

City & Society

Covid-19, Policing and (Anti)Fascism in Brazil

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The death of poor black teenagers – such as João Pedro, shot 70 times by police officers on May 18, 2020 in São Gonçalo, Rio de Janeiro – once again opened the Pandora’s box of Brazil’s justice apparatus, specifically in its main cities. Due to recurring controversial cases of the police posing an additional danger to the population in Covid-19 times, on the 100th day of the epidemic [Brazil’s Supreme Federal Court created an injunction](#) prohibiting police operations in poor communities in Rio de Janeiro. The police are subordinate to the state governments, but due to the country’s current political chaos, the Supreme Federal Court has taken the lead in many decisions, moving into the crosshairs of criticism from the executive powers. This time, the court decreed that police operations can only take place in “absolutely exceptional cases”, following requests to the Public Ministry from governors and police commanders for exceptional action. In a follow-up report on the first two weeks of the judicial order’s effect, it was estimated that the decrease in police operations in Rio’s favelas and the subsequent decrease in shootings saved 18 lives in just 15 days (Hirata et al. 2020).

This decision highlights the unsustainability of violent policing policies, in a time that demands precisely the opposite, that is the protection of the most vulnerable populations, with structural support for survival, and the reduction of threats to life. There will always be those who defend police as a part of a social order to be preserved. Many scholars understand policing to involve the maintenance of the status quo. If the status quo is a racist, violent, and usurping one, as it is in most places, then the same applies to policing. But in urban contexts such as those in Brazil, in which democracy is led by authoritarian governments that wage war on the population and state institutions, police violence gains new contours, overtly displaying racist, radical right-wing and discriminatory tendencies. In authoritarian regimes, white supremacists come out of the closet, in a clear fashion and with state support.

In Brazil, the political management of the pandemic has been violent since day one, and instead of reorienting the course of government, it revealed its necropolitical tendency based on denial. The philosopher Marcos Nobre (2020) states that the arrival of Covid-19 has only accentuated the Bolsonaro government's defining trait: it operates according to logics of war, in which the political adversary is cast as an enemy to be exterminated. Or, as Miriam Leitão, journalist and op-ed writer at Globo, notes, [he acts in a persecutory delirium](#). In this war effort, the president has several allies, many of them in the armed forces and in the police agencies.

This threatening policy and the flirtation with the police forces was already apparent back in 2018, before the elections. Since his candidacy for president, the security forces have been a pillar of support for Bolsonaro, who has acted as a kind of union leader of the low ranks of the police forces throughout his political career. During the 2018 election, Bolsonaro promoted the increase of successful police candidacies to the state, federal and state legislative powers. The presence of military police officers in government positions is notorious, even if not as organized as high-ranking military personnel, which led to the idea that they are a "military party". In the last eight electoral cycles some 7000 police officers ran for legislative and executive seats – though only a small percentage was successful (only 34 were elected). Police began to gain space in the national political arena since 2018. [Statistics reveal that 1 in 58 police officers have \(mostly right or far-right\) political aspirations](#). This state of affairs has led some specialists, such as Renato Sérgio de Lima (president of the Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública), to [warn of the eminent danger](#) of a democratic rupture at the hands of police officers.

With authoritarian processes underway, police lethality – in which Brazil is a champion – does not stop. "The police that kills and dies the most in the world", [has become the mantra](#) of Amnesty International and Brazilian Humans Rights. Between 2017 and 2018, police killings increased by 19.6% in Brazil, despite a reduction in homicides, robberies, and property crimes. However, the situation is worse when the number of police deaths is seen as a proportion of the total number of intentional violent deaths. São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro lead these statistics: [in 2018, 33.1% and 28.1%](#) (respectively) of the total number of intentional violent deaths were at the hands of police.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, [deaths during police interventions increased](#) by 13% while in the state São Paulo the number rose by 53% during March, April, and May 2020, months marked by the pandemic and stay-at-home orders. As such, we can surely say that we are looking at the expansion of Brazil's necropolitics (Mbembe 2003). Despite isolation and quarantine, and with mobility severely restricted, black people and poor citizens in general are still being shot and killed by their police. The

political logics that produce deaths by Covid-19 and by police interventions in Brazil seem more and more aligned. The profiles of the victims and the places most affected are the same: young black and poor people, residents of urban peripheries. The harm caused by the advent of the new coronavirus proves that the main cities of Brazil quickly adapted to the unequal distribution of the violence produced by the governments. In cities across the world – from Brazil to the United States to Kenya (Kimari 2020)– there seems to be a constant relationship between violence caused by the new coronavirus and violence produced by the security apparatus, leading to joint protests against both. Both police violence and virus violence seem to be decisive vectors for governments that create very unequal fields of possibility of death among postcolonial populations (Mbembe 1993).

