

Criminal Networks in Urban Brazil

Bryan McCann

Brazil's megacities are under siege from within. Criminal networks formerly content with control over isolated slices of turf have demonstrated an ever-greater willingness to choke off the economic and social life of the city at large whenever it is in their immediate interests. Brazil's security apparatus—chiefly its surprisingly timid federal investigative bodies and its corruption-plagued state police corps—have proven unable to adapt to this transformation. In consequence, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are at the leading edge of a crisis confronting many megacities across the global south, driven by the mismatch between increasingly flexible transnational criminal networks and corrupt local security forces.

One of the most farcical episodes in Rio de Janeiro's ongoing crime wave helps illustrate the phenomenon. In November of 2006 a well-organized team of bandits disguised as policemen stole a van full of toy guns from a film crew. The crew had been shooting scenes for a "shoot 'em up" called *Tropa de Elite* (Elite Troop) in Morro do Chapéu Mangueira, a favela overlooking the glamorous beach neighborhood of Leme. Filming in such a location was only possible due to the payment of an unspecified sum to the local neighborhood association in Chapéu. Having filmed from midnight to four a.m., the crew was heading home on the main access road when bandits in a passenger car forced their van to the side of the road. In a choreography increasingly familiar to residents of the city, the

Bryan McCann is an associate professor in the department of history and director of the Brazilian Studies Program at Georgetown University.

crew was waved out of the van and onto the road, guns thrust in their faces. The bandits sped off in the van, newly armed with a few dozen assorted dummy rifles and thirty real guns that had been altered to make them suitable for film purposes but not for firing live ammo.

The obvious suspects were the local crew chiefs of the *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command) or CV, the criminal network that controls access to both Chapéu and many other favelas across the city. The film producers who negotiated shooting rights with Chapéu's neighborhood association knew that this criminal network was the silent partner in the deal. What they were truly negotiating was not the right to disturb the normal comings-and-goings in the neighborhood, but a guarantee that they would not be hassled by the gang. The president of the neighborhood association traded this implicit assurance for a donation to the association's coffers and the equally unspoken promise that the filming would not violate the favela's functional autonomy.

These unspoken deals have been so reliable in the past that many observers did not believe the local gang could have been involved in the holdup. Fernando Meirelles, director of *Cidade de Deus* (City of God), the Oscar-nominated 2002 film about drug wars in a notorious favela, had also filmed a successful TV series in Chapéu. "I can't believe it was someone from the favela," he argued, "because we never had any problem." Several public intellectuals with experience in Rio's favelas echoed this sentiment.

But the investigation led inexorably to Jony Paulo Gomes de Oliveira, chief of the Chapéu gang, and his regional supervisor Robson Roque da Cunha, who

allegedly approved plans for the holdup via mobile phone from his cell in a maximum-security prison. Subsequent tapped phone conversations corroborated this theory. The temptation of a van full of dummy guns—no good for firing, but useful for holdups—was apparently too much for the CV to resist, deal or no deal.

The episode, with its life/art/life imitations, a deal gone bad, and misguided expert opinion, reveals much about the changing landscape of crime in urban Brazil. The social contract alluded to by Meirelles, wherein public officials and representatives of private interests trade tolerance of petty crime in return for local peace, was never very stable, and is now decidedly a thing of the past. Engaged experts nonetheless continue to react as if it should be revived rather than abandoned. They attribute its decline solely to general social inequality, rather than to the increasingly rapacious tactics of Brazil's criminal networks.

These observers believe that the local cells of large criminal networks are interested primarily in selling drugs to willing buyers, are only loosely connected to each other, and mostly want to be left alone. However, abundant evidence suggests the contrary; drugs are no longer the primary source of income for these networks. Their leaders are increasingly sophisticated in the organization of large-scale plans, and they are stepping up violence in order to seize more turf. Brazil's security forces and the general population must comprehend this evolution. Establishing security for the citizens of Rio and São Paulo depends on a successful confrontation of the networks.

