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In the shadows of protection: Brazilian police in private security

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ABSTRACT

The police play a pivotal role in Brazil's private security industry, even though they are prevented by law from participating in the business. In this article, we argue that the configuration of the private security market reinforces officers' material and symbolic gains. Drawing on long-term ethnographic work on private security and policing in elite residential complexes in São Paulo state, we demonstrate how police enhance their individual standing and personal wealth while maintaining regular security guards in subordinate positions. We describe officers' role in risk management, firm ownership, and gig work (known as *bicos*). By showing how these forms of labor are negotiated in private security settings, we conclude that strategic blurring between public and private realms produces systemic ambiguities and advances a governance model that privileges police power.

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On a sunny Saturday in August 2022, we accompanied private security workers at a large residential condominium complex, located in the interior of São Paulo. The sprawling 'Townville' gated community boasted 1462 houses spread over an area of 3 million square meters. We had spent months accompanying private security workers at the complex, before 'Julio,' one of the security managers, finally agreed to introduce us to what he called the 'sensitive sector,' accessible only with his supervision.¹ Together, we climbed into the security patrol car used by the guards and left the main gate, circling the entire condominium until we reached a small dilapidated building. Inside were two cramped cubicles, adorned with computers displaying video footage of the complex. Renato, one of several police officers subcontracted to work in this special area, sat behind one of the desks. A plastic bag of take-out food was set off to the side, sustenance for the long shift. Water dripped from the ceiling behind him, falling into a strategically placed bucket. The situation was quite typical. In condominiums and other high end private security settings across Brazil, 'undercover' security agents like Renato, who are very often Military Police (PM) officers, work in private security on their days off from the battalion, occupying worn chairs in discreet buildings like this one.²

Renato was dressed in head-to-toe black clothing, an outfit which made him easily distinguishable from other security workers, all of whom wore the corporate uniform of the official company contracted by the condominium. In private security, black clothing in general signals 'special security' for the occasion of events, parties, and meetings. But in other contexts, it also works to convey security processes operating under a layer of secrecy. Dressing agents in black, Julio told us, has desired effects on criminals. He explained:

'For those who already have a history with the police, for the *vagabundo*, seeing a man in black will raise the criminal's suspicion that the person is probably a plainclothes policeman, which in turn will dissuade him from targeting this condominium.'³

Overall, the black clothing works as a symbolic device, suggesting that the security agent is a police officer regardless of whether or not he actually is one. Furthermore, if the agent in black identifies what he deems to be a *vagabundo* lingering around the streets outside of the condominium, he will discreetly approach the guy asking: 'What are you going to serve time for? A 155 or 157?'. As these are the police codes for assault with weapon or assault without one respectively, the question essentially functions as a veiled threat of arrest.

In the following days, we observed the 'sensitive sector' more closely in order to better understand the role of these agents in the overall security plans of the condominium. It quickly became apparent that while the men in black were on hand to assist and intervene in potential moments of crisis, the majority of their work entailed the collection of confidential data on the condominium, its residents, service providers, and on the complex hierarchy of laborers who guard the space. Julio justified the practice, explaining: 'Guards and other employees, including myself, are not authorized to investigate anyone's personal life. But the police can; and they are more experienced than the guards.' The sensitive sector did not routinely co-mingle with others in the complex's security hierarchy; officers interacted very minimally with the other hired guards, if they interacted at all. Yet the regular guards, access controllers, receptionists, and those monitoring the cameras all knew that their work was being surveilled.⁴

Residents, by contrast, see themselves as the clients of the complex's security apparatus and have no idea that they themselves can be investigated and have their criminal records in the hands of the intelligence officers, who they did not seem to know existed. For most residents, the security system seems simple, composed of 'guardinhas,' (little guards) whom they treat as subordinates (Durão *et al.* 2021).⁵

We learned from Julio that the entire record of activities at the gatehouse (including the collection of identification numbers, employers, and addresses of service providers and the residents guests) and footage from the surveillance cameras is screened by Renato and his colleagues, who then use both the police database and other 'knowledge networks,' like their private WhatsApp groups, to identify and flag people with a criminal record, creating a cache of valuable information that can be used in incidences of robbery, assault, and kidnapping. Thus, even while residents pay top dollar to be protected, they do not know that they are actually paying to be spied on, with details of their private lives, the floor plans of their residences, lists of their family members and friends, visitors, and service providers, all their identification numbers and photos, compiled into a database created and selectively disseminated by maybe police.

Most incidents are perpetrated by someone with access to the inside of the condominium and not from outside suspects, Julio told us, attempting to further justify the practice of aggregating an enormous private database of information on everyone who moves through the complex. He continued, 'Because Townville is a very high-end condominium, some residents are white collar criminals, embezzlers, and tax evaders, many of whom are under investigation by the Federal Police.' Others even hold important positions in organized crime, he contended. But unlike the common criminals who are confronted as they case the condominium, those Julio considered 'high end criminals,' are not approached in a face-to-face manner. They are simply surveilled. In this way, the men in black, while drawing on the resources of their role as cops to guard the condominium, also use their private security work to quietly enhance their policework.

Given the generalized climate of suspicion in security and the sensitive nature of the questionably legal work, Julio must ensure that he has a trusted team of men in black. Júlio is a well-known political actor among municipal government secretaries and city councilors, and has allies among influential leaders of the Municipal Council of Public Security in the city where he lives. These connections reinforce his role as a private entrepreneur who enjoys direct access to a labor pool of military police interested in working (discreetly but illegally) as subcontractors. He recruits directly from a recommended list of military police officers provided to him by his allies.

Júlio mentioned several times that this innovative security system is the result of a 'risk planning' methodology that he himself created in his security consulting company for high-end residential

condominiums. He has sold this methodology in the form of a private security plan to counterparts in more than twenty Brazilian states. He argues that the strategy of using men like Renato is ‘a smart combination of the best that exists in the military and civilian worlds. From the military world, comes secrecy and hierarchy. The private sector brings the flexibility, communication, and a business sense.’

