

# *Police Places:* Ethnographic Notes About Other Police Territorialities in the Suburbs of Rio de Janeiro

*Eduardo de Oliveira Rodrigues*

Colégio Pedro II, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil

Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, RJ, Brasil

## **Abstract**

One of the biggest challenges in researching the practices of any police institution is finding a place from which it is possible to ethnographically observe and thus describe them, taking into account the methodological restrictions one encounters in accessing certain dimensions of police work. Faced with this problem, the present article aims to debate what I call “police places”: an analytical category used to describe other dimensions of police territoriality in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Based on a description of a walk I took with a young man interested in joining the military police, I argue that the informal presence of agents in his neighborhood implies another type of spatial control. The article shows that, from the perspective of the population of these places, the police are understood to be an important “center of power” that attracts a series of young people involved in precarious contexts to the police career.

**Key words:** police, State, ethnography, methodology, place, territoriality.

# *Lugares de polícia:* notas etnográficas sobre outras territorialidades policiais no subúrbio carioca

## **Resumo**

Um dos maiores desafios em pesquisar as práticas de qualquer instituição policial é encontrar um lugar desde onde seja possível etnografá-las, levando-se em conta as restrições metodológicas encontradas para acessar certas dimensões do trabalho da polícia. Diante do problema, o presente artigo objetiva empreender um debate a partir do que denominei “lugares de polícia” – categoria analítica usada para descrever outras dimensões da territorialidade policial no subúrbio do Rio de Janeiro. A partir da descrição de um passeio que fiz ao lado de um jovem interessado em entrar para a polícia militar, argumento que a presença informal dos agentes em seu bairro implica um outro tipo de controle sobre o espaço da vizinhança. O artigo mostra que na perspectiva da população desses lugares, a polícia é compreendida enquanto importante “centro de poder” que atrai uma série de jovens inscritos em contextos de precariedade para a carreira policial.

**Palavras-chave:** polícia, Estado, etnografia, metodologia, lugar, territorialidade.

# *Police Places:* Ethnographic Notes About Other Police Territorialities in the Suburbs of Rio de Janeiro

Eduardo de Oliveira Rodrigues

## **Introduction: building other places from which conduct police ethnography**

One of the biggest challenges in conducting ethnographic investigation into the practices of any police institution is to find a place from where one can “look, listen and write” about them (Cardoso de Oliveira, 1996). A series of dimensions of police work - in particular the coexistence between agents in the *back regions* (Goffman, 1985, p. 107) of patrolling - are inaccessible to the vast majority of people who are not police officers. According to Fine and Holyfield (1996), certain communities find their elements of internal cohesion in *trust* and *secrecy*, especially when it comes to groups that carry out activities with varying levels of risk, as is the case of police forces. What an agent does or does not do on the streets, or even what he thinks beyond the stock answers he would provide in an interview, is information generally limited to his professional peers or people in his innermost circle.

These challenges become even more serious in the Brazilian context, when we take into account the low levels of “accountability” that Brazilian police have in relation to civil society (Lemgruber, Musumeci and Cano, 2003; Kant de Lima 2013; Soares, 2019). The problem becomes apparent not only in the relative scarcity of quantitative data produced by the police themselves, but also in access to this data and to the police and, mainly, in the lack of openness of corporations towards researchers interested in understanding their operation (notably through the production of qualitative analyzes). It is no coincidence that most of the themes and methodologies employed by police studies tend to favor an approach that is more focused on the institutional and normative analysis of these institutions (Nóbrega Júnior, 2018), based on the quantitative analysis of criminal statistics, as well as the use of the “interview” as a privileged form of interaction with potential interlocutors (Ribeiro and Teixeira, 2018). When compared to the growing number of ethnographies of criminal behavior (Aquino and Hirata, 2018), ethnographies dedicated to the study of the police are still quite underrepresented in published works in Brazil (Muniz, Caruso and Freitas, 2018) and worldwide (Fassin, 2017).

Given this situation, the present article presents another methodological perspective, focused on the analysis of police work on the streets, in the context of what I call *police places*. A *police place* does not have a strictly geographic meaning. Rather, as defended by Massey (1991: 28), it is a spatial cut that configures a given “constellation of social relations” through experiences shared between subjects regarding the police. In a city like Rio de Janeiro (but more specifically in its suburban regions<sup>1</sup>), the police exercise territoriality not only through their institutional presence in vehicles, police stations, or through uniformed agents on the streets, but also through the other social roles played by police officers as respectable (and feared) residents of some of neighborhoods; owners or regulars of bars, nightclubs and brothels; and employees of private security

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a region that is difficult to geographically and socially delimit. The representations of the Rio suburbs presented in this article follow the most recurrent meaning of this term. They refer to a social space concentrating the experiences of the poor and peripheral neighborhoods of the city of Rio de Janeiro, which are crossed by train lines and symbolically distant from the so-called “center” of the metropolitan region. This is the meaning that informs most of the stories I had collected from the candidates, including during my transit through the *police places* that intersect the native spaces of housing, work and leisure. In any case, for a bibliographic review on the polysemy of meanings surrounding the “carioca suburb”, see Fernandes (2001) and Guimarães and Davies (2018).

companies, among other roles. Immersion in these places makes it possible to get to know some of their frequenters and the informal ways in which the presence of the police can thus be perceived that produce particular meanings regarding this dimension of police territoriality.

This unusual way of observing the Brazilian police was a consequence of the manner my face-to-face fieldwork was developed, even during my PhD (Rodrigues, 2022). For a period of just over nine uninterrupted months (June/2019 – March/2020), I accompanied hundreds of young people as they prepared for their written exams to enter into the career of Military Police “soldier” for the State of Rio de Janeiro (PMERJ)<sup>2</sup>. I was not engaging here with a group of recruits - that is, future police officers who are already enrolled in police training schools. These were young people between the age of 18 and 32 years old who had not had, up to the moment I met them, any contact formal with the police force. In carrying out my empirical fieldwork, I was initially able to participate in a “preparatory course” for the exam. The fact that I was simultaneously a geography teacher in the basic education network and, at the time, a doctoral candidate in anthropology made it possible to actively help candidates to prepare for their exams as a kind of informal “tutor”<sup>3</sup>. The study routine strengthened bonds of trust and allowed me access, in greater depth, to the social representations around what these young people understood to be the military police in Rio de Janeiro.

During the course of these preparatory classes, I developed even more intense relationships with some candidates that went beyond the confines of the classroom. I traveled through the relevant spaces of my interlocutors’ daily life, such as those connected to their places of residence, work and leisure. This led me to become aware of how the police presence usually appeared in their lives of these youth, long before they decided to try join the force, in the presence of individuals “PMs” (military policemen) they had met through kinship and neighborhood relations, friendship, and work. In places such as bars, brothels, and concert halls - but also in the daily lives of some youths in their neighborhoods during work in hospitals, garages, or informal transport vans - police territoriality was often not exercised exclusively by the social roles that the police took on during their work. In these *police places*, police were present along with said spaces residents or frequent visitors. Police presence implied some control over the local circulation flows of goods (whether material or symbolic) and of the people themselves. I want to emphasize the territorial dimensions of these social relations, since they describe attempts to “affect, influence, or control actions and interactions” through political control over a given space (Sack, 1983:55).

In general, to describe what the police do in certain places beyond the more obvious environments where they manifest, one must assume that these practices are one of the possible *effects* that are produced by or from the State, but which are not necessarily limited to the institutions formally defined as belonging to the State (Trouillot, 2001; Mitchell, 2006). This methodological effort is a possible contribution to the ethnographies

---

2 Within the list of institutions that make up the Brazilian Justice System, article 144, paragraph 5 of Brazil’s Federal Constitution of 1989 states that the military police are responsible for the ostensive policing of the streets and the maintenance of public order in the 26 states of the federation and in the Federal District. This idiosyncrasy is a remnant of the period of the last Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985), which removed these tasks from the hands of the civil police (who were given the role of the policing and investigation of criminal offenses, except for those conducted by military personnel). Roughly speaking, and mirroring the military structure, the military police are organized through the existence of two career paths within the institution. On the one hand, the highest-ranking agents are grouped within the “officer cycle”, where ranks range from first lieutenant to colonel. These positions are more focused on command functions, with higher salaries that require higher levels of education in law in order to access the career (in the case of PMERJ). Military police officers (PMs) of lower ranks, ranging from soldier to sub-lieutenant, are grouped within the “cycle of enlisted men”. These positions are more focused on patrolling and street-based activities. They have lower salaries and require medium-level training in order to access the career (again, referencing the PMERJ here). These two careers are distinct in terms of access, training paths, responsibilities, salaries, *status*, etc., which imply a series of particularities regarding the formation of the Military Police as an institution. For a better perspective on the duality of “soldiers” and “officers” within the Brazilian military police, – but with particular attention to the case of Rio de Janeiro – see the works of Muniz (1999), Poncioni (2004) and Caruso, Patricio and Pinto (2010).

