

Surviving São Paulo

It's a clear and bright Saturday morning in São Paulo. I ride with the windows down in the back seat of a black-and-white Chevy Blazer from the Civil Police's Homicide Division. In front of me are two plainclothes officers—Brazil's version of the police detective. Unencumbered by work-day traffic, we drive leisurely southbound through the city's expansive sprawl. We are headed to one of the city's southernmost urban districts, a hilly working-class place called Jardim Ângela. As we approach our destination, where I had been once many years prior, I am struck again by how Ângela occupies a distinct place in São Paulo's urban landscape—the urban periphery. Parts of the district are rural and vegetated, dotted with horses, chickens, and fruit trees. Red brick and concrete houses, interspersed with finished and brightly painted homes, flow southward from the city toward the final edge of constructed space. At that edge, sandwiched between empty fields, a fetid urban reservoir that nonetheless nourishes the city, and the expanding brick and mortar of the constructed city, are the new homes. But these homes are in fact nothing new. They are made almost entirely of old bits and pieces: chunks of wood, rusty sheets of aluminum, and jagged bits of broken asbestos roofing tile fastened together by planks of wood—painstaking examples of human agency in a city dramatically and spatially segregated between have and have not.

It is a quiet morning in the city. No one was killed overnight, or if they were, they haven't yet been found. So we've come to have a look



FIGURE 1. Ângela (photo by author).

around. Ângela is where one of these two police, a man I'll call Beto, was raised. It was much different then, when Beto himself grew up and lived in one of these "new" homes. His grandparents who raised him were economic migrants from the northeast region of the country, like hundreds of thousands of others in this and other Brazilian cities through the latter half of the twentieth century. Arriving in Ângela (figure 1) in the late 1970s, Beto's grandfather bought a lot from someone, built a house, and slowly, brick by brick, improved it into a two-story home with suites to rent. The home was a perfectly unexceptional example of the self-built auto-construction that defines urbanization in this city and many other cities in the Global South.¹ Beto could recall it clearly: "I remember as a little boy, a truck showing up with the leftovers from jobs he

had worked. They'd take the leftover bricks, wood planks, and bags of cement off the truck and put them in the yard. Then, on his days off, my grandpa would put things together."

Beto went to public school with all the kids in the neighborhood, most of whom likewise came from regional migrant families putting their roots down in this rapidly urbanizing city. After school and on weekends they passed their time playing *futebol* when they could find a reasonably flat and dry campo in this area of steep streets and hillsides. Being a kid wasn't crazy then, Beto explained. The area's residents were full of hope. They had made major sacrifices to come and find a new start in the city, leaving drought and despair behind. While building their homes with their own hands, they were excited about the new world emergent from the demise of Brazil's twenty-year dictatorship. A fresh democracy and a new, decidedly social-justice-oriented federal Constitution in 1988 promised a novel era of inclusion, respect, and prosperity for all. It was about time.

A handful of years later this hopefulness was in shambles. By the early 1990s many of Beto's fellow soccer players and school friends had turned to a new and alluring source of money and status—the drug trade. *Ângela* erupted into violence. Rival gangs emerged, massacring each other over street corner turf and sending the homicide rate spiraling. Statistics from the Secretariat of Public Security showed that by 1996, 166 per 100,000 residents died in homicides in *Ângela*. This nearly unbelievable rate of violent death far superseded that of the United States, for example, which was only then emerging from its own crack cocaine epidemic. *Ângela*'s homicide rate was nineteen times higher than the average urban homicide rate of the United States (8.8).² *Ângela*'s deadliness, which wasn't different from many other parts of the city, led swiftly to recognition from far and wide—UNESCO tattooed it ignominiously as the "most violent neighborhood on earth."³

But it wasn't just drug gangs that fueled the violence. Extermination groups known as *justiceiros*, or *Pés-de-Pato*, composed largely of off-duty or former police, many of whom lived in the area, increasingly took up the moral mantle of removing the "scourge" of marauding drug traffickers by "cleaning" the streets.⁴ They killed indiscriminately in their efforts to get rid of criminals, catching and slaying no limit of people—but mostly young men—in the process. Beto himself narrowly escaped on a couple of occasions. He reminded me many times that he would hear the bullets whizzing by his head while sprinting away. As the violence peaked in the late 1990s, many of his former schoolmates lay dead were arrested, or had just plain disappeared in the chaos and confusion. It didn't much

matter who pulled the trigger, whether police, rival gang members, or an extermination group, Beto reflected to me. It was all a blur. There had been shootouts on his street and violence at every corner. Everyone was desensitized. Bodies lay in the streets for days at a time, bloated and waiting for police and the *carro de cadaver* to finally show up. Even to those in the midst of it, the violence seemed unintelligible.

