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# The law of God, the law of the State and the law of Crime: an anthropological account of the consolidation of multiple normative regimes in Brazilian urban margins

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## ABSTRACT

In Brazil’s poor urban areas, the state is not the sole producer of ‘law and order’ or monopoliser of the legitimate use of force. A multiplicity of authorities coexist and interact, and much of the dynamics of violence and urban order emerge from this tense interplay. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Brazilian urban peripheries, this article proposes a theoretical reflection on normative multiplicities and their relations to the dynamics of violence in contexts of sharp conflict. Two main arguments are presented: 1 - that the processes of Brazil’s recent history have culminated in a specific social configuration of normative pluralism in the country’s urban peripheries, where the state, religion and crime act as coexisting authorities; and 2 - that this plurality is sustained by a triple paradigm: respectability, material bases and the capacity and will to use violence. Theoretically, therefore, we have sought to develop the concept of ‘normative regimes’ and the triple paradigm that underpins their formation. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the social science debate on plural governance.

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## Introduction

For João, a 58-year-old white man from the outskirts of São Paulo, there was only one way out of the criminal world: to become an evangelical pastor. João’s journey gives us a flavour of the last decades of change in Brazil’s urban world. He was born in 1965 in Pernambuco, northeast of Brazil. In the late 1970s, after the death of his father, João and countless other workers moved from the north of the country to São Paulo in search of better working conditions (Durhan 1973; Kowarick 1979). But he and his family didn’t find prosperity in formal employment. When João was

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17, his mother died and he began his varied criminal life. He started by stealing cars with a cousin. Then, he says, he moved on to robbing banks, luxury homes and ATMs. It was finally possible to make money. But there were many risks, and in 1985 he was arrested for the first time. After several stints in prison, in the early 2000s João joined the now largest criminal group in South America, the First Command of Capital (*Primeiro Comando da Capital*, PCC). From then on everything changed. More money, more risk, more protection. Over the next few years, he moved into the most powerful positions in the organisation. He began to make life and death decisions in his region and took care of much of the group's business. But after a robbery went wrong, João ended up in hospital with the chance of never walking again. There, for the first time, he couldn't make a deal with the police, whom he regularly paid off. They wanted to kill him. Meanwhile, João heard from his wife and son that he still had a mission: to spread the word of God. João survived, walked again, and went from the hospital back to prison. It was there that he was converted to evangelism. Today, João works as a security guard at a petrol station and as a pastor. Every month he still receives money from his former "criminal" friends who believe in his and God's project<sup>1</sup>.

From João's point of view and that of many of the actors we are ethnographically studying, their territories and behaviours in recent decades cannot be understood only by state laws, state order, state justice and its bureaucratic procedures. To understand João's trajectory, or favelas, prisons, streets and other highly vulnerable social environments in Brazil, there are at least two other sets of normativities that should be taken into account: the criminal and the religious. Based on life trajectories and situations like João's, this article aims to synthesise a theoretical reflection we have developed on the triangulation of these normative regimes (Feltran 2012) in force in the Brazilian outskirts, namely: 1- *the law of the state*, which we do not perceive as a coherent and rational entity, but as a network of diverse and often contradictory actions with multiple effects (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1999); 2- *the law of God/religion*, which has undergone a significant transformation in Brazil and Latin America in recent decades, marked by a steep decline in Catholicism and a substantial expansion of various strands and doctrines of evangelicalism, especially among low-income communities (Semán 2019; Smilde 2007; Almeida 2006); and 3- *the law of crime* -or the natively termed "world of crime"-, which includes networks, businesses, moralities and symbolic universes that have developed, especially since the 1990s, around the illegal drug and robbery markets in the country's poor communities. Over time, this world has expanded its influence beyond those directly involved in illicit activities to include a significant portion of the inhabitants of these areas (Feltran 2008; Machado da Silva 2008; Misse 2010; Mattos 2016).

The paper draws on two ethnographic fieldworks conducted in Brazilian urban poor communities. One was carried out by Maldonado in a large favela located in the eastern part of São Paulo, a region of the city with concentrated poverty, between 2018 and 2023. In 2018, the first contacts were made between the author and institutions in the region, with sporadic visits and virtual exchanges. In total, there were 11 months of living in the area between 2019 and 2022. During the months she was resident in the area, the author worked extensively with the region's Human Rights Centre, an important mediator in her entry into the field. There, she devoted herself

to daily visits to her interlocutors and to monitoring the Centre's work, especially with young people engaged in illegal markets. In 2023, she spent a further six months in São Paulo, carrying out twice-weekly visits to her main interlocutors, following conflict situations and family trajectories. These periods were interspersed with sporadic visits, participation in social events and digital contact. The other was conducted by Beraldo between 2011 and 2020 in an equally large favela located in the south of the city of Belo Horizonte, a region that mixes poor and middle-class neighbourhoods. In 2011, Beraldo did an internship at a school in the neighbourhood; in 2012 and 2013, she was part of a project aimed at reconstructing the history of the women of Morro da Luz; between 2014 and 2016, there was virtual contact with residents and social media tracking of community leaders and local political and cultural groups; between 2017 and 2018, the denser part of the ethnographic fieldwork was carried out, consisting mainly of frequent visits to Morro da Luz (about four times a week); in 2019, punctual visits were made to contact key informants and participate in social events; in 2020, there was virtual but constant follow-up of the situation of the neighbourhood through social media and personal contacts.

