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The Bastard Child of the Dictatorship:

*The Comando Vermelho and the Birth of
"Narco-culture" in Rio de Janeiro*

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Este artigo apresenta um análise do surgimento e da evolução do Comando Vermelho, uma organização de tráfico de drogas nas favelas do Rio de Janeiro. Baseando-se em pesquisa etnográfica numa favela do Rio, o artigo mostra o impacto que o crescimento do tráfico de drogas teve sobre a vida dos moradores das favelas do Rio, produzindo novos padrões sociais, novos símbolos de identidade e novas formas de poder. O artigo analisa como o Comando Vermelho aproveitou-se das contradições sociais existentes enquanto também utilizou o seu conhecimento da cultura dos moradores para criar uma "narco-cultura" que continua a ter um impacto profundo na vida cotidiana dos moradores das favelas do Rio.

Introduction

One afternoon in 1999 I asked André, a resident of Caxambu, a *favela* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, what the neighborhood was like when he was younger:

André: Ah, it was good. But when I was fifteen to twenty there was a climate that was . . . how could I say this? . . . Sort of stormy, right? Wars. It was the time of wars in the seventies to eighties. Understand? Drug wars, right? And it wasn't good for the community.

Ben: Of course not.

André: So what happened? No one had peace. But then there was a change in the behavior . . . with a change in the personnel (*uma mudança no pessoal*) there was a change in behavior. It seems that people started waking

up slowly, about what was right and what wasn't. What should be done and what shouldn't. And over time they changed things.

Ben: And then it got better?

André: Absolutely.

In recent years scholars have examined the causes and consequence of violence and drug-trafficking in Rio de Janeiro, particularly in the city's favelas. The literature has attained a critical point where it is now possible to assess a crucial issue: the nature of Rio's drug trafficking groups, the power they exert in favelas, and the effect they have had on social, political and economic relations in Rio's favelas and beyond. Bringing together literature on violence in favelas in Rio with my own ethnographic research in Caxambu, a favela in the northern Zone of Rio, this article analyzes the emergence, consolidation, and legacies of the "new personnel" that André alluded to: the Comando Vermelho, or CV.¹ I argue that the most important legacy of the CV was a set of symbols, discourses and the tactics the group produced.

The time period of the late 1970s-late 1990s, was a crucial turning-point when the distribution and sale of cocaine had a profound impact not only upon the daily lives of residents of Rio's favelas, but also upon social and political structures in Rio de Janeiro and indeed upon the nature of Brazil's transition to democracy. Although by the late 1990s the nature of drug trafficking in Rio had changed, André's comments illustrate that the emergence of the Comando Vermelho (or CV) had a profound effect upon the social relationships established between residents of Rio's favelas and traffickers, and thus on the relationship between favelas and the state. It has affected how residents of Rio's favelas periodize their history (into times of "war" and of "peace"), think of their communities, and understand legitimate forms of power. Drug trafficking has even transformed the lexicon of favela residents, adding new connotations to terms like *pessoal* (personnel), *amigos* (friends), *o homem* (the man), and *os caras* (the guys).

The expansion of drug-trafficking and the emergence of the Comando Vermelho are clearly connected to the wave of violence that has characterized post-dictatorship Brazil. Looking at nation-wide homicide rates, in 1979, during the military's rule, the homicide rate was 11.5 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. By 1997, more than ten years after the return to democracy, the homicide rate in Brazil more than doubled, increasing to 25.4 per 100,000.² Drug-trafficking is not the only cause of violence. Violent policing, the proliferation of handguns, the growth of petty crime, the highly unequal distribution of wealth and the legacies of authoritarianism are all to blame. Police violence against civilians has assumed epidemic proportions: in Rio alone,

the police killed 1,194 civilians between January 1993 and July 1996.³ But as Robert Gay has argued, “by far the most important factor in the increase in violent crime is drugs.”⁴

Drawing upon both secondary sources and my own ethnographic research in a favela in Rio’s Zona Norte, I will make two central arguments. First, I will argue that the CV was instrumental in generating what Brazilian favela activists such as MV Bill, Celso Athayde and José Júnior, have called a “narco-culture.” Other scholars have noted how drug traffickers associated with the CV not only created a new way of organizing drug-trafficking and criminality, in the process territorializing drug-trafficking in Rio’s favelas, but also constituted a new structure of authority in Rio’s favelas and, thus, changed how favelas and their residents were connected to the state and Brazilian society at large.⁵ Less commonly analyzed is how the group also produced a broader set of representations, symbols and discourses.⁶ As the comments of André, the resident of Caxambu reveal, perhaps one of the most profound legacy of the emergence of drug trafficking has been upon the meanings – such as notions of “what’s right and what isn’t” – that favela residents used to understand their lives.

Second, I will argue that the CV is an example of, and a main contributor to, the new ways that favela residents are integrated into and yet excluded from larger socio-economic systems. It is not by coincidence that the regional trade in cocaine, marijuana and other illicit drugs expanded in the late 1970s and 1980s, as authoritarian regimes were beginning to democratize and as borders and local economies were being opened to greater international penetration. It is essential to see the CV as more than just a criminal organization seeking to profit from the sales of cocaine and marijuana, but as a “bastard child,” or unintended and undesired offspring, of Brazil’s military dictatorship and, more broadly, of the relationships established between residents of favelas and the rest of the city.

Following on Carolyn Nordstrom’s concept of il/legal economies, I argue that to understand the process by which flows of illegal goods transform local cultures, it is necessary to think of structures of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. As Nordstrom notes, the “shadow economies” where the line between legal and illegal goods is blurred “are not peripheral to a country’s economic and political systems, but are deeply enmeshed in them.”⁷ The metaphor of bastardization points to how the “offspring” of legitimate social actors are unintended, unwanted, seen as illegitimate and as social pariahs, yet are very much a direct product of the larger forces that have “birthed” them.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong about children born outside of the legally or religiously sanctioned institution of marriage. The

point is, rather, to point to the complex and contested nature of the “offspring” –anticipated or not, socially recognized or not, incorporated as legitimate offspring or socially ostracized – which are the result of forms of socio-economic production and reproduction. Concepts such as “perverse integration,” applied by Alba Zaluar to drug-trafficking in Rio, emphasizing as they do connections, even if illegal ones, do not seem to adequately capture the simultaneous process of integration and exclusion.⁸

The social phenomenon of illegitimate offspring is, of course, a very familiar theme in Brazilian culture, from Gilberto Freyre’s classic work to telenovelas such as “Escrava Isaura.” And Brazilian history shows, repeatedly, the creative strategies that formally excluded peoples have used to transform traditional social structures. Without romanticizing drug-trafficking groups, it is essential to see them as responding creatively and innovatively, and often violently, to their simultaneous exclusion and integration. It is also essential to focus on the symbols, discourses and meanings that drug trafficking produces.

The emergence and growth of the CV is also one example – though perhaps a dark one – of the new structures of power, new forms of identity and new conflicts that have been created as Latin American nations have emerged from dictatorship and state-controlled economies into the harsh glare of neoliberalism and free-market capitalism. The expansion of global economy, revolutions in technology, transportation and communication, and free-market oriented reforms such as deregulation, privatization, and liberalization, have all enhanced legal international economic activities and also the flow of illegal goods and services. But the neoliberal imperative to open up markets clashes with the push, from the U.S. and various international organizations, to crack down on the cross-border flow of psychoactive substances such as cocaine and marijuana. As Andreas has noted: “The effort to tighten state controls over the flow of illicit drugs contrasts sharply with the current global trend to relax state controls over the flow of goods, services, and capital.”⁹ Out of this contradictory process have emerged, region-wide, new or transformed social actors, new forms of power, and new identities.

