The Favelados in Rio De Janerio, Brazil

Jorge da Silva, Researcher
Faculdade Latino-Americano de Ciências Sociais

Violence plagues Brazil's new democracy, now in its second decade. Violent crime by civilians began to increase sharply in 1985, and violence by police has risen with it. In 1992, the police committed almost one-third of the country's murders.[1] The problems are especially severe in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which is the focus of this paper. In an attempt to quell disorder in Rio, the government has taken a series of repressive and counterproductive police actions, including the deployment of armed forces between November 1994 and April 1995.

It is clear that the government must attempt to make Rio's police more effective and accountable. Unfortunately, most of the proposals for reform are either insufficient or misguided. They generally fail to take into account the societal and institutional problems that lead to police misconduct. I will discuss four major problems that should inform any attempt at reform: Brazil's myth of the racial democracy, Rio's economic and racial division, the centralization of the police force, and its militarization. At the end of the paper, I will examine how left-wing leader Leonel Brizola and the inefficacy of prevailing policing methods have created an opportunity for reform.

The Myth of the Racial Democracy

Many Brazilians believe that their country has no racial problems. Taught in school and by the media that Brazil resolved its racial woes with the abolition of slavery in 1888, they cling to the notion that the country is a racial democracy, as opposed to a white autocracy like the United States. I shared this view until I visited the United States in 1968. Noticing little difference between race relations in the two countries, I began to question the belief that Brazilians lived in racial harmony. I also realized that as a black man, I had come to accept my inferior status. To this day, many Afro-Brazilians have negative self-images because they are simultaneously taught that they are inferior and that Brazil has no racial problems. Of course, such is the goal of a hierarchical state—to make the oppressed believe that their plight is natural.

At the time, I could not express my feelings on the subject. As a police officer, I was supposed to uphold the laws and propaganda of the military dictatorship. If I had openly questioned the state-perpetuated myth about race, not only would I have been breaking a

taboo, I may have been committing a crime against the state, a violation of the National Security Act (Lei de Segurança Nacional).

In 1988, political leaders were planning to use the centennial of the abolition of slavery to burnish Brazil's image as a genuine democracy. Unable to remain silent and freed by the transition to democracy, I entered a writing contest commemorating the centennial, sponsored by the Rio de Janeiro Bar Association. Politicians and police leaders were no doubt surprised to learn that one of the winners of the contest was a black colonel in the Military Police whose paper challenged the racial democracy myth, questioned the methods of the police, and revealed how society legitimized discrimination and police brutality.

In researching the paper, I was astonished to learn that virtually no Brazilian jurist has written about race. Almost all the work on the topic has been done by social scientists, who have begun to write extensively about race after neglecting it for many years. However, their analyses are generally superficial. Unlike academics in the United States and Europe, who have examined how racial prejudice influences and is influenced by violence and police brutality, Brazilian social scientists seldom do more than acknowledge that racism exists.

Scholars and journalists who write about crime in Rio basically ignore racial matters. When they write about groups of poor Brazilians who go to the elegant beaches and disrupt the peace by running wildly from one side to the other, they do not mention that most are black. Nor do they mention race when they write about the state's slaughter of children in the streets, omitting the obvious fact that most have dark skin. (According to research coordinated by Santos (1996), roughly 75 percent of the children killed by the government in the state of Rio were Afro-Brazilian. In the city of Rio, the figure was approximately 50 percent).[2] Most important, many presume to explain increasing violence and deteriorating relations between the police and marginal communities without considering race. To improve policing in Rio, scholars and political leaders need to contend with the fact that the city has severe racial divisions.

The Fractured City

With a population of 5.5 million, Rio is Brazil's second largest city, after São Paulo. It is an important political, financial, cultural, and tourist center. Lying between lush mountains and the sea, Rio is commonly said to be one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It is also one of the most divided. Upper and middle class neighborhoods sit in the hills and line the world-famous beaches, but about a third of the population live in 500 slums and squatter settlements, known as favelas[3].