Following ethnographically the life trajectories of interlocutors, and their daily situations have a long tradition in the social sciences (Das and Poole 2004; Blokland 2017; Simone 2004; De Certeau 2012; Knowles 2014; Alleyne 2014). Our methodological assumption is that everyday life structures urban life and that we can understand its social forms from its systematic observation (Feltran 2016). Both of our methodological works are based on participatory observation, comprehensive description of conflict situations and complementary biographical interviews with key informants (13 in São Paulo and 20 in Belo Horizonte). Our material consists of transcribed interviews, fieldwork diaries and secondary data. There are, of course, particularities in the ways in which state, religion and crime are shaped in each specific locality. Life in a favela in Belo Horizonte is not the same as life in a favela in São Paulo, nor is it the same as life in an impoverished neighbourhood in Natal, Porto Alegre or Manaus. Even so, the literature on Brazil's various urban centres points to the existence of state, criminal and religious norms in all of them. For this paper, we have privileged the trajectories established in our fields, where the three normativities described here strongly cross the lives of our interlocutors.

We argue that state, criminal and religious normative regimes are formed over time and are based on a triple-paradigm: i) the accumulation of resources and the circulation of goods from markets such as the drug market, stolen cars, protection markets, public funds or church tithes, which provide the material basis for their existence; ii) the access to and control of violence, especially armed violence, and the possibility of dictating over life and death; and iii) the development of relationships of respectability with local groups through the sharing of basic moralised notions.

To enhance the reader's understanding of this framework and to ensure a clear grasp of its theoretical implications, this paper is divided into four parts, in addition to this introduction. First, we will discuss our theoretical framework by introducing the concept of plural social fabric in contemporary Latin American cities and our core concept of 'normative regimes' (Feltran 2012, Maldonado 2020, Beraldo 2021).

We will then organise the text around our main empirical findings. First, in order to reconstruct the formation of these normative regimes over time, we will present a detailed synopsis of each of the three normativities we identify as the main drivers of Brazilian urban governance in recent decades. This qualitative recovery seeks to encompass, within the dimensions of governance, the aspects of respectability, access to violence and material accumulation that characterise each of these regimes. Secondly, we will demonstrate the relational nature and coexistence of these regimes through the presentation of two ethnographic situations. Finally, we will summarise our theoretical argument and its implications for the debate on urban governance.

### **Theoretical framework: a plural social fabric**

There is a substantial body of academic and intellectual work exploring the various legal orders governing specific contexts. The social science literature on legal pluralism has drawn attention to the possibility that more than one legal system may become relevant to the regulation of social interaction in the same space (Griffiths 1986; Pospisil 1981). This has been done first by studying the encounter between European and traditional forms of law in colonial settings, and then by studying legal relations in post-colonial and non-colonised societies (Merry 1988). For the intellectual tradition of legal pluralism, state law is one of many systems that govern society, which may include, for example, national, religious, or indigenous customary law. From this perspective, legal orders can be more or less regulated, institutionalised, valid and legitimate (von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann 2006). Scholars of legal pluralism have also highlighted the relationships between multiple legal spheres and the transformative dynamics they reinforce each other (Nuijten and Anders 2007; Urinboyev and Svensson 2013). Moreover, as von Benda-Beckman and Turner argue, the legal pluralism perspective “has been essential to understand the context-specific ways in which normative orders are invoked, interpreted, and put into practice” (Benda-Beckman & Turner 2020, 94).

Therefore, the concept of legal pluralism helps us to move away from state-centred prescriptive perspectives on theoretical governance of territories and to focus instead on empirical *de facto* orders, laws, and norms. However, the experiences of our interlocutors in the Brazilian peripheries, such as João’s, bring to the fore aspects that have received very little attention in the literature on plural legalism and which, on the contrary, lie at the heart of the normative regime framework with which we are working. There are two main points to consider. First, state formation in Latin America has never achieved a monopoly on the use of force, making violence a plausible resource available to different groups to achieve different ends; and second, the constitution of different regimes in Latin American territories is closely linked to the expansion of highly profitable illegal markets and to the deep porosities that connect the legal and illegal spheres. Scholarly debate on conflict in the region has consistently emphasised these two aspects.

José Miguel Cruz (2016), for example, argued that in many Latin American countries, the state has often had to negotiate and articulate with other forms of local authority to achieve governance capacity. Based on her research in cities in

Colombia and Mexico, Durán-Martínez (2018) contends that drug trafficking violence should not be viewed as the reckless, senseless use of brute force by criminal groups, but rather as a product of the relationships of agreement and confrontation established by both criminal and state actors. In Argentina, Javier Auyero and Katherine Sobering's (2019) analysis examines the collusion between drug traffickers and the police, while Matías Dewey's (2018) research reveals that a portion of the state relies on the illegal suspension of the law.

Researchers who have analysed the Brazilian case more specifically have drawn attention to the same phenomenon. In a seminal work on Rio de Janeiro, Luiz Antonio Machado da Silva (1999) drew attention to the emergence of a 'violent sociability' in the urban peripheries. He argued that the increase in violence and crime at the time (the 1990s) did not reflect disorder or a threat to social order, but rather constituted a social order in its own right, coexisting with the legal social order. Similarly, Arias (2006) showed that drug traffickers had managed to establish deep links with the police and politicians, indicating that the boundaries between these orders are permeable. In the same vein, Palloma Menezes (2018) and Matthew Richmond (2019) have shown that certain public safety policies have led to a duality of authority in Rio's favelas: on the one hand, the authority of the police, and on the other, the authority of drug traffickers. In this configuration, both authors argue, individuals are compelled to manage and live their lives guided by two normativities with great potential for the use of violence, necessitating perpetual self-monitoring of their conduct.

In Belo Horizonte, several researchers, including Luís Felipe Zilli (2015), Claudio Beato (Zilli and Beato 2015), Rafael Rocha (2017), and Beraldo (2021), have demonstrated that small, local gangs assume the role of authorities in favelas, establishing codes of conduct and wielding power over matters of life and death. It has been argued that the police are a significant element in this situation. They have been known to benefit from extorting drug traffickers, who need to avoid arrest. Moreover, they frequently exacerbate the tension between criminal groups by abducting young individuals from one gang and releasing them in an area dominated by a rival gang, where they usually are subsequently killed.