3 Access to the PMERJ’s “cycle of enlisted men” takes place through a public competition and any Brazilian citizen between 18 and 32 years old who has a high school diploma and a valid National Driver’s License can compete for a vacancy. In the last two competitions (2010 and 2014), theoretical knowledge of the following disciplines was required: basic Portuguese, writing, history, geography, sociology, traffic legislation, human rights, and information technology. Once approved in this first stage of the competition, called the “intellectual exam”, candidates are then evaluated by a “psychological exam”, an “anthropometric exam”, a “Physical Aptitude Test (TAF)”, a “toxicological exam”, a “medical examination” and, finally, “social research” – an investigation into the candidates’ previous lives carried out by the PMERJ’s intelligence sector.

that investigate these institutions. It involves a shift of perspective beyond diagnoses of a more normative nature, which tend to see the Brazilian military police as institutions in permanent “crisis”. The supposed “crisis” that plagues these police institutions is mainly materialized by their negative public image (Zilli, 2017). Scholars of the topic, public policy makers, government officials, and even those police considered be “progressive” use such studies to call for changes in the police institutions (Poncioni, 2012). Since the Brazilian re-democratization process following the last dictatorship (1964-1985), some attempts at “reform” have been undertaken based on what has debated about the problems caused and faced by the military police over the last four decades. These reforms encompass a wide spectrum of measures that include initiatives such as changes in the training of agents, less belligerent public programs and policies, and attempts at greater civil control over police work, among others <sup>4</sup>.

In order to distinguish and better illustrate the methodological perspective I am proposing, the next sections of the present article will be dedicated to the examination of the possible benefits offered by *police places* through the ethnographic description of a “walk” that I took through the neighborhood of one of my main research interlocutors. Pablo is a 19-year-old young man whose life trajectory weaves together institutions such as the police and his family, since he has relatives who are “active” or “retired” PMs. Walking by his side, I listen to the narrative the candidate presents as we move through his neighborhood. Pablo describes this as a place where the police are a key element in the functioning of daily life. I intend to demonstrate that, from the point of view of my interlocutor, far from being an institution in “crisis”, the PMERJ becomes something capable of symbolically organizing native experiences, expectations, and worldviews within a universe that involves graphic stories of violence but, equally, narratives of survival and fun. Pablo is just one of many other candidates I’ve lived with who see “being policer” as not only a mechanism for social ascension through entering a public career, but also as a *police condition* (Silva, 2014:132-133), a native category used to describe the possible advantages linked to the exercise of the police profession.

In accordance with the problem suggested by the “Ethnographies of Governance Institutions” dossier, my description of that episode demonstrates how military police institutions are constituted as important *centers of power* (Geertz, 1997:187) in a society such as Brazil, when thought of from the perspective of its precarious urban populations. In the case of the PMERJ, studies such as those by Bretas (1997) and Holloway (1997) show us that, since its inception, police work has always been much more attractive to poorer and blacker workers than to wealthier social segments. This is the social profile of the majority of the troops in Rio de Janeiro up to the present day (Minayo et. al., 2008:67-71). The PMERJ, therefore, is a governance institution whose members’ profile deviates from those traditionally occupying the field of interests of an “anthropology of the elites” in both the international (Abbinck and Salverda, 2013) and Brazilian (Gomes, Motta and Souza Lima, 2021) spheres. Investigations of this institution also pose a series of methodological challenges common to “studying up” (Nader, 1972:301-308).

In fact, ethnographically studying the police in these terms - that is, understanding their fundamental role in the political administration of life in certain precarious places of a city like Rio de Janeiro - is also a way of reflecting on the possible relational character between categories such as “studying up” and “studying down”. In the reading of candidates for a police career, “being a police officer” allows one to ascend socially through the earning of unparalleled economic and reputational income within the social contexts in which these young people live: i.e regions such as the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Pablo is just one example within the universe of candidates who I engaged with during my fieldwork, as I will try to describe in the following sections.

---

<sup>4</sup> An exhaustive review of the mapping of the debate on police studies in Brazil is beyond the scope of the present article. For more information, see the overview of the consensus and dissent of production in the field of studies on crime, police and the justice system contained in Rattón (2018). For deeper bibliographical engagement, see the surveys and systematizations made by Kant de Lima, Misse, and Miranda (2000) for works published until the early 2000s, and Campos and Alvarez (2017) for the period between 2000 and 2016.

## Suburban routes

On November 13th, 2019, a Wednesday, I headed towards Pablo's house around 4 pm. The Vasco da Gama and Flamengo football teams would face off for the return of the Brazilian Championship to Rio de Janeiro that same night. We had agreed to watch the game together through a bet: he whose team lost the duel would have to wear the shirt of the opposing team the next morning, when we would meet again in the environment of the "preparatory course", along with dozens of other young people who, like Pablo, were preparing for the next competition to become a PM. My interlocutor was very excited about his team's chances and he disturbed my patience daily with videos of goals, *memes*, and provocations in general about the antagonistic situation of the two clubs. At the time, Flamengo was coming from a series of 20 undefeated games (with an impressive 18 wins), and started towards the anticipated championship title. Vasco, on the other hand, remained around the middle of the standings, with an irregular campaign that had not managed to reach even a 50% win rate.

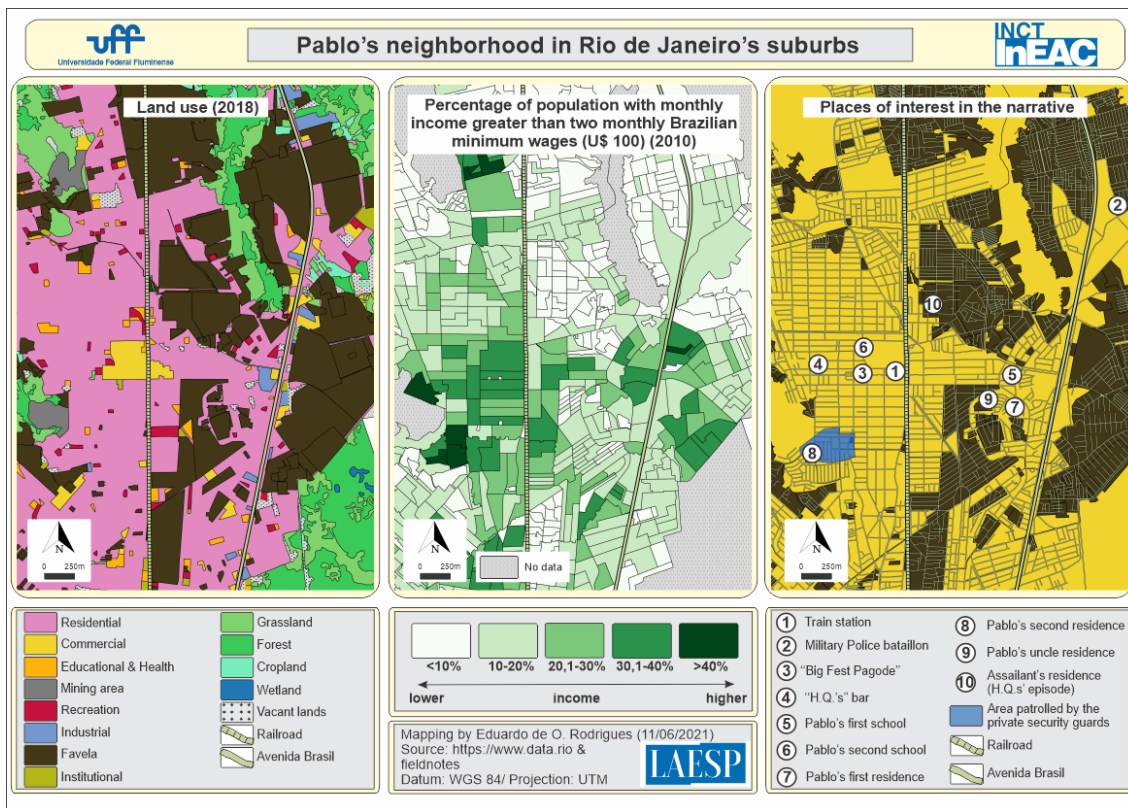
Given our mutual interest in football, Pablo invited me to watch the game with him, since he claimed to have no money to go to Maracanã. His suggestion was that we meet earlier at his house and drink a few beers, taking advantage of the fact that his parents were away. Afterwards, we would head to a nearby bar to watch the match. Agreeing, I then took an early afternoon train to avoid the "rush hour", which began after 5:00 PM as workers returned from city center to their suburban neighborhoods of residence. Standing in the train car, I looked at the map of the stations that indicated my destination. Both Pablo and I lived in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, although our homes were approximately an hour away from each other by train.