But that was then. Beto no longer lives there. He can't. Not since the dynamic of violence changed so dramatically. Today, there is only one recognized source of order here, an organized crime group known as the Primeiro Comando da Capital, known colloquially as the PCC, 1533, "the party," or just "the family." By 2003, the PCC had emerged from the São Paulo state prison system to establish a "peace among criminals" (*paz entre os ladrões*) and an "ethic of crime" across the urban periphery of São Paulo, uniting those who had been behind much of the violence under one moral banner. Today, in certain parts of the city, homicide is regulated and carried out by the organization—emulating the statelike function of sword and shield. As a public prosecutor once told me, everyone knows that if anyone—a resident, a police officer, or even a PCC member—kills someone without proper justification or PCC authorization, "é bigode no asfalto," it's "moustache to the asphalt" for them.

Paradoxically this centralized control over the streets of Ângela has made it safer for most residents. Under this new system homicides happen only with the explicit authorization of those in charge. They occur much less often as a result. According to the Secretariat for Public Security's own statistics, the numbers of homicides dropped dizzyingly over a few short years.⁵ From an apex around the year 2000 the rate fell by 80 percent in some places. Across greater São Paulo—an area of 19.7 million residents spread over 7,951 square kilometers—but particularly in the urban periphery, places like Brasilândia, Sapopemba, Capão Redondo, and Paraisópolis, the story for local residents was much the same. The violence that had consumed daily life was receding and residents were feeling more secure. This was well reflected in the fact that upwards of 6000 less people were dying violently each year.

We decide to go for lunch. Beto takes us to one of his old favorites, a bar-cum-country music nightclub with a killer *feijoada* bean stew. We sit down. Beto and Felipe, the other detective with us, turn their chairs to face the doorway. We get a big bottle of Coke to share. Beto and Felipe talk about what is going down these days. Things are in upheaval.

The PCC has been actively seeking out and assassinating police officers, killing them as they leave their houses, shop at the mall, work their second (or third) job, or as they leave for work in the early daylight hours. The count for this year so far is around 85 police dead—an increase of about 115 percent over all of last year. Police these days are visibly and emotionally nervous. For good reason: by the end of the year at least 106 police in São Paulo would be killed.

The reality of police mortality had been laid bare weeks earlier during a particularly troublesome eruption of police assassinations. In the span of three days, eight off-duty police officers were killed. A number of others were wounded or narrowly escaped around the same time, showing up in the Homicide Division not as bodies but as rumor tale and innuendo—becoming almost more emotionally moving. These events destabilized police even more than usual, exposing unambiguously the insecurity of being a police officer in this city.

When I had arrived at the station on the first night, I ran into Peanut, a detective, still hanging around from the day shift. We sat down to watch some TV in the change room. Other police filed in as they were coming on shift. Peanut started talking: “Something strange is happening,” he said. “They’re saying that 70 percent of all the police killed last year have been killed just this month. There were two just yesterday.” The other police had heard similar things. “What are your friends in the penitentiaries saying?” asked one officer. Peanut shrugged it off, distracted by a commercial on TV.

Later I Googled it on one of the computers in the station: since an incident the Month prior in which a SWAT-styled agency of the patrolling Military Police known as the Rondas Ostensivas Tobias de Aguiar (ROTA) had killed six PCC members in one raid, the PCC had been crying bloody murder. This particularly questionable incident had resulted in four police from that unit being arrested by homicide detectives, and the PCC had stepped up its retaliatory attacks, singling out off-duty cops in particular, for what I would later learn they saw as unjust killings. There had been thirty-three killings of police in just the last six months. One of these had happened just recently on the north side of the city. A cop there was shot thirty-six times, one detective told me.