As far as São Paulo is concerned, many researchers have shown that the hyper-incarceration policy has served as fuel for the constitution of criminal groups, which initially emerged as a form of self-protection among prisoners in a context of constant human rights violations. This is the case of the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). Karina Biondi (2010) has analysed the bonds of solidarity among prisoners and the flourishing of a new kind of normativity that values 'peace among thieves' and preaches 'violence against the system'. Feltran (2012) has shown that this normativity extended to the urban margins of São Paulo, becoming a possible instance to which people could turn in search of justice.

Latin Americanist literature has therefore shown that in order to understand everyday life, violence and governance in the subcontinent's urban margins, it is necessary to focus on the complex political economy that links legal and illegal, local and transnational markets, urban conflicts and state policy practices (Machado da Silva 2010; Kessler 2011; Fischer, McCann and Auyero 2014; Feltran 2022). In dialogue with this literature, a group of researchers on Brazilian urban peripheries,

to which we belong, has proposed the concept of "normative regimes" to refer to the normative arrangements that emerge from processes of urban differentiation over time (Feltran 2012, Maldonado 2020, Beraldo 2021). Namely, regimes of the "ought to be" of the world, in which agents evaluate the behaviour of their peers on an everyday basis and delimit the possible and legitimate instances of justice, punishment and regulation, but also of what is beautiful or ugly, seductive or repulsive (Maldonado 2020, Simmel 2010).

The argument is that different regimes of action coexist and maintain contemporary urban order. Thus, urban conflict would not only be the spectacle of violence. Rather, it would be the small disagreements based on long histories of "accumulation of difference" (Maldonado 2020) over the course of life, between subjects who do not share the same parameters of what is plausible in each everyday situation (Machado da Silva 1967, 1993, 2004; Misse 2006; Feltran 2010, 2012; Grillo 2013; Cabanes 2014). This means that these are not just different positions of subjects sharing the same urban order (a common space of assumptions about the world and how it should be), but rather different positions of subjects distributed across different, albeit coexisting, urban orders.

We believe that the normative multiplicity that has always been characteristic of the country has been condensed in recent decades into three main regimes that operate simultaneously in poor neighbourhoods: the state and the criminal (usually the focus of Latin American work on governance and violence), but also the religious regime. The state, crime and religion have come to form political regimes (Feltran 2010, 2012; Beraldo 2021, 2022, 2023; Beraldo et al. 2022) that construct different justifications (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999) for social problems and thus produce different regimes of action. We argue that these regimes have become increasingly embedded in people's socialities and subjectivities and are triggered by actors individually and situationally. Over time, the escalation of these disputes has led to a specific social configuration of normative pluralism in the country's urban peripheries, which this article will explore further.

## **The constitution of normative regimes over time**

### ***The law of the state***

During the authoritarian regime (1964-1985), favela residents lived under the constant threat of eviction (N. Lima 1989; Valladares 1978; Machado da Silva 2010; Feltran 2007). Large families were crammed into small houses. There was no running water, sewerage or electricity. Hunger was not uncommon. The roads, narrow and bumpy, were made of dirt; the shacks (usually made of wood or tin), especially in mountainous areas, were extremely vulnerable to landslides during the rainy season (G. Cunha and Tavares 2016; Á. Cunha 2003). Many of the men worked in construction, and women tended to work as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy families. The vast majority worked informally, for long hours and low pay. Health care was largely linked to employment in the formal labour market. Those who had a formal job and earned enough money paid social security contributions to access health services. The poorest, even if they were

employed, could not afford health insurance (Rodrigues and Lages 2009; Mathias 2018).

People did not endure this situation passively. On the one hand, they developed what Larissa Lomnitz (1975) called 'networks of mutual reciprocity', i.e. in marginalised neighbourhoods, residents set up mutual aid networks in which clothes, furniture and food circulated. On the other hand, poor people on the margins of cities also mobilised politically on various fronts to secure access to certain goods and services and to demand better living conditions for themselves and others. However, these social movements were severely repressed by the military regime.

The "subversives", i.e. those from any social class who criticised the government, were almost automatically classified as "communists" and considered to be the main public enemy. They were persecuted by the state and many were imprisoned, tortured and disappeared (Sanjurjo and Feltran 2015). Violence by the security forces through death squads paid by small local elites to kill thieves or local 'troublemakers' was also a constant, particularly against the poorest. It was a period of marked poverty of rights (Fischer 2008).

With the gradual retreat of the military regime in the early 1980s, political mobilisations that had previously been formally and violently repressed were able to occupy public space. The effervescence of social movements became part of much of Brazilian life, especially in the urban peripheries. Movements demanding multiple forms of equality - class, but also sexual, gender or racial, among others - expanded and gained visibility. Sanitarians, human rights activists, trade unions, favela associations, feminist movements, sectors of the Catholic Church identified with liberation theology and a host of other forms of political mobilisation managed to find common ground among themselves. This was based on a shared concept of citizenship and the idea of the "right to have rights" (Dagnino 2006).

Much of this process materialised in the new Brazilian Constitution, known as the 'Citizens' Constitution of 1988', which established a broad recognition of social rights in health, education and social assistance, overcoming the exclusively security-oriented tradition of the country's social protection policies (Jaccoud, Bichir and Mesquita 2017; Jaccoud 2014). The new constitution also established the representation and rights of groups previously excluded from the political sphere (Arretche 2018) and inaugurated a perspective that gives the state responsibility for social welfare policy (Jaccoud, Bichir and Mesquita 2017). State policy in Brazil has moved from an active policy of excluding the working classes from the processes of urbanisation and development - which has produced specific forms of occupation of cities, as described by Kowarick (1979) through the notion of urban spoliation - to a state construction based on an ideal of universalism and access to rights. However, today inequalities in access to rights remain and some policies are not as universal as they were intended to be, with many of them providing poor quality services due to their precarious infrastructure. Nevertheless, nowadays, state institutions and policies are part of the daily lives of the urban poor, usually to a much greater extent than in the lives of middle and upper class citizens.

