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A few ethnographic notes concerning violence in Brazil

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1. *The context*

In Brazil, different forms of violence are reported amongst regions and cities, and expressed in domestic and family relationships, inter-gender relations, across social classes and ethnic groups, and within and between institutions. Within a short period of time (1993) three samples of violence occurred which attracted worldwide attention:

- the massacre of 19 Yanomami indians in Hachimu (in the border of Brazil and Venezuela) by the **garimpeiros** (goldminers); in a context of continuous violations against indigenous peoples (i.e. the Greater Carajás mining project and the threat of collective suicide among the guaranies in the South).
- the **meninos da rua** (street children) massacre of La Candelaria Church in Rio (where 8 children were killed by military policemen in the early hours of the 23rd of July, while sleeping outside the church of La Candelaria) ... a survivor to the killing recovering from 2 bullet wounds said "... I will never forget that night even if I live one hundred years - they must pay for what they did"). A parliamentary report show 298 children killed in the first semester of '93, in Rio (a 70% increase compared with the same period the previous year)
- the killing of 21 **favelados** (shanty-town dwellers) of Vigario Geral, a **favela** in Rio de Janeiro, carried out by a band of 30 hooded and heavily armed men (military police according to some witnesses). None of the 21 victims had a criminal record.

Other features of the context in Brazil today:

- 500,000 child prostitutes in the streets of major cities (second to Thailand),
- 32 million living below subsistence level (IPEA, 1992): 1/5 controlling less than one per cent of wealth (no ethnic data is in the Federal census 1940 and 1970),
- over 3,300 favelas with over one million **barracas** (shacks),
- \$ 4 billion in food is wasted/spoiled every year,
- a racial democracy myth, and conditions of social exclusion and discrimination with a population of 50 million blacks,

- there are only 11 afro-brazilians among the 503 representatives in the Chamber of Deputies.

2. *Violence as presented by the ICD:*

In the main capital cities, mortality due to external causes (accidents, suicides and homicides) represent more than 10 per cent of all deaths and ranks as the third main cause of death country wide. In some cities, like Rio de Janeiro, deaths due to violence are becoming the second main cause of death (1989).

Brazil: 10,5% (1980)
 12,3% (1988)

Goiania lead the group (17.5%), followed by Rio, Curitiba and Sao Paulo. Main increments are in the NE cities: Recife and Salvador (Minayo, 1993). Homicide rates in Rio reached 45.2 per 100,000 pop. (1988); yet there are many cities in Latin America experiencing similar if not higher rates, such as Medellin, Colombia which recorded as much as 232 homicides per 100,000 (1988)

- 8 out of 10 homicide victims are men, the vast majority between 15-45 y.o. age bracket. External causes are the second cause of death amongst men (140 X 100,000 inhabitants)
- a victims' profile is: male, black and young with little schooling and no income; no qualifications; often a bandit "hero" plays a role model (who in spite of constantly challenging the social norms is "successful" in the eyes of the locals)
- homicide is the first cause of violent death in both sexes (largely with firearms) (92.3%) followed by strangulation and "*arma branca*" (daggers, etc)
- morbidity and permanent disability resulting from violence is little known. Some authors estimate the impact about 200-400 higher than mortality.

3. *Approaches to the study of violence.*

There are various approaches to the study of violence. I'd like to focus in the ones most often found in Brazil nowadays:

- a) First, there is a medical/natural science perspective, centring their analysis in the **biological and psychological factors**, following what in North America is represented by the classical ethnological studies (Lorenz, ..) and the socio-biological studies on genetics of violence (Edward Wilson, 1984; Ardrey, 1972). This is the field that we may call "violontology", which uses a predominantly "natural science" perspective, resulting in a "neutral" notion of violence, functional and classificatory... (i.e. the purely medical approach: count and classify the death, care of the wounded and improve the

rehabilitation technologies...).

- b) A second group focuses their analysis on the effects of **social change**, particularly those of rapid industrialisation, modernisation and accelerated urbanisation...rural-urban migration, the *favelas* (shanty-towns) and extreme poverty conditions and frustrated expectations are generally blamed for the increase of urban violence. The inner-city is not seen as the generating mechanism of violence, but rather the “locus” of violence, where frustrated aspirations of the poor classes explains delinquency and crime. These authors tend to ignore the macro-structural factors and adopt a more functional approach: in the final analysis they claim that rapid social change is the main force which results in criminal and violent behaviour. Rural-urban migration, “*favelisation*”, unemployment and low literacy are seen as generators of deviant behaviour. To label the urban poor as potentially “criminal” is to ignore the influence of other forms of structural violence: such as state and cultural violence; and gender, age, ethnic and religious forms of violence.
- c) The third approach, which we may call “**political**”, interprets violent behaviour as part of the **survival strategies of the poor**, as victims of the exploitative capitalistic state. Social inequalities and the existing contrast between the rich and the poor, are forces which lead the latter to use violence in their attempts to recover the surplus which was expropriated by the rich (Sorel, 1970; Engels, 19..). Such view sees violence as an instrumental force to even out the prevailing conditions of inequality and injustice, and the other contextual factors are minimised...repressive forces (i.e. police) are often blamed as responsible for the violence.