This ethnographic vignette describes one way in which the police interface with private security, carrying out intelligence work in the shadows of large residential condominiums. We recount it here because it suggests the foundational articulation and enmeshment between various different actors across public and private security settings. The widespread presence of police in lucrative condominium security work as we observed it in Townville, as well as in other condominiums we visited across Sao Paulo state, violates the legal frameworks governing public and private security in the country, which mandate a distinct separation based on public versus private space, which restrict police from holding other employment, and which says that private property should be protected by private asset protection and not by public forces⁶ Regardless of the law, the police are a ubiquitous presence in private security work.

Even while some of the existing literature maps the gray zones of security (Muniz and Paes-Machado 2010; Zanetic 2010), it has been difficult to empirically delimit public/private intersections and the ways in which they serve specific power interests in everyday practices (Lima *et al.* 2014, Lopes 2011, Zanetic 2009; 2010). We seek to begin to address this gap here. We contend that it is not possible to understand the private security industry in Brazil, nor the growth of such security in urban middle-class residential and commercial environments during the last forty years, without grasping the complex and varied participation of police officers at its heart.⁷ Police exercise an ambiguous and often hidden power which is widely tolerated in the private security world. Through their presence they both produce private security at all levels and increase their own influence.

In this article, we seek to demonstrate the various ways that the police work inside the private security sector. Exploring a variety of ethnographic cases, we show how the police presence inside the private industry reflects their rank and status in their corporations, and their relation to local and corporate power networks. Put differently, all police do not have equal access to lucrative private security work. Who has access to which positions and for what price, rather, reflects extant hierarchies within the police corps but such work can also provide a path to advancement and wealth. Police in private security, we argue, create a productive ambiguity that provides them with special power, both in and out of the corporations.⁸ The resulting police power opens a space for economic gain but also impunity and unchecked extra-judicial violence largely out of the control of the state or civil society oversight.

In the pages that follow, we first frame our approach as it relates to the literature on security governance and public/private security blurs and describe our methodology. Next, we turn to our empirical data, exploring the presence of police across three different spaces: risk management, firm ownership, and gig work. We discuss the implications of the pivotal role of police in producing private security for our understandings of the industry and its unique characteristics in Brazilian entrepreneurial cities such as São Paulo. Lastly, we explore how by earning money and gaining status through private security industry work, police officers are actively contributing to maintaining regular security guards in subaltern positions, restricting their ability to negotiate better working conditions or upward mobility within the profession. Police in the private security industry is therefore not only reproducing the social order, as it is critically recognized (Neocleous and Rigakos 2011), but also perpetuating class and racial hierarchies through security work (Robb-Larkins and Durão 2023).

Security blurs in Brazil

Since at least the 1990s, the exponential growth of new forms of extra-state security has led to the conceptualization of policing as plural. What we mean by ‘policing’ has been expanded by the

participation and competition between a myriad of actors involved that decentralize state security (cf. Ericson 1994, Jones and Newburn 1998; idem 2006, Johnston 2000, 2006, Loader 2000, Bayley and Shearing 2001, O'Reilly 2015).⁹ Yet while the plural policing literature in Brazil recognizes that the public-private dichotomy does not reflect contemporary policing practices, work to date has not fully explored the connections between state security and private protections (Lopes 2013, Lopes and Paes-Machado 2021, Muniz and Paes-Machado 2010, Muniz and Dias 2022). In this article, we examine plural policing from the perspective of practice, focusing on the pragmatics of 'policing at work' (cf. Garriott 2013, 3). This perspective has been the basis for defining a new field of anthropological research on police institutions and practices (Karpiak and Garriott 2018).

Private security markets have historically been understood as creating productive ambiguities in the security field. The most consistent reference in these topics is the ethnography work of Tessa Diphoorn (2016; 2017) (Diphoorn and Berg 2014, Diphoorn and Kyed 2016), who has shown the importance of intricate historical and social ties that blur the public/private security dichotomy in South Africa, powerfully illustrated by the figure of 'old boys' of the Apartheid regime (Diphoorn 2017, Diphoorn and Grassiani 2019). Perhaps differently from other places, due to the normalization of the presence of police in Brazilian private security, although always practicing some degree of illegality as will also be seen throughout the text, police and military personnel are not considered clandestine in the industry. Especially when they come from the higher ranks, they are exempted from the accusation of the campaigns of the National Federation of Security and Values Transportation Companies (FENAVIST) and other powerful industry associations that characterize clandestine activities as the biggest challenge to the expansion of 'professional' private security in Brazil (Durão and Paes 2021).

Meanwhile, the growth of the private security industry has posed challenges to the organization of state policing globally, as the territory and practices of what constitutes public policing and what constitutes private security work are negotiated (Percy 2016, Soussai 2016). In the Brazilian case, this negotiation has played out primarily around public versus private spaces and around discussions of private security work as focused on protecting *property* and *assets*. Although a federal legislative framework laying out this distinction has been in place since before the post-dictatorship re-democratization process in the country (between 1985 and 1988), it has been constantly challenged in practice (Durão and Paes 2021). Therefore, even if there is a legislative distinction between these spheres of work, the widespread presence of police officers in all spheres of private security obscures it.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that in 1983 the private security company with the largest operations in Brazil dating from 1969, Pires Serviços de Segurança Ltda., belonged to Colonel Erasmo Dias, a known torturer during the military regime, who once served as the Secretary of Public Security and who enthusiastically championed private security as necessary to the prosperity and comfort of the upper classes (Caldeira 2001, p. 201).¹¹

Estimates of the size of the private sector note that for each registered security guard, another two or three likely work without a license and outside the law. This means that if the Federal Police Department reports that 495,989 guards are currently registered for Brazil's private agents, another 1,096,398 are working clandestinely (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2022). What number of these workers are, in fact, police officers is unclear (Lopes 2022) but our experience on the ground certainly points to the ways in which police are ever present in the field.