At the same time, the idea of an ongoing internal 'war' was carried over from the dictatorship to democracy, as the police remained militarised. Moreover, as it will be analysed in more detail in the next section, the arrival of the cocaine market



in the 1980s and its various consequences for people's sociability and access to money and violence promoted a change in a key factor in the logic of the state: the enemy of public order moved away from the figure of the 'subversive' and crystallised in the figure of the dangerous and inherently violent drug dealer, known as the 'bandit', whose representation was (and still is) closely linked to that of young black men, residents of the urban peripheries (Misse 2018). The 'bandits' became the primary focus of militarised police forces.

However, the relationship between law enforcement and illegal actors is multifaceted. It was precisely because of the ongoing persecution experienced by 'bandits' that a new market flourished: police and security agents began to sell protection to criminal actors so that they could operate illegal markets for drugs, weapons, stolen vehicles, and other items (Misse 2018). The illegal sale of protection, known as 'fixings' (bribes), operates as a 'political commodity'. As Misse (2018) highlights, this practice serves to regulate both legal and illegal informal markets through the exchange of services whose values are determined by 'strategic assessments of power, potential recourse to violence and the balance of power' (Misse 2006, p. 21, our translation). These protection markets have expanded significantly in recent years, through what Feltran (2020) calls a centripetal force, from the urban margins to the centre of institutional politics.

In addition to (and in relation to) the ambiguous links that the Brazilian police have established with criminal actors, the police (or at least their corrupt parts) have also become incrementally independent of the elected officials who are supposed to command them. Although theoretically a facet of the state, the police have increasingly acted as a fairly separate and self-determined entity (Feltran 2021; R. S. de Lima et al. 2022), which is also increasingly linked to evangelical groups. Especially in recent years, the growing power of far-right groups and ideologies has challenged the political ideal of a modern state that is inclusive and universal (an ideal that has always been frustrated in Brazil and Latin America in general), and has promoted the idea of an exclusionary, religious and militarised state, which is very much materialised in the police forces.

In practice, it is the street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) and the security forces who bring the various manifestations of the 'state' into the everyday life of our cities. When it comes to public security, marginalised people are often seen as those from whom others should be protected, rather than as a group that also deserves protection. Indeed, Motta (2017) argues that the presence of state institutions and agents in poor urban communities in contemporary Brazil is based on a double paradigm, a binary that oscillates between assistance and fierce repression.

Material accumulation through protection markets has led to the autonomy of the security forces from the state, as an ordering institution, through a double expropriation process. This involves the extraction of money from bribes and protection services for illegal markets, as well as the appropriation of the state security infrastructure. Put simply, corrupt police and their paramilitary counterparts seize control of the state apparatus and criminal markets for their own profit. The legitimacy or respectability of the police in the social fabric is linked to the use of the repressive state apparatus and the dominant narrative of a war between good and evil, with the good side represented by the police and the evil side represented by

'bandits,' even though the police regularly commit crimes themselves. Unsurprisingly, the government under former President Jair Bolsonaro had its core ideological and material basis in the convergence between the police and Pentecostal norms (Feltran 2020) by establishing militia logic in the parliament, which will be elaborated on in the following sections.

### ***The law of crime***

Until the 1960s and 1970s, crime in Brazil was largely of a less offensive nature, such as petty robbery or assault. Illegal activities and the groups that carried them out were rather diffuse, and armed violence was still relatively insignificant and largely confined to those directly involved in the criminal dynamic. There was no normativity emanating from these collectives to organise them, and even less to transcend them. So-called 'urban violence' had not yet become a public problem during most of the military dictatorship. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, in addition to the intense political violence perpetrated by the government and its allies, extermination groups aimed at eliminating petty thieves and others considered dangerous (Misse 2009; Machado da Silva 2008, 2010) gained strength and considerable local legitimacy.

The situation changed radically in the 1980s and 1990s. The process of redemocratisation was accompanied by a productive restructuring that led to high unemployment and increased poverty, not only in Brazil but in Latin America in general (Benza and Kessler 2020). It became clear that the project of integrating the lower classes work and the expansion of citizenship policies was insufficient. At the same time, the global cocaine market was expanding, with a particularly severe impact in Latin America compared to other regions. Leeds (1996) has argued that the cultivation of coca and the production of cocaine, at least at the time a Latin American monopoly, provided the subcontinent for the first time with a large economy of its own, linking it to the rest of the world. Brazil did not grow coca, but it had a huge internal market for the drug, and nowadays the logistical expertise to export it (Pinho et al. 2023). Throughout the country, the profits that small-scale traffickers made from selling drugs, especially cocaine, were many times greater than what the urban poor could earn from any other activity, legal or illegal. Other criminal activities, such as car theft, also generated large amounts of material wealth (Feltran 2022). But along with the money, firearms began to circulate on an unprecedented scale. Criminal groups became armed groups. As a result, wars for control of this highly profitable market by a variety of actors - thieves, mercenaries, police - intensified lethality and disputes over the money in circulation.

The main strategy adopted by the authorities to deal with the spread of crime and violence in the cities was imprisonment. Incarceration rates increased rapidly (Salla 2007). Prison conditions, already poor, became unsustainable due to overcrowding and the constant violation of human rights behind bars. Prisoners organised themselves to protect each other, forming more sophisticated criminal groups. A specific morality was forged, which became normative in the sense that it defined what was and was not acceptable (e.g. rape between inmates would no longer be a

constant and any kind of violence would be regulated) (Feltran 2007; Biondi 2010). The normativity formed inside the prison system was gradually transferred to the streets, either through the inside-outside links or through the release of prisoners. Over time, criminal normativity began to produce order on the urban margins and to regulate violence in these places. This order is known as the 'world of crime'.

