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Diluted Crime

On the PCC, power and sociality in Zona Sul, São Paulo

PhD Dissertation 2020
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*To my mother, Gitte Gregersen, who fell suddenly ill and did not have the chance to see this PhD
finished. For always believing in me, thank you.*

PhD dissertation

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PART ONE: Introduction

*“Não é homem, não é Estados Unidos. Não é nada.
Não é revolver, não é bomba. Não é nada
É uma coisa espiritual
É um ato numa língua que envolve para o altíssimo”*

“It is not man, it is not the USA. It is nothing
It is not a gun, it is not a bomb. It is nothing
It is a spiritual thing
It is a language that implicates the highest (power)”

Samuel on the PCC.¹

Samuel has spent half his life in prison, eleven years at the infamous Complexo do Carandiru in São Paulo and later in two different prisons in Mato Grosso, a state far from São Paulo. “The place they bury criminals,” as Samuel describes it. There were also some ‘stops on the road’, shorter periods in other prisons. For more than 20 years, Samuel lived with new fences, new walls and new roads for the family and girlfriends to follow when visiting him on the *dia de visita* (visiting day). For some time, Samuel had two girlfriends at the same time, one visiting in the even weeks, the other in the odd weeks, but even so, Samuel had felt lonely during the time he was incarcerated. The family did not visit him often, and the many transfers between prisons across the state had confused his mother and sister, and they were unsure where he was located and how to get there. A couple of years into his sentence, his younger brother, with whom Samuel felt a special bond, was killed by ‘*alguns deles*’ (‘some of them’, a reference to the PCC). Later, another brother was shot, but Samuel is not sure why or by whom. On the first day I meet Samuel, five years have passed since his time in prison. Today he lives on the far outskirts of Zona Sul in the southern part of São Paulo, which since the 1990s has been infamous for its high levels of crime and violence. Samuel has built a home in one of the squatting areas of Zona Sul that are characterised by their small wooden constructions covered

¹ Recorded interview, September 2015.

in blue tarpaulins. He never shows me which of the houses is his, nor does he invite me in. We always meet behind the kitchen tent he shares with the other residents of the squatter area. He lives his life mostly alone, no phone, no work, and no address.

As I sit next to him, Samuel lights a small fire using the scraps around the tent to keep the insects away and with a piece of cardboard waves the smoke in my direction, engulfing me in dark fumes. “Mosquito repellent, my little doll”, he laughs while his grey, curly page hair balances up and down. We sit like this for a while. Then Samuel begins to tell me about the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (the First Command of the City), which is also known by its abbreviation, the PCC, by the number 15.3.3, or simply as the *Comando* (Command) or the ‘*Partido*’ (party).

The PCC originates in São Paulo’s prisons, but in recent years it has grown to become a massive, but largely secretive, criminal organisation with what are estimated at 30,000 baptised members and over two million involved men, women and children, who are said to *correr com o Comando* (run with the Command) in its illegal activities. It is estimated that the PCC today controls 90 percent of São Paulo’s urban peripheries (Barros 2006; Feltran 2018, 17).

Outside Brazil the PCC has bases in countries such as Argentina, Peru, Colombia and Venezuela (*Ministério Público Estadual*, the State Agency for Law Enforcement and Prosecution in Hisayasu 2016), and members of the PCC carry out legal and illegal business on at least four continents besides Latin America, including Europe, Africa and the Middle East (Hisayasu 2016; Feltran 2018; Manfrin 2018). In media reports we read that the PCC has alliances with FARC in Colombia (Goi 2020; Jelmayer, Vyas, and Pearson 2017), Hezbollah in Lebanon (Gurney 2014; Vargas 2018) and the Venezuelan army (Feltran 2018, 238).

And yet, Samuel begins by repeatedly telling me, as a returning mantra, that the PCC “is nothing”. Whenever he speaks about *them* (the PCC) his voice lightens up, and words of spirituality blend with darker tales of people showing up in the middle of the night searching for him, and men with executive tones tracking his papers and documents, calling his sister asking where her brother is.

Samuel recalls: “When I got out of prison, I returned to do good. I have already met people from ‘the inside’ [of prison] who were here on the ‘outside’. They were looking for me, wanting to give me five thousand, six thousand (Brazilian *reais*) to plan a kidnapping, but I didn’t take advantage of these opportunities. Even without a job, I didn’t want to”.

“Do you still have friends from prison?”, I ask.

“No, I lost all of them”, Samuel says, “completely”. He scans the small path leading down to where we sit leaning against the wooden frame of the kitchen tent, and then he smiles. “I am waiting for somebody, but you can relax, I won’t let anybody do...”.

