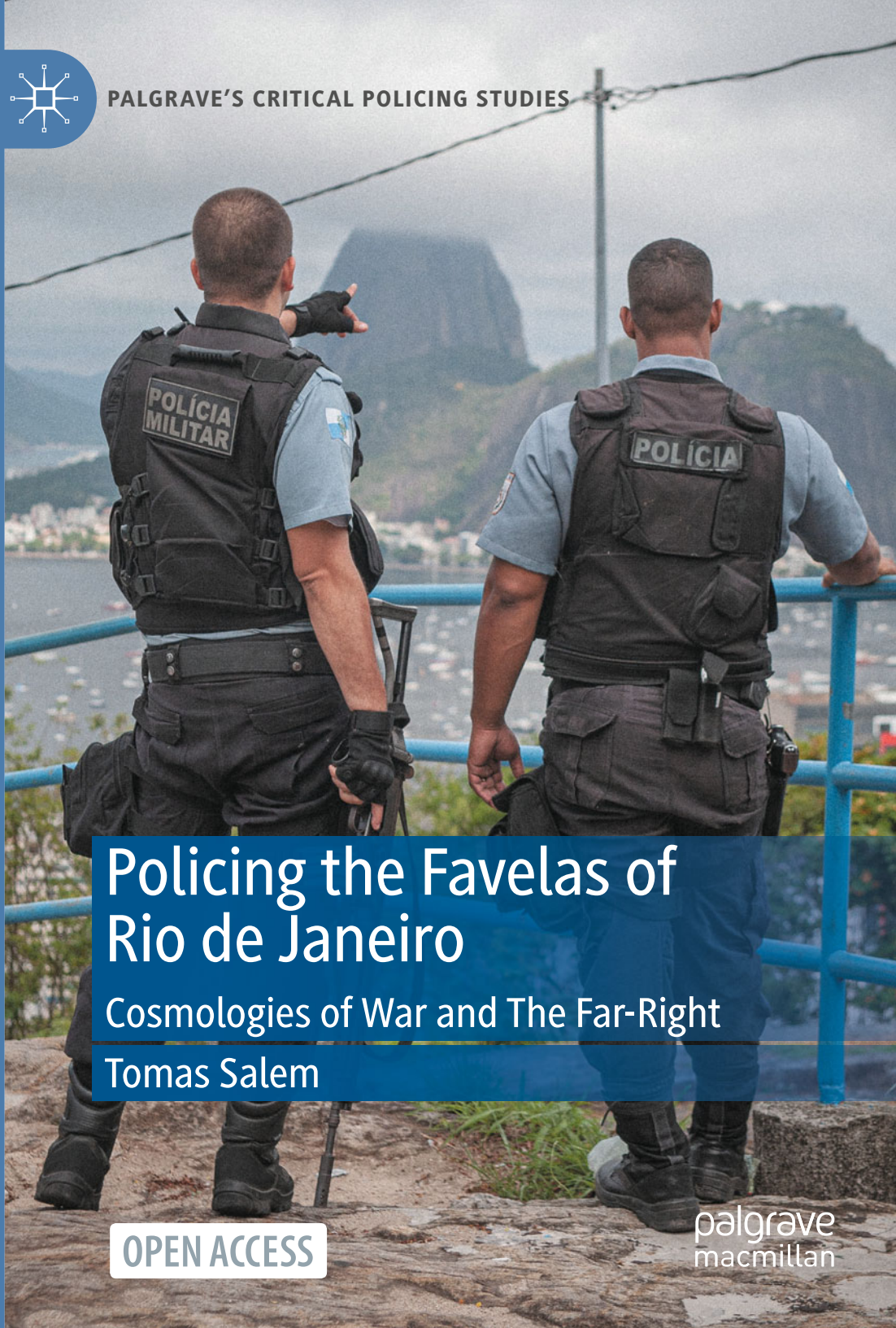

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Cosmologies of War and The Far-Right

Tomas Salem

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The urban landscape seen through the officers' gaze

To Javier, for everything

Preface

…those advocating war always define it in terms of the highest applicable values, whether that involves the need to retaliate against witchcraft, defend the one true religion, or promote democracy. That is the way to sway the undecided and build emotional commitment. And always, it is the other side that somehow brought war on.

