Movement between and beyond walls:

Micropolitics of incitements and variations among São Paulo's Prisoners' Movement the 'PCC' and the Prison System[1]

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In this paper, I write about the first results of my most recent research, conducted in a prison of Guarulhos city, in the metropolitan area of São Paulo, Brazil. Six years after I conduced my first research on prisons,[2] I have once again conducted research inside prison facilities. I returned to a penal institution in order to, on the one hand, observe the changes undergone by the collective of prisoners that I previously studied and, secondly, to address the specifics of their local composition, especially in relation to the management of the prison unit.

The prison where I conducted my research is a unit designated for men that were granted the right to semi-open conditions and has a capacity for 246 inmates, but currently houses a population of 568 men, divided into two pavilions. Most of them work during the day, some at the institution and others out of jail. Of those who work there, one part undertakes unit maintenance activities (such as cleaning, cooking and maintenance of outdoor spaces) and another part works in workshops installed by companies, in partnership with the prison administration. The prisoners are related to the First Command of Capital (PCC), a type of prisoner collective that appeared in the early 1990s and currently is present in the majority of penal institutions and urban areas within the State of São Paulo.

The PCC has commonly been referred to as 'the biggest prison gang' or as 'organised crime', yet I approach it as a 'movement'. But as a movement, the PCC does not fit easily into specific, delimited spaces or temporal intervals. This is due, in part, to the fact that it does not have a defined origin or endpoints. As a result, the PCC-as-movement is never limited to the trajectories traced out or encouraged by particular people, not even the 'brothers' (PCC members) themselves. The PCC is instead composed by the simultaneous crossing of several movements. These traverse territories, times, and people in a motility that erases and leaves behind even as it establishes powerful traces. This is one result of a PCC composed of disparate entities that do not reveal any definitive, corresponding identities. Or, put slightly differently, people and things do not come together — all together — in order to take up shared, definitive paths in realizing a common goal or participating in a cohesive mission. Far from making up a monolithic unit, the movement called the PCC does not simply behave like the type of movement I am working to describe here, but it is also constituted by multiple and varied 'minor' movements that promise to provide the Movement called the PCC with diverse forms, calibers, velocities, and pathways. So, instead of defining the PCC as a gang or as organised crime, I would approach it as a name or as a quality of relations, following the traditional anthropological attention to human relations.

These are the relationships that tension the daily life of the prison where I conducted my research. According to the prisoners with whom I spoke, that semi-open conditions unit was actually semi-open, as opposed to other prisons of the same type located in the Greater São Paulo, which they defined as semi-closed. They highlighted the job opportunities and training offered by the unit, which they contrasted with those found in other units. In contrast, they said, there still existed what they defined as injustices practiced by the team of prison staff in relation to prisoners. Moreover, the interaction between the prisoners was not the best they had ever lived and therefore it was not the best prison through which they already passed.

1. This paper is a version of my presentation at the session Gangs, Prison Governance, Gender & 'Rehabilitation' in Latin America, organized by Julienne Weegels (Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation CEDLA), at the 2016 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association. The research presented in this article was part of post-doctoral activities conducted at the University of Campinas, Brazil, with a scholarship granted by CAPES (Higher Education Personnel Improvement Coordination) and financial resources provided by CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development). I am particularly grateful to Juan Albarracin for dialogues and for help in translation.

2. Biondi, Karina. 2010. *Junto e misturado: uma etnografia do PCC*. São Paulo: Editora Terceiro Nome. Published in English as Biondi, Karina. 2016. *Sharing this walk: An Ethnography of Prison Life and the PCC in Brazil*. Edited and translated by John F. Collins. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