Going along that route made it possible for me to get to better know some of the axes that gave life to those most forgotten corners of the "wonderful city" of Rio de Janeiro. In Rio, train branches and expressways provided different spatial fractures to the urban plan of the metropolis and, especially, of the suburbs. Especially in the neighborhoods crossed by trains, the railways have played an important role in the material and symbolic division of the neighborhoods, where many residents have transformed crossing the tracks via footbridges or underpasses into rituals (Lins, 2010:150-153). The landscapes that were being laid out before my eyes brought together some of these idiosyncrasies, which were verifiable by the different land uses in the mixture of houses, slums, small businesses and industries along the tracks. These last developments only remained in the landscape as empty or repurposed sheds, whose industrial activities had long ago given way to other uses. Often, industrial buildings were simply abandoned and visibly falling into ruin.

As I moved into the more distant reaches of the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, "radinhos"<sup>5</sup> standing or sitting on improvised chairs and sofas showed the presence of illegal drug commerce along the margins of some points of the line. This was all observed through the windows of the train, where passengers already familiar with the scene were only concerned with getting home as quickly as possible. All these elements made me think about how different Pablo's suburb was from mine. It was grayer, more polluted, more impoverished and, for some, even more dangerous. However, the place held no less vitality for those reasons, as the streets that led to the train station located in the center of the neighborhood would soon show. To better situate the reader in this narrative, the description I present below can be better understood through the following maps representing Pablo's neighborhood. These show, respectively, "land uses", the socioeconomic profile of residents and "places of interest" that will appear throughout the rest of this article:

---

<sup>5</sup> "Radinho" is the informal designation given to those who monitor the flow of people into and out of *favelas* territorialized by groups of illicit drug dealers in Rio de Janeiro. The name "radio" refers to the fact that these young people usually carry radio transmitters or walkie-talkies that serve for internal communication within the gang.



## Police Neighborhood

"Fuck bro, where's the shirt? Are you going to say you didn't bring it!?" Pablo asked, when he saw me leaving the station. I showed him the Maltese cross that stamped the white diagonal stripe of the Vasco shirt inside my backpack and explained that I had kept it in there shirt to "avoid trouble" with the flamenguistas on the train. Pablo didn't miss a chance to mock me: "That's right, bro. It's been embarrassing to be a Vasco fan these last few years". Jokes aside, we greeted each other and Pablo's enthusiasm for the game was quite evident.

I commented that it had been many years since I had last visited his neighborhood, since my relationship with the place was limited to an old personal bond that had ended many years ago. Pablo asked if I knew the area well, and I explained that I didn't, emphasizing that my knowledge was limited only to the surroundings of the station and the street where my ex-girlfriend lived. Upon hearing the address, he asked if she lived "on the other side of the station", which I confirmed. "Oh bro, I know the street. But here is another scene entirely: much better. Let's go to the market and on the way back I'll show you around". I agreed with the suggestion and we continued on foot in order to stock up on beers and crackers.

The market was "on the other side" of the railway line and we were forced to walk towards the station to reach the place. The area was well known to Pablo, as he and his family had also lived on that side of the neighborhood for many years during the candidate's childhood. Both sides of the neighborhood were thus Pablo's "area", or, in the terms used by Magnani (2002:21), they were his *turf* [*pedaço*]. The candidate understood the union between those two halves as a physical cut of a geographical nature, which demarcated a reasonably well-defined common territory. But he also understood the two halves equally as a part of the social order, through the way in which his own trajectory was constructed and which enabled him to establish different relationships of friendship and kinship, which filled out the contents of the space in particular ways.

This particularism was due not only to the fact that the Pablo's daily life had been created in the same neighborhood, but mainly to the role that the PMERJ played in organizing the relationships that structured this life. Throughout his childhood, Pablo's father had been full-time "enlisted"<sup>6</sup> for over a decade in the local police battalion, whose station house was on the opposite side of the rail line from where Pablo now lived. His uncle was also a PM and had lived in the neighborhood for many years, although he was assigned to another battalion in the city. The uncle's former residence was still his property, although it was occupied by his ex-wife and one of his sons who was, like his father, an "enlisted" PM. I asked if those family relationships were routine in this "area" and if "there were a lot of police"<sup>7</sup> in the neighborhood. Pablo said that not only did the police "live" there, but that the existence of a relatively high concentration of PM residences allowed the "police" to enjoy other common living spaces spread throughout the streets, corners, squares, parks, and blocks of the neighborhood.

Indeed, in analytical terms, the regularity of meetings in that suburban stronghold ended up demonstrating the high informal presence of the police as one possible reading. I emphasize the *informal* character of this presence because it does not necessarily have to do with uniformed agents in functions such as policing on foot, patrolling in vehicles, or serving the public offered by the local station house. Again, according to Magnani (2002:19), the informal presence of PMs and other police agents acted more in the sense of conforming one of the distinct *totalities*: that is, an order understood by the natives as a set of practices and daily interactions in places such as streets, housing complexes, bars, restaurants, concert halls, clubs, etc. In these spaces, PMs took on social roles as residents and regulars in addition to the functions more directly linked to the policing performed when they were on duty. It was this particular *totality* that gave the neighborhood a certain reputation as a "police neighborhood".

As we were going over the walkway across the tracks, Pablo tried to explain to me the reputation of the place as the result of elements that took shape over time. This explanation ended up intertwining some important people in his life. Right away, Pablo explained that the salary paid by the PMERJ was not enough for the agents to live in more affluent neighborhoods – especially the "enlisted". Most of the PMs he knew (whether they were family members or not) lived in that and many peripheral neighborhoods of the capital and its metropolitan area, since their networks of kinship and friendship were generally territorialized in these spaces. A second point Pablo brought up concerned the presence of a PM battalion, which had been on-going for many decades in the neighborhood. This allowed the agents stationed there to interact more with local daily life, getting to know some people better and arranging "jobs"<sup>8</sup>, wives, girlfriends, "lovers", friends, etc. Some of these PMs ended up deciding to establish their lives more fully in that place, changing their address to a residence located in the vicinity. Finally, the neighborhood still had a strong presence of "bicheiros" and their families, maintaining a series of businesses linked not only to the "jogo do bicho"<sup>9</sup> stalls, but also to the financing of Samba Schools, Carnaval street "blocos", and other commercial and service activities whose owners had a connection with these families. Pablo stated that both his father and his uncle were close to different activities linked to the "jogo do bicho" when they were "active" PMs.

---

6 Being an "enlisted" – or a "praça" – is a reference to a police officer belonging to the "circle of enlisted men", as explained in footnote nº 2, regardless of rank. Roughly speaking, calling a military police officer "enlisted" means saying that he is a low-ranking police officer.

7 In everyday life in Rio, it is commonplace for people to call agents "policia" and not "policial". Both the "police" institution and its staff are therefore referred to in the same way in the Portuguese version of this text as "policia".

8 A "job" or "bico" in the military police universe means any type of informal paid activity that police officers carry out during their time off from "official" police service. On the "police bico", see Brito, Souza and Magalhães (2011).

9 The *Jogo do Bicho* is an illegal lottery betting on numbers ranging from 1 to 25, each representing a certain animal. It was created at the end of the 19th century in the city of Rio de Janeiro and later spread throughout Brazil. Although it is illegal, the lottery is still very popular among Brazilians. The nickname "bicheiro", in turn, designates the heads of the betting points of the "jogo do bicho" spread throughout the cities of the country. On the "Jogo do Bicho", see Damatta and Soárez (1999), Chazkel (2011) and Labronici (2015).



The trajectory of my interlocutor was not an isolated case in the neighborhood. Pablo remembered that some of his school classmates were also sons and daughters of PMs, or at least of other security agents and low-ranking military personnel. Other boys and girls had low-ranking enlisted military parents in the form of privates, corporals and sergeants. Pablo maintained similar relationships with friends and acquaintances on the street who had relatives, colleagues, neighbors or other close relations active in these military corporations. A significant part of all these young people were trying out for a police or military career. Pablo's own younger half-brother – from an extramarital relationship of his father's – dreamt of pursuing a career in the Rio de Janeiro Fire Department (CBMERJ). The eldest daughter from Pablo's father's first marriage was also married to another PM, who initially had shared a position in the same battalion as Pablo's father.

These stories suggest that many of the young people who inhabited a neighborhood such as the one described share common experiences linked to early contact with moral subjects close to the police universe. Besides police officers, low-ranking military personnel, firefighters, penitentiary agents, municipal guards, "militiamen"<sup>10</sup> and "bicheiros", these are also family members, friends, neighbors, and many other people close to these youth. As *youth raised up (crias)* in this universe of values these young people are subjects who build their identities around values and moralities that attribute his existence to a local circulation (Silva, 2019:68-97), Pablo and many other *crias* of the neighborhood guide their daily actions through an ethics close to that proffered by these security agents – although they were not, necessarily, policemen or any other of the subjects listed above. Although these are moralities inscribed in fundamentally *situational* contexts (Eilbaum, 2012:32), certain consensuses ended up being built around not only the interdiction of some types of behavior within that community, but also the ways in which conflicts are managed in *places* as Pablo's "police neighborhood".

