in São Paulo, the police "have themselves entered into a cycle of private revenge instead of acting to avert" violence. In Salvador, according to Osmar, "if we burst [kill] a policeman, it's like a hornets' nest. They kill everyone." Leandro, a 19-year-old from a town near Salvador who had been convicted of homicide, commented that "the police are doing their job, as they call it," referring to the killing of five of his friends who were suspected of involvement in the murder of a police officer. The aforementioned Cabula massacre was also preceded by an armed conflict with the police. According to the mother of one of the victims, the previous month "there was a clash with police officers of RONDESP [a special police unit] in which two people were killed." As she stated, the officers said that "they would come back and that there wouldn't be any survivors the next time" (STJ 2016: 2).

Several inmates who belonged to a drug faction remarked that they avoided carrying guns when walking around in their neighborhoods. Gil explained this by saying that "if they [the police] catch somebody armed, they want to kill them. Kill the guy, put on a glove, put the gun in the guy's hand, fire a couple of shots and say that the guy exchanged fire with them." Others concurred: "If they catch you with a gun on your hip, they kill you right away" (Ítalo), or "if we were armed, they would have wanted to kill us" (Clayton).

Such narratives are corroborated by the accounts of police officers themselves. In the Human Rights Watch (HRW) study on policing in Rio de Janeiro mentioned earlier, an officer recalls another officer being reprimanded by his colleagues for arresting, rather than killing, an armed suspect, as "someone with an assault rifle cannot stay alive" (HRW 2016: 14). Soares (2019: 143), in turn, quotes a police officer from Bahia who confirms that the official narrative of armed confrontations is often fabricated: "There is hardly ever an exchange of fire. In an exchange of fire, the policeman also exposes himself to danger. The risk of dying is fifty-fifty for each side." Suspects arrested with weapons in their possession may thus be killed by the police to eliminate any risk they might pose in the future: "He may not shoot you, he may surrender, he may do anything. But what does the survival instinct of the police officer, who is a human being like everyone else, tell him to do in that first moment? Pull the trigger" (Soares 2019: 137).

As the above quotes show, the unofficial death penalty imposed when a gun is found in the wrong hands reflects, to some extent, the real dangers associated with police work in Brazil. In Bahia, six police officers were killed in confrontations with suspects in 2023 (FBSP 2024: 45). However, the summary killing of presumed criminals also points to notions of territoriality and power struggles between drug factions and law enforcement. Larkins (2013: 569), for example, mentions that Rio's special police unit BOPE used to raise "the squad's flag from a favela rooftop during invasions" in order to signal that "the favela is now under BOPE and, by extension, state command." Drug dealers in Salvador, such as Osmar, similarly displayed a pronounced sense of territoriality, not only toward opposing drug factions but also toward the police, whom they would only allow to enter their neighborhood "if we want them to. Because if we have the devil on our backs, they will not come in for sure."

Osmar's remark reflects the significance of ideas of masculinity within the antagonistic, yet kindred, realms of crime and law enforcement. The Bahian victims of police violence often emphasized their steadfastness and resilience in the face of torture as part of their identity as "true-men" (*cara-homem*). Antônio, for example, recalled that when he was detained for robbery:

> They pulled me out of the car and handcuffed me. I thought I was going to die. Because they wanted me to tell them [the name of] the owner of the gun. I told them that I was the owner of the gun. But they didn't want to believe me. "Who's the owner of the gun?" "It's my gun, sir." So it got worse and worse. When they realized that they were just wasting their time and that I wasn't going to say anything … Because I'm a true-man in here [the juvenile prison] as much as anywhere else I go. So they let it be. They sprayed some more pepper spray into my face and took me to the DAI [police unit for juvenile offenders]. (Antônio)

Other youths similarly maintained: "I didn't give them [the names of other suspects]. I was a true-man" (Breno, an 18-year-old from rural Bahia). According to Antônio and others, their refusal to betray their peers fueled their tormentors' anger: "I never told them anything. That's what sparked their fury" (Tarik).