“Okay”, I smile, and Samuel continues. “I have one friend, a *camarada* (comrade), from the time when I was *envolvido* (‘involved’ with the PCC). He is PCC. And today, he messes with...some time ago he was messing with drugs, a lot of drugs. Now, he is supplying the whole of São Paulo with dynamite. Do you want dynamite? Then he is the man. To explode ATM’s and stuff. He was terrible as a young man, killed some men, so imagine now that he has experience”.

There is a pause, and then Samuel tells me, “You know, ‘*eu nunca fiz compromisso com eles*’ (I never committed to them - the PCC). If I want to return to crime, that is one thing, but I did not sign the statute (of the PCC). They give you a paper, you read and sign it, and then you are an *irmão* (baptised member of the PCC). It is organised crime, very organised ...”. Samuel hesitates, as if to signal to me that he has already said too much about the topic that none of my other interlocutors would speak openly about. He then ends our conversation. “Frida, I have to go now...”.

Leaving the ocean blue field, I meet Igor by the car. He often gives me a ride there, as it is difficult to reach by public transport. During my talk with Samuel, Igor has drifted around the area to ‘give us privacy to talk freely’, but now he looks at me: “So, I suppose he talks openly about ‘them’ (the PCC), right?”, he asks. I do not reply. “He has nothing to fear. *They* (the PCC) can’t kill him, because he is already dead”, Igor then says.

I am wondering if Igor is referring to a form of social death, a ‘homo sacer’ (Agamben 1998) or an ‘ex-human’ (Biehl 2007), as Samuel lives a secluded, excluded and isolated life with seemingly no formal attachments to the world outside his house. Or if Igor is making a darker prediction of Samuel’s life course, as a previous, but no longer *envolvido* (involved with the PCC), who no longer wishes to be part of the *Comando*.

Samuel’s enigmatic description of the PCC provides a powerful beginning to the core theme of this dissertation: how power is exercised by a criminal society in an urban periphery of a megacity that is undergoing rapid transformation and is characterised by high rates of violence. Based on intensive fieldwork (2015-2019) in the periphery Zona Sul of São Paulo, I explore what form of power the PCC yields and ask what effects this power has on sociality and on

ways of being, relating and living in the urban landscape. I further analyse the historical and urban conditions that have laid the foundations for the PCC's emergence and the specific form of power that it yields.

A central argument of the dissertation is that the PCC in Zona Sul constitutes a criminal 'secret society' (Simmel 1906) that is felt as omnipresent, and yet has a ghostly presence that rarely materialises as a collective body or as persons who clearly announce or show their involvement with it. The PCC is almost never talked about directly and very seldom named, and when it is, it is most often through obfuscating talk and the absence of words, as when Samuel spoke to me. In fact, Samuel was the only one of my interlocutors who actually called *them* by name, spoke about those involved with the PCC and openly described the PCC's violence.

Throughout the course of my research it seemed there was nothing to hold on to, not clear speech about the PCC, nor a locatable member, known as *irmão* (brother), nor spectacular violence as a means to visibly demonstrate the PCC's power. And yet I came to understand that the *moradores* (residents) of Zona Sul experience and live as if the PCC is omnipresent in social relations and in the urban landscape. The consequence of this omnipresence for sociality is a constant sense of fearfulness, embedded in the ever-present threat of violence if one does not follow the PCC's elusive and situationally determined order (*ordem*) and codes (*Certo*).

This intangible omnipresence of PCC's power is captured by the emic term 'Diluted Crime' (*Crime Diluído*), which denotes how crime and violence are at the same time all-pervasive and uncontainable. They spill over into the urban landscape and the sociality of Zona Sul, not in visible, materialised ways, but, I suggest, through affects and atmosphere. I show how, through the lingering sense of threat it installs, the PCC comes to have an affective presence that is palpable, layered and complex and not beyond the reach of the senses and the circuits of the social. This form of power, I argue, emerges under conditions of rapid urban transformation, historical structural violence and social inequality in São Paulo, as in Brazil in general.

