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The ‘debate’ and the politics of the PCC’s informal justice in São Paulo

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ABSTRACT

This article is an ethnographic account of the Primeiro Comando da Capital’s informal justice. I introduce a key aspect of the ‘debate’, a dispute resolution process, which has not been discussed yet: its selective and fragmented nature. This refines the idea of normative orders and the discussion on how informal justices shape legal pluralism in Latin America. I show that the effect of the PCC’s informal justice on governance should be analysed in the light of the growing disconnection between two dimensions: on the one hand, its transcendent dimension relates to a set of behaviours and performances. It has shaped the city’s code of the street and has a self regulatory effect. On the other hand, the implication of the PCC’s members in dispute and arbitration is as selective as is the order of the police or the state. Access to the PCC’s institutions depends on individuals’ networks, their behaviours, gatekeepers, and broader political and territorial considerations that are not grasped by approaches in term of norms, criminal governance or legal pluralism. This increasingly selective system of justice led to new perceptions of the PCC in the 2010s and a form of disappointment with the organisation in some deprived communities.

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Introduction: the debate, a tribunal of organised crime or a popular tribunal?

After its creation among a group of inmates in 1993, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) justice system rose to regulate life in the prisons under the control of the group (Biondi, 2010). The ‘debate’ progressively came to designate a social institution that regulated life and death in São Paulo (Feltran, 2020): in cases of disagreement between individuals or PCC members, discussions are organised to solve disputes. Some debates may require the presence of a member of the PCC, a brother (*irmão*). He arbitrates after both parties have argued in favour of their positions. In more serious cases, the debate involves various actors, representing the litigants, witnesses and brothers. They need to produce evidence and go through an open debate. The brothers can solicit the opinion of higher-level members of the PCC.

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The debate is either presented as a ‘tribunal of organised crime’, or as a ‘popular tribunal’. According to the first view, echoed in sensational reports and the media, these tribunals are able to decide the life and death of outlaws. It is depicted as arbitrary, relying on the ultimate say of PCC members. The media hence insist on the ‘barbarity’ of the tribunals. This has particularly been the case since 2017 when the PCC violently clashed with criminal factions of the Comando Vermelho and Família do Norte, two of the largest criminal organisations in Brazil. However, as many rulers and informal lawmakers (Pirie, 2010), most members present the PCC as a revolutionary popular tribunal. They claim to rule over São Paulo’s periphery and that they represent the people. This would mean that the PCC enjoys a unique legitimacy. Ultimately, both views imply that the PCC occupies a void left by the state in the margins of the society and has established formal institutions (tribunals) accessible to everyone.

This view of the PCC’s informal justice as a tribunal is reflected in the existing literature. Institutional approaches have looked at the PCC as a commercial and predatory actor. They consider that the PCC established a ‘monopoly of violence’ within prisons (Nunes Dias, 2011) and a ‘quasi-legal system that defines transgression and provides for prosecution, trial and sentencing’ (Nunes Dias & Darke, 2016, p. 220) which has fuelled its expansion to other prisons in the country (Nunes Dias & Manso, 2018). The debate has hence been described as a ‘court’ (Insight Crime & CLALS, 2020, p. 29). However, ethnographic accounts such as Biondi’s (2010) show that the PCC does not enforce a code of conduct and must be analysed as a form of regulatory transcendence. Members are accountable for their behaviour which will be judged and categorised in the light of the *proceder*: the idea of doing things how they should be done, an ethic that is both situational and relational (Biondi, 2010). These studies highlight the importance of the *proceder* in the production of the PCC’s group identity (Biondi & Marques, 2010), accounting for the transformation of São Paulo and the establishment of a new form of moral regulation amongst those of the church and the state (Feltran, 2010, 2018). It implies to act ‘in tune’ (*sintonia*) with the party and its values: ‘Peace, Justice, Freedom, Equality’. The status of the organisation declares that members should never divide the party, nor use it for their personal interest, and that ‘merit is not synonymous with impunity’. This means that the PCC should rather be understood as a freemasonry or brotherhood whose members have their own businesses and who regulate each other via interaction.