As we saw in the opening vignette, despite legal limitations, individual police officers, often acting with the explicit consent of their direct superiors, and even the São Paulo Secretary of Public Security, work extra shifts in property security, even if it is in defiance of federal legislation. This work is generically called '*bico*' (translated as police gig work) and functions similarly to what Diphoorn has described in South Africa as the practice of 'moonlighting' or 'security work which does not appear in official records or occur through official channels' (2017, 136). *Bico*, as a socially accepted but legally dubious practice, persists in part because of the limits of regulation and oversight of private security by the Federal Police, as has been pointed out in the literature (Lopes 2011, 2013, Zanetic 2009, 2010).¹² Or to put it differently, the federal branch of the police is essentially declining

to effectively regulate the state branch of the police. But police in the private protection business have also been allowed to flourish because *bico* is a way for many policemen to earn critical extra income, since their unions have not been able to secure significant raises with the state governments. One of our interviewees, a soldier in the Military Police of São Paulo State, commented that he earned twice as much as his salary through *bico* work. This amounted to about eight thousand reais per month (six times more than a regular security guard's salary), which allowed him to enroll his children in private schools.

As we learned, *bico* is not only tolerated, but even encouraged by police superiors, since it is seen as a mechanism that rewards the hustle on the part of individual police to pick up extra work while denying structural change.¹³ Furthermore, as we noted with the case of Renato, allowing police to infiltrate private security spaces produces not only monetary benefits but also has the potential to generate important information which can be useful to public security. For the policemen who are more 'in tune' with the market, generally upper-level police officers or high-ranking army officers, private security is a fertile field for growth, where they often maintain the status of 'specialists' (something Diphorn also notes for South Africa police moonlighting), consulting on security plans for multinationals, owning companies, etc. At all times, for both high-level police and low-level gig workers, the ambiguity of whether they are acting as police or private security agents works in their favor.

Therefore, we take as a starting point an approach which understands the interplay of various actors as forming a security assemblage – a new normative order beyond the nation-state which is also shaped by the growing power of private actors who interact with the state (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009, 06, Haggerty and Ericson 2000, Sammimian-Darash and Stalcup 2016). The presence of the military policeman impersonating a guard, but still sometimes strategically evoking the power of being a police officer as described above in Townville, perfectly illustrates how security assemblages that 'blur our interpretations and understandings of power and social order' are organized (Diphorn and Grassiani 2019, 2). More specifically, we are interested in how our empirical findings reflect what Diphorn and Grassiani call 'security blurs' or 'performances aimed at providing a sense of (perceived) safety that includes numerous and different actors, roles, objects and aesthetic appearances that overlap, and through this overlapping, create various forms of blurriness' (2019, 2).

In general, security blurs in Brazil have been identified as evidence of poor regulation and governance of security work (Sinhoretto and Sérgio De Lima 2015, Lima *et al.* 2015) and as proof of the country's frustrating and incomplete 'disjunctive democracy' (Caldeira 2002, Caldeira and Holston 1999, Zaluar 2007). In this line of argument, the transition to democracy was not enough to guarantee rights or curb abuses, with the mismanagement of security instead becoming part of everyday democratic functioning (Caldeira 2002, Caldeira and Holston 1999). As a result, the country lives in a security state which 'establishes the insecurity as a project of power and governance, fear as a regime and the exception as a rule. It governs itself with 'organized' crime and not against it' (Muniz and Dias 2022, 134). The democratic mismanagement of security grows the criminal world (Cano and Duarte 2012, Grillo 2019, Paes Manso 2020, Zaluar and Conceição 2007), where 'armed domains' – drug traffickers, militias and others – are present as mobile forms of government over territories and populations (Muniz and Proença 2007, Miranda and Muniz 2018). This process has only heightened during the government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro, who promoted a discourse of war that encouraged state, para-state, and free-enterprise solutions to crime that not only violated human rights but which were also openly hostile to state regulation of any kind (Avritzer 2020, Paes Manso 2020, Pinheiro Machado and Freixo 2019).

In our long-term ethnographic work, we have found that contrary to what is assumed in the literature, in Brazil the advance of the private security industry is not due to the absence of the state or public security. As we will show ethnographically in this article, the private market reinforces the power of police officers, whether individually, in groups, in companies or as freelancers, where police hierarchies determine the mechanisms for gain and power. Far from being a residual

anachronism of the violent transitional process from Military dictatorship to a democracy still waiting to be regulated by the state, the police remain central actors in private security industry today.

Ethnography in the shadows of security

The data presented here draws on the long-term fieldwork carried out in various security environments since 2015, including shopping malls, gated communities, and on the streets of middle-class and elite neighborhoods. The first and second author interviewed dozens of entrepreneurs, managers, and private consultants working in a number of security companies of various sizes, including those that offer training courses for property guards in the largest schools in the state of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Both followed the routines of security guards at major events, and observed the largest security fairs in the country, and interviewed important businessmen and political leaders representing the sector at the National Federation of Security and Value Transport Companies, and the Union of Private Security Companies, Electronic Security and Training Courses in the State of São Paulo. The third author attended the meetings of the Municipal Security Councils and the Community Security Councils, interviewing their presidents and community leaders. Starting in 2018 the first and third author have also been doing joint fieldwork in residential and commercial middle-class private security settings in several São Paulo cities.¹⁴

Our approach has been to examine private security precisely at the places where it blurs into adjacent enterprise, such as entrepreneurship, or state policing (Diphooorn and Grassiani 2019). Looking at these blurred regions is an important methodological entry point to teasing out the empirical complexities of security assemblages and the everyday expansion of the presence of the state in the most diverse modalities of private security, but also to demonstrate how certain social actors and markets operate parasitically (Durão and Argentin 2023).