At the turn of the century, Rio had only one favela, Morro da Favela (now Morro da Providência), formed by freed slaves and other homeless people, including many soldiers returning from the Canudos Rebellion in Bahia. As more favelas sprung up,

Rio's political and economic elites initially ignored them. Eventually, however, they concocted a number of schemes to expel the residents of the favelas, the favelados, to the city's periphery. But the elites never managed to move the favelados. Nor did they make an effort to deal with the burgeoning poverty at the heart of the city.

Today, conditions in the favelas resemble those of a third-world country. The favelas lack adequate sanitation, running water, education, and transportation. Thousands of homeless beggars and abandoned children roam the streets.[4] With few opportunities, more children are entering the drug trade. Between 1991 and 1996, the number of drug cases handled by Rio's juvenile court rose from 204 to 1,402. Of all juvenile offenders in 1996, more than 39 percent had no formal education.[5]

Officially, Rio is 55 percent white and 44 percent Afro-Brazilian.[6] However, it is difficult to determine the city's racial composition, partly because the government has engaged in a "whitening" policy. After the establishment of the Republic in 1889, immigration was reopened, except to blacks and Asians, whose admittance would be conditioned on Congressional approval. The Immigration Act of 1941 stated that Europeans were more "convenient" to the country.[7] These laws, based on the notion that white skin is more desirable, have encouraged mulattos and even blacks to identify themselves as whites. As a consequence, official figures exaggerate the percentage of whites. Furthermore, the government asks people to identify themselves as white, black, brown, or yellow, without regard to race or origin. Some blacks identify themselves as browns (mulattos), and some browns call themselves white or black.

In any case, it is evident that the vast majority of people in the favelas and in the poor areas on the city's periphery are Afro-Brazilian and that most people in the wealthy neighborhoods are white. Brazil's poor people are often called "marginals" because they are not citizens in the full sense of the word; they lack the means and opportunity to exercise the rights enshrined in the Constitution. Indeed, many elites do not believe that marginals should have full citizenship. The division between citizens and marginals is so stark that Ventura (1994) calls Rio the "fractured city" (cidade partida). DaMatta similarly depicts the social hierarchy in his seminal work, *Do You Know Who You Are Talking To?* (Você Sabe Quem Está Falando?)—an expression commonly uttered by Brazilians to assert their social superiority.[8]

The police are forced to navigate the chasm between the two Rios. It is extremely difficult to reform policing in such a divided city, one where people in the upper classes, instead of supporting efforts to make the police more accountable, demand that the police use whatever force necessary to control the favelados. Even when the police use brutal force, the upper classes call for stricter action. Meanwhile, police authorities either deny the brutality or blame "deviant" police officers. In other words, the police are used to maintain the very division that is at the root of violence and police brutality. I am not suggesting that societal change must precede police reform. I am saying that social

division poses a great barrier to reform and that attempts at reform should aim to bridge the gap between the two Rios.

Organizational Structure

Although Brazil has a population of more than 150 million people, spread across 27 states and 8.5 million square kilometers, local communities are largely dependent on decisions made at the federal level. Furthermore, cities and municipalities do not maintain police forces. Policing, though heavily influenced by the federal government, is primarily a state function. Each state has two police bodies: the civil police, responsible for the investigation of crimes, and the military police, charged with keeping order. The police force of the state of Rio de Janerio, which consists of 10,000 civil officers and 30,000 military officers, serves the city of Rio and more than 70 other cities and municipalities.