Urban poverty, violence, crime, police and the “*bandidos*” -- as seen from the perspective of the local dwellers—are systematically interrelated. The relation between poverty and crime is self-evident when walking the internal alleys of the *favelas*, where you can see the squalor, smell the stench coming from decomposing organic matter, mixed with plastic containers, cans and broken bottles, slime and foetid excreta from open sewage. One can always see workers coming and going, drunken men, erratic women, young kids as street vendors and the always busy (housewives), dogs with running sores coming out of cottages made out of rugs, mixed with a large number of unemployed youngsters watching the time going by and the presence of the *avioes* or *vapores* (watchman or sentinel standing in strategic positions, to point to clients or detect the presence of policemen or bandit gangs of enemies). This scenario of daily life is often shook by violence and a *troca de tiros* (exchange of bullets) between the police and the *bandidos*. The local population have an ambiguous relation with the police, a mixture of fear and disguised hostility... “*Quem faz o bandido é a policia*” (it is the police who produce the bandits).

d) closely connected to the previous one, a fourth approach centres the analysis in either the State's **lack of authority**, or in the opposite: "excess and abuse of force"... encompassing the repressive and/or persuasive power of the judiciary and police authorities. The "State" is presented as a neutral judge above the conflicts... the omnipresent symbol with the inscription of "order and progress" which is at the centre of the Brazilian flag. There are many middle class intellectuals who propose to analyse violence as a consequence of lack of political will, weakness or inefficiency of the repressive forces. On the other hand there are increasing reports on the abuses of military police involved with the murdering of street children and favela dwellers.

Brazil's criminal justice system is in crisis (Amnesty, 1990). Anxiety about the rising crime rate and the prevailing climate of lawlessness has increased the pressure on the police forces to show results. The police response is increasing violence taking the law into their own hands: torture and extrajudicial execution is an everyday occurrence in many Brazilian cities.

The civil and military branches of the Brazilian police have separate duties but frequently act in unison. The civil police investigates crimes (serious allegations of torture and ill-treatment have been made to the civil police). Military police is organised in battalions and responsible for public order in each state. They normally carry out arrests and control street crime, answering only to military courts.

The Brazilian penitentiary system is "...an incubator of criminals, in which prisoners are exploited by fellow prisoners and by organised gangs... plagued by drugs, physical abuse and often fatal violence and corruption, all of which contributed to frequent riots and jail breaks..." (Nilo Batista, a former civil police chief of Rio, 1987). The Casa de Detencao (Rio) was built for 3,200 inmates, but in 1989 was holding 7,200. In 1989, some of the cells used for solitary confinement were used as bathrooms for inmates isolated because of AIDS (15 per cent of new prisoners and about 30 % of the inmate population are HIV positive (1989).

In September 1986, some 2,000 prisoners rioted at the President Venceslau Penitentiary in the north of the Sao Paulo state. Once the police stormed the prison, the rebels surrendered and released the hostages. Battering and beating began out of which 13 prisoners died. The inquiry report that followed determined no individual responsibility for the violence. In early October 1992, the military police quelled a prison riot in Sao Paulo by firing over 5,000 bullets in one hour and leaving 111 prisoners dead and about the same number wounded. In Sao Paulo, the total of civilians killed was about 1,400 (five a day) in 1992. About 1,000 children are killed in Brazilian cities every year (UNICEF, 1993)

We do need to develop a more comprehensive framework (a network approach) for the study of violence (including its determinants and consequences). The so called **structural** approach to violence provides a better framework for understanding and explaining violence, that is to focus the analysis on both, the macro-structural (economic, cultural, and political) dimensions which exert oppression in determined individuals, groups, classes or even peoples and nations, as well as in the micro dimensions of violence. Violence should be seen as an historical construct with the features of the same society that generates it (Minayo, 1992) and a social product intimately related to the way of life, the culture and the organisation of the society at large.