Nonetheless, drug trafficking assumes a unique shape in Rio. To understand effects of drug trade it is not enough to focus on factors such as regional shifts in supply, demand, distribution and repression. As Francisco Thoumi argues, internal regional and local forces alter the shape and effect of drug trafficking.¹⁰ Especially important are relations between poor communities and the state, local forms of cultural identity and perceptions of power and justice. Drug-trafficking organizations have deep connections to local and regional economies, and also to local understandings of authority, power, and social organization and identity.

I will first trace how and why the Comando Vermelho emerged to dominate the cocaine trade in Rio de Janeiro, paying special attention to why drug trafficking became territorialized in Rio's favelas. I will then examine the tactics that traffickers associated with the CV used to legitimate themselves in Rio's favelas. This historical and ethnographic material will allow for two larger discussions: an analysis of how the CV's members operated at both the favela-level and in the broader market in illegal drugs, and a discussion of the group's legacies. In the conclusion I will point to how the "narco-panic" associated with drug trafficking relates to larger anxieties about changes in Brazil's socio-economic structures.

A "Vast Criminal Conspiracy" or a "Way of Thinking and Being"

As Gordon Hawkins argued, part of the difficulty in understanding organized crime results from how the phenomenon is depicted. Organized crime is "referred to in terms that imply divine attributes, such as invisibility, immateriality, eternity, omnipresence and omnipotence."¹¹ The Comando Vermelho is often depicted, in the Brazilian press in particular, as shadowy and invisible, yet all-knowing and all-powerful. The Comando Vermelho is also often compared to the North American and Sicilian Mafia, being seen as either a group of "social bandits," protecting the poor against the depredations of the powerful, albeit for their own profit, or as a vast, centrally-organized criminal conspiracy acting at the behest of a criminal mastermind. Though these characterizations help increase the organization's image – and, not coincidentally, sell newspapers, justify larger budgets for policing, and allow politicians to attack their rivals – they do not help to understand the CV or its effects.

In the social science literature, the Comando Vermelho has variously been described as a "narco-dictatorship," a "parallel polity" or a "criminal network."¹² In perhaps the most provocative assessment, Marcos Alvito has argued that the CV should be seen not as an empirical entity, but as a "myth," or collective representation. For Alvito, this myth was fed by long-standing representations of favelas as sites of disorder and savagery, repressive and militarized policing, and sensationalistic media coverage, which together produced a "phantom."¹³

When discussing the CV, it is important, as R.T. Naylor has so aptly stated, not to mistake an association of criminals for a criminal association.¹⁴ Simply because drug traffickers identify with the name "Comando Vermelho," does not necessarily mean that this is a criminal organization, much less a fairly permanent and hierarchically structured entity such as a state or a dictatorship. But neither is the CV merely a "phantom," the collec-

tive product of self-interested representations by the police, the media and the state.

The CV is most accurately described as a loose association of drug traffickers who come together for reciprocal assistance yet who act with great degrees of autonomy. It can be thought of, as it is often described by its members and favela residents, as a *bandeira* (a flag) or a *modo de pensar e agir* (a way of thinking and acting). As an “association of criminals,” it brings together a loose, but lasting, set of symbols of common identity, a general strategy to use for collective gain, and a set of assumptions about how to interact with other criminals, with residents of poor neighborhoods, and with the state.¹⁵

It is also difficult to generalize about a group as amorphous as the CV. Because favela-level drug bosses have a wide degree of local autonomy, there is considerable variation in practices among those who consider themselves to be part of the CV. This problem is compounded, as Luiz Eduardo Soares has noted, by the way in which the categories used by social science – such as “violence” or “drug-trafficking” – present a false and overly simplistic view of phenomena marked by complexity and multiplicity. As Soares notes: “There is no such thing as *the* drug-trade, or *the* drug-trafficker, but instead multiple distinct ways of experiencing the entrance, exit, participation and leadership in the multiple and heterogeneous world that we designate with the generic category drug-trafficking.”¹⁶

Nonetheless, there are some important commonalities in the drug trade, as individual traffickers respond to larger forces such as the nature of the illegal economy and shifting patterns of state repression or tolerance. And even as a loose association of drug-traffickers, the CV has common features which distinguished it both from drug-trafficking operations in other parts of Brazil and from prior methods of distributing and selling drugs within the city of Rio. What is important to keep in mind are the overall similarities and wide variety of empirical examples.

The drug-trafficking group in the favela where I conducted my research is a case in point. Even as the CV splintered into rival factions in the late 1990s, the period of my main fieldwork, residents and drug-traffickers in the favela described the local drug-trafficking group as an “old-style” CV organization. Residents of Caxambu often contrasted the local drug traffickers with what they regarded as the younger, more violent and capricious, and less “respectful” traffickers of other communities. This form of comparison – our favela is “safer” and less “chaotic” than others – is no doubt widespread throughout Rio, and often serves as a guarded way for favela residents to exert social pressure upon traffickers. These comparisons also serve two useful analytical purposes: to understand the CV in its period of greatest influence (the late 1980s-early 1990s), a phase that was already ending as I conducted

my fieldwork; and to ground generalizations about the CV's practices in actual ethnographic observation.

CV and Drug Trafficking in Rio de Janeiro

The emergence of drug trafficking organizations in Rio has been seen as a result of the state's inability or unwillingness to exert control over territories, economic activities and populations. For instance, Donna Goldstein argues that the state's absence in favelas – especially its inability to provide public safety – led favela residents to turn to local figures for protection. "The gangs," Golstein argues, "provide an alternative justice system – a parallel state, if you will – among the poorest, who thoroughly reject a corrupt police force and, in their everyday lives, seek some organized entity that can administer 'justice' in the local arena."¹⁷

An alternative approach argues that drug-trafficking groups such as the CV emerged in a context of patron-client relations between favela residents and local elites, effectively colonizing these structures of power. Michele Misse, for example, argues that Rio's drug trafficking groups grew out of both an old tradition of urban crime and the "dangerous liaisons" that connected criminals to agents of the state.¹⁸ Arias has expanded upon this approach arguing that criminals in Rio's favelas have created "connections to state and civic actors to fend off efforts by other criminals and some law-abiding state actors to arrest, kill, or displace them."¹⁹

Though both these approaches contain important insights – drug traffickers would not exert the power they do without antagonistic relations between favela-dwellers and the state, or without the patron-client networks enabled by the absence of formal institutional ties – a closer look at the CV's history presents a more complex picture. Three features stand out. First, is how legitimate actors, such as the state's repressive apparatus and the media, contributed to the creation of the organization, in many cases unknowingly and unwillingly. Thus, rather than seeing drug-traffickers as filling in a void, it is important to see how they were actually the unwanted offspring of larger social forces.

Second is the extent to which the CV shifted according to its integration into various criminal markets. These criminal markets, it is important to note, are the product of relationships of both conflict and cooperation between state actors and criminals. As Friman and Andreas argue, the state's prohibition of activities such as drug-dealing does not always match its ability to control these activities. This gap between prohibition and repression creates the illegal market: as they state, "the illicit global economy is defined by and depends on the state exercising metapolitical authority to criminalize without the full capacity to effectively enforce its criminal laws."²⁰ Not

only does prohibition create the “added value” of drugs, but shifts in how state agents repress or collude with criminals alter the illicit criminal market. The CV has to be understood not primarily as a gang seeking to protect favela residents, but as group of social actors responding to different costs and opportunities generated by a changing criminal marketplace.

Third, is of more lasting importance in the CV’s history is not so the creation of a “narco-ditadura,” or a coherent, centralized and hierarchical organization, but instead a more diffuse network of actors tied together through reciprocal assistance and common symbols. It is this loose association and the tactics, structures of authority, discourses and symbols – a “narco-cultura” – used by the group to legitimate itself in Rio’s favelas and control the drug trade, that would have a lasting impact long after the CV’s power began to fracture and dissipate.