Brian Ferguson 2003

When I arrived in Rio de Janeiro in December 2014, the far-right was still just a specter on the horizon. It has since grown to a matter of existential concern for the advocates of democracy. In the social sciences, new research on right-wing populism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism has grown at an exponential rate. In Brazil, in particular, there is a long and consolidated tradition of scholarship on state violence and the police's role in perpetuating hierarchies rooted in the country's past as a patriarchal plantation economy. This book has contributed to this debate by offering an ethnographic account of the daily practices of the men and women who work at what has become one of the world's most deadly police forces, Rio de Janeiro's Military Police.

Focusing on the entanglements between official and unofficial forms of police violence, legal and illegal practices within the police, negotiations of gender norms and sexuality, racialization, militarization, and police practices of extermination, I have explored the link between Rio's police forces, predatory economies, and the far-right. My fieldwork captured an important moment of recent Brazilian history. As Rio prepared for the 2016 Olympics, the economic growth that had Brazil vying to become a global power came to an abrupt halt, while the political class was engulfed by corruption scandals that had many Brazilians calling for a return to authoritarian rule. In Rio de Janeiro, these crises coincided with a territorial reordering of the urban landscape as power relations between police, drug gangs, and right-wing paramilitary groups were shifting. Importantly, I carried out my fieldwork at a moment of intense moral anxieties about the future of Brazil, expressed in concerns with police violence, corruption, family values, gender roles, security, and the desire for a strong leader that could restore the nation's moral order.

Doing fieldwork with police officers at the frontline of the state's war on drugs put me in a unique position to examine how modernizing and authoritarian forces were expressed and negotiated within one of the country's most controversial institutions, responsible centuries of extreme violence systematically targeting Brazil's black communities and culture. There, I followed men and women who mainly ascribed to the worldview and ideology that is interchangeably described through concepts such as illiberalism, right-wing populism, the far-right, or authoritarianism. In this book I have explored their worldview, arguing that it is shaped by different but entangled *cosmologies of war*: Of different theories of the world that understand social dynamics through the optics of warfare. I have seen it as my responsibility to represent the police officers, a group that is often demonized by the intellectual left, with nuance and complexity. Not to legitimize police violence but to further our understanding of far-right claims and positions that might contribute to a consolidation of democracy and justice.

Bergen, Norway Tomas Salem

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mother—have read and commented on early drafts of the manuscript—thank you. This project lay in a drawer for several years and was picked up again when I was included in the AGOPOL-project (Algorithmic Governance and Cultures of Policing) led by Christin Thea Wathne and Tereza Kuldova. I also owe thanks to the members of the research group: Ashwin Varghese, Dean Wilson, Ella Paneyakh, Jardar Østbø, Helene Gundhus, Kjetil Kletter Bøhler, Paulo Cruz Terra, Shivangi Narayan, Tessa Diphoorn, and Veronika Nagy. In Brazil, I have received the help and support of several academics who have generously shared their knowledge. Thanks to Elisabete Albernaz, Marco Martinez-Moreno, and Omar Ribeiro Thomaz for reading and commenting on the manuscript and to Alcides Eduardo dos Reis Peron, Ary Azevedo, André Dumans Guedes, Bruno Cardoso, Daniel Edler, Michel Misse, Lenin dos Santos Pires, Letícia Simões-Gomes, Luciana Panke, Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte, Palloma Menezes, Susana Durão, Thallita G. Lopes Lima, Valentina Suárez Baldo, Åsne Håndlykken-Luz, and members of the InEAC (*Instituto de Estudos Comparados em Administração de Conflitos*, Institute of Comparative Studies in Conflict Administration at the Federal Fluminense University). Thank you Raúl Marquez Porras for allowing me to present the project at the University of Barcelona and to Maria Victoria Pita and Torkjell Leira for your insightful comments and suggestions. And finally, to Erika Robb Larkins for your friendship, for hosting me at the Behner Stiefel Center for Brazilian Studies at San Diego State University, reading and commenting on several versions of the manuscript, and providing moral support and guidance in the process of finishing this book.

