

The Exceptional Prison

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We walk through an arched pergola draped with passion-fruit vines. “Everything happens for a reason,” says Luis,¹ the military police officer walking with the two of us. In the distance, gunfire crackles in occasional bursts from a training ground behind a grove of citrus trees. “He killed eight people . . . all while off duty.” Luis is speaking of someone who has turned his life around. He’s been rehabilitated. “He isn’t one of those people, you know, the corrupt kind . . . he was taking justice into his own hands, you know?” His eyes seek recognition. Pedro is a good person now, *right?*

Pedro, a convicted mass murder and also a military police officer, later shows us around the apiary. “I got lost in the emotion,” he says. Pedro goes on to tell us, again, about how he ended up here twelve years ago. Sentenced to more than one hundred years in prison, he had gone on a killing spree. Off the job, and over the course of a year, he “cleaned” a poor neighborhood on the north side of a major city. Unable to control the thrill of killing, he mis-stepped, getting in trouble for such extreme violence.

“Try my honey,” he says. “Everything in it is natural. The sugar for the hives comes from cane. The starter beeswax I order. The pollen . . . is pollen.” The honey is really good, and Pedro is very personable. As he shows us a dead queen bee with its wing squeezed delicately between tweezers, and later stings himself

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1. All names are pseudonyms. We have altered some details and made use of composites in ways that do not impact the analysis.

twice with bees to explain that doing so, regularly, strengthens the immune system, one can't help but feel disarmed—especially in a prison environment like this, adjacent to a pond full of tilapia, a greenhouse with rows of lettuce, and groves of tangerine trees.

We're interrupted. Two kids run up, panting from running freely around the lush grounds. "Do you have honey?" they ask Pedro, between gasps. "In the jar and the basin, guys," he says, pointing to the shed. "And close the door behind you." Luis interjects, seeing the incredulity that must be displayed on at least one of our faces, "They are the boss's kids." We are in a Latin American prison. But it seems like nothing of the sort. This is a prison solely for "wayward" police officers, one of only a few in the world.

The starting point of this article is, What constitutes "wayward"? Prisons are widely understood to be exceptionally punitive and foreclosed spaces, the outcome of the deployment of the heavily punitive carceral condition in the contemporary historical moment. From this counterintuitive location we ask, What might an exceptional prison such as this tell us about who and what is contained, and who and what is not? Or, of what violence is wayward? This space defies what is well known about neoliberal penalty, punitive containment, and mass incarceration. Moreover, it defies how prisons are meant to operate as a technique of social, political, and racial order across the Americas. Or does it? In fact, almost no one in this prison is here because they were found guilty for lethal violence on the job. We propose, as a result, that this case, this space, provides a novel and complementary window on the mundane; of how law, policing, and prison operate within the logic of political will. While the scholarship on prisons overwhelmingly examines the carceral spaces of the criminalized subjects of law—obviously, and for good reason—this rare case affords a very different opportunity: to scrutinize what a prison for people working for the maintenance of liberal capitalist power looks like, empirically.

We consider the narratives of sixteen in-depth interviews with police prisoners, all of whom are men sentenced for murder,² and describe a counterintuitive finding: only one was sentenced for on-the-job violence. In a state where police have killed 16,816 citizens since 1990³, these police speak openly about violence

2. This article is substantiated and informed by our respective ethnographic research (Bueno 2018; Denyer Willis 2015, 2017). The interviews for this article were carried out largely by the first author, who was given access via a judicial decision, over a six-month period. The second author has carried out extensive multiyear ethnographic research on police violence, homicide, and disappearances in Brazilian cities. At the time of our research there was only one female prisoner.

3. According to the statistics of the state Public Security Secretary.

in policing. That violence isn't why they are here. These prisoners are wayward because they have committed other kinds of murder. While around half of the prison population has been sentenced or charged with murder, only around 10 percent of those being held for murder in this prison are here because they have been found guilty for doing so on the job. Almost every prisoner is here because, like Pedro, they deviated from "acceptable" killing. And they know why. They talk about it: They killed off the job. They killed too many. They killed intimate partners or family members. They took money to "clean up the streets." Ending up in this prison, in other words, is refracted through other "deviations."