Ilha Grande and the “Organização da Fumaça”

The history of the group that became the Comando Vermelho has been recounted in detail elsewhere.²¹ But two elements in this history are important to highlight. First, though the group first emerged as a prison-based organization, its early history generated significant elements of what would later become a widespread “narco-cultura,” a set of ideas and rules, identities and symbols, and aspirations and modes of representation. Second, the group’s early history helps to identify the parents who contributed to the Comando Vermelho’s birth.

It is not a historical coincidence that the drug trade became an important force in Rio’s favelas at the time of democratization; in a fairly direct sense, the Comando Vermelho was the bastard child of the dictatorship’s attempt to repress armed political opposition. As is now well-documented, the CV first emerged in the 1970s in the Cândido Mendes prison on Ilha Grande, where members of armed political groups and common prisoners convicted under the Lei de Segurança Nacional, or LSN, were housed in the same unit of the prison, Galeria B.

The military regime’s repressive apparatus successfully stamped out armed political opposition. Yet these very repressive activities generated new enemies and new forms of oppositional identification. The memoirs of William da Silva, one of the early organizers of the CV, reveal the larger dynamic at work. For example, in the 1970s, the police arrested William after he robbed a bank and then handed him over to the DOI-CODI, the military’s main agents of repression. There, according to his biography, agents tortured William demanding that he identify the subversive political organization to which he belonged. In a perfect example of what Taussig has described as the mimesis of violence, the interrogators produced that which

they sought to repress.²² After four days of torture, William stated that he was part of the *organização da fumaça* or the “organization of smoke.”²³

Much has been made of the connections between political prisoners and common criminals, with competing versions claiming, alternately, that the common prisoners absorbed tactical and ideological lessons from the political prisoners, or that there was considerable tension and conflict between the two groups.²⁴ It seems, though, that what was transmitted from the political prisoners to common inmates was both more diffuse and more-long lasting: the common criminals saw what could be achieved if they united together in a group for mutual assistance and acted collectively by organizing around a common identity (LSN prisoners) and a common set of rules to which all were beholden.

For instance, the common criminals in Galeria B saw how the political prisoners organized themselves, sharing any food or money that they received from outside the prison and enforcing strict discipline that banned inmates from attacking or stealing from each other, practices which were common in the prison. The political prisoners also joined together to defend any political prisoner who had been assaulted by guards or by other prisoners and to demand better conditions. The military’s strategy of holding all prisoners under the Lei de Segurança Nacional also generated a common identity, under which inmates joined together in a common struggle against the prison system for better treatment and to achieve their ultimate goal, escape. William da Silva states, that the Lei de Segurança Nacional became their “trade mark, even from a personal point of view.”²⁵

The common prisoners in the Fundão section of Galeria B organized themselves into a group initially called the Falange LSN. This grouping, called a *coletivo* or collective, was not a hierarchically-structured organization. Instead, it was a group of like-minded prisoners committed to assisting each other, ensuring better treatment by guards and fellow inmates, and helping with escape attempts. To pursue these aims, the group sought to spread its *maneira de pensar* (or way of thinking), and its common prison rules, or *estilo de comportamento* (style of behaving), rather than create a hierarchical prison gang. In 1979, the Falange LSN killed several leaders of a rival gang and took over the prison.²⁶

When the LSN prisoners assumed control of the prison, William da Silva described not the consolidation of a new structure of authority, but the diffusion of new social norms. He states: “The repercussion in the entire system was enormous. Very quickly the rules of the Fundão were adopted in all prisons: death to anyone who assaults or rapes fellow prisoners; conflicts brought from the street must be left outside of prison; violence only to attempt to escape; constant struggle against repression and abuse.”²⁷

The military dictatorship's strategy of repressing prisoners and submitting them to harsh treatment in Ilha Grande not only led to a new form of prison sociability, with new rules of mutual assistance, but also produced other features that would come to characterize the CV as members of the group moved into drug-trafficking. For instance, the early organizers of the CV, in pushing for mutual assistance and unity within the prison system, stated that divisions and conflicts "from the street" should be abandoned in prison. This split between prison and "street" behavior would be influential in creating a distinction, which persists to this day, between the CV's relative consolidation within prison and its much looser ties outside the penal system.

It also inaugurated another feature: the combination of unity and mutual assistance with wide latitude for independent behavior. While CV leaders urged prisoners to refrain from attacking each other, they were allowed to carry out other activities as long as they did not harm the "collective." William da Silva, for instance, stated that with the exception of abolishing the prison gangs, "we didn't mess with anyone's affairs, so that everyone could have their own small businesses. All that was prohibited was killing, stealing, raping, and, of course, informing (*alcaguetar*)."²⁸ This structure of loose rules prohibiting rival organizations, and banning robbery, theft, rape and informing to the police, yet allowing for maximum individual autonomy, would eventually be carried by members of the CV into Rio's favelas.

The experience of observing the actions and treatment of the political prisoners seems to have convinced members of the CV that open confrontation with the penal system, rather than individual prisoners making their own deals with guards, was the best option. During the last years of the dictatorship, the political prisoners on Ilha Grande claimed a special status not only for ideological reasons, but also because they could see that an amnesty for politically-motivated crimes was on the horizon. The other prisoners did not have such an opening and, Silva states, chose the opposite path: rather than seeking reintegration into legitimate middle-class society outside the prison, the prisoners in the Fundão section of Ilha Grande's prison sought to bring together the *massa carcerária* to "struggle for freedom, counting on our own methods."²⁹

The CV sought to break with the earlier pattern whereby prisoners formed corrupt alliances with prison guards and then used their authority to mistreat fellow inmates. Inmates, the CV urged, should present a "common front" to the guards rather than remain divided against each other. In many ways the CV today is much more of a brand, or "common front," to which drug-traffickers claim allegiance, than an established organization. At the same time, though, the *bandeira* held up by CV was predicated upon

a new form of social organization which members of the group would take into Rio's favelas: presenting a united opposition to a common enemy, rather than building or utilizing individualistic patron-client relations.

The CV and the “War in the Favelas”

By the early 1980s, as some prisoners escaped from Ilha Grande and others were transferred to different prisons, the CV's influence spread. Its organizational base also widened, to include other prisons and the outside world. The Comando Vermelho began to develop deeper roots in the favelas and poor neighborhoods of Rio, for two reasons. First, many prisoners were from these neighborhoods. Second, because of the CV's successful organizing in prison, it quickly became advantageous for criminals to join the organization so that they would have *companheiros* in prison if they were arrested.

The birth of the CV as a result of the military's repression of dissidents illuminates the group's origins, but taken alone, it does not explain why the group moved into drug trafficking, why it adopted the tactics that it did, or what effects it has had on larger city-wide political and social structures. Nor does it account for the high levels of violence that drug-trafficking has produced. To explain these developments, other 'parents' of this bastard child must be taken into account, including: changes in the regional criminal marketplace, a long history of abusive policing and state neglect of favelas, prior patterns of patronage relations that tied favela residents to non-favela elites, and changes in state repressive policies.