Strategies of Urban Terror. This past year, 2006, will be remembered as

an explosive one, when Brazil's principal criminal networks demonstrated their ability to bring the ebb and flow of life in its two largest cities to a halt. In the last days of the year, CV staged a series of exemplary actions across Rio de Janeiro, sending its low-ranking soldiers into the streets to burn and loot. This wave of violence showed the flexibility and coherence of network strategy—the actions were centrally-spurred, but not centrally-planned. They happened with near simultaneity, but the destruction they reaped was unpredictable and superficially chaotic. Gangsters threw grenades at police stations, fired on kiosks in drive-by shootings, burned cars, and set fire to an interstate bus, killing eight passengers and wounding numerous others. The rampage yielded nineteen corpses.

Experts searched for a motive and came up with no convincing explanation. The most popular theory suggested that the attacks were a warning to incoming governor Sérgio Cabral, who took office on 1 January 2007. But Cabral comes

and prison guards, who have booted the criminal networks out of a string of favelas on the city's periphery. The militias hold this turf through intimidation and resort to the same tactics favored by the networks themselves, including extorting protection money from local businesses and extracting profit via monopoly provision of services like van transportation and pirated cable TV. The networks and the militias are clearly engaged in a violent turf battle, though no single event could have precipitated the December attacks.

The most convincing theory is that the CV simply wished to show its muscle to the city at large. This would intimidate the low-ranking officers of the security apparatus who would bear the brunt of any crackdown on crime as well as the working-class population of the neighborhoods where the networks are most thoroughly entrenched.

The attacks echoed a similar wave in São Paulo in early May, carried out by the reigning network of that state, the

These gangs developed in the vacuum created by tacit concession of prison administration to powerful prisoners.

from the same party as the outgoing governor, and his most explicit campaign statements on the issue of crime merely decried police use of the *caveirão*, a tank-like military defense vehicle, in Rio's favelas. His election suggests continuation rather than disruption of the state's failed security policies.

A slightly more convincing theory suggests that the attacks responded to the growth of defense militias, comprised mostly of off-duty policemen, firemen,

Primeiro Comando do Capital (First Command of the Capital), or PCC. As in Rio, the network showed its ability to shut down the city for several days with a wave of drive-by shootings and bus burnings. Those attacks were supposedly prompted by the transfer of PCC leaders to more isolated prisons, and by threatened denial of prisoner demands in the state's maximum-security facilities. Such demands included permission to ship in dozens of televisions for the World Cup

and the continuation of traditional leave for well-behaved prisoners on Mother's Day and other family holidays. In previous years, up to 30 percent of prisoners had failed to return following this customary indulgence, leading prison officials sensibly to suspend the gesture. Given that these frequently-conceded demands for unusual comforts coexist with overall prison conditions that can only be described as hellish, they are difficult for outside observers to take seriously. Nevertheless, every media organ in Brazil reported the May attacks as, to a large degree, a response to threatened luxury concessions in São Paulo's prisons.

While this coverage reveals the extraordinary public profile of the networks—they can hardly be considered “underground”—it fails to reckon with the implications of changing network strategy. The violence of 2006 does not merely allude to prison transfers and luxuries; it shows the growing leverage the networks exercise over nearly every aspect of the economic life of Rio and São Paulo.

The Nature of the Beast. To grasp this situation, one must step back from the immediate demands and look at larger patterns. The CV and the PCC are run from prisons. Both organizations started as prison gangs, later spreading their tentacles to sectors of urban crime such as drug trafficking, car theft, bank robbery, kidnapping, stick-ups, shake-downs, and protection rackets. These gangs developed in the vacuum created by tacit concession of daily internal prison administration to powerful prisoners, keeping with longstanding Brazilian tradition. They grew from the practice of commingling petty thieves, organized mobsters, and revolutionary political

prisoners. State and federal authorities have been late and ineffective in responding to their control of prisons. The most pathetic line of public debate following the May attacks, for example, concerned whether cell-phone companies should block transmission waves near prisons. Removing cell phones from prisoners was never considered an option likely to succeed.

Both networks have created or co-opted non-governmental organizations to guarantee this status quo. Nova Ordem, for example, is ostensibly a prisoner's rights NGO in São Paulo, but is widely acknowledged to be a legal arm of the PCC. Its officers were recently indicted for money laundering and kidnapping and are implicated in the kidnapping of a television reporter last August.