The 'world of crime' is a moralised regime which, although linked to illegal dynamics, is in many respects in tune with popular morality in general (since it is an order forged among the poor): it values the figure of the 'worker', attaches great importance to religiosity and understands that it is necessary and right to seek to protect the neighbourhood or community in which it is located. This gives 'crime' in many areas a respectability (always partial, but significant) and makes it a possible instance in the search for justice in these places (a mediator in conflicts). The problems of drug dealers, thieves and people involved in illegal networks, but also of people not involved in these networks, are brought to 'criminals' in search of solutions. Domestic violence, sexual abuse, conflicts between neighbours, neighbourhood robberies are mediated by these groups. Two mechanisms therefore seem to legitimise the expansion of a criminal normative regime: i) the clarification of homicides by the criminal groups, offering those excluded from the formal justice system third party conflict mediation, victim reparation and perpetrator accountability, sometimes imposing strict gun control (Feltran et al. 2022); and ii) the connections that the criminal groups have to both legal and illegal markets, actors and institutions, allowing the accumulation of capital and influence.<sup>2</sup> As Hirata and Grillo (2017) show, in informal markets, and particularly in the market for illicit drugs, the interaction between the actors directly involved in sales and the agents responsible for their control is crucial.

### ***The law of god***

At the same time, the religious profile of the country (and Latin America as a whole) has also undergone important changes<sup>3</sup>. Until the 1960s, in the early years of the military dictatorship, Catholicism had maintained its hegemony among all social classes (although other religions, such as Afro-Brazilian and indigenous, were also present). Around the 1970s, the former Catholic hegemony began to crumble and evangelicalism began to gain ground. In the 1980s and 1990s, this process accelerated and the many strands of evangelicalism, especially Pentecostalism (Mariano 2013), spread rapidly. However, this growth was not homogeneous. On the contrary, it was highly concentrated in a specific social stratum: the poor.

Today, walking through the streets of marginalised neighbourhoods, the architectural landscape is mainly a mixture of precarious housing, government offices, bars, NGOs and many evangelical churches. A number of hypotheses have been proposed to explain the disproportionate spread of evangelicalism among the lower classes. Some argue that the evangelical cosmology of Pentecostalism resonates well with the religious imagination of the Latin American popular classes. For example, the conception of miracles and salvation as everyday events that can be witnessed and experienced by anyone (Semán 2019). Other scholars show, for example, that

being evangelical can provide protection in an environment of criminal and state violence (Côrtes 2007; Marques 2013; Dias 2008). There is also the argument that Pentecostal discourses, often imbued with the idea of a "war" between God and the devil (and the devil, among the Latin American poor, is associated with crime, drug use, promiscuity, etc.), fit well with the subjectivities of those who live in contradictory and violent realities (Galdeano 2014; Beraldo 2022). The fact is that a process of religious transit (Almeida & Monteiro 2001) has been taking place for some time in Brazil's urban peripheries.

While these shifts in religious identity result from transformations of subjectivities and sociabilities, they also dialectically generate effects on both. In general, churches and temples of any religion are privileged sites for building affective relationships, life perspectives and solidarity networks. This is certainly the case for Catholicism in the urban peripheries. However, the centrality that Evangelical churches seem to have in the daily lives of their regular attenders appears to be significantly greater than that of Catholic churches. The level of religious observance among evangelicals (how often they go to church, how often they pray and how important they consider their religion to be in their lives) is much higher than that of Catholics, as the literature has shown (Center Pew Research 2014).

There is another difference between the Catholic Church and evangelical branches that needs to be considered when dealing with favelas and other vulnerable areas. While Catholic priests are mostly white, educated, middle-class men who visit the poor neighbourhoods to celebrate mass, organise events and manage philanthropic initiatives (or, at best, move into these neighbourhoods to do pastoral work), evangelical pastors are generally "from the inside": also poor, also living in the same neighbourhood, also with an experience of life characterised on the one hand by a strong sense of community and belonging to the territory, and on the other hand by the harsh effects of the dynamics of marginalisation and violence to which the lower classes in Latin America are subjected. In this scenario, the pastor can be (and usually is) an ordinary neighbour. Related to this is the fact that while Catholics are strongly anchored in the notion of "charity", which presupposes a hierarchy, evangelical networks are significantly horizontal, configuring forms of mutual help among similar people, among "brothers" and "sisters" (Almeida 1999; Beraldo 2022). Marked by the idea of prosperity, these networks provide economic support to church members, for example, by privileging churchgoers in the choice of employees or the destination of donations received.

With this horizontality comes another important factor: unlike the Catholic Church, which operates as a very rigidly structured and hierarchical organisation, evangelism has the capacity to adapt easily to local specificities. It is no coincidence that the "war against evil" or the "war between God and the devil" often permeates evangelical discourses (especially Pentecostal ones) in Brazil and Latin America's urban peripheries. The constant reference to a threat that is at once supranormal and very concrete - because it encompasses an evil that, according to this logic, would materialise in people's lives through drugs, alcohol, crime, etc. - can only make sense in contexts where these experiences are a widespread reality.

While there is a fierce discursive opposition between evangelism and the "world of crime", in practice, these two spheres are deeply intertwined. Indeed, pastors and

evangelical churches are often the ones who welcome those who find themselves in situations of great vulnerability, such as drug addicts or 'bandits'. In fact, conversion is a common phenomenon, not rarely involving the most "lost" subjects, who, as João, come to transform themselves into deeply religious characters (Teixeira 2009). This does not go unnoticed by favela dwellers: because of their perceived ability to make direct contact with the divine and to "save" lives, evangelical churches have a widespread respectability among the poor.

There is also a clear market aspect to the growth of evangelism. While the thousand-year-old Catholic institution has a long history of material accumulation, evangelical churches, especially in Latin America, have seen their profit margins soar in recent decades. But this is uneven: a few mega-churches raise huge sums of money, while other neighbourhood churches may not be able to reach the minimum required to stay in business. In any case, it is a fact that there is an accumulation of money associated with religion that is inherent in the material capacity of religiosity to act as governance in the country, from small local spheres to macro-social politics. Researchers have also pointed out the financial links between these churches and the criminal world (Cunha 2014; Marques 2013; 2019), as well as the ideological coincidences between different forms of evangelicalism and police forces (Almeida 2017; Feltran 2020). As a result of these transformations, evangelical churches have become politically institutionalised. Today, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the Chamber of Deputies represents 20% of its members.

