

**TRANSNATIONAL GANGS IN SOUTH AMERICA:
THE EXPANSION OF THE *PRIMEIRO COMANDO DA CAPITAL* TO
PARAGUAY**

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Abstract: This article analyzes the Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Command of the Capital, or PCC) as a transnational gang in expansion to South America. In particular, it shows how the structure of the gang enables its strong cross-border performance, specifically in Paraguay since the 2010s. The article uses triangulated data from official documents obtained from Brazilian judicial agencies, expert analysis and interviews. Since its beginning in 1993, and mainly after its transformations during the 2000s, the PCC has demonstrated a unique organization that affects state and social structures in the field of public security. The expansion of the group is a demonstration of existing flaws in the Brazilian prison system, such as overcrowding, poor health conditions, and human rights violations, as well as the absence of the state in urban and rural areas with limited material resources. Consequently, the PCC has overcome prison walls to reach borders and other countries, and has become a highly professionalized and complex organization managing drug trafficking in South America.

KEYWORDS: Gangs; Organized Crime; Peace Studies; Primeiro Comando da Capital; Brazil; Paraguay

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Introduction: violence in contemporary Brazil

South America has been a region without interstate conflict since 1995 when Peru and Ecuador disputed a violent conflict over the territory known as the "Cenepa War" (Biato, 2020). Nevertheless, even with low violent conflicts between states, South America is one of the most violent areas in the world. According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (in partnership with the Igarapé Institute), the region is responsible for 39% of homicides globally (Alvarado and Muggah, 2018). The perception that peace exists only and reverberates in situations of absence of war excludes different levels of social violence that are experienced in the region (Lissardy, 2019). In this regard, examining the actions of gangs, their motivations, and consequences in social peace seem to be an integral part of state-centric approaches. Furthermore, such an analysis may explain why violence perpetuates in contexts such as Latin America.

According to the 2019 Brazilian Public Security Forum (FBSP) yearbook, Brazil is one of the countries where the police kill most citizens (Misse, 2013). According to a survey presented by the Committee on Human Rights and Minorities of the Brazilian House of Representatives in 2018, the black population (equivalent to 53.63% of the inhabitants) is the main social group murdered. It is also the largest group in Brazilian prisons.

Looking at the Brazilian prison system, as well as its overflows and problems, is key to understanding social processes existing in Brazilian society. Mass incarceration, especially of young and black people with few material resources, results substantially in massive violence in addition to the growth of criminal organizations. The National Council of Justice suggests that there are more than 800,000 people arrested in Brazil (Barbiéri, 2019). According to a survey conducted in 2017, 67% of the prison population is black, while whites account for 32% (Almeida & Marini, 2017). Overcrowding and unhealthy circumstances are recurrent in the prison (Barbiéri, 2019). The use of violence by the state fosters fear and revolt, directly reflecting on the strengthening of collective ideologies that facilitates the growth of criminal groups (Dias & Darke, 2015).

In this context, it is not surprising that gangs are emerging as a direct consequence of this process of formation of inequalities and violence (Ferreira, 2017). In response to police and

state violence, in 1993, a year after the Carandiru massacre³, the PCC was set up. Born in Taubaté prison, the group identifies itself as an advocate against human rights violations experienced in prisons. The *irmãos* (“brothers”, as they call themselves) point out that the enemy is not other prisoners, but “the system” – i.e., the social configuration that blends capitalism, state violence, and segregation of poor and black people. However, as Ferreira (2019) points out, although the group emerged as a response to the atrocities and human rights violations committed by the state, its use of violence emerged as a way to keep the drug trafficking business going and perpetuating the functioning of the *irmandade* (“brotherhood”, as PCC call themselves).

Over the years, the PCC has become one of the largest drug trafficking organizations in the region, something that has consolidated its commercial links with other criminal organizations and intermediaries from other countries, such as Bolivia, Peru, and Paraguay (BBC, 2020). Therefore, the challenges that the organization brings to social peace in the South American region are remarkable.

Thus, this article seeks to understand what enables the expansion of the PCC beyond the borders and how its cross-border action takes place. To do so, the work is divided into four sections. After a brief description of the methodology, we provide a literature review on violence and transnational ‘gangs’. These concepts are necessary to understand how violent non-state actors, which gangs are a type of, foster the cycle of violence. Then, the structure of the PCC is presented to understand what enables its expansion beyond the prison walls. Finally, the group's internationalization process is focused upon, by analyzing the PCC's performance in Paraguay.

Research methodology

The methodological foundations of this article are based on qualitative research. Due to the difficulty of researching public security and criminality, data triangulation—based on official, journalistic and academic documents, as well as interviews—is an appropriate

³ The Carandiru massacre (in Portuguese, *Massacre do Carandiru*) occurred on Friday, 2 October 1992, in Carandiru Penitentiary in São Paulo, Brazil, when military police stormed the penitentiary following a prison riot. The massacre, which left 111 prisoners dead, is considered the major human rights violation in the Brazilian penal system.

approach to give credibility to a study on a theme with limitations imposed by danger to researchers or because of the secrecy of official information (Salkind, 2010).