We ask how police that have been punished make sense of the logics and value systems of everyday policing. These conversations shed light on how they came to transgress the rules and norms that matter in practice. This helps show why they, and not others, are in this prison. Prisoners discuss how it matters that violent killings are a constitutive part of policing, being "normal cases" (Sudnow 1965) that happen, on average 2.34 times per day. Or, as one former officer puts it, of what it looks like when "death is like a family custom."

Our argument, then, is twofold: first, that the punishment of lethal police violence is not apparent in this prison, the only place where institutional punishment of lethal police violence could materially exist; and second, that the reasons that police who are here reveal what kinds of violence is acceptable by virtue of how it sits structurally outside the symbolic and material space of institutional punishment. Seen from the egregious racial and violence inequality of Brazil, policing and its management are not particularly concerned with limiting police violence. The implication is this: to speak of impunity for lethal police violence on the job is to dramatically misunderstand the work of policing.

Three parts follow: (1) "The Exceptional Prison" describes how this case is exceptional and why it matters for rigorous reflection; (2) "What Abides" considers wayward violence through what exists within the walls of this prison; (3) "Beyond Containment" shows how it matters that some kinds of violence are contained here, but on the job police violence is not.

The Exceptional Prison

Few prisons anywhere are like this one. In almost every way, the global prison literature couldn't illustrate a more dramatically different space, logic, and moral economy of commonplace prison conditions under neoliberal governance (e.g., Gilmore 1999; Pettit and Western 2004; Simon 2007; Comfort 2009; Rios 2011; McKittrick 2011; for a counterpoint see Johnsen, Granheim, and Helgesen 2011).

This is even more so in Latin America. As J. Amparo Alves (2018: 149) writes of a pretrial jail in São Paulo, “A small curtain made up of old clothes covered what was supposed to be a bathroom: just a hole in the wall through which a trickle of cold water ran constantly, with a dirty broken toilet bowl and a small water tap. The temperature in the cell was around forty degrees Celsius and there was an unbearably strong, nauseating smell in the air.”

A growing body of work on Latin American prisons laments the bleak—sexual violence, massacres, and fires that consume hundreds of lives. Prisons are sites of acute degradation, overcrowding, and extensive violence, strongly evoking a presence of political will through the absence of attention (Salvatore and Aguirre 2010; Garces 2010; Lemgruber and Paiva 2010; Drybread 2009, 2014, 2016; Alves 2016; Godoi 2016; O’Neill and Fontes 2016; Weegels 2016). A remarkable and similarly contrasting pattern has emerged across the region. Many prisons are regularly “self-governed” as a result. Behind the walls built evermore by states, prison groups of different varieties manage everything from distribution of food, rooms, and beds; security; and cleaning (Godoi 2010; Macaulay 2013; Darke and Garces 2017; King and Valensia 2014). Under the mitigated authority of a handful of guards who rarely enter, rich and complex political economies drive patterns of survival and meaning (Biondi 2017; for the United States, see Skarbek 2011; for elsewhere, Symkovych 2017). As Jon Carter (2014: 475–76) argues, such spaces become “gothic,” structured by a kind of absent power that is nonetheless “haunted by crypts of its own lawlessness.”⁴

None of these problems and practices is present in the police prison. There are no “gangs,” and there is no substantive sexual or other violence. The prisoners don’t carry out their own tribunals and in-house executions. There is no concern for high walls and fortifications. Guards walk the grounds, strolling with prisoners. Administrators walk unaccompanied. And on the weekends or on special occasions, so do their children. This prison is widely celebrated as a model. Unlike any other prison in Latin America, its managers commemorate and invest in its distinction. The International Standards Association, a global reference for quality management, has certified this prison. This is for maintaining key principles like “customer focus,” “leadership,” “evidence-based decision making,” and “relationship management,” for a “quality that is consistently improved.”

