

Black-Blocking Rio: Dislocating Police and Remapping Race for Brazil's Megaevents

A Conversation with Vargas' "Taking Back the Land: Police Operations and Sports Megaevents in Rio de Janeiro"

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This article traces the origins of shifts in policing practices and racialized imaginaries in Brazil, since 2013, in the wake of large-scale social protests that rocked the country in June of that year, and following the roll-out of a new set of public works, security and morality megaprojects. It begins by highlighting the contributions of João Vargas' scholarship to the understanding of the imminently racial character of lethal state violence in Brazil, around practices of police killings of black youth justified as "acts of resistance," the media's visualization of danger in favelas as a militarized "state of emergency," and housing practices that continue to segregate race and concentrate poverty. Generating new analyses that trace extensions or dis-locations, since 2013, of some of the practices described by Vargas, this article examines (1) the shift from bandido (drug gang member) to vândalo (racialized rioter/looter) as "enemy number one" of the police, (2) the rise of the Black Bloc as target of state security discourse haunted by imaginaries of African diasporic radicalism as well as youth anarchy, and (3) new public mobilizations around and against the "public morality" and "shock of order" campaigns launched against black delinquency and prostitution in consumer spaces.

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In the first decade of the 21st century, since the election of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the Brazilian state launched a host of new projects for economic development, institutional reform, and social empowerment. In the wake of these efforts, Brazil has experienced an economic boom (and then economic slow-down in 2013), the middle class has doubled in size, and, at long last, yawning levels of inequality between rich and poor have begun to diminish. Since 2010, an additional intensification of state and public efforts in Brazil have converged to prepare the landscape of culture, infrastructure and the economy for two megaevents.¹ First, the World Cup global football/soccer championship will take place in newly erected arenas throughout the country in June and July 2014, and then the Olympic Games will be hosted exclusively by the city of Rio de Janeiro in August 2016. These two phenomena—the explosive growth of the middle class during this period, and the international spotlight directed at Brazil’s civil society as it prepares for these megaevents—have combined to trigger a social-movement boom.² Starting in June 2013, the country’s political landscape has been shaken by a new generation of uprisings as the cronyism and repressiveness of state practices triggered anti-corruption protests, mobilizations for improved public services, and mass sit-ins by public-sector employees demanding social rights.

In the middle of this set of wrenching transformations, a wholly new, reimagined police force, the Police Units for Pacification (UPP), was created and deployed, particularly in the global city of Rio de Janeiro.³ These UPPs have been deployed in the wake of intensively militarized cleansing operations that have driven narcotraffickers, as well as corrupt police militias, out of some of Rio’s densely populated urban favelas. These favelas are the self-generated informal housing communities where many of Rio’s Afro-descendent citizens reside, and where the most lethal and racialized forms of state violence have occurred in the form of structural violence in the housing, health, and services sectors, as well as near-genocidal levels of police atrocities. The UPPs have been welcomed and celebrated, for the most part, by a large portion of Rio’s public, including by favela residents. But does early “success” of the UPP mean the racial violence of the state and the instrumentalization of blackness by the media to legitimize state violence and to stratify space has been arrested, and that racism has been chased to the margins along with the narco-cartels?⁴

In view of these profound changes and in light of the eruption of a new generation of protest activities and state interventions, João Vargas’ illuminating and important study asks: Is the analytical category and mobilizing framework of race—and figurations of blackness in particular—still relevant, in this context of rapid

change in Brazil, for critically interpreting the force deployed by police operations and social stratification in urban space?

Blackness and Continuity of State Violence

Vargas' article argues that yes, race does continue to matter and that racism remains an essential anchor for massive levels of institutionalized inequality, and target of direct, deadly forms of repression by the state. Figurations of blackness continue to animate horrific levels of dehumanization and violence, while also providing rich histories and practices of social resistance and cultural solidarity in Brazil. Vargas' article offers an illuminating critical framework for analysis and provides statistical and qualitative data that demonstrate that *structures of racialized policing* and the *lethal demonization of blackness* have remained constant throughout this decade of profound changes. The racial ordering of space, death, and desire have persisted as core processes, untouched by the campaigns for political reformism unleashed by the state, or by the invention and deployment of "pacification" police, or by the waves of social restiveness generated by the new middle classes.

