

Urban outcasts: favelas, violence and the 'lost generation'

Fernando Lannes Fernandes outlines strategies of control in Rio de Janeiro

The term 'precarariat' can be used to illustrate the re-creation of social groups that historically have been identified as worthless, marginal and disposable. They now share a common identity as part of a global process of marginalisation resulting from new concentrations of power and wealth. Although such processes have occurred in parallel with a *reduction* of state regulation, states have simultaneously been playing a more intrusive role in the management of the poor. The political challenges associated with the expansion of these groups are aligned with the strategies adopted by governments to control the new 'dangerous classes'. In effect, the development of strategies of socio-spatial control and enclosure (Fernandes, 2012) and of the containment of the 'redundant' (Bauman, 2004), are shaping new models of governance for those groups that are seen as socially 'invisible' and worthless.

Governing the 'disposable'

In countries with limited experience of democracy and human rights, such as Brazil, the governance of the 'disposable' constitutes a singular experience where historical processes of the symbolic depreciation of marginalised groups are reinforced by discourses that sustain punishment, humiliation and even physical elimination.

The expansion of what can be termed the Brazilian 'hyperprecarariat' has resulted in the expansion of informal and illegal economies as well as the precarious neighbourhoods where the state fails to regulate social life. The most

familiar example is the favelas. Since the 1980s, such areas have been experiencing an increasing territorialisation of armed criminal groups, with drug trafficking as their core activity (Fernandes et al., 2008). The historical criminalisation of favelas is exacerbated by new threats in the form of the 'drug dealer', typically portrayed as a young black male (Fernandes, 2013). Crack users, in particular, are frequently represented as 'wasted lives' and 'worthless' by the mass media and wider society.

Disputes between criminal groups to control territories as well as the violent responses from the state have resulted in rising fear and a fragmentation of the urban social fabric (Souza, 2000). The state has responded to crime with more violence, human rights violations and killings, practices which seem to be widely accepted by both society and the mass media in particular (Ramos and Paiva, 2007). Youngsters from favelas are now represented as the enduring face of crime and danger. The fear this engenders has resulted in a culture of indifference and demonisation (Fernandes, 2013).

The emergence of this urban marginalisation is rooted within a new reality of urban poverty. The advance of armed criminal groups in favelas represents a space for the reproduction of the conditions that

reinforce the criminalisation of poverty. In this context the 'war' against drugs has functioned, as Wacquant (2007) has observed in the USA, as an opportunity to punish the poor and to create symbolic barriers between favelas and the wider city. Favelas are seen as places of crime, where youngsters are targeted by the police. Unlike the USA, where police abuse and imprisonment are the most visible dimensions of the penal state, in Brazil the state has also been performing a massive social cleansing. This has manifested itself through the elimination of the lives of poor youngsters and, in consequence, the reaffirmation of their undesirability in society: they are a new 'lost generation' (Fernandes, 2013).

Police killings

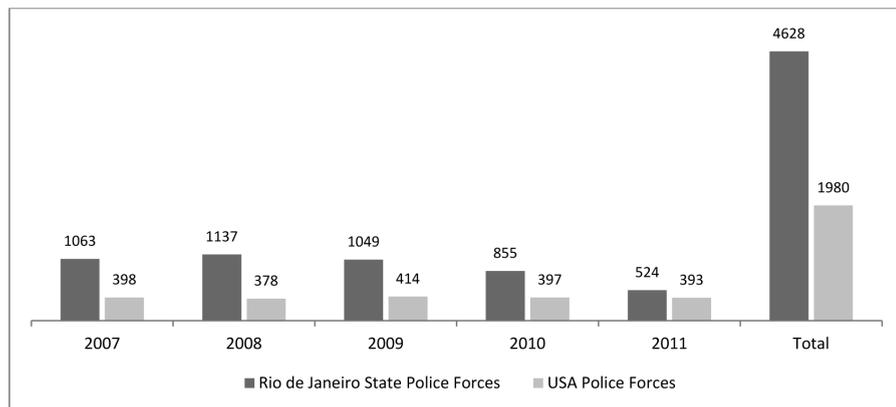
While the main feature of the penal state in the USA may be found

in the rise of incarceration (Wacquant, 2009), in Brazil such processes are reflected, not only in the number of prison sentences (with half a million prisoners), but also in the exceptionally high numbers of police killings. In one single year,

2007, Rio State police only arrested 12 people for each person killed whereas the US police arrested 35,702 for each suspect killed (source: Rio, ISP; USA, FBI). Where systematically collected data are available (despite absent data and large numbers of 'missing people') it is possible to see the consequences of this criminalisation of the poor in Brazil. Evidence for Rio de Janeiro state, for instance, shows that *each year* Rio police killings exceeded those reported for all of US police forces combined.