Thus, in the initial phase of the research, we focused on reviewing the literature on gangs and violence, revisiting concepts and studies by Johan Galtung, John Sullivan, Robert Bunker, John Hagedorn, and Celinda Franco. Moreover, the gangs were analyzed as social actors that perpetuate and foster the cycle of violence, corroborating the discussion of violent non-state actors provided by Phil Williams. Thus, such a conceptual framework is provided to allow a critical analysis of the existence and functioning of the research object—the expansion of the PCC.

Empirically, in order to understand the historical and structural formation of the PCC, as well as to unfold its transformations, a literature review was carried out also taking into account reports from three award-winning journalist who have been covering the gang's activities for years—namely Josmar Jozino, Flávio Costa and Luís Adorno—as well as bibliographic references on the PCC from experts such as Bruno Manso, Camila Dias Nunes, and Gabriel Feltran. In order to understand the role of the PCC in the neighboring country, Paraguay, primary sources were used, specifically, police investigations files obtained from the Public Prosecutor's Office of São Paulo. In these cases, messages and transcripts of phone calls exchanged between the gang members can be found. Furthermore, hand-written notes by gang members, collected by the police and included in the investigation files, also served as a data source for the study.

We triangulated the above information with the information made available by centers researching violence in South America such as the Igarapé Institute and the Brazilian Public Security Forum. Finally, complementing the information, we conducted interviews with journalists who work directly with PCC issues, which allowed a better picture of the gang's potential and its expansions.

Violence and Gangs: a brief analysis in the light of the Studies for Peace

An essential element towards understanding the dispositions and structures of society

involves examining how violence is configured. Johan Galtung sees violence as a tripartite element, presenting the concepts in a triangle (Ramsbotham, 2005; Galtung, 1990). At its vertexes are structural, cultural, and direct violence. The author points out that one kind of violence does not act individually, but is complementary to the other two. One strengthens and legitimizes the other (Galtung, 1990).

Structural violence is explained by the unequal way in which political, social, and economic structures are situated. An example applied by Galtung is the violence suffered by women (Galtung, 1969). Femicide is not an act of violence isolated to a single individual, but to a specific gender. Thus, Galtung (1969) points out that if only one husband assaulted his wife, it would become personal violence; however, the massive and structural form that fosters these multiple aggressions has a root in the very structure of society. Another possible example of structural violence raised by the author is the comparison of life expectancy of low-income populations and high-income populations. Once again, there is a social injustice not provoked by an individual, but by an economic structure, centered on the capitalist production model (Galtung, 1969).

The direct violence represents violence understood as physical, the act of hurting or hurting something and/or someone materially. Cultural violence is elucidated by Galtung by the symbolic resources that legitimize the use of direct and structural violence. The author exemplifies it as religions, flags, arts, and discourses that naturalize the use of violence and make it "less" aggressive, or at least more tolerable (Galtung, 1990). By unraveling how ideology is a symbolic tool of violence, the author mentions that nationalism can become a discourse that justifies state violence against marginalized groups or peoples; Galtung (1990), for example, points to the prohibition of abortion as a form of authoritarianism by the state.

It is remarkable how the presence of the three levels of violence affects of Latin American society. The unequal and asymmetric social structure is felt both in the direct violence and at the most immaterial levels, as in the share of the population exploited with precarious working conditions which symbolizes structural violence. There is a process of "internalization of culture" that fosters a cultural alienation (Galtung, 1990: 293), naturalizes and legitimizes violent practices ranging from the acceptance of the death of black, indigenous, and low-income people, to austerity policies that further promote social exclusion.

This setting creates an environment conducive to the growth of groups that seek to meet the most elementary needs of survival in a setting of high violence. With the absence of the state in the suburban regions, the power vacuum enables the strengthening of non-state actors who often use violence to achieve parallel justice. Here, emerges the central role of the gangs.

The discussion about the emergence and strengthening of violent groups is multifaceted but invariably relates to social inequality (Franco, 2007). Looking to survive in a capitalist society, marginalized groups seek ways to reinvent and sustain themselves as individuals. It is evident here that cities with a high degree of oppression, whether racial or economic, favor the reproduction and growth of gangs (Hagedorn, 2005). Thus, gangs are a response to socio-economic marginalization (Hagedorn 2005), added to the historical naturalization of violence experienced in countries such as Brazil (Scheper-Hughes, 2015; Schwarz, 2019).