Although the management of the state force is centralized, the style of policing varies. In *Varieties of Police Behavior* (1978), James Q. Wilson analyzes eight police departments in the United States. He identifies three styles of policing: the "watchman style," stressing order maintenance; the "legalistic style," stressing law enforcement, even for minor problems; and the "service style," stressing informal problem-solving. Wilson shows that the style employed depends on the type of community. For example, the service style is often found in homogenous middle-class neighborhoods.[9] In a state marked by racial and social division, sustained by the myth of racial democracy, it is not difficult to determine which style prevails in marginal communities like the favelas. Police try to maintain order, with little regard to law enforcement, much less individual rights or the wishes of the community. The "watchman style" serves the demands of the elites and conforms to the historic role of the Brazilian police. In *Policing Rio de Janeiro: Repression and Resistance in a 19th Century City* (1993), Holloway says that the principal concern of the police during the 350 years of slavery was to maintain order. In the twentieth century, the authoritarian tendencies of the police were heightened by developments that I discuss in the next section.

Militarization of the Police

It is not possible to examine policing in Rio without considering the fact that Brazil is in Latin America, an authoritarian and militaristic region. Like many other Latin American countries, Brazil was for many years a military state. For two decades, beginning in 1964, the police were part of the military, enlisted in the war against communism. The military controlled all police functions at the national and state level. Army generals and colonels served as public security state secretaries, who were in effect police chiefs. The

training programs at police academies, modeled on the army and subject to the army's control, focused on military tactics. Instead of learning the basics of police work, officers in training learned national security intelligence, siege techniques, and riot control. Indoctrinated in military philosophy, they were taught that their enemies, evil in essence, must be defeated. A model of police action that delineated "friends" from "enemies" meshed all too well with a society that had already distinguished between citizens and marginals. Poor people in the favelas and on the periphery were cast as enemies.

The military regime has not been in place for more than a decade. The president of Brazil is a scholar who cares about individual rights. States, no longer bound by national security doctrine, have some freedom to develop their own public safety policies. However, politicians continue to militarize the police, using the War on Drugs as their pretext and justification. Examples of militarization are legion. At the Ministry of Justice, the federal branch dedicated to public safety issues is headed by an army general. At the Ministry of the Army, the branch created under the previous regime to supervise the military police still focuses on police matters (military police forces are, under the Constitution, auxiliary forces of the Army and its reserve). The intelligence service of the military police is linked and oriented by the intelligence service of the army. Under the presidency of Itamar Franco (1993-95), an army colonel headed the federal police. At the state level, governors have resumed the practice of appointing army officers to direct public safety branches. During Rio's 1994 gubernatorial election, even the left-wing candidates, aiming to win the supports of the upper and middle classes, pledged to appoint an army general to head public safety; between November 1994 and April 1995, the government deployed tanks, canons, military helicopters, and other instruments of conventional war to Rio.

Regrettably, proponents of police reform seldom take into account the militarization of the police, as if the police operate in isolation from other institutions of government. Worse, they propose irrational measures, such as merging state police forces into one national force. Efforts to reform Rio's police should take aim at the militarization of the police and related management issues, such as absence of control and negative motivation. By absence of control, I mean that because of the militarization of the police, no internal or external force exerts sufficient control over officers' behavior: not the officers themselves, who are taught not to exercise discretion but to obey orders unconditionally; not the internal affairs division, which is modeled on the military and focuses on disciplinary rules related to internal hierarchy instead of police abuse of civilians; and not citizens, who have no vehicle to hold the police accountable. By negative motivation, I mean the prejudice against human rights expressed by law enforcement authorities, politicians, and even journalists. Some claim that efforts to uphold individual rights only protect criminals. Moreover, police authorities give cash

awards for "acts of bravery," which are invariably those in which officers risk their lives and often ones in which they kill civilians.

The Politicization of Police Accountability

When Leonel Brizola took office as the governor of the city of Rio in 1983, he established a mechanism of civilian oversight called the State Counsel of Justice, Public Safety, and Human Rights (Conselho Estadual de Justiça, Segurança Pública e Direitos Humanos). Representatives of government, including Brizola, and of nongovernmental organizations held seats on the counsel. Perhaps even more notable, Brizola stated that the police should treat all the residents of Rio as citizens. In a city divided between citizens and marginals, Brizola's actions were nothing short of heresy. Police officers accused Brizola of not letting them do their job. Elites claimed Brizola was too lenient on drug dealers and blamed his policies for increasing crime. Brizola lost the election for statewide office in 1986.