In summary, the analysis of violence in the Brazilian case has often been restricted to one or another macro structural factor (i.e. the economic factors, or the issue of power or extreme poverty) to explain social violence. Yet, it is increasingly recognised the importance of cultural-organisational-institutional dimensions of violence. Two levels are clearly distinguished and much inter-related: 1) the organised violence—exerted by a group, the state, and the institutions— (i.e. the conditions of “apartheid” in the cities; the Yanomami case; the repression of indian leaders; the violence of the asylums for mental patients, etc); and 2) the domestic level of violence: child abuse, battered women, rape and street delinquency.

But it is clearly not enough to recognise the socio-historical dimensions, nor remain restricted to the identification of the social, economic and political dimensions involved in the construction of violence and its impact in the health status of individuals, groups and populations... it is also necessary to look at the micro-social dimensions... to recover its meaning through narratives of actual experience, to identify the social representations (i.e. systems of signs, meaning and action) and actions and re-actions associated with violence on the streets, institutional and domestic violence. From a methodological perspective it is important to develop a more comprehensive frame prior to the planning of interventions, for which it is required:

i) to identify the cultural-organisational-institutional core of violence existing and its inter-relationships with a given context... (we need further elaboration for this point)

ii) to understand the value systems and daily life of victims and/or agents of violence, allowing them to express the experience of violence in their own words, with their structure of meanings, avoiding to “filter” their own experiences imposing our own parameters and set of categories. The daily life is generally described “as felt and lived” by the people, through realistic narratives, often rich in details...

The enquiry of the orthodox epidemiologist interested in measuring the prevalence and distribution of violence in a given population, should be complemented with the point of view of the people who has experienced violence in its various forms. The collection of “factual” quantitative information should be complemented with qualitative data, such as narratives (the collection of popular discourses and the local interpretation) and the systematic reconstruction of actual cases. Facts are usually accompanied by multiple local discourses, which are elaborated to assign meaning to the problems and dilemmas experienced by the people in their daily life. The analysis of narratives reveals the co-existence of multiple readings on the same problem... Every community has multiple voices regarding the facts (Bibeau, 1992)...

As an example, during the La Candelaria massacre of street children in Rio de Janeiro, the next day papers brought different segments of narratives. For the police authorities the killing was explained as a rivalry among gangs in the city, trying to gain control of a drug trafficking corridor. Others explained the incident as part of a “cleansing operation” of “dead squads” or professional killers contracted by the local shopkeepers; and finally others, referred to it as part of a revenge of the military police, as a response to children throwing stones at a police car on the afternoon before the massacre, after a man selling sniffing glue to the street children was arrested. In the meantime, an anonymous “tip off” phone line, to help the police with their enquiries over the murder of street children, was inundated with dozens of calls “congratulating the police for their good work on Friday”... Is this multi-vocality of the discourse what is missing

in the attempts to analyse the problem of violence and street children in urban Brazil.

Alfredo Molano, a Colombian sociologist, resorts to extensive use of narratives in his stories, offering to the readers the popular discourse of drug traffic dealers, gold miners, prostitutes and corrupted government officials, about the daily life and violence in Colombia. Molano's narrative gives the "facts" the feelings, dreams, expectations and all of the drama and substance that is part of peoples' lives...as well as all of the chaos, uncertainty and ambiguity. The analysis and presentation made by ethnographers and social scientists tend to super-impose coherence and often incur in over-culturalisation in the interpretation of the data (Bibeau, 1992).

Footnote:

In some cases, the purpose of repressive violence is to induce terror, suppress opposition and impose **silence** (individually or collectively in part or all of the population)... this is a response to trauma (usually multiple traumas), associated with denial, dissociation and rage (silence is part of the Type II post-traumatic reaction according to Terr, 1991). Type I is usually associated with a single trauma, and features a detailed memory of events, signals identified a posteriori, and temporal distortion.

3. *Heros, bandidos, pivetes, bichos soltos and malandros: a taxonomy of violence in urban Brazil.*

The *traficante* is whom has the capital to buy drug in large quantities... they are always armed, under the protection of the *quadrilha* which have well defined territories and collect from the *vapores* or *avioes* the money from drugs sold in consignment. The *vapor* is the one that has the drug and wait for clients in specific spots and is an *homen de confianca* (a reliable man) of the *traficante* (he is accountable for expenses "money given to the police to guarantee their neutrality" and of money collected from clients. The *aviao* goes after the client or points the client to the *vapor*, and look out for the police. This roles and transactions are necessarily under coercion often with the threat of arms (Zaluar, 1983).

In view of the locals, the police indiscriminately and unjustified kills... this is always qualified as a "coward" attack, with no previous warning. By opposition, the *bandido* kills for revenge or because treason, defender *sua honra* (defense their honor or reputation) or in defence of his *espaco* (territory). This violent acts are seen within a frame of personal loyalty, honour and respect paid to each other, which allows for a moral judgement made up by the social actors. A *bandido* never mixes-up with the *trabalhador* (worker) nor with their respective business.