The drug market often emerges as an economic and political outlet. For its functioning violence is put as a tool (Batista *et al*, 2008), or in other words, violence becomes a "*work tool*". As Mendez (2019) explains, violent actions turn into commodities, which are traded as service goods by gang members. Moreover, it is critical to emphasize that violence is not necessary for the structuring and carrying out of illicit activities; however, in the informal/drug trafficking economy, peaceful activities and arrangements may be a liability for survival. As such, in this environment, violence becomes essential (Hagedorn, 2005). Thus, to understand the role attributed to violence in the world of crime means also to understand tactics and strategies for achieving goals and maintaining power (Hauck & Peterke, 2010).

The power vacuum in marginalized areas caused by state absence in these regions enhances gang formation (Hagedorn, 2005). The way these groups spread and structure make them social actors, replacing groups and/or sectors that previously occupied this social space, and also playing important roles for social functioning (Hagedorn, 2005). Here, a space for criminal groups to exercise alternative governance is opened (Lessing, 2020). As affirmed by Jaspers (2018: 417), "organized crime replaces an absent government", and this is what PCC does in poor regions through the imposition and control of social norms (Feltran, 2020).

A nodal point in this discussion is to understand the importance of the prison system in the

creation and strengthening of gangs. Sullivan (2008) describes prisons as schools of crime since in this environment gangs and ideologies intersect, refining skills, and co-opting new members. Besides, prisons also function as an alignment network of different criminal groups (see Skarbek, 2011).

That said, many researchers point out common features that permeate and define gangs. Hagedorn (2005) in his research encompasses these characteristics and briefly presents them with three aspects: I) have a complex organization adaptable to different adverse situations (such as police repression and attacks by other gangs); II) provide social services to their community; III) have their own rules and ideologies.

Sullivan & Bunker (2002) highlight the generations of gangs according to their historical and organizational development. The first generation of gangs is the most traditional, based on the defense of its territory, and is characterized by 'fragile' leaders. They have a small spatial domain, such as neighborhoods or jails— eg. the case of the PCC in its first phase from 1993 to 2001 (Ferreira, 2019; Feltran 2020)—and converge their activities to protect the territory (Sullivan, 2008). The groups allocated at the second generational level stand out for their focus on business, especially drug trafficking. Its activities are tied to sales growth and competition control (Sullivan & Bunker, 2002). They can work beyond their cities and federal states, and can even move on to international business in a centralized hierarchy of organization (Sullivan & Bunker, 2002). The third generation is more sophisticated, in which one of its main features is the development of political objectives, such as replacing some functions of the state in a given territory—criminal governance, for example (Villa *et al.*, 2021). They have a more complex organization and financial capacity. One of the main aspects of the third generation gang is its area of activity, which covers both the national and international realm (Franco, 2007). Second- or third-generation gangs can be eventually classified as transnational and become threats to public security (Sullivan & Bunker, 2002).

Regarding the conceptualization of transnational gangs, Sullivan and Franco (2008; 2007) describe four characteristics. First, regarding its geographic operation, the criminal activity needs to take place in more than one country, that is, there are practices of illicit activities that cross borders. Second, organization, planning, and execution are guided by members allocated in different countries. Third, it has adaptability and ability to operate in new areas

and regions, besides having a sophisticated organization. And fourth, to occupy territories, transnational gangs rely on local individuals or groups, enjoying corruption and strengthening the illegal market, either through corrupt officials or by exchanging products - such as exchanging drugs for weapons (Sullivan & Bunker, 2002).

It is noteworthy that globalization has driven the growth of illicit activities, which causes a strengthening of the groups behind these illegal activities (Williams, 2008). Just as globalization and technological advances facilitate cross-border legal trade, the same logic expands to illicit activity, which strengthens an international network of a collaboration of criminal organizations (Zabyelina, 2009). Thus, transnational gangs seek to achieve greater profits by expanding their markets, overcoming national barriers, and configuring themselves as a violent non-state actor (Williams, 2008).

In the following section, we aim to understand the performance of one of the largest South American gangs, the Primeiro Comando da Capital. The group is identified by authorities as a transnational criminal organization (MPSP, 2017). Its role as a gang is reinforced by analyzing the existence of the application of a parallel justice (Lessing, 2020; Villa et al., 2021), which takes the role of the state in conflict resolution, in addition to controlling national prisons, especially in states that PCC is hegemonic—as happens in the state of São Paulo and Paraná (MPSP, 2017). According to Batista and Burgos (2008), the Brazilian terms that we designate the PCC, as "faction", "gang" or "movement", are correlated with the concept of gangs.

Structure and operation of the PCC

Understanding the emergence and structure of the PCC is key to apprehend its expansion. The PCC was created in 1993 (Jozino, 2017), one year after the Carandiru massacre, at the Taubaté Custody Prison; it was only in 2006 that its structure became better known (MPSP, 2017). The motto "Peace, Justice, and Freedom" has followed the group's trajectory since its establishment and represents its purpose. The gang emerged as a response to the police oppression and the prison system. "The union in the struggle against injustices and oppression within the prison", removed from the third article of the Faction Statute itself (Jozino, 2017: 27), is a passage that demonstrates a condemnation of the precarious

conditions at national prisons. However, in the trajectory of combating prison violence, the organization reproduces it as a way of functioning in its multiple aspects, whether direct, structural, and cultural (Ferreira, 2017).

