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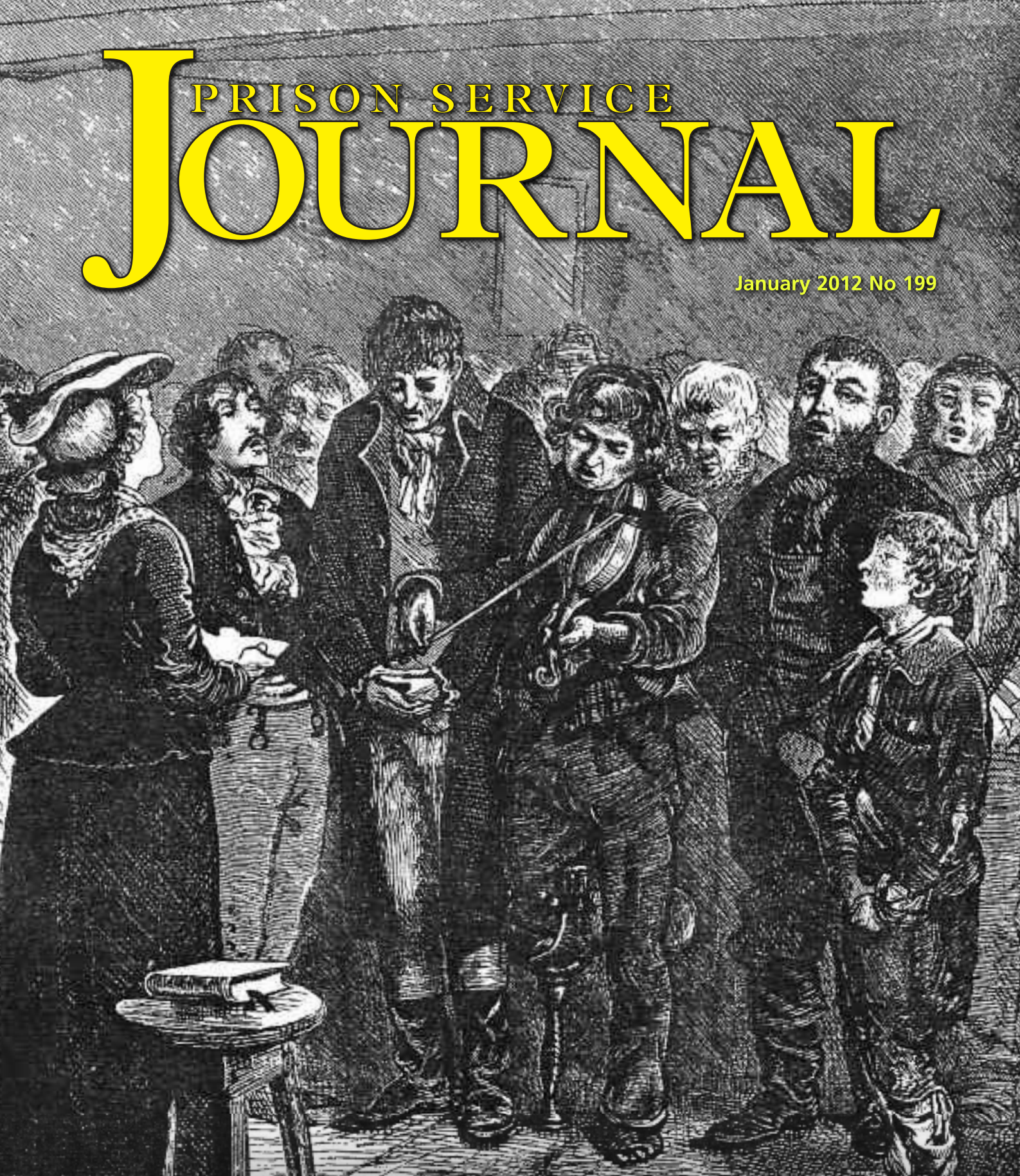

Special Edition

Alternative Representations of Imprisonment

Estação Carandiru[1]