In this article, I argue that the PCC’s claim that they provide a form of popular justice should not be taken as given. A fundamental aspect of the debate which has not been discussed yet is its selectivity and the negotiations it entails. Access to the debate depends on an individual’s network, their behaviours being in tune with the organisation, gatekeepers, and political calculations. As with other secret or criminal organisations in Brazil, all individuals are not equal in their rights and access to informal justice (Arias & Rodrigues, 2006), and these organisations can suspend and negotiate their enforcement of norms (Penglase, 2009). This means that although the PCC shape orders in São Paulo (Feltran, 2020, p. 152), the effect of its informal justice on governance is unequally divided and concentrated between different social groups, spaces and goods. I show that the effect of PCC justice on existing orders should rather be analysed in the light of the growing disconnection between two dimensions: on the one hand, as pointed out by Biondi (2010), there is an ideal dimension of the debate which relates to a set of behaviours and performances of individuals. But on the other hand, when it comes to action, the debate should not be

romanticised and the PCC's order is as selective as is the police's or the state's. To use the words of one of my informants, 'the debate is a technology', which means that it produces a form of self-government of members but also that it is a tool. This discussion is important as over the last 10 years the PCC has transformed, being accused of 'giving up' some neighbourhoods (*quebradas largas*). This gap between a transcendent ideal dimension that shaped behaviours as it was enforced in prisons and the access to increasingly selective systems of justice have led to new perceptions of the PCC.

The analysis of the PCC's informal justice is a case in point for the understanding of popular sovereignty and legal pluralism in Latin America. I show that more than the legal or normative apparatus, it is the selective and negotiated inclusions in these orders that shape urban lives. The transformation of the debate also highlights transformations of morals and politics in Brazil that have taken place since 2013 and the fragmentation of political orders in major cities since popular justice became a field of political competition. Practices of popular justice supported by the PCC have been challenged and reorganised under new brokers, mostly connected to police forces and evangelical churches.

Methodologically, my argument relies on ethnographic research undertaken between 2014 and 2017 within different groups from 'the street' of São Paulo. I interviewed young offenders, social workers, former inmates, alleged members of the PCC. I met most of my informants through the support of a former inmate who introduced me to other inmates. They put me in contact with informants, mostly in the Zona Sul and Zona Norte of São Paulo. All interviews were given on condition of anonymity. I could engage in interviews and observe some of the informants' daily interactions. The lack of continuity in our relationship was a challenge as they often disappeared without notice. My ethnography relied on Goffman's interactionism (1959), comparing stage performances influenced by my presence and moments when my informants attempted to hide 'the backstage' in different contexts. Due to the snowball sampling method of finding interviewees, a possible sample bias exists; the literature review on the topic outlined below was conducted to correct this. Non-state and criminal orders have nuances, which may vary across prisons, cities and neighbourhoods; the focus on selectiveness in justice provision allows for exploring such nuances, thus avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach when discussing informal justice systems in Latin America.

The first part of the article focuses on how the PCC articulated its revolutionary discourse with its claims to organise a form of popular justice and how this shaped the group's identity. This narrative should not go unquestioned. In the second section, I show how members understand the effect of the debate on their socialisation and how it has come to produce a form of self-governance. This explains how the debate shaped the 'code of the street' of São Paulo without being enforced by a formal institution. The third part shows that this self-governance is distinct from access to the justice of the brothers. Access to the debate remains selective. Different factors such as personal connections, the importance of territories and political referents are at play in this negotiated inclusion, which account for the production of fragmented orders.

The PCC's narratives of popular justice and sovereignty

The idea of popular justice has shaped the PCC's group identity. It stands at the core of its creation in 1993 after the massacre at Carandiru prison in São Paulo, when 111 inmates were

killed by the police. Members associate the idea of popular justice with revolutionary claims. This association is both a form of resistance against 'the state's oppression' and against 'the system', the social order articulated by predatory elites, and other forms of justice.

This idea of popular justice is thus polysemous. It has been used by different political entrepreneurs to build up their legitimacies. With the beginning of the military dictatorship in 1964, a new form of management and policing of underprivileged neighbourhoods emerged in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Vigilantes and death squads organised by police officers such as Sérgio Fleury claimed to protect neighbourhoods from thieves (Nunes Dias, 2011, pp. 92, 93). As the media showed their killings in a positive light, they received protection. My informants all named these figures when defining the context in which they grew up and how they regarded the dominant order of the state and its manifestations over marginalised neighbourhoods: through extra judicial executions, torture and rackets. Many informants referred to the cases of vigilantes such as 'Geraldão' and the 'Cabo Bruno'. Those who grew up in Capão Redondo always mentioned Adalton Pereira Novaes, another avenger whose legacy was still vividly felt during my fieldwork. Another form of popular justice my informants referred to was the use of lynching. In the 1980s lynching reflected forms of self-organisation and community frustration with justice and the police's inability to solve issues (Sinhoretto, 2009).