4. This has allowed for all sorts of peculiar and transcendental practices to emerge or become fortified, including urban extortion (Fontes 2016), a transnational and heavily gendered drug trade (Gay 2012; Giacomello 2014), global tourism (Whitfield 2016), and practices of social order that have led to widespread homicide declines in cities (Dias 2010; Denyer Willis 2015; Lessing and Denyer Willis 2019).

It is hard to imagine a more distinctive and stiff departure from the global carceral condition. What, then, can such an incongruent case tell us that might actually matter? Our conceptual departure point is that some kinds of “exceptional cases” have important analytic and “disruptive” normative and scholarly potential. This can be because they evoke something about systemic political and legal practice (Schmitt 1985; Benjamin 1996; Das 2004), because their “spectacularity” helps isolate new categories (Larkins 2015), or because they allow for heuristic interpolation of well-entrenched patterns and assumptions (Ermakoff 2014). Exceptional cases are important, too, because they stand at odds with some general model of causal relations (Seawright and Gerring 2008). And while identifying what constitutes an exceptional case can be treacherous, their significance is established in their conspicuous contrast with existing theories and affirmations.

Why this prison exists is a puzzle of its own. One reason might be that the scarcity of police prisons obscures them from view, both mitigating an interest in them and constraining access to researchers. Only in a country like Brazil are police so violent and “extralegal” as to require a prison of their own. A second possibility is that there is really no good reason for such a unique prison to exist; wayward police would typically be placed in a prison for the general population, perhaps in a particular wing. In other words, there may be peculiar institutional and historical reasons such a prison should exist at all. A third explanation might be that such as an instance isn’t really exceptional at all, being, instead, the product of different “cultures” or moments of punishment in which Brazil sees punishment of police as a kind of cultural imperative, or a product of a distinctive political or government crackdown on police violence.

We surmise that it is odd that this prison, as an identifiable space, exists at all. It is exceptional for institutional reasons. In Brazil, everyday “beat cops,” who are the most numerous, most public, and most central, interface with citizens on the street and operate under a separate system of justice administered through a military hierarchy. Any street-level police officer is a military police officer and a reservist in the national military. They are not subject to ordinary legal procedures but instead to military jurisprudence. Other, smaller, and more institutionally distinct police institutions, civil ones, do indeed send their wayward police through “normal” penal channels. When convicted, these civilian police end up in the regular prison system, albeit, usually in a small wing specifically maintained for police, the university educated, and politicians.

The distinctive condition of the exceptional prison can operate as an abnormal but complementary window on what prisons routinely imply in their slimmest

function, to contain violence and violent individuals. The difference between the exceptional and the mundane prison perhaps lies most acutely in a consideration of law in practice. Prisons are for populations that are the subject of law. The exceptional prison is for something contrasting: for those who deploy the law, working on behalf of it, toward the reproduction of the former. And so the question becomes, amid the arbitrariness of law (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004), when does law actually govern the people who work on behalf of power?

This spatial confluence contains analytical possibility as a peculiar empirical location where the unvarnished outcomes and logics of law and institutional justice have been filtered and made material. Most acutely, we think, is how this prison offers a spatial condition revelatory of what kinds of violence are actually subject to state punishment. Who is actually punished, and why, is spatially sorted here. This sorting strips the foils of power that cloud critical inference of the structural logics of policing.

What Abides

The handheld video that had flashed across the evening news was deeply incriminating. After a police chase, a police officer corners a suspected thief above a precipice. The suspect lies flat on his stomach and raises his hands above his head, a gun pointed at his head. He's placed in handcuffs. But as the police officer raises the man to his feet and moves toward the edge, he shoves the man over. He falls to an unseen ground, leaving the camera frame in the process. Seconds later, two gunshots echo. The man is declared dead at the hospital with gunshot wounds.