The original leaders of the Comando Vermelho were mainly bank robbers, though its early members also included some prisoners convicted of drug dealing (including a drug dealer from Caxambu). During the 1980s, the Comando Vermelho began to move into the drug trade in a more systematic fashion. A second *grupo dirigente*, or leadership group, was set up in prison, with the goal of establishing themselves as the main retail sellers for Colombian cartels by controlling all of the sales points in the favelas in Rio and eliminating any "independents."³⁰ By 1984, traffickers associated with the CV were well on their way to controlling the drug trade in Rio, as several important *donos*, or owners of drug selling points in favelas, were part of the organization or would soon join.³¹ During this period – the "time of wars" that André referred to – the CV ignited a series of violent conflicts with other groups in the city's favelas. By the end of 1985, the CV controlled the drug trade in seventy percent of the favelas of the city of Rio.³²

For some observers, the turn-over in leadership of the CV, and its shift from bank-robbery and kidnapping to drug-dealing, mean that by the mid 1980s, the "original" CV ceased to exist.³³ Others claim that the "second team" that took over the CV represented a change, though not a rupture,

with the past.³⁴ But if the CV was never a hierarchically-structured group, but a “way of thinking,” then this debate misses the important point: how the modes of social organization, symbols and forms of identity the group created in prison have shaped drug trafficking in Rio’s favelas. Closer examination reveals both continuities in modes of organization and representation produced during the CV’s earlier period, and also changes, as the CV’s strategies and goals adapted to the exigencies of a new criminal marketplace, shifts in relationships with the state, and to the social and cultural context of the city’s favelas.

Mutual Assistance and Forced Reciprocity

The CV’s most important move was to adapt its policy of mutual assistance to the new context of Rio’s favelas in a way that enabled traffickers associated with the group to profit from the region-wide expansion of cocaine trafficking in the late 1970s and 1980s. Here, the CV’s policies met, and significantly altered, both a new economic marketplace and older patterns that both excluded favela resident from effective citizenship, subjecting them to repressive policing, and yet integrated them into larger, if “unofficial” political and economic systems.

In the 1980s, traffickers associated with the CV began the group’s policy of *boa vizinhança*, or neighborliness. Expanding upon the rules of the Fundão, which prohibited inmates from attacking, robbing or raping each other, the CV instituted a system of forced reciprocity in favelas by which traffickers provided security in favelas, outlawing theft, robbery or rape, in exchange for the silence or complicity of favela residents. Older favela strongmen, sometimes with ties to the police, often ruled through fear and intimidation, sometimes arbitrarily attacking residents. The CV, by contrast, would combine its coercive power with rules that prohibited crime and promised that traffickers would not attack residents who “respected” them. This policy – the “change in behavior” that André alluded to – allowed traffickers associated with the CV to take advantage of a local favelas social context, distinguishing themselves from older favela-based drug dealers and from the police, to maximize the profits they could extract from a wider regional and city-wide distribution and sales of drugs.

Bank robbery, theft, and kidnapping have different requirements than drug-trafficking. Bank robbers did need a permanent base of operations, though they did need areas to store stolen goods, and connections to fences. Success in drug-trafficking requires greater capital inputs: a wider and more long-lasting set of social relationships, including relationships with suppliers and customers, and investments in shipments of drugs, weapons and manpower. Drug dealing also requires a more-or-less permanently estab-

lished territory for distribution, and areas for stockpiling drugs and weapons, “cutting” (or adulterating) cocaine, and packaging of larger shipments of cocaine and marijuana into smaller sales units. This means that as the CV’s leadership shifted from bank robbery to a new section of the criminal marketplace, control over territory, the ability to forge relationships with allies, having access to capital, being able to discourage competitors, and strategizing to influence law enforcement are all major assets.

Given the demands of the cocaine market, favelas became key sites for the distribution and sales of cocaine in the city of Rio. Clearly favelas had important logistical characteristics. Many favelas are located near major routes into the city (sources of supply) and near good transportation routes to wealthier neighborhoods or indeed adjacent to wealthier neighborhoods (sources of demand). And the social and physical geography of favelas – often located on hilltops, and often not officially mapped nor built on any easily patrolled grid – made them ideal territory to defend against rivals and elude apprehension by the police.

However, there was nothing automatic about the affiliation between favelas and drug sales. Several other forces are responsible for this relationship. Most important are prior patterns of relations between favelas and the state, and especially between favela residents and the police. Rio’s police force had also long been accustomed to carrying out policing, crime-prevention and disciplinary actions in highly uneven ways. As has been documented by the historian Thomas Holloway, the original mission of Rio’s police force was maintaining the unequal distribution of power and privilege first established during slavery.³⁵ As a result, non-whites and poor residents of Rio were often regarded as fair targets for police harassment. Favelas and their residents, in particular, were often regarded by the city’s elite as a threat to the city’s moral, hygienic, and “civilizational” order.

Rio’s police also have a long history of enjoying impunity for criminal activities. This pattern deepened during dictatorship, when the military police were one of the main agents of repression against the regime’s real or imagined opponents. During this time, the military government took control over the military police out of the civil justice system and put it in hands of a separate military court system. Police were, and continue to be, disciplined for violations “within the corporation,” such as insubordination. But even though a 1996 law put the civil courts back in charge of prosecuting military policemen accused of murder, impunity for police violence against civilians remains pervasive.

As many other cases have shown, police involvement in the repression of political opposition often fuels corruption and police involvement with criminal activities. Since the police carry out activities that the government

does not want openly acknowledged, the police often turn to criminal activity as ways of funding and carrying out their operations. Illegality is allowed and tolerated, even encouraged, if it is in the name of “fighting subversion.” But once the subversive threat is eliminated, the networks that tie police to illegal activities, and the practice of turning a blind-eye to official illegality and corruption, remain in place.

The long pattern of police repression in Rio’s favelas meant that the CV could offer to provide “public safety” knowing that few favela residents would see the police as a viable alternative. This strategy of offering protection in exchange for silence or complicity toward drug trafficking is known in Rio’s favelas as the “law of the hillside,” and is perhaps best described as one of “forced reciprocity.”³⁶ André Torres, one of the founders of the Comando Vermelho, explained it this way:

Organized crime occupies with competency the space that the system, the government, ignores in the area of social assistance. It’s the bosses of the drug trade who buy school supplies for the children of favela residents, who pay for medicine and even for funerals. When a poor person needs a larger favor, he sends a message to a *companheiro* in prison. From there come the orders to fulfill the request. Even hospital beds are arranged. Sometimes a woman in a favela doesn’t have enough money to buy a butane gas tank to cook for her kids. She goes to the *boca de fumo* (the drug-selling point in the favela) and the *traficante* gives her the gas. We gain a lot when we help people. That’s why poor communities protect drug traffickers. It’s a question of survival.³⁷

This strategy was built upon the patron-client ties that politicians had established with favela resident. But there was a difference: because they were locals, the Comando Vermelho often had better knowledge of local needs and could respond more quickly to requests for help. And because they were constantly present in the neighborhood and were heavily armed, they could ensure that the favela residents reciprocated by turning a blind eye to their activities.

The “reciprocity” in this arrangement was clearly uneven and coerced: silence was purchased not only through “help” but also through the threat of force. And organizations and individuals, such as the favela neighborhood association movement, who openly opposed drug traffickers were not tolerated. In fact, drug traffickers have not hesitated to assassinate community leaders or expel them from favelas.³⁸ Nonetheless, many favela residents I spoke with saw the rules instituted by the Comando Vermelho as a sharp improvement from the actions of the police, who are widely seen in favela communities as acting arbitrarily and violently. As Luiz Eduardo Soares has

stated, “police terror is more feared than the barbarity of drug traffickers, since the police disdain rules and enjoy an ad hoc morbid creativity, while traffickers constrain themselves with basic principles and subordinate their despotic practice to an intelligible and public order.”³⁹

Although the Comando Vermelho’s push to take over drug dealing produced increased violence, for many favela residents the CV’s policy of “good neighborliness” was a positive change from the past, and significantly improved the safety of their neighborhoods. Some residents of Caxambu credit the Comando Vermelho with having put an end to crime in the hillside favela. As Seu Jânio told me, using the term *morro* or hillside for favela:

Seu Jânio: . . . this is a place where lots of things that happen elsewhere . . . they’re rare here. So there’s peace, dignity. It’s a family-based morro (*É um morro familiar*).⁴⁰ I know everyone. Girls here don’t get raped, like in other morros. . . . So it’s a morro that, thank God, despite everything is like a big family (*é muito familiar*). The people have lots of respect. It used to be that the morro was really tough. Really tough. . . . Back then, just to give you an idea of what it’s like now . . . Now you see lots of people out late at night. There was a time when no one would go out after six o’clock at night. [laughs.] In sixty-something, sixty-five, there were two guys back then . . . two guys who would come up the morro and would even rob a dog if it had a nice collar.