## Big Fest Pagode

When we left the market, Pablo and I were forced to return to the other side of the train tracks. We crossed the footbridge again to walk to the candidate's residence, with Pablo showing me some of the places belonging to the *totality* that socially delimited his neighborhood. One could perceive the difference between the two sides of the neighborhood only with a closer look because, in principle, both were equally endowed with a dense network of commerce and varied services. The differences in the establishments were only related to the level of sophistication of what they offered.

Crossing the main square of the neighborhood, I commented that the bars and clubs there were familiar to me because I had once gone to a "pagode"<sup>11</sup> there with my ex-girlfriend and some friends. When I pointed out the place, Pablo was surprised that I was familiar with the "Big Fest Pagode", stating that he was a regular at the same place. We didn't like pagode, but Pablo said that his attention was captured by the party a few times "because there were so many women". The only time I went to the "Big Fest", I was surprised that, right at the entrance, a particular group of men had formed a kind of "queue" separately from the other people going in. At the time, my girlfriend explained to me that this separate line was formed, in large part, by police and other people who were armed and who were waiting for the house to open. Separating those guys from the rest of the public was a way to better organize the flow of people into attend the event.

---

<sup>10</sup> Generically called "militiamen", these are all members of the paramilitary gangs active in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro. In general, these are groups formed mostly by agents and former agents of public security institutions such as the police, fire department, municipal guard and members of the Armed Forces. Militiamen tend to dispute city territories with drug trafficking gangs, committing crimes such as extortion, murder, threats, and etc. In recent years, however, the definition of the category "militia" as opposed to "trafficker" has become increasingly complex, given the new relationships that both groups have established with each other and with the State itself. On this, see the works by Brama (2019), Misse (2019) and Hirata et al. (2022).

<sup>11</sup> A form of carioca popular music.

Pablo confirmed to me that there were also “a lot of police” at the “Big Fest Pagode” in addition to “women”, but that the exclusive privileges given to security agents no longer took place there. In the past, he said that those who were “police” accessed the venue through another entrance: a small separate room where weapons could be kept in a “safe”. However, Pablo explained, “Big Fest” had not happen for a few years and, when the event returned (now with a new organizer), things changed. Apparently, the party began to cause damage to the former “owner”, largely because of the relatively negative reputation it acquired. Both Pablo in 2019 and my girlfriend in 2012 stated that, every now and then, some of the fights that happened there were resolved “with a bullet”, with people being injured by clashes involving police and other people who went armed to the party. Pablo believed that, since the return of the festivities, the “spirits” of the regulars were relatively calmer.

Pablo said that he had gone to the Fest twice because of women. I asked if the presence of many women at the event wasn’t also the reason for many of the fights among the men. I told him about a comment that a friend of my ex-girlfriend’s had made at the time, that “it wasn’t cool to approach a woman at the Big Fest”, because you didn’t know who was accompanied and who was not, if her escort was armed or not, if a certain girl was a sister, cousin, friend, neighbor or acquaintance of someone who was armed, etc. Pablo minimized the critique, saying that “people exaggerate”. He claimed that the fact that a lot of “police” attended the “Big Fest” was a good thing. For Pablo, the presence of guns discouraged more fights than they encouraged. This was an enunciation of a similar native theory that I had already heard from other police candidates, although without the same level of sophistication:

Brother, think together with me: since everyone is ‘packed’<sup>12</sup>, you don’t want to get into trouble over nothing. The armed dude over there... if you know that the dude might be armed, would you want to start messing around [*esculhachando*]? Are you going to go around grabbing any woman, telling everyone to fuck off? Are you going to get ‘high’ and start annoying others? No! You’ll get it together. You’ll think carefully before doing things. You’ll show some respect. Of course, there’s always gonna be a ‘goose’<sup>13</sup> doing shit, but if you compare it to other places, I’m sure there’s a lot less confusion at the ‘Big Fest’ than at the favela balls or at those playboy parties in the south zone<sup>14</sup>.

Pablo claimed that there was a certain *ethics* of acting in places like Big Fest. Some behaviors were more socially accepted there while others were avoided or were simply forbidden. The moral codes that prescribed the expectations regarding the behavior of the subjects in the concert hall seemed to be linked to the informal presence of the police, where agents ended up assuming different roles as regulars, “security guards”, or even “partners”. Pablo sought to support his argument by contrasting “Big Fest” with other areas of *enjoyment* (“*curtição*”) in Rio (Silva, 2019:11-19), such as the “favela balls” and the “playboy parties in the south zone”. In native terms, he sought to build for himself a kind of symbolic cartography delimiting three distinct *moral regions* (Park, 1976:62-64) that prescribed three disparate ways of acting.

Therefore, if *esculacho* can be sociologically understood as morally disregarding an individual (Pires, 2011:123-124), “*esculhachar*” - or messing around - particularly at “Big Fest” is something that goes against the ethical precepts that inform the expectations of how people should behave in a place like that. Pablo told me that the last time he went to the event, he saw a young man being “dragged” from the party and being “slapped around” by security. The reason for the treatment seemed adequate to him: “why did the guy get in

<sup>12</sup> *Trepado*. Slang for “carrying a gun”.

<sup>13</sup> Slang from the carioca police universe used to refer to people who supposedly have some involvement with the use or trade of illicit drugs. From the native point of view, just as the animal goose has a suspicious appearance and is always stretching its neck to try to see what is going on around it, the “geese” involved with drugs tend to assume the same suspicious posture, trying to protect themselves from possible repressive action by the police.

<sup>14</sup> Reference to the “South Zone” of the city of Rio de Janeiro, a region that concentrates the most affluent neighborhoods, as opposed to the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.

there in the middle of the party and light up a joint?”. Smoking marijuana, in this case, is an *esculhacho* of “Big Fest”. It was something that Pablo and the other regulars understood to be unacceptable behavior, practiced by people who were properly labeled *geese*. Pablo and many of the other candidates employed this category, taken from the police universe in Rio de Janeiro, to reinforce the criminalization of certain subjects based on their appearance, place of residence, way of speaking and walking, but, above all, based on their supposed involvement with sales and/or consumption of illicit drugs (Cruz e Costa, 2021:244-245).

On the other hand, those figures close to the police such as militiamen, “bicheiros”, and the “security guards” at the event, who occasionally carried weapons without permission were not *esculhachando* at the party – although they were people who were practicing equally illegal activities. The appropriate ways of acting in *police places* thus seem to escape the norms written down in the law. Instead, they are constituted more as a set of rules produced and reproduced by these subjects in an informal way that, sometimes, refers to behaviors that PMs understand as correct in the light of particular readings of *police ethics* (Kant de Lima, 2019:57). While not on duty “24/7,” police officers’ moral sensibilities seem to be always active in *places* traditionally inhabited by them. As Pablo argued, obeying such ethical precepts was an indication of respect for the place.

## Memories and trajectories

As we walked, the hustle and bustle of the neighborhood center became more distant and we began walking along streets that were increasingly peaceful. From the neighborhood’s main arterial road, we moved on to its side streets. Now we were on absolutely local streets, where speed bumps built by the residents themselves forced cars to reduce their speed. There were no housing developments to be seen, nor buildings of many or even a couple of floors. These streets were completely taken up by houses of one or two floors, which now and then shared space with more modest businesses like bakeries, grocery stores, self-service restaurants, or small construction materials stores. The few trees planted on the sidewalks didn’t produce enough shade to mask the sun that still burned our heads. The heat also did not contain the animation of the many children who left the schools at the end of the afternoon, and who, running home, produced a rattling sound as if we were in a large playground built under an open sky. Small clusters of humble men and women were flanked by teenagers, also in school uniforms (who I thought might be the older brothers, cousins, or neighbors of the children), responsible for accompanying the younger ones in their parents’ absence. All of the youths, without exception, wore the uniforms of the public school system.

The scene made Pablo remember a specific part of his childhood: how he, like the children, had studied in one of the public schools present in the neighborhood. He spoke of the “chaos” that was his first school – characterized as a “violent” place with a chronic lack of teachers. The school was located close to his first home, on the “other side” of the train line, close to Avenida Brasil<sup>15</sup>. Pablo said that most of his classmates were residents of the surrounding favelas, and that Sub-Lieutenant Mendonça, his father, told him never to tell any of them that he was a “son of the police”. After moving to the new address, already a little older, Pablo began to study in a “more organized” school. This second school was close to the center of the neighborhood, on the side of the rail line, where we were, and the candidate seemed to have better memories about that institution. It was during this time that Pablo met his first girlfriend and some of the friends he most fully brought into his life. According to him, these young people were not the “little seeds of evil”<sup>16</sup> that his former class supposedly were, generally young people aged 11 to 14 between the 6th and 9th grade of Elementary School.