In the media it was all being disavowed—“they are just corrupt cops,” many were intoning. Even the secretary of public security was said to have told the media it was something of a cleansing—a purging of police who were obviously engaged in something fishy and illegal. Layered within that idea the government left little room for interpretation other

than that it was okay, perhaps even deserved, that some police were being knocked off. From within the station, the idea of a purging of rotten apples didn't ring true. The two police who had been killed a couple of nights earlier seemed anything but crooked. One had been killed while teaching a class. Three guys came in and shot him up, walking past everyone else on the way in and the way out. The other had been working off-duty doing private security, one of the tens of thousands of police officers who have become accustomed to taking a second job. The detectives in the station understood those fallen police as regular cops just working their moonlight *bico*—as almost all do—in order to get by. And yet from those above—the public face of public security—the tone was obvious, if dismissive: this wave of violence, like many of the killings off-duty police that happen in normal times, was purifying.

Later that night, things were shaken up even more. A message came in over the intranet that there had been a police shooting of a citizen, known as a “resisting arrest followed by death” (*resistência seguida de morte*) in a district on the East Side. A police officer was also dead in the exchange. Yet the preliminary details were sketchy and confusing, giving little clarity about how to classify the incident and the jurisdiction. No one was quite sure how it happened and why both the shooter and the police officer were dead. Was it a homicide? Or did the police officer react to his assailant, a fact that would have made it a *resistência*?

Over the next two hours the homicide detectives went back and forth over whether the incident was a double homicide or a single *resistência*. If the officer had been able to respond, by drawing his gun and shooting—but not necessarily killing or even hitting—his attacker, it would be classified as a *resistência*. But if the police officer had not been able to shoot back, either because he was too surprised to get his gun out or because he wasn't wearing a gun—which would be unlikely—then it would have been a double homicide. To make matters more complex, if the homicide detectives chose to call the incident a homicide, then it would no longer be their jurisdiction. Convolutioned rules state that when a homicide suspect is known, the investigation and paperwork falls to the local police precinct to carry out and not to the homicide division.

At first the homicide detectives decided in favor of registering the case as a *resistência*. The thinking was that the dead assailant had been killed by the police officer, who had reacted to being assaulted by drawing his gun and shooting. Yet within a couple of hours, they changed their mind, deciding that it was indeed a homicide. The reason was this: security footage revealed that the dead police officer had not even pulled out his gun.

He had been checking out his purchases at a pet food store and was too surprised to even have time to reach for anything in self-defense.

This meant that since it was a homicide where the suspect was known, the case should have become the responsibility of the local police precinct—with their absence of specialized homicide detectives and technical resources—to carry out the investigation. But in a startling turn, another key detail came to the fore. Three men had actually been there to kill the police officer. According to security footage and witnesses, one of them had said, “That’s him there! Shoot! Shoot! In the head!”

This new revelation left a bizarre fissure in the case. Who had killed the attacker, if it wasn’t the dead police officer? And, as it was, it turned out that it was the man who said “Atira!” (Shoot!) that was dead. Not only that, he had been shot from behind. “He was killed by a ghost,” a detective told me days later. “No one knows how it happened. It probably was an off-duty police officer working security and [the other police] were protecting him.” Protecting them from the homicide detectives. This mysterious third party was indeed a ghost. He or she wasn’t visible on camera and didn’t even appear in the crime report that was written over the next few hours. As far as the official word and documents went, the person that actually killed the attacker did not exist. There was a phantom shooter.

In the end, the homicide detectives kept the case for their own investigation even though it was technically out of their jurisdiction. This was all especially contorted since the reason for keeping the case, which was that they wanted to keep the identity of the person who shot the assailant quiet, would have made it their jurisdiction anyway.

Not that this seemed to matter all that much. The detectives were more concerned with what was happening these days. One policeman spoke up, “A friend of mine said that a few weeks ago the PCC gave a green light to kill off-duty police.” Another responded, “The last few days there have been thousands of calls, you know, from prison to prison.”