Across PCC's history and transformation, the group reduced its role as an advocate for better conditions for prisoners to become one of the largest leaders of drug trafficking in the South American region (Manso & Dias; 2018). The former inmates, when released, little by little created a complex criminal organization dedicated to drug trafficking, extortion, and smuggling. In this regard, it is important to remember that "criminal syndicates go where money is" (Zabyelina, 2009: 19), reinforcing the previous idea that criminal groups have as a priority the search for profit and not necessarily political and social demands.

The organization has a set of rules and norms that act as a guide for the activities and behaviors of its members and sympathizers, strengthening the political power of the group (Dias & Darke, 2015). The "ethics of crime" in Brazilian prisons have existed long before the formation of the PCC, however, the PCC created written documents that regulate the members' conduct, or the "walk for the right way" (*andar pelo certo*), and collective assumptions of the brotherhood (Manso & Dias, 2018). The ban on the use of crack in prisons dominated by the PCC is an example of how a regulatory process occurs, such as a kind of law established by the gang. Respecting the statute and the "salves"⁴ is essential for membership; if any member fails to comply with the document, he can be expelled from the gang (Adorno & Costa, 2018).

The founder of the group added the word "equality" to the motto, seeking to reduce the personification of leaders towards a more horizontal structure (Dias & Darke, 2015). At the top of PCC organizations, there are the *sintonias* (the "tunes"), similar to a board of directors for different issues that PCC aims to deal with. Positions can be taken by the gang brothers according to their level of engagement and knowledge of criminal activities. The mutual respect between the detainees is also important here; the brother able to perform complex activities—such as international drug trafficking—can reach higher positions. An *irmão* ("brother") is considered a PCC if he has carried out the process called "baptism", which

⁴ "Salves" are authoritative messages that function as the gang's internal means of communication to its members and even beyond (Manso & Dias, 2018).

works as an entry ‘register’ for the gang (Feltran, 2018, 2020). According to investigations by the São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office, the *Sintonia Final* members—the board that has the final decision in PCC structure—undertake a higher power in the gang, grasping a decision-making power over the entire territory of the PCC, which expands to the 26 states of the Brazilian federation—3 of them with hegemony in prisons, such as Paraná, São Paulo, and Mato Grosso do Sul—and to neighboring countries like Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru (MPSP, 2017; Feltran, 2018; Ferreira 2019).

The Public Prosecutor's Office of São Paulo, in one of its operations combating organized crime, mapped the structure of PCC, which corroborates other studies on the structure of the group (Manso and Dias 2018, Ferreira, 2019, Lessing 2020). As explained, the *Sintonia Final* has the final decision-making power; but there is the *apoio* (support) to the *Sintonia Final*, which provide support in the complex functions like economic and territorial management, secretary, communications, and others (MPSP, 2017; Manso & Dias, 2018). Currently, the PCC has two organizational structures for different purposes: one dedicated to controlling social spaces (both prisons and poor neighborhoods that are key for drug trafficking), and another to managing different issues like finances, the payment of lawyers and the ‘registration’ of members.

Regarding the structure to control prisons and poor neighborhoods, just below *Sintonia Final*, the performance of the *Resumo* (“summary”) works as monitoring of issues of a region composed of one or more states. The latest data from police investigations in 2018 indicate that the PCC divides Brazil into four territories: *Resumo* of the Northern States, commanded by the leader alias "Confusão", arrested in Santo André; *Resumo* of the Central States, commanded by "Thiaguinho or Robinho"; *Resumo* of the States of the Northeast, led by the member aka “Gilmar”; and *Resumo* of the Southern states and Mato Grosso do Sul state, under the command of "Kaike", imprisoned in Presidente Venceslau prison (Pérez, 2018). These individuals coordinate their region in particular with the support of the so-called *Geral* (“general”) or *Disciplinas* (“disciplinas”).

The position of *Geral* is responsible for the functioning of the brotherhood in a given region or a set of prisons, reporting to the *Resumos*. They can be responsible for a whole state or city, for example, *Geral* of Ceará state or *Geral* of the Capital (São Paulo city), according

to the needs of the gang business outside prisons. The *Disciplina's* position deals with matters of a sub-region of a city, or a specific prison, or even a neighborhood.

Thus, it is remarkable the importance of territoriality to PCC's organization, an element that strengthens the activities of the group in each region (MPSP, 2017). Thus, in short, the *Disciplina* reports to *Geral*; the *Geral* must communicate with the *Resumo*, then turning to the *Sintonia* of [subnational] states and Countries, which in turn responds to the *Sintonia Final*. Thus, each position represents a hierarchical level, the positions are not fixed—they change according to the PCC's development—, and in general, they are connected with the time that someone is a PCC member (Ferreira 2019; Feltran, 2018; Manso & Dias, 2018).