Six police officers from this case subsequently arrived at the prison. They were arrested, given red badges as recent arrivals, and placed in a particular wing for pretrial detainees. For around eighteen months the six made this prison their home. Some time later, all six were declared to have acted in self-defense. They walked free, returning to their job.

Carlos was a long-serving police officer. He and the others are interested in this previous case and the ways that the police were publicly chastised. Carlos was involved in one of the largest prison massacres in the history of the country. Shortly after he entered a prison alongside his colleagues to quell a riot, more than one hundred inmates lay dead. Carlos likes to talk about what the public knows of policing. There is an important distinction to be made between what is presented to the public, he says, and what occurs on an everyday basis. To be a police officer is to know and act in a different reality: "When a guy enters the police force, he comes to live in a fictional world emulating a stage of war. The people around

him induce him to think that he is in a war and that this war is legitimate. This is not ‘the police’ but some of the important people who represent the institution.”

Carlos’s analysis distinguishes between “the police” as a formal entity and the shared sensibility that exists, as a set of assumptions and practices, within it. While police trumpet and publicly perform respect for human rights, the everyday understanding of police work, behind the stage, is much different; it is a “stage of war,” of violence. For Carlos the idea of being a soldier in the war is a feeling present throughout life as a police person. Far from diminishing this desire, police work condenses and legitimates this logic. For Carlos, until the early 1990s, “the death of bandits was a practice institutionalized by the police, with the understanding of all.” If an incident “really happened” in the course of a criminal act, or if it was contrived—*forjado*—after the fact, it didn’t really matter. No one would have understood it any differently; “what mattered,” he says, “was the end result.” Carlos believes things are no longer this way.

But Carlos didn’t end up in prison for any of this kind of violence, for his association with this massacre, or for on-the-job violence that he speaks of openly. Carlos is in prison for something much different, despite his nostalgia for a kind of police work that he believed existed, that could openly exalt lethality. He has been convicted, twice, of murdering transgendered sex workers off the job, targeting them as a category threatening his heteronormativity.

If there is a divergence between how Carlos talks about the violence that courses through policing and what makes him a resident of this prison, he is not alone. Prisoners routinely speak of what they idealize about policing. And as in Carlos’s case, the values of policing emerge in stark relief to the actual historical and legal condition of their containment.

Luis claims that the police have always supported the use of lethal force, as long as it was done in a “slow way.” A former beat cop, he speaks of having “snapped” following a personal experience with crime: the sound of his car being stolen outside his house. After this episode, he recalled, he decided that he was OK with this prison being his future home. As he put it, he “started to go crazy off duty . . . and suddenly had eighteen police reports on my back.” This new killing spree was off duty but targeted the same kinds of people that he’d already been killing on the job. He recalls blithely that after finishing his shifts he used to pick up his car and go out “hunting” in the neighborhood where he lived, picking up clues and tips from local merchants. He sums it up in his own terms: “I only killed delinquents.”

Until nearly the year 2000, police officers commonly and publicly received medals after what are known as “resisting arrest followed by death” cases. These “death medals” operated as an archetypal and public benchmark for the success

of an officer's career. The linear and public relationship between death and commendation has been pushed underground.⁵ But the symbolism of such medals and commendation now has a front stage and a back stage; what they mean to a police officer is different than how they are presented to the public. Crucially, receiving a medal was an affirmation of leadership and bravery. Even today it allows a police person to claim an esteemed social category—"the Billy,"—a brave, effective, and deadly efficient police officer (Bueno, 2018). Today medals are divided into five grades. The first three are given by a local commander, and the next is given by a regional commander. The highest degree is bestowed by the commander general of the military police. It is very difficult for a police officer to receive all five commendations.