The law of the PCC is described as a resistance to these forms of (in)justice. The PCC emerged in the midst of a movement of redefinition of suburban identities and as social movements were mobilising for the reborn democracy (Dagnino, 2020). At the end of the 1980s, social movements on the periphery rejected the form of suburban subjectivities of the 'good worker' who needed to accept submission to the dominant order and who was seen as poor and fragile. A new identity emerged. Some claimed their dignity as children of structural inequalities and violence but also of the solidarity of the periphery (D'Andrea, 2013). Popular figures of justice and its contestations such as the 'angel' and 'guardian' of the communities came to embody this ideal (Feltran, 2013), along with Brazil's legendary Lampião, and international figures such as the Joker or the Ying Yang (Cohen, 2017). Indeed, the PCC promised to 'revolutionise the country directly from prisons cells having as a weapon the terror of the powerful, oppressors, and tyrants'.¹ The PCC's popular rhetoric borrowed from these social mobilisations: 'they come from the same vein' explained one brother. Already by the end of 1993, the rap band *Tribunal Popular* had articulated the denunciation of repression of the Carandiru massacre with the need of another form of order and justice:

'A exploração do nosso povo já virou rotina. Negros em baixo, e os brancos sempre em cima. Leis, artigos, na constituição, tudo é violado e sendo assim, tudo em vão [...]. Nossos irmãos foram assassinados e como já se esperava, ninguém foi condenado. Mais uma vez essa justiça muito falhada para você pois no poder, pode creer, só existe canalha'.

'The exploitation of our people is already routine. Blacks on the bottom, and whites always on the top. Laws, articles, in the constitution everything violated and being like that, all is in vain [...]. Our brothers were murdered and as expected no one was condemned. Once again, this failed justice for you. You can believe, those in power are all crooks'.

Animais Irracionais, Tribunal Popular, 1993.

Members of the PCC came to rhetorically assume the role of the guardians of peace and justice in São Paulo. The PCC embodied a form of popular justice where citizens would discuss what was right or wrong and rhetorically set this in opposition to the

justice represented by avengers and the police. Ten years later, this was made clear by one of the alleged leaders of the organisation, Marcola. In his testimony to the commission investigating the massive attacks of the PCC against state institutions in 2006, he claimed that: 'The prisoners support the prisoners, the marginalised of the streets [...]. Why? Because they all believe that it is a fair fight of the poor against the established power who don't allow any improvement of their situation' (Marcola CPI, 2006, p. 113). As the PCC staged itself as a popular tribunal, this narrative of justice brought members together.

This idea is anchored in member's experience of racism and of being categorised as a 'dangerous class'. All my informants referred to the tragic conditions of living in the margins of the city, to the experience of being a 'Nordestino', a migrant from the North-east seen as 'illiterate and lazy' or prone to stealing. Regarding biographical trajectories, most were born in the 1980s and 1990s. But there are important differences relating to generations, criminal activities and perception of the role of this popular justice. Informants in their 40s and 50s claimed youths never experienced the 'pacifying effect of the comando'. They consider that the youths 'prefer quick and easy money', they do not 'think' and have excessive reactions in conflict. Most of them express a form of nostalgia and see themselves as guardians of the legacies of the comando. The PCC also has a different status in young offenders's institutions (Mallart, 2011) and in prisons: petty criminals selling drugs or stealing cars abide by the discipline of the party, but 'professional thieves' are regarded to be at the top, particularly armed robbers (Biondi, 2010). This also depends on the kind of offence, crime or number of convictions. Despite these differences, all my informants, including young offenders, praise the PCC for fighting for the dignity of prisoners and for pacifying relations between inmates and with their guards. Similarly, petty criminals also credit the PCC for pacifying the city:

Before the advent of the comando, in the 1990s, the daily life of our neighbourhood was one of assassinations, every day someone would die. Sometimes it was just because eyes would meet, or saying a wrong word. Sometimes there wasn't even a clear reason.

As put by an alleged brother: 'Youth were massively dying, and no one cared. The comando appeared as a regulator of life and death'. All my interviews referred to 'justice for all' and the fact that the PCC was providing fair justice to protect the poor who would otherwise depend on the 'law of the strongest'. In my interviews and observations, this last expression encompasses both state and police repression, but also the anomie which prevailed in the streets of São Paulo before the advent of the PCC.

