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Special Edition
**Informal dynamics of survival
in Latin American prisons**

Hearing the voices of Brazilian correction officers¹

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L: I have a BA in Social Communication, and I'm currently attending a special program on public safety in a private university. I've been working in a pre-trial detention TC prison (a prison for detainees of the Terceiro Comando [Third Command]) in a mid-sized city since 2008.

W: I'm currently attending the Public Safety Course of the Fluminense Federal University. I work in a unit of the Bangu prison complex in the capital of the state. It's a CV prison (a prison for inmates of the Comando Vermelho [Red Command]). I work directly with the inmates as a guarda de miolo [core guard].

HRS: When I worked in police stations, there was an orientation to classify people under arrest as members of CV, TC or ADA [*Amigos dos Amigos* [Friends of the Friends]] before sending them to a prison, even if they weren't actually affiliated to these gangs. In this case, we should consider the place where they lived: *favela X*, gang X; *favela Y*, gang Y.

L: It still works like that. Even if they aren't affiliated to a gang, they'll say they are.

W: In addition, when we receive an inmate, even if he just lives in a neighborhood under the influence of a gang, we ask if he had any problem in the streets, in order to avoid conflicts in the interior of the cells. When the new inmate mentions any unsolved issue, we separate him from the *coletivo* [prisoner community], putting him in the cell called *seguro* [insurance], where he'll serve his sentence.

HRS: Before we formally started our interview, you mentioned that some internal procedures may vary depending on who is the prison (or jail) superintendent.

W: It's true, but anyway a CV unit is quite different from other units. In CV units everything must be negotiated. They have an inmates' **council**, with legitimacy to create a consensus in order to avoid disagreements.

L: There are also **chairs** of the cell, the block, and the unit. You have to hear the **council** in order to deal with any relevant issue that will affect the *coletivo*.

W: Think about the recent law about visitors. A change came from the outside: according to the new law, visitors cannot be strip-searched any more. This fact implied a change in the way prisoners are searched after they come back from the courtyard where they received their families. The search must be more rigorous. How to do it? We had to negotiate in order to avoid any *alteração* [disturbance].

L: In a TC unit, you ask the prisoner, who is naked, to crouch down, facing you and turning his back on you. He crouches down both ways, and then he can go. In a CV unit it is completely unacceptable to have a prisoner turning his back on an officer. If a new superintendent ignores this 'rule', there will be problems; it will probably cause an *alteração*. After the first rebellion, the superintendent will negotiate.

L: Prisoners have their own morals. You may pay with your life if this moral is disrespected. There is no delay in the enforcement of the 'law' behind bars. It may happen that a rebellion occurs in the day you are on duty; you may be sacrificed as an example, even if you were not the agent who broke the 'law.'

L: The TC's discipline is not the same as the CV's. The CV's conception of *coletivo* is much stronger. It's almost a military organisation. They have watchmen; they organise day/night shifts — there's a watchman in charge of each 'work' period. I wouldn't say that their discipline is stronger than the discipline of the officers, but it is surely much stronger than other gangs' organisation. The officers on duty are at a high risk of losing their lives. This fact encourages the whole group to be responsible for the safety of each other. In my unit we take this very seriously; I would say with professionalism. However, the point that I'd like to make is that the prisoners also have a discipline: if somebody is in charge of watching in a certain cell, he will do it. If the **council** asks: 'Which officer is on duty now?' — He will know the answer. They have

1. The following interview was held with two correction officers currently working in the state of Rio de Janeiro. They do not want their names to be published; therefore they are identified just as L and W.

information about the whole unit. They know which team is on duty each day. They know if an officer changed his period of work. They know who is commanding the team on duty. They know which officer snoozes in his turn, as well as they know who the 'armored' officers (those who never sleep) are. It's interesting to notice this particular language. It's something used by all gangs — slang as a defence strategy. A new officer may stay the whole day listening to the conversation among the inmates, and he won't understand a word. Naturally, as time passes, officers start learning their language, but it's not so simple.

MLK: How many prisoners and officers are there in your units?

L: In my unit there are seven guards to watch about 500 detainees. The maximum capacity is 300. Besides these seven guards in the *miolo*, there are three more officers in the lookout towers. If an external attack occurs, they are expected to stop it. We don't have those cells where overcrowding is so bad that prisoners can't sleep at the same time. But it's amazing that we're relieved because there are places to sleep.

W: We used to have seven guards. The prison's maximum capacity is 750, but we have 1200 inmates. Recently, the administration put one additional guard during the day and two at night. So, at best, we have nine officers to take care of 1200 convicts. Inside, in the *miolo*, there are usually only five guards.

HRS: In São Paulo, the PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital [First Command of the Capital] was created after the Carandiru massacre.² In some way, we could ironically say that the state is an ally of the gangs, as it offers the horrible conditions of prisons as a fuel for their strengthening and expansion.

L: Surely, the formation of gangs is a matter of survival. When prisoners are organised, they become more powerful, and life behind bars turns out to be less uncomfortable. However, the history of CV is older: it dates back to the 1970s, when bank robbers were kept together with political prisoners in the *Ilha Grande* prison. It's amazing how this organisation didn't lose its strength as time went by.

W: It should be said that most people have a wrong idea of such organisation. They overthrow each other all the time. I've been working in my current unit

for a little more than one year, and I've already seen five different CV leaders.

L: I don't disagree with you. The point I wanted to make is that the person is substituted, but the structure remains. The Command as an 'institution' is not overthrown by the **coup d'état**.

W: However, many things change. I can see the changes daily. For instance, now, any move that I make in the visitors' courtyard is watched by an inmate. This didn't happen under past 'administrations'.