This structure of forced reciprocity varies widely from favela to favela, and just as often masks arbitrary actions by traffickers as it emphasizes their common ties to favela residents. In fact, as I argue elsewhere, for most favela residents it is exactly the difficulties generated by the gap between a rhetoric which emphasizes respect, and the actual complexities of negotiating daily relations with traffickers, who often favor family members and who sometimes act arbitrarily, especially if they use their own product, that leads to tension and anxiety.

Nonetheless, this CV-generated discourse of respect between traffickers and residents, and a wider set of social expectations based around a commonly-observed set of “rules,” has produced a set of expectations and an evaluative standard that favela residents can attempt to use to moderate drug trafficker violence. Even if the structure of reciprocity is coerced, traffickers realize that some level of cooperation with favela residents is important. Luke Dowdney, in his excellent investigation of youth involved in drug trafficking, recorded many interviews in which even young drug dealers commented on the need to treat favela residents with respect. One sixteen year-old drug dealer, for instance, told him: “They respect us, and we have to respect them back. Because we need them too, so we can run and hide in their houses, so if we don’t respect the residents, they won’t support us . . . There has to be a union, every one of us must treat the residents well.”⁴¹

"A Group of Friends"

The loose affiliational structure developed by the CV in prison, allowing for individual autonomy and yet for reciprocal help and mutual defense when faced by an outside threat, also provided a useful resource that traffickers affiliated with the group could draw upon as they moved into the drug trade. And, reciprocally, these tactics have heavily shaped the nature of drug-trafficking in the city of Rio.

The demands of the illegal market in cocaine differed from earlier structures set up to distribute and sell marijuana, which had also been centered in favelas. Most of Brazil's marijuana is grown domestically, mainly in the northeast, and it appears that little capital is needed to arrange a truckload of marijuana, often on consignment. Journalist Caco Barcellos, for instance, describes how Juliano VP, his pseudonym for a well-known drug-dealer from the favela of Santa Marta, was able to arrange several shipments of marijuana at a time when he had few resources and little influence in the drug trade.⁴² Overall, there are few barriers to entry into this market, a fairly ample supply, and many users. Profits, as a result, would predictably be low, though since marijuana use was fairly widespread and tolerated, risks were also low.

The cocaine market is structured differently. Cocaine is worth far more, per ounce, than marijuana. Thus, while profits are greater, so too are risks: having a shipment of cocaine apprehended, stolen, or siphoned off without payment by unscrupulous middlemen or customers means accruing a greater financial loss. Shipments of cocaine also come from much further a field, since coca is not grown in any significant quantities in Brazil. Thus greater financial capital is needed to purchase a *carga* (or shipment), or the purchaser must have enough criminal capital to be able to take the shipment on a consignment basis and back up their promises with the necessary amounts of coercive violence to ensure that investments are repaid. Greater profit and risks also mean that there is a much greater incentive and ability to spend money on the men and firepower needed to protect distribution and packaging points from theft and apprehension. Thus while Barcellos describes how easy it was for Juliano VP to move a truckload of marijuana, he also describes how hard it was for Juliano, at a time when he was lacking capital, a territorial base, manpower, and access to weapons, to move back into the cocaine business.⁴³

The specifics of how, and through whom, shipments of cocaine enter Rio de Janeiro is one of the murkier aspects of the city's drug trade (for obvious reasons, since the vast amount of profit is made in shipping cocaine from processing areas to retail sales points, and hence great effort is put into avoiding detection). It seems that the distribution is decentralized and

dynamic, with various suppliers, known as *matutos* (literally hillbillies) delivering drugs to favelas.⁴⁴

Individual traffickers affiliated with the CV appear to have wide latitude to create their own connections with *matutos*, and the CV, at least until the emergence of drug trafficker Fernandinho Beira-Mar in the late 1990s, has not attempted to monopolize the distribution of cocaine within the city. Instead, the CV seems to facilitate the movement of drug shipments into Rio for its members on fairly ad hoc basis. In Caxambu, for example, shipments of drugs were sometimes made directly to the favela by *matutos*. At other times, the cocaine and marijuana would be supplied by intermediates in other nearby favelas which did more business.

Being able to claim affiliation with the CV is an important factor in being able to have a good “reputation”, and thus the symbolic capital needed to back up promises to repay loans which are often needed to secure shipments of drugs. Thus, Dê, who ran the drug trafficking in Caxambu during my period of fieldwork, constantly sought to maintain good relationships with the heads of drug-dealing operations in other favelas, all under the banner of the CV.

Another important service that the CV offers its members is to facilitate the distribution and supply of illegal weaponry and to help distribute “soldiers” among allied favelas. This distribution is also not hierarchical or centralized, but occurs through a loose structure of reciprocity and mutual assistance. Traffickers who are part of the CV are not obligated to assist each other. Instead, personal ties between particular traffickers are the product of common experiences such as sharing prison cells or being involved in joint criminal operations, or family and friendship connections. These connections can be created, or reinforced, through helping fellow traffickers (referred to, significantly, as *compadres* or *amigos*) in times of need, knowing that such assistance is likely to be repaid should a drug dealer need help in repelling a rival group. Even if assistance is not immediately needed, loaning soldiers and guns to other CV-affiliated drug dealers is a way for a favela-based drug lord to increase his status within the group, thus ensuring that others will be invested in his success.

For example, the drug business in Caxambu was not particularly intense, mainly serving a lower middle-class clientele in the surrounding neighborhood and the few favela residents who could afford to buy cocaine. Caxambu was located near a favela with a more active drug business, partially because the favela housed a famous samba school’s rehearsal space, and because it was located near major routes into and out of Rio. Thus Caxambu had important strategic value, both as a hide-out for traffickers from the neighboring favela, and as a potential launching-pad for rival gangs looking to take over the more profitable neighboring favela.

Because of this, Dê, the main trafficker in Caxambu, had an incentive to maintain more soldiers in his organization than were required for daily operations. To build closer alliances with figures in the CV, and to ensure that his soldiers would be paid, Dê often sent them to work in other favelas, such as Alemão, a stronghold of the CV, or the Complexo da Maré, a group of favelas fought over by the CV and the Terceiro Comando, a rival group. For drug-dealers in Caxambu, being sent on such “missions” represented a source of pride, and two teenage soldiers in Caxambu would sometimes brag to me about their exploits in Alemão.

The CV also seems to provide assistance in resolving leadership and succession disputes in particular favelas. Though the organization cannot appoint who will be the “owner” of a particular favela, securing the group’s approval is an important step for a drug-dealer to take in order to assume leadership of a favela if the former owner is killed. Influential traffickers within the CV also appear to step in to resolve leadership conflicts when these threaten the group’s overall influence.

In Caxambu, for example, Dê, the head drug-trafficker, was arrested toward the end of my main period of fieldwork in late 1999. For several months, the drug-trade in the favela was run by three of Dê’s lieutenants, who split the neighborhood between themselves. This arrangement, though, was highly unstable and led to rivalry and conflict. After a period of extreme tension, when residents worried that Caxambu would be taken over by a rival gang, a drug-trafficker who had been released from prison took over leadership with the CV’s approval.