Competing Interests

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Introduction

It is late in the afternoon. Thick clouds hover over the hill towering in front of us. Hundreds of houses and small buildings cascade down the hillside. They resemble Lego bricks carelessly stacked on top of each other—like a jigsaw puzzle of bricks and mortar. I am walking in a long row of about 40 black-clad police officers moving through the alleyways and stairs towards the heart of the favela with stealth. They have raised their guns and are ready to retaliate should we come under fire. Some of them whisper quiet orders at each other. They fear an ambush and do not want to announce their presence to the drug traffickers. There are many places for the traffickers to hide and many blind alleys where the police might get trapped. In some places the passages are so narrow you can touch the walls on both sides of the alley if you extend your arms, and so steep that the stairs have been built to scale the hillside crossways. The officers at the front-guard are armed with semi-automatic FAL machine guns. These are war-grade weapons and offer more power and precision than the usual police guns. But above all, the officers tell me, they warrant respect. As we make our way through the neighborhood, they aim their guns at the windows and terraces of the low buildings surrounding us, where the enemy might be hiding (Fig. 1.1).

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Fig. 1.1 Police officers patrolling in Mangueira, April 2015

In the last few weeks, the situation in Mangueira has been tense. The favela complex is controlled by *Commando Vermelho* (CV, the Red Command), one of the three main gangs vying for control over Rio's favelas. The name is a nod to the socialist rhetoric that the group used to gain legitimacy among residents when they emerged in the 1980s. Initially, they presented themselves as a welfare state for the poor, offering handouts and help to favela residents in exchange for their support. Since then, *traficantes* (lit. "drug traffickers"; gang members) from different gangs have been fighting each other to gain control of the drug retail in the favelas. Meanwhile, the police have played an ambiguous role, staging spectacular "invasions" in the favelas, confronting the drug traffickers and recurring to torture, executions, and massacres in an all-out war on drugs, while simultaneously extorting fees from the gangs, funneling the money to local politicians, and establishing a symbiotic relation with the favela-based drug economy. This *modus operandi* has produced levels of armed violence and death that are normally only seen in warzones.

In 2009, the Rio's Military Police forces began to establish Pacifying Police Units (*Unidades da Policia Pacificadora*, UPPs) within the favelas in an alleged attempt to "pacify" them: to assert police authority and force out armed drug traffickers. Through the pacification, the police sought to quell the armed violence and gunfights that periodically transformed entire neighborhoods into battlegrounds.[1] Officially, the pacification was also meant to signal the abandonment of war-oriented forms of policing and favor a democratic modernization of the police force inspired by the principles of community policing. Addressing security concerns ahead of the 2016 Olympics, the UPP at Mangueira was inaugurated in 2011, right across *Maracanã*, the football stadium where the games' opening and closing ceremonies would take place. In the first years of its existence, it seemed the police's efforts to repress armed violence had largely succeeded.

But in 2015, while I was doing fieldwork at Rio's UPPs, police officers were frequently involved in confrontations with traffickers. Increasingly, Mangueira as well as many of the other "pacified" favelas were becoming battlefields in the war between police and traffickers from different gangs. Following a wave of armed violence, police leaders promised to "re-occupy" Mangueira. The Commander in Chief at the UPP reorganized patrol to saturate the favela with police officers and assert territorial control. In areas where the risk of armed confrontations was high, several units patrolled together to offer each other tactical support in combat situations. The re-occupation involved the coordinated deployment of officers at strategic points in the favela, with all the patrol units—some 50 officers—leaving the base simultaneously in