Outside of the prisons, hemispheric links with guerilla factions have strengthened the organizational capacities of the PCC and the CV. Mauricio Norambuena, a Chilean kidnapper and longtime captain in the communist militant organization Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez, was arrested in Brazil for his participation in notorious kidnappings. He subsequently shared a cellblock with Marcos Herbas Camacho, who is better known as Marcola, kingpin of the PCC, and credited with helping to organize the network's successful kidnapping ring. The CV, meanwhile, has relied on Colombia's Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionárias de Colombia (FARC) for cocaine supply, tactical advice, and the occasional hideout for a crime lord on the lam.

Brazil's networks have also learned to exploit the rhetoric of these revolutionary allies, issuing manifestos demanding social justice and blaming urban violence on the police. The standard CV graffiti

tag includes the initials PJJL for “*Paz, Justiça e Liberdade*” (Peace, Justice, and Liberty), although it is difficult to credit the notion that an organization that runs a highly lucrative kidnapping ring is interested in social justice. The revolutionary rhetoric of the networks resonates enough with reality in Brazil that it successfully obfuscates network tactics. Many politicians are corrupt, police tactics are often shockingly violent, and prison conditions are deplorable; denunciations of these phenomena can pass for sincerity in certain circles. In the wake of the São Paulo attacks, *Caros Amigos*, a magazine influential among left-wing intellectuals in Brazil, ran a special issue on the PCC, including an article on “the ideas of Marcola,” that emphasized his indictment of the corrupt system.

In practice the CV and the PCC are dedicated to exacerbating poor conditions in and outside Brazil’s prisons. Wretched prison conditions may have allowed the initial growth of the PCC and the CV, but the networks now actively produce such conditions in order to maintain their power over inmates. In May of 2006, for example, a PCC riot reduced a prison in Araraquara, São Paulo to ruins. Following the riot hundreds of prisoners, grouped in a tiny recreation yard, scabbled among themselves for food delivered by airlift and arranged critically wounded colleagues in a circle in the center of the yard, where they waited days for relief.

Outside the prisons, the tactic of burning buses seems designed primarily to make life more difficult for the working-class residents of the urban periphery. Bus burnings also help to drive customers to semi-legal van operators, a rapidly-expanding sector of the public transportation matrix in Brazil’s major

cities, and one in which both major criminal networks are heavily involved. The vans prove no safer, as they are not designed for mass transportation, rarely inspected, and frequently in violation of traffic laws. But alternatives are decreasing, as bus companies deliberately abandon dangerous, money-losing routes in peripheral neighborhoods and limit themselves to central routes.

The consequences for these areas are predictable—higher prices, more violence, no official accountability, and an ever-constricting range of opportunities for local residents. Again, the previous existence of such conditions facilitated the initial growth of the networks that now act to produce these conditions anywhere they are not yet present.

Neither Episodic Nor Systemic.

Changing network strategies have produced a grotesque catalogue of notorious urban crimes, particularly in Rio. To earn front-page status in that city, a crime must be truly spectacular, involving famous names or particularly gory details. These crimes typically dominate headlines and public discussion for a few days, until they are replaced by a new instance of depravity. A survey of recent headline-grabbers makes for an impressionistic but revealing picture of changing criminal patterns. In April of 2006, Rodrigo Netto, lead singer of the popular rock band Detonautas, was killed by teenage carjackers who believed he was insufficiently acquiescent in pulling to the side of the road. In August of 2006, André Costa Bordalo, a nineteen year-old Portuguese tourist, was stabbed to death on Copacabana beach at 8:30 on a sunny morning because he resisted surrendering his knapsack to a thief. In November of 2006 Ana Christina

Johannpeter, the glamorous wife of a wealthy industrialist, was killed at a stoplight in the upscale neighborhood of Leblon. When Johannpeter saw an armed thief approaching her window, she attempted to remove her watch to hand it over, and her car rolled forward. The teenage gunman shot her in the head and fled on his bicycle. In December of 2006, Ellen Gracie, President of Brazil's Supreme Federal Court, was carjacked on the highway between Rio's international airport and the city center. (Gracie was unscathed.)