<sup>15</sup> One of the main internal circulation routes in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which also cuts through a good part of the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>16</sup> Pablo sought to establish a causal relationship between those children living in the favela and crime. Because they had early contact with the world of retail drug trafficking, they were considered to be “bandits in gestation”.

Going back to Pablo's school days encouraged me to talk about my own trajectory and how I had gone from being a student to being a teacher. Pablo asked me why I chose geography and teaching and I explained to him that geography, in my school days, always seemed to me to be the subject that "best explained the world". In particular, a teacher I had in the 3rd year of high school directly influenced my choice, although I initially did not think about becoming a teacher. I told Pablo that my "desire" to follow the teaching profession was only consolidated after I had graduated. It was therefore not something, therefore I had planned from an early age as "being a police officer" was for him. I took advantage of the conversation to ask what Pablo's first memories about the police were, as these could better explain his choice of career.

The candidate began by talking about his father in uniform, still in police gear, which seemed to give him a superhuman aura. The candidate also spoke of the huge stainless steel .44 caliber revolver that the sub-lieutenant kept at home and of some military ceremonies that he followed closely, whose "close order" marching evolutions were painted in the vivid colors of the eyes of a child. At a certain moment, however, Pablo fell silent. A lost look came over his face, as if he was going through his memory in search of some half-forgotten entanglement. He then stated that, once, while playing ball with other children, he became sure that "being a police officer was badass" due to an episode that happened on his old street. He took advantage of the reputation inscribed in his father's *police condition* to rescue a ball that had fallen into the backyard of another "policeman". The man was a retired corporal with a reputation for being "crazy" since, supposedly, he had been removed from his duties in the corporation due to psychological problems. Pablo's father knew him and said that he was just "a bit nervous", but that, just in case, his son should "avoid trouble" and never play football near the PM's house. Whether he was "crazy" or "nervous", the fact is that the reputation built around the man, who mixed attributes of fear and respect<sup>17</sup>, made him feared by the entire neighborhood.

On the occasion of the lost ball, in view of the fear another boy had in ringing the man's doorbell, the other children suggested that Pablo go and ask for the ball back because his father was one of the only people who maintained a cordial relationship with the "crazy" PM. This pushed Pablo candidate to accept the "mission". He introduced himself to the man, saying his name and whose son he was, apologizing for what happened and quietly requesting the ball back. The "policeman" approached and said: "Ah! So you are the son of 'Mendonça'? Take it kid, but make sure you throw the ball over there, okay? Give your dad a hug." The ball was then thrown over the wall, ending in the middle of the street in front of other boys who, in disbelief, witnessed with admiration Pablo's feat. From that day on, the candidate's *status* among his friends increased considerably while the boy who chickened out became a laughingstock. Time and again, the episode was remembered in conversations between their colleagues on the old street, thus becoming part of the collective memories built by that group of young people.

## The "south zone" of the neighborhood

Further on, close to Pablo's residence, the simple-looking houses gained a rather imposing air in the space of a few blocks, indicating a relatively more affluent residential occupation in that part of the neighborhood. The greater sophistication of the residences contrasted with what I had seen up to then, especially since some of them had a more defensive aspect. In these cases, high walls covered a good part of the house's facades, adorned along their top by concertina wire or electric fences. Security cameras were often strategically positioned at the gates of residences, with nameplates affixed to the walls indicating which

---

<sup>17</sup> According to Ramos (2017:20), one of the most common representations of respect among PMs is linked to the agent's ability to potentially commit evil. In the native view, the greater the fear of suffering retaliation, the greater the respect that the "policeman" will have among his peers and civilians. The ethics that prescribe certain codes of action in *police places* are intimately related to this problem, since fear of retaliation of various levels of severity leads people to adhere to the informal regulations imposed by the PMs who inhabit these spaces in different ways.

company provided the security services for the residence. The only thing these residences had in common with the simplest houses was the occasional presence of Brazilian flags in the windows, denoting the political preference of most of the residents<sup>18</sup>. Also striking was the fact that certain side streets had guardhouses and men in vests with radio transmitters in their hands. There were no weapons to be seen, however.

I commented on all the differences to Pablo, asking if that part of the neighborhood was very dangerous. Pablo smiled and said that, to the contrary, it was one of the safest places in the region. “This side is the ‘south zone’ of the neighborhood: you can walk in peace.” The way the candidate spoke, saying that his neighborhood was the “south zone” was a way of summarizing, in a few words, that it was the best possible place to live within the neighborhood. Pablo was playing with toponyms, just like so many other residents of Rio’s suburbs did, in order to add greater symbolic value to the representations about their place of residence. Roughly speaking, every place outside the limits of Rio’s “south zone” had its own respective “south zone”, just as every place outside the “favela” areas also had its respective “favela”<sup>19</sup>. In a city with very high levels of segregation, the mobilization of certain toponyms to refer to places describes a fundamentally socio-spatial problem. In Rio de Janeiro, people often end up defining themselves according to the place where they live (Velho, 2002:80).

When Pablo said that I could “walk around in peace” in that part of the neighborhood, he was also referring to the more explicit absence of “bums” in the area: criminals who practiced robberies, thefts, and retail drug trafficking as in other parts of the neighborhood, like in those places called favelas. The candidate stated that he had moved to his new address four years ago, but the location had long since had built a reputation as “a quiet place”. I asked if a lot of “police” lived there, and Pablo explained that some residents were police officers, but more were, in his reading, “elite police” such as investigators of the Rio de Janeiro Civil Police (PCERJ) and PMERJ high-rank officers. His father, an “enlisted”, was an exception in the neighborhood, given that the profile of the residents was typically composed of middle-class families headed by liberal professionals, civil servants, and Armed Forces personnel.

In a relational context, these residents were considered to be an important part of “those at the top” within the *scale of experience* (Masuda and Crooks, 2007:257-258) of those who shared the common daily life of the neighborhood. In the composition of what Pablo considered to be “the neighborhood elite”, there was an important police and military component because it was formed, in part, by cadres of these that held the highest ranks in these institutions, especially officers. However, this did not mean that the influence of “enlisted” police officers was small in the region. My interlocutor claimed that the private “security guards” who worked on the streets were linked to a firm whose owner was a PMERJ sergeant named Fonseca. Although he was close to Sub Lieutenant Mendonça, Pablo did not know whether the security guards were regular workers, nor whether the firm was legal. He claimed, however, that although the young men were armed, especially on the night shift, those he knew were not, in fact, police officers.

Indeed, the support received by the “security guards” was mainly due to the efficiency with which “the boys” faced down potential threats to the neighborhood: “they are always ‘feeling’<sup>20</sup> the street. If they see someone suspicious, they go up to him and ask who they are and where they are going”. Or, again, according to Pablo, “if someone arrives by car at night, and passes by the guardhouse, they have to lower their headlights

---

<sup>18</sup> Even after the 2018 presidential election, it was still common to see, throughout Rio de Janeiro, the presence of Brazilian flags displayed in homes and commercial establishments as a form of support for President Jair Bolsonaro. In Pablo’s neighborhood, their presence was even more common than in other places where I walked with other candidates.

<sup>19</sup> Silva (2019:60) draws attention to the denomination that some places receive as “favela” in the sense of making them precarious due to the unequal application of the law, allowing and legitimizing a series of violations suffered by its residents. The State participates directly in this process, assuming an active role in the diffuse denomination of what areas are and are not represented as “favelas”. This delimitation occurs not only in the official cartography of the metropolitan institutes of urbanism and urban planning (as in the “land use” map shown above), but also in the practical effects of State action through the unequal offer of public services, the unequal guarantee rights to the population and, of course, the very violent actions carried out by the police in these areas.

<sup>20</sup> *Palmeando*. Slang from the military police universe, which means “to monitor” something.

and windows. They nudge the person when they are not from around here and this is the protocol”. So I ask if, even with the presence of the security team, some crimes ended up happening, anyhow. Pablo admits that “yes, this happens”, but says that these are “isolated cases” which do not even compare to the crime rates of the surrounding areas, most notably in the neighborhoods located “on the other side” of the train tracks, closer to the largest favelas in the region. Pablo claimed that “the guys here are tough, there’s no mess. We don’t even call 911<sup>21</sup> when things go wrong”. He explained that most of the problems were solved locally, without the *formal presence* of the police. However, all these actions were always done in agreement with the “policemen” who *informally managed* the “security” of the guard posts. The agents acted in the daily life of the neighborhood, not only in uniform, but also by playing other social roles as residents, owners of commercial and service establishments or, simply, as subjects who enjoy the local leisure and entertainment spaces.