We believe that money, respect and the ability to use violence - the three dimensions that, in our view, enable a normative regime to establish itself as such - are quite clear when we talk about the state and the 'criminal world'. Religiosity, on the other hand, operates in a different way. Although it undoubtedly enjoys financial support and respect in the country's urban peripheries, its relationship with violence is indirect. In favelas and marginalised neighbourhoods, religious leaders are unlikely to take up arms and use violence to enforce certain norms. What happens - and this is what we have analysed in previous work (Beraldo 2023) - is that religious normativity is an important part of a moralised mechanism of classifying lives as more or less important. In a context of conflict, such as Brazil's urban peripheries, this classification often determines which subjects are more or less likely to suffer violence and ultimately be killed. Even if it is not the pastors, for example, who pull the trigger, they certainly help to determine who will be the targets of the bullet.

### **Jessica and Du: the relational and coexistent nature of these normativities<sup>4</sup>**

Jessica and Du have lived at the crossroads of the three normative regimes analysed in this study. Du is a 66-year-old black man. He was born and raised in one of Belo Horizonte's largest favelas where he and his family faced severe material deprivation. As a teenager, Du and one of his brothers, Zé, joined a group of local youths engaged in criminal activities, including cheating, theft, scams, and the sale of marijuana. With the arrival of cocaine in the city, the group began earning more money than ever. This trend was followed by other similar groups in the favela. As

profits increased, the use of firearms became more widespread. Over time, these groups established rules of conduct for their members and, gradually, for their respective territories as well. They began to create mandates, such as the prohibition of robbery or rape within the neighbourhood. These now armed groups became a local source of authority and justice. One day, Zé was killed during a police chase. There was no police investigation into his death.

At some point, Du started using the drugs he was supposed to be distributing, which led to his chemical dependency. He got into debt with the same group of people to which he belonged, one of the numerous gangs in the vicinity. An attempt was made on his life by members of his own gang and he was on the verge of death. If he had died – like Zé and many of Du's friends and relatives– it would not have been surprising. Those deaths were, to a certain extent, bearable to the people around them. But he survived.

While hospitalized, Du was provided unwavering backing by the members of a Catholic church, whose envoys called on him, granted him financial aid, and, once he had recuperated and returned to the neighbourhood, welcomed him into their social circle. Du's transition from an addict and dealer to a churchgoer shielded him from further assaults. He started working as craftsman creating wooden miniatures. At a certain stage of his life, Du converted to evangelicalism, attending one of the multiple religious temples within the favela. His remaining bullet wounds serve as a stark reminder of a bygone era.

As Du forms connections within religious circles - first within the Catholic community and later with evangelicals - and as he seeks to improve his manual skills as a craftsman, he undergoes a significant transformation from who he was for a large portion of his life. The way in which he perceives the world, the favela, and himself represents the viewpoint of a convert who, amidst a backdrop of suffering and violence, has achieved salvation. This salvation seems to have been possible solely because it is rooted in the transcendental, as argued by Birman and Machado (2012). Du, who was previously a degraded figure in the favela (not because he was a 'bandit' but because he was a 'bad bandit' who did not follow the criminal codes), now symbolises the prospect of breaking away from crime and pursuing an honest path.

Du's devotion to religion and his craft did not undermine his ability to interact closely with the young people now involved in the drug trade in the favela. On the contrary, he seemed to be respected by them, by churchgoers and by state officials working in the neighbourhood. So much so that he was hired by the state government to work on a programme called 'Fica Vivo' (Stay Alive), which aims to reduce homicides in the most vulnerable areas of Minas Gerais. He became one of the programme's "workshoppers". The workshoppers are key to Fica Vivo, not so much because of the content of the workshops they offer, but because they act as a much-needed bridge between state actors and local communities, hopefully making them a state-linked local role model for young people. Du represents the possibility of change, and his status as a former dealer/addict and now convert is precisely why a homicide prevention policy sees him as an ally in its goals.

Already as an elderly man, Du saw one of his sons "become a bandit" and the relationship between the two became strained. The son exhibited aggressive behavior

towards his father and in a fit of rage, threw away numerous pieces of handicrafts that would have been the family's main source of income for weeks to come. After encountering this scenario, Du decided to call the police, who, according to him, treated the incident with disrespect and were aggressive towards Du, even though he was the victim in the situation. When the police left, the 'guys in crime' paid him a visit. Du, a believer, a worker, and, in the eyes of some spheres of the state, a citizen, was still a former criminal. He was made to experience the consequences of having called the police and was subjected to a series of beatings.

If Du experienced the path into the world of crime firsthand, and then through his son, Jessica saw the consequences of her children's involvement in the illegal markets change the course of her life permanently. Born in the eastern zone of São Paulo, she is a 60-year-old black woman. In the 1970s, her parents migrated from the northeast of the country to São Paulo to work in the city's flourishing industry. As the daughter of a factory worker, Jessica grew up in a relatively stable life on the outskirts of the city. Although they were poor, the family earned enough money to meet their basic needs without having to worry too much about it. But as an adult, Jessica no longer found the same opportunities to earn a living in the factories as her father. She married in 1982, became a housewife and worked as a manicurist to supplement her husband's income as a bus driver. By the late 1980s, Jessica had three male children. In the late 1990s, her children gradually dropped out of school and turned to work to generate income and move up the social ladder. The unemployment rate in São Paulo at the time was around 20 per cent (PED - DIEESE)<sup>5</sup>. The jobs that were available to her children with incomplete secondary education were informal, low-paying jobs with little recognition among their peers - for example, working in construction or collecting recyclables, which paid an average of \$5 a day with long, exhausting hours. The desire to consume was almost unattainable for teenagers like them growing up on the outskirts of São Paulo.