Such episodes tend to be treated in two

acting autonomously within the scope of these networks, have communicated to their soldiers that they are to escalate immediately to mortal violence. In this light, the death of the Portuguese tourist, for example, takes on different implications. His killer, twenty-three-year-old Claudeci Bezerra, told police that he had recently moved to the favela of Babilônia, which overlooks Copacabana beach, and had spent the night preceding the attack snorting cocaine. The CV controls access to Babilônia and does not normally welcome young, able-bodied drug abusers as new residents in the neighborhood

To earn front-page status, a crime must be truly spectacular, involving famous names or particularly gory details.

distinct registers, the episodic and the systemic. In the episodic register, they are treated as isolated incidents—the kind that can happen in any unruly city but seem to happen more frequently in Rio. They are often described with a surprising lack of irony as *fatalidades* (fatalities), a usage that emphasizes that such events are dictated by fate. This explains why they disappear so quickly. Meanwhile, in the systemic register, they are analyzed as consequences of Brazil's notorious inequality, of its violent history, of the pervasive presence of handguns, or of the contradictions embedded in Brazil's constitution.

Neither account is particularly revealing. In contrast, when analyzed as clues to the constantly evolving strategies of criminal networks, they suggest clear and alarming trends. The Rio networks are currently emphasizing car theft and stick-ups as both revenue sources and intimidation tactics. Local crew chiefs,

unless they are already soldiers in the network. Nevertheless, not a single media organ in Brazil pursued Bezerra's links to the CV. Within four days, coverage of the crime had ceased entirely.

The CV almost certainly did not order Bezerra to stab a tourist in broad daylight. But his actions nonetheless bespeak the network's current strategy of opportunistic street crime accompanied by extreme violence. When one looks between the episodic and systemic registers, this pattern is apparent enough that it would seem to require no explicit confirmation. Yet explicit confirmation exists.

In December of 2006 Robson Roque da Cunha, planner of the dummy rifle heist, was released from prison for a Christmas visit with his family. Roque da Cunha, affectionately known as Caveirinha, or "little skull," was in the middle of a kidnapping sentence and clearly

implicated in ongoing criminal activity, but his indulgence was nevertheless granted. Not surprisingly, he failed to return to prison and returned instead to his position as active commander of the CV crew in the Pavão-Pavãozinho favela. Within a month, police investigators discovered that Roque da Cunha had ordered his soldiers to increase stick-ups in the area to boost revenue. Three months later, in late March 2007, Roque da Cunha was gunned down in an alleged shootout with the police in another CV neighborhood across town. Citizens of Rio have learned to treat such shootings skeptically, as they often amount to extrajudicial assassinations, with no greater effect on network power.

In another city, Roque da Cunha's orders to step up street crime might have made front-page news. In Rio, they took back seat to the latest horrific crime. On 7 February 2007 a band of carjackers in a working-class neighborhood on Rio's north side forced a sedan to the side of the road and waved its occupants, a mother and her two children, to the sidewalk. One of the children, a six-year-old boy, was unable to get his seatbelt open. The bandits sped off in the car nevertheless, with the six-year-old hanging out the driver's-side rear door. They dragged him four miles across the city, zigzagging in a vain attempt to shake his body loose. They abandoned the car with

what was left of the boy's corpse still hanging from the seatbelt.

The members of the gang were arrested over the following days. Their leader, twenty-three-year-old Carlos Eduardo Toledo Lima, had already been arrested six times. In November of 2006 he began serving a one-year sentence for theft, in an "open regime," which permitted him to leave during the day and return to jail at night. In late December he failed to return to jail, but no steps had been taken to locate him. The carjacking, reaching a new level of pointless cruelty, horrified all of Brazil. In the first few days after the crime, it was treated primarily as a particularly shocking, deeply disturbing episode. Systemic interpretations began shortly thereafter.

If Rio and São Paulo are to confront their raging crime problems, they need a more precise approach. This includes a security policy that will acknowledge and confront the changing strategies of the country's two most powerful criminal networks. Until the command structures of these networks are broken, until local crews are cut off from prison leadership, and until network turf domination is broken, rather than conceded, the problems will only get worse. The networks have demonstrated their ability to evolve. If the security apparatus cannot do the same, it will concede ever-growing portions of these cities to the underworld.

NOTES

- 1 Antonio Werneck, "Um Assalto de Cinema," *O Globo*, 3 November 2006.