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Editors' Forum Hot Spots

Bolsonaro's Brazil and the Police Fetish

FROM THE SERIES: [Bolsonaro and the Unmaking of Brazil](#)

Photo by Fernando Piva/ADUNICAMP. "Amerindian Scholar Fernando Piva/ADUNICAMP. "Amerindian Scholars from Unicamp (State University of Campinas) against budget cuts in education." Student rally against Bolsonaro (Campinas-SP, May 2019).

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“Police reflects the industrial capitalist societies,” pronounced the criminal sociologist Robert Reiner (2010, 87) in *The Politics of the Police*, first published in 1985 but already a classic. In 2019 we come across the inverse aphorism. In Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil, society mirrors its police.

Witness, for example, the anti-crime bill that minister of Justice Sergio Moro launched on February 4, 2019, with the aim of combating violent crime through violence itself. We are squarely within the realm of necropolitics, as outlined by Achille Mbembe (2019) and Francisco Ferrándiz and Antonius C.G.M. Robben (2017). Necropolitics is about the biopolitical body. As Foucault states “the right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die,” (in Campbell and Sitze 2013, 62). But it is also about the right to expose people to death—physical, social, and civic death. The exaltation of armed security and military police are part of this process. Inspired by Marx and the “commodity fetishism,” Robert Reiner (2010) forwards the idea that “police fetishism” is the attribution of supernatural powers to an object which transforms the police into the state itself; as Jacques Derrida (2002) would argue, the force of law is in itself mystical. How police fetishism operates in Brazil is a long story.

To begin, Minister Moro proposed an extensive package of measures in 2019. One of the most commented upon was the extension of the use of the legitimate defense (exclusion of unlawfulness), going against the norms of international law. The document explicitly says that, “If excessive use of police force results from excruciating fear, surprise or violence, the judge can either reduce the penalty or fail to apply it” (Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2019). This effectively authorizes police execution without trial. The death penalty now descends onto the streets.

Police in Brazil kill an average of fourteen people a day: *The police that kills and dies the most in the world*, has become the mantra of Amnesty International and Brazilian Human Rights organizations. But there is a substantial difference. From 2016 to 2017 the number of law enforcement officers killed decreased by 15 percent (367 on duty and 294 off duty), whereas lethality at the hands of the police increased by 20 percent, reaching an astonishing 5,144 people killed (Cerqueira et al. 2018).

Moro's measures are not motivated by coherent policies of crime reduction or by any thoughtful public security strategy. The goal is to govern through the moral panic of crime, as was previously and extensively undertaken in many states in the United States (Simon 2007). In Brazil, it comes with a difference: in a very violent atmosphere, neither does the population believe in the public security forces, nor do the police show signs of effectiveness or offer better services than before. In the United States, the homicide settlement rate is 65 percent, and in the UK 90 percent. In Brazil, the Brazilian Criminalistics Association indicates that [only 5 percent to 8 percent of murderers are punished](#). Out of every 100, more than 90 homicides have never been solved.

The Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2018) identified that 76.2 percent of the police victims are black. The risk of a young black citizen being a victim of homicide in Brazil is 2.7 times higher than that of a young white citizen. Racial inequality in Brazil expresses itself undeniably in lethal violence and public security policies. In 2016, for example, the black homicide rate was two and a half times greater than the rate for non-blacks (16.0 percent versus 40.2 percent). More generally, the homicide victimization of young people (15 to 29 years old) has been described as “the lost youth.”

As argued by the leaders of the National Truth Commission (2011–2014), the settling of scores following twenty-one years of military dictatorship is yet to be done. The process of democratic transition was carried out without deep questioning. Amnesty given to torturers of the dictatorship period taught police officers that nothing happens if a black man is beaten or killed. Officers learned this defense: “I killed him because he tried to kill me.” Police impunity is socially accepted and politically motivated.

In Rio de Janeiro, the almost unknown judge Wilson Witzel was elected state governor in 2018. [His first public statements](#) pledged to open up mass graves to ditch people killed by police officers in crime-fighting actions, and also prison ships to house prisoners on the high seas. Witzel encouraged the military police to “shoot down armed bandits,” reclaiming the “wild-west gratification” that not so long ago rewarded police for acts of bravery. Police slaughters from the 1990s are returning, but with no need to cover them up. Everything now happens on a stage, in a necro performative political mode.

In São Paulo, the champion state in both police lethality and incarceration, the gubernatorial candidate João Doria promised that, if elected, the São Paulo police force would “shoot to kill.” Once in office, in one of the first streaming interviews after being elected, [Doria stated](#) “whoever resists arrest goes directly to the cemetery, not to jail.” But one morning in the small city of Suzano, when an armed assailant surprised several families at the door of a college, a woman pulls out her revolver, fires several times at point-blank range, and immobilizes the subject who would later die. She was an off-duty military police officer. A police star was born.

Kátia, the “mother-cop,” as she became known, would be publicly honored by the Governor. To launch her own candidacy for federal deputy, she exhaustively displayed the CCTV video recording of her quick action. Kátia garnered the seventh-highest vote count in the state, joining the so-called “bullet-coalition” operating in the National Congress. The number of uniformed candidates to the legislature quadrupled between 2014 and 2018. And in the 2016 municipal elections, 972 of the candidates had a military profile (Berlatto, Codato, and Bolognesi 2016).

Retaliation has long been a hallmark of the Brazilian police. Nevertheless, what used to circulate as part of a Brazilian “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2016)—e.g., that “the only good bandit is a dead one”—is now politically mandated. Since the transition to democracy starting in 1985, we have not seen such a fetishization of the uniform, nor such social tolerance for lethal force.

What is new today is that police-killing is now legitimated in the National Congress as a form of governance. Democracy in Brazil, as in many other Latin American countries, has been analyzed as a violent democracy (Arias and Goldstein 2010). In the Bolsonaro and Moro era, the risk is that Brazil will quickly and openly become a martial democracy.

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