It was around this period that their lives changed radically. Her three children started to work in the illegal markets that were expanding in the city. Jessica's relatively stable life of upward mobility through formal work was destabilised. Her sons, like other boys of their age at the time, knew that they could earn ten times more by doing small jobs for local drug dealers than by working hours in jobs that bordered on modern forms of slavery. They also knew that risks were high. It wasn't uncommon to hear that friends had been killed by the police, other drug dealers or vigilantes hired by local businesses. Taking the risk of venturing into the criminal world was, and still is, a decision made by the minority and lower strata of families in vulnerable social positions (Galdeano et al. 2018).

The 1990s and early 2000s are known as the "war time" on the outskirts of São Paulo. Where the disputes over the control of the expanding cocaine market led to a spike in the homicide rate. Simultaneously, the state's response has been to expand policies of imprisonment and repression. Jessica's children have experienced this process: the three of them have been arrested several times. For Jessica, this has meant facing police violence against those involved in criminalised networks. On countless occasions, she held and participated in conversations with police officers about deals and bribes to protect her children. Furthermore, with her children's arrest, Jessica began to follow the daily life of the penal institutions. It was there

where she first heard about the PCC criminal group and the internal rules of crime itself. Jessica often tells stories of her children paying off debts to drug dealers out or within the prison system or of how she herself has had to negotiate with "brothers" (PCC members) for her children's safety.

Coming from a Catholic family, she also began to experience religious work in prisons on a daily basis. The Catholic Church was a great ally in her fight for better conditions for her children in prison. On the other hand, it was in an evangelical church that Jessica found a way to protect her youngest son, who was an addict and was facing a time of deep crisis due to debts with local drug dealers. Jessica was able to get him into a church-run rehabilitation centre, which took the boy off the streets for a while and gave the family some temporary relief.

Faced with the arrests and the daily violence that afflicted her family, Jessica began participating in the neighbourhood human rights centre in the early-2000s. There she began to work with young people from the area who were in similar situations to her sons. But her life changed tragically not long after, still in the 2000s. Two of her children were murdered. One by the police, the other in a criminal dispute. Far from abandoning her human rights initiatives in the midst of her grief, Jessica became even more involved in community work and fight for justice. Her work with young people and women in the area led to the formation of a prisoners' rights association. Today she leads groups of young people and family members who have been victims of state violence. These meetings happen in places as diverse as public health facilities, evangelical churches, public hearings and neighbourhood squares. Jessica's knowledge of the state, criminal and religious worlds is crucial in these mobilisations. She navigates and is able to identify and activate the different normative codes in circulation.

Jessica and Du's trajectories bring together the passage through the different normativities discussed here: state, crime, and religion. It sheds light on a crucial aspect of our proposed theory: actors can and do move through different normativities during their lifetime. These normativities are situational. Some individuals have a less flexible path, more closely aligned with a particular regime and distancing themselves from the other two. Nevertheless, it is those who have accumulated the codes of the various normativities who, in our ethnographical experience, occupy important positions of mediation in the territories. They know how to navigate troubled waters. This is a fundamental quality of life in the Brazilian urban margins.

## **Conclusion: the triple paradigm**

In this article, we have attempted to reconstruct the trajectory of the three main normative regimes that currently govern Brazil's urban poor territories: that of the state, that of the "world of crime", and that of religion. We have developed an account of how these regimes have come into being in the course of time, and have briefly described their most important transformations over the last four decades in the country. Although the historical synopses of each regime have been presented separately, these stories intersect and co-produce. Some of the subjects we encountered during our ethnographic work in São Paulo and Belo Horizonte were more



closely aligned with one or another of the normativities we are analysing here. There were those, for example, who fitted well into the state's idea of the 'worker'/citizen, whose life revolved around work, earning 'honest' money and providing for the household. Others were deeply identified with religion, with religious beliefs guiding their actions. They may have been brought up in a church environment and may have made most of their social connections through religious spaces. There are also those who are more deeply subjectified in the normativity of the 'world of crime', who identify themselves as 'bandits' and are mainly concerned with illegal markets and the status and prestige associated with crime. But for the majority of the people we met, life goes on in the midst of the normativities of the state, crime and religion.

This was the case for both Jessica and Du, who have learned to move through different normative regimes. Du had an intense experience of the criminal world, and after his brother's death and his own quasi-death, he learned the importance of taking seriously the logics that govern crime in the favela. At the same time, driven by his intense vulnerability in the hospital bed and the support he received from church members, he converted to Catholicism. He then turned to evangelicalism, as many Latin Americans did. He now dominated both the criminal and religious codes. Further in his trajectory this knowledge – and the respectability that came with it – qualified him to work within the state normativity in protection and violence tackling policies.

Likewise, Jessica works in a Human Rights guarantee centre, in which the state world is an important reference. Jessica's sons, on the other hand, have had a life experience much more limited to the criminal world, where they have occupied its most risky positions. Before and during their children's engagement with illegal markets, Jessica and her husband lived the state world on a daily basis through the bureaucracy of formal work, school, health services, and through their close contact with the prison system. However, Jessica began to activate the criminal codes as she also had to navigate the social spaces of her sons. In addition, religiosity and religious connections helped her to fight for the rights of those in prison and to deal with her youngest son's problems with drug abuse and threats from drug dealers. The accumulation of codes, knowledge and experiences allows her to transit through different normativities and accumulate respect in each one of them. It is clear, then, that these regimes produce distinct urban orders that touch, mix and clash. Subjects can navigate through these normativities as they accumulate experiences and know their codes, structures and territories.

During our reconstruction, we intended to demonstrate how the bases for the constitution of a normative regime over time go through three main processes: the appropriation of resources generating material accumulation; access to and control of (physical) violence; and relations of respectability throughout common notions of morality. The combination of these main factors seems to us to provide a basis for the normativities described here.