[1] Mirroring broader international trends towards humanitarian-centered approaches in warfare and policing (see, e.g. Fassin 2011; Lutz 2002), the UPPs were modeled on both UN peacekeeping forces and North American beat cops. Patrol officers trained in human rights would be the honest and upstanding face of a new, modernized force (Menezes 2013). They were presented to the public as a softer, gentler police force that included women (Saborio 2014; Salem and Larkins 2021; Savell 2016). Police authorities conceived them as a response to what was broadly perceived as an outdated, inefficient, and violent model of policing. UPPs were, therefore, frequently described as pacifying not only the favelas but also the police themselves (Henriques and Ramos 2011). Centered on notions of preventative action and collaboration with local communities, the UPP initiative was also thought to indicate a changing perception of acceptable levels of state violence among the Brazilian public, which has historically supported killings in the favelas (Caldeira 2001; French 2013; Larkins 2015).

a spectacular performance of police power that was meant to discourage attacks.

I walk at the back of the group, right behind the only female officer in a long row of men. We move quickly, and since I am wearing a bulletproof vest with the police's insignia, I have hung my camera across my shoulder to signal that I am not a police officer. My hope is that by keeping my camera visible I will be seen as a journalist rather than an officer dressed in civilian clothes and that this will give me at least some protection as a non-combatant. But I also feel a slight discomfort at being associated with the Military Police by the people living in Mangueira. The institution is poorly viewed by many favela residents. On this day, the streets are empty and the few people we encounter silently step to the side as we pass. Most of them look down to the ground, pretending that we're not there. They are used to seeing their neighborhood transformed into scenes from a war movie and don't want to attract attention from the police. Some, however, gaze at us in defiance. I feel like an intruder or member of an invading force. We climb the stairs to a small open square at the top of the ridge. It is protected by a tall brick wall and a large water tank that services the community. The police consider it a safe place for a short break. They share a bottle of water to quell the thirst after the steep climb.

We continue down one of the main streets; a winding road that runs along the upper part of a narrow gorge covered by forest. To our left, the slope is too steep to accommodate any buildings, allowing for a panorama of the favela. The small brick homes roll over the edge on both sides of the gorge. In the eyes of the police, such open landscapes are dangerous. Deprived of shelter, we become vulnerable targets. Gang members can easily hide in the buildings across the gorge, making us easy targets with no chance to retaliate should we come under fire. To reduce risk, we cross the most exposed stretches of the road one at a time. The only female officer is ordered to escort me across the patch of open road. She tells me that the men see her as a liability for being a woman. One of the men gives me a quick order as we get ready to cross: "Don't stop moving!" The officers see me as a liability too, forced on them by their superiors. The female officer grabs the handle attached to the back of my bulletproof vest. It's meant to make it easier to pull wounded officers out

of combat situations. With a firm grip on the vest, she forces my head down as we crouch to make ourselves smaller and harder to hit. Then we run.

Cosmologies of War

Arguably, the installment of the UPPs in Rio's favelas was supposed to end the logic of war that has characterized Rio's public security policies since the return of democracy in 1985. But rather than ending the war on drugs, the pacification resulted in intensified police presence and the perpetuation of war dynamics in Rio's favelas, especially from 2012 when the project expanded to the favelas of Rocinha, Complexo do Alemão, and Penha (see Menezes 2018). Coinciding with the multiplication of "old practices" of policing (i.e. repressive and truculent forms) at the UPPs, the prevalence of armed drug traffickers in Rio's pacified favelas produced a sense of crisis of the project that would eventually lead to its official dismantling in 2018.