When we delved deeper into the subject, Pablo made a point of underlining that, although the daily life around the area was infused by the formal and informal presence of police officers, the *scheme*<sup>22</sup> there was not militia-run. That part of the neighborhood did not have a “gatonet”<sup>23</sup> signal. There were no extra charges for gas or other services. And although all residents were “invited” to pay a monthly “security fee” of ten 2023 USD, it was not obligatory, but only a “contribution” for services rendered. Other “contributions” were also willingly offered by local merchants, such as the cafeteria run by “Bigode”, an old resident of the region who allowed the security guards to eat for free in his establishment every day. Pablo said that the vast majority of residents paid the fee charged for services, since it was worth “the tranquility of the place”. The presence of the “security guards” generally had the support of Pablo’s neighbors and was capitalized on by a city councilor who had grown up in the neighborhood and had moved out a few years earlier to a more affluent seaside enclave. In the town’s main square, a frayed and time-stained raffia banner announced “community support” for councilor “Dr. Sílvio Pereira” who stood behind the security guards’ presence. Pablo said that the politician had family members who were police officers and who maintained bonds of friendship and camaraderie with Fonseca, the security firm’s owner.

It was these *schemes* established between PMs, security guards, residents, and owners of commercial and service establishments that ended up being pointed to as the main reference for “security” by all those who shared the routine of the region. It was the police that continued to be the main reference for conflict management, although it was not formally *the police* as a State institution, but *the police* who were residents, agents who did “odd jobs” in other activities, or even in the “patrons” of other men who offered protection services. Pablo stated that, as in so many other places in the city, the police were also formally present in the daily life of the neighborhood, although they operated there through what seemed to be the mediation of other local “policemen” who more explicitly exercised their territoriality. In that particular situation, “the police” and “police officers” were by no means exclusive categories.

### Assault on “the HQ”<sup>24</sup>

After we finally arrived at our destination, Pablo and I managed to drink almost a dozen beers until night fell. We drank on the terrace of Pablo’s house, watching the sun set behind the mountains that surrounded Pablo’s neighborhood. We were hungry and I went downstairs to get the rest of the crackers that would fill us

21 “190” The emergency number to call PMERJ in Rio de Janeiro.

22 A native category among my interlocutors that refers to any arrangement of relationships of a personal nature that involved individuals, groups, or institutions, and which are articulated around the operation of an illegal or partially illegal market. Regarding the analytical exploration of this category, see Rodrigues (2022).

23 Slang referring to any clandestine cable TV connection. In territories controlled by militiamen, it is very common for gangs to illegally exploit the provision of telephone, television, and internet services.

24 Acronym for “Headquarters”.

up for a few moments. When I returned, my interlocutor was smoking a cigarette and exchanging audios with a girl via *Whatsapp*. I thought it was a “hook up” he had been seeing for some time. Pablo was unsuccessfully trying to convince her to come with us to watch the match. She said she couldn’t, but left open the possibility of meeting him after the game, after her mother went to sleep. The candidate was excited and said that he could even “split an *Uber*” so that she could go from and return to her home “in secrecy”. With the potential meeting thus organized, Pablo said that it would be easy for us to “kill” that last beer and proceed to the “HQ”. This was a bar where he and his friends used to drink, which was no more than a 10-minute walk from where we were. The place was so named because it hosted the periodic meetings of the “old-time police” linked to Pablo’s father, who were a group of retired PMs who maintained friendly relations since the times of the work in the local battalion – the original “HQ” from their time “on active duty”.

Some twenty minutes later, we were back on the street and on our way to the establishment. By then, the heat had let up a bit, but some clouds lower in the sky made the weather muggy. We walked through streets that were even quieter at that time of day, when people were usually resting at home. The clock passed eight PM, and most of the anonymous people we came across were sitting in pubs, grocery stores, and food trailers watching the evening news or “pre-game show” on cable TV channels. Everyone seemed to be waiting for the start of the game, but many people were also crammed into very small buildings that looked to be improvised construction, which I was able to identify as churches only by the praises effusively chanted by the faithful within.

We walked along in a straight line for a long time until, a few corners later, we arrived at the “HQ”. The first thing that caught my attention in the place was an image of Saint George posted on the wall at the back of the bar. The painting had an altar-like aura, with a very bright red light positioned at its base. It was surrounded by newspaper clippings of the last Flamengo teams that had been champions and advertisements for cheap beers which depicted women in bikinis. An older gentleman had his back to the public, washing glasses on the other side of the bar, while a very young man served the customers. No one waited on the tables, so it was necessary to go to the bar to buy beers or request any other service.

“Good evening, Mr. Machado! By how much will we beat them today?” Pablo shouted towards the older man. As he looked over his shoulder, the old man squinted under his glasses like so many other elderly people do in an attempt to see more accurately. When he finally recognized Pablo, he approached and the two greeted each other warmly even though they were separated by the bar. The man’s affection for the candidate was very evident, especially through the interest he showed in Pablo’s family. To Machado, Pablo was “Mendonçinha” and the bar owner soon wanted to know about the candidate’s parents: “Your old man sent me photos of him and your mother on whatsapp. So they’re traveling, right?” Amidst the family gossip, Pablo introduced me as his friend and made fun of our bet, which gave him a large advantage in the face of the moment the two teams were passing through. Amidst the laughter, we greeted each other and then Pablo and I went to sit at one of the plastic tables that were arranged on the sidewalk of the “HQ”. A “litirão” of beer was brought with us, while an order of “pepperoni and fries” was placed with the attendant.

Mr. Machado was Rivaldo’s older brother and Rivaldo was a PM who was a contemporary of Pablo’s father in the local battalion. He had kept bar in the same location for decades and the PM brother ended up establishing the habit of getting together with his “police” friends there. Over time, that tradition was strengthened and other people were integrated into birthday festivities, year-end festivities, or even occasional meetings that transformed the bar into the parallel “Headquarters” for those men. Additionally, some people like the bar owner himself and other associates – mostly friends and family of the “policemen” - participated in these fraternizations. The place was thus a reference mainly for the older agents who patrolled the area, being where they sometimes also had lunch, a snack, or helped with “security” when Mr. Machado needed help “closing the till” or when a customer disturbed the tranquility of the establishment.

Pablo told me that the place was quiet because nobody was “crazy” enough to get into trouble with the owner of a bar who was a “police brother”, especially in a place that, according to him, was a “police area”. That part of the neighborhood did not have a security *system* along the lines of Pablo’s part of the neighborhood, but the presence of “policemen” who were residents of neighboring houses and housing developments gave the bar a reputation that discouraged crimes. Pablo said that, a few years ago, Mr. Machado injured a young man who tried to rob his bar on the day Machado was to pay his suppliers. Machado called his brother, who personally contacted colleagues who were patrolling the area. It was they who arrested the assailant and learned from Mr. Machado, that the young man seemed to have been “sent by someone”, since the robbery attempt had taken place on the day when the cashbox would have been full of money. A few hours after the arrest, Rivaldo told Machado, via phone, that the bandit had “confessed” that a bar employee had informed him of the payment date, and that the two would split the spoils of the robbery. The boy had given the information under torture, and the PM went to try to “cross-check” with Machado’s brother in order to find out if the story he had told was feasible - that is, if the information he had given about the employee’s physical appearance, where he lived, how long he worked at the bar, etc., lined up. No one else heard about the assailant after he was taken away by the agents.

When the robber’s story was confirmed, the employee was executed a few days later when he left for work. He was shot at a bus stop, where he was waiting for the bus to take him to the bar, by an unidentified man who drove by and opened fire. Within a few days, the two accused thieves had been tried, convicted, and had their sentence carried out without the presence of any inspector or deputy, nor of any attorneys, public defenders, or judges. Pablo told me that the assailant had already “passed through” the criminal justice system and was a neighbor of the bartender in a favela located on the “other side” of the neighborhood. He had since been listed as “missing” by the authorities, along with thousands of other people in Rio de Janeiro. Likewise, the bar employee’s killer was never identified by any witnesses – although people close to those involved knew that his death was likely linked to the robbery. No one from the neighborhood itself “spoke up” as a witness in either case. It was as if the robbery had never happened in the neighborhood. There was no official record of anything other than a “disappearance” and a “homicide” that were supposedly unrelated.

I asked Pablo if this type of procedure was common in that area, since, both there and in the blocks close to his house, the “policemen” themselves tried to solve any security problems that appeared without reference to the law or its institutions. Pablo explained to me that it “depended a lot”, emphasizing that the circumstances of the conflict would determine how it would be managed. “If the old man [Machado] wasn’t ‘the policeman’s brother’, nothing would have come of it. The guy was going to be arrested, and quickly, as he was, out there on the ‘track’<sup>25</sup>. No one would have even known that the employee had ‘passed the scene’<sup>26</sup> to the bandit. If it had went easy, the guy would have robbed the bar. He wouldn’t have been arrested and he would have shot the old man”. Pablo then spoke of his own cousin, who, though he wasn’t a police officer, had his car stolen near his home, on Avenida Brasil. The car belonged to the boy’s father (Pablo’s PM uncle, Sublieutenant Mendonça’s brother), who was soon notified of the theft, passing on information about the incident to some colleagues in uniform who were on duty. Pablo said that the vehicle “appeared” that same night, abandoned in a neighborhood next to the crime scene, near the entrance of a favela. “They called 911 and said where the car was! Do you think that any criminal would keep a ‘police’ car up on the [favela] hill? They [the criminals] will send it down right away, bro... It’s not worth it. It’s just a headache for them”.