In this article, we focus primarily on blurred security in large elite residential complexes in several cities located in the state of São Paulo. Residential condominiums are one of the most lucrative places for private security companies. They are widespread, forming a vast market, and as private residences, they are not subject to direct scrutiny by state regulators and or prone to labor contract inspections such as is the case for public companies, universities, courts, etc. (Durão 2022). Residential condominiums are not just security bubbles that promise to protect residents against predatory criminals but can function as a kind of lucrative security playground for enterprising officers (Hentschel 2015, Diphooorn 2016). They work as a place where security investment has a little financial ceiling, with security plans sometimes reaching into the millions of reais, opening up an extremely profitable space for entrepreneurial innovation.

Police commanders and the business of risk analysis: Coronel Hilton

Between 2007 and 2017, while he was a commander in São Paulo's Military Police, 'Colonel Hilton,' a 60-year-old white man, also engaged in private security labor. He did not, however, use the term 'private security' to describe the work he did when he was an active-duty officer, instead stating that he was a 'freelancer' in a 'property security consulting company' involved in the oil and gas industries. He currently refers to this same work, which he still performs today, as 'consulting services.' As we noted in all cases of police in private security, Hilton's position in the private security field draws explicitly on his leadership role in the police. 'I was just applying my preventive knowledge to the private sector,' the colonel told us in an August 2022 interview. Speaking of his work and of other military police in private security, the colonel explained that 'because we have technical knowledge in the area of security, we inevitably act in various parts of the private security enterprise, both in prevention and in action, in moments of crisis; sometimes we are recruited to work, but always with a certain flexibility to leave and enter the business as we like.'

With his own resources and through the contacts and 'networks' he established during his police years, Hilton created his own consulting company. 'Doing consulting work is much safer for a police

officer than having his own private security company, because we are paid for our knowledge of the practice and we don't need to have financial capital to invest,' he explained. He also mentioned that the consulting work offers him a lot of freedom. The laws which govern security consultants are rudimentary. Oversight from the Federal Police is negligible. As Hilton told us, 'There is an immense creative space where you can design and offer your own 'security model', especially in residential condominiums, where there is more money to spend on security.'

While he was still active duty, the Colonel's main client was Petrobras, a company responsible for the oil and gas extraction process, whose main shareholder is the Brazilian State. He provided long-term consulting services at a refinery in the State of São Paulo. There, he told us, he carried out the 'risk analysis' to identify the 'vulnerable points' from the warehouse to the oil distribution networks. Security consulting, he continues, is above all a sales job. Today, his main clients are the high-end condominiums that house the elites of Campinas. He explains: 'I need to convince the business owners, the condominium board, and the residents how vulnerable they are. So, I have to know the crimes of the moment – the crime trends – and argue in favor of security.' As the Colonel says: 'I do well on sales because I can convince clients. I describe my perspective, which is based on my experience with the world of crime and with the most serious sorts of security crises. My description of the damages that the condominium and its residents could suffer in the face of security vulnerabilities may be convincing enough for the client to decide to shell out more than one million reais for a new security plan.' He continued: 'I always ask, do you have the resources to immediately attack the problem?' At that moment, he also tried to convince us, the researchers: 'How much is your life worth?' he asked, answering without waiting for our reaction: 'Priceless! We need to ask this question during a crisis to understand how much our work is worth,' he added, with a serious look on his face. Indeed, as the Colonel indicated, the fear of crime and the available expertise of police officers, active or retired and in reserve, greatly expanded the demand for security surveillance systems in condominiums of houses in many regions of Campinas – a city whose urban growth has been characterized almost exclusively by condominiums on one side and favelas on the other, mountain ranges of poverty and wealth (Cunha 2007, Melgaço 2012).

Part of this rhetoric of professionalism and the need for police-consultants to produce new and expensive security plans, promoted by public security agents working in private domains, is the respective devaluation of regular non-police private security professionals, whom they often diminishingly call 'adventurers.' As he told us: 'The guards who go into the consulting world do not have the technical capacity or experience, but they offer attractive prices, creating unfair competition for us, the specialists.'

The Colonel ends the conversation by recounting what he considers a successful case of a client he recently acquired. The week before, his fellow police officers responded to a call from a condominium in the vicinity of Campinas. A woman was kidnapped, her home was invaded and robbed. The police, Hilton's friends in the corporation, recovered the stolen belongings, rescued the woman, and immediately referred his company to the condominium manager. Today, the affected condominium is a 'client in progress' and Hilton is carrying out what he calls a 'plan of attack.'

Hilton is just one of the many colonels we encountered in São Paulo providing consultancy services for residential condominiums, managing millions in budgets, and exerting significant influence over the local managers who try to convince residents of the need for new models in exchange for a piece of the profits. Beyond just selling the plan, the Colonel recommends that it be carried out by specific private security and electronic surveillance companies he knows, thus generating more opportunities for extra jobs for his police friends and for the local managers who helped him to secure the contract.

While powerful police like Hilton are able to work as consultants, developing costly security plans, other officers, who have some social capital but lack access to very elite networks he relies on, own and operate companies that do the on-the-ground work in condominiums. Most of the civil and military police officers that we encountered in private security circles maintain their companies in parallel with their work in the police, even if this is prohibited by law. Many have small firms, with 10 to

50 employees and who regularly hire their labor force from within the police stations where they work or on the recommendation of colleagues. Some of the police officers we spoke with reported having the same side job for decades. Others said they just intermittently picked up what they euphemistically called 'outside contracts,' occasional gigs in 'special operations' in residential condominiums or in 'post rental' schemes that we will discuss shortly. In the following sections, we will explore the varying dynamics and breadth of different opportunities in which police work inside condominiums and in residential security.