The youths' narratives of what they considered masculine behavior in the face of police violence echo what studies of policing in Brazil have found on officers' own pursuit of masculinity. Salem and Larkins (2021: 71), for example, have observed that among patrol officers in Rio de Janeiro, killing a criminal is "perceived not only as the real task of the police but also as the epitome of manhood." Police officers, according to the same authors, see themselves as "warriors and combatants," viewing attacks on the police as attacks on their masculinity that call for "retributive violence … to restore [their] male agency and reputation" (2021: 71–72). This is corroborated by Soares' (2019: 97) observation of the "warrior ethos" of Bahia's Military Police, which is "formed around the construction of a hegemonic masculinity," in which the use of violence "is one of the defining characteristics." Interestingly, Soares (2019: 97) quotes an officer using the same expression as Antônio and Breno to praise the behavior of a colleague during an armed confrontation: "He was a true-man [*cara-homem*], he managed to return fire, shoot shots at the thugs."

Even so, for the youths from Salvador, proving themselves as "true-men" at the hands of the police was about more than idealized masculinity. Giving in to police pressure would put them at risk of being killed by their peers, as Tarik explained: "You have to take it. It is better to suffer because you never know if you won't die anyway. If you talk, when the police let you go, you will die." Concurrently subjected to the laws of crime and the violence of the police, the imperative to be a *cara-homem* thus presented itself to them as a matter of survival, as is also evident in the following quote from Caio:

> The life [of crime] is like that. To enter this life, you have to be able to stand a beating. You have to be a man. And you have to have readiness. Attitude. Courage. If you don't have that, there's no point in staying in this mess, because you're going to die. If you can't take a beating, can't take a punch, take torture, then you're going to die. You pay with your life. The cops will catch you, arrest your mates or kill them. We know who snitched, they themselves [the police] tell us. We go and kill him. He talked. So he loses his life. He only entered [crime] to die. (Caio)

Caio's thoughts portray the world of crime as a labyrinth in which the ability to deal with violence, whether from friend or foe, is critical for survival (cf. Zoettl 2023). As far as the violence exercised in the name of the state is concerned, the frontline between those who defend and those who break the law is increasingly difficult to establish. In Rio de Janeiro, *milícias*—criminal organizations with close links to the police and local politicians, which control lucrative parts of the favela economy—dominated more than 25 percent of all neighborhoods where an armed group was present in 2023 (GENI 2024: 37–38). While confrontations with the police were recorded in 70 percent of the areas controlled by drug factions, only 32 percent of areas under *milícia* control saw an armed police operation (GENI 2024: 34). Killings by the police

occurred mainly in areas dominated by drug gangs: in the first half of 2019, for example, none of the 881 killings reportedly took place in areas controlled by the *milícia* (Manso 2020: 244). According to the Public Prosecutor's Office, the emergence of *milícia* groups is also gaining momentum in the state of Bahia, where the number of police officers charged with criminal offenses increased by more than 330 percent between 2021/2022 and 2023/2024 (MPBA 2024).

As a consequence of the intermingling of crime and crime control, the police and juvenile offenders in Brazil have become reminiscent of Girard's (1977: 143–168) notion of "monstrous doubles" who are consumed by reciprocal violence driven by their unacknowledged assimilation. In Girard's conception, there is no "originary" violence; rather, violence is largely a "by-product of mimetic rivalry" (1996: 12). Mimetic rivalry arises out of mimetic desire, that is, the desire for an object that is not based on the object's intrinsic qualities but on the fact that the same object is also being desired by others: "In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object" (Girard 1977: 145). When an object of desire cannot simply be shared (as, for example, in the case of sexual desire, social position, territory, etc.), mimetic desire gives rise to competition, rivalry, and conflict, ultimately resulting in interpersonal violence (Palaver 2013: 44–46).