But there are also *ad hoc* structures for the management of illicit activities. For the registration and affiliation of new members, as well as to monitor active members—change of nicknames and functions—there is the *Geral* of Registrations. Outside the prisons, there is also the *ponteiro* (“pointer”), which coordinates communications between the top leaders and the illicit business outside prisons. One of main tasks of the *ponteiro* is the participation in the parallel justice trials made by PCC, the so-called *debates*, or “criminal courts”.

There are also even more specific structures, like the *Sintonia* of “Ties”, which exercises the function of managing the lawyers connected to the gang. Another example is the *Sintonia* of the Progress, which is responsible for drug trafficking management. For the PCC's performance in terms of finance, there is the *Sintonia* of Finance, which is responsible for managing the organization's money. It is from its command that the sources of revenue are subdivided, encompassing the sale of drugs within and outside prisons, the gang tuition fee (*cebola*, or “onion”) which assists in operating costs to prisoners (like lawyers) (Manso & Dias, 2018). This fee depends on the need for PCC “services”, ranging from US\$20 to US\$200 a month. The *Geral* of the Raffle has an assignment to manage raffles organized by each state, in which their purchase is mandatory for the *irmãos*. Regarding the presence of women in the organization, there is a *Geral* for Females that deals specifically with female members of the PCC. This branch aggregates all the functions of the other tunings, however, it is smaller, including only incarcerated women.

This structure of the organization is presented by several experts, such as Bruno Manso and

Camila Dias (2018), Gabriel Feltran (2018), and Benjamin Lessing (2020: 11). These experts facilitate our understanding of the functioning, the hierarchical levels, and the positions/roles of the PCC. However, what is even more important than understanding the positions in the gang are the details of its operation.

Regarding the communication of the members, phone calls, letters, and communication applications are commonly used. It is known that even inside prisons the inmates do not find it difficult to handle telephone devices, mainly due to the corruption of public officers (MPSP, 2017). Another widely used form is communication through third parties, mainly by PCC lawyers or family visits.

A form of communication between gang members known by the Public Prosecutor's Office of São Paulo are letters, also called manuscripts (MPSP, 2017). To make investigation difficult, letters go through a process called the "printer." It is a message written by high-position members—usually, *members of the Sintonia Final* - which, to make it impossible to identify the original spelling, is rewritten by a member who functions as a "printer". After this step, the letter is forwarded to a "bridge", a free individual who has the function of visiting an inmate to take the letter in question.

Another vital aspect of the group is its alternative governance. Understanding state failures, especially in the peripheries, the PCC emerges as a "parallel justice", "offering services and providing collective goods that the state cannot or does not want to offer and provide" (Williams, 2008: 6). One of the main motivations to keep alternative governance is to prevent the entry of police officers in discussions that can be resolved by members of the gang itself (MPSP, 2017), as well as to avoid state interference in their business (Villa et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that bonds of trust built between PCC members and residents of deprived areas are very common since many of its members were raised in these areas. The legitimacy of the PCC is built based on normative regimes that regulate aspects of social life in deprived areas (Feltran, 2020).

In an interview, Luís Adorno⁵ points out that understanding the repressive way that police arrive in the poor neighborhoods is also essential. Police violence reinforces the symbolic

⁵ Interview – Journalist with expertise and fieldwork on PCC (June 11, 2020)

power of the PCC, which denounces this oppression and guarantees basic services and assistance for gang members (Dias & Darke, 2015). It is thus possible to reinforce the role played by the gang: the PCC pleads for itself the monopoly of force because of the negligence of state presence, which is only seen in episodes of violent approaches toward the low-income population (Feltran, 2018; 2020).

A way in which PCC reinforces the monopoly of violence in areas under the gang control is the so called '*criminal courts*'. To make clear its norms and rules, PCC created, in 2000s, a structure similar to a judicial court trial, both in prisons and areas under gang control. For its realization, a judging council, called *Judges of Crime*, is in operation. Everything takes place through a teleconference while the accused individual is kidnapped and taken to a *cantoneira*—the place where he is kept in private prison—until the application of the penalty followed by the decision of the trial (MPSP, 2017). One of the examples presented by the police investigation of the Public Prosecutor's Office of São Paulo is the case of a sympathizer of the Comando Vermelho—a rival gang to the PCC—framed by members of PCC. The court decides to behead the individual, a practice already performed at other times by the gang (MPSP, 2017; Dias & Darke, 2015). Nevertheless, violence is not always the first resort. There are cases of acquittal or even softer sentences, such as expulsion from a given neighborhood or payment of a sum of money (see Feltran 2020; Villa et.al, 2021).

The organizational structure presented by the PCC differs from other groups already studied. Flávio Costa⁶ states that the group has its own "genesis". Thus, framing the PCC with pre-existing models is difficult, since it has its peculiarities and management systems. Studying and understanding its structure facilitates an appreciation of what enables its expansion.