The collapse of the UPPs (between 2012 and 2018) was accompanied by a similar unraveling of Brazilian democracy. A succession of corruption scandals, economic crises, political realignments, and moral panic targeted at the Worker Party, which had governed for four consecutive periods, led to the destitution of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and mock trial of Lula da Silva in 2018, paving the grounds for the Presidency of Jair Bolsonaro. Although most of the police officers I met during my fieldwork in Brazil in 2015 were arduous Bolsonaro supporters, at the time he was still a fringe figure in national politics. To me, the authoritarian worldview that he invoked seemed like a gust from the past, diverging from the image I had of Brazil as a liberal albeit "disjunctive" democracy (Holston 2007) that was going through a process of modernization of its institutions and society.[2]

[2] Since the 1980s Jair Bolsonaro had established himself as an outspoken supporter of hard-handed security policies and defender of the working conditions of police and military personnel. In 2018 his political constituency had grown beyond Brazil's military and security apparatuses to span various groups (including criminal organizations and private security providers) that could broadly be described as engaging in "violence work," members of the

In hindsight, my fieldwork took place at a moment of contestation over Brazil's future that is still unfolding. While Bolsonaro drew on a worldview with a long historical trajectory in Brazil, he must be seen as part of a global (re)emergence of the far right. In Brazil, this movement found its expression in the figure of a former army captain who had built his political career on his unwavering support of the police and military, and whose family has been tied to paramilitary groups—the *milícias* (militias) dominating Rio's suburbs. In the aftermath of Bolsonaro's presidency, academics have tried to understand how a far-right politician and outspoken defender of the military dictatorship could gain so much support among Brazilian voters. Explanations tend to follow four different avenues (Duarte and Martínez-Moreno 2023): some note the growth and strengthening of the paramilitaries and the reorganization of illicit markets in Rio, alongside a macroeconomic restructuring as an important prelude to Bolsonaro's bid for presidency (Menezes 2018; Grillo 2019; Manso 2020); others have focused on the political turmoil that followed the popular uprising in 2013, plunging Brazil's political class into a moral crisis from which it has not recovered (Neiburg and Thomaz 2020; Nobre 2020, 2022); a third analytical avenue emphasizes the surge of right-wing and religious discourses in conventional and social media, and the affective materiality of digital media that produces effects of its own (Cesarino 2020, 2022; Salem and Larkins, forthcoming)[3]; finally, some scholars point to a cosmological reordering largely shaped by conservative and religious moral crusades (de Almeida 2017; Messenberg 2019).

evangelical churches, large populations from the urban peripheries of Brazilian big cities, and segments of Brazil's conservative elites. During Bolsonaro's time in office the worldview, values, and opinions I observed among police at the UPPs laid the foundations of a national politics that intensified the necropolitical modes of governance and police terror that have characterized the Brazilian social order since the onset of colonization. Understanding the dynamics of the war waged by the police in the favelas and the moral universe it is set within is therefore paramount to understanding ongoing state transformations in Brazil.

[3] In our analysis of Rio de Janeiro's Special Operations Unit's (BOPE) Instagram account, Erika Robb Larkins and I explore the algorithmic co-production of a militarization of the everyday and mundane, including family relations and infancy. We see this as a process that expresses the banality of evil (Arendt 2006 [1963]): An insidious militarization resulting from people's adoption of the social media logics of engagement.

Most analyses, while situating the emergence of Bolsonaro as part of a global resurgence of right-wing authoritarianism, emphasize the political power negotiations on a national level and the fact that he drew on a hardline approach to policing and security that resonates with many Brazilians. Political philosopher Marcos Nobre (2020) warns that calling Bolsonaro stupid or crazy immediately shuts down the possibility of understanding the political crisis that brought him to power. He argues that Bolsonaro's presidency must be understood as a war against the democratic system and his government, as a government of war, permeated by a military logic (see also Durão 2020). Bolsonaro's understanding of politics and the state differs from liberal political philosophy in its rejection of any notion of common good or social contract. He understands politics as a process whereby the will of one group—the true Brazilian people—is imposed on the rest (Feltran 2020b). In this sense, Bolsonaro's understanding of the state is rooted in a dialectic conflict, like that of Marxist philosophy. Similarly, anthropologists have problematized the bias that results when we refrain from studying the subjects that are often referred to as fundamentalist, authoritarian, or fascist—the "repugnant others" according to Susan Harding (1991). Harding shows how, in these cases, social scientists tend to retreat into binary thinking, where the non-modern other is associated with religion, magic thinking, and backwardness, while the modern us is attributed with rationality and civility. These scholars advocate the need to take this "other" seriously, rather than disregarding them as irrational and easily manipulated (Pasieka 2017).