Vargas' analysis centers on *three sets of practices* that demonstrate the continuity of racial power in changing Brazil: "resistance acts," "panoptic media framings of danger," and "housing geographies of blackness." First, Vargas examines the continuing discourse of "resistance acts" that justifies police execution of black youth. "Resistance acts" are acts by the police of "self-defense" against a "suspect element" in the context of a supposedly armed exchange, usually during a raid or invasion of a favela by police. This discourse of resistance/defense persists because of the continuing hegemony of the profoundly racial notion that black male youth in favelas incorporate mortal danger. So a "shoot first" policy remains legitimate in the public imagination, despite a decade of overwhelming evidence that youth (overwhelmingly black youth) who are killed by police "resistance acts" are often shot in the head or neck at close range, from behind, and without any evidence of the youth being armed or posing imminent danger to the officer.

Second, Vargas offers a vivid analysis of media coverage of BOPE (Special-Operations Police Battalions) as they invade favelas in order to "cleanse" the communities of narcotraffickers before new UPP units are installed.⁵ Vargas reveals how the television network *O Globo* generates a particular visual and affective landscape of racialized horror, with its live coverage of "crime wars" from its hovering armored helicopters, with each scene emotionally overdetermined by the grim facial expressions of reporters themselves. As Vargas argues,

the militarized distance and “emergency seriousness” of the newscasters project the idea that black communities require the gravest forms of repressive violence to control them. This coverage frames the radical otherness and explicitly labeled blackness of the favelas as spaces of utter terror and chaos. This coverage also interpellates gender/sexuality subjects, I would add, since this is where the public’s fantasies about militarized “heroic” ultra-masculinities (of both police and traffickers) are staged. These racialized masculinity fantasies are projected from the distant, safe voyeuristic view of the supposedly non-racialized position of the “Brazilian citizen” observer. As Vargas reminds us, twenty-three people were killed in three days during the police invasion of Vila Cruzeiro in November 2010. Vargas reminds us that this panoptic fixation with viewing state violence as a militarized, grimly observed orgy of eroticized police invasions is explicitly racialized. Vargas cites Rio’s Governor who refers to the populations of favela Rocinha as another country, a Third World backwater living at “Zambia, Gabon standards. That is a criminal assembly line, an industry of criminals” (p. 275).

Third, Vargas presents us with maps of racial demography and housing settlement in the greater Rio area, proving beyond a doubt that racial stratification still exists, and spaces of black settlement still maps directly onto spaces where lethal state violence is most intense, and where poverty is most concentrated.

In the section, below, I would like to tentatively extend and expand upon certain elements of Vargas’ productive framework to analyze some of the radical shifts in policing practice and resistance mobilization in Rio de Janeiro since the start of 2013, as UPPs have “matured” and become more complicated and controversial actors, and when new middle class uprisings have been confronted by militarized police and BOPE (special-operations SWAT teams) that have “descended from the favelas to the asphalt.” I argue that certain policing operations and labelling practices have taken their racial discourses and dehumanizing practices with them, leading to some newly violent figurations of blackness that are being projected in new ways, upon bodies of public sociability and collective resistance in pre-Olympic Rio.

Post-2013 Shifts in the Police State and its Racial Security Agendas

Three figurations have emerged recently that are intensely and rapidly reconfiguring forms of displaced racial hegemony in (1) shifts from *bandido* to *vândalo* in terms of who police target as “enemy number one”; (2) revival of Cold War-era anti-anarchist

anti-terrorism hysteria around “black blocs”; and, (3) more positively, the emergence of race-and-sexuality-conscious social movements that have come to challenge both the UPPs as well as the racialized “moral cleansing” campaign of Rio’s governor that targets “prostitutes and delinquents” in public space.

In June 2013, massive public protests erupted, first in São Paulo, then spreading throughout the country, but coming to be concentrated and continuing for months, in Rio de Janeiro. These protests came to mix a broad and often contradictory spectrum of collective actors—labor movements, students and teachers protesting education cuts, anti-corruption militants, right-wing anti-PT/anti-Dilma nationalists, boys’ soccer fan clubs enraged by police and corporate control of sports events, and discontented community residents displaced or dissatisfied with Cup/Olympic megaprojects.⁶ Protesters, and the vast public that supported these millions-strong demonstrations, were shocked to see the levels of brutal police response, which included militarized BOPE shock troops, occasionally backed up by armed forces deployments. The use of deadly levels of tear gas, armored vehicles, and water cannon, as well as police beatings of youth, women, and pre-teen protesters shocked news viewers. But *O Globo* news coverage and police discourse on the violence around the protests insisted on framing the violence as justified, not a threat to the public or to democratic rights to assembly, but as a problem caused by *vândalos* (vandals, rioters) among the protesters. Television cameras, and police announcements to the public focused on these *vândalos*, saturating coverage of protests with carefully selected images NOT of the millions of peaceful political protesters, chanting and waving banners with specific political claims and demands, but instead broadcasting images of a few young boys of color, in stocking caps and face masks, lobbing molotovs through the windows of public buildings.⁷ *Vândalos* were often accused of leaving behind small boxes with bomb-like apparatuses, conveniently “discovered and defused just in time” by police.⁸ Meanwhile, protesters argued that most *vândalos* were not from among their groups; protester videographers, the “Ninjas” even filmed police preparing and deploying young men as *vândalos*, as agents provocateurs, obviously trained and inserted to make the protesters look like criminals, and to justify violent repression and dispersal of sit-ins and marches.