Promising to put an end to violence in six months, Moreira Franco was elected governor in 1987. At the end of his term four years later, violence and fear of violence had increased. Despite the opposition of the upper classes, Brizola was reelected. He restored his projects and introduced some news ones, such as a community policing project in Copacabana. He left office to run for president in 1994. Labeled the evildoer of Rio, he finished fourth.

Shortly after Brizola resigned, the government deployed armed forces to Rio in an effort to quell disorder. The new governor, Marcello Alencar, appointed an army general to oversee public safety and dismantled Brizola's policing projects. The general appointed by Alencar reportedly said that officers should "shoot first and then ask" questions. The remilitarization of the police has worsened violence and police brutality. The number of civilians killed or injured by the police and the number of police officers killed or injured have increased considerably. A 1997 inquiry by the state legislative body (Assembléia Legislativa) found that 64 percent of the civilians killed were shot either in the head or from behind.[10] Stray bullets from gunfights between drug gangs or between drug gangs and the police injure dozens of people every year. Automatic weapons, including many foreign-made assault rifles, have poured into Rio, making the gunfights especially lethal.

People of all classes are justifiably alarmed by the violence. The upper classes use private security measures to protect themselves from most types of crime but are vulnerable to kidnappings, which increased from 15 in 1989 to 119 in 1995. Compelled by the elites to spend much of their time combating kidnapping, the police view the favelados as the primary suspects, further straining relations. Meanwhile, the police do little to meet the needs of poor people in the favelas and on the periphery, who endure violent crime, the despotism of drug lords, and police brutality.

Conclusion

The dire situation in Rio in fact presents an opportunity. People in the upper classes see that, despite the repressive measures they have supported, violence continues to increase. More are coming to realize that fighting violence with violence leads to more violence, and that conceiving of public safety as a war against abstract enemies invites terror. In 1998, elections for president and for governors will be held. Public safety issues will again be politicized at national and state levels. Will political leaders perpetuate the repressive system of policing that victimizes civilians and officers alike? Or will they seize the opportunity and help to mend a fractured city by making police accountable to their communities, including the favelas? We will soon know the answer.

---

[1] Paul Chevigny, *Edge of the Knife*. New York: The New Press, 1995.

[2] The researchers made use of official data from the juvenile court of Rio de Janeiro (2ª Vara da Infância e da Juventude) and press reports of killings of children and adolescents.

[3] A study conducted by researchers of the Plano Estratégico da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro (1996) estimated that if one includes the so-called conjuntos habitacionais (popular housing projects) the people who live in these favela-like communities totals 42 percent of the city's population.

[4] In a 1992 study by the Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (IBASE), 861 children were reported to be permanently living on the streets in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

[5] Statistical data of 2ª Vara da Infância e da Juventude. (Cf. Entrada de Crianças e Adolescentes. 2ª Vara da Infância e da Juventude. Rio de Janeiro, 1996).

[6] *Colour of the Population* (Cor da População), based on the 1987 National Survey published in 1990. *National Survey*, 1989.

[7] Decreto 525/90, enacted on July 28, 1890 and Decreto-Lei 7.967/41, of September 18, 1941, signed by Getúlio Vargas.

[8] Roberto DaMatta, "Você Sabe Com Quem Está Falando?" *Roberto da Matta, Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis.* Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1979, 139-193.

[9] James Q. Wilson, *Varieties of Police Behavior: The Management of Law & Order in Eight Communities*. Harvard University Press, 1978, 200.

[10] Dimmi Amora, *O Globo*, October 21, 1997, 11.