The police company owner: Leandro

The private security market is so broad that there are always opportunities to integrate police officers into its midst. Another form of unofficial labor that police working in private security do is in the street, in the public spaces of middle-class neighborhoods, sometimes in subdivisions. Working for small neighborhood associations, with networks of businesses, they form small groups, to protect a given area, with officers known as 'motinhas' (little motorcycles) patrolling with their weapons thinly hidden under their civilian clothes. While some manage to get jobs through neighborhood associations, others offer their services door-to-door to residents, in student dormitories, to merchants, in hotels, etc. This was the case of Leandro, a military policeman. Like most police officers who work in private security, Leandro told us he started out making modest earnings. Like others, he had sought to supplement the low income he earned in his formal jobs as an entry-level officer with side gigs. As Leandro rose through the ranks of the police, however, he was able to translate initial forays working as a motinha into more ambitious enterprises, eventually becoming the owner of a small private security company.

Leandro started his security business in the 1990s in Campinas, selling his private security patrol services 'door to door.' As he says, 'I first conquered the Cambuí neighborhood, covering the surroundings of local hotels and bars.' As the security perimeter grew beyond what he could handle himself, he hired more police soldiers to patrol. A decade later, he was able to expand his business to a lucrative upscale residential neighborhood, an opportunity that came only after solving a case of robbery followed by death in his police job. The case, which he described as an inflection point in the growth of his business, earned him a good reputation as an operational police officer and allowed him to advance in the local private security business. Leandro said that: 'I increased my off-duty work to deal with the worst criminals of the time – a gang specialized in kidnappings that operated in the region.' As his company grew, he was able to generate extra job opportunities for lower-ranking police officers. His criteria for hiring police officers, however, was strict. Leandro says: 'I hired rock faces/ tough guys myself. Those willing to do a real clean up in the place, prioritizing the most violent police, known for working in the Tobias de Aguiar Ostensive Rounds.'

Today, Leandro's company has grown to the point that it has fifty employees, a license, and lucrative private contracts with a large condominium. He is identifying other potential clients in condominiums in the region where he will subcontract security guards and also his police and civilian friends. At the same time that he is experiencing growth, his business operates in the grey zone of legality. He is concerned about falling prey to inspection by the Federal Police and protects himself with political and influential friends so that his business is not audited. To stay out of the way of the Federal Police's inspection, he keeps an influential lawyer on retainer. He is also close with the owner of a school for training security guards. This training entrepreneur, in addition to being a close friend of the general coordinator of the Federal Police Department of São Paulo, which regulates and supervises the private security sector, helps Leandro fake the documents that show that his guards are doing their continuing education.

Leandro's company was in no way exceptional among the dozens we encountered during fieldwork. Even if a company has a license from the Federal Police to act as private security, it is almost always draws on a variety of police laborers and is 'irregular' in numerous ways, a modality

that has been described in other contexts in the world (Colona and Jaffe 2016, Diphooorn 2016, Diphooorn and Kyed 2016).

Cristian, a police officer from the Civil Police, 47 years old, still active, like Leandro, started working in private security in fuel distribution stations due to the explosion of cargo thefts. A friend involved him in his nightly rounds of yards where dozens of trucks were parked near oil refineries. There Cristian did gig work for many years. After some time, Cristian got hired on small security jobs from other distributors in the same region until he was no longer able to maintain the business alone. He then began to hire other civil police officers from his network of personal contacts in the corporation. The business was promising and profitable, as he told us: 'If at the time I earned 1,000 reais from police work, with private business I managed to earn triple that; I discovered all the lucrative possibilities of the outside world.' But if opportunities arose in the private world outside the police, they were only accessible to Cristian and others due to their position *within* the corporation. His next step was to open his own private security company, even if in the name of a family member in order to avoid breaking the law on paper. 'That's how I started to have my business regulated and supervised by the Federal Police,' he told us with obvious pride.

Police gig work

Not all police officers are able to climb the ladder from taking on gig work to opening companies. Others that we spoke to reported engaging in less regular work, where their status is more temporary. This scope of work generally takes place in special situations or in what they call 'critical situations.' In this scenario, police are hired to provide security reinforcements at specific times of the year, when special security teams are set up. The various officers we spoke with generally picked up more of this sort of work during the holiday season or on commemorative dates such as Mother's Day and Easter, when many families travel and houses are empty, raising the threat of robbery. Several others cited being hired to reinforce security at other times, such as when inmates of a nearby prison were granted work release, a time which generally generates panic among the condominium owners. As part of their sales pitch, companies feed the imagination of predatory crime lurking just around the corner, thereby necessitating special security schemes.

Faguno, a 50-year-old white private security guard, who works as a car patrol officer, also manages these special security schemes in a residential neighborhood of high-end condominiums in Campinas. Though he aspired to be a police officer, he was unable to pass the entrance exam. Faguno instead works as the right-hand man of the office. In his 20 years on the job, Faguno has become the go-to guy to set up rosters and schedules for special police jobs and to implement the security strategies of the immense neighborhood comprised of more than 30 residential condominium buildings. Faguno subcontracts police officers and men he trusts, such as his 30-year-old cousin, who, when necessary, makes motorcycle patrols and, authorized by the military police officer who owns the company, also carries out stops in the streets posing as a plainclothes policeman, a man in black. All those who work in the condominium are armed while on duty, using their service weapons, but dress in the company uniform or plainclothes.