The *bandidos* are either presented as a *vingador* (revenger) of his own people, or of his *pedaco*, and/or as somebody who leads other youngsters to the *condominio do diabo* (the devil's condominium). The fight stories may have heroic features, dignity and even recognition of courage to the enemy as well as accusations of treason, cowardice and revenge. There is a moral code that allows to make assessments, rewards and sanctions.

There are a few specific categories of *bandidos*. The *bandidos formados* (formed or seasoned) are those who are experienced, know the difference between the good and the bad, know the rules of the game... "*saben disso e nao trocan tiros com qualquier... quem nao esta na guerra*" (they are wise and do not fire gunshots at random... or to those who are not at war)

“... *bandidos* have a hard life and people have sympathy for them, because they respect us and cannot be blamed for the unfortunate life they have... a lot of people tell me: ‘you live amongst *bandidos*’. No, I live amongst people... because *bandidos* are people too, each one has a story to tell and nobody turns into *bandido* on their own accord or because they simply want to (*ninguem e bandido porque quer*)... they respect us calling us ‘*senhor*’...” (*diretor do bloco*)

Bandidos formados usually become “hero-bandits” and are very different from a *bicho solto* (wild animal, bloody), the *bandido porco* (swine, hog, filthy), and the *pivete*. The *pivete* or *bicho solto* is a *bandido* that uses with prepotency or in an uncontrolled way his firearm. He humiliates, kills a *trabalhador* with unnecessary violence after provocation. The *bandido porco* is an obscure character who steals from his neighbour and *trabalhadores* living in their own *pedaco* (parcel). Both of these categories risks *linchamento* (to lynch) by the locals in case they are not persecuted and punished by the *bandidos formados*. Ambiguity is replaced by hate, respect and fear are replaced by fury...and the *linchamento* takes place. Guns are never used in a *linchamento*.

Malandro is a disappearing category of *bandido* It was formerly used for those who are “smart” in surviving, either by exploiting women or deceiving *otarios* (easy prey) with his speech, avoiding police. They never use *ferro* or *máquina* (guns) but carries a *navalha* (dagger) and are always smartly dressed.

All *bandidos* have two features in common: the first is an stigma, a distinctive mark “... the *bandido* belongs to other category of people because the *bandido* is always *marcado* (marked)”. To be *marcado* is to have his name inscribed in the police records... but you can also be “marked” just by owing money to somebody or having to collect money from somebody. The second element is that all *bandidos* are identified as poor, as a subaltern class, and in that sense are considered as being equal or of “equal status” as the rest of the lower classes “... o *bandido* é *igual, nem pior nem melhor.*” (the bandits are all equal, nor better neither worse”)

Summary

1. Inter-personal aggression (i.e. domestic violence, delinquency) and street violence in Brazil is on the rise in a context of structural violence as a result of socio-economic stagnation (increase of social and economic inequalities; decreasing family income and lower purchase power; rampant inflation); corruption and fragility of judicial system; fragile local governance and violent behaviour of institutions in charge of dealing with crime and delinquent behaviour (e.g. police). In addition, there is absence or lack of implementation of social policies; and a broader economic downfall, which are contributes to the emergence of hostility and crime, across various sectors of the population, etc. The cultural-organisational-institutional forms of violence i.e. the increase in the younger population living and working in the streets (*meninos/meninas da rua*); racial discrimination; are also contributing factors.
2. In the ‘80s there were two additional factors closely related to the increase of street violence and homicide rates in the cities:
 - the consolidation of organised crime (drug trafficking) and creation of a parallel power

in clear confrontation with the public and security forces *estaduales*, but at the same time “integrated” with the official institutions (judges, politicians, police officers, entrepreneurs, and government bureaucrats)

- the consolidation of the extermination brigades (*grupos de extermínio*, “*justiceiros*” paid by local businessmen, remains of the former “*esquadrões da morte*” (death squads) operating as repressive forces during the military regime in ‘60s and ‘70s.
3. Contrast: in the early ‘60s the Brazilian society was searching for more social integration and participation (a national political project), a process which was frustrated by the military coup (1964). After 21 years under military rule, the state’s civil institutions remain weak and powerless. The criminal justice system became inefficient and allocated resources to this end have been grossly inadequate. The (social, political and economic) *elite* abandoned the construction of their own identity and signs of increased pragmatism and individualism (“*salve-se quem puder*”) were (and still are) an obvious strategy chosen for survival. In 1985 Brazil returned to civilian rule and the killing of street children and adolescents became an adopted social practice.

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