José, the eldest of the police officers interviewed, boasted that he had received the five medals, describing in detail the "white medal"—a first-degree honor given to him after a killing. For José, medals were official commemorations of valued everyday police practices. The most common of these was to mark the butt of the service weapon with white paint for each killing—an informal commemoration. "The more stripes, the more Billy," said José, who could not disguise his pride of having a "zebra gun." José speaks openly of killing sixteen people throughout his career as a police officer. He was, though, convicted of the murder of his ex-wife and of three attempted homicides, one of which was against a girlfriend.

Younger police officers complained that today no medals or public commendations are awarded after killings, nor do they get away with dressing up an execution. "There is no honor in death," said Paulo, evoking the disappearance of public exaltation. He was frustrated that he'd not won a medal when he broke up a bank robbery and killed two criminals. Before ending up in prison for what he called "high-risk incidents," Paulo was a police officer in a regional tactical unit akin to a low-level SWAT squad.

Paulo served for eight years in one of these specialized units before being arrested for killing a man in a shopping mall, whose death he says was paid for by a foreign mafia. As Paulo tells it, "I had already snapped at that point." Being violent on the job wasn't enough. He'd been killing for years "without any financial benefit, just out of job satisfaction." He decided to make a living, taking money from others to go on doing what he'd been doing on the job anyway. Paulo sees his own baptism and "Billy status" clearly: "The tactical unit man is baptized and no longer an ordinary man. He feels different, he's different, he's not a regular cop or

5. The practice of public commemoration has started to reemerge under President Jair Bolsonaro, who took power in 2019.

an ordinary human being.” For Paulo there is a key distinction in being *the* police and being *of* a particular unit—placed systemically above all others.

This concern with hierarchies in policing closely follows the ways that police talk about their fondness for on-the-job violence and the sought-after social categories that operate within it. Where elite units are professionally sought after, more well-resourced and enabled to carry out violence with impunity, incentive structures and desirability follow. Policing is a collective enterprise, with police advancing, every day, a set of assumptions about how to protect “good” populations from those who would do them harm. *Tirocínio* is understood as the heightened cognitive ability to differentiate between these two, to be followed with violence to reassert the difference.

The same logic appears in José’s words when he speaks of the killings he carried out: “For us police officers you feel satisfaction, you feel more satisfaction than when you arrest. For some cops killing becomes an addiction, when you cannot kill you feel like your service has not been done properly. You feel that you can solve the problems of society, and you want at any cost to do it.” But transgressing these limits creates practical political problems for others, who are otherwise on side. Being a Billy with *tirocínio* means being a sentient, controlled killer who understands the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable violence—between how violence is now carried out and celebrated quietly, mundanely accepted, as long as it does not transgress mutually observed norms and larger social assumptions.

Such violence has a distinctive and clear history in Brazil, with some individuals gaining public and unabashed fame in the national press for “cleaning the streets” (Manso 2016). While this violence was more transparent in a different historical moment, for which these police have nostalgia, they describe how this violence remains but in transformed ways. What matters now is that it needs to be maintained in more secretive ways. It wears a shroud. Luis’s explanation mixes personal satisfaction with professional recognition. According to him, the reason he ended up in prison is that he took it too far. As he put it, “That [killing] was ostentatiousness, I was feeling like superman, being recognized on the side of good . . . everyone knew, my superiors knew, my colleagues knew. . . . Although I did harm to many, I did very well for others.”

“In my view I was doing the right thing,” a prisoner named Joseph recalled. Joseph was convicted for killing sixteen people off the job. “By eliminating the enemy and protecting good people; society wants you to do this, but it crucifies you when you do.” Indeed, the process of being remanded, publicly shredded, and

held in this prison feels like punishment for police like Joseph. They have a sense of being thrown under the bus.

Victor sighs before discussing a cornerstone of his past, and of fitting in. He describes having killed at least thirty people as a police officer. “What the police taught me,” he says, “is that I was different. I am a born follower. I’ve always wanted this, to do it perfectly. There is no way to take the blame and be caught out, you just have to assume who you are and do it exactly like everyone else.” Victor was eventually caught after veering into different territory. He killed a man, in the midst of a fight, that he alleges had murdered a friend of his.

