

## Book Review

### ***Conviviality and Survival: Co-Producing Brazilian Prison Order***

**By Sacha Darke**

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As I read the title of the book, I'm intrigued by the contrast between the term conviviality, survival and the image on the front cover. The monograph combines: ethnographic; biographic and personal reflection of the Brazilian prison system. *Conviviality and Survival: Co-Producing Brazilian Prison Order* as titled in this book illuminates the fragility, yet effective, balance of power between prisoners and staff in Brazilian prisons. A concept that may be at odds with the global north and Western view of prison that is premised on order and control that is administered solely by prison officers and prison managers. I am captivated by Sacha Darke's ability to draw on his historical awareness and exploration of Brazilian prison life, to create the reader's curiosity to understand how Brazilian prisons, which despite being underfunded, overcrowded and divergent from the global norms and trends, continue to function and are relatively stable.

Darke has created a book that is compelling and discerning. Emphasising the symbolic importance of the Carandiru

massacre, the book illuminates the complexity of relations between prisoners and prison staff. It goes beyond what general academic and governmental literature portrays, which tends to be concerned with the appalling conditions in which prisoners find themselves, from severe staff shortage and overcrowding to wholly inadequate facilities, legal and medical cover. Darke's research focuses on the means by which Brazilian prison managers, staff and prisoners manage to get by despite such adversity and state neglect.

This impressive book maps the Brazilian prison system that is centred on co-governance and conviviality within its unique historical, political, social, economic and cultural context. Darke draws on data from prison ethnographies, prisoners' biographies, and his own fieldwork to provide a unique and innovative analysis of first-hand accounts, about the daily lives of its prisoners, staff and prison conditions, to illuminate how order is co-produced by prisoners who have to collaborate, organise and self-govern to function within an environment that is overcrowded and understaffed, and within a system that is underfunded by the Brazilian Government.

This book is divided into seven chapters. Darke begins with an introduction to the reality of Brazilian prisons. He emphasises the role of key actors of the conviviality within the prison system, introducing the trusty *faxina* or prisoners who are 'officially employed by prison authorities' (p. 11). Other important actors are the *Comando Vermelho* (CV), a gang that operates both within

and outside prisons, the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC), a gang that was formed in the aftermath of the Carandiru massacre, 'with the explicit aim to protect prisoners from such a tragedy being repeated' (p. 4), and the *Povo de Israel*, which protects inmates who did not belong, did not want to belong, or could not belong to CV or PCC. It is evident that prisoners play a significant role in which order is co-produced through self-governing communities. This is premised in a historical tradition of co-produced governance that for decades has kept most Brazilian prisons in better order and enabled most prisoners to better survive.

Darke's boldness of applying a political-academic stance that involved him studying Brazilian prisons 'in their own terms' (p. 20) is exemplary. For example, he thoroughly cites Brazilian and other academic works written in Portuguese and by doing so builds on postcolonial voices that critique the homogenisation of the global south. This demonstrates that his research is not shrouded by the Northern America and Western Europe theories about prisons and their order. This standpoint in my opinion is revolutionary and indeed the epitome of decolonising the theoretical assessment of the prisons being researched. This emphasises that the Northern America and Western Europe standpoints are not easily transferable. And while human rights critique 'the failure of authorities to adequately invest in its prison system' (p. 48), emphasising the crowded and unpleasant prison conditions, Darke highlights the quality of prison life, referring to the high

number of prisoners held in open or semi-open units in full time work in comparison to their counterparts in Northern America and Western Europe.

Undoubtably, this book is concerned with realities more than ideals. While chapter 4 — *Surviving through the Convívio* provides a much-needed bridge between the theoretical framework contained in the previous chapters and the following chapters, Darke details the various aspects of prisoner self-governance and collaboration that have pervaded the experience of imprisonment in Brazil. In doing so, he introduces the reader to the culture within prisons in Brazil that sustains co-governance within them through the late twentieth century.

Chapter 5 entitled *Managing without guards* provides a detailed account of Darke's ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Rio de Janeiro in a carceragen or a lock-up; unit of holding cells he calls Polinter. Darke's observations and analysis provides rich accounts of

how prisoner self-governance is ingrained into everyday prison routine that is premised on 'order, authority and legitimacy' (p. 221), that compensates for a critical lack of prison personnel. Darke's meticulous account of the different role prisoners play, for example the *colaboradores* (trusted prisoners), who work in trusted positions that cover administrative functions, such as reception duty, searches on visit days, and allocation of food, while the *comissão* (committee) self-govern the wings illustrate how the negotiation of space plays a pivotal part in co-governance.

*Prison gangs* is the title of chapter 6, here, Darke discusses the rise of the two-dominant prison 'gangs', the Comando Vermelho in the Rio de Janeiro and the PCC in São Paulo. He provides a vivid picture of a homogenisation of governance structures, illustrating how the gangs are viewed as 'unspoken allies' (p. 251-253) ergo, through customary practice, codes of conduct and

core principles they have brought some stability to Brazilian prisons, as postulated by Darke when he states: 'it is also true that São Paulo's prisons have become safer and inmate/staff-inmate relations more predictable' (p. 255). The unspoken allyship and his reference to prisoner/staff-prisoner relation illustrate the complex relationship between the State and these gangs.

Chapter 7 — is the final chapter and provides a detailed summary of each chapter and consideration for further research.

The authenticity and courage of the author to rebuttal the preconceived view that prisons in Brazil are repressive institutions, and his disregard of Northern America and Western Europe standpoint of prison order was thought-provoking and challenged my own way of thinking that was influenced by Western Europe theories about prison, their order, and how it is experienced by prisoners and staff. I would highly recommend this book.