Social processes around the debate

Narratives regarding the progressive establishment of a monopoly of justice do not correspond to the brothers' understanding of the expansion of the debate outside prisons. Indeed, it is important to distinguish the debate, in its transcending dimensions (Biondi, 2010), which shaped new members' interactions in São Paulo and produced a form of self-governance from the PCC performances of justice and litigation, which are selective.

The use of the debate and the *proceder* offered members new ways of dealing with uncertainty, producing original forms of socialisation. What was a 'discipline' learned in the context of prisons came to define a way of behaving which had a structuring

impact on the code of the streets. For some brothers, it was also a moral ideal that needed to be defended. This – still incomplete – conversion of the world of crime was progressive but also violent. Many former inmates witnessed the clashes between the PCC and other prison-based factions: the *Serpentes Negras*, the *Seita Satanista* and later with the *Comando Revolucionario Brasileiro da Criminalidade*. Outside of prisons, small gangs also contributed to expanding the debate to different neighbourhoods: ‘there were small factions. They had various reputations including in some neighbourhoods [...] where numerous gangs competed between each other [...]. Most of the members died, the others joined the PCC or accepted its framework’. They converted ‘their fellow members, their friends and sometimes their brothers or cousins’ and contributed through discussions and conflicts in exporting the *proceder*:

one thing was essential, the idea that life was sacred. That was the real change of the party, if there was one thing we would all hold on, one principle we would respect and expect others to respect, that was it. Then everyone knew killing would have consequences. And because everyone knew they would likely end up in jail again, they knew that if they could escape explanations outside (of prisons), they would have to submit to the principle or risk much.

This fear of being held accountable by the PCC was progressively internalised by brothers, and then by members of the world of the crime. As with the *pandillas* in Nicaragua, transformations in forms of socialisation can help to understand shifts in repertoires of violence (Rodgers, 2017). After the prisons’ mega rebellions of 2001 and the rise of Marcola in 2002, inmates started to use the debate as a tool to organise relations. But it did not abolish territorial domination nor individual enterprise. The idea of the debate and of the *proceder* affected other subjects of the periphery and socialised non-members to new ways of behaving. This is important as criminal repertoires of violence circulate and affect those at the interpersonal level (Auyero & Berti, 2015). ‘Puxar o bonde’, ‘jogar a bala para alguém’² became ways to solve most issues. Individuals would resort to the debate to solve their problems and it shaped daily interactions. It was the case with crime but also with personal relations and friendships:

I have saved the lives of many friends who got in trouble as they engaged in relationships with married women or girlfriends of other guys [...] I was good, and people knew it so I would play the ball and save them. But it wasn’t only that I was that good. It’s because in most cases the debate would make clear that there were some mistakes on all sides, and that nothing had happened without reason.

This change was incorporated among most members and even crossed my informant’s nightmares:

In my dream, I was walking down my street with a friend from prison who was kicked out of the party a few months ago. We started walking and chatting normally, but he was screaming and saying he wanted to kill me. He was chasing me. I didn’t know why, but he wanted to kill. For no reason. We never worked together in real life. He was talking about stealing my drug selling point and I was fighting with him. He punched me in the stomach. I tried [...] to calm him down but each time he became more violent. I would run in the streets, looking for the brother I know of, and who actually kicked him out. But he was not there, and my friend told me that there was no point in calling the brother, that he was already excluded, I had to keep running ...

The man's fear is that this self-regulatory mechanism might become inefficient. Through its disciplinary processes in prisons, the PCC enforced a framework that created strong social bonds, stabilising a set of values and behaviours. Indeed, as opposed to sensationalist reports, members' punishment was mild regarding losses of drug loads. Instead of killing, expelling or banning in cases of non-payment of drug loads, the punishment allowed individuals to pay back their debts and contribute to the common wealth (Lessing & Willis, 2019, pp. 602–605). This mild punishment probably gave members incentives to endorse this new ethos.

This form of self-governance is reflected in members' performances of justice. The code of the street in different parts of the world is structured around the exhibition of one's ability to use force and display of capacity to retaliate in case of a fight (Anderson, 2000). In São Paulo, the PCC's brothers need to 'exhibit' *proceder*: firm and strong bodies do not represent an ability to carry out violence. They exhibit a moral and relational ability and rigour. Their legitimacy as individuals results primarily from this performance: to know how to listen, 'to be serious', to keep composure.³ It means that members should never overreact, 'be emotional'. This ability to self-monitor is associated with a form of manhood and maturity that draws a line between the brothers and petty delinquents or young offenders.