In this book I explore the relation between the cultural meanings and social practices that preceded conservative backlash in Brazil by looking at the exercise of police authority in Rio de Janeiro's favelas through the notion of *cosmologies of war: different theories of the world that understand social dynamics through the optics of warfare.* Rather than discussing whether Rio's police forces are really at war according to the conventional criteria of warfare, I approach war as a cognitive framework or cosmological force that shapes Brazilian social relations, subjectivities, landscapes, economies, and politics (see Grillo 2019). Acknowledging the long-standing configuration of policing as warfare against racialized territories and populations in Brazil, I unpack the moral universe and cosmological

order that is produced through the Military Police of Rio de Janeiro's war on crime and analyze its effects.[4] I situate my analysis in relation to some of the most recent and ambitious ethnographic attempts at theorizing police power and urban conflict in Brazil and suggest that the Deleuzian concept of war machine and state dynamics offer a powerful theoretical framework through which different but complementary perspectives can be synthesized. Finally, in my conclusion, I show how policing at Rio's pacified favelas can illuminate wider political currents in Brazil, especially the tension between modernizing projects and the resistance to these.

In the following sections, I will build on the ethnographic work of Jaime Amparo Alves, Graham Denyer Willis, and Gabriel Feltran to

[4] Police power and war power are not as easily distinguishable as the normative framework that sets them apart would suggest. Instead, scholars note that policing and warfare conflate, especially so in colonial and postcolonial contexts, but also through the intensification of militarized policing in the last decades, making tangible the longstanding blurring of the boundaries between war power and police power (Hardt and Negri 2001; Mbembe 2003; Neocleous 2013). The normative divisions separating military war power and civilian policing do not reflect the historical entanglement of military and police practices and are discursive constructs that serve to legitimate state violence (Seigel 2018). In this vein, critical scholarship on policing is increasingly signaling how war has been "inseparable from the history of capitalist domination" (Neocleous 2013: 6). Recent global trends of securitization and militarization of society are paradigmatic examples of how violent state power is wed to the process of capitalist accumulation, especially in large urban areas (Davis 1995; Graham 2011). Often configured through notions of a war on crime or war on drugs, these trends have also been associated with the racial legacy of colonialism and with the emergence of neoliberalism, as violent solutions to the panoply of social problems brought on by neoliberal policies (Alves 2018; Fassin 2013; Arias and Goldstein 2010; Wacquant 2003, 2008). The multiplication of paradigms, technologies and practices of policing that has followed in the wake of securitization is radically reshaping the social fabric and political cultures of the societies in which they are embedded. "By thinking through the war power in conjunction with the police power, and the police power as dealing with a condition of disorder, the war power can more easily be read in the terms of the fabrication of order," Mark Neocleous (2013: 13) writes. Analyzing the dynamics of militarized policing or the more expansive notion of policing as warfare and its entanglement with liberal as well as authoritarian state projects (Salem and Bertelsen 2020), is important to understand and challenge the weaponization of security discourses and re-emergence of the far-right. These critical approaches to policing challenge *a priori* assumptions of liberal democracies as less violent than that other state forms. They suggest that the violent potential of democratic states must be analyzed empirically: The kinds of violence that a particular state formation is likely to generate is contingent on the "methods and procedures whereby states achieve and legitimate the domains of their control and power" (Kapferer and Bertelsen 2009: 2). Brazil offers a case in point, as police lethality and armed violence by a multiplicity of agents exercising sovereignty has dramatically increased during the country's democratization period from 1985 and onwards and is a paradigmatic example of the violence carried out under the aegis of racial capitalism (see Seigel 2018).