Not all the police that are here see the wrongs of their violence directly or indirectly in opposition to the violence they carried out on the job. Around five years ago, Jorge was a police officer working the day shift in the prison. It was a Sunday, and he had worked all day tending to prisoners and other duties. He left the prison and went home. Arriving there, his wife confronted him. She wanted a separation. She had cheated on him previously, and he had forgiven her. But this time, she seemed to be laughing in his face. He felt hurt, his honor deflated, a “lesser man.” He wouldn’t accept a separation. Jorge shot and killed her. She should have known the risk this time, he said. Jorge spent the rest of that night in the same prison that he had guarded that workday. Jorge has been in this same prison ever since and has twenty years left to serve.

Jorge’s case is symptomatic in other regards. First, the egregious murder of his wife is what police describe as a “crime of passion”—a gendered sociolegal category of violence that typically involves men murdering women. And while the category itself contains a mechanism for normatively diminishing or justifying the act—passion—new laws for batterers and discussion of femicide have raised public scrutiny. According to administrators, 18 percent of the population is held for “crimes of passion.”⁶ Jorge’s act, which he proudly and unrepentantly owns as the result of an affront to his masculinity, is the subject of new public concerns.

Second, like every other police officer we’ve introduced, Jorge is now posttrial. He is a convicted murderer serving out his sentence, following the letter of the law, as laid down by a judge. He spends his days in the general population. Much of his time is spent circulating around the prison and its lush green grounds. Not all prisoners live together, however. This is defining in other ways: convicted rapists are held in their cells, though administrators deny this is a formal practice. Convicted thieves and those found guilty of corruption are not seen outside their

6. In 2015 this type of crime became codified as femicide (*feminicidio*) in the Brazilian penal code, recognizing gender relations as an aggravating factor in many homicides.

quarters either. Those that killed off duty walk the grounds. And those that killed on duty are, simply, not here for that reason.

Beyond Containment

You're ridding the community of bad little fruit. And if you spare the wolf today, you condemn the sheep to die tomorrow.

—Victor

Marcos swears he didn't do it. Not this time, he says. He was found guilty for participating in a twilight mass murder—*chacina*—of seven men. Two months earlier he'd been caught on camera with others by a resident who filmed him and other police extorting and harassing neighborhood residents. The mass killing was pinned on him, Marcos believes, because of the public nature of the video and the widely assumed logic of the crime—police seeking to eliminate witnesses that might testify. Marcos swears on being a just and honest person who has become the subject of a politicized injustice as a result. “This world is hypocritical, capitalist, no one cares about their neighbor. If I had just looked the other way I'd have been fine.”

He was too good, he believes. “The guy that worked with me didn't know the limits, I did. I was always methodical and empirical, but what is the method of the institution? Beatings, bludgeoning, and bombs. Study doesn't matter. The police wants you to be a hunting dog, but they sell another story [to the public].” Marcos, who speaks of having killed on the job, leaves the paradox of injustice hanging: “Before they arrested me I was in a really good group, and it is even because of this that I was arrested, we were so great. Even me, an old guy, I felt young again.”

The exceptional prison can tell us crucial things about policing and the use of violence. Three are preeminent. First, even in a city where at least 25 percent of all formally registered violent deaths are committed by on-duty military police, virtually none of it is punished. In this place, one in four violent deaths is the result of police action. This won't come as much surprise to those who study Brazil. After all, between 2013 and 2016, in one city alone, police killed nearly thirty-five hundred people—66.5 percent of whom were black.⁷ Much work attests to the feeble or nonexistent judicial responses to police violence in Brazil that result in few police being arrested, brought to trial, or found guilty (Caldeira 2002; Zaccone 2015; Misse et al. 2013). Policing is, after all, about order maintenance (Ericson 1982; Fassin 2013; Steinberg 2014).