The brothers' performance produces effects *per se*: litigants cannot report crimes to the police anymore. They are put under the comando's jurisdiction and need to align with some of its values. They need to respect the process of the investigation and obey the ruling. In most cases, litigants know they cannot escape the ruling.

An example of the effect of this form of governance was given during my fieldwork. In 2015, spontaneous student protests broke out in response to budget cuts and the closure of a number of schools announced by São Paulo's State Governor. In the following months, a larger movement spread within the state and several hundred schools were occupied. I had organised an interview but when my informant arrived with another man, both proposed to go together to a school nearby. In the courtyard, a dozen people were seated on the ground. Several people started to applaud when we arrived. A girl and a boy who were the leaders of the student movement explained:

The occupation started two weeks ago at the beginning, it was going well, [...] but groups who are not from the school have entered to attack us ... The following day a woman who said she was a lawyer came, and the day after, the gang came again to take the computers.

The other students continued:

After the first invasion we were afraid, we called the police. They did not come. But after the second invasion, we called back to say that the computers had been stolen. They came to the school. They didn't even come out of their car: they told us that we were just shit and that we'd better go back to study, that we were responsible for what had happened, that they knew our names and that we'd better get out.

We are afraid, but we started sleeping in the school. We try to make sure that there are always many of us.

We don't know if they will come back ...

When one of the brothers spoke, all eyes were on him, and the assembly kept silent. He had not said a word yet. He first asked if these computers were really important, how

many computers had been stolen and engaged in – to all intents and purposes – criminal investigation:

Did you see someone; do you know who this crew is? Anyone knows them?

They're people from the vila rosa district, not from here, we don't know their names, but someone saw them.

But how do you know it's them if nobody except a person knows them, and they don't even know their name?

We know who it is, it's them, we're sure.

But do you have evidence?

(A car passes in front of the school, and we hear shouts of insults, bottles are thrown and break on the school's door.) One of the students continued:

A neighbour filmed the gang putting stuff in a car, but he does not want to play the video. And there was someone who saw them, but the girl does not want to give names ...

Well, I need proof [...]. Anyway, you saw that it was useless to call the police, so now if you have any clues or information, you pass them to us. We're going to do checks anyway ... We'll take care of finding the guys and your computers anyway, even if the guys are from another neighbourhood, it will go fast, but that's just to give you a hand.

During this discussion, both brothers had exhibited seriousness, calm behaviour and a form of professionalism that contrasted with the anxiety of the youth in the school. In this case, the PCC's informal justice is recognised as it aims at solving cases and formulating clear and definitive sentences after selective state institutions refused to act because of political factors at play. It is restorative and may result in the coming back of the computers to the school. It is likely that after 2006, the PCC's provision of informal justice to inhabitants of São Paulo's periphery increased its acceptability and legitimacy, as they could, to a certain extent, enjoy a connection with the brotherhood through justice provision. Another key feature is that this informal justice indeed mimics the existing practices of state institutions (Willis, 2017); it is based on an investigation: the brother would go after the computers and investigate the case, requiring the collection of evidence.

Negotiated inclusions in justice

What the above example also reveals is a growing disconnect between the transcending values of the debate and the effective access to justice provision and rulings of the brothers since the end of the 2000s. By that time, a new idiom had appeared: abandoned neighbourhoods (*quebradas largadas*). Throughout my fieldwork, I regularly heard complaints about the PCC's disengagement from daily policing and justice provision. 'They don't come when a husband beats his spouse' or when 'there are some fights'. Inhabitants of the northern part of the city claimed that in some of the neighbourhoods the *proceder* that had contributed to peace was now 'abandoned' by the PCC. This form of looking back at the past and complaint echoes popular criticism about what is seen as the selective engagement of the comando. However, this complaint must be taken with caution

(Saunders-Hastings, 2019); it can indicate a disappointment with the political project carried by the PCC. But it also shows that not all individuals are equal, and that arbitrations can be more favourable to people in tune with the comando than to others:

There are motorbike thefts in the neighbourhood where I live. There used to be a local trafficker who was from a close neighbourhood. He prohibited theft and any attack here. He enforced the rules, it was clear. Then the PCC came in, chased him away, and some other brothers took his drug selling points, which are still active. A few weeks ago, there was a series of motorcycle thefts in my street. The guys passed by and put the motorcycles in their van. My neighbour had two motorcycles, his own and that of his son. Both were stolen. He called the brother to solve the problem. The brother found the guys. But since one of them is connected, they protected him. Some of the motorcycles of the neighbourhood were returned, some not.