In the light of the theoretical discussion, in what corresponds to the three pillars of the evolution of a gang—politicization, internationalization, and sophistication (Sullivan, 2008)—it is noted that the PCC covers significantly the three sectors. It is observed that the gang represents an important social role in the politicization of marginalized areas and populations, such as prison populations and marginalized areas by the state. Its statute, the

⁶ Interview – Journalist with expertise and fieldwork on PCC (June 19, 2020)

Criminal Courts, and its form of governance represents a political objective of claiming rights and questioning the monopoly of the use of force by the state, but for the economic purposes of the group in particular. Also, its high degree of structural sophistication points to this gang as a unique object of study. We will see in the next section the strong presence and international organization of the group characterizes the PCC not only as a Brazilian gang but a transnational gang. Violence reverberates in other territories and membership is no longer only a restricted factor in Brazil.

Internationalization of PCC: beyond the Brazilian walls, towards the control of Paraguay

Paraguay is the second-largest marijuana producer in the world. It is estimated that 80% of the drug consumed in Brazil comes from its neighboring country (Manso & Dias, 2018). As a facilitator for criminal gangs, the country borders 1,365.4 km of the Brazilian territory, through the states of Paraná and Mato Grosso do Sul (Globo, 2016). Between the borders, the countries have five twin cities embracing 2 million people, with the main ones being Ponta Porã and Foz do Iguazu (Brazil), and Ciudad del Este and Pedro Juan Caballero (Paraguay).

The admission of Brazilian criminal gangs into Paraguay did not start with the PCC. The latter took advantage of the path trodden by its rival, Comando Vermelho (Manso & Dias, 2018). One of the main drivers for this expansion has been to participate in the entire production process of marijuana and cocaine trafficking, reducing the number of intermediaries. Differently from other organizations, the PCC have sought to act as a regulatory agency with a complex structure, as explained earlier.

According to Bruno Manso and Camila Dias (2018), in 2008 PCC members initiated contact with the local drug trafficker known as "Capilo" (Antonio Carlos Caballero). Also known as "Ambassador of the PCC", in this period Capilo worked as a supplier of drugs and armaments to the Brazilian gang. Given his commitment in drug market, soon Capilo became one of the first foreign members to be affiliated (Manso & Dias, 2018). In 2009, he was arrested with another gang member but facilitated the smuggling of weapons and drugs into the criminal organization from the prison. However, the leaders of the PCC

noticed difficulties in the behavior of the Paraguayan member. The collective and ideological importance did not seem to be a concern for Antonio Carlos Caballero, challenging the structure and logic of the PCC's functioning in its Article 12 of the gang statute, which states that all baptized members must comply with the statute and follow the ideology (Feltran, 2018).

As a form of control and verification of the Paraguayan region, the group sent trusted affiliates to the country. At the time, the PCC member named "Teia" (Ilson Rodrigues de Oliveira) was sent to Paraguay to examine the situation. He confirmed the speculation of Capilo's overbilling that the gang leaders disliked. This reaffirmed, then, the need to create its expansion project led by trusted members so that the presence of intermediaries was reduced.

Thus, it is essential to bring to the discussion the *salve* sent in August 2010 expressing the need for PCC's expansion to the region, reinforcing the importance of bringing the group's ideology to Paraguayan territory. The message stated that the brotherhood did not seek to be the owner of the border but "*within what is right, correct and just, to conquer and expect that the bloodshed will soon end*" (MPSP, 2017).

In 2011, Teia assumed responsibility for strengthening the PCC's presence in the neighboring country. Police investigations of the Public Prosecutor's Office of São Paulo transcribed calls from "Teia" in 2011 pointing out necessary funding to "make the project walk" (MPSP, 2017: 130). According to the phone calls intercepted by the authorities, it was estimated that one million reais (US\$300,000.00 in 2011) were sent to the initial phase of the expansionist project. Moreover, in another telephone transcript, the member Abel Pacheco de Andrade stated in May 2011 that "the purpose of the PCC is to expand to Paraguay, build the ground there and spread ideology" (MPSP, 2017: 131). Thus, it was noted that the expansionist project for Paraguay became a concrete goal of the gang. The financial support and sending of members to the region corroborated the importance of the border for the drug trafficking route.

To continue the PCC project, Teia pointed out the need to remove Capilo from the gang's activities (Manso & Dias, 2018). The leaders of the PCC decided, thus, to disconnect

Antônio Carlos Caballero from the organization, preserving his life (Manso & Dias, 2018)—possibly also because of its strong influence in the drug trafficking production chain. To assist Teia in his activities, another member, alias Magrelo (Diego Bruno dos Santos) was sent to the border (Manso & Dias, 2018).