What is striking about the CV’s actions in all these cases is how the group’s actions were shaped by its earlier experiences in Ilha Grande. Rather than insisting upon a hard-and-fast set of “laws,” or a centralized leadership group, the CV functions more on the basis of common identity, reciprocity and a loose set of norms governing relations between members of the group. It is most accurate to think of the CV as a group of friends who help each other, and as a loose structure of common interest which comes together at times of mutual need, rather than as a group at all. For social scientists familiar with classic anthropological analysis of “acephalous” African states and segmentary lineages, this structure of temporary unity when faced with a common enemy is oddly familiar.⁴⁵

The Comando Vermelho and the Comando Azul⁴⁶

The CV’s tactics have also deeply shaped relationships between drug traffickers and the police. The CV pursues a variety of tactics aimed at pressuring state authorities (especially those in charge of public safety) to set favorable conditions for its business, or at least minimize repressive actions. These

actions range from positive pressure, such as allowing politicians access to favelas for campaigning and vote-gathering, to negative pressure, such as attacks on police, attacks on public transportation system, and forcing local businesses to shut down when a drug trafficker is arrested or killed.

The police and other elements of the state (especially judicial and prison systems) are involved with drug dealing in multiple ways, sometimes through omission and complicity, sometimes through active participation. The CV enters into corrupt relations with the police so that they will allow trafficking to occur, often at price of a “tax” (a weekly or monthly payment from traffickers to police). A significant amount of the money made in Rio’s drug trade goes to paying bribes. For example, according to news reports, in 1997 police received R\$3 thousand a day from the drug dealers in Rocinha.⁴⁷ Some corrupt police officers also engage in a practice known as the *mineira*, detaining a person on the accusation of drug dealing and demanding payment for that person’s release. Drug traffickers also establish and maintain connections to elements of police and armed forces who participate in illegal weapons trade. More recently, as drug trafficking in Rio has fractured into multiple competing groups, some elements of Rio’s police have taken advantage of a new money-earning opportunity, offering to sell captured weapons or ransom detained traffickers to rival groups.

The CV’s influence in the prison system also allows traffickers associated with the group to corrupt and control the judicial and prison systems. The networks tying organized crime to factions of the state mean that despite criminalization of the drug trade and police actions against traffickers (with, for example, the arrest of most of Rio’s major drug dealers in the late 1990s), the drug trade persists. Most of Rio’s drug dealers are able to run their favela drug businesses from within prison through the illegal use of cell phones and the bribery of prison officials.⁴⁸

The Comando Vermelho’s structure also helps explain why after its initial consolidation it subsequently generated such high levels of conflict. The group’s loose affiliation and ample latitude for autonomy gives traffickers flexibility in addressing shifts in supply and demand, choosing who to ally themselves with on an individual basis, and makes detection and repression more difficult. The arrest of any single trafficker, or the seizure of any one shipment, no matter how large the shipment or how influential the trafficker, has little effect on the CV as a group or on the overall market for cocaine and marijuana.

But this loose affiliational structure can promote conflict. Since there is no one boss in control of the CV, corrupt policemen have to negotiate pay-offs with multiple different drug bosses, rather than with one organization, and the nature and price of arrangements differ from favela to favela. Since what the police are “selling” is protection from arrest and harassment, nego-

tiations between traffickers and corrupt policemen are conducted through the use of violence: to prove how much their cooperation is worth, police crackdown hard on traffickers to increase the price of buying their cooperation. As a result, corrupt relationships between policemen and traffickers are highly unstable, conflictual, and constantly subject to renegotiation.⁴⁹ With the increase in rival organizations, and splits within the CV itself, policemen can use competition within the drug trade to their advantage, playing one faction off of the other if the political climate calls for a crackdown on a particular favela or drug-boss.

The CV's structure also generates considerable internal conflict as members of the group struggle for dominance among themselves. With such a loose system of exchanging help, yet allowing for individual autonomy, the CV seems structurally better suited at assisting members in fending off rivals than in helping with internal power struggles. The loss of a favela to a rival group, especially if it is strategically important, is a blow to the organization as a whole, making it harder to distribute drugs, weapons and manpower. However, rivalries between drug dealers in a particular favela have little impact on the group as a whole as long as the competing drug dealers claim membership in the CV. In fact, what seems to have occurred in the past few years is the culmination of this logic, with the CV meaning very little, in terms of a coherent entity, in the city's favelas, characterized by extreme levels of rivalry and competition and a high turnover of personnel, yet retaining a strong overall umbrella structure in Rio's prisons.

“Narco-culture” and the CV’s Legacy

During the 1970s to the late 1990s, the CV developed a distinct organizational structure and set of symbols, discourses and the tactics that the group used to legitimate itself in Rio's favelas. The CV's use of a rhetoric of pride in local place, of “defending” favelas against attack by outsiders, and of standing up against abusive forms of authority, have all been crucial to how the group constructs its authority. But the policy of “neighborliness” and the emphasis put on “respecting” favela residents also indicates that ties between traffickers and other favela residents go beyond purely utilitarian calculations, and indicate how the CV has helped create a larger “narco-culture” that has had a lasting impact even as the CV began to fracture and dissipate in the late 1990s.

For individual drug-traffickers, membership in the CV and providing assistance to the group is not only a way to gain financial profit, but is also a path to greater visibility and social prestige. The ability of a *dono*, or drug boss, to provide a modicum of “order” in his favela, and to ensure that the community is portrayed in a positive light to other city-wide traffickers, is

a key way of reflecting his own power and authority, regardless of his actual monetary income. For instance, Dê, the dono of Caxambu, took great pride and effort to portray himself as an exemplary favela drug boss who followed the “traditional” rules of the CV, often hosting large communal parties in Caxambu to which he would invite other local drug bosses.

It is at this level of cultural and social exclusion and integration that the effects of the CV are most profound. The territorialization of the drug trade in Rio’s favelas was perhaps initially a product of the logistics of the drug trade. But it is clear that particular criminals saw their ability to control territory from rivals as part of their identity. This relationship between territory and identity has become much stronger and more widespread.

The position that favelas occupy in the drug trade has also become a way for particular favelas to gain greater notoriety and thus enjoy a social visibility that they would otherwise not have. For some favela youth, living in a neighborhood associated with a particular *comando*, especially if that area is seen as “strong” in a comando (contributing weapons, willing soldiers, and being *firme*), is an important part of social identity, regardless of whether or not they actually participate in drug trafficking. Young boys from Caxambu often tagged walls, personal items and clothing, with the insignia of the CV, and made CV hand-gestures in photographs, even if they were not drug traffickers (and often to the consternation of their parents, who feared that such symbols would lead to their arrest). For instance, Clara, a resident of Caxambu, once loudly berated her eleven year-old son for scrawling CV on his school notebook, saying his teachers would think that was a *bandido* or criminal.

The *baile-funk* music played at favela dances also emphasizes the drug-trafficking-related notoriety of certain favelas.⁵⁰ Funk music fans often name themselves after the drug syndicate that controls their favela, and at funk dances, groups of teenagers from different neighborhoods sometimes line up on different sides of the dance hall according to which *comando* controls their neighborhood. Songs such as the “Rap das Comunidades,” essentially a list of favelas associated with particular *comandos*, or drug-trafficking groups, are often played at the beginning of funk dances. During the time of my fieldwork, traffickers in some of Rio’s favelas handed out CDs of funk music, known as *rap proibidão*, that had been banned from the radio because of its explicit advocacy of the drug trade. A song that extolled Caxambu’s role in the CV – claiming that any rival gang member entering Caxambu would be met with “spray from a G4” – was one of the favorite songs of teenagers in Caxambu.