Indeed, different dynamics affect the informal justice and the engagement of brothers. It is well-known by many inhabitants that access to this informal justice depends on networks and relationships. These connections need to be 'activated' through intermediaries such as the relative of one of the brothers (Biondi, 2013). As in Rio de Janeiro, this is part of a politics of categorisation of citizens by traffickers who do not enforce laws homogeneously, but according to personal and political relations (Arias & Rodrigues, 2006). My observations showed that this also relies on *brokers* of access who are connected (and in tune) as they contribute to the social life of the neighbourhood.

Beyond that, informants suggest that not all territories and social groups receive similar levels of involvement. An example is that of two drug selling locations. Both may be managed by non-members who exhibit *proceder*. But depending on the relations they have with a brother, financial flows, and the symbolical importance of the location, some brothers may support the owner and invest a lot of time in what could be called the micro-policing of daily interactions. This can include helping to organise the car parks around the drug selling location, mitigating tensions between neighbours if needed, or regulating petty delinquency. This happens when streets or neighbourhoods are particularly valuable or contentious and can receive intense normative pressure with more direct enforcement of the *proceder*. In other locations, these issues are not considered important, and the brothers prefer to leave neighbourhoods 'in disorder'. The role of patron-client relations in informal justice provision in poor areas has been analysed in Rio de Janeiro (Fischer, 2008), where they structure relations between inhabitants of *morros* and drug traffickers (Arias, 2006). According to Penglase (2009), in Rio de Janeiro, this strategy forces local actors to recognise that they depend ultimately on patrons and traffickers. In the case of São Paulo, it can set the term of trade between local figures and entrepreneurs and the PCC.

But inclusion in this informal justice is also shaped by political considerations. When everyone thought the meeting in the school was over as it had been decided the case would be investigated, the first brother asked:

Now tell me, why are you occupying the school?

Everyone was surprised and the girl tried to answer:

Well ... we occupy it because we need more money and because we are against the policy of Aickmin and we have to be recognized ... then we're tired of learning nothing ... school is useless, we spend our time studying things that have nothing to do with life ...

She was cut off by the brother:

I can help you, we all want to change society, but you need to have ambitions and ideas, not just occupy the school so as not to go to class ... we support the ideas that interest us. Do you have specific ideas for school reform? Or any reform?

No ...

You can't occupy the school if it's just because of the cold pasta in the canteen. You see, what you have to do is show people that you have to mobilize, that it concerns them. You need a vision. For instance, I found school boring because there is no discussion. Then I stopped, it's always the teacher who speaks and who knows everything. And all this is preparing you to be well disciplined, docile, to have a job as a secretary, or work at MacDonal'd's. In fact, school should make us think and make people want to change society. From that, either you create a mass mobilization, film screening [...], you bring the students to discuss your program, or you make smaller events, you see you invite people to make a conference. [...] If you want to do a projection, we can find you a projector. But anyway, you see, you must get a political culture, you have to read because it shows that you don't know what your goal is. And read for your culture, to get an idea, look at Machiavelli, Malcolm X ... you should look at the history of the French Revolution ... We will support you if you have ideas, a vision, at least something that can change the school and therefore society.

Really, is that true ... ?It doesn't look like that, but it is the most important thing to study, to be aware of history, of politics, and it is by studying that you understand things and articulate ideas ... And then, particularly true for a black man, [...] it's super important that you can go to university, and that you can also change things from the inside. And then, you'd have to go see other schools in the neighbourhood too, to discuss, coordinate, we can make all that happen [...]. If you have ideas, we may talk again ...

The episode shows that access to the PCC's debate and the rules regarding its application are not homogenous. The school is a space that is not in tune with the PCC, and therefore there is more room for individual decisions on how to engage with the group of students, including for political reasons. Here, the debate is an opportunity to negotiate a relationship or establish common referents with actors and institutions beyond the inmate or street world. The performance of justice aimed here at engaging with the group of students providing that adopter a critical distance toward the state and its 'system'. This would establish a common ground of values. The argument adopted by the brother is much more political than the PCC's revolutionary narrative claims: the brother does not support the revolt of the youth *per se*. Studying and changing the political mindset of students is more important. Accordingly, there would be no further relationship (nor investigation, nor justice service) if the pupils did not have consistent political demands and exhibit the correct 'attitude', or as the brother would put it 'stopped acting like spoiled kids'.