W: The unit where I'm currently working can be considered the second most dangerous prison in the *Bangu* complex, but everything inmates do there must be authorised by *Bangu* III, where drug trafficking leaders are incarcerated. They don't talk to the chief officer or to the prison superintendent. They negotiate

directly with the superintendent of the whole *Bangu* complex: he is the one who intermediates the negotiations between the inmates and the SEAP (the state department that manages the prison system). An agreement reached in *Bangu* III will be followed in the other units.

HRS: Do the prisoners work in your units?

L: Presently, there are only ten *faxinas* (prisoners who have a formal job). There used to be courses of computer, craftwork,

but only a few detainees attended. The administration says that work is a way to change people — it's a joke. Many prisoners attach a stigma to those who formally work helping the administration. The *faxina* in a TC unit or the *ligação* in a CV unit knows that he will not be accepted by his comrades: one should be either an outlaw or a worker; you can't be both.

W: In a CV unit there is only janitorial work. Except for this, the prisoners' labor force is not used. I've already worked in units where officers and prisoners could sit and talk just as we're doing now. In a CV unit you can't do that. A prisoner is a prisoner, and an officer is an officer. Anyway, as a formal job may reduce the time to serve, the inmates that get these jobs are the most important ones for the CV activities in the outside. The CV tries to do everything to reduce their time in prison so that they can go back to their businesses.

L: When prisoners don't work they stay the whole day doing nothing. The lack of work strengthens the outlaw culture. It may happen that a prisoner insults another, by calling him a worker. And he'll answer: 'I'm

2. In 1992, 111 inmates were killed in the prison called *Carandiru*, in the state of São Paulo, when military police used lethal force in response to a fight between two groups of prisoners.

not a worker; I'm an outlaw!' And the administration does nothing to try to change this culture. After being behind bars for a few years, somebody, who was a worker before being arrested, will probably have adhered to this 'being proud to be a criminal' culture. People are deprived from their liberty, and nothing is done to qualify or rehabilitate them. The lack of dialogue and educational programs attests that prisons are just a depository of people.

MLK: Are there differences between a pre-trial detention unit and a unit for sentenced inmates?

L: The pre-trial detainees don't like disturbances. They just want to have their day in court. It's completely different to be behind bars for the first time, or to know that you will remain in prison for 20 years. The convict's anguish is different.

HRS: How about the relationship between officers and prisoners?

W: I always try to be respected by the inmates. Respect cannot be achieved by force. It's rather achieved by the rectitude of my behavior there. Nobody disturbs me, because they see that I'm doing my job in the right way.

L: The officer must learn the ethics developed behind bars. It's not a matter of being corrupted by this ethics, but to know where you are. Prisoners can't stand a dishonest officer. If you are dishonest in the outside, people will just despise you; in prison, you can be severely hurt. If you act according to the law — according to their 'law'; according to that ethics that we mentioned before — there will be no problems. Prisoners know when one of them is wrong: if you admonish him, the other prisoners won't be against you. A mere admonishment may imply more time to serve, for instance impeding a parole. If you maliciously admonish a prisoner, they'll see it. But, if he was wrong, the other prisoners also see it. You can admonish him with no concerns, also because you cannot be seen as a milksop. There's a routine which neither the officers nor the prisoners want to be broken. The most important thing is to keep this routine.

W: And they often suggest that the balance of power may occasionally change. Every day we have the *confere* [cell check]. Only one officer will be with 90 prisoners inside the cell. This is one reason why respect among people that are together in the same institution is so important.

MLK: How about the relationships between prisoners and the drug trafficking in the favelas?

W: The *Bangu* III leaders receive orders from the drug dealers of the *favelas*. Then, they transmit the orders to the blocks, the cells, the most remote jails in the interior of the state.

L: Many drug dealers in the *favelas* are former prisoners. They have experience; they've already proved that they can stand living in prison. Moreover, as they leave prison, where are they going to work? Where will they make R\$2000 [about £500] a week? Among former prisoners there are those who can become 'operational soldiers,' who like the adrenaline flowing of holding a machine gun and shooting at the police. After spending time in prison, what will these guys do? Play jiu-jitsu? No, they will handle guns again.

W: Moreover, prisons end up establishing connections that wouldn't be made outside. A guy from a certain *favela* can be side by side with a guy from another very distant *favela*. Internal connections help the external connections. Not all drug dealers of the *favelas* are 'shareholders of nothing,' as Zaccone says.³ Some of them, even behind bars, can make R\$700,000 a week. How can you deal with somebody who handles such amounts of money?

L: This huge amount of money is a product of drug prohibition. Prohibition gives the market to drug dealers: it creates a criminal monopoly over a quite profitable activity, which offers jobs for lots of former prisoners. We know all the drug dealers, from the CV founders to the boss who was arrested last week. However, we don't know the names of anybody who handles this trade in a superior level, far from the *favelas*. I'm not saying that the drug dealers who are in prison are poor or nice people. If you cross the way of one of these guys who is making R\$700,000 a week, your life is worth nothing.

L: In effect, the lives of prison officers are quite fragile. Comparing to other states, the situation in Rio isn't so bad. Our salary is reasonable; we work 24 hours on, 72 off. However, in the 24 hours in which we are on duty, we live in a violent environment, in a permanent tension. Even if you can rest for four hours during this work period, you won't be able to sleep inside a powder keg with 1200 inmates. This tension impacts on your body and obviously affects your mental health. The *guarda de miolo* remains 24 hours behind the bars. There are no psychologists, no social workers, no further educational programs. Both officers and prisoners are victims of the same precariousness.

3. Zaccone, Orlando (2007). *Acionistas do nada: quem são os traficantes de drogas*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Revan.