---

<sup>25</sup> Slang for “street”.

<sup>26</sup> Slang used to describe the act of giving tips and advice to someone, as well as issuing a warning. In the situation in question, “passing the vision” means that the employee described how the closing of the bar’s cashier worked, giving the criminal tips on how he could successfully carry out the robbery.



In any case, with the start of the football game, the “classic of the millions”<sup>27</sup> imploded the progress of any conversation that was not following up of the kicks and goals of an absolutely outstanding game, whose score stood at an improbable 4x3 for Flamengo until the 47 minutes of the 2nd half. I could already see myself paying the bet and putting up with Pablo’s teasing, when a ball launched into the goal area and took up by a Vasco “peg leg”<sup>28</sup> striker, was knocked into Flamengo’s net, decreeing the final result of the game and eliminating any possibility of me being embarrassed by having to wear the red-and-black shirt. As soon as the game ended, I said goodbye to Mr. Machado leaving him in the company of his indignation with the final score. No more trains would be running into the center at that time, so I ended up taking an *Uber* after first leaving an equally indignant Pablo at home. We said goodbye and he said he would send a “zap” to his “hookup” to try, in the case of the other game he was playing, “to get out of the tie”.

The next morning, Pablo arrived at the “prep course” almost an hour late. I asked if the delay was because “the night had been good”. After all, that was his expectation. With a frown, he lamented: “Was it good? Brother, her mother was a Vasco fan and was excited about the game. The old lady went to sleep ‘late’ and the ‘girl’ couldn’t meet me. She said ‘it was late’. Can you believe it?”. My impression was that, from that day on, Pablo hated the Clube de Regatas Vasco da Gama even more.

## Final considerations

In this article, I have tried to describe my “tour” through Pablo’s neighborhood as a methodological effort centered on the exploration of so-called *police places*. I undertook this brief exercise to show how looking at the construction of these other places allow us to unravel paths hitherto little traveled in the ethnography of police institutions. Ethnography of the police involves methodological challenges that require different strategies to develop of our research. Within the limits of the article, I have outlined an analytical approach that aims to partially demonstrate how my fieldwork has been constructed. During the course of my fieldwork, I often ended up finding myself traveling through spaces of native daily life where the police presence was quite easy to perceive, even if we were not near a battalion station house or could see a police vehicle or any formal patrol activities. My approach to the police force seeks to face it methodologically as one of the possible effects that are produced *from* the State, but which, on the other hand, are not limited to the institutions formally defined as belonging to the State.

By following these other paths, we can perceive Pablo’s story as one among other trajectories that indicate the way in which candidates and police officers form the same *moral community* (Bailey, 1971:8-10) from the point of view of the common sharing of values and social categories, even before candidates become police. Likewise, walking through these *police places* side by side with my interlocutors made it possible to perceive certain intersections between *territorialities* (Sack, 1983:55) of both social groups in the city. In the places of residence, work, and leisure inhabited by the young people seeking to become police, the police are often able to exercise, through their agents, various forms of informal control and influence over local actions and interactions, which indicate the privileged position that the “policemen” have. They occupy various economic and reputational markets embedded in the most humble areas of a Brazilian metropolis like Rio de Janeiro. From this perspective, I also try to demonstrate that, unlike an elitist view commonly expressed as a common sense opinion, “being a military policeman” is a profession that has significant value in many corners of the Rio de Janeiro suburbs, making the police one of the most important centers of power for those living in these areas.

---

27 Nickname received by the Vasco X Flamengo derby.

28 Slang for a bad player.

As Masuda and Crooks (2007:257) argue, an inductive perspective of building analytical perspectives from the experiences accumulated by “flesh and blood” subjects can help us to reflect the less rigid scalar hierarchies that sometimes reify dichotomies present in the play between the macro and micro level of analysis (Ravel, 1998). In other words, my attempt to observe the PMERJ from the *perspective of police places*, again in methodological terms, seemed to me to be closer to Strathernian reflections on the role of social actors in the political construction of their scales of action. Following this suggestion, I tried to think about the production of scales (and their potential analytical cuts) from the social practices of the actors in the field, in a holographic way, taking into consideration the fact that relations between the agents produce their own scale (Strathern 2017:256). If my methodological appropriation has some value, the *scales of experience* inscribed in “being a policeman” indicate that transit through these *police places* is part of the formative path of police candidates, since they “learn to be a policeman” through contact with the agents that cohabit these spaces with them. In my work, this is precisely one of the *effects* that the State brings with it in its formation processes. The data presented in this article is a small contribution to thinking about the unstable nature of the State’s borders. From the native point of view, the desire to “be a policeman” is part of this same formative process created on the “ground of the city” that these young people experience.

Therefore, a *police place* is not a homogeneous enclave circumscribed by clearly delimited geographical boundaries. Rather, it is a relatively open social space, through which people and goods of different qualities circulate. Police territoriality acts more in the sense of “influencing, affecting or controlling” the circulation regimes inscribed in these flows, since the orders that define these places are directed by police or people and groups that are close to them. I think, again in the terms employed by Massey (1991), that what gives the place its specificity is the fact that the constellation of social relations that builds it presents its own local configurations of meaning. Places, from this author’s perspective, have the ability connect together relationships, experiences, and understandings built on a larger scale than what we define as “a place” at a given moment. Such a “global sense of place”, in fact, is part of the exercise suggested by *police places* in methodologically thinking about other scales in the analysis of governance institutions – for example, a State agency such as the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro.

Received: April 25, 2022

Approved: February 10, 2023

Translated by Thaddeus Gregory Blanchette

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Antropologia (PPGA) of the Universidade Federal Fluminense and the Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ) for financing the translation of this article into English.

## Bibliography

- ABBINK, Jon; SALVERDA, Tijo. 2013. *The Anthropology of Elites: Power, Culture and the Complexities of Distinction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- AQUINO, Jânia P. D.; HIRATA, Daniel. 2018. "Inserções etnográficas ao universo do crime: algumas considerações sobre pesquisas realizadas no Brasil entre 2000 e 2017". *BIB*, 84: 107-147.
- BAILEY, F. G. 1971. "Gifts and Poison". In: F. G. Bailey (org.), *Gifts and Poison: the Politics of Reputation*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pp. 1-25.
- BRAMA, Leonardo. 2019. *As diversas milícias do Rio de Janeiro: entre expansões práticas e semânticas*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal Fluminense - Niterói.
- BRETAS, Marcos. 1997. *Ordem na Cidade: o exercício cotidiano da autoridade policial no Rio de Janeiro: 1907-1930*. 1ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco.
- BRITO, D. Chaves de; SOUZA, J. Luiz Cunha de; MAGALHÃES, R. Lima. 2011. "Políciais e o 'bico': a formação de redes de trabalho paralelo de segurança". *Revista Brasileira de Segurança Pública*, 5(1): 156-171.
- CARDOSO DE OLIVEIRA, Luís Roberto. 1996. "O Trabalho do Antropólogo: Olhar, Ouvir, Escrever". *Revista de Antropologia*, 39(1): 13-37.
- CARUSO, Haydée; PATRÍCIO, Luciane; PINTO, Nalayne Mendonça. 2010. "Da escola de formação à prática profissional: um estudo comparativo sobre a formação de praças e oficiais da PMERJ". *Segurança, justiça e cidadania: pesquisas aplicadas em segurança pública*, 2(4): 101-118. Senasp/Anpocs. Brasília-DF
- CAMPOS, M. S.; ALVAREZ, M. C. 2017. "Políticas públicas de segurança, violência e punição no Brasil (2000-2016)". In: S. Miceli; C. B. Martins (org.), *Sociologia brasileira hoje*. São Paulo: Ateliê. pp. 143-217
- CHAZKEL, Amy. 2011. *Laws of Chance: Brazil's Clandestine Lottery and the Making of Urban Public Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- CRUZ, Fernanda Novaes; COSTA, Perla Alves Bento de Oliveira. 2021. "É tudo 'ganso'? A (in)distinção entre usuários e traficantes de drogas e seus limites na perspectiva dos policiais militares do Rio de Janeiro". *Dilemas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc.*, 14(1): 243-261.
- DAMATTA, Roberto; SOÁREZ, Elena. 1999. *Águias, Burros e Borboletas: Um estudo antropológico do jogo do bicho*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco.
- EILBAUM, Lucía. 2012. "O bairro fala": conflitos, moralidades e justiça no conurbano bonaerense. São Paulo: Hucitec/ Anpocs.
- FASSIN, Didier. 2017. "Introduction: Ethnographing the Police". In: Didier Fassin (org.), *Writing the World of Policing: The Difference Ethnography Makes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 1-20.
- FERNANDES, Néelson da Nóbrega. 2011. *O rapto ideológico da categoria subúrbio: Rio de Janeiro 1858/1945*. Rio de Janeiro: Apicuri.
- FINE, Gary Alan; HOLYFIELD, Lori. 1996. "Secrecy, Trust, and Dangerous Leisure: Generating Group Cohesion in Voluntary Organizations". *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 59(1): 22-38.
- GEERTZ, Clifford. 1997. "Centros, reis e carisma: reflexões sobre o simbolismo do poder." In: Clifford Geertz. *O saber local: Novos ensaios em antropologia interpretativa*. Petrópolis: Vozes. pp. 182-219.
- GOFFMAN, Erving. 1985. *A representação do eu na vida cotidiana*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- GOMES, Laura Graziela; MOTTA, Antônio; SOUZA LIMA, Antônio Carlos. 2021. "Apresentação: Por uma antropologia das elites no Brasil". *Antropolítica - Revista Contemporânea de Antropologia*, 53: 12-52.
- GUIMARÃES, Roberta Sampaio; DAVIES, Frank Andrew. 2018. "Alegorias e deslocamentos do 'subúrbio carioca' nos estudos das Ciências Sociais (1970-2010)". *Sociol. Antropol.* [online], 8(2): 457-482.
- HIRATA, D.V.; CARDOSO, A., GRILLO, C.C.; DOS SANTOS JÚNIOR, O.A.; LYRA, D.A. and DIRK, R.C. 2022. "The Expansion of Milícias in Rio de Janeiro. Political and Economic Advantages". *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 4(3): 257-271.