This was due to three factors. First, as it is a regime that usually precedes open conditions, many prisoners feared reacting to these injustices. This could make them lose the benefit of the semi-open conditions and would take them back to closed conditions. Second, the prison population housed in that unit was mostly formed of first offenders condemned for short sentences. Many had been sentenced directly to semi-open conditions. According to the prisoners with whom I spoke, the vast majority of these inmates 'were not from crime',[3] but drug users. It was an effect of the current law that decriminalises the use of drugs, and the actions of the police, who arrest the users as if they were drug dealers, and of the judges who condemn them. Finally, the interaction between the prisoners was not the best they had ever lived because the PCC was very little rigorous, giving room for many attitudes that did not fit with their ethics. According to the prisoners, until 2009, someone that made a mistake received a charge (in the form of reprimand, aggression, expulsion from the coexistence area or, ultimately, in the form of his death). From 2009 until now, the PCC had become 'more tolerant'; its members had begun to prefer to create awareness in prisoners rather than punish them. That was the first time I had heard about the 'Rescue Era', mentioned in the work of Dias.[4] With that, they say, there is now no 'seguro' (space for prisoners whose lives are at risk when in contact with others). Only rapists, whistleblowers and members of other factions, cases considered very serious, are sent to prisons controlled by rival gangs.

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Penal legislation (that defines the penal regime), Law of Criminal Executions (that guide the conditions benefits), prison management (that dispose about internal punishments), State secretary of prison administration (that define the profile of prison's population), legislation that decriminalized drug use, along with the police action and action of the Courts of Justice (which led to the arrest as dealers who before the decriminalising were considered users), PCC ethics. All these forces are transformed into movements by the prisoners in their assessments of the possibilities of action in the situation in which they find themselves. All this is transformed into ordinary components of the PCC that operates in that prison unit.

An event that occurred during my research served as an illustration of the problems of coexistence at the prison unit, as pointed out by the prisoners. During 15 days, an entire pavilion was punished. No prisoner could go out for work, study or even for association (or to collaborate on my research). After that, I talked to some prisoners who explained to me what had happened. According to them, there was a blitz in which more than 40 mobile phones were seized. Prison officials requested that the prisoners responsible for the phones plead guilty, but none of the prisoners did. Something similar had happened a few weeks before, when drugs were seized and also no prisoners appeared to be responsible for them. On both occasions, all prisoners suffered the punishment of being locked in the pavilion.

A guard told me that in such cases, the administration needs a name to whom it can attribute the material found, and usually the prisoners themselves induce someone to assume responsibility. Detainees confirmed that this works, or at least should work in this way: a prisoner assumes the responsibility of the seized material so that the punishment does not fall on everyone. However, they didn't. Nobody assumed responsibility and everyone was punished. If, on the one hand, it showed a lack of solidarity among the prisoners or lack of one among them who had argumentative power to persuade a prisoner to take responsibility (which denotes a certain weakness of the 'brothers' in the prison unit or a absence of 'brothers' there), on the other hand it revealed that 'equality',[5] so valuable to the ethics of PCC, was there with all its strength. After all, no prisoner was forced to assume the offense and none of them tried to force another to do so.

An inmate whose first arrest occurred even in the early 1990s was discontented with what occurred and with what happened later. According to him, in the absence of a prisoner prepared to assume responsibility

3. Different from the legal definition for crime, for prisoners this word concerns a specific form of conduct that can be followed for those engaged in criminal acts, as well as for those who are not. Thus, there are criminals who are not from crime and workers who never infringed the law that are from crime.
4. Dias, Camila Caldeira Nunes. 2011. *Da pulverização ao monopólio da violência: expansão e consolidação do Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) no sistema carcerário paulista.* Tese de doutorado em Sociologia defendida na Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras da Universidade de São Paulo.
5. Biondi. 2010. See n.2.

for the cell phones, the director of discipline had gone to the pavilion to lecture to the inmates about how things work in these cases. 'It was a slap in the face brothers'. He continued:

> *Because it is one thing when the director or a guard talks about his work, what can, what cannot be done, what is related to the operation of the prison, right? But interaction between inmates is a matter for prisoners. We have to solve it between us. But then the director was giving a lecture to talk about how we have to behave among us. That does not exist! It is unacceptable!*

According to him, the 'brothers' should promote this conversation with the prison population and explain to the prisoners how things work in the case of seizure of forbidden objects. A volunteer to take responsibility for the object should appear to prevent 300 prisoners from being harmed, and it was the PCC's responsibility to work to make it happen. At the same time, the tolerance and the permissiveness of the PCC had created a problem for the prison administration: the absence of a name to attribute ownership of the objects.