As the profits from the favela's illicit economies depend on monopolies that are secured through territorial dominance, violence is an indispensable part of drug factions' business model (Zoettl 2022). However, the same territorial control is coveted not only by criminal organizations but also by the police. Their ambition to gain control over peripheral neighborhoods—as evidenced, for instance, by Larkins' (2013) above-mentioned observation of police flags being raised on favela rooftops or, in Bahia, police officers painting over drug faction nametags on house walls[7]—is motivated less and less by the concern to defend the sovereignty of the state than by the drive to assert the territorial authority of the police. The following two quotes illustrate the extent to which police officers and juvenile drug dealers in Brazil have begun to conceptualize their relationship as a simultaneously interpersonal and intergroup struggle for power that demands to be fought out in a warlike manner:

> It is war, war is war! … If they kill one of us, we really have to go to war, we have to find the guys and cut their throats in the same way. If we can't find one of the guys [who did it], we'll find their accomplice, and then we'll storm in. Because they don't understand it any other way. (Bahian police officer, quoted in Soares 2019: 129)

> I ain't got no fear. I do fear, who doesn't? But this war won't end until the last soldier is on the ground. One dies, another is born. … From here, I will only leave dead. I will only leave when Jesus returns. I will only leave crime when Jesus returns. Hard-hitting. … [Caliber]. 40, .45, .672. The ones they've got, we've got them too. (Osmar)

When violence permeates a community and is no longer employed for the sake of maintaining order, Girard (1977: 67) writes, it quickly grows into an "orgy of self-propagation." Social order, in Girard's theory, is sustained by cultural differences, the dissolution of which propels social conflict: "[I]t is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos" (1977: 51). The more rival social actors start to resemble each other, the more fiercely they tend to confront one another. Disputes between equals, Girard argues, "have the greatest risk of turning violent because the social limitations that normally prevent or channel mimetic desire are missing" (Palaver 2013: 66).

In Brazil, not only have juvenile drug dealers become the scapegoats for all social evils, but, as Soares notes, many police officers have also come to feel scorned by the very society they are supposed to defend, often at the risk of their lives: "[E]specially the ordinary soldiers see

themselves left alone … as if they were the scum of society" (officer quoted in Soares 2019: 124). Soares (2019: 110) also points out that the majority of lower-ranking officers of the Bahian Military Police belong to economically disadvantaged classes and, due to their limited financial resources, often live next door to those they confront when on duty. Moreover, like most residents of Bahia's peripheral neighborhoods, the majority of the street-level police officers are of non-white ethnicity. According to Soares (2019: 119–120), they face, within their institution, structural racial inequalities similar to those experienced by many of their victims. This is evident, for example, in the Military Police's work environment, which is marked by a stark professional divide between rank-and-file officers and the command level, where socioeconomic class and ethnic origin coincide.

Interestingly, the violence perpetrated by officers often mirrors what some of them appear to have experienced themselves during their training, albeit to a far lesser degree. Several of the practices described by victims of police violence in Bahia are reminiscent of what Souza (2020: 19) recalls in his autobiographical account of training with the São Paulo riot police, such as "truncheon blows to certain areas of the body," psychological violence "with threats, harsh verbal treatment and confinement in a closed room with tear gas," or "electric shocks … administered using the coil of an old telephone set." Similarly, Soares (2019: 71) quotes a Bahian officer who recalls his training as comprising "60 per cent beatings, 40 per cent instruction."

Representing the endpoint of police violence, the killing of undesirable criminal identities in the urban periphery is encouraged by superiors, politicians, and the public alike, but swiftly condemned when its character as an unofficial state execution becomes all too visible. As Souza (2020: 79; 85) notes, the killing of suspects represents a kind of *rite de passage* in the training of officers, guaranteeing their acceptance within the institution. Yet, when what has become standard police practice unexpectedly results in court proceedings against the officer in charge, those who have carried out society's dirty work are dropped and declared criminals themselves: "The more encouragement there was to root out those considered enemies of society, the more one was left alone when a police officer was arrested for this reason" (Souza 2020: 20). By punishing police officers for crimes committed in the name of order and by means that are simultaneously tabooed and exacted, society strives to restore the appearance of the rule of law, without, however, breaking the cycle of violence it perpetuates through the contradictory demands placed on those who exercise state authority on the ground.