show how the cosmologies of war that shape Brasil's urban conflicts draw on the notion of colonial war as a racialized process of resources extraction, organized around necropolitical forms of governance, and of cultural war as a particular way of understanding the relation between different values and meanings that draws on religious tropes and narratives. These authors have analyzed the dynamics of police violence and urban conflict in São Paulo, a context that differs from Rio de Janeiro in some important respects: Whereas Brazil's biggest city is characterized by the predominance of a single, centralized criminal organization (the PCC), the situation in Rio is more complex, with a multiplicity of armed groups vying for power (see Hirata and Grillo 2017). However, what concerns me here is to explore how the notions of colonial war and cultural war can be applied in a Brazilian context. I will return to the particularities of Rio de Janeiro in the last section of this chapter.

The Racialized Necropolitics and Predation of Colonial Warfare

With some of the world's most violent police forces as well as levels of armed conflict that are often compared to recent wars in the Middle East, Brazilian big cities have garnered attention from social scientists that try to grapple with issues of securitization, militarization, urban conflict, state violence, and police terror.[5] Following in the tradition of Franz Fanon, Jaime Amparo Alves (2018: 12) suggests that Brazilian civil society is a fundamentally anti-black "political space for the heteronormative white male subject of rights." He reproaches that despite the "affirmative action policies and welfare policies that took millions of black families out of poverty during the Workers' Party's government" we still observe "genocidal proportions of violent black death during the same leftist administration." This, he argues, reveals "the limited impact

[5] According to the Brasilian Forum of Public Security (*Forum Brasileiro de Segurança Publica*, FBSP), between January 2011 and December 2015, 279,567 violent deaths were registered in Brazil, against the registered 256,124 violent deaths in Syria as a result of the war. In 2015 alone, 58,467 were killed throughout Brazil, a 2% reduction compared to the preceding year (FBSP 2015).

of the politics of rights in challenging the black structural condition in Brazilian society" (Alves 2018: 14). How is it that despite decades of democratization, market liberalization, and economic growth, the Brazilian state has not managed to establish an egalitarian sociopolitical order in the ideal image of liberal democracy? Instead, the almost forty years of democratization has engendered a political project with a strong totalitarian thrust, emerging from the intestines of extractivism, religious fundamentalism, and militarism. The framework of liberal political philosophy, building on the idea that the urban conflict is the effect of an insufficiently developed democracy (implying that liberal democratic systems are anti-ethical to violence) is unable to offer plausible explanations (Alves 2018).

Challenging Foucauldian and Agambian approaches to sovereignty, the postcolonial scholarship of Jaime Amparo Alves and others who draw on Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics have signaled how a racialized politics of death originating in the country's colonial history is shaping the Brazilian social order (see, e.g. do Nascimento 2016 [1978]; Gonzalez 1988; Vargas 2012; Salem 2016; de Oliveira 2016; Alves 2018; Saborio 2018). In these analyses, the favelas appear as colonial spaces, embedded within the Brazilian state order.[6] As a necropolitical terror formation, colonies are places where disciplinary and biopolitical forms of governance converge with the administration of death, in such a way that "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003: 40). In the colonies, war becomes a mode of governance and is often associated with extractivism and predatory accumulation, such as the narcotics industry, that characterizes war-machine formations (see Bourgois 2018). Brazil's urban violence, according to this perspective, must be understood as part of an ongoing process of colonization and of the production of an anti-black social order through the killing of black bodies and war within black

[6] Mbembe (2003: 12ff.) argues that colonies are characterized by a permanent state of exception, where racism functions as the underlying logic that permits the exercise of extended powers by the state (see also Buck-Morss 2009). He writes that "the colonies are the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization'" and that they are sites "where 'peace' is more likely to take on the face of a 'war without end'" (Mbembe 2003: 22ff.).

spaces, but also as the production of spaces for different forms of capital accumulation centered around violence and predation.[7]