Faguno has impressive intermediary power as he manages the entire network of police contacts and is the man responsible for offering the extra work to these professionals even while he himself is not a police officer. He is widely known in security circles around the city and even not all the practical extensions of his subterranean power are clear; a quasi-police civilian. He says he only deals with elite condominiums, where he protects those he serves with his life. When hiring police to work with him, tells us that he makes a point to seek out those with a certain profile. 'Not men who just need the money, but who are also committed to 'cleaning up.' (Fazer a limpeza)' Cleaning up here means arresting whoever as necessary, using illegal force, and demonstrating military skills, even in the private space of the condominium.

The police gig economy even produces its own outsourcing, known as the practice of 'renting out the post.' In the city of Osasco, working in a multinational retail market, we met Cesinha, a security

guard with a driver's license and some security training. When facing a job crisis, he earned money by renting the post of a policeman when the officer was unable to get away from his police shift to work in private security. The modality of renting stations helped Cesinha but also the officer in question, who wanted to keep his extra earnings, maintaining the informal subcontract with clients, but who was himself at times unable to physically provide the work for which he was paid. Such a practice was not, we found, so uncommon. For much lower price than what they earn, police officers rent their posts in the private sector to other police officers or guards such as Cesinha, who cobble together a series of rented post shifts to make ends meet. Cesinha also told us about several police officers who were managing the rental of gas station posts. The presence of police officers is desirable on the part of the contracting companies since they see employing police as a means of protecting themselves from inspection. They also put the responsibility on police to manage the posts. That is, they make them responsible for camouflaging the dynamics of renting the shifts and keeping the schemes under their control – schemes that are often place trust in the hands of the police. In this modality of sub-subcontracting people to perform services, there are no limits to the participation of people; any interested party can perform the 'security' service as long as it is within the network of each police officer who governs the post.

Gig work for poor security workers

While colonels, politicians, private security entrepreneurs, technology entrepreneurs, and police are using their formal jobs to earn money and reputation with private security, this devalues and throws its regular workers – the non-police private security guards – into structural precariousness. Thus, similar to many other parts of the world, such as South Africa, Kanya and India, in Brazil the governance of private security depends on a large mass of workers who are poorly paid and constantly replaced (Cf. Abrahamsen and Williams 2005, 2009, Berg 2003, Diphooorn 2016, 2016b, Minnaar 2005, Nalla *et al.* 2013, Sundar 2010).

The surveillance sector was one of the first to be outsourced in the country (Antunes 2015), leaving workers with little ability to negotiate working conditions, and with the lowest formal wages in the market – a little more than a minimum wage for access controllers and a minimum wage and a half for basic security guards (Durão and Paes 2021, 33). In the 2000s, with the explosion of private protection markets, the oversupply of services and the advent of large-scale outsourcing and hiring of private security guards, all security professionals were reduced to accepting low salaries. Thus, even when they hold a formal contract, these workers live in the fear that they will lose their jobs or not be paid, especially when they work precarious security companies, which often go bankrupt, a common scenario in Brazil. In South Africa, these are called 'fly-by-night companies' (Minnaar 2007, Minaar and Ngoveni 2004).

Faguno, Cesinha, and many other private security agents, men and women, that we met during our research, also scramble to find gigs to supplement their low income. 'On the outside,' as they say, they work odd jobs in civil construction, are furniture assemblers, and help mechanics in auto repair shops. Those who own a car or motorcycle work as app drivers, delivering goods or passengers. Even though they are driven to these side gigs by the poor remuneration they receive as guards, they continue to identify security work as one of the only places where, given their low level of education, they are able to secure a formal work contract. But at some point, informality emerges as a necessary alternative. During fieldwork, we accompanied Danilo, 48 years old, an outsourced security supervisor currently at a federal university complex in the state of São Paulo with 20 years of experience in the profession.

Danilo explained to us that while guards sought work in other 'outside' places, they also had 'inside' opportunities. In the contract, security guards are allowed to work on their days off – 4 days a month are permitted and include benefits. But guards are offered informal work on their days off – wherein their regular job becomes a mere gig. They are doing the same work, but informally and sliding below the radar of the contract. Most of the guards who work for Danilo did this for

15 days a month. It was so common, that companies like his engaged in a kind of intentional understaffing where the entrepreneur leaves half of his jobs open to be 'covered' by those who are on their days off, thus exempting himself from formalizing new contracts, which means paying reduced social burdens costs, like insurance or workers compensation.¹⁵ Danilo explains: 'If I need 4 security guards for the 12/36 shift, it will cost me 20,000 per month, but if I only hire 2 employees working 15 days a month, plus 15 days off the books, I spend only 12 thousand'.¹⁶

Sociologists, economists and labor historians have criticized the voracity of this sort of neoliberal employment structure (Antunes 2015, Antunes and Druck 2015, Teixeira da Silva 2011, Krein 2018, Krein and Colombi 2019). In private security, has been discussed by other scholars, outsourcing has given rise to disputes about the legitimacy of the use of State force and the pluralization of governance (Burris 2005, Shearing and Johnston 2003; Martin 2016). But rarely does either academic field delve into the correlation between security blurs and guard impoverishment. Our anthropological critique is based on the fact that security governance is supported not only by the confusion of a system that works by incorporating, normalizing and trivializing illegalisms and supporting the accumulation of power of businessmen, police and managers. It also works through the impoverishment of the great masses of non-police workers that constitute this market and who are under the command of the those with more status.

Concluding remarks

As we have argued, even the business model of security outsourcing that has expanded in recent decades in Brazil has not changed the widespread participation of police in the industry. On the contrary, outsourcing has perhaps facilitated the participation of police officers in the market. In practice, security outsourcing has allowed the expansion of contracts that offer specialized services without the contractors having to directly hire security personnel. What has resulted is a practical governance model that includes the different 'services' of public security agents. Even if prevented by law from participating in private security, with the expansion of markets, police officers and other agents have seen their opportunities for profit increase. In this way, the privatization of wide swaths of public security continues to transform the streets, businesses, condominiums, shops, industrial plants and many other spaces into competitive opportunities which are disputed, among others, by the police themselves.