Most killings happen in favelas and a significant number occur in explicit violation of human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2009) rather than in self-defence. These deaths are officially and routinely classified as a

Strategies of socio-spatial control, enclosure and the containment of the 'redundant' are shaping new models of governance



Comparative killings undertaken by the police in Rio de Janeiro state and in the USA as a whole, 2007-2011 (Sources: Rio, ISP; USA, FBI)

result of resistance from suspects. However, as Cano (2001) has shown, a significant number of deaths occur in very doubtful circumstances. Police victims are often found with back, neck and head gunshot wounds, even where they were already thought to be in police custody. Such evidence suggests that a culture of violence inherited from the former military regime still persists, even after almost three decades of democracy (Ahnen, 2007).

Strategies

In Rio the profound social problems, standing at the intersection of marked inequality, civil and human rights violations, are powerfully associated with the social representation of the *favelas* and their inhabitants. Accordingly, strategies to tackle urban violence must include a comprehensive re-investment in social wellbeing and, most importantly, they should be grounded in a reassertion of state sovereignty in areas currently dominated by armed criminal groups, so as to extend and guarantee the provision of human rights. Social policies need to be reshaped to reposition such groups, especially concerning the ways in which the state has historically treated them.

Recent experiences with the Pacifying Police Units (UPP) in some favelas in Rio signal some important potential changes. UPP policy has been achieving interesting results, both a reduction in armed

confrontations and killings by the police and the establishment of new forms of crime control based on community policing strategies. However, the police still remain the most prominent institution confronting a problem that is far beyond their capacity to resolve. Although some efforts to create a 'social UPP' strategy have been attempted, such initiatives lack political and economic support. However, debates around forced interventions and the role of police forces in social reconstruction may be critical aspects of attempts to re-establish 'law and order' in Brazilian cities.

The directions taken by the Brazilian government to tackle these problems will show how it will handle the invisible and undesirable. In the monitoring of the UPP and drug gang intervention strategies it will be important to examine the outcomes after a period of time, especially, perhaps, after the World Cup and the Olympic Games in Rio in 2014 and 2016. It is not unreasonable to expect that, given the scale and nature of these events and the strategy to consolidate Rio as the (sports) tourism capital of South America, security will go well beyond current levels and even perhaps in opposition to the real needs of the most marginalised people in the city.

Furthermore, securitisation for the Olympics might bring with it new strategies of social control and enclosure of the 'undesirable', but perhaps without the negative

proliferation of police violence, drug dealers and crack users throughout the city. As a result, Rio might be developing unique models of governing, delivered both in the favelas and across the wider city, which will demand close attention over the next few years. ■

Dr Fernando Lannes Fernandes is Senior Lecturer in Inequalities, Research Centre for Inequalities, University of Dundee

References

- Anhen, R. (2007), 'The Politics of Police Violence in Democratic Brazil', *Latin America Politics and Society*, 49 (1), pp.141-164.
- Bauman, Z. (2004), *Wasted lives: modernity and its outcasts*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cano, I. (2001), *Letalidade da ação policial no Rio de Janeiro*, Rio de Janeiro: ISER.
- Fernandes, F. L. (2013), 'Youth Gang Members in Rio de Janeiro: The Face of a "Lost Generation" in an Age of Fear and Mistrust', *Bulletin of Latin American Studies*, 32 (2), pp. 210-223.
- Fernandes, F. L. (2012), 'The youth from favela. Reflections on socio-spatial control and enclosure of the urban outcasts in Rio de Janeiro', *Convergência: Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 19 (52).
- Fernandes, F. L., de Souza e Silva, J. and Willadino, R. (2008), 'Grupos criminosos armados com domínio de território', in *Justiça Global* (org.), *Segurança, tráfico e milícia no Rio de Janeiro*, Rio de Janeiro: Heinrich Böll Foundation, pp. 16-24.
- Human Rights Watch (2011), *Lethal Force. Police Violence and Public Security in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo*, New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Ramos, S. (2009), 'Meninos do Rio', *Boletim Segurança e Cidadania – Cesec*, 8, (13), pp.1-28.
- Ramos, S and Paiva, A (2007), *Mídia e violência. Novas tendências na cobertura de criminalidade e segurança no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, IUPERJ.
- Souza, M. L. (2008), *Fobópole. O medo generalizado e a militarização da questão urbana*, Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil.
- Wacquant, L. (2007), *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wacquant, L. (2009), *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Durham and London: Durham University Press.