The secretive, depersonalised and elusive manner through which the PCC's power makes itself omnipresent in Zona Sul challenges prevailing assumptions and theories about criminal organisations in the urban peripheries of megacities. It also requires a different methodological approach that enables the tracing of the intangible and the elusive. As shown by previous studies, the PCC is known to have an *Estatuto* (statute), definable networks of *Sintonias* (the

name for different positions or ‘responsibilities’ within the PCC) and to hold meetings for dispute resolution, which the PCC calls *Debates* (debates). It has also engaged in temporary enactments of spectacular violence in the past, giving way to severe responses by the state police (see for example Denyer Willis 2015, 44; Marques 2014, 20). However, the PCC has no identifiable leader, no hierarchy and no claims to demarcated territories of control. In these respects, it departs from the classical images of gangs, whose members show gang attachment through tattoos or particular clothing, as with northern Central American street gangs like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Calle 18 (Wolf 2010). Also, the PCC does not fit the classical characteristics of the Italian, Russian and Oriental mafias whose diverse organised crime activities (see Meier 2013, 1392-1393) are often tied to specific territories and where the mafia commonly extort and demand tribute from businesses and local citizens (Schneider et al. 2005, 502), or who act as loan sharks for enterprises, commercial activities and urban residents (Scaglione 2014, 77). Nor does the PCC in Zona Sul resemble those violent non-state actors who use direct intimidation as a way to demonstrate power in the urban peripheries (see for example Zaluar 1995, 95f; Misse 2000, 11) or who form sporadic vigilante-style groups to provide local security in the absence of the state (Koonings and Kruijt 2009).

While there is a clear similarity between the PCC and other types of criminal grouping like gangs and mafias when it comes to violent methods and criminal activities, the classification of the PCC using classic definitions of gangs and mafias fails to capture the multiple ways in which the PCC yields power in Zona Sul through a secretive, intangible and elusive omnipresent-absent antipole. It is not possible to locate and identify a PCC with static forms and flows in their production of order and maintenance of power (Biondi 2016, 26). Yet, simultaneously, I came to recognise during my fieldwork how the threat of the PCC is still locatable in bodies, events, shadows and gestures in ways that reveal and are disclosed as traces of what perhaps could be understood as the PCC.² This empirical reality has shifted my analysis from the visible, palpable, materialised and articulated into the analytical domain of *affective atmospheres*. I therefore focus on what I term the *affective presence* of the PCC in Zona Sul by combining elements of affect theory with Foucault’s (1980; 1991; 2000) and Bourdieu’s (1989; 2010; 2009) understandings of power. Drawing on a theory of affect draws

² I understand these ‘traces’ both as an analytical means and a methodological field of inquiry, which I will discuss in greater depth in the section on ‘fieldwork’.

attention to the ways in which the PCC, despite being invisible, is sustained and established and how it comes into being through affective atmospheres that are palpable, layered and complex with very tangible effects on the *moradores* (residents).

By using affect theory in this way, the dissertation contributes a new theoretical and methodological approach to the study of criminal organisations in megacities that reveals the distinctive of power of the PCC, in comparison to classic understandings of gangs, mafias and vigilante groups in other contexts. It also adds a new way of understanding the PCC in São Paulo, with its focus on the particular ways in which the PCC exercises power in the city's urban peripheries that are not only rooted in the practical or visible manifestations of the *Comando* but in invisible and affective forms. Much of the current literature on the PCC outlines the pragmatic workings and sheds light on the PCC's concrete functioning, whether from the perspectives of the police, as in Graham Denyer Willis's (2015) detailed ethnography of the Civil Police in São Paulo, or the thoroughly crafted ethnographies of the PCC by anthropologist Karina Biondi (2010; 2018). Biondi's ethnographic entry into the PCC was through a state penitentiary facility in São Paulo where her husband was incarcerated at the time (though he was not a member of the PCC). Here she gained access to *irmãos* inside the prison in a bounded place delimited by the physical walls where PCC *irmãos* were physically located. This provided her with a detailed 'pragmatic' perspective on how the PCC works in its multitude, primarily from the perspective of the declared *irmãos*. In another pioneering work on the PCC, Gabriel de Santis Feltran (2010; 2011; 2012; 2018) analyses the functioning of the PCC by showing both its formations at the local level in the Paulistan peripheries and the larger national and transnational movements of the *Comando*. However, I turn my gaze to the way the PCC comes into being and materialises itself through the affective experiences of the *moradores* in Zona Sul to show how the PCC's workings also exceed its boundaries and work *affectively*. As we shall see, the way in which the PCC's 'presence' made itself known to the *moradores* through traces, cross-references and metaphors offered many suggestions about the unique characteristics of how the PCC produces order in neighbourhoods in Zona Sul, albeit secretly. By placing the focus here, the dissertation contributes a new theoretical and methodological way of studying the PCC revealing the forms of power that are made possible by the way the PCC operates through its ghostly and secretive presence in Zona Sul.