Rather than seeing the blurring between different fields of security and police and crime as signs of incomplete democratization or incomplete regulation, we see ambiguity as an intentional productive force which allows for material gain for key actors, in this case police officers themselves. Such gains are mostly tolerated, and even valued in high end private security settings. Police officers use state power to create opportunities in private security firms. In that sense, it is fair to say that one of the unspoken perks of being a police officer is having access to several forms of private security that will bring material and symbolic gains. In a lengthy interview, a security CEO at a renowned technology firm explained why he eventually left his career as a high-ranking Military Police officer. The issue was never, he told us, the fact that he had two jobs. It never crossed his mind that he was doing something wrong. The problem, he explained to us, was being envied by a hierarchical superior, his commander, who penalized him for years for not being able to himself achieve private gains that he saw his subordinate achieve. There is a calculation of state career and personal expansion in private security that is generally accepted, but also disputed, as the case shows, within the police force.

As we have described, the senior high-ranking officer, like Hilton, who operates in private security risk management and ownership is seen in private security as someone with special symbolic and economic capital. The police officer like Leandro tends to see himself as someone who deserves to earn his extra money in private security gigs; after all, doing what he knows best, that is ostensive private policing. Although the only person acting in accordance with federal legislation is the

security guard, he is ironically he one who is the most precarious and vulnerable in the work chain of corporate private security.

This article responds to the call for more in-depth ethnographic studies to characterize the specificities of the global form of private security industries (See the intro of the SI). In this sense, we have explored the silent agreements that make the illicit confusion between public and private security agents into daily, banal practices that everyone imagines that occur and are afraid of, but which people are reticent to openly confront. We argue that more than a private supplement to the state or an interpersonal network of people performing state and non-state practices – or as Lund puts ‘unstately stateliness’ (Lund 2006, 677) – in Brazilian contexts security ambiguity is a means of performing, asserting and claiming power.

The confusion between public and private policing for some may essentially mean earning extra-money, but for many others it constitutes an endless extension of power, violence, entrepreneurship and political influence. As such, the public/private blurriness in Brazilian contexts produces systemic ambiguities, power domains of ‘no one’s land’, and also creating a stage for practical governance of (in)security through profitable gains.¹⁷ The different businesses that involve law enforcement and security agents, such as Leandro and Cristian, or that put them in contact with security guards, like in the cases of Faguno and Cesinha, show the creative variations of police governance of private security. As we have seen, their participation occurs at the most diverse levels of the security field, with important consequences. From whatever angle private security is viewed in Brazil, police and guards do not occupy symmetrical or equitable positions.

Notes

1. The ethnographic data present in this article were obtained after prior approval by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) – approval number 5,153,238. To ensure the safety of participants in this research, all the names mentioned are pseudonyms, as stated in the informed consent document presented to each of our interlocutors at the time of interviews and observations. We have also changed place names. This is standard ethical practice in the social sciences, intended to protect our research subjects’ identities.
2. Military police commanders are powerful in Brazil for several historical and social reasons. First, the military police is one of the oldest institutions in the country, having been created in 1808 with the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in Brazil (Monteiro 2022, Lembo 2002, Silva Filho 2015, Siqueira 2003). Since then, the military police has been responsible for maintaining public order and protecting the population in various situations, which has given it legitimacy. In addition, the military police is an institution present throughout the Brazilian territory, and is seen by some as a symbol of authority and public safety. In many cases, it is the only security force present in poorer or isolated regions, which further increases its importance and relevance to the population. However, it is important to point out that the military police are also highly criticized for corruption and especially in relation to the excessive use of force and police violence against low-income and Black communities.
3. *Vagabundo* is a multivalent term with no precise English equivalent but whose meaning lies somewhere between thug, bum, and criminal (Robb Larkins and Durão 2022).
4. Indeed, in all the security sectors that we have observed during fieldwork, mention is often made of ‘intelligence sector agents,’ but only the highest-level supervisors dare to say that they are police officers. Private police have long been used for ‘gathering intelligence,’ ‘prevention,’ and ‘recovering property’ (Marx 1987). Sworn agents cannot be everywhere and they face restrictions on access to private places and on the collection of many kinds of information, absent a warrant. But private agents, operating on private property and in contexts where persons appear voluntarily, are granted wide authority to carry out searches, to keep people under surveillance, and to collect and distribute extensive personal information. Citizens agree to cooperate as a condition for entering or staying on the property or obtaining some desired benefit. See also O’Reilly (2015) on the interface of private high policing and intelligence gathering.
5. Some residents accept and even prefer having police officers present in residential areas. They argue that security managers can hire officers informally, without announcing it publicly. Other residents, such as those who serve on the administrative council or the condominium board suspect that part of the fees they pay goes towards compensating the police. In a wider sense, citizens are aware that police officers often participate in private security schemes, both external and internal to condominiums. However, residents are often unaware that police officers may be involved in intelligence gathering, potentially scrutinizing their private lives.