By June 2020, that same police violence gave birth to a new wave of civilian protests in Brazil (as in the United States following the killing of George Floyd by police officers), which despite Covid-19 energized the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Back in 2013, the international activist movement centered its attention on the African-American community, denouncing once more the violence towards Black people. In Brazil, the deep connection between Bolsonaro and the police, and the increase in electoral candidacies of members of the security forces, provide a specific tone to the political debate on violence.

Truth be told, police violence has always been at the center of Brazilian black movements' agendas, whether police persecution of Afro-Brazilian cultures such as samba, candomblé, Umbanda, and capoeira (all prohibited by law at some point in history) or the usual selectivity and lethality of policing intervention in low-income urban peripheries. The anti-racist struggle is present in struggles for justice such as those by Mothers of May (Mães de Maio), a movement of mothers of youth killed by the police, and Amparar, a group that helps imprisoned people. The very foundation of the Unified Black Movement (MNU), a national network of anti-racist associations, came about after a protest organized in response to the police murder of a black worker (Pereira 2013). The influence of Black Lives Matter in Brazil reflects both this long history of national anti-racist struggles, and connects local struggles to global systemic fights, popularizing the slogan *Vidas Negras Importam* on protesters posters and t-shirts.

During the first peak of the pandemic in June, hundreds of thousands of Brazilians marched and protested. It is important to note that in Brazil specifically, these protests add an antifascist facet to the usual antiracist motif. Unexpectedly, one of the most active public and political reactions within social networks, and with representatives from all Brazilian cities, came from within the security forces themselves. The so-called Antifascist Police Officer Movement emerged ahead of this year's

protests in Brazil. Inspired by Foucault's preface to *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1961), and its critical influence in the Brazilian academy, the movement defines fascism not merely as a state form, but as a way of life that had been taking shape in the country before Bolsonaro's election. Its members consider fascism to be a socially and institutionally embedded, lethally violent perspective based on the war on drugs that started to appear inside the police forces, but also as a signal of a wider trend in society. According to them, the shape of fascism is not produced from top to bottom; rather, it is identified in the daily growth of citizens who exalt the language and logic of war and reinforce a vision of violence as a way to solve social problems, even if it means exterminating part of the poorer black population in Brazil. [Statistics show](#) that black people are 75.4% of those killed by the police.

Despite the simultaneity of the protests, in the US racial inequality has remained at the heart of the disputes, while in Brazil they also voice dissatisfaction with government responses to the pandemic, and reflect an expansion into a general critique of a right-wing extremist government. The police institutions are divided. Despite being permeated by many who feel well represented by those authoritarian governments, many other police officers do not accept the government's actions at face value but also question what they see.

#Antifascismpoliceofficers": Why not?

On June 7, antifascist and antiracist protests took place all over Brazil. That day, to the surprise of many, 500 policemen and women [signed a manifesto](#) against fascism and in defense of Brazilian democracy (see screenshots in Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Manifesto front cover text.



Figure 2. Manifesto last page (with signatures).

If you follow this type of political movement within police institutions closely, you will be well aware of all the tensions and dynamics that officers taking this position might need to contend with. The dissent went public when Mark Bray – celebrated author of the 2017 anarchist manifesto *Antifa* – engaged in a feud with Leonel Radde, one of the most well-known Brazilian antifascist police officers. Bray tweeted “No no no no no... If you’re really an antifascist then quit your job” (Figure 3), to which Radde replied (in Portuguese, Figure 4):

The police worker who investigates Marielle Franco’s murder, is he a fascist? The policeman who investigates the deaths in the periphery, the cases of racism, or the violence against women, is he a fascist? Policemen who mobilize in the defense of democracy, shouldn’t they have some backing and respect? Is it the whole institution fascist? If we want to better our country’s situation, we’ll have to count on the police”.



Figure 3. [Tweet from Mark Bray](#) about Leonel Radde



Figure 4. [Tweet from Leonel Radde](#) replying to Mark Bray

What we often forget, even those who study such subjects, is that imagining a “new police” is part of a larger project that does not belong exclusively to political or academic actors. It is quite an endeavor, an entanglement of justice projects, administration, social appeals, always striving for political consensus; it involves projects that are being claimed, maybe through somewhat controversial methods, from within the police institutions themselves. In dispute are policemen and women’s own bodies, most of them recruited from the lower social classes, brutalized by the daily inhuman treatment of the police hierarchy, and at the same time kept apart from other social environments by the profession’s inherent corporatism.