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According to official statistics, São Paulo state police killed 1,470 civilians in 1992.[2] 111 of these deaths occurred on 2 October, when 300 military police, many armed with machine guns, entered block 9 of Casa de Detenção de São Paulo (Carandiru prison) in response to a riot. The operation took just 30 minutes.[3] Most prisoners died at the hands of the notoriously violent unit Rota,[4] whose 700 officers continue to be responsible for 1 in 6 police killings in São Paulo today.[5] Guards, prisoners and police that witnessed the killings give varying descriptions of the events that led to guards withdrawing from the block, from a fight over space on a washing line, a game of football or unpaid debts on one of the prison's infamous rua dez (10th street), corridors where prisoners met to settle scores out of site of guards, that escalated into a brawl between rival groups of prisoners, to a fall out between inmates that commanded the block over a drugs deal. Explanations for why the police responded with such deadly force also vary, from public expectation (Rota could count on the support of the vast majority of the São Paulo public, despite its reputation for summary executions[6]) to prisoners threatening to attack officers with knives covered in HIV contaminated blood, to a systematic attempt to rid the block of its inmate hierarchy. What is broadly agreed is that tensions among the 2,000 offenders in the block boiled over following a routine dispute, that most of the killings occurred on the first floor, where inmates leaders and their associates resided, and that by the time Rota reached the floor prisoners had dropped their weapons and fled to their cells. The police forensics team that examined the crime scene concluded that a number of prisoners had been shot while kneeling or lying down; of the 397 shots that reached their target, 126 were to the head.[7] Carandiru did not survive the controversy surrounding the operation, and was eventually deactivated in September 2002. In December three blocks, including block 9, were imploded live on TV. The remaining blocks were demolished in 2005. Paradoxically, the final victims of the Carandiru massacre, as the event came to be known, were the director of the prison, José Ismael Pedrosa, and the head of the São Paulo military police, who commanded the operation, Ubiratan Guimarães. Pedrosa was assassinated in 2005 on the orders of the *Primeiro Comando do Capital* (First Command of the Capital), a prison gang formed in the aftermath of the massacre that today operates in over 90 per cent of São Paulo prisons.[8] Guimarães was sentenced to 632 years imprisonment in 2001, only to escape punishment by being elected onto the São Paulo state legislature before winning an appeal against his conviction in 2006. Seven months later he was shot dead in as yet unexplained circumstances.

Opened in 1952, Carandiru was the largest prison in Latin America. In 1992 it held 7,000 prisoners, three times the number for which it had been built. Since the massacre, numerous firsthand accounts of life in Carandiru have appeared in popular music and writing in Brazil. Of these, two stand out as providing particularly authoritative and detailed insight: *O Prisoneiro da Grade de Ferro*,[9] a remarkable documentary filmed by prisoners over seven months the year before the prison was deactivated, which is available with English subtitles, and the subject of this article, Drauzio Varella's *Estação Carandiru*, which is yet to be translated into English. Varella worked voluntarily at the prison as a doctor from 1989 to 2001. His book was reproduced as the internationally acclaimed film *Carandiru*,[10] and adapted for the television series *Carandiru: Outros Historias*.[11]

The Carandiru massacre highlighted two aspects of life behind bars in Brazil. The first, and the basis of

1. Varella, D. (1999) *Estação Carandiru São Paulo*: Companhia das Letras.
2. Caldeira, T. (2000) *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo* Berkley: University of California Press.
3. Veja, 14 October 1992.
4. Folha de São Paulo, 21 June 2001.
5. Veja São Paulo, 11 August 2010.
6. Caldeira, T. (2000). See n.2.
7. Justiça Global (2001) *Massacre at Carandiru* (unpublished report).
8. Biondi, K. and Marques, A. (2010) 'Memória e historicidade em dois "comandos" prisionais' in *Lua Nova*, 79: 39-70.
9. Sacremento, P. (Director) (2004) *O Prisoneiro da Grade de Ferro* (documentary).
10. Babenco, H. (Director) (2003) *Carandiru* (film).
11. Carvalho, W., Gervitz, R., Babenco, H. and Faria, M. (Directors) (2005) *Carandiru: Outros Historias* (Rede Globo).