This “displacement” of BOPE and militarized police invasion tactics indexed an extension of racial militarization from *morro*, to *asfalto*, that is, from the hilltop favela slums into the paved streets of public squares and middle-class downtown commercial areas. The concomitant symbolic shift was thus facilitated by the shift in racial demonologies from the targeting of *bandidos* (narco-band traffickers

in favelas) to *vândalos* (rioters and looters). Both figurations depended on racial notions of the monstrous danger of the teenage black boy, menacing the public, driven by a “lust” for destruction of public property, theft through looting, and sexual predation, not by any “legitimate” agenda of political dissidence. The vandalo figure was hypervisibilized by the Brazilian media and by police/state declarations that displaced the police as the origin of the violence of protests.

In a second, and related set of symbolic shifts and efforts to re-legitimize lethal levels of racialized police practice, the figure of the “black bloc” was rearticulated by the police and media as a more elaborated incarnation of the “vandal” and one that was infused with Cold War tropes and Black Power-era imaginaries of radical struggle. In July of 2013, as protests continued to multiply, Brazil’s president Dilma Rousseff began to respond to some of the manifestations’ demands, promising to root out corruption, rationalize megaevent planning, and increase funding for public services and health. But the forces of repression—associated with the television media and, in particular, with the security apparatuses of the Rio governor’s office—redoubled their crackdown tactics and their shocking portrayal of public protesters as enemies of the state and as monstrous threats to the public.⁹ Public discussions and media outlets came to obsessively discuss the supposed participation of “black blocs” in the uprisings. Historically, the term “black bloc” originated in the Cold War era to describe Western European anarchist organization that used direct action tactics to protect protesters from police aggression. Wearing black masks and standing at the front lines of mass demonstrations, “black blocs” would not shy away from physical confrontation with police. But in their view, they acted strictly defensively, in response to police violence. But in 2013, the figure of the “black bloc” was reanimated worldwide, spotlighted by coverage of protests in Cairo, Athens, and Istanbul. Police reports and some press outlets came to focus obsessively on a handful of individuals who formed masked blocs organized to protect protesters from the police. In the police and press imaginary, the symbolic figure of the black bloc combined two discourses. One was the anti-terrorism/anti-anarchism security language of rooting out “blocs” of militants and sleeper-cells in the political underground. And a second, the language that demonized (and also romanticized) Black Panther and Black Power-type armed resistance movements that stood up to police.¹⁰ These latter U.S.-based anti-police mobilizations remained well known throughout the post-colonial world among its admirers in the African diaspora as well as among police, intelligence, and security organizations that had infiltrated and targeted these movements during the era of dictatorship in Brazil.

A third category of racialized shifts and displacements that took place in 2013 in Rio de Janeiro operated around new forms of resistance that came to be organized around the Rio mayor and governor's "shock of order" campaign that targeted prostitution, public drinking, and public "disorderliness." And parallel to this, the honeymoon of the UPPs came to an end, as the broad public consensus behind these new "pacifying" police units began to crumble.¹¹ A middle-class boy, Amarildo, was "disappeared" after being detained in a UPP raid in the favela of Rocinha, where it was assumed the UPP executed him and then hid the body. In the second half of 2013, mobilizations against these repressive public morality campaigns and the search for the missing Amarildo, opened up possibilities for new coalitions among gender and sexuality activists, middle-class anti-police brutality activists, and anti-racism activists who had been mobilizing to spotlight lethal state violence, and to highlight the racial geography's of new mega-events developments.

Conclusion

João Costa Vargas' groundbreaking theoretical and empirical work on the persistence of racial figurations has demonstrated the persistence of blackness as an axis of state dehumanization and violence, as well as for new forms of collective mobilization and resistance, in Rio de Janeiro's shifting geography of development, settlement, and public protest. But a new age of contentious politics is dawning in Brazil. In 2014, police use of lethal force, and the symbolic deployment of racialized tropes of *vândalo* and Black Bloc have become challenged by a new generation of protesters. The state's corrupt deployment of megaevent planning resources has been exposed and massively critiqued. Time will tell if this new set of controversies and solidarities would remake the geography of racial stratification and state violence in Brazil, and if new voices and consciousness would emerge.

Notes

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