We saw how movements incited by this new attitude of the PCC contribute to the composition of the prison population of that unit (its more tolerant stance ceased to expel imprisoned from that prison). After all, if the PCC had another posture, many prisoners that fulfilled their sentences in the prison would be sent to jails controlled by rival gangs. Thus, the composition of the unit prison, defined by the jail's management, is incited by movement triggered by the prisoner policies. Moreover, the reduction of cases of aggression and deaths within the prison system create specific conditions for the management of prisons. Finally, the PCC's stance to be lenient with errors or not ensure that a prisoner is presented as responsible for seizures creates impasses for the prison administration and for the processes that result from these events.

According to the prisoners, the prison was not the best through which they had passed because of the penalty compliance regime that is intended, the profile of prisoners and the new attitude of the PCC. All these factors congregate elements that do not end on the outskirts of the prison unit and involve factional policies, prison policies, prison management, staff, legislation, policing, decisions of the Justice and the Court of Criminal Executions.

When I approach the PCC as a Movement composed by many movements, both 'inside' and 'outside' are then not so evident. Even if one considers the penal institutions as the center of the PCC, and if one considers that one is never more within the state than when inside a prison (as remembered by Barbosa,[6] inspired by Foucault),[7] my proposed approach offers a perspective that neither puts the PCC at the margins of state[8] or as something that arises in the 'absence' of the state, as seen by King and Valensia.[9] On the contrary, this approach enables us to describe how detainees — PCC members — put in movement administrative actions and prison policies, and how their movement in turn is productive of changes both in the management of prisons and public security.

This allows me to describe how the PCC is co-produced through the exercise of justice, security operations, current laws, public policies, and by what is written about it.[10] At the same time, it also allows me to approach the effects of movements in prison management, mainly the way they are lived by inmates. Whereas the policies or prison administrations do not start from a harmonically constituted State and do not act on the uniquely classified population — i.e. 'State' and 'prisoners' cannot be approached as monolithic units — my intention is to describe the micropolitics of incitements and variations in those relationships.

6. Barbosa, Antonio Rafael. 2005. *Prender e dar fuga: biopolítica, sistema penitenciário e tráfico de drogas no Rio de Janeiro*. Tese de doutorado em Antropologia Social. Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Museu Nacional. Rio de Janeiro.
7. Foucault, Michel. 1996 [1975]. *Vigiar e punir: história da violência nas prisões*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
8. Das, Veena and Poole, Deborah. 2008. 'El estado e sus márgenes. Etnografías comparadas'. Cuadernos de Antropología Social. No 27, pp. 19–52.
9. King, Roy D. and Valensia, Bruna. 2014. 'Power, Control, and Symbiosis in Brazilian Prisons'. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 113 Issue 3, pp. 503–528. King and Bruna write about the same penitential complex where I conduced my fieldwork. However, they are not rigorous with the date or theory. They consider things that occurred in early 90s as current, do not make their source of information clear (from guards, prisoners, newspaper, books), or who is talking about who. They also confuse reciprocity with symmetry when they criticize the work of Darke (Darke, Sacha. 2013a. 'Entangled Staff–Inmate Relations.' *Prison Service Journal*, no 207, pp. 16–23; 2013b. Darke, Sacha. 'Inmate Governance in Brazilian Prisons.' *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 52, no 3, pp. 272–84), and seem to assume that all Brazilian prisons operate under the same administrative, management and factional conditions.
10. For another conjugations that produce specific prison settings, see Garces, Chris. 2010. 'The cross politics of Ecuador's Penal State'. *Cultural Anthropology* , Vol. 25, Issue 3, pp. 459–496; Garces, Chris. 2014. 'Ecuador's 'black site': On prison securitization and its zones of legal silence'. *Focaal — Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology, Vol*. 68, pp. 18–34.