Meanwhile, Teia was murdered during a police operation. Paraguay's most important position became Magrelo's, with the help of another member, Tiquinho, who was already in charge of trafficking in the nearby region (Manso & Dias, 2018). However, the expansion project for Paraguay was stalled until 2014. What modified this context was that Fabiano Alves de Souza, known as "Paca"—one of the members of *Sintonia Final*—was released from prison. From that moment on, Paca went to Paraguay to resume the expansion project (Manso & Dias, 2018), putting a top PCC leader in charge of the important task of expanding the gang to Paraguay.

So far, we can see the high degree of decision-making sophistication of the PCC. Since the beginning of its operations in Paraguay, the group has been operating strategically, expanding according to conditions, but also retreating when necessary. Even more important is to note how the PCC can read the business scenarios, joining local traffickers at the appropriate time, eliminating them if they do not align with the group's ideology and business, and putting top leaders to advance business when necessary.

From the mid-1980s and in the 1990s, Fahd Jamil, a millionaire businessman known as "El Padrino", maintained control of the Brazil-Paraguay border. Accused of corruption and involvement with public officials, he dominated drug trafficking and lived unpunished for his crimes (Manso & Dias, 2018). With the support of Brazilian and Paraguayan politicians, Fahd regulated local trades that depended on their approval for operation. However, because of the presence of multinational companies and large businesses in the region, "El Padrino" lost territorial control.

Parallel to Fahd's decline since the 1990s, Jorge Rafaat entered drug trafficking and gradually expanded his power on the border. Together with his partner, alias "Cabeça Branca" (Luiz Carlos Rocha), they strengthened the commercialization of marijuana produced in Paraguay for Brazil and established a cocaine distribution chain from Peru and

Bolivia (into Brazil). In the 2000s, Rafaat called himself the "King of the Border" (Feltran, 2018). He established rules that were to be obeyed and began to control the entire border, having relations with different criminal gangs. With the help of a private army, composed of former police officers and private security guards, Rafaat commanded the region, controlling part of the local trade and financing the corruption of public officials (Manso & Dias, 2018).

The PCC and the "King of the Frontier", were at first allies who held joint negotiations to bring narcotics to Brazil. Nevertheless, the expansionist approach of the Brazilian gang created conflicts between them. In 2016, the dispute over the region arose and direct clashes were established. In June 2016, Rafaat was assassinated in a high-level PCC mission involving hundreds of men and weapons used in armed conflict scenarios, like caliber .50 rifles (Ferreira, 2019; Ribeiro, 2017). The power vacuum was obvious in the region, resulting in the increase in homicides due to the dispute over control of illicit markets (Feltran, 2018).

According to news reports, the dispute between factions became more aggressive after Rafaat's death, especially in the fight between PCC and Comando Vermelho. In 2018, 30 deaths were recorded due to the conflict over factional rule (Maruyama, 2018). The Inspector of the Federal Police, Luciano Flores, in an interview with Globo newspaper, compared border violence with Rio de Janeiro's violence (Wurmeister, 2018).

With the power vacuum after the death of the "King of the Border", a local mediator, Jarvis Chimenes Pavão, rose to power with the support of the PCC. Pavão had been working together with the *irmãos* since he was arrested with Capilo in 2009 (Manso & Dias, 2018). Since the mid-2000s he has been identified as one of the largest distributors of drugs for Brazilian gangs. It is suspected that he was involved, along with the PCC, in the murder of Rafaat, although he was claimed to have a good relationship with Rafaat (Freitas, 2019). According to investigations conducted in 2016 and 2017, Paraguay's National Anti-Drug Secretariat (SENAD) argues that Pavão dominates the region, supplying both the PCC and the CV (Konig, 2016).

Currently, the project of PCC expansion in the region remains active through the sending

of members in large numbers to the region. In an interview, Paraguayan Prosecutor Samuel Valdez reported that "when we arrested ten [PCC members], there come twenty. When we arrested twenty, another thirty come"(Ribeiro & Correa, 2017). Moreover, the affiliation of Paraguayans in the Brazilian gang grew, especially after Rifaat's murder.

A demonstration of the organization's strong presence in Paraguay was the mega-assault on April 24, 2017, in Ciudad del Este, seen as the largest robbery in Paraguayan history. The organization stole approximately R\$120 million (US\$ 35 million in 2017) from the company Prosegur. To carry out the crime, forty members of the PCC with heavy weapons broke into the company and fled with the money, blowing up cars and property during the escape. In an exchange of gunfire with police officers, three men and a police officer were killed (Maruyama, 2018). Some of the individuals arrested were released because there was no adequate evidence of their involvement, although members of the court were suspicious of some documents provided during the trial.⁷

In January 2020, another incident took place in Paraguay, involving the escape of 90 inmates from the prison of Pedro Juan Caballero. The cost of this operation was approximately R\$ 6 million (US\$ 1,5 million) for the gang (Adorno & Garcia, 2020). The escape occurred through a tunnel built by the detainees. Among the fugitives, 40 were Brazilians and 35 Paraguayans (Adorno & Garcia, 2020). According to the Paraguayan authorities, one of the main drivers for the escape was the need for PCC members to assume positions in the drug business on the border (Adorno & Garcia, 2020), as the cases of David Timoteo Ferreira and Osvaldo Rodrigo Pagiotto indicate.