6. There are two main reasons why police officers do not officially declare their activities in the private sector. First, like most state employees in Brazil, they are hired on an exclusive contract. No additional work is allowed. Second, according to private security legislation, only specially trained guards can be hired as private security laborers. A security guard must complete a certified course (Federal Police Norm 3.258, 2013). Police officers do not take the courses. Thus, policemen working in the private sector usurp the contractual laws of the private sector, as well as the laws of the organized private security market. In this case, the illegality is further compounded. Not only are men like Renato prohibited from doing this sort of work while also serving as police officers but the details of what he is doing – ‘collecting ‘intelligence’ – is also not allowed under his authority as a military police officer, as this is the branch of the police charged with strictly ostensive, not investigative, work.
7. In 1990, there were 82 private security companies in Brazil. In 2000, the number would increase to 284 companies. In 2012, the country had 2,282 companies, which represented a significant growth of 700% of the sector in 12 years. In 2022, 3,625 private security companies are operating in the country (Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2021; 2022, Robb Larkins and Durão 2023).
8. Interestingly, Brazilian police do not suffer damage to their reputation by engaging in private security work, a trend that has been noted to be the case in different contexts (Lippert and Walby 2013, 374).
9. On the other hand, in the literature on governance of private security, mostly comprised by scholars in the field of political sciences, sociology and criminology, the basic approach to these issues involves a definition of governments functioning through multiple regulations of the private sectors of protections (Scarpello 2016, Shearing 1992, Shearing and Stenning 1981, Kempa *et al.* 2004). Ultimately, governance is guaranteed by public bodies of the State that control the plurality of action by private actors (Shearing and Johnston 2003, Martin 2018, Shearing and Wood 2003). Nodal governance points to the collaboration between state regulation and non-state-controlled action nodes, that is, a wide mesh of actors that enable the governance of security forces – – the State and monopolies controlling violent action (Burris 2005, Holley and Shearing 2017). These theories have the advantage of reviewing theoretical orientations centered on state hegemony to understand security phenomena. In any case, despite observing the immense variation in the relationships between state and non-state security actors, and with variations among theorists, the very sense of governance still retains a systemic view in the sense of normative and regulatory functional articulations.
10. In 1983, as the country moved towards democratization, an effort was finally made to legally delimit and separate the field of private security from that of public security, through Federal Law # 7102, which remains to this day the main reference in the sector. The legal framework developed in this law separated private security from the public security sphere, linking it explicitly to asset protection and framing it as ‘complementary’ to public security, restricted to guarding businesses, residences, and other private spaces (Federal Police Department No. 3,233 of 2012). Legally, the participation of private security in police operations is not permitted since guards’ activity is restricted to the field of property.
11. Private security guards were first employed in Brazil in 1969 by the banking sector to combat bank robberies carried out by political opponents of the military dictatorship. The industry grew substantially post-democratization, primarily due to the rise in urban violence and changes in the spatial organization of cities. The creation of gated communities and semi-public spaces such as shopping centers, sports clubs, business parks, and corporate offices necessitated new forms of protection. This coincided with the neoliberal wave that commodified urban spaces and rendered security as an attractive consumer good. The growth of private security was linked to the advent of global capitalism, where security is rendered a good that the consumer should be able to obtain with their own buying power.
In the organization of Brazilian public security system, the Military Police is responsible for ostensive patrolling while the Civil Police carry out judicial and investigative activities. Both forces answer to state governors. As such, unlike most other police models, the policing in Brazil is divided in two. As expected, the Military Police has a bigger numerical presence (461,456 agents) in relation to the Civil Police (91,926 agents). Contrary to policing military raids and frequent abuses evidenced in favelas and poor neighborhood (Forum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2022, 84), in elite and middle class protected spaces, PM officers are often welcomed and appreciated. Not surprisingly, in private property protection we observed the larger effective presence of PM officers than PC officers.
12. The involvement of police officers in the security industry can be traced back to the power they gained during the military dictatorship in Brazil. This power persisted even after the country’s re-democratization and disregarded or circumvented the legal framework of the Federal Police and the regulations of the Ministry of Justice.
13. In their study of the effects of pay duty work among Canadian police officers, criminologists Lippert and Walby note a similar issue when discussing the potential challenges posed by police working off duty; ‘There is also the question of whether pay duty assignments, especially in cases where it may be seen to serve the public good, obscures the need for increased government funding for police services. Pay duty may be a risk to police services in reducing demand for budget increases from the Municipality’ (2013, 375).
14. We would like to emphasize that as ethnographers, our methods are based on long term engagement with research interlocutors over extended periods of time. This article draws on six months of regular (weekly)

participant observation in four residential condominiums located in the state of São Paulo. Over the course of this six-month engagement, we formally interviewed 120 guards and supervisors. Interviews took place either during or after work hours. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in most but not all of the cases. Daily fieldwork observations were recorded on a daily basis in individual field journals that totaled more than five hundred pages by the end of the immersive research period. Each author maintained her own field diary. Both interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed for this article.

15. As a supervisor, Danilo often receives orders from the firm's administrative and legal department to terminate employees. Supervisors like him are encouraged by their superiors to come up with valid reasons for dismissing employees. Many guards feel that they are vulnerable to dismissal without cause and told us that they believe that their unions merely represent the interests of business owners. Danilo himself explained that if an employee complains to their union about a supervisor's behavior, late payments, or the company's failure to meet its obligations, the union immediately informs the offending firm, which then puts the employee on a blacklist. The employee then has a hard time finding another job in the security sector as they would be labeled as a 'snitch' for speaking to the union.
16. Outsourcing security services, including concierge, cleaning, food, driving chartered buses, and other activities, is touted as a way to expand specialized companies, formalize workers, and reduce the impact of burdensome labor laws in Brazil. Proponents say that it allows the state and private sector to reduce maintenance costs and focus on core activities. Outsourcing transfers responsibility for 'middle activities' to another company, streamlining operational structure, reducing costs, saving resources, and simplifying administration (Antunes 2015, Basaldo and Morales 2014).
17. We aim to move away from arguments that present normative operating models on one hand and plural practical security modalities on the other. The latter become less compliant with the norm as they move away from the center and capitalize. Our understanding of security governance refers to the structures and functioning of security markets that are sustained through the stabilization of permanent and daily illegalities, where security ungovernance is the rule and not the exception. The norms for acting in private protections and the respective borders between public and private domains have historically been in dispute, making security never solely a matter of the state (Wylls 2020). Plural security governance can be analyzed from three axes: the ubiquitous participation of the police in private security business, the corporate power of security with public authorities, and the structural maintenance of basic security as a precarious and subaltern market of work.

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