Conclusion

In Brazil, law enforcement has come to focus primarily on the inner boundaries of the nation-state, that is, on those places where state power appears to be crumbling. Particularly in the outskirts of the city, where state institutions are often beyond the reach of residents, the police, when they do appear, seek not only to control crime but also to "summon the active presence of the state into being" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004: 809). However, those who work for the police are not only representatives of state authority but also ordinary citizens, subject to the same affections, aversions, and wants, both material and emotional, as others. While the lethal violence they exercise can be understood as part of the state's efforts to maintain sovereignty at the margins, it is concurrently the result of patterns of action and reaction among competing groups and individuals, such as drug dealers, drug factions, police officers, and the police institution itself.

The mounting violence of the organized drug trade in Brazil, both against other traffickers and the general population, has been accompanied by an increase in police violence, mainly

directed against juvenile suspects but also affecting the low-income suburban population as a whole. The narratives of young offenders from Bahia reveal the complex nature of police (ab) use of force: it is employed as an unlawful tool of investigation, as a form of extrajudicial punishment, and for its own sake or in response to the conjectured violence of others. However, what presents itself as a higher, albeit extralegal, form of justice designed to remedy the alleged shortcomings of the country's courts is itself entangled in a web of criminal practices closely akin to those it purports to combat, including murder and the trafficking of arms and drugs.

In their attempts to violently enforce the law through unlawful means, the Brazilian police have come to resemble the mostly juvenile offenders they are chasing, and their fight against crime appears to be waged less in the interest of order than in the service of police power itself. Still, their evidently futile efforts to fight violent crime by committing violent crimes reflect a broad societal consensus on how to deal with delinquents. It will therefore continue in the same vein, if not necessarily until "the last soldier is on the ground" (as Osmar has it), then at least until Brazilian society finds a more inclusive way to deal with the growing number of underclass youths who seek to escape the suburban precariat by joining one of the country's many scorned yet highly successful drug factions.

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■ NOTES

1. In the US in 2023, 1,247 people were killed by police, a rate of 0.37 per 100,000 people; see https://policeviolencereport.org/2023/ and https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045223. In Germany, an average of 11.6 people were fatally shot by the police between 2019 and 2023, a rate of around 0.014; see https://polizeischuesse.cilip.de/statistic and https://www.destatis.de/. In England and Wales, an average of 2.2 people were fatally shot by police between 2019 and 2024, a rate of around 0.0036; see https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/publications/annual-deaths-during-or-following-police-contact-report-202324 and https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/. All accessed on 19 April 2025.
2. In the years 2013 and 2023, 313 and 1,699 people, respectively, were killed by the police, out of a total of 6,026 and 6,578 homicides, in a population of 14,351,030 and 14,828,806. See https://publicacoes.forumseguranca.org.br/handle/123456789/11 and https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/sociais/populacao/9109-projecao-da-populacao.html (accessed 21 April 2025).
3. All terms and quotes originally in Portuguese have been translated by the author. All names have been changed.

4. At the state level, the Brazilian police force is organized into the Military Police (*Polícia Militar*) and the Civil Police (*Polícia Civil*), the former being mainly responsible for public-order policing and the latter for investigative police work.
5. Decreto no. 9.846 de 25 de Junho de 2019, arts. 3 and 4. In 2023, new legislation was introduced (Decreto no. 11.615 de 21 de Julho de 2023) restricting the acquisition of firearms and ammunition by persons in these categories.
6. See STJ (2016: 2). At the time of writing, the case was still pending.
7. See, for example, https://www.correio24horas.com.br/minha-bahia/comitiva-da-policia-cobre-pichacoes-de-faccoes-apos-ataque-no-suburbio-0425 (accessed 14 May 2025).

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