The current situation of the PCC leadership in Paraguay is not clear. However, with the help of Brazilian and Paraguayan news reports, it is possible to monitor the situation of the gang. The drug trafficker "Minotauro" (Sérgio Arruda Quintiliano) was appointed as the new leadership of the PCC on the Paraguayan border. Nevertheless, he was arrested in February 2019 and Edson Barbosa became the new PCC leader in the region. He was also later arrested.

According to the latest police operations in the region, Fahd Jamil is again in a dispute as

⁷ Interview – Federal Court Judge, Anonymous, Jan 05, 2019.

to who the 'King of the Border' is (Konchinski, 2020). Out of play during Raafat's rise, Fahd has remained at large. Jamil and his son Flávio Correia Jamil Georges claimed this position (Konchinski, 2020), probably suggesting they can serve as mediators between the PCC and the Paraguayan local producers of marijuana. Nevertheless, in this dispute, the release of one of main PCC leaders, André Oliveira Macedo (alias *André do Rap*), on 10th October 2020, made the situation even more unclear⁸. Macedo previously worked towards connecting the Italian 'Ndrangheta and PCC, and is now a fugitive probably living in Paraguay (Jozino, 2020).

The data explored thus far makes it possible to describe the PCC as a transnational gang (Hagedorn, 2005; Sullivan, 2008). The PCC's performance in at least four countries in the South American region - Brazil, Paraguay, Colombia, and Bolivia - is now proven (Ferreira, 2019; Manso & Dias, 2018). However, in no country in the region is the PCC as strong and present as in Paraguay, in which it dominates entire prisons and strongly disputes the control of the illicit drug market. Thus, it is possible to affirm that the PCC promotes the illicit market inside and outside the national territory, exercising its practices in a cross-border fashion.

It is also important to highlight that globalization and media facilitation support the strengthening of the PCC as an expanding gang. Through "salves" and messages from tools such as Whatsapp, the group has a greater influence on its members, and can accelerate the dissemination of information. As a consequence of the new forms of communication, gangs—in this case, the PCC—break the local obstacles of action, since the spread of information no longer depends on the physical distance but on the technological device, allowing for and enhancing interstate and international action (Sullivan, 2008).

Another key aspect of transnational gang classification is the development of political objectives. It is interesting to analyze the PCC's work in weakening the capacity of the government in regions where the group has a stronger performance. Alternative governance

⁸ André Macedo's release was authorized by Supreme Court member, Marco Aurélio Mello. It only happened because of a gap in the Brazilian Penal System. The latter authorizes the release if the judge does not require that a prisoner remains in detention when his/her case is to be tried on appeal. Just two days after release, another judge in the Supreme Court, Luiz Fux, requested that Macedo was detained again, but Macedo was not found at that point.

practices and alternative criminal courts challenge state legitimacy, and weaken the rule of law. Penetrating the political structure through corruption, the gang establishes itself as an active social actor with tangible political goals for the functioning of its businesses.

Final remarks

Looking at the potential and activities of the PCC over the years, it is clear that the gang is a side-effect of a broken socioeconomic and political setting. The expansion and growth of the group are direct consequences of a flawed prison system, which provides the conditions for the growth of criminal gangs. The ideology of the criminal organization fills the gap of a negligent state towards the poorest share of the population. Taking advantage of a weak rule of law, the PCC provides financial protection to its members and recruits new criminals through a discourse against oppression.

The insistence on ineffective policies to combat drugs and organized crime further enhances the gang. The cycle of violence is reproduced, and the main issue is not dealt with: the illicit financial flow that allows the advancement of the gang. As a consequence of the structural, cultural, and direct violence of our society, organized crime becomes an alternative for survival or an alternative avenue for meeting the ambition in a neoliberal system that fosters unbridled consumption (Feltran, 2020). The control of state violence in the prisons and Brazilian peripheries is on the agenda of PCC, but it is not sufficiently strong to supplant drug management as the main 'policy' of the gang. Furthermore, there is a symbiosis between state and crime; the role played by the Brazilian State promotes crime and allows its strengthening. As pointed out by the gang members themselves in a judicial investigation: *"the [sociopolitical] system is a PCC maker machine"* (MPSP, 2017).

Finally, as we have explored above, taking advantage of South American border weaknesses, the group expands its presence and becomes stronger in neighboring countries. It is a clear example of how transnational crime contributes to the weakening of the social fabric and the rule of law since it promotes practices of corruption and manipulation of political bodies (Sullivan & Bunker, 2002). The echoing of social impacts of cross-border crime affects, even worse, the social peace that is far from being achieved in the violent streets that divide Brazil and Paraguay.

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