The relationship between Brazil's urban poor and the state is marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, there is the repressive face of Brazilian state formation, which stems from a colonial past and more recent authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, there are public policies that guarantee the rights of the popular classes. However, these rights were historically won through social struggles and are still

incomplete in many areas. For this reason, the state is often seen as an ideal to be achieved in the form of a long-awaited guarantee of citizenship for all or as something to be fought against, especially because of its violent presence. As a result, *respect* for the state in the country's urban margins is a matter of constant negotiation, as we see in both Du and Jessica stories. When trying to activate state normativity (both *via* police work) in face of the violent situations they encounter – Du's son's rage episode and Jessica's sons' murder – both found no success.

Their frustration with the results of these attempts to turn to state normativity did not, however, erase the role of the state in their lives or their belief in it. They continued to make use of public policies of various kinds (health, social security, etc.) and, more importantly, they inserted themselves into the state apparatus – as facilitators and workers in projects to tackle violence – in the hope of improving the living conditions of their communities. Their respect for the state was far from constant or self-evident. But it did play a role in their lives.

Jessica and Du also had an ambivalent relation with the “world of crime”. It was becoming involved in that world that endangered Du's life and ultimately led to the violent deaths of Jessica's children. But in many ways they shared similar notions of right and wrong with the “bandits”. This illustrates how the expansion of the criminal normativity to the urban margins came into being: it was built precisely on a common morality based on notions of loyalty, respect and humility. And indeed, the criminal world has acted – in certain territories of the country (not coincidentally, those in which it enjoys more moral legitimacy) – to reduce violence through hegemony in the management of the illegal markets in the areas where it is established. Du and Jessica also recognised the role of criminal groups in producing mechanisms for delivering justice and pacifying local relations. For Jessica, Du and many of favela dwellers across Brazil, both the state and crime are plausible sources of justice.

The religious world, in turn, accumulates *respectability* through sharing interpretations of the social world such as “self-entrepreneurship”, “prosperity” and a world split between Good and Evil. Such categories serve to produce justifications about social problems, since they attribute to the supernatural problems as distinct as drug use, rape, hunger and unemployment. Religiosity and its perceived capacity for ‘salvation’ are valued the more vulnerable a population is. These political narratives add to the spaces of mutual aid produced by the neo-Pentecostal churches through their politics of salvation and conversion. All these factors find fertile territory in a contemporary urban world. Unlike crime and the state, religiousness seems to enjoy a widespread respectability, with very little questioning of its legitimacy. When Du converted and Jessica put her son in a religious rehabilitation centre, their lives were much safer than before. Religiosity gave them respectability, their lives were more valuable and they were, at least temporarily, no longer the target of extreme violence.

Nevertheless, two other characteristics guarantee the plurality of these regimes: the *use of violence* and the *material accumulation* that sustains them. The state does not have a monopoly of violence in the territories we are studying. The world of crime, with its mechanism of criminal justice, control of access to weapons and the ordering of behaviour, also manages the use of violence in the spaces in which they

are present. The possibility of dictating over life and death by state and criminal normativity were in the centre of the tragical deaths of Jessica's children and of Du's brother, as well as Du's quasi-murder. As we saw with Jessica's and Du's biographies, the normative regimes say not only how one should live, but govern about how, who and when one should die. Governing over life and death underpins their 'expressions of sovereignty' (Stepputat 2015). The religious world, with its strong moral conduction of daily lives and its links to both the police and the criminal world, produces syntheses with the other regimes in the administration of the use of force and violence.

When it comes to *material accumulation*, the normativity of the state, with its infrastructural presence, manages to produce a regime of power located in the most diverse territories. The public policies present in the lives of Jéssica and Du are an example of this. In addition, the police forces, or their corrupt part, extract money and political capital from illegal markets to further use the state apparatuses for the expansion and institutionalisation of their power projects. The criminal normativity, through transnational illegal markets, accumulates investments, influence and financial capital to circulate either in the urban peripheries on a smaller scale, or in the networks of transnational value chains. Or notably on the borders between legal and illegal. While the material accumulation of illegal markets generates profits for the security forces and the criminal world, the risks associated with these activities fall on those who earn less, mostly young and black males, residents of urban peripheries (Feltran et al. 2022). On the other hand, religious normativity also concentrates a fundamental aspect of resource accumulation in contemporary Brazil. Whether through the circulation of money in services (unevenly distributed between small and mega-churches), investors or lobby-oriented political capital.

We have attempted to reconstruct the trajectory of these regimes in the course of time, describing briefly its main transformations in the last four decades in the country. As we have demonstrated, in Brazilian urban poor territories, the state is not the only one to produce "law", nor to produce order, nor to monopolise the legitimate use of force. A multiplicity of authorities coexist and interact with one another, and much of the dynamics of violence and of urban order result from this tense interaction. People turn to different normative regimes according to the kind of situation they are dealing with: one thing does not cancel the other. Religiousness, criminality, and state are all parts of the lives of the urban poor, and there is no way to really understand their reality unless we take this into serious consideration.

## Notes

1. João was interviewed in São Paulo by Maldonado in 2022, in the context of her doctoral research.
2. Brazilian criminal world changed radically in the 2000s with the expansion of groups such as the PCC (hegemonic in São Paulo) and the Comando Vermelho (Rio de Janeiro) to other regions of the country. At the same time, there are regions, such as Minas Gerais, where local criminal groups continue to operate on a small scale, with

internal disputes that do not lead to hegemony. For more on the differences, see Hirata and Grillo 2019; Rodrigues 2020; Feltran et al. 2022; Motta et al 2022; Lessing 2022; Rodrigues, Feltran, Zambon 2023.

3. Until the 1960s, 90% of the Latin American population was Catholic. Today, it is 69% (Center Pew Research, 2014).
4. Jessica is an interlocutor from Maldonado since 2018. Du is an interlocutor of Beraldo since 2017.
5. To see the historical series: DIEESE - Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos.

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