Nowadays a beat cop is generally someone who leaves a situation of poverty to enter a daily routine of institutional violence. The same policeman gains lethal powers that he uses in his everyday life (as statistics show), and some material gains such as access to quality hospitals and to social security that anchor him in his new life.

The Brazilian police forces [are definitely the deadliest](#) in all of Latin America. The mixture of extreme violence and the access to the stability of state employment is a powder keg for any democracy. Many far-right politicians exploit this ambiguity, and then charge themselves with the task of galvanizing a

belligerent aesthetic (Ghertner et al. 2020). In Brazil, we can watch this process gaining momentum, and in one of those disputes lies the antifascist police movement.

The “antifascist police officers” movement is a network mostly composed of a large number of so-called civil police officers (*policiais civis*) and military police officers (*policiais militares*), but it includes some federal highway patrol (*policiais rodoviários federais*), prison guards (*policiais penais*), scientific police (*policiais científicos*), traffic agents (*agentes de trânsito*), firefighters (*bombeiros*), municipal police forces (*guardas municipais*), members of the judicial system, and socio-educational agents as well. They are present in at least 22 states, with particular public visibility in Alagoas, Bahia, Paraná, Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Norte, São Paulo, and Tocantins. The founding moment of the movement took place in September 2017 with the realization of the “I Seminário Nacional Policiais Antifascismo” in the Brazilian Bar Association of Rio de Janeiro, where [the Manifesto](#) that outlines the movement’s main principles was launched.

We do not claim to speak on behalf of this heterogeneous movement, nor do we mean to suggest that the movement is the only form of reflection or debate on democracy within the police – there are various other organized police groups, focusing on LGBT, feminism and racial issues. It is also important to remember that during the military dictatorship [there also was some opposition from within the police and armed forces to the regime](#), and some officers were victims of actual persecution. Here, we outline some of the philosophical and practical orientations that the contemporary antifascist police officers profess.

They are policemen and policewomen who see policing as work (and not as a mission) and police officers as workers (and not as missionaries); who differentiate between antifascism and antifascists, emphasizing their position against ideas and ideals rather than against people; who want to build a two-way dialogue between police organizations and the larger society, through police democratization support groups; who want to participate in much needed structural changes in the architecture of the public security system; and who believe in the creation of inter- and trans-agency dialogue platforms, breaking free from the Brazilian paradigms that organize the most obscure solidarities and complicities between police subpowers.

Final words

The all-or-nothing argument for abolishing the police is a weak one, as its proposed solutions disregard historical processes. What the anti-fascism police movement evidences is that, even in the worst global scenario in terms of an anti-democratic government and police forces unable to deal with a pandemic, we find a broad range of political and social reactions. As Beatrice Jauregui's research shows, police worker politics and their legitimacy in the Global South are co-configured with processes of democratization, decolonization, and development, and despite locally specific fights and movements, police worker politics are a global phenomenon (Jauregui 2018; Jauregui, forthcoming). To tell a police officer that they must cease to be a police officer in order to be coherent within their own ideologies and democratic practices fails to see the police in its complexity. Furthermore, such a statement is blind to the plurality of social life, flattens the democratic political game, and ignores the possibility that police officers are simultaneously victims and enforcers of the Brazil's violence and inequalities. It might be more valuable to understand an antifascist police agent as more useful to democracy *inside* the institution than outside of it.

If biopolitics is a policy that involves the body, the same applies to police institutions. Living (and lively) bodies exist inside police forces. To say that a police officer cannot profess an antifascist stance is to suggest an institutional homogeneity that simply does not correspond with reality. To say that a police officer cannot fight for democracy is to deny that inequality is fractal. Part of those contradictions cannot be solved without the action of workers such as police officers – mainly the low-ranking ones – who are generally young, black and poor, and who have finally found a stable form mode of income in this profession. The fact that the police systematically wield lethal violence against demographically similar compatriots, is a fundamental knot in the present Brazilian democratic crisis. If we want to reverse events such as those described earlier in this text, we will need, without a doubt, to include police agents.

The Brazilian Supreme Federal Court's emphasis on the need to restrict the police use of lethal violence during the pandemic appears to have been ignored by the police forces and their commands. Meanwhile, in November 2020, Brazil has seen over 160,000 deaths from coronavirus, in just over eight months. [The words of the Supreme Court's Minister Carmen Lucia](#) that the country faces a tragedy as a result of a political irresponsibility has not sensitized the executive branch. Alongside the United States, Brazil is one of the countries most affected by the pandemic. Yet during this same pandemic, the São Paulo [police beat their own record](#) of killings, despite an abrupt drop in robberies and thefts. As this dispatch has underlined, the pandemic is accompanied by police lethality. Black social movements, the anti-fascist policemen, and others can help to reverse this scenario, albeit late.

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