7. This despite the black population being, officially, only 37 percent of the population

Particularly striking, given the racial inequality of Brazil and the patterns evident in the statistics of police violence, is that race appears only as a pseudonym. In the version of liberal capitalism practiced in this country, a country that solicited and received the most chattel slaves from the transatlantic trade, order maintenance and threat are centrally about race. But under democracy, such an enemy is rarely explicitly defined as the young black or ethnic man—although this is a category well shaped in assumption and police practice. Our interviewees almost never used racial terminologies to locate their violence. Instead, they used myriad color-blind synonyms: *wolf*, *bad people*, *thugs* (*bandidos*), *prey*, *delinquents*, *fringe elements*, or *bad fruit*. These constructs, under symbol and pseudonym, produce and rely on wider assumptions of an “evil” and threatening figure that must be combatted at all costs and with all available means (Misse 2010). In Brazil, as elsewhere (Yahmatta Taylor 2016), color-blind and “racial democracy” narratives have been fastened together in the years since the end of the Cold War. Implied in these whitening euphemisms is what Alves (2018) calls the blackpolis—the city built on policing black life.

In the deeply racialized topography of the postcolonial Brazilian city, the real or implied black body is a particular target (Vargas and Alves 2010). Rich ethnographic work details how this violence is felt by its subject population, experienced affectively and through resurgent and recurrent trauma for black Brazilians (Smith 2013, 2015; Alves 2014). Several studies of police violence in Brazil demonstrate how racial bias and selectivity in police actions that result in heavily racialized police deaths (Cano 2014; Sinhoretto et al. 2014). A recent study by Michel Misse et al. (2013) found that public prosecutors archived 99.2 percent of all cases of lethal police violence in one city over a ten-year period. Under these conditions, historically heavy-handed approaches to address “fear of crime” haven’t led to only stop and frisk, “three strikes,” or the privatization of the prison system. In substantive addition, control takes place through mundane categories of police work, known variously around the country as “resisting arrest followed by death,” “death resulting from police intervention,” or “resistance cases” (Cano and Massini 1997). Such a condition is in keeping with how P. S. Pinheiro (1997) sees police action, as an expression of a system of domination under which law is precarious, enabling a kind of “socially implanted authoritarianism” (47).

Second, there are mechanisms for obscuring how unhindered this violence actually is. In an era of democratic accountability, rights, and the rhetoric of justice reform, the political sphere must defend itself. “Participatory security,” citizen engagement, and public oversight are some of the ways. This prison is a foil, casting a façade of police accountability through a peculiar performance and

pageantry of punishment. Many police arrive in this prison, but few become long-term residents. They are held for the duration of their trial and judgment before being released. Only one prisoner that we spoke with, a man named Francisco, was in this prison after being found guilty for killing a young black man on the job in a city *favela*. (Francisco also describes police officers as specially trained “hunting dogs” that need to go through a “beefing up process.”) Under these conditions, this prison operates as a kind of temporary insulation from public scrutiny, evoked in new reports after spectacular and egregious events, effectively deflecting criticism under the hopefulness of justice in process. Politicians can claim that accountability and oversight is coming. It is about iterative gains, a long arc of justice and citizenship. But, inevitably, public outrage blows over, consumed by the next case, unable to sustain its attention to individual cases in the flood of others. Years on, news quietly leaks out that police have been *inocentado* for their killing, and by now, they are flying well below the public-outrage radar.

Third, this institutional aberration reveals the dissonance between law on the books and law in practice. These walls serve a logic of containment different from what is widely surmised of prisons. To speak of police violence as “unjust” doesn’t make sense if law is the reference point; it flows through the law. Each of the police officers interviewed participated in many “resistance killings,” but they were never held responsible for them. Rather, they were arrested for crossing the fungible but observable line between what is constructed as permissible and not. What emerges from the evidence is that police who fail to kill in the appropriate manner, to kill the right people, to kill with the approved justifications and with appropriate self-control are subject to punishment. Don’t be wayward. You can’t kill your wife and not repent. Don’t take money to kill. Don’t kill too many people too quickly. Don’t kill again after you’ve been punished. A contrast emerges: learn to kill on the job.