much academic, government and NGO literature, concerns the appalling conditions in which prisoners find themselves, from severe staff shortage and overcrowding to wholly inadequate facilities, legal and medical cover.[12] The second, and my focus today, concerns the means by which Brazilian prisons continue to operate and prisoners manage to survive in spite of such adversity and abandonment: in particular, how inmates are formally recruited to work as janitors and administrators, and how prisoners organise themselves to provide security, discipline and mutual support on the wings. While much has been written about the dominance of criminal gangs, few studies have provided more than a partial picture of the nature of inmate involvement in running Brazilian prisons, or the resultant complexity of relations that have arisen between inmates and prison staff.[13] Though written for a public rather than an academic or government audience, Varella's account of his time working at Carandiru remains the most complete study of Brazilian prison life to date.

Varella's interest in inmate participation is made clear from the first chapter, where he describes the work carried out by prisoners loading and unloading vans used to transport prisoners, food and building materials. Varella goes on to explain that 1000 inmates were formally employed by the prison administration, for instance as porters, couriers, cooks, cleaners, laundry washers, tailors, hairdressers or clerks. At Carandiru the effective inmate-guard ratio (taking into account sickness and work shift patterns) was 100:1 in the 1990s.[14] As in the remainder of the Brazilian penal establishment, where it is not unusual to find just one guard on duty per 200 or more prisoners,[15] prison staff had little choice but to recruit and work alongside prisoners. Most of these collaborating, trustie inmates were housed in block 2, which was located between the entrance to the prison and the administrative building. All trusties carried identity cards that allowed them to circulate throughout the prison.

Varella devotes several chapters of *Estação Carandiru* to prisoners' health, outlining among other things the devastatingly high levels of drug abuse and serious illness such as tuberculoses, leprosy and HIV. Chapters are also included on the 1000 or so inmates employed by private companies in prison workshops, manufacturing items such as toys, kites, footballs or greetings cards; the prison's thriving informal economy (in drugs, alcohol, clothes washing, even ice-cream); the 5-6 hours a day that a further 1000 members of the Assembly of God spent in prayer or religious learning; the 2-3000 visits from families each weekend, more at Christmas or on mothers' day, which included hundreds of intimate visits (for which 2,000 wives or girlfriends had registered); the lives of transvestites on the *Rua das Flores* (Street of Flowers) or *Paris*, a corridor that in the past had housed female prisoners; and the plight of over 500 prisoners held on security wings, usually for their own protection, 24 hours a day, 6-7 to a single cell. However, it is Varella's first impression of the prison, of inmate governance and fused staff-inmate functions, that sets the central theme of the book. Having outlined the functions played by trustie prisoners, whose work was restricted to the communal areas of the prison, Varella moves on to explore the more informal work of prisoners on the wings, sweeping corridors, cooking and distributing meals, and organising in-cell rotas for matters such as cleaning, bathing and sleeping. He refers to these *faxina* (literally, cleaners, as such prisoners are referred to in São Paulo) as the spinal cord of the prison. Even the main cell blocks, 5, 8 and 9, were guarded by no more than 12 prison officers during the day and seven at night. Like many other Brazilian prisons, officers rarely entered the wings but for unlock/lock-up at the beginning and end of the day.

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12. E.g. Brazil, Chamber of Deputies (2008) *CPI do Sistema Carcerário* Brasília: Câmara dos Deputados; Human Rights Watch (1998) *Behind Bars in Brazil* New York: Human Rights Watch; Salla, F. et al. (2009) *Democracy, Human Rights and Prison Conditions in South America* São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo; Wacquant, L. (2003) 'Towards a dictatorship over the poor: Notes on the penalization of poverty in Brazil', *Punishment and Society* 5 p.197-205.
13. For notable exceptions, see Biondi, K. (2007) 'Relações políticas e termos criminosos: O PCC e uma teoria do irmão-rede' in *Teoria e Sociedade* 15 p.206-235; Marques, A. (2010) '"Liderança", "proceder" e "igualdade": Uma etnografia das relações políticas no Primeiro Comando do Capital' in *Etnográfica* 14:2 p.311-335; Ramalho, J. (1979) *Mundo do Crime: A Ordem pelo Avesso*, Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal.
14. Human Rights Watch (1998). See n.12.
15. Salla, F. (2006) 'As rebeliões nas prisões: Novos significados a partir da experiência brasileira' in *Sociologias*, 8 p.274-307.