The counter-part to this increasingly favela-centric sense of identity and social status is greater separation of favela residents both from the “official” neighborhoods and from residents of other favelas, which has seriously

damaged opportunities for pan-favela political mobilization. As drug trafficking groups become key intermediaries between favela residents and state authorities, they undermine and in some cases directly attack other favela-based social groups which do not “cooperate” with them.⁵¹ In Caxambu, for instance, when a candidate to local political office wanted to hold a campaign rally in the neighborhood, he “negotiated” his access to the neighborhood with Dê through the intercession of the Resident’s Association. In these relationships with state actors, patron-client ties between favela residents, local political elites, and agents of the state, have been substituted for ones mediated through non-state and illegal, but favela-based, actors.

As fear of violence has followed the drug trade, favela residents are also increasingly cut off from ties to residents of surrounding neighborhoods. Caxambu’s samba school, for instance, often brought people who reside in the neighborhood below Caxambu into the favela. In the mid-1980s, when the drug war in the favelas heated up, attendance at the samba school’s rehearsals dropped as middle-class samba enthusiasts were no longer willing to enter the favela. Anacleto, the school’s president, told me that the samba school saw only one solution: moving the school’s rehearsal space out of the favela and into the neighborhood below. He told me:

Caxambu’s school . . . no one wants to hear this . . . but the school needed to change because the *morro* (the favela) alone wasn’t sustaining it. We needed other partnerships to help us sustain the school. That would be the people from outside the favela. And how am I going to bring them here to the *morro*? It’s like we were talking about security: there are people down below who don’t know that the *morro* is like it is, that it’s calm. So how am I going to bring these people to the school?

Older residents of Caxambu also often told me that famous samba singers such as Zeca Pagodinho, Beth Carvalho, and Almir Guineto often attended and performed at weekend samba parties. Some middle-class residents of the area below Caxambu told me that they came to these parties, and younger people attended funk dances in the favela in the early 1990s. By the mid 1990s, though, these parties were seen as too dangerous (funk dances were banned by the police), or when they did occur were attended by very few people from outside the favela.

The severing of ties between residents of the favela and those of the surrounding neighborhood is only part of a larger pattern of increased social isolation. With increased violence, many other people and agencies – such as telephone installation and repair crews, city construction workers, electric company workers, health care workers, etc – were reluctant to venture into a neighborhood that they saw as extremely violent. Employees of Light, the electricity company, who all too rarely appeared in Caxambu, would

openly tell me that they were reluctant to walk around the favela, on one occasion even insisting that I accompany them to make sure that they'd have a "free pass" to walk though the neighborhood.

Along with integration into a network of favelas associated through the CV comes exclusion from other parts of the city, which limit a favela resident's freedom of movement. Some residents of Caxambu told me that they would not visit friends or relatives who lived in favelas controlled by a different *comando*. When I mentioned to a local soccer coach who openly discouraged boys from dealing drugs, that a friend of mine ran a boxing gym in the Complexo da Maré, a large agglomeration of favelas, he immediately asked which favela the gym was located in. When I told him that it was in Parque União he said: "Oh, OK. You can go there because they're not the enemies of the guys from here."

Favela residents are also increasingly excluded from both effective legal citizenship and larger senses of "Brazilianess." Highly discriminatory and abusive forms of policing in favelas ensure that the provision of basic services such as public safety and the rights to life and freedom from torture, are rare. At a symbolic level, the cultural identity of Cariocas, and of Brazilians more broadly, has often relied upon the cultural products of residents of Rio's favelas, such as samba and carnival. Brazil's hegemonic national discourse has famously used these symbols to proclaim the uniqueness of a national identity which positively values hybridity and the crossing of racial and class lines. But as favelas come to be pictured as "war zones" which threaten the rest of the city, favela residents are excluded from the old mythology of favelas as dangerous and primitive, but also symbolic of the "authentic" (i.e. Afro-Brazilian) aspects of national identity.

Matching these exclusions, though, are a set of inclusions. Excluded from or perhaps rejecting older forms of identity and social relations, favela youth are opting for either a favela-centric funk music which actively celebrate their neighborhoods, or into a broader cross-national youth subculture where street-level "authenticity" is a marketable commodity. Two teenage drug dealers in Caxambu who I would often talk to insisted that their favorite musician was Tupac Shakur (whose lyrics they could not understand). On the other hand, Rio's favela funk is increasingly popular in the United States and Europe, as Western hipsters search for "authentic" forms of dangerous-yet-sexy music (whose lyrics they do not understand).

Conclusion

The Comando Vermelho is only one example of a non-state social group in Latin America which is the unwanted, unrecognized, "child" of democratization, globalization, and neo-liberal economic and political reform. With

significant differences, one could think of MS-13 and other Central American *marras*, Mexican drug cartels, Colombian paramilitaries, and other social groups in Latin Americas as broadly similar phenomena. What these examples reveal is how globalization and neoliberalization, in ways that are both novel and that merge with older social and historical forces, are reshaping Latin American society.

Understanding the structure of the CV and the effects it has had, and more broadly examining the contradictory impact of global legal and illegal exchanges upon Brazil, requires a different way of thinking, beyond easy dichotomies of inclusion or exclusion. Region-wide (indeed perhaps world-wide), it is increasingly difficult and perhaps even anachronistic to draw distinctions between violence as either political or non-political, to think of economic structures as either legal or illegal, to describe actors as state-based or non-state, and indeed to characterize a society as being either “at peace” or “at war”.

Drug-trafficking and transnational crimes are exemplary cases of broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion. As Bunt and Siegel have noted, while global crime has become a major trasnational force, spreading across boundaries and often following patterns of international trade and migration, crime also remains distinctly local. As they argue: “... the criminals who run international operations often rely on a local power base, propped up by friendships of many years’ standing or close-knit families. Proximity as a condition for successful operations is one of the most fascinating aspects of global organized crime.”⁵²

Illicit criminal organizations such as the CV integrate favela residents into transnational flows of illegal commodities, using and exploiting local social structures cultural discourses to deepen this integration, legitimate themselves, and gain increased profits. At the same time, drug-trafficking groups exclude these communities from integration into effective citizenship, divide poor communities from wealthier ones and from each other, undermine or take over pre-existing forms of political mobilization, and dramatically alter local understandings of justice, community and identity.

In this way, the “narco-panic” associated with the CV, the spread of drug-trafficking, and the larger sense of insecurity that has swept much of Brazil since the mid-1980s and is also indicative of larger social anxieties. As historian Paul Gootenberg has argued: “Drugs are protean and relational things, and cultural magnets for charged meanings.”⁵³ Though Brazil’s cities are experiencing high levels of violence, this violence, is highly unevenly distributed, concentrated in favelas and other poor neighborhoods. And, favela residents were always quick to point out to me, concern about violence had little apparent effect on decreasing the demand for cocaine and marijuana in wealthier neighborhoods.

Yet drug and police-related violence has spawned a widespread sense of panic that reaches far beyond Brazil's poor neighborhoods. Likewise, the history of "drug panics" in the United States reveals how concern about the "evils" associated with particular drugs were often disproportionate to actual harm, and drugs were often linked to both immigrant groups seen as "dangerous" and to broader concerns about social change.⁵⁴ In this light, concern about the violence generated by crime and drugs can be seen as a reflection of deeper anxieties about neoliberal mobility and change, and about transformations in both Brazil's sovereignty and Brazilian society and national identity.

The form of anxieties, of course, varies depending upon who is articulating them. The comments by André, the resident of Caxambu quoted at the opening of this article, reveal that while the emergence of the drug trade may have produced a "narco panic," for many residents of Rio's favelas, the CV was perceived as providing stability and order, producing a welcomed "change in behavior." As Rio's drug trade has shifted, becoming ever more unstable and fragmented, and hence producing increased violence, this "change in personnel" is now looked upon nostalgically by many favela residents as a time when there was greater certainty "about what was right and what wasn't."

