Chapter 9

Deadly Symbiosis? The PCC, the State, and the Institutionalization of Violence in São Paulo, Brazil

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Introduction

Soon after the democratic opening of the Brazilian political system in 1985, the city of São Paulo began to experience rapidly escalating violence. Homicide rates rose to levels expected under conditions of open warfare, with some 10,845 people killed in 1999 (SSP 2007). This violence was particularly acute in the periphery of the city, where many neighborhoods suffered upwards of 100 murders per 100,000 people per year (SEADE 2007), over five times the Latin American average. The prognosis for public security at the turn of the millennium was thus highly negative. To almost universal surprise, however, violence in São Paulo experienced a remarkable decline from 2000 onwards. By 2005, the overall number of homicides had dropped by 48 percent compared to the 1999 peak (SSP 2007). One of the most significant factors underlying this decline was a dramatic reduction in homicide rates in some of the city’s most violent peripheral neighborhoods. The homicide rate in the District of Cidade Tiradentes, for example, which had been 107 per 100,000 in 2000, had declined to 13 per 100,000 by 2006 (SEADE 2007).

This decline has been widely attributed to the introduction of “zero tolerance” policies by the state of São Paulo during the past decade and a half (Goertzel and Khan 2007). This approach, pioneered in New York during Rudy Giuliani’s municipal administration, places great emphasis on strict law enforcement and the repressive control of “visible” social disorder (Greene 1999). Police means are increased, and law enforcement officers are provided with greater latitude in their deployment of violence, especially when targeting so-called problem areas and problem demographics. The approach has become very popular throughout Latin America (see Davis 2007), and proved particularly attractive to policy makers in São Paulo within the context of geographically concentrated violence in the city’s poor peripheral areas.
communities. The result was that zero tolerance style policies were vigorously put into application from the late 1990s onwards (Wendel and Curtis 2002). Nevertheless, in May 2006 São Paulo was brought to a standstill by an unprecedented series of attacks on police stations, banks, and other public buildings throughout the city that lasted 10 days, killed 493 people, and caused a wholesale paralysis of business, transportation, education, and urban public life. These attacks were carried out by the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), an organization that James Holston (2007: 273) has pithily labeled a “gang cartel,” but is in many ways much more complex, insofar as it originated as a small-scale prison gang which has now evolved into a highly organized, centralized, and hierarchical syndicate structure of thousands of members that is a ubiquitous fixture of São Paulo’s peripheral communities.

The PCC attacks, which were spurred by the abrupt transfer of imprisoned PCC leaders to an isolated maximum security detention regime, marked the first time in São Paulo’s recent history that violence had reached out from the periphery into the heart of the city. As such, they clearly seemed to indicate the failure of zero tolerance measures. The reality is arguably much more complex, however, with the dynamics of violence regulation in São Paulo very different to the portrait conventionally presented. The argument that is made in this chapter is that the attacks were a reflection of the inherent fragility of the perverse symbiotic institutionalization of state and nonstate violence in São Paulo. Zero tolerance policies effectively fostered the emergence of the PCC, which paradoxically had a positive effect on levels of violence in the urban periphery by imposing monopolistic forms of order in areas where the state was unable or unwilling to do so. The PCC does not represent a “parallel power” (Leeds 1996), however, but is symbiotically linked to the state in a way that is leading to particular societal perceptions of violence that are ominous for the future. The first part of the chapter explores the origins of the PCC, highlighting its connections to the introduction of zero tolerance policies, and its initial logic as a prison self-protection group. Drawing on the example of the neighborhood of São Gotardo, the second section then describes how the PCC has spread into poor peripheral communities in São Paulo where the state is either absent or only partially present, and how this movement led to declining levels of violence in these areas of the city. Finally, a last section looks at the fragile symbiosis that exists between the PCC and state authorities, focusing specifically on the corrosive consequences of this particular institutionalization of violence, including especially vis-à-vis the emergence of a discourse calling for the revocation of human rights.

Zero Tolerance: Planting the Seeds of the PCC

Although the declining number of homicides in São Paulo is widely claimed to reflect the success of zero tolerance policies, the evidence on the ground supporting this assertion is not obvious (World Bank 2006). A multitude of other efforts have also been invoked to explain the radical decline, including,