The argument put forth by Graham Denyer Willis in *The Killing Consensus* (2018) is amenable to such analyses. In his analysis of the dynamics of urban violence in São Paulo, where the exercise of sovereign power is shared between the criminal organization *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) and the state's security forces, Willis suggests a shift in emphasis from the sovereign agents that exercise the right to kill, to "the existence of a 'disposable' population that states allow to be preyed on under an acknowledged definition and common denomination of deservedness" (Willis 2018: 40). If routine violence appears uncontrolled, he writes, "it is only because the definition of life and death is so expansive"—i.e. the violence that the state allows appears limitless because it encompasses a large segment of the population (Willis 2018: 12).[8]

According to this approach, state and crime are not antagonistic powers but "morally and practically nested, operating in mutually beneficial and symbiotic ways" (Willis 2018: 94). At first glance, this claim seems to be in line with Amparo Alves' (2018) proposition that the Brazilian urban order is structured around anti-blackness as an organizing principle. The killing consensus that Willis observes attributes a multiplicity of groups with the right to kill as long as those killed are black, poor, criminalized, and therefore imagined as deserving. However, the framework of a killing consensus suggests that criminal organizations such as the PCC are encompassed by or nested within the Brazilian

[7] In modern Brazil, the favelas have continued to act as sources of cheap labor for the privileged living in the *asfalto*, and as sites were illicit economies, such the drug trade, generate profit that is channeled into the city's formal economy through practices of collusion, bribes, and extortion that often involve the police (see Misse 2006; Hirata 2014; Penglase 2014; Larkins 2015; Hirata and Grillo 2017).

[8] The idea of a disposable population, contemplated in Agamben's notion of bare life and Mbembe's description of the living dead, allows Willis to develop the concept of "sovereignty by consensus," which "is contingent on the recognition and practice of boundaries for violence, which can occasionally be ruptured – and mended." The existence of boundaries for violence and of violent parties that concur on these boundaries most of the time produces moments of relative peace, interrupted by "periodic moments of crisis where a shared understanding and practice of appropriate and comparatively nonviolent behavior implodes into feud-like violence" (Willis 2018: 12–13).

state formation. In the words of Willis, it posits the existence of a single sovereign but a multiplicity of agents exercising the right to kill within a common, overarching framework. Here, Alves offers a radically different reading of the relationship between the PCC and the state. Understanding the war between the PCC and the police as a contest over territorial sovereignty, he argues that gang violence can be seen as the political expression of black criminal agency—i.e. as a strategy of black resistance that explicitly challenges society's moral norms (Alves 2016, 2018).

The idea of an expansive killing consensus offers a powerful analytic lens from where to gauze the racialized macro dynamics of urban violence. Similarly, the anti-black, necropolitics-perspective effectively underscores the historical continuities of the Brazilian state formation and points to a significant gap in traditional analyses of urban violence in Brazil, which have until recently avoided the issue of race (Vargas 2012). Following Alves' anti-black approach, the political emergence of the far-right does not appear as a radical break with a former, democratic state order, but should rather be interpreted as a weaponization of existing security discourses and intensification of necropolitical modes of governance that have been active throughout Brazilian history (Ystanes and Salem 2020: 54).

The notion of colonial warfare is good at capturing the historical continuity of anti-black state terror throughout Brazilian history and signals how racial capitalism (Seigel 2018) is organized around practices of predation and extractivism that are underpinned by a logic of extermination. However, the emphasis on the continuity of anti-black state terror shifts the focus from what is new or emergent in Bolsonarismo in relation to the (in important respects) socially inclusive politics of the Workers Party which extended political rights to new, individualized subjects.[9] In this book, I argue that the conflicts that I observed within the Military Police reflect the larger dynamics of Brazilian modernization processes and reactions to these that also draws on a notion of war—albeit a cultural one.

[9] Here I am building on Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte's (1995, 2009) understanding of modernization processes as structured around the production of rights-bearing individual subjects (see also Martínez-Moreno 2023).