In total around 700 prisoners were integrated into the *faxina*, most of which as I have already indicated, managed the wings from their cells on the first floor. Each block had its own *faxina*.

It was simply not possible, Varella stresses, to comprehend life at Carandiru without understanding the role played by the *faxina*. Of particular importance to his analysis, they were not the equivalent of trustie prisoners; they were responsible (and in prisons across Brazil continue to be responsible) for order and discipline as well as prison maintenance. Through organising and enforcing the decisions of ad hoc *debates* when prisoners are accused of breaking inmate codes (which at Carandiru, as elsewhere, included averting your eyes from others' visitors, remaining in your cell and putting on a shirt during mealtimes, maintaining silence during sleeping hours, not getting into debt, not resorting to violence without permission, and sharing food, toiletries and clothing brought in by your family), the *faxina*, set the rhythm of Brazilian prisons.[16] Guards do not interfere with the organisation or hierarchy of the *faxina*, nor with their management of the wings unless prisoners are severely beaten, though at Carandiru even an execution would more often than not be settled by a *laranja* (orange; scapegoat), typically an indebted crack addict, stepping forward to falsely confess to the crime. Moreover, guards would consult senior *faxina* before making their own decisions as to when/how to discipline wayward prisoners. The safety of inmates and staff alike depended on *faxina* and guards maintaining mutual respect and good dialogue.

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Of course, all of this depended on inmate and staff-inmate relations remaining reciprocal. The most striking parts of *Estação Carandiru* deal with times when the status quo broke down at the prison. Varella describes two such episodes during the years that he worked there. The first occurred in block 5, when the five guards on duty one night were taken hostage, robbed and assaulted, and the director took advantage of divisions among prisoners in the block to help install an entirely new *faxina*, headed by a (unknown to other inmates) prison informer. At lockdown a few nights after the initial incident, guards left the 200 prisoners that had been chosen to form the new inmate hierarchy in charge of the block. Masked and armed with sticks and knives, the new command proceeded to remove the old *faxina* cell by cell and hand them over to guards to be transferred to a punishment wing in another part of the prison. The second such episode, dealt with in the final chapters of the book, was the riot in block 9. If Varella's version of the events that led to the police entering the prison with such devastating consequences on 2 October 1992 is the correct one, it appears the immediate cause of the riot was the *faxina* failing to prevent a relatively minor dispute between common prisoners from igniting. Others, as I alluded to in the introduction, insist that there was a more serious dispute within the *faxina* itself. Common to both interpretations is it was not the entangled lives of trusties, *faxina* and guards but rather inmate governance that broke down that day. Depressingly, Varella finds no rational explanations for the riot. For this reason, as much as the killings, the last few chapters of *Estação Carandiru* do not make comfortable reading. In contrast to other rebellions in Brazil, the prisoners made no demands and took no hostages. Nor is there anything to indicate that the riot masked a re-organisation of the inmate hierarchy in the block, as was claimed to be the case, for instance, in 2001, when the *Primeiro Comando do Capital* instigated simultaneous rebellions in 29 prisons.[17] Along with other accounts of the Carandiru massacre, Varella depicts the riot as an illogical, disorganised, chaotic affair, and is quick to point out that block 9 was populated by first time offenders, who not surprisingly were renowned for being undisciplined and volatile. Tragically, and in complete contrast to the inexperience demonstrated by these prisoners, Varella concludes, Rota's response was unleashed with military precision.

16. Marques, A. (2009) *Crime, Proceder, Convívio-Seguro: Um Experimento Antropológico a partir de relações entre Ladrões* Ph.D. thesis, University of São Paulo.

17 Salla, F. (2006) 'As rebeliões nas prisões: Novos significados a partir a experiência brasileira' in *Sociologias* 8:16 p.274-307.