As one of the homicide teams left to investigate the resistência-cum-homicide scene, the other team was returning to the precinct. It was quiet now, so they had a chance to nap. But at around 2:30 a.m., another call came in. A police station had been attacked in a notorious neighborhood on the south side of the city. One police officer was shot, but saved by his vest. A vehicle pursuit had followed and the police had shot and killed one of the suspects. When the homicide detectives in the station heard the details the mood got tense, and the attention shifted, conjuring memories. Someone mentioned the PCC attacks in May 2006, in which fifty-

two police, prison agents, and city law enforcement were killed in three days. The team would have to go to exactly the kind of neighborhood in the city where that violence was most prevalent—and not knowing (but fearing) that another 2006 was crashing down upon them.

It took them a long time to get ready. They kept finding guns. One after the other. Each officer now had multiple guns—some always carried two—and were loading all of them diligently. They loaded their bullets into all manner of handguns, revolvers, and submachine guns. One officer even pulled out an old double-barrel shotgun with a hardwood stock.

I watched as one police detective loaded ammunition clips for his .40 caliber handgun. He had different kinds of bullets, some hollow points, others not, some that splintered differently. To describe them is to describe the intentional boring of live flesh and bone. As he finished he kissed the chamber of one of the guns. When he noticed that I had been watching he smiled shyly. Others were less methodical. One police detective who never wore a bulletproof vest was hassled by his peers to put his on. When he did, it was still in the plastic bag, new. When he lifted it over his head, the hefty Kevlar insert fell clean out of the vest, slapping to the floor. Everyone jeered. He laughed sheepishly. Another police officer stepped in to help out. As he bent over to help pick up the insert, one of his loaded guns fell out of a front jacket pocket onto the floor, clanking heavily. Everyone jeered again, but this time much more nervously, knowing they just escaped a random bullet.

Eventually the team left the station. As they were leaving a group of Military Police came in. Most were in uniform. One wasn't. He was the officer that had been shot during the attack on the police station on the South Side. Among them the talk was all about the PCC. One of them commented, "They're saying that, from here on out, when there are confrontations, we are to kill." Another chimed in, "Because of internal affairs, they say it is better to register things not as resistências. It is better [to classify it] as a robbery followed by death [*latrocínio*], that kind of thing." It was as though there was no recognition or little importance given to the fact that they were sitting amongst the very police detectives responsible for investigating police shootings of citizens.

These police weren't just concerned about how to deal with the PCC, however. There was a lot of the talk about the higher-ups, comfortable in their offices and with their armed escorts, moving seamlessly and securely from air-conditioned office to chauffeured car or helicopter and gated home. It was these leaders who had been making public statements

that there was no relation between these assassinations of police and the PCC, implying—if not stating outright—that police were ending up that way for good reason. The police in the station knew that the death of a small-time police officer in some distant and poor district of the urban periphery wasn't a big deal for a politician. "They prefer that police die while off duty," said one. "It is easier to hide. Less shocking for the public." Savvy to politics and troublesome security inequities, these police were speaking not just about politicians passing the buck, but also about the importance of urban space and invisibility in questions of urban (and their own) security.

But the police also recognized the pattern of police killings for what it was—a savvy strategy on the part of the PCC that nodded to those very same politics of space and inequality. Eliminating off-duty police was a way to maintain pressure and influence on the bottom rungs of the police—the low hanging and exposed fruit of the public security system. By killing off-duty police in places like Jardim Ângela, the PCC could avoid drawing the attention of the public in the wealthier parts of the city that politicians seemed to care about—the kind of public that, when made to feel insecure, would have demanded a massive police crackdown. The PCC knew this. By staying in the shadows they could force these coercible police back into line, as implicit subjects of the PCC's will, without adversely disrupting their own interests.

Back in Ângela, Beto, Felipe, and I eat our bean stew. "I wouldn't come here at night," says Beto. He feels insecure, but this was still the neighborhood where he grew up and where his family home is. He isn't worried that he doesn't personally know the drug dealers running things like he did so many years ago. Now it was much worse. Just the simple fact that he had grown up there, that everyone knows him and what he does for a living is enough to get him killed. It would just take one person to spread the word to the wrong people that he was hanging out there again, he said. This was why, well before the current crisis, he had to leave the community and work three moonlighting jobs in order to move to a middle-class part of the city. There was just no other way to make sure he and his family could be safe.

We finished our feijoada, paid Beto's friend, and said good-bye. Back in the Blazer, we head north toward Civil Police headquarters downtown. I watched the red brick and asbestos of Ângela slowly fade back to the concrete and wide avenues of the city.