Notes

1. I conducted ethnographic research in Caxambu from 1998–1999 and again in 2001. I have used pseudonyms for the name of the favela and the names of the people I interviewed.

2. Martha Huggins, "Urban violence and police privatization in Brazil," *Social Justice* Summer 2000: 113.

3. *Jornal do Brasil*, November 7, 2001.

4. Robert Gay, *Lucia: Testimonies of a Brazilian Drug Dealer's Woman* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2005), 5.

5. See: Enrique Desmond Arias, *Drugs and Democracy in Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006); Robert Gay, *Lucia*; Michel Misso, *Crime e violência no Brasil contemporâneo* (Rio de Janeiro: Lumen Juris, 2006); Alba Zaluar, *Integração perversa: pobreza e tráfico de drogas* (Rio de Janeiro: FGV Editora, 2004).

6. For important exceptions see: Marcos Alvito, *As cores de Acari: uma favela carioca* (Rio de Janeiro: FGV Editora, 2001); Antônio Rafael, *Um abraço para todos os amigos: algumas considerações sobre o tráfico de drogas no Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: EDUFF, 1998).

7. Carolyn Nordstrom, *Shadows of War: Violence, Power and international Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2004), 252.
8. Alba Zaluar, "Perverse Integration: Drug trafficking and youth in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro," *Journal of International Affairs* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 653–671; see also Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium: The Information Age* (London: Blackwell, 2000), 72–73.
9. Peter Andreas, "When Policies Collide," in *The Illicit Global Economy & State Power* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 125–141.
10. Francisco Thoumi, "The Colombian Competitive Advantage in Illegal Drugs." *Journal of Drug Issues* Winter 2005: 7–26.
11. Gordon Hawkins, "God and the Mafia," *The Public Interest* 14 (1969): 26.
12. See, respectively: Ricardo Vélez Rodriguez, "The Sociological Dimension of the Drug-Traffic in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro," in Else Vieira, ed. *City of God in Several Voices* (Nottingham UP, 2005); Elizabeth Leeds, "Cocaine and Parallel Polities in the Brazilian Urban Periphery," *Latin American Research Review* 31, no. 3 (1996); and Michel Misse, "As ligações perigosas," *Contemporaneidade e Educação* 2, no. 1 (1997).
13. Alvito, 80–90, 119.
14. R. T. Naylor, *Wages of Crime* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002), 22.
15. The perils of uncritical comparison are revealed by the difficulties of choosing which English word to use to label the CV. Some analysts have used English cognates of Portuguese terms – such as "faction" (*facção*) or "command" (*comando*) – to describe the CV. These terms, though, carry connotations of a quasi-military or quasi-guerrilla organization which, although they echo the group's rhetoric, do not match its practices. I prefer the term "group," which seems appropriately loose and ambiguous.
16. Luiz Eduardo Soares, MV Bill and Celso Athayde, *Cabeça de porco* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2005), 130.
17. Donna Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003), 207.
18. Misse, "As ligações perigosas."
19. Arias, 14.
20. H. Richard Friman and Peter Andreas, "Introduction," in *The Illicit Global Economy & State Power* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 10.
21. Carlos Amorim, *Comando Vermelho, a história secreta do crime organizado* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1993); William da Silva, *Quatrocentos contra um* (Rio de Janeiro: Vozes, 1991); Luke Dowdney, *Children of the Drug Trade* (Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras, 2003); Aziz Filho and Francisco Alves Filho, *Paraíso armado interpretações da violência no Rio de Janeiro* (São Paulo: Editora Garçoni, 2003); Michel Misse, *Crime e violência no Brasil contemporâneo*.
22. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), 133–4.
23. Silva, 39–40.
24. See Amorim and Eduardo Campos Coelho, "Da Falange Vermelha a Escadinhha: o poder nas prisões," *Presença* 11 (January 1988).

25. Silva, 45.
26. Amorim, 99–102.
27. Silva, 76.
28. Silva, 78.
29. Silva, 48.
30. Amorim, 161.
31. They included: Rogério Lemgruber (Bagulhão), who became a leader of the CV, and Escadinha (José dos Reis Encina) who controlled the drug trade in the favela of the Morro do Juramento (see Amorim, 143). Other important drug dealers who joined the CV were Dênis da Rocinha, Cy de Acari, Isaías do Borel, and Beatu Salú.
32. Amorim, 167.
33. Coelho, 107–8 and *passim*.
34. Amorim, 161–2.
35. Thomas Holloway, *Policing Rio de Janeiro: Repression and Resistance in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993).
36. Dowdney, 63.
37. Valério Meniel, “O homem que organizou o crime,” *Trip* 56 (1997).
38. Gay, 57–8, 187
39. Luiz Eduardo Soares, *Meu casaco de general* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, 2000), 39.
40. The word *familiar* means well known, familial, or intimate. In this context it means that the favela is a family-based neighborhood.
41. Dowdney, 56.
42. Caco Barcellos, *Abusado: o dono do Morro Dona Marta* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2003).
43. Barcellos, 506.
44. Rafael, 84–5; Dowdney, 40–2.
45. See: E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969).
46. It is common, as Alvito notes and as I heard many times in Caxambu, for favela residents to use the term Comando Azul to compare the military police, who wear blue uniforms, to the Comando Vermelho.
47. *O Dia*, July 20, 1997. Marcinho VP, the former head drug dealer in the favela of Santa Marta, told the press that police charged R\$200–300 a day to “deixar o tráfico rolar.” (*Jornal do Brasil*, November 28, 2000.) A drug trafficker from Mangueira arrested by the police was released after the traffickers paid the police R\$1 thousand. Another trafficker, Celsinho da Vila Vintém, allegedly paid over R\$1.6 million to military and civil policemen to avoid arrest during 2001. Traffickers in the Bangu I prison were also overheard discussing negotiations with police to buy back an AK-47 that had been seized during a raid. (See *Jornal do Brasil*, June 19, 2002; *O Dia*, March 14, 2002; *Globo*, June 20, 2002, *O Dia*, March 24, 2002.)
48. Rio’s press reports extensively on how the drug trade is run from within the prison system: see *O Dia*, August 31, 1999; *Jornal do Brasil*, April 12, 1999; *Jornal do Brasil*, August 29, 1999; *Globo*, June 19, 2002.

49. For a fictionalized account of the implications that this has for policemen, see: Luiz Eduardo Soareas, Andrés Batista and Rodrigo Pimentel, *Elite da Tropa* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2006), 119–127.

50. On funk music see: Hermano Vianna, *O mundo funk carioca* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1988); Fátima Regina Cecchetto, “Galeras funk cariocas,” in Alba Zaluar and Marcos Alvito, eds., *Um século de Favela*, 145–166; and Micael Herschmann, ed., *Abalando os anos 90: funk e hip-hop* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1997). For a recent history of the musical genre, see Silvio Essinger, *Batidão: uma história do funk* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2005).

51. For three detailed and illustrative case studies of relationships between favela community groups and drug traffickers see Arias, 61–168.

52. Henk van de Bunt and Dina Seigel, “Introduction,” in *Global Organized Crime: Trends and Developments* (Amsterdam: Kluwer, 2003), 3–6.

53. Paul Gootenberg, “Introduction,” in *Cocaine: Global Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

54. David Musto has shown how panic over opium in the United States was associated with Chinese migrants and concern about immigration, fear of cocaine was associated with southern blacks and anxieties about racial integration, and how marijuana was tied to Mexican immigrants and economic anxieties during the Great Depression. See David F. Musto, *American Disease: the origins of narcotics control* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973).