The exceptional prison shows how violence carried out by police is not about individuals or deviation from occupational roles. At least not in the ways we expected. Violence (or, if you will, “force”) is an inalienable part of policing. Of that there is broad agreement. The debate about the adequate, controlled, slowly escalated or measured use of force is not trivial. It consumes large parts of criminology as a field of inquiry, with the distinctions and variations between “the use of legitimate and necessary force” and “police violence” the subject of worldwide studies (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993; Chevigny 1995; Klockars 1996; Bittner 2003). Not only so, it drives foundational scholarly and policy considerations about civilian control, accountability, and public service. For many, the meaningful boundary between the use of “legitimate force” (which can result in death) and the

“abuse of force” varies substantially according to the regime of government, cultural, and social context, and the relevant legislation of different countries and jurisdictions. In Brazil, police are legally justified to use lethal violence, but only in cases of extreme necessity and in the strict fulfillment of duty or in self-defense. Police officers in this prison never used the verb *matar*—to kill—with us, even in the face of visceral descriptions. Such violence is understood as legitimate. Why call it “killing”? There is, it seems, virtually no such thing as abusive force on the job, that is, in terms of who is actually punished.

This makes sense relative to previous research. Police violence has become so institutionally normal that those responsible for investigating police violence turn, pedagogically, toward making it less emotionally problematic for those involved. In 2015, during previous work, one of the authors observed homicide detectives—who are responsible for investigating lethal police violence—instructing police, after a case, to “be calm” and “aim for the center of the body . . . next time” (Denyer Willis 2015: 84).

The exceptional prison and the problem of police violence is not just about Brazil. The debate about measured use of force requires holistic interrogations of its basic assumptions. The world over (see also Jauregui 2015), there is little evidence that police are actually held to account for lethal violence. In the United States, the visibility of such violence has come with recent technological advances, and the use of body cameras was widely hoped to limit police use of force (there is substantive evidence to the contrary; see Ariel et. al 2016). To reiterate: the debate about the adequate, controlled, slowly escalated or measured use of force is not trivial; it is misguided.

This all raises key questions about the relationship between political will, violence, and policing. One school of thought, political liberalism, holds that contestation, mobilization, and the evocation of rights through citizenship allows for vital iterative gains. Democracy, via the state, allows for progress toward emancipation. Slow gains reshape injustice, beat back structural violence, and allow—demand—substantive institutional reforms. Iterative gains move toward a horizon of justice, on an unknown time line but with an ultimate (but undefined) promise. This body of thought has a long and prominent history in scholarship on Brazil and Latin America—often brought by scholars from a Northern elsewhere. But if this school and its political practice are correct, their successes are not evident in the exceptional prison and police violence. Indeed, if police continue to kill with abandon, not much has changed since Brazil’s redemocratization in 1985—or, indeed, over the last several hundred years (Holloway 1993). This political prescription has perhaps made it necessary for violence to be less public,

requiring the political sphere to develop techniques of obscurity and opacity. The ramification of making police violence less visible (to some) is the possibility of misguided hope. The horizon of justice is a mirage.

Another body of thought makes much more sense. “Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject,” writes Achille Mbembe (2003: 14), “we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death.” Both Mbembe and Carlos speak of police work as “a stage of war” and as “war by other means.” This prison and the life and death that it contains (and doesn’t contain) says invaluable things about politics in this regard. In having a prison like this, the politics of life and death, of sovereignty, of politics as ongoing war, shows its hand. This allows a glimpse at who can kill, under what conditions and how, on behalf of power—the emperor without his clothes. The implication, in the meantime, we leave to a prisoner named Pingo. “There is no way to fight what is done by police on the street,” he says, gesturing to himself as though on the street. “I will teach you the good, the bad, and what is possible, and you’ll need to walk among it.”

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