- HOLLOWAY, Thomas H. 1997. *Polícia no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas.
- KANT DE LIMA, Roberto. 2013. “Entre as leis e as normas: Éticas corporativas e práticas profissionais na segurança pública e na Justiça Criminal”. *Dilemas - Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social*, 6(4): 549-580.
- KANT DE LIMA, Roberto. 2019. *A polícia na cidade do Rio de Janeiro: seus dilemas e paradoxos*. 3ª ed. rev. Rio de Janeiro: independent publication.
- KANT DE LIMA, Roberto; MISSE, Michel; MIRANDA, Ana Paula Mendes. 2000. “Violência, criminalidade, segurança pública e justiça criminal no Brasil: uma bibliografia”. *BIB*, 50(2): 45-124.
- LABRONICI, Rômulo Bulgarelli. 2015. *Para Todos, vale o escrito: uma etnografia do jogo do bicho*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal Fluminense - Niterói.
- LEMGRUBER, Julita; MUSUMECI, Leonarda; CANO, Ignacio. 2003. *Quem vigia os vigias? Um estudo sobre controle externo da polícia no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Record.
- LINS, Antônio José Pedral Sampaio. 2010. “Ferrovias e segregação espacial no subúrbio: Quintino Bocaiúva, Rio de Janeiro”. In: Márcio Piñon de Oliveira; Néelson da Nóbrega Fernandes (org.), *150 anos de subúrbio*. Rio de Janeiro: Lamparina/ Faperj/ EdUFF. pp. 138-160.
- MAGNANI, José Guilherme Cantor. 2002. “De perto e de dentro: notas para uma etnografia urbana.” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 17(49): 11-29.
- MASSEY, Doreen. 1991. “A Global Sense of Place”. *Marxism Today*, June: 24-29.
- MASUDA, Jeffrey; CROOKS, Valorie. 2007. “Introduction: (Re)thinking the scales of lived experience”. *Area*, 39(3): 257-258.
- MINAYO, Maria Cecília de Souza; SOUZA, Edinilsa Ramos de; CONSTANTINO, Patrícia (org.), 2008. *Missão prevenir e proteger: condições de vida, trabalho e saúde dos policiais militares do Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fiocruz.
- MISSE, Michel. 2019. “The Puzzle of Social Accumulation of Violence in Brazil: Some Remarks”. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 1(2): 177-182.
- MITCHELL, Timothy. 2006. “Society, Economy and the State Effect”. In: Aradhana Sharma; Akhil Gupta (org.), *The Anthropology of the State: a reader*. New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing. pp. 169-186.
- MUNIZ, Jaqueline de O. 1999. *Ser policial é, sobretudo, uma razão de ser. Cultura e cotidiano da Polícia Militar do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*. Tese de doutorado, Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro - Rio de Janeiro.
- MUNIZ, Jaqueline; CARUSO, Haydeé; FREITAS, Felipe. 2018. “Os estudos policiais nas ciências sociais: um balanço sobre a produção brasileira a partir dos anos 2000”. *BIB*, 84: 148-187.
- NADER, Laura. 1972. “Up the anthropologist: perspectives gained from studying up”. In: Dell Hymes (ed.), *Reinventing Anthropology*. New York: Pantheon Books. pp. 284-311.
- NÓBREGA JÚNIOR, José Maria Pereira da. 2018. “O que se escreve no Brasil sobre Segurança Pública? Uma revisão da literatura recente”. *Revista Brasileira de Segurança Pública*, 12(2): 14-47.
- PARK, Robert E. 1976. “A Cidade: Sugestões para a Investigação do Comportamento Humano no Meio Urbano”. In: Otávio G. Velho (org.), *O fenômeno Urbano*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores. pp. 26-67.
- PIRES, Lenin dos Santos. 2011. “Esculhamba, mas não esculacha!”: uma etnografia dos usos dos trens urbanos na Central do Brasil. Niterói: EdUFF.
- PONCIONI, Paula. 2004. *Tornar-se policial: a construção da identidade profissional policial no estado do Rio de Janeiro*. Doctoral Thesis, Universidade de São Paulo - São Paulo.
- PONCIONI, Paula. 2012. “Políticas Públicas para a educação policial no Brasil: propostas e realizações”. *Estud. sociol.*, 17(33): 315-331.

- RAMOS, Leonardo dos Santos. 2017. *Entre a “judaria interna”, a “pista salgada” e o “medo de se entregar”*: Uma etnografia das representações de medo entre policiais militares do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Monografia de Bacharelado, Universidade Federal Fluminense - Niterói.
- RATTON, José Luiz. 2018. “Crime, polícia e sistema de justiça no Brasil contemporâneo: uma cartografia (incompleta) dos consensos e dissensos da produção recente das ciências sociais”. *BIB*, 84: 5-12.
- RAVEL, Jaques. 1998. “Apresentação”. In: Jacques Ravel (org.), *Jogos de escalas: a experiência da microanálise*. Rio de Janeiro: FGV. pp. 7-15.
- RIBEIRO, Ludmila; TEIXEIRA, Alex Niche. 2018. “O calcanhar de Aquiles dos estudos sobre crime, violência e dinâmica criminal”. *BIB*, 84: 13-80.
- RODRIGUES, Eduardo de Oliveira. 2022. *Sociedade dos Esquemas: uma etnografia sobre candidatos à carreira policial militar no subúrbio carioca*. Tese de doutorado, Universidade Federal Fluminense - Niterói.
- SACK, Robert D. 1983. “Human Territoriality: A Theory”. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 73: 55-74.
- SILVA, Gabriel Borges da. 2014. *Entre precariedades e os “direitos” que delas advém: uma etnografia do Mercado Popular da Uruguaiana*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal Fluminense - Niterói.
- SILVA, Gabriel Borges da. 2019. “Quantos ainda vão morrer eu não sei”: o regime do arbítrio, curtição, morte e a vida em um lugar chamado de favela. Tese de Doutorado, Universidade Federal Fluminense - Niterói.
- SOARES, Luiz Eduardo. 2019. *Desmilitarizar: segurança pública e direitos humanos*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- STRATHERN, Marilyn. 2017. “A relação: acerca da complexidade e da escala”. In: Marilyn Strathern, *O efeito etnográfico e outros ensaios*. Coleção Argonautas. São Paulo: Ubu Editora. pp. 225-258.
- TROUILLOT, Michel-Rolph. 2001. “The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization”. *Current Anthropology*, 42(1): 125-138.
- VELHO, Gilberto. 2002. *A utopia urbana: um estudo de antropologia social*. 6ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar.
- ZILLI, Luís Felipe. 2017. “Percepções e avaliações da população sobre instituições e serviços de segurança pública no Brasil”. In: A. J. L. Brandão et al. (orgs.), *Estudos sobre vitimização*. Brasília: Ministério da Justiça, Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Pública. pp. 233-286.

*Eduardo de Oliveira Rodrigues*

Pedro II College

Fluminense Federal University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9246-6462>

Email: [eorodrigues@gmail.com](mailto:eorodrigues@gmail.com)

## Dossier editors

Carla Costa Teixeira (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3792-9687>)

Cristiane Brum Bernardes (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5367-3047>)

Emma Crewe (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0109-219X>)