After this episode, we left the school to start the interview. But the attempt to broaden the PCC's community was contentious and the men started to argue. The first man who had kept quiet was angry. He said the comando had nothing to do with those kids: 'they are not fighting, they are privileged. I want to see them spend just one day in prison. [...] no way I waste my time on their computer'. Although he seemed older and in charge, the other one was not at ease and tried to put an end to the conversation several times. 'We need to work with people fighting the state [...] we are giving them a chance ... ' he concluded. Later in the interview, as he was embarrassed by the situation, he claimed that the other brother was being too conservative and that the comando followed a progressive line.

Conclusion: what is left of the debate after the *quebradas largas*?

This paper raises the question of how the social institution of the debate remains and how the ethnographic look on different norms and legal orders are articulate while influencing each other. The relative withdrawal of the PCC has been explained by its interest in bigger businesses and generational gaps between the first generation of founders and those who did not see the effect of the pacification (Cruz Silva, 2018). According to some informants, however, this transformation is not a withdrawal but a way to use justice as a lever for more important issues. A claim that some interviewed members made is that they never aimed at policing neighbourhoods. Some brothers credit the PCC for having produced 'privileged conditions in which people can focus on their businesses and prosperity' but complain that it 'has not been acknowledged'. Through this prism, I could depict the adaptation of the PCC to the transformation of the city and of the popular appeal for new moral repertoires. The group needed to 'take care of its members first' in a context where, according to an informant 'evangelical churches turn to business and look at the middle classes instead of helping those who need it the most'. It is thus the moral and political space in which the PCC evolved that has changed. Some brothers stated that as most inhabitants benefited from the reforms of the Workers' Party, they had also resorted to a new form of consumerism and joined networks of solidarity within evangelical churches.

What happened in the beginning of the 2010s as a reaction to the PCC's domination was an attempt to put control of most deprived neighbourhoods into the hands of new political forces: this happened through the use of militias, police officers and the alliance with major evangelical church leaders. Traces of this underground fight for popular sovereignty can be identified in São Paulo. One indicator is the growing popularity of the Batman figure as a new symbol of self-justice and punishment aligned with evangelical discourses (Oosterbaan, 2015, p. 198). A form of militarism and enthusiasm for the *ethos* of avengers was visible in most social networks in 2014 and 2015 (Cohen, 2017). During fieldwork in 2015 and 2016, it was clear that the form of popular justice the PCC claimed to embody was being challenged by these discourses and particularly by politicians who were former members of the military police forces while claiming to be 'apolitical'. In some neighbourhoods, militias supported by political candidates emerged. These actors had structured online communities around official and unofficial battalions' social networks pages. Accordingly, corporations of police officers presented their own candidates to several of São Paulo's state-deputy positions in 2016. Their programs were built upon ideas such as the 'Fim da impunidade' (End of impunity) 'Orgulho em ser policial' (pride of being a policeman), 'Maioria penal 14 anos' (Penal responsibility at 14). Along with the right to bear arms these ideas set the ground for a common programme for a new form of popular justice.

In this context, the debate is more than ever an underground institution and gives us an insight on how normative orders work in Latin America and how different moral repertoires interact. Even if the PCC's attempt to go grow its influence did not work, this selective regime is key to understanding its effects on the order in the city, as it is for many inhabitants 'the only way to solve issues efficiently'. Another reason for this is that it allows different moralities and very heterogeneous repertoires of arguments. In the eyes of a pastor, the PCC's idea that 'everyone is responsible, life is sacred' is 'compatible with the Bible'. An example of the evolution of the moral repertoires of the city and how

they also affect the comando was the addition in its latest constitution in 2017 of a paragraph about the military police, other factions, and ‘acts of oppression’. Largely inspired by the talion law and its evangelical reactivation, it states that for these enemies ‘the same that they deserve should be given, life is paid with lives, and blood is paid with blood’.

Notes

1. Status of the PCC, first version.
2. Expressions to say that one will defend one’s interests or those of a relative in the debate.
